

5

On the bridge of the Celeste Marie the captain was regretting his thoughts about bad omens as he looked out of the ship's windscreen. "Number one, what do you make of that?" he asked.

"It's a fog bank captain."

"And the luminescent green shimmer around the edge of it?"

"Refracted light from the sun. Just because we're in the legendary Bermuda Triangle, it doesn't mean that every fog bank is ominous."

"What's our latest position on the chart?"

"North of the Dominican Republic, close to the Navidad Bank," the first mate reported.

"So, in your professional opinion this fog bank is just a normal meteorological phenomena?" the captain continued.

"Yes sir. The green luminescence is just an optical illusion. Nothing at all to worry about."

Continuing on its previous course towards the US Virgin Islands, the Celeste Marie approached the fog bank at a steady twelve knots. The closer the cruise ship approached, the more eerie the wisps appeared. The effects of superstition hadn't only been applied to their sense of sight, the captain and crew thought they could hear a bubbling sound and the air definitely smelt wrong as well. As the bows of the ship pierced the fog wall the compass needle started to spin furiously, as if it was a propeller on an aeroplane and the radio receiver started to crackle badly.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is the Celeste Marie. Our compass has gone haywire. Can anybody hear us out..." The radio started to cut out intermittently. "... triangle ... light ... help ... saucer ..." was all that followed, before the signal finally died.

By the time the captain manoeuvred the ship onto a different course, they'd been completely enveloped by the fog bank, and the intense smell was starting to irritate their sinuses. The smell wasn't the only strange thing about the fog. It also felt rather strange. Not the physical feeling, that was still the same dewy softness of ordinary fog. This fog appeared to affect their consciousness as one by one the crew and passengers felt very light headed and confused.

"Let me see if I've got this right. An American registered ship, while cruising the Caribbean, disappears without trace and nobody knows where it is. Is that accurate so far?" President Ken Adie of the United States was talking on the telephone with the CIA chief at Langley.

"Yes Mr President. Nobody knows where she is at this precise moment but we've got some ideas."

"Do they include this Bermuda Triangle crap that's starting to float around the white house?"

"No Mr President, we have sound scientific theories, not fanciful stories."

"Good, because you know what happened to the last president who believed in flying saucers."

"We've ignored the reference to saucer in the captain's last transmission and assumed that he just wanted a cup of coffee."

"Well done. So what is your completely scientific theory then?"

"Well Mr President, we have a selection for you to chose from. Do you want to avoid a war or not?"

"A theory that doesn't involve declaring war would be preferable at this moment in time."

"OK, that rules out sinking by a Russian submarine and bombing by Iraqi terrorists."

Similar to some police forces, the international intelligence community worked in reverse. First they found a plausible reason (or scapegoat) that suited the situation at hand, then they published the facts which agreed with it and conveniently lost the ones that were totally contradictory to their theory. With luck an outcome of dubious accuracy would then be accepted as conclusive facts and the real reason would never need to be known.

"I wouldn't mind an excuse for the navy to nose around the Caribbean Islands for a little bit though," the president suggested.

"We'll drop the iceberg theory and the old favourite of inadequate maintenance by the shipping line then. Can you give me thirty minutes to fine-tune a couple of other ideas we have cooking?"

"No problem," the president of the United States replied, hanging up the phone only for it to immediately ring again.

"Mr President, I have the Queen of England on the line."

"Put her through."

Within seconds Queen Eleanor III was talking to the US President about Roy's disappearance with the Celeste Marie.

"Mr President, I understand that a Caribbean cruise ship has disappeared off the Dominican Republic. Is that correct?"

"Yes your majesty, we've lost radio contact with one of our ships but we're still determining the reason for its disappearance. What may I ask is Britain's interest in this matter, I was led to believe that the crew and passengers were all American."

"Not all I'm afraid Mr President. There are three British citizens onboard. My ex-daughter-in-law, her companion, and a knight of the realm. As you can see this matter is rather personal to me."

"I was under the impression that you didn't get on with your ex-daughter-in-law. Is that not so?"

"It's not her I'm concerned about. I knighted a little man who helped me in Antarctica, and now he's onboard your missing ship. I would appreciate a call when you have any news of their whereabouts," she hung up the phone after receiving that assurance.

