

**LIAM BRACKEN**

**EXIT  
ONLY**



ENC Press

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE APEX OF ISLAM, THE APEX OF PETROL, Saudi Arabia touches the lives of everyone in the world. I wanted to go, and I went. From the First Gulf War to the Second, I worked in Jeddah, and every year my fascination with the kingdom defeated wishes to leave. My friends were rich sheiks and struggling Saudis, builders and biologists, oil refiners and water desalinators, doctors and nurses, airline captains and flight attendants, schoolteachers and university professors, Hajj guides and imams, journalists and advertising agents. I drank home-made booze with employees of Bin Ladin Group and the sons of Idi Amin, and, on several occasions, met a Saudi executioner.

I knew Saudis who fought in Afghanistan; one of them was arrested for bloodying the nose of an American who refused to conform to local codes of conduct. The year was 1993. Was this a new David striking at a Goliath? Every day in Jeddah wrote a chapter in a novel. I shared an office with a man whose sons were featured in *Time* magazine and are still in prison in the U.S. on terrorism charges. The year was 2002.

Where precisely did this novel, *Exit Only*, which I completed in 1998, come from? Where did the perpetrators of September 11 come from? My first shock, when I arrived in Saudi Arabia, was the disdain many Saudis expressed toward the U.S. government. I thought we were heroes. While people in America tied yellow ribbons 'round trees and patted themselves on the back for liberating Kuwait and rescuing the Saudis from the threat of Saddam, hordes of Saudis were joining the military. "To protect yourself from Saddam?" I had asked. "No," they had said. "To protect ourselves from the American soldiers on our land." Although many of my Saudi friends and acquaintances went to the States regularly on vacation and for training, and delighted in pointing out their love

for Americans and the freedoms in America, the attitude that American military should exit the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula in particular, remained a populist view, especially among the poorest Saudis.

And I thought: what a great plot for a novel—amidst all Western foreigners maximizing financial gains, having fun, and ignoring political analysis, some poor and discontent Saudis hatch a plot to send a message to America using a New York-bound 747!

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I love my friends in Saudi Arabia and hate being apart from them. Among them are the people who encouraged me and made the completion of *Exit Only* possible. An English translator of Arabic is one of them. He wrote the glossary and showed me truth where I could see only chaos. Brilliant men named Neil and Mohammed, whose academic thinking is a millennium ahead of our time, took pride in beating me up, but always called me a writer. My understanding of the modern movement of humanity comes from my wife, a flight attendant in Saudi Arabia for eight years, and her father, a 747 captain flying from the same lands. Responsible for *Exit Only* rising from my ambitions to a published form is Olga Gardner Galvin, who selected my manuscript among the products of hard work and thought of hundreds of other authors. Acknowledging *Exit Only's* relevance to the political dilemmas of today, Gerald Robbins of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia dignified the novel with his interest.

I left transliteration of the spellings of the holy cities of Makkah, Madinah, and other locales the way they are commonly transliterated in Saudi Arabia. *Exit Only* is a work of fiction, but I tried to recreate Saudi Arabia and the people there as close to reality as possible. Just as in Rome you read “Roma” on the signs, when reading *Exit Only*, or standing in Jeddah, you will read “Makkah.”

*Liam Bracken*



*Bhulus*  
eternity

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**CHARLIE DURANGO**, 56, American. Airframe and power-plant mechanic, in debt and depressed.

**SARA SANTOS**, 28, Filipina. Domestic helper, grasping for riyals and self-respect.

**LANCE WHITE**, 46, English. Instructor of English as a Foreign Language, wind surfer, hash smoker.

**CATHERINE WELLS**, 35, English. Flight attendant who aspires to write a novel about flying and the Middle East.

**DUANE SNOW**, 55, American. Captain of a 747, hedonist who doesn't know the meaning of the word.

**SHELLY SYKES**, 30, American. Mother of a toddler, homemaker, college graduate, leaving Saudi Arabia and her husband permanently.

