

THE MALTHUS PANDEMIC

Terry Morgan

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2013 by TJM Books www.tjmbooks.com

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"Anchored firmly in the present, no high-tech Bond style gadgets, just good old-fashioned detective work. Gritty descriptions of the international locations, compelling plot and poignant rants about the inadequacy of democratic institutions and persuasive insight on the inner workings of the global establishment. Easy reading and difficult to put down once started. Enjoyable read."

CHAPTER 1

My name is Daniel Capelli and, before you ask, I am not Italian. My father was but my mother wasn't. I am English born and bred. Born in Portsmouth and brought up around West London - Chiswick to be precise. I'm forty-five years old and until recently I'd never found it hard to stay single. But details of my private life are sure to crop up later anyway so let's cut out the personal stuff right now. There's a lot to cover and I hate wasting time.

I'm writing this for a hundred different reasons but, before we start, I need to get something off my chest.

In the USA, UK and what is humorously called the European Union it is supposed to be a democracy. Right? Individuals can express their opinion freely, they can influence decisions that affect them and they are listened to because politicians need their votes. Correct? The many layers of bureaucracy, frustrating though they are, exist to ensure the necessary checks and balances so that we all live together in some sort of big, happy community. Organisations have been put in place that provide us, the hard-working tax-payer, with protection and support when we need protection and support. Those that get paid out of our taxes do as we want not what they want.

So, if we want to improve things and can show that it can be done at no extra cost to the public purse it stands to reason that we can point this out, expect immediate action and won't need to wait for an election to come around. And if we showed them that half of this happy community might be dead within a year, then what would you expect?

If I am not badly mistaken, you would expect all of our highly paid political leaders and that teeming mass of salaried and pensioned pen pushers that is their back-office support to drop everything and deal with it. Right?

Well, let's hope so because as I write this I'm so concerned for the future of this community of billions that I'm beginning to think a short spell of dictatorship might be better for a while. As far as I can tell, nothing has been learned from what we found and yet another man-made, lethal virus with another fancy name could, right now, be sat in a freezer next door to where you live.

Are you comfortable knowing that? If so, would you like to see someone else, perhaps a scientist, taking decisions for all those politicians who have shown they are too afraid to listen let alone take any action?

So why do I start this with a rant? Well, the politicians and bureaucrats had their backs turned or were on their tax payer funded summer holidays at the time. But it only took a handful of us to uncover this ingenious but complicated plot - and we weren't even being paid. The hand wringing and buck-passing started when we tried to explain to them what was going on under their noses and asked them to act. We weren't part of their cosy system you see. We were outside their comfort zone and so they couldn't recognise us, in the official sense of the word. Their system ensures they only deal with each other. That way they keep control and cover each other's backs to keep the cosy system ticking over. But many of us want to see real, dynamic leadership and action. We're fed up with this short-term, pandering just to

get re-elected. So, is it any wonder that some, tired of waiting, decide to take direct action themselves and bypass the system?

But, you know what really hurts? At one stage they thought we were a bunch of fruitcakes. But I forgive them for that last bit. There are lots of fruitcakes out there.

So, yes, I'm Daniel Capelli and now I've got that first rant off my chest, let me tell you what I do and then introduce you to a few other fruitcakes.

In a nutshell I'm a private investigator. That's not what it says in my passport but it's what I sometimes call myself if asked. A business consultant might go a step further and say that I operate in a niche sector. That would be correct.

I like what I do and I'm good at it. If I wasn't any good I wouldn't survive. After all I run a private enterprise not a publicly funded monopoly. I'm a one-man band as it's called but my clients are often very big businesses. Most of the companies willing to pay for my services are not easy to please and demand value for their money so if I hadn't been delivering over the last few years then I wouldn't still be around. But I've slowly built a solid reputation for the specialised services I provide. Let's list a few:

Corporate fraud, industrial espionage, theft of intellectual property. That's a start. Satisfying suspicions about how competitors had made money so much more quickly and easily than they did or how the already wealthy have made their sometimes-ill-gotten gains are two more. The work does, occasionally, put you at odds with people, so I have to be careful, but I've always believed that life without risk was rather dull, besides being far less lucrative.

I still keep my small pad in West London but I travel around a lot. Airports are a necessity but no country is off limits and so I live mostly out of a suitcase with a few other passports tucked somewhere. Daniel Capelli, you see, also has a few other names he can use from time to time. It makes life so much easier.

But that's enough about me for now.

Sometimes I need my own back office support just like those politicians. But my civil service is another one-man band, or at least it started out as one. Colin Asher is a mate of mine. We've known each other for years but Colin has also built his business, Asher & Asher, from straight forward private investigation into something that resembles a privately-owned SIS - MI5 or MI6. He's got nothing like the same numbers of staff and operates from a little office off the Edgware Road, but Colin's intelligence gathering service is good enough for my purposes. Colin is important. You'll hear more about Colin.

I'd never heard of Doctor Larry Brown until this case started. This is the way these things go. Larry is American and he's already seen what I've written above about democracy and leadership and the power of individuals. I knew he'd like it. Larry was in Nigeria working for the American Embassy when it started and it was Larry who came across tests on the Malthus A virus being carried out on a hundred or so innocent victims up in the north of Nigeria. Larry is black, of West African descent and mixed well in Nigeria once he'd slipped on a pair of old jeans. I like Larry's gritty determination and frustration with the system. He's left the Embassy now as the frustration got the better of him. But we're staying in touch.

