

Chapter One

Thursday April 7th April 2006, Gholhak Garden, Northern Tehran, Iran

Gholhak Garden is the British diplomatic compound in the northern Tehran neighbourhood of Gholhak, about three miles from the main Embassy in the city centre. The sprawling wooded area, bordered by high walls, houses British diplomats and their families. Parrots flutter between towering plane trees and foxes can frequently be seen frolicking on the landscaped lawns. The compound is also home to the Tehran Commonwealth War Cemetery, the British Council, and a French school.

The entrance is dominated by an impressive tower and pointed archway, typical of Islamic architecture; it is closely guarded.

Seven o'clock, and Afareen Mahabadi approached the gate. Today she is anxious as she waits her turn. Sometimes she is searched; sometimes not. Two people in front of her are checked; then she is waved through unhindered. She exhales but not loudly as can be heard. It's a journey she has made for the last four months; one of six women employed as cleaners to specific residencies. It had taken Afareen several weeks to find the right one.

Sophie Dexter was in her kitchen; her husband, David, was already on his way to the embassy in town. At thirty-three, she was four years younger than her husband who was considered a 'high-flyer' in diplomatic circles.

The wife of the Commercial Attaché, she was an active member of the community and one of the three teachers at the compound school, the *École Française de Téhéran*, where she teaches English.

"Good morning, Afareen," said Sophie, as her cleaner entered the front door of the three-bedroomed bungalow. "How are you today?"

"I'm ok... thank you," replied Afareen, with an accent that reflected her American tutelage. "I want to start with the bedrooms today, can you show me where you would like me to start?"

Sophie looked confused. "Any, I don't mind," she replied.

"Show me," whispered Afareen.

Still unsure of what was being requested, Sophie led Afareen to the master-bedroom. The duvet-cover was pulled back, but the sheets were untidy and the pillows askew. Discarded clothes were scattered on the two chairs next to the window; the dressing-table showed evidence of spilt powder and makeup.

“Here, would be best, I think,” said Sophie.

Afareen was dressed in a pink embroidered shawl over her black long-sleeve top and black leggings, completed by a white Hijab; fashionable in Tehran and complying with the strict local dress-code for women. Sophie detected a change in her cleaner of four weeks that she hadn't seen before; her demeanour, nervous for some reason. Her dark eyes flitted from side to side anxiously scanning the room as if she were looking for something.

“Are you ok?” said Sophie.

Afareen put her fingers to her lips to indicate silence.

She removed one of her slip-on shoes and twisted the heel revealing a hollow space. She inserted her fingers and extracted a piece of paper, then pushed it into Sophie's hand. She repeated the 'shh' sign.

“I will start here,” said Afareen in her normal voice.

The role of Commercial Attaché is primarily to promote UK business and commerce in the country where they are based. In Iran this was especially problematic given the fractious relationship between the two countries. Tensions had lessened over the last two years and there were opportunities to boost UK trade which David Dexter was charged to do. Most of his days were spent meeting businessmen and government officials. He was constantly under surveillance.

David did have an ulterior agenda. Although paid by the government, his pay-slip originated in a different building from the Trade and Industry department. It came from Vauxhall Cross, home to the British Secret Service, MI6.

After another day of meetings, David Dexter was being driven through the Gholhak Garden Arch in the Jaguar provided for him by the Foreign Office. The two senior diplomats had one, the Ambassador had a

Bentley; they went with the role. Dexter's diary was clear for the evening which would give him some much-needed down-time. He was about to be disappointed.

"Hi, darling," he said, as he entered the house.

"I'm in the kitchen," was the reply.

David walked through from the living room. They kissed; a fond greeting shared between husband and wife.

"How was your day?" said Sophie.

"The usual," said David. "Back-to-back meetings."

"Dinner won't be long," she said. She opened the cutlery drawer and lifted out the container of utensils.

She was aware of the possibility that the bungalow might be bugged. There were two areas which had been screened by the embassy tech people and declared 'safe', the bathroom and master bedroom. It was something she complained about to her husband, but recognised it went with the territory.

"Something smells good," he said.

