

# **HITBACK**

P.S Bridge

**By the same author**

Hit

Hitback

**COMING SOON**

Hit: The Black Nest



# Prologue

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*April 1945*

The small group of civilians tentatively stepped aboard U-739 bound for Argentina, after all the VIP's were escorted on board. Some of the crew took one ladies hand as she gingerly stepped aboard the cold steel bridge that linked the U-boat to the harbour, staggering to stay upright as the vessel swayed in the rough waters.

The U-boat was to take them to Argentina, where they would be safe, living in a world of peace, not war and suffering and murder at the hands of the Red Army as they marched into the Furherland, butchering, raping, and murdering the German people as they went. It was a cold, wet April and their Commander welcomed them with a smile. Some saw straight through it immediately, knowing how dangerous this journey would be, but it had to be done, there was no way the Red Army would show them mercy. They were wanted and were not expecting to be treated well by the "invaders".

Some found their quarters easily and set down carefully on their cramped bunks which lined the main causeway. Things had been prepared in advance, for them. The Kastner's had connections and ensured the precious passengers travelled in comfort. The only details some of them knew, was that they were also carrying a Nazi General who would flee with them to Argentina, and start a new life away from the eyes of the world. One woman had only glimpsed the brown hat and frail body as he limped aboard before they embarked, flanked by heavily armed guards of the SS.

The Commander, a Freidrick Kirchner, a consummate professional, whose manner and discipline, instantly put his crew and passengers at ease, came to check on the small group, huddled together, to ensure they were settling in ok for the long journey ahead. He assured them that the crew aboard, had been handpicked for their loyalty to the Fuhrer and to Germany and he trusted them with his life. He ordered fresh blankets, sheets, medical supplies and a good supply of food. He also assured them that, as most allied shipping and naval armoury was directed towards Germany and France, they could slip, virtually undetected, to their Argentinian refuge, where provisions had already been made, to escort them to safety when they docked.

Mrs Kastner had noted how the crew aboard, had brought the best foods available with them, and, with such little time to prepare, this was an impressive feat. Food including fresh meat, sausages and bread loaves were available, and a multitude of fresh fruits and vegetables. However, certain foods could not be bought on board due to the damp environment of the U-boat.

The crew and passengers set out on the sixty-six day journey, submerged throughout, to avoid contact with any enemy destroyers or anti-submarine aircraft. It was to be a gruelling trip. The nurse questioned the Commander about their journey and intentions afterwards. He advised that he intended to join up with other members of the infamous 'Wolf Pack' group of German U-Boats that had plagued British shipping for the duration of the war, and they were planning to travel to Scotland and surrender there where they believed they would be treated fairly and not handed over to be butchered and tortured by the Russians. The group looked nervously at each other, wondering if they would make it safely to their destination.

After short stop off at Cape Verde, where the U-boat was re-supplied and some of the passengers and crew spent some much needed time ABOVE the surface and gave the Kastner's a chance to breathe normal air again which made her much more comfortable, it was full steam ahead to Argentina, where they would be met by friends who would help to relocate them and provide them with new identities and documents. There was a large pro-Nazi and German community in Argentina, and when they reached Mar Del Plata, they would take the journey by car and plane, to the villa which belonged to the Kastner family who had been so kind to them throughout this daring and dangerous scenario.

They reached Argentina and were welcomed ashore by two women who escorted them to a waiting vehicle. Mrs Kastner was in a bad way, having been uncomfortable for the last leg of the journey and Mr Kastner had stayed by her side the whole time. As they were getting into the waiting car, Mrs Kastner glimpsed over at another waiting car a little down the road, and saw the frail old man in the hat, being helped into the car by his wife, surrounded by armed guards. Whoever this was, she thought, was very important.

The car pulled away and headed for the small secluded runway strip just outside Laguna de los Padres, where a plane would take them, at night, to their final destination where they would be greeted with warm, comfortable beds, proper food and a chance to start afresh, away from war and suffering. The Kastner's were hoping to start a family when they arrived, so their child could be born into a world of peace and Mr Kastner had always hoped for a boy to carry on his family name. Perhaps this was their chance.

### ***December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1991***

Andriy was nervous. He'd never met a woman in secret before, especially not since he had been married, and he wasn't sure what to expect. She had been at the political rally a few days beforehand and seemed greatly interested in everything he had to say. She had also been interested in everything he did, especially in the bedroom and virtually threw herself at him. Away from the cameras, he had to maintain a safe distance; however, behind closed doors it was a different story.

He loved his wife very much, but their marriage had been static lately and, with him being on the road so much, it wasn't easy to make time for affection and normality. There was a knock at the room door, and Andriy checked through the small spy hole in the door. He smiled and opened the door, allowing his guest to slip quietly in.

Andriy escorted his guest over to a small round table, set for two, adorned with a crisp, clean white cloth, and containing silver plates, a bottle of Bollinger Champagne, and lit with a candle. He politely pulled out the chair for Miss Shadrova and she sat, smiling up at him, her face beaming with adoration and affection at how she was being treated, like a lady, unlike the way others had treated her in the past.