Then there's Kevin Parker. Larry and Kevin are poles apart in many ways but it was Kevin's Malthus Society website that helped us find the technical brains behind the creation of this lethal, human virus, and the plot to release it. Kevin lectures on social

and economic history and is a passionate speaker on anything to do with Thomas Malthus, Paul Eyrlich and others you may or may not have heard of. Like them, he holds some very strong views himself on the need for a reduction in the world population and he's full of statistics to show it makes a lot of sense. I learned a lot from Kevin and am now a fully signed up member of his Malthus Society with a growing appreciation of what it wants our sleeping politicians to do. As Kevin says in his usual way, "When the fuckers wake up it'll be too fucking late."

When I spoke to Kevin last week he told me he'd only just started sleeping properly again. Kevin, you see, had been having nightmares about being arrested on suspicion of involvement in a bioterrorism plot.

There are several others I could mention as well but you'll come across them later. But I need to make a special mention of Jimmy 'The Ferret' Banda from Nairobi. Jimmy, my friend - you were brilliant.

But let me start with the afternoon a few months ago when Colin finally tracked me down to the airport in Kuala Lumpur and asked me to fly back to London to meet a new client.

I had never heard of the American medical research company, Virex International, let alone its President, Charles Brady. But within twenty-four hours of the phone call I had abandoned my private plan to go up to Bangkok for the weekend and flown back to London for two nights and one day. The day was mostly spent waiting for Brady's delayed flight to arrive from Boston. What was left of the day was spent discussing Brady's problem.

By the time Brady arrived, I already knew that Virex International did complicated research on viruses that caused influenza and other human diseases and that they had apparently lost some research material. But Brady turned out to be strong on long, technical words and weak on commercial facts. In exasperation, and as he was already looking at his watch, I finally asked him to be more explicit by defining the importance of his loss in financial terms. At first, Brady appeared embarrassed by my bluntness but eventually put a value of a few million dollars on it. It still wasn't an exact sum but it was big enough to explain why Brady had flown first class to London to meet me and why I had then flown to Bangkok. Bangkok, Brady had suggested, might produce a few leads.

Now, at that point, I would normally have asked for far more detail but time was already running out for Brady's return flight and there was also a neat co-incidence of sorts. There was this other business in Bangkok that I had been planning to deal with just two days before and then postponed. So, armed with a very poor remit, I wished Brady a safe journey back to Boston, told him I'd be in touch and bought myself a ticket to Bangkok for the following night.

So let us now jump twenty four hours.

I woke in my Bangkok hotel room to the faint drone of the air conditioning unit and the pale light of dawn breaking through the window blind. I was tired, had slept deeply and for a few seconds wondered where I was. For someone who travels time zones as much as I do this is a common enough experience but, with my eyes still firmly shut, I tried to put the past few days and hours back into perspective.

I knew I had this vague job to do and had been busy but it had all been fairly plain sailing and normal up until last night.

I had arrived late afternoon and, after a shower and a change of clothing into something more suited to the Bangkok weather, ventured out into the hot, evening air, fought my way along the Sukhumvit Road through the hordes of evening strollers and ended up at a certain place that had become a bit of a habit of mine on recent visits to Bangkok. Up until then, it had been like the start of any other business trip but it then changed into something far more private.

The job I was there to do for Virex was, as I've said, unusually vague but as I lay there still half asleep, there was no harm in going over everything in my mind. I am, despite how I might sometimes appear, a very organized man. I am a professional in my field and don't normally make rash decisions. It is just that I occasionally take calculated risks or allow myself to be carried on a whim. Whims are a bit like instincts. I know they sound unprofessional but they are much the safest sort of risk. Last night's whim - the one that had taken me to that place - had looked innocent enough at the time. Nevertheless, I had still given it some thought before setting off. After all, any misjudgement could mean, at the very least, a ruined reputation and a nail in the coffin for a self-employed businessman.

But 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' has been a motto of mine for many years. I think I inherited that one from my Italian father. The other motto, 'muddle through' comes, I like to think, from my English mother to ensure that if life throws up the unexpected, as it often does, you can still find a way to deal with it and not be tied down by procedure or other matters that get in the way.

'Impatience is a virtue' is a motto I invented myself and I value it highly - in fact, it partly explains my rant at the beginning. So, anyway, a sudden retreat from the whim to stroll along Sukhumvit Road so as not to end up in that usual place looked like surrender and this is not my style. To accept my fate - whatever it might be - with a shrug had seemed a far manlier response at the time.

But, I admit I still felt a little uncertainty when I reached the door of that place. I had stopped and stared at the door as a vision of myself hit my conscience like that of a drowning man.

I am sure a drowning man can be forgiven for the flashbacks of his past pleasures or regrets. Perhaps, also, a drowning man with no hope of rescue can also cram an entire life into the short space of time it takes to hold his breath until he could stand it no longer and finally inhales that last, fateful lungful.

