

## CHAPTER 1

*Sunday, 29th June 2014*

“Good to see you again, Phoenix,”

“You too, Biggles,” replied Phoenix.

“So, we’re off to Bonnie Scotland this evening then, I gather?” asked Les Biggar, the pilot Olympus had on speed-dial for urgent flights around the United Kingdom.

“Yes, and Rusty is coming along for the ride. He’s parking the van. I’ve left him to carry the equipment over to the chopper on his own. Rusty will let you know how he feels in a few minutes.”

“There’s never a dull moment with you two,” said Les.

The rear door of the helicopter flew open, and a bag was shoved into the luggage compartment. The helicopter rocked as the door slammed. Rusty Scott, the rugged, red-headed agent who was Phoenix’s best friend, clambered on board.

“Travelling light?” asked Biggles.

“His lordship needed a few essentials for this job. He forgets, sometimes, just how heavy they are. It’s his age,” muttered Rusty.

“Neither of us is getting any younger,” said Biggles “okay, gents, if you’re set, we’ll be on our way.”

“How long do you think it will take, Biggles?” asked Phoenix.

“Two hours in these conditions. It’s a pleasant enough evening.”

Rusty checked his watch. It read six forty-five.

“Relax,” said Phoenix “our pick-up is scheduled for nine o’clock. If we’re early, we can get a coffee. If the weather closes in, the Glasgow team will sit and wait until we land.”

“What’s the mission lads, can you tell me?” asked Biggles.

“A lot less dangerous than the last one we used you on in Ireland,” said Rusty.

“Good, I still get the odd twinge and a few flashbacks; but it goes with the territory.”

“I guess you won’t be in a rush to return?” asked Phoenix.

“Been there already. I’ve ferried a few racegoers over to meetings at Cheltenham, and Newbury, and then home again. Apart from a few drunks, there’s been no problem. It was either get back in the game straight away or get out. I chose to keep flying. I’ll go wherever the money is, Phoenix.”

“Well, this Glasgow trip will be easy enough. It’s a direct result of our Manchester mission a few weeks ago,” said Phoenix. “We cleared out a fair number of the Grid’s gang members based in the Bent Triangle.”

“Where’s that when it’s at home?” asked Biggles.

“The area containing Beswick, Hulme, and Cheetham Hill,” replied Phoenix “the whole place is rife with people for whom law and order is only the name of a TV programme.”

“Drugs were being smuggled to Scotland by car or train, using couriers from the region,”

continued Rusty. “We passed the information gathered by the Lancashire and Merseyside Olympus agents to our colleagues over the border. They were tasked with following up on our leads.”

“The fact you’re travelling north suggests progress has stalled somewhat then, am I right?”

“Yes, and no. They acted on the leads we provided, and the noose has tightened,” said Phoenix. “The whole network in Glasgow and Edinburgh has now been identified. Direct action to eliminate the leading faces in the organisation was sanctioned, but resources are stretched to the limit by other demands around the country.”

“Sometimes it’s better for Olympus to avoid being caught in the media headlights,” added Rusty “and let the authorities take the credit.”

“This mission is designed to expose enough of the network that even the police can uncover it, and clean it up,” said Phoenix.

Biggles laughed.

“Am I right in thinking an anonymous phone call will be your last act before I fly you home?”

“We’re so predictable,” groaned Rusty.

The rest of the trip proved uneventful. Les Biggar landed at Glasgow Airport at eight forty.

“Leave your gear in the storage compartment, Rusty,” said Biggles. “Follow me, we can get checked in, and then I’ll start scheduling our flight plans for the return flight. Do you have any suggestions on timing, Phoenix?”

“First light in the morning, Les,” he replied, “I don’t intend hanging around up here any longer than necessary.”

“Fair enough.”

“Will we have time for that coffee?” asked Rusty.

“We’ll make time,” said Biggles.

They were checked in and drinking a mug of coffee by nine o’clock. Phoenix kept a weather eye open for movement on the tarmac outside the window. The single-storey building stood on the perimeter of the airfield and was used by pilots of helicopters, and small private planes. They were the only people in the place tonight.

“Here they come, right on time,” said Phoenix.

A black van motored towards Les Biggar’s helicopter. It stopped, facing the building, and the driver turned his headlights off, and then on again. Ten seconds later he switched off the engine, killing the lights. The area around the parking bays was bathed in a dim amber glow from lamps high overhead. It felt eerily quiet.

“Not a bad night for it, Sunday,” said Rusty, “it’s peaceful.”

“We still need to be off this airfield as quick as we can,” cautioned Phoenix.

The three men emptied their coffee mugs, carried them to the sink, and swilled them under the hot tap.

