



MICHELE RIGBY ASSAD

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BREAKING COVER

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MY SECRET LIFE IN THE CIA
and WHAT IT TAUGHT ME *about*
WHAT'S WORTH FIGHTING FOR



I was always comfortable relying on Ms. Assad's exceptional substantive expertise and commitment to her colleagues and our mission when we served together in an overseas war zone. Ms. Assad's deeply introspective account of her CIA career, faith, and humanitarian work is an exciting read with firsthand insightful observations of the war-torn Middle East and valuable lessons learned, which readers will cherish.

DANIEL HOFFMAN

Retired senior CIA officer

Michele Rigby Assad's *Breaking Cover* is an absolutely amazing read! It will grab your attention on every single page as you follow Michele's remarkable journey working as a spy for the CIA. Even as someone who spent three years undercover for the FBI at a Fortune 500 company during the investigation of one of the largest white-collar crime cases in US history, I was amazed at Michele's courage and perseverance as she fought terrorism in the most dangerous part of the world, the Middle East. I was especially touched at how she inspires us all. Michele Rigby Assad is a modern-day hero! Her book will inspire you to do more for your community, your country, and your society, and to live a life of significance.

MARK WHITACRE, PhD

Subject of the Warner Brothers movie *The Informant!*, starring Matt Damon as Mark Whitacre

The first time I met Michele, I was struck by her fashionista style, her quick wit, bright smile, and immense knowledge of the Middle East. She quickly proved herself to be a hard worker, a savvy ops officer, and an outside-of-the-box thinker. Her vivid descriptions of her life and travels with the CIA are very authentic, very personal, and a great read. The day Michele told me she was leaving the Agency, she explained that she felt a calling to do something impactful for women, and though she didn't know what that was going to be, she

knew it would be significant. Her story is a riveting one. Although I can neither confirm nor deny that I worked with Michele, I can tell you she is a great patriot with a great faith who will continue to blaze trails wherever she goes.

FORMER COWORKER

Breaking Cover is an authentic and honest look into a world that operates all around us, but to which most are oblivious. Michele Rigby Assad masterfully shares the soul-baring tale of her life, from small-town Southern girl to fierce intelligence operative challenging evil face-to-face. This story is not a simple autobiography, but a story of how one individual—walking in humility and faith, recognizing that life is not about her, and willing to risk it all to serve her fellow man—changed and saved an untold number of lives. One thing is certain: *Breaking Cover* is just the beginning of Assad's story. The best is yet to come.

SUSAN RICHMOND JOHNSON

Managing principal, The Ashcroft Group LLC; former chief of staff for management, US Department of Homeland Security

Bold, beautiful, and brave, Michele Rigby Assad's *Breaking Cover* is a must-read. She grants readers rare access into what it's like to spend over a decade as an undercover officer in the CIA through riveting accounts of navigating life and work as a woman in war zones across the Middle East. Michele also lets us in on a bigger secret: She never felt like she was the secret agent type. Her courageous stories of resilience, faith, and grace will inspire millions of women (and men) to press on despite self-doubt, and to keep moving forward even in the face of fear.

JENNY BLAKE

Author of *Pivot: The Only Move That Matters Is Your Next One*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



A number of names and biographical details in this book have been altered to protect the identities of CIA sources, agency officers, and others who could be adversely affected by being associated with former CIA intelligence officers. Though the specifics of operations have been blurred, I have done my best to retain the details of my experiences, while changing enough information to protect sources, locations, and methods.

Thankfully, I documented many of my overseas adventures for personal as well as work purposes. During my first deployment in 2003, I started keeping a journal and shared many of those stories with a small group of family and friends. Regarding the evacuation, I kept notes on the interviews conducted at Mar Elia Church in Erbil, Iraq. Furthermore, I was able to refer back to a bevy of e-mails and cell phone texts to remember dates and specifics of that effort. The names and some identifying details of the potential evacuees we interviewed at Mar Elia have been changed to protect their privacy.

CIA operations included in the book were initially captured in agency cables in which I documented meeting dynamics, intelligence acquisition, and counterintelligence flags, as well as my findings and assessments. Since I am no longer employed by the CIA, I do not

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have access to those files and have had to recall those situations from memory. As a former employee, I obtained CIA clearance of the manuscript to ensure that no equities, such as sources or methods, would be harmed through the publication of this material.