Ten minutes later I B Nowsey, head of the CIA, was back on the line with his solution to the problem.

"How about piracy on the high seas for an explanation and we believe that they've taken their captives to one of the Caribbean Island. In the old days it gave us excuse enough to search the area irrespective of sovereign territory. It should suffice, even in this day and age."

"Well done I B. Piracy on the high seas indeed. I can't think of a better idea for searching every little island in the Caribbean chain."

At Buckingham Palace the Queen was in a quandary. On the one hand she wanted to help Roy in whatever predicament he'd got himself into this time, while on the other, she would prefer not to be involved in finding Fungy.

"Sorry your majesty, I don't think a personal family crisis should involve M.I.5." Lion was trying to wheedle out of any activity on his department's behalf. "It's an American ship and predominantly American passengers. Not really the province of British military intelligence."

"What about the three British citizens onboard. Doesn't that make it your business?"

"A pit bull terrier and a poodle go missing and M.I.5. are expected to drop everything and go looking for them. I'm afraid we have more pressing duties your majesty."

Lion had obviously been to the Emerald City and obtained some courage but unfortunately the Queen had been there before him and had become considerable more assertive since Roy had rescued her from Antarctica.

"I take it you have your M.I.5. identity-badge on you?" the Queen asked Lion and received a grunt to indicate the affirmative. "Then if you look in the corner, you'll see a royal crest, my crest. If you don't like your present position, I can always arrange for a replacement head of M.I.5."

The desired effect had been achieved and in less than ten minutes the cogs in the lumbering brain of British military intelligence were whirring like a dream. The disappearance of the ship after leaving Turks Island had meant involving the governor of the former British colony and no stone was left unturned. In no time at all Lion's desk was starting to fill up with reports from outlying agents.

The world tabloid presses were having a heyday as well, and The Daily Global wasn't being left behind. The fact that her little brother had got himself lost again hadn't stopped Sadie from printing a fanciful account of the possible outcome of this fated ship. Theories of alien abduction of the entire ship's complement had been foremost in the US news, but the more restrained British press had predominantly led with the possibility of a terrorist bombing or an accident involving the US Navy.

Nobody was interested in the White House's official theory of piracy on the high seas, except as a by-line about the president's mental well-being. Sadie had even included an 'on the scene' quote from Roy. The fact that he wasn't contactable hadn't deterred her in the slightest.

"What if they question us about our source of information?" the assistant editor had argued.

"All we have to do is get to Roy first when they eventually find the ship, then feed him the lines we've just printed. No problem."

"Are you sure the psychological warfare department of the MoD. aren't paying you a retainer? Your disregard for facts, in favour of what you can get away with, reminds me a lot of their tactics," the assistant editor was starting to feel brave again. "Anyway, aren't you concerned about the fate of your little brother?"

"I've given up being concerned about his welfare. He always seems to come out smelling of roses at the end of the day anyway. Look what happened last time; he even got himself a knighthood. What I am worried about though is how we're going to ensure that we're the first to see him, when they do find him. I think maybe that you should go to the Turks Islands to meet him."

"And what if they take him somewhere else? I'm quite happy being here in London and what's more, who would you get to stand in for Ed if I'm not here?"

After the hospitalisation of Sadie's fiancé Edward Rooter, the assistant editor, under threat of a fate worse than death, had been required to substitute for him in providing sexual favours to Sadie. A liaison with Sadie may have been regarded in the Daily Global circles as a fate worse than death itself, but to refuse would have been a fate worse than a fate worse than death, so consequently the assistant editor had capitulated (or was it copulated (or maybe it was even both)).

"Good point. You're off the hook this time but they may be letting Ed out on weekend leave soon. He's out of intensive therapy now and into an open ward. Whether he's still physically capable or not remains to be seen."

"So we can dispense with the idea of sending someone to the Caribbean then?"

"No, we still need to cover all the options. What are the young war reporters up to at the moment?"

"With the United Nation's success in obtaining relative world peace. The war reporters have been reassigned to cover football matches. Remarkably dramatic coverage as well from what I've seen."