**MARK SYKES**, 35, American. Flight engineer of a 747, Rolex-owner and self-proclaimed ladies' man.

**KHALID BA SALLAH**, 25, Saudi. Airframe and power-plant mechanic, smart, good-looking, and poor.

**JULIE JONES**, 27, Welsh. Flight attendant, sensitive and loving, with a weakness for guys with money.

**FATIMA AL KABOOS**, 16, Saudi. Secondary-school student and nemesis of Sara Santos.

**JULIO LOPEZ**, 27, Spanish. Gypsum worker, hashish peddler, below average in height, above average in noise.

**MOHAMMED AL HARTHI**, 41, Saudi. Flight engineer of a 747, religiously devout, professionally dedicated.

**BARBARA AND BRIAN SHORT**, 48 and 53, respectively, American. Professors of linguistics, middle-aged and still in love.

## EXCERPT

NONE OF THE STREETS IN AL KANDARAH MARKET DISTRICT run in a straight line. Yemenis built every structure a different size and height and shape, and painted them all white. The narrow streets and alleys are a diabolical maze, and the air is dense with the old urban stink of street food, mint, smashed dates, and garbage. Charlie can see no one around whom he can ask for directions. He was down here a couple years ago, for dinner at Khalid's. He had no choice but to go. Khalid had wanted to pay him back for showing him the ropes at the hangar, and Charlie had to accept. The meal hadn't actually been as bad as he expected it to be, but it wasn't great, either—*kabsah*, of course.

But where exactly was the place? Charlie drifts along in the currents of the white and black forms, shouting, arguing, and chatting, many in languages he is unable to even identify.

Here and there, the steel doors of the shops and restaurants are starting to close. The evening's last prayer ended hours ago, and the next one will not be until sunrise. A Yemeni in a white *thobe* pauses before pulling metal doors across a display window full of the most enormous bras and tacky frilly undies Charlie has ever seen. "You want intimacy clothes?" asks the old man.

"No thanks," says Charlie, moving on.

"Look, look," says the old man. "Good for madam. Good for you. Give you very strong." The old man makes a fist, holds up his shriveled forearm, and croaks out laughter from deep inside his chest.

Charlie looks up yet another side street and feels a fart slip out. Self-conscious about the strength of the odor, which has been brutal since his pouring *sid* atop the fruits of the fast-food binge this afternoon, he whiffs cautiously. It's nasty. Thankfully, the aromas of

curries and *kabsabs* in the immediate area mask the stench. Dry-mouthed, he steps into a shop where one man is ladling *fool* from a huge aluminum pot into plastic bags while another man shovels *tamees*, flat bread, from an igloo-shaped oven, using a large spatula with a six-foot handle. Customers grab the bread as it is thrown onto an ancient-looking, wooden table.

“*Waahed moyah*,” says Charlie, handing a riyal to a man standing in front of a money box.

The man takes the money, reaches back, pulls a bottle from a rusty refrigerator, and hands it to Charlie.

“*Shukran*.” Charlie sits down at one of the rickety metal tables and stares at the soccer match showing on an old color TV sitting on top of the refrigerator.

This is definitely the place Khalid brought him a couple years ago. “Best *fool-tamees* in Jeddah,” Khalid had said. Given that the place is heaving with customers, the locals obviously share Khalid’s taste. “You have billions and billions of riyals and unlimited oil in this country,” Khalid had said. “But it’s this food—*fool*, *ma’soub*, *tamees*, *galaabah*—each dish one or two riyals—that built the place. Take away the many, many restaurants and Western supermarkets for the rich, and Jeddah will look and work as normal. This city belongs to people who eat *fool*, not benzene or people who chase and steal money.”

Charlie sips his water. The patrons take no notice of him, probably mistaking his Mexican features for Middle Eastern. Their eyes stay fixed on the match as they scoop smashed-up beans and homemade salsa into their mouths with the hearty, warm bread. Through the door, fixed open, a steady flow of customers, many of whom are children, enter and take away bread and *fool*, probably for their families. Everyone in the shop is Afghani, Pakistani, or Saudi, but without the designer watches or compact mobile phones that you see them flashing in the newer parts of the city.

Charlie gulps down the rest of his water and puts the bottle in the garbage. “*Shukran*,” he says again to the man at the cash register.

“*Afwan*,” says the man with a smile, barely looking up from the small plastic bags he’s filling with salt and turmeric.