PROLOGUE



ERBIL, IRAQ

SEPTEMBER 2015

“Why do you want to leave Iraq?”

The frightened family of six stared at us quizzically.

“Don’t you already know what happened to us?” asked Danial, the father. “We thought that was why you’re here.”

He was right. That *was* why we were there. Over the course of the past week, my husband, Joseph, and I had interviewed more than four hundred Christians who had been driven from their homes by Islamic extremists and were now anxiously seeking asylum outside Iraq.

While many Muslims were also suffering, Christians were far more vulnerable. When ISIS or other Islamic insurgents took over a city, the Christians were ordered to leave their homes or convert. Many fled—but then had nowhere to go. They knew that Christians who sought refuge at UN camps were often intimidated, attacked, or persecuted in other ways.

“We want to know what happened to *your* family specifically,” I told Danial. “If we are going to find a safe country willing to take you in, we must know the details of your stories so we can explain why these governments should help.”

What I didn’t tell him was that Joseph and I were also vetting those

we interviewed. Our job was to ensure that there weren't any elements of ISIS or other extremist groups in the mix—anyone who could pose a threat, now or in the future, to countries willing to provide them refuge. As former CIA counterterrorism and counterintelligence specialists, we had the perfect backgrounds for such an undertaking.

By this point in the week, after meeting with hundreds of people, Joseph and I were beyond exhausted. We had to turn off our feelings in order to get through the interviews, which were filled with one dramatic story after another. We didn't have the physical or emotional bandwidth to process the depth of the tragedy these people, and hundreds of thousands like them, had endured. There was a job to do, and we had to get through it, tired or not.

That is what I told myself, anyway. At times, it was impossible not to respond to the utter desperation evident in so many faces. Not long before my interview with Danial, I'd sat across from a young husband and his wife. We had barely begun the interview process when their little boy began squirming on his mother's lap. Soon he was not only struggling to get down, but he became quite vocal, breaking the conversation with the chatty disruptions of a bored toddler. Both parents snapped at him, desperately trying to rein him in.

As I read the panic in his mother's eyes, I realized how terrified they were that their son might be jeopardizing the interview. I got out of my chair, knelt down in front of the mother, took the little boy's hand in mine, and asked, "*Kifak habibi? Ismak eh? Kam omrak?*" ("How are you, my love? What's your name? How old are you?")

Both parents told me his name was George, and his mother helped hold up three of his fingers to indicate his age. While I focused on the boy, squeezing his adorably chubby cheeks, faint smiles appeared on the family's anxious faces. I grabbed a plastic toy car from the table behind me and handed it to George.

As I noticed his parents visibly relax, I was struck again by the unfairness of the situation. This little boy was one of millions of Iraqis displaced by war. In a way, he was fortunate—he had lost only his

home; his immediate family was still intact. Now his father and mother were desperately trying to get them out. They had no idea who we were or exactly what we were doing—only that we were working to find a safe haven in another country for one hundred or more Iraqis.

After concluding our interview with George's parents, we'd conducted several others without incident. The interview with Danial and his family proceeded like those before it until the family's eighteen-year-old daughter, Miriam, asked, "Can I please add my fiancé, Hamad, to the file? He is a convert from Islam to Christianity, and we are in danger if we stay here in Iraq."

"Where is Hamad now?" Joseph asked.

"He lives with his family here in Erbil," she explained.

That's odd, I thought. Most Muslim families are not at *all* accepting when one of their members rejects Islam.

"They are not happy about his conversion," she continued. "But he's not in trouble with them so much as ISIS."

"Why is that?" Joseph asked.

"Hamad's mother used to be a Christian. She converted to Islam when she married a Muslim man many years ago. When ISIS took over Mosul where they resided, ISIS was looking for people to shake down for money. Even though she was a Muslim convert, ISIS heard that she was formerly a Christian who still had Christian family members, so they kidnapped her and demanded a ransom. Hamad was frantic to free his mother, so he sold one of his kidneys. He sent the money he received to the kidnappers, and they released her."

What? I leaned forward in my chair. "Wait a minute. Your fiancé sold his *kidney* to pay a ransom for his mother?"

