

CHAPTER 1

Monday 29th September 2014

Henry Case left the Olympus car with the transport section, collected his bag from the boot, and walked to his quarters in the stable block. He was tired but happy. The weekend in Surrey with the Reverend Sarah Gough had flown by.

Henry couldn't believe twelve weeks had passed since his first visit. That crazy weekend in mid-July, when Sarah invited him to the annual flower show and fete that was a high spot of the summer for her parishioners.

Sarah had booked him into the Hurtwood Hotel on that occasion, three miles away in Walking Bottom, Peaslake. Decorum was the order of the day. Her neighbours mustn't catch a whiff of scandal in the air, she had told him.

Last Friday evening, Henry had arrived at the vicarage and parked in front of the main house. As he stood on the doorstep with his dozen red roses, he checked his jacket pocket. Yes, the surprise was still there. Where he had put it before leaving Larcombe Manor.

"Hello, darling," cried Sarah, as she threw open the door, "come inside."

Henry followed her indoors. Sarah took the bunch of flowers and went to the kitchen. She found a vase in one of the lower cupboards, arranged them to her satisfaction, and then topped up the glass container with water.

"There," she said "that's done. Now for a proper welcome."

Sarah took Henry by the hand and led him to the bottom of the stairs.

Henry stopped.

"Before we go any further, there's something I need to do," he said.

Sarah gave him a quizzical look.

"Not more revelations, surely?"

Henry smiled. His mother had always told him the truth will out, and it did two weeks ago. Sarah now knew most of his duties at Larcombe for the Olympus Project. She had come to terms with them. His concerns over whether they could ever have a lasting relationship were over. He was ready to move forward to a bright future.

"Nothing sinister, I promise," said Henry, taking the small box from his pocket.

"Will you marry me, Sarah?" He opened the box, revealing the elegant diamond solitaire he bought in Bath. Sarah's only response had been to extend her left hand, so Henry could slide the ring onto her finger.

"It's perfect, Henry," she said, "yes, I'll marry you."

"Excellent," said Henry, "now let's carry on what we had started."

The vase of red roses remained on the work surface in the kitchen for several hours as the happy couple made love upstairs. There was no question of Henry needing to drive to Walking Bottom tonight. The car could stay in the driveway.

"Oh, Henry," sighed Sarah, "that exercise has made me hungry. Let's walk up to the Royal

Oak for a bite to eat, and a few drinks. I'll keep flicking my hair out of my eyes until someone notices the ring. That should start the tongue's wagging."

"The sooner the locals see us together the better," said Henry. "I expect they've wondered why I haven't been back."

They dressed and returned downstairs.

"Did you bring a bag?" asked Sarah.

"It's still in the car," Henry replied, "I was waiting until you accepted my proposal before moving my gear indoors. Regardless of your answer, I wasn't driving to a damn hotel."

"That would never happen, darling," said Sarah.

The couple had strolled up the street to the pub, had a meal and shared a bottle of wine. When the Royal Oak landlord called time, Sarah and Henry were threading their way through a crowded bar. Several customers spotted the new adornment their vicar had acquired. Drinking-up time was ended before the well-wishers let them leave.

Henry and Sarah had returned to the vicarage arm in arm. There were no furtive glances, no snatched goodnight kisses behind the greenery this time. Henry stopped to collect his bag from the car. Sarah let them into the house, and although the downstairs lights went on to pacify the neighbours, the newly engaged couple had headed upstairs.

On Saturday and Sunday, Sarah had parish duties to fulfil. She disappeared on her bicycle to spend an hour or two fulfilling her commitments, and when she returned. the couple discussed their plans.

"Where shall we marry?" asked Sarah.

"I thought you wanted the service here," said Henry.

"If we were to live here as husband and wife, and I continued to work in the parishes this ministry covers then yes, it makes sense. However, I'm not sure that's practical."

"What do you propose then?" asked Henry.

"I wasn't born here in the village, so I have no strong ties to the place. My parents lived in Hungerford, and that was where I was raised. Father died when I was in my early twenties. I haven't been back to the place since my mother's funeral three years ago. There are happy memories there, but nothing that makes me yearn to marry in the church where I was christened and confirmed."

"Where do you wish to marry?" Henry asked.

