



LOW LIFE IN HIGH PLACES.

By David Elliott



2999 WORDS

8 PAGES

Low life in high places.

Marak Sikorski crossed himself. In the name of Our Lady what a mess. His plastic-bag galoshed Nikes, rustled through the penthouse show-flat till they settled in the pool of delicate dawn light that poured through dual-aspect windows. He took stock of the scene. Tarantino on steroids; more abattoir than estate agent pitch.

Crimson splatters swarmed across the high-end white goods and added a subtle Jackson Pollock ambience to the Dulux colour of the year, 'sweet embrace' walls. At least eau-de-nil was no longer de-rigour. A dead-un lay crumpled on the living room floor. Supine and resting the longest of sleeps. Welts, slashes and deep-purple bloomed through lacerated denim. The black pudding of his life force, an imperfect sinister circle on the new Wilton.

A second body lay prone, sniper style beside a telescope, trained out over Croxley View and the playing fields and schools of West Watford. His wide-open eyes stared out blindly at the same view.

Marak yawned, rubbed the embroidered Leavesden Launderers and Cleaners logo on his polo shirt and breathed deep. An iron tang hung in the air but there was a deeper background scent that refused to come to the fore. His night had ended with a mysterious summons, swiftly followed by a bank transfer of serious numbers. The normal plea for help and why not? Jobs like this were his bread and butter.

His three-handed brigade swiftly cocooned the two bodies in a mile of industrial clingfilm and unceremoniously shoved them into a laundry basket. The shrink-wrapped mannequins immediately whisked down to the tradesman's entrance and a white transit, engine ticking.

Marak looked down at the white spec as it disappeared past where the old fire-station once stood. The unsanctioned private ambulance, tinged in an orange halo as it breasted a lone working streetlight. The corona collapsed in respect of the departed, as the lamp timed-out. The van looped the roundabouts and headed off on the backroads towards the Chilterns and an obliging associate's pig farm.

For Marak, sterilizing crime scenes or cockups as he referred to them, was the antithesis of all those CSI shows on the gogglebox. It was a case of working carefully in reverse, squeezing the toothpaste back into the tube. Now with the stiffies out of the way, it was wash high and scrub low, the opposite of cleaning his Audi.

The flat looked worse than it was. A little blood goes a long way, especially after the abomination of the knife fight, he suspected had occurred. Funny though; no weapons. Not a blade in sight, not even a butter knife in the kitchen draws.

He supervised, directed operations. Yes, his brigade could use the cold-water tap, but all the wrung dregs had to be poured into the plastic bin sat by the front door. Marak had never trusted plumbing. He wasn't going to be hung out to dry by a clagged-up drain. No blood clot or mote of nitty-gritty DNA evidence would catch him

out. Having a client caught and convicted by the trap, arrested by a nest of pubic hair or sanitary product catching evidence in the u-bend, even after a proper old-school Debbie-double-flush; was simply not an option.

Marak pointed to the telescope.

The closest operative sidled up and put his eye close, then huffed. Everyone knew Marak couldn't lookout himself without suffering vertiginous collywobbles.

'Blimey Boss, proper nonces, trained right in on the school changing rooms it is. Dirty bastards.'

What was going on? Dodgy pictures? County lines? Should he consult the Tabernacle? Them that oversee. Them that pontificate.

The bin slowly but surely filled with a pink frothy lemonade. Cold as ice, not from the frosty situation but because all good cleaners know hot water sets haemoglobin, severely hindering crime-scene eradication. Marak shone his ultraviolet torch over the scrubbed walls and into every nook and cranny. All clear. He had a degree in life and blood splatters.

Next up the luxurious Wilton. Careful not to snag any evidence on the grippers, it was prized free and then coiled into a Swiss roll, sliced and diced into manageable chunks with an electric saw. They hadn't even used underlay the cheap gits, but thankfully the carpet was thick enough that the body fluids had sat in the pile and not seeped through to stain the concrete beneath. His unflinching brigade hefted the corrupted bite size whorls into bin bags and then taped them up tight, to be stacked in the ubiquitous laundry basket.

