

Eavesdrop

by
Ian Coates

Copyright © 2014 Ian Coates
All rights reserved.

ISBN-10: 1-62827-976-1
ISBN-13: 978-1-62827-976-4

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of this author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Published by Bad Day Books, an imprint of Assent Publishing



In memory of Nokia, for whom I undertook the many business trips to Finland that provided the background for this thriller. Their advanced and forward thinking policies gave me the means to write *Eavesdrop*, for which I shall be ever grateful.

PROLOGUE

August 2nd, 2010

Bashar Al-Jabib wriggled forward into position in the long grass. Everywhere smelled fresh and damp. Perched on the crag among the trees that carpeted the higher slope, he commanded an uninterrupted view of the lake in the valley bottom. Water glinted silver when the first rays of sun reached its mirrored surface. Thin ribbons of mist hung here and there above it like wraiths.

Al-Jabib's pulse quickened with excitement. After many months of planning, it was finally time to set things in motion. He smiled to himself. They would be proud of him back home.

On the far bank, an angler tied a new fly to his line. After one final inspection, he cast toward the row of willows that edged the water, then slowly drew it back by hand so that the lure glided smoothly across the surface.

Al-Jabib reached for his rifle, felt its cold metal against his fingertips. Without taking his eyes off the fisherman, he seated the bipod in the soil to support the muzzle, and pushed the stock hard against his shoulder. Shuffling awkwardly until he was aligned with the weapon, he squinted into its telescopic sight. He noticed his nerves didn't flutter. Years ago, he would have wet himself doing this.

Not now.

He adjusted the focus and flicked off the safety catch.

The fisherman raised his rod and flicked it forward again, letting the line run through his fingers. The man's face looked content. Al-Jabib could see it clearly as he squeezed the trigger.

The bullet entered through the angler's right eye. Blood splattered across the fishing bag that stood on the bank as he toppled backwards and the rod splashed into the water. In the woods, the gunshot sent a pair of pigeons flapping away through the undergrowth.

Staying on his stomach, Al-Jabib shuffled backwards off the small square of tarpaulin he'd been lying on. His whole body tingled with exhilaration. It had been a beautifully placed shot. Easy.

He retrieved the spent case, and did his best to rough-up the flattened grass before he wriggled further back into the trees. Only when he was well into their cover did he stand and brush himself down.

Al-Jabib slid his hand inside his jacket and felt for the locket that hung around his neck. His fingers caressed the polished metal, conjuring the memories, the screams, the falling masonry, and choking dust. He shouldn't be wearing it, but it had seemed so appropriate; a fresh chapter of history was going to be written and it fell to him to prepare the ground. It was his destiny.

As he hiked the mile back to the hire car, he tapped a number into his mobile and spoke in Arabic.

Two weeks later

The meeting in Tel-Aviv drew to a close. Fluorescent strips lit the windowless room three floors below ground. The ashtrays on the table around which the eight men sat were full, and thick cigarette smoke hung in the air, the air conditioning too slow to remove it.

Ehud Mandell, a large man with heavy jowls and thick spectacles, looked around at the others from his place at the head of the table. "Any other items?" He wanted to go home. Already, the meeting had gone over time. Mandell chaired these cross-departmental security meetings, held every month under the grandiose directive of *ensuring the continued security of the homeland of the Israeli State*. He scratched his mop of white hair as he waited. Most of the others were already gathering up their papers.

The head of International Analysis coughed. "I have one thing." Leon Cardash was the antithesis of Mandell: short, with sallow features that looked malnourished. His head jerked in short rapid movements when he looked around the table like a bird nervously searching for grubs.

Mandell sighed. The traffic was going to be hell. "Go on," he said. Cardash was not known for getting to the point quickly.

"I...well...rather the head of the European team, asked me to raise this." Cardash coughed again. "He's very reliable, and if he says...well...if he thinks this committee needs to know about it, certainly we should not dismiss it."

"Just get on with it," Mandell barked.

He smiled obsequiously. "Well, a couple of weeks ago in England, one of their top government officials was assassinated during a weekend fishing break. It seems it was...er...a very professional job."

