



TAPS

to the Soul

KIMBERLEE R. MENDOZA

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landscape fly by.**

An Iraqi couple strolled along the road, followed by a donkey carrying wood. The man was draped in an ankle-length white disdasha, typical of Iraqi men. The woman wore a black burqa, though her face showed. Both eyed the trucks, no emotion visible other than curiosity.

After several checkpoints, they pulled into a town. Buildings reduced to shambles surrounded them. Old trucks and cars lined the dirt street and chaos of bartering people clattered on every street corner. The caravan crept through the town. Several eyes watched from burned out windows.

Star realized she wasn't breathing and exhaled aloud. *Jesus. Jesus.* She was afraid to close her eyes, but her spirit prayed. Something stirred on a nearby rooftop. She flinched. Her heart stopped. She tried to focus. And exhaled again. *Only a broom. Just a broom.*

"Are you okay?" Boyd asked.

Reviews

Ms. Mendoza is winner of the 2006 San Diego Christian Writer's Sherwood Eliot Wirt Writer of the Year Award.

Her REVEILLE OF THE HEART was a *Night Owl Romance* Reviewer "Top Pick" and got Five Stars from *Romance Studio*: "It was an incredible book which I am pleased to recommend highly!"

"Kimberlee R Mendoza manages what many Christian writers can't, to use religion in a story without coming across preachy."

~*Dakota Rebel, Sensual Reads and Reviews*

"Mendoza writes with the mind of a chess champion. She's always at least three moves ahead of her reader."

~*Paul McShane, Good News*

"Ms. Mendoza shows the reality of life, with trials and heartache, through her characters, giving them a highly believable quality that her readers will remember long after they read the last page."

~*Bluegrass Romance Reviews*

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by

Kimberlee R. Mendoza

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To my Grandpa Leland Vandeventer
(an Army veteran),
my “Army Dad” SSG Doug Weih,
and to the POW/MIA, and all the military overseas.
Come home safe!

The History of *Taps*

There is much speculation on where the twenty-four-note bugle song came from. Here are two versions:

Some believe it started when General Butterfield decided he didn't like the song *Extinguish Lights* because of its formal tone. The song *Taps* was then written on the back of an envelope by one of his Confederate relatives during a truce and handed off to Butterfield.

Others believe the legend that in 1862, during the Civil War, Captain Robert Ellicombe of the Union Army rescued a soldier and pulled him to their camp. When he reached his own side, he realized the man was a Confederate soldier. He lit a lantern and discovered it was his own son. When he asked permission to give a full military burial to his son, the request was denied. They instead offered only one band member to play at his funeral. The Captain chose a bugler to play a series of notes found in his son's uniform.

Taps Lyrics

*Day is done, Gone the sun
From the lakes, From the hills, From the sky.
All is well, Safely rest. God is nigh.
Fading light, Dims the sight
And a star, Gems the sky, Gleaming bright
From afar, Drawing nigh, Falls the night.
Thanks and praise, For our days,
Neath the sun, Neath the stars, Neath the sky,
As we go, This we know, God is nigh.*

Since the Civil War, the haunting sound of *Taps* is not only played at funerals but is also played at the completion of each day as the flag is lowered. It is the universal sound that signals to all U.S. Army soldiers that all is well.

Chapter One

Elena Star Mellor stared across the sand dunes of the Iraqi desert. The setting sun cast a purple hue across the horizon. The slight sound of *Taps* played in the distance.

“Specialist Mellor?”

Star turned sharply and saluted. “Yes, sir?”

Captain Gardner offered a tight smile under his white mustache and returned her salute. “Command has just informed me that you’re to join the 309th. They’re moving out in the morning.”

“But I just got here.”

“It’s not up for debate.” The captain lifted his cleft chin; his stare indicated her fight would be in vain.

She sighed. “I know. It’s orders.”

“Good luck, soldier.” He walked to the mess tent and slipped under the flap.

Great. Another move. This would be the third time they switched her unit since coming to Iraq. The first time she didn’t mind so much. She’d been dating a guy in her unit and he dumped her for a girl back home. That time, Star almost kissed the sergeant who gave her the news. This time, not so much. She had just started to make friends and liked the out-of-harm’s-way location.

“Excuse me, Specialist?”

“Yeah?” She spun around.

A private first-class stood behind her, adjusting his cavalier helmet. When her gaze met his, he pointed to a vehicle a few yards away. "The 309th convoy is moving out at 1700. I was told to have you grab your gear and join me."