“Can you tell we’ve been house-trained in recent years?” laughed Rusty.

“Leave them to drain,” said Biggles “I’ll pop back and tidy up once you’ve left. Then get to sleep for a few hours so that I’m ready to fly you south at around a quarter to five.”

“I’ll call you if we’re delayed,” said Phoenix “although, there’s not much room for anything to go wrong on this trip.”

“Famous last words,” muttered Rusty.

Outside the building, the night was warm, and the breeze no more than a whisper. As they approached the van, the driver's door opened, and a short, stocky man stepped out.

"Jimmy McLean, as I live and breathe," exclaimed Rusty "how are you, my friend? It's been a long time."

"I volunteered for this gig when I heard who was coming," the man replied "our team leader Greg, is in the passenger seat. Apologies, but he's on the phone to our lads on the other side of the city."

Phoenix walked around to introduce himself.

"You two have met before then?" asked Biggles.

"We trained at Hereford together," replied Jimmy "both times. When we applied to join the SAS, then again in 2005 when we formed part of the first intake for the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. I left in 2008, the year before Rusty had a difference of opinion with a superior officer."

"He thought he was proficient," said Rusty, "I told him he was a bleeding liability,"

"OK," said Phoenix, returning with Greg, the Glasgow team leader in tow "if you two have caught up on the old days, we'll get moving."

"We're off to Barrhead first," barked Laidlaw "get your kit stowed, and climb in."

Greg Laidlaw was a tall, angular man in his mid-thirties, his accent pure Glaswegian. Rusty reckoned he had been born and raised no further than five miles from Govanhill. He knew how rough that district was, and had a degree of respect for a man who dragged himself up from there to a senior post in Olympus.

Biggles smiled as he watched Phoenix offer to help Rusty carry the heavy bag. Rusty patted his arm away and slung the equipment over his shoulder. The pilot knew the score. No way would he let his old SAS comrade McLean think the years had caught up with him.

"I'll see you guys in the morning," said Les Biggar "good hunting."

Phoenix and Rusty raised a hand in acknowledgement as the pilot trudged towards the building. They got into the van, and Jimmy McLean drove away from the airfield. They were soon leaving the motorway and heading along the A76.

"Another fifteen minutes, and we'll be there," said Jimmy.

"What's at Barrhead?" asked Rusty.

"A town that has seen better days, with a population of twenty thousand," said Phoenix. "The gang leaders selected this place for the variety of industrial estates it possesses. Plus, it's accessible by road and rail from Manchester, with none of the risks associated with being spotted in the heart of Glasgow. They rented several units across the town, and most of the face-to-face meetings needed were in a bar in Cross Arthurlie Street, just up from the railway station."

"Thanks for the history lesson, Phoenix," said Rusty.

"My pleasure," Phoenix replied.

"We're coming up to our first warehouse just now," said Laidlaw, "so, let's park, and I can go through the layout with you."

"Who's running this outfit?" asked Rusty.

"Gregor McGrath," replied Greg Laidlaw "he's quietened a touch as he's grown older, but he was a wild one in his teens. His reputation with a blade has left him untouched for forty years. Nobody has threatened his position at the head of the organisation covering Glasgow

and Renfrewshire and lived. Yet there's nothing to suggest McGrath's laid a finger on anyone in the past three decades himself. He has a loyal crew of enforcers who carry out his orders without question."

The four men sat in the van, one hundred yards from the warehouse that was their target. The building was in darkness, just what you might expect, late on a Sunday night. There was no sign anyone was on the premises, let alone that it was a potential hive of illegal activity.

"Do we have a backup team in place?" asked Phoenix.

Laidlaw nodded and unfolded a drawing which showed the ground surrounding the building, plus the layout of all three floors.

"We have a van here, and here, on the far side. Each vehicle holds six agents. It doesn't take a genius to work out the reason we can't see signs of activity is we're looking through the windscreen at a two-floor warehouse building. The drawing shows the layout of the basement. That's where the workers are grafting away, converting the product transported from Manchester into the street-ready product. This is a slick operation, and the quality control is variable by design. They put every kind of rubbish into the gear to sell to junkies and cut the crap content the further they move up the social scale. Got the process off to a fine art. Stocks of every grade match demand to the ounce. They never hold excess stock. Just in time, and continuous improvement were management tools in the Nineties; now these buggers have taken it to a new level."

"Kanban, and Kaizen," said Phoenix.

"Those names sound more like sumo wrestlers," said Jimmy McLean to Rusty Scott.

"Watched that every week, didn't we?" replied Rusty, "did they ever fight that Hawaiian giant, The Dump Truck? Davy Glass was a big fan, I remember. What happened to him?"

