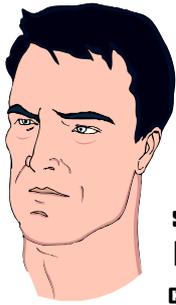


## Chapter 2



Jason Hawk had been a member of the SOU for three years now. Behind him was a long career in the SAS, when he was Captain Hawk. He was no stranger to Iraq, Sierra Leone and, of course, the wild hills and plains of Afghanistan. He was a quiet man, who preferred to blend into the background, which wasn't always easy. Jason stood 1m 65cm tall (6ft 5ins), and was built like a tank! Wide shoulders and huge muscles could be clearly seen, straining the seams of his shirt – he always worked-out whenever the opportunity arose. His thick, black hair flopped over his deep forehead, and narrow dark eyes seemed to be ceaselessly roving over his surroundings. A lantern jaw hung beneath a small slit of a mouth. He was clearly not a man to tangle with!

His last mission in Afghanistan had been to rescue a couple of young riflemen in the dangerous bad-lands of Helmand Province. They'd had a rough time at the hands of the Taliban, and he'd lost a young private from his own command – for which Jason, as commanding officer, blamed himself to this day. The young man was in his first few months of the tour. He'd only been 23, and this had been his first taste of real action. He'd been walking gingerly along a road when he stepped on a mine, laid at a roadside, where it could, of course, have blown a small child to pieces. He'd lost both legs and, despite the frantic efforts of the 'medic', he'd died before the 'copter had been able to land. It always affected troops when they lost a man. Jason could still picture the scene, and often dreamed about it. It had to be his fault, he thought, despite the fact that an enquiry had cleared him of all blame. They had, at least, managed to rescue the two young riflemen: no doubt to the great joy and relief of their own families, but he could imagine the grief of the family of his young private. But could anyone imagine it if they hadn't been through it?



The small café attracted Jason's attention. He entered, eyed the fare in the chilled cabinet and wandered over and took a seat near to the window, where he could watch the street. A young waitress sauntered across, book in hand. "Can I get you something? Sir?" she asked.

"I'll just have a filter coffee and a flapjack, please." Jason replied, smiling up at the young lady. She nodded and scurried off and returned shortly with a mug of steaming filter coffee and a large slice of what looked like very tasty flapjack. Jason took a bite and decided that the cake was as delicious as it appeared. He took his time and relished the sweet, syrupy taste and the strong flavour of the drink. He gazed out across the street at the sleepy scene of village life, and wondered when he would meet his contact.

The young waitress eyed Jason, evidently quite taken by the tall stranger to the village. He went to the counter to pay, "On holiday?" the girl queried, with 'warm-as-sunlight' smile.

"Yeah," Jason responded. "I'm here for the countryside and the birds."

"Oh, well. We're not short of countryside here," she laughed. Jason handed over the cash and smiled at the girl as he took his leave, "Drop in again," the girl called after him. Jason glanced over his shoulder and grinned. She was quite pretty, Jason thought, with blond hair, tied back in a ponytail for hygiene purposes, and deep blue eyes like Dutch china. Jason reckoned her to be in her early 20s.



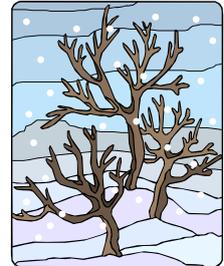
The SOU agent decided to stroll up the hill to the ridge and take another look at the landscape.

At the top of the ridge, he sat on a farm fence and studied the valley below him. This part

of the North Pennines was shaped by the ice and water of the last ice age. At the height of the last Ice Age, the Pennines had lain under a kilometre of ice. Huge glaciers and melt water streams making their way from west to east, had scrubbed away at the land, gouging out the valleys and leaving glacial debris scattered in moraines.

Around 15,000 years ago, the climate of the North began to get wetter and warmer. The ice melted, and left a landscape of bleak, rocky slopes and debris.

The landscape had been developed further by landslides and the constant round of freezing and melting. Soon, arctic plants began to appear, and were followed by what we now know as tundra animals, such as arctic fox and reindeer. Slowly, tundra scrub was replaced by pioneer woodland; the highest hilltops remaining bare and desolate. The woodland gradually became home to deer, wild boar and wolf.



In later years, humans had had a hand in its evolution. They began to populate the area around 8,000 years ago. They began to clear the woodland, and, after a spell of cold and wet climate, blanket bog developed over the uplands.

Jason considered the scene before him and tried to measure up, in his mind, the distances between the features he could see. How long would it take him to walk from one to the other? How easy would vehicle access be? What could be seen from the roads and bye-ways? What *couldn't* be seen! Where would be the best place to hole up, away from prying eyes and the odd ramblers who might venture out into the countryside?



This was serious business. It was definitely *not* the holiday he'd pretended it was! It wasn't unknown for SOU officers, and members of local badger groups, to be shot at in the woods. Only a couple of years ago, a badger group member had been shot in a wood near London, and had to be carefully nursed back to health by a loving wife. The sort of people involved with badger digging and baiting were not to be meddled with lightly. They often had convictions for other offences, such as wounding and grievous bodily harm. They included burglars, drug dealers and other

unsavoury characters amongst their number. **(If you suspect people of badger digging, do NOT approach them. Tell a responsible adult to contact the police.)** (Photo © Dave Sumpton)

Why people would want to become involved in such a horrible pastime, Jason could never fathom. Though, of course, he could ..... money!

