

OUT OF THE FAR NORTH

A
NIR TAVOR
MOSSAD
THRILLER

AMIR TSARFATI
AND STEVE YOHN

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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AND STEVE YOHN



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Out of the Far North

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AMIR DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO...

God, the true giver and sustainer of life.

All those who are still searching for the truth in the midst of a frighteningly volatile world. Also, to everyone who knows that there is more than just what we can see and touch, but is afraid to make a step of faith and trust that Someone higher is in full control. Hope, peace, and an end to fear are waiting for you in the arms of your Savior and Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

STEVE DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO...

The God who is always there. There is so much peace in knowing that no matter the journey, we are never traveling it alone.

Nick, my brother. While I write about the dark side of Russia, you've lived it. I have so much respect for you as a thinker, a writer, and an adventurer. Somewhere, there's a dirt farm calling our names.

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God, You continue to show us that You are faithful. It is only through Your gifts and creativity that this series of books has been written, and we give You all the glory for what You have done.

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“In Russia, the government is
autocracy tempered by strangulation.”

MADAME DE STAËL
(1766-1817)

“Russia is a country with a certain future;
it is only its past that is unpredictable.”

SOVIET PROVERB

“Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “On that day when My people Israel dwell safely, will you not know it? Then you will come from your place out of the far north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great company and a mighty army. You will come up against My people Israel like a cloud, to cover the land. It will be in the latter days that I will bring you against My land, so that the nations may know Me, when I am hallowed in you, O Gog, before their eyes.”’”

EZEKIEL 38:14-16

“The burden against Damascus.

‘Behold, Damascus will cease from *being* a city,
and it will be a ruinous heap.’”

ISAIAH 17:1

GLOSSARY

ARABIC

- Allah yerhamba* – “may God have mercy on her”
almughafil – “mutt, idiot”
as salaam alaikum – “peace be upon you”; typical Arabic greeting
habibi – “my love, my friend”
habibti – female “my love, my friend”
inshallah – “if Allah wills, God willing”
ma’assalama – “peace be upon you, goodbye”
shukran – “thanks”
ya amar – “my moon, my most beautiful”
yalla – “let’s go”

HEBREW

- a dank* – “thank you” (Yiddish)
achi – “my brother, my friend”
ahabal – “moron, idiot”
aliyah – lit.: “ascent, rise”; refers to a Jew’s immigration to Israel
balagan – slang: “chaos, a mess”
bèshu’shu – slang: “doing something secretly or behind the scenes”
bobkes – “nothing, nonsense” (Yiddish)
bul – lit.: “stamp”; slang: “exactly, bingo”
boker tov – “good morning”
boker tov Eliyahu – lit.: “good morning, Eliyahu”; slang: “nice of you to finally show up”
chai b’seret – lit.: “living in a movie”; slang: “totally unrealistic, impossible”
eizeh seret – lit.: “what a movie”; slang: “what a series of bad events”
elef ahuz – lit.: “1,000 percent”; slang: “without a doubt”
gilita et America – lit.: “you discovered America”; slang: “obviously, duh”
hamefaked – military: “sir, commander”
idyotim – “idiots”
ma pitom – lit.: “what suddenly”; slang: “no way, unbelievable”
mashu mashu – lit.: “something something”; slang: “awesome, fantastic”

maslul – military, lit.: “way, path”; refers to countersurveillance activities
motek – “sweetheart, darling”
nafal lee ha’asimon – lit.: “my token dropped”; slang: “I get it, aha”
otzma enoshit – “human strength”
oy vavoy – slang variant of *oy vey*
oy vey – lit.: “oh, woe”; slang: expresses frustration, exasperation, sorrow (Yiddish)
ramsad – head of the Mossad
root – “yes, sir”
sababa – “great, perfect, wonderful”
savta – “grandmother”
shuyot bamitz – lit.: “nonsense in juice”; slang: “total nonsense, ridiculous”
walla – slang: “wow, oh really?”
yalla – “let’s go”
yeshiva – school for learning the Torah and rabbinic writings
yoffi – lit.: “beauty”; slang: “well done, great”
yutz – “jerk, fool” (Yiddish)

