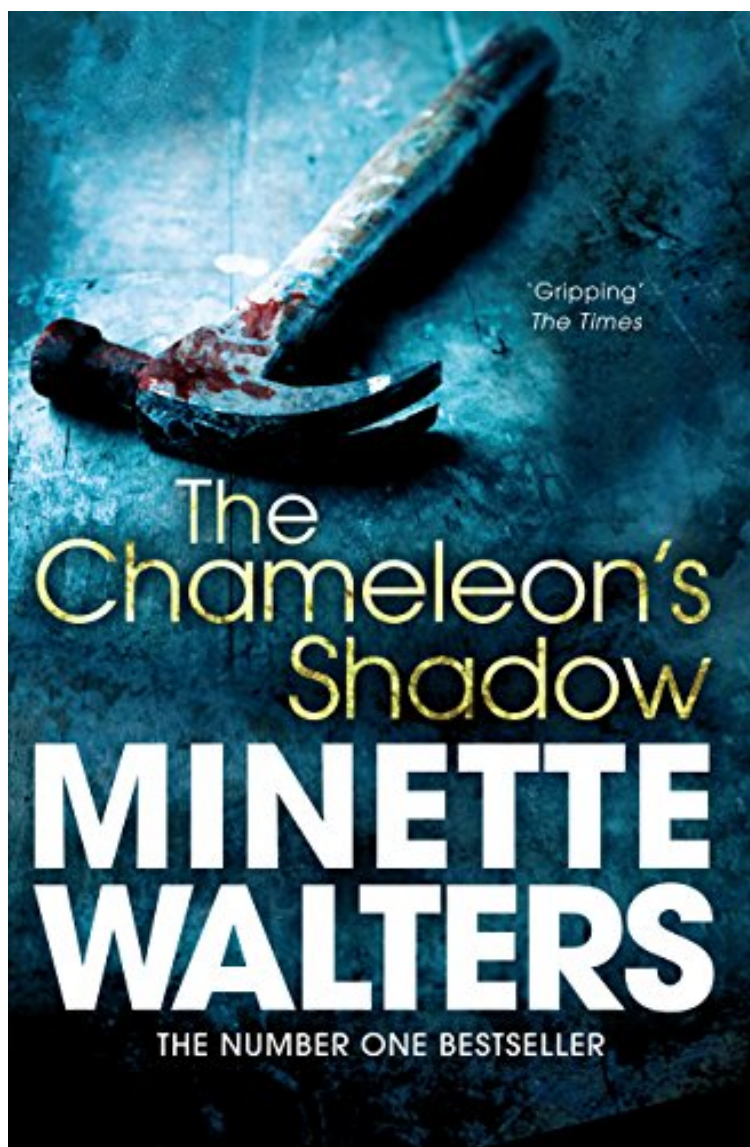


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The Chameleon's Shadow (English Edition)



Par Minette Walters
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhen Lieutenant Charles Acland is flown home from Iraq with serious head injuries, he faces not only permanent disfigurement but also an apparent change to his previously outgoing personality. Crippled by migraines, and suspicious of his psychiatrist, he begins to display sporadic bouts of aggression, particularly against women, especially his ex-fiancee who seems unable to accept that the relationship is over. After his injuries prevent his return to the army, he cuts all ties with his former life and moves to London. Alone and unmonitored, he sinks into a private world of guilt and paranoid distrust . . . until a customer annoys him in a Bermondsey pub and he attracts the attention of local police investigating three murders which appear to have been motivated by extreme rage . . . Under suspicion, Acland is forced

to confront the real issues behind his isolation. How much control does he have over the dark side of his personality? Do his migraines contribute to his rages? Has he always been the duplicitous chameleon that his ex-fiancee claims? And why if he hates women does he look to a woman for help? Extrait Chapter 1