The Chief of the Israeli Air Force spoke up. "So what? Let the Brits sort out their own mess. It's nothing to do with us."

Cardash tugged at his earlobe and looked down at the sheet of paper in front of him.

"Well, you see, there we're not quite so sure. As you say, it is probably nothing, but the thing is, the British police—and we've seen all their reports—the thing is, they can find no motive at all."

"I still don't see why this is relevant."

"It may not be, of course, but Charles Asquith—that's the dead man—well, he was always a strong advocate of Israel and had an influential place in the British government that was often to our advantage. He has, on occasions persuaded it to make decisions that favor our position. My European head was concerned that Asquith may have been..." He hesitated as he chose for the most appropriate phrase. "...well, perhaps he was permanently removed because of it."

Mandell took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It had been a long day. It was fifty-fifty whether anything raised by Analysis was useful, but they were right just frequently enough that one couldn't take the chance of dismissing them. He turned to the head of Mossad. "Perhaps you could check it out, Avraham? Do you have anyone in England who could take a look?"

The head of Mossad nodded slowly. "I've a man in London, Sol Halutz. He's a pain in the arse, but he's good at bringing a fresh perspective to things. I'll get him to dig around."

CHAPTER ONE

England, January 2011.

The throb of a distant engine carried on the night air from farther downstream. James Winter took another step forward, careful to make no sound. The stick of Wrigley's he'd been chewing to ease the tension was now reduced to a tasteless putty. He spat it into the darkness and crept toward the square of gravel where the van was parked.

The smell of sea mingled with that of damp soil from the farmland and marshes that stretched into the darkness behind him. A light breeze rustled the tall grass, and tapped the rigging of moored boats against their masts. It plucked at the flags beside the dark harbor master's office and set them fluttering.

Winter paused to check his surroundings. Two wooden jetties ran parallel to the land. Lamps shone down from posts fixed regularly along the guard rails, and illuminated the uneven slats of wood. The few fishing boats moored to the pillars, swayed with the waves, tiny lines of phosphorescence bubbling around their hulls. Now closer, Winter heard the gentle slap of water.

The van Winter had followed here waited near the jetty. Its engine was off, but McEvoy remained in the passenger's seat. The tip-off looked like it had been a good one. Winter had tailed him here from the cramped semi in Rye, and en route, had seen McEvoy collect the man who was now at the wheel.

Winter's boss would have turned purple if he'd known Winter was here alone—work in pairs, policy said. Shipman was certainly one for the rules. But Winter wasn't expecting trouble. Just passive surveillance, that's what he intended, simply to see what was going on for himself. And what could one do when a tip-off came in and everyone else had already gone home?

Winter didn't know this bit of coastline well, but reckoned he must be on the inlet fed by the Rother. From what he could remember, it was narrow but deep and allowed even an occasional two thousand tonner upstream to a nearby wharf. He wondered where the hell he'd picked that fact up from. Some Customs report read years ago, probably.

Whatever they were smuggling was obviously coming on the approaching boat. Just a shame it was dark. He had a camcorder in the car, but it was no use in these conditions.

Winter kept close to the right-hand mound of soil and grass that edged the car park as he inched closer, staying low to avoid making himself a silhouette against the sky. Adrenaline heightened every sense. That's what he loved about this job.

His shin crashed into a large crate that was barely visible in the faint moonlight. Winter reached down and felt its plastic rim, touched bundles of netting, and sent the tang of salt rising into the air around him. He felt more crates alongside him. Winter crept forward, crouching low, and used his hands to feel his way along the line of them toward the van.

He found a gap between the crates where they were stacked two or three high, and squeezed through, out of sight of the waterfront. He tried to get comfortable and settle down for whatever was about to happen.

The problem with waiting was that it gave one time to think. Alison. His stomach tightened. He didn't want to think about it. *Please, God, don't let her die.* He felt cold as the memories flooded back—her repeated indigestion, the tiredness, her eventual visit to Dr. Lomax, their GP, in November. “To get it sorted out before Jenny gets home for the holidays,” Alison had said. Then there was the seemingly endless succession of tests, back and forth to hospitals and specialists before that God-awful day a few weeks before Christmas.

