



Being a spy is a lot like being a bank robber. In espionage—as in crime—it’s always the little things that get you. You can plan for an entire operation, allowing for one contingency after another, foreseeing when and where things might go wrong, but you inevitably miss the little things. A drop of sweat on a doorknob, drywall shavings left behind after the installation of a bug, a nick in the brass plate of a lock from a tension wrench. Small things with huge impacts.

In this case, the little thing happened before Aaron Bergmann had even left Israel, when a travel voucher routed through Mossad headquarters included a man who had been specifically excluded from the mission read-on. For a specific reason. And that little thing would prove devastating for Aaron and his neophyte apprentice.

Casually tapping the tablet in front of him, Aaron said, “Alex, turn just a tad bit to the right. I’m missing the man on the left side of the table.”

Across the table from him Alexandra Levy shifted slightly, her face aglow. She said, “This is so exiting! Straight out of a James Bond movie.”

He chuckled, then said, “Right there. Good.” He hit record on the tablet.

Alex stiffened a little bit, as if she were posing for a photographer, holding her angle. She whispered, “That

thing will really read their lips? Tell us what they're saying?"

Aaron said, "Yep. If you can keep the camera on them, but don't look so rigid. Relax a little. I'll tell you if it shifts off."

Aaron continued manipulating a piece of software in his tablet, something that was highly classified and usually reserved for active Mossad agents. A simple button camera in Alexandra's blouse was tied by Bluetooth to his tablet and seemed to be something out of a 007 movie, but in truth, both were commercially available to anyone who wanted one. The secret was the software churning through what the camera sent it.

Artificial intelligence for facial recognition had grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, and the Mossad had taken that in a different direction, focusing on the spoken word. They'd replicated the human act of lip reading into the cyber world, designing a software suite that could decipher what was being said without hearing sound.

Alex relaxed her body a bit, contrition floating across her face. "Sorry. This isn't my expertise. You should be doing the camera work."

He laid the tablet on the table and took a sip of beer, saying, "You're doing fine. This beats working in the diamond exchange, right? Keep up the talent and I might recruit you for my firm."

She grinned and said, "No, no, this is enough excitement. I enjoy being able to help—I've never even been to Africa—but I'll stick with my boring job."

There was no fear in the statement. No realization of the risk. It was like she thought they were executing a high school senior prank. She had no idea of the threat level.

That would come later.

She glanced over the balcony toward their target and said, “Besides, I don’t think your partner would agree to that. I think she hates me.”

Three people sat at the table they were filming: two white and one black. Their target was a man of about thirty-five and, unlike the rest of the patrons in the restaurant, was dressed in a suit as if he were still working in his office in Israel. The other white man looked like he was about to head out on a safari, wearing cargo pants and a shirt that had more pockets than a photographer’s vest. He had shaggy blond hair, ice blue eyes, and a feral quality. Aaron had seen his type plenty of times before, but only in a war zone. It intrigued him.

The final man was tall, with a thin mustache and coal black skin. He was dressed like a local but didn’t act like one. Ramrod straight, he showed not a whit of humor. Had they held the meeting at a café in downtown Johannesburg—where the target was staying—they would have attracted attention by their very disparate appearances, but they didn’t here. Which explained why Aaron’s target had chosen this restaurant. The one thing remaining was to find out why the meeting was occurring.

The only man Aaron recognized was the one the Mossad had asked him to track—an employee of a diamond broker in Tel Aviv. The other two were a mystery, but he’d know about them soon enough when they reviewed the footage later.

The primary problem with the lipreading software was choosing a language—try to lipread German when the target was speaking Chinese and you’d get gibberish. Here, in the township of Soweto, just outside the city center of Johannesburg, South Africa, he was sure they were speaking English. There was no way the black man spoke Hebrew, and he would be astounded if his target

from Israel spoke something like Swahili or Afrikaans. No, they'd be speaking English, and the fact that his method of recording the conversation came through in visual rather than auditory means was a plus in the current environment.

The outdoor balcony they were on belonged to a restaurant called Sakhumzi, as did the patio holding the target's table. Just a stone's throw from the historical houses of Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu, in the section of Soweto known as Orlando West, the restaurant hosted a smorgasbord of local food and native performers and was a permanent stop for tour groups large and small traveling to see the ghetto made famous in the uprising against apartheid. Because of it, there was a constant drumbeat of laughter and clapping—something that had no effect on the lipreading software. As long as Aaron could keep a line of sight with whoever was talking.

Aaron focused on the computer, tapping icons and ensuring three computer-generated squares remained over the mouths. He said, "Position is good. Keep that." When he hadn't responded to Alex's statement, she repeated, "Your partner doesn't care for me at all. I thought she was going to throw me out of your house."

