

CHAPTER 1

It had been a typical Bank Holiday Monday following the wedding, with strong winds, thunderstorms and conditions better suited to staying indoors. Phoenix and Athena ventured outside for a walk with Hope, to clear the cobwebs when a brief break appeared in the foul weather.

“Do you think someone is trying to tell us something?” asked Phoenix.

“We’re happy,” replied Athena “that’s what matters.”

Hope was wrapped up warm in her buggy; without a care in the world. She kicked her feet out and gave her parents a gummy grin.

The excitement of the celebrations was fading; the old manor house felt quiet and empty once her parents and Sarah Gough returned to their respective homes. That was why Athena insisted on getting outside. Phoenix would have lounged around in their rooms feeling sorry for himself.

“I’m getting too old for a series of late nights in a row,” he grumbled when Hope woke them up before seven that morning.

Athena had brought her in from the nursery, plopped her on the bed, next to her father, and headed for the shower.

“Talk sense into your father, Hope. Daddy’s back to work in the morning. There’s no rest from the wicked.”

Phoenix smiled at that quip. He cuddled his daughter and wondered what he had done to be so lucky. A new wife, a beautiful daughter and a job he enjoyed, working with friends and colleagues he trusted and admired. Many never had even one of those things. He should be grateful.

Now, a few hours later he wheeled Hope’s buggy into the house. He kicked off his muddy boots, as he and Athena returned upstairs. Phoenix reminded himself that if he wanted to hold on to the things he cherished, they needed protecting to his last breath.

Once they got dry, and warm, in their quarters, Athena looked out over the lawns in front of the house. The next passing storm battered the windows. Dark menacing clouds appeared to touch the rooftops of the stable-block and the buildings on the edge of the estate. The tiny church where they had married on Saturday was just a shimmering haze in the distance.

“What a horrid day,” she sighed.

“Erebus always thought of Larcombe Manor as his sanctuary,” said Phoenix, as he joined her by the window, with Hope half-asleep on his shoulder.

“Those long years in the Royal Navy, being buffeted by mountainous seas, wondering whether he’d ever see dry land again. This offered a guaranteed haven; built to last by his ancestors.”

The last days of April were due to deliver a mixture of sunshine and showers to the West Country. Larcombe Manor had seen it before over the centuries, and its current guardians had plenty to occupy their minds. Everything would survive the battering of the winds and the heavy rainfall. It always did.

As May prepared to begin, the old manor house would shake itself dry and carry on as it

had in the past. Phoenix and Athena needed to do the same.

Hayden Vincent had informed Athena of the telephone conversation he received from Orion, on Easter Sunday morning. The tip-off, suggesting a possible cryptic connection between a series of gangland deaths around the country, was noted.

At the first meeting of the new week following the Bank Holiday, Athena gave Giles and Artemis the task of discovering whether there any truth lay behind it.

Minos and Alastor had their own important research to carry out. At the last Olympus meeting in London, four potential candidates for the Olympus Project hierarchy had been identified. Their backgrounds needed vetting with extreme care, to make sure no potential 'bad eggs' slipped through the process. Zeus was cautious in the extreme, and with good reason, after the trials and tribulations caused by the Titans.

Athena decided she would leave her senior colleagues to do the groundwork alone. She felt confident she could trust them to leave no stone unturned. Phoenix could work with her on the finer details later. To be one hundred percent certain Zeus selected the right candidates.

The next item on the agenda concerned the new agent intake and their training. Kelly Dexter and Hayden Vincent were set to start. The training manuals had been reviewed and revised. Rusty Scott checked them over, and when Athena asked if he was satisfied with the results, he nodded his approval.

"The sooner the first group of recruits arrive, the better," he grunted, "I fear we'll need every pair of hands we can get this summer."

"We have enough to cope with," said Phoenix "at home, and abroad. We may have to prioritise our activities and channel our resources to areas where they have the most benefit. The 'one-off' targets Zeus sends our way, will have to wait. We need to concentrate on the bigger picture."

"I agree," said Athena "perhaps our salvation in that area lies on our own doorstep? I suggest we check this data from Orion to see if it proves valuable. As well as a financial reward, it might be possible to offer Hounsell Security Services a role more aligned to that of Olympus. They could carry out the investigations on those singular names supplied to us by Zeus. A rogue policeman; a suspect politician, that type of thing. We wouldn't expect them to take direct action themselves. They report back their findings, and an agent will do whatever we decide is necessary."