"He came out of the mob and returned to Edinburgh. That was three years ago. His wife and kids had moved south within six months. He found it difficult to adjust. She couldn't handle his moods. The last I heard, he was living on the streets. I keep meaning to look him up, to see if I can help,"

"Damn shame, he was a good lad," said Rusty.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, reflecting on the times the three of them had lived, fought, and socialised together. Along with the rest of the regiment they had served in, how things had changed. The spell broke when Laidlaw issued an order.

"Time to move in," he said into his mouthpiece.

On the far side of the warehouse, the action against the Grid's gang members was underway. Eight heavily armed Olympus agents burst into the ground-floor and descended into the basement. Laidlaw ordered Jimmy McLean to drive to the right-hand end of the building.

Phoenix and Rusty could hear the muffled sounds of what were flash-bangs, smoke bombs, and brief bursts of gunfire.

"The best point of entry for the teams was at the opposite end," said Laidlaw "we should see activity here in a tick."

Phoenix and Rusty were now out of the van and grabbing their gear from the bag. McLean and Laidlaw had already moved forward to within ten yards of the building.

"Cover the far door, and subdue anyone who tries to escape," shouted Laidlaw "once we finish that part of the exercise, we'll head inside. You're aware of the layout now. The stairs on the left take you to the basement and bring you into the rows of storage racks. Not every

gang member carries a weapon, but you need to be careful as you make your way forward. The other team will keep me informed on how much resistance these guys are offering. We can adapt our tactics from 'subdue' to 'eliminate' as required."

The metal door was suddenly flung open, and two men ran out onto the open ground. They were overpowered by McLean and Laidlaw in seconds. The bright light from the doorway allowed Phoenix to see the men were only teenagers and from South-East Asia.

"McGrath seems to be an equal opportunities employer," said Rusty.

"I doubt they were born and bred in Barrhead," said Phoenix "my guess is they were trafficked in and set to work long hours for little or no pay."

"Well, it keeps the profit margins high, which will please the Grid's hierarchy," muttered Rusty.

"We need to get inside," shouted Laidlaw "our lads have dealt with another half dozen kids, like these, but as many again remain with handguns keeping them occupied. We've suffered no casualties so far, thank goodness. Let's give these gunmen something to think about."

The four agents edged towards the open door. McLean led the way inside. The hallway was clear. He signalled to the others to follow as he descended the stairs one at a time. Rusty moved forwards, ahead of Phoenix and Laidlaw, to join his former colleague.

"Just like old times, Jimmy," he whispered.

They crept past the first rows of roof-high racking. There were cartons dotted here and there, but plenty of gaps, which gave them a chance to look across the whole width of the building. There were no gunmen near the back wall yet.

Jimmy indicated to Phoenix and Laidlaw to replace them.

"We'll make our way across to the far wall," he whispered.

"Take care," said Laidlaw.

As he and Rusty moved from one stack to the next, they checked the gangways for any sign of the opposition. Halfway over, the sound of automatic weapons caused them to stop and hit the floor.

"That was our lot, opening fire again," said McLean "but I'm bugged if I know where."

"The low ceiling in this basement and the metal racking is causing every sound to echo," said Rusty "but we're no help lying here. Let's head for the far wall, as planned, and make our way forward. Keep Greg and Phoenix well behind us, I don't want us engaging with the enemy at the same time if they move past us towards the exit. It might get hairy."

"Agreed," said McLean, and they set off at a run, crouching low. They reached the relative security of the far wall. McLean contacted Laidlaw and said they were moving forward.

"We've had two agents hit in the past few minutes," Greg told McLean, "only flesh wounds, nothing terminal. They've eliminated two gunmen. There are three to sort out, and they're holed up in the centre of the room, just beyond the final row of racking."

"All received," said McLean, and he and Rusty inched forwards.

"There," said Rusty, grabbing his friend's left arm, and bringing them to a temporary halt.

Through the gaps in the rack spaces, he could see the three gunmen. They were shielded from the other teams by a fork-lift truck, and steel cabinets which housed electrical equipment. The two agents were able to see the rest of the layout as Greg's plan had shown. In the distance was the racking for the Inward Goods. There were tables for the preparatory work, and then

final assembly. Nothing had been left to chance. It was a lean, mean production plant.

The gunmen were still concentrating their attention forwards where the initial attack had started. They weren't expecting an attack from the rear.

"Let's finish this," said Rusty.

"Permission to eliminate the threat, boss," McLean asked Laidlaw.

"Affirmative," replied his team leader.

"Here goes nothing," cried Jimmy.

