

BY WAY OF
DECEPTION

A
NIR TAVOR
MOSSAD
THRILLER

AMIR TSARFATI
AND STEVE YOHN

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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DECEPTION

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AND STEVE YOHN



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AMIR DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO...

God, all-powerful and ever-present. This past year You have shown me that no matter the trial, You are always there.

My father-in-law, Hanan Lokes, a pastor, a father, a friend, and a brother. You were a true patriarch who led this family in our pursuit of God's truth. You read online with Mike and me the verse from Psalm 116, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints" (verse 15). Two days later, you passed into the arms of the Savior. You are loved and you are missed, and we anticipate the day we will reunite with you in the presence of our God. For now, we hold tight to the hopeful assurance of Romans 8:28 that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

STEVE DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO...

The Almighty Creator and Sustainer of all things. Your beauty, creativity, truth, and humor are the muses that feed my passion to put words to paper.

Madeline, your joy at life lifts me, your beauty overwhelms me, your passion to educate challenges me, your laser wit ensures that I never get away with anything. You are the greatest gift God has given to your mother and me. You are my light, my Liora.

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“If the man constitutes a capability that endangers
the citizens of Israel, he must stop existing.”

YOSSI COHEN,
FORMER HEAD OF THE MOSSAD (2106-2021)

“The dirtiest actions should be
carried out by the most honest men.”

MEIR DAGAN,
FORMER HEAD OF THE MOSSAD (2002-2011)

בתחבולות תעשה לך מלחמה
“By way of deception, Thou shalt do war.”

FORMER MOSSAD MOTTO
(PROVERBS 24:6)

CHARACTER LIST

ISRAELIS

Zakai Abelman – Kidon team leader

Dima “Drago” Aronov – Kidon agent

Omer Azoulai – head of Shayetet 13 team

Lavie Bensoussan – Kidon team leader

Malka Bieler – ramsad’s executive assistant

Efraim Cohen – assistant deputy director of Caesarea

Ravid Efrat – Kidon team leader

Irin Ehrlich – Kidon team leader

Yaron Eisenbach – Kidon agent

Karin Friedman – assistant deputy director of Mossad

Oren Geller – prime minister

Yossi Hirschfield – Mossad analyst

Ira Katz – ramsad (head of Mossad)

Doron Mizrahi – Kidon agent

Avigdor Neeman – former Kidon agent

Asher Porush – deputy director of Mossad

Liora Regev – Mossad analyst

Dafna Ronen – Mossad analyst

Lahav Tabib – Mossad analyst

Nir Tavor – Kidon team leader

Yoram Tzadik – Mossad agent-in-charge of Operation Deep Sleep

Imri Zaid – Kidon agent

SOUTH AFRICAN

Nicole le Roux – Mossad agent

SAUDI

Ali Kamal – member of Saudi royal family

Saad Salim – owner/CEO of ASEnergy

AZERBAIJANI

Elnur Isayev – former assistant deputy head of the Azerbaijani Foreign Intelligence Service

IRANIAN

Lieutenant Asadi – member NAJA

Dr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh – head of the Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (S.P.N.D.) and “Father of the Iranian Bomb”

Dr. Ghasemi – IRGC specialist

Officer Kazemi – member of the Traffic Police of the General Command of the Law Enforcement of the Islamic Republic of Iran (NAJA)

General Arash Mousavi – head of the Intelligence Division of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

