

# PLAQUE



An Adam Dekker Novel

LAWRENCE CLAYTON MILLER

# PLAGUE

By

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## CHAPTER ONE

TWO YOUNG MEN sat in the shade of a cinderblock wall to escape the scorching heat of the small island nation of Dominica beating down on them. The friends did not hear the quiet and persistent digging sound behind them because they were much more interested in gossip and drinking. The nondescript building that was their refuge from the sun was like a dozen others in the commercial zone outside Roseau. The young men did not know or care what went on inside the building. They only knew that the building housed a foreign company, as they all were, taking advantage of Dominica's cheap labor and lax regulations, making goods to be sold in England, Canada, and America, but not in Dominica. When they discussed such things between long swallows of rum they became angry and blamed foreigners for all manner of ills in their country. Blaming someone else was easy, and it transferred responsibility for their poverty and excused the pointless life they seemed doomed to live.

The pair fell silent, sipping from the shared bottle, giving in to the oppressive afternoon heat. Depak was the first to notice the sound of digging coupled with a strange buzzing, and he brought it to the attention of Finbar. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That buzzing and digging noise." Finbar listened for a moment and then dismissed Depak's alarm.

"Mon, you gonna get worked up over some bug noise? Everything here buzzes and flies and bites."

"Naw, this is different." Depak insisted. "It's like current inside the wall."

Finbar snorted in reply, tipping the brim of his hat over his eyes, signaling his intention to take a nap. Depak was still curious and a little uncomfortable with the noise and pressed his ear against the wall to listen.

He clearly heard buzzing, like angry bees or electric current, and stood to inspect the wall. Depak picked at various places on the wall in an attempt to discover the source of the sound. He found a soft spot in the mortar between blocks and rubbed with his finger until little bits of the mortar fell to the ground. The buzzing sound became louder. Looking around for a tool to use in his excavation, he spotted a stick lying in the brown dirt a few feet away. He walked to the stick and then returned to his spot at the wall.

Depak used the sharper end of the stick for his probing and soon made a significant hole between the cinderblocks. He leaned down to inspect his handiwork and blew out the remaining dust in the hole. He noticed the buzzing had stopped and thought it curious, but he continued digging into the loose mortar.

The hole was soon large enough for his finger, which he poked into the hole and was rewarded with a sharp bite for his effort. "Hey, mon! The wall bit me!" This roused his friend, Finbar.

"What did you say?" But Depak wasn't responding. He pulled his finger from the hole and found a bug attached to his digit. It wasn't like any bug he had ever seen and that frightened him all the more.

"A scorpion or something. Get it off me!"

"Stop it, you baby," Finbar said. "Let me see." Depak held up his hand to show the attached creature. Finbar jumped up in alarm. "Oh, mon, that's not like any scorpion I ever seen. Get that thing off you!"

Depak shook his hand vigorously, but the creature would not relinquish its hold; instead it thrust its tail stinger into his hand. "It hurts, Finbar. Please help me."

Finbar was reluctant to touch the strange looking creature, and cried out when he looked closely. "It looked at me mon. This thing has a face and teeth!"

Depak, thoroughly frightened, began running and shaking his hand to dislodge the unwanted guest. Finbar ran after him, calling out for his friend to be calm, but Depak was in full flight and would not be reasoned with. Finbar caught up and tackled him to the ground. Depak picked up a flat stone and began striking the creature on his hand but only succeeded in injuring his finger. The bashing continued until the bug was finally squashed; its guts smelled putrid and oozed out its body with an odd yellow color.

Depak cried out in pain, and Finbar realizing that even though the bug was clearly dead, its jaws still held on tightly to Depak's finger.

The strange bug must have injected poison into Depak, thought Finbar, because he seems woozy. And then his friend stopped screaming.

Finbar did not know what to do and stood desperately looking around for help, but there was no one in sight. He pulled Depak, now unconscious, to the shade of a banana tree, propped him up against the trunk, and ran off to find help.

"Don't worry! I go for help!" Finbar said to his friend, even though Depak was beyond hearing, then dashed off toward the city. He didn't notice what was happening at the hole Depak had dug in the wall as he ran past.

There was a furious buzzing as, first, one and then more of the creatures popped out of Depak's hole in the wall and escaped to freedom. Soon there were a dozen creatures on the ground, circling, seeming to search for their leader. The last creature to emerge was different from the others, larger in size and its carapace swept up over the head creating a ridge that looked like a crown.

All the creatures had faces and had long hair flowing back over their iridescent green backs. Each was about six inches in length. Below the "face" was a fierce looking mouth with dagger-like teeth, and each bug's tail displayed a deadly, venomous stinger.