They talked as they ate, about his political campaign, about her life before they met, and about what their future held for them both. Andriy talked with passion and determination, about a Ukraine free from crime, strong, with a great military and Miss Shadrova's eyes glistened with pride as she listened to him speak of the changes he would make when he became President. Her mind wandered to what it would be like to be married to such a man and why his wife would not support his dreams of becoming president. She would support him in everything he did and he would always have her for support.

In the morning, she awoke to find the bed empty and a small note on the pillow next to her. She dressed and left the hotel quietly, without being seen, heading back home to await a call from Andriy, like he promised, asking her to join him on his campaign tour.

The wait, would be in vain.....

HITBACK

# Chapter One

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**T**he twelve-year-old Scottish Malt was going down a treat, along with a large steak as Mark sat back and relaxed in the burgundy leather arm chair in front of the window. He had prime place this afternoon at the Carnegie Club's Skibo Castle in Scotland's eastern highlands. It stood on the shores of the Dornoch Firth and was a prestigious private club. Mark hadn't been since before Hope was born and so took the opportunity whilst sorting out the sale of his and Marie's marital home, to have a few days break here. He had managed to find time for some shooting and felt relaxed. He pulled out his phone to answer a text from Benjamin in New York asking when he would be home because he wanted them to go to a 'boys only' trip to see the New York Giants play the Philadelphia Eagles.

Mark was excited by this prospect and text back advising it was a fantastic idea and he would book the tickets on his return home. He smiled; they had bonded so well together since he returned from Algeria. They had really coped well with Marie's death and he was surprised at just how grown up they were. Perhaps it was the American influence on them and he noted that both children were getting more of a transatlantic accent these days. Perhaps it was everything they had all been through together which helped them to grow up a bit too quickly, or could it have been his mother-in-law's tutorship. She had helped them realise that evil existed in the world and that it should be faced rather than hidden from. This always gave Mark new vigour when he encountered a problem he didn't always know how to solve and he thought Marie would have been very proud of the children.

Mark wasn't sure what he would do next, but perhaps the future didn't look as bleak as it first did. These past months had taught Mark that there WAS hope. Mark knew he would not be welcomed in the public eye anymore after what happened in London, nor did he want to be involved in that anymore, and he definitely couldn't go back to Lever & Sons to continue his work. Perhaps he could write a book under an assumed name. It would keep him busy and as Marie's life insurance was safely in a trust for the children; money wasn't a problem anymore. He had to do something though, but not right now. Now was a time for relaxing and enjoying his surroundings. He got up to get another drink and, as he did so, walked straight into a beautiful redhead clutching a small Louis Vuitton bag. She apologised profusely, as did Mark and he smiled helplessly at her and she stared back, the two of them not knowing what to do.

It had been a while since Marie and Mark had not even considered moving on with his love life, despite desperate pleas from Hope to date again. He wouldn't know where to begin and felt very much like he did when he first started college, way before St Andrews. The pair continued to stare at each other before Mark finally came to his senses,

'Er, I'm sorry. Please. I wasn't looking where I was going,' he stuttered, trying to hide the increasing feeling of going red in the face, 'let me get you a drink to make up for it?'

She smiled again,

'Thank you, no. I have somewhere I need to be, perhaps another time?'

She continued on her way, leaving Mark feeling slightly embarrassed and now under the watchful eye of the barman, though perhaps it was the Whiskey which caused him not to see that woman. He felt sure she wasn't there when he got up. It couldn't have been the Whiskey, he'd only had one. He ordered another and leant casually at the bar and glanced round to see if he could catch sight of her again. She was nowhere to be seen. He thought perhaps she was on her way to the spa or outside for a cigarette. Mark felt for his 'emergency' packet in his shirt pocket and his zippo in his dark tan chinos. He would take a look outside to see if she was out there as he was puzzled about where she could have gone so quickly. He grabbed his dark brown leather jacket from the chair and, Whiskey in hand, headed out onto the terrace which overlooked the woodland and hills of the Scottish Highlands. Mark took it in with a big breath.

No matter how many times he came up here, it was still as beautiful as ever and it NEVER failed to amaze him. He took great delight in smoking his cigarette as he hadn't smoked all the time he was in New York. He didn't want to do that in front of his family and, well, it was HIS little pleasure and he wanted it for occasions like this where he felt free and, for once in a long, long while, was happy the word? He wasn't sure, but he felt contented. He had nothing but time and didn't have to fly back to London until the day after tomorrow. His joints had eventually stopped aching and rounds of intense physio had returned Mark to peak physical fitness in the months after Algeria. He also knew he would have to head to the bunker to check things over there but he wasn't sure what to do with that either. He supposed he would put it all into the deep storage levels way below ground in secure boxes and with laser alarm systems he had installed, just in case there should ever come a time when he would need it.

The black boots of Alpha team 6 splashed the mud puddles and leaves as the team approached the modern, wooded house they were targeting. Their black Kevlar gloves gripped triggers and safety catches intently as they covered each other's access, all the while checking and re checking their line of sight for any signs of disturbance. The leader held his arm and all 6 members of the team dropped to their knees silently, like deer being stalked in the dark. Their piercing, determined eyes shone through their balaclava's and their combat gear was laden with ammunition, although it was to be a quick in and out, they were about to ambush someone who knew them and their tactics well. Inside the lake house, a single table lamp illuminated the window and an old man sat at a computer screen and seemed to be desperately willing something to happen on the screen in front of him.



