

PLAGUE

Prologue

A lattice of shadow and coloured light fell upon the two women standing at the front of the chapel. A tall, broad-shouldered man in a business suit stood further back.

'We commit this child of God to be cremated.'

The chaplain intoned the final words of the brief funeral service and pressed the button marked 'Christian Trad.' at the lectern. The curtains behind him drew closed and the coffin disappeared from view as organ music played. He snapped shut the prayer book and stepped off the shallow step into the aisle between the rows of plastic chairs.

'Vicar.' One of the women caught his eye. 'This is Ms Skarlsgard from the Danish Embassy.'

'How do you do?' the Dane said as she offered her hand. 'Unfortunately, we have not been able to identify the dead boy. A university signet ring was just not enough to go on.'

'Okay. We'll keep the ashes for a year then scatter them in our Garden of Remembrance,' the chaplain said. 'If he's identified in future, relatives will have a place to visit and pay their respects.'

'That will be acceptable.'

'Charge the Tower Hamlets account,' the other woman said.

The two women followed the chaplain down the aisle.

'And you are...?' he asked the solitary man.

'Detective Inspector Rowlands. I'm in charge of the case.'

'Good of you to come.'

'Not at all.'

His presence was a mark of respect the boy had not been afforded in life; it was the least he could do. The policeman followed the others out into a sun-lit municipal cemetery of neat, marble-chip graves and well-mown grass.

The Danish boy's bloated body had been found entangled in a pleasure boat's anchor chain, to the distress of the party-goers on board. He was the latest addition to a growing case file of young and vulnerable victims found raped and sometimes tortured to death. There were seven now, seven young lives cut short. Some were identified and their families informed. The unnamed had a public health funeral, like the one in Tower Hamlets, and no one was much the wiser.

They had been targeted, he suspected, because their disappearances wouldn't raise an alarm. All seemed forsaken and far from home. There was no outcry, no one had been charged with their murder, nor was there a single suspect. DI Rowlands had hesitated before adding the Danish boy to the list. The body was disfigured, but it seemed his wrists and ankles had been bound and his throat may have been cut, like the others.

The neglected killings offended Rowlands, on a personal as well as a professional level. They insulted his sense of justice, so he pursued any clues to the youngsters' fate, often in his own time. There'd be no plaudits for doing so, but he was determined to find and expose whoever was responsible. He turned into the high road and headed towards the underground.

Monday

One

'Customer information: due to construction works at this station there is no direct access to South Molton Street. Customers wishing to visit South Molton Street should exit on to Oxford Street and turn right into New Bond Street.'

The announcement sounding in her ears, Cassandra rose with the escalator, gliding into daylight. It was the construction works she was there to see. The glossy tiles and mirrored surfaces of Bond Street Underground station threw her hazy reflection back at her as she headed towards the exit. Now she had to find the building site.

Difficult to miss.

The horizontal jibs of giant cranes swayed sideways against counter-weights, their towers looming over tall wooden hoardings. Unseen machinery rumbled and bleeped. In a gap in the perimeter stood a bearded man, who wore a hardhat and hi-vis vest. He carried a clipboard.

That must be the way in.

Her name was checked off his list and she was directed to a row of temporary cabins. Bulky men in hardhats strode past, dust rising from their heavy boots. They shouted, purposefully, to each other in different languages, ignoring her presence completely.

In the cabin designated 'Reception', a young woman sat behind a cheap desk.

'Ms Fortune,' she read the name from another list. 'Please leave any personal belongings in the final cabin along; it's quite secure. Here is your hat and your pass. You'll find shoes, dust masks and safety glasses in the cabin. They're waiting to go down; you're the last.'

Cassie winced at the ear-splitting rat-a-tat of a jackhammer starting up nearby. In the furthest cabin people were still changing, fellow civil servants whom she greeted wordlessly as she put on hard-toed overshoes and safety equipment. Together they crossed the site to a single storey building destined to become the new rear entrance to the station, where the other members of the Project Board waited.

