

Chapter 1

Killing isn't the hard part. Gangbangers and other fear biters do it every day. Anger pumps you up, panic cancels consideration, you grab the gun, close your eyes, pull the trigger, Christ, an ape could do it, you don't even need to be a man.

No, the truth is, killing is the easy part. Getting close to the target, though, that takes some talent. And making it look "natural," which is my specialty, well, I've only known of one other operator who could consistently get that right, and I'm not sure he should count because I'm the one who killed him. And leaving no trail back to yourself, that's no cakewalk, either.

But the hardest part? The part that you can't plan for, that you can only really understand when it's already too late? Living with it after. Bearing up under the weight of what you've done. That's the hardest. Even with limitations like mine – no women, no children, no acts against non-principals – you're not the same person after. You never draw the same breath again, or dream the same dreams. Trust me, I know.

As much as you can, you try to dehumanize the target. Accepting the target as human, a man just like you, creates empathy. Empathy makes killing more difficult and produces caustic regret.

So you employ euphemisms: in Vietnam we never killed people; we only "wasted gooks" or "engaged the enemy," the same as in all wars. When possible, you prefer distance: air strikes are nice, bayonet range is horrible. You diffuse responsibility: crew-served weapons, long chains of command, systematic replacement of the soldier's sense of self with an identification with the platoon or regiment or other group. You obscure features: the hood is used not to comfort the condemned, but to enable each member of the firing squad to pull the trigger without an anguished face to remember afterward.

But it's been a long time since any of these emotional stratagems has been available to me. I typically operate alone, so there's no group with whom to share responsibility. I don't discuss my work, so euphemisms would be pointless. And what I do, I need to do from a very personal distance. By the time I'm that close, it's too late to try to cover the target's face or otherwise conceal his humanity.

All bad enough, even under the usual circumstances. But this time I was watching the target enjoy a Sunday outing in Manila with his obviously adoring Filipino family just before I killed him, and it was making things worse.

The target. See? Everyone does it. If I'm different than most, it's only in that I try to be more honest. "More" honest. A matter of degree.

Manheim Lavi was his name, "Manny" to his business associates. Manny was an Israeli national, resident of South Africa, and citizen of the world, which he traveled

much of the year sharing bomb-making expertise with a network of people who put the knowledge to increasingly grisly use. Vocations like Manny's once offered a reasonable risk-to-reward ratio, but post-9/11, if you sold your expertise to the wrong people, you could lose your rewards pretty fast. That was Manny's story, as I was given to understand it, a tragic fall from a certain government's grace.

Manny had arrived in Manila from Johannesburg that evening. A black Mercedes from the small Peninsula fleet had picked him up at Ninoy Aquino Airport and whisked him straight to the hotel. Dox and I were already staying there, outfitted with first-rate ersatz identities and the latest communication and other gear, all courtesy of Israeli intelligence, my client of the moment. Dox, an ex-marine sniper and former comrade-in-arms of mine, had recently walked away from a five-million-dollar payday to save my life in Hong Kong. Bringing him in on this job was in part my way of trying to repay him for that.

Dox was waiting in the lobby when Manny arrived. I was in my room on the sixth floor, a tiny, flesh-colored, Danish-designed wireless earpiece nestled in my ear canal, a wireless mike secured to the underside of the left lapel of the navy blazer I was wearing. Dox was similarly equipped.

"Okay, partner," I heard him say softly in his southern twang, "our friend just got here, him and the world's biggest, butt-ugliest bodyguard. They're checking in right now."

I nodded. It had been a while since I'd worked with a partner, and not so long ago Dox had proven himself a damn good one.

"Good. Let's see if you can get the name he's using and a room number."

"Roger that."

Having to get this information on our own wasn't ideal, but the Philippines wasn't exactly the Israelis' backyard, and they hadn't been able to offer all that much. Manny traveled to Manila frequently from his nominal home in Johannesburg, taking as many as ten trips in a year. He never stayed for less than a week; the longest of these visits had lasted two months. He'd been doing this for a decade: presumably because customs control in Manila isn't as tight as it is in, say, Singapore, making the Philippines a good place for meetings with the MNLF, Abu Sayef, Jemaah Islamiah, and other violent groups in the region; possibly because he liked the price and variety of Manila's well-known nightlife, as well. He always stayed at the Peninsula. There were a few surveillance photos. That was all.