Henry Case's mind drifted while these matters were being discussed. The Reverend Sarah Gough had set off for home last evening. Her battered VW camper van 'Maggie' had been patched together by the transport team in the garage. Despite a weary shake of the head from the mechanic that told a different tale to the words he uttered; 'Maggie' he pronounced 'is good to go.'

"I'll be in touch," Henry had said, as the odd couple said their goodbyes.

"You'd better, Henry," Sarah had shouted. Her van spluttered and coughed its way along the winding drive towards the stone pillars marking the boundary of the estate.

Henry glanced across the table at his colleague, Giles Burke. He looked weary this morning. Maria Elena must have worn him out, he thought. Lucky devil! Perhaps if he and the padre saw one another more often, their relationship might become more physical.

Henry had been content with the progress they made in the short time they spent together, but it was unfamiliar territory. He hadn't wanted to force the pace and make a fool of himself,

Sarah being an ordained minister. They probably had an unwritten set of rules somewhere. If Sarah had been a real padre, it would have been covered by Queen's Regulations, and he would have known where he stood.

Civvy Street proved a minefield for Henry Case. He had been cocooned by the Army and the Security Services throughout his adult life. His lack of experience with the opposite sex had never been an issue. Henry always thought marriage not to be an option for him, given his line of work.

Until happy couples popped up all over the place at Larcombe, he never wondered what he might have been missing. Even when Maria Elena arrived, although he had been as interested as Giles Burke, he knew the younger, more attractive man stood far more chance. With his looks and occupation, his options were limited.

"A penny for them, Henry?" Athena asked, sensing her security chief's distraction this morning.

"Beggars can't be choosers," blurted out Henry, startled by the question.

"My thoughts too, Henry," said Rusty. He assumed Henry commented on the HSS relationship. "Orion and his workforce can offer useful intelligence now and then, but Olympus mustn't form too close a partnership. It might lead to weaker security here at Larcombe."

Phoenix could see Henry was floundering. Their enforcer wondered whether he could extricate himself from the hole he dug with his outburst. Or to keep quiet in case he made matters worse and convinced everyone he hadn't been listening.

Athena's facial expression contained a mixture of amusement, and confusion; which didn't help the poor devil much. Phoenix intervened, to allow the security chief a breathing space to gather his wits and get himself back on track.

"With the tasks allocated so far, this morning," he said, "we have reached a suitable point to finish matters for the day. We enjoyed a busy, and exciting weekend. That might have caught up with us. We need a break. I suggest we take the rest of the day off, and re-charge our batteries. We can pick up where we left off in the morning."

Nobody was in the mood to argue. Henry was grateful, and as the room emptied, the good-natured atmosphere suggested Phoenix gauged things to perfection. Everyone present needed to catch-up on a few hours' sleep.

Phoenix and Athena watched as the weary line of colleagues left. Then they headed upstairs to their apartment. Maria Elena returned with Hope from a quick turn around the grounds. This English weather didn't agree with the young nanny from Estepona. She missed the three hundred days a year sunshine of her home country.

"You are returning early?" she asked, "shall I take Hope to the nursery for the rest of the morning?"

"That won't be necessary," said Athena "we'll look after her. You can put your feet up for an hour."

Phoenix spotted the puzzled expression on the young girl's face.

"Athena means for you to relax, have time to yourself. We'll look after Hope until after lunch. We'll see you again at two o'clock."

"Okay." With that Maria Elena headed for the door.

As she turned the handle, Phoenix called out to her.

"Giles has time off now too," he said, "perhaps you can relax together?"

Maria Elena turned her head and her smile said everything. It was as if the sun had come out. Then she blushed and scurried outside onto the corridor.

“You’re terrible,” said Athena “you embarrassed the poor girl.”

“It’s not as if it’s a big secret anymore, is it? They spent less than a second apart at the wedding reception.”

“Somehow, I don’t think Giles will get the rest he hoped for,” said Athena. “Neither will we. A few extra hours with our daughter is no hardship.”

“When we said our goodbyes before your parents travelled home, what did you and Grace talk about in your deep conversation?” asked Phoenix.

“Mummy’s keen for Hope to be christened as soon as possible. I want to wait until she’s older. She often sleeps through the night now at four months. She’ll be more of a little person towards the end of the summer. I’d like her to be more aware of what’s going on around her. I thought we might get her christened here in late August. What do you think?”

Phoenix tried to remember how it had been for him, but he couldn’t remember the occasion. He knew he went to church once or twice when growing up, but it never left a lasting impression on him. Except that it always being cold.

