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IRANIAN ROOTS; AMERICAN WINGS

Men dream. REZA ABEDI's dream is simple—to attend a university and become a teacher. When Ayatollah Khomeini comes to power in 1979, that dream dies. On the last night of the Military World Wrestling Championships in Venezuela 1982, Reza grips his gold medal and makes a choice. More than just choosing to risk his own life by defecting, he risks the revenge killing of his younger brother locked in an Iranian prison.

But in the peaceful Spring of 1963 when Reza is born, the fifth of ten children, life is simple. His parents, although illiterate, emphasize education, hard work and character. Reza's father nurtures his natural wrestling skills and soon Reza is competing against the strongest wrestlers in Iran.

At thirteen, Reza qualifies to compete at the Nationals in Tehran. He collapses on the scale due to his extreme efforts to make weight and loses to MASHIDI AGHEE in the championship match. Reza returns in shame, but is surprised when greeted by family and friends proud of his efforts. He rededicates himself to his first passion—education and continues his intensive training on the wrestling mats.

In January 1979, Iran's Shah steps down and previously exiled Islamic cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini assumes power. In the violent months that follow, Reza organizes a band of the toughest wrestlers from his neighborhood. He directs them to throw molotov

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cocktails to combat Shah's police, leads bloody market raids for food and storms the local prison for weapons.

In May 1980, just a few months after Ayatollah Khomeini proclaims all universities must be pure in their Islamic teachings, Reza applies for admission. His transcripts reflect his academic performance at a stellar level. During the final interview with the Mullah, Reza cannot prove his allegiance to Islam. His admission: denied.

For young men like Reza at this time in Iran, one can attend the Muslim universities or become a soldier. Reza follows his oldest brother into the Iranian Air Force and for several months, he drives an ambulance to collect both wounded and dead soldiers from the battle front of a war he does not understand.

At eighteen, Reza knows he cannot live as an arm to the machine of death, fear and suppression. His only hope to defect lies in making the Military Wrestling Team and escaping when they travel to compete in other nations. Through excruciating matches, he earns his place on the team.

In June 1982 he returns home to announce he will be competing in Venezuela at upcoming International Military World Wrestling Championship. However, he returns to a family grieving the imprisonment of his thirteen year-old brother HOUSHANG; his crime—bringing food to starving Kurdish children.

When Reza returns to the base, he is told his place on the team is being challenged by Mashida Aghee; the same wrestler who beat him in the National Championships four years earlier. Fighting the visions of his disgraceful defeat, Reza takes the mat.

Reza wins the first match, but Mashida Aghee, Ayatollah Khomeini's personal body guard, is declared the winner. Reza insists on a rematch and again, Reza wins. And again, Mashida Aghee is declared the winner. With only twenty-four hours before the team is to depart for Venezuela, Reza risks court-martial by demanding a third match. Reza steps onto the mat for this final battle and pins Mashida Aghee.

At the Military Championship, teams from all the other nations stay together in comfortable dorms. The Iranians report to the fourth floor of a guarded barrack with

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barred windows and little hope of escape. Reza notices a fellow teammate, SAAM, whispering with American wrestlers in the far corners of the gym. He approaches the teammate in the shower. "I want to defect too," Reza whispers. With the help of the American wrestlers, Reza and two others plan to defect on the last night.

On the second to the last night, Reza sneaks out and goes to the night clubs of Caracas with a local. Although tempted, he knows if he doesn't return then the plan of the final night will be impossible for the two others. He returns at 1 a.m., faces military court-martial and fears he will be executed.

Moreover, his best friend Ardeshir has been questioned extensively regarding Reza's absence. Just before sunrise, Ardeshir sneaks into Reza's bunk and whispers, "They're going to kill us both the second we get home." Reza knows Ardeshir's father is a personal body guard for Ayatollah Khomeini and Ardeshir would bring extreme shame to the family if he defected. Trusting Ardeshir's loyalty as a friend more than his loyalty to his Iran, he replies, "Don't go back. Stay here with me."

It is 2 a.m. on the final night. With thoughts of his little brother suffering in prison, Reza wraps his clothes around his gold medal and pushes them through the bars from the fourth floor bathroom window. In only his underwear, he approaches the guard and asks to go downstairs for a drink of water. Reza escapes to join the others in the van driven by the American wrestlers. At the last minute, Ardeshir joins them and the four are driven a safe house.

