

Vladimir Fomin

Gambit



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«Издательские решения»

Fomin V.

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For nearly a decade, the international community has tried to stop the Iranian nuclear program with diplomacy. That hasn't worked. Iran uses diplomatic negotiations as a means to buy time to advance its nuclear program. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, during the last year alone, Iran has doubled the number of centrifuges in its underground nuclear facility in Qom.

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I

“Colonel, where are we at with Cyrus?” asked Said Jalili, chairman of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, referring to the most secret operation in Iran’s history, even more secret than their nuclear ambitions

“Everything is set from a logistical standpoint,” replied Colonel Ashkan Rafsanjani. “All we need to do is get all of the troops in place, and I’ll need a little time to do that. I’ve already started moving them a few at a time as I don’t want a sudden and massive influx that would likely draw attention to our plans. That mistake happened before; we don’t want to repeat that.”

“No, we don’t, this is far too important,” admitted Major General Qassim Suleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force. “With everything else in order, and given Prime Minister Netanyahu’s UN address yesterday, I believe we should step up the pace of moving your men. We really do not know how much time we have and I do not trust that Israeli pig.”

“Agreed,” said Jalili. “Go ahead and get them over there. There is some urgency here but we must not draw attention to ourselves – and remember, we are not the ones setting the time table here.”

* * *

The two motorcycles appeared without notice. Dr. Zadegan, the chief electrical engineer at the Parchin military complex outside of Tehran, had emerged from his car, after his driver had dropped him off, completely lost in thought about solving the exploding bridge wire detonator problem that one of his colleagues had just discovered. He didn’t even hear the motorcyclists as he walked up to the front door of his house. His driver, though, quickly switched roles from that of a chauffeur to a body guard. As he turned out of Dr. Zadegan’s driveway he noticed the first assassin take out a silenced Heckler & Koch MP-5 submachine gun and lower it at his charge as the biker quickly drove past him. The two second burst fired from the assassin resulted in approximately twenty five rounds being fired at the young electrical engineer. The second assassin didn’t have quite the element of surprise as the first. Zadegan’s body guard noticed the second bike immediately after the first one sped past him. The second one approached so quickly, though, that all he had time to do was throw open his door in an attempt to strike the cycle as it approached his car. The impact threw the assassin off of the bike just as it began to accelerate past him. The cyclist himself completely lost control of the bike, putting it on its side, and sliding under a neighboring parked car, pinning the cyclist.

“Arielle,” Jonah called to the second assassin as he sped away, completely unaware of his compatriots’ predicament, “I couldn’t tell; what’s the status of the target?”

Hearing no answer, Jonah called again, “Arielle, can you hear me?”

No answer; “Arielle?!” Jonah called again, a sense of desperation in his voice.

“We’re down; I’m pinned under a car,” Arielle’s driver reported. “Arielle looks to be in trouble.”

Zadegan’s body guard, who had lost his sidearm when his car door hit the cyclists, saw that the biker had gotten pinned under a car with his bike while the assassin had slid across the pavement and slammed against the wheel of another car. Ignoring the pinned biker, the body guard turned his attention towards the trigger puller. As the body guard charged the assassin, he unsheathed an eight inch razor-sharp double edged knife and swung at his target. The assassin, slightly dazed from being thrown off of the bike and the sudden impact against the parked car, and now unarmed as well, jumped back to avoid the guard’s initial thrust with the knife only to jump back against the side of the car. Consequently, the guard’s initial swing found its mark, slicing the assassin’s left arm and rib cage. With the second thrust, the assassin’s response caught the guard completely by surprise: as the guard took another swing with his right hand, Arielle quickly swung out with her left foot and, using the guard’s momentum against him, kicked the back of the guard’s knife-hand in the direction he was

swinging and then immediately followed that up with another kick to guard's now fully exposed right knee, completely destroying the joint. Arielle picked up the guard's knife, now laying on the pavement as he had dropped the knife due to the sudden shock of a damaged wrist and a shattered knee, and thrust it into the guard's chest, severing the aorta. Arielle's sudden attack was over in seconds.

With the guard dispatched, Arielle grabbed the guard's car and drove the short distance to her compatriot. Running up to free her friend, she noticed he wasn't so much pinned under the car as he had a compound leg fracture below the knee. Despite her own injuries, Arielle all but carried him into the back seat of the car, secured him there, and then got back in front and took off.

"Jonah... mission accomplished; ahh..." Arielle winced in pain, "we'll need to meet at Jericho as soon as possible" – a reference to a prearranged site where a medic is required.

"Roger that; we'll see you at Jericho in five minutes," came the prompt response.

"How'd the other teams do?" Arielle asked.

"Mission accomplished," came the succinct reply. And with that, Arielle knew that three of Iran's leading scientists, each working on different components for the development of a nuclear bomb, had just been assassinated.

* * *

If someone didn't know any better, the man walking out of the meeting could have been in his eighties. As it was, his aged appearance came from the news he had been anticipating, well not really anticipating in the sense that this was something he wanted to hear. No, he had dreaded hearing this news, expecting that it would be coming but still nonetheless hoping against hope that it would not. In point of fact, and try as he might, he still hadn't recovered from hearing it: Iran would have a nuclear bomb in just a couple months! This couldn't happen. The Americans had repeatedly stressed that they would never allow this. Now, given the present administration, that threat didn't look all too ominous. However, the Israelis would never allow this – and everyone in every Western intelligence agency knew that they had been practicing for just such a raid. This would not be just any normal raid, though. This could lead to the total destruction of much of the Middle East: Israel, to be sure, but also his beloved Iran. He couldn't let this happen. He knew what he had to do, and the weight of this burden almost paralyzed him. He knew that some, perhaps many, of his fellow citizens would die by his actions but in the end, he would be saving a great deal more. Getting into his car, he quietly advised his driver to take him to his home in the resort area of Bashgah-e Savarkri-e. Once there, he would make a phone call on a very secure, and very secret, satellite phone.

II

“Jim? What’s up?” Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson asked answering his cell phone. “It’s got to be, what, two thirty in the morning over there?”

“Stonewall, have you left London yet?” Jim Carmichael, the head of the CIA’s Intelligence Directorate asked him.

“Just about to leave for the airport; I have a ten thirty flight to Dulles and London traffic can be horrendous so I figured I’d try and give myself some extra time just in case. Looking forward to getting back home; it’s been unseasonably cool and wet all week – even by London’s standards. It’s supposed to be summer, right; be nice to get back home to some dry weather, warm temperatures, and sunshine!”

“Well, I’m afraid you’re going to have to delay that trip back home for a little while.”

“What’s up? I haven’t heard of anything pressing at the moment. Our friends on this side of the pond really didn’t have anything new on our Persian friends. We know they are pursuing a nuke but the general consensus is that they are still a couple years out. I don’t believe that for a second but I don’t have anything to base that on other than my gut instinct – there’s just too many unanswered questions.”

“Well, you’re going to get that chance to prove your instincts right. I’ve booked you on a 9:45 British Airways flight to Tel Aviv. General Pardo just called and he’s expecting you later this afternoon,” referencing the head of Mossad. “Tamir mentioned that they have something really hot they are working on and wanted to know if we wanted in on it – he knew we would – I think he just wanted the chance to get me out of bed at two in the morning. I told him you’d be on the first flight out of London.”

“Any idea what this is all about?”

“He wouldn’t say over the phone – though we were on a secure line – which leads me to believe it’s extremely sensitive. I realize you’ve never worked with him but he’s a personal friend of mine and he was at K2 with us,” a reference to Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan, “in the first few months after 9/11 while you were in Afghanistan with the Northern Alliance. He knows you’ve recently taken over as my lead on Iranian intelligence and nuclear proliferation and I’ve told him that you’re still active duty, a colonel with the Fifth Group” – that is, Fifth Group Special Forces, whose area of concentration is the Middle East – “so whatever they have for you, he knows you’re more than qualified.”

“Okay, I’m all packed and heading to check out of the hotel right now. Any idea as to who’s picking me up in Tel Aviv? Someone from the embassy or one of the general’s folks?”

“Her name is Danielle Yaniv and, yes, she works for Tamir, but that’s all I know. Go ahead and wear your patch and she’ll find you.”

“Okay, will do.”

“Colonel Jackson?” Danielle asked, leaning towards – and somewhat yelling through – the open passenger window, as she saw someone standing by the curb who she thought fit the description her boss, General Tamir Pardo, had given her: kind of tall, dish-water blonde, well chiseled features – and sporting an eye patch.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Jackson replied. “Call me Tom.”

“Hop in, Tom. I’m Danielle; call me Dani. The Prime Minister scheduled an urgent meeting with Tamir for five thirty so he told me to get you over to his office right away so he’d have the opportunity to meet you before he went in with Bibi,” an informal reference to the Prime Minister. “I’m not sure what his meeting’s all about but I’ll get you there so you’ll have a few minutes with Tamir before he has to leave. By the way, welcome to Israel; have you ever been here before?”

“No, I haven’t but I’m looking forward to the visit,” Jackson replied.

The tail end of Dani's pony-tail whipped across her face as she snapped her head back towards Jackson, caught completely by surprise on hearing that he had never been to Israel before. This guy came highly recommended by Jim Carmichael, a close friend of Tamir's from the CIA, yet he had never been to Israel? What was up with this, she wondered.

Jackson, seeing Dani's expression, partially obstructed by her long hair, sensed this was the wrong answer, though he had no idea why.

* * *

"Stonewall, Jim speaks very highly of you. Nice to finally meet you. You've obviously met Arielle; I trust the drive over from the airport wasn't too eventful," General Pardo added, somewhat facetiously.

"Tamir! You made it sound pretty urgent that I get him here just as soon as I could, so I did," Dani interrupted.

"Likewise, General, I'm glad to be here," Stonewall replied, somewhat surprised by Dani's interruption.

"Arielle, you won't believe what this guy did in Afghanistan. In the first few months after 9/11, the US only had a couple teams in Afghanistan; Jackson, here, commanded one of them. His team had joined the Northern Alliance up in the Panjshir region of northern Afghanistan. Remember, the US role was just getting started so the Taliban thoroughly outnumbered Stonewall's team and his allies. At one point, they came across a Taliban force of, I think, around nine thousand men bivouacked in a relatively narrow valley; Jackson's twelve man team and the Northern Alliance force amounted to something like 1,500 men. Stonewall, here, then a relatively junior captain, comes up with this incredibly bold and brilliant idea – I mean, it's Gideon out of the Old Testament all over again: Sometime in the middle of the night, something like two in the morning, he takes three hundred of his men and marches them up and down the canyon trail – with torches fully lit so everyone in the Taliban encampment can see them. The other 1,200 were set up in a blocking position at the other end of the valley. The really cool thing about this is that the three hundred men with torches – each one only marched about a couple hundred feet along this trail. Stonewall, go ahead and tell her about this."

"You see the whole trick here is about being a force multiplier. I had the men on the trail spaced out about every few hundred feet or so. I had the man at the very top of the canyon light his torches or lanterns. Each man carried two of them; he'd walk to the next one down the trail, who would then hand the lanterns to him; this man would then walk another hundred feet or so and hand the lanterns off to him, and so on. Once each exchange was made each one returned to his place on the trail. As the lit lanterns reached the bottom, these were turned off and exchanged at every hand-off of those coming down the hill so that these would go back up the hill and repeat the process. In this manner, mind you, it's about 2:00 a.m., the impression of the number of men coming down the trail would never seem to end. The idea was to panic them into thinking that a very large force was assembling and force them to run up the other end of the valley, right into our blocking force."

"How'd it go?" Dani asked.

"We destroyed the entire Taliban force."

"There's a little more to the story, though," General Pardo added. "You see, this young captain, here, was the last one on the trail, right on the valley floor and some of the Taliban decided to stand and fight."

"That they did. I had one of my weapons sergeants and my senior comms sergeant with me, along with several of the Northern Alliance guys. We set up a few claymores in the brief time we had and the few of us had every heavy weapon we could carry; we needed to give the impression that we were a much larger force than we really were. If they figured it out, it would have been a disaster. As it was, it got pretty intense and chaotic there for a while."

“I’m impressed,” Dani said.

“Jim invited me to participate in the after-action debrief,” Pardo added. “Jackson, and his two sergeants each received the Silver Star. It was an incredibly bold and brilliant – not to mention very risky – operation.”

