

CHAPTER 1

On the other side of the Georgian house, Rusty Scott and his partner were awake and at various stages of preparing for the day ahead. Artemis had showered and dressed. Rusty was still thinking about it.

“Come on,” Artemis urged her lover, with a friendly poke at his back.

Rusty stayed under the covers for a few more seconds.

“I’m only just coming to terms with this, you know,” he said as he swung his legs out of bed.

“What, being naked before a younger woman?” asked Artemis.

Rusty strolled unselfconsciously around the bed to where Artemis sat, brushing her hair.

“I’ve been comfortable with ‘us’ from the first day we met, sweetheart,” he said, taking the brush from her hand. He continued to brush her hair and they looked at one another in the dressing-table mirror.

“No, it’s this apartment. Since I arrived here I’ve lived in the stable block quarters. I admit, they were male-orientated, but we rubbed along in there, didn’t we? When Athena elevated you to the hierarchy here, it was natural she wanted us to distance ourselves from the other ranks. We needed to be close at hand if Olympus matters took an urgent turn for the worse. That had to be a plus for the Project, but I feel uncomfortable here, in Thanatos’s old rooms.”

Artemis touched his hand, to indicate he could stop. She took the brush from him, laid it on the table and stood. She put her arms around his neck and looked up into the rugged face of the man she loved.

“He was a traitor, Rusty,” she whispered “and he paid the price. Athena had the place redecorated and fitted out with new furniture. Nothing of your former colleague remains. Just what’s lying in the unmarked grave in the pet cemetery. We’re together, and among friends. Our work is interesting and rewarding. I’ve never been happier.”

Rusty shrugged.

“You think you know someone,” he said “all those years working alongside him, day in, day out. Even though he could be a pain sometimes; I never suspected a thing. Phoenix dubbed the ‘originals’ Erebus recruited at the outset of the Project as ‘The Three Stooges’. It suited them. Erebus led the way, they followed like sheep. Although Phoenix poked fun at them now and then, he never doubted their loyalty.”

“Thanatos felt slighted when Athena was favoured by Erebus to assume responsibility here when he retired,” said Artemis. “I wish I’d met the old man; he sounds a special person. Thanatos felt power was his by right, and sold out to a faction that offered him the possibility. He backed the wrong horse.”

With that, Artemis gave Rusty a shove.

“Now, get in that shower. I’ll get us something to eat before we go to the meeting.”

Rusty did as he was told. As the hot water cascaded over his head and broad shoulders he tried to push the dark thoughts out of his mind. He knew Thanatos wasn’t the real cause of his unease; it was Phoenix.

A life of domestic bliss wasn’t an attribute Rusty associated with the vigilante killer he’d

known for four years. He had enjoyed training the new agent; refining the skills he already possessed and adding more. They formed an easy friendship that had grown so strong, they were like brothers.

Since little Hope had arrived, although they had attended meetings together and Olympus direct actions were discussed, planned and put into operation; neither he nor Phoenix had left Larcombe Manor on active service. Rusty was itching to get back in the field. He wasn't sure if his brother-in-arms welcomed that prospect.

As nine o'clock ticked around and the first meeting of the new week was upon them, Artemis and Rusty left their apartment and crossed the landing. The sweeping staircase took them to the ground floor. As they passed the oil paintings of famous ships and portraits of the Hunt family ancestors, it was impossible for Rusty not to think of Erebus. How would the old gentleman tackle this situation?

"A penny for them?" asked Artemis.

"I was thinking of the old man. You were right. Erebus *was* special. I don't think he would have sat on his hands for three months, waiting for Phoenix and Athena to sort things out. He would have anticipated the problem and more than likely, met up with Phoenix in the orangery after a fortnight. That's where they always went. Just the two of them. If I was lucky enough to join them, it was always interesting, and productive. He had a knack for cutting to the chase. If a decision had to be made, he took it. There was no argument."

"Why not ask Phoenix to meet *you* there then?" Artemis suggested "Get him away from the main building, tell him your concerns and sound him out on his future. I'm not daft. You've got itchy feet. Fighting is what you were trained to do; it's what you live for. Sat around the main table with Athena and her team isn't where you flourish."

