

CHAPTER 2

Monday, July 1st, 2013

Getting out of bed on a Monday morning can be hard.

On one side of the old Roman city of Bath, Phil Hounsell padded quietly to the bathroom, trying not to disturb his wife Erica. He glanced towards the two bedrooms, where Shaun and Tracey still lay fast asleep. Phil knew from experience that as soon as they heard him get in the shower, they would scramble downstairs to snatch a few minutes watching television before they began the countdown to the school run.

Erica usually awoke by half past seven; either she heard her husband creeping around, despite his best efforts, or the kids had started arguing over which channel to watch. Once in a blue moon, she didn't stir until the alarm on her mobile phone shattered the relative quiet with a few bars of 'Sweet Child of Mine'.

The routine and order that Erica established when she reached the kitchen were what got them through this rigmarole every weekday morning. As Phil stepped out of the shower and gathered his wits and his shaving kit, things downstairs grew calmer by the minute. Erica had awoken. Phil looked in the mirror. He lathered his face and started shaving. His mind drifted back over the weekend at Glastonbury and forwards to the day ahead at Portishead.

Phil attempted to recall that French phrase that said the more things change, the more they stay the same, but it wouldn't come to him. He finished up in the bathroom and wandered back to the bedroom to get dressed, ready for work. By the time he reached the kitchen, that first cup of coffee and his bowl of cornflakes should be waiting. The tried and trusted routine all over again.

Erica would be wide awake, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed; all set to pack him off to work so she could go to the bathroom herself. Shaun and Tracey always eager to tell their Dad everything that had happened over the weekend and what they expected of him over the coming days. There were those summer fetes, end of year plays and other occasions he was probably due to miss out on again no doubt because of the job.

Phil entered the kitchen and three faces turned to greet him.

"Ha-ha! Cut yourself again Dad," sniggered Shaun.

"Don't worry darling," said Erica "there's another clean shirt ready in the wardrobe."

Phil sipped his coffee and sighed. As he wolfed down his breakfast and carried his mug back upstairs to see to his face and change his shirt, it came to him; 'plus ca change, plus la meme chose.'

Yeah, that was right he thought, as he drained his mug. He picked up the car keys, went downstairs, kissed Erica goodbye and waved at the kids, who had already flopped on the sofa watching the box. He barely noticed the glorious summer's day outside the house as he got into his car and headed for Portishead.

Elsewhere in Bath, Zara Wheeler was also experiencing those same Monday morning 'blues'. Ever since that chance meeting with Rusty on the streets of Bristol during the terrorist attack on the Royal visit last November, her weekends, her whole life, had been transformed.

Gone were the cosy, but loveless hours spent with Toby Drysdale, her long-time colleague from her days at Manvers Street police station. Gone too the hours spent alone here at home with her cats and a bottle of Chardonnay, pining over her boss Phil Hounsell. Rusty had changed that.

Zara was an extremely intelligent young woman. She appreciated that Rusty had secrets. In those first few weeks of their relationship, it had been wonderful discovering things about one another in the bedroom. Zara had no complaints in that department. Rusty was a strong, athletic and capable lover; they spent a large amount of their time together in bed.

Although she wanted to learn so many other things about her partner, Zara understood that Rusty needed to be absolutely sure he could trust her before he revealed anything of what he did when they were apart. Clearly, he was in the SAS, or with a 'special ops' unit that targeted terror threats on the UK mainland. That much was clear from his presence in Bristol, where he suddenly appeared to stop her from checking the boot of a suspicious car. Rusty's prompt action saved her life.

The details of which branch of the secret services he was attached to were unimportant to her; she just wanted to know he would be coming home to her safe and well for years to come.

One Sunday evening in late January, they had curled up together on the sofa with a glass of wine.

"It's easy enough to work out why they call you Rusty," said Zara "but what did your parents name you? Are they still alive?"

"My mother died when I was twenty-five. She had cervical cancer. Her and my dad split up five or six years earlier. I've no idea whether he's dead or alive."

"Really?" she asked, "Aren't you in touch with him?"

Rusty snorted.

"I joined up as soon as I could to escape from the bullying bastard. He treated my mother as a servant, not a wife. My father was a regular soldier and he demanded everything in his life be regular too; mealtimes, sex, you get the picture. If not, she got knocked around.