“I was wondering how you knew all of this,” Jackson added. “I know Jim said you were over there but I never knew in what capacity.”

“Well, that’s our little secret. I’ll have to make this brief as I can’t keep Bibi waiting too much longer, but I’m curious as to the general sense in Washington regarding Iran. From over here, it seems that the current administration has lost any appetite for showing any type of leadership or involvement on the world stage. Look at the failures in Benghazi, Syria, Ukraine and the rise of ISIS – you have a bunch of amateurs running the show in Washington. In spite of these failures, your secretary of state hasn’t learned anything – she still wants to negotiate with Iran and, in essence, give them an atomic bomb. Has she lost her mind?!?” Pardo asked, almost demanding an answer.

“General, there are those of us at the Agency and in the military that share your concerns. I can assure you, though, that if I can get something concrete that I can take back to Jim, he’ll be able to take it to Secretary Johnson and Pam McDowell,” referring to the secretary of state and the national security advisor, “to do more than simply rely on economic sanctions and negotiations.”

“You have a lot more confidence in those two than we do.” Tamir said, with more than a little degree of skepticism. “However, I think we can help you out there. Let Arielle, here, know of anything you want. She’s been advised to be at your disposal for absolutely anything you want – and I mean anything.”

Hearing this, Jackson stole a quick glance at Dani. For a brief moment, her eyes seemingly locked on his until she looked away rather awkwardly. General Pardo, seemingly oblivious to this, continued on.

“Also, and I believe you are aware, we’ve been practicing for a raid on Iran for some time now – we are prepared to ‘go it alone’ if need be.”

“I am aware of that, and I know Jim, the Agency and the Pentagon is as well. I just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“We shall see, Colonel. We shall see. Now, I must apologize, but I can’t keep Bibi waiting any longer.”

“Nothing to apologize for, General. And thanks for your openness; I look forward to working with Arielle and her team.”

After the brief meeting with General Pardo, Dani took Stonewall to their operations center. Benjamin Givon and Yoni Cohen were in a small conference room in the middle of watching a live feed from a drone, currently flying over Iran’s Parchin military facility in Tehran. As Dani and Stonewall entered the room the feed switched over to more of an urban area which Jackson easily recognized as suburban Tehran. It took a few minutes but eventually the drone centered on a somewhat remote area in western Tehran. The area looked somewhat like a park of sorts. The picture on the screen eventually focused in on a residence and then centered in on the car in the driveway.

“Looks like someone’s home,” Yoni volunteered.

“Zoom in on the window in the southwest corner of the house. Can you see if there’s anything in the window? We told him to leave a couple plants in the window when he’s home; we didn’t want to simply rely on a car being in the driveway,” Ben somewhat rhetorically asked Yoni, his executive officer.

“Yeah, it looks like the good doctor’s home this afternoon,” Yoni replied.

“Looks that way. Okay, let’s get out of here. We don’t want to draw any undo suspicion here at this late stage,” Ben added.

“Gentlemen,” Dani interrupted, “our friend from the States has just arrived. Colonel Tom ‘Stonewall’ Jackson, this is Benjamin Givon, our Iranian field team leader, and Yoni Cohen, our executive officer.”

“The general said you’d be coming by later today. Nice to finally meet you. We’ve heard a lot about you, though you didn’t need to go and emulate General Dayan on us,” Ben added with a sly grin, referring to the black eye patch Jackson wore and which had been a trademark of the legendary one-eyed Israeli General Moshe Dayan.

“That was Jim’s idea; he thought it’d be easier for you to pick me up at the airport. I’ve got the glass eye as well and I’m comfortable with either one. As for what you may have heard, I wouldn’t believe everything you hear. I’m sure Jim embellished a few areas,” Jackson said, referencing his boss at the CIA. “I have heard a little about what you all do here, though. I know that over the past few years several Iranian scientists have met with, shall we say, an ‘unfortunate demise.’ We also know you managed to slow the Iranians down with that Stuxnet virus. That was nice work.”

“The brain drain caused by the loss of their scientists didn’t slow them as much as we had hoped. Stuxnet really set them back, though,” Ben admitted. “We followed that up with a Stuxnet variant which slowed them down even more than the original virus, but it didn’t stop them. We knew it wouldn’t; that wasn’t our intent. We simply wanted to buy some time, and in that, we really succeeded.”

“That’s what we heard. So, tell me, just how close are they to getting a bomb?” Jackson asked the small group.

Somewhat nonchalantly, Ben simply said “farther along than you’d believe. Tell you what, where do they have you staying?”

“I guess I really don’t know. I think it’s a place called the Daniel Hotel, or something like that. I’ve never been here so I’m really not sure.”

“Okay, Yoni and I have a couple things left to finish up. Let’s have Arielle take you over there so you can get checked in and all, then the three of us can grab a bite to eat. Sound okay?”

“Okay by me.”

“Arielle, why don’t we plan on meeting you at the Accad right there at the hotel? Give us, oh..., about half an hour to finish up and we’ll see you there.”

“Yeah, that sounds good; it’s new and I haven’t had a chance to get there yet. We’ll give him a proper introduction to Israel. You ready, Colonel?” Dani asked Stonewall.

“All set; my bag’s still in your rig, so I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Okay, we’ll see you guys there,” Dani said over her shoulder as Jackson accompanied her out the door.

“Dani, you can drop the formality; call me Stonewall, everyone else does. These days, no one’s using my rank.”

“Sorry, since Tamir mentioned you’re still active duty I thought I’d respect the rank,” Dani said as she walked to the car.

“No need to worry about that. Oh, and what’s with the ‘proper introduction’ idea? Anything I should know about?”

“They’ve got you at the Daniel?” Dani asked, ignoring Jackson’s question as he got into the car.

“Yeah, that’s the one; I haven’t even had a chance to look at it online.”

“Well, I don’t see a ring on that finger. Does that mean there’s no ‘Mrs. Jackson’ or someone else in your life?” Dani had that out there before she realized it probably sounded better in her head than spoken. “Ah... I mean, the Daniel is one of the nicest hotels in Israel, let alone Tel Aviv. If you wanted to spoil someone, this is the place,” Dani continued, noticeably blushing.

“Ah, no, there’s no one else,” Jackson replied. “But back to this ‘proper introduction.’”

“Oh yeah; it’s just the usual initiation we do for all new members of the Unit.”

“Excuse me?” Jackson replied, whipping his head around to look at Dani, caught more than a little off guard on a couple different levels. As he did so, he noticed that, as she had been driving with her left arm, the left sleeve of her blouse had slipped up towards her shoulder, revealing a long scar across her arm just above the elbow.

“Relax, it’s nothing to worry about, at least not too much. I mean, I’ve heard of the initiation some of your SEALs go through. We like to have fun, too, but that’s just crazy; we won’t embarrass you too much,” Dani said, with a bit of a mischievous grin. “I mean, it’s not like you have to drive somewhere tonight, right?”

* * *

Jackson didn’t realize that the elevator opened right at the Accad restaurant. He looked around to find Dani and finally noticed her back in a corner booth. As he walked up to the booth, he realized that both Ben and Yoni had already arrived. The “initiation” to which Dani had alluded simply revolved around each of them getting to know Stonewall, and he getting to know them – in essence, more of a job interview. Dani wanted to get to know this Special Forces, turned CIA, officer who had never been to Israel before but had come highly recommended for what she knew to be a very important mission for both of their countries. Ben and Yoni wanted to size up this intelligence officer to get an idea if he might be up for this mission. So, over a very casual dinner, their “interview” began.

“So, ‘Stonewall’, just where did that moniker come from?” Dani began, with somewhat of an edge.

Ignoring the tenor of Dani’s question, Jackson started, “It was back in ‘05 or ‘06 in northern Iraq. I commanded an A team that parachuted into northern Iraq. At one point, an entire Iraqi tank company confronted our team – mind you, the heaviest thing we had was a Humvee with a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on it – against several tanks and armored personnel carriers. We were outnumbered by about five to one. We had several of the new Javelin anti-tank missiles as well and we were facing some extreme ranges. We used them, and completely destroyed the tank company. With my name: Thomas Jackson, and the situation we faced, the colonel who relieved us tagged me with the moniker ‘Stonewall’, and it seemed to fit, reminiscent of the Civil War general.”

“Ah, I hadn’t thought of him; I can see that, now that you mention it. Tamir told me you’ve had quite the career with the Special Forces,” Dani replied. Her use of the Mossad director’s first name – again – did not escape Jackson; actually, somewhat surprised him as her tone implied more than a customary familiarity with her very powerful boss.

“As for the rest of my career with the Special Forces, I’m still active duty, just temporarily with the Agency. I can’t tell you much more than what you probably already know: I’ve served with the Fifth Group for the last sixteen years now and along the way hit most of the countries in the region. I had a few tours in Afghanistan, a couple in Iraq, and spent some time at KASOTC,” referring to the King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center in Amman, Jordan. “Serving as a CIF team commander with the Fifth Group has probably been the highlight of my career. It’s been a great ride and I wouldn’t change anything. I was fortunate enough to find the time to get a doctorate in Persian studies a couple years ago.”

“CIF team?” Dani asked. “Aren’t those relatively new?”

“The Commander’s In-extremis Force team has been around since the 90’s but we’ve honed it into a very capable unit. The idea is that whenever a situation blows up in a group’s region, there’s a force immediately available for the group commander, or the president, should something that sensitive develop. Every group has a team and they’re permanently deployed to their region – that’s how I got to KASOTC. Every asset a team commander could possibly need deploys with them, from ground transportation to air assets, be it Apache Longbows, C-130’s or even half a dozen A-10’s. The

team can literally be wheels up to anywhere in its region – or its proximity – within half an hour. We've learned a lot from you guys, and from our own successes – and failures.”

“We've both had our share of each, I'm afraid,” Ben admitted.

Dani and her teammates had Jackson at a little bit of a disadvantage as they knew some of Jackson's history, given General Pardo's relationship with Jim Carmichael. She knew he had three Silver Stars, one of which could have – and probably should have – been a Distinguished Service Cross, but due to Army politics, this had been downgraded to a Silver Star. She wanted to hear how Jackson described it, if he did at all. She appreciated his modesty in leaving this out.

Jackson hadn't had the opportunity to learn much of anything about the Israeli team with whom he'd be working. Ben and Yoni looked as though they could have been part of his team with the Special Forces. They were both very well built, not overly large men as, at six two, Jackson was taller than both of them. Rather, they had a lean, rugged and confident air about them as having practiced their craft in the field rather than in the class room. Dani on the other hand, intrigued him. She fit right in with Ben and Yoni but women didn't serve in a Special Forces unit, at least not in his army. He knew women served alongside men in most Israeli army units but this wasn't the typical unit. She certainly had the athletic build and he had noticed that she moved with all the grace of a lioness on the prowl. Clearly, Dani looked as though she could certainly take care of herself.

“How about you guys; Jim sent me over here with very little advance notice.”

“Both Yoni and I started out in the Paratroopers,” Ben began. “I was about five years ahead of him. He was actually one of my platoon leaders when I was a battalion commander. My CO introduced me to General Pardo during some of our actions in Lebanon in the mid ‘90's. The general took an interest in me and, shortly after the September ‘11 attacks in the States, he offered me a job with Mossad working with Iran's growing threat in the region. I jumped at the chance. I had been heavily involved with the actions of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, so the opportunity to work more on the Iranian connection, even inside Iran, seemed like a godsend. Several years ago, we had an opening on the team and I spoke with General Pardo about the possibility of bringing Yoni on board. He had much of the same experience I had so bringing him on board was a no-brainer.”

Looking at Dani, Jackson asked, “what about you?”

Ben initially answered for her. “She's third on the team, in charge of operations. We call her ‘Arielle’.”

“Operations, really?” Jackson replied, clearly impressed. “And where does ‘Arielle’ come from?” he asked. “Just how long have you been working with these two?”

Ben replied first. “Arielle's easy; it means Lioness of God. It fits.”

“So, is that what that scar's all about?” Jackson asked Dani, looking at her left arm.

“Yeah; I'm sure you've heard the adage about bringing a knife to a gun fight, right? Well, several months back, I was the number two shooter on a bike team in Tehran. We were driving through a residential neighborhood and got separated by some kids playing in the street. We were only a second or two behind but that's all it took for the target's body guard to knock me off the bike. I lost my piece and so did the guard, but he had a knife. His first – and only – swing sliced my arm and continued across the left side of my rib cage. I disarmed him with his next attempt and killed him with his own knife.”