AMERICAN

First Lieutenant Caitlin Bader – USMC helicopter pilot

Lily Cohen – Tommy Cohen’s daughter

Tomaso “Tommy” Cohen – security guard

Alicia Marcos – artist

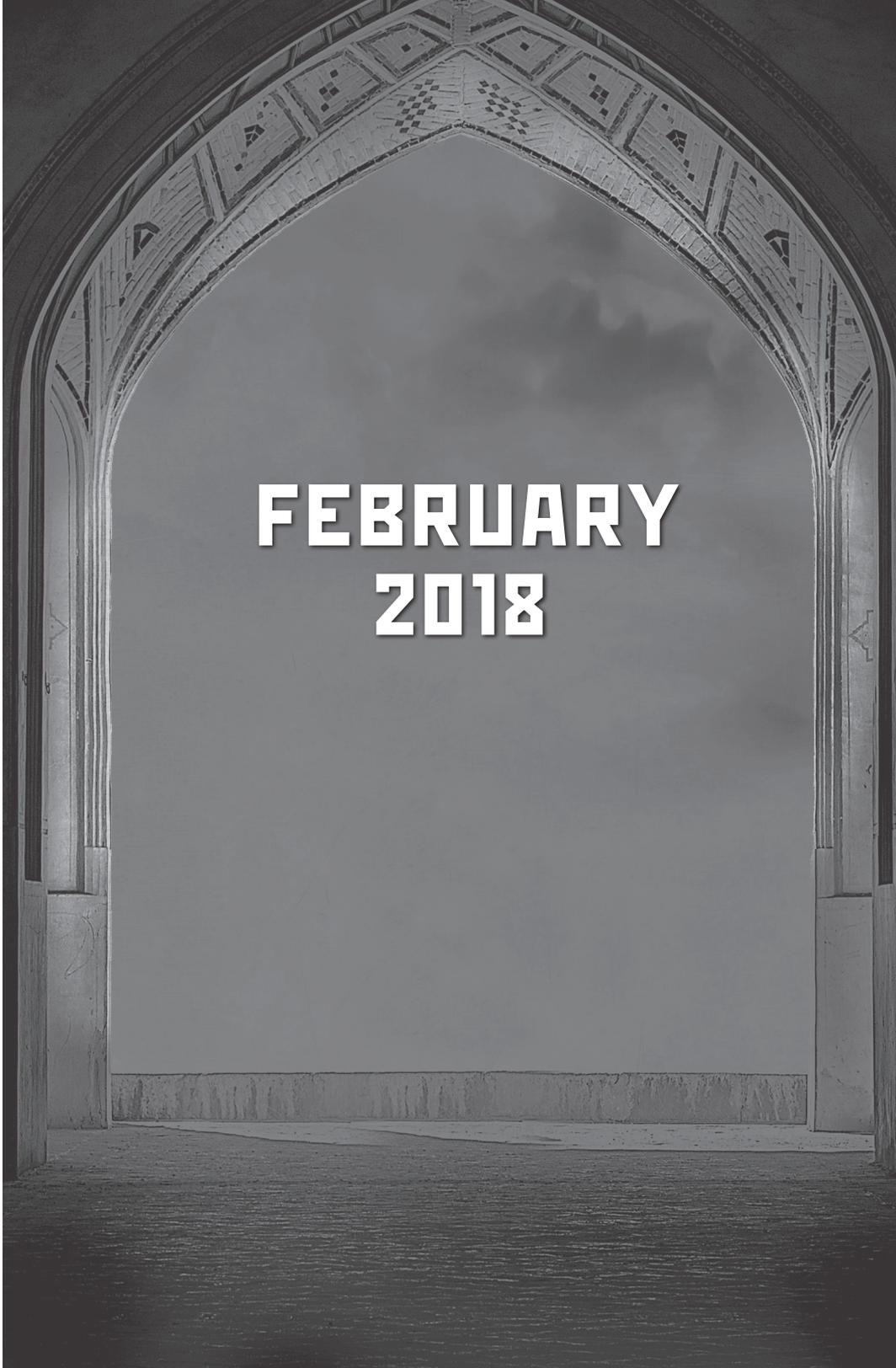
Captain J.J. Marks – USMC helicopter pilot

BELGIAN

Mila Wooters – executive assistant at Yael Diamonds

GERMAN

Dr. Horst Lindner – nuclear physicist



**FEBRUARY
2018**

CHAPTER 1

MOSSAD SAFE HOUSE, ASTARA, AZERBAIJAN—
FEBRUARY 1, 2018—06:40 / 6:40 A.M. AST

You look like someone stole your wife, Tavor,” Elnur Isayev said in his stilted English. “Are you not pleased with the progress?”

Only a thin line separates pessimism from realism, which is particularly true for the Jews. Life had made a habit of unexpectedly rising and punching them in the mouth. And that was why, Nir realized, he was preparing for a taste of life’s fist even though Operation Deep Sleep had thus far advanced remarkably well.

Without looking at the former assistant deputy head of the Azerbaijani Foreign Intelligence Service, Nir replied, “She’s not safe yet.” Then catching his slip, “We still have a lot of sheep out there among the wolves.”

“Ah, but it seems you are most concerned over one little lamb.”