RUSSIAN

boyar – member of the old Russian aristocracy
da – “yes”
devushka – “young woman”
dobroye utro – “good morning”
dorogaya – lit.: “expensive”; slang: “my dear, sweetheart”
drug – “friend”
Masha – diminutive of “Maria”
Nika – diminutive of “Nicole”
nyet – “no”
Seryozha – diminutive of “Sergei”
spasibo – “thank you”
Tatia – diminutive of “Tatiana”
tsar-batiushka – “dear tsar, father tsar”
voenkory – “military correspondents”
za zdorovie – “to your health”
zatknis – “shut up”

CHARACTER LIST

SYRIAN OPS TEAM

Unit 504 – Alif (leader), Ba (Syrian), Gim (Syrian), Ra (Syrian)

Kidon – Lead (Nir), Hamza (Dafna), Nun (Imri), Qaf (Dima), Sin (Doron), Waw (Lahav), Zay (Yaron)

ISRAELIS

Zakai Abelman – Kidon team leader

Dima “Drago” Aronov – Kidon agent

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

Yossi Hirschfield – Mossad analyst

Ira Katz – ramsad (head of Mossad)

Doron Mizrahi – Kidon agent

Asher Porush – deputy director of Mossad

Daniel Ramon – prime minister

Liora Regev – Mossad analyst

Dafna Ronen – Mossad analyst

Idan Snir – prime minister-elect

Lahav Tabib – Mossad analyst

Nir Tavor – Kidon team leader

Imri Zaid – Kidon agent

SOUTH AFRICAN

Nicole le Roux – Mossad agent

BELARUSIAN

Myechyslau Aleksandrovich Sharetsky – oligarch in potash industry

BELGIAN

Mila Wooters – executive assistant at Yael Diamonds

HUNGARIANS

István – Hungarian Mossad agent

Mónika – Hungarian Mossad agent

LEBANESE

Baqil – Hezbollah camp guard

RUSSIANS

Major General Sergei Sergeevich Bogdanov – military liaison in Syria

Anatoly Mikhailovich Kvashnin – oligarch in fertilizer industry

Polina Viktorovna Kvashnin – wife of Anatoly

Dmitry Leonidovich Livanov – Wagner Group Mercenary

Colonel General Leonid Anatolyevich Moshev – deputy in the Ministry of Defense

SYRIANS

Abdul – Derifa’s uncle

Derifa – little girl

Muhammad – Derifa’s uncle

Wael – Derifa’s father

Yusuf – Derifa’s grandfather

CHAPTER 1

DER SALMAN, NORTH OF DAMASCUS, SYRIA—
OCTOBER 4, 2022—02:05 (2:05 AM) EEST

A carton of cigarettes is the passkey that will open the gates to a great many checkpoints around the world. The man sitting in the passenger seat hoped that this was one of them. The Russian-made GAZ-3308 Sadko army truck bounced and rumbled to a stop in front of one of the hastily constructed, but now seemingly permanent, roadblocks that littered the thoroughfares outside the city of Damascus, Syria. Two rows of concrete barriers reached into the road, leaving a gap just wide enough for a truck to pass through, but only if the driver was watching his mirrors. Across the tops of the barriers, razor wire stretched in wide, lazy coils.

A uniformed soldier stepped forward, looking young and bored. Two more remained in the guard shack, not looking up. Their eyes were locked on a point in front of them, and a blue glow filled the small building.

Must be a game on, thought the man. For a country at battle with itself, these guards seem less than zealous about their stations. Seems the rumors of war fatigue are true.

“As salaam alaikum. Cool night,” said the driver in Arabic.

“What business do you have at this time of night?” the guard replied.

His terseness seemed to indicate that he was upset at being pulled away from whatever was on their television.

The driver seemed a little affronted that his traditional greeting was not returned. "What business? Lieutenant colonel business," he said with a nod toward the passenger, who continued to stare out the front windshield.

After standing up on his toes so he could clearly see the man in the other seat, the soldier said, "That still doesn't answer my question. What business do you have out here at this time of night?"

"The none-of-your-business kind of business," the driver replied. His smile remained, but his voice had hardened.

The lieutenant colonel noticed that one of the guards in the shack had looked up and was now watching the action outside. His hand moved slowly to the grip of his pistol.

"Give me your papers."