They had reached the meeting room door. Rusty could hear voices. Phoenix and Athena had arrived ahead of them. The nanny, Maria Elena Urbano from Estepona on the Costa del Sol, was now looking after Hope.

The first arrival at Larcombe Manor at the dawn of 2014 had caused a stir; when the twenty-five-year-old beauty with long jet-black hair had breezed onto the estate, several days later to start work, the effect was even more momentous.

"Minos and Alastor are just behind us," whispered Artemis.

Rusty opened the door and ushered her through in front of him. He glanced back towards the staircase. The two senior Olympus servants appeared to stick closer together than ever these days; in perfect step, they followed him inside.

"Good morning, everyone," said Athena "I see we're waiting for Giles and Henry, as usual."

"It takes longer to get ready in the mornings than it used to Athena," Rusty grinned.

"Yes, apart from the aftershave," added Artemis, wafting her hand in front of her nose in an exaggerated fashion. "They must decide what to wear, and then check the mirror half a dozen times before they leave their quarters..."

"Then they drag their feet walking across from the ice-house so they can bump into Hope and her nanny, by accident, on their morning constitutional," said Rusty.

"She's attractive, that's for sure," said Athena. "I'll speak with Maria Elena; get her to change her routine. We need those two to be giving one hundred percent concentration on Olympus matters. I shouldn't need to say that goes for everyone around the table. So far, the

year has been quiet. The wet and windy weather the major feature. The direct actions we sanctioned for our teams in London and the Midlands have been carried out successfully. Two ‘crash for cash’ entrepreneurs were taken out of the game, which makes our roads safer and insurance costs cheaper.

As for our schools, well, we uncovered attempts by Islamic extremists plotting to take over several schools. Information has been passed to the Home Office. Provided they act on that information, those attempts can be thwarted.”

The door opened and in rushed Giles Burke and Henry Case.

“Sorry we’re late,” blustered Henry “we were unavoidably delayed.”

“Of course, you were,” muttered Phoenix, looking across to where Rusty sat.

Rusty grinned at his friend, but there was no reaction. Phoenix had ‘zoned out’ and was staring into space. Rusty wondered where his mind had wandered. Meanwhile, Athena was calmly getting the meeting back on agenda and prefacing the first item.

“Our intervention is required to stop the menace of drugs being sold to our children. Minos, this subject is close to your heart. Can you run through the background material please?”

Almost nine years ago, Sir Julian Langford, QC had lost his only son, Harry, to a cocktail of drugs. On the surface, nineteen-year-old Harry had appeared to be a happy-go-lucky teenager with the world at his feet. In his darker moments, he suffered a crisis of confidence. He felt the weight of expectation on his young shoulders. While in a depressed state, he chose to take his own life.

While this was a tragedy for Sir Julian and his wife Claudia, it was even more difficult to understand happening in the relatively low crime area around Maidstone, in Kent, where the Langford family lived. That incident alone might have triggered a desire to join an organisation such as the Olympus Project. It was his time as a prosecutor, and on the bench as a judge, that persuaded Sir Julian to join Erebus at Larcombe Manor.

He had noted a steady increase in the number of criminals appearing before him, despite the establishment’s constant preaching of the opposite message. They were kidding the public into believing the battle was being won. He had seen first-hand the watering-down of justice that saw courts handing out shorter, softer sentences even for horrific crimes. Defence lawyers seemed to have the odds stacked in their favour in this modern age. Criminals often walked free from his court over a trifling slip by the police or the CPS; guilty or not.

After he had arrived at Larcombe Manor, he became known as Minos – the judge of the dead of the Underworld. Over the past eight years, he had been a vital cog in the wheel that drove the Project forward. His main wish being to tackle those responsible for manufacturing and peddling drugs and to ensure they received the appropriate level of justice.

For Minos, the ‘suspended sentences’ so often handed out these days, due in part to overcrowded prisons, but in the main due to a weak-willed establishment, held memories of different times. He was a strong advocate for the return of capital punishment.

“I’m afraid we’re in for a long and difficult battle with this problem, Athena,” Minos began. “The tentacles of this evil reach into all corners of the nation. Into every level of society. Nowhere is safe anymore. I have here details of a mother, whose daughter became addicted to drugs while at an expensive public school in Surrey. She has started an on-line blog warning other parents their loved ones could be groomed by dealers targeting independent schools. They select naïve pupils from wealthy homes because they know they have access to funds to feed

their habit. Also, in the past, these same privileged children have been led to believe they are immune. They don't believe drugs can touch them.