"If Annabelle will agree, I should love it to be at Larcombe Manor. Neither of us has a large family to invite, and your friends and colleagues live there. I can ask a friend to officiate. She shares duties with me in the four parishes we cover."

"What are your plans following the wedding?" asked Henry.

"I'll call the Bishop first thing on Monday and ask him to look for a move further west. If he asks; how soon will the wedding be?"

"There's no cause for concern, is there?" asked Henry "we haven't taken precautions this weekend."

Sarah dug him in the ribs with an elbow.

"My first job when I get back is to explore the possibilities of moving into the main house," said Henry, rubbing his side. "Rusty moved from the stable block with his good lady, and they aren't married yet. My quarters are no place for a married couple to live. Your new position may come with a vicarage, but it's not practical for me to be living off-site while I'm working

for Olympus.”

“Right,” said Sarah, “that’s settled. As soon as I secure a new parish near Bath, we set a date. If Annabelle agrees, we’ll get married in that delightful church on the estate and live in one of the apartments. I know from my visits how comfortable they are. We can make a home there. If we’re blessed with a child in time, it will be an idyllic setting to raise a baby. Hope thrives on it.”

In between the wedding plans and Sarah’s parish duties, they visited the Royal Oak for refreshments. Henry felt the effects of the superb food on his waistline. It had been a special weekend. Now, it was Monday lunchtime. Henry had missed the morning meeting, and he had a long list of jobs that need his attention. As he reached the door to his quarters, all he planned to do was drop the bag and sleep.

Hugh Fraser heard Henry’s door close. He checked his watch. Someone had a good weekend, he thought. Hugh was leaving the estate to drive to Manchester later. Tomorrow at three fifteen, he was attending the funeral of Monty Jacks. The disabled ex-serviceman who was murdered at New Street station, Birmingham. Monty was the first casualty suffered by the Irregulars.

The logistics officer had been working with Phoenix in the orangery over the weekend. Phoenix was keen to keep the pressure on organised crime gangs across the country. It didn’t matter where you looked, even the most unlikely towns were being dragged into the statistics.

Hugh Fraser knew only too well areas in Glasgow where crime was rife. That was nothing new in Drumchapel and Govan. They had been in the Top 10 for decades. Even in Scotland, he had raised an eyebrow when violence or burglary became a hot topic in the smaller towns in the countryside. Phoenix and Rusty kept turning over stones in affluent areas of the South, or the Midlands and the worst low-life criminal crawled out.

Despite the authorities claims of an improving picture, crime was no longer under control. It was spreading further than ever before, and faster than a forest fire. Olympus did what it could, given its resources, but unless they reversed cuts to services, the battle would be lost.

The ringing phone interrupted his thoughts. Ambrosia was calling him.

“I wanted to catch you before you left,” she said. “I’ve just learned from Zeus that the funeral for the other agent murdered in Winson Green is on Friday.”

“Finn’s family came from Rugeley, in Staffordshire,” said Hugh, “I had better attend.”

“We’ll go there together,” said Ambrosia, “I told Zeus I thought a senior Olympian should be present and offered my services. When will you arrive in Leeds?”

“I’m leaving Larcombe within the hour. Olympus have booked me into a budget hotel tonight. The funeral in South Manchester tomorrow is mid-afternoon. I should be with you by seven in the evening.”

“I can’t wait for you to taste my food,” said Ambrosia, “it will be a pleasure to cook for someone. When you live alone, it’s easier to eat out, or get a takeaway.”

Hugh thought of the lonely nights after his wife had moved out. He had the local pizza parlour, chippy, and Chinese restaurant on speed-dial on his phone. Things had moved fast with Ambrosia. She was ambitious and knew what she wanted. Who was he to complain?

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy everything,” he said.

Hugh heard Ambrosia’s trademark giggle.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure of that,” she replied.

“I must drive back to Larcombe on Wednesday morning,” he said, “unless I can persuade Phoenix I’m owed two days leave.”

“Stay with me,” begged Ambrosia, “we need to discuss future roles for the Irregulars. I’ll clear it with Zeus if there’s a problem. We’ll make our own way to Rugeley on Friday. You can head home after the service, and I’ll return here. Can I convince you to spend time with me?”

“Do you have an extensive range of dishes to tempt me with?” asked Hugh.

