

THE BABYLON CONTINGENCY

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**THE
BABYLON
CONTINGENCY**

CLIFFORD LONGLEY



LION FICTION

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In memory of Eva Ergazakis RIP



“We have no means of guessing, even approximately, the nature of the text, for nothing like it has been found in any known language. All this could change if more specimens of the script were to be found...”

*John Chadwick, Linear B and Related Scripts,
British Museum Publications 1987*

“From the time of the exile, Babylon – which destroyed Jerusalem, slaughtered its inhabitants, burned the temple, deported its elites, thus attacking the very structures of the holy nation in order to make it lose its identity - becomes the symbol of all the empires that oppose God and his people.”

*Olivier Odelain and Raymond Séguineau,
Dictionnaire des Noms Propres de la Bible, Ecole Biblique de
Jérusalem 1978*

It was late, but I had an hour to spare. So I took a long detour and drove back to Broxborough Manor House. Something was bugging me. There are only so many different ways of breaking into an old house like this. The broken window with the forced latch was over a straight drop of at least 20 feet, down to a flower bed. It didn't add up. So I decided to have another look, just to see how easy it would be to get to the window from the roof, on the end of a rope, at night – to get the feel of the thing.

I pulled up at the gate out of sight of the house and walked the rest. The air was pleasantly fresh, still and damp from recent rain, cool but not chilly. Hardly a breeze; very quiet. The twilight had faded but there was an almost-full moon, with the odd wisp of cloud. As I rounded the bend in the drive I could see the house clearly enough. I remembered it was big but somehow it was bigger in the gloom – and more forbidding. The darkened windows suggested the hollow sockets of a skull. The crenelations on the roof, though I guessed they were Victorian fakery, gave it a grim Gothic aspect.

I stopped 80 yards short, though I knew nobody would be inside. On instinct I stepped across a strip of lawn to take shelter in the deep shadow of the laurels and rhododendrons at the side of the drive. There was one dim light by the entrance. And a glimmer from one of the downstairs windows – for security, I guessed. Otherwise all was shadow and silence. The moon went briefly behind a cloud. In the distance a fox barked. Sharp, ugly noise. I don't spook easily but I was on edge.

I could see the upstairs side window where they'd entered. But how had they got to it? They must have had a ladder, surely. I

made out more details as my eyes adjusted to the dark and ran through the outlines of the evidence once more. It had been during the night. They'd disabled an alarm, done some damage to furniture, possibly helped themselves to a few tasty items, and left. Probably opportunistic but forensically aware enough not to leave fingerprints or DNA – or, with reference to the soft damp earth at the foot of the outside wall, footprints. If they were looking for something, they didn't find it. They certainly didn't find the one big treasure the house actually held. Did they know about it?

Then, as I watched from the bushes, something struck me. The window was still broken. I could've sworn it'd been mended, even before my last visit. By the handyman – what was his name? – Jenkins. Or was I looking at the wrong window? Stupid of me. Not only broken, but slightly ajar. Had they come back? Or were they here now?

They could still be on the premises. With luck we'd catch them red-handed. I felt like a gambler whose horse was ahead at the last bend. A steady nerve, and the prize was ours. End of case. Hardly worth the effort.

I stepped back, further out of sight, alert, personal radio in hand. I whispered my rank and name and the location of the property – glad I knew the post-code, needless to say they'd never heard of Broxborough Manor House – and added "Intruders still on premises, need uniform back-up fastest. Tell them to stay back, stop short of main gate. No blue lights or two-tones. Nor vis vests. I will meet them. Avoid warning suspects we are on to them."

I cradled the tiny speaker to my jacket to deaden the sound. A distant MP voice crackled the message back to me, gave me a CAD number and signed off. I could be wrong, but it was better to assume they were still on the job than not.

Ten minutes passed. I was watching the window so intently that I nearly missed the figure suddenly made visible in the shadows below by the flare of a match. He must have been there

all the time, right beneath the window. Dark clothes, from head to foot. I couldn't see details of a face, but he was looking to and fro. Not aware of my presence, I was certain. Body language said sentry rather than hunter or prey. Heavy smoker too; he lit another cigarette.

Thank God I'd whispered on the radio; my heart was pounding. What was I supposed to do? Wait for back-up. But fifteen minutes!

I could just see the lane outside from where I was. There was a car stopped 200 yards further along in the shadows, where a minute before there hadn't been. White. Had to be a patrol car. Good stealthy approach. They'd got the message, and taken off their visibility vests. Two figures, one tall, one shorter, moved silently through the shrubs towards me. A glimpse of a dark blue uniform. I raised my hand cautiously, waved them into the bushes, pointed to the house. They saw me, understood, waved back. A few more yards and they'd caught up.

"DI Peele," I whispered. "Keep your voices down. See, they've a look-out, just by the house. Hasn't seen us."

I peered into the shadows again and could just make out the silhouette of the man. He still hadn't moved, but had smoked two more cigarettes, lighting each from the tip of the last. Thanks for the DNA, I thought.

