

This opening extract is exclusive to Love♥reading.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

# Hawke

Ted Bell

## Chapter One

The Englishman looked at his unsmiling reflection in the smoky mirror behind the bar and drained the last of his pint. He'd lost count of how many he'd downed since entering the tattered old pub. It was called The Grapes, and it was one of the more respectable establishments in a rather bawdy little quarter of Mayfair known as Shepherd's Market.

Pink and rose lights were glowing softly in many of the small windows of the narrow buildings that lined the winding lanes. Hand-lettered names could be found beside the illuminated buttons inside each of the darkened doorways. Fanny. Cecily. Vera and Bea. Their pale faces could often be seen at the window for just a moment before the shade was drawn.

He had drifted aimlessly through the narrow streets of Mayfair, having decided to walk home from dinner at the German ambassador's residence. He'd left rather early when, after he'd downed yet another flute of champagne, it occurred to him that every single thing he'd said all evening had bored him to tears.

He'd meant to go straight home, but the miserable weather so perfectly matched the texture and color of his current state of mind that he'd decided to embrace it, dismissing his driver for the evening and electing to hoof it to Belgrave Square.

Damp. Cold. Foggy. Lowering clouds threatening rain or snow or both. Miserable. Perfect.

There was an electric fire in the coal grate of the smoky pub, and now, brooding upon his perch at the end of the bar, he looked at the thin gold Patek on his wrist. Bloody hell. It was considerably further past his bedtime than he'd imagined. Not that it mattered much. He could sleep in next morning. Had nothing on until lunch at his club at one. He tried to recall whom he was lunching with and was damned if he could.

---

The days had become an endless blur and, except for the constant dull ache in his heart, he would have sworn that he'd died some time ago and no one had bothered to inform him of his own passing.

The pub had thinned out quite a bit, only one or two chaps remaining at the bar and a few young foreign backpackers necking in the curves of the dark banquettes. At least there were fewer patrons to stare at him and the ones remaining had finally left him bloody well alone.

He was aware, of course, that he stood out.

He was, after all, wearing white tie and tails, and his feet were shod with black patent leather pumps. His long black opera cloak, sealskin topper, and gold-headed cane lay atop the bar. He knew he must cut quite an amusing figure at The Grapes, but he was long past caring. He signaled the barman for a check and ordered what would definitely be his last pint before heading home. Sticking twenty quid under the ashtray, he returned to his stormy thoughts.

Part of it was sheer boredom, of course, what the cursed French called ennui. He was rotting away so rapidly that it would hardly surprise him if he awoke one morning to find mildew growing on his --

"Got a match, guv?" someone suddenly said at his side. He turned to regard the newcomer and saw that there were three of them. Leather jackets, shaved heads, black jeans shoved into heavy black boots. All staring at him, sneers on their pallid faces. They looked, what was the word, itchy.

He hadn't even seen them come in.

"Matter of fact I do," he said, and fished his old gold Dunhill out of his waistcoat pocket. He flicked it open and lit the cigarette dangling from the lips of the grinning skinhead who was staring at him with glittering eyes.

Whatever drugs he was taking had definitely kicked in.

"Ta," the youth said. He'd had blond hair once, but the stubby new growth was some sort of acid green.

"Pleasure," he replied and, pocketing his lighter, returned to his pint.

"Me mates and I," the lout continued, "we was wonderin' about you."

"Really? I'm not at all interesting, I assure you."

"Yeah? Well, what we was wonderin', me mates and me, was whether or not you were a, you know, a poofter."

"A poofter?" he asked, putting down his pint and turning his cold blue eyes toward the sallow face and wide grin full of bad teeth.

---

"Yeah. A fooking flamer," the man said, though something in the older man's eyes made him take a step backwards.

Two well-manicured hands shot out and pinched the skinhead's ringed earlobes cruelly.

"Poofter?" the elegant man said, smiling, twisting his fingers. "You don't mean the sort of chap who wears earrings and dyes his hair, do you?"