The familiar hollowness returned to his chest at the thought of losing her. And instantly, came the guilt at not being with her in the hospital right now. But who else could have come?

With a jolt, he realized the low chug of the boat's engine was suddenly louder. A green pinprick of a navigation light glided toward him, the boat's outline a little more than a smudge against the water. The vessel slid toward the jetty and bumped against its line of fenders. Winter was instantly alert.

A figure in the prow bent to fasten a rope as a second man jumped ashore and tied another from the stern. He straightened, and cupped his hands against the wind to light a cigarette before surveying the car park. As if in answer, the van's passenger door clicked open, and McEvoy joined the fisherman on the jetty, leaving the driver at the wheel. They shook hands, and McEvoy muttered something Winter couldn't catch. The man nodded and led the way on board. The other fisherman paused in the prow and watched the van for a few seconds longer before he, too, turned and followed them below deck.

Winter rubbed his leg muscles. When he'd been younger he could have squatted like this for hours. These days, he ached like an old man.

Keeping behind the line of crates, Winter edged awkwardly toward the boat. What were they smuggling? French or Dutch goods maybe? Certainly not drugs, as that came from farther afield on freighters, and this small fishing boat wasn't the kind of vessel they'd offload it to in the channel. They would use a small inflatable for that. So they carried something else—spirits, perhaps? His ears strained for the slightest sound, but heard only the lapping of water and the rustle of tall grass in the wind.

Despite the faint light that now glowed from one of the grubby portholes, he couldn't see what was happening inside. Tattered orange and black flags were stacked against the rear gunnels, but the deck seemed otherwise empty and clean, all too neat for a working boat. He could just make out the boat's registration painted on the white hull; it was an English vessel. Winter committed the registration to memory.

His stomach rumbled. He'd not eaten since lunchtime, and then only a cheese sandwich at his desk while he battled the stacks of leftover paperwork from the previous case. It must be well gone seven by now.

A click from the van made Winter's heart lurch when someone opened a door. The driver was visible for a second against the side panels before he silently went after the others. Winter didn't move, sure he couldn't be seen behind the crates. The faintest of creaks betrayed the position of the ghostlike figure when he reached the jetty and climbed the gangplank. It was amazing how silently he moved.

As the driver passed one of the lights, Winter caught a glimpse of a clean-shaven face and a sweep of jet black hair drawn back into a ponytail. The figure climbed noiselessly on deck and disappeared from sight. Winter abandoned his cover and hurried after him, careful to make no noise on the gravel. What the hell was the guy doing?

Winter saw the top half of the boat clearly now, with a limited view of the cabin's interior through the porthole. McEvoy and one of the fishermen moved past the window, but it was still impossible to see what was happening.

There was no sign of the driver until a shadow flitted briefly across the side of the cabin to suggest he was still on deck. Winter reached the gangplank and laid a hand on the metal balustrade. The cold stung his fingers.

If he continued forward, he would be exposed under the lights, but he had to get closer to see. Winter suddenly felt nervous. He was getting in deeper than he should by himself. With four of them, he could easily be killed and dumped at sea.

You're being foolish.

Beside the gangplank, the ground slowly fell toward the dark water under the jetty. As the clouds drifted from the moon, tufts of grass became visible, poking through the silt. Winter cautiously edged underneath and out of sight. Feeble shafts of light from the jetty lamps fell through cracks in the planking, and painted the water with stripes of yellow that danced in the ripples. Everything smelled musty and of seaweed.

He wondered how much closer to the boat he could get before the water became too deep or he got stuck in the mud. Already, one foot had half sunk between the weeds. Water sloshed over his shoes.

Through the legs of the jetty, he could see the hull of the fishing boat, and was about to try a step closer when the scuff of a foot overhead made him freeze. Winter held his breath, not moving as the gangplank creaked. He turned his face upward to peer through the cracks in time to see a shadow glide overhead.

A moment later, the faintest rattle of loose stones made Winter look over his shoulder toward the car park. The driver now leaned casually against the front wing of the van as though he'd been there all the time.