I felt guilty leaving her with him, but I need to to get away. If I'd stayed, I'd have killed him. When she wrote to say she'd escaped and found peace in a women's refuge, I was happy for her. She never lived long enough to enjoy her freedom. In her letters, she always used the name I was christened with, David. That was his name too; which is why I never use it. David Scott. That was me until my first few weeks as a boy soldier. The red hair branded me as Rusty and that was good enough for me."

Zara had cradled Rusty's head on her shoulder and kissed his closely cropped hair. Over the following weeks, more small details were uncovered; he told Zara where he had been stationed in his early time in the army. He mentioned operations he had been involved in and made her laugh at a few of the lighter moments he and his young colleagues shared when they on leave in far-flung places around the world.

Eventually, she learned that he applied for the SAS and this was where his real soldiering began. He couldn't tell her where he had served, or what he experienced. But he could say he was already considered an 'old hand' when he had been in the first intake of the Special Reconnaissance Regiment in '05.

"This red hair is often associated with people with a short fuse and a fiery temper Zara. The discipline drummed into me from day one in the army keeps it under control for the vast

majority of the time. Now and then, someone winds me up so tight I explode. Every corner of British society has been weakened by the idiots that preach liberalism and appeasement. Even in a proud, action-based organisation such as the SAS, there are officers who should never have been given the honour. These officers are weak and spineless. Instead of getting in amongst the bad guys and sorting them out permanently as soon as they arrive on the scene, every step has to be weighed, risk-assessed and rubber-stamped by faceless mandarins before anything is allowed to happen.

We were on a mission, deep in bandit country and I was heading a team of seven. A sandstorm struck without warning and two of my lads got separated from the group. We were ordered to pull out by a young colonel sat thousands of miles away. He was still wet behind the ears and had never seen any real action. He didn't want to risk us being captured by hanging around searching for them. He said they were capable of finding their own way home. We never left anyone behind on one of those missions, Zara, never.

When we got back to base and the shambles was debriefed, we learned that their bodies were found by the Americans, who had their own special forces on the ground there. My two lads survived for a few days in the searing heat, but when their water ran out they were finished.

I stormed out of the room after I got the news and tracked down the superior officer responsible. He ended up in the hospital with a broken jaw and they dismissed me from the service. This was back in '09."

Zara listened in silence to what had been the longest speech she had listened to from Rusty.

"I don't blame you for lashing out," she had said "I joined the police force to make a difference, but we've both suffered from the same disease that's strangling the fight against terrorism and crime. My career has been 'on hold' since I rescued little Grace from the flood waters last year. I can't face being sidelined into crowd control and pointless PR exercises until I collect my pension."

Rusty had shut down after that for a while. Zara bided her time before she tried to get him to open up about what he had been doing for the past three years. Over the Spring Bank Holiday weekend, they travelled north to her parent's home and spent hours walking in the countryside near her hometown of Durham.

"Can you tell me what you do now Rusty?" she asked as they stood on a hillside looking across a wooded valley. The sun was gathering strength and warmth so that gradually everything around them waking up after a cold and lengthy winter prolonged by the coldest spring for fifty years.

Rusty had gathered his coat about him and thrust his hands deeper into his pockets. He had known that this day would come. Rusty drip-fed snippets of information to Zara over the months and time was running out. He had promised Phoenix that he would resolve the situation within six months. Rusty had to decide whether now was the right moment. He resolved to plough ahead.

"I work for someone in the private sector. They approached me a few months after the SAS showed me the door. This outfit operates in the manner that each our security services should, but you need to understand that what I tell you goes no further. It will change your life forever. You know how I feel about you. I want us to share the rest of our lives together. Bringing you into the fold alongside my colleagues and my superiors is the only way that can happen. Will you trust me?"

Zara stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

“If it means we’re together, then I’ll go anywhere Rusty. What I need you to promise is that you and whoever you work for aren’t involved in any criminal activity.”

Rusty smiled.

“A typical copper to the last,” he said “start with the difficult question. I can guarantee you that villains and terrorists are most definitely on the opposite side to my employers. Criminals work outside the law. We work in a somewhat grey area. Maybe that goes on in an area above the law, but we prefer to consider that the law has become so lax of late that we are merely operating at its rightful level.”