Ambrosia laughed out loud.

“My skills in the kitchen only stretch to enough dishes to feed you tomorrow evening. After that, we’ll phone for a takeaway. I only want to get out of bed for food, don’t you?”

“That sounds good,” he replied, “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening.”

“Drive safe,” said Ambrosia, “and sleep well tonight.”

Hugh listened to her laughter before she ended the call. Then he packed a bag for four nights away from Larcombe. He had known when he moved south from Scotland that this was a tough assignment, but someone had to do it. Hugh puffed out his cheeks, hoisted his bag on his shoulder, and left the stable block. It was time to drive to Manchester.

In the meeting room, Athena was wondering why Henry Case hadn’t been present this morning. She knew he planned to spend the weekend with her friend, Sarah, but had assumed he would return late on Sunday evening. It was unlike Henry to miss a meeting without warning.

Her husband was taking the others through the mission plans agreed for the coming week. Phoenix had disappeared for half a day on both Saturday, and Sunday to work on them with Hugh Fraser in the orangery. It was in a good cause, but it would be nice to spend quality time together. Little more than a week ago Phoenix had started delegating tasks to less senior agents. Stress affects everyone in time, no matter how tough they appear.

“Will these missions cause the Grid any long-term damage, Phoenix,” asked Minos. Athena forgot Henry for now and switched her attention to the matter in hand.

“I think we’ve used this comparison before, Minos,” replied Phoenix, “it’s like that Whack-A-Mole game for kids. Heads pop up all over the place, and we try to hit them. Every head we take out of the game hurts the Grid for a while, there’s no doubt. How long it lasts depends on how soon they select another soldier to fill the gap.”

“My concern is that every time we send agents into the field we take risks. First, that they are killed, as we have on several missions in the past six months. Second, that during those actions their identity is uncovered. That poses a danger to everyone here at Larcombe.”

“We take every precaution against both eventualities,” said Athena, “our losses are painful, but weighed against the benefits we have secured, they represent a low percentage of our assets.”

“It’s not our job to inflict lasting damage on the Grid,” said Rusty, more animated than Athena had seen him of late.

“Exactly,” agreed Phoenix, “our missions often target the vilest criminals. People who must be eliminated before they can carry out any further crimes. On occasion, we encounter the soldiers, the low-level villains who operate in regions plastered across every media outlet

for a few weeks. Then, we hope the nudge we give the police galvanises them into positive action. So far, that element of our strategy has yielded the smallest fruit.”

“The authorities have been slow to respond in every arena,” said Alastor. “One can understand the logic behind not spending money you don’t have. But this extended period of austerity is punishing the wrong people. Whoever said crime doesn’t pay was a fool. The Grid has increased the profits from organised crime in the last month by a percentage that is manna from heaven for any of the world’s leading companies.”

“I have been distracted of late, with good reason,” said Athena, “and I haven’t kept up to date with your reports, Alastor. I apologise. Can you bring us up to speed? It might help everyone here.”

“Please don’t apologise, Athena. No matter what we face at Olympus, the family must always come first. The reason I introduced the Grid into this conversation was that something concerns me with the latest figures from the Glencairn Bank. Things have moved on since the Spring when we were seeking the identity of the elusive ‘H’. The ice house named him as Ardal James Hannon, an entrepreneur who five years ago lived in Cricklewood. Everything in his background suggested he was the perfect fit for the mastermind behind the Grid’s increasingly cohesive network.”

“Matching locations of a string of deaths to the letter ‘H’ was down to Orion’s work,” said Rusty. “We then discovered Hannon had changed his name, didn’t we?”

“By the end of April, we knew Hannon had gone to ground five years ago. When he opened the Glencairn Bank, he had taken his mother’s maiden name, Hanigan. He ditched his first names. In his new persona, Hugo Hanigan controlled the bank and out-performed the opposition on every level. Hanigan covered his tracks well. Any photographs of him from his youth were useless. There were no current photographs of him online. We stationed an agent on Gresham Street in the summer, to capture images of frequent visitors. His vigil has been intermittent, for security reasons. The images he has sent through to Giles left us with eight possibilities. Progress on nailing the identities of those men has been deferred whenever another crisis has arisen.”

