

Chapter 1

Dasht-e Kavir, Semnan Province, Iran

A solitary bird darted among the wilting shrubs, its nimble legs a blur as it navigated the arid terrain. It was January, and the dark-stemmed mugwort that poked this portion of the Great Salt Desert were not yet in bloom, leaving little to mask the bird's movements. Despite the ground jay's nervous flitting, it was anything but nervous. The only living things around bigger than the bird were two stationary figures five hundred meters from the lone dirt road that dissected the north and south horizons, but the bird discounted them as predators. They had been there for two days, and the bird was still alive.

The bird was right to ignore the men. They were not interested in the desert's sparse indigenous wildlife. They were interested in something entirely different.

Babak Abed checked his watch for the tenth time in seven minutes. He scanned the open desert in front of him and turned to the man crouched low beside him. "Is it ready?" he asked.

Hafez Madani verified the power indicator was still lit, and the sampling syringes were still secure. "It is ready," he said. Hafez wiped the sweat from his forehead with a dirty rag, thankful it was not August, and the temperature was only 22° Celsius. "How will we know when it happens?" he asked.

“We will know,” Babak assured him. He looked at his watch again. Babak Abed’s outward confidence masked his internal anxiety. He wasn’t lying to Hafez when he said they would know. He’d been briefed on as much many times before he and his fellow MeK fighter took the long drive from Kashan. But he was nervous about what would happen after.

At first, the mission Babak was given sounded easy enough—take a portable atmospheric sampler to the Dasht-e Kavir on a specified date and wait. After he was told what the machine was for, he began to have his doubts. Babak and Hafez were recruited to collect radiation samples during Iran’s first underground nuclear weapons test. Babak wasn’t sure if intentionally exposing himself to radiation was such a good idea, but his Mujahideen-e Khalq commander insisted the data he would collect was vital to proving to the world that the Islamic Republic of Iran had finally crossed the line. Just as MeK was the first to break the news to the international community about Iran’s nuclear program in 2002, MeK would be the first to inform them their economic sanctions, soft-handed reprimands, and endless negotiations, did nothing to keep the mullahs from building the bomb.

Babak checked his watch again. *Any minute now*, he thought. *If our source is right, that is*. He stared across the road, wondering if there would be any visible sign of detonation. In any case, they would be packing up and starting the twenty-kilometer hike back to their “abandoned” vehicle as soon as the sun went down.

“Babak, look,” Hafez said, pointing toward the brush just south of their position.

Babak followed Hafez’s outstretched hand and saw a small bird batting its wings furiously as it flew low to the ground. “Soose’ le’ng,” he said, amused that his young comrade was biding his time bird-

watching, especially because the Pleske's ground jay was the only bird they'd seen in two days.

"I know," Hafez said. "But they don't fly, they run."

Babak Abed only had two seconds to process the statement when the earth rumbled violently beneath them. He and Hafez both grabbed the radionuclide sampler to keep it steady. They looked directly at each other, and Babak allowed a nervous grin to form, hoping the gesture would calm his companion. But the grin slowly disappeared as the gravity of what they just witnessed set in. *The game just changed.*

Chapter 2

Doha, Qatar

“**T**his is a great day for Iran, and one the world will not soon forget.”

Around the table, all heads nodded in agreement as hushed thanks to Allah and praise for the Supreme Leader filled the room. Dr. Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran stepped away from the table, exchanging handshakes and kisses as he made his way to the door.

The news he brought was no surprise to the men and women in the room—each had played a part in funding it—but the success of Iran’s first nuclear weapons test was still comforting to hear. Coming from Abbasi, one of the main architects of Iran’s nuclear weapons program, made the words that much sweeter. If things had gone differently just four years earlier, Abbasi would not have been able to relay the test’s success to the group of Iranian business elite. He would not have been able to do much of anything at all, because he would have been dead.

The visit that night was brief by design. Abbasi had planned to address the group during a break in the hectic schedule of the World Economic Forum, and he was not able to enjoy the Indian cuisine of Souq Waqif’s famous “Royal Tandoor”—though the smell of *taza kadai khumb* and *kheema mutter* made him wish he had more time. For

reasons everyone in the room understood, Abbasi's assigned escorts were keeping him on the move until he flew back to Tehran in the morning. The fifty-six-year-old scientist didn't argue, following the men to the two black BMWs waiting outside.

"How long to the hotel?" Abbasi asked when his driver pulled onto the northbound road that followed the corniche around Doha Bay.