Zara and Rusty had continued their afternoon walk and nothing more was said on the matter for a few days. The couple returned to Bath and were at her home, preparing to return to work the next morning. Rusty was in the shower. The door opened and a naked Zara joined him.

“To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?” he asked.

“I’ve made my decision,” said Zara, wrapping her arms around him “I’ll hand in my resignation and that will set me free from these mundane non-jobs they keep assigning me. In four weeks’ time, I’m all yours.”

Rusty grinned.

“I think you can already tell that waiting four weeks won’t be an option for that young lady.”

Minutes later they were under the duvet and any thoughts of resignation forms forgotten until the morning. As they went their separate ways after an early breakfast, Zara had driven into the Police HQ at Portishead and started the ball rolling. She chatted to Toby Drysdale to let him know her decision. She had been nervous about Phil Hounsell finding out, she wasn’t sure of his reaction. Toby had plenty of questions and Zara knew that this was due to be a familiar pattern over the coming weeks.

“Why on earth are you leaving Zara? Where will you go? Has someone been headhunting you already?” Toby asked, concerned over what his good friend leaving.

Zara had thought long and hard how to answer these questions; she had to be firm in her decision to leave and yet guarded about where she was to be working next. She needed to be vague on that front, but not so vague that it might draw attention to the possible clandestine nature of her future job. A delicate balance but Zara was confident she could cope.

“I have to leave Toby,” she had replied “ever since we did the right thing and pulled baby Grace from that car, I’ve been shunted into a corner. My ambitions of further promotions and a dream of one day becoming a Chief Constable have been crushed.

There’s no way they’ll consider me for any significant advancement in the future. I’m not sure where I’ll go eventually. I’ll take time out to go through my options. I reckon I deserve a short holiday.”

Zara had asked Toby not to spread her news around the building. She knew the cat would be out of the bag soon enough, but every day of the twenty-eight it remained a secret was a bonus. She had downloaded a copy of Form 232 and provided the necessary written notice of her intention to leave the organisation. So far she hadn’t handed it to her Department Head.

Thank goodness that wasn’t Phil Hounsell these days. Ever since that night in Bristol and the subsequent fall-out, they spent increasingly less time in contact at work.

After she had completed the form, she then took a few days wondering about Toby's second question. Where *would* she go? What was she *actually* going to be asked to do? Rusty must be based somewhere near Bath or Bristol, that much she realised. Otherwise, he wouldn't always be able to find his way to her house, or to Portishead with little prior warning.

The same as her, he wasn't doing a nine to five job. Every now and then he told her he'd be 'off the grid' for a few days. He never said where he was being sent. Zara never asked.

In a month's time, they were due to be living and working together. As she had driven home after work that Friday she had waited for Rusty to drop by so that she could ask him. That was the evening when the ground seemed to fall away from under her feet and she wondered what on earth she was getting involved in.

The pair had shared a meal and a bottle of wine, and then as they relaxed listening to music, she plucked up the courage to pose the questions bothering her.

"Can I ask for a few details Rusty?" she began.

"What do you need to know, sweetheart?" Rusty had replied.

"Where will I be working? Will I be able to continue to live here, or do I need to move? What salary can I expect to receive? What type of work will I be expected to carry out?"

"Woah, steady Zara; let's take these one at a time shall we? Firstly, you already know the place where we'll be working. We'll live there together; but if you want to keep this place, rent it out or sell it on, that's up to you. Based on what I know of the salary structure in the organisation, I reckon you will receive something around twenty percent above the figure you earn now. As for the work, I recommended you for attachment to the intelligence section. The team there needs to be strengthened, being a woman will help. We're thin on the ground in that area at Olympus. As well as gathering intelligence, then increasingly we'll need a sharp mind like yours to develop strategies to fight cyber crime and cyber terrorism. Do you think that could keep you gainfully occupied while I'm off hunting down the villains you identify for me?"

A dim light went on in the corner of Zara's brain as Rusty was speaking. When he had finished she jumped up from the sofa.

"It's Larcombe Manor isn't it?" she squealed "I bloody knew that place was suspicious. That shower gave me the run around when I was there last September chasing up that ICO enquiry. So they did have something to hide with that bloke Garry Burns."

Rusty held his breath; had that been one step too far, too soon?