Outside, a thickset man spoke rapidly into a walkie-talkie. 'Okay, all here now. On our way down.' He made a show of clicking the 'off' button and beckoned them forward into the building. 'Everyone come please. My name is Bogdan and I am the foreman. I will take you.'

They clomped down a set of stationary escalators and the clanking of machinery grew fainter. Then down another level to the platforms, where the curving walls of the tunnel were completely bare of tiling or decoration and the concrete exposed. Like an older woman caught without her makeup, Cassie thought, unready to be seen by the world.

'Follow me, please.' The foreman climbed down a wide ladder into the central trench where the rails would run. 'Take care where you walk.'

Naked light bulbs drooped from cables slung upon the tunnel walls and shadows loomed then shrank as they walked along the trench. A generator hummed nearby and there was a metallic taste to the air. The ground became uneven.

Ahead Cassie could see building workers, gathered by a side opening. Bogdan called out a question and one of them replied. Another began to complain. The foreman cut him short by turning to face the visiting party.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'We are now approximately two hundred feet below South Molton Street. We discovered the cave you are about to enter at the end of last week. It is a burial chamber. Please stay near the entrance, so as to respect the graves. The archaeologist is already here and can answer your questions.'

He led them through the opening into a cavern.

About twenty feet wide, its rough floor stretched back forty feet or so. It was about the size of a tennis court. Arc lamps showed shards of broken masonry scattered among large, upright pieces of grey stone. Grave markers, Cassie thought. The white electric light created slender shadows in the shallow inscriptions cut into the stones. These must have belonged to a much older London.

'Oh!' The woman beside her caught hold of Cassie's arm in surprise, as a figure rose from behind a gravestone

'Hello. Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.'

The man grinned.

Sorry? You're enjoying yourself.

'My name is Dr Holle Maartens and I'm an archaeologist with the Museum of London. With discoveries of this kind, construction work must cease to allow for archaeological exploration.' He rested one trail-booted foot atop a pile of stones.

'How long will the project be delayed?' someone asked.

'That depends. The investigation could be over and the site reopened in a week. On the other hand, if we find anything of significance, we'll have to remove it, which, given the fragile state of some of this, might take much longer.'

Not fragile enough to stop you posing on it.

'How old are the graves?' she asked.

'Anything from three to five hundred years old. London's population expanded hugely between 1500 and 1650 and existing churchyards couldn't cope, so overspill burial grounds were created, outside the old city limits. I think this is one of those.'

'Are they quite common, then?' someone else asked.

'Yes, but there's something of greater interest here. I discovered it late last night.' The archaeologist chuckled. 'Let me show you.'

They followed Dr Maartens to the back of the cavern where he connected up a light. Cassie gasped as it clicked on.

Bones. Human bones.

They lay in heaps. Skulls, femurs, ulnas, finger and collar bones, all mixed up with shattered slivers. Some were large and heavy looking, others tiny, children's bones.

'It looks like they've been dumped, not even given a proper burial,' a man observed.

'I think that's exactly what happened to them,' Dr Maartens replied. 'And I think we'll find more of them below, a whole pit of them, I suspect.'

'A pit? What kind of pit? Like a plague pit?' There was a tremor of excitement in the man's voice.

For a few seconds, Cassie heard only the faraway hum of the generator. Then people began to murmur.

Plague. Ciuma. Pest. Plaga. In any language, a word of power and fear.

This was news to the workmen, she realised. They hadn't known about the plague pit.

Most of them wouldn't have been in London when the last plague pit was found, almost thirty years before. With shocked and angry faces, they surrounded the foreman. Others, hearing their protestations, came to join them. Space and oxygen contracted as men jostled at the entrance of the cavern.

Cassie sensed the rising panic. Fear, as contagious as any virus, was spreading invisibly from one to another, infecting them all. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. A few moments longer and they'd be stampeding along the narrow, half-lit passageway.