With less than the usual dossier to go on, I knew we would have to improvise. Where to hit Manny, for one thing. The hotel was our only current nexus and so presented a logical choice. But if Manny died in the hotel, it would absolutely have to look natural; otherwise, there would be too much investigative attention on the other

guests, including Dox and me. Staying elsewhere wouldn't have helped; it would have kept us too far from the action.

The level of "naturalness" a hotel hit itself would require isn't easy, but there were other problems, as well. Most of the ruses I typically use to get into someone's room depend on the target's anonymity, yet Manny was well known to the hotel. And even if I did get into the room while Manny was out and then waited for him to return, what if the bodyguard swept the room immediately before his arrival? What if Manny came back with a bar girl? In the current terrain, I couldn't control for these variables, and I didn't like that.

Still, I wanted the room number. Partly in case a better opportunity didn't present itself and we had to use the Hotel Room Expiration as Plan B; more important, so we would know on which floor to place the video camera that we would use to track his movements. We could have tried placing a camera in the lobby, which would have been easier because it would have saved us the trouble of finding out what floor he was on. But there were downsides to the lobby, too. With all the people coming and going through the hotel entrance, we'd have to scrutinize the grainy feed constantly to pick Manny out of the crowd. And if the lobby was always our first chance to see him on the move, we'd have to scramble to follow him out of the hotel – behavior that any decent bodyguard would key on in a heartbeat. So I decided we would use the lobby only if we had to.

Even low-end hotels don't give out their guests' room numbers, though, and the regal Peninsula Manila, with its expansive, marble-lined lobby and white-uniformed bellhops, was anything but low-end. And even if we found an indiscreet employee, we wouldn't have known who to ask for because we didn't know what name Manny would be staying under. So, while leaning forward to ask some typical questions about Manila and environs, Dox had taken the liberty of placing a few adhesive-backed transmitters under the long front edge of the marble reception desk. When Manny checked in, Dox would be able to listen in on his conversation with the clerk.

I waited two minutes, then heard the twang again. "Well, it's good news and bad news. Our friend is here under the name Mr. Hartman. But all the clerk said to him is, 'Mr. Hartman, your room number is written here.'"

I'd received the same treatment when I checked in and wasn't surprised. The hotel staff was well trained.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Sure, there's something else," I heard him say, and I could imagine his trademark grin. "He took the elevator on the Ayala Tower side."

The hotel had two separate wings – the Ayala and the Makati. Now we knew which set of elevators to focus on. We were beginning to triangulate.

“You get on with him?” I asked.

“I tried to. But the bodyguard was awfully polite and insisted that I just head on up by my lonesome.”

All right, his bodyguard had some tactical sense. Not a surprise. “Did he get a good look at you?”

“Good enough. I think we can expect him to recognize the best-looking fella in Manila next time he sees me.”

I nodded. Letting Dox run ahead was a calculated risk. Soon enough we would be double-teaming Manny, and it would be hard for his bodyguard to avoid getting distracted by sightings of Caucasian Dox, with his linebacker’s physique and good ol’ boy’s grin. Distracted enough to completely overlook the smaller, unassuming Asian guy Dox was working with.

There were about two hundred and sixty rooms on the Ayala side, and I thought about calling each of them from the house phone, offering, “May we have someone draw you a bath, Mr. Hartman?” until I hit the right room. But if Manny knew the hotel’s routines, as presumably he did, or even if he was just reasonably paranoid, a call like that could make him suspicious. He might phone the front desk to confirm. Or he might just accept the offer, which would create its own set of problems. Enormous, goateed Dox showing up to draw you a bath isn’t everyone’s idea of proper hygiene.

So I’d hold off on Plan Bath, and use it only if our more subtle attempts came to nothing. “Think you can get anything else?” I asked.

“You know I’m working on it. Give me five minutes.”

The next part of the plan was for Dox to make his way to the gift shop, where he would buy a book or something and charge it to his room. The clerk would check Dox’s name and room number against a list to ensure that the transaction was legitimate. Dox would be holding a high-resolution camera designed to look like an ordinary cell phone, and would position himself so that he could use the camera to capture what was on the list, including the name Hartman and an accompanying room number. We’d tested the system earlier, and it had worked perfectly. Now that we had the right name, it was time to see whether it would work when it counted.