This drew a laugh from the two sullen mates and brought an angry flush of color into the cheeks of the green-haired fellow.

"Nice meeting you lads," the Englishman said, releasing the chap's bright red ears. He stood, picked up his cloak, and shouldered into it. Then he donned his top hat, picked up the ebony cane, and turned to go.

"Wot's at?" the green-haired boy said, blocking his way.

"Wot's wot?" the gentleman replied in a perfect mimicry of the fellow's accent.

"Wot you said. Wot you called me -- "

"Get out of my way," he said. "Now."

"Make me, guv. C'mon. Give 'er a go."

"Pleasure," he said, and he brought the flat hard edge of his hand down on the fellow's right shoulder with such blinding speed that the youth felt the sharp stab of pain before he even saw the hand coming.

"Christ!" he screamed in pain, staggering backwards, his shoulder blade sagging at an odd angle. "You broke me bloody -- me bloody -- "

"Clavicle," the Englishman said as the fellow stumbled backwards over a barstool and collapsed to the floor.

He then stepped over the chap on his way out the door. "Good evening," he said, tipping his hat as he strolled out the open door and onto the empty street. No one about. It was a good deal later than he'd imagined.

He walked to the next corner and paused beside a lamppost to draw out his gunmetal cigar case. He lit his cigar, listening carefully for their approach. It didn't take long. He let them get within six feet, then whirled about to face the three thugs. The green-haired one was holding his broken collarbone, his face contorted with rage.

"Ah, my new friends," the Englishman said, a pleasant smile on his face. "I've been expecting you. Now. Who wants to go first? You? You? Perhaps all of you at once?"

---

He waited for one of them to move and when it happened he attacked. His senses were surging back to him, and, like an animal, he rejoiced in the feeling.

He broke two noses first, then lashed out at the third chap, his right foot the blur of a scalded piston. He connected, first hearing the snap of the fibula and then the deeper crack of the tibia, the inner and larger of the two bones of the lower leg. Sadly, it was enough to take all the fight out of them, and so he turned away and headed for home. It had started to rain, a raw, cold rain, and he removed his hat and turned his face up into it, enjoying the sting of the icy drops. He reached the house in Belgrave Square, and Pelham swung the door open for him, taking his hat and cane.

"Good heavens!" the old fellow exclaimed when the man removed his cloak to reveal his blood-spattered shirtfront. "What happened, m'lord?"

"Bloody nose, I'm afraid," he replied, mounting the broad stairs. "Two of them, in fact."

Ten minutes later, he was in his bed, yearning for sleep and the American woman he seemed to have fallen deeply in love with, Victoria Sweet.

A few hours on, the Englishman was staring at the ringing bedside telephone and the clock with equal disbelief. "Bloody hell," he said to himself. He picked up the phone.

"Yes?" he said, with no intention of being polite. Christ, it was barely a quarter to five in the morning.

"Hi," said the throaty female voice at the other end, altogether too cheery for the ungodly hour.

"Good God," he said, yawning. He'd been in a deep sleep. Having quite a pleasant dream as he remembered. Vicky was undoing her -- he'd lost it.

"No, not Him. But close. It's the brand-new secretary. First day on the job!"

"Do you have even the faintest idea what time it is over here?"

"You sound put out."

"May I be frank?"

"Oh, don't be mad. I've had the most amazing day. I'm not calling to flirt, either. It's strictly business."

The Englishman, fully awake now, propped himself up against the many large pillows at the head of his bed. A hard rain, now mixed with sleet, was thrashing against his tall bedroom windows. The fire, which had been casting shadows on the vaulted ceiling when he'd at last fallen asleep, was now reduced to a few glowing coals, and a damp chill pervaded the lofty chamber.

---

He pulled the blanket up under his chin, cradling the phone against his cheek. Another soggy January day in London was about to dawn. He was sluggish. He was bored. His limbs, his mind, his very cells, had gone soft and flaccid.