"In that case we can reassign half of them to Caribbean duties. I don't imagine they'll object too much if it means sitting on a beach waiting for news of the Celeste Marie. One reporter for each group of islands should suffice and I want them all in telephone communication with this office," Sadie ordered, showing her knack for organisation together with an aptitude for leadership.

Her leadership skill compared well to that of Boadicea. Both were feared by their troops and Sadie was more than capable of rallying the staff of a small newspaper. To date her aspirations hadn't inclined towards politics and the country had been saved another female dictatorial leader. Boadicea could safely hold on to her gold medal in that respect, as the only recent challenger had fallen at the last fence and been placated with Lady status.

In the New York offices of the F&O Line bookings for future sailing's on sister ships to the Celeste Marie had halted, as the American public acted in its usual headless chicken manner. Shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted was a common state of affairs in America and many companies with previously untarnished reputations had folded because of public reaction to an act of god. The principal roughly went along the lines of, if one of an airline's planes was struck by lightning, then don't fly with that company ever again, because it will happen to all their other planes as well. Would anybody ever understand the American mentality?

Leading newspapers vied for readership by competing to assign blame for the disappearance. The less reputable papers laid the blame squarely at the US government's feet, for not ensuring that the military had alien detectors in their arsenal. The more up market newspapers had obtained transcripts of the last radio transmission of the Celeste Marie. Their headlines were broadly based around the captain's use of the word 'saucer' before the radio signal died. Broadly being the operative word because artistic licence had been used with finesse and flair.

Polly Harrdon was mobbed by reporters in Nashville about her hear miss with what had been called a disaster. Her departure from the fated ship, along with ex-president Nicksom, at its last port of call had been regarded as a miracle and religious leaders were saying that divine intervention had been the cause. The fact that Mojay Stiffsem had remained onboard had only reinforced their views on the subject.

The fallen stars of stage and screen had warranted a smaller amount of column inches and the money lords of Wall Street fame had only been featured in the financial press, the general press being too full with a full frontal photograph of Polly Harrdon filling most of the front page. Ex-president Nicksom hadn't even made one line in even the local newspaper of his hometown; in fact his name hadn't even cropped up in conversation on the matter. To the American people he was forgotten and ancient history.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico the US Extra-terrestrial Welcoming Committee had just arrived from their regular base in Nevada, the world-renowned site for UFO sightings. (The largest secret aircraft testing facility in the US being next door obviously didn't explain any of the UFOs in the slightest). The committee had been set-up to extend an invitation to visiting alien life forms to make friendly contact with us and in particular the USA

Some members of the committee had laid out a massive banner on the beach and staked it to the ground. From 30,000 feet you could read the message of 'Come in peace'. Providing the visiting extra-terrestrials with an Alien-American dictionary had presented a slight problem as nobody knew how to write or speak alien. In the end it was decided that as the United States was obviously the most important country on earth (their own opinion obviously) and that the majority of alien sightings had been recorded in the USA (more gullible or psychotic people per head of population {just look at the psychiatrist's waiting lists}) therefore any self respecting alien would learn American before coming to earth.

Puerto Rico had been chosen as the welcome site partly because of its proximity to the last known position of the Celeste Marie but mainly because it had a large enough Mc Doggies for them to take the aliens to dinner at. Why any life form purportedly of higher intelligence than humans, would want to eat anything from Mc Doggies was never taken into consideration and the welcoming banquet of mega-quadruple cheeseburgers with all the trimmings was being prepared.

Americans were descending in hundreds on the Puerto Rican capital of San Juan for the alien watching party that had started to form there. The standard American response to any kind of disaster was to run there as fast as possible in order to have a look. Nobody really wanted to be left out but luckily full coverage on the television news channels, as well as the desire to stay at work making as much money as possible, kept most Americans in the USA.

C.N.T. Television had already set up a satellite transmitter on the roof of the largest hotel in town and the whole penthouse floor had been hired for the following weeks. The airport was a hive of activity as reporters from the four corners of the globe arrived by the minute, the Daily Global reporter amongst them. It was looking like being a massive party and the tourist industry of Puerto Rico wasn't complaining in the slightest, as a brisk trade ensued.