“Damn,” was all Stonewall could say.

“Told you; it suits her,” Ben added.

“My family's been tied pretty closely to the Israeli Special Forces and Mossad since our independence,” Dani continued on. “My Dad and Tamir served together in the Paratroopers and my grandfather and Tami's father served with General Arik Sharon in the Sinai in the ‘67 war.” For Jackson, that answered a few questions right there. “I talked with Tamir right after I finished my schooling as I wanted another challenge. Tamir offered me a chance to try out for the Sayeret Matkal” – Israeli Special Forces – “and four years later, here I am.”

“What did you do your schooling in?” Jackson asked her.

“I did my undergrad work in Tel Aviv in nuclear physics. From there, I got my PhD in nuclear engineering at Texas A & M.”

“Texas? Why Texas?” asked Jackson.

“A & M has a great program and I wanted to see the States. Everything I read made Texas look and feel like Israel so I applied and they accepted me. Outside of Israel, I consider Texas, my second home.”

“That’s cool; I hail from San Angelo. Always nice to have another Texan around.”

III

Dani arrived at Jackson's hotel at six forty-five the following morning. "Hey, Stonewall, you ready?" she said into her phone.

"All set; be right down. Wasn't expecting you for another fifteen to twenty minutes."

"What's the matter? I thought you Special Forces guys were always ready," Dani chimed in.

"I'm ready; just need to put my shoes on and I'll be right there."

Jackson emerged from the lobby elevator to find Dani waiting for him – and her transformation could not have been more complete: Gone was yesterday's ponytail and tomboy image and replaced with a Giorgio Armani business suit that seriously out-classed Jackson's sport coat and tie.

"Ready to go?" She asked him as Jackson walked up to her.

"I'm not sure; just what are we doing today?" Jackson asked, noting Dani's very professional attire.

"Ah, today's an office day, so you're good."

Jackson noticed Dani's sense of style extended to her choice of vehicle as well. "Cadillac, huh? Nice car," Jackson commented admiringly as he got into her car. "A little different from yesterday's rig?"

"That was a pool car; those things are just too generic for me. I like something with a little more style."

"Well, it looks like you found it. Bet you don't see many of these over here, do you?"

"No, you really don't. I wanted something stylish yet something really sporty. The ATS seemed to fit the bill – I actually had to special order it so I picked up the ATS-V," Dani replied.

"I bet you did; this is really cool!" Jackson added. "So, what's on tap for today? Jim didn't give me any kind of agenda or any idea as to what to expect."

"Remember that sudden meeting I told you that Bibi scheduled with Tamir, just as you arrived yesterday? Well, it turns out we have a little operation scheduled for tonight."

"Really? What kind of an 'operation'?" Jackson asked.

"Well, Ben's talking it over with Tamir right now. Even though I'm Ops, I don't know all of the details on this one yet. Ben will fill us in when we get to the office."

"So, tell me about Ben. He seems like a real take charge kind of guy. I mean he answered the first two questions that I asked you last night."

"He is in command of our unit but don't prejudge him. He's very good and usually, all business. Until you get to know him, he might come off as a bit of a control-freak. Once he's had a chance to get to know someone, however, he relaxes quite a bit. Yoni, on the other hand, is much like you saw him last night, quiet and fairly reserved, but don't let that calm demeanor fool you. We've been in a few scrapes with Hezbollah up in Lebanon – there is no one, Ben included, who I'd rather have with me in a fire fight. Yoni is rock solid and seemingly knows the entire battle-scape – wherever that is – like it was his hometown."

"What are you guys doing in Lebanon? I thought this team's focus was Iran."

"Oh, Iran is, and remains, the primary focus of our team. You see, Iran supplies Hezbollah with everything, from ammunition to rockets – and they station several of their Republican Guards in the Beqaa Valley. Every now and then, we get another piece of the puzzle up there."

"I can see that; just thought a different team would take care of that for you."

"When it comes to Iran, Ben likes our team to do as much of the work as possible. He wants to make sure nothing gets missed."

"Yeah, I can appreciate that."

"So, did you get your Starbucks fix in yet this morning?" Dani asked, changing the subject.

"No, I didn't. I thought there'd be one in the hotel but couldn't find anything."

“Well, Starbucks isn’t in Israel. I got hooked on them when I was at A & M but had to get used to our variety back here when I came home; it’s a lot stronger here. This place here’s a favorite of mine.”

Seeing that Dani pulled into a parking spot, rather than the proverbial drive-thru, he asked Dani, “Ah, what time are we supposed to get in to the office this morning?”

“Ben and Tamir are still working out the details for tonight’s operation. They told me we didn’t need to be in the office all that early, so, since you haven’t been to Israel before, I thought we’d take our time this morning. Find a table and I’ll get the coffee.”

Jackson found a table on the street-side patio and waited for Dani. Once she sat down with their coffee, Jackson simply stated, “So, tell me about Iran’s nuclear ambitions.”

* * *

Tamir told Ben that as soon as Arielle & Stonewall arrived, they were to be brought into his office right away. Two hours after their coffee stop, Ben ushered them into Tamir’s office.

“Stonewall, I believe Arielle mentioned that we have an operation scheduled for tonight. This will be a simple recon mission that will last about a day and a half. Would you be interested in tagging along as an ‘observer’? We’d love to have you along for the ride.”

“I’d love to. Jim didn’t give me much in the way of instructions so, yeah, let’s go.”

“Excellent. While this is a recon mission, we still want to get you checked out. What do you carry for a sidearm?” Tamir asked Stonewall.

“I carry either an H&K VP9 or a Sig P226,” Jackson responded, suddenly piqued by the nature of this “recon” mission.

“Good, we have both. Yoni will take you out to the range and check you out. Ben and Arielle will go over the mission while you’re out with Yoni. Once you get back, we’ll fill you in on all of the details.”

Two hours later, Jackson joined Tamir, Ben, Dani, & Yoni in the conference room where he initially met Ben and Yoni. Ben began the briefing letting Jackson know that they would be flying to Baku, Azerbaijan, that evening and from there they would drive to Tehran.

“We kind of figured you’d be going,” Ben added, as he handed Jackson his false documents. “We’ll have the rest of the gear you’ll need when we get to our destination.”

“I’m not even going to ask you how you put these together so quickly.”

“That’s okay; we wouldn’t tell you anyway,” Ben added with a big grin on his face. “Okay, when we’re done here, Arielle will take you back to the hotel to get some sleep. She’ll pick you up around nine o’clock tonight, grab some dinner and get you to the airfield.”

Jackson knew that every Israeli served in the military in some capacity. However, he had as yet to fully accept the exact capacity in which Dani served. She’d clearly been in the field before; that much was obvious. However, given her position in Mossad, the operations officer of this team, and her education – a full-fledged PhD in nuclear engineering – he fully expected her to be more of a rear echelon-type who would be monitoring events via satellite in some highly secretive operations center. When they arrived at Tel Nof Air Force Base around midnight, though, Jackson was somewhat surprised to see that Dani would be joining them.

“You’re going to?” Jackson asked.

“I’m the operations officer for this unit; I kind of need to go.”

“I’m sorry, I guess I just figured...” Jackson started.

“What? That since I’m a woman, I’m not a full member of the team?” Dani interrupted, with both a bit of an edge but also knowing she had something over on Stonewall.

“It’s just that I’m not used to women serving in a Special Ops unit.”

“Well, this is Israel, not the United States. I can hold my own, I think I’ve demonstrated that. And, besides, on this little excursion, we’ll be traveling as a couple – once we get to Iran, you’ll be my husband.”

“What?!?” Jackson blurted out.

“Ben didn’t tell you that, huh?” Dani said with a bit of a laugh. “Relax, we both speak perfect Farsi and I’ve been over there several times. It’ll be a walk in the park, as you Americans fondly say.”

* * *

Upon landing in Baku, they taxied over to a large hangar at a far corner of the airport completely out of sight from the rest of the terminal. The pilot actually taxied the plane into the hangar and, once inside, the doors of the hangar closed and the pilot shut down the engines. Poking his head out of the cabin door before deplaning, Jackson noticed several things seemingly all at once: the hangar was far larger than it needed to be for this little plane but it also housed four other planes, each presumably Israeli though there were no markings on the planes. As he walked down from the plane, Jackson noticed that each of the planes in the hangar sported large, conformal bulges – clearly electronic warfare aircraft – and quickly suspected that something else was in the works.

“Ah, Dani, what’s going on?” Jackson asked as he got off the plane.

“What do you mean?” Dani quickly responded.

“Dani, you’re Ops; unless I’m mistaken, you’ve got four EW planes parked in here as well as the plane we just flew in on. Is there something else in the works that I’m not aware of?” Jackson asked.

“Nah, we keep these guys here to keep a close eye on Tehran. It’s a lot closer than flying from any of our bases back home, which means they can spend more time in the air over here. Obviously, we have a pretty tight, and secret, agreement with Azerbaijan.” Dani went on, hoping to sound somewhat reassuring.

“Uh huh...” Jackson replied, not entirely convinced. “We knew you were working with them and had rights to use the air field, in an emergency – or so we thought – but didn’t realize they allowed you to base your EW craft here.”

“Well, we haven’t advertised it but this airfield has come in quite handy. Looks like our ride is here,” Dani added, quickly changing the subject.

Jackson hadn’t noticed the two Toyota SUVs that pulled up behind him while he had been talking with Dani. Both vehicles were registered in Astara, Azerbaijan, so as not to raise any undo suspicion: they would not be in Iran very long and would appear to be nothing more than tourists traveling in Iran for a few days – it was the height of the summer tourist season, after all. The six man team, now broken into two teams – Jackson and Dani in one vehicle and the other four in the second SUV – proceeded to the Astara border crossing, which was the only open crossing as the Azerbaijanis had recently closed the crossings at Bileh Savar and Julfa due to a border incident involving Iranian border guards firing at a farmer working the river bank separating the two countries. Ben had planned on hitting the border around 7:00 a.m., ordinarily one of the busiest times of the day at the border crossing as it was; now, the increased border traffic at Astara greatly eased the infiltration as the border guards here, like low level bureaucrats everywhere, were seriously overworked and underpaid.

Getting into their SUV, Jackson looked at Dani and, somewhat facetiously said “Well, ‘Mrs. Jackson’, just how long of a drive do we have?”

“Careful with that, Cowboy,” Dani replied, after all, he was a Texan Dani thought to herself. “Ben wants to hit the border crossing around seven o’clock. It’s what, oh... something like 185 miles and it’s a little after three right now so we should make that as planned. From the border, it’s about another 320 miles or so. As long we’re in Azerbaijan, I can help you with the driving but once we cross the border, you’ll need to do all of the driving as the Iranians don’t like their women driving.”

IV

Back in 2012, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his UN speech drawing a “red line” in the sand, he also made an estimate as to when the Iranians might be able to produce a nuclear bomb. The Prime Minister had followed up his 2012 UN speech with another one to the same world body just a few days ago and this one specified, in rather great detail, as to when the Iranians would have a nuclear weapon – in just a few months. This was incredibly sooner than anyone in the agency, let alone the world, had expected. Most everyone in the agency – and the world, for that matter – simply assigned this, understandably, to regional paranoia. No other intelligence agency in the world, not MI6, not the DGSE, hell not even the KGB, believed Iran was this far along. However, Jackson thought there might be something to this and the opportunity to join Dani and her team on the recon mission into Iran looked like a golden opportunity to see whether or not the Israelis and his own agency were operating from the same intelligence – or if the Israelis had a source unknown to the CIA.

“You realize what he’s telling us, don’t you?” Grand Ayatollah Khomeini said to Said Jalili who sat across from him in his office.

“Of course,” Jalili responded rather smugly, “Netan-yahu’s telling us that he knows how close we are to achieving a nuclear bomb. We have a leak.”

“Not only that, but he’s essentially daring us to find his source. He’s betting everything that we won’t be able to find the leak.”

“Even Netanyahu wouldn’t be so cynical as to burn his own source. He either doesn’t think we’ll find him, or her, or...”