Nir turned to see a grin beneath the man’s thick gray mustache. He wanted to poke back at the jab, but Isayev was absolutely right. He was anxious about the safety of each of the 20 players out on this operation’s pitch, but worry about the fate of a particular one kept him pacing the cement floor of this safe house.

And why should Isayev’s detecting his concern for Nicole stop him from what he wanted to do next?

“Call up Julia,” he said to one of the four Mossad techs sitting in front of a computer station in the center of the open, low-ceilinged room. The man glanced at Yoram Tzadik, the agent in charge of the operation. Tzadik nodded his approval. Then after a series of key-strokes, a headset was handed to Nir, and he slid it on.

He leaned forward on his fists, resting them on the table in front of him, and waited.

“Julia,” said a smoky, South African-accented voice, using one of the legend names for this operation. That one word was all it took for Nir to breathe a sigh of relief. Although Nicole le Roux was only 400 kilometers away, that distance was entirely in the Islamic Republic of Iran. She might as well have been on the other side of the world.

“Julia, Matt. Checking in.”

“So far, so good. Looking forward to a nice hot bath and a good stiff drink.”

“I’m guessing you’ll have better luck with the first than the second. Take care of yourself. Out.”

Nir pulled off the headset and handed it back to the tech, giving the young man a grateful tap on the back as he did so. Then with a twist of his wrist, he calculated the time difference between what he read on his G-Shock watch and Nicole’s probable ETA at the pickup point. At least her safety was now measured in hours rather than days.

For the first time that morning, he sat down.

Although he and Nicole lived in two different European countries, each leading a busy life, they found time to connect. Sometimes she visited him in Belgium. Often, he found an excuse to carry out business for his Antwerp-based diamond company near one of her photo-shoot locales. Or he’d visit her in Milan, her home when she could be there. Somehow their eight-year relationship seemed to be working—though on paper, it shouldn’t be.

He was even starting to wonder if this South African, full-time model and part-time Mossad computer hacker could be “the one.”

And that was why he hadn’t wanted her to be part of this operation. It was too dangerous. Nicole wasn’t an operative. She’d never even shot a gun outside of a firing range. The closest she’d ever come to any sort

of danger was as a target in a gun battle in South Africa before she was even part of the Mossad. Putting her in-country like this without any kind of ops experience could get her imprisoned or even killed. He had tried to persuade Tzadik to remove her from the operation. When that didn't work, he'd yelled and cursed at the man. Finally, his superior had thrown him out of his office, threatening to pull him from the operation if he couldn't control himself.

Besides, he'd kept running up against the wall that told him Nicole's being a part of their team made perfect sense. She wasn't an Israeli, and her tech skills were essential for the success of the plan. But she was in Iran, the den filled with the most vicious of lions. There were so many what-ifs, and each one led to an even nastier conclusion than the last. As it turned out, though, his fears had been unfounded—so far.

Realizing his only caloric intake since last night had been a cup of sweetened coffee now and then, Nir reached into one of his cargo pants pockets and pulled out a PowerBar. Although it was 11 degrees Celsius and rainy outside—and not all that warm in the safe house either—the bar was soft from his body heat. He took a bite, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply.

Twenty minutes later, any serenity he'd achieved disappeared in an instant. Life had indeed swung its fist and delivered a direct hit.

CHAPTER 2

EIGHT HOURS EARLIER
TEHRAN, IRAN—JANUARY 31, 2018—
22:15 / 10:15 P.M. IRST

Nicole shivered as she slipped the gloves off her hands. It was below freezing outside, and the van's metal shell wasn't doing much to keep out the cold. Unfortunately, running the engine for the heater would draw undue attention, so she had to depend on layers of clothing and body fat to keep her core temperature up. She was wearing plenty of the former, but she was sorely lacking in the latter.

Holding her bare hands against the bay of computers in front of her, she soaked in the meager warmth they emitted.

Three others sat in the van—the driver and two techs, all men. One tech oversaw communications. The second, the only other English-speaker in the vehicle, monitored the picture from a small camera placed across the street from the target warehouse. A fifth member of their team in this secluded location was standing in the shadows outside, making sure no one happened to stumble over the thin wires that connected the van to the security system of the building next to them.

