

IAIN AIRE



THE GREY PILGRIM'S GAMBIT

**A deadly assassin: Sam's nemesis:
Her kindred spirit in the final retribution**

The Grey Pilgrim: A deadly assassin: Sam's nemesis.

Sam and Maddy Hawk are sisters. Alone in the world. Maddy's work as a supply teacher allows her the rare opportunity to live with her detective sister in Norfolk but they are not prepared for the devastating consequences.

Maddy's murder triggers events beyond Sam's control, tipping her into a criminal and political conspiracy that stalls the police investigation lead by her Boss DS Hood, whose career in turn is threatened. Desperate to find answers, Sam contacts Jake an old military police colleague. Loyalty is tested to the extreme. Her Chief Constable, government agencies and international priorities threatened their very survival, bringing back nightmares of Sam's RMP betrayal in Afghanistan years before.

Relentless in her pursuit of the truth and to avenge Maddy's death, Sam is willing to sanction Joe, her guardian angel, to kill for justice, despite the dire legal ramifications.

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Sunday evening, late September.

Forty-one years of age with less than sixty minutes to live. Maddy knew nothing of her destiny nor could she have anticipated the reason the predator wanted her dead - a gambit critical to his two-year investment in an operation with 14 days to its completion. He had set constraints on Maddy's response to a text that would direct her to her death.

Every second counted. Maddy tormented by the time slipping away, wanting to get to the Little Ouse as fast as possible; to answer the desperate plea of one of her students; wrestling with the fear she may already be too late. The deepening gloom a reality but also in her mood. She switched on the headlights and with it her sepia world contracted into the narrowing achromatic tunnel of trees along the Thetford Road. Maddy, swept off the metalled surface onto the shingle-surfaced forest track, surprised but relieved to see the pole barrier open. At last some luck, she wouldn't have to run the last mile. The green flashing map and remote voice on Maddy's mobile confirmed the route to her destination. Trees and bushes pressed in closer. Her breath shallow and panting - the sprint to the finish line. The Mondeo's engine fluttered and surged as Maddy accelerated harder, breaking late into black hollows and bends. Caution abandoned she crested the rising forest track, headlights burst high into the deep shadows of the cathedral arch of branches before dipping back onto the road. Without warning, a child's pushchair flashed into view. Confusing impressions burned into Maddy's mind's eye - a child? No time to make sense of it. She swerved clipping the pushchair. Maddy screamed; instinctively over breaking; her mind a trauma of consequences. The car danced and skidded on the adverse camber of the track as it vanished to the left. The last image before the grinding of metal - the violent impact and shock of deceleration - a blackened ancient, scarred oak; a 300-year-old road side sentinel with a tree preservation order, an irony not lost on its previous human victims.

The deadening sound of the forest interrupted by the misfiring of the dying engine: the idle clicking of a spinning wheel: ruptured radiator coolant escaping: Maddy's coughing in a fog of dust and dirt from the deployed air bag. She pushed the deflating bag to one side. Groaning as much in emotional anguish as physical pain, she awoke from a dazed stupor, unable to focus or understand how she could be numb and yet ache all over. Gently moving she discovered her feet and lower legs trapped. Maddy sighed, grateful to have survived, then with an involuntary small cry she remembered the pushchair. She had to get out, so much depended on her escaping the wreckage. But no amount of tugging and wriggling loosened the entombed grip. Her fingers felt around the wreckage of her surroundings. Where had her handbag and mobile gone? The mess puzzling and chaotic. She lay back exhausted, trying to think past her thumping headache. What were her options? So far from the main road. Would Helen come looking for her? Would she have heard the crash? Would anyone? Maddy paused. Did she imagine it? A movement, the scrunch of gravel underfoot?

"Hello? Please help."

Had she imagined a shadowy figure? Unnaturally motionless - a trick of the evanescent light - before the man materialized by her door. No hallucination. She went to speak, puzzled, there were no words of comfort; no enquiry as to her injuries. It must be the person with the pushchair as she had seen no one else on the road. The silhouette moved. The rear door wrenched open. Refreshing forest scented air rushed in washing away the stale fumes.

