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MIKE EVANS

**THE
SAMSON OPTION**

A NOVEL



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EGYPT, NEAR THE GAZA BORDER

NASSER HAMID STEPPED OUT from beneath the tent and checked his watch. It was almost four o'clock. They should have heard something by now.

Overhead, the afternoon sun beat down with a scorching heat. Around him, Hamid saw nothing but the rolling sand dunes of the Egyptian desert. He scanned the western sky and focused on the horizon—anyone approaching from that direction would stand out like a dark silhouette against the stark background. He watched a moment, carefully surveying the line where sky and sand met.

Behind him, the top of the tent made a flapping sound as a breeze blew up from the east. Hamid glanced in that direction, then looked up at the clear blue sky. When he saw nothing but the vast expanse of the heavens, he closed his eyes and listened intently for the telltale sound of an unmanned drone. Yet all he heard was the eerie silence of the desert.

Footsteps hurried toward him. He opened his eyes and spun in that direction to see Salim, who was carrying a small shortwave radio. "They did it!" Salim shouted, his young eyes alive with excitement. "They did it."

Hamid's heart skipped a beat. "It really happened?"

"Yes." Salim thrust the radio toward Hamid. "Listen for yourself."

Hamid took the receiver and adjusted a knob on the side to increase the volume. His heart pounded as he raised the antennae and turned it toward the east. The voice came in loud and clear. “This is Radio Iran.”

The first reports from America indicated the missile from the *Panama Clipper* had done its job. It had traveled in a perfect arc from the ship’s deck southwestward toward Washington, D.C. All available information indicated it had detonated at an altitude of one hundred twenty miles above DuPont Circle, exactly as planned. In spite of his usual cynicism, Hamid’s chest swelled with pride as he thought of what he’d done and what had happened when the warhead exploded.

Salim stepped closer. “Those arrogant Americans. Now they will know what it is like to live in the desert.” Hamid motioned for silence and once more adjusted the position of the antennae.

As originally conceived, missiles from three carefully constructed ships, each carrying specially designed cargo containers, were to steam within range of the American continent—the *Panama Clipper* and the *Amazon Cloud* approaching from the Atlantic side, the *Santiago* from the Pacific. As planned, the first missile, launched from the *Panama Clipper*, would detonate a nuclear warhead high above the nation’s capital, creating an electromagnetic pulse that would take out the government’s technological capability. Then, while the mighty American military was blind to the world, the other two ships would launch their missiles striking targets on the ground—the *Santiago* hitting Los Angeles and the *Amazon Cloud* obliterating Washington, D.C.

Hamid listened a moment longer, then switched off the radio. Salim smiled at him. “Now we can do it?” He gestured over his shoulder. “We can launch our own missile?”

Parked beneath the tent a few feet away was a Russian-made

MAZ 534 missile launcher like the ones that had been loaded on the ships. Resting on it was an Iranian Shahab-3 missile. Just days earlier, the tent had been filled with engineers and technicians working feverishly to make final adjustments to the missile and its payload, a five-megaton nuclear warhead. Now the tent was empty and silent as the missile rested there, awaiting the launch codes and coordinates for the real target of the plan—Israel.

“No,” Hamid said, shaking his head. “We must wait.”

“For what?”

“For confirmation that the others have launched their missiles.”

“But they have,” Salim protested. “Did you not hear? Up and down the East Coast the electrical power is out. The United States is in the dark.”

“The eastern half is in the dark,” Hamid corrected. “That was the result of the first missile. We have no report of the other two.”

“How will we know?”

“I will know.”

“But how?”

“Bring me the radio in one hour.” Hamid handed the radio to Salim. “One hour,” he repeated. “And do not turn it on until then. We must not run down the batteries.”

Hamid turned away and folded his arms across his chest. He pulled his robe up over the back of his neck and scrunched his shoulders. What they were attempting was far more daring than anything conceived by the 9-11 martyrs. Others had tried, but they had all fallen victim to the myriad details and logistical complexity of a global effort, and Hamid knew more than anyone else that there was ample reason to worry this attempt might fail, too.

At first, everything had gone according to plan. The ships had established a record of service as legitimate cargo vessels, calling on ports in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans, establishing a paper

trail that made them seem like all the other container ships plying trade routes in the East. Then, as the time approached, they each had reached their assigned ports precisely as directed. The *Panama Clipper* in Bremerhaven, Germany, and the *Amazon Cloud* in Aden, Yemen, had taken their cargo and proceeded on schedule. The third ship, the *Santiago*, reached the port of Guangzhou, China, where it was loading as planned, and then the trouble began.

