

CHAPTER 1

On the far bank of the river everything was bathed in late evening sunshine. The man in the water was barely breathing; his right arm was hooked over a lower branch of one of many overgrown bushes and trees scattered along the waterline.

He could see a thinning group of people peering across the water, shading their eyes; they were blinded by the glare of the sunlight as it was almost disappearing behind the roofs of the nearby buildings. Although they continued to gaze across to the opposite bank, searching and searching for a glimpse of their quarry, they saw nothing. He was too tired to move. The bushes and tethered barges strung along that stretch of water below the Pulteney Weir provided the perfect shelter.

The man rested; in safety for now, letting his mind drift back over the events of the previous hours. All his plans had gone out of the window when that stupid female copper had recognised him and started shouting! A bullet had shut her up but an old bag, probably her mother, had chased after him and started lashing out at him with her handbag. He remembered running down the steps to the towpath in a blind panic; trying to calm his nerves and gather his thoughts.

He had thought that he could make it back to the Land Rover and get the hell out of this city, but then he had spotted a uniformed policeman running towards him. He had had no choice but to turn and sprint back towards the steps. He remembered running alongside the weir and being only a few strides from the spiral steps which would have led him up to the street again and at least a chance of escaping among the city crowds.

Suddenly he had heard a shout, just feet away. As he glanced over his shoulder, he spotted his nemesis. That meddling policeman, who had pursued him relentlessly the length and breadth of the country, had been at his heels and had suddenly launched himself towards him and they had both fallen headlong over the railings and into the murky waters of the river. Both men surfaced, gasping for the air that had been knocked from both of them because of the force of the impact.

He struck out towards the opposite bank, confidently at first, despite his lack of experience and the policeman followed. He soon realised his adversary was a much stronger swimmer and any thoughts of a quick escape were futile. The two men had grappled and while both were concentrating on gaining the upper hand they were drawn inexorably towards the weir and the lethal foaming waters below it. The nature of the water around them as they fought suddenly changed and both men realised the danger they were in; they disappeared under the water and were tossed around under the weir like a pair of socks in a washing machine.

The water had seemed to clutch at the man's legs, dragging him further down and down. He cracked his knees and elbows on the concrete buttresses of the weir. He continued to punch and kick at the policeman as they both tried to swim back towards the surface. When they did, the respite was brief. A second to take in an invaluable lungful of air, then the water snatched them back under the churning waters. They immediately resumed their battle but as their struggle took its toll their actions grew more and more laboured. Both men were soon at the end of their tether, neither man knew which way was up any longer and battered and winded, each having swallowed large quantities of water, the man felt the policeman suddenly let go and watched as he slowly drifted away from him.

The man had no idea whether his nemesis was sinking to the river bed or escaping to the surface and to safety. He was just happy that he no longer had to fight; he was almost prepared to resign himself to his fate. He sensed his lungs must finally be giving up the ghost as an excruciating pain began to grow within his chest. He broke through the surface and desperately breathed in. The pain increased! There was little relief with successive breaths but he willed himself to press forward, away from the direction the policeman had gone.

As he briefly surfaced again he realised that he was close to the far bank. He drifted silently behind a barge and forced himself against all his instincts, to swim under the nearside of the hull of the barge, keeping the river wall at his fingertips. When he surfaced once more, he continued to breathe; each breath becoming a little easier but he was exhausted.

With a supreme effort he got his right arm over a branch and rested; he had to stay focussed though, because if he slipped under the water again he knew there was no chance of him saving himself.

From his place of sanctuary the man could see people running to and fro on the towpath; he could hear sirens blaring somewhere nearby. He tried to check himself over. His knees and elbows were bloodied but he didn't appear to have any broken bones. He was bitterly cold. He was probably suffering from shock as well, but he had no time to worry about that. He heard the sound of a helicopter throbbing overhead; he knew that as night fell a searchlight would probably be probing the little nooks and crannies trying to find him. If only he could evade capture long enough for them to believe he had drowned in the weir and his body had been carried downstream, maybe, just maybe he would be able to get out of this mess.

An hour later the towpath was all but empty; all the armed response men were being withdrawn, the paramedics and onlookers had disappeared. The man looked across to the opposite bank, where a distinguished looking elderly gentleman stood in the shadows of a bridge talking on his mobile phone. The man looked directly at him; it was as if he knew instinctively where his hiding place was! Had he just called the police? Was this how it was all going to end?

The old man smiled briefly, then he spoke loudly, as if he was still talking on the phone to someone who was in a crowded room and was struggling to make out what he was saying:-

“Hold on for a few minutes more Mr Bailey; there’s a good chap. Our people will be along in a tick to get you out of there. You’ll be perfectly safe; I can assure you that where you are going you will be among friends.”

Still hidden on the opposite bank Colin Bailey had been almost afraid to breathe; he exhaled raggedly and allowed himself the briefest of smiles; he had no idea who the well dressed man was, but he oozed class both in the cut of his suit and the way he spoke. Colin wasn’t sure what lay ahead for him, but he was convinced the police weren’t involved and friends were always welcome.

Moments later an inflatable dinghy appeared from downstream and silently inched its way close into the bank; two pairs of strong arms hoisted Colin Bailey from the icy river. Without a word the men stripped him of his wet things and helped him don multiple layers of dry warm clothing; there was even a really warm skiing hat and socks too to help the warming process. He managed to get these on with some difficulty and then one of the men offered him a warming drink that he had poured from a thermos flask. The other man had returned to the wheel and slowly he turned the craft around and sticking to the far side of the river away from the odd dog walker on the towpath, the dinghy carried the three men away from the centre of the city; away from Pulteney weir where Colin had cheated a watery grave.

They had travelled for no more than a minute when the driver turned the wheel quickly and they darted across the river to the opposite bank. Under the weeping willow trees, only yards from the water’s edge was an ambulance, its rear doors open, the engine idling.

His two companions grabbed an arm each and lifted him up onto the towpath where a man dressed in the uniform of a paramedic was waiting. Colin’s legs almost buckled as his feet touched dry land for the first time in several hours; the man took hold of him firmly as he stumbled and with surprising ease swept him up in his arms and carried him bodily up into the ambulance. He lay Colin down, covered him with a heavy blanket, and then closed the doors behind them. With that the ambulance drove away into the night.

In the Royal United Hospital, DCI Phil Hounsell was resting after his own ordeal in the water. His wife Erica had visited him and was now safely tucked up at home with their children. DS Zara Wheeler was enjoying a drink with her two male colleagues in a popular Bath hostelry; hers was non-alcoholic as usual, but the two young policemen were heading for a hangover.

Colin Bailey wasn’t heading for a hangover or an NHS hospital though; his ambulance was soon driving out of the city towards a large Georgian manor house about ten miles away. The only clue to where he was being taken was the unmistakable sound

of a cattle grid when they drove between the stone pillars at the entrance to the extensive grounds of the property.

Satisfied he was in safe hands, Colin closed his eyes and was sound asleep before the ambulance negotiated the long arc of the driveway to reach the main house.