“They are attacking...” Khomeini finished Jalili’s sentence for him. “They are attacking... They wouldn’t dare; not alone.” Khomeini couldn’t believe what he had just said. On the one hand, it made sense, but on the other... they wouldn’t go it alone. They couldn’t; they didn’t have the means. Neither the Saudis nor the Jordanians would allow the Israelis to violate their air space. The Turks, well, they might, Khomeini thought to himself, but that would be the longest route for them to take and the Israelis simply did not have the logistical means to do something this ambitious. No, Netanyahu clearly thought they would never find his source. That arrogant pig Khomeini thought to himself.

“Said, you need to find our leak. That arrogant pig is daring us to find his source. He doesn’t think we can find him. I want you to put your best people on this. We need to plug this leak immediately. We have come too far to let it all slip away at this point.”

“I’ll find the leak and I know just who should handle this,” Jalili said. Unlike the Grand Ayatollah, though, Jalili knew that he also needed to get ready for an attack. Khomeini could delude himself all he wanted to, but Jalili fully believed an attack would be forthcoming. He’d had plans in place for this for a little while but he never expected he’d have to find a mole. No, that stunned Jalili more than the prospect of an Israeli attack. He knew he could handle – and survive – any attack the Israeli’s threw at him. However, the prospect of a mole, a spy, infuriated him to no end – and since he had no idea where to look, he had no idea the damage this spy could inflict.

* * *

Dani and Stonewall followed Ben and the rest of the team in the lead car. Once the team crossed the border in to Iran, he noticed a particular change in Dani that he had usually only seen in his Special Forces teams – it was not one of fear but more of recognition, and acceptance, of their very real danger. They knew they were on a dangerous mission but they also knew their experience and training made them more than ready for anything they might encounter. For his part, Jackson had no idea as to what the nature of this “recon” mission was. He’d conducted all kinds of recon missions with the Special Forces but something about this one just seemed different. He’d been a part of teams

that had been hastily organized where no one knew more than half the team, so being new to this team did not faze him. He knew that as the chief of operations, Dani knew their mission. However, it was her inherent contradictions that really intrigued him: this relatively tall and attractive woman, who defined Class and Style, also served as one of the toughest commandos in the IDF!?! Women were not allowed in any type of Special Forces in the US military; SEALs, Delta, the Rangers, or the Special Forces. Yet, he was sure Dani could qualify for any one of them: She appeared to be incredibly physically fit and she had a distinct air about her that exuded an uncompromising tenacity. Clearly, this was not Dani's first time in Indian country.

"So tell me, just how did you get to be a part of this team? You already mentioned your family ties to General Pardo but this team would appear to rival any of our Special Operations teams. I didn't realize women could be a part of the Israeli Special Forces."

"Zivah and I are the first two women who made it into the Sayeret Matkal. You'll meet Zivah later today. After I finished my doctorate, remember I was still in the IDF, I looked for another challenge, and I found it. I asked Tamir if he could get me into the program, and, reluctantly, he did. Zivah and I were in the same class and I couldn't have gotten through it without her – that's the hardest thing I've ever done, but it's been very rewarding: How many women do you know who serve in a Special Forces unit who also have a PhD in nuclear engineering?"

"Ah... you would be the first."

"Yeah, well as Iran's progress with its nuclear program became more pronounced, I was a natural fit with Ben's team. Ben's been doing this for close to ten years now; I'm on my fourth with the team."

"I kind of thought you'd been over here before."

"Yeah, I've lost track of the times I've been over here. Often enough that we know some of the border guards by name. That being said, we still compartmentalize the nature of each mission – only Ben, Yoni, and myself fully know the nature of most of our missions. Obviously, since I'm Ops, I usually know the nature of each mission but Ben's in charge – he can change the mission as he sees fit."

"Just when does Ben plan on telling the rest of us what we'll be doing?"

"He usually fills everyone in at the last possible moment. We're all exceptionally well trained and we've been working together for the last four years. Zivah and I were the last two to join the team and having two women on the team adds to our cover – the Iranians would never suspect two women would be part of a Sayeret Matkal team, after all, you didn't," she said with a smirk that screamed "Gotcha."

"Yeah, you got me there. So, just what all do you do when you're not "lockin' horns with the Iranians?"

"Lockin' horns, huh? I see where this is going. I may be Israeli but I'm not that far removed from A & M – see this ring here?" she asked, referencing her Aggie ring, as she held out her right hand ring finger. "I'm still an Aggie."

"What? Everyone knows there's only one real school in Texas."

"I know, and it's in College Station. I mean, have you ever been to Austin? That's one of the drabest and dullest places in Texas; even their school colors reflect the community: a dried up, burnt up orange."

"Yeah, well at least those of us in Austin knew we were at a university; we didn't need to name the community after the type of school we were at, just in case we forgot."

"Touché. Well, to answer your question, I do a lot to stay in shape; I do a lot of jogging and swimming, when I can. I read when I get the chance, a lot of non-fiction, Mideast history for the most part, and I really enjoy playing the piano. The piano is probably my favorite; it's just so relaxing, I can totally lose myself in it."

“So, in addition to being a full-fledged PhD in nuclear engineering and a highly trained commando, you’re also a concert pianist?”

“I didn’t say that I’m a concert pianist, just that I really enjoy the piano,” Dani replied with a sly grin. “Though, I am pretty good,” she added.

“I bet you are, and, after knowing you for only a couple of days, you seem to be one that, no matter what you do, you do it to excess. I mean look at it: You received your PhD in nuclear engineering from a fairly prestigious university, you’re in the highly specialized Sayeret Matkal, you drive an exceptionally nice car, your sense of style is incredible; shall I go on?”

“Think you have me pegged pretty good, huh? But doesn’t the old adage say that ‘if it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing to excess’? But no, I’m not a concert pianist – that would be my sister; she’s incredible. She studied in New York at Julliard. She’s a couple year’s older than me and has played in some of the finest orchestras in the States and here in Israel. She’s the one who really got me interested in the piano.”

“So, is your whole family a bunch of over achievers?” Jackson asked.

“There’s just the two of us, and my parents, of course. But we are very competitive; we both just hate to lose, at anything. I think we feed off of each other.”

“Yeah, I can believe that. How did everyone feel about you signing up for Sayeret Matkal?”

“My sister thought it was pretty cool; my folks were dead-set against it. My dad, being a former paratrooper, has obviously seen his share of action and he definitely did not want his little girl trying out to be an elite commando but he knew he couldn’t stop me. I’m sure he talked with Tamir ahead of time to try and discourage me, and I did speak with Tamir, but he was very fair with everything. Like I said, that was the toughest thing I’ve ever done. But what about you? It seems that I’m the one doing all the talking.”

“Who, me?” Jackson replied. “There’s nothing special about me.”

“Right. You appear to be rather young for a full bird colonel and, from what I understand, you have, what, three Silver Stars? Then there’s your eye patch, and with one eye, you still managed to requalify for the Special Forces – there’s gotta be a story behind that.”

“Nah, no real story, stuff like that kind of happens when you’re too close to an Iraqi mortar. As for the rest, I guess that’s what you get when people exaggerate about some of the things you’ve done.”

* * *

When Jackson and his fellow team members arrived at the safe house, he was more than a little surprised that Dani walked right in the front door without bothering to unlock the door in some manner or to alert anyone who might have been inside. Dani had been to this house before and took more than a little pleasure in showing Jackson all the “amenities” this house provided – starting with the entrance. Jackson had used safe houses before in his career with the Special Forces, and was rather surprised at the apparent lack of security as the door seemed to be unlocked as Dani had walked right in. Playing off of his amazement, Dani took Stonewall back out front and had him try and open the door, only to find the door completely locked – and very solid. Dani, then, simply opened the door for Jackson to let him back in the house. At this point, Jackson began to realize just how sophisticated this safe house really was.

“Oh, this is good; this is really cool. Is there some sort of facial recognition key that automatically unlocks the door?” Jackson asked.

“Close; there’s a biometric sensor at the door that picks up on both facial recognition and behavioral analytics to function as the ‘key’, ” Dani replied. She could see that Jackson was suitably impressed – and she loved showing off.

For his part, Jackson had used safe houses before, but nothing like this – this “house” was more like a small fortress, complete with an eight foot wall around the perimeter: to all but the most trained

eye, each window could stop a 7.62 bullet; he didn't see any cameras but he knew they were there as well, both inside and out. Dani took him to the basement control room where he realized just how thorough the camera surveillance really was: multiple cameras had every square inch of the property – and its approaches – thoroughly covered, with multiple redundancy; if someone tried to sneak up and disable even half a dozen cameras, there were still more. Dani showed Jackson the “armory” next; in addition to the usual small arms, this arsenal had enough hardware to take out a battalion of tanks and to take down a small squadron of fighters – even an aerial assault could be met with fierce resistance. Jackson had been so taken in by Dani and the “amenities” of the house that he had totally failed to realize that there were three inhabitants of the residence. Ben, and the rest of Jackson's new Israeli friends, did not fail to, good naturally, remind him of their presence!

“So, Arielle, who's General Dayan, here?” Zivah asked Dani as she sized up Jackson. Turning to Stonewall, she simply commented, “You don't work out much, do you?” Jackson had been wearing a loose fitting cotton Oxford, which felt pretty good in the cool morning air up in Baku, but had removed this due to the intense afternoon heat in Tehran. The fitted Under Armour T-shirt he now wore accented his sculpted torso, which Zivah admiringly noticed.

“I usually run about five miles a day and then do a little work in the weight room; I spend more time on the cardio than on the weights.”

“Well, don't change a thing! It's working for me; you fill that shirt out in all the right places!” Zivah commented admiringly.

“Dani, he's a keeper!” she continued.

“Zivah! I can't believe you!” Dani exclaimed, noticeably blushing. “Stonewall, this is Zivah – and watch out for her. She's our electronics and comms expert – she has ‘ears’ everywhere! Next, this is Ayal, he's our explosives expert. Finally, we have Jonah, who pretty much lives here.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Jackson replied.

“I assume there's a story behind the ‘Stonewall’ name?” Ayal asked.

“There is. Suffice it to say that a colonel I worked with a while back thought something I did reminded him of our Civil War General Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson; my name is Thomas Jackson, so the handle fit.”

Once the complete team, now nine members strong, had been fully introduced to Stonewall, Ben set about explaining the exact nature of their little mission. From the first, Jackson suspected that this little mission they were on had to be something big – and he was not disappointed.

“Recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke at the United Nations and drew a red line advising the world body that Iran was extremely close to achieving a nuclear bomb. What he did not tell the world was that we have a source within the Iranian government that has been leaking highly classified information to us and that, within that speech, was a coded message for our source to get ready to leave Iran as we would be coming to get him – we are that mission,” Ben advised.

“My God; you guys are... Ah!” Jackson exclaimed as he received a powerful elbow in the rib cage. “What was that for?” he asked Dani.

“Just shut up; we'll discuss this later,” she quietly responded.

“Our source, is none other than Dr. Ali Bagheri Kani, the deputy secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council,” Ben continued. “Bagheri knows we are coming but he does not know exactly when or how we will be picking him up; there is simply no way of getting that information to him. He currently lives in a residence in the resort area of Bashgah-e Savarkri-e, not too far from here in Tehran. The resort is part of the National Botanical Gardens, and there are only two entrances – one on the west and the other on the east side of the park. We know he is home as Jonah and his team here, have had him under surveillance for the past week. The plan to get him out is relatively quite simple: We'll grab him tonight and head immediately for Astara and the border,” Ben said with a smile. Jackson knew, as did everyone else, that it wouldn't exactly be that simple.

After Ben's briefing, Dani took Jackson aside.

“You’re pretty quick,” she told him.

“Well, it’s pretty obvious. You tell the world that the Persians are on the verge of a nuclear weapon, you have four EW aircraft forward deployed and now we’re over here to smuggle out your source before everything hits the fan – you guys are attacking.” A simple statement; no question implied. “Dani, don’t get me wrong, I’m all for it. Some folks in Washington might not be but we’ll have to cross that bridge very soon.”

“Tamir said you were a quick study. You put that together very fast. I don’t need to tell you: don’t let this out, and for that matter, the decision really hasn’t been made. Zivah, Jonah, and Ayal don’t know how soon we might be attacking, though you are correct – if this mission is a success, we’ll probably be attacking as soon as we get back.”

“Dani, don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me. I’ve been around the block a time or two. It wouldn’t surprise me if the raiding party already has their engines warmed up by the time we land back in Tel Aviv.”