She furrowed her brow. "But I just talked to the captain. He said tomorrow."

The guy shrugged. "That was the orders."

Star sighed. No use fighting it. She never won. "I'll be back."

"Twenty minutes."

She waved over her shoulder indicating that she knew and then walked to her tent. Her bunkmates were all out on duty. She wouldn't even get to say good-bye. She quickly stuffed all of her belongings in a green duffel bag and glanced around. It was so unfair that they kept moving her. No questions asked, just do it is the Army way. She sighed. Some big wig had his reasons. She tightened the string on her pack and lifted it onto her back, then pulled the strap of her duffel over her shoulder and stood. For a second, she wondered if she should leave a note. No, they'd know. She ducked under the tent doorway and handed her stuff to the private.

She glanced at his nametag—PFC Boyd. "I'm ready if you are."

"Good." He checked his watch. "We're supposed to join the convoy in less than five minutes."

"How far are they?"

He pointed past a building on their right. "On the other side. Let's go."

She climbed in the Humvee and slammed the door. Instantly, her apprehension rose. Anytime she went anywhere in this country, her stomach churned worse than it did on a Ferris wheel ride. One of her

friends almost died in a roadside bomb at one of the checkpoints. She'd been on edge ever since.

The engine roared to life. The tires spit dirt as they drove onto the road. Within a yard of the camp, she spotted a row of trucks and armored vehicles.

"That's quite a caravan. Is your whole unit relocating?"

"We're being moved to the front."

Her heart plummeted to her stomach. "I'm sorry. The front?" Was there a front to this war? She tried to swallow. What did that mean? Nothing good. The dust filtered in the windows and clogged her throat. She coughed, wheezing, trying to find her bearings. *Lord, help me.*

Boyd pulled in behind the next to the last truck. The order to move out came only a moment later. The caravan crept around the winding road.

Out the side window, Star watched the dusty landscape fly by.

An Iraqi couple strolled along the road, followed by a donkey carrying wood. The man was draped in an ankle-length white disdasha, typical of Iraqi men. The woman wore a black burqa, though her face showed. Both eyed the trucks, no emotion visible other than curiosity.

After several checkpoints, they pulled into a town. Buildings reduced to shambles surrounded them. Old trucks and cars lined the dirt street and chaos of bartering people clattered on every street corner. The caravan crept through the town. Several eyes watched from burned out windows.

Star realized she wasn't breathing and exhaled aloud. *Jesus. Jesus.* She was afraid to close her eyes, but her spirit prayed. Something stirred on a nearby rooftop. She flinched. Her heart stopped. She tried to

focus. And exhaled again. *Only a broom. Just a broom.*

“Are you okay?” Boyd asked.

She clutched the door handle and straightened in her seat. “Yes, I just get nervous when we go through these towns. It doesn’t help that it’s getting dark. Makes it more eerie.”

He adjusted his mirror. “Relax. It’s okay. The infantry swept this town earlier today. We were cleared to pass through.”

Her heart rate started to slow. She rolled her neck side-to-side to ease the tension in her shoulders. *I’ve just got to relax.* “How much farther?”

“We’re about twenty-two clicks away.”

That’s got to be twenty minutes or so. Right? She didn’t want to sound stupid, so she didn’t ask. Red lights flashed from the vehicles in front of them and then the caravan came to a sudden halt.

“Something’s wrong,” the private said.

“What?” Panic rose again in Star’s throat. She rubbed the dirty windshield. “I can’t see anything.”

He shushed her and picked up the radio. “Why have we stopped?”

The radio squawked. “There’s a civilian van blocking our path.”

She leaned out the open passenger window, squinting in the dusk light. The shadow of the lead Humvee appeared inches from a beat-up vehicle. “Great. He’s right. I can see it.”

The piercing sound of gunfire sliced through the night. Screams and the smell of brimstone filled the air. The town’s people ran for cover.

Star fumbled with her rifle and raised it to her chest. She hit the bottom of her magazine to insure it was ready to fire. Her head spun as she labored to

breathe. *I'm not supposed to be here. This isn't my unit. I'm not supposed to be here.*

"Move back!" The order screeched through the radio. "Back now!"

Bullets rattled and sparks flew from the vehicle in front of her.

Head down, Star twisted and peered out the back. The truck behind them wasn't moving. *Why? Why aren't they moving?* "What are we going to do?"

The stalled engine behind them sputtered. How could they back out with the tail car held up?