"Thank you, thank you," Maddy surprised by the rasping, guttural sound of her voice. "Did I hit you? Is your child safe - the pushchair? I am so sorry." She couldn't help the garbled,

stumbling words, so much needed saying. "I must get out. One of my students needs my help. Down by the river. I am so sorry about all this."

The figure remained silent, grunting with the endeavor to free Maddy? But his behaviour frightened Maddy, she could not explain why. She persisted desperate for human contact. "I need your help, please. Please, I beg you."

The car bounced under the extra weight in the rear seat. Maddy's chair began to crank back. She could hear laboured breathing with each violent turn of the adjustment wheel. The man removed the head rest from its mounting exposing Maddy's shoulders and head. She felt two strong gloved hands locate her shoulders: Assured confident movements. Her rescuer attempting to extract Maddy over the driver's seat? After a few moments she sensed the hands were not attempting to pull her clear. Fingers pressured either side of her head, seeking leverage. Maddy's rational mind became confused.

"No... No. No.... Please."

Her skin tingled with the adrenalin surge, the fine sweat cooled on Maddy's skin as she realized the man intended her harm. She thrashed wildly, wrestled with the grim spectre's grip. But his muscular strength did not yield, pulling her head back, discovering a point of resistance as he twisted her skull. Maddy's efforts were in vain. Her muscles shook with exhaustion: legs started to shake as terror gripped her bladder. Tears of anguish ran unabated, thoughts of her sister alone left Maddy distraught.

"No," she screamed. "Please - my sister - plea...."

The sinewy scrunch of bone: a pitiful whimpering mew: a desolate whispering breath of air rose into the night.

Sunday pm/ Monday am

Voracious acrid smoke lit from beneath by a convulsive blood red fire, billowed and swirled up, vanishing above the Thetford canopy into the night sky. Ominous popping of melting radial steel tyres betrayed the root source. In the distance there were faint echoes, growing stronger - the long wailing cry of fire tender, followed minutes later by a resonating ambulance siren and finally by the lower pitch call of a blue and two, some distance behind the others. Rippling phosphorescent light intermittently broke the forest shroud tracking the emergency vehicles' progress as they descended onto the crash scene. A resounding thump, roar and crackle of fire fly sparks answered back.

Sergeant Wilson had 28 years police experience with the Norfolk constabulary. It brought assured confidence and unflappability at least on the surface to the casual observer. There was not much he had not dealt with. Wilson knew all too well the reported accident spot he was travelling towards. Over the last decade he had attended over nine RTAs at the notorious bend. It had claimed three lives. His shoulders slumped. He was bone tired of the waste. The fatigue caused by more than the futility of life: more than age or broken sleep. It was the job. Two more years till mandatory retirement from the force didn't sound long but Wilson's disillusionment led him to calculate he had over half a million minutes to survive. To survive the cutbacks: the work overload and disrespect from the crap of humanity. He shook his head to rid himself of the self-pitying thoughts.

Pulling over at the last junction on the road to the crash site Wilson strolled around to the back of his patrol car. He unloaded the closed and diversion signs, and the warning lamps. Switched on, they intermittently illuminated the proficient movements of a balding officer who appeared overburdened by a bulky hi-vis jacket that hid a stab vest. He inspected his work and nodded to himself, satisfied with his unremarkable achievement. Wilson stood for a moment transfixed by the yellow strobing lights lost again in his thoughts. Divorced, like many of his colleagues, at least he didn't have to go home and either pretend nothing had happened or off load his shit job onto someone who didn't deserve it. He had learned that lesson too late for his ex.

Sergeant Wilson tipped his head and listened to the dark silence. The red and yellows - his shorthand for his fellow emergency ambulance and fire brigade colleagues - had arrived on site. It confirmed they were attending to the driver and any passengers and putting out the car fire. His priorities were to close vehicular and public access and secure the scene until they had made an initial assessment. Wilson disliked night-time accidents. It was all too easy to miss critical information and evidence. As he clambered back into his patrol car, he consoled himself with the thought that at least it wasn't raining nor likely to be for the next 24 hours - enough time for him to gather all the information and measurements he would need for his report.

