

THE
TAO
DECEPTION

A TORI SWYFT THRILLER

JOHN M. GREEN



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Pantera Press, P.O. Box 1989 Neutral Bay, NSW 2089 Australia or info@PanteraPress.com

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*In memory of Sylvia Green,
whose magic fingers conjured dresses out of sacks,
whose presence charmed sunshine out of gloom.*

NATIONAL SECURITY NOTICE

The Central Intelligence Agency disputes
a number of Dr Victoria (Tori) Swyft's accounts.

The Agency also asked for certain names to be redacted
claiming disclosure may imperil operations or lives.

The Author has changed those names.

Tao (道): the Universe's natural order, its essence

'To get rich is glorious!'

—**Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader, 1978-92**

'The march of the mujahidin will continue to Rome,
by Allah's permission.'

—**Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Caliph, Islamic State, 2014**

'A nuclear EMP attack would kill two-thirds of America's
population, 200 million dead in one year from starvation, disease and
societal collapse.'

—**Task Force on National and Homeland Security, 2016**

PROLOGUE

Three years earlier – Tehran, Iran

‘D-D-DID WE JUST HAVE SEX?’ THE husband of two sputtered from under his black shoe-brush of a moustache.

Tori Swyft shuddered at the mere notion, yearning to shout *As if!* Instead, she forced out a slow wink, lowered her shoulder strap and sidled back to the bed.

In truth, the man revolted her. His arrogant swagger, his shameless ogling, even his hair; it was like it had dropped off the top of his head and stuck to him everywhere else. Tori had made out *on* a couple of rugs but never *with* one. And not even a crucial catch like Dr Masoud Mahdi Akhtar, head of Iran’s atomic energy organisation, would make her change that.

To reel him in, all it had taken was a slinky black dress, an airy whiff of her gardenia fragrance and a few husky whispers.

After that, the redheaded CIA officer had flown the living Persian carpet to her hotel room where she'd plied him with his first dose of dazzle—the street name for midazolam—quickly laying him to rest so she could get on with her mission.

Carving her mouth into what she hoped was a seductive smile, she leant over the bed and flashed her cold green eyes at him. 'You were magnificent, Masoud ... a lion,' she said in the steamiest Persian she could muster from her recent training.

For the second time, she twisted the tip of the vintage urn on her charm bracelet and tipped four more drops into the tumbler on the night table. She stirred it with one finger then pressed the glass to his lips. 'Drink this to give you energy, then let me feel you roar inside me once more.' She cringed. *As if.*

Then she smiled, genuinely this time. *I christen thee Asif*, she decided. *Well, not so much 'christen', but definitely Asif.*

With the exception of the mullahs themselves, Asif was as powerful an official as they came, palpably close to Iran's political heartbeat and one of a handful with unfettered access to the nation's nuclear secrets.

With his head nestling into his pillow, Tori went back to the desk where she'd piggybacked her tablet onto his smartphone and continued trying to crack into Iran's nuclear control and operating systems. Her mission: to reconfigure and supercharge Stuxnet, a computer worm that had first spun Iran's nuclear centrifuges out of control in 2009.

Every minute increased her risk of being gatecrashed by VEVAK, Iran's infamous secret police and, glancing at the timer on her tablet, she'd already been at this for 125 of them. Asif was snoring but VEVAK wouldn't be.

The drug top-up would give her another two hours but tiptoeing inside Iran's network for that much longer was too great a gamble, with their digital trip-wires everywhere.

Besides, the battery level on her satellite phone, with its aerial poking out the window to secure a signal, only gave her thirty minutes more at best.

To work faster, she needed to think faster so she reached for her most sure-fire accelerant: classic surf rock. Popping in an earbud, she picked out a track on her tablet and began streaming it from her ear into her fingers. The opening tremolo twang and the urgent, dangerous drums crashed over her like waves pounding a sea wall. As she resumed her tapping and typing, she imagined herself standing precariously on the wet, stone blocks, breathing in the briny smell, the spray cooling her skin, the salt prickling her tongue. And as she worked through six repeats—fifteen pounding minutes of The Break's *Groynes*—a sparkling Aladdin's cave of the country's most precious digital treasures started opening up before her.

Lifting every binary rock, poking into every crevice, she unearthed the perfect hidey-hole for the 25,000 lines of code that a CIA tech team had spent eighteen months creating, refining and squashing into ten tiny digital packets.

With the music's work done, she turned it off. Then her fingers froze and her ears cocked. Out in the corridor ... a scuffle? Something ... someone dragging?

VEVAK?

She twiddled her left pearl earring, ready to snap it open and swallow the kill pill inside it if she had to. Her eyes spun around the room, landing on the cold plate of kebabs on the nightstand. Grabbing one, she pushed the meat cubes off the metal spike and crept to the door. Standing to the side to avoid casting a shadow, she held the skewer point up as she put an ear to the wood. Holding her breath, she stretched over to look out the peephole.

A man, his face in darkness, was tottering on a stepladder and fiddling with a dead light bulb, one Tori was sure had been

burning brightly when she'd used her card key to enter the room. Her jaw clenched and she twisted the spike downward.

She pulled back to the side, her breath quickening, sweat beading on her forehead. A ribbon of light wavered across the crack under the door and she leant back to the peephole. The back of the man's head was now bathed in light. He boxed the dead globe and dropped it onto the tool bag on the carpet below him. As he turned his face toward her door, her body tensed and she raised her fist, gripping the skewer. Then she blinked and smiled, her arm falling beside her, muscles at ease.

Jaman from her extraction team, also realising her time was running out, had come to stand watch. She dropped her eyes to his bag, which she knew concealed the respectable black chador he'd brought for her escape and the Heckler & Koch UMP submachine gun intended for anyone who tried to stop her.