Something caught his eye, and he instinctively moved under the desk for his shotgun and suppressed Glock.

He kept shooting anxious glances at his computer screen until he was satisfied the email he had just drafted, was sent before typing something quickly on the keyboard and standing well back. In a matter of seconds, the computer exploded in a small, controlled explosion, obliterated and beyond repair. Suddenly, the table lamp next to the old man went out. He stood, motionless and almost not breathing at all.

He was ex Marines and knew what was about to happen, he had been on many operations like this before and he waited for the smoke grenade to come through the glass window. He knew he would only have precious seconds after this, to fire off a few shots at whoever was out there. He had a good idea who it was and who sent them and why. He gripped the double-barrelled shot gun tightly in his aged hands as he waited for the window to come through. He spotted the red laser sight of someone searching for a target through the darkness and it settled on the computer. Then the ping of the glass, and a smoke grenade landed on his desk. In one move, the old man jumped in front of the window and let off two shots, killing one member of Alpha team six and seriously wounding another. No sooner had the old man moved back behind cover; he had opened the barrels and reloaded them. He waited for the burst of automatic gun fire to rip through the remains of the window and tried to hold his breath to avoid the smoke grenade forcing him to cough and give away his position.

‘Come on ya backless bastards’, he muttered to himself, in his thick Scottish accent, flinching at the flying glass and wooden fragments from the window frame which burst in the air.

The old man held on until the gunfire ceased but immediately he was back in front of the window and fired off another two shots, taking out two more of Alpha Team six. He heard the smash of his front door and realised it was time to ditch the shot gun as he didn’t have time or space to reload it now, anyway. He pulled the suppressed Glock from his holster and shot the first man through the door, straight in the face,

‘Clumsy oaf, amateur mistake.’ the old soldier laughed.

The second knocked the old man to the floor with the butt of his gun but it didn’t worry him, even at his age, after all, he had lived through far worse beatings than that. He tasted the blood and spat towards the Alpha team Six Commander and laughed manically at them.

‘That supposed to frighten me laddie?’ he scorned as he tried to pick himself up, ‘you’re gonae have to do a load better than that ya noo.’

The commander swore at him and lifted a foot to kick him, but the old man was quicker, and rolled out of the way, grabbing the small telephone table as he did so and smashing it

against the commander's outstretched leg. The commander gave a shout and went down clutching his knee.

'See laddie' he chocked, mocking the professional as he writhed around the floor trying to stem the blood from a badly broken and splintered leg, 'There's life in the old dawg yet!'

The old man looked down in panic as he spotted several little red dots on his chest. It didn't matter now anyway, the warning email had been sent via a secure server so they couldn't even track it and, especially as the computer was now toast. He heard a noise in the shadows and growled into the darkness

'Aye reckon I gots one more feyte left in me yet. Are ye goona be man enough to show yeself tae me or ye goon a be a dirty coowerd and heyed?'

There was silence but the old man peered into the darkness, looking for clues as to the height, weight and shape of whoever stood there. He had done his calculations and fired into the darkness at whoever was there. Before the hail of automatic weapons bullets deprived him of all his senses and his life, the old man heard the screams and gurgles of the target he hit with his Glock and smiled to himself before the final remnants of life left him.

Footsteps echoed around the lake house as what remained of Alpha Team six, rifled through draws, cupboard, and anywhere where documents could be hidden, before assembling outside. Three large black four-by-four's pulled up on the muddy path outside and two members of Alpha Team pulled their injured colleagues out of the lake house while others opened the car doors. The Commander limped over to the driver of one of the vehicles and requested a radio. The driver handed it to him and he relayed the message to command

'Eagle One, Eagle One this is Alpha six, repeat, this is Alpha six. Target eliminated, confirm target has been eliminated.' the radio crackled, and whined before the reply came across the airwaves,

'Roger Alpha six, this is Eagle One, received and understood. Over.' The commander of Alpha six returned the radio to the driver and glanced around at remained of his team. He watched grimly as the body bags were carried into the back of the third vehicle. The Commander's men stopped what they were doing and looked to him for orders. He motioned for them to wind up and get going.

Behind a long boardroom table made of dark grey granite, surrounded by eleven other members of the 'House', a man switched off various TV screens around the hall. It was footage taken from Algeria and Mark King's assault on the Ain M'lila airfield. The room was silent and everyone looked down at their paperwork. Then the man at the head of the table spoke in a low, gruff and elderly voice

'This clearly showed a very experienced and skilled Mark King assaulting the facility in a textbook format which resulted in the destruction of the site and the loss of one hundred plus men, not to mention equipment, documents and files relating to our movements, the whereabouts of assets and banking correspondence. Would anyone please like to inform me as to how this was allowed to happen?'

The old man, Richard Tremone, Head of House, then flicked the screen on again, this time showing a different black and white hand-held camera video. It was from the lead men in Alpha Team six who were wearing battle cams on their flak jackets. It showed the murder of the old man in the lake house and the burning of all his possessions.

'Gentlemen,' he began 'it is good to see SOME people know what they're doing. Is there any other business we must attend to before we bring this meeting to a close?'

