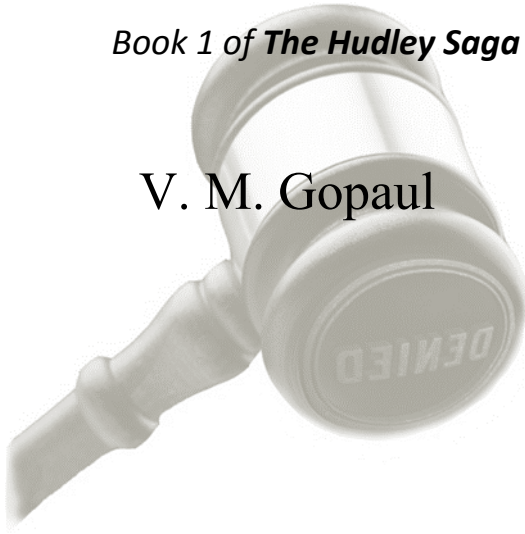


JUSTICE DENIED

*Book 1 of **The Hudley Saga***

V. M. Gopaul



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Praise for *Justice Denied*

An incredible story of true love fighting against all odds, Gopaul has laid bare a harsh reality so few are willing to see.

~ *Infinite Pathways Press*

... a fast moving story that engages the reader instantly. The characters are real and believable and we become immediately immersed in this real moving drama.

~ *Saundra Arnold*

From page one you had my full attention, filled with deep concern for all the characters in peril.

~ *Susan Haines*

As an Iranian individual and particularly because of my religious background, also condemned by the Iranian Government and its religious leaders, I felt very much connected to the story.

~ *Mandana Sabet*

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Chapter 1

An unexpected light flashed off the passenger side-mirror. Orie looked out the window on his right as a Toyota Land cruiser maneuvered into the next lane.

A speaker blared, “Pull over, now.” The flickering white and red beam came from the vehicle’s roof. Mouth half open, Orie grabbed the armrest and squeezed. *This can’t be happening.*

“*Lanatie,*” the curse slipped, thoughtlessly.

Through the Land Cruiser’s window, one of the Ayatollah’s boys from the Army of the Guardians waved his hand, signaling Ahmad to pull over.

Orie felt an uncontrollable shaking to his left. He hit Ahmad on the shoulder and pointing at his friend’s legs, shouted, “Pull yourself together!”

Ahmad’s foot smashed onto the brake pedal; the car jolted to a stop. In the back passenger seats Foad and Kamran spoke the same phrase over and over with their heads lowered, as if praying.

Within seconds, four men empowered by their green khaki uniforms and machine guns surrounded the car, now parked on the side of the road in a business complex.

Now, Orie *did* pray—*Please God, don’t make this the worst day of my life.* Struggling to regain his senses, he gasped for a breath he didn’t realize he held and gripped the armrest tighter.

A stocky man motioned the teens out onto the side walk.

“Empty your pocket,” the Guardian, holding a tray, ordered. Hands dug out coins, bills and pieces of paper.

Another Guardian flung open the glove compartment and shifted through the car maintenance manual. The third checked the trunk, then moved to the front and unlatched the hood.

Leaning forward with his head hovering over the hot engine, the Guard’s eyes tracked the empty spaces as his right hand moved around the engine block, wires, and carburetor.

The forth Guardian unhooked the back seat and ripped off the lining.

What are they looking for? Orie tried to follow every move of the search without being conspicuous. But the Ayatollah boys came out empty handed. The guards surrounded their prey. Orie risked a sigh of frustration.

The stocky Guard faced the youths who huddled together, their backs against two large wall-pictures of the Ayatollahs—a common sight in Tehran.

The Guardian shook his head and said, “Where are you going?”

“To get a movie,” Orie replied.

The man examined the faces in front of him. “Do you go to school?”

“Yes,” the boys said.

“Whose car is this?”

“My father’s,” Ahmad’s voice trembled.

Then the questions changed.

“Are you Muslim?”

Silence fell.

“What are you? *Armeniye*.” In Parsi *Armeniye* was synonymous to Christianity.

“No,” Ahmad said.

The Guardian’s facial muscles tightened. Eyes bulging, he yelled, “What the hell are you?”

Silence.

