

Roller-Coaster

by

Jim Reay

Dedicated to those in protected occupations
who
were unable to serve overseas in the world wars of
the twentieth century

They also serve who only stand and wait

John Milton (1608-1674)

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Roller Coaster

Chapter 1

Arthur and Billy

‘Right?’

The question comes as a whisper from a bearded mouth pressed close to Arthur’s ear.

The old man ponders the question, as he balances in the small boat and sniffs the familiar sea air. How can anything be right?

Here he is, an eighty-two year old man going back into the land of his birth in the near pitch dark, while the world around him in 2030 is in the grip of one of worst crises in living memory. The consortiums of world powers have been caught napping. This is as close to dystopia as any sane person would ever want to come.

For Arthur, there has been too much posturing, too much trying to justify archaic economic and political models. Meanwhile, the clever evil forces of no moral restrictions have been quietly colonising and manipulating on a global scale. Add in too many people on the planet, who are all now struggling to survive. They have been duped into the trusting charade of anonymous technological friendship, which has now all collapsed in such a staggering fashion.

Arthur shakes his head slowly at the naivety – too little understanding of the history of mankind, of how power actually works, of the hypocrisy that nationalism, alliances and diplomacy conceal.

But, he squeezes Tony Conner’s shoulder in affirmation. ‘Right.’

The rubber-coated paddles of Conner’s skilled team hold the inflatable silently against the rock jetty while deep-green wavelets slap the worn stone steps. Drapes of brown seaweed swing in the water, tossing a wet salty tang into the Scottish darkness.

Arthur doesn't peer into the gloom. Rather, he is using his remembered instinct; mental images of long ago, his sense of smell and touch, more than sight. For a few seconds, the darkness provides a fragile cocoon of safety which none of them seems to want to break – because it actually doesn't feel right, to the team, for an octogenarian to be placed in such a situation.

The saturated granite boulders hang with glistening mussels at the water level. Centimetres from Arthur's face, the white barnacles attached to the shells are dim eyes staring at him, as if seeking recognition, landing permission – descendants of those timeless custodians who guarded the same steps all those years before, when he and Dougal Watson, Gordon Baird and Gary Redpath and the other village lads had dunked their fishing lines in that same water just for the fun of hunting silver herring sprat and immature saithe. Such safe carefree times, back then.

Strong arms help Arthur balance onto the first step.

He hitches the soft bag onto his left shoulder, grips the sturdy stick in his right and sniffs up at the dark scudding sky. He can still sense it as if he had never been away. Storm coming. Nor-easter. Maybe a day from the worst of it – but he won't have very long before the first rain will start to pelt down. The words of the old school poem, *Sir Patrick Spens*, come into his mind: *The sky grew dark, and the wind blew loud, and gurlly grew the sea.*

Gurly, indeed – at least, beyond the protection of that harbour wall. Even in the gentle rolling of the safe anchorage, the sailing boat that the team has so recently moored only twenty metres away is no more than an imagined shape, lost from his sight in the night. It had come in unseen, lightless, in a slick operation; and it will appear to all when the dawn breaks, as a mystery – as the distraction, the innocent back-up for the cover story.

Arthur leans in at Conner's beard with, 'Thanks.'

'Take care, old man.' The words are breathed earnestly, in reply.

'Second childhood. Fear not. Have a safe trip back to the tanker.' He sends the team away with an impish grin at the bewildered shaking heads.

Bizarre and inappropriate as it might seem to others – *my duty is to return* – Arthur has taken on the obligation to step up, and in, where others might not see what is possibly staring right at them. He imagines the spirit of his father, looking down, feeling proud that he is following his gut instinct; Gerry

Carlton too, maybe. It is against all conventional logic – but it is a time when his irreverent persuasive humour has again been able to override the paralysis of the defeatists.

It takes only seconds for the insertion team to disappear silently beyond Arthur's vision. He tops the steps into the bluster of the wind and casts his eyes around the jetty top which, as kids, they used as a diving spot – well, jumping really, and only at high tide. Youthful bravado could only go so far – and anyway, the water was always freezing, even in summer. The North Sea waters had a way of reducing bold, macho young boys to bedraggled, blue-skinned tooth-chatterers.

The whole town is dark; just the suggestion of building shapes – more imagined than seen. No stars, just the faintest ambient moon-glow behind the dark, fast-moving clouds.

As his old eyes slowly adapt their focal length and exposure, he can eventually pick out an occasional dim hint of some house lighting, as if reflected behind a dusky window pane – but no street lights, nothing bright. It looks as if the power is still off and they are back to hurricane lamps.