Relieved, she darted back to the desk to finish her assignment. Within minutes it was apparent how good Asif and his nuclear minions were. Brilliant in fact. But for the noise it would make, she would've been whistling at their technical wizardry; one expert's awe at another's work.

Then her mouth suddenly dropped, her admiration boiling into loathing. At first tens, then hundreds of lines of code started scrolling up in front of her, lines so recognisable she was mentally reciting the next one before it appeared on the screen. The filthy, thieving bastard lying on the bed had filched *her* model, the protocol she'd earned her nuclear engineering PhD for.

She squinted at one line, then six, then sixty ... new lines of code. Tweaks. Enhancements. *Improvements*. The bastards hadn't just pilfered the intellectual sweat of her brow, they'd made revisions she now knew she should have thought of herself. With reworks like these, she realised, Asif would have

squeezed so much extra juice out of Iran's nuclear cores their program would have been fast-tracked by years, far beyond what the CIA's intel had revealed.

The new virus wasn't just important, it might prove crucial. Her fingers worked even faster than before and she'd just hidden it in place when Asif groaned. She grabbed the skewer and spun around, but judging by the lewd smile drooling from beneath his moustache he was still in the land of nod.

Her mission was complete. This was officially go time. But unknown to her superiors she was going to push her luck, implanting another tiny block of code. This one she'd written herself.

Tori worked for the US government, but that didn't mean she trusted them to control Iran's nuclear ambitions. And now, with her own code hibernating alongside theirs, she didn't have to.

1

Present day – the Vatican

AT FIRST GLANCE, AUGUSTINE APPEARED MORE like an affable grandfather than a pope. In reality, his silky tousle of white hair, feeble pink eyes and soft translucent skin camouflaged a stiffness of backbone and a moral rigidity that only the brave or foolish dared challenge.

Strangely for a cleric, he'd struggled with the notion of miracles until a hundred days ago, the day God gave him one. His fellow cardinals had elected him Bishop of Rome and Vicar of Christ, entrusting him to grip the papal wheel and lurch the Church back onto its true path, to restore the wreckage the populist Latino had left in his dust.

Showing only a trace of his trademark fervour, Augustine's frail eyes fluttered open at the first sparks of a new dawn. His bedchamber was aglow as the sun's rays began bouncing off all

the gold: the rococo furniture, the Renaissance picture frames, the glittering gilt thread woven into the brocade tapestry, the urns banded in shiny saffron-yellow ribbons. Even the light switches were plated with the lavish metal.

Augustine saw the light and though it was harsh and bright, it was good. Except unknown to him, the real dawn was three cold, grim hours away.

His bedroom blushed with an eerie holiness, a twinkling in the air like golden sunbursts fading into mist. Whatever this was it prickled against his skin, more numb than cool. He sniffed at the odour, which oddly had none of the astringency of the bare-leaved winter morning outside. It was sweeter ... a little like milk.

His ears pulsed with a crinkly thrumming, as if papery wings were fluttering just out of his reach. A dragonfly or a bee, perhaps.

An angel?

Curiously, he couldn't shift his head even an inch to see what caused the rustling. He blinked as a laser-sharp beam of golden light shot through the open window, slicing through the veil of mist then circling around and around his head like a sculptor's knife carving a target out of clay.

A second spray of the sweetness—this time more luscious—burst out along the beam and puffed its creaminess, cool and fresh, over the bullseye of his delicate face. He tried to lick the flavour off his lips but his tongue stayed stuck in his mouth. He went to rub his eyes but his hand wouldn't budge from his side. He tried his other hand but it wouldn't lift either. He couldn't move his legs, not even his toes. All he could control were his eyes; his insipid, pathetic eyes. His genetic weakness had become his only strength.

The mist encased his head like a plastic bag. He panicked, tried to scream out to his valet who, at 5 am, should have been

outside his door awaiting the call to enter. But Augustine's mouth wouldn't open, not even a crack, and he couldn't raise his voice beyond a rasp.

His eyes engorged with terror and his suffocating breaths became shallower and shorter. As the mist around him dissipated, the bag muffling his head dissolved and relief began to wash over him.

He saw. He understood. He knew.

An angel. It hovered a sceptre's length inside his window, above his water jug. This too was a miracle, and God, on this day and at this moment, was blessing his papacy.

This angel bore no resemblance to the classic depictions in Bible stories, but that didn't perturb Augustine, it thrilled him. With no face, no eyes, no arms, no legs, not even a single wing, his angel was far more miraculous. The dull, unpolished sphere the size of a football was perfection itself, its meshed surface matte gunmetal grey. A revelation.

A bizarre thought struck him. If his valet hadn't insisted on opening the window last night when the central heating got stuck on high, would this angel still have come? His windows were bulletproof. What if they were angel-proof?

The mist finally cleared and the golden light paled and sputtered out.

Augustine's ears no longer heard and his lungs no longer breathed. The light left his pink eyes and they grew peaceful, but they no longer saw.

Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.



THE DRONE FLEW forward, hovering directly above Augustine. When its operator, 5,063 miles away according to the

GPS, was satisfied the job was done, the metallic orb glided out the window as unnoticed as when it had entered.

The video feeding back over SATCOM was so sharp, so real, that the assassin could almost inhale the sweet unction His Holiness liked to dab on his forehead before sleeping.

The pope's killer replayed the video frame by frame, by the end confident the autopsy would bring in a verdict of death by natural causes. Only then, after the toxin had passed its first independent trial, would the clip be released and RUA, Rome Under Allah, would proclaim itself to the world.

Allah is truly in the details, the assassin laughed. This was a great moment. A triumph. Step one in the immaculate deception.