The little scuffle in the street had been a pleasant distraction, but nothing more. The Englishman was in fact a restless warrior who, for far too long now, had been "between assignments," as the euphemism has it.

Which is why the single word business had crackled like lightning around his languishing synapses and stirred his lazy blood.

"You mentioned something about business," he said.

"Are you disappointed? Tell the truth. You were hoping it was phone sex. I could hear it in your voice."

"Your voice does sound rather -- never mind. Smoky. I thought you'd stopped smoking."

"I'm trying to quit. I'm going hot turkey."

"Excuse me?"

"It's the opposite of cold turkey. You fire up your first one the second you wake up and then smoke as many as you possibly can before you go to sleep at night."

"Sounds brilliant. Well. You said business. Tell me."

"First, you have to know something. This is not my idea. Your pal the president asked for you specifically. I'm telling you that just in case you've got too much on your plate already."

"All right."

"It's not me who's asking. It's him."

"Doesn't matter to me who it is. My plate, dear girl, is as clean as your proverbial American whistle."

"You have no idea how glad they'll be to hear that over at Casa Blanca."

"All right. I'm no longer annoyed. I'm awake. Razor sharp. Tell me."

"Your MI6 picked this up, tossed the ball to us. CIA has checked it out and it's serious. Confirmed through the captured Al Qaeda commander, Abu Subeida."

"The Gatekeeper."

"Yes. Ever heard of something called Project Boomerang?"

---

"Hmm. I do seem to remember that. Some kind of wildly experimental submarine program. The Soviets were building a prototype at the Komsomolsk yard. Tail end of the Cold War. Never got it operational as I recall. Is that it?"

"Exactly. The Russians called it the Borzoi. They'd gotten their hands on a lot of our stealth technology. And they'd also developed some of their own. Plus a three-foot-thick coating of sonar- and radar-absorptive material, advanced fuel-cell technology, and a virtually silent propulsion system. The sub carries forty of their SS-N-20 SLBMs. Long-range Sturgeon ballistic missiles."

"Carries? As in present tense?"

"Yes."

"Christ."

"The thing is huge. Shaped like a boomerang, hence the name. Two airfoil-shaped hulls join at the bow to form a V shape, twenty missile silos on each hull. Virtually invisible to detection. When she's running submerged at speed, a single conning tower at the bow is retracted entirely within the hull."

"An underwater flying wing."

"Yes. An invisible underwater flying wing. At least three times faster than anything either of us has got."

"Bloody hell. They actually got one up and running?"

"They built two."

"Yes?"

"We can only account for one."

"What do our new best friends have to say about that?"

"Moscow says it was stolen."

"Security never being their strong point."

"Exactly. They say they have no idea where it is. The theory both at Defense and here at State is that one sub has probably been sold. The president would like you to find out who sold it. And more importantly, who bought it. And when."

"Consider it done," the Englishman said, springing from his bed and grabbing his robe from the back of a chair.

"We could have phone sex now if you'd like," the woman said.

"I wouldn't even dream of taking advantage of you at a moment like this, darling."

"I'll take that as a no. Go back to sleep. Good night, baby."

"Good night."

"I love you, Alex," the woman said.

But the Englishman's heart was in another place entirely, and he had no reply to that.

"Good night," he repeated softly, and replaced the receiver. He had told her that their relationship was over. And that he was very much in love with another woman. No matter what he said, or how frequently, however, it didn't seem to take.

He stood up, stretched, and pushed the bell that would alert Pelham down in the kitchen that he'd be having an early breakfast. Then he dropped to the floor by his bed, did his customary thirty push-ups and fifty sit-ups, followed by the rest of his exercise program. Muscles aflame, he then headed for the shower.

Under the scalding water, Alexander Hawke was surprised to find himself singing at the top of his lungs.

An old Beatles tune.

"Here Comes the Sun."