

# 3

‘The agent called. They are picking us up at four o’clock.’

‘Ooh, how exciting.’

‘Yeah, isn’t it.’

‘They know we have a lot of bags, I mean, it won’t be a problem will it?’

‘No, no he’s bringing a minibus, so it won’t be a problem.’

‘And they’ll take us straight to the port and sort out our passports and everything?’

‘I s’pose so, I didn’t ask. He didn’t speak very good English and, you know, it’s hard on the telephone. I’m sure it’ll be alright though.’

‘Ok, well we’ve got a little while, shall I take you to that book shop I found with the really bad science fiction novels in it?’

‘Yeah, we could do with some more research material for the journey.’ Seth King took Ruby Wells’ hand the pair stepped out of their hotel and headed up along Fuzhou Street towards the centre of Shanghai. Seth gave Ruby’s hand a little squeeze, he was really looking forward to the voyage. Ruby’s creased forehead, however, betrayed her silent concern about the next few weeks.

‘Why are we stopping here?’

‘I don’t know Ruby, why don’t you ask the driver?’

‘He doesn’t speak fucking English, you know that.’

‘Well I don’t know, I’m going to get something to eat.’

Seth got out of the minibus and headed towards the woman grilling baby octopus and tofu outside a school. Chinese children walked past staring at Ruby, many holding skewers of barbecued food. She sighed and slid open the window and watched the heavy traffic crawl past.

The pair had bought a couple of new books for the voyage and had returned to their hotel to find the man and the minibus waiting for them. Having driven for half an hour through Shanghai the driver had suddenly pulled up outside some official looking building. Ruby craned her neck to look at the sign again, but the Cantonese characters still gave her no clues. The driver had got out ages ago and was reclining on the back seat of a black Mercedes parked nearby. She could see his legs poking out of the door and the smoke wafting out.

They had been picked up at the right time, by a man holding a sign with their names misspelled on it. Then, they had followed the ring road out of Shanghai towards the port but had turned off here. Ruby was running this all through in her mind. So we must be ok, she thought and retied her short brown ponytail for the thirtieth time that day and ran her cold damp palms across her skinny thighs. But now they had been parked here for over an hour and it was nearly dark. A man approached her from the pavement opposite and pulled some Russian binoculars from his bag.

‘Looky looky,’ he said quietly, and she shook her head.

‘You like watch?’ He pulled what looked like a silver Rolex from his pocket.

‘No. I don’t want a watch.’

Seth got in beside her and handed her a skewer of baby octopus. ‘What you got?’ he said to the man at the window.

‘Seth!’ Ruby cringed. ‘You’ll just wind him up, you know you don’t want anything.’

‘Its funny.’ Another man appeared at his side, attracted by the positive signs Seth was giving the first man. He was selling the same goods and Seth continued to tease them offering them ridiculous money and pretending the watch wasn’t working. Ruby looked away and ate her octopus. Another minibus arrived and parked alongside them and the men moved over to it. A man got out of the passenger seat and put his head through the window of their van.

‘Passports.’

‘What?’ said Ruby.

‘I need your passports. I’m the agent.’

‘Give him your passport Ruby,’ said Seth.

The man took them and then disappeared inside the official building. Ruby looked aghast. The driver got back in and turned to face them. Seth wiped the octopus juice away from his bristly chin and grinned at the driver. Seth’s face had a number of deep wrinkles around his slightly sunken tired looking eyes which made him look older than thirty.

‘Three people now. No room.’

‘Someone else is coming with us?’ asked Seth

‘Three people now.’

‘I think that means someone is joining us Seth, we’d better move some of our stuff.’ They climbed into the seat behind dragging one of their heavy bags with them. The door then slid open and an pensionable older woman of stared in. Ruby tied her ponytail again.

‘Oh hello. I’m coming too,’ said the woman in a shrilling voice that seemed to contain a jarring combination of a North of England and a New World accent . The woman stepped inside lugging two enormous suitcases and a massive plastic bag. Seth reached over and pulled them inside the minibus. ‘Isn’t this exciting?’ she said as she craned her neck round to look at them from the seat in front. Lots thin fluffy blond grey hair sat around her shoulders looking like hay that had been left outdoors for too many seasons. It would have made a perfect place for a field mouse nest.