But his memory knows the positions of every shed and house, anyway. It feels so familiar, even after all the years – the scents, the awareness; but no reliable shapes, no sound either beyond the growl of a rising wind and the occasional slap of a halyard against a mast or a flagpole; the ghosts of a past era create no noises.

The nearby sheds of the fish market and the harbour office are inky shadows. If guards exist, they are well hidden ... or asleep – not a masked torchlight or even a cigarette glow.

Quietly and slowly, he makes his way over the stone pavers atop the harbour wall, avoiding the jetty timbers, which might rattle and give his presence away. He has a plan if he is sprung but, ideally, he will make his way unheralded to his old house. For reassurance, he touches the cloth-wrapped door-keys in his pocket and he seems to glide gently on in the shadows.

Tomorrow, he will lob casually into the old grocery store to announce his presence on an unsuspecting public. Then the cat will really be among the pigeons. He grins at the prospect.

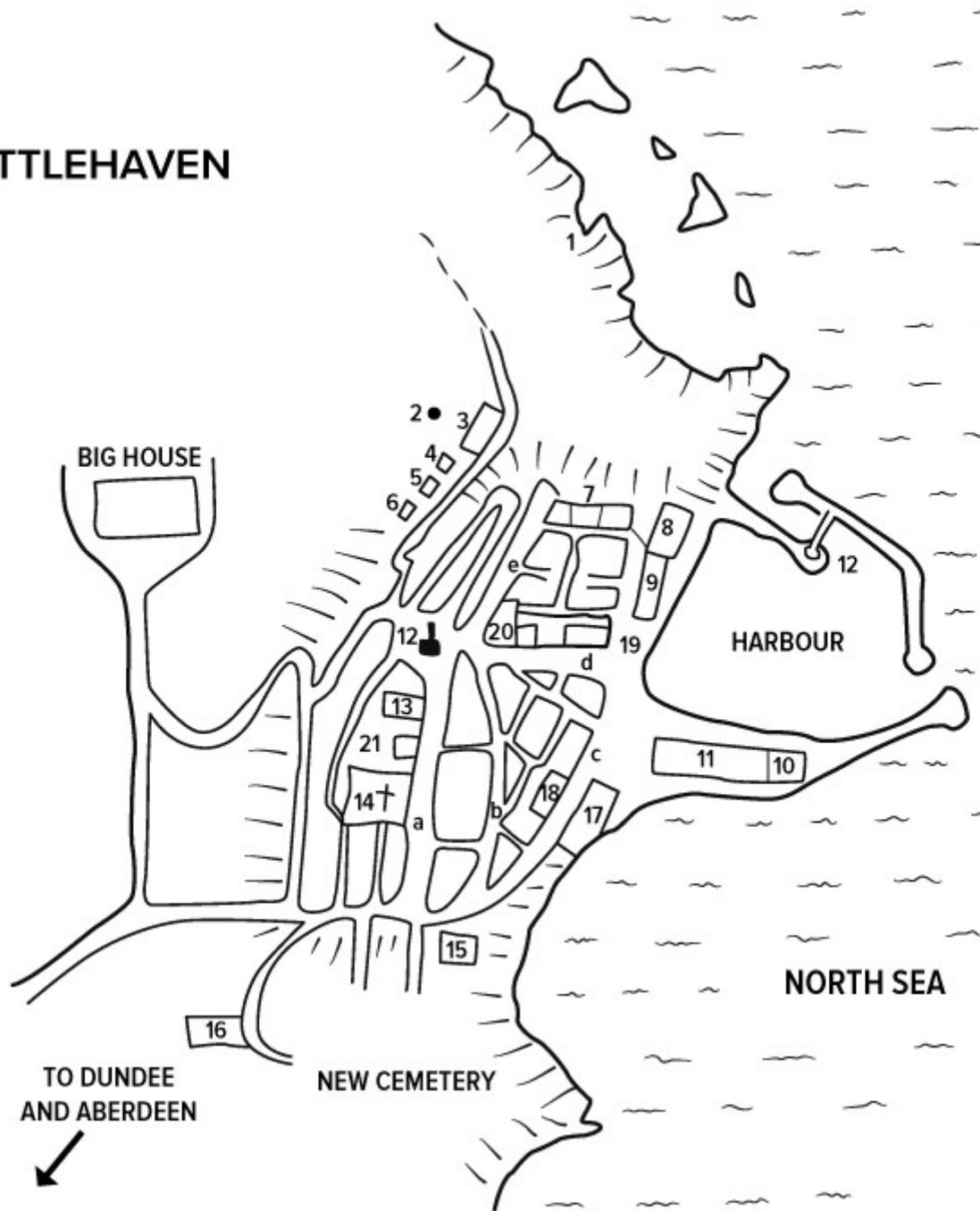
Key to the Littlehaven map

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Smugglers' Cave | 9. Kipper yards | 17. Harbour Arms Hotel |
| 2. Lookout Post | 10. Harbour Office | 18. Port Building |
| 3. Terrace Row | 11. Fish Market | 19. Fisherman's Arms |
| 4. Grant's house | 12. War Memorial | 20. Convenience Store |
| 5. Kelty's house | 13. Council Offices | 21. Old Police Station |
| 6. Turret House | 14. Old Kirk | 22. Swing Bridge |
| 7. Carlton Museum | 15. Castle St, Police | |
| 8. Old kipper yard | 16. Bob Strachan's house | |

Streets

- a. High Street
- b. Castle Street
- c. Harbour Street
- d. Dalgleish Street
- e. Gowan Road

LITTLEHAVEN



The place is deserted.

As he passes by The Fisherman's Arms, he breathes in generations of beer fumes, leaching out of the darkened pub walls, which seem much smaller than he remembers.

He is a steady, sedate phantom, following his memorised path through the night streets, up the narrow laneway to the back gate and ... into the house of his childhood.

He shrugs away the disappointment that the familiar aromas of his youth have long been lost to the years of rental sanitising.

The light switch.

Dead. To be expected.

His pencil torch beam flits around the kitchen. The walls are still the white-washed stone finish – his mother's pride and joy. The sturdy old table remains – it would have been too hard to dismantle. The laundry annexe that his father built, juts out onto a back court – the sinks are still where they have always been, below the window. He visualises his mother's smile, her scent is forever stored in his olfactory glands. He senses, in his memory, his big sister, kid brother and the honest dignity of his dad – there are ways to live a life – but always with the laughs and the security of that loving nest.