Pulling in behind the ambulance, the situation confronting Wilson left him with a sinking feeling. The ambulance crew were standing by the front of the vehicle in deep conversation. Its rear doors were closed. Beyond them the fire engine's powerful lights brightly illuminated the crash site. It's undulating roar a life force for the human's scurrying around it. There were no flames but a vast expanse of foam surrounding the blackened vehicle and oak headstone. Wilson drew in a deep breath and gradually exhaled, resigned to the likelihood of another death and its inevitable consequences. It would set him on an inescapable routine of lengthy enquiries, whereas the victim's immediate circle faced a fraught, emotional journey drawn out by a belated inquest process. The file would sit on his desk for months staring

critically at him for not delivering - that hackneyed phrase - closure for the family and loved ones. Wilson nodded to the ambulance crew who acknowledged his presence with resigned shrugs. There was nothing to say. As he approached the crash site, the crew commander broke away from the scene and walked to meet him. Pulling off his breathing apparatus he waved to Wilson to stop where he was. It pleased both men to see each other in the challenging circumstances. They had served roughly the same time and dealt with each other through more incidents than either would care to remember let alone discuss.

“Can you stay back for a bit Mike, the wreck’s still a toxic mess. I hate these bloody car fires.”

He nodded, “Casualties Tom?”

“Just the one. The driver, small build can’t tell you much else from what we can see at the moment.”

“Okay, I’ll wait here. Straight forward do you think?”

“H’mn. Hold that thought Mike we need to get better access to the car. Something is odd.” Commander Tom Haye replaced his BA as he returned to his men.

Sergeant Wilson didn’t care too much for Tom’s uncertainty. Odd equalled complications. That would mean every detail including circumstantial issues would require confirmation or elimination. As he stepped back to return to his patrol car, his foot caught something metal on the roadway. He flicked on his flashlight and looked for the cause. It was the reverse side of a vehicle registration marque. He crouched down onto the damp road surface, groaning with stiffness; his curiosity roused. It was a strange place to find a VRM. It was an inexplicable anomaly: was it connected? He used his pen to flip it over. Was he imagining it - there appeared to be blood smears? They looked significant and fresh? It was hard to tell in the artificial light. He looked back toward the crash scene trying to understand how the VRM was where it was. He couldn’t tell if it was from the vehicle. And the registration was familiar. It was telling him something? He frowned searching back through images and situations to trigger the memory. Then it hit him; a sickening gut punch. It was a shock, and he fervently hoped he was wrong.

Leaning heavily on one hand he struggled back to his feet and looked up at the crash site again, desperate to get closer. He waved his flashlight at the crew to attract their attention. He needed confirmation that the burned-out vehicle was missing a plate. One man, tapped his commander’s shoulder and pointed back towards Mike. He felt guilty watching his colleague struggling back out of his BA but he had no other option.

“Problem Mike?”

“I hope not Tom but I have a bad feeling about this, I urgently need you to tell me whether the vehicle is missing a VRM. I have one here.” He flashed the torch on the plate. “I recognise the number and I bloody hope it doesn’t belong to that car.”

“Okay, give me a moment.” The Commander returned to his team. Mike started to pace back and forth. It took an age. He watched the gesticulations and sign language and eventually they washed the foam free of the rear of the vehicle. For a moment no one moved, an ominous sign for Sergeant Wilson. The men began a search around the car. The Commander

listened to the muffled reports lost in the pulsing grunt of the tender's engine. An exhausting backdrop to the unfolding drama. Mike observed the performance it reminded him of the spotlight characters in a surreal macabre play. Once more the commander exited the limelight removing his BA. Mike could see Tom's sweat plastered silver hair, and the exhaustion etched on his face. Fighting fires was tough enough without all the heavy protective equipment. Wilson felt contrite about the many times he had griped about his safety equipment.