As soon as the "queen" joined the group, the creatures swarmed and then settled. As one they spotted Depak lying not far away against the banana tree. They sensed Depak was dying and rose up into the air on glistening wings and flew to the inert human, settling on and then attacking the stomach area, the

softest and so the easiest way inside. The creatures burrowed into the still twitching body of Depak to feast and flourish.

It would be some time before the creatures' escape was discovered.

Hannah Ahmed sat in the comfortably appointed waiting area of the Vauxhall Cross office of Alex Younger, Chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service. Hannah still mourns the death of her father, a tenured professor of Oriental Studies at Oxford. She followed his lead and studied at Oxford.

Although born in England, her father and mother, Egyptian immigrants, made sure she grew up knowing her heritage and speaking Arabic. Hannah was considered a true Egyptian, tracing her lineage back to the era of kings the Muqawqis, before the time of Mohammed and the incursion of his Islamic Caliphate. In her mid-30s, her long dark hair was pulled back from her oval face and wrapped on the back of her head in a complicated plait. This only enhanced her clear, pale skin and alarmingly blue eyes.

Despite her natural beauty she never had a serious relationship. There had been boyfriends, but none lasted. With no siblings and both parents deceased, she was aloof and devoted to her work. She was recruited into the Counter-Terrorism Protective Security Service division in MI5. When she uncovered an al-Qaeda suicide bombing plot, reminiscent of her mother's death when she was twelve years old at the hands of an IRA terrorist, she was invited to join SIS. The agency developed her skills and assigned her to intelligence-gathering and identifying threats to England.

The attendant sitting at the desk before the inner office door answered the soft trill of her desk telephone, murmured something unintelligible, and placed the handset in its cradle. "Agent Ahmed, you may go in." She smoothed her dark gray skirt and straightened the matching jacket before entering the office.

Known to all within the SIS as C, as were all his predecessors, Alex Younger was a distinguished looking gentleman. He wore a fine Saville Row tailored suit and muted Cambridge school tie. He projected an air of maturity with his salt-and-pepper hair, and his bearing was one of quiet confidence. Alex Younger was everybody's image of a proper English gentleman.

She stood a few steps inside, waiting for C to lift his head from the papers he was studying. He looked up after a moment. "Aah, there you are Agent Ahmed. Please, make yourself comfortable." Hannah took the center of three chairs in front of his desk. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, but the PM called, and, well, when he calls..."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Right, then. Now, to the reason you are here." He shuffled through the papers on the desk, extracted a folder and opened it. "You have some experience in the West Indies, I see." He went through a few pages and then closed the folder. "You had successful missions in Jamaica, Guyana, and St. Lucia."

"Yes, sir. Mostly cases involving drug trafficking."

"In light of your recent adventure in Egypt and America, something has come up that I believe will benefit from your, ah, unique perspective."

She frowned slightly and raised one delicately shaped eyebrow. "Perspective, sir?"

"We have received a report of something rather disturbing. A death in Dominica, which, I'm sure you know, is a member of the Commonwealth."

"Wouldn't the local police or Scotland Yard be better suited to investigate something like this?"

"Normally, yes. However, there are peculiarities suggesting something bigger in play." He dug through the stack of papers and extracted another folder. "Read this."

Hannah took the folder and began reading. After several minutes she closed the folder and handed it back to C. "I can see why this is no ordinary case. There is more unsaid than said, but it obviously avoids the question of who or what may be behind what happened."

"Indeed. At first I thought it some Carib Indian ritual. But the young man involved was not an ethnic Carib, and this took place far from their holdings on the island. It is, perhaps the suggestion of something, shall we say, supernatural, at work that caught my attention."

Hannah said, "And you thought of me."

"Right. I want you to go straightaway to Dominica and look around, quietly of course, and see if there is anything more to this event. If there is nothing, we'll hand it over to Scotland Yard."

"And if I find something...more?"

"Just see what is going on. We can plan from there."

"Yes, sir. When?"

He smiled. "Today, if possible. This needs investigating before the body gets cold, so to speak."

Late that afternoon Hannah found herself in the crowded passenger lounge at Heathrow, waiting for what promised to be a very long trip. The first leg would take her to New York's JFK airport, then she would fly on to Puerto Rico, and finally to Marigot Field in Dominica. There is some good news here. I can ring up Adam while I'm in New York and catch up. She fondly remembered the few days Adam and she spent together after the Merlin Box affair. Even after making calls to the police, the airport authority, Scotland Yard, SIS, and MI5, there was nothing to be done. Kamenwati, the elusive Egyptian mystic behind the scheme to steal drones and start a world conflict, was not to be found.

