

COMPANY SECRETS

A NOVEL

Bobby Leonard



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Prologue

Somewhere near Kandahar, Afghanistan

FOUR HOURS OF BLISTERING HEAT AND DUST rose from the dirt road near Kandahar. The Fixer, as his clients called him, was driving to meet Abdul Wazir in the southeastern hills.

“I don’t know this Abdul, but my errand will cost him more than my usual fee because he demanded I drop everything and come to the mine,” Fixer said to himself. “Ah, my fee? I’ll wait to see what this job is.”

Arriving at the site, he saw the three mobile trailers and headed straight to the middle trailer to see Abdul. Abdul met him at the door and introduced himself.

“I am Poya,” Fixer said. “What goes on here?”

“I get mining equipment for operations. Can’t tell you what’s mined here. It’s secret,” said Abdul, pausing to watch Poya’s expression. “You can’t tell anyone about me, this mine, this location, or any other location I sent you. Agree?”

“You don’t know who I am,” said Poya. “I not just errand boy. I am Mohammad Poya. I am the Fixer, well known in Kandahar for doing important jobs for American army. I am Sunni Islam, and have friends with the Shias. I assassinated warlords before. I survived hard time when Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan. I make trust over years. I even worked for Hamid Karzai. I listened

to American colonels and delivered messages to warlords and Taliban. What work do you have for me?”

“Pick up packages from places and deliver to me. Deliver packages from here to places in Kandahar. Some places may be shipping companies. I demand you be quiet and you use connections you have. I pay good for you; be fast and tell no one. Afgani AFN 30,000 for each package. I have no U.S. dollars to pay, but this equal U.S. \$440.”

“You want me pick up and deliver items between here and Kandahar and not tell anyone. What connections do you need from shipper?” asked Poya.

“Make sure each package gets no special attention from the inspectors. You do that?”

“Yes, for surcharge,” said Poya.

“If you ask them not to look, makes them more suspicious. You tell them story that contents are samples, if they ask. I don’t want suspicion,” said Abdul. “Can you do that?”

“What are contents?” asked Poya.

“Secret material. Won’t hurt people. I cannot risk having them get in competitors’ hands. You understand?” asked Abdul.

Poya looked around at the landscape of dirt and rocks. “What is special here?”

Abdul ignored the question. “Also we talk on my special phone—both text and voice. You must come when I call. I tell you time to pick up package and where to deliver.”

“I do this, but I need AFN 200 more. How many deliveries do you need, for how long?” asked Poya.

“Four deliveries a week for six weeks. Later, I need two or four per month. We done in six months,” said Abdul.

Poya did a little math in his head and estimated his future earnings. That would be more than ten years income in Afghanistan.

“We have deal,” said Poya. “Good. I tell you more later so you learn how I work with you.”

On his drive back to Kandahar, Poya took his time driving the dirt road. The sun was setting in front of him, casting a reddish glow over the countryside. He felt good about the project and the prospect of making money with little risk in the coming months.

“I thank my friend for giving my name,” he said to himself as he looked into his rear view mirror. On the North Slope he could see the top of a mine platform.

Park Avenue, New York

DAN DUGGAN'S ALARM WOKE HIM AT 6 A.M. WITH A START. He remembered that he was going to his office in New York City, so he quickly showered and shaved. Looking in his closet, he selected a light gray two-piece suit from a selection of about a dozen, "I'll be ultra conservative today; besides, the light gray will keep my spirits high." He selected a white shirt with fine blue pinstripes, and a tie with red, blue and gray strips to complete the look and feel he was trying to achieve. No power suit today. He looked at his clean shaven face and brown hair—not too short, but neatly combed to the right side with just enough gel to keep it from falling in his face. His sideburns were trimmed neatly at the ears and the back expertly layered. He put the tie around his neck and pinched the overlap while he sized lengths. His favorite knot was the double Windsor because of the perfectly symmetrical knot. He synched it up and checked the length to ensure that it just touched the top of his black leather belt before running the other end of the tie through the maker's label. Dan seldom wore a tie clasp. He put on his suit jacket, closed one button, and then stepped back to see the whole ensemble including his black, cap-toe shoes. *Voila*, a perfectly dressed management consultant.