Time for the last dance. The whole gaff was sprayed down with Marak's secret formula cleansing squirt. Part acid, part detergent, part descaler to account for the local hard water and applied with a garden sprayer. Any condemning residuals, wiped away with copious sheeves of kitchen roll.

Marak's ringtone, Don Henley's Dirty Laundry rinsed the air.

'Boss the old bill are flying down Ricky Road in convoy. I'm pretty sure you're compromised.'

Marak terminated the call. 'OUT! NOW!'

What was he missing? Was this a set up? His gloved hand opened the fridge. Nothing inside, but hang on? He pocketed the business card that had stowed away, caught in the seal. Something drew him to the Rangemaster. He opened the door. A large packet of white powder sat neatly on the middle shelf with two crossed knives guarding it. He quickly grabbed the end of the knives with a pincer motion and threw them into the basket. The brick followed and with a departing glance to check there were no hangers on, Marak shut the front door and strolled down to the lift. Breathing himself thin, he squeezed in with his not so glamorous assistants.

They filled a second white transit and drove off.

Marak held up his hand. 'Go slow. Don't head back towards Town, drive down onto Caxton Way, right to the bottom of the business park and holdup there. We don't want to drive straight into their web.'

A half hour later they poodled back towards Watford. Ascott Road pulsed with blue lights, triggering Marak. The high-rises rippled and tangoed in the emergency. Marak stared them down, praying that they'd all disappear in the biggest of domino-topples.

'No officer, not seen another soul. ID? Sorry, the early shift cleaners, just finished at...'

Marak named a local, well-known company and flashed a headed worksheet.

'Got to keep records, their office manager gets right umpy if it isn't done by the book and won't pay. What's cooking? Oh - nothing here then. No need to stay?

Glamorous assistant pulled away from the roadblock. In the rear of the van, the soapy slops, sloshed and glugged. Marak reached back and steadied the bin with his large palm.

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Marak nursed a mocha as he paced the gum strewn pavement. He snapped out several WhatsApp's, span round at the Chinese takeaway and marched back past the tyre-fitters and pharmacy towards his domain, the bookies and the launderette. He owned both. Respectable frontages, separate to the un-avowed but interconnected at the rear by the real industry of Leavesden Launderers and Cleaners.

He walked through the launderette where the service washes span in synchronicity with the fruit-machines next door. Smalls or cherries, both enterprises maximised to clean out wallets. He nodded to the twins, his trusted right-hand executive managers. They were so interchangeable; he could never completely tell which one was which. Branwyn or Angelina. His compromise – both had long morphed into Brangelina.

He pushed into the office/boardroom. The WhatsApp had worked. All his brigade were in attendance, sat around the Ikea kitchen cum conference table.

'Let's debrief last night... What went wrong?'

There was a general shrug of shoulders.

'Did anything go wrong Boss?'

'Good question. I have a distinct feeling that we was bubbled. The Feds knew. How?' Marak's hand fiddled with the miscreant business card in his pocket. He dealt it flat onto the table. 'Is this our problem?'

Ian McKenzie. Watford's estate agent of the year.

'As if.' A glamorous assistant piped up. 'His boards litter the Town. Heavily involved in all the new redevelopment. Acres of his advertising banners along the railway by the Junction.'

Marak spat, 'you mean all those high-rise monstrosities killing the town. No parking, no schools; gardens in the sky. Pah. Brangelina, the launderette?'

'Everything's as clean as a Queen in a washing machine. Contracts working well and last night's fees have put us in the proverbial pink, think lost red sock in a whitewash.'

Marak smiled and turned to her sister, 'and the bookies?'

She hesitated, 'well Boss, I was going to speak in private when you were free.'

Marak waved his arm, 'all family here.'

The twins smiled.

'Well... business is pants. Not the over-the-counter stakes, they're right up, especially as we've just had the Euro's. It's the special bets, the under-the-counter stuff. Right down, well over fifty percent.'

Marak grimaced. 'What's the point of running a cleaning business if no-one takes advantage of our expertise and actually launders their dirty cash.'