He and Rusty stood up from their crouching position and burst into the open. They skirted the rows of racking, firing as they ran. The gunmen half-turned, aware of the danger at last. It was far too late. They were felled in a hail of bullets.

"Clear," Jimmy McLean called to his team leader.

Phoenix and Laidlaw emerged from the other side of the racking and were joined by four of the agents. A final sweep by two of their colleagues would soon confirm that each of the three floors of the warehouse was under Olympus control.

"How are your wounded?" asked Phoenix.

"Embarrassed," came the reply.

"They live to fight another day, unlike the Grid's casualties," said Rusty.

"We've got a group of Vietnamese teenagers to hand over to the authorities," said Laidlaw "I'll start the ball rolling on that later. For now, we need to clean up in here. My crew will dispose of the bodies."

The agents looked around them. A clean-up crew would soon dispose of the bodies, but the explosions and the gunfight had disturbed much of the product the warehouse was handling. The air was full of white particles, and the floor looked as if it was carpeted in snow.

"What's the plan?" Rusty asked Phoenix.

"Any scrap of information within these walls to help the police track the source of the drugs backwards to Manchester, and the distribution network onwards will be accessible to them. The young lads will be next to the tables they were working at awaiting their arrival. Trussed-up like chickens, perhaps; but alive and well. Greg's men will leave as few clues as possible that we were ever here. The anonymous phone call will hint at a turf-war. The workers don't know any different, and they pose no threat to Olympus. Our best bet is for McGrath to believe this was a police operation, driven by a tip-off of the illegal immigrants. The uncovering of a drug network was a happy coincidence."

"Let's hope he swallows that," said Laidlaw. "If we can dispose of the bodies, and spread misinformation on the whereabouts of the gang members within the police system, then we buy ourselves valuable time."

"It's a ploy that's worked well for Olympus over the years," agreed Phoenix.

"We had better make a move," said Jimmy McLean "you guys need to transfer to your next target site. Greg will look after the wounded here, and when the place is shipshape, he'll make the call."

With a quick nod of gratitude to Greg Laidlaw, Phoenix and Rusty followed Jimmy McLean outside. They crossed the open ground to the van quickly, and quietly. The gear was stowed away. Jimmy started the engine, and made for Glasgow on the M77, then took the M74 towards Edinburgh.

"Sit back, and enjoy the ride, lads," said Jimmy "we'll be there in less than forty minutes."

Rusty checked his watch. It was still only twenty-five minutes past ten. Times flies when you're enjoying yourself.

"Have you prepared a history lesson for me about our destination, Phoenix?" asked Rusty.

"A thumbnail sketch," replied Phoenix "what do you expect? I'm a past master at turning over every little detail in case it affects the outcome of my mission. If you're sitting comfortably, then I'll begin. Coatbridge lies ten miles east of Glasgow, it's a working-class town, twice the size of the place we've just left, and is called Little Ireland. It has great transport links via road and rail. In recent years it's become Scotland's inland container base."

"That sums the place up," said McLean. "The container aspect gave the town ample opportunity to develop the trafficking of drugs, women for the sex trade, and illegal workers. It wouldn't surprise me if those Vietnamese teenagers we uncovered didn't arrive through that route."

"It sounds just the place to settle down, and raise a family," said Rusty.

"As if," scoffed Jimmy McLean "I can never remember you even chatting to a lassie, let alone having any intentions of getting settled."

"Times change," said Rusty "I needed to find the right girl, and I did. We live together at Larcombe Manor."

"Good for you, mate," said McLean "Jessie left me while I was in Kosovo. There were no kids. When I threw my lot in with Olympus up here, I didn't think it fair to lumber a woman with the worry of whether I'd be coming home at night. Jessie had enough of that to bear while I was in the SAS."

"There's still time, Jimmy," said Rusty "and it's good to have someone to come home to after a mission. It makes the fight worthwhile, believe me."

"You'll get no argument from me," said Phoenix "my wife and daughter keep me sane. If I had nothing else to occupy my mind except the criminals out there, and the depraved nonsense they get up to, I'd go crazy."

"I'll bear it in mind, Rusty," said Jimmy "if you find a girl looking for a vertically challenged Scotsman, the wrong side of forty-five, tell her to call me. Right, lads, this is your stop."

Jimmy had turned off the motorway and was nearing the ubiquitous industrial estate. Phoenix thought their footprints were so similar these days you could be anywhere in Europe. It was only the local road signs and the weather that set one place apart from the next. Truckers from every corner of Europe used the motorway systems these days, and the estate they were entering had vehicles from Germany, Norway, Poland, Netherlands, and Spain, parked up overnight.