This area could little afford to lose its population of badgers, as the dales countryside was not the ideal environment for them in the first place. Good pasture forage was sparse; especially on the higher slopes, and the only good areas for their favourite food – earthworms – were in the pastures in the valley bottom. Life in the dales was hard. They did tend to enjoy the lambing season though. Not that it was usual for badgers to take lambs as prey, but because of the lamb hoppers that were placed in the fields to feed the lambs on a high energy/high protein lamb food to supplement the milk from the ewes. In the half-gloom of evening, the badgers would emerge cautiously from the sett – sniffing the air for the slightest unusual scent, and listening intently to the sounds of the woodland – before relaxing and ambling out. Only when they were satisfied that there was



nothing to fear, would they stroll down to the pastures and fill their bellies from the hoppers, before wandering on to see what else the landscape had to offer. The farmers knew what the badgers were up to, but shrugged. If a hopper was designed to allow lambs to feed, it surely wasn't going to keep a badger out!

The SOU had sent Jason to work in Weardale to try to bring to justice an evil gang of badger baiters who had robbed the area's landscape of a good number of animals over the past year. The local badger group and the diligent police wildlife liaison officers had done their best to contain the attacks, but were simply overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the criminal operation around the county. They'd tried monitoring the setts. They'd managed to reinforce a few, but they'd still been thwarted by the criminals. Often badger digging was carried out by a few local jobs, wanting to see who had the hardest dog; bad enough, but this lot were different – they were professionals!



The sun was beginning to set when Jason arose from his perch and took a long look across the dale. It really wasn't the sort of countryside that outsiders expected to see. Many people imagined the North East to be an endless line of factories and pit heads. Yes, it was once a major industrial area, but no longer. The heavy industries have largely gone, and people have to make a living in other ways. This dale had once been the scene of lead and silver mining, but no longer. The pits were silent. The miners were gone. Much of Durham is actually a beautiful rural county. <http://www.killhope.org.uk> (Lead mining centre for tourists.)

Jason made his way down from the ridge, back to the White Lion. He climbed the stairs to his room and briefly freshened up. He'd order a bar meal in the pub, and await the contact.

A short while later, Jason entered the pub lounge and bellied up to the bar. The landlord looked up and smiled. "What will it be, Sir?" he enquired.

"I'll have a pint of bitter please, and could I have a glance at the menu?" Jason replied. The landlord pulled the drink and handed Jason a large, red plastic menu folder.

"There's specials on the blackboard," he said, nodding up to a board on the far end wall of the bar.

"Thanks," answered Jason. "I could eat a horse!" He glanced down the menu and decided on a rib-eye steak. He placed the order and sauntered over to a table, from where he could monitor all the comings and goings from the pub.

A number of locals ambled in and ordered from the barman, who obviously knew them well and was on first name terms with the majority. Jason weighed them up, trying to decide what sort of people they were. One, he decided, looked like the 'local poacher' and he guessed that the old man could probably give him some good leads – if he dared, and if he wanted to.



After a short while, the door opened and a young man walked in. His hair was as light as Jason's was dark. He too was a tall, about 1m 88cm (6ft 2in), and a well-built man – obviously athletic and powerful. He shot a glance at Jason, but turned away and made his way to the bar. He ordered a drink and turned disinterestedly in Jason's direction.

"Chilly out, isn't it?" he declared.

"Yeah," replied Jason. "Warm in here though."

The other man considered him for a moment. "Nice place for a wildlife holiday," he said.

Jason looked at him more intently. "Perfect," he returned, staring at the young man's face.

"Mind if I join you?" the man enquired? "I'm a stranger around here."

"Me too. Be my guest,"

The man seated himself across the table from Jason. "I'm Will Stout," he declared, "Here for the walking."

"Jason Hawk," Jason said.

"I know," whispered the big blond man. "I saw your photo in the projects office."

Jason smiled. "Yeah, I recognised you when you walked in." he breathed. The two SOU men fell to chatting, as if they were simply two blokes on their own, looking to enjoy a short break in the countryside. Will ordered a meal and they enjoyed it together before the roaring fire of the pub lounge. The evening wore on and the two chatted together over pints, seemingly about everything under the sun. Eventually, Jason stretched and sighed. "Past my bedtime," he yawned.

"Mine too," agreed Will. "Fancy a walk in the morning? We might see something interesting." Will enquired.

"Yeah," agreed Jason. "About 9.30?"

"Do for me."

"See you then." And the two men went their separate ways, relieved that their meeting had gone well and that no one seemed the slightest bit interested in them or their 'holiday'.

Jason was pleased with his new companion. They'd never met before, but Jason sensed that Will would be a useful man to have around over the next few days or weeks – no one knew.

Will had been a Royal Marine Commando in his former life. He'd served in a number of places around the world, and was well used to living hard and rough. He was big and rangy, and looked as hard as baked earth! Yes, he would do, decided Jason.



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