

A PLAGUE OF ECHOES

Chapter One

It was a fine summer's evening, warm and balmy, with the barest hint of a breeze ruffling the surface of the River Thames. Simon Crozier, Director in Chief of Department 18, dismissed his driver, as he regularly did, giving the man the rest of the night off. Crozier needed a walk to clear his head after a particularly fractious day, and the two-mile trek to his riverside flat seemed the perfect opportunity.

Walking along the Embankment, he gradually felt the day's tensions dropping from his shoulders; his breathing became deeper, more relaxed, and he, once again, started to notice the world around him. Under Waterloo Bridge there was a cacophony of skateboarders each trying to outdo each other's reckless stunts. The queues outside the various restaurants dotted along this stretch of the river were animated and noisy as diners waited to be seated. The book market on the paved piazza at the front of the British Film Institute was doing a lively trade with students searching out research material and tourists looking for paperbacks to fill the empty hours in their hotel rooms.

London didn't really change, Crozier thought. He'd been walking this part of the Embankment off and on for the best part of fifteen years and it offered few, if any, surprises. So when the old woman, unseasonably dressed for summer, in a long, tweed coat, approached him and stood, blocking his path, Crozier regarded her with disinterest and made to step around her. When she produced the long, wickedly sharp kitchen knife from beneath the folds of her coat and plunged it into Crozier's belly, his eyes registered nothing more than mild surprise and his mouth made a small O shape before he pitched forward onto the grey paving slabs and lay there with his life blood forming a wet, sticky pool beneath him.

"What do you mean, attacked?" Harry Bailey said. He was cradling the phone between his chin and shoulder while he mixed the ingredients for a Spanish omelet, his dinner for tonight. On the phone was Simon Crozier's PA, Trudy Banks who'd stayed late at the office with every intention of catching up on some paperwork. Her plans had been shattered by the call from the police.

Bailey was Crozier's deputy and, as such, was top of her list of people to call.

"Trudy, calm down," Bailey said as he whisked the eggs. "And tell me slowly and rationally what happened."

Bailey listened attentively, set the Pyrex mixing bowl down on the granite counter, and went through to the lounge.

"So what's the hospital saying?"

“He’s in theatre at the moment,” Trudy said, sniffing back the tears. “I’m going down there now.”

“But did they give a prognosis?”

“I don’t know, Harry. I’m getting all my information secondhand through the police. I’ll know more when I get to the hospital.”

“Who else have you called?”

“No one. You’re the first.”

“Okay. Leave it to me to inform everyone who matters. You get to the hospital. I’ll meet you there when I’m done with the phone calls,” Bailey said and hung up. He went back to the kitchen, switched off the cooker, grabbed his coat from behind the door and left the flat.

On the way to the hospital in a taxi, Bailey made a number of phone calls to various Department 18 operatives and government ministers. The Home Secretary knew of the attack already, the police having briefed him as soon as they realized who the victim was. Simon Crozier was not exactly high profile as far as the media was concerned, but as head of the Department, his name carried a lot of weight in Whitehall and Westminster and many of the civil servants and politicians would treat the attack as an assault on one of their own. The Department 18 members he contacted were altogether more pragmatic.

“An eighty-two-year-old woman stabs Simon in broad daylight...” John McKinley said incredulously, “...and the police are treating it as just another manifestation of street crime?”

“To be fair to them, John, the investigation’s barely got underway.”

“Well, they’re going to need our help,” McKinley said decisively.

“We don’t know that at this time,” Bailey said. “For all anyone knows, the old girl could have escaped from an institution. Once I’ve been to the hospital I’ll go to the police to find out what they know, and if they need our help, I’ll certainly offer it. In the meantime it’s best that we keep an open mind.”

Robert Carter had very little to say about the stabbing. That he and Crozier rarely saw eye to eye and had a difficult working relationship was an open secret in Whitehall. Like McKinley, Carter expressed concern about the perpetrator of the attack and asked Bailey to keep him in the loop, but was no more forthcoming than that.

