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London Bridges

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Published by Headline

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First published in Great Britain in 2004
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2005
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A HEADLINE paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 0 7553 0580 9

Typeset in Palatino Light by
Letterpart Limited, Reigate, Surrey

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
LONDON NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com



PROLOGUE

THE WEASEL RETURNS, AND WHAT A NICE SURPRISE



Chapter One

Colonel Geoffrey Shafer loved his new life in Salvador, Brazil's third-largest city and, some would say, its most intriguing. It was definitely the most fun.

He had rented a plush six-bedroom villa directly across from Guarajuba Beach, where he spent his days drinking sweet caipirinhas and ice-cold Brahma beers, or sometimes playing tennis at the club. At night, Colonel Shafer – the psychopathic killer known as the Weasel – was up to his old tricks, hunting on the narrow, winding streets of the 'Old City'. He had lost count of his kills in Brazil, and nobody in Salvador seemed to care, or to keep count either. There hadn't been a single newspaper story about the disappearances of any young prostitutes. Not one. Maybe it was true what they said of the people here – *when they weren't actually partying, they were already rehearsing for the next one*.

At a few ticks past two in the morning, Shafer returned to the villa with a young and beautiful streetwalker who called herself Maria. What a gorgeous face the girl had, and a stunning brown body, especially for someone so young. Maria said she was only thirteen.

The Weasel picked a fat banana from one of several plants in his front garden. At this time of year he had his choice of coconut, guava, mango and pinka, which was sugar apple. As he plucked the fresh fruit, he had the thought that there was always something ripe for the taking in Salvador, which he believed was paradise. *Or maybe it's hell and I'm the devil,* Shafer thought and chuckled to himself.

'For you, Maria,' he said, handing her the banana. 'We'll put it to good use.'

The girl smiled knowingly and the Weasel noticed her eyes – what perfect brown eyes. *And all mine now – eyes, lips, breasts.*

Just then, he spotted a small Brazilian monkey called a mico trying to work its way through a screened window and into his house. 'Get out of here, you thieving little bastard!' he yelled. 'G'wan! Beat it!'

There came a quick movement from out of the bushes, then three men jumped him. *The police,* he was certain, *probably Americans. Alex Cross?*

The cops were all over him, powerful arms and legs everywhere. He was struck down by a bat, or a lead

pipe, yanked back up by his full head of hair, then beaten unconscious.

'We caught him. We caught the Weasel first try. That wasn't very hard,' said one of the men. 'Bring him inside.'

Then he looked at the beautiful young girl, who was clearly afraid, rightly so. 'You did a good job, Maria. You brought him to us.' He turned to one of his men. '*Kill her.*'

A single gunshot ruptured the silence. No one seemed to notice or care in Salvador.



Chapter Two

The Weasel just wanted to die now. He was hanging upside down from the ceiling of his own master bedroom. The room had mirrors everywhere and he could see himself in several of the reflections.

He looked like death. He was naked, bruised and bleeding all over. His hands were tightly cuffed behind his back, his ankles bound together, cutting off the circulation. Blood was rushing to his head.

Hanging beside him was the young girl, Maria, but she had been dead for several hours, maybe as much as a day, judging by the terrible smell. Her brown eyes were turned his way, but they stared right through him.

The leader of his captors, bearded, always squeezing a black ball in one hand, squatted down so that he was only a foot or so from Shafer's face. He spoke softly, a whisper.

'What we did with some prisoners when I was active – we would sit them down, rather politely, peacefully – and then nail their fucking tongues to a table. That's absolutely true, my weasely friend. You know what else? Simply plucking hairs . . . from the *nostrils* . . . the *chest* . . . *stomach* . . . *genitals* . . . it's more than a little bothersome, no? *Ouch*,' he said, as he plucked hairs from Shafer's naked body.

'But I'll tell you the worst torture, in my opinion anyway. Worse than what you would have done to poor Maria. You grab the prisoner by both shoulders and shake violently until he *convulses*. You literally rattle his brain, the sensitive organ itself. It feels as if the head will fly off. The body is on fire. I'm not exaggerating.

'Here, let me show you what I mean.'

The terrible, unimaginable violent shaking – while Geoffrey Shafer hung upside down – went on for nearly an hour.

Finally, he was cut down. 'Who are you? What do you want from me?' he screamed.

The head captor shrugged. 'You're a tough bastard, but always remember, *I found you*. And I'll find you again if I need to. Do you understand?'

Geoffrey Shafer could barely focus his eyes, but he looked up to where he thought the captor's voice came from. Finally, he whispered, *'What – do you – want? Please?'*

The bearded man's face bent close to his. He almost seemed to smile. 'I have a job, a most incredible job for you. Believe me, *you were born for this*.'

'Who are you?' the Weasel whispered again through badly chapped and bleeding lips. It was a question he'd asked a hundred times during the torture.

