

Chapter One

31 October 1956

‘The Interplanetary Parliament.’ Mr Heddon nodded emphatically.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Behind him, Detective Inspector Stratton heard Feather the duty sergeant trying, unconvincingly, to turn a laugh into a cough.

‘The Interplanetary Parliament,’ Heddon repeated, apparently oblivious to the barely smothered snorts of mirth coming from behind the desk. Small, dapper and bright-eyed, he was standing in the middle of the West End Central police station entrance hall with an alert and sprightly bearing that made Stratton think of a Jack Russell standing on its hind legs. He tried vainly to suppress an image of the little chap jumping head-first through a hoop with a ruff around his neck as Heddon continued, ‘I felt it would be best to alert the proper authorities, to put things on an emergency footing – after all, we can’t be caught on the hop, can we?’

‘And this is because,’ said Stratton carefully, ‘you have received information from an alien being about a war between different planets.’

‘That’s right. The war is imminent. The being came from Venus. His name is Master Maitreya. I was cleaning my teeth at the time. It gave me quite a turn, I can tell you.’

‘I imagine it would,’ said Stratton. ‘Was there anyone with you?’

Heddon shook his head. ‘I live alone.’ I’m not bloody surprised, thought Stratton.

‘Obviously,’ Heddon continued, ‘the United Nations will also need to be told.’

‘I’m not sure about that, sir.’ Stratton fought back an image of a fleet of flying saucers like upside-down soup bowls with little green men peering from their portholes and wondered why on earth he was participating in such a ridiculous conversation. ‘I mean, the UN are wonderful in theory, but in practice... I mean, they don’t seem to be doing much good in Hungary, do they?’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Heddon, to the accompaniment of a choked-off explosion of laughter from Feather, ‘they do need to be informed. I trust,’ he added, ‘that you – all of you – will be treating this matter with the utmost seriousness.’

‘We’ll do our best, sir,’ said Stratton.

‘Good. Should I receive any more communications from Venus, I shall let you know immediately.’ Turning on his heel, the little man trotted out of the station.

Stratton stared after him. ‘I hope it keeps fine for you,’ he murmured. Turning to Feather, he added more loudly, ‘Fat lot of help you were.’

‘Sorry, sir.’ Feather, who was big, pink and jolly, sounded anything but apologetic. ‘Got a message from you from DCI Lamb. Urgent – wants you to see him as soon as possible. I’ll speak to the United Nations in the meantime, shall I? Tell them the Martians have arrived?’

‘Ha, bloody ha.’

‘Seriously, though.’ Feather shook his head, suddenly deflated. ‘I dunno why he bothered. Never mind the Martians – any minute now, we’ll all be blown to buggery by a bunch of idiot politicians with H-bombs.’

DCI Lamb had softened perceptibly towards Stratton in the last few years. Stratton thought that while this may have been partially due to the fact that his superior was soon to retire and so was, to a certain extent, marking time, the change of attitude dated from three years earlier, when, as the result of an investigation in which he’d taken a hand, an innocent man had been hanged. When the real criminal was caught, the case had received a great deal of bad publicity which, as the resulting judicial inquiry was deemed a whitewash, had never, entirely, gone away. Lamb had never said as much, but Stratton knew that it had shaken his superior deeply. That said, he still looked like George Formby, still had the irritating habit of jabbing his fore-finger on the desk for emphasis, still wanted everything done five minutes ago, and his recent attempts at chumminess and jocularity were buttock-clenchingly excruciating. This time, though, the interview was brief. ‘What kept you?’

‘Chap came in to report a visitation from the planet Venus, sir. Apparently, we’re to have a war of the worlds. Took a few minutes to get rid of him.’

Lamb shook his head in bewilderment. ‘Everyone seems to think the world’s coming to an end. But at least that sort are harmless, which is’ – he glanced downwards and to one side and Stratton, following his gaze, saw that it was directed at a newspaper sticking out of the wastepaper bin – ‘more than you can say for the Soviets. Anyway,’ Lamb cleared his throat, ‘we’ve got a suspicious death in Flaxman Court. It’s a chap – described as a student, although he seems to have been a bit old for it. Found in his room. Name of Jeremy Lloyd. You and Collins-‘

‘He’s still on leave, sir.’ Detective Sergeant Collins had been rushed to hospital with what turned out to be a burst appendix three days before and Stratton, who’d been to see him, doubted he’d be back any time soon.

‘Yes, of course. Poor chap...’ Lamb stared expectantly at Stratton for a moment, as if hoping he might pull a brand new DS from a pocket in the manner of a conjurer producing a rabbit from a hat, then said, ‘Well, take PC Canning with you, then. The death was reported by the landlady, a Mrs...’ Lamb paused to consult his notes, ‘Mrs Jean Linder. She was the one who found him. Says he looks as if he’s been stabbed, so we’d better get McNally to

him before he's moved. We've been onto Fingerprints, and the photographer's on the way... Let's just hope it's not those wretched Teddy boys making their presence felt. Now that really is a sign that something's wrong – they've no respect for anything.'

Standing on the steps of West End Central, Stratton stared upwards. Remembering what Feather had said about the H-bomb, he imagined the roiling iron-dark winter sky exploding, spread-eagled, into a mushroom cloud. He thought of the Pathe newsreels he'd seen of the tests at Bikini Atoll, suspended skeins of cloud like the skirts of a gigantic ballerina, the air all around dying in the sunless glare... What would be left of England then? Cockroaches and tyres?

(c) Laura Wilson, 2012