* * *

Bagheri, who was Said Jalili’s chief deputy, found himself in a unique position: each member of his family had been killed in service to the Islamic Republic: one son had been killed by an Israeli air strike in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon helping Hezbollah with some advanced long range missiles; another son had been killed in the US air strike that had also killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq; and, his wife and first born son had been passengers on Iranian Flight 655—something which would have no meaning to any American but had been etched into the psyche of every Iranian since that fateful day in July, 1988, when the USS Vincennes had shot down Iranian Flight 655 in the Persian Gulf, killing all 290 passengers on board. Bagheri thoroughly detested everything about the United States and its arrogance. However, he, perhaps more than anyone else also clearly saw the direction that Iran was heading with its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and he also clearly saw the only possible outcome that could become of such an objective – and he loved his country more than he hated the Americans, which was why he had decided to aid the Israelis in their desire to keep Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The fact that his family had been destroyed by both the Israelis and the Americans put him way beyond reproach – no one would suspect him of helping the hated Zionists and their ally, the Great Satan.

* * *

Stonewall already knew that this wasn’t Dani’s first rodeo but he still felt a little odd going into a combat situation with her. He didn’t think of himself as “old fashioned” and he could tell that Dani certainly knew how to handle herself. Rather, he simply blamed this “odd feeling” on the fact that women did not serve in the Special Forces and he simply wasn’t used to it. Dani could sense his discomfort and tried to put him at ease, calling this a very simple routine mission. However, Stonewall had been around long enough to know that there was no such thing as a “routine” mission.

As sunset drew near, the nine man team (seven men and two women, actually) set out for Bagheri’s residence. The team broke up into five vehicles; Ayal drove a relatively larger box van type of truck; Jonah had another in which he drove separately; and Zivah and Levi had the coms vehicle, each of which would actually enter the gardens from the west entrance; Dov and Yoni would be in a fourth vehicle and Ben, Dani and Stonewall would be in the fifth. On the way out of Tehran, Bagheri would be riding with Dani and Jackson. The photos that Ayal’s advance team had provided the actual assault team appeared to show a relatively lax security arrangement – and driving through the gardens gave Jackson a firsthand look, and confirmation that the security lacked the detail he would expect from a more professional force. Either the detail team did not think there was much

of a threat to Bagheri, or they were not all that professional of a detail, or a combination of both. Bagheri lived alone in a modest single family residence located on one of the main streets that leads straight through the gardens. About a quarter mile from the house a relatively wide entrance way allowed some cover for Ayal's, Jonah's and Zivah's vans. Zivah stayed in her van and monitored all of the electronic jamming gear to make sure no outgoing calls could get through while Ayal, Jonah and Levi proceeded to Bagheri's house to take out the guards before Ben, Jackson and the rest of the team pulled into Bagheri's driveway – they wanted to make sure the outside guards had been dispatched prior to their arrival. As expected, both of the guards covering the exterior of the place did not pose any problems for Ayal's team. When Ben pulled into the drive way – Dov stayed quietly along the roadside with his lights out – it was obvious from the disturbance inside that Bagheri's guards were not expecting company this evening, though it was still relatively early.

Ben and Dani had teamed up and both were at the door and announced that they were looking for Dr. Bagheri as Dani explained that while visiting the gardens that afternoon, she thought she overheard someone mention that he lived around here. She went on to explain that she had Dr. Bagheri as a professor at Tehran University and, as long as she was back in the area, she wanted to look him up if this was where he lived. The guard that answered the door seemed rather nervous, looking over Dani's shoulder to see why his guards had not intercepted this couple, and gruffly insisted that there was no Dr. Bagheri here, which is when Ben pulled out his 9mm silenced Sig P226 and put two rounds into the guard's chest. At this point, Dani and Ben rushed through the door, followed closely by Jackson, Dov, and Yoni. Dani and Ben took the left side of the house; Jackson and the others, the right side. In the kitchen, Dani surprised another guard preparing dinner and quickly dispatched him. Bagheri's office was at the end of a long hallway that led right from the front entrance. Jackson found another guard here with Bagheri himself and quickly took him out as well. Three guards, plus the two outside, were all that Ayal's advance team had expected and after a quick search of the house, Yoni announced the all clear. With the assault completed, Ayal went back to where he had parked his truck, brought it into Bagheri's driveway and parked it immediately adjacent to the house.

Ben immediately met with Bagheri and introduced himself as his escort out of Iran. Introductions were made all around, and Bagheri was surprised to hear that a US Special Forces member was on the team as well. Jackson admitted that he, too, was surprised to be a part of the team but indicated that he would not have had it any other way. With the pleasantries completed, Ayal advised Ben that the security detail had been cleaned up and hidden away so that no one should be finding them until they intended. Zivah had gathered up all of the computer equipment – the guards had a laptop, as did Bagheri, along with a desktop and cell phone and she took these to her van. She returned with two old laptops and an old desktop to replace those she had just taken. To Bagheri's amazement, Yoni and Jonah grabbed the guard's body they believed to be the detail lead and put him into one of the vans which would remain in Tehran – on the way back to the safe house, the body would be hidden in a very secluded place along the Tigris River.

Ben now advised Bagheri of their plan to park a large truck bomb next to the house and detonate it early in the morning – prior to the changing of the guards. Ben told him that “we simply want to cause as much confusion regarding your disappearance as possible. If they find you missing and all of your guards have been killed, that's going to raise some suspicion. However, if we can thoroughly demolish the house and the authorities find you and the team leader for your security detail missing; that's going to create some confusion as to what really happened. Hopefully, they'll think you and your detail here have been assassinated. They may even think that the two of you have fled and have been unable to make contact. In any case, in the time it takes for them to try and figure out what actually happened... well, let's just say, hopefully, it won't matter. We'll be heading straight for the Azerbaijani border and traveling all night; four of the team will simply return to our safe house. The plan is to arrive at the border before 7:00 a.m. tomorrow morning – just when the traffic crossing the border will be at its peak – and also at about the same time the truck bomb should be going off –

if all goes according to plan.” Ben explained that he wanted to take advantage of the overworked guards at the crossing as they were always the easiest to distract as well as the ones that would often simply let things go without taking the time to ask a lot of questions – especially when there was a solid stream of cars and trucks wanting to cross the border. Ben specifically requested that Bagheri ride with Dani and Jackson so that Jackson could get a firsthand account of just how close Iran was to achieving a nuclear weapon. He also had given Dani a recorder so that the conversations they had for the next eight hours on the way back to Baku would be recorded. For the next several hours, then, both Jackson and Dani got an earful of the sophistication of the Iranian nuclear weapons program – something Jackson had long suspected but only now began to fully appreciate the implications of their program – with a bomb just a couple months away – and of Israel’s impending attack.

At the border, Ben and his team found the crossing as expected – a line of cars proceeded for close to a kilometer ahead of him. By the time his car got close to the border, he could tell that the guards were getting pretty lax in their duties – as he had expected. Ben’s car was the first of the two and passed through the security without any difficulties. Dani, Jackson and Bagheri were a little nervous, wondering if Bagheri’s detail had been discovered and an alert issued but everything was in order. Bagheri was a little surprised that the fake passport Ben had given him had an entry stamp, the same as the rest of the team. He wasn’t sure how Ben had accomplished that feat but he did not pursue it; he was just thankful that he was able to cross the border into Azerbaijan without any difficulty.

The rest of the trip proved rather uneventful for the entire team. They still had a three hour drive from Astara to the Baku airbase. From there, it was a relatively short flight from Baku back to Tel Aviv. However, Bagheri had spent most of the past five hours spelling out the details of Iran’s nuclear program, including the development of a previously unknown fuel reprocessing facility at Arak and long suspected, though unconfirmed, details about testing at Parchin. Both Jackson and Dani were completely surprised to learn that the actual testing of an Iranian nuclear weapon was just over a month out. Once past the border, and with the adrenalin from the tension for the past several hours spent, Bagheri collapsed in the back seat of the car.

The plane on which the team had arrived only a couple days before had remained in the hangar at the Baku airbase. Ben had radioed ahead to let the flight crew know they were on their way and they needed to get back to Tel Aviv just as soon as possible. By the time the team arrived, the flight crew had the engines warmed up with the preflight checklist completed – all that remained was the team and their guest.

Once the team was airborne, Jackson immediately asked Ben about the possibility of notifying his superiors in Washington. The communications gear their plane had rivaled that of Air Force One so gaining a secure link would not be a problem. Both men knew the urgency of getting their information back to Washington so Jackson did not have a hard sell with this; Ben ordered the call made at once.

V

Said Jalili knew he had to act right away to find the source of Netanyahu's information. He thoroughly detested the Israelis, but he had a great deal of respect for them, and he did not believe for a minute that Netanyahu would be so callous as to discard a source which had to be extremely reliable, and important, without so much as making an attempt to get him out of Iran. The trouble was, he had been out of the country when Netanyahu gave his speech. As a result, he was getting a late start. His first call was to Colonel Ashkan Rafsanjani. Colonel Rafsanjani reminded Jalili of himself twenty years ago: extremely intelligent, relatively good looking and very ambitious and, even though he was the youngest colonel in the Quds, he had recently been appointed as the operations officer for the Supreme National Security Council by Major General Qassim Suleimani, the leader of the Quds Force. Together, Jalili and Suleimani had already tasked him with Operation Cyrus, one of the most secret and boldest operations in Iranian history. However, now they needed him to plug the Intelligence leak as well.

Operation Cyrus had kept Colonel Rafsanjani extremely busy at his office out at the Bidganeh Republican Guards base. Jalili's call interrupted a hectic afternoon and he immediately thought the secretary was requesting yet another briefing on Cyrus. However, he knew otherwise after Jalili mentioned he had another urgent task for him – and that he should report to the Ministry just as fast as he could get back into Tehran. One hour later, Rafsanjani walked into Jalili's office to find him staring out his fifth story window. The secretary motioned for him to take a seat and, as he did, Jalili – still staring out the window – casually asked him if he had heard Netan-yahu's speech.

"I did, and I noticed that his estimate for us finally getting a bomb is quite accurate," stated Rafsanjani.

"It is, and that is what I want you to look into. Just how is it that the Israelis know precisely how far along we are in building a nuclear bomb? Netanyahu's estimate is the same one I received from our own Atomic Agency Commission. We obviously have a leak and I want you to look into this right away."

"Right away? What about Cyrus?"

"I still want you to pursue that. If I know the Israelis, they won't be sitting on their laurels. They will attempt to get him out of the country as soon as possible. For all we know, they might already have a team here to pick him up. Obviously, I do not expect this search to last all that long. You have an executive officer; delegate the operation to him while you pursue this traitor. I wouldn't expect this to be much more than a week long endeavor."

"Do we have any leads whatsoever?" asked Rafsanjani.

"You know as much as I do," replied Jalili.

"So we have nothing," more of a statement than a question.

"We have nothing at all."

"Well then, I guess I'll start with the borders. Maybe we can get lucky and catch both the traitor and an Israeli team trying to smuggle him out."

"Just keep me apprised of what you find out," and with that, Rafsanjani took his leave.

Back at Bidganeh, Rafsanjani called in his executive officer, Major Farrok Zarin, to discuss Jalili's new assignment.

"So, you need to find a grain of salt on the beach, huh?" asked Zarin.

"So it would seem. I'll be starting with the borders in the north. The Astara crossing is already the only crossing from Azerbaijan so we'll double the guards there. We'll also beef up the Bazargan crossing at the Turkish border. This is really going to hurt things in the north but I don't expect it to last all that long. We won't be closing the border but it is definitely going to take a lot longer to cross

it. The Iraqi border is pretty well covered; we've had that managed pretty well since the Americans invaded back in '03."

"What about the coast? Israel has a number of submarines and it wouldn't take much for a submarine to surface in the middle of the night and have a few Israeli commandos come ashore to smuggle someone out."

"That is the hardest part. We only have 1,700 kilometers of coast line to guard," Rafsanjani added rather sarcastically. "However, the Bushehr reactor is right on the coast. I'll have the navy saturate the surrounding area with patrol boats so no one could get through. We also need to check and see if any 'surprise' inspections show up here in the next few days or if anyone is making an unscheduled trip to Bushehr."

"What do you think about Afghanistan and the eastern borders? I can't see the Israelis going this far out: we don't have any nuclear facilities in that direction and it's a long way to travel if they want to pursue this route."