As the driver reached next to him on the seat, he said, "Of course." When his hand came around, he was holding a few sheets of paper and a carton of Alhamraa cigarettes. "For the chilly nights," he said with a wink.

The guard stared hard at him before taking the stack. He ducked briefly, presumably to put the cigarettes on the truck's step, then began scanning the papers.

"Is everything okay?" called out the second guard as he leaned out the doorway.

An almost imperceptible tension passed through the truck, both front and back. All knew that this was the moment when the whole operation could take an ugly turn. The likely result of that eventuality was that not everyone at this roadblock would still be breathing five minutes from now.

But the guard at the truck waved the other man off, and the adrenaline spike began to subside. The passenger let his hand slide back toward his armrest.

"Let me call this in," said the soldier, stepping away from the truck.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" called the driver. When the guard paused, he continued, "Think about it. When you call, the

person who answers will have to ring someone above him, who will have to ring someone above him. And when that one rings the person above him, do you know whose phone is going to buzz?" He pointed at the passenger. "That guy's. And what do you think he will say?"

The soldier, looking a bit nervous now, answered, "Let them through?"

"Good, yes! But you're only half right. The lieutenant colonel will say, 'Let them through. And send that idiot kid who made me wait so long off to the Kurdish front.'"

The young guard's eyes widened at the prospect.

The driver waved the man back toward the truck. "Come now. You have seen that our papers are in order. So, lift the gate, let us through, and go share those smokes with your friends."

After one more glance at the officer who remained focused out the windshield, the guard nodded. He stepped back and signaled toward the guards in the shack to lift the gate.

The diesel rattled back into action and the truck lurched forward. "*Ma'assalama*. And don't forget your cigarettes," the driver called out, putting his hand outside the window and pointing down.

Out of his peripheral vision, the passenger could see into the guard shack. The third guard had still not looked up from what he could now see was a small television that indeed was showing a football match.

It wasn't until the truck was clear of the roadblock and back up to speed that the lieutenant colonel allowed himself a tense sigh. Catching the driver's eyes, he gave him a wink and a grin. Then he turned forward again to watch the road ahead.

CHAPTER 2

OUTSIDE DAMASCUS, SYRIA—
OCTOBER 4, 2022—02:10 (2:10 AM) EEST

CARL, Lead. We're through the checkpoint," Nir Tavor informed his ops center. "How's the road look to target?"

"Traffic stop fifteen kilometers ahead," replied Liora Regev, one of CARL's analysts. CARL was Nir's team of odd specialists back at Mossad headquarters. The acronym itself stood for absolutely nothing, an inside joke amongst the small group of millennials. "Appears routine. Otherwise, clear."

Turning toward the driver, Nir said, "Nice work with the guard."

"He was just a clueless kid. Easily controlled," *Alif* chuckled. "I could have had him doing pushups on the street if we had the time."

Nir laughed, figuring he probably could. *Alif* was a member of the HUMINT-gathering Unit 504, who were masters of human intelligence collection, interrogation, and PSYOP. When Nir was a kid, he and his friends used to talk about the shadowy unit, but always with hushed voices. Formed soon after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, it is one of three divisions of the Israeli Defense Forces' Military Intelligence Directorate—and, by far, its most secretive. Recently, he read an article in which one of the unit's officers said that if you want to understand the activities of Unit 504, you should go to a theater and

watch a thriller double feature. Only then will you scratch the surface of the work they do.

Reading those words had sent a little twinge through Nir. As he had approached the end of his mandatory military service and begun weighing the options for his future, he had considered applying for Unit 504. He wanted action in his life. He wanted to make a difference. But living a secret life for years at a time in an enemy country had seemed exhausting to him. Many of the undercover agents that 504 had deployed around the world, and particularly in the Middle East, reminded Nir of Cold War moles deeply hidden by their governments on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain. There is the loud war that Israel fights with rockets and fighter jets, then there is the larger quiet war. It is this silent war that Unit 504 fights.

Except for nights like tonight.