They spend many months away at school, far from the warmth of a loving family home. Their only compensation being they have too much money. This lady's daughter is recovering from her cocaine addiction; she told her mother her dealer charged her well over the normal price for her fix. He told her, 'You can afford it, darling. Why worry? Daddy will always cough up more if you run short.' What shocks me is that the education system pays little or no heed to the potential dangers. Pupils at this public school were ignorant of the sophisticated grooming techniques used by dealers. Every step is carefully choreographed. From a bit of harmless fun, taking that first 'hit', to a regular dependence on recreational drugs. Thereafter, follows the gradual decline into despair and death, as we are all too aware.

In the Midlands, another case highlights how young these children can be. Two thirteen-year-old lads took their first drag on a cigarette on the way to school. Both boys' parents were alerted by school staff two years later informing them they had been caught smoking cannabis on school premises. Aged sixteen, they left school with very few qualifications and no ambition, other than to get 'wasted' as often as possible. Ecstasy, crack cocaine and heroin were the next steps on their downward spiral. Their parents now had no clue as to their whereabouts. They had resigned themselves to waiting for the knock on the door that told them their son had taken his final fix."

Minos paused. He looked up to gauge the reaction. Not one pair of eyes met his. Everyone was staring at the shiny surface of the elegant Georgian table directly in front of them.

"It hits home hard, doesn't it?" he said "it could affect any of you; as it did me. I thought things were bad in '05 when Harry died; but things have got much worse, as these figures demonstrate."

Minos slid a pile of reports to his left, where Alastor sat. His colleague removed a copy, then passed the pile further around the table so the others could study the figures for themselves. The room fell silent for a while.

Alastor spoke first, "The government's latest survey shows twenty percent of secondary pupils have taken an illegal drug. Cocaine use has doubled in the past year. Thirty-five thousand eleven-year-olds around the country have tried Class A drugs. Up to half a million fifteen-year-olds have at least tried hard drugs, if not become addicted to them. Whatever policy this country is following. It ain't working. These numbers are scandalous."

"What the heck is 'Frank' doing these days?" said Phoenix, sitting up straighter in his chair. "That bloody multi-million-pound campaign was designed to reduce drug and alcohol misuse. A decade on, and it's dead in the water. Deaths from cocaine were in the low hundreds for teenagers a decade ago. This report suggests they've risen six-fold."

"At least there's one thing we're excelling at," muttered Rusty. "We might be well down the rankings in standards of education, and health care, but we hold the dubious distinction of having the highest level of cocaine use in Europe."

"You certainly don't overstate the problems of the task facing us, Minos," said Athena. "However, we mustn't let that weaken our resolve. Where do we lay the blame for this escalation in the past decade?"

"The failure to control our borders has allowed hard drugs to flow into our leafy suburbs, and school yards," said Henry Case. "By softening our stance on cannabis classification, and

dithering over whether we should go further, or not, we led many to believe it's okay to use the drug. We can see the results of this in the pages of this survey. Young lives are being destroyed, a whole generation of children betrayed."

"What has been the government's response to these figures?" asked Giles Burke.

"This survey covered the use of both drugs and alcohol among secondary school pupils," replied Minos. "Despite the alarming picture the drug statistics paint, the government welcomed the report. The figures show a small fall in the proportion drinking and using types of less addictive drugs."

"Unbelievable!" said Phoenix.

"If I was a parent of a child attending school, I would be horrified," said Artemis. "We entrust our children to schools for large amounts of their lives until they're at least sixteen. Surely, we should expect them to safeguard them from the dangers of drugs? Not through education alone; but by keeping a close watch on the school perimeters and checking on who and what enters the premises?"

Minos flipped open another file on the table in front of him.

"In times of austerity, it becomes very difficult to cover all the bases, Artemis. I have examples here of brazen dealers preying on kids after they left school and walked home. Police increased their patrols around bus stations in North Wales, after reports of dealers targeting school transports. Dealers have no morals, no scruples, no conscience."

"Can we home in on two, or three of the worst offenders?" asked Rusty.

"There are dealers who are more prolific than others," said Minos "my dossier is here for analysis. Take your pick. You will find plenty from which to choose."