Some more furniture remnants of his time have survived – perhaps to retain the character or just because there would have been no value in removing them – the huge old pedestal clock, a heavy mahogany sideboard, blackened pans hanging decoratively on the high rack, still there from when the old kitchen range filled that wall space below. He remembers his father pulling it out in a bid to be modern and healthy. Now, a bland standard electric stove stands in that alcove, framed by a beige cabinet and bench top. There are other changes too – the impersonal lounge suite and mass-produced dining chairs; but, in Arthur's mind, they are all very easy to ignore. He is relishing a time warp of nostalgia.

His father's den was there under the stairs – only an empty shell now, devoid of his gear, but the ambience draws a small tear to Arthur's eye – when, as if in retribution for all his weak sentimentality, the roof light

suddenly springs into life. Power has returned to Littlehaven – and so has Arthur Blair.

Earlier in the week, Arthur had been asked, *Have they no conscience?* – and the question is niggling at him still. *Why* would they do this?

‘Arthur Blair!’ the shouted voice from the front street interrupts his thoughts. He notes, with satisfaction, that the back door is being closed quietly and carefully in the kitchen, just as the commanding knock lifts its intensity at the front door.

He collects his book from the table and his walking stick, which is leaning beside his chair. Mustering a smile, he shuffles deliberately towards the front room, passing the old ticking clock on the way – eleven fifteen in the morning – just as well he’d wound up the old mechanical relic when he arrived the previous night.

It hadn’t taken long for the word to spread from the grocer’s to the powers that controlled the community. An hour before, that was all; he’d only stayed in the shop long enough to buy a few necessities from the almost bare shelves – but that seems to have been enough. He knows that this is the start to resolving the most pressing challenge of 2030 ... and that he must be patient.

He continues his deliberately slow response to the thumping on the street door.

‘You in there, Arthur Blair? Get a move on! Open up! Provost’s Police.’

‘Who?’

‘Provost’s Police. Don’t be smart with us. Open up.’

‘Just a second. I need my walking stick. I’m not as young as you lot.’

Slowly, very slowly, Arthur unlocks the exit to the street, opening it a fraction, then reeling back quickly to allow the two officious men outside to thrust the door wide and barge straight inside.

Arthur smooths his dishevelled white hair, ‘And you are?’

‘Provost’s Police. I told you.’

‘You don’t have names?’ The old man smiles politely.

The ruddy-faced leader stops his charge, turns and tries an affronted look. 'Officer Grant ... and Officer Cantwell.' But the superior pose doesn't quite work with a thick neck and stub nose over a grubby dark jacket and jeans.

He thrusts out his silver badge of office. 'There! Provost's Police. See.' He points at an engraved name. 'Officer Norman Grant.'

'Indeed. But I'm surprised you didn't bring Robespierre with you.'

'Who?'

'French Revolution. Sorry. Just the subtlety of your house-call style. But I had forgotten your schooling mightn't have included that.'