Brangelina sniggered. 'The regular punters are rerouting their nefariously earnt money to where they're being offered better returns. They've asked for seventy-five pence in the pound rather than our habitual fifty-p and got right umpy when I refused. Said they could go elsewhere Couldn't wheedle it out of them to where they were jumping ship. They clammed up tighter than your wallet. But I did hear one quip that property was currently a better investment.'

Marak laughed at the wallet joke, his brigade knew which side their bread was buttered. With a thumbs up, he looked directly at Brangelina, 'nice work.'

She continued. 'Word-up – someone is proper dissing our name. A hostile takeover?'

Marak's tongue pushed out his cheek, all knew, that in that simple action, a lot of their blood, sweat and tears were in the offing.

He pointed out individual jobs. 'Surveillance, deep dive into Mr McKenzie's businesses and make that his private life too. Ladies, I suggest that one of you needs to sell their house, a divorce fire sale perhaps and the other has just had a lottery win and is looking to upgrade their present humble abode if you get my drift.' He clocked his watch. 'Back here; tomorrow afternoon.'

Marak stretched back in his chair and sipped his stone-cold Mocha. 'Yuk.' He stood up and cracked out his six-foot-two frame to gird his anxiety. This palaver meant a

visit to Soho, to meet with his so-called uncles, his departed father's insalubrious second family at the Tabernacle. Normally something to totally avoid.

However, this wasn't normal.

All previous engagements, instantly struck from the calendar.

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'What do we have?' asked Marak. 'The Tabernacle, have informed me that Mr McKenzie, is persona non-gratis.' Gasps filled the boardroom. 'The numpty recently let his Edinburgh portfolio slip through his fingers. Fell fowl of the local Albanian Mafiosi who relieved his holdings with a full-on coup d'état on his derriere. He's now trying to resurrect his career on our manor. All those high-rise redevelopments, a perfect front for cooking his books. This has my goat on both levels. You know my thoughts on drugs but muscling in on our turf? He's declared war. Right, what else?'

A less glamorous assistant piped up. 'The cost-of living-crisis along with rotten lettuce Truss and her badly managed budget and associated mortgage rises have crashed his sales. He's desperate for cash and word on the ring-road says he's overextended with the local drugs cartel. He plies all the site managers with booze, sniffing for bungs and sealed deals to launder through the estate agents. Buy low sell high or something, I can't put my finger on how. They're all lowlife in high places.'

'Were you clocked?'

'As if Boss. There's a constant buzz of Uber and Just Eat drivers in and out of his office and it's not food they are deliverooing. Flies round shite if you ask me, ouch. Mum!'

Brangelina had clipped his ear.

Less glamorous assistant rubbed the offending hurt, 'Fitted right in on my scooter, the perfect surveillance cover with a full-face helmet to hide my good looks.'

Brangelina ruffled her son's hair.

'And house hunting?'

'Overpriced with aggressive sales pitches. Pushy, on the verge of desperation I'd say.'

'Selling?'

'Ahh, I pled damsel in distress and a messy divorce. The scumbag, who valued in person was all uninterested shmooze and smiles. I almost puked. Offered a hundred-K below Right-view's market value with a bat of his eyelids; can you believe it? He insinuated that he had the perfect cash-buyer, a bigwig at the studios, ready to jump. You were right son, buy low, sell high, then concreate his ill-gotten gains through his cement mixers. Wants me to reinvest in an off-plan, top of the range

penthouse, full discount. He's got issues, was so desperate to get his grubby pinkies on my *inverted commas* impending divorce settlement. So, the sky gardens viewing is at seven.' Eyes narrowed, she looked at Marak. 'Said my brother would be joining for moral support. I hate estate agents.'

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'Stand back on platform seven, the next train does not stop.' The ersatz announcement soared up to the sky garden penthouse. The Manchester express made even more of a commotion as it thundered through on singing rails.

With the chunky sky garden sales-brochure in hand Marak lingered in the shadow behind Brangelina. As promised McKenzie was strutting his banter. He opened the patio doors and strode out onto the balcony which helped dilute his cloying aftershave. It evoked the background scent from West Watford and McKenzie's voice matched the caller that instigated that job; perfectly.

'Ignore the trains. You get used to them. My own place backs onto the tracks, kids love trainspotting. See, perfect transport links to London. Fourteen minutes tops.'