When Charles Acland regained consciousness, he thought he was dreaming about a visit to the dentist. Certainly, the numbness in his mouth suggested novocaine even if the rest of the fantasy was absurd. He was lying on his back, staring up at a moving ceiling, and a bell was ringing loudly behind him. An alarm? He tried to raise his head to see where it was, but a hand descended on his chest and a woman's disembodied face loomed over him. The dentist? He watched her lips move, but couldn't make out what she was saying over the insistent clamour of the alarm. He toyed with asking her to turn it off, but doubted that novocaine would allow his words to be understood. She wouldn't be able to hear him anyway. Somewhere at the back of his mind was a lurking fear that he didn't recognize. For no reason that he understood, the closeness of the woman worried him. He'd been in this position before flat on his back and unable to move and there was a strong association in his mind with pain. Fleeting, another woman, slender, dark-haired and graceful, appeared in his line of vision. There were tears in her eyes, but Acland had no idea who she was. His instinctive reaction was dislike. His only points of reference were the alarm and the ceiling moving above his head. Neither had any meaning for him. He could have floated forever in morphine-induced detachment if increasing awareness hadn't told him this wasn't a dream. He started to experience sensations. A jolt as the trolley crossed a threshold. The sympathetic tightening of stretcher straps as his body shifted. A low ache at the back of his jaw. A brief stabbing pain that knifed up his neck. A puzzled realization that only one of his eyes was open. With a sense of dread, he knew he was awake . . . with no idea who he was, where he was or what had happened to him . . . Subsequent awakenings increased his dread. He came to understand that the ringing was inside his head. It grew more bearable with each return to consciousness, but he couldn't hear what was said by the faces that stared down at him. Their mouths opened and closed but nothing reached him. Nor did he know if his own mouth was relaying the signals his brain was sending to it. He tried to speak of his fears, but the lack of response in the faces above him persuaded him his lips weren't moving. Time was meaningless. He couldn't tell how often he drifted in and out of consciousness or how long his periods of sleep lasted. He convinced himself that days and weeks had passed since he'd been brought to this place, and a slow anger burned inside him as threads of insight began to knit together. Something cataclysmic had happened. He was in hospital. The talking heads were doctors. But they weren't helping him and they couldn't see that he was awake. He had a terrifying anxiety that he was in the hands of enemies why? or that he was trapped forever in a paralysed state that allowed him to think and reason, but left him unable to communicate. The dark-haired woman suffocated him. He hated the smell of her and the touch of her hand on his skin. She was always there, weeping soft, round tears down her pale cheeks, but her sadness failed to move Acland. He knew intuitively that the tears were for show, not for him, and he despised her for her lack of sincerity. He felt he should recognize her. Every time he woke and watched her through a half-closed lid, a sense of familiarity swam just below the surface. He knew his father before he knew her. Recognition of the tired-looking man who hovered at the edges of his vision came like an electric shock. In the next moment, he knew who the woman was and why her touch repulsed him. Other memories flooded back. He recalled his name. Charles Acland. His occupation. Lieutenant, British Army. His last deployment. Iraq. He had a clear recollection, which he played over and over in his mind because it offered an explanation, of boarding an RAF Hercules on the day he left for the Middle East. He guessed the plane must have crashed on take-off, for his last memory was of buckling himself into his seat. Charles. Wake up, Charles. Fingers pinched the skin on his hand. There's a good boy. Come on, now. Wake up. He opened his eye and looked at the middle-aged nurse who was bending over him. I heard you, he said. The words came out as a long slur but he knew he'd said them. You've had an operation and you're now in recovery, she told him, answering the question she thought he'd asked. Where am I? If all goes well, you'll be returned to your own bed this afternoon. You're connected to a PCA pump she guided his left hand towards a control set otherwise known as patient-controlled analgesia. It allows you to be in charge of your own post-operative care. You shouldn't need any pain relief for a while, but if you begin to feel discomfort press the white button. The morphine will help you sleep. He jerked his hand away immediately. It's up to you, she said easily, but this way you can manage the pain yourself. The doses are measured and the machine overrides any attempt at self-indulgence. She smiled cheerfully. You won't be on it long enough to become an addict, Charles. Trust me. He didn't. He had an instant understanding that he didn't trust any woman, although he had no idea why that should be. The nurse held up a black plastic egg-shaped object. I'm going to put this in your

right hand. Tell me if you can feel it. Yes. Good man. She placed his thumb on a button at the top. Push that if you need me. Ill be keeping a close eye on you, but in case of emergencies, holler. Youre a lucky fellow. If

God hadnt given you a skull like a rhinoceros, you wouldnt have survived. She started to move away but Acland used his free hand to catch at her skirt. How did it crash? Say again. He took the words back into his throat like a ventriloquist and repeated them in slow, guttural fashion. Khow . . . di . . . i . . . khrash? How

did what crash? The plane. He tried again. Khe khlane. I was on a khlane. Dont you remember what happened? He shook his head. OK. Ill ask someone to explain it to you. She patted his hand again. But dont worry, love. Youve got a few wires crossed, thats all. Theyll right themselves eventually. Time passed and nothing happened. The nurse returned at intervals, but her complacent smiles and inane comments annoyed him. Once or twice, he attempted to remind her that he needed explanations but, out of stupidity or bloody-mindedness, she refused to understand what he was saying. A scream was circling around his head and he

found himself struggling with anger in a way that he didnt understand. Everything, from the curtained cubicle he was lying in to the sounds from outsidemuted voices, footsteps, a phone ringingconspired to ratchet up his irritation. Even the nurse had lost interest. He counted off the seconds between her visits. Three hundred. Four hundred. When the interval reached five hundred, he put his finger on the buzzer and kept it there. She bustled in with a stupid laugh and attempted to remove the plastic egg from his hand, but he wrestled it away from her and held it against his chest. Fuck you. She had no trouble understanding that, he thought, watching her smile disappear. I cant turn it off if you keep your finger on it, she said, indicating a bleeping light on a remote receiver clipped to her waistband. Youll have everyone in here if you dont let go. Good. Ill disconnect it, she warned. Youre not the only patient whos had surgery today. She held out her palm. Come on, Charles. Give me a break, eh? Ive made the call. Its not my fault its taking so long. This is a

