

CHAPTER 1

Monday September 3rd 2012

The Olympics were fading from the headlines. With every passing day, something else would creep into the headlights of the media's all-seeing eye. Memories for those directly involved faded a good deal slower. The athletes would retain their successes and failures for years to come. The spectators at the packed stadiums would always be able to say "I was there."

Those caught up in the bombings in the heart of the capital and who witnessed the execution of the would-be bomber on the sandy beach at Weymouth would bear the scars and the memories forever. At Larcombe Manor, time and tide waited for no man, as their agents continued to carry out direct action against those who sought to bring the nation into disrepute.

The Phoenix had been in the thick of the action in London. Kelly Dixon and Hayden Vincent were in Weymouth. Others had been positioned around the country, ready to strike where action was required. Throughout the month of August, Rusty had been at Larcombe waiting to be asked to join in the fun.

On the first Monday of the new month, that time had arrived. Erebus invited Rusty to join him in the orangery alone. He was more than a little surprised; Phoenix was generally selected for these special meetings with the old man. Every now and then, the old gentleman deigned to let the tough ex-SAS sergeant join them. A face-to-face meeting was a privilege not to be sniffed at.

Rusty arrived in the orangery at the appointed time. He had put on a clean t-shirt especially. Erebus was waiting. He nodded at Rusty and noted the slogan across his chest; SAS – Super Army Soldier. He passed no comment.

"Thousands of foreign domestic workers are living as slaves in Britain, being abused sexually, physically and psychologically by their employers; more than fifteen thousand migrant workers come to Britain every year to earn money to send back to their families. Many endure conditions that amount to slavery. They can suffer physical and psychological abuse. Thousands are not allowed out alone, never have a day off, work all the hours God sends and receive a pittance in return.

Foreign diplomats are among the worst offenders. Their workers, unlike those brought in on a domestic worker visa, cannot change their employer and face being homeless or being deported if they run away. It is also extremely difficult to prosecute diplomats for treating their workers as slaves.

Children are also being bought to the UK. One young girl was trafficked from Nigeria to London when she was just twelve years old. Her employer worked as a cultural attaché at the Embassy. The young girl was supposedly employed as a domestic servant, but behind closed doors she was regularly raped and beaten.

When she was fourteen she was thrown out onto the street. What had been her crime? She had asked for a day off. The attaché left her with nothing; terrified and alone, all she could do was to sit in the street, waiting for her abuser to change his mind. He relented in the morning and she was forced to return to the household duties and be at his beck and call whenever he wanted her.

In June of this year she took her own life by drinking bleach. Her employer was adamant that there had been no signs that the girl was unhappy. She had been 'a good worker, always willing and her

smiling face around the house would be sadly missed.’

Extreme mistreatment like that is not unusual. Migrant domestic workers are in a uniquely vulnerable position. Thousands of miles from home, they rely on that single employer for their accommodation, work and immigration status. They are largely isolated and they don't mix with anyone.

When this young girl died in June, a woman who was a cook for the attaché contacted her family in Bandung to tell them what she knew. She was frightened of going to the police because her employer told her they would deport her, if she didn't have her visa and documents. The cultural attaché had retained those, and she was too intimidated to ask him to return them.

We intercepted her story in messages she texted back to Indonesia. She said this child was expected to work from dawn to midnight; she was constantly scared of what would happen to her. The cook told them what had happened to the young girl and said that she suspected that her employer had raped her; that this had been the reason behind her taking her own life. The older woman feared she could face being assaulted too if she kept working there.”

“It beggar's belief Sir, doesn't it?” said Rusty “I find it difficult to get my head around the numbers involved. It seems massive.”

“There are more servants in the UK now than there were in Victorian times Rusty, because of the growth of childcare and the relatively low cost of employing domestic staff,” said Erebus.

“I'm hoping that folder in front of you holds the identity of the bastard involved? Excuse my language Sir.”

“It's all there Rusty,” said Erebus “I should like this job carried out immediately. I believe the bastard concerned, as you rightly termed him, has outlived his usefulness as a cultural attaché to these shores. Please arrange for him to be repatriated forthwith.”

“Consider it done boss,” said Rusty grimly, and he picked up the file from the table and left the orangery to return to his quarters to prepare.

Rusty had sat in with Phoenix on many occasions to watch the master planner at work. He had picked up a few tricks of the trade in the past two years. With the amount of training that Rusty had given Phoenix when he first arrived at Larcombe, it seemed only fair that it had finally become a ‘two-way street.’

Solomon Okonkwo was forty-six; he had been with the High Commission for three and a half years. His high-rise apartment was impressive, situated in Marylebone. Rusty had imagined that most of these blokes would have gravitated towards Mayfair or Knightsbridge. After all, their government was picking up the tab. Rusty flicked through some of the information that Giles and his team had put together.

He was interested to learn that five million bought you more space in Marylebone than in the more upmarket areas of central London.

“Who knew” asked Rusty, to nobody in particular “how the other half lives eh?”

He read on. Marylebone had transformed itself into a great destination, with a lovely village feel and, arguably, the best high street in London. Marylebone's international diversity with Russian, American and African inhabitants was part of its charm.