Boyd seemed amazingly calm. "Hang on." He slammed the Hummer in reverse and hit the gas pedal. Their vehicle hit a parked car, but it didn't seem to deter him. He shifted into drive and stomped on the gas pedal. Their tires screeched, but they didn't move.

Star panicked. "We're stuck!"

"I know. Shh."

The sound of a rocket launcher fizzed through the air. Star spun to the sound. The missile slammed into the stalled rear vehicle. It exploded. The ground shook. Flames poured from the windows.

She clutched her weapon with trembling hands. Blood rushed to her head. She blinked in an attempt to remain conscious. Sweat seeped into her eyes. She wiped them on her sleeve. "Get us out of here!"

Boyd gunned it. The tires spun, but the Humvee still remained.

Star's door flew open. A man wearing a black mask yanked her out. She hit the dirt hard. Pain shot through her shoulder blade.

The man snatched her weapon from her fingers and then shouted words in Arabic to another terrorist farther down. Suddenly, a bullet ripped

through her captor's arm. He clasped his bloody limb, but didn't loosen his grip.

Star snapped her gaze to the truck.

PFC Boyd held an M-16 on the Iraqi, ready to fire again.

A grenade crashed through the windshield, sending glass into Boyd's lap. He seemed to react, but not fast enough. The vehicle exploded.

"No!" Her voice choked.

Her captor yanked hard on the neck of Star's shirt with his good arm, dragging her through the street. Sand poured into her clothes and scraped her exposed skin. She kicked and flailed but couldn't free herself from the man's grasp. Her leg struck something sharp.

She winced.

To her relief, the man stopped.

"Please let me go," she cried.

He brandished a weapon over his head, then brought it down toward her skull. A searing pain and then darkness.

Chapter Two

Wesley picked up the radio. "We have to get out of here, now!" He glanced at the passenger seat. Sergeant Michaels lay slumped against the window, unresponsive, covered in blood.

"Dear Lord, get us out of here."

He cranked the key in the ignition again. The engine whined in complaint.

The driver door flung open and two men in fatigues and black masks yelled at him in Arabic.

Wes held up his hands. *Dear God, please.*

The taller of the two men grasped Wes' arm and hurled him to the ground. The other man pushed Wes face down and stomped on his back. "You stay," he said in a thick accent, before spouting something to his partner.

Wes spit dirt and turned his head, searching for an escape route.

One of the men lifted the butt of a rifle high in the air and before Wes could cover his head, it struck.

Star opened her eyes, but saw nothing. Nothing but darkness. A hood covered her head. Her warm breath hovered around her mouth. She wanted to remove the cloth, but couldn't. Her hands were tied behind her back.

The space was chilly and damp. The smell of mildew hung in the air, probably caused by the dripping sound of pipes.

Trucks exploding. Gunfire. The nightmare played in her mind like a movie. She squeezed her eyes shut to block out the images, but that only made them more intense. Her pulse thundered in her ears. The room, if it was indeed that, remained still.

She shuddered.

Lord, help me. Her leg throbbed and scratches stung her skin everywhere. She couldn't sit flat against the wall and her back began to spasm.

Something deep inside burst her sanity. She started screaming. Tears streamed down her cheeks, wetting the cloth on her face. "Help! Help me!" She rocked side-to-side, tugging at her restraints. They held steady. "Please somebody help!"

A creaking sound, resembling a metal door, opened to her right. Something smashed against her side, knocking the wind from her. She doubled over in pain, unable to grab her aching stomach.

"You, woman, keep quiet," a man said. "You no get hurt."

She couldn't see anything, but heard a thud to her right. A second later, it sounded like the door slammed closed.

I'm going to die. Labored breaths cramped her lungs. Panic laced adrenaline coursed through her veins. Never had she felt this scared. She laid her head to the cement floor and sobbed.

Muffled noises. Arabic voices. Wes could hear them, but couldn't see the source. He struggled to breath. Something lay over his head and his arms

were tied behind his back. The room felt damp and sounded hollow. He shivered, not sure if from being cold or scared.

It sounded like someone sniffed to his left. He turned his head. "Hello," he whispered.

The sniffing stopped.

"Who's there?"

No response.

"I'm Wesley."

The person whispered, but he couldn't make out what he or she said.

He scooted closer. "I didn't catch that. Can you say it again?"

"I'm Star," she rasped.

Using his hands against the wall, he pivoted to face her. "Are you hurt?"

"A little." Scraping sounds indicated she'd moved in his direction.

"What hurts?"