“Sharron screamed right through the service when we had her christened,” he recalled. “She was in good company, three or four others lined up on the production-line with her, that Sunday. None of them seemed that keen on the old bloke hanging on to them, nor on the icy water in the font. I was glad to get out. My ears rang for hours. Karen and her mother seemed happy enough. Her Dad and her brothers used it as an excuse to get drunk, as usual. My mother left as soon as she could. It’s not a day that lived long in the memory.”

“You poor thing,” teased Athena “what an impoverished upbringing you suffered.

They both fell silent. Hope played with one of her favourite toys and looked at her parents in turn. She wondered why everything had gone so quiet.

Athena wished she hadn’t made that last remark. She and Phoenix met four years ago, and their lives altered dramatically ever since that day. Erebus made them aware at Larcombe of the new agent’s history. As far as Olympus was concerned, the past stayed at the gates when he arrived that night.

Although certain incidents prompted the occasional remark that had a direct link to something he had done or resembled an occasion he attended, nothing prior to him arriving got described in any detail. It was strange that mention of a christening prompted the revelation of such a personal event from over a quarter of a century ago.

He hadn’t talked much about his weddings either. Except last Saturday was the first to involve a church service. Phoenix now possessed a registry office, a beach in The Gambia, and the Larcombe Manor church on his CV. Few men matched that; nor would they welcome it.

“I’m sorry, darling,” she said at last “that was unnecessary. The past is the past, you don’t have to tell me more.”

“There’s nothing to apologise for, darling,” he replied “my childhood was impoverished in other ways. We weren’t poor in financial terms. My parents clothed and fed me well enough. It was their love they denied me. I was a loner. Even after I married and had a young daughter, I never felt the strength most people experience of having family surrounding them. I loved my daughter, without reservation, but I had so many things I needed to deal with.”

Athena picked up Hope and sat her on her lap, facing the two of them, on the settee.

“How did life in The Gambia affect your feelings?”

“Sharron’s murder devastated me. I lashed out and took revenge on as many of my tormentors as possible. Sue Owens got me out of harm’s way, and our life in the sun was idyllic, but I couldn’t let things rest. Every month I lived abroad I spent hours every day checking the internet for news on what had happened back here in the UK. When Sue was diagnosed with breast cancer, she fought hard, but to no avail. One of the last conversations we had concerned what I would do when she died. I told her I would find a way to get home. I needed to deal with that unfinished business.”

“Sharron’s killer?” Athena whispered.

“He was number one on my list. I didn’t realise the others I identified as needing to be dealt with brought me to the attention of Erebus and the Olympus Project.”

“You kept busy in those few months I understand?” asked Athena.

“I prepared well, as usual. However, I didn’t account for the tenacity of our neighbourhood copper, and his fresh-faced companion. By the end of June, I was no longer the hunter but the hunted. Strange how things work out, isn’t it? Orion is still on our doorstep, with no idea how close he lives to his nemesis; and as for Artemis, well, that fresh-faced young detective is now a valued colleague, who lives with my best friend.”

“So much has changed here in four years, haven’t they?”

“The biggest change was that I found somewhere I didn’t feel alone. Erebus became the father I never had, Rusty became my first real friend, and even you and the Three Stooges made me feel as if I belonged. I found the family I had been searching for. Things have just grown from there.”

“And now our family of three can look forward to the future,”

“With caution,” sighed Phoenix “this business that Giles and Artemis are investigating worries me somewhat. It could pose a significant threat. Evil is only just around the corner, you mark my words. As for this little one, let’s plan the christening for the Late Summer Bank Holiday. Sarah Gough should have plenty of time to free herself up to officiate.”

“That should bring a smile to Henry’s face at least,” said Athena “I’m sure he’s smitten by her, although where his head was at this morning, who knows?”

Silence fell on the room again. Phoenix was drifting off to sleep. He felt dog-tired, and no mistake. He shook his head and stood.

“Let’s take Hope for a walk. We’ll need to get wrapped up against this wind and rain. If we do it in stages, we can make it to the orangery, then wait for the next shower to blow through. Then we can dart over to the swimming pool via the ice-house entrance. An hour playing with her in the shallow end, taking turns to swim lengths on our own, will serve us better than lazing around here.”

“Translated, that means Daddy wants time alone to think, Hope,” said Athena to their daughter, who knew when a smile was required, and obliged.

“You know me so well, darling,” said Phoenix.

“I’m learning,” replied Athena “let’s face whatever the weather or the future throws at us. Together we’re a match for anything.”