Dan lived in Stamford, Connecticut, only a few minutes from the Metro station via Uber. When he got on the train, he was still in a sour mood because his boss, Robert Kavanah, insisted that he stop everything and come to the office about a new engagement. He was in the middle of writing the final client engagement report. Robert had occasionally asked him to jump through hoops, insisting he drop everything. Well, he's the boss.

He rode the Metro-North train from Connecticut, his brain still wrapped around his current engagement. During the thirty-minute ride he read his email and project reports from the team. When the train lurched to a stop, he closed his laptop and started his ten-minute walk through mobs of people to the office. A warm blast of air hit him as it always does when he exited the train. The tunnel was smelly with steamy grease mixed with perfumes, aftershave, leather, and wet wool. He merged with hundreds of commuters and rushed to the tunnel exit, to the center of the terminal, and then up the escalator and through the MetLife building. Anderson & Smith's offices were just through the Park Avenue tunnel where it crosses East 46th Street. The air was cool and dry and helped him calm down from the summons he received.

Dan is a senior associate with Anderson & Smith and has done this commute from Connecticut for eleven months. Previously, he lived in New York City for five years. Most of the time he worked from home or at clients' sites. He's meeting with his partner about a new engagement that will run one to three months and require significant travel. Being a closer-finisher personality, he's irritated about this sudden change of plans. His friends think his job is glamorous—traveling to major metropolises around the world, staying at five-star hotels, eating at first-rate restaurants and bistros. They haven't walked in Dan's shoes working ten hours or more a day.

"What's up today?" Dan barked, entering Robert's office. The corner office had a clear view of Park Avenue, and this morning was so clear he could see all the way to Central Park and even make out the George Washington Bridge. The great view calmed him down for the meeting.

“Dan, we have an urgent request from my friend Rajah Malani, CEO of AeroStar.” Robert is all business, no time for small talk. Not even a hello, how are you?

“He wants us to review their current business strategy. The Board wasn’t sold on the plan he presented, and they asked for a second review before they approve funding of a new strategic initiative. He’s beside himself and wants me to pull our best and brightest to conduct the assessment. I want you to lead this engagement because you have aerospace industry experience, and you’re my top business strategy consultant.”

“So I just drop my current project?” Dan asked with a little edge in his voice.

“Already cleared you to hand off your work to Allison Weldon. She’ll finish the project and manage the team members. It’s good for her to step up to take on more responsibility. I’ll oversee the final report.”

“Tell me more about AeroStar. What’s wrong with the current business strategy? What issues did the Board have? And, where do we need to dig into the plan to satisfy them?” Dan tried to get to the heart of the engagement. He also displayed his own disappointment with his body language.

“Dan, ah, I’m sorry to do this to you again,” said Robert. “If I could have put Rajah off, I would have, but his sense of urgency was very compelling. Besides, this is good money for us and more to come in the future.” Robert paused to watch Dan’s reaction. After what seemed like an eternity, Dan finally relaxed and smiled, the sour mood dissipated.

Robert continued, “But, before we start, you and your associate must sign a nondisclosure agreement. Then you can go to our library and review the annual report and other reports Rajah sent over. This is secret because of the sensitivity of their plan. None of the information we see and gather can ever be leaked or shared with anyone other than the top management team at AeroStar. You will work under a cover name for the project called ‘process reengineering and supply chain management.’ Your first step will be to meet with Rajah and his senior team to determine the scope

and timing of the engagement and to write the engagement letter for his signature.”

As Dan signed the nondisclosure agreement, Robert explained, “AeroStar started a strategic initiative—code name Aether—last year to investigate the feasibility of entering NASA’s space race. They have new technology they believe will revolutionize space travel. The Board was not impressed with his presentation, at least not enough to fund \$5 billion. The Board posed two questions he couldn’t answer: 1. Will the technology work? 2. Do we have an adequate rare earth metals supply chain to produce all the spacecraft?”