But that vision of myself had been just as quick. It was like a fast-forwarded video, a packaged version of my life to date, a quick snap shot of how other people might judge me if they had followed me over the last twenty years or so. And I freely admit that I did not like what I saw in the closing moments of the vision. I saw a professional loner, a sad example of a forty-five years old single man with no place he could call home except a rented flat over a Turkish restaurant in Queensway, West London. I saw a battered case containing a few bare essentials for personal hygiene - a toothbrush, a razor - and a few shirts and socks and a crumpled suit and blue tie in case there was a need to impress.

I also saw an empty notepad that I rarely use but still keep in there because, these days, I use mobile phones an awful lot. I'm buying and throwing them all the time for reasons you will slowly understand. I keep a few essential things on a memory stick hung around my neck until I can find a suitable place to plug the laptop in or visit an internet cafe. Often, too, I leave these technical aids behind in a hotel room or

somewhere just in case I find myself in a spot of bother. I have learned a thing or two, you see. I regard a mobile phone as the worst piece of technology for storing private data, which is why I prefer new one's empty of all private data and other information. No-one is ever going to steal Daniel Capelli's intellectual property.

Most things I carry in my head and so mine is a surprisingly light case for a man who lives out of it, uses it as his office and as an occasional pillow and travels around the world with it with a couple of spare passports tucked behind its lining.

Now I don't normally get depressed, but what I saw in that vision was, I admit, a bit dull and depressing. But I had always thought that one day I might find the time to sort myself out. It isn't as though I'm short of money although it has taken a lot longer to accumulate than I ever envisaged. After all, this business of mine is not one that promotes itself via a website or glossy brochures. Using third parties, word of mouth and constantly building a reputation works far better.

My ten o'clock appointment with a guy called Amos Gazit, the Research Director of Virex International was proof of that strategy. And the call in KL that had started it had come from Colin Asher and Colin had got the lead from somewhere else. This is how it works.

Anyway, on my bed I opened my eyes again to check the increasing light from the window to guess the time and then returned to the whim that had taken me to that place last night and that awful vision of myself as a lonely man living out of a battered black case. Finally, I had persuaded myself to push the door open. I left the street with all its heat and noise behind and stepped inside.

Now, seven hours later, I could feel a warm hand resting on my shoulder. It then moved down to my waist and around to my bare stomach. Her name is Anna. I was still a professional businessman with a job to do at ten o'clock but I knew then I was also on a very private slippery slope.

CHAPTER 2

Kevin Parker had just finished another week at the Bristol University School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies. But his regular Friday night drinking session with fellow lecturers and other hangers-on had been postponed because Kevin had an appointment.

He had spent most of the day in the library rather than teaching, so Kevin was even more casually dressed than normal. As he locked the door of his cluttered flat in Clifton he was wearing crumpled brown corduroy trousers, a green, open-necked shirt beneath a bright red sweater that said Liverpool FC on the front.

With six years of trying to teach British Economic and Social History to students with mixed results and very little self-satisfaction behind him, Kevin's weekends, most evenings and any other spare time was spent on his real interest - moderating the website of the International Malthus Society.

"Dedicated to exploring the ideas of Thomas Malthus on a theoretical and a practical level" was the somewhat uninspiring strap line of Kevin's website. But it opened the

doors for all sorts of comment, opinion, political lobbying or action linked to Thomas Malthus' dire, eighteenth century warnings of the effects of overpopulation.

Kevin was on his way by train to London to give what he thought was a talk to Malthus Society members and any other enthusiasts interested in human population control. Kevin was an expert on the subject. He lectured on it so had all the facts and figures at his fingertips but he also tried hard to temper his lectures to conceal his own views and, even more so, his radical solutions. After all, he told some in private, he was not there to behave like some radical cleric in an Islamic mosque.

But he would often feel comfortable enough to expound on his wish to see direct action to radically reduce the world population so that the quality of life for those remaining improved. That was why he was looking forward to giving the lecture.

But the invitation had come as a surprise to Kevin. It had been a phone call from someone he hadn't even heard of and the man was clearly an Arab if the accent and name of El Badry was anything to go by. He also seemed to be an Arab with money as the flat Kevin had been invited to was overlooking Chelsea Embankment. It would certainly be large enough to hold several other members of the Malthus Society if that was what the caller intended.

On the train, Kevin took out his notes and a yellow marker and, in total innocence of who he was to meet, set about highlighting the points he wanted to make.

Larry Brown had always had a somewhat morbid interest in infectious diseases. He told friends that he could trace it back to watching a video as a boy. While his younger sister played at being a nurse, Larry would sit and watch and then replay the video about leprosy, Chagas disease, yellow fever and leptospirosis. His sister had gone on to become a lawyer but it was Larry who became the doctor. But the childhood fascination with infection and tropical disease had never waned and was one reason why he had left New York to travel, first to South America and then to West Africa.

Doctor Larry Brown, now in his late thirties and new to his post with the American Embassy commercial team in Lagos, Nigeria had just spent two nights in the northern State capital of Kano. The smaller city of Jos in neighbouring Plateau State was, according to Larry's calculations, only about 150 miles away so as the Evangel Hospital in Jos had always held top spot in Larry's list of places with especially interesting diseases, the chance for a quick visit was too good to miss.