One small, shrill voice rang out from one of the eleven places, a small, weedy looking man in an ill-fitting suit who sat, trembling as he spoke

'Sir,' he said nervously, 'I think you ought to take a look at this.'

The man handed Tremone a file of CCTV still images and a medical file. The eyes of the old man at the head of the table widened when he flicked through the images of a man in intensive care at a hospital. He raised his glasses to look at the man who had handed them to him.

'When were these taken?' He asked sternly.

'This morning Sir,' replied the nervous reply.

Tremone slammed the file down on the table, making the already nervous 11 members, even more nervous.

Just as he was about to adjourn the meeting, the oak door into the hall burst open and a young man with blonde hair down past his eyes and an expensive Tom Ford suit which still looked cheap on him, strolled in smoking a cigarette. The men at the table stood up and backed off in shock, Tremone looked concerned but relaxed. He glared at the insolence of this unannounced visitor and signalled to several of the guards to take control of the situation. Just as the guards moved to intercept, several armed thugs entered the room armed with automatic weapons and the whole room fell still and silent. The blonde man laughed as he flicked his cigarette across the room and approached Richard Tremone, sitting in front of him at the table. The blonde blew the last remnants of cigarette smoke into Tremone's face. There was an exchange of whispers and both men dismissed their body guards. The head of the house spoke

'Is this who is responsible for Mark King "relieving" us of our assets and control?' Tremone asked fiercely.

The men previously sat around the table nervously returned to their seats and all nodded. Tremone pulled out a silver pistol and held it to the blonde man's head.

'Is there any reason I should NOT pull this trigger?' he sneered as he watched beads of sweat drip down the blonde man's forehead.

He looked nervous in a slightly mentally disturbed way Tremone looked expectantly around the room awaiting an answer. None came so without warning, he pulled the trigger and the blonde man dropped to the floor while blood spatter stained the granite table and all paperwork left on it. There was shock around the room as everyone was now terrified.

'MEETING ADJOURNED!' he shouted, face red with rage.

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# Chapter Two

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Mark wandered around the patio terrace outside the lounge bar enjoying his second cigarette as he sipped his Malt. The taste combination of the two made him feel at ease and calm while his eyes scanned the grounds for the mysterious redhead whose drink he spilled. His heart beat faster at the thought of seeing her again and this excitement he had not felt since Marie and was a strange feeling. However, what intrigued him most was that there was something else about her which he couldn't put his finger on, which didn't quite add up. He was always taught at Sandhurst and as a Lawyer, to take notice of your gut instinct and this had his gut worrying. His expert eye caught sight of a slight flash between the trees towards the forest and he instantly recognised it as a muzzle flash.

Thinking it was a late afternoon shoot, he waited for the shot to echo through the trees and for the birds to scatter in shock. Instead he heard a muted thud and his blood went cold realising that unauthorised weapons meant that something was wrong. He gulped down his whiskey and flicked his cigarette with disappointment and hopped over the small stone wall and ran down towards where the sound was coming from. As he neared the area, he saw the muzzle flash, he heard several more shots, this time, they were in his direction and he ducked on the run as bark splintered and flew in all directions around him. He stopped and hit the ground on one knee to buy himself some time. He quickly assessed the situation and realised he was in the middle of a shootout and there were numerous shooters. He had no weapon and no idea who they were shooting at. Mark was about to get up and resume his search when he heard twigs snapping and footsteps coming quickly towards him. He braced himself for impact when out of some bushes, ran the redhead from the bar, clutching a black revolver and a balaclava, quickly followed by a hail of automatic gunfire, muted by the thickness of the surrounding forest.

'Ohhh look out Mr King, coming through' she giggled as she ran toward him, looking comical trying to run through woodland in high heels.

Mark raised his eyes in sarcasm and surprise as she motioned to him to run. Mark grabbed the redhead and shielded her from the debris of tree bark, stone shards and falling leaves and branches as the two of them ran for cover, back towards the patio and club.

'Pretend you've had an accident and you are suffering from shock and cold,' Mark scolded as they approached the patio doors which lead into the lounge bar. She smiled, rolled her eyes and nodded.

'Oh sweetie, really? That old chestnut again? Is there nothing more original Mr King?' she replied before switching on the acting like a light as they were met with a concerned barman and club manager, flanked by security.

Mark snatched the handgun away from her and concealed it in his belt and acted as the concerned club member.

'Shut up,' he Mark indignantly as he grabbed her arm tightly, causing her to wince in pain, his mind racing with thoughts of what just happened and that he desperately needed answers from her.

'Monsieur King, Mademoiselle Moore,' the club manager exclaimed in his light French accent, with a look of terror on his face as he guided them inside and up to the bar where he ordered the barman to fetch the Brandy, 'what on earth has 'appened? Are you both ok?'

Miss Moore opened her mouth to speak before Mark quickly shut her down and spoke on her behalf, squeezing her arm tighter to shut her up

'This lady seems to have taken a bit of a tumble down the hill,' he said loudly, shooting Miss Moore an angry look.

'I heard her shouting and managed to find her but I think she is in shock' he continued, thrusting the brandy in her hand that the barman had put in front of them. Miss Moore swallowed the brandy in one and placed the glass down on the bar, beckoning to the barman for another, winking at him as she did so

'I think I'll escort Miss Moore to her room so she can change and calm her nerves.' Mark suggested, leading Miss Moore away from the bar while the barman stood hopelessly holding out the brandy for her.