“You need to get in and quickly gather the necessary information to assess their business strategy as it relates to their new technology. I suggest that you use our Issue-Based Technique so that we don’t waste time,” he continued. “I’m also assigning a new associate, Mary Johnson, to work with you. I know you’ll do a good job mentoring her. She has excellent business strategy experience, but she hasn’t used the Issue-Based Technique.”

“I’ll pull her curriculum vitae and work experience and begin preparing for my initial meeting with management.”

Dan read the annual report and waited for Mary Johnson. He wondered why they named the project “Aether.”

He typed on his laptop: What is Aether?

The computer screen displayed

Sky deity

Aether is the primeval god of the upper air . . .

I wonder who named the project, Aether, the primeval god of the upper air? Dan thought. He knew that aerospace firms love to use mythical names for their most secret projects. The names seem to come alive to fulfill their prophecy. This one must certainly fly to upper earth orbit or beyond. He wondered about NASA’s business approach, knowing they retired the space shuttle. A new company, SpaceX, owned by a young man named Elon Musk, delivered supplies to the International Space Station (ISS). Mr. Musk also founded Tesla, a company that makes expensive electric cars. He even put his personal Tesla sedan on the nose cone of his Falcon 9

heavy rocket for its maiden flight. A dummy astronaut drove the car.

Dan typed: What is NASA's plan for space exploration?

The computer screen displayed

Advanced Space Transportation Program: Paving the Highway to Space

Going to Mars, the stars, and beyond requires a vision for the future and innovative technology development to take us there. Scientists and engineers at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, are paving the highway to space by developing technologies for 21st century space transportation.

As NASA's core technology program for all space transportation, the Advanced Space Transportation Program at the Marshall Center is pushing technologies that will dramatically increase the safety and reliability, and reduce the cost of space transportation. Today it costs \$10,000 to put a pound of payload in earth's orbit. NASA's goal is to reduce the cost of getting to space to hundreds of dollars per pound within twenty-five years and tens of dollars per pound within forty years...

NASA's plans sounded a little like a big corporation mission statement. They want to go to Mars and lower the cost of flying in space too. Dan printed the article and started a tab in the binder labeled Engagement Research Binder.

Now it's time to go look at what Elon Musk wants to do with his SpaceX Company.

Dan typed: What is SpaceX business plan?

The computer screen displayed

Achievements of SpaceX include:

- The first privately funded, liquid-fueled rocket (Falcon 1) to reach orbit (28 September 2008)
- The first privately funded company to successfully launch (by Falcon 9) orbit and recover a spacecraft (Dragon) (9 December 2010)
- The first private company to send a spacecraft (Dragon) to the International Space Station (25 May 2012)

- The first private company to send a satellite into geosynchronous orbit (SES-8, 3 December 2013)
- The landing of a first-stage orbital capable rocket (Falcon 9) (22 December 2015 1:40 UTC)

SpaceX Business Goals:

Musk has stated that one of his goals is to improve the cost and reliability of access to space, ultimately by a factor of ten. The company plans in 2004 called for “development of a heavy lift product and even a super-heavy, if there is customer demand.” Each size increase would result in a significant decrease in cost per pound to orbit. CEO Elon Musk said: “I believe \$500 per pound (\$1,100/kg) or less is achievable.”

Dan underlined his cost goal and put a copy in the engagement binder. He found it interesting that Elon Musk thinks he can lower costs also. That’s about a twenty-fold decrease from current cost. Dan researched other topics to help refresh his aeronautical engineering knowledge and added them to the binder.

Dan was puzzled about the material technology for the nuclear-based plasma rocket motor. He referred to the Board minutes to get the three “rare-earth metals.”