'Are you being smart? I warn you. Don't come your airs and graces with us. I don't care if you're old or not. You are all the same before the law?'

'The law, is it? And what law would that be? The law of Scotland? International law? Or the law of the Provost of Littlehaven?'

Cantwell moves behind the old man, drawing himself up to his considerable bulky height.

Grant's lip curls in a sly smile. 'Okay. You will accompany us to the station.'

'On what charge?'

'Let's start with assisting our inquiries into murder on the high seas.' He puffs out his chest. 'Not joking so much now, are you?'

'I'll need my stick for walking. Oh, and a book to read. For the breaks in the interrogation, you understand. There will be breaks, won't there?'

Grant ignores this questioning tone which, it seems, he can't fully understand. He grabs the stick from the man and studies the peculiar steel lightning patterns a third of the way down the shaft. 'Fancy stick.'

'Made in Sheffield. It's a unique design. Made for my height and gait. I can't walk far without it. You wouldn't want to carry me now, would you?'

'Alright.' Grant shudders briefly, to clear his thinking. 'The book?' He stretches out a large hand for the reading matter.

'Gerry Carlton's book, *Summer into Winter*.'

'I thought you were going to ask for the Bible.' Grant humphs, shakes the book upside down and ruffles the pages. 'Right. Grab your jacket. We're off.'

The holding cell looks surprisingly clean as Arthur limps through the door; cream-white plaster walls, stainless-steel toilet and wash basin, high window with grating beyond the thick glass, a square table, two chairs and a double bunk.

At the table, peering silently at the new *guest*, sits a slim, unshaven man with a clearly bruised left eye.

When the cell door has slammed shut, throwing an echo along the outside corridor, the thin young man grunts and mutters the obvious, 'Well, you'd better have the bottom bunk.' He rises and tosses his small, soft bag onto the upper bed and straightens the blanket on the lower bunk.

'I'm Billy Redpath,' thrusting out his hand.

Arthur tucks his book under his arm, shifts his stick from his right to the left and grips Billy's outstretched hand. 'Arthur Blair.' His old eyes take in the rumpled work shirt with sleeves rolled to just below the elbow, well-worn jeans, muddy boots, a grey fishing-twill jumper draped over his shoulders – and the recent swelling of the blackened eye. And the hands, stained a fading brown on the palms and fingers.

'Whatchoo in for?' Billy asks.

'Murder apparently; on the high seas. What about you?'

'Same; but on the Estate.' He pulls the second chair out from the table and gestures for Arthur to be seated.

Billy stares at the new arrival's efforts at settling himself slowly at the table. 'This is crazy. It can't be happening. Tell me I've not gone mad. Am I in the asylum and the nutters are running the place?'

The old man smiles. 'No. I wouldn't think you're mad, Billy, but the nutters, as you put it, do appear to be in charge. How did you get the bruised eye?'

'Those big bastards.' He gives an offensive finger gesture at the door. 'I've had worse. Three weeks ago in fact – same bloody eye too. This one's my own fault. Shouldn't have been caught. You talk fancy. You're not a fishing man.'

'No, indeed. A lawyer actually. I used to live in Littlehaven, many years ago though. I grew up here – in Dalgleish Street – near the harbour, next to the grocer's. I still own the house. Rented it to shopkeepers since.'

‘I don’t remember you. Blair, you say?’

‘Billy, I’m eighty-two. I left here in my late teens. Just came back occasionally while my parents were alive – and Gerry Carlton ...’ he holds up the book he has carried into the cell, ‘... the man who wrote this book. He lived in Gowan Road, that’s the back of the house anyway, at the end where the cliffs start – the front is above where the harbour kipper sheds butt into the rock.’

Billy is still staring at the book in Arthur’s hand. ‘Gerry Carlton?’ Then with a glimmer of awareness of what Arthur has been saying, he adds, ‘Oh, that house with the big garden. It looks over the shut-off part of the old kipper yard, big tree out the front – the place that tourists visit? Used to anyways, before the electronic collapse? Yes ... it has a sign, *Carlton House*, now that I think about it. Never had much call for names on people’s houses.’ Billy looks up for the old man’s confirmation. ‘Okay. Gerry Carlton, you say? Don’t know nothin about him, though. Never thought much about it, neither. Only walked past the place ... a woman is there, as a caretaker, in case anyone wants to see round. Is that the right place ... backing into the end of Gowan Road?’

‘The very same. They tell me it’s a museum now, run by a Trust. Still almost like he left it. When I was a lad, eleven years old, I used to deliver his groceries on my message bike – for Auchterlonie, the grocer. In Dalgleish Street.’