"Yes."

Joseph and I exchanged furtive glances. There was something very fishy about this story, and the more questions we asked, the stranger it got.

I suddenly had a flashback to my CIA days, in which we'd heard some really tall tales in the debriefing room. Experience had shown

that the more far-fetched the story, the more likely it was to be a fabrication. But every now and then, a source would tell us something outrageous that we didn't initially believe but that would turn out to be shockingly true. Which one was this?

We needed to determine whether Hamad had *really* converted to Christianity. Was he a brave man willing to risk death for his new-found faith, was he just a liar seeking a way out of Iraq, or was he an Islamic extremist parading as a Christian convert to gain entry into another country?

What had begun like dozens of other interviews that week had taken an ominous turn. If we incorrectly sized up this man's intentions, we might be sentencing him to death at the hands of ISIS—but if he were somehow allied with them, we might be jeopardizing the lives of countless innocent people.

My stomach tightened as I looked back at Miriam's face, willing her to reveal something more about this man. She remained inscrutable, her eyes downcast, her hands folded demurely in her lap.

"Miriam," Joseph said. She glanced at him shyly. "We will need to speak with Hamad. Please ask him to come by this evening." She gave a quick nod.

Hours later, Joseph and I were back at the trailer that served as our office, waiting for the couple to arrive. My mind raced as I tried to put the pieces together.

The sound of heavy footsteps on the trailer steps, followed by the squeak of the door, made me look up. Miriam walked in first, trailed by a passive-faced young man.

On the surface, Hamad seemed just like any of the hundreds of other men we had interviewed—quiet, and with a vacant expression that resulted from utter defeat, from not being able to provide for or protect their families.

But Hamad was single. He didn't have a family to protect or provide for. The vacancy in his eyes was not one of embarrassment or failure; it was . . . *something else*.

Something was off about this guy *and* his story. I wasn't sure what it was, but I had every confidence that Joseph and I would get to the bottom of it. After all, this is why we had come to Iraq. This is what we had been trained for. We knew what converts looked and acted like, and we knew what terrorists looked and acted like. If this guy *was* bad news, we'd figure it out soon enough.

As Hamad sank down into the chair across from us, a rush of adrenaline coursed through my veins. *This guy doesn't know who he is up against.* Joseph and I stole a quick glance at each other. Neither of us showed the slightest trace of emotion, but the feeling was palpable.

We've got this.

CHAPTER 1

THE SPY NEXT DOOR

I never dreamed of becoming a spy. My dreams were for a much more pedestrian future: a comfortable home in the suburbs, a good, solid career, a couple of kids, and a white picket fence.

In fact, if you had told me twenty years ago that my calling would involve traveling to war zones or dealing with insurgents, I would have thought you were crazy. I wasn't exposed to such things growing up.

My dad, a traveling life insurance salesman, was on the road a lot, and my mom stayed home with me and my little sister, Julie. When I was six, my family followed my maternal grandparents from rural Pennsylvania to Mount Plymouth, Florida, a little town in the center of the state. We lived in "the sticks," which meant we were surrounded by cow pastures, orange groves, pine forests, and swamp-land. Sturdy oak trees dripping with Spanish moss and a tiny lake full of lily pads and reeds—not to mention herons, turtles, frogs, alligators, and water moccasins—added to the wild beauty of that rural setting.

Though I never strayed far from home as a child, I occasionally got glimpses of the wider world. Our neighbor Gladys paid Julie

and me to water her plants each summer while she was on vacation. I would skip over to the house and water the dozens of houseplants. Before returning home, I'd sit on the floor in front of Gladys's bookcase and spend hours pulling issues of *National Geographic* off the shelf and carefully paging through their colorful, glossy spreads. I was transfixed. The cultures were so intriguing to me, and their strangeness made me ache for the rest of the experience: the sights, sounds, and smells that would accompany such forays into the unknown.

Occasionally missionaries would visit our little country church to talk about their work in other cultures. Julie and I still remember a few words in Portuguese thanks to the visiting missionaries who taught us a gospel song in that language. Being able to "learn" a foreign language left a lasting impression on me.