Dan typed: neodymium, samarium, and gadolinium:

- Another chief use of neodymium is as a component in the alloys used to make high-strength neodymium magnets—powerful permanent magnets.
- The major commercial application of samarium is in samarium-cobalt magnets, which have permanent magnetization second only to neodymium magnets; however, samarium compounds can withstand significantly higher temperatures, above 700 °C (1292 °F), without losing their magnetic properties.
- Gadolinium as a metal or salt has exceptionally high absorption of neutrons and therefore is used for shielding in neutron radiography and in

nuclear reactors. The world gadolinium supply is found in Afghanistan.

I'm not a nuclear chemist, but these metals seem to have properties that improve magnets. I think they must have something to do with their breakthrough research, thought Dan

He scanned down to the end of the Board minutes and read the last few lines, "Hmm, they've already approved a half-million dollars for our engagement. I think we have plenty of funding to complete the engagement."

- Motion/Second/Carries 10-Y 0-N—Torri Berri motion "to approve up to \$500,000 for outside consulting review of the current business plan."

- Action Plan: Harold Zaben to request assay report from Gholam Sharma, Managing Director of Annokkha Drat Exports.

- Rajah Malani: "Board tables motion to approve the \$5 billion strategic initiative until mine assay report and the strategy assessment report by third party consulting group is completed. Board of Directors meeting is adjourned."

New York City

KEVIN KOUBIEL'S CONTRACT SALES BUSINESS he runs from his apartment in New York City changed eighteen months ago when he received a voice message on his home office answering machine that intrigued him. "My name is Frankie Gallo. I have a unique offer for you to join our team. Call me at area code 973-425-1575."

Kevin got on his computer and searched for the name Frankie Gallo. He learned that he runs a technology business in New Jersey—computer and software sales. He also read some New Jersey news articles purporting that Mr. Gallo is a New Jersey mobster specializing in technology-related scams. He noted that the writer referred to Mr. Gallo as *Il Capo*, his underworld nickname. Kevin jotted some notes on a pad and returned his call.

The number he dialed was answered immediately. "Frankie Gallo. And you are the famous Mr. Kevin Koubiel."

"Yes *Il Capo*, I got your message and I'm intrigued that you may have an opportunity for me. I run a legitimate business, so I don't know why you called."

"Listen to what I have to say this one time," said Frankie, aka *Il Capo*, in a low-toned voice with a heavy accent. "You know me because of my name and reputation. You don't know this. I started

a new business. It's gonna be big, very big, and it is legal. Lithium, ever heard of it?" He pauses waiting for Kevin to reply—nothing. "This stuff is the latest thing. Ever heard of a lithium ion battery? It's big in electric cars. I formed a new company and I have a partner—a large mining company. They will mine the lithium. My company buys the mining leases in North America. I have a business plan too. Want you to look at it and you decide."

"I'm listening," said Kevin.

"We—I mean you—will quietly lease lithium mineral rights in America. No one has a plan like ours. We will become the leading owner of lithium mineral leases in America."

"Why do you want me? I know nothing about minerals or mining or lithium. I sell equipment and parts."

"Three reasons: one, you are good closing deals; two, you get the job done—no matter how complex; and three, you're organized, a hard worker. We have a lot of people to meet and deals to close. That's why I want you." He spoke with a low, extended youuuuuuu.

"I'm flattered at your confidence in me, but I'm really doing well with my current business."

"Here's the deal—I pay you a salary \$150 g's, all expenses to cover travel, office, and other costs. I offer you 100,000 shares in our company with additional shares and options based on performance signing leases," said Frankie. "You sign our NDA, then I show you my financial plan. My accountant calls it a valuation model. It shows exactly how the stock value will grow the next few years. He estimates company will be worth upwards of \$1 billion. You heard it, billion with a capital B!"

"Mr. Gallo, I don't want to insult you. You have my attention. I will look into your financial and business plans. I will treat this opportunity like I would any other—with respect and dignity. I would hope that you would also respect mine."

"Mr. Koubiel, trust me. This is real. I will send you plenty of research we've done. You can search the corporation documents also. The new company is U.S. Lithium Mines Corporation in Delaware, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Nevada. You see our partner company is from India. Company is Annokkha Drat

Exports. I want you to know everything we know, but you can't tell anyone! Do you understand?"