In 1969, before Larry was born, the Evangel Hospital had been the first centre in West Africa to identify the haemorrhagic, flesh-eating, Lassa Fever virus that still causes around five thousand deaths a year across West Africa. Two missionary nurses at the Evangel Hospital died of the virus and a third fell ill and was flown to the USA. It was here where the virus was isolated and named. A year later, the medical director at the hospital, a missionary surgeon, also caught Lassa Fever after she accidentally cut herself during an autopsy. She was dead within two days.

After his visit and hoping that diplomatic relations between the US and Nigeria had been enhanced by his short and unannounced intrusion, Larry began to consider what he himself had discovered the day before during his time in Kano. The more he thought about it the more he was convinced that he might have discovered another new fever. It had none of the characteristics of Lassa Fever but if the estimated

death toll in Kano of more than one hundred was accurate then someone needed to sit up and take notice. But no-one yet had.

Larry's official visit to Kano had been at the request of his Embassy superiors in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, and the line was that it would be useful diplomacy for an American to be seen to be doing something for the ordinary people. All the better if it was handled in a way that could not possibly be interpreted as remotely political or in any shape or form designed to inflame ongoing tensions with the northern Moslem community.

So, someone had organised a debate for two schools in Kano. The topic of discussion was to be "Who is more important to society, the teacher or the doctor" and was designed to encourage students to speak good and correct American English using appropriate American expressions. Who better to run the debate, then, than a real live doctor fresh out of New York - and a black one with ancestral roots in West Africa at that.

But Larry had never been a man who did his job and then went home. He met the students as required, learned far more from them than they did from him, went back to his hotel and then, with time on his hands decided to explore Kano.

Whether he was also naturally drawn to clinics and old mission hospitals he didn't know but as he wandered down the Kofar Wambai Road watching, listening to and smelling the local, Kano life he took off down one of the side streets. And he had hardly walked fifty yards when he found himself looking up at a plastic banner hanging, upside down on a thread of red nylon string. It was flapping in the steady, dusty breeze over the entrance to a single story, concrete building with rusting bars fronting unwashed windows. Perhaps it was because a red cross is never upside down, but it made him stop and, by twisting his head to read the rest of the banner, Larry could see it said, "Kofi Clinic."

Interest sparked, Larry thought he'd take a look inside. Being a black American doctor of West African descent, Larry had started to enjoy his ability to blend in with the locals and, as he also enjoyed checking out run down clinical establishments, this one looked like the best example he'd come across for some time. He pushed open the unlocked, wooden door and stood in a dark and dusty hallway that might, had the electricity been turned on, have been lit by a single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. At the far end was another door.

"It is closed, sir." The voice that came from behind was that of an elderly woman Larry had seen sitting and sewing outside on a stool. She was now stood behind him holding an old shirt and with the needle and thread hanging from the corner of her mouth.

Dressed in a long, colourful dress she also wore what Larry had recently learned was known, at least in Lagos, as a "Gele" - a Yoruba word for an ornate female head-dress. Despite the plastic stool, the dust, the trash and the lumps of concrete rubble around her feet, the woman looked clean, smart and educated. Larry introduced himself. "Closed down, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Very dirty," she said and removed the needle and thread from between her lips.

"So, who owned the clinic?"

"Doctor Mustafa."

"Did he have many patients?" Larry asked peering down the dark hallway. All he could see was a grey metal filing cabinet with empty drawers hanging out.

"No sir."

"Where has he gone?"

"I don't know, sir," the old lady said and started to walk back to her stool.

"Do you live locally?" Larry asked as he followed her. She pointed to a concrete block building opposite with a corrugated tin roof and open doorway.

"Did you see patients arrive here?"

"Yes sir, the doctor brought them in his truck."

"A truck? Do you know what happened to them - his patients?"

"Yes, they died."

"So were they very sick when they arrived here?"

"I don't know sir. I was a teacher but not a doctor."

"Of course," said Larry understandingly. "Do you know how many died?"

The old lady already seemed engrossed in her sewing once again but Larry noticed she looked at him out of the corner of her eye as if unsure whether to say anything. Then she glanced back down to her sewing and said, very quietly, "I heard it was more than one hundred." Then she got up again and started to walk away. Larry followed her.

"So, who decided to close the clinic?" asked Larry.

"The State Government sir." Then she hurried across the road.

Back at the Prince Hotel in Kano where he was staying, Larry phoned the American Embassy in Abuja and told them briefly what he had found. Pleased that no-one asked him how his earlier meeting with the students had gone or why he was wasting time wandering around Kano instead of hot footing it back to Lagos, he was given a phone number for the Kano State Government and a department that might be able to answer a few questions about the Kofi Clinic.

CHAPTER 3

I realised my growing personal problem as soon as Anna had accepted my invitation to close her bar earlier than normal and spend the rest of the night with me back at my hotel. In the bar, she had looked at me with those big, black eyes, her black hair in a neat, parted fringe at the front and so long at the back.

"What's your name?" she had said in her delightful accent.

"Daniel. The same as last time," I said. "What's yours?"

"Anna, the same as last time."

"Where you come from?" she said and glanced down to where my hand had, without any permission from me, moved to touch hers.

I paused to take a mouthful of beer from my bottle and give myself time to think. "London," I said, truthfully and then watched the look on her face change. She stared directly at me and I knew exactly what her next words would be.