Aaron looked up from the tablet and said, "Shoshana? She doesn't hate you. She's just mad because I brought you instead of her. She was aggravated at me for the decision. It's nothing personal."

Making sure not to disrupt the camera angle, she said, "I don't think so. When you left the room, she was . . . a little scary."

Aaron laughed and returned to the tablet, offhandedly saying, "You need to get to know her. She's not all knives and death threats. She just acts that way. She understands that she didn't have the knowledge base for

this mission. When we fly back tomorrow, I'll take you to dinner. The three of us."

Alex smiled and said, "I'd like that. I think she thought . . ."

Aaron looked up from the tablet and said, "Thought what?"

"That we . . . I mean, you and me . . . might . . ."

Aaron scoffed and said, "You're twenty years younger than me."

She said, "Yeah, but it was the Mossad that asked me . . . *you* asked me . . . I mean, they wouldn't do that unless it was for a reason."

Aaron realized she thought she really *was* in a movie. And realized she was hitting on him. A twenty-something *sabra* that worked inside the Israeli diamond exchange, she was no doubt attractive. Brown hair, brown eyes, liquid skin, and a quiet intelligence surrounded by an innocence he no longer possessed, he would have hunted her like a wolf a decade ago, but no longer. She deserved to live in her innocence. His entire existence was ensuring people like her could do so. He decided to put an end to the fantasy.

"Alex, I picked you because you understand the diamond market. Yes, you're attractive, which meant I could use you to blend in, but I need your knowledge. Period. You listen to the tape, you tell me what they're talking about within the diamond world, and I write an assessment. That's it. This isn't a complex thing. We're not here to save Israel from Blofeld. We're here to save Israel from embarrassment. That's all. It's a simple mission."

Turning red, she tilted forward and whispered, "What does that mean? I wasn't suggesting anything."

He said, "You're screwing with the camera angle. Lean back."

The target at the table answered a cell phone.

Aaron said, “Shit. Lean back—now.”

Alex did so abruptly, causing the camera to sway wildly. Aaron said, “Stay still.”

The man turned away from them, still on the phone.

Aaron said, “We need to move. *You* need to move. Stand up and go to the bathroom. Walk by the table and get me a shot of his face as long as you can. Stop and ask the table for directions, but not to him. Let him keep talking on the phone.”

Hesitantly, Alex stood. More forcefully than he wanted, Aaron said, “Go.”

She did, sidling between the throngs of tour bus patrons and locals, threading between the tables and down the stairs, the picture on Aaron’s tablet jumping left and right. She reached the patio and it stabilized. She walked toward the restrooms, then stopped at the table, asking directions. He recorded about a fifteen-second snippet of the phone conversation, unsure if the software would be able to utilize the footage because the target’s face was partially obscured by his smartphone.

He glanced over the balcony to see the interaction, and she broke contact, doing a passable job of being a tourist. He saw no outward interest in the interruption.

Aaron ignored the rest of the feed, wondering if Alex would be smart enough to cut it off if she really chose to use the bathroom. She did. Or maybe the Bluetooth simply lost contact because of distance. He grinned and took a sip of his beer, surreptitiously giving the target table a side-eye.

The target was asking a waitress for the check. He immediately picked up his phone and called Alex, telling her to return.

The men tossed some rand on the table, preparing to

leave, and he saw her coming across the patio. She mounted the stairs to the balcony and he stood, saying, “Hopefully they take the same car. If they split up, we’ll stick to the target.”

Hidden by the balcony railing, they let the group exit the restaurant, then followed, getting to the parking lot just as they were loading a single car. While he had made the comment earlier about one vehicle, a part of him spiked at the action, since they’d arrived in two separate cars.

He should have listened to his sixth sense. Lulled by the minimal threat of his mission, he thought he had his bases covered but had forgotten a hard truth he had learned in the past: In warfare, the enemy gets a vote.

## 2



Crossing the lobby to the Las Vegas Venetian casino, another gaggle of bearded men went by, all wearing cargo pants and baseball caps with Velcro patches. Half of them toted some form of corduroy nylon backpack, which also sported a variety of gun-porn patches, like *ISIS Hunter* or a *Punisher* skull.

I said, “I have never seen this many super-commando ‘operators’ in one place in my life.”

Knuckles laughed and said, “Yeah, this event brings ‘em out of the woodwork, no doubt. But make no mistake, the real deal’s running around in here as well. In fact, keep your eyes peeled. The odds of us running into someone we know are pretty high, so be prepared to run the cover story.”