Charlie takes a step towards the door and stops, “Sorry, but you don’t know Khalid Ba Sallah, do you?”

“*Aish?*”

“Khalid Ba Sallah? Where house?”

“*Maafee ingleezee.*”

“*Ma’ laish,*” says Charlie and goes out the door.

All the cars on the street are old. Money is definitely something Khalid would be worried about. Who isn’t worried about money? Political activism has got to be pretty low on the list of concerns here. That shit is for people like Margaret—housewives who will never work and rich people who don’t have to work. Coming out here to make sure Khalid’s not a terrorist—this is a waste of time. It’s got to be the booze that these ideas are coming from. Terrorists couldn’t pay as much as drug smugglers, could they?

Charlie heads up another narrow street. He’s here now. He might as well try to find the guy. In no time, he finds himself at a fork with wooden-shuttered apartment houses winding off on both sides. This looks familiar but not that familiar. He sits down in front of the closed iron doors of a shop to think, and—

The stench of ammonia pierces his nose. He is reeling. He knows this place. It’s one of those shops that sell old dried fish and are stacked to the ceiling with pungent filets. He remembers the old man arranging the fish and Khalid making some joke in English when he was here before.

He is close. Charlie wonders a little farther—

“For what you are looking?” asks a fat Egyptian, crunching sunflower seeds with brown and yellow teeth and making severe wrinkles in his broad, sloped forehead as he does so. In Egypt, the man might be called a *Saidi*, a Southerner, an uneducated farmer. The Egyptian is standing in the doorway of a tiny watch shop, open unusually late.

“A friend,” Charlie annunciates. “He lives around here. His name is Khalid Ba Sallah. Young guy. Do you know him?”

“*Yezz, yez. Tch.*” The Egyptian spits some seeds into the street and beckons Charlie into his shop. “Come in, come in.” The Egyptian slips inside a door beneath a sign saying WATCHES REPAIR.

“Are you sure you understand me?” Charlie halts at the doorway of the shop. The few chairs and a glass case inside look like they came from the same dump. Fake watches within display the lower limits of Chinese workmanship.

“Tea?” asks the Egyptian through rotten teeth. He motions to a filthy electric kettle in the corner of the shop.

“No—thanks. *Maafee* time—” Charlie points to his own watch. “I must go to my friend now. Khalid now.” He steps towards the door. “If you could tell me where my friend lives I would—” Charlie looks to the Egyptian’s left. The guy is too disgusting to look at directly.

“I call and we have tea.”

“No, no tea. And no, you don’t have to call the guy. He is expecting me. Just tell me or show me where he lives.”

“You know somezing.” The Egyptian is more serious. “When a poor man he iz try to give you somezing. Thiz iz, you know, *kareem*—”

“Generosity,” says Charlie. This is one word Charlie can’t help but know after hearing it said a million times during Ramadan every year as Arabs give each other gifts and exclaim: “*Kareem!*” Why do they say this? Isn’t it obvious?

“*Egzactly!* How you say it?” asks the seed-cruncher.

“‘Generosity’—but I don’t like tea.”

“*Yez.*” The Egyptian picks up a disgusting-looking phone. “How much you can give?”

“What?”

“Money—how much you give for see a friend?”

“How much do you want?” As soon as Charlie says it, he knows it’s a mistake. He shouldn’t even be here with this toothless wonder. It’s getting late. He should be out there, looking around. Better yet, he should be in the compound, sleeping for the graveyard. The only way to deal with a shift change is to load up on sleep, and tomorrow morning he won’t be able to sleep, since he promised Amos he would go to Nadi with him. This fucking guy here is probably full of bullshit anyway.

“Four hundred riyals.”

“I don’t think so.” Charlie steps back out onto the street and feels some wet flatulence slip out at the same time—

“No. Stop. Thiz joking.” The Egyptian is laughing one of the most disgusting laughs that Charlie has ever heard. “Fifty riyals.”

“No, just take me to the guy, then you can have the money.”

“Of courze, of courze.” The Egyptian quickly slides the gate across his door, padlocks it, and is off down the street, spitting a trail of sunflower seeds.