At the hospital Bailey found Trudy Banks waiting just outside the main doors smoking a cigarette. Her cheeks were tear-streaked and she pulled in the smoke with the zeal of the condemned. She dropped the cigarette to the ground as Bailey approached and crushed it out with the toe of her Bally slingbacks. Clutching Bailey tightly in a hug, she blew out the last of the smoke over his shoulder and said, “We should go straight in. He’s just come out of surgery and they’ve put him in Intensive Care.”

“At least he made it through the operation,” Bailey said.

“They’re describing him as critical,” Trudy said. “The knife cut through his intestines and punctured his liver. It isn’t good.”

They took the lift to the ICU, but an officious nurse blocked their path when they tried to get into the room, so they stood and stared at Crozier through the glass, watching the vital signs machine monitoring his heart rate, respiration and blood pressure. The steady bleep of the machine should have been reassuring but, as they stood there, both of them found themselves holding their breaths, waiting for the machine to fall silent. A woman, wearing a white coat, with a stethoscope draped around her neck, leaned over Crozier, slender hands

adjusting the feed of an intravenous drip that stood sentinel at the side of the bed. She had long, dark hair, secured with a clip at the back of her head, but the hair at the front was wayward and kept falling in front of her eyes. With small shakes of her head, which looked like gestures of despair, she flicked the strands back, away from her face.

Finishing her task, she stood upright, turned, faced the window and noticed Bailey and Trudy observing her. Flashing them a sympathetic smile, she went to the door and stepped out into the corridor to greet them.

“Doctor Maria Bridge,” she said, holding out her hand. “Are you family?”

Trudy shook her head.

“As good as,” Bailey said, producing his Department 18 ID card and letting her read it. “What are his chances?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Crozier is no more than stable. The internal damage is extensive and he lost an awful lot of blood before the paramedics arrived. We should know more by morning, when he regains consciousness.”

“So he might die,” Bailey said, and heard Trudy suck in her breath. He turned to her. “I’m only voicing what we’re both thinking,” he said.

“To be so blunt about it...” Her voice trailed off as the tears started to flow again.

Bridge was nodding her head slowly. “Yes, he might. If you were family I’d sugar coat it a little, but as you work for the Department I think it’s best I’m as direct as you are. Let’s say the next twenty-four hours are going to be critical. I’m keeping him sedated so his body can get on with the healing process.”

“So you know about the Department,” Bailey said. It wasn’t a question. When he’d shown her his ID card, there was no query in her eyes, only a guarded recognition.

“Yes, the secret department the government has to investigate abnormal, possibly paranormal, activities,” she said and then hesitated, giving a small shake of her head. “Another story, another time, perhaps.”

“Can we go in and see him?” Trudy said.

“There’s little point,” Bridge said. “He’s in a state of deep unconsciousness. He won’t know you’re here.” She took in the pleading look in Trudy’s moist eyes and relented. “Five minutes. No more.”

“Thank you,” Trudy said and stepped around her into the room.

“Did you perform the operation?” Bailey said.

“Yes,” she said.

“He’s in good hands then.” From what he’d seen of her so far he was impressed by Maria Bridge. She seemed capable and confident.

Smiling slightly she stared down at her palms. “I’d like to think so. Yes.”

Robert Carter put the phone down and flopped back down onto the pillow with a sigh.

“Who was that?” Jane Talbot asked.

“Harry. Crozier’s been stabbed. He’s in hospital.”

“Stabbed?” Jane said, throwing back the covers and swinging her legs to the floor. “Who stabbed him?” She grabbed a silk bathrobe and wrapped it around her naked body.

“A woman in her eighties. He was walking along the South Bank when she attacked him.”

“Jesus Christ!” Jane said, getting to her feet. “We need to get to the hospital.”

Carter held on to her wrist and pulled her back down to the bed. “Why? He’s in the best place. There’s nothing we can do for him.”