He scrutinized each of the four boys’ faces one by one. Then he jabbed Kamran’s shoulder with the muzzle of his gun.

“Who are you?”

JUSTICE DENIED

His paled face showed the hopelessness of a rabbit in a lion's den. Orie's childhood friend said one word, barely audible. But the Guardian, two inches from his face, knew it well.

Orie's heart sank. His mouth became dry. *No, no, no.*

"Dirty bastards," the Guardian's voice ground out the words; his stare hardened. "You are under arrest."

All four boys were cuffed and shoved into the cargo area of the cruiser. Crammed into the back of the vehicle, they dared not complain as the SUV carried on through normal, slow Tehran mid-day traffic. The air-conditioning ran full blast to compensate for the heat and humidity, but the boys never felt it.

Not knowing exactly where they were going, thoughts jumbled for prominence in Orie's mind. *Where are they taking us? Will they torture us? Will I see my family again?* The voice of his father echoed restlessly, "*Where is Orie? Where is Orie?*" Just as it did every evening when the man returned home.

His father fondly called him Orie; his full name was Orang Dareini. Abbas Dareini did not have a job, but went out every afternoon as he could not stand being at home listening to his wife complain. Orie's mind clung to those simple, loving memories in an attempt to keep his sanity as he sat between his friends with the promise of a movie and laughter completely gone.

The vehicle stopped in front of a building that looked like a hospital. The boys were yanked from the vehicle and separated. Orie, accompanied by the stocky guard, was taken to an office in the basement. Trapped in the clutches of a hungry vulture.

A stocky agent, calling himself Amin, closed the door and unhooked the cuffs from Orie's hands.

"Sit!"

“Look at me!”

Orie lifted his gaze.

Only the two of them occupied a room barely large enough to house the small veneer-topped table. On one wall pins held up the oversized picture of the living Ayatollah at each corner. A bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling. Other walls held score marks and peeling paint. The air tasted stale.

Amin got on his feet, and with slow steps walked around to the other side of the table and leaned forward.

“You are a dirty people. But don’t worry,”—Amin placed his hand on Orie’s shoulder—“You have a chance to redeem yourself. Think hard on what I am about to offer you.” The words rolled past his lips with unmistakable resolve. He took a deep breath, filling his massive barrel chest, as if to give the young man time to reflect. “Just say that you are a Muslim and you will become clean.” He paused. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

At that moment the haze shrouding Orie’s brain dissipated as his chest filled with the energy of his fierce devotion. Nothing could persuade him to dismiss his beliefs. But he was trapped.

Please God, you don’t have to challenge me this way. Do not force their hand in this matter.

“I don’t have anything against Mohammad. I believe in my religion, too, and live by it. I’m not doing anybody any harm. My parents, God bless them, always taught me and my sisters to be good to others.”

Amin stood, removed the gun from his shoulder, and placed it on the table. Orie’s gaze shifted to the black, scuffed weapon then back to his captor.

“You are still young. This is your only chance. If I were you, I’d take advantage of this opportunity. Think. Think clearly. Think about your future.”

Orie lowered his head, avoiding eye contact with the interrogator. “I am not changing my religion. I won’t say I’m Muslim.” This wouldn’t save his life, but if he was lucky it might just save his soul.

JUSTICE DENIED

Amin shook his head and raised his eyebrows at Orie's resistance. He sank back onto the wooden chair. Pulling open a drawer from the rickety table, he grabbed a pad and pencil, and dropped them squarely on the rusty-brown stain next to his gun.

He fired questions at Orie about his parents, sisters, friends, and neighbors all the while scribbling the boy's answers. The agent circled the details around family names. On a clean sheet, Amin wrote a few paragraphs, then pushed it in front of his subject.

"Sign it."

Orie scanned it. It started with names of his family members, including those living in Iran and the US. When he read the last sentence he shook his head. "This is a confession that I am a Muslim, which I am not. With all due respect, I can't sign this."

For another half-hour the exchange continued. With every question the knot in Orie's stomach grew. Adrenaline-spiked fear rose like mercury in his veins.

Orie held his ground.

Amin's facial muscles tightened with every refusal until the man left the room without warning.

Five minutes later, he and two others re-entered. One guard ordered Orie to step into the corridor. A nurse passed by.

Must be a hospital used by the Army of Guardians.