"I think there's also someone inside, see the broken window?" I whispered to the nearest uniform, a woman's. We crouched, watching intently. She nodded.

"What do you want us to do?"

The other officer, male, older, by my side, bending down so I could hear him.

"PCs Oliver and Winstone, by the way. Sorry we took so long. RTA."

"Just wait and watch. Did you see any other vehicle?"

"Nothing. Well, just yours." We waited in suspense for about five minutes.

The female officer reappeared, though I hadn't noticed her go.

Surprising, as her blond ponytail made her a little too conspicuous in the moonlight.

“Sir, there’s a car in the car park, engine still slightly warm, must be theirs,” she whispered.

“Exits?”

“Back this way, but also a track leading the other way.”

“Damn.”

I thought a bit. So far we hadn’t seen a crime committed, except possibly criminal damage to a pane of glass, value 50 quid. Standing below an open window isn’t an arrestable offence, even done suspiciously. Smoking wasn’t a crime – yet. Not even when trespassing on private property. Being on enclosed premises by night? Couldn’t remember whether that’d been repealed. Why didn’t the bloody Government leave things alone?

Whoever they were, they would be likely to retreat back to their car. Then they might get away by the track at the rear, even if they knew we were on to them. So the car was the best place for an ambush – to get some real evidence. I sent the two constables crawling through the undergrowth to stake it out.

“I’ll try and flush them out towards you,” I whispered as they disappeared.

Another long wait. The moon went behind a cloud. I was getting stiff and slightly chilled. Then the window opened wider. An arm appeared. Something shook from side to side. It was a rope, hanging down the side of the building from the roof. A figure emerged, scrambled out of the window, and deftly abseiled to the ground, leaping the last yard onto the gravel path. He was also dressed in black, agile, and moved silently. Trained, I noticed, and very fit. I strained to see into the semi-darkness where the moonlight reached, and into the deeper black in the shadows.

He was carrying a bag over one shoulder. And what looked suspiciously like a heavy strap over the other. Another bag? A gun? As he turned and the moon reappeared, its profile became clearer. My blood ran cold. It was a machine carbine of some

sort, aka light machine-gun, black. I’ve only once handled an SR-2 9mm, but this looked similar. Totally deadly and professional. Cut you in half, easily. Not favoured by British criminals, because it took skill to get it right.

Those two uniformed officers were unarmed, they didn’t even have anti-stab vests, and if my next move was the wrong one, either or both would soon be dead. Me too, likely as not.

In the same second, the figure on the ground moved further into the moonlight, which had brightened. He too was carrying a short-barrelled automatic weapon, rested in the crook of his arm. That or a pump action. I couldn’t understand why I hadn’t noticed it sooner. I heard voices, very low, and saw them bend together to light their cigarettes.

Now I could see why I hadn’t made out their faces. They were both wearing balaclavas, covering everything except eyes and mouth.

I felt foolish, not to mention outgunned. Three unarmed bobbies, playing cops and robbers, up against something mean and nasty from the underworld. Our lives were suddenly very cheap. My clothes felt thin, my skin thinner. You don’t carry a weapon like that unless you mean to use it. The nearest inhabited property was probably a quarter of a mile away, the nearest busy road further than that. Nobody would hear anything. We should be wearing body armour at least.

First thing, get them out of danger. Then withdraw. Second thing, call for armed back-up. This was fast turning into a major incident. I didn’t have time to think through the ramifications, but I put the whole criminal investigation we were on in an entirely different light. Just make some routine inquiries, Superintendent Richardson had said when I tried to wriggle out of this job. Crap. I thought there was some hidden meaning in his voice but couldn’t decode it at the time. I sensed he knew something I didn’t.

I was about to move towards the car park when a twig cracked nearby and made me jump. It was PC Winstone, the woman

officer, with Oliver just behind. They'd seen the weapons and beaten a retreat.

"They're armed, sir." It was PC Winstone who spoke first in a whisper. "Didn't think you'd want to sacrifice us." Despite the levity she sounded alarmed.

Oliver hissed at her under his breath: "Keep quiet!"

The two figures by the house had frozen, as if listening. One turned to the other, said something, and tossed aside his cigarette. The other laughed. Then with no warning he slipped his gun off his shoulder, levelled it, and fired.

The noise was devastating, even at this distance. We could see the muzzle flashes, like a jet of fire. Bullets sprayed in a semicircle as if from a hose. We were at the end of the arc, and how they missed all three of us I do not know. It was a long burst with a half-second pause in the middle, first one way then the other. Utterly reckless. As an afterthought, he sent one last burst our way. I flinched instinctively.

Smoke lingered, hanging eerily in the moonlight like a wraith. A couple of crows, startled out of sleep by the sudden pandemonium, rose into the night air squawking and fluttering. Somewhere in the distance a sleepy cow moored in protest. At the same instant there was a muffled gasp from PC Oliver. I glanced at his face in alarm. He was hurt, teeth clenched against the pain. The commotion of the birds had masked his cry.