Rusty checked the easiest route to Northumberland Avenue, so that he could get to the Embassy. He had photographs of his target and could pick him up from there and follow him home. He wanted to

get a look around the apartment block itself first, while Solomon was at work. Gaining access was not an issue. Phoenix had about half a dozen methods, all tried and tested, and half a dozen that never failed. One of those would serve his purpose.

Rusty didn't need much convincing that Solomon Okonkwo deserved to pay the price for his actions, but he went through the data concerning the young girl just the same. Olabisi Promise Chukwu had been just twelve years old when she arrived in the UK on a flight from Lagos. An elderly relative had accompanied her; he was said to be an uncle from her village.

Olabisi had been left at Solomon's new apartment only days after he had collected the keys from the letting agents. He had been staying at a five-star hotel for the first two months after taking up his new position at the High Commission. Solomon was a single man, with specific needs. Olabisi was to perform all his domestic duties and she soon discovered that she was to provide other more personal ones too.

In addition to Olabisi, Solomon employed an Indonesian woman, Nurul Ruby Pohan, a thirty-nine year old mother of four, who had worked in London for seven years. She came to the flat seven days a week and was Solomon's cook.

Rusty looked at the photographs of the two desperate women. He looked at the long list of crimes that diplomats were responsible for in the past year. There were robberies, sex attacks, fraud, grievous bodily harm, drink-driving and shoplifting. One suspect had been arrested for making a bomb threat.

"You couldn't make it up," muttered Rusty.

International treaty rules give immunity from prosecution to all diplomats and any relatives living with them. Rusty was appalled by the fact that serious offenders were escaping justice. The immunity granted exemption from arrest or detention.

"Well, in my book, that means that Solomon's immunity doesn't exempt him from having a nasty accident then."

Everyone at the Olympus Project were of the same opinion. Serious offenders escaping justice was not an option.

Rusty went through his outline plans once more. He was happy. He could arrange transport for the morning and have a day in the big city. He looked at his watch. Yes, he had time to drop in to see the lads in the armoury, select the appropriate kit and then walk down to the pool. A hundred lengths would give him time to go through every step of his plan, just once more. You can never be too careful. 'Fail to prepare; prepare to fail', that was the mantra that Phoenix lived by. If it was good enough for him it was good enough for Rusty.

The following morning he was up bright and early. The car arrived outside the stable block at exactly seven fifteen. The seven forty-three from the old Spa station would arrive at Platform Five at Paddington, just before a quarter past ten.

Rusty collected his kitbag and started the journey. As the train sped through the Wiltshire countryside he thought through his initial timetable. Straight ahead to the Tube; then the Bakerloo Line to Northumberland Avenue. He should be outside the Nigerian High Commission before eleven.

The concourse wasn't especially crowded on this Tuesday morning. He strode through the slow-moving throng of commuters, tourists and students. Why were there always students around, no matter what time of day you travelled? Late for wherever they were supposed to be, he imagined, either that or they had selected a course where lectures were scattered carelessly through each week, making sure

they had lots of downtime.

Twenty minutes later Rusty was looking at the front doors of the building. It certainly had plenty of character. His mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a message from Giles. He had hacked into the CCTV in the vicinity and checked that Solomon Okonkwo had arrived for work. He confirmed that Solomon was definitely inside the building. The coast was clear for Rusty to pay a visit to Marylebone.

Another short ride underground via Green Park and he was craning his neck to see the floor on which his target lived. As the crick in his neck increased, Rusty knew that his choice had been perfect. All he needed to do now was gain access. Time to use one of Phoenix's ruses. He removed a clipboard and hi-viz waistcoat from his kitbag.

He strolled up to the nearest pedestrian crossing, donning his disguise as he went. As he waited for the 'Green' light, he kept an eye out for any movement at the front entrance to the apartment block.

There it was! A postie pushing a trolley. Early September and she was in shorts, but then they all tended to wear shorts whatever the weather these days. In her case, it was a mistake. She was almost old enough to be his mother, with legs that should remain hidden by law. The lights changed; the mighty noise of traffic paused and Rusty crossed over.

He hoped that a little charm would win the day. He held back for a second as she searched through her set of keys. She found the one that would allow her entry to the foyer and the post-boxes on the wall.

Rusty sprinted forward.

"Here you go, sweetheart, let me get that for you," he said, holding the door back in order for her to get her trolley inside.

"Oh thank you my lovely," the old postie cooed "I'm getting too old for this game."

"Too old?" said Rusty "don't be daft. The council have sent me round to check some flats on the top floor, they keep hearing pigeons in the roof spaces. I might have to get rid of some vermin later."

"Bloody nuisance, pigeons," the postie agreed. She was dishing out the post. The pile was disappearing fast.

"Nearly done?" asked Rusty "they can wait for me a little longer; I'll help you get out without scratching those pins."

She was like putty in his hands. She slotted the last gas bill into No 84 and wheeled her trolley back to the door. Rusty let her out.

"Have a nice day!" he called after her.

"You too, love, you too," cried the postwoman.