Miss Moore's arm was outstretched as she was marched away by Mark, reaching for the brandy. Mark half threw her half pushed her against the wall in the corridor outside the lounge bar. She straightened up and smiled at him, dropping the act immediately

'How did I do hunny?' she asked flirtatiously. Mark scowled at her but couldn't help but admire her skills.

'Great, yeah great.' Mark replied sarcastically, annoyed with her enough as it was, 'very Oscar worthy. Quick, give this girl a part in the next big movie.'

Miss Moore by this time was reapplying her make-up and removing leaves and twigs from her clothing. She replied to Mark without looking up from her small handbag mirror as she fixed her lipstick and blusher

'You know Mr King; you really ought to respect a fellow "professional" she teased, showing her annoyance at the apparent lack of gratitude from Mark.

He glared at her as he followed her up the stairs to her room enraged at her comments. Professional, he thought to himself. What professional? Who the hell was this woman and how did she know his name? Miss Moore slid the room key gracefully into the lock on the room door and swung open the door. Instantly, Mark shoved her inside, locked the door, pushed her onto the bed and pulled out her revolver, aiming it at her determinedly.

'You, Miss Moore, will tell me *exactly* what happened down in the woods and how the bloody hell you know my name'

Miss Moore resigned herself to defeat and sat herself up and explained who she really was. Mark listened intently as she described she was Nadia Moore and she was a hit woman on the trail of a drug lord from South America rumoured to have been holidaying in Scotland this week. She reached across to a silver metallic case as she talked. Mark flicked the hammer down on the revolver, making her jump. He put both hands in the air but relaxed when he realised she was going for black and white stills of each of this drug lords henchmen. She finished explaining and looked up at Mark who was stunned by it. There was something else still unanswered.

'So you are after revenge. But there's one more thing,' he said in a low voice. Nadia Moore expected this and handed Mark one final photograph from her case. Mark holstered the revolver and took the photograph and stared at it in disbelief before turning to Nadia Moore, 'where did you get this?'

'From one of the men I shot in the woods.' she replied in a very 'matter of fact' tone.

Mark's head swam, and he sat down as the shock pumped through him. Nadia reached for him to prevent him from falling over and sat him down, grabbing a cold bottle of water from her mini fridge and handing it to him. Mark gulped it down, scarcely able to breathe as a million and one thoughts ran through his mind. He had left that life behind him and now it seems they still will not listen. He stared again at the black and white image of him, taken a few days previously, along with several smaller shots of him at the airport, getting into his hire car, checking into the club and smoking on the balcony prior to spotting the muzzle flash in the woods.

Mark stood up and reached for his cigarettes as he strode towards the bedroom window, checking out through the curtain before opening it to let the cigarette smoke out. He was thinking far too fast for his own good and he liked none of the options he was considering. Nadia got up and reached for her suitcase and headed into the second bedroom to get changed. Mark took the photographs and put them inside his jacket as he thought back to the last time he was in this dark, violent and unrelenting world of killing. His mind flashed back to multiple episodes he was involved in after Marie's death, the near

death encounters he had, those who betrayed him, tried to kill him and those who helped him. It was a flash back, it was also a play of options and Mark realised he had to go back to his bunker.

‘Where do I find these people?’ he shouted to Nadia through the closed second bedroom door. She opened the door slightly to hear him better.

‘Intelligence suggests there is a branch of this group operating out of Ukraine. I don’t know if they are based there or whether they are moving around. I only know some sort of deal is due to take place in a few days.’

Mark thought for a second, if she has access to intelligence, she must have skills. Could she be CIA, FBI, NSA, MI6?

‘Where do you get your information from? You’re clearly not CIA, FBI, NSA or MI6. Born in Leicester from your voice, late thirties, early forties? Various public school educations but a bit of a rebel?’

Nadia stared at him, impressed but cross as he was right.

‘Probably either expelled or ran away and spent time on the streets and in and out of strangers beds to get what you want. Learned to shoot, probably from shacking up with an older soldier or military source. You are angry at something and that path has led you here. The deaths of someone close, perhaps?’

She slammed the bedroom door, hearing most of her life story narrated by a stranger she’d only just met was painful as she had much of it hidden deep where it could not cause her any harm. But now she was vulnerable and hurt. But he was right.

Mark raised his eyebrows in shock at her sudden outburst of anger and pulled another cigarette from his jacket pocket, turning towards the window. Suddenly he remembered to check the clip in the revolver. He pulled it from his jacket and checked it. four left. That meant she was hitting or attempting to hit more than one target.

‘So who were the people in the woods then?’ he asked, hoping to probe her for more intelligence. The furniture she pushed in front of the bedroom door moved and it opened.

‘Remember that drug lord I told you about?’ she said sternly. Mark nodded, ‘those were his goons. I walked into a trap. If he WAS here, they managed to usher him away before I got too close. I was out-gunned, and I wasn’t expecting that much resistance.’ she explained, as Mark smiled at her amateur approach to the situation. She continued

‘I did some recon some time ago when I came here last and figured out which rooms they would put a VIP in or someone with serious connections. I figured out the blind spots and ideal places for an ambush and planned for the entourage to be provided with



complimentary shooting sessions so the sound of my weapon would be masked by the shooting and so it would look like a terrible accident.'