"There is no plate. It isn't there. If that is it," he said pointing to the ground, "that's not all. The car is a diesel, and the fire doesn't appear to have originated in the engine. I can't be certain but at the moment the circumstances of this incident are suspicious."

"Shit."

"Not the information you wanted to hear I guess? Who does the car belong to Mike?"

Sergeant Wilson hesitated, not because he didn't trust his friend but because saying his thoughts out loud was about to trigger a lot of trouble for everyone. Not that he had any option but to radio in his findings.

"It belongs to one of our own Tom." No turning back now he thought and sighed - *'the suspicious circumstances of the death of DCI Sam Hawk.'*

The intermittent buzzing wouldn't leave Mark Hood alone. The noise remained irritatingly out of reach but try as he may, he could not ignore it. Mark leapt from incomprehension to realization with the abrupt recognition of the source. It triggered an instinctive response born of years in the force. He was sitting on the side of his bed while his mind was playing catch up. Mark searched simultaneously for the lamp switch and phone. He found the first and swept the second onto the carpeted floor. The buzzing stopped. He shuddered with the shock – he'd never got used to it. Mark rubbed his beard and ruffled his greying hair, a habitual delaying tactic familiar to colleagues. The pain of waking alone clawed at his mind. He dreaded going to sleep because he would have to wake up. Ten months, one week... how many days he couldn't think what day it was.... seemed like yesterday. It was a lifetime ago. His wife's antineoplastic medication gathered dust on the dressing table. Everything remained as it had been. He felt shame for not keeping the house the way she would have done but he was alone and adrift. He hated coming home: he hated eating alone: he hated himself for being so weak: he hated she had left him. The buzzing started again. He stared at the pulsing light and drew a deep breath as the adrenalin surged. Detective Superintendent Mark Hood reached down. He could escape again.

The trip from his home to the accident site brought mixed emotions. Sam's death was devastating in several ways. Not least of which she reminded him of his daughter Sarah who had died, three years before his wife. As Hood drove the shock report of Sam's accident had been replaced by reflection and analysis. Sam Hawk had retired from the Royal Military Police, Special Investigation Branch before joining the Norfolk Constabulary. She had been a flier. Her successful RMP career - whose motto 'By example we lead', had taken her across Europe into the Balkans. That experience underpinned her rapid progression through the Constabulary structure, from uniform to Detective Chief Inspector. Hood recalled how, like many others he had initially under-estimated Sam. There was a period of her military service that was a taboo subject, involving her and a colleague being kidnapped in

Afghanistan. It was a dark period which he had been partly privy to as her superior. But he never discussed it. Despite her experiences she was deceptively strong in mind and body and determined no one would ever take advantage of her again. He smiled at a memory of one of her self-effacing comments that caught the essence of character. The claim that one benefit of her being a lefty was she saw the world in a different way. The truth however, as he came to appreciate, was more complex. Sam had a way of creating the impression that she was not a threat; he had observed many colleagues and criminals make that misjudgement. It allowed her quirky, insightful mind the opportunity to get under the guard of a suspect. She had an uncanny knack of finding behavioural patterns others overlooked. In the flashing street lights that marked his passage through the Norfolk villages remorse overcame Hood, “Damn it to hell,” he cursed several times at the injustice of it all.

After the long miles between his home and Thetford Forest in the early morning darkness DS Hood arrived to confront a situation he really wished was a bad dream. He pulled in behind Sergeant Wilson’s car and took a few moments to assess the scene. Silhouettes appeared frozen in time, against the floodlights. Cold breath betrayed life. Hood had been off duty but as Sam Hawk’s superior the incident report had been forwarded to him. They would replace first responders after the initial incident assessment. The change in shifts would see the arrival of the Traffic Justice Unit and forensic team. Hood emerged from his car, a signal for the figures to spring back to life. He stretched his tall languid frame easing the stiffness due in part to old rugby injuries – common enough for a ‘lock’ in his day. Hood had bulked up since then, now a heavily built man with a reputation in the force as a temperate plodder. His investigative style and lack of ambition did nothing to endear him to his Chief Constable or her minions. Despite his traits or perhaps because of them his clear up rate was better than average. Mark Hood did not rush to conclusions or follow the herd instinct. He had built a small loyal team who shared his values and operational methods. A team that now appeared to have suffered a painful loss.