‘Yes,’ said Seth. It had never occurred to him or Ruby that there might be another passenger on board. They had always imagined their voyage to be endless days of just them and the crew. Absorbed in their work they would share the ship with no one. They would sit on deck, the wind in their hair, feeling daring and courageous for being at sea for weeks. Of course, seeing Margaret McKlusky sitting there in front of them they felt silly that they had never considered that they wouldn’t be alone. It might be the first time for them, but of course people travel this way all the time.

‘This is my first time you know,’ the woman proudly

announced. 'Where do we go now?'

'To the ship, I expect,' said Seth as he patted Ruby's knee. The agent got into the front seat and the minibus pulled off edging its way aggressively through the heavy traffic and up onto to the ring road. They drove for only twenty or so minutes and then made a left off the road and followed a large truck into the docks and along an avenue made up of huge forty foot long shipping containers stacked five high. At the end stood the ship, lit up from the lights on the harbour and the many tiny orange lights on the ship itself. As the minibus pulled up Seth and Ruby could see that there were lots of people queuing on the gangplank and a heated discussion taking place. Ruby could make out a man in a safety jacket and hat with a clipboard who seemed to be holding them up. They got out of the minibus. They were too close to be able to see the whole ship, but it looked smaller than she imagined.

'We'll just wait here,' said the agent.

'Sweetie?' asked Margaret holding a large plastic bag full of brightly coloured sticky sweets.

'No thanks,' said Seth.

'Oh, I will,' said Ruby. 'I'm hungry, I wonder if they'll give us any dinner tonight?'

'Well, they ought to, I mean, we are paying passengers,' trilled the older lady.

'Yes, but we are passengers on a cargo ship. The cargo is the priority and I imagine that they are pretty busy when they are in port.'

'Well,' the lady pursed her thin lips. 'They had better feed me, otherwise I'll complain. Sweetie, hello, neehow, sweetie,' but the agent ignored her.

'We haven't introduced ourselves,' said Seth. 'I'm Seth King and this Ruby Wells.'

The lady pulled a tight smile, filling the sides of her face with a crazy pavement pattern of fine lines, but neglected to tell them her name was Margaret McKlusky.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Ruby. 'Where are you going to?'

'New Zealand of course.'

'Well the ship stops in other places you know. South Korea and Japan.'

‘Oh does it? I didn’t know, no-one told me. Don’t like Japan, they’ve got big heads and short bodies.’ Seth turned away and wandered off and Ruby sucked her sweet, trying to contain her smile.

‘So, you are Australian?’ asked the chief officer. He was standing at the end of the gang plank wearing a safety jacket and helmet and carrying a clipboard. He smiled widely displaying his white teeth and particularly healthy salmon pink gums to them. He looked at the short, slightly lardy, fair haired man and the taller pale woman who were standing in front of him. They seemed awfully untidy. The woman had a number of escaped strands of damp hair plastered across on her acne scared forehead. Her shoulders rolled forward and gave her a slightly stooped posture creating the impression of an old lady, not a woman of twenty nine. Besides her poor complexion, limp hair and bad posture, she had some elements of beauty. Her features were fine, a thin elegant nose just on the right side of long, a nicely sculpted chin beneath the occasional angry red pimple, and the most enchanting deep brown almond shaped eyes . The man clearly hadn’t shaved for a few days with stubble growing patchily across his cheeks and down his neck. A thin, cheap looking white tee shirt stretched slightly across the beginnings of a paunch and what looked like the remains of lunch created an orange medallion down the front.

‘Yes,’ Ruby and Seth answered together.

‘Well, welcome on board. Sorry about the delaying, It was the Chinese customs officials. The agent has been giving the captain your passports and we will be keeping them whilst you are on board. Please be signing your names here to say you have made the boarding and the steward will shower you your cabin. Welcome, welcome.’

‘What’s his accent?’ whispered Ruby to Seth as they walked inside the ship.

‘I’m not sure, Scandinavian I think. Was he looking at my crotch? Oh, the bags...’

‘I have them, don’t worry.’ They both turned to see a

compact, dark chestnut tanned, man carrying all three. Seeing their faces he added, 'Don't worry, they're not heavy.'