Nadia Moore sounded almost mournful at her failure to hit her target. Mark felt sorry for her, knowing her pain.

Mark looked again at the pictures. He didn't recognise the face and was confident he had not been at the club; at least, not in person. His thoughts wandered back to his children; perhaps they were also a target too. He had a difficult phone call to make. He pulled out his mobile and called the home phone. His mother-in-law answered and Mark explained everything. He was met by serious resistance but when he explained what Nadia had found on the pictures, her tone had changed. He ended the call by asking her to explain to the children that he was caught up in an issue and would be home as soon as possible. After he came off the phone, he logged onto his open email accounts and purchased a plane ticket to Cairo.

'What are you doing?' Nadia asked him after watching him for some time.

'Booking a ticket to Cairo.' he replied,

'Why Cairo? What's there? These guys are based in the Ukraine?' she pushed. Mark was getting frustrated now. Mark smiled at her.

'If they are monitoring my holiday, chances are they knew I was coming, which means they may have a tap on my phone,'

Nadia felt her phone, concerned that the goons that got away could have tapped HER phone too.

'So I booked a ticket to Cairo so that they will look for me there, which buys me time in the Ukraine.' he explained. Nadia smiled admiringly.

'Resourceful' she replied. They both smiled at each other before Mark remembered himself and made his excuses to leave, 'you're just going to abandon me then?' she shrieked after him. At the door, he turned to glare at her,

'Put it this way "sweetheart", if they have information on me from my life before, they know who they're dealing with. I need to move fast if I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I can't carry anyone. The last time I did that, it ended badly'

Mark was surprised at the amount of pain which came flooding back when he remembered Frans Luca and the unnecessary way he died. Nadia felt insulted by his comments.

'So you think because I'm female, I am a liability?' she accused, angry at his apparent lack of respect for her and her skills.

'It has nothing to do with those two on your chest' Mark said pointing to and eyeing up the rather impressive cleavage on show and the half-dressed Nadia stood in the doorway.

Nadia looked down at herself having forgotten she came to talk to him half naked. But she felt flattered as she saw his eyes run all over her briefly. He had to admit her body was impressive.

Once he had logged off, he dropped it and stamped on it until it was nothing but an unrecognisable pile of plastic and glass. Next he reached down to the sim card and put it in the ash tray and set fire to it, setting it down on the open window sill. He felt in the lining of his jacket for his back up phone and made a small tear in the coat lining, revealing a burn phone. He powered it up and logged onto his secure emails, where he purchased a ticket to the Ukraine, leaving first thing in the morning. He would drive overnight to Glasgow airport and fly direct to Kiev where he would set up and work out his next move.

Nadia stood, stunned as Mark king left her room and shut the door. She was furious that after coming to her aid the way he did and them sharing a common goal that he would just abandon her. She looked for her cigarettes and sat on the bed in next to nothing smoking to calm her down before preparing her kit.

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# Chapter Three

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After half an hour, there was a knock at the door. Nadia grabbed her back up weapon as Mark had taken her revolver, and silently made her way through the darkness to the room door, peeping through the spy hole. It was Mark King.

She opened the door and was about to throw an insult at him when he walked right in and sat down on the bed. He had his kit bag with him and she could see he had his holster on under his jacket which presumably housed her revolver.

'Tell me about the people you've been tracking' he asked with a stern and determined look on his face. Nadia's face fell from angry to reconciliation in a matter of seconds. No man had been able to do that for her except her father. She was surprised by this and shut the room door and went over to sit down next to him on the bed. She handed him her cigarette packet and reached over to pour some coffee from the in room percolator. Mark was extremely grateful for this and smiled at her as she handed him the hot black coffee. He lit up a cigarette and lit Nadia's for her. Nadia reached over the bed and picked up a series of files from her go bag. She handed them to him and they both sat there in silence, sipping coffee and smoking for a few moments. Mark thumbed through the files and took pictures on his burn phone of any information he thought might be of relevance.

Hours went by and lots of discussions, coffee, cigarettes and knowledge sharing. Mark had forgotten what it was like to have female company and Nadia had not spent time with a man like this who didn't want to abuse her or sleep with her. This Mark King didn't seem to expect anything, although she did catch his eyes wandering a few times, but that didn't bother her too much. She knew far more about him that he was aware of and she admired him although he made her angry with his typical male 'go it alone and the devil may care' attitude.

The bustle of people rushing to and fro in their suits, dresses and holiday clothing was something Mark King had NOT missed and he thought back to the peace of Scotland before it erupted into another battle between him and unseen forces. He had left Nadia Moore sound asleep in her room at The Carnegie Club and slipped out with her files and a few other 'items' he had relieved her of. He had also paid for her to have another few nights stay, a spa, full massage and facial treatment. After what she had been through, it was the least he could do. He hoped she would forgive him for slipping a sleeping sedative into her coffee in order to prevent her from joining him on his little excursion, and he had also done a background check which he was waiting for the results to come back. He checked his watch; there was a good fifteen to twenty minutes of time left before he had to board so thought it was a good idea to pop outside for a cigarette before the flight.