"Oh, it was something Afareen cooked this afternoon... I only had to heat it up. I don't know what I would do without her," said Sophie and took out the piece of paper from beneath the knives and fork and handed it to her husband as discreetly as possible.

"Go and freshen up, dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

"Yes, won't be long," said David and put the piece of paper in his suit jacket pocket.

In the bathroom, he took out the note and studied the small piece of paper. The writing was tiny and not readable by normal vision. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to compose it.

The second bedroom had been converted to a home office and David went to one of the desk-drawers and retrieved a magnifying glass. He put the note on the top of the desk and scanned it.

"Shit," he said when he realised what it was.

He changed back into his suit and called his driver.

“Sorry, darling, I need to go back to the Embassy,” said David.

“Oh dear... how long will you be?”

“I don’t know, I’ll call you.”

“What about your dinner?”

“I’ll get a sandwich at the Embassy.”

Twenty minutes later, David was in the staff Jaguar heading down the Modares Highway towards the British Embassy. He knew that there was a likelihood that he was being followed; a surveillance team might well have called in the unscheduled departure. It was unlikely, however, that they would be stopped. In the event of that possibility, David had secreted the note in the lining of his jacket, and it was as secure as it could be. His suit was bespoke, it had been especially made for him for exactly this purpose. The vent at the back of the jacket was not stitched at the bottom but fastened by a strip of Velcro, undetectable to the human eye. Today was the first time David had had cause to use this customisation.

They drove down the tree-lined Ferdowski Avenue; traffic was lighter now the main rush-hour had passed but it was still busy. The high gates of the embassy opened as the Jaguar approached the entrance. It stopped at the barrier to allow the usual checks, then an official waved them through.

David’s office was on the second floor of the building. He unlocked the door and closed it behind him. He needed to get the information back to London as soon as possible; it was a matter of life or death.

At this time of day there was only a skeleton staff present but there was always one of the tech guys on duty in case of a hacking incident or any other disruption to web-based traffic. David picked up the internal phone.

“Ryan, can you spare a minute?”

Ryan Hudson was one of the most valuable of the team at the Embassy. As senior communications officer, he was an expert in covert messaging systems.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in, Ryan,” said David.

Ryan Hudson defied the stereotypical geeky computer tech image. He was suited and resembled a male model; strong, rugged features, sharp haircut, well-built, developed through his five years working with special forces as comms officer. His move into diplomatic service was a natural progression.

“Take a seat.”

David was holding a small container.

“Ryan, I need to get this to Vauxhall as soon as possible.”

“What have we got?”

David opened the container and showed Ryan the content. “Hmm, someone’s gone to a lot of trouble.”

“Yes, it’s extremely delicate. Can you encrypt it and get it off?”

“Of course, I’ll get right on it... Anything else you want me to do?”

“Not at the moment; let’s see what Mother says.”

Vauxhall Cross, MI6 Headquarters London; Nine a.m. the following day.

Nick Houghton was at his desk still wearing his jacket. It was one of those days when the office central-heating system wasn’t sure whether to kick in or not and the room felt chill. His internal phone rang.

“Houghton,” he responded. “Yes, ma’am, right away.”

He put his head around the door and spoke to one of the P.A.’s.

“Mother’s called, not sure how long I’ll be.”

“I’ll pick up any messages,” said the assistant.

Houghton took the lift to the twenty-second floor.

Commander Philippa Jenkins, Head of MI6, was in her office; her assistant, Andy Fellows, was seated on a chair in front of her desk. There was a vacant seat next to him.

“Ah, Nick, come in... You know Andy, don't you?”

“Morning, ma'am, yes,” said Houghton and shook hands with Fellows.

“Sit down, would you like a coffee?”

“Thank you,” said Nick and took the vacant chair.

“Andy, can you pour Nick a coffee?”

Andy got up and poured the drink from a coffee-machine in the corner of the large office. The Commander was stood at the green-tinted window and surveying the magnificent view of the Thames. She was a formidable woman who commanded respect throughout the community. Dressed in her usual twin-set and pearls, grey hair cut in a bob; she appeared on edge. She turned and addressed the two men like an old school ma'am, arms folded.