"Yeah, I agree with you there. It just doesn't make sense. I'll alert the border guards but aside from that, I don't see it out there."

"What about actually looking for the traitor? Any ideas there? From what I understand, it seems to be some pretty specific information that has been leaked. There can't be all that many people with that kind of knowledge."

"Yeah, I've thought about that. We can't put everyone under a microscope – that was done when each of these people was hired in the first place. We'd essentially be looking for something that doesn't exist. No, the source of this leak is going to be someone beyond reproach. And, if we start investigating the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council or the head of our Atomic Agency Commission, I'm liable to end up in front of a firing squad. However, I think we should look at each of these respective offices, and others, and see if there are any junior staff members who are planning on taking any unscheduled trips, with or without their superiors."

"You realize the trouble with this idea, though, is that irregular travel is the norm for these people – and their staffs. What you'll need to look for is irregularities, within the irregularities: is there a staff member who hardly ever travels, but is taking a trip now? What about phone calls and email correspondence? Have there been any phone numbers called in the past few days that had not been contacted on a regular basis? Were there any staff members who had family all of a sudden 'vacationing' abroad?"

"You know, Jalili suggested letting you take over our original project. However, you seem to have a pretty good grasp on how to conduct this search. Why don't you take over the search – use my name whenever you need to – and I'll continue with Cyrus?"

"That's fine. I don't think this will last all that long, either, and then I can get back to work around here. Besides, I personally think our original assignment is a little more important and your talents would be better used on Cyrus than trying to find this traitor who is probably on his way out of the country as we speak."

"Good. Since we both expect this to be a relatively short lived assignment, why don't you swing by my office every afternoon before you leave for the day and let me know how things are going?"

"Will do; see you tomorrow." And with that, Zarin dismissed himself.

* * *

"Good morning, Amir," Colonel Rafsanjani greeted his driver. Amir had been driving for Rafsanjani for a couple years now.

"Good morning, sir. Where to this morning, the office or out to Bidganeh?"

"Bidganeh, Amir. Major Zarin is working on a small project for me and I'll need to see him later this afternoon so let's just head to the base."

The drive to the base took about half an hour longer than to where Rafsanjani had his office at the Ministry of Intelligence in Tehran so he came prepared for the ride: Rafsanjani already had his new iPad open and began trying to get caught up on several items he had hoped to get done yesterday. Jalili's call and new assignment had taken up his entire day, leaving him a day behind on his latest project.

Amir interrupted his concentration as they approached the halfway point to the base. "Colonel? Excuse me, sir. Major Zarin is on the phone for you. He said something about an explosion over at the Botanical Gardens."

"The Botanical Gardens? There's nothing over there; who wants to blow up a bunch of trees? Give me the phone. Major, what's going on? Amir mentioned something about an explosion over in the Botanical Gardens. There's nothing over there."

"Sir, Dr. Ali Bagheri lives over by the gardens. Would the Israelis be targeting him?"

"Amir, turn around and let's head over to there. Farrok, get me Bagheri's address. We are on our way over there now but it'll take us forty-five minutes to even get in the general area – the traffic is awful. Send me a text with Bagheri's address as soon as you can."

"Will do, sir; I'll get it to you right away."

"Here you are, sir. Bagheri currently lives in a resort area of Bashgah-e Savarkri-e, which is actually a part of the National Botanical Gardens."

Rafsanjani could tell that the explosion had come from the resort area of the gardens as they passed through the east entrance. The remnant wisps of a heavy smoke plume rising from that area, as Farrok had indicated, clearly indicated a massive fire had raged here. The local police already had established a cordon about a quarter mile from Bagheri's residence, or what remained of it. However, being a colonel in the Quds Force has its privileges. One of which is ready access to catastrophic scenes such as that posed by the horrific scene of what once was Ali Bagheri's residence and surrounding yard – there was nothing left of the house but a huge crater and scattered and charred debris of what once was the residence of the Islamic Republic's Deputy Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. The incident commander had already relayed that two bodies had been discovered though identifying who they were would require contacting a few dentists. There simply wasn't enough left to visually identify the bodies. Rafsanjani inquired about any other corpses and the commander indicated that they had only found the two but, given the extent of the devastation – and the still smoldering fire amongst the vegetation – there was no telling if they would ever know just how many might have been at the home. Clearly, Dr. Bagheri had been assassinated, Rafsanjani thought, as no one had heard from him as yet and at this hour of the morning, he should have either been at his office or have been in contact with someone from his security detail. He did not need the commander's expertise to tell him that this was not an ordinary explosion: the size of the crater, and its location immediately adjacent to the house, clearly implied something other than an accident. The list of suspects would not be a long one. It would take time to determine just who had assassinated the deputy secretary, though he had a good idea who would be at the top of the list.

"Major, I want you to start your search with the deputy secretary's office," Rafsanjani said over his cell phone.

"Surely you don't suspect the deputy secretary?" replied Major Zarin.

"No, the deputy secretary is dead; there is no way anyone could have survived that blast, and not even Netanyahu would be cynical enough to kill his source. However, this is the only unusual or irregular thing to occur that is really out of the ordinary. We need to track down any loose end that might come out of Bagheri's office, no matter how remote the possibility could be – you said it yourself just yesterday: did anyone in the office make any calls to a totally different number, even if they turned out to be a wrong number? What about email correspondence? Are there any emails that might look like SPAM or junk emails? Is anyone in the office planning a family vacation out of the country – I want you to track everything down no matter how small it might seem. I'm sure

the Israelis are involved in this in some manner; the only question is how. I'm going straight to the Ministry to see Secretary Jalili. I'd expect to be out to the base later today and will talk to you then."

Rafsanjani quickly realized that there was no point in his hanging around what used to be Ali Bagheri's residence. They had professionals already assigned to dig through the rubble and search for any remaining bodies. Rafsanjani did not need to take part in that. He told Amir to head immediately to Said Jalili's office at the Supreme National Security Council's office downtown. He knew Jalili would demand an update from him even though he had absolutely no jurisdiction in the assassination. However, he already had Major Zarin chasing down any leads from Bagheri's office personnel to see if his assassination could be connected in any way with Netanyahu's speech. He really didn't see how, but he knew that is exactly the situation that would arise in their search for the traitor, whoever it might be.

Rafsanjani found Jalili completely shocked by Bagheri's assassination – and furious – Bagheri was his deputy. "Colonel," Jalili began, "just how bad is it?"

"The devastation could not be more incredible. They used enough explosives to bring down this building."

"Any chance of survivors?"

"None; there's no way anyone could have survived that blast. The local fire officials found two bodies so far and I think they were lucky to find them. It's too soon to begin looking at reconstructing this but we'll begin that tomorrow if we can, certainly by the day after, and that will give us a better idea of what actually happened. Do we know if there had been any threats towards Bagheri? I mean, taking him out serves absolutely no purpose."

"Ali Bagheri was our leading negotiator with the West regarding our nuclear ambitions. To think the Europeans would be involved in this? – totally ridiculous; certainly not the Russians or the Chinese. The Americans right now are simply out of the picture on the International front. That leaves the Israelis, who incidentally are not a part of the negotiations. I can easily see them trying to derail the negotiations to try and prove a point but even for them, this would be an extremely dangerous game."

"Okay, well, I'll get back over there tomorrow and see if we can begin to get to work reconstructing this thing to see just how powerful this bomb was, where it came from, and all that. I'll keep you posted as things develop."

"Do that. For the next few days, this is your first priority. Turn over everything else to Major Zarin."

"I've already done that; see you tomorrow."

VI

Several thousand miles away, Jim Carmichael received a phone call at home from his signals people. “Sir, we are receiving word of a detonation just outside of Tehran. From the looks of it, this happened within the hour.”

“Do we have any details on this as yet?”

“Sir, it’s conventional, but it’s huge. Brigadier General John Anderson out at Cheyenne Mountain called in the initial report. If they picked it up, it had to be big. Looks like someone took out an entire city block on the outskirts of Tehran. Preliminary reports are saying that the Israelis just took out Ali Bagheri.”

“What?!? He was leading their negotiating team in Bern. Why would they do that? What the hell are they thinking? Okay... Stonewall Jackson is supposed to be in Tel Aviv. Try and raise him. It’s what, about 5:00 a.m. over there? Keep trying until you get ahold of him. I’ll be in early in the morning, unless something else develops; keep me posted.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * *

Jackson had not been with the Agency long enough to have the clout to call up the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), and since he had seriously exceeded his orders, he figured he’d be better off starting with his own superior – and friend – James Carmichael. He had known Jim Carmichael for more than fifteen years now, dating to September of 2001. Jim had lead a CIA team – the Northern Alliance Liaison Team – that entered Afghanistan very soon after the assassination of General Ahmad Shah Massoud, known in Afghanistan as the Lion of Panjshir. Massoud commanded the Northern Alliance and had been seeking the CIA’s assistance in fighting the Taliban for a number of years. The combination of his assassination on September 9th, 2001, and the attacks in New York and Washington D.C., two days later, ironically, cemented the deal for this assistance. Indeed, the afternoon of September 11th, the director of the CIA ordered the establishment of a team to support the Northern Alliance with all means necessary to defeat the Taliban and root out and kill Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda cohorts. The Clandestine Services Division jumped into high gear: Word quickly went out to the Army’s Special Operations Command looking for anyone from the Special Forces’ Fifth Group who would be willing to join the team – they’d still be active duty, just temporarily attached to the Agency. Thomas Jackson, then a bright, young and eager captain in the special operations community, had signed up as soon as word went out for volunteers. Two weeks after the World Trade Center collapsed, Carmichael, Jackson and the rest of the team was in Afghanistan and working in the Panjshir valley.

Stonewall knew his little trek into Tehran had stretched things more than a little but he also knew that Jim was not one to dwell on technicalities when one obtained the desired results – and Jackson knew he had just delivered. Now, he needed to get those results to those who could actually act upon them.

“Stonewall, where have you been? We’ve been trying to get ahold of you for the past several hours. Do you have any idea as to what is going on over there? It seems the Israelis have just assassinated Ali Bagheri, the deputy secretary of their Supreme National Security Council.”

“Jim, back up a bit. Ali Bagheri is out of the picture as far as Iran is concerned – because he just defected to the Israelis. I’ve been on the mission to pick him up in Tehran – I’ll tell you more about that later. The bombing you’ve seen was designed to make the Iranians think that Bagheri is dead; in fact, he’s sitting right here with me now.”

“Wait a minute; you were in Tehran?”

“I’ll explain later. The real issue is just how far along the Iranians are to achieving a nuclear bomb. Jim, they’ll have the bomb in the next couple of months. If I was a betting man, now that the Israelis have their source out of the country, they’ll be attacking any time; they may already have the strike force warmed up. They already have the EW planes forward deployed to Baku. Jim, the Israelis are attacking – it’s just a question of how soon.”

This was a lot of information all at once, even for someone as experienced as Jim Carmichael.

“Are you sure of this? This is way off of what we’ve predicted. And the Israelis; Tamir hasn’t even dropped a clue to me.”

“Sir, I’ve spent the last several hours talking with Bagheri. His information all checks out. There is no way any of this is disinformation; not from him. We grabbed his laptops, desk top computer and cell phone to verify everything but, sir, everything checks out. You’ll need to check with the Pentagon to see what assets we have in the region. As soon as we touch down in Tel Aviv the Israelis are going to be free to attack as they feel they have nothing left to lose.”

“Well, the extent of what we can or will do is beyond our call, but I’ll be getting this information up to the DNI, the national security advisor, the secdef, and the president as soon as we hang up. We have some resources in the area – we’ve kept a carrier in the gulf since ’03 and I know we have something in the Med, I’m just not sure what all we have there. Give me a call after you’ve landed and have had a chance to talk with Pardo. I know the Israelis have not been sitting on the sidelines diplomatically should they decide to attack on their own. No one in the region wants the mad mullahs of Iran to have the Bomb and all are content to let Israel do the heavy lifting. I know they have had some discussions with the Turks and it sounds like you know more than the rest of us about their relationship with the Azerbaijanis. Aside from that, I don’t know of anyone who would actually assist them with an attack but most in the region will certainly look the other way.”

“Okay, will do Jim. It’s about a two hour flight so I’ll give you a call later this afternoon or early evening my time; that should be right about noon on the east coast.”