He caught the eye of the receptionist whose attempt at flirting with him made him chuckle to himself. As she stood to question where he was going, he waved his cigarette packet partially out of his top jacket pocket and she smiled and mouthed 'OK' as she sat back down. As he opened the door to walk outside, he used the perfectly polished reflection in the glass to check out the rest of the passengers sat around waiting for the same flight and to see if he had been followed. He relaxed a little knowing no one had got up to follow him.

He stepped outside into the cold Glasgow air and pulled the collar up on his dark blue puffer jacket to keep himself warm. He eyed all the taxi's and possible surveillance cars with suspicion and he could tell which vehicles made good covert surveillance vehicles. Usually Chrysler Voyagers and Grand Voyagers, Vauxhall Zafira and Meriva's, people movers or as the Americans fondly referred to them, MPV's, Mercedes with blacked-out windows, basically any vehicle in which the occupants didn't want to be seen. The sun was low, and he was grateful he has his aviator sunglasses on. He finished up his cigarette and made his way back into the departure lounge. Seated at a table with a coffee in the far corner of the departure lounge so he had a view of the whole room and so that no one could look over his shoulder, he again thumbed through the files on the different mercenaries Nadia Moore had under surveillance to get close to this "drug lord" target she was chasing. What issues did SHE have with him? She was quite open about a lot of what she was doing but got cagey when he had pushed her for more information on WHY she was chasing him. Mark had an idea who was responsible for the surveillance, but had no idea what that had to do with a South American gangster.

Could it be that Invictus Advoca have been revived and are back to get revenge on him for taking down Thomas Lundon? He puzzled over that thought for a while before he was called to board his flight, so he put the files in his secure carry-on luggage which was lined with thin material preventing them from showing up on the airport X-ray scanners. He grabbed his coffee and headed towards the entrance gates. He was tired as he and Nadia has spent the majority of the night discussing how best to locate the operatives of this sex trafficking ring in the Ukraine. Mark, meanwhile, had made calls to some old clients he still had left to talk to. He needed setting him up with some bad guys in the Ukraine so he could infiltrate the underworld and get close to this gang and see where it leads. He had a meeting and half past three with his contact that planned to introduce him to some 'investors' in his skills. They required someone to take care of some "issues" they had. He would be perfectly placed to gain valuable intelligence on Invictus Advoca's Eastern European arm. This looked like their area of operation.

As the black Mercedes S Class completed another circle of Cairo International Airport, its driver and passengers were beginning to get frustrated. Their intelligence told them their target was due to have landed forty minutes ago yet there was still no sign. The driver radioed to the second vehicle waiting on the other side of the airport to obtain an update

and whether their target's passport had been sighted passing through airport security. It was relatively easy to slip an inside man into security as they were always short staffed and nothing really needed doing other than standing at the security gates, checking for a specific target. Once the target had been sighted, the job was done and they could leave to follow their target. However, on this occasion, even the inside man had not seen Mark King at all. Surely they couldn't have let him slip past them? They had two on security; checking everyone's passport, plus the S Class Mercedes, plus the Mercedes G Class on the opposite side of the airport. Not only that, but their tech analyst had hacked into the CCTV system so they could make doubly sure there wouldn't be a problem. After all, the last time their organisation faced off Mark King, the majority of them ended up dead.

A voice came back over the radio, English, although transatlantic and very serious.

'No mate, not seen a thing. Keep your eyes peeled though, he's a slippery little bugger and dangerous. Do another round of the airport and KEEP IT TIGHT!'

The occupants of the S Class looked at each other apprehensively. What would their boss say if 8 of them couldn't apprehend ONE single target? One of the passengers tightened his grip on his automatic rifle and grabbed the radio and blasted insultingly across the airwaves in a cockney accent

'Listen, I don't give a bleedin monkeys if he's dangerous or not you pillock. I'll av him on his back before he can say 'ows ya father,'

A third voice radioed through mocking the man's English accent by putting on his own off Dick Van Dykes accent from Mary Poppins,

'Mushy peas,' it mocked.

The men in the car all laughed as the one nearest the car window put down his hi tech telephoto camera to glare at the others for their childish behaviour.

Mark was sat drinking his coffee and thumbing through the files he stole from Nadia Moore in Scotland. He watched the people coming and going in the airport and his mind wandered back to his and Marie's last flight together until the reality of where he was became blurred with the vision he was seeing.

A young Russian couple walked past with the male holding the arm of the female tightly. She looked scared and tense as he roughly pulled her along. She turned to look at him but instead, Mark saw Marie. He saw her reach out to him in slow motion and could make out the words 'help me' fly from her lips. The male turned round and Mark stared in horror as the face of Roman Vose came into view. Mark was on his feet and began to run towards them reaching for his gun, only to find his holster was empty. The image of Marie and Roman Vose suddenly began to appear further away and the more Mark ran, the further away the couple got, until the world blurred into a narrow vanishing point ahead of him.