When his “What-am-I-going-to-do-with-my-life?” moment had come, Nir decided that Unit 504 might end up being a little too much action for his taste. So, he had joined the State Security System in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instead. Calm and easy, with excitement coming in the form of international travel to exotic lands. But action had a way of finding him. His courage and skill in a shootout in South Africa had caught the attention of the Mossad, which quickly recruited him. Not long after, he was brought into the intelligence agency’s Kidon unit. Kidon was the tip of the Mossad’s spear—a finely honed point that always seemed to be dripping blood.

For a guy who was not looking for too much action, he had done a very poor job of avoiding it. In recent years, he had been stabbed, shot, kidnapped, and tortured. And now here he was in Syria, in a stolen truck, wearing a counterfeit officer’s uniform and leading a combined team of five Kidon operatives, four Unit 504 agents, and two analysts. And then there’s the secret weapon in the back of the truck—can’t forget about that.

Maybe living undercover in a hostile nation under constant threat of death would have been a safer career choice, he thought with a shake of his head.

He had been introduced to the Unit 504 guys after the Israeli Air Force’s Yanshuf helicopter had set them down in the hill country near

the village of Talfita, north of Damascus. The flight in had been necessarily low to keep them below radar detection. But low altitude meant a turbulent trip. So, during the introductions, his brain was still bouncing.

Thankfully, Unit 504 wasn't big on names, even with people on their side. The team lead, an Israeli, had introduced himself only as *Alif*; and with him were three Syrian subordinate agents also with Arabic letters as names. Nir had figured that when in Damascus, he might as well do as the Syrians do, so he had followed suit, assigning the operators on his Kidon team Arabic letters for their operational names.

The flashing blue lights of the traffic stop passed on Nir's right. The officer was talking to a man in a vehicle and didn't seem to take notice of them.

"CARL, Lead. We've cleared the traffic stop," said Nir into his coms unit.

"We see you," Liora answered. "You're clear to target."

Operation Boom began a little over two weeks ago. Nir had just flown into Tel Aviv, having been summoned by text while he was at Yael Diamonds, his precious gems company located in Brussels, Belgium. When he arrived at Mossad headquarters, he went straight to CARL. His text on the way in made sure the team was already sitting around the conference table waiting for him. Before joining them, Nir walked over to Lahav Tabib's desk and placed a green ball cap on the head of the analyst's life-sized Chewbacca mannequin. On the hat was a large shamrock embroidered with the words *Kiss Me I'm Irish*.

Applause broke out around the table.

"Well played," said Yossi Hirschfield.

"I never knew," added Dafna Ronen.

"You can hear a little lilt when he does his..." And here, Nir tried to do a Chewbacca roar, which turned out as poorly as did all his attempts at impersonation.

"That was such a *balagan!* Don't ever do that again," chided Liora.

Nir laughed as he sat at the head of the table surrounded by his little band of brilliant analytical misfits. To his left was Liora, a cute, tiny brunette with a gift for sarcasm that punched far above her weight class. To her left was Dafna, tall and thin with more tattoos and piercings than an

entire all-girl punk band. On Nir's right sat Yossi, whose hipster beard and man bun perfectly fit his laid-back surfer vibe. And, finally, next to him was Nir's problem child—Lahav. Bespectacled and pocket-protected, he was relationally inept, wickedly smart, and ambivalent when it came to the law and authority. Lahav was the perfect guy to have around when you needed him, and like fingernails on a chalkboard when you didn't.

The only member of the team who was not there was the one Nir wanted to see the most. Nicole le Roux's face filled Nir's mind. Ice-blue eyes, dark brows, full lips, all surrounded by curly brown hair that was perfectly made for someone, preferably him, to run their fingers through. He would have loved for her to be in the ops center with them, but instead, she was on assignment for her other job, doing a photo shoot in New York City for some makeup company.

"He's thinking of her again," said Dafna. "You can tell by the wistful look in his eyes."

Liora leaned toward him. "I'm not so sure. How do you tell the difference between wistful and vacant?"

Nir glared at her. In the center of the table sat a bowl filled with little green bags of Klik chocolate-covered corn flakes. He snatched one and pulled it open. "We're still waiting for Efraim."

As if on cue, the door opened and in walked Efraim Cohen, assistant deputy director of Caesarea. Caesarea, pronounced with a hard *c*, is the ops branch of the Mossad and the parent division of Kidon.

"*Boker tov Eliyahu*," Nir chided his friend.