“Okay, I’ll be expecting your call. Let me know what Pardo is thinking and just how soon the Israelis might go.”

“Sir, if I read this right, they’re already locked and loaded.”

“Yeah, that’s my thinking too. Let me know what you find out. I’ll set up the meetings with the White House, the national security counselor and the rest of the national security team for later this morning; if you can call back before, say five this afternoon your time, I’d have a little time to go over everything before I brief them.”

“Okay, I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

* * *

“Ben, I know you probably don’t know the answer to this question, for obvious reasons, but just how soon do you really think the IDF will launch their attack?”

“Well, we should be landing in around two hours. They’ll want a little time to debrief Bagheri, say about three hours, and that puts it right around 6:00 p.m. our time. Given the complexity of the attack, I would assume that the Air Force would prefer to launch and refuel in daylight – that’s just a guess, not being an airedale myself. As such, I would expect them to launch about twelve hours later, or six in the morning... but that’s just a guess.”

“Okay, that’s kind of what I suspected; no reason to wait now.”

As soon as the team’s plane landed, Dani and Ben escorted Jackson in to see General Pardo. “So, Stonewall, what did you think of your little trip?” Pardo asked him.

“I have to thank you for the opportunity to join the party; it was quite the trip. I must say, it was not quite what I expected when you offered it to me.”

“Well, I couldn’t exactly fill you in on all of the details but I’m glad you were able to go. I realize you don’t know the disposition of your fleet, but could you relay a message for us? You see, now that we have Bagheri, all of our assets are safe; we can attack at will. We’ve already positioned several of our tankers and EW aircraft along the route; in fact, you may have seen some of them in Baku. We aren’t looking for any assistance from you with the strike; we believe we can handle that on our own. In retrospect, our strike on the Syrian nuclear site of Dayr az-Zawr actually served as a nice practice run. However, we would really like to know if we could at least count on US support in some manner. We know you have one carrier, the Roosevelt, I believe, in the Mediterranean and another in the Persian Gulf, the George Washington, with a third, the John C Stennis on the way to relieve the Washington. We are not sure what other ships might be accompanying these carriers but we are not asking for help with your navy fighters. Rather, we’d like to know if we could count on your navy’s support should any of our pilots have to ditch either in the gulf or the Mediterranean. Also, if in the unfortunate circumstance, any of our pilots were to be shot down, would your navy be available to go in and rescue them? I know that is asking a great deal but it would be a nice gesture if the United States government could do this.”

Left unsaid was the simple fact that, in all likelihood, the Iranians would lash out at the American fleet in the gulf and try to hit one of their vaunted carriers with the new Sunburn missiles Russia had provided them. The Sunburn is a radar-guided anti-ship missile, capable of being fired from the air, land or sea, making it an extremely versatile – and dangerous – weapon. The Russian version of the Sunburn had a range of one hundred miles – no one knew if the Iranians had modified this – carried a powerful 750 pound warhead, and flew very fast at Mach 3—at that speed, it could travel the hundred miles in less than three minutes! Any anti-missile defenses the navy had would have a very limited time in which to respond. The French made Exocet missile, by comparison, which the Argentinians used in the Falklands War back in the 80’s, only carried a 350 pound warhead, and flew at less than half the speed of the Sunburn. However, the Argentinians still managed to sink two British destroyers with the Exocet. Clearly, the Sunburn posed a very clear threat to any vessels in the gulf – and an American carrier posed a very tempting target.

“Well, sir, it would seem that you know more about our fleet’s disposition than I do, but I will most definitely pass this on. Actually, if you’d have a secure phone, I’d like to call my boss right away and fill him in on everything.”

Pardo handed Jackson the phone; he was not too surprised to hear that the phone was already ringing.

“Tamir, is that you?” asked Jim Carmichael, having General Pardo’s number in his speed dial.

“No, sir, it’s me, Stonewall. Jim, how soon can we get the Roosevelt through the Suez Canal and into the Arabian Sea and the Stennis to the gulf? Tamir has shared their operational plans with me and it seems that all assets are in place – and like I mentioned earlier, their EW aircraft are already forward deployed. I can’t get into a lot of detail for obvious reasons but Tamir told me to tell you to remember Dayr az-Zawr in Syria. Jim, the Israelis are ready to rock; they’ll be airborne before first light. Tamir isn’t asking for any assistance in the attack – he believes they can handle that themselves – but, ostensibly, he would like to know if he could count on any CSAR” – Combat Search and Rescue – “support from the carriers both in the gulf and the Med if any pilots are shot down during the raid. Plus, the Washington needs to be ready for any retaliation from Iran – and they will retaliate.”

“This is for real, right? I mean, this isn’t a hypothetical thing, is it?”

“No, sir; this is the real thing. They’ll be launching in about twelve hours or so. They’re ready to rock.”

“Okay, this is what I need. I’ll be briefing the president and the rest of the national security team in half an hour. The vice president, though, is out of town at the moment. Tell Tamir ‘thanks for the heads up’ on this one. Oh, . . . and Stonewall, the next time you decide to join a raiding party in a hostile

country, at least let me know what you're up to; you don't need to necessarily ask permission, but it would be nice to tell your next of kin that you at least died in the line of duty.”

“Okay, will do sir.”

“Well, Tamir, I guess we wait and see,” said Jackson, turning to General Pardo.

VII

Washington, D. C.

This was not Jim Carmichael's first visit to the White House; over the past few years, he had made several visits here and had given several briefings as well. However, this one was different. The current administration had based their entire Iranian policy on their preconceived notion that economic sanctions would completely solve the nuclear issue. As the chairman of the CIA's Intelligence Directorate, Carmichael knew otherwise – and had repeatedly said as much; it was the politicians who didn't want to listen, or really believe, what was really happening. He had given his boss, Felix Jones, the director of national intelligence, a heads up on this morning's meeting – essentially a condensed Reader's Digest version – though he had not fully briefed him as yet on all of the details. He knew he was going to get some push-back – especially from State and the White House – on their, read “his”, failure to really determine just how far along the Iranians were on their nuclear ambitions but all that was a mute-point at this stage of the game.

Jim rode in the DNI's limo on the way to the White House and briefly updated Jones on the latest developments from Stonewall.

“Here's the latest: I just heard from Stonewall; the Israelis will be attacking tomorrow. I guess for that matter, their planes will be taking off in about ten hours. I already let ‘Axe’ know” – referring to Eric Axelsson, the secretary of defense – “that the Fifth Fleet should be expecting some company very soon. I didn't give him any specifics – didn't really have any at the time as this was before Jackson's latest call – but the Pentagon's been put on notice. Axe and the chairman will be at the White House so they'll receive the latest information at the same time everyone else will.”

“Jackson's sure this is the real thing, right? I mean, State's going to come unglued that their ambassador hasn't been clued in on any of this.”

“Well, we've warned them about the deteriorating conditions with our relationship with the Israelis. This is exactly why I sent Stonewall over there – he's essentially my personal representative to Tamir. I had a feeling something was coming down and they weren't comfortable enough with State to let them know. I didn't think it would amount to their attacking Iran, but I had a feeling something was in the works.”

“Well, let's go,” Jones said as their limo arrived at the White House. “Don't be surprised if both State and the chief of staff hit you up on failing to pick up on Iran's nuke program.”

“I'm expecting that. The real issue here is the Israeli's pending attack; I won't let them diverge from that.”

“You do that, and I'll be there as well to help you out should one of them try and get you off track. After all, we weren't the only ones who underestimated the Iranians: MI6, the KGB... hell every intelligence network not named Mossad missed this.”

“Yeah, but we're supposed to be better than all the rest, right?” Carmichael responded.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Jones replied. “Remember, the other...”

“I know, I know... the other guy wants to hide his activities as much as we want to figure them out.”

As they walked into the White House, Carmichael noticed that they were the last ones to show up – everyone else's limousines were already in the lot.

“Off to a great start already – looks like we're the last one's here.”

“Yeah, I noticed that, too. Well, might as well get the show started,” Jones added as they approached the Situation Room.

Sure enough, Carmichael noticed: everyone was here, that is, everyone except President Barre... and the front podium was empty. Jim walked right to the podium and Jones took his seat

at the middle of the conference table. No sooner had he gotten his briefing outline pulled up on his iPad than the president walked in and took his seat.

“Good morning,” President Barre said to those seated around the table. “I understand we have something pressing so I won’t take up any of your time Jim; you can proceed whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” Carmichael replied. “I received a call from Colonel Tom Jackson first thing this morning. Tom’s an assistant of mine that is acting as a liaison for me with General Tamir Pardo, the head of Mossad. It seems that the Israelis have had a very high level asset in Tehran. This morning, they managed to smuggle him out of Iran. We all know him, or at least know of him, as it’s none other than Dr. Ali Bagheri, the deputy secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council and the man who led their negotiation team in Bern.”

“Ali Bagheri is Mossad’s source on all of this?” asked Secretary of State Andrea Johnson.

“That’s correct. Jackson called me from Baku just as they were flying back to Tel Aviv. The team set off a car bomb in Bagheri’s driveway to cover their tracks – and completely took out both the house and the garage – there is literally nothing left. In fact, NORAD actually picked up the detonation so the explosion had to be massive. Obviously, the Israelis want Tehran to believe Bagheri is completely out of the picture. However, what is more important is that Jackson also noticed that the Israeli Air Force has prepositioned four of their advanced EW aircraft at Baku. I called Axe as soon as I got off the phone with Jackson and let him know that things could get real hot for our folks in the Persian Gulf.”

“I let Admiral Fischer know of the possibility of any action and I’ve ordered the Teddy Roosevelt to make best possible speed to the gulf,” interjected Axelsson.

“Good, because we’re going to need the firepower,” Carmichael replied. “Jackson went straight to General Pardo when he arrived back in Tel Aviv. With their asset now cleanly out of Iran, the Israelis will be attacking at dawn tomorrow morning. In fact, their planes will be taking off in roughly ten hours or so.”

“What?!?” Tom Fleming, the White House chief of staff, and Secretary of State Andrea Johnson blurted out in unison.

“You’ve got to be kidding?” added in Pamela McDowell, President Barre’s national security advisor.

“I wish I was,” Carmichael replied. “You see, the Iranians are only a couple months away from fielding a nuclear bomb – if even that long. Jackson managed to discuss Iran’s nuclear ambitions with Dr. Bagheri for several hours; they are much farther along than we thought possible. The Israelis wanted to get their asset out before they attacked – and they just accomplished this so the attack will commence as soon as practical.”

“How did you miss this?” McDowell demanded.

The “you” of McDowell’s question did not escape Carmichael, nor Jones.

“Damn near everyone missed this, except the Israelis. We’d been reporting that the Iranians were probably farther along than we expected, though we did not think they were this close,” Jones immediately replied.

“You also told us that the economic sanctions would work!” Secretary of State Johnson interjected.

“No, we said that the sanctions would work as part of an overall strategy. However, you have instead allowed the sanctions to be our entire strategy – and we told you, this would not work,” Jones emphasized. “Our diplomatic strategy, aside from the sanctions, has been pretty weak. We’ve always warned that the Iranians were going to pursue the bomb regardless of any sanctions. A bigger stick was needed rather than simply relying on sanctions.”

“And just how do we know that your assistant, Colonel Thomas Jackson, is reliable? The Israelis haven’t said ‘boo’ to our ambassador in Tel Aviv. It would seem to me that if they haven’t bothered to tell our ambassador, and go through our official channels, they are simply trying to embarrass us.”

“Andrea, they haven’t told our ambassador as you wouldn’t believe them even if they did,” Jones shot back.

“Ambassador Richards is a very trusted supporter of the president, and has been so for years,” added Fleming. “If the Israelis are really serious about this planned attack, there is no reason they couldn’t have notified him.”

“Tom, even if they had told Ambassador Richards, not only would you not have believed him, this administration is so tuned into economic sanctions that we probably would not have even listened. As for Jackson – he’s as reliable and trust-worthy as they come,” Carmichael interjected. “He’s been a member of the Fifth Group, Special Forces, for many years – three of those years he led the CIF team for the group – and has his doctorate in Persian studies. He’s been monitoring the Iranians for several years. Finally, he was a part of the mission to grab Dr. Bagheri and get him out of Iran.”

“Wait a minute! We had US troops on the ground in Iran?!?” Pam McDowell demanded.