People were going to get hurt.

She looked over at the archaeologist. Maartens was watching the workmen, open mouthed. Gone was the easy showmanship, replaced by astonishment. Meanwhile the hubbub of fear grew, voices jumbled and the noise level rose.

Do something, say something.

A chunk of sculpted masonry, part of a fallen mausoleum, lay propped against the cavern wall. Stretching to get a handhold, Cassie clambered on top of it, her head almost up against the roof. She shielded her eyes from the glare of the lamps.

'Wait!' she shouted. 'Listen to me!' Faces turned towards her and she heard the faint fizzing of the arc lamps in the sudden silence. 'It's not contagious, or dangerous. The bacillus dies with its host. It's safe – *sigur, bezpieczny, saker... seguro*. We know this because we've found plague pits before.' She glared at the archaeologist. 'Haven't we.'

'Er, yes, that's right,' he confirmed. 'That's why I'm happy to work here. You won't catch anything here more dangerous than a cold.'

There was a general muttering, though the men seemed to accept what he said, temporarily at least. Cassie noticed one or two civil servants still casting anxious glances at the bones and hopeful ones towards the tunnel.

'There's no need to worry at all,' she reiterated, brooking no denial. 'There's no danger.'

As she spoke she felt the stone move beneath her feet and instinctively bent her knees and raised her arms for balance. The structure was shifting. A deep growl of noise began and pieces of rock and clay showered her from above. She lost sight of the people in the chamber as the light dimmed, then was snuffed out.

The cavern wall was collapsing and the roof was falling with it.

'Lady! Jump!' she heard the foreman yell.

Against all her instincts, she leapt from her stone perch.

Two

She stumbled as her legs hit the ground. Sprawling, she gasped for air. What was happening? Soil and rock fell around her, an underground avalanche. Was the whole cavern subsiding?

Get out. Move!

She thrust herself upward, a kneeling sprinter starting a race. She was trapped in slow motion as the ground slid from beneath her feet, but, legs and arms pumping, muscles taut, she drove against the yielding soil and stones. She was almost free of the earth fall when she collided with someone.

The archaeologist - he had been standing close by her vantage point when the collapse began. Each grabbed the other and they staggered towards the opening of the cave. There the ground was solid beneath her feet and Cassie stopped, chest heaving.

'You okay?' Bogdan asked. He scrutinised her face. 'Death is very bad publicity.'

Cassie couldn't help but smile at him. A joke, even a bad one, was welcome. Floating particles of dirt caught in her throat and she coughed, her eyes watering.

'Yeah,' she croaked. 'Thanks – and thanks for the warning.'

It might have saved her life. Even with a hard hat, one falling rock could have stunned her and she would have been buried beneath the earth. It wouldn't have taken long for her vital functions to fail.

Don't think about it.

She straightened her shoulders and began to brush down her clothes, discreetly wiping the tears away. Stepping out of her shoes she emptied them of earth and pebbles.

'How about everyone else?' she asked.

'We just got dirty. You and the doctor got the worst of it,' he answered, then grinned. 'Some ran back into the tunnel, very quickly.'

Cassie turned to look back at the place where she had been standing when the collapse began. The ruined mausoleum had disappeared beneath a mound of earth and rock. The cavern wall had fallen in, soil spilling across the old burial ground to reach more than half way to the tunnel.

It seemed to have settled. Workmen were already tamping down loose dirt. Beams of light veered around the chamber as they hauled on cables to tug lights free of the rubble. The plague pit was now completely covered over.

'What's that?' She pointed to a dark opening at the top of the new slope.

'It's another chamber,' Dr Maartens replied, curious. He took a heavy torch from his pocket and directed its beam into the darkness. 'We must have disturbed its wall. I wonder what's in there?'

'Dangerous.' Bogdan said. 'Enough for today. Everyone is going back to the surface.'