Barely seconds later, the boat rocked when someone climbed off deck onto the jetty, accompanied by a heavy thud and more footsteps. The murmur of men's voices filled the night air.

Feet tramped down the gangplank and stopped inches from where Winter crouched. A hoarse voice above him shouted, "I told you to stay in the van."

"I needed a pee." The reply drifted across to Winter. What was the accent? Australian? New Zealand? Antipodean, anyway. It was met by a loud snort of disgust from nearby. Someone trundled a trolley across the uneven slats with a squeak of metal.

Winter cautiously took a step sideways to get a better view. Mud clung to his shoes and squelched loudly. Sea water soaked through his socks but he barely noticed as he climbed back to the car park and watched, still hidden by darkness. What game was the driver playing?

McEvoy helped the others load the trolley with plastic crates—the type fishermen used for the night's catch. Winter's nose wrinkled at the smell of fish.

The jetty lights were sufficiently bright that he could see their faces as they worked. McEvoy's scruffy mound of beard and untrimmed moustache made him easily

identifiable. The other two were in their forties, both clean shaven with weathered faces; possibly brothers.

They finished and watched McEvoy wheel the load to the van. When he was halfway along the jetty, one of them yelled after him, "Careful you don't spill it." The other laughed as though he'd love to see McEvoy deposit the lot across the gangplank. They waited for him to reach the car park before untying the ropes and disappearing into the cabin. The engine throbbed into life, and water sloshed around the moorings when the fishing boat slid back into the night. Waves lapped against Winter's ankles.

The van driver threw open the rear doors and they loaded the crates. Winter didn't move; the cold from the water numbed his legs and feet. With the last tray stowed, McEvoy pushed the trolley aside and joined the driver. Gravel crunched when the van disappeared through the narrow exit.

Winter sprinted after them, pulling out car keys as he ran. Seconds later, he was wildly reversing the Audi and careening back along the narrow concrete track between the gorse bushes. An Environmental Agency sign glinted briefly as he bounced past it. The car bucked violently when it hit a speed ramp. He cracked his head against the windshield pillar. He cursed but didn't slow down. *You're not going to get out of my sight, not now.*

As the van turned left toward Rye, Winter dialed a number from his car phone.

* * * *

Eighty miles away, Kathleen Fry twisted a lock of hair between her long fingers. Suddenly realizing what she was doing, she stopped and started to endlessly square up the stacks of paper instead. She sat at her desk in Custom House in London's Lower Thames Street, an imposing colonnaded building of white stone that overlooked the river and London Bridge. This late at night, the only sound was the hum of her single PC. The ceiling lights were off except for the bank above her seat, and the edges of the open-plan office were in semi-darkness.

Fry was in her thirties, with ebony hair styled into a bob that framed a stern face. The fringe again flopped down over one eye, and she brushed it away. It had been a couple of hours since she'd spoken to James Winter. Where was he? She pushed up her cardigan's sleeve to check her watch again. He should never have gone down there alone, but that was just typical of him; reckless—like all men.

Winter had called her to explain about the tip-off just as she'd reached home. "No worries," she'd said. "I'll come straight back." It could only help to speed her promotion. She hadn't admitted her plans for the evening failed to extend beyond a solitary ready-meal in front of East Enders.

She couldn't help liking James—he was a good boss with a warm charm—but there were times he took too many risks. "He always gets results," someone had once said to her when she'd raised concern. Maybe, but it was certainly not an example she would want any of her team to emulate. One day, it would send him flat on his face. She needed to ensure he didn't take her down with him.

The phone rang from somewhere under the piles of papers, and Fry jumped, even though she'd been expecting it. She quickly excavated the handset. "Fry."

"Hi Kathleen, it's James Winter."

She suppressed any show of relief. When he'd finished filling her in, she said, "I managed to get Gavin on standby in the last few minutes, so I can send him down to you. It's always fun to spoil his social life. Where d'you think you're heading?"

Fry scribbled his answer on a Post-It note, and Winter rung off. She called Gavin on speed dial. "James called in," she said the second he answered. "He's following the target now. So stop trying to chat up that bird and get down there fast to support him."

She hung up, yawned and stretched, then padded to the coffee machine in the lobby. It could be a long night, but one she was not prepared to miss.