“Nick, Andy, something's come up... It's big, very big...” She sat down and picked up her half-drunk cup of coffee and took a sip. “Have you heard of Hassan Mahabadi?”

They looked blank.

“No, there's no reason why you should... He's one of Iran's top nuclear scientists.”

Nick raised his eye-brows. The Commander continued.

“Ok, let me fill in some background. As you are no doubt aware, Iran stopped Uranium enrichment in 2003, after the Paris agreement, but what you might not know is, according to our cousins at least, there are rumours that they have started production again.”

“Is this still at Natanz?”

“Probably, but they also have a place at Esfahan, it's a Uranium enrichment facility... south of Tehran,” said the Commander. “We don't know for certain... But this is highly sensitive, and we haven't had confirmation yet. The Americans are monitoring it.”

“I bet they are,” said Houghton.

“As you can imagine, the loss of one of their top scientists at this particular moment in time, would be incredibly damaging both scientifically and politically.”

“Loss...? What do you mean, loss?”

“Ah, yes, that’s why you’re here...” She paused and took another drink of coffee. “We’ve had some information yesterday; it appears that Mr Mahabadi is becoming, how can I put it...? Disaffected with the regime... He wants to defect.”

“Defect?” said Houghton. “Why?”

“We don’t know exactly, could be any number of reasons but he’s virtually a prisoner there. It certainly can’t be much of a life... Unfortunately, we don’t have a great deal of information. Would you believe, his wife is working as a cleaner in the British compound in Tehran? She managed to smuggle a message to one of our people.”

Houghton looked at Fellows. “Wow, she’s one brave lady.”

“Yes, she is... Having got this information, I spoke to the Home Secretary last night, given the political sensitivities, and he’s given the go-ahead to pursue this eventuality.”

“You want us to spring this man?” said Houghton.

“If it’s possible, yes, but first, we need to work on a strategy for me to put to the Home Secretary. We need it to look like an escape. In the present climate, we can’t be seen to be aiding the defection of one of their key people.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” said Houghton. “Where’s he based; do we know?”

“Hmm, that’s the other problem, we don’t, not for certain. The Iranians also have a heavy-water production plant on a new site at Arak; just outside the town, started two years ago. He could be there, or either of the other two.”

“Hmm, I bet the Americans are all over this,” said Houghton.

“Yes, they are,” said the Commander. “And that’s another problem. We don’t want to involve them.”

“Hmm, so basically you want us to extract this man...”

“And his family,” interrupted the Commander.

“And his family,” echoed Houghton. “Without either the Americans or Iranians finding out?”

“Yes,” said the Commander.

Houghton looked at Fellows.

“Do we have any more information?”

“Yes, some... Mahabadi has an older brother, Mehran, in Cambridge. He’s a professor in natural sciences; been here since the revolution in seventy-nine. Mehran fled the regime and was granted asylum; highly regarded, by all accounts... This is probably why Hassan has approached us and not the Americans. In fact, it might be worth speaking to him. I don’t know what contact he has with his brother, if any. Whatever you do, though, don’t say anything about a possible defection at this stage. We have no idea about Mahabadi’s situation.”

“That might be difficult; he’s going to wonder why we’ve contacted him.”

“Yes, that’s true, but he’s been helpful to us in the past, so it should be a relatively open door... There will be a file which may help... I cannot stress enough this must be handled extremely sensitively, there are people’s lives at stake here, not to mention the possible political fallout. Can you work with Andy and come up with some ideas...? Oh, and you might want to chat to Ahmad Qomi on the tech team, he’s from Tehran; he could be quite useful... As I see it, the biggest problem’s going to be communication. We don’t know how long it’s taken to get this message to us, and I have no idea how we can get a message back. I need something quickly; I want you to drop everything and work on this.”

“Right, ma’am, I’ll get on with it.”

“I’m going to allocate you a secure office and comms; let me know what other resources you’re going to need... Right, meeting closed; can you let me have a progress report by five o’clock...? Good luck.”

Houghton and Fellows left the commander’s office and took the lift to the twelfth-floor and the secure office they had been allocated.

“So, where do you want to start?” said Fellows.