"How long will you stay?" Then she looked down. "Seem like too long. Where you go? I think you forget me."

I was at this point, looking at the top of her bowed head, faintly smelling a perfumed shampoo. Then I held her hand tighter and said to the top of the head. "I missed you."

Oh, yes, I knew right at that moment that my normal composure had gone and with it most of my professional dignity.

I turned over in the bed to look at what I'd brought back with me. Her long black hair was draped across her face but hidden inside it was my problem. And just to prove it, I found myself fumbling to part the long strands of black hair to see her face. And, yes, I openly admit to liking what I saw.

Her eyes opened and for a moment seemed shocked at the sight of my eyes just inches away. They seemed to soften and turn perhaps a little moist. I, of course, looked away but then found myself looking down at her naked body stretched out beside me. And, as I looked, her hand came up to my rough, unshaven face and a finger ran from beneath my eye to my lips and stayed there.

"How long you stay in Bangkok?" she murmured, moving her hips closer and wrapping a leg over mine. Now I found myself looking deep into her black eyes.

"Maybe a few days," I said knowing it was vague. But I did, nevertheless, manage a smile and, as luck would have it, she returned it. Then she stuck her finger into my mouth as if to stop me saying any more.

"Ooh. Long time, eh?" she joked, giggling in a sad sort of way. And my own thoughts went back to the night we had last parted.

She had been very upset when I left the last time. What's more, I hadn't even had the decency to tell her face to face that I was leaving. We had spoken on a noisy mobile phone link. I had been at the airport and she in the middle of a busy evening in the bar. The last sound I heard was the sound of quiet, wet sniffing. It was she who had then cut me off. This was just not normal. That, more than anything, had left me feeling thoroughly sick with myself and unknown to her I had almost taken a taxi back from the airport. But I had had a job to do. Duty called and I needed to be in Kuala Lumpur that night and it had been urgent. So, what was I to do?

"I told you I would be back" I said, though I realise I have said that to a few others in the past. There was no response, just a stare. "So," I added, "here I am".

I admit to being a bit embarrassed by my flippancy. In fact, you will find I will admit to a number of other personal weaknesses over the next few pages. I tried to sit up but my punishment for the flippancy was that she got hold of my ear and her mood changed. The look on her face also changed. Dear me, this was no frail woman needing the tender protection of a strong male.

"Where have you been?" she asked and her lips puckered not into a shape designed for kissing but one designed to instil fear into a man. This was a woman in angry tirade mode. She sat up and, still holding onto my ear, said:

"Too long you go away, I not know where you are, you not write to me, you not phone me. I try to forget but cannot. I try new man but he no good. I try another one but he go away and not come back. Like you, you crazy farang. You marry now? Why you not call me? I'm still here. Where you go? Why you come now? You make me sad again. You have other lady now. Sure you have. So why you come back and what your name this time? One time you say Daniel, next time Dan, then say Mike, next time say Steven. I think you joke. Another time you check in hotel in the name John. I say I prefer call you Kun Look-Lap, mean Mister No Name."

Thankfully, she then let go of my ear, looked away and sat up in bed holding her knees together with her hands. "Why you come?" she asked again, more quietly this time but speaking as if to the opposite wall. I, Kun Look-Lap as she had just called me, watched her reflection in the mirror but found I lacked any suitable words. Instead I rubbed my sore ear.

"Why have you come?" she repeated. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming back?"

Still no words came to me but I put this down to a general weakness with small talk. So, here's another admittance. I am not good at chit-chat. Business discussions yes, but not this sort of conversation. The dreadful silence probably lasted seconds but, to me, Kun Luke-Lap, Mister No Name or whoever I now was, it felt like an hour.

"Oooweee!" she then seemed to say, "Same silence as always. You are a very stupid man. You want some coffee?" And she sprang suddenly from the bed.

"Sorry" I muttered, trying to grab her but only finding thin air. "I think of you a lot, wherever I am. Sorry".

"Ao cafe mai?"

Clearly, she was tiring of communicating in English and fleetingly, I wondered if she was also tired of me. I thought I had better say something.

"No thank you. I have had enough."

"Not beer you stupid man. I asked you if you want coffee?"

"Sorry," I said feeling totally insignificant. Then I waited and watched her in the mirror with a sort of thickness in my throat. I wanted to swallow something but there was nothing there.

"Oooweee! Why you say sorry? Sorry, sorry, sorry - you always say sorry but you still leave me. Why did you come back? Why did you come back?"

She was clearly very upset now but I still had no explanation why I had come. I wondered if I should tell her about a migrating bird theory I had once invented but she was definitely not the right woman for this one. So why had I returned? Privately I knew that I had accepted the job with Virex International largely because it offered a trip back to Bangkok and I wanted to see Anna again. But I couldn't possibly admit that, could I?

I think I may have said, "Umm!" or similar because there was this dreadful silence again. Anna was now watching me in the mirror. I couldn't stand it and glanced away.

"You still do the same business?" she asked, clearly trying to stay calm.

"Yes," I said grabbing a possible excuse as it passed by. But then I spoiled it. "Sort of," I added and felt it necessary to try to touch her shoulder.