"I think my leg may be cut and it really hurts to breathe."

His skull boiled at their hosts' treatment of her. In his mind's eye, he heard his father saying, "That's not how you treat a lady." Of course, Wes had heard that on many occasions growing up. He wasn't exactly known for his charm. Often women accused him of being too cold, rude, and arrogant. He didn't feel he was any of those things. He considered himself a thinker. Not a touchy-feely guy. Could he help it if most women didn't understand him?

She cleared her throat. "Are you okay?"

He rolled his shoulders, trying to clear the crick in his neck. "I'd be even better if I could take off this hood."

She coughed several times. "I could really use some water."

Wes licked his parched lips. *Me, too.*

"Do you know where we are?" Her voice seemed to waver. He sensed fear. Not that he could blame her. He felt it, too.

"I wish I did. I heard someone talking when I first woke up, but haven't heard anything since. It's awfully quiet here for the city. I assume we're out in the middle of nowhere."

A long silence followed before he heard her softly crying again.

"I'm sorry." He had to change the subject. "Do I know you? I assume you're with my unit."

"I doubt it." She sniveled. "I'd only been assigned when we left."

"Where are you from?"

"California, originally. Stationed in Jersey at Monmouth. You?"

"Texas, Florida, Washington, Hawaii. My dad is in the Navy. My current home is Iraq."

The door creaked open, then pounding of footsteps rushed to his right. They started yelling in Arabic. One spoke broken English. "Up. On feet." Only he wasn't talking to Wes.

Star screamed.

"Leave her alone!"

A fist hit his jaw. The back of his head slammed against the wall. His skull flamed. "Please don't hurt her."

"She not your business."

A kick to his side caused him to double over. He yanked at his tied ropes to no avail.

Her foot knocked Wes as she passed. He heard her sobbing. She sounded frightened, but he couldn't

do anything. Most likely, if he spoke again, it would only agitate them more without delaying them from their objective.

The metal door banged closed and silence engulfed him. He closed his eyes and did the only thing he knew he could do. Pray.

The men threw Star to her knees and ripped the mask from her head. For a second she was disoriented as her eyes adjusted to the light. Her entire body trembled uncontrollably. Sweat collected in her palms and pits, despite how cold she felt. She glanced around the room. A camera sat a few feet in front of her, backed by an enormous black flag with Arabic writing. The walls were clay and the floor cement. She heard men behind her, probably plotting her demise.

Memories of Daniel Pearl haunted her mind. Would they decapitate her on live TV? Was she to be another political example? Her vision blurred. *Jesus, help me. I don't want to die. I wasn't supposed to be here.*

A man came to her side and yanked on her hair, forcing her head back. He reached to the side and withdrew a blade, then cut the rope on her hands. He lifted the knife again. She pinched her eyes shut, not wanting to see what would happen next.

Liquid dripped on her cheek. She opened her eyes. He held a canteen over her mouth.

Sputtering, she drank. Some went down her throat, but most ran off her cheek.

“Enough. Now you help.” The English speaking man was no longer masked. He had no facial hair, his skin dark, and hair black, he looked like any other Middle Eastern man. Nothing special or

significant. She probably couldn't pick him out in a line-up, nor would she think him evil on the street.

"You look there." He pointed to the camera and handed out a white paper. "Read."

She grasped the sheet in her trembling hand and scanned the words; they flowed together in a dark blue blur. The man reached behind his back and pulled out a black mask. He drew it over his head. Another man positioned himself behind the camera and turned it on. A red light blinked at her, fueling her with more anxiety.

The English speaking man spoke in Arabic. Whatever he was saying, he sounded angry. He finished and then pointed to her. "You read."

She lifted the paper and stared at the written words. Several times she blinked to clear her vision. Finally, she began to make out what it said. *Say my name?* For a second, she couldn't remember her own name. "My name, um, is Specialist Mellor. I am okay. I understand that I am..." *How can I say that?* She lowered the paper and glanced at her captor.

He lifted a weapon to his torso and nodded.

"I, um, understand that I am guilty of a crime as are my people." Her voice cracked. "We, the American people, must leave this region. We do not belong here." Nausea swept over her. What would happen if she vomited in front of this audience? "They will trade my freedom for their own. If you retreat, I will be returned to you unharmed. If you do not..." Her breath caught. All of her muscles constricted. She could not finish reading.

The man stepped in front of her. "You do not do this by the end of the week, she will die."

The room swayed around her. Their voices muted in a sea of colors as Star buckled to the floor.