'Let me take a quick look,' the archaeologist said. 'I've lost my plague pit, after all.'

The foreman hesitated.

'Please, just a few minutes,' Maartens pleaded. 'I'm going to have to go in there anyway. This might save some time for the project, right?'

'Looks like it's okay,' a workman said. 'Probably.'

'Well... a few minutes only,' Bogdan reluctantly agreed. 'And I come with you.'

'Me too,' said Cassie. She wasn't going to be left behind. 'I want to know what's up there; it could have killed me. May I borrow...?' The workman gave her his torch.

Climbing the mound was like walking up sand dunes. Ahead of her, Bogdan reached the top and turned to offer her a hand.

'Is rock here,' he said, stamping.

In a few sinking strides Cassie reached the ledge, about ten feet above the floor of the first chamber.

'It is another cavern,' Maartens called from inside.

Cassie shone her torch across the floor immediately in front of her. It looked more like rough concrete than rock. She joined the archaeologist, who was stepping forward very slowly and carefully, shining his torch.

'Careful, stay behind me,' he said, holding out his arm. 'Mustn't inadvertently - oh! Fuck!'

'What?' Bogdan called. 'What is it?' He pushed past them both. '*Stranje!* Everybody back!'

'A body,' Maartens' voice quivered. 'It's a body.'

Cassie stepped forward. On the bare floor she saw a naked young man, his pale skin waxy in the torchlight. Lying face down, his arms reached out towards them, unmoving.

Bogdan tried to usher them back to the opening.

'If he's dead then this is a possible crime scene,' Cassie said to him, quietly. 'Make sure no one else comes up here. I've done this sort of thing before.'

Almost true.

'And call the police, but do it discreetly. Call Scotland Yard. They won't want word of this getting out until they know what they're dealing with.'

The foreman swallowed hard.

'Death is very bad publicity'. Well, now it's unavoidable.

He nodded and started back down the slope.

Cassie knelt to examine the body. She didn't want to touch the pallid skin, but she had to be certain that the boy was dead.

'Don't,' the archaeologist said, as she reached forward. 'You don't need to. He's dead alright. Look at the side of his neck.'

She peered more closely and saw the end of a distinctive red-brown slash slicing round his neck. The ground beneath it was stained dark. Someone had cut his throat.

How old is he? Twenty? Maybe younger?

His muscular arms were bruised purple and brown, almost obscuring a tattoo. It was an anchor, no, a *kotwica*, a Polish symbol.

She raised her torch to look beyond the body.

What is this place?

Skulls grinned at her and skeletal hands clawed the air. Part of the chamber wall was packed tight with bones. A snake slithered from an eye socket.

No, not a snake. Of course not, only a trickle of dirt.

A heavy metal ring reflected in the torchlight. It was fixed into the wall of skeletons and streaked with slivers of silver where the rust had been rubbed away. Someone had recently been tied or chained to that ring.

Cassie glanced down at the boy's wrists. Their skin was red and raw.

Exactly what happened here?

'Maartens?' Cassie said. 'What are these bones? Are they part of the plague pit?'

'What?' he glanced over at the wall of skeletons and straightened up. 'Not necessarily. Once a place was known as a burial site, it was often re-used.'

He swung the beam of his torch around the chamber, revealing stone walls and large puddles of what looked like solidified candle wax. The cavern had been lit by candlelight.

Cassie heard someone breathing hard as they climbed the slope. It was Bogdan, returning.

'Police are coming,' he said, panting, as he reached the top. 'Nobody leaves. Wait for them in the cabins. I stay here and make sure it's not disturbed.' Cassie exchanged looks with Maartens. She retreated towards the cavern, but stopped as she drew level with the foreman.

'Do you know what a *kotwica* is, Bogdan?'

'Polish for anchor,' he answered, promptly.

'Yes, it is.' She started down the earth slope.