"Who are we meeting here?" asked Rusty.

"The Edinburgh team Greg was talking to when you met us at the airport. Their leader is Hugh Fraser, an ex-Captain in the Scots Guards. Hugh earned a reputation as the Army's supreme logistics man. When Greg took us through tonight's wee skirmish, he showed us the floor plan, issued basic instructions, and then relied on our training to know what to do when the action started. Fraser gives each agent under his command a detailed, colour coded file containing every step of the mission. It's all rather anal if you ask me, but his success rate is off the chart, and his men never complain; not in public, at least."

Jimmy was soon driving onto the Monklands Industrial Estate. In front of them was a

single black van, with tinted windows. It was facing the estate road exit.

“I think that’s Fraser’s crew,” said Jimmy “hard to tell whether they’re inside the van, or already on the ground.”

“Did Laidlaw say what time Fraser was hitting the warehouse?” asked Phoenix.

“There’s something you need to know about Fraser,” chuckled Jimmy “when he thinks he has the exact window of opportunity, he’s off like a rat up a drainpipe. He likes to lead from the front and isn’t one for waiting around for backup. When I got out of the van to talk to Rusty earlier, Greg was having a few words with our Hughie. He never did fill me in on the outcome of that conversation. We were too busy with our own job after that.”

“I’ll walk over and have a word,” said Phoenix, “you two cover me, in case it’s a trap.”

“No problem, Phoenix,” said Rusty.

He and Jimmy got out of the van and collected their weapons. They watched as Phoenix wandered across the lorry park towards the van. As he drew near, the passenger door opened, and a tall, distinguished-looking man stepped out.

“Phoenix, I presume?”

“You must be Fraser?”

“I have something for you,” said Fraser, handing a blue folder to Phoenix.

“What’s this?”

“My report on tonight’s direct action. In brief, my four agents and I entered the building at 21.50 hours. We overpowered the four criminals we found. They’re in the warehouse’s canteen, for now. I’ve indicated where the relevant documentation was, so it can be passed to the police. We found information on the entire trafficking network from Asia, through Central Africa, on to Southern Europe and beyond. I think you’ll find the report comprehensive enough for the authorities to take immediate action to cripple this damnable human trade.”

“There’s little to do, then?” smiled Phoenix.

“Sorry, I didn’t wait for you. Time was of the essence. The criminals could have left by ten o’clock. They used this building as a transit site after the human cargo arrived. Men, women, and children were shuttled through here overnight, with none staying long. Then transport arrived to distribute them throughout Scotland. On the outside, the firm looked like a building trades supplier. But it held a far darker secret.”

“Does your report suggest how we proceed, regarding your prisoners?” asked Phoenix.

“Of course,” said Fraser, somewhat surprised at the question, “it’s unlikely the police will rouse themselves tonight. I’ll arrange a call in the morning. One of my men is standing guard. Once the police are on their way on the approach road, I’ll tell him to get off home. He knows the escape route.”

“He has a blue folder too?” asked Rusty.

“Naturally,” replied Fraser “look, if there’s nothing more, I’d prefer to get off home. I suggest you read the report at your leisure, and then you can head back south. Our work here is as good as done. We’ll tie a neat bow on matters first thing tomorrow.”

“Right,” said Phoenix “well, thank you, and good to meet you.”

Fraser turned on his heel and got back in the van.

“White was the colour in Glasgow,” said Phoenix, “blue seems to be popular in Edinburgh.”

Phoenix and Rusty stood and watched as Fraser’s driver pulled away. Jimmy’s van was

now the only vehicle in the lorry park.

“Back to the airport, guys?” he asked.

“We might as well get some shut-eye with Biggles, and then head home at first light,” said Phoenix “I can’t help feeling cheated. I was looking forward to the action.”

Rusty smiled. That was typical of Phoenix. He liked to take the troubles of the world on his shoulders. So much so he had been stressed in recent months. When someone gave a helping-hand he took umbrage.

Jimmy McLean dropped the two agents at the airport building.

“It was grand to meet up with you again, Rusty,” he said “keep in touch. A pleasure working with you, Phoenix.”

“Thanks, Jimmy, I’m sure we’ll be back this way before too long.”

As they walked through the door of the building, they could hear loud snoring coming from the far end of the room. Phoenix sat in the nearest chair and read the report Fraser had handed him. Rusty found a comfortable chair and hoped to get some sleep before sunrise.

Biggles never stirred.

Phoenix reckoned it would be a long night.

The upside was that Fraser was everything Jimmy McLean had said. The man was meticulous; never a bad thing as far as Phoenix was concerned.