Marak totted up the lies on his fingers.

'Ready to sign on the dotted line? Make your commitment to this dream real. No regrets. But... a small issue... tons of interest in this beauty. You need to strike while the iron is hot. Six more viewings lined up. Selling like hot potatoes.'

'Surely hot cakes?'

McKenzie's face hardened at Marak's voice and he squinted in the twilight. The penny dropped as he realised who he was talking to. He spat at Brangelina, 'you set me up, bitch.'

Marak, finger to his lips; shushed.

'Can't have your cake and eat it McKenzie. Bitten off more than you can chew. Watford doesn't like the cut of your jib. Access denied. You're finished.'

McKenzie menaced in a lowland Scottish slur. 'Who's going to stop me? You and Elton John's, Taylor made army?'

'That's rich, coming from a failed Scottish goalkeeper who couldn't catch covid. No balls, no business acumen and no authorisation. The Tabernacle despise your methods. You littered high places and did a moonlight flit on all your low-level rents. You also stiffed me. Incredible bad form to bubble competitors to the Feds. So, action immediate, the Tabernacle have revoked all your non-existent privileges. Their decree: you run out of town.'

'No-no-no-no-no-no,' McKenzie wagged his index finger. He then jumped into a fencer's stance, wielding a switchblade, which had appeared Paul Daniel's-esque from behind his ear.

Marak stepped in front of Brangelina. He coughed twice and the door burst open, his brigade filled the penthouse.

'Easy tiger. Going to shank us, like you did those poor couriers? That upset some influential people whom you shouldn't have. They want retribution and you have no collateral.'

The knife glinted as the Liverpool express rocked the Junction below. McKenzie keened its sharpness, then feinted to lunge.

Marak sidestepped.

'Boss, did he bring a knife to a gunfight?'

'It's Okay boys, they do things differently north of the wall.'

'What? Deep-fried Mars bars and heroin?'

McKenzie spat away the insults.

'Just out of interest, can you liquidate any assets? You apparently ask others to do the same on a regular basis.'

'Whatever.' McKenzie shrugged, flexing his free fist.

The knife whirled in a figure of eight.

Marak teeth itched. 'Is this a fencing or boxing match.'

'Boss, this isn't a tragic ballet. Your normal smiles and words aint working ere. Tango im, don't just tickle im.'

Marak juddered, barely evading McKenzie's ungentlemanly pre-emptive strike.

Thrust, parry, bob, weave.

In out, backwards, forwards.

Lunge, counter, feint, double bluff.

Marak's legs quaked, he wanted this unfettered high-wire act finished. 'If he takes one more step, shoot his kneecaps out.'

There were grunts behind Marak, who contemplated his next move. This tiger was cornered; dangerous and volatile.

Without warning, McKenzie dashed, Butch and Sundance style. His three counter-attack steps ended as Brangelina dropped to her haunches and swept McKenzie's legs away. In desperation he flung the knife.

It arced end over end, in slow-mo.

Marak batted it away with the brochure.

McKenzie scrambled for the knife in the nook of the balcony. The two-way tie to retrieve the weapon ended in a melee. Marak elbowed and barged McKenzie out of reaching distance and against the balustrade. He regrouped, charged again, averted now by a Brangelina pirouette kick to the head.

It wasn't that which toppled him over the edge, McKenzie literally tripped over himself in the rush to escape Marak's menacing, vertigo induced advance. McKenzie terrified, retreated, overbalanced and barged right through the balustrade. It shattered. He merged with the glass, concrete and stainless-steel as they twisted and piked fifteen floors earthward. His own goal, polyphonic screams, drowned by the Glasgow express.

Marak's launderer's eye surveyed the displaced chunk of real estate. How would the Feds investigate? He fabricated a coroner's report in his head. 'Sudden deacceleration trauma, instigated by corruption, dodgy deals and shoddy building practices.' He shivered.

Brangelina irreverently pinched knife and brochure and disdainfully lobbed them over the parapet to join the turmoil on the permanent way. 'I told you. I hate estate agents.'

Marak looked around at his brigade, then down at the tracks. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Best let someone else tidy up this cockup. Pub?

'Pub,' came the resounding replies.