Amin shoved a white band around Orie's eyes, knotting it at the back of his head. A zip-tie handcuffed both wrists behind his back. Blindfolded, Orie marched out of the basement pushed by the butt of a gun. His shins hit the edge of a vehicle, maybe even the same Land Cruiser he arrived in. He fell into the cargo area.

As each of his friends jostled in beside him, Orie's relief increased, knowing they were still alive. The vehicle drove off.

The Land Cruiser stopped a long while later. Orie had lost all sense of time and place.

“Get out!”

Still blindfolded, one by one, each of the boys were dragged from the vehicle by their shirt collar. A coarse hand led Orie somewhere outside. Far above his head a crow cawed, flapping its wings hard. How he wished the bird could take a message to someone. Orie shuffled his feet, directed only by that hand. He didn't know exactly where his friends were, but from their voices they weren't too far away.

“Squat.”

Hands still strapped behind his back, Orie obeyed.

“Move! Move!”

When Orie did not respond to this confusing command, the guard kicked him in the back, kidneys, and chest. Feet and fists pummeled his body for a long time—too long. Orie lost track of time again. Gone was his sense of direction as the cloth over his eyes soaked blood from the slice above his brow.

Now and then, a gust of wind blew, chilling the damp shirt clinging to his spine—his pullover now ragged and torn. Determined not to show weakness, Orie took the abuse. But he was emotionally drained and worried.

Am I going survive this?

His voice broke, “Why are you doing this? I haven't done anything wrong.”

No reply except for a kick to his shoulder followed by another shout, “Move!”

Dust collected in the crevices of his mouth. He tried to spit but had no saliva.

Footsteps approached.

“Get up!” A new voice yelled.

Orie staggered but rose, holding his raw wrists away from his back. A presence loomed behind him, not a person but a wall. The wind gusted again. Anger shot like ice through his veins. Silence reigned except for his

JUSTICE DENIED

racing heart and shallow gasps, which increased as spikes of pain flared up from bruises on his ribs and spine.

His fingers grazed concrete, slipping into small crumbling holes. He shuddered. *From bullets? What are they going to do?* He drew in a pain-laced breath. *Am I going to die?*

More footsteps approached. A sudden blare of music made him sick to his stomach. The words, “Khamenei, you are the chosen one. Khamenei, you are our prophet,” repeated endlessly over Persian classical instruments. Minutes stretched and disappeared leaving only aching ear drums. His body vibrated with music he did not want, but could not stop.

Before this, if asked about religion, usually Orie felt uncomfortable and preferred to change the subject. Now, he felt trapped—he had no choice but to face the reality of his decisions.

Is this it?

His mind fogged as thoughts upon thoughts churned with no hope of reaching a conclusion. The music was too loud. Every sound ignited a piercing pain just below his skull where a thick trickle of moisture flowed. He dared not wipe it away.

The music stopped.

Orie tensed until the strain left him breathless. He collapsed. His body shuddered from head to toe.

Footsteps scuffed closer. With every motion the new guard shouted, “Kafar,” renouncing Orie as an unbeliever. The man shoved the boy into a kneeling position.

“I am *Ali Mohmed*,” he said. “Your religion is wrong. No one is better than Mohammad.”

Orie sensed heat close to one damaged ear.

In a low voice Ali said, “Here is your chance.” With carefully pronounced words he repeated, “Here is your chance—your people are not allowed to attend university. By becoming Muslim, we can give you a proper education. You can become somebody in life, rather than remain a *dog*.” The disgrace of the term jarred Orie. “This is your chance. Tell me now.”

The unspoken pressure pushed him to answer. In as subdued a manner as he could muster, Orie replied, "I respect what you are saying."

He blinked his eyes under the now filthy, blood-soaked blindfold, to push back tears, and pressed his lips tight to stop from crying out.

His physical energy had drained with every word Ali spoke. Orie prayed silently for the strength to persevere. He had to be true to himself, he couldn't be otherwise.

And then he knew.

Carefully, Orie planned his words so as not to offend his tormentor. Lowering his voice, purging any trace of arrogance, he fortified his spirit though still convinced Ali would harm him if he did not conform.

"My religion does benefit me."

"You bastard! You don't understand. I am here to *save* you. Give you a better future."