Mark looked desperately around him to find the room was suddenly full of the faces of people he had killed and recognised faces of people he knew, friends, relations, his children, Agent Williams and others who all seemed to be doing nothing to help and he tried to scream but only silence came out. Sweat was beginning to pour down Marks face as he desperately tried to catch up to Roman Vose and Marie. Roman laughed at Mark and began to pull Marie away further. Marks breathing became laboured as he began to run out of breath. Roman Vose drew a Glock from his holster and held it to Marie's head and just as he is about to pull the trigger, Mark came to his senses and looked around him, panicked, sweating and breathing heavily.

After a few moments, he calmed down and realised he'd acted out the flashback and was stood across from his table, face to face with a young Russian couple about to board his plane. The male, a stocky bald-headed guy in jeans and a jacket, glared defensively at Mark and the female looked terrified and confused. Mark felt thoroughly embarrassed as the male, in broken English, spoke

'What do you want?' he said slowly, squaring up to Mark. Mark quickly assessed the situation and decided fighting was not an option here.

'Nothing, I'm so very sorry' he panted, feeling confused about what was real and what was imagination, 'mistook you for someone familiar.'

Mark sheepishly but worryingly returned to his table, glancing round at people staring at him in shock. A member of staff approached him cautiously

'Is everything OK sir?' she asked. 'Do you need anything?' Mark shook his head and apologised for causing a stir.

He shook his head to try to shake the feeling he had of confusion and shock. He picked up his things and asked the receptionist how long boarding would take. She advised him he had another ten minutes so Mark requested she let all the other passengers on the plane first so he could have a cigarette and calm himself down. The sweet receptionist smiled and nodded, charmed at his gentlemanly gesture.

Outside, Mark breathed a huge sigh of relief as that boarding lounge was becoming claustrophobic. He inhaled his cigarette deeply and watched as the smoke hung in the air before rising slowly skyward. His heart rate was returning to a normal pace after the panic that engulfed him like a tidal wave a few minutes before. He was still shocked but calming down and he puzzled over how he lost so much control. It wouldn't be the first time he had these flashbacks but thought they were just some form of delayed Post Traumatic Stress, caused by the last time he did this. At first he ignored them as they weren't too bad, but over the last few weeks, and especially since Scotland, they have been getting worse. Also, he had a severe headache and, putting his cigarette out, made for the pharmacy counter

for some headache tablets before returning to the boarding lounge just in time to board his flight.

It was ironic that Mark was behind the same young Russian couple who he had scared by his behaviour earlier and the girl kept shifting her eyes to him the whole time they were in the queue. Mark thought this was strange, especially as the man had his hand firmly, almost abusively round her upper left arm and it looked extremely uncomfortable. Mark decided he would keep a close eye on these two as the female, whose name he managed to make out through the few Russian words exchanged between the two, was Elena. The male had noticed Mark and his body language changed as soon as he noticed. He became defensive and nervous, shifting his weight from one foot to the next. Mark noted his breathing had also quickened and wondered if they may be on the run from someone, or illegal immigrants trying to get somewhere without being caught. Either way, their passports checked out, and they had tickets which had been upgraded to the same class as Mark's so at least he could keep an eye on them if they were to be seated together.

Mark boarded flight LH1412, headed for Kiev Boryspil Airport and settled into seat "22B" next to the window, settling himself down for the five hour flight. There were two empty seats next to him and he was wondering who would sit next to him when he heard raised voices a few rows behind him. He turned to see the young Russian couple debating with the air stewardess about where they were sitting. He watched for a few moments, noting the male's abusive and aggressive behaviour, noting that he was an abusive partner. The poor Elena looked helpless and embarrassed at the problems being caused before the air stewardess apologized and directed them into the two empty seats next to Mark. As they sat down, the male looked at Mark and rolled his eyes, frustrated at the fact that, yet again, they faced "the guy he didn't trust". Elena made a half-hearted attempt at a smile which Mark wasn't, for one second, convinced by and was adjusting her seat when Mark noticed her sleeve had risen higher up her wrist.

There were multiple scars including what appeared to be obvious finger marks, and what seemed to be burn marks and a small branding mark. Elena noticed him staring and quickly pulled her sleeve back down, hoping Mark didn't see them. Mark turned his gaze to the window and wondered what other scars she had that people couldn't see. He felt sorry for her and the more he thought about it, the more he believed she was being taken somewhere against her will and he fully intended to find out where and why, when they landed.

Mark awoke with a start hearing the seatbelt notification being called. He realised he had been asleep almost three and a half hours after carefully watching the behaviour of Elena and her 'companion' by using the black screen of his mobile phone as a mirror. There was no doubt in his mind she was being abused and held against her will so Mark had devised a plan to follow them out of the airport and teach this ugly son-of-a-bitch how to respect and treat a woman properly. The stewardess passed, reminding everyone to fasten

their seatbelts for landing and the Russian male glared at her and made offensive comments to her in Russian. Her colleague further down the aisle noticed and looked worried. The two stewardesses whispered to each other, occasionally glaring at the Russian male in disgust, then at Elena in sympathy. Mark lip read their discussion about how anyone could stay with such an ugly despicable thug as that and that they felt sorry for the 'poor love' because she was probably too frightened to leave.

If Mark's mind wasn't made up he would do something about this before that, it certainly was now and just as Elena was fastening her seatbelt, he slyly patted her hand to reassure her. The two locked eyes for a few seconds and Elena seemed to show a mixture of gratitude and fear before she quickly returned to plugging in her seat belt.