Disguised as OPEC dignitaries, the Revolutionary Guard is sent to Venezuela to assassinate the wrestlers, but the wrestlers are locked into a prison cell for their own security. After a Jewish translator misrepresents the wrestlers, they are granted a six month Visa for religious, not political asylum. The wrestlers move into a cheap, leaky apartment and search hotel trash cans for food. Although the American and British embassies provide some money to the wrestlers, no country will grant them admission for religious asylum.

Meanwhile, Reza's family is interrogated daily and his father loses his job. Reza's older brother is able to buy Houshang's freedom, but he must leave Iran

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immediately. Reza's two older sisters escape with their husbands by falsifying business deals in Belgium, but the others remain trapped in Iran. The strain takes a toll on Reza's mother who dies in her sleep.

Desperate to leave Venezuela, Ardeshir conceives a plan wherein they turn themselves into the Iranian Embassy, say they were stupid kids and now they want to come home. Without money, this is the only way they will get a plane ticket and paperwork to leave Venezuela. Knowing there is no direct flight from Venezuela to Iran, they plan to escape in the international airport of Madrid before boarding the second plane. Reza hides a sharpened can opener in his pocket; if they are caught in Madrid, he plans to slit his wrists.

The plane has an unexpected delay in the Canary Islands which throws off the Revolutionary Guards waiting for them in Madrid. The four are able to elude capture by hiding in a bathroom and finding an Iranian Mujahideen who is selling newspapers in Farsi. In exchange for doing an international press conference exposing the terrors of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime, the four wrestlers are given food, clothes and a guarded apartment in Madrid. In the next year, Reza and Ardeshir are granted Visas to live in Southern California. Reza and Ardeshir earn wrestling scholarships to attend Cal State Fullerton. Only one phone call could rip Reza away from achieving his dream.

In Iran, Reza's older brother hires smugglers to take his father and four sisters out of Iran to join the older sisters in Belgium. It is late December. While in Turkey, all of their money is stolen and Reza's sister, SOROYA places a desperate call to Reza. He secures false paperwork from a Mexican CSUF teammate and flies to Belgium to develop a plan with his sisters. Although he can pass as "Jose Martinez" in the European airports, in Turkey they will recognize him as an Iranian and jail him immediately for having false paperwork. But there is no other way, and Reza boards a plane to Istanbul.

He escapes detection in the Istanbul airport, finds his family and hires new smugglers to take them to Germany. Reza returns to Belgium to await their call from Germany, but instead he receives a call from Vienna, Austria. He drives to Vienna,

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gathers his family and gets arrested at a checkpoint at the German-Austrian border. Reza is sent to prison and his family is transferred to an Austrian refugee processing camp.

After Reza's false paperwork is processed, he's freed. However, his family is quarantined in the Austrian refugee camp until their identities are processed (at which time they will be sent back to Iran). For five days, Reza searches for a road that will go from Austria to Germany without passing through a checkpoint. He sleeps in his car and steals food to stay alive. At a gas station, he befriends a drug smuggler who provides him with a map of trails that will take his family to Germany. But the trails are covered in ice and snow and the German guards watch the mountain passes from guard towers. If he can get to Germany, he has a chance to drive them through Holland and into Belgium where border crossings are not as strict.

With a map in hand, he arrives at the refugee camp in the middle of the night. Through a broken window, he is able to get his family out. The exhausted family stands at the side of the frozen river. A smoker, his father coughs and gasps for breath. One younger sister suffers with a broken foot while another sister shivers with fever. Reza struggles to bring the family along the narrow and frozen mountain trails while staying unseen by the Germans guards.

His sisters forge ahead, while Reza carries his father down the icy path. "I will not let you die here," he says to his father who begs Reza leave him. Stumbling, Reza continues through the frozen darkness until he reaches his sisters. He lays his father to huddle with them and returns with the car. Through a snowstorm, he drives his family to safety in Belgium. The next day, he boards a plane back to America. He wants to be back in time take his course finals.

The book is written with two chapters about Reza and then a short chapter written in first person by me in which I describe how my perceptions of Iran are being changed as I write the book.

In this way, it's very unique to other books written about Iranians and their experience during The Revolution. Additionally, because it is written by an American, I

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take great care to find opportunities for readers to ‘discover’ Iran as I did. With as much detail as possible, I attempt not only to share the rich culture and clarify misunderstood historical events, but also to explore the impact of religion and the socio-political climate.

In 1994, Reza Abedi graduated from CSUF with a teaching credential and currently works as a Spanish teacher and Head Varsity Wrestling Coach at a high school in Southern California. In 2000, his colleagues nominated him for “Teacher of the Year.” He lives with his two sons; his oldest currently competes on his Varsity wrestling team. In 2019, Reza was inducted into the elite National Wrestling Hall of Fame.