"What mean, sort of? What real man says that? Only a man with many names or called Mister Crazy Look-Lap can say thing like that," she said crossly.

"Well, yes," I said rather stupidly but trying hard to think how much I may have told her previously about my work. "I still travel a lot. You know. Live in a suitcase."

Yes, I know, no need to tell me - another flippant remark. It was pathetic and, of course, it failed. So, I tried to improve on it. "I have been to several countries since I was last here." Oh yes, this was much better. I even sounded better.

"Did you go to London?" she asked.

"Yes, for two nights and one day." True.

"I think you have a wife you've not told me about. That's why you not like to tell me real name. I think there is a Mrs Look-Lap you don't want to talk about."

"No, no, no, believe me. You know I'm not married. There is no Mrs Look-Lap or whatever you call me," I said hurriedly. I'm always very quick to confirm my unmarried status to women. Then I continued because I was anxious to regain some authority. "And, anyway you also have two names - one is English the other I can't pronounce. That makes me confused as well."

"Mmm, maybe," she said but as she clearly wasn't going to let that upset her attack, she added, "But you know it's Anna - I like Anna. It's always Anna. Never change." Then she continued with her interrogation. "So, then, why did you come back?"

I looked at her and tried smiling and then, with a passing thought that I was back on the slippery slope again, found myself saying, "I came to see if you were still here".

But she was quick and her voice became instantly louder once again.

"Yes, so now you can see I am here. You see? This is me. I am sitting here. But why you come? You want me for your wife now?"

This was a bit blunt and pointed I thought. But I have heard that this is not at all untypical of Thai women. I let it pass but continued to slide down the slope. "I came to see you. I told you I think about you a lot".

She obviously wasn't going to be treated like this.

"Yes, but I'm sure you didn't come just to see me. Something else brings you here. You too much of a big shot and have some big business." And, with that she got up, tugged at the bed sheet, wrapped it around her middle and went to the bathroom. All I could do was watch her. Unusually, she closed the bathroom door and I heard her lock it.

I sat naked on the bed staring at the bathroom door.

She was just the same as I remembered. Her hair was a bit longer. The cheap gold chain with the impression of a Buddhist monk still hung around her neck. Her jeans were of the same slim fit that I like. They were hanging on the back of the chair. She still wore small brown sandals. They sat, neatly together on the floor by my case. Her underwear had been put carefully underneath her white blouse.

Finally, I heard the toilet being flushed and the door unlocked. She walked purposefully across the room, still covered in the bed sheet, and took out a comb

from her handbag. Then she turned. There was no smile, no tears, no happiness in her eyes. She stared at me. "Why are you here, Mister Look-Lap?"

I still wasn't sure if I liked being called Mister Look-Lap. To be referred to as Mister No-Name felt a little like mockery. Daniel was better. On the other hand, it was perfectly true that I used several aliases from time to time. I held several passports as well but it was all part of my profession. It was useful. Often it was necessary. And yes, I had once been operating as a Stephen Crossman and another time as a Mark Fitzgerald-Spencer - the latter name seemed to fit an investigation I was being paid to carry out on a company selling fake Chinese antiques. But I also knew she was clever with her words and, to be fair, I decided, Look-Lap was not a bad name for someone who kept inventing different names for himself for different reasons. Look-Lap sounded like Luke Lapp. Perhaps I should try it out. I had already used Matthew, Mark and John so Luke would complete the quartet.

But, to get back to her question, why was I here? Whilst she was in the bathroom I had had a few minutes to think about the question, which I knew she would soon repeat. So, I looked at her straight and said, "I still do the same thing as last time."

To be fair, I was trying to make it simple. But it was also very vague because, frankly, she did not know what I did and I should have known better. Anna's lips puckered once more and I knew I was in for another tirade. This one was even longer with hardly a breath taken.

"I do not know what you do. You are a busy man and fly, never stay a long time, always go, come and go. I don't know. You left me last time. I was very sad. Where did you go, I don't know. Last time you had a problem. I know. I tried to help but you said I couldn't. Then you left me. I didn't know where or why you went. You didn't tell me. I worried about you when you went. You said there was a big problem and you had to go. I thought maybe you were a bad man. but I then I thought no, you are too kind in heart, good man. I think someone gave you problem. Why you couldn't tell me, I didn't understand. Sometimes I think of you a lot. Many nights I think where you are and I want you here but that maybe you were with another lady or maybe you have a wife. I don't know. Sometime I get very up-sad. I don't know where you are. Big world out there. Maybe you never come to see me again. So, I think. Try to forget and look for another man. Many men come here, but I not like them. I check some, but not so many. They are no good. I always think of you and where you are, why you don't come to see me. I worry a lot. Perhaps you had died. I think maybe you will never come. But now you are here again. I didn't know what to say when I saw you last night. Why did you come? Did you come to see me? Did you come for business? Why?"

Finally, she stopped and I saw bright, wet eyes. I hate to see upset women, don't you? My manly, protective urges take over and that can be fateful. I have known women do it on purpose. They are a fearful sex. But I myself, felt a little choked now and it was clear I needed to say something meaningful in response. So I said, "Sorry."