Sergeant Wilson approached and shook Hood’s hand; Wilson relieved to see him. There were no egos or agendas with DS Hood. In the half-light at the edge of the illuminated crash site, both men stood side-by-side reviewing the scene.

“No change then?”

“Fraid not sir, I sent the ambulance crew back. Nothing for them to do here until we get further information. I have secured the accident site.”

Hood nodded his understanding. “Who reported it? Do we have a witness: first on the scene?”

Wilson shook his head. “No one here when the brigade arrived. Not seen a soul. Odd but not unusual, some people don’t want to get involved.” It was time to hand over to Hood. “There is little more I can do here, sir. Suspicious circumstances; ID the body, forensics?”

Hood agreed. “I’ll get onto Command. I was at home when they called through to me. Need to get things moving.” He paused for a moment. “You did a good job Mike, as always, whatever the outcome from this. My thanks.”

“DCI Hawk was one of yours, sir? You appointed her?”

Hood nodded again.

“What was she working on? Could it be a reason for all this?”

“Far too early to say Mike. She was working independently. Directly reporting to me. Undercover. Not part of any major crime’s team or their operations. Hawk should have been well below the radar of the targets. Until this, there was no hint the investigation had been compromised.” His frustration and sense of loss briefly surfaced again. “Bugger! Bugger! Bugger!” His mind struggled to understand why Sam was here. It was not near her operational area. The stakeout was about as far away from this location as it could be.

The fire Commander’s approach announced by the raking sound of his heavy boots on the gravel road - accompanied by the strong body odour of the car’s poisonous plastic, rubber and chemical cocktail of fumes that clung to his uniform. His smoke-stained face broke briefly by an acknowledging smile to Hood, “Good to see you, sorry circumstances are grim.”

“It is what it is. Can’t change it I am sorry to say. Any hope we have it wrong?”

The Sergeant noted with relief the inclusive question – not that he had got it wrong.

“At this stage the wreck is still too hot for the CSI team. May need a few more hours before we can let you lose.”

“Not a problem, no point in rushing. Need to get it right. Want nothing missed - daylight would be better for their work.”

“Okay, good. But I can only tell you from what we can see of the front plate: it’s partial because the car is wrapped around the tree. But the VRM we have matches part of the plate discovered on the road. It’s a Ford Mondeo, and the driver is a woman of medium stature.”

Hood finally accepted the situation as much as he was loath to. “Conclusive by the sounds of it. That’s a vehicle match, make and model. It’s enough confirmation at this stage. We will go with that. I will report in. I’ll advise the forensic team to wait on the shift change there is no rush. The time is....”

Hood started to search his pocket for his phone but Sergeant Wilson saved him the trouble - being old school – looking at his watch. “01.18”

“You also need to know there’s the matter of the fire,” the Commander continued. “I would class it as suspicious. Cars catching fire at an accident are rare and primarily petrol. Diesel? Well, this is a first for me. And it doesn’t look like it started in the engine compartment. We will work with your team but I would suggest someone started it deliberately.”

Hood’s shoulders slumped. The implications were running out of control. He had to get a hold of the situation. Slow it down until they could identify strong lines of enquiry even if that risked leads going cold. It was a risk he would have to take.

“Okay. Understood. It complicates the hell out of this situation but let’s keep everything tight. Mike would you head back to your traffic control point and stop any inquisitive twitters or Instagram wanna-bees getting up here. In the old days it was the press, now it’s

anyone with a smart phone. I don't want anyone's body, least of all DCI Hawk's final image to be a burnt corpse on social media."

Sergeant Wilson and the Commander nodded in unison taking Hood's comments as their signal to get back to their work. Hood stood alone, unwilling to leave his DCI, even though there was nothing he could do. He didn't want to break the spell, alone with his thoughts. A small tear ran down his cheek. He didn't know he had any tears left. So much heartache in recent years had burned him out.