They round a couple of corners, go up a cobbled alleyway, and enter an apartment building, which looks more rundown than the one he visited Khalid in last year.

“I don’t think this is it.”

*“Dageegah, dageegah.”*

The Egyptian runs up a flight of stairs and pounds on a dark, wooden door. It opens a crack, and a Sudanese-sounding voice begins speaking, arguing in Arabic. The Egyptian says the name “Omar” several times—

“Hey,” says Charlie. He climbs a few stairs. “What’s going on up there.”

“Come up,” says the Egyptian. “You seez if you like thiz friend.”

“What?!” Charlie has been offered these services here too many times to be embarrassed. “I didn’t come here for an African blow job, you fucking idiot.” Charlie storms out of the building, feeling more annoyed with himself than the Egyptian.

He walks for less than three minutes before someone is right behind him.

“Hey, sorry man.” It’s the Sudanese. His accent is perfectly American. “We do some sick things for money here.”

“I’ll say.” Charlie looks at the Sudanese. He looks intelligent and poor. Charlie doesn’t even consider asking him where he learned English. He never bothers anymore. You fill up on so many tragedies that eventually you reach your saturation point.

“What is the name of the person that you’re looking for?”

Charlie tells him.

“Oh—Khalid. Yeah, no problem. He lives right across the street. Come on.”

Khalid's apartment isn't exactly across the street, but it is close. "Here." Charlie gives the Sudanese fifty riyals after he has brought him to the right building.

"Want me to take you up?"

"That's OK. I can deal with it." Charlie clomps up to the apartment door and pounds on it. As soon as the latch moves, he steps away, putting his back against the wall, so that if the person answering is a woman, she can speak without looking at him.

The door swings open, and the smell of lamb and cardamom pour into the hall.

"*Na'am?*" Pointing into the hall are the gaudiest pair of woman's shoes that Charlie has seen in a long time. They are a pair of snowshoe-sized black stilettos, blossoming with purple flowers and blue bows.

"*Marhaba.*"

"*Marhaba. Khalid fee?*"

"*Aywah, dageegah.*" The shoes disappear, and Charlie steps away from the wall and starts to study the cracks in the marble floor.

A minute later, the door swings open again.

"Hey, Charlie, what are you doing in Al Kandarrah?" As Khalid comes into the hall, he is smiling, as if sincerely glad to see Charlie. "Are you here for a lady?" He winks. "That's what you say to any Saudi who comes down here. There are many Eritrean, Somali, Ethiopian, Egyptian, Nigerian women here . . ."

"Oh, I didn't know. I wish I had brought some money," says Charlie.

Khalid laughs. "No, better you didn't. So many of my friends have gotten burned bad, really bad, by disease, from the girls here. You know it is so bad here if you're a young man—you have two choices: an African woman or another guy. Marriage you can't make, you know, unless you're a guy with a good job."

"Yeah . . ." Charlie casts his eyes at the white marble floors and dark woodwork that seems to be used in almost every modest apartment block in Jeddah.

"So, Charlie, I am sure you did not come here to talk about

this. You probably know all of it already anyway. What do you want?” asks Khalid, standing back and widening his eyes as if he wants to assess Charlie’s answer.

“Oh . . . I was just thinking about a few things, and thought that I might drive over and say hello.”

“Like what were you thinking about?” Without his coveralls and trashed safety shoes, and wearing a *thobe*, Khalid looks like a thousand other Saudis. His hair is neatly brushed and he smells of good cologne. “It must be something serious. If I lived in a compound in Al Khalidia with swimming pools and girls in bikinis, I don’t think I’d go to a dirty place like Al Kandarrah in my free time.”

Charlie smiles. The dark, cutting eyes of the young Saudi reveal nothing to him.

“Well, Khalid, I guess it is a bit serious.”

“Yeah. What is it?”

Charlie takes a step forward. “Tell me what’s in the box.”

“What box?” asks Khalid, smiling.

“*The box you told me to put on the aircraft.*”

“Did I tell you to put a box on the aircraft? No way. I think you have me confused with someone else, Charlie.” Khalid looks at Charlie with the mocking confidence of an arrogant policeman.