With that, her wet eyes shot another frightening glance so I gave a little cough as if preparing to deliver a speech and continued:

"I came here to see you, Anna. I think about you every day. I did not know if you were still there. I thought maybe you had moved somewhere. If you were not there I think I would have had to try to find you. Believe me. I know I left you in a bad way -

do you think I did not feel sad? I was also sad and upset, believe me. You say I am a busy man. I know you do not understand but I had to go. I cannot explain everything to you."

I then found myself staring at her without blinking until my own eyes felt so sore that I then had to blink frantically for a few seconds. Then I continued. "I am not a bad man, Anna. I had some business problems when I was here and I had to go. I went to Malaysia and Singapore and then to Hong Kong. I went to the Middle East - Israel. Then I came back to Malaysia and back to London. I work all the time. No holiday. No rest. Now I come here again. I arrived yesterday afternoon. And what did I do? I came to find you. I know I made you sad and I know that maybe I should not have come to see you but I want to try to say sorry and that I felt very sad and I am sorry and....."

I admit I am useless in very personal, emotionally charged situations. My unnaturally long and private speech, which I regret having mixed with an unnecessary description of a travel schedule, hadn't started too well and it hadn't finish too well either. In the end it had petered out and so I tried looking at her as if pleading for some help. No, I lie. It wasn't 'as if pleading', I was pleading - stop. Anna was staring back at me. Both of us knew that all I had actually said was what she had once called a 'big sorry'. I like the phrase. I have since used it a lot. But how long the silence lasted I do not know. What I do know is that I had a dreadful feeling that she was going to hit me and walk out. But, as you begin to know and understand Anna, you will find her words are far more constructive.

"Do you have a few more minutes to spare me before you rush off again, Mister Luke-Lap?"

CHAPTER 4

Kevin Parker was on the train to London preparing for his talk to what he thought was a small gathering of those interested in Thomas Malthus and human population control. But without being sure of the likely audience or numbers it was proving difficult. His academic's dilemma was whether to pitch it at ideas for direct action to get politicians to do something or whether to stick to the facts and figures.

Kevin had always advocated positive action but waiting for individual Governments to act was, he now knew, utterly pointless. International co-operation was vital for success but few Governments, except perhaps the Chinese with its one family - one child policy, Singapore, or Iran with its mandatory contraception had faced up to it let alone demanded international co-operation. The political will just wasn't there. It was far too risky to open such a bucket of worms when re-election was always the top priority. Dictatorships were a far better system for imposing the will than democracies. Indeed, it was becoming politically incorrect to even talk about reducing population. It infringed basic human rights, it upset the Catholic Church and was often deemed racist even to mention forcefully ending mass economic migration from destitute and overpopulated war-torn countries. The excuses for inaction were endless.

So political action was completely stalled and reasons to sweep the issue under the carpet for future generations to worry about just went on and on. There were even

countries that considered population as a source of political, economic and military strength.

Kevin Parker had become a very angry and impatient man although he did his best to conceal it from friends and found it hard to support democracy as a system when it came to enforcing birth control. He had written extensively on the subject under his screen name of 'Thalmus' and had once hoped the UK might provide a world lead on it but he was sure now it would never happen.

The British branch of the Malthus Society rarely, if ever, met together but normally shared their views online. As website moderator and unelected Chairman of the UK branch, Kevin had only ever been able to organise one full meeting of members in the past and that meeting, held in the back room of a public house in Wolverhampton, had not been the success Kevin had hoped. If the group were to move their radical views forward to lobby government then they clearly needed funds from somewhere. Despite Kevin's efforts, no-one had offered either to donate to the group or pay a monthly membership subscription. And Kevin had even had to pick up the bar tab. Undeterred, Kevin had persevered and three years later he was still at it - if anything more motivated than ever and certainly keener for some direct action.

He sat back in his train seat and put his notes to one side. Despite being the unelected chairman of the UK branch of the Malthus Society, Kevin was unsure where this strange Mr El Badry who he was due to meet stood in relation to the Society. He could well have been a regular reader or even a contributor but because the website only asked for screen names and not anyone's full contact details, there was no way of telling. In fact, Kevin only knew the details of about twelve UK members by their online names and this was only because of the Wolverhampton meeting.

But this Mr El Badry could also have been based somewhere outside the UK because there were many other affiliated groups that Kevin monitored - not least the followers of the American Professor, Paul R Ehrlich. Kevin had also lectured on Ehrlich but Thomas Malthus had preceded Ehrlich by two hundred years and was British. Malthus was the one who had set the ball in motion. But knowing that there were thousands of people out there sharing his views was what Kevin found so encouraging.

Years of lecturing students first thing on a Monday morning had taught him the need to get people's attention right from the start and he wanted to cover as much as possible - conflict over food and water supplies, the misery of war and sickness, economic migration and mass unemployment in the west. He wanted to offer quotes from the great Robert Wallace - the "earth would be overstocked and become unable to support its numerous inhabitants." or, as his even greater hero Thomas Malthus had put it, "the germs of existence contained in this spot of earth, with ample food, and ample room to expand in, would fill millions of worlds, in the course of a few thousand years."