Rusty was already by the lifts. Floor after floor slipped by silently and then he was there. When the doors opened, all Rusty could hear was his own breathing. It was as quiet as the grave. Perfect.

Getting inside Solomon's flat presented no problems. Picking a lock was one of many skills that Rusty had acquired over the years. Once inside he moved around quickly and quietly, just in case there were people at home in the adjoining apartments. It was unlikely, nearly all the occupants were at work. This wasn't the sort of flat that a single mum with a nipper could afford on benefits. He wasn't likely to hear Jeremy Kyle seeping through the walls.

Rusty crept towards the windows. He peered out from behind the curtains to ensure that nobody was watching the flat from across the street, or idly glancing up from street level. It was all clear. He tried to open the sash window. It was stuck, or secured in some way.

“Back to the kitbag,” he muttered “just as well I collected a few bits and pieces from stores.”

Fifteen minutes later the window opened, it slid up and down smoothly in fact, probably as well as it had done for fifty years.

“Job’s a good one,” said Rusty “time for lunch I reckon.”

Taking as much care on the way down as he had done on the way up, Rusty exited the apartment block. He shared the lift for a couple of floors with a Jewish couple and met a lady with sunglasses and a voluminous handbag sashaying into the foyer. Nobody challenged the man with the hi-viz waistcoat and clipboard. Why would they? People who could afford these apartments didn’t talk to ‘the help’ did they?

Rusty removed his waistcoat and stored it along with the clipboard in his bag. He was off to find a decent pub for a pint and some proper nosh. Two hours later he was fed and watered. As he strolled through Regent’s Park he made a mental note to thank Phoenix for telling him to take twice the cash you thought you’d need on a mission. Rusty had thought that was overkill; but a pint and some proper nosh set you back a pretty penny around here.

Nurul Ruby Pohan was due at her employer’s flat at six o’clock. She would prepare a meal, cook it, and serve it at seven thirty as usual. Everything would be in the dishwasher before eight, and Nurul would be out of the door as quickly as her little legs would allow; before Solomon got any ideas.

Rusty made his way back to Northumberland Avenue. He wanted to arrive in plenty of time. These cultural attaches wouldn’t work too late. Solomon might leave early for once. He started to patrol the street opposite at just after half- past three. There were a lot of people going in and out of the building. Rusty had to concentrate to make sure he didn’t miss him.

At around half-past four the door opened. Solomon Okonkwo strode through it majestically. He was a big man, suited, and booted, every inch the gentleman. A black limousine glided to a halt. Solomon merely had to bend forward and open the door, sliding elegantly into the back seat. Rusty was desperately looking for a taxi. Two minutes later, he was in pursuit. Afternoon traffic in London can move fairly slowly, so his target wasn’t that far ahead. Tenners in the top pocket of his driver got Rusty a little short cut and the gap was closed to a manageable distance.

Rusty paid the rest of the fare as he got the driver to park near the apartment block. He crossed over the road, between stationary vehicles as the traffic was starting to build in preparation for the evening rush hour. Where was a postie when you needed one? He didn’t have long to wait. A couple let themselves in; they were young and probably single. Perhaps he had brought the girl from the office back for a ‘quickie’, anyway they were so engrossed in one another as they moved entwined to the lifts, that they didn’t notice that the door hadn’t closed properly behind them. That was because of Rusty’s right foot.

As the lift ascended, Rusty slipped into the foyer and called the lift back down. His luck was holding. No one else was coming home just yet. The lift doors opened and he pressed the button for the top floor. He checked the gun in his inside jacket pocket. He didn’t plan on using it, except as a frightener. He pressed the buzzer on the door to Solomon’s flat. The door swung open.

“Come in Mrs Pohan, I’ve been waiting for you,” said Solomon Okonkwo, wearing only a towel “hey, who are you?”

Rusty stepped forward and grabbed the cultural attaché. Despite being a big man, he was weak and no match for the trained SAS operative. Rusty kicked the door closed and bundled Solomon into the

lounge, expertly zip-tying his wrists and ankles in seconds.

Solomon was shouting now. He was demanding to know who the hell was in his flat. Rusty slapped some duct-tape across his mouth to shut him up and carried on with his preparations.

“Who am I? Why am I here? I’m your worst nightmare. It’s time for you to pay for causing the death of Olabisi Promise Chukwu.”

Solomon’s eyes widened. Rusty moved to the window. He opened the sash window to the fullest extent. He looked out onto the early evening traffic. He turned around. Solomon’s eyes had widened even more. Rusty shoved him unceremoniously to the ledge. He cut off the ties with a knife, ripped the tape away and held on to the towel. Just a gentle shove was all that was necessary. Solomon screamed. The traffic was still moving steadily. Nobody looked up; not immediately at least.

Rusty had already moved away from the window. He folded the towel neatly and put it away in the airing cupboard, and then he tidied up the flat and made his way towards the door. He paused and wondered whether to leave a note for Nurul Ruby Pohan. She wouldn’t need to cook tonight; she needn’t worry about the randy attaché any longer either. Just a few words, he thought would suffice; something along the lines of ‘Solomon has left the building.’