Charlie glances down the hall. This is the only apartment on this floor. “Khalid, don’t start playing the prick with me now. It’s late and I’m tired. Just answer the fucking question and I’ll be out of your hair. You can go right back to your family.” Charlie wipes some sweat from his head.

“Are you under a lot of stress or something these days? Or maybe you’re shining that bald head too much and burning your brain, because I don’t have any idea about a box on an aircraft.”

“Fuck you, Khalid.” In a single motion, Charlie takes another step forward, and with full Texas macho force grabs Khalid by the fabric of his *thobe*. Unfortunately, the action comes simultaneously with several short puffs from Charlie’s backside, which dramatically reduces the effect of the attack—

“What is this shit!” With more strength and will than Charlie

would have ever imagined, the wiry Arab throws Charlie's hands off and shoves him away. "You have fucking bad manners."

Khalid brushes the wrinkles out of his *thobe*. "Go back to your compound, count your money, and . . ." Khalid sniffs. "Man—are you sick or what?"

"A little. It's from eating your cooking—*falaafil* and *shawermah*."

"That's not my cooking." A disgusted sneer leers within Khalid's smile. "How long have you been here and you don't know that's Lebanese? Am I Lebanese?"

"Who gives a shit. I didn't come to talk to you about Arab cuisine—"

"Of course not. You're American. You don't *give a shit*. All you like to do is drive around in big cars, eat junk food, and . . ." Khalid smiles. "And make a bad smell—"

"Listen, Khalid, let's forget the food and farts for a minute. Just put my fuckin' mind at rest and tell me what's in the goddamn box."

"I am sorry, Charlie. But *what box?!?*"

"Don't fuckin' start again!"

"Start *what?!?* I really don't know what you're—"

"Stop giving me this shit, Khalid, or I'll be back with the police—"

"Are you an idiot?! You'll be the first one they lock up! You want to be in a jail here?"

"I don't give a shit. I'd rather be in jail here than be a murderer—"

"*Murderer?!?*" Khalid repeats it so quickly that it seems he could have been expecting it. "What the fuck are you talking about? What did *you* put on the aircraft?! Did you wear gloves?" Khalid laughs.

"No."

"That was stupid." The more Khalid smiles, the more he appears to be getting pissed off. "Since it seems you're joking, I will continue the joke. Did you look inside the box? If I were to put a box somewhere it shouldn't be, I think I'd look in the box."

“Yeah. I looked inside. It was coke—”

“*Coca-Cola?! That’s a funny thing to hide on an aircraft . . . Was it diet or with sugar? Did you get paid for that? I mean you don’t just hide anything someone asks you to in an aircraft, do you? That would be very stupid, to hide things on jets and not get paid.*” Khalid scratches his head. “How much did you get for hiding some Cokes on the plane?”

“You know how much,” says Charlie. His arms are crossed across his chest. “Just tell me that coke was the only thing in the goddamn box.”

Khalid takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “Well, Charlie, this is really bullshit. *Ya’nee*. I have lost respect for you. Tch . . . You took money to put something on an aircraft, and you go around talking about it to people. It makes me wonder who else you spoke to. I’m sure anyone asking you to do this *job* asked you not to speak to anyone. To forget you did this. Tch. I thought you were a straight guy.”

Charlie tilts his head. “I am a straight guy, smart ass.” Charlie’s lip curls as he speaks. “If I say I’m going to do something, I mean it and I do it. You know that from the hangar—”

Khalid holds up his index finger and waves it. “But you are not in the hangar now, Mr. Charlie, American. You’re not at your *little job*. You’re in the big world—”

“No shit, Khalid. That’s why I’ve come here. To make sure there was not false bottom in that box. To make sure that I am the straight man that I am.”

“Bravo, Charlie.” Khalid claps his hands, laughing, then steps closer, puts his arm around Charlie’s shoulder, and gives him a hug. “I’m sure anyone working with a straight guy like you would be straight.” Khalid nods his head approvingly. “This crazy world, it makes us paranoid. I would not worry at all about this. But . . .” Khalid looks into Charlie’s eyes. “Also, I would not speak of it at all, either. Coke is very, very, very serious. You know, all Arabs here . . . They prefer Pepsi.”

“Oh . . .” Charlie feels back to normal—helpless.