'No, please, I insist,' said Seth. 'I don't want to be any trouble,' and he lifted the bags from able bodied seaman Millian Tondolambung's broad shoulders.

'I've got heavy bags, you can help me,' called Margaret as Ruby and Seth disappeared into the ship after the steward.

'Of course madam, of course,' said the seaman as he hurried over.

The cabin was small but Ruby and Seth thought it was wonderful. They had three windows, one starboard and two aft. There were two single beds that lay head to toe, which was a bit of a shame, but a nice bathroom, big cupboards where they could keep all their equipment and a large table with two chairs and a lamp, perfect for all the work they wanted to do. Seth grabbed Ruby and pulled her towards him. 'I can't believe it. We are actually here.'

'I know. The cabin's not bad is it?'

'It's great, I'll be fine here for the next four weeks.' They started to unpack.

'Carefully of that bag...' instructed Margaret. But it was too late.

'Ow,' yelled Millian.

'It's got my knitting in it.'

Millian put it in the floor.

'No don't put it there, put it on the bed.'

Millian placed it on the bed.

'The bed's not very big is it?'

'Well, madam, I believe that this is a single room. But you'll have to ask the steward about such things.'

'Well I might not always be by myself,' said Margaret confidently.

'The steward will be here in a minute,' Millian said and left hastily.

There was a knock at Ruby and Seth's door. 'Hello?'

said Ruby. The person knocked again and Ruby opened the door. A tall, clean shaven man, in slacks and a short sleeved shirt stood in the corridor.

‘Good evening madam. I am the master, Captain Nemo. Welcome aboard the Divine Vessel.’ He spoke with a North African accent, his voice low and soft.

Ruby was a little taken aback at the formalness of his greeting. She had been hoping that the captain would be wearing a white uniform as she found such things very attractive. In fact she had seen some Indian navel crew in such uniforms in the markets in Shanghai and they had fuelled a few late night fantasies she had had by herself in the hotel.

‘Hello, pleased to meet you. I’m Ruby.’ Her voice sounded small, they shook hands.

‘May I come in?’

‘Yes, yes of course.’ The Master sat at the table. He had an unusual face. His skin was incredibly smooth and deeply tanned, his eyes were slanted upwards at the outer edges and his chin was quite pointed making him look rather cat like. He spoke slowly as he went through the formalities of boarding the ship with them, as if speaking in English was both boring and difficult, and that he had something else on his mind. The ship was already six days late but he informed them that this was perfectly normal and, although they would be very well looked after, the ship was always at the mercy of the weather, the tides and the cargo. This suited them though, they had not wanted to be on a cruise or tour. It was essential for their work that they were left alone, and they were keen to submit to the routine of the ship and to their work. They couldn’t wait.

‘Oh and please remember. If there is anything wrong please speak directly to me. I am responsible for you and I want to know if there are any problems, anything at all. You are very welcome here. I sincerely hope that you have a very pleasant voyage with us, Goodnight.’

‘Oh, er...Captain Nemo...’ called Ruby awkwardly, wondering if she was using the right terminology.

‘Yes.’

‘Are there any more passengers joining the ship in

Shanghai, apart from the older lady we have already met?’

‘No. There are four new crew members joining, Chinese. But they’ll join late tonight and their cabins are on the deck below, so you’ll not be waken.’ Captain Nemo left.

Later that evening the steward brought Seth and Ruby bread, cheese, ham and tea. He said he’d show them around the ship tomorrow and would collect them at seven thirty for breakfast. They put the lights out at around midnight and Seth fell fast asleep.

Ruby couldn’t drop off though, Seth’s snoring was getting louder and she always found it difficult to sleep in a strange place, and for her the ship was very strange. She was excited but at the same time terribly apprehensive about the next four weeks. Never a good traveller, the sounds of the boat set her mind thinking about the possibility of sinking, worrying especially about storms and being more than a little concerned that she might get sea sick. She got up in the dark, leaving the lights off so as not to wake Seth, and pulled back the curtain. Outside there was still a lot of activity, all illuminated by the huge spotlights on the harbour side. Massive refrigerated containers were being loaded onto the ship and a van had just pulled up. Four Chinese men with bags and suitcases got out and walked towards the ship.

Wow, thought Ruby, China today and South Korea tomorrow. I hope it’s not bad weather, and she climbed back into bed.