Pointing toward Chewbacca's hat, Efraim laughed and said, "I never knew."

Everybody booed.

"Already been said," Yossi said with an eye roll. "Maybe if you got here on time."

Efraim laughed as he sat, and said to Nir, "Try controlling your people."

"Yeah, right," replied Nir through a mouthful of candy. "Okay, you've got us here. What's up?"

"*Sababa*. Straight to business. We've tracked a shipment of arms from Iran to Damascus," began Efraim.

“Is that all?” asked Lahav. “Just send some F-16s from Ramat David and blast a new crater. Done and done.” He brushed his hands together as he said the last three words.

“That’s very helpful, Lahav. You know, we hadn’t thought of that,” an excited Efraim replied, pretending to punch a number into his phone.

Lahav beamed, then his smile disappeared. “Wait, you’re mocking me, aren’t you?”

With a glance at Nir and a shake of his head, Efraim continued. “The cargo plane was unloaded rapidly, and the contents were immediately trucked to a new storage location in Harran al-‘Awamid, less than two kilometers from the airport. Because of the speed of the transfer, we couldn’t get a clear look at what Tehran sent to them.”

“Any thoughts?” asked Dafna.

“Might be drones. We’re concerned that Iran might be upping the quality of the UAVs available to the militias in Syria and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since, thanks to you all, our airstrike cratered their nuke program last year, they’ve been pouring money and technology into building the effectiveness of their proxies.”

“I’ve picked up pieces of that chatter,” said Yossi, who was among the Mossad’s best at intercepting and analyzing COMINT, or communications intelligence.

“I know. Your work is one of the reasons we’re concerned.”

The team cheered Yossi, and Liora tossed him a bag of Klik that he caught one-handed and pulled open.

Efraim continued, “There’s also the possibility of it being a better series of missiles than the next-to-worthless Katyusha rockets the dirties are usually sending our way. *Be’shu’shu*, Russia has been promising to upgrade Iran’s precision missiles ever since the two became bed buddies over Iran’s high-quality drones. Whatever it is in that shipment, it’s created a big stir amongst the bad guys, so it’s also creating a big stir amongst us.”

Nir said, “There has to be a reason we don’t just send a couple Delilah missiles their way. I’m guessing it’s the storage location.”

“*Bul*. That’s it exactly. Toss me four of those Klik bags.”

Liora complied.

“Hospital,” said Efraim, placing one bag on the table. He set a

second one next to the first. “Maternity hospital.” Then he placed a third just a short distance away. “Across the street, a newly built orphanage.” Then, setting the fourth one next to the “orphanage” pack, he said, “And guess what that is.”

Dafna let slip a non-synagogue word, and said, “They’re terrible people.”

“*Ma pitom!* Who uses their own children as human shields?” added Yossi.

“Exactly,” said Efraim. “The location was perfectly chosen to create an international incident. One rocket or missile just a few meters off target from their brand-new weapons storage warehouse and we’ve got the UN passing another resolution against us. Oh, and, by the way, just up the road from the hospitals are two schools,” Efraim said, pointing to the appropriate place on the table. “Wouldn’t be in session when we attacked, but would still make a nice headline.”

Efraim let the gravity of the situation sink in, then said, “Now, guess what your job is.”

The discussion went well into the evening. Plan after plan was suggested and developed until a flaw was found that caused it to crash like a house of cards. It was Lahav who finally offered up the winning idea, which led to Nir and his team riding in a stolen Syrian army truck with a squad of Unit 504 guys and very expensive cargo in the back.

Yossi had come up with the name of the operation quite accidentally. As they were working through the details of the plan, a song he had heard the previous day on his classic rock playlist kept rustling around in his mind and out of his mouth. Soon, every time the words “Boom, boom” slipped from between his lips, everyone else around the table called out, “Out go the lights.” Nir refused to present Operation Boom Boom to the shadowy spooks in Unit 504, so the name was shortened to Operation Boom. This was despite no actual “boom” being necessary to complete the mission if everything went according to plan. In fact, Nir was hoping for no explosions at all.

The name is still a bit embarrassing, Nir thought as he glanced sideways at *Alif* in the driver’s seat. *But I suppose you’ve got to keep the kids happy if you want them to play nice.*