"We must start somewhere," said Phoenix "to do nothing isn't an option. If we remove the problem from a few schools across the country, it might get the government's head out of the sand."

"Based on their reaction to this survey, it might take a lot of shifting," said Rusty.

"Phoenix and Rusty will assume responsibility for the direct action we take," said Athena. "I'm sure I can rely on the two of you to achieve the results we expect. Can you produce an action plan for next Monday's meeting?"

"No problem, Athena," said Phoenix "it will be good to have something positive to contribute again."

"The drugs menace won't disappear overnight," said Athena. "We will need to revisit it time and time again. Even if the government wake up and make meaningful inroads. One thing is certain. I want the landscape to look very different to the one portrayed in this survey before our daughter starts school."

Henry Case and Giles Burke were next up as they delivered their security report updates. Artemis sat quietly, watching and listening, as her superiors ran through the list of threats facing the country from home and abroad. If the public ever became fully aware of the scale of problems the security services tackled daily, it was inevitable widespread panic would follow.

It was clear the official security organisations were struggling to cope. There was constant pressure from terrorist organisations and organised crime, increasingly from cyber criminals, yet the greatest pressure came from their own government. Year on year they were required to achieve more and more, with fewer resources.

Artemis had experienced several years of this impossible task within the police force. In

her short time with Olympus, she appreciated how valuable the secret organisation's input was, behind the scenes, in smoothing out the 'hot-spots'.

The meeting was ending. Athena closed by informing everyone the next Olympus hierarchy meeting had been rescheduled for Curzon Street, London in four weeks' time. Zeus had postponed the original meeting in early January following Hope's birth. Flowers, cards, and little gifts had arrived at Larcombe from the remaining Olympians. Zeus was keen to promote the image that the new Olympus was one, big happy family after the troubles of last year.

One item on the agenda for the meeting was evident. There were new faces to introduce. Following the demise of Demeter, Poseidon, Hermes and Nemesis there had been an urgent need for fresh blood. Zeus had searched high and low for people with both the financial capacity to help bankroll Olympus missions and ideology aligned with that epitomised by their founder, Erebus.

It appeared from the confirmed date of the meeting, that quest had been successful.

Giles and Henry waited for Artemis to join them, then they headed off towards the ice-house. They would soon disappear below ground to carry on the highly-sophisticated surveillance and intelligence gathering in which the Olympus operations room excelled.

Minos and Alastor hovered. Athena could tell they needed a quiet word with her. She knew it was unlikely to be important; they needed to be reassured their perceived status in the organisation was still intact. Athena saw these few minutes massaging their frail egos as a small price to pay. After all, they were more than happy to graft away on the analysis and interpretation of the data generated by Giles and his staff.

Rusty saw his opportunity. As Artemis scuttled over to join Giles and Henry, he collared Phoenix.

"So, when do we start on this drugs problem?" he asked.

"Meet me in the orangery in fifteen minutes," replied Phoenix.

With that, Phoenix left the meeting room and headed for the stairs.

Rusty glanced over to Athena. She had just finished chatting with the Two Stooges.

"What did he say?" she asked Rusty.

"We're meeting in fifteen minutes, in the orangery," he said.

"That's good," sighed Athena "a few hours spent in his old surroundings might snap him out of this melancholy."

"Don't worry," said Rusty "I'll keep him there until he breaks."

Athena smiled. She knew Rusty had the Project's best interests at heart. It was good to learn that at least one other person in the organisation had noticed her partner's darker mood since the New Year.

"Handle him with care, Rusty," she said, as she swept through the doorway and practically ran up the stairs to find Phoenix. With luck, they could spend a few minutes together with Hope before Phoenix left for the orangery.

"I don't think kid gloves are what he responds to," whispered Rusty "I reckon a sharp dig in the ribs is what he needs right now. Then we can both get back doing what we do best."

Rusty closed the door behind him and headed out of the house. The late morning sun was bright, but still weak, as he walked at a brisk pace towards the building Erebus had held so dear.

Everything at Larcombe Manor was coming alive after the winter. Despite the chill in the air, he could sense the changes occurring. Spring was just around the corner. It was time for estate's grounds to come alive again. The time for Phoenix to rise again was long overdue.