“No, we had one Special Forces officer accompany an Israeli Sayeret Matkal team on the ground in Iran.”

“Who authorized this? Eric, did you authorize this?” Tom Fleming demanded of the secretary of defense.

“Jackson has been on temporary assignment to the CIA for a little while, so, no, I did not know about it.”

“Colonel Jackson is one of very few men we have suitable for just such a mission,” interjected General Stan Kaufman, chairman of the Joint Chiefs. “Jackson has served with the Fifth Group for more than fifteen years and has served several tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Between his military training and his academics, he’s as qualified as anyone for a mission of this type.”

“So then, Felix,” Fleming asked turning to the DNI, and totally ignoring the general’s comments, “did you authorize this?”

“Actually, Tom, I’m the one who gave Stonewall his orders – and I gave him a wide degree of latitude to pursue his objective,” Carmichael answered before his boss had a chance to say anything. “However, the issue here is not who may have exceeded their orders or to pronounce the eulogy of a failed policy. Rather, the Israelis will be launching their raid in something like ten hours from now. We need to be ready.”

“Eric, what’s the disposition of the Navy?” President Barre asked.

“I put the Fifth Fleet on notice as soon as I received Jim’s call. We have the Washington currently in the gulf and the Stennis in the Arabian Sea on the way to relieve them. The Roosevelt is in the Med on its way to the Suez Canal. They can be in striking range in just a few days. In addition, we have an Amphibious Ready Group in the gulf as well, centered around the San Antonio. Unfortunately, we’ve allowed our forces at Al Udeid to dwindle quite a bit. All we have there are a couple squadrons of drones and an F-15 squadron. For the moment, the Eagles will be on standby to assist the Washington in the gulf and essentially guard their rear flank as the Washington Battle Group heads towards Doha.”

“Can the Washington take care of herself? I don’t want to hand the Iranians any PR victories by having them put a hole in one of our carriers,” President Barre asked.

“Sir, once the missiles start flying, it’s a whole new ball game. However, that being said, she can take care of herself, even in the narrow confines of the gulf. And with two carriers, and a third on the way, we’ll be able to assure the world that the Strait of Hormuz will remain open.”

“Okay, get word out to the Fifth Fleet.”

“I’ll do that, sir, but what are the rules of engagement?”

“Each officer has the authority to do what is necessary for the safety of his command. The Iranians are going to be thoroughly pissed and I’m sure they will strike out at the fleet. If we need to take out the entire Iranian Navy and Air Force, then that is what we need to do.”

“What about offensive operations, sir?” Axelsson followed up. “Can I tell Admiral Fischer that he can conduct any operations inside Iran? The gulf is exceptionally narrow for defensive operations. I’d like to let Fischer and Admiral Ramsey, the commanding officer of the Fifth Fleet, conduct operations inside Iran if they even get a hint of possible action against them. If they have to wait until a threat extends beyond Iran’s territorial waters, their options will be seriously restricted.”

“Mr. President,” Andrea Johnson interrupted, “if we invade Iran’s air space, we will have lost all deniability on the world stage, and it will look as though we were actually behind this attack. I’m sorry but we cannot allow the Navy to attack Iran. This is an Israeli operation and we should have no part of it. If the Navy stays by Doha they should be out of range of Iran’s capabilities and be perfectly safe.”

“Mr. President,” Axelsson interjected, “we do not know the extent, or range, of Iran’s capabilities. Andrea’s notion that the fleet should be safe at Doha could be right – but we missed on their nuclear ambitions. I wouldn’t want to bet the safety of our fleet on our intel on the exact ranges of their defense capabilities in the gulf. The fleet needs to be able to defend itself. Furthermore, if they launch on our ships – and at this point, I am assuming that they will – we should have every right to defend ourselves – and that should include taking out any threat before it materializes. Remember, we did not start this.”

“Tom,” President Barre said, turning to his chief of staff, “set up a meeting with the Speaker and the rest of the Congressional leaders for seven tonight. Jim, you said the Israelis would be taking off in what, about ten hours?”

“That’s right; it’s now about twelve thirty in the afternoon here so that makes it about 7:30 p.m. in Israel. Colonel Jackson thought they’d be launching around six in the morning, local time.”

“Okay, six tomorrow morning over there would be 11:00 p.m. our time. By seven tonight – that’ll be just four hours before they launch – we should know if anything else has developed. At that point, I’ll let the Speaker, the Senate Majority Leader and the rest of the Congressional leaders know that Israel will be launching their attack and that we expect hostilities with Iran in the gulf and that if that arises as expected, the Fifth Fleet will have authorization to take out any naval and air threat they deem necessary – including operations within Iranian territory. However, actual offensive operations will not be authorized at this point. Is that understood Eric?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about the Strait of Hormuz?” General Kaufman quickly added. “Tehran has long boasted that they would close the strait should something like this happen.”

“The same goes for the strait. It is a vital interest to this country – and we will defend it as such. Let Admirals Fischer and Ramsey know that both the fleet and the strait are to be defended, and that includes operations within Iranian territory, though again, no offensive operations.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll let them know.”

VIII

USS George Washington

“CAG, come on in,” announced Captain Noel Roberts, CO of the George Washington, to his commander, Air Group.

“Sir, what do we have?” replied the CAG.

“We have just been advised by the Pentagon that the Israelis will be taking out several of Iran’s nuclear sites. They’ll actually be launching in about eight hours; that’s about 6:00 a.m. their time in Jerusalem.”

“Nice of them to give us some warning,” the CAG remarked acidly. “So, where does that place us? Did the Stennis get the same warning?”

“Are you familiar with the term ‘Like shooting fish in a barrel’? Well, we’re the fish and this lake we’re in is the barrel. We’re too far north to make a run for the strait to try and get out of here. We’ll head to a little pocket between Doha and Abu Dhabi. Russia supposedly has supplied the Iranians with a pretty good supply of Sunburn missiles. However, by the time everything kicks off, we should be out of their range – if they haven’t modified those things. If they have, well we’ll have your Hornets out there to knock down anything that flies as well as anything that even looks like it might be ready to fire at us. The Stennis received the same warning as we did; they’ll remain in the Arabian Sea. Their Hornets will need to pair up with buddy stores to help us out should we need it. In addition, the Roosevelt is on its way as well and should be transiting the Suez Canal as we speak and, at full speed, could be here in a little more than three days.”

“I’ll keep two Hawkeyes up and double the CAP,” referring to the Hornet’s combat air patrol over the fleet. “I don’t want to do too much to tip off our friends for tomorrow morning but I want to get as much up and still not raise too much suspicion. The Israelis will be launching at six, figure it will take them three hours to get to their targets, so we’ll start launching everything we have about eight thirty, or two and a half hours after they’ve launched.”

“Once they’re airborne, I want them on station north and east of us. Any plane that gets past the Iranian coast line needs to be warned to back off immediately. I don’t want any unidentified aircraft within 150 miles of us so if they don’t back off, shoot’em down. If by chance they have some Sunburn missiles from the Russians, we’ll need to keep them at least one hundred miles from the fleet; I don’t want to take the chance that they might have modified these and extended their range.”

“Do we have any other assets in the region?” asked the CAG.

“Not as much as we did just a few years ago. There’s a squadron of Eagles at Al Udeid as well as a couple squadrons of Wraiths and Reapers. The Eagles will be guarding our back door as we head south. The Wraiths and Reapers will be airborne over several of Iran’s nuclear sites so when the Israelis hit them, we’ll know about it right away. A few years ago, the Iranians actually hacked into one of the Wraiths and brought it down so if they happen to see one snooping around, it shouldn’t raise too much suspicion.”

The following morning, twenty-five F-15I Eagles and seventy-five F-16I Vipers took off for Iran. Each of the F-15’s were loaded with two GBU-28 five thousand pound bombs while the F-16’s each carried two GBU-27 two thousand pound bombs. In addition, each of the fighters carried their own complement of air-to-air missiles: the Eagles each carried four missiles while the Vipers carried two each. Jim Carmichael had been right in that the Israelis had not been idle on the diplomatic front. The pilots were going to need to refuel in flight and both Turkey and Azerbaijan had granted the Israelis permission to base their tankers and other support craft out of their respective air fields; in Turkey, the Diyarbakir airfield practically sat astride the route the Israelis were flying so the tankers would fly out of here. In addition, the Azerbaijanis had granted use of the Baku airbase as Jackson

had noticed, and the Israelis would base their G-550 EW “Eitam” craft out of here. The Eitams would meet up in flight as the strike fighters made the turn to enter Iranian airspace.

The Israeli G-550 EW, that is, electronic warfare, aircraft first made a name for themselves when the Israelis took out the Syrian nuclear plant at Dayr az-Zawr. The Israelis managed to crash Syria’s entire air defense system allowing its fighters unfettered access to their target. It seems that some enterprising graduate student at MIT had caught on to the notion that a significant part of any radar system is to receive data. He figured that if a way could be designed to capture the signal frequency of the radar unit and, instead of simply jamming that frequency, actually hijack the frequency and send data back along the frequency – that is any data – you could literally do anything you wanted to the enemy’s radar and, potentially, their entire air defense network. In the case of the Israeli raid on the Syrian nuclear facility at Dayr az-Zawr, the Israelis had actually shut down Syria’s air defense network – for the entire country!

As soon as the raiders met up with the G-550’s they split up into three main groups: ten of the F-16’s and one of the G-550’s headed to the heavy water nuclear reactor at Arak and ten more Vipers and an additional Eitam headed towards the Esfahan Nuclear Research Center. The remaining two Eitams accompanied the fifty-five F-16’s and the twenty-five F-15’s that headed towards the Natanz and Qom/Fordow uranium enrichment facilities. One of the Eitams, thirty of the Vipers and fifteen of the Eagles ultimately veered off towards Qom/Fordow leaving the remaining Eitam, twenty-five of the Vipers and the ten Eagles for Natanz. It was a brilliantly coordinated attack: At both Natanz and Qom, for over twenty minutes, every thirty seconds another two tons of high explosive projectiles penetrated the earth. In each case, the Eagles went in first with their heavier bunker buster GBU-28’s softening up the targets for the lighter GBU-27’s carried by the Vipers. At both Qom and Natanz, the Eitams earned their pay as the Iranian SAM search radars were non-existent. However, the Iranian Air Force had obviously been alerted. The Eagles, having been the first ones in were now free of their heavy ordnance, reverted to their original purpose – an air superiority fighter. In the forty year history of the F-15, not a single plane had been lost in aerial combat – and this day would pose no exception. Every one of the Iranian defenders that rose to challenge the raiders went down in flames. As in the Dayr az-Zawr raid, the destruction was complete – by the time the raiders had left, the Iranian nuclear program had received a blow the likes of which no one in Iran had dared contemplate: its nuclear program was in tatters and its Air Force had been ravaged.

* * *

Ever since the 2008 US presidential election, the Iranians had been boasting of their ability to close the vital Strait of Hormuz should they be attacked by either the Israelis or the United States. The subject of the Iranian nuclear program had gained more and more headlines in the US elections with each presidential candidate promising that they would never allow a nuclear Iran. Said Jalili knew that Iran needed a response and literally everyone expected a response in the strait – after all, the strait was the doorway to the Persian Gulf – their gulf! However, America presented Jalili with a huge problem: the Great Satan was the most powerful empire the world had ever known. They based their Fifth Fleet in Qatar, and while no ships were permanently assigned to the Fifth Fleet, the US maintained a constant presence in the gulf with either an Amphibious Ready Group, a Carrier Battle Group – usually the case – or both. Even if the Israelis were to attack on their own, Iran would still have to contend with that American fleet. He knew that any attempt to close the gulf would be a gamble. Iran had a stockpile of Russian made “Sunburn” anti-ship missiles, but they had never been used in combat and he’d only seen them tested on a stationary target. In addition, once they fired their first salvo, the Americans would have at least a couple airborne warning aircraft up – probably an Air Force AWACS or, more likely, a Navy Hawkeye, or maybe even some of their new Predators, Wraiths, or Reapers, each of the latter three could also be armed – watching for any activity that

could even be mistaken for preparations for a missile launch. Once detected, attack aircraft from Al Udeid or a Navy carrier would be on them in seconds leaving little chance to launch a second salvo. Obviously, then, their first shot would possibly be the only one they were going to get, so it needed to be a good one.

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