Their target's alarm system wouldn't be difficult for her to hack, but because it was connected into a closed system, it couldn't be accessed from the outside. The internet was no use, nor were phone lines. The

only way to get control was to go to the building itself or to one of the four other government-owned structures that were part of the same security loop. And it was for this reason that Nicole found herself in an Iran Khodro Diesel van icebox with these three Azerbaijani Mossad agents in the suburbs of Tehran.

“Okay, Julia, roll the dice.”

Immediately upon hearing Tzadik’s order over her headset, Nicole began typing on her keyboard. This was her cue to shut down the alarm to the warehouse. Her fingers ached from the cold, but they warmed as they flew.

“Seven,” she called when the job was done. Although the alarm was now disengaged, to anyone monitoring the system, it would appear fully armed—as normal.

“Okay. Gather your chips,” Tzadik said.

With a few more keystrokes, Nicole tapped into the warehouse’s internal cameras and began recording. As she watched her monitors, she once again shook her head at the audaciousness of what the Mossad was about to attempt. Only the Israelis would try to pull off a heist this daring. But when Nir explained the purpose of the operation to her, it made perfect sense.

She’d been home in Milan when he called to tell her he was coming to discuss Mossad business. That was unusual. Normally, her contacts from the Mossad came through encrypted emails, and only rarely did she and Nir work together—at least on this kind of business. He arrived with a bottle of wine and a bag of fresh prawns. Then later that evening, with their stomachs full and the wine bottle empty, the two leaned back on her plush linen sectional, Nicole tucking herself under Nir’s arm.

“So what brings you here, Agent?”

“Your beauty drew me like honey draws a bee,” Nir said with a stunningly poor French accent.

Nicole laughed and slapped his chest. “That was awful.”

“Yeah, not my best.”

Turning her body toward him and looking up, she said, “What best? There is no best. I’ve told you before—you have absolutely no game.”

Nir took the moment to kiss her forehead. “You are one hundred percent correct. I am utterly gameless.”

Nicole slipped back into Nir’s side. “What does that say about me? I got won over by a gameless man.”

It was Nir’s turn to laugh. “Desperate people do desperate things. But seriously, you’re right. I am here as Agent Tavor.”

“What’s my next mission should I choose to accept it, Agent Tavor?”

Nir sighed deeply and then remained quiet for a few moments. Nicole remembered running her hand up and down the contours and ridges of his arm as she waited.

Finally, he’d said, “First, you should know I fought against your being part of this operation. I understand why the team leader—Tzadik—wants you. You’re just too darn good. But I don’t like the risk.” He sighed. “I made my case. He disagreed. I’m here.”

“I don’t need your protection, Nir Tavor,” Nicole said with an edge in her voice.

“I know, I know. Duly noted. Just hear me out before you get too angry.”

“Okay, go on. I’m intrigued.”

“Okay,” he began. “Here’s the background. In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA nuclear deal, opening them up to various inspections. The problem for them? They’d been secretly working on their nuclear program for years.”

“Probably the worst-kept secret ever.”

“True, but no one had the goods to nail them. Now if these inspectors discovered all the written materials documenting their work, our Persian friends would be in quite a *balagan*.”

“A what?”

“Sorry. A mess. Their hands would be in the cookie jar, right? That’s how you say it?”

“Close enough.”

“So they decided to hide all the evidence.”

“Makes sense. Shouldn’t be too hard to do given the size of the country.”

Nir had given a short laugh at that. “Agreed, but here’s where it gets

weird. Rather than dig a big hole for an underground vault out somewhere in East Camel Flop Province, they decided to use a regular warehouse in a commercial district in Tehran. They installed a bunch of vaults there, and then in early 2016 they started transferring load after load of their nuclear secrets into them. They thought they were being sneaky, but we've had cameras on this warehouse from the moment they first started moving it all in."

Nicole had tried to picture the scene in her head. "So what are we looking to do? The place has to be fortified like it's the national treasury. Walls, guards, state-of-the-art security system..."

Again, Nir laughed, and she could feel the movement of his head shaking. "That's the thing. It's not. It's like they thought they were so sly and tricky that nobody would have a clue that quite literally tons of nuclear secrets sit in that warehouse. They put in a good alarm system, and they have guards there during the day. But at nine o'clock at night, the guards shut everything down and go home, leaving the building one hundred percent unattended."

That's when Nicole sat up and scooted to the next cushion so she could see Nir more clearly. "You have got to be joking."