Kevin signed the NDA and conducted his own research into lithium before he agreed to work for the company. He was equally impressed with the worldwide projections of lithium production over the next twenty years. Yes, it was a real opportunity and he would make sure that his contract was rock solid!

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER, Kevin Koubiel's operation in Rock Springs was moving according to plan. He was like the energizer bunny. He rented a small apartment on the west side of Rock Springs where he could work with anonymity. He was well organized and systematic in his plan to secure mineral leases in a four-state area—Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado.

While he knew little about lithium and mining, he was an excellent salesman with an uncanny ability to gain people's trust. He started by researching the property records in the state, and then reaching out to each landowner. He used a clandestine approach, keeping everything secret. It worked because he was believable, and people want to make a lot of money.

Kevin knew that the current generation in Wyoming was ready to cash in. Why not? Oil and gas leases were making many land owners rich indeed. And now, lithium was really going to make a difference in the world too. And there was lots of lithium in the four states.

The operation worked by having Mr. Koubiel sign lithium mineral leases that excluded all other oil, gas, and minerals. To secure the lease, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) required a signed and notarized lease and a recent assay showing that lithium had been discovered on the property. Kevin hired a local lawyer, held by nondisclosure agreement, to file the leases. The process was similar to filing any legal document at the courthouse; only the filing was done at the appropriate Bureaus of Land Management (BLM) office. It was similar to the way gold claims were staked in California during the gold rush.

Anyone can go to the BLM office and conduct searches to see what leases have been filed, who owned them, the property boundaries, the minerals included, and the assay results for the lease. Kevin spent some of his time finding land that had no lithium mineral leases. The pickings were really easy. He lined up the leases, and his office manager in Brooklyn filed the paperwork and maintained necessary documentation.

St. Louis, Missouri

LIGHTS WERE OUT IN THE COMSTAR'S DESIGN LAB except for the dim glow shining from cube A-59. Across the aisle the printers were quiet; the large, high-tech 3-D printers looked like big mechanical arms stopped in strange positions, as if they were thinking about their next chess move.

A faint cell phone chime rang from the cubical. "Hello Bill," answered Dr. Summer Sexton. "What's up? Where are you so late this evening?" As she waited for a reply, she could hear buffeting sounds like wind rushing through sheets hung on a clothesline.

"I need an update from you," replied Bill with a heavy and slurred drawl. "The Board didn't approve our request; they want more proof that our designs will work."

"You should speak directly with Wyatt. He's my boss and I don't need you going around him."

"I wanted to hear your voice again. You just have a way of explaining the design to me and how it will work."

William "Bill" Anderson has been ComStar's VP of Research and Development for the past ten years and is a key manager in the Aether Program. He came up through the ranks during the heyday of the SST race in the 1970s and helped build the highly successful SW-11 commercial transport. It was the first commercial

flying wing design. He knows nothing about designing a hypersonic spacecraft.

Back in the days when he was in charge, he kept abreast of all the design pieces of the airplane puzzle. He challenged everyone's work—draftsmen, structural engineers, systems engineers, and aerodynamics engineers—to test their conviction and understanding of their work. Everyone working for him paid attention. He expected excellence from his team then, as he does now. But today, he found it hard to keep up with the many computer design iterations, so he relied on frequent discussions with his key team members, Summer Sexton and Wyatt Calvert. He preferred to talk to Summer.

Bill has relied mostly on Summer's help to explain the technical nuances of the spacecraft design. Sophisticated computer programs tests many design alternatives. The design team selected hypersonic delta wing because it was the best fit for this mission. The drawback was its poor performance, flying slowly during take-off and landing. So they decided to add a swing-wing to improve slow flight modes.

"Bill, cut the crap," said Summer. "You shouldn't be talking to me, really. Why don't you call Wyatt in the morning."

"I'll be back in the office tomorrow. I've already asked Wyatt to brief me on the swing-wing design. I need to know exactly where you and Wyatt are in the design and what needs to be done next. This project is extremely important to this company, and all of us," said Bill.