'I am the Wolf,' said the bearded man. 'Perhaps you've heard of me.'



PART ONE

THE UNTHINKABLE



Chapter Three

On the sunny, blue-skied afternoon when one of them would die, unexpectedly, needlessly, Frances and Dougie Puslowski were hanging sheets and pillowcases and the kids' play clothes out to dry in the noonday sun.

Suddenly, US Army soldiers began to arrive at their mobile-home park, 'Azure Views', in Sunrise Valley, Nevada. *Lots* of soldiers. A full convoy of US jeeps and trucks came bouncing up the dirt road they lived on, and stopped abruptly. Troops poured out of the vehicles. The soldiers were heavily armed. They definitely meant business.

'What in the name of Sweet Jesus is going on?' asked Dougie, who was currently on disability from the Cortey Mine outside Henderson and was still trying to get used to the 'domestic scene', as he called it. But Dougie knew that he was failing pretty badly.

He was almost always depressed, always grumpy and mean-spirited, and always short with poor Frances and the kids.

As they climbed out of their trucks, Dougie noticed that the soldier boys and girls were outfitted in battle-dress uniform: leather boots, camouflage pants, olive T-shirts – the whole kit and caboodle, as if this were Iraq and not the ass-end of Nevada. They carried M-16 rifles and ran toward the closest trailers with muzzles raised. Some of the soldiers even looked scared themselves.

The desert wind was blowing pretty good, and their voices carried all the way to the Puslowskis' clothes-line. Frances and Dougie clearly heard, 'We're evacuating the town! This is an emergency situation. Everyone has to leave their houses now! *Now*, people!'

Frances Puslowski had the presence of mind to notice that all of the soldiers were pretty much saying the same thing, like they had rehearsed it, and that their tight, solemn faces sure showed that they wouldn't take no for an answer. The Puslowskis' three-hundred-odd neighbors – some of them *very* odd – were already leaving their mobile houses, complaining about it, but definitely doing as they were told.

The next-door neighbor, Delta Shore, ran over to Frances. 'What's happening, hon? Why are all these soldiers *here*? My good God Almighty! Can you believe it? They must be from Nellis or Fallon or

someplace. I'm a little scared, Frances. You scared, hon?'

The clothes-peg in Frances's mouth finally dropped to the ground as she spoke to Delta. 'They say that they're evacuating us. I've got to get the girls.'

Then Frances ran inside the mobile home, and at 240 some pounds, she had believed her sprinting, or even jogging days were far behind her.

'Madison, Brett, c'mere you two. Nothin' to be scared of. We just have to leave the house for a while! It'll be fun. Like a movie. Get a move on, you two!'

The girls, aged two and four, appeared from the small bedroom where they'd been watching *Rolie Polie Olie* on the Disney Channel. Madison, the oldest, offered her usual, 'Why? Why do we have to? I don't want to. I won't. We're too busy, Momma.'

Frances grabbed her cell phone off the kitchen counter – and then the next really strange thing happened. She tried to get a line to the police, but there was nothing except loud static. Now that had *never* happened before, not that kind of annoying, buzzy noise she was hearing. Was some kind of invasion going down? Something nuclear maybe?

'Damn it!' she snapped at the buzzing cell phone, and almost started to cry. *'What is going on here?'*

'You said a bad word!' Brett squeaked, but she also laughed at her mother. She kind of liked bad words. It was as if her mother had made a mistake, and she

loved it when adults made mistakes.

'Get Mrs Summerkin and Oink,' Frances told the girls, who *would not* leave the house without their two favorite lovies, not even if the infernal plague of Egypt had come to town, and Frances prayed that it hadn't – but what *had*? Why was the US Army swarming all over the place, waving scary guns in people's faces?

She could hear her frightened neighbors outside verbalizing the very thoughts racing around in her head: *What's happened? Who says we have to leave? Tell us why! Over my dead body, soldier! You hear me, now?*

That last voice was Dougie's! Now what was *he* up to?

'Dougie, come back in the house!' Frances yelled. 'Help me with these girls! Dougie, I *need* you in here.'

There was a gunshot outside! A loud, lightning-bolt *crack* exploded from one of the rifles.

Frances ran to the screen door – here she was, running again – and she saw two US Army soldiers standing over Dougie's body.

Oh my God, Dougie wasn't moving. Oh my God, oh my God! The soldiers had shot him down like a rabid dog. For practically nothing! Frances started to shiver and shake, then she threw up lunch.

Her girls screeched, 'Yuk, Mommy. Mommy, yuk. You threw up all over the kitchen!'

Then suddenly a soldier with a couple of days' facial growth on his chin kicked open the screen door and

he was right in her face and he was *screaming*, 'Get out of this trailer! Now! Unless you want to die too.'

The soldier had the business end of a gun pointed right at Frances. 'I'm not kidding, lady,' he said. 'Tell the truth, I'd just as soon shoot you as talk to you.'