‘Are you meaning where the convenience store is now?’

‘Yes. Groceries.’

‘Whatever.’ Then his eyes light up. ‘Oh, I’m with you now. The house ... beside the store.’ He shrugs dismissively. ‘It’s empty. Been like that for a few weeks, though the store’s still open. Just.’

The old man spoke patiently. ‘Billy, I lived there at the end of the 1950s, start of the 60s – and I just moved back in overnight. Still hold the keys.’ He jangles his pocket. ‘Littlehaven was a very different place back when I was a kid. Beautiful, as I remember. Everybody knew everybody else. Always a sense of hope. People were dreaming again after the war – that’s the Second World War,’ Arthur adds helpfully but the thin man still looks puzzled. ‘Sure, things were always in short supply – a bit like now – but everyone was in it

together. The boats brought the fish in, the crops were flourishing up on the Estate and the place had a feel of progress. How old are you, Billy?’

‘Nineteen. You’re talking over half a century ago. That’s older than my grandpa’s time.’

Arthur nods, ‘Much older. And Mr Carlton wrote *this* book back then. It’s one of my treasured possessions. *Summer into Winter*, it’s called. So who’s your dad, Billy?’

‘My dad is Billy too. We live in Harbour Street, the block of flats, the Port Building it’s called. It’s not real flash; oldish place – forty years, at least.’

Arthur smiles, tolerance in his eyes. ‘Your grandpa, then. What’s his name?’

‘Tom Redpath. And his dad was Gary Redpath. They lived in Castle Street. They’re both gone now.’

‘I was at school with a Gary Redpath from Castle Street. Good bloke, he was. We used to swim in the harbour together, we did. All of us kids. He played the cornet in the primary school band. Wanted to work on the herring boats, if I remember right.’

‘Yep,’ Billy’s eyes widen in surprise, ‘that’s what he did, I’m told. Made skipper too. But them days with the harbour packed with the fishing boats, they’re all gone now – just a couple of skippers left, most of the time. I never knew my Great-Grandad Gary but Grandpa Tom was around when I was small. He worked for the Post Office in its last days – letters and parcels, you know – it’s all gone now too. Couriers from outside do that now. My Dad, that’s Billy like me, reckons the fishing will never die. It’s here to stay, just a lot smaller than in the boom times. There will always be fish in the sea, eh?’

Arthur smiles. ‘I certainly hope so, Billy. What does your dad do? Is he a skipper?’

‘Naw. Dad’s a net maker – a good one too. But all this business ... he hasn’t been well. It’s eating away at him. He’s been taken too. They came for him three weeks ago. I wasn’t home – arguing with them all at work, I was. They put me off. I wanted back on. We need the food on the table. “No more work”, they said. Flat, no discussion. “You’re finished, Billy. Get lost.” No wonder I had a go at them. That was the first black eye.’ He points at his face

and winces. Arthur grimaces in sympathy. 'But you can't beat them. It's just been terrible.'

The young man suddenly stares at the huge locked cell door and sighs. There is no sound from outside; no birds chirping, no people banging around, not a plane flying overhead, not a truck in the street outside. Just silence.

'I can't take this quiet,' he wails. 'I'm used to music in my ear and a phone in my hand to text and link on the Net, people to speak to. And now no mobiles work. I'm cut off. Can't even play my computer games. I'm in a silent, boring prison; dark, even with these glary white walls. Sorry,' he looks at the old man, 'you don't want to hear me grizzling,' and he draws in a deep breath. 'So you know my family, eh? My great-grandad, at least. I liked the oldies talking about those times when the harbour was at its peak. Exciting back then, eh?' The sigh returns, but louder this time. 'Oh Jeezus, I've been in here for two days! See my scratches on the wall? This is killing me.'

The old man watches patiently as Billy bangs his head slowly on the table top and then continues, 'They haven't even interviewed me. Drive you mad. Nothing to do or listen to. We could be here for ages. Would you tell me about when you were young here? I need some cheering up. We'll only get out of this place in a box. That's what they told me.'

'Oh, we'll get out – and not in a box. Trust me.' Arthur taps his Sheffield-made cane.

Billy doesn't look convinced. 'People have been killed here. I'm telling you. Truly ... here, in Littlehaven.' He makes as if to say more but instead repeats, 'Tell me about the old days.'

The old man pauses for a thought. 'Yes, I'll take you back to when I was a boy and Littlehaven was a happy town – but what happened to you on the Estate to get you in here?'

'I was only after a pheasant. That's murder now under Provost Kelty's crazy new laws. I shot low; that was all.' Billy lowers his head as if he has explained everything.