“Wu and his stupid temper,” Hamid growled to himself. He wrapped his arms tighter across his chest. “The Chinese are more arrogant than the Americans.”

If Wu had held his temper, the ship would have reached its destination, and Los Angeles would be a wasteland. But no, Wu could not wait. He had to vent his anger. When the authorities discovered the FBI agent’s body, it was a simple matter to work backward through his day and figure out that he had been at the port. Their investigation delayed the ship two days while the Americans and their Chinese counterparts determined the details of how the agent died. Now the *Santiago* was somewhere in the Pacific and no one knew for sure what the crew would do. The missile could strike from three thousand miles away, but communicating with the crew was nearly impossible. Once the ships were underway, Adnan Karroubi had forbidden the use of cell phones and satellite phones for fear the Americans and their allies might intercept the conversation. Instead, all of the crews, including Hamid, were relegated to information broadcast over traditional shortwave frequencies using coded language embedded in scheduled news reports.

“I should have thought of this,” Hamid castigated himself. “I should have made certain everyone knew to launch at the appointed time, regardless of their location.” Still, there was the chance they would do it anyway. Perhaps Allah would remind them.

At five that evening, Salim returned with the radio. Hamid

flipped the switch to turn it on and punched in the numbers for the correct frequency. A moment later, he heard the familiar voice of the newscaster from Tehran. Hamid listened intently, but all he heard were more reports of the blackout along the American East Coast. “They are having trouble.” His face turned serious. “But there is no news of a strike against Los Angeles. And nothing of a direct hit on Washington.”

Salim’s face lit up. “Perhaps they do not have a report about Washington because no one can call out with news of it.”

Hamid smiled. “I like your optimism. But by now there should have been news about Los Angeles. And we should have—” The voice on the radio interrupted him.

Salim looked worried. “What is it?”

Hamid ignored him and lifted the radio to his ear. He listened a moment, then shook his head. “They are expecting a statement from Karroubi later this evening.”

“Adnan Karroubi? Why not the president?”

“Karroubi is head of the Assembly of Experts.”

Salim looked puzzled. “But he is not the president.”

“No.”

“This is not good.” Salim spoke with a hint of resignation in his voice.

“No,” Hamid shook his head. “That is not good.”

“What will happen now?”

“We must wait and see.”

Hamid glanced at his watch. It would soon be six in the evening in the desert. He calculated in his head. *Almost noon in Washington, D.C.*, he thought. There was still time to strike the other targets in America, but the window of opportunity was rapidly closing. He was not certain Karroubi understood the precarious position they faced.

With the shortwave radio in his hand, Hamid walked to a tent on

the far side of the compound, a hundred yards from the one that held the missile. Inside he found technicians lounging near a worktable. Karim Atef, the senior physicist in the group, looked up as Hamid approached. "You are ready to launch?"

"No." Hamid shook his head. "Not yet."

Atef rose from his place at the table and pulled Hamid aside. "This waiting is not good." He gestured over his shoulder to the others at the table. "These are the best minds Iran has to offer. Why are they still sitting here? All this waiting is putting them at risk."

"Karroubi will issue a statement this evening."

Atef ran his hand over his forehead. "This is insane."

Under other circumstances, Karim Atef would have spent his career teaching physics in America at a prestigious university like MIT or Stanford. Instead, after completing his education he returned to Iran, where he became the father of Iran's indigenous missile program. An ardent follower of Shi'a Islam, he was singularly focused on Jihad against infidels that threatened the spread of the faith, once even beating his cousin to death for converting to Christianity. He demanded complete devotion for himself and had little patience for those who did not display the same.

"We cannot just sit here waiting. Send them away. All of them," Atef gestured to the others in the tent. "We do not need them. Send them now. You do not need them to launch the missile. Send them now."

Hamid glanced down at his feet as if contemplating the request. It made sense. The men sitting around the table beneath the tent represented the heart and soul of Iran's technological community. They were essential to Iran's continuing effort to achieve a viable defense system. And they should have been gone from the compound long before now. Once again, Hamid excoriated himself for not thinking of it. "Yes." He lifted his head and nodded. "You are right. Tell them to go."

“Good,” Atef nodded. “Good.” He turned away to tell the others. Hamid called after him, “Not all at once.”