The phone connection went silent when he hit the red button on his cell phone.

Rock Springs, Wyoming

AFTERNOON BREEZES FELL OFF THE WESTERN PLATEAU, then down across the valley, but the temperatures were perfect for a championship rodeo. This is the last year that Rock Springs will host the Annual National High School Finals Rodeo. The city of Rock Springs has grown to 25,000 people mostly from coal mining, minerals, and natural gas and oil shale production. Rock Springs is doing well spending its money on facilities and amenities most small towns could only dream about.

Life in Rock Springs was good; you could see the brand new high-end trucks and off-road vehicles parked in most driveways. Community parks dot both the new and old housing developments. Restaurants and fast-food joints are thriving. Over at the Sweetwater Events Complex, the rodeo is in its third day.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please move your attention to the arena and give our own local boy, Dale Butterfield, support as he mounts his bareback bronco named Jumper,” called the rodeo announcer.

As the gate swung back, Jumper left the chute, he bucked straight out and up as Dale’s left arm rose and his boots marked the horse out of the bucking chute.

“What a great start,” said the fancy-dressed cowboy watching the event from the grandstand. Eight seconds latter, Dale released his grip just as the bronco whipped him off the right side.

“So let’s talk about why we are here,” said Buck Jackson. Buck had received a call and decided to meet with the man, name unknown. He was intrigued with his caller because the man knew so much about his ranch, specifically the location and acres he owned. The caller knew that Buck had lost his wife a few years earlier to breast cancer. And, he mentioned that his employer wants to work with Buck. He could make significant income from a possible deal.

The man dressed in blue jeans, button-down shirt, and loafers nodded and said, “My employer is interested in the mineral rights on your property. Are you willing to make a deal? If you are, then what would you need from me to secure one?”

“Who do you work for?” asked Buck. “What minerals do they want?”

“In due time you will know who your partner will be, but we need to keep our discussions confidential. We want to understand your needs to ensure compatibility with my employer. You know, this is a two-way street—your needs to protect your property, and ours for the mineral. It’s too early for lawyers until you and I have a solid meeting of the minds,” said the unidentified man.

“I might be interested under certain conditions,” said Buck. “First ‘n foremost, I can’t have you destroy property. My land has supported cattle, sheep, and horses for six generations, and we’re not stopping I want money, or royalties, as you call them, for the rights and then a cut of minerals you mine. I just won’t allow you to sit on the lease. Understand?”

“Yes, I think we can meet those needs,” said the man. “I’ll get some preliminary information from my employer, an offer so to speak. If you approve, then we’ll put words to paper. But you must never talk about our discussion with anyone. Will you do that?”

“Look, I’ve lived my entire life in Wyoming. Inherited this ranch from my parents. My brother and sister also have original homesteads. Ranching is our whole life. When I lost Martha, I also lost a lot of motivation for ranching. I even considered selling. But

I told myself not to give in. Not for at least five years before making any decision.”

“Next up is Skyler Holley from Columbus, Ohio,” said the announcer.

“May I consult my lawyer?” asked Buck.

“Not yet, but in due time. Because of secrecy, my employer asks that you use this burner phone. We cannot be too careful. I’ll call you next week to schedule our next meeting,” said blue-jeaned man. “You may call me anytime.”

“Why all the cloak and dagger?” asked Buck.

“It’s quite simple. This is a strategic move for my employer, and any leak to the public could jeopardize their plans. Okay? Secrecy and timing are critical. We’re not doing anything illegal. Okay? You most likely will get rich. I think you’ll understand,” said the man. “Also, I’ll know if you go around asking questions about your mineral rights. That will kill the deal. Do you understand?”

“I can live with that for now,” said Buck. “But I need to know your name. I need to know the man I’m doing business with. Do you understand?”

The unidentified man said, “Certainly. My name is Kevin Koubiel. And, you will get to know me a lot better.”

A few minutes later, Buck and Kevin left the grandstand and went in separate directions.