Still, the fact remained: My family was simple and didn't discuss politics, debate international affairs, or opine on world events. We were blissfully ignorant of military conflicts and foreign coups d'état. The only inkling I had that a crazy world existed out there was back in the eighties when I started seeing television broadcasts about hijackings of passenger airplanes.

I remember asking my mom, "Do you think it's possible *we* could ever get hijacked?"

"Oh, honey," she said, "you have nothing to worry about. It's only flights in the Middle East that get hijacked, and you'll never go there."

For sure, I thought, *I'll never go there*. (Spoiler alert: Never say never.)

Those who grew up with me and knew me as a sweet, southern girl are probably still shocked that I would even apply to the CIA. After all, how could the little ballerina voted homecoming queen—the girl who openly and frequently talked about her faith—get involved in clandestine activities that required such manipulation and deceit?

Michele Rigby, international spy.

It was—to say the least—a wild contradiction.

But as it turns out, that is *exactly* what the CIA was looking for.

Like most people, my only context for the CIA and its work was what I knew from TV and movies, so I had no idea what was real and what was fiction. All I knew was that it seemed like a place where only the world's most sophisticated and smartest human beings applied—not normal people like me.

Regardless, when the career center at Georgetown University announced that CIA representatives were coming to discuss job opportunities at the secretive organization, my curiosity got the better of me—even though I *knew* I wasn't the type of person they were looking for. So . . . like a meek little nun, I entered the library with my head bowed low and quickly took a seat in the back corner of the room.

After all, I reasoned, it can't hurt just to listen, right? What do I have to lose?

I was finishing up my final year of graduate school at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, and as much as I would love to say I had a clear career path in mind, the truth is, I had no idea what I wanted to do. And don't let the Arab studies focus fool you. My interest in the Middle East was more personal than professional.

In addition to being a floundering grad student, I was a newlywed.

I had met my husband, Joseph, during my senior year of high school. As a cheerleader, I often held get-togethers at my house after football games, and one night, one of my classmates brought along a young man from Egypt whom his church had been helping. His name was Joseph Assad, and he was unlike anyone I had ever met before.

We all sat with rapt attention as he told us what it was like to grow up in a part of Egypt that had given birth to a virulent form of Islamic extremism. He described the experience of being threatened by classmates whose parents were members of secret terrorist cells in the city and of being deliberately blocked from entering the university (or any college) in Egypt because he was Christian.

Though it's embarrassing to admit, prior to meeting Joseph,

I didn't even know that Egypt was a country. To me, it was just an ancient civilization, a historic land that I saw on the History Channel and read about in the Bible. Nor did I know that there were Christians in the Middle East, or that they had been so brutally persecuted for centuries.

Joseph's story amazed me. Having lived a remarkably sheltered life, I was astonished to meet someone who, at the age of nineteen, already knew what it meant to stand strong in the face of such intense intimidation. This wasn't just being picked on by the mean girls at lunch. This was life and death, and I was utterly and completely stricken. As I sat listening to Joseph share his testimony, I thought, *I want to marry someone just like that.*

Five years later, I did.

Joseph opened my eyes to a world I never knew existed. Shortly after we met, we traveled to Egypt as part of a mission team sponsored by Campus Ministries at Palm Beach Atlantic University. Despite all the drama in the region, my parents agreed to let me go. They trusted God, and they knew that he would take care of me. Looking back, it was incredibly brave to let their eldest daughter travel to the far side of the world, where the only thing dicier than being a woman was being a Christian. But they had the courage and the spiritual discernment to let go.

I, on the other hand, was the picture of naiveté. With no idea of the challenges before me, I jumped into this new adventure with the enthusiasm that only the young and inexperienced can muster. No one warned me of the intense heat, the swarming flies, the blood-hungry mosquitoes, or how hard it is to communicate with people who speak a different language. Almost immediately, the romantic notions I had created in my mind of how amazing this trip would be were replaced by the harsh reality of puking my guts out and nearly passing out from the heat and stress of physical labor.

During that trip, I saw things that I'd never seen before: gun-

wielding soldiers on every other street corner, women shrouded in *hijabs* and suffocating black *abayas*, villagers washing their pots and pans in the Nile, donkey carts hauling their wares to market, and mud-brick homes situated along dusty, pockmarked roads.