National Health Service hospital, and theres only one psychiatric consultant on call at the moment. Hell be here before long. You have to trust me on that. He tried to say he didnt need a psychiatrist. There was nothing wrong with his brain. He simply wanted to know what had happened. There were other men on the plane. Had they survived? But the concentration needed to speak the words (which were incomprehensible even to his own ears) was so intense that the woman easily deprived him of his buzzer. He swore at her again. She checked the PCA, saw that he hadnt used it. Is it pain thats making you angry? No. She didnt believe him. No one expects you to be a hero, Charles. Pain-free sleep will do you more good than staying awake and becoming frustrated. She shook her head. You shouldnt be this alert anyway, not after what youve been through. When the psychiatrist finally arrived, he said much the same thing. You look brighter than I was expecting. He introduced himself as Dr. Robert Willis and drew up a chair beside Aclands recovery-room trolley. He was mid-fifties, thin and bespectacled, with a habit of staring into his patients eyes when he wasnt consulting a computer printout of their notes, which he placed on his knees. He confirmed Aclands name and rank, then asked him what his last memory was. Khetting o kh khlane. In England? Acland stuck a thumb in the air. Willis smiled. Right. I think it might be better if I do the talking. We dont want to make this painful for you . . . or for me. Give me a thumbs-up for yes and a thumbs-down for no. Lets start with a simple question. Do you understand what Im saying? He watched the lieutenants thumb shoot up. Good. Do you know what happened to you? Acland jabbed repeatedly towards the floor.

The man nodded. Then well take this slowly. Do you remember arriving in Iraq? No. Do you remember anything about Iraq? Repeated downward jabs of the thumb. Nothing at all? Your base? Your command? Your squad? Acland shook his head. Right. Well, I can only go by the medical and regimental reports that came with you, and the newspaper coverage that Ive just taken off the net, but Ill tell you as much as I know.

If theres anything you want repeated, raise your hand. Acland learned that hed spent eight weeks attached to one of the U.K. military bases near Basra. He had taken command of a four-Scimitar, twelve-man reconnaissance troop whose task was to search out insurgent crossing points along the Iraq/Iran border. He and his troopers made two recce patrols, each of three weeks duration, which were described by his CO as extremely successful. Following a few days RR, his troop was then deployed to recce ahead of a convoy on the Baghdad-to-Basra highway. As commander, Acland was in the lead Scimitar with his two most experienced troopers, Lance Corporals Barry Williams and Doug Hughes. The vehicle had been attacked by an improvised explosive device buried in a roadside culvert. The two lance corporals had died in the explosion, but Acland had been thrown clear. All three men had been recommended for decoration. Willis turned a piece of paper towards the young lieutenant. It was a printout of a newspaper article with a banner headline saying: Our Heroes. To the side, under a photograph of him at his passing-out parade, were two portraits of smiling men, posing with their wives and children, over the caption: Devastated families mourn

brave dads. His own caption read: Seriously injured but alive. Do you recognize them, Charles? This he touched a face is Barry Williams and this is Doug Hughes. Acland stared at the pictures, trying to find something he remembered a feature, a smile but he might have been looking at strangers for all the recognition he had of them. He suppressed a surge of panic because he had shared a Scimitar with these men on two extended reconnaissance trips and knew how close he must have grown to them. Or should have done. It didn't make sense that he could forget his men so easily. No. Perhaps Willis noticed his concern, because he told him not to worry about it. You took a hell of a knock to the head. It's not surprising you have holes in your memory. It's usually just a question of time before things start to return. How long? How long? It depends how bad your concussion is. A few days, perhaps. You won't remember everything all at once . . . We tend to retrieve memory bit by bit, but he broke off as Acland shook his head. How long? How long he pointed to himself here? How long have you been here? Acland nodded. About thirty hours. You're in a hospital on the outskirts of Birmingham. It's Tuesday, 28 November. The attack happened on Friday and you arrived here early yesterday. You had a CAT scan during the afternoon and an operation this morning to plate the bones in your left cheek and above your left eye. Willis smiled. You're in pretty good shape, all things considered. Acland raised his thumb in acknowledgement, but the conversation had done little to allay his fears or his sense of resentment. How could he forget eight weeks of his life? How could thirty hours have turned into an eternity? Why had the nurse said his wires were crossed? What was wrong with him? From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly One look at Lt. Charles Acland's disfigured face and anyone can see that the Iraqi bomb that blew up two of his men has left him profoundly changed but have his traumatic brain injuries altered the young British army officer's personality enough to make him a murderer? That's the narrative fuse Edgar-winner Walters (*The Devil's Feather*) lights to ignite this sizzling psychological thriller. She skillfully interweaves strands of Acland's story, including notes from the military psychiatrist treating him, with the hunt for a serial killer who's claimed at least three victims in South London. Then another man is beaten within an inch of his life not long after Acland's move into the neighborhood. When the lieutenant gets into a near-fatal bar fight with a Pakistani stockbroker, Acland's unlikely savior is a 250-pound lesbian weight lifter and doctor named Jackson. Surprisingly, Jackson is also one of the few convincing characters in this plot-propelled tale, a flaw readers may be willing to ignore until they slam into a contrived denouement well below Walters's usual standard. (Jan.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.