Arthur gives an understanding nod. 'You wouldn't have been the first to shoot low. I've seen lords and ladies doing precisely the same – and gamekeepers ripping right into them for it too.'

Billy lifts his head. 'Have you?' He grins. 'Really?'

‘Yes. I used to be a beater for the pheasants when I was a kid. A lot of us lads from the village would be taken up to the Estate.’

‘Pheasant beaters. I’ve heard of them.’

‘This was long ago, Billy. They’d line us up along the edge of the wood while all the lords and ladies would be at the far side with their shotguns at the ready. The gamekeeper was employed by the Laird – you’d know that – but he was the man really in charge of the shoot. Nobody argued with the gamekeeper, for safety’s sake. The Laird didn’t want any of his guests getting injured. Too much money to be made out of his shooting days to let a bad word get about.’

Billy’s eyes are wide. ‘So you were *allowed* on the Estate back then?’

‘Yes. As workers, for a feed, sixpence and an adventure. On the whistle, our line of boys would bash away through the trees, scaring all the birds in the opposite direction where they would fly out over the open field and right into the line of the guns. And all these well-heeled shooters would blast away at the flocks of defenceless birds flying over them.’

‘Wouldn’t be allowed today.’ Billy shakes his head in wonder.

‘Times change, Billy. Mind you, their lordships couldn’t all handle their big guns as well as they should. We could hear the gamekeeper bellowing, even over the shots as we bashed our noisy way through the woods towards them. “Keep those barrels high,” he’d shout. “C’mon, your ladyship. Towards the sky.”

‘Once, the buckshot splintered the branches just above my head. You see, the birds would fly out in straight lines, but at all angles. In the heat of the kill, the brainless ones would turn the guns wherever they saw a bird.

‘I heard the keeper give a tubby lord a right bollocking for that shot. “I told you to keep the bloody barrel up, Sir. You could have killed one of the beaters. Listen to what I effin tell you!” And then, he would politely dip his cap and say, “M’lord.” How crazy was that?’

Billy chortles at the thought. ‘So I’m not the only one shooting low.’

‘No, Billy. But no-one dips his lid to you, I’m afraid. What was the work you were doing, before they put you off?’

‘I was in the yards – *smokies* and *kippers*. It’s just along from home. Gutting ... and in the kilns. Smelly work. It’s been a month now.’ He turns

his stained palms towards Arthur. 'Kippers. Can't be wearing those rubber gloves.' He gives a wry grin. 'It takes ages to fade out of your skin. But it's going away slowly now.'

'I haven't heard of the *smokies* for years. I loved a smoked haddock; kippered herring too. Ah, memories. Okay, you told me about your dad. Do you have other folks?'

'Mum's dead. My dad's probably in here somewhere. That was about three weeks ago they took him, I think. Maybe more. I'm losing track of time. No phone, no clock, no nothin. My brother, Stan, he's seventeen – a labourer. He was taken a month ago, I'm guessing – it was all about the time I was sacked, but before Dad. They pick people up when there's no-one around. Stan would have fought them. I heard from a fella at the docks that he was in a work gang somewhere. But that's what they say about all of them – working for the Council; always somewhere else in the shire though. No-one ever sees them. It's just *someone said*. Provost Kelty runs the Council and his police just bully people. Who knows what's really happening? Then there's Stella, my sister. She'd be twenty-one now. I haven't spoken to her for a year. She went off with a gang of no-hopers – bloody *neds*, they were.' Billy turns his nose up and sniffs. He scratches his fingers through his dirty scalp; a tear moistening his eye.

Old Arthur watches, thinking. He glances up at where the surveillance camera sits shielded in its protective shell, nodding before taking his time to speak again.

'That won't be working.' He points at the camera on the ceiling. 'Nothing much electronic works, until this world collapse gets resolved.'

Billy glances up. 'I wouldn't know. I don't care what they hear or see. Those Provost's Police will just make it up anyway. Fucken thugs, that's all they are.'

'Mmm,' Arthur agrees. 'It's a bad world you're in. Two lonely days in here with nothing but painted walls for amusement. No fun, eh?'

'Fuck it. Fuck them. You're here too, now. You're no better off. This is crazy. I need to hear about something else. I'm going mad. Tell me about when you were young ...'

And Arthur nods. 'I will ... in a while. But first ...'

Chapter 2

Marsha and Max

Marsha Milano hadn't expected to hear about Arthur Blair immediately so the coded ham radio message is a pleasant surprise.

Without doubt, any passive listeners would have been just as suitably confused by the transmission as if it had been sent by encrypted email or a scrambled radio call. But these are new times in 2030. With the electronic collapse, neither secure common-use system could actually be relied upon to work properly. So the old ham radio technology from a previous century still works as it always did, decades before. One has to adapt to changing circumstances.