We were enveloped by a world starkly different from our own. Had we known what we were getting into, some of us probably would not have signed up for the trip. Thank God I set off unaware, or I would never have received the blessings of being a member of that team. Not only did I learn a lot about myself and my faith, the trip made me realize how little I knew and how much there was to discover in this great big, beautiful world.

The following fall, I enrolled at Palm Beach Atlantic, where Joseph was beginning his sophomore year. Eventually I chose to major in political science. That gave me the opportunity, three years later, to return to Egypt as part of a study abroad program. In addition to studying politics, culture, religion, history, and the Arabic language, I had the chance to climb Mount Sinai, go scuba diving in the Red Sea, explore the great pyramids of Giza, meander through the busy stalls of the historic Khan al-Khalili market, watch the whirling dervishes in Old Cairo, tour the world's oldest Christian monasteries, and even star in an Egyptian television advertisement for Eva skin care products. (I was "discovered" by a television producer in an ice cream shop.)

We also spent three weeks in Israel and Palestine studying one of the hottest and most contested topics of the early nineties. The Oslo Accords had just been signed, and intense negotiations were continuing in an effort to keep both sides engaged and the process moving forward in a constructive manner. We met with political leaders, community organizers, and educators on every side of the issue. The briefings we received were sobering and insightful, taking on even more meaning as we made our way across Israel and the West Bank. The issues weren't theoretical but flashed regularly in front of our eyes. We could see the problems, and we could feel the tension as we

explored the contentious Temple Mount and the Jewish, Arab, and Armenian Quarters of Jerusalem's Old City.

We also sailed across the Sea of Galilee, peered over the mountains of the Golan Heights into Lebanon and Syria, and followed the footsteps of Jesus in Bethlehem, Galilee, and Jerusalem. It was the education of a lifetime.

There is no question that traveling to the Middle East irrevocably changed the course of my life. The differences between my value system and the worldviews of the various Egyptians, Palestinians, and Israelis I interacted with made me hungry to understand them. What influenced their thinking, and what factors shaped their outlooks on life? I wanted to unlock the mysteries of human behavior and understand other people's frames of reference.

The summer after I graduated from Palm Beach Atlantic, we married and moved to Washington, DC, where Joseph began working as a Middle East research director at a think tank focused on human rights and democracy. At the same time, he worked on acquiring a master's degree at George Mason University in conflict analysis and resolution. Joseph's experience testifying before the US Congress and the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva and focus on conflict and diplomacy in the graduate program prompted him to consider a career working for the government. To this end, he took the foreign service exam that is required to become a diplomat at the State Department. While awaiting the results of the exam, he began applying for similar jobs that could take advantage of his unique background, experience, and education.

Three months after moving to Washington, DC, I obtained a job working as an administrative assistant in the government relations department of a humanitarian organization before enrolling in Georgetown's Arab studies program. Naturally, my family and friends wanted to understand my plans for the future. "What will you do with an Arab studies degree?" they asked.

My answer didn't exactly induce confidence. "I'm not sure."

I knew that the degree was a stepping-stone to a variety of careers in journalism or with a think tank, the government, or an international organization. But what *I* would do with it? I had no idea. I just felt this insanely strong pull to study the Middle East. Travels to the region had whetted my appetite, and I had a burning desire to dig deeper, to learn more.

And so I did what I had always done: I heeded the urge deep within my soul, the feeling that I just had to take a particular course of action. I had made a decision very early on in my life that I would follow God's lead no matter where it took me. That visceral sense of direction had never led me astray, so I listened to it. Two years later, that same urging led me to the back of a crowded library to listen to a CIA representative describe a career path I would never have imagined for myself.

I don't remember much about what the recruiter said that day, but I definitely did not leave that room thinking I was the type of person the CIA was looking for.

Later that afternoon, while inserting my résumé in various recruitment files, I saw a box in the career center with a sign on it that read, "CIA: Place Résumés Here." Hundreds of hopeful applicants had flooded the box with their résumés. I threw mine on top. I don't know why I did that, other than the fact that I desperately needed a job. I was applying for any and all job opportunities.

A couple of weeks later I received a telephone call from a woman saying she was a hiring coordinator at the CIA. The agency had reviewed my résumé and liked what they saw. Now they were inviting me to a personal interview.