The driver quickly glanced at Abbasi's shadowed reflection in the rearview mirror. "Twenty minutes," he said.

Two kilometers away, a pair of motorcycles headed east on Mohammed bin Thani Street, past the fire station. The black-clad riders ignored the traffic to and from the Ministry of Defence buildings on their right. They were on a time schedule

Abbasi peered listlessly out the window at the black waters of Doha Bay. The lights from Old Palm Trees Island and the sparse boat traffic did little to break the darkness, the waxing quarter moon having disappeared below the horizon almost half an hour earlier.

He couldn't wait to get home. His trip to Qatar was not part of his normal duties as one of Iran's twelve vice presidents. For all he was concerned, the people in that room could have heard the news of the successful nuclear test on Al Jazeera or BBC, like the rest of the world. But he did it as a favor to Ayatollah Khamenei—as if he had a choice to refuse the Supreme Leader's *request*. Apparently one of the men at the Indian restaurant was a cousin, or something.

Abbasi sighed as the car slowed in response to the bright red tail lights ahead that flooded the cabin of his own car with their annoy-

ing glow. “Was this factored into your twenty minutes?” Abbasi asked the driver. He saw the driver’s eyes glance briefly at him in the mirror. “Never mind,” he added. “Don’t answer that.”

At least my flight is not until morning, he thought and closed his eyes.

The motorcycles turned onto the corniche road in single file, moving deftly between the lanes of traffic. The rear rider opened the distance between them to twenty meters before matching speeds again. The cars around them began braking, but the riders moved on.

The slam of a car door and horns from irritated drivers startled Abbasi, and he sat upright. *Where in the hell is he going?* Abbasi thought with more than a little worry as he watched his driver on the street beside the car. His worry grew exponentially when he saw the man leveling a rifle and aiming behind them.

Abbasi rolled onto the floor of the car at the first rifle crack. The first was followed by another and another. The sound of each shot seemed farther away as the rifleman-driver made his way into the traffic behind the car.

The rear motorcyclist squeezed the hand brake hard when the front rider went down—too hard it turned out. The bike flipped, and its rider landed on the hood of a beige Toyota pick-up. He continued the slide onto the street and subconsciously felt for the messenger bag over his shoulder. Crouching low, he made his way between the other two

lanes of traffic, still heading for the target, but out of the line of fire.

Ten meters into his foot pursuit, a bullet struck the rear window of a car to the motorcycle-less rider's left. *How the fuck?* he thought as a second round pierced his back just between the shoulder blades.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

"Are you okay?" a voice asked after the car door opened.

Abbasi looked up and saw the familiar face of his driver. "Yes, yes, I'm not hurt," he said as the driver helped him out of the car. Two other men approached the pair from behind the car. Abbasi recognized them as his government-assigned escorts. *They must have been following us,* he thought. He watched the escorts while he asked his driver, "What the hell just happened?"

"*This* happened," one of the escorts said, holding up two identical satchels. "Mossad," he added. "Motorcycles and magnet bombs."

Abbasi shuddered, remembering that day in Tehran four years ago when the Zionist terrorists blew apart his parked car only seconds after he shoved his wife out the passenger door. A man on a motorcycle sped by that November morning, and only his earlier training in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps taught him to recognize the sound of a heavy magnet on the side of the car, giving him just enough time.

"You are certain it was Mossad?" Abbasi asked, looking past his own men to try and see his failed attackers.

"We knew they would be coming," the man with the unused bombs said. "We just didn't know how many."

Abbasi's jaw tightened. "You *knew* they were coming? And you didn't think that might be something I should know?" he yelled above the horns of increasingly frustrated drivers. The sound of approaching

sirens added to the noise and reminded the men they were on foreign soil. Trying to explain away the two dead bodies in the middle of the corniche road would not be easy, if it was possible at all.

“We should leave,” Abbasi’s driver said. No other words were spoken as the four men returned to their vehicles and continued down the road as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 3

New York City

Casey gently touched the monument and looked up to the top of the black marble obelisk twenty feet above. Inscribed in the tiered base below were sixty-three names. Names of the innocent victims of the Manhattan bombings that ripped through the city less than four years earlier. Located in the south courtyard of the massive 9/11 Memorial, finished in earnest after the July 2011 attacks, the lesser bombing monument stood in silent contrast to the perpetual waterfalls commemorating the loss of nearly three thousand people when a group of committed radicals led by Osama bin Laden brought down the towering symbols of America's economic might with two passenger jets on the morning of September 11, 2001.