"What can I say?" Orie pleaded. "I have to be honest with myself. I believe in my religion; the way you believe in yours."

Ali paused before speaking, "I am capable of killing you and dumping your body. No one will know what happened to you, not even your family."

"I know."

"All you have to say is 'I am a Muslim,' and you are a free man. Is that so difficult?"

The shock felt like Orie's soul crashing into the back of his skull. Ali's words made him reel but the ache awakened a hibernating bear.

"What benefit does that have?" he whispered. "In my heart I am who I am. If I convert to Islam, it will be for you, not Mohammad. Do you want that?"

"It does not matter! I don't care about your heart."

Silence.

"Just say you are a Muslim, and you will be free." The words were slow, but firm.

"I can't."

"Then I'll kill you like the *dog* you are."

JUSTICE DENIED

Orie staggered at the arrow-like impact of this man's words. A group of feet marched forward.

Ali yelled, "Get ready! Load your weapons." A mechanical clicking echoed before he commanded, "Ready."

In his mind's eye, Orie saw death coming; he tasted blood from the gun wounds on his face. His mind scrambled with worry about his father—his Baba's heart problem. Then to his *Maman*, his sister Laila, in the US, and his older sister, Nagar at home. The thought of being killed by *Sepāh* made his stomach roil.

But as Orie accepted his fate, the metaphysical barriers he had drawn crumbled. Indistinct shouting echoed nearby. Muffled cries of pain reached his damaged ears, followed by uncontrollable weeping. His friends endured the same punishment.

A hail of bullets rang out. A loud thump resounded, like a sack of wheat dropping. Then, Ahmad's voice cried, "Please don't kill me!"

Another volley of shots.

Another muffled drop.

Guns loaded, slides pulled. Ali yelled, "Aim."

Orie felt as though he stood outside of himself, waiting for the bullets to pass through his body. He'd never thought about death before today, not seriously. He struggled to remember the few teachings he'd learned about the end of the physical life and entering the spiritual realm.

I can't remember. Why can't I remember? He licked his cracked lips tasting a metallic tinge. *Should I change my mind?* All he had to do was say he was a Muslim.

He opened his mouth, hesitated. Instead, he drew a last, lung-piercing breath.

But the shot never came.

Different muscles twitched at random. Chaos ruled Orie's body. The adrenaline fled and dampness spread in his pants. Then, the strangest sensation—like a spirit entering inside him to cradle his heart. He felt every beat as though a great drum from the heavens thundered inside. He breathed again, in short bursts.

After a time, someone approached.

“I am with you. I understand. I want to give you another chance,” Ali said.

But Orie did not understand. What was it to this man if he were Muslim or not?

Emboldened he said, “You feel bad for me. You’re the one putting me in this position. You have a choice just as much as I do—you *don’t* have to do it. My answer isn’t going to change. Please, just make it quick.”

“You don’t take my warnings seriously, do you?”

Ali signaled for the execution squad to resume. Once again, came the order to ready the gun and aim.

Orie murmured a prayer, “Is there any remover of difficulties, save God.”

He waited. Seconds drifted into what seemed a millennia. It was quiet except for the howling of the wind. His heart went numb inside but the moment evoked thought. His friends were silenced forever, and he was about to lose his life because of a stupid movie. No. Because of someone’s desire to change another person’s belief. He shivered.

A radio squawked.

“Move!” A deep voice demanded of the executioners, an uprising had erupted somewhere in Tehran and help was urgently needed.

“I’m not done with you,” Ali snarled.

A guard dragged Orie across the yard to a cell in Evin prison.

If you liked *Justice Denied*, be sure to check out

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Book 1 of the *Jason McDeere Novels*

V. M. GOPAUL



Fiction writing is V. M. Gopaul's passion. His capacity to dream up ideas show no bounds, with outlines for more than ten books yet to be written.

As a software and database specialist, Gopaul wrote seven books for IT professionals. He then turned his attention to writing books on spirituality, which paved the way for a hidden passion to emerge. When crafting and completing *Tainted Justice*, a lifelong dream of Gopaul's had become reality. *Justice Denied* is the first book in a new thrilling series based around ex-military officer Jake Hudley.

Gopaul is planning to continue both the Jason McDeere Saga as well as Jake Hudley's.

Stay tuned at <http://vmgopaul.com>.