"I know. It's mind-blowing." He feigned a small explosion from his forehead. "Your country's greatest secrets, and you walk away each night, saying, 'Oh, they'll be just fine.'"

"So is that the operation? Break in and photograph all the materials?" She'd crisscrossed her legs on the couch and tucked a small pillow onto her lap. She was starting to piece together what her role in the action might be.

"Not exactly. The Mossad head has been in the game for decades, and he knows the Iranians well. If we just took photos, Tehran would say we faked them, and the UN would undoubtedly jump to their side. So the *ramsad*—with the prime minister's approval, of course—has decided we'll break into the vaults, steal it all, and take it back to Israel. Hard to argue against hundreds of binders filled with Iranian secrets."

Nicole sat stunned. "They're going to steal it—all of it."

"Yep."

"And then haul it two thousand kilometers back to Israel."

Nir laughed. "I know." He'd leaned forward and tilted the wine bottle over Nicole's glass. But when nothing came out, he placed the bottle back on the coffee table in front of them and settled into the couch.

"It's called Operation Deep Sleep. At the end of January, we'll disable their alarm system, override their security cameras, and send a team in to steal the contents of thirty-two vaults, all in under seven hours."

Nir's mood changed, and he again let out a deep sigh. "Nicole, they want you to be the lead tech. That means going on the ground in Iran. They can't use any Israeli agents because it will be an international incident and a death sentence if we get caught. The team in-country will be made up of Azerbaijanis who live in Iran but work for us. They're loyal and good at what they do, but..."

"But none of them do what I do." A feeling in her stomach wavered between excitement and fear.

"I can't stress enough how important this mission is. Iran is racing toward a nuclear bomb. Once they get it, two things will happen. First, they'll have much more influence on the world stage. When you can dangle a nuke over people's heads, you're in a much stronger bargaining position. Second, the risk of Israel's annihilation increases exponentially."

"Do you think they would really use it if they had it?"

"Maybe, maybe not with this regime. But who knows who's coming in next? It's not like Iran has a track record of increasing sanity in their leadership. Besides, I'm more concerned with their putting a nuke into the hands of one of their proxy militias, like Hezbollah. With this solid information, though, we can prove to the world that despite their protests of innocence, Iran truly is racing toward possession of a nuclear bomb."

That dinner had been six weeks ago. Now here she was sitting in a freezing van with stage one of the operation complete—the alarm system disarmed. Stage two, the recording of video, was underway.

Nicole took a deep breath to tamp down her anxiety. It was times like this that she wished she had some god or higher power she could rely on. Just someone or something that would watch over her to make

sure she was all right. But that wasn't the way she was raised. *Toughen up, girl. Between you and that guy on the other side of the border, you'll be okay.*

The more Nir had explained the plan to her that night, the more it reminded her of a movie she'd seen with her twin brother when they were kids—*Ocean's Eleven*. A group of con artists led by Danny Ocean, played by George Clooney, break into the vault of a Las Vegas casino. Nir hadn't seen the film, so they'd streamed it.

Nir loved the comparison, as had Tzadik when Nir passed it on. Soon it became the lexicon from which the operators drew their legend names and the planners identified the steps of the operation. Tzadik became George Clooney, and the team's number two man was Brad Pitt. Nir had to settle for Matt Damon's stuffy character for his *nom de guerre*. Technically, Nicole should have been Eddie Jemison after the *Ocean's Eleven* tech geek, but Tzadik had been kind enough to christen her Julia Roberts instead.

If all goes well in this movie, Matt Damon's going to get the girl and George Clooney will go home alone, Nicole thought with a smile as she monitored the static recording.

A voice broke through her musings. "Julia, George. Cash in your chips."

"Cashing in," she replied as she took her fingers away from her mouth. She'd been blowing on them. After just five seconds of keyboard work, the series of security feeds on her top monitor glitched almost imperceptibly. For the next six hours and 29 minutes, this video of an empty warehouse would loop every five minutes.

"Jackpot," she said into her microphone, confirming that her work was done. Suddenly, her coms were filled with a flurry of words she couldn't understand but knew were a mixture of Azeri and Farsi. Twisting open a thermos, Nicole poured herself some hot chai and settled in. For the rest of the night her job was twofold. First, to avoid freezing, and second, to ensure that all the activity about to take place in the live lower monitor didn't find its way into the looping video streams displayed in the monitor above.