Five minutes later there was a knock on my door. I padded quietly over and flipped up the small piece of cardboard I had taped over the peephole – no sense blocking the light from behind with my approach and alerting a visitor to my presence – and looked through. It was Dox. I opened the door. He came inside wearing his indefatigable grin.

“You’re smiling like that, you better have good news,” I said, closing the door behind him.

The grin broadened and he nodded. “That, and I’m just happy to see you, partner, it doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

I gave him a nod in return, knowing that anything more would encourage him. I couldn’t pretend to fully understand Dox. In many ways he was a contradiction, a conundrum. He was a talker, for one thing – not a breed I’ve ever been particularly comfortable around – and a loud one at that. And yet every other sniper I’ve known, and I’ve known more than a few, has been reserved, even taciturn. Every environment has a certain flow to it, a rhythm, a connectivity, and snipers instinctively and habitually enter into that flow without disturbing it. But Dox liked to stir things up – in fact, his *nom de guerre* was short for “unorthodox,” an accolade awarded by consensus in Afghanistan, where the Reagan-era CIA had sent men like us to arm and train the Mujahadeen against the invading Soviets. His constant boisterous clowning there had put me off at first, and I’d initially figured him for nothing but a braggart. But when I’d seen his effectiveness and coolness under fire, I knew I’d been wrong. When he settled behind the scope of his rifle, there was an eerie transformation, and the good ol’ boy persona would fade away, leaving in its shadow one of the most focused, deadly men I’ve ever met. I didn’t understand the opposing forces that combined to create his character, and I knew I would never have trusted him but for what he’d done at Kwai Chung. Of course, that single act couldn’t eradicate my lifelong tendency to doubt, but it seemed in a way to have eclipsed it, or at least to have created an uncomfortable exception.

We walked into the room. I sat down at the small desk and flipped open the Mac PowerBook I’d brought along for the festivities. It came out of sleep mode and I typed in the password. Dox handed me the camera.

“You sure you got a shot of the page with Manny’s name on it?” I asked.

He gave me a theatrical sigh. “There you go, hurting my feelings again.”

“Does that mean you got it?”

He sighed again. “Didn’t I tell you I’d get it?”

I attached the camera to the laptop. I hit the “sync” key, then glanced at him and said, “Let’s see if I have to apologize for my outrageous lack of faith in your infallibility.”

“Don’t worry, partner, I’ll be gracious about it. I hate to see a grown man grovel.”

It took just a few seconds for the images to download. The first of them was an alphabetical listing of hotel guests, A through F. I closed the image and opened the next one. G through M. Including one Randolph Hartman, Room 914. Bingo.

“How’d you get the clerk to give you a shot of G through M?” I asked. “You’re checked in under Smith, right?”

“Yeah, Mr. Smith first told the clerk that he couldn’t remember his room number, but that she could charge the Snickers bar he was buying to Mr. Herat.”

Cute. Herat is one of the northern cities of Afghanistan.

“And then?”

“Well, the nice young lady – pretty little thing, by the way, and I think she liked me – she flipped to the page with the H names on it and told me there was no Mr. Herat registered at the hotel. I told her, ‘That’s odd... Oh, wait a minute, that’s right, the room is under my name, not my partner’s.’ Should be under Smith, I told her, and okay, now I’m remembering, it’s room 1107, Ayala Tower. Which is indeed where Mr. Smith is staying.”

I looked at him. “Did she seem suspicious?”

He rolled his eyes. “Shoot, partner, I was trying to buy a damn candy bar, not cash a check. She couldn’t have cared less. Besides, it was pretty obvious she was distracted by her blossoming feelings for me. I think I might stop by again later, see what time she leaves work.”

“Hey,” I said, looking at him, “if you need to get off, Burgos Street is a two-minute cab ride from here. I don’t want you trying to make it with the hotel staff. That kind of shit gets noticed.” Even as I said it, though, I realized it would be pointless. Dox was genetically wired to be conspicuous. In some ways, I supposed, the tendency could be an asset. In an environment like this one, Dox came across more like an ugly American tourist than an undercover operator. He was hiding in plain sight.