Working in cover was the worst when you did it in an area where the locals potentially knew you. Whenever that happened, the nastiest thing that could occur—besides getting your fingernails pulled out by the enemy—was running into someone who knows who you are in real life. It was the surest way to blow the hell out of what you were pretending. An FBI agent infiltrating an outlaw motorcycle gang would be in dire straights if he bumped into a friend from law school.

In this case, Knuckles was still active duty Navy and I was retired Army. In the world of the Taskforce, when we were out in the Badlands earning our *ISIS Hunter*



patches for real, he was a civilian employee of my company, but if another SEAL from his past saw him here, they'd know that was bullshit, so we'd created a story that was plausible should that happen to either of us.

It was my first trip to the fabled SHOT Show in Las Vegas, the largest gun show on earth, and the interior of the Sands convention center was literally stuffed with booth after booth selling various weapons, accessories, and outdoor gear. It was Mecca to people like me, and the Taskforce sent a contingent every year to prowl the halls looking for anything new that we could incorporate into our mission. Back when I was on active duty, as the team leader, I'd always let a junior member of the team make the trip, and Knuckles, my 2IC, had been a few times before.

Given how he was dressed, I'm surprised they let him in.

In contrast to the bearded ones, he looked like he had come to protest the convention, with his long hippy hair, Che Guevara T-shirt, and lack of any taticool paraphernalia. He was even wearing a leather necklace with a bronze peace sign the size of a fifty-cent piece—either as irony or a challenge. With him it was hard to tell, but if someone took it as a challenge, they'd be sorely wishing they hadn't. Unlike a lot of the posers at the convention, he was most definitely an Operator.

While the trip *was* a little bit of a boondoggle, we did have a specific mission. We'd just come from a booth manned by a company called ZEV Technologies—a maker of high-end aftermarket components and custom frame/slide work for Glock pistols—and had sealed a deal to test some pistols for our specific applications.

Although we already had our own armorer support that we used to hone our combat weapons, Kurt

Hale—the commander of the Taskforce—was wondering if we weren't just reinventing the wheel and wanted to see if it would be better to simply farm out the work. After talking to ZEV, I was beginning to believe he was right, only our wheels were something from a Conestoga wagon while ZEV was racing around on run-flats.

We pushed through the crowd and entered the cavernous Venetian casino, working our way to Las Vegas Boulevard. We exited into the sunshine, leaving the commandos and gamblers only to be hit by Guatemalan refugees trying to hand me cards with hookers offering their services. One of the strangest things about Vegas.

Knuckles said, "What did you think?"

"Seriously? I think we should have flown here with the entire team's Glocks. No question they can do better than our internal armorers. Nothing against them, but did you work the one they had on display? Better trigger than ours by far."

Knuckles took a left toward Caesars Palace, passing the gigantic Venetian hotel, saying, "So forget about any other vendors?"

He had a point. While we didn't fall under any official DoD rules about contracts, it would be stupid to latch on to the first one we found. We had a list of potential companies that could meet our goals, and it wouldn't be right not to at least check them out. But I was pretty sure where I would end up on my recommendation to Kurt.

I said, "Naw, we should hit 'em up as well, but we only get two days out here, and I want some Vegas time. I'll send Retro and Jennifer to go hunt them down."

"Retro isn't going to like that, and Jennifer's not exactly an expert."

Retro had been a teammate of mine since Jesus was wearing diapers, but all things come to a close sooner or

later. He was set to retire from the military at the end of the month and had truly come out here as a complete vacation. Kurt knew he wasn't needed but had let him come along as a little retirement gift. Unbeknownst to me, in all our time together, I learned he absolutely loved playing craps, and his wife frowned on gambling. He had planned on spending his entire time in the casinos betting away his per diem like a drunken sailor.

As we were planning to leave for the trip, he'd begged to come along, getting a seat through Kurt, then had turned around and told his wife he was desperately needed for national security, which she bought. As they say, "What happens in Vegas . . ."

I said, "It's not going to kill him to take a break for a few hours, and as far as Jennifer goes, she could learn something."

Jennifer was my partner in Grolier Recovery Services—our company—and, outside of some serious weapons training I'd given her, had no military experience. She wasn't qualified to judge whether a vendor was worthy, and wasn't needed on this trip either, but I'd paid for her to come along out of my own pocket because, well, she was a partner in more ways than one. She'd planned on spending her time at the pool—or if the weather was too cold, in the spa.

I felt my phone vibrate and saw it was her. I said, "Speak of the devil."

I answered, "Hey, we're on Vegas Boulevard headed home. What's up?"

"Kurt wants to talk on the VPN. Secure."

"About what?"

"Apparently, about a mission. In Vegas."