“Well, I think I need to get up to Cambridge and see the brother... Can you do some digging and find out as much as you can about those places, Natanz... Esfahan, oh, and Arak? You can speak to Ahmad; he might have some information. Then, see if we can set up some outline feasible exfil plan... how and where? Just possibilities at this stage,” said Nick. “Oh, and see if you can beg, borrow or steal a coffee-machine from somewhere. I think we’re going to need it.”

“Right, Nick, I’m on it.”

While Fellows was hunting for a coffee-machine, Houghton was tracking down the Cambridge professor; his phone number would be on file. Unfortunately, it was the University Natural Sciences Department switchboard and not the professor himself. He called the number, but the receptionist politely explained that Professor Mahabadi was lecturing. Houghton would try later.

It was gone eleven o’clock before Nick was able to speak to the professor.

“Professor Mahabadi...? Nick Houghton, Vauxhall Cross, is it possible I could come up and speak to you... Yes, it’s about your brother... No, he’s ok, as far as I know. No, I would prefer to discuss it in person... As soon as possible, this afternoon, preferably... Yes, I can be there around four. Cambridge Arts Theatre, Italian coffee shop... Yes, ok, I’ll find it... See you then, thank you.”

“Any joy?” asked Fellows as Houghton came off the phone. He was engrossed on his computer doing research; his desk piled high with files.

“Yeah, I’m going up to Cambridge this afternoon... meeting him outside the University at four... better let Mother know.”

Fellows responded. “Well, I’ve spoken to GCHQ and managed to get some more background on the professor. Pretty much what Mother told us, they’ve been keeping an eye on him for a few years... nothing remarkable, I’m afraid, just basic stuff; email traffic and phone calls but he hasn’t made any contact with Iran in the last two years that we know of, if that helps.”

“Yeah, cheers,” said Houghton.

Nick sent an email to the Commander explaining the pending visit and suggested the up-date conference take place the following morning with the benefit of the meeting. Five minutes later, she replied agreeing to the change in schedule.

With the volume of traffic, it took Nick over three hours to get to Cambridge. He hadn't been before, but it was clear to see why it was such a desirable place to live; so different from London; more 'civilised' was his conclusion.

He found the University complex and, after some searching, pulled up outside the Italian Coffee shop next to the Cambridge Arts Theatre where the meeting would take place. He checked the photograph from the file again; he would remember the professor.

There was a multi-story car-park a hundred yards on the right, and he drove away and parked up. He checked his watch, three forty-eight as he approached the café. The area was awash with students, easily identifiable with their college scarves worn as trophies.

The café was elegant-looking from the outside; the window displaying various pictures of varieties of coffee and an array of cakes and pastries, all home-made, it said.

Inside reflected the style of the exterior. There were around twenty tables with four chairs at each; pictures of Tuscan landscapes decorated the walls. Staff were dodging from tables to the counter where two people wearing tee-shirts with the word 'Barista' appended on the back, were dispensing drink orders. It was about half-full, many were students, but there were some elderly people taking their afternoon tea. Nick chose a seat in the corner which would afford a degree of privacy.

A waitress descended on him just a few seconds of him being seated. "I'm waiting for someone," said Nick and the girl acknowledged and moved to another customer.

It was gone ten-past when Professor Mahabadi walked in; Houghton recognised him straightaway and watched him looking around the room. Eye-contact was made and acknowledged with a nod. Houghton got up from his seat as the professor approached and held out his hand in greeting.

"Nick Houghton, we spoke on the phone."

The professor made a mere cursory response and sat down ignoring Houghton's offer of a handshake.

"Why are we here? I told you people I did not want to be contacted," said the professor gruffly.

The waitress re-appeared before Houghton had chance to reply.

"What would you like?" asked the officer.

"A tea," said Mahabadi, sharply.

"Two teas," said Houghton to the waitress. She took the order and went to the counter.

"Yes, I'm sorry, but we really need your help... it concerns your brother."

"Yes, you told me... I haven't spoken to him in over two years."

Nick looked at him; he looked older than his fifty-seven years, his wavy hair was greasy, thinning towards baldness and grey. There was a stern look about him; his face lined with past angst.

"Look, you know how these things work; I can't go into details, but I need as much information on your brother as you can give me."