“We’ve had people work on those images, Athena,” said Artemis, “but it’s likely most are seasoned criminals. They are skilled in avoiding being caught on camera. A quick dash from a car to the bank gives us little to work with.”

“However, we named five of the frequent visitors,” said Giles Burke, “and none of them was Hanigan or Hannon. We have three sets of photographs remaining of men who often visit the Glencairn, but we can’t trace them anywhere. They are of a similar age, white, and well-dressed. As Alastor pointed out, getting a face for Hanigan has been a lower priority in the past ten weeks. He may be among those three, or our agent could have missed him altogether. Who knows how often he visits the bank? He could work from home these days.”

“Keep searching for those identities, Giles,” said Athena. “Can we work back from the images of the three unidentified men to discover where they live? I know that’s like finding a needle in a haystack, but it could help confirm who they are.”

“If I may, Athena,” said Alastor, “that’s unnecessary. I’ve seen those photos often enough since the first ones arrived in early June. When I studied the latest batch from Gresham Street, I spotted something. That’s what raised my suspicions with last month’s performance. One of the three men hasn’t visited since before the Bank Holiday weekend. Four weeks is a long time,

after being a frequent visitor for four months.”

“You believe the sudden improvement is due to a change of management at the bank?” asked Phoenix, “could that mean Hanigan has been replaced? Or has he appointed a new person and is giving his total concentration to Grid business?”

“I checked the discarded photos in the latest batch,” said Alastor, “the ice house is focussed on the three that are still unidentified. A much younger man was snapped by our agent two weeks ago. He visited the Glencairn at the same time as one of its regulars. The image was sharp and in focus. No attempt to hide his face. I checked for him online and in hours I had found him on social media. His name is Tyrone O’Riordan.”

The room fell silent. The implication was not lost on anyone sat around the table.

“Tommy O’Riordan’s son?” asked Rusty. “What is he doing at the Glencairn?”

“Tyrone and his sister Rosie lived in Marbella,” said Artemis. “Tommy had a place out there. That was where the police arrested him for the murder of Michael Devlin.”

“The two kids came home for the funeral,” said Rusty. “Have they moved back in with their mother?”

“Not in the family home in Kilburn, because that’s been sold,” said Alastor, “the Marbella apartment has gone too. With Tommy dead, I imagine money was tight, and Tommy’s widow made cutbacks. She doesn’t appear to have worked ever since she and Tommy married. I doubt she wants to start now.”

“They will have done better than scrape by on his ill-gotten gains,” said Phoenix. “I doubt she’s living in poverty. I hope they don’t blame me for getting rid of the family breadwinner?”

“We both had a hand in that,” said Rusty, with a grin.

“Giles, we need to find out more on young Tyrone,” said Athena. “What’s his history? Where does he live?”

“Will do, Athena,” replied Giles, “should we add Colleen and Rosie to the list?”

“It can’t do any harm,” said Athena.

“I think what you have uncovered is gold dust, Alastor,” said Phoenix, “well done. If we add other things into the mix, we could have answers to questions that have concerned me for a while. Who took over as leader of the Kilburn gang after we disposed of Tommy?”

“Tommy’s deputy at the time of his murder trial was his brother-in-law, Sean Walsh,” said Artemis, “he would have been Hanigan’s first-choice. We must assume Walsh was the go-between for the gang while Tommy was in Belmarsh. With Tommy dead, Hanigan had to have let Walsh continue in the role. Unless he under-performed. Giles and I will check the current status.”

“It may already be too late,” said Phoenix, “we received intelligence that a member of the old guard, Michael Quinn, was murdered last month. It wasn’t obvious whether it was an internal struggle for power in the borough, or the gang from Kilburn, next door, spreading its wings.”

“So, the question I need to answer is, who succeeded Sean Walsh in Kilburn?” said Giles, “and are they looking to expand?”

“You two have got plenty to be getting on with,” said Athena, “I suggest you get below to the ice house and make a start. If you bump into Henry Case on your way, could you ask him to call into my office this afternoon?”

Artemis nodded, and she and Giles left the room. Athena looked at the others.

“I think we’ve found a chink in the Grid’s armour, don’t you?”