He shrugged. “All right, don’t get your panties in a wad. It’s just that I hate to disappoint the pretty ones, is all.”

“The pretty ones?” I said, still annoyed. “Dox, you’d fuck an alligator if it would hold still for you.”

“That is not true, partner, marines do not engage in congress with reptiles. We prefer whenever possible that our partners be mammalian.”

I gave up. “Oh, okay. I don’t know how these rumors get started.”

“Lot of nasty people in the world, man, that’s all,” he said, giving me the grin. “I mean a sheep is one thing, but an alligator? I’m surprised you’d think so little of me.”

I didn’t know how Dox was able to maintain his constant good cheer even as he prepared to go operational. When I’m gearing up, I get serious, even dour. Harry, my martyred hacker friend, had always been nervous helping me with ops, and had often provoked an unfamiliar clownishness in me. But Dox and I seemed to polarize the opposite way.

But he’d done well so far. I wasn’t yet confident in his social engineering skills. He was too consistently brash, too direct, and, I had to admit to myself, his style was just too different from mine. Getting Manny’s room number had been a test. I’d resisted the urge to tell him how to go about it, and he had come up with something close to what I’d thought of myself. More important, something that worked. It wouldn’t come easily to me, but I’d have to try to give him more slack as we went along, as he continued to prove himself.

“Let’s see,” I said, closing my eyes. “He’s in nine-fourteen. That’s around the corner from the elevators. Unless the bodyguard is positioned at the elevators while Manny is in his room, I ought to be able to get some video in place.”

“Yeah, nice having a way to know when he’s leaving. I hate hanging around in the open, waiting for someone to go out.”

In the dark, though, I knew Dox could wait for days. He had the kills to prove it.

I opened my laptop bag and took out a camera, a wireless unit about 20 millimeters square and weighing less than an ounce. I clicked it on, then worked the laptop’s keyboard for a minute, watching as the screen filled with input from the unit. “It’s transmitting all right from here,” I said, “but at nine hundred megahertz it’s only rated to about a thousand feet. I might have to install a couple of repeaters along the way. You wait here and monitor the screen. Tell me if you’re getting reception and the right view of the elevators once I’ve got it in place.”

“Roger that.”

We took earpieces from the laptop bag and slipped them in place. I walked over to the door and checked through the peephole. The hallway was empty.

I walked out, hearing a loud clack as the door closed behind me. “You there?” I asked quietly.

“Roger that,” I heard back. Okay, the commo gear was still working.

I took the elevator down to the lobby level, not wanting to go to Manny’s floor directly from mine. To satisfy anyone who might be watching through the dome security

camera peeking down from the elevator ceiling, I got out and bought a pack of gum at the gift shop, then came back and headed up to the ninth floor. There were no stops along the way, and a minute later the doors opened on nine. I walked out and looked around. The hallway was empty.

There was a wooden credenza against the wall opposite the elevators with a mirror behind it. I walked over, supported myself against the credenza with my left hand, and ran the fingers of my right through my hair. There was another dome camera mounted on the ceiling in front of the elevators, and if anyone was watching right then all they would see was a man concerned with his appearance. In fact, I had slipped the adhesive-backed unit under the left edge of the credenza, where it would have a wide-angle view of the approach to the elevators.

“How’s the image?” I asked quietly.

“No go. Too grainy. Signal’s falling off before it reaches the receiver. I think we need the repeater to boost it.”

“Okay. Hang on.”

I walked down the hallway for a few paces, then returned to the elevator, just another hotel guest who’d absentmindedly gotten off on the wrong floor. This time, I stopped on six. As I got off, I checked my room key and looked around in slightly theatrical confusion, thinking, *Gosh, these floors all look the same, where was I staying again?* just in case someone was watching. Then I placed a repeater in front of the elevators the same way I had put the camera in on Manny’s floor.

The moment I clicked it on, I heard Dox’s voice: “Okay, there we go. Now that’s a beautiful view.”

I moved out of the way. “The approach to the elevators?”

“Yeah, and it beats the wide-angle shot of your crotch I was getting a minute ago. Someone should call *America’s Funniest Home Videos*.”

I thought about a retort, but then this was exactly what he wanted. I let it go and walked back to the room.