"Is he in trouble?"

"I hope not, no," said Houghton. "But I could really do with your help here."

The waitress brought the teas and Nick noticed the man visibly relax. His rather old-looking sports jacket gaped wide and the pressure on his shirt-buttons was straining the cotton threads that attached them to his shirt. His accent was distinctly Farsi, but his English was good; his students would be able to understand him.

He poured some tea from the china teapot into the matching cup and took a first sip. He was taking his time, considering Houghton's request.

"So, what is it you need to know?" he said in a measured way.

"As much as you can give me... what's his date of birth?"

"You do not have this on file...? I am surprised."

“No,” replied Houghton.

“Fourteenth October 1957.” Houghton made a note.

“Tehran?”

“No, Karaj, near.”

“What about his wife, Afareen?”

“I do not know her birthday, why should I?”

“No, ok, forget that... It’s fine. Do they have children?”

“Yes, two... what’s this all about?”

“Like I said, I can’t go into detail, but it is very important. You will be helping your brother if you can answer my questions.”

Mahabadi eyed up his interrogator. “Ok, what else do you want to know?”

“When did you last speak to him?”

Mahabadi took another drink. “It is over two years now.”

“Do you know where he is...? Which facility, I mean?” Houghton was fishing.

“I do not know...? He could be anywhere.” Nick raised his eyebrows in disbelief.; the professor became defensive. “I told you I have not spoken to him, so how would I know where he is.”

“Have you tried to contact him?”

“Of course, but he no longer has a phone, I think.”

“What about his wife... have you spoken to her?”

“No, it is not possible. I do not know where she lives or what she is doing. I don’t have her number.”

The questions continued for another thirty minutes before the professor declared a halt. “I have told you all I can, now if you will excuse me, I have another lecture. I need to go,” he said and stood up.

Nick also stood up. "Before you go, have you got a photograph you could let me have? I will return it to you."

There was a look of frustration from the professor.

"One minute."

He rummaged around in his jacket for his wallet and opened it; then pulled out a picture from one of the leather pockets. It was a family group; the edges of the photograph were dog-eared and frayed.

"That is Hassan and his wife and the children. It is over two years old, but it is the only one I have."

Houghton took the picture and looked at it.

"Thank you, I will return it in a few day. Have you got an address I can have?"

"You know where to find me," he said.

"Yes, of course... well, thank you, professor, you have been very helpful, I really appreciate you seeing me today."

Houghton offered his hand again, but the professor just turned and walked out of the café.

Houghton went to the cashier's desk and paid for the drinks. It would take him another four hours before he was back on home territory. He was mulling over his conversation with the professor; it hadn't proved as fruitful as he had hoped. The task ahead had not got any easier.

The following day, operatives Houghton and Fellows were seated in the Commander's briefing room at eight o'clock, waiting for their boss. It was one of the meeting rooms which were frequently in use and had glass sides. Nick twisted the blind mechanism, so the outside was blocked out to ensure privacy.

"Good morning, ma'am," said Houghton and Fellows in unison as the Commander entered the small room.

"Good morning gentlemen... so, what have we got?" Straight and to the point, the Commander put a file down on the table. "No, wait, Andy can you get someone to bring some coffees?"

Fellows got up and exited the room and returned moments later. “On their way ma’am.” He said and sat down.

“So, Nick, your meeting with Professor Mahabadi, how did it go?”

“Hmm, not easy, or as productive as I’d have liked... He doesn’t like British Secret Service, that’s for sure.”

“No, well, I can’t blame him; we’ve not treated him that well,” said the Commander.

“I did get some background personal details on Hassan which will come in useful and something interesting about his wife. She’s the daughter of Sadeq Pahlavi.” There were blank looks from his colleagues.

Just then, the door opened, and a bright-looking intern walked in with a tray, three cups and a large thermos; there was a small jug of milk and a sugar bowl to the side. Fellows took the tray and the intern left.

“Carry on Nick,” said the Commander while Fellows dispensed the drinks.

“Yes, Hassan’s wife... as I was saying, she’s the daughter of Sadeq Pahlavi. I did some research and he was a cousin of the former prime minister and a prominent member of the pre-revolution government. Unfortunately, he was executed by the Ayatollah’s regime in 1979.”