Thomas Malthus a British clergyman and economist had published "An Essay on the Principles of Population" in 1798. Population, when unchecked, he proposed, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increased only in an arithmetical ratio. Malthus outlined the idea of "positive checks" and "preventative checks" on population. Disease, war, disaster and famine were factors that Malthus considered

to increase the death rate. "Preventative checks" were factors that Malthus believed to affect the birth rate such as moral restraint, abstinence and birth control. He predicted that only "positive checks" on exponential population growth would ultimately save humanity from itself. Without these checks, human misery was an "absolute necessary consequence."

Anger and impatience was what had led Kevin to track down the many hundreds of groups with similar opinions on population control dotted across the world. He had found them in North America, South America, right across Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Far East, in Japan and in Australia. Many were closeted individuals operating from bedrooms, others were far better organised. Kevin's list of contacts now ran to thousands.

There was the German group that operated from somewhere in Cologne with a membership claimed to be in the hundreds. Ausser Kontrolle (Out of Control) still advocated extermination of certain ethnic groups that did not match up to a long list of criteria they had published. Moslems were high on this list due, according to Ausser Kontrolle, to "their unwillingness to move their culture forward from where it had stagnated since the hay-day of Islamic influence on science and education."

Then there was his Indian group, his Indonesian Group and a Singapore Group that advocated a policy of setting IQ tests with those not reaching the required level being left to fend for themselves. There was the Spanish Group, the Italian group and a very low profile South African group with similar views to Ausser Kontrolle.

But Kevin's favourite group was the Nigerian one. Tunje Fayinka, also a college lecturer in Sociology, ran the group from his flat in Barnet, north London. Tunje believed that even the current population of Nigeria of some 166 million - a figure expected to reach 390 million by 2050 - was already totally unsustainable. Increasing ethnic and religious conflict was already proof of the need to reduce the population back to at least the 45.2 million figure it stood at in 1960.

Kevin and Tunje had a lot in common. They were, in fact, good friends and verbal sparring partners. But Tunje had learned to be far more careful with what he said in public or wrote online.

"Big Brother is always watching, Kevin. Go careful. The least you should do is keep the laptop hidden some place where MI6 won't go looking. Alternatively, just appear to be an innocent nutcase."

Until then, Kevin had not thought very much about security.

With good evidence, Kevin Parker knew that his UK Malthus Society website had become a genuine focal point for similar groups and he was proud of all that he had done to achieve that. Kevin now wanted to see some results for all his efforts, but not at any cost.

He sat back as the train rolled into Reading Station and picked up his copy of the Guardian. He read the headlines once again and then dropped the newspaper back on the adjacent, empty seat. Buying a Guardian had become a habit although he rarely read it properly these days. The newspaper was another English institution he now disliked because of the furore that had erupted amongst indignant would-be mothers attending fertility clinics and wealthy politicians with four children after his open letter to the Editor was published. Indeed, he had, afterwards, been summoned to meet the University Departments' Professor for an explanation.

But Kevin had personal experience of poor living conditions and overcrowding. As the oldest sibling of eleven brought up on a housing estate in Liverpool he had seen and felt the consequences. His father had left soon after Kevin was born and his ten brothers and sisters had ten different fathers.

Castration or mass sterilisation had once been an attractive and popular idea put on the Malthus Society website and Kevin, with Tunje Fayinka's help, had become an expert on access to water supplies in target countries just in case an opportunity arose. But what was really needed was action on an international scale. A world war with nuclear weapons might have helped but was too indiscriminate. An epidemic of biblical proportions had possibilities but science moved so fast these days that treatments almost always became available before they had any real effect. Mass famine brought on by essential crops like rice and wheat being ruined by widespread resistance to pesticide was another idea. Kevin had been running out of new, practical ideas until, that is, he reached the Chelsea apartment of Mr El Badry

Larry Brown had been working for the American Embassy in Nigeria for less than six weeks and the cultural shock of life outside its confines had more than lived up to his expectations. But he had come for the interest more than career progression so he was more than ready to do whatever was needed. And, if he found he didn't like the job, he'd just move on somewhere else.

As a New York doctor, who had quickly tired of the daily mix of coughs, colds and backache, Larry had decided to do some overseas volunteering. He went first to Chile and then to Kenya and it was in Nairobi that he was asked if he was interested in looking at the Nigerian health system with a view to - as it eventually explained in his new job description - "assisting American companies to understand how best to win lucrative contracts in the provision of management services. medical supplies and medical equipment."

Larry had been unsure about taking the job at first but the thought of combining it with some travelling around Nigeria and possibly elsewhere on expenses had swung it. He had spent the first few days in Lagos and, if it not been for the hotel he'd been staying at, wasn't sure he if he would have survived the job for long. But the new apartment he now had was making it bearable and he was also starting to make the most of his status with the American Embassy.

It was this status that helped him make the appointment at the Kano State Government office to ask about the closed Kofi Clinic. He was met by a State official whose own status wasn't so well defined.

"Our police don't have time to look for missing Doctors, Doctor Brown," the man said. "More important to our police and security forces is to deal with those murderous Islamist thugs, Boko Haram, who are threatening to disturb our peace."

The man had then seen an opportunity for a joke. He laughed.

"You need to watch out Doctor Brown. They don't like Westerners, especially Americans and in particular black Americans who they think have gone native."

"But I heard there were over one hundred deaths from this disease," said Larry.

The official shrugged. "We had a hundred die in a bomb blast a month ago."

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