'They've come for Arthur already.'

As she speaks, printed message in hand, she turns away from the picture window. It looks out from the Maasboulevard, over bridges sparkling in the sunlight onto what used to be the busyness of a prosperous Rotterdam – just minutes away from The Hague airport in the Netherlands – the river docks and the centre of international judicial affairs. It is a view that Arthur himself loved for years. But now it is so quiet.

The huge trading ships, governed by electronic navigation systems, now lie idle at the sea ports. The burden of moving cargoes has fallen back to the small coastal carriers to ferry what produce there still is from storage dumps to river ports – a pale fraction of what was normal. The world can only be grateful that the transition from oil based fuels to renewable power sources had started a decade earlier ... or even less transport would be available. Even so, carbon-based fuels are being rationed by every national government for vital use only, under their emergency powers. The airport can only be used by selected modified military aircraft, helicopters mainly – and a few private planes on short hauls – using the back-up navigation and visual air traffic control methods of nearly a century before.

Her dark business suit and slim figure give scant indication of her forty-five years on the planet and some distinguished service in the most clandestine of scenarios.

‘Scared? Or just bullying an old man?’ Max Phillips asks.

‘Who knows? Maybe a bit of both.’

Marsha Milano is the Director of IIB, the International Investigations Bureau in Rotterdam and The Hague. And she takes particular interest in leading *The Section* – the clandestine sharp edge of their work. Since the GEC, the global electronic collapse, a month earlier and the ineptitude of the archaic United Nations alliances to have any meaningful contribution to an international problem that they don’t understand, IIB has taken on a much more significant role in trying to solve the criminal mystery.

‘Do you really think this is connected to the business blackmail we’ve been tracking? It’s been a year now, chasing phantom leads. I tell you, Boss, it’ll be fine by me if I don’t have to go back into bloody Mozambique looking for electronic shadows.’

‘Transport that far would be a challenge in the current circumstances, Max. It’s definitely not masterminded from there.’

‘As we have established on previous occasions, with the blackmailing. They’re clever bastards.’

‘Rat cunning, I think,’ Marsha adds. ‘But this new collapse of the world electronic and economic systems may well be their undoing.’

‘If it’s the same people. That last one was from the Balkans.’

‘The key is that this collapse isn’t just financial this time around; nor simple nuisance hacking, nor whistle-blowing attacks. There have been no terrorism links – they are never slow to claim responsibility. Not a skerrick of a clue as to what this is all about.’ Marsha pauses to wrestle with a thought. ‘Who would have the high-level nous to infect everything that has relied on silicon-based electronics? What sort of person would have that knowledge? And then to make it seem to come from separate sources in Mozambique and Bulgaria?’

Phillips shrugs. ‘Given that our computing systems are all stuffed, we can’t even run a decent correlation analysis any more. So much for all our government disaster planning. And such a song and dance from our super-

sophisticated industries a decade ago, moving everything to computerised automation, to Additive Layer and DNA bio-print technology – all stuffed as well, and no fall-back positions. Burned their bridges. They didn't think of anything as big as this.'

'Yes, Max, we know. Hindsight is a great thing. We are back to first principles of survival with very few having the old skills of the pre-technological age. Old people are suddenly in demand again.' Her expression is almost a smile.

All national law enforcement and military responses have been stretched to the maximum, and beyond. They are struggling to maintain and restore order with eight billion people trying to survive on the planet, with next to nothing working. Over the past month, governments have been dealing with mob riots across the globe, columns of starving refugees walking or sailing somewhere for a better life, when there's nowhere better left to flee to.

'If they survive long enough,' replies Max. 'Lots of people are dying out there and more will be very soon.'

'Have a bit of faith, Max. We conquered the South American pandemic flu that killed multi-millions worldwide only two years back – people said that couldn't be done – and we handled Ebola and AIDS before that.'

Max stiffens at the last comment as he thinks of a dear friend he'd lost to that latter illness.

Marsha continues 'Mankind is resilient. The world resources have to be smarter than one person or a few people. We'll get them.'

The agent gives his director a reassuring but slightly cynical grin. 'I admire your confidence, Marsha. So now we're zoning in on a possible criminal cell on the east coast of Scotland. I know we have a reputation for being prescient, but we don't need to believe our own publicity.'

'I don't, Max. Never have. But I do focus on being ahead of the game. Arthur's instinct has paid dividends many times before. If he's right this time, this will all assume a much greater world significance.'

Phillips is well aware of the advantage IIB has in being able to place surveillance watchers on intuition, rather than account to the *bean counters* in the civil service. While there have been many wild goose chases, more than a few have paid off.