I was floored. *Out of all of those résumés, they picked mine? How is that possible?* I spent days preparing for that interview, but what I could not prepare for was the strange sensation of driving up to the gates of the massive, intimidating compound located in Langley, Virginia.

I swerved off Route 123 toward the main entrance and carefully

followed the signs that separated the visitor line from the employee entrance. With great caution, I pulled up next to the guard gate to check in as I had been instructed. As I handed over my identification to the security officers, my heart felt as if it were beating out of my chest. I thought of Charlie, standing at the iron gates of the great chocolate factory preparing to enter the impenetrable fortress. Like him, I had gotten the Golden Ticket, and I was gaining admission to a place that I had only seen in the movies. The security officers were curt, further adding to the distinct sensation that I was utterly out of place, infringing on a top-secret facility that I really shouldn't have access to.

Despite my nervousness, the interview inside the great building went extremely well. The woman who interviewed me was intelligent and friendly. Soon thereafter, I received a conditional offer of employment to become a leadership analyst at the CIA.

The position is described online in this way:

Leadership analysts . . . are responsible for providing U.S. policymakers and other relevant decision makers with assessments and analyses of foreign leaders and legislators/representatives, as well as other key members in the science and technology, social, cultural, economic, and military fields. . . . Leadership analysis is best defined as studying all facets of leaders, including their psychological components. This field of study, which is often seen as an offshoot of political psychology, utilizes the tools of psychology by exploiting the psychological traits of the individual in questions [sic]. Leadership analysts use this study of the psyche to analyze the leader's character traits within the context of society and culture.¹

How they looked at my résumé and decided I was the perfect fit for this job, I have no idea. But then, who was I to question the CIA?

The offer was contingent on my ability to pass the polygraph test, medical examinations, psychological examinations, and a background investigation, all of which I was somehow able to schedule and complete while finishing up my degree.

In May 2000, I graduated from Georgetown with a master's degree from the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. This had not come easily. The Arab studies program did not confer the degree until students passed the dreaded Arabic proficiency test, which included a written and verbal examination. But all the effort (including the Arabic-induced headaches) was worth it because I was going to work for the CIA!

Or so I thought. A week before my start date, I received an odd letter in the mail. It was from the agency, but it wasn't thick like all the other correspondence I'd received from them. The envelope contained one sheet of paper, a short message on CIA letterhead that said, "You no longer meet the requirements for this position at the CIA." The job offer had been rescinded. Bam. No explanation. Just like that. Gone.

My head was swimming. *What did I do wrong? Why do I no longer meet their requirements? What requirements are they referring to? What does this mean? What could I possibly have done to have jeopardized this job?*

After all the time and effort I'd spent to get a degree from Georgetown and secure the job, all I was left holding was a cold, impersonal rejection letter. I was devastated.

Maybe they are right, I thought. Maybe I'm not a fit for the CIA after all, because I sure didn't see this coming.

The next day, even though I was still in shock, I started my job search from scratch. I applied to every foreign affairs, think tank, advocacy, and intelligence-related job in the Washington, DC, area. Rejection after rejection piled into my in-box. Everyone seemed to have plenty of experts on the Middle East. The organizations and agencies that did have openings wanted people with years of

experience. It's the conundrum every new graduate faces: How are you supposed to get experience if nobody is willing to give you a chance?

I would never want to repeat this period of my life. I was flooded with depression and insecurity. My chances of getting a job seemed just as impossible now as they had five years ago when I showed up in DC with a basic college degree. Despite my having obtained a graduate degree from a top school, nothing seemed to have changed. I was back to looking for temp jobs, competing against people who'd never been to college. I was placed in support roles under the direction of other recent graduates who had slid into these amazing positions. What did all these new graduates have that I did not? Why could they get jobs and I couldn't?

Every prayer I lifted up to God seemed to hang in the air, unheard or unanswered. In the silence I prayed, "God, where are you?" and "God, please show me where to go."

No answer.

The lack of direction made me feel empty, scared, and unsure of myself, wondering whether God had even heard me or was withholding something fabulous from me. Little did I know that he was moving the chess pieces where they needed to be, setting the stage for my future.