The official blame for the 2011 bombings was pinned on Houthi rebels from Yemen, but Casey knew that was a lie. His hand found the name of Mariam Fahda, and the scenes from that morning at Soren's Deli came flooding back into his consciousness. It wasn't that he tried to repress those memories, but what followed as a result of the bombing altered his own perception of the world around him, and his life changed course because of it. Casey Shenk, the vending machine stocker-turned geopolitical analyst, was less sure about the line between good and evil. He was more cynical of people's true

intentions, while at the same time more cognizant of others' feelings. And while Casey's name was not on the monument in front of him, it could have been—more and more he thought it should have been and wondered why it wasn't.

Casey rounded the stone memorial and pulled short, almost knocking down a twelve-year-old boy. "Geez, you startled me," Casey said, purposely keeping his usual, salty vernacular in check in the presence of the minor. "I thought I was the only one here this early." Casey did a quick look around, but there was no sign of an adult to whom the kid belonged.

"It's okay," the boy said. "Spies are quiet. I wouldn't expect you to hear me coming."

Casey smiled. "Spy, huh?" He looked at the boy—green winter coat, blue jeans, and an Avengers backpack. *Probably on his way to school*, he thought. "So who are you spying on?"

The boy never once looked at Casey. He focused, instead, on the folded newspaper in his left hand. "I'm not spying on anyone," the boy said. "It's a dead drop."

"A dead drop?"

This time the kid looked up. "A dead drop," he repeated. "It's tradecraft." He turned back to his paper.

Casey laughed, amused by the boy's vocabulary and stone cold seriousness. "I know what it is," he said. He looked closer at the newspaper the boy was busy marking up with a ballpoint pen. "You leaving a coded message for another spy?"

The boy ignored Casey and worked faster. He underlined whole words, single letters, and random numbers. At least, they seemed random to Casey. The boy's concentration belied that assumption and indicated a definite purpose to his actions.

“Stephen!”

Now Casey understood the boy’s urgency.

“You can’t just wander off like that,” a woman scolded as she rapidly approached from Casey’s right.

“It’s Wednesday,” Stephen told the woman. “I had to get the message to him.”

“But you need to let me know where you’re going before you just take off like that.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

Stephen’s mom relaxed and ran her fingers through her hair. “I know it’s Wednesday, and I’m sorry for being so frantic. But next time, please wait for me.” She put her hand on her son’s shoulder and said softly, “You’re all I’ve got left.” Stephen continued his work as his mother looked over at Casey, noticing him standing there for the first time.

“Howdy,” Casey said with a half-grin in response to the woman’s glare. He felt as if *he’d* just been reprimanded. The woman looked back to her son, and Casey turned to leave.

“His father.”

Casey halted his retreat and turned back around. The woman was looking over Stephen’s head at the monument, and Casey wasn’t sure if she was talking to him or not. “Excuse me?”

“He’s leaving a message for his father.” The woman turned her head to look at Casey. “He was at St. Pat’s that morning. When the bomb... when the explosion happened.”

Casey looked at Stephen, then back at Stephen’s mother. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“He wasn’t even supposed to be there,” the woman continued. “He stopped in on his way to work to light a candle for his mother. She

lost her fight with cancer a week later. Stephen's father used to write coded messages for Stephen and leave them on the breakfast table every Wednesday morning. It was their secret game, and ever since the bombing, Stephen's been leaving these messages for his father. Every Wednesday. When they built this memorial, Stephen insisted that he leave the messages here. It's a lot closer than the cemetery."

"I see," Casey said. He didn't ask to hear the story. But for some reason, people always felt comfortable telling Casey everything about their lives. He didn't know why, and many times, like just then, he wasn't sure he wanted to hear them. But Casey was too polite by nature to push people away—so he listened.

"Okay, Mom," Stephen said bringing both his mother and Casey back to the present. "We don't want to be late for school."

Stephen's mom smiled and mussed the boy's hair. "Alright honey, let's go." She smiled at Casey as mother and son made their way out of the park.

No good bye. Casey was glad for that. He looked back at the monument and shook his head, smiling. The folded newspaper with the underlined "codes" sat at the base of the marble structure. A message from son to father, that only they could decipher. He looked back to the top one more time before leaving.

Casey wondered if the message got through.