The wounded officer knelt and then slowly sank to sitting, his right arm across his body clutching his left. I saw a trickle of blood, black in the moonlight. It started to ooze between the fingers. PC Winstone, leaning over, touched his cheek in a spontaneous gesture. I knew in an instant they were more than driver and observer. He peered intently towards the house. I saw he wanted to show me he was still on duty, that the injury was not too serious.

The two gunmen laughed again, and set off towards the car park. I could hear bits of conversation. It was clear, thank the

Lord, that they didn't know we were there. But I felt raw fear run through my body. I'd had single shots fired my way before, but never so casually nor so close, never a burst like this. With such callous intent.

"You OK?"

"Not really. That was real scary. Jack's hit in the arm." She sounded shaky. "Not too badly," I heard him say under his breath. "But it's pretty painful."

"Sorry, sir. Let's wait here. Keep in the bushes." It was PC Oliver speaking again – an order to her, a suggestion to me. He was cool now, voice steady. The bullet had only grazed him. We each sought out the darkest patch we could find, and huddled as low as we could. Soon a car started, doors slammed. Instead of getting louder it faded away, driving in low gear over broken ground. I got a glimpse of a red tail light bouncing up and down. Oliver, I found out later, had served with the army in Northern Ireland and had been under fire before, hence the steady nerves. "They've gone down the track. God knows where it comes out," said Winstone, back on her feet.

All clear and out of danger, my wits recovered. I even felt a little angry. How dare they? We waited for silence, then I straightened up. They had his blood-stained jacket off, and a handkerchief pressed to the wound. I was on the radio again, gave the reference number I'd been given earlier, went through to District then Area, first duty inspector then duty superintendent, stabbed out a quick account of who we were and what we had seen. Asked for an ambulance, told them "gunshot wound to uniformed officer, not life-threatening."

Caused consternation at the other end, until I said "Minor injury. Repeat: minor." Winstone had the car number, good lass. So I gave passed it on. But we had no idea where the lane led, or where they were headed.

I reckoned the crime scene was now cold, danger over. I phoned my sergeant, DS Sarah Shipton, at home. Then called the local Super back, said I wanted duty CID and forensics to do a proper scene-of-crime job, plus the firearms boys as presumably there were cartridges lying about and even bullets buried in the soil or, if we were lucky, in the odd tree trunk. Maybe one bullet was already in police custody, as it were, though I suspected it had passed right through him. Finally called the manager of the house, Mrs Scott, and asked her to come out with her keys. I said there had been another incident but didn't specify what.

I sat on the steps for a while and started to shiver. It wasn't particularly cold, just shock. I was sweating a little. The sheer violence and volume of gunfire still stunned me. Maniacs. I pulled myself together and went to look for the other two. Jack Oliver was behaving as if nothing had happened rather than a man who'd just been shot. I told him to sit down. Adrenaline still pumping, I guessed. I discovered I had indigestion. Funny, it was not the risk to me but the risk to them that really shook me.

We kept ourselves busy talking until another police vehicle arrived, this time a van with three officers, one with sergeant's stripes. I told them the situation, and asked why the hell they'd taken so long. Unfair, but I was tense. Then I sent them to search around outside the house to see if anything else had been disturbed while we waited for the keys so we could take a look inside. Also not to mess up any footprints. The Socos would want a clean scene.

Mrs Scott turned up sooner than expected, followed a few seconds later by another car, a red MG sports car I recognized, Sarah's. I was glad to see her. We talked, and then she went inside with Mrs Scott. A few minutes later I started to follow, with the sergeant. I wished I was still a smoker. Needed one just then.

The ambulance pulled in, unnecessary blue light flashing, and I watched from the doorway as Winstone – Sharon, Oliver had called – coaxed him to get in the back. She had his arm well

bandaged in a neat sling. He didn't want to leave the scene – or her. Good officers. Must remember to commend them. Told her to follow us inside the house; she deserved to know what this was all about. Finally an armed response vehicle turned up, and we ribbed it for missing the show and sent it on its way. Didn't turn a hair. "OK mate, no worries," shouted the driver as he accelerated out of the drive. Whatever happened to respect?

First we checked the office, which hadn't been broken into, then went upstairs to the room – more a passageway, in fact – with the broken window. As we passed the store room door we'd entered on our last visit I could see recent wood splinters round the lock. "It's been forced," said Sarah. "This time they knew about it." She opened the door, holding the knob with a handkerchief.

Inside was a mess, much worse than when we last saw it. The entire floor was covered in debris, bags ripped open, torn clothes, masses of paper everywhere. Dust. Old shoe boxes and other clutter. Stained mattress flat on the floor. No sign of the suitcase. "Blast," I said. Winstone looked alarmed.

"I know what you're thinking," said Sarah, "but we put it in the safe in the office downstairs, just this afternoon." I remembered she'd said she was going over there to take pictures for the file.

"Just as well," I replied, "but why, exactly? How did you know they were coming back?"

"Something Richardson said when I ran into him this morning. Word to the wise, he said, there's more to this case than our Peele realizes. Don't take any risks. Look after yourself. And him, of course."

Cheeky.