‘You’re quite a saleswoman to persuade the British Ministry of Defence to task our *Section* into this upgraded role; and a lead responsibility with the Scottish Police.’

‘It was mainly Arthur’s contacts, as you would expect. He has some heavy clout in high places.’

IIB has been able to persuade the British and the Scots that the Bureau’s months of quiet infiltration into industrial blackmail really might be on the money now, for a whole different set of reasons. The world’s counter-Electronic Warfare agencies appear to be at last recognising that Arthur’s suggestion of a potential link to the recent global disaster from the coastal area at Littlehaven might be right – even if they are grasping at straws.

Max raises his arms in an exasperated shrug. ‘But it’s just a dot of a place between Dundee and Aberdeen. Why would the source be there on the east coast of Scotland?’

That is the question which has been teasing them all. Why would international criminals even use that area as a location for hacking and technology scams, let alone a crisis many many times more serious?

Max gives a frustrated grunt. ‘For decades, I’ve been listening to pompous politicians boasting about their surveillance joining the metadata dots; able to find any crim on the planet. CCTV covering most of the world – and now it doesn’t work because it has modern silicon components ... and they are largely gone now, thanks to this damned infection.’

‘Sadly, you’re right,’ agrees Marsha. ‘And, while the *pollies* have been posturing, the *dark side* has been active; slowly packaging, firewalling, manipulating, controlling the flows of information on the internet.’ She stops to register the frustration of her agent.

Max takes a few steps closer to the picture window. ‘We don’t even know who the *dark side* people are. My bet is that they will be in that exclusive T5 group, the *Top Five* technology corporates that governments pay way too much attention to. Who else has that level of knowledge and power? We have given all the control to the enemy. Bad tactics and even worse strategy. We are back to the laws of the jungle now and people have forgotten the old skills of tracking the bad guys.’

Marsha shrugged in possible agreement. ‘Well, that’s our job now, Max. That’s why no-one has established proof about what might be happening in Littlehaven. These are not normal times. At least, we don’t have to answer to politically-correct committees – or most of them anyway. We can move fast ... and quietly, if we need to.’

The emergency has meant that the police have neither the manpower nor the evidence to march into Littlehaven on speculation. The individual rights lawyers would tie them into legal knots.

Marsha stares out again over silent Rotterdam. Eventually she turns to look at Max. ‘Scammers. If the original scammers are operating out of there, then they have been operating for months, even years. But low key; flying under the radar.’

Max sighs. ‘Hard to track, Marsha. Scam victims are usually too embarrassed to declare that sort of crime.’

The director is unfazed. ‘Well, if the innocuous signs are to be believed, the deception and extortion has netted the criminals a considerable fortune, paid in many small amounts into financial institutions from the Caribbean to central Europe to any of the central Asian *stans*. We have *that* evidence. It just wouldn’t stand up in a court.’

Max shrugs. ‘So you are suggesting that they are well set up now, and making use of the confusion?’

‘Yes, Max. We are tasked to find *court-admissible evidence* of the crime, quietly, without being compromised, so that the national police can move in with the established proof on their warrants.’

Her agent shakes his head, politely. ‘Court-admissible evidence? I know. But it makes no sense. If you think it through – with the current crisis hitting every country on the planet, if the instigators of the scams are also involved in the electronic collapse, they would be bound to be caught eventually. It’s a massive crime with no way back. It would be madness to think otherwise. So why would they have done it? There is no great suicide cause being flaunted. The usual suspects would have been shouting it from the rooftops.’

Marsha walks away from the window to sit in the high-backed chair behind her desk ... and breathes out heavily.

‘They are smart, Max. Perhaps they have figured some way out. The chaos is protecting them at the moment. Rat cunning, like I said. Don’t underestimate them. They have us all scratching for something tangible.’

Most of the world has no functioning electronics, no television, no internet, and effectively no modern silicon-based communications if they had been in use at the time of the collapse. Civil unrest and riots are rampant across the globe as people fight to survive ... or bury their many dead, especially in the already overpopulated, under-resourced countries.

The police have been drawn back to the big cities to maintain order. There is no law in tiny places like Littlehaven except the local Provost’s deputised security people.

Max strokes his stylishly unshaven chin. ‘I still don’t buy it, Boss. I always look for the motivation. What could it be? Why would they do it; knowing that they must get caught? Money? Power? It’s bizarre. But, I suppose, that’s why I’m the field agent. I’ll leave the strategic stuff to you and Andy van Buuren.’

‘And you are a very good field agent too, Max. Horses for courses.’

‘So ...’ He pauses. ‘I have a question for you.’