After sharing their disappointment, and perhaps one or two more drinks than were absolutely necessary, Dekker asked her to stay for a few days to show him some of the local sights. She agreed and they began with a tour of Stonehenge, which he had not previously visited. She surprised herself when, after touring Stonehenge, she held his hand as they walked back to the car. Hannah had not cared for a man as she did for Adam Dekker. He was tall, strong, and handsome. She enjoyed talking with him and sharing stories, and it felt like they had known one another for a long time.

Eventually they ended up staying for the night at a tiny village inn, in separate rooms, where they spent the next two days hiking through the English countryside and enjoying each other's company.

On the third day, when Adam was scheduled to leave for home in America, Hannah was startled when bent and kissed her goodbye. She touched her lips now, as she flew toward New York, remembering his kiss, which was soft and respectful. She wondered for the hundredth time if it meant there was more. Will he still be interested? I guess a phone call during my layover will answer that question.

After her scheduled layover at JFK and the call to Adam, her mind would not stop spinning. The call went well. Better than well; it was great. They talked right up to the minute she boarded her flight to Puerto Rico. It was like they had never been apart.

During their phone call she briefly explained that Dominica was her final destination and that she was looking into a situation there.

“Maybe I could meet you,” he said. “I hear the scuba diving is terrific.” She demurred but didn’t say no.

Where is this going? I care for him but he’s thousands of miles away in America. These were the thoughts that had consumed her for the last twenty hours. Now on the last leg of her trip and only a half hour from Dominica, she was no closer to an answer and her head ached.

Finger combing her long, dark hair, she felt positively grimy. “I don’t care how tired I am. A good soak is the first thing I’m going to do.” A light came on, indicating seatbelts must be fastened, and a pretty West Indian flight attendant moved down the narrow aisle of the propeller-driven aircraft, checking that everyone was buckled in.

Gazing out the aircraft window at the endless ocean, she sighed. “Almost there.”

Adam Dekker placed the cell phone in his pocket, his thoughts and emotions swirling. He stepped through the French doors leading to the back patio of his Territorial style home in New Mexico and looked without seeing the blazing orange orb of the sun setting over the Jemez Mountains. He was on leave from his office at the National Counterterrorism Center in McLean, Virginia, which was typical for him after an operation. As one of the few special operators for the NCTC he was given wide latitude regarding time off; his close relationship with Assistant Director Jim Lynch gave him more flexibility to determine when he worked and when he didn’t.

He looked up and finally noticed the serene beauty of the mountain setting, reflecting on how peaceful and soul-filling it was. This was also a place of memories, both good and bad. He wandered around the grounds with no particular destination in mind, thinking of Kelly, his wife, dead nearly two years. The grief over losing her, and especially the way she was taken from him, remained a dull ache in his chest. He thought about the conversation with Hannah, how it had lifted his spirits and brightened his day.

Dekker found himself in a stand of oak trees and beneath the largest tree of the lot, the spot where Kelly was buried. He looked with fond memory at the gravestone and stepped over the low picket fence to clear away the small, shriveled bundle of wildflowers he had placed on her grave the month before. His caretaker duties complete, he stood solemnly before the grave.

The conversation with Hannah had confirmed something in him; there was no way to explain what he was feeling, but that phone call somehow signaled something new. The way he was feeling, he told

himself, wasn't a betrayal of Kelly, who would always remain in his heart, but he realized it was time to move on and unconsciously he came to the gravesite to explain it to his deceased wife.

"Kelly, I think my time of grieving is over. Somehow I think you know this and you are pleased. I've met someone. She's British, and I think you'd like her. Her name is Hannah, an SIS agent. I know. I know. You're saying, 'How can that work?' But the fact is, we actually have a lot in common. She's smart and she's tough and beautiful. Did I mention she's an ethnic Egyptian, descended from the pharaohs? She helped me with the whole Merlin Box situation. In fact, I wouldn't have survived if not for her. She called me today on her way to the Caribbean and we talked for an hour." He paused and looked up. "It was like we'd never parted even though months have gone by. Kelly, I think I love her and I want your permission." Dekker hung his head and was quiet for a long moment. His posture firmed up and he once again became the determined man-of-action he had always been. "Goodbye, Kelly, and may God keep you. There's somewhere I need to be."

He walked away from the gravesite, a place of memories and reflection, a representation of the past that would always be with him. But now he was headed to the future.

"What do you suppose Dominica will hold for me, for us?"