The Commander looked at the two officers and took a drink of coffee. “Hmm, that could prove a problem. Do you think she’s being watched?”

“That’s difficult to say, but we can’t rule it out... wife of a prominent nuclear scientist and daughter of a pre-revolution politician; my guess, they’ll be all over her like a rash.”

“Hmm,” said the Commander, topping up her cup from the flask. “Although, if they had suspected her of anything wouldn’t they have picked her up by now?”

“That depends, you would have thought so, but if she is being watched, they’ll probably keep her under surveillance to see what she’s up to. I mean, applying for a job at the British compound; it would have set all manner of hares racing,” said Houghton.

“Hmm, yes, you could be right,” said the Commander. “So, where does that leave us...? Any thoughts?”

Fellows picked up the narrative. “The real difficulty is going to be getting in touch with Mahabadi. I’ve had a chat with Ahmad Qomi, as you suggested, and they’re going to see if they can set up some way of exchanging messages without alerting the Iranians. Unfortunately, we don’t know what communication he has with his wife. There must be some, otherwise we wouldn’t have received the message in the first place... We really need to speak to her; she’s the key.”

“Yes, I agree with that, although in view of her situation we will need to tread very carefully...” The room went quiet as the Commander finished the remainder of her coffee and looked up. “There is someone else who might be able to help us.”

Houghton and Fellows looked at each other.

“Mayflower,” said the Commander cryptically.

“Mayflower?” said Houghton.

“Yes, she’s an asset we have in Tehran... She’s been in deep cover for over three years.”

“I wasn’t aware we had anyone actually in Tehran,” said Houghton.

“No, few people do, just me, the DC and her handler; just too risky.”

“So, what’s her story?” said Houghton.

“She’s a nurse at Mardom Hospital. Michael Saunders, one of the embassy staff, was admitted there just over three years ago with appendicitis and she was looking after him. As I understand it, she passed him a note as he was leaving, just her phone number. Saunders contacted her and, to cut a very long story short, we recruited her. We have kept her very low key, through necessity, but occasionally she sends us useful information. The hospital in question is a private facility where government officials are sent if they need treatment... It’s always useful to know who is feeling unwell in the regime.” Houghton and Fellows chuckled.

“But why did she want to get involved? I mean if she were caught...” said Fellows.

“Precisely... I don’t have a lot of information, but, apparently, she was another whose father was killed by Khomeini. Saunders arranged to meet her and eventually passed her on to us, but, given the situation out there, we have been very light-touch. Even the Embassy are not aware of her, but she’s already proved to be a reliable asset and I think she could be very useful here. Have a word with Jordan Proctor, he’s her handler. I’ll let him know to expect you.”

The Commander refilled her cup for the second time.

“Have you any ideas on how you might get them away?” said the Commander.

“Nothing definite; I’m working on a couple of scenarios but it’s going to take a lot of arranging, and a lot of luck,” said Fellows.

“Hmm, don’t like the sound of luck.”

“Turn of phrase, I’m trying to ensure that it’s taken out of the equation.”

“Well, bring Nick up to speed and give me an update later today.”

“Yes, will do,” said Fellows.

“Oh, I did get a photograph from the Professor,” said Houghton. “I’ve passed it on to the tech guys. I’m hoping we can use it for passports. It had all four of the family and in not bad condition.”

“Yes, good, we’ll certainly need passports, I can’t believe the Iranians would have let them keep theirs,” said the Commander.

The Commander knocked back the remnants of her coffee and stood up. “Ok, Nick, speak to Proctor, then I think you need to get out there and see Hassan’s wife... I’ll speak to the Foreign Office see if we can arrange for one of the admin staff to take some leave; there’ll be no shortage of takers.”

“Right, ma’am,” said Nick and the Commander left the room.

Back in the secure office, Adam brought Nick up-to-date.

“I’ve been looking at possible exfil possibilities and I have an option I’d like to chat over with you.”

“Ok, great, let’s talk; then I need to speak to Proctor about Mayflower. It sounds like she could be useful.”