She shrugged him off and stood up again. “But it’s *Simon*. He’d be there for us.”

“I doubt that very much,” Carter said.

“Don’t be such a cynic. Besides,” Jane said, “the news has rather killed the mood.”

“I’ve waited months for this evening to happen,” he said after a pause.

“And, believe it or not, so have I. What do I have to say to make you believe me?”

Carter sat up. “Nothing. Just come back to bed.”

She shook her head.

“It’s been a year since we broke up,” he said, reaching for a cigarette. “And in those twelve months I’ve been hoping that, somewhere down the line, you’d change your mind. This seemed such a perfect opportunity. David taking the girls away, work commitments keeping you in London...”

Jane picked up her skirt from the floor. “It wasn’t work keeping me here. I wanted this as much as you did,” she said. “The last year has been hell. I’ve regretted the decision I made every day. But my reasons for ending it were valid. This isn’t just about you and me, Rob. I have to think of the girls. Gemma and Amy have had enough upheaval in their lives. I have a commitment to my daughters.”

“Rightly so. But David? You don’t love him.”

As she pulled on her clothes she watched in the wardrobe mirror as Carter threw off the covers and got out of bed. His taut, athletic body made the breath catch in her throat. She looked away before her resolve wavered and she climbed back under the sheets. “No, I don’t. I love you,” she said. “But it’s all about timing, and at the moment the timing’s crap.”

They drove to the hospital in total silence. It was Jane who broke it just as they entered the hospital gates. “What are you thinking? You haven’t said a word since we left the Barbican.”

“I was just marveling at the fact that, even from his hospital bed, Crozier can still reach out and fuck up my life.”

“It’s probably for the best,” she said.

Carter looked at her sharply. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes... No... Oh, hell! I don’t know. That’s the trouble. Being with you just confuses me.”

Carter didn’t respond, concentrating instead on finding a parking space. After a few moments he spoke. “McKinley’s here. That’s his Audi.”

Jane looked across at an olive-green, beaten-up Audi A3 parked between a Toyota and a Kia, and looking every bit the poor relation.

“Why doesn’t he buy himself a new car? It’s not as if he can’t afford it.” In fact Jane couldn’t care less if John McKinley bought himself a new car or not, but talking about that, or anything else for that matter, was preferable to having yet another conversation with Carter about their relationship.

As they were entering the hospital, Bailey, Trudy and the newly arrived McKinley were on their way out.

“How is he?” Jane asked Trudy.

“Not good,” she said. “There’s no point going up. They won’t let you see him.”

“As I found to my cost,” McKinley said. “Man, that nurse up there is fierce.”

John McKinley was a six-foot-four-inch, well-muscled African American who’d been with the Department for the past eight years. The thought of him intimidated by anyone was hard for Jane to swallow.

“Are you serious?” she said.

“Wait ’til you meet her. Scarier than my ex-wife and, man, Celia is a ball-buster.”

“We’re going on to Waterloo Street police station,” Bailey said. “To try to make some sense of what’s happened.”

“Well, they won’t welcome us all turning up there,” Carter said. “Perhaps we ought to leave you to it.”

“I’m going,” Jane said. “I can help.”

Trudy turned to Bailey. “Jane can go in my place, Harry,” she said. “Old lady or not, if I see her face to face, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

“Fair enough,” Bailey said. “Rob? John? Are you coming?”

“I’ll pass too,” Carter said. “It doesn’t need four of us.” He took Jane’s arm and steered her away. “Are you coming back to the Barbican when you’re finished at the hospital?” he asked her quietly.

“I’ll see, Rob. It depends how long I’m going to be there.”

He let her arm drop, disappointment etched on his face.

Jane went across to join the others.

“Can I give you a lift, Trudy?” Carter said.

Trudy nodded eagerly. “If you wouldn’t mind. That would be great.”

“Keep me posted,” Carter said to Bailey and started to walk back to his car.

Jane watched him leave, a handful of mixed emotions spinning in her head, the chief one being regret.