* * * *

Winter settled a safe distance behind their tail lights. The van's front beams sliced across the fields as it followed the twists of ancient boundaries. There were only a few other cars. Darkness stretched everywhere, with the moon barely a glow behind the thick cloud. They briefly neared the sprinkled lights of Rye before the van turned right, skirted the ancient walls and headed northeast, once more speeding across the expanse of black.

Winter stuck with them and, now the road was busier, he was able to keep one or two cars between him and the target.

Despite turning up the heating and blasting it at his feet, his socks still squelched inside his shoes with every gear change.

The warmth, combined with the sleep he'd lost with worry over Alison, made him drowsy. Winter wound down the window, felt the cold air whip across his face. If her surgery wasn't successful tomorrow, if they couldn't cure her, if she died...he tried not to think about it.

Cutting back across the marshes now, they retraced their route through flat grazing land to the isolated pub where McEvoy had met the driver. Sure enough, as they neared the Woolpack, brake lights flickered. Winter passed the van and waited farther up the road. McEvoy he could easily find afterwards, but he wanted to know more about the new driver. Moments later, the van swept past, and Winter again followed.

He tailed it up the A2070 and onto the dual carriageway, where they became one of a handful of vehicles on the dark road. The surroundings slowly became more urban. Street lights appeared, and Winter dropped back. Following with just a single car was notoriously difficult, even for Winter with his years of experience. If the target tried any anti-surveillance, Winter would easily be spotted or have to pull out.

The clock on the dash showed twenty past eight when they reached Ashford. Winter's heart lurched, and he thumped the steering wheel. *Shit! Where had all the time gone?* At his rate, Alison would be asleep when he finally got back to the hospital.

He shouldn't have come. A good husband would just have shrugged and told someone else to investigate the tip-off as soon as they could, even if that meant they totally missed McEvoy.

Well, he'd make up for it tomorrow with another day's leave to be with her for the operation. Dennis Shipman was showing an increasing lack of sympathy toward his time off. "Can't a friend take her? You're getting so behind schedule with what you're meant to be doing." So loving and empathetic, his boss. Well stuff him. Alison came first.

A knot of panic rose in his stomach at the thought of all the paperwork currently piled on his desk. The legal boys were already hassling him for the reports needed to

make the prosecution on his last case. Now there was this, right when Alison needed so much time.

Suddenly the van signaled and turned left. Street lights flooded pools of yellow light across the deserted roads. Large corrugated warehouses dwarfed the scattering of low brick offices, some with chain link fences surrounding their compounds, and “keep out” signs that rattled in the breeze. They passed cul-de-sacs of bland industrial units, and snaked their way through a crisscross maze of silent roads. Winter kept well back.

This was it. Winter felt a burst of excitement that pushed every other thought from his mind. They were almost there; he was about to find their distribution channel.

The van stopped in front of a chain-link gate. Beyond it was an empty car park and a two-story building of brown corrugated metal. With no sign boards and no markings anywhere except a large number fifty-two high up on the wall, it was totally anonymous.

The driver fiddled with the padlock and pushed the gate open. Moments later, the massive roller door at the front of the warehouse rattled upward, and he drove the van into the loading bay before lowering it behind him.

Winter quickly reversed his car into a nearby side road. He dialed Custom House again and rested a hand impatiently on the door handle. *Come on, where are you?* He was going to go in after the driver, but at least wanted to give Fry the chance to get a team in place first.

About the author

Ian Coates graduated with honors in engineering and has worked in the high tech electronics industry for thirty years, where he specialized in the design of radio communication equipment. His intimate knowledge of that environment has brought a unique authenticity to his writing. His interest in politics and lifelong love of thriller action suspense books led Mr. Coates to write, but it was being named as one of the winners in the Writers' & Artists' Yearbook centenary novel writing competition that spurred him on to complete his first novel. He wrote this Mossad spy fiction novel largely on planes and in airport lounges as well as in snatched half-hours before starting work each morning. Mr. Coates lives in Buckinghamshire, England with his wife and two daughters and is currently working on a second action thriller, *The Rival*.