“Whatever role Tyrone O’Riordan plays, he’s a different breed to Hanigan,” said Minos. “His digital footprint is easy to track. It might be because he was thrust into a new role and hasn’t learned to be more guarded in his actions.”

“Or he’s an arrogant sod, who thinks he’s untouchable,” muttered Phoenix.

“Either way, we can investigate his link to the Glencairn, discover what happened to Hugo Hanigan, and see whether the Kilburn gang’s ambition has any limits.”

Athena couldn’t think of anything to add to Minos’s comment, so she called the meeting to a close.

When they were back in the apartment Athena was restless. Maria Elena had prepared them their lunch. She was helping Hope grapple with hers. Phoenix was soon polishing off his second sandwich and stopped to take a sip from his cup of coffee.

“A penny for them, darling?” he asked.

“I wanted to catch up with Henry, to hear about his weekend. It’s not vital, given what we learned from Alastor this morning, but all the same…”

“That’s the first time since I’ve been here that he surprised me,” said Phoenix, “he and Minos are such dry sticks. They churn out report after report. Their attention to detail is amazing.”

“Yet your in-tray is always full,” chided Athena, “I have to pester you to take time to catch up with your reading.”

“This was different,” said Phoenix, “Alastor showed initiative. Something bothered him in the numbers he was seeing from the Glencairn. Because those two delve into the minutiae every day, it registered with him. Normal people would have missed it altogether or dismissed it as a seasonal blip, or an adjustment from earlier in the financial year.”

“I’ve always told you not to underestimate them,” said Athena.

“Fair point. As for what he spotted on that photograph I’m itching to hear what Giles and Artemis uncover regarding the O’Riordan family.”

“I hope they can work fast, you’ll be away after Wednesday.”

Maria Elena had disappeared to the nursery with their daughter. Athena was still only picking at her salad. Phoenix rested his eyes and went through the actions planned for later in the week. It never hurt to check those plans.

When he opened his eyes, Athena was in the kitchen.

Phoenix walked to the door and watched as his wife stacked the dishwasher. Athena’s heart wasn’t in it, he could tell.

“Why don’t you see if Henry is waiting for you?”

Athena looked at her watch.

“Where did that hour go?” she cried and flew along the corridor and took the stairs to the administration area. Minos and Alastor were hard at work on their next batch of reports. Henry Case stood outside her door like a naughty schoolboy.

“Henry, you’re alive and well. What a relief.”

“Apologies for the late arrival, Athena,” said Henry, “Sarah, and I didn’t want the weekend to finish.”

“I’m only teasing you, Henry. Sarah called me yesterday when she was on her way to church for evensong. She told me she left you snoring on the sofa in front of the television. I

take it the food at the Royal Oak is as good as ever? Congratulations on your engagement. I didn't share your good news with the others this morning. You can do that yourself."

"Did Sarah mention the wedding?" asked Henry.

"No, she was too excited about the ring you gave her. I imagine you've started to make plans though?"

"I won't put off matters," said Henry, "Sarah's calling the Bishop to ask for a transfer closer to Bath. Sarah doesn't want me to feel obliged to leave Larcombe and move nearer to her. If you agree, we want to marry in the tiny church. One of her colleagues has agreed to do the honours."

"That sounds lovely," said Athena.

"What are the chances of us living here afterwards? Not in the stable block, but in this building, the same as Rusty and Artemis."

"I'd be disappointed if you went somewhere else, Henry," said Athena. "This old Georgian manor house has eleven bedrooms and seven bathrooms. Daddy will move out in a few weeks, based on what he told me at lunchtime. Even if he stayed with us permanently, we can still find a spot for you both."

"Oh, jolly good," said Henry.

"I imagine the date of the wedding will depend on how soon the Church find a new living for the soon to be Reverend Sarah Case?"

"Sarah has her heart set on Easter Saturday," said Henry.

"Well then, her matron of honour and the flower girl are happy to accept," said Athena, "that was another thing she mentioned during her frantic phone call last evening."

"I shall ask Giles to be my best man," said Henry, "he asked me if I would do the job when he gets married. I said I'd give it some thought, not realising I would be engaged myself only weeks later."

Henry trotted back to the stable block to call Sarah with the good news. He hoped she received positive news soon on her next parish. October was upon them. April seemed a long way off. If the last year had taught him anything, it was that things can change before you know it.

