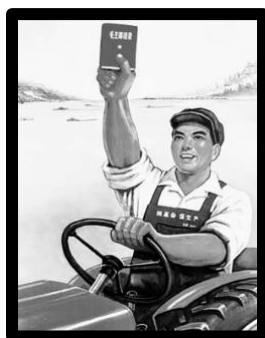


A Chinese Odyssey by Axel Forrester

Chapter One

July 2010 St Ives, Cornwall



I was at home, sitting in my favourite chair, thinking about my first photo assignment outside of Cornwall. I'd be away for three weeks, but it was good money. Katie would be pleased for me, wouldn't she? I'd just have to find the right way to bring it up.

Katie was working in the same room, on her laptop. Ariel came crashing through the front door. It slammed shut in the backdraft. She tossed her school bag on the floor.

'Nee HOW!' she called out at the top of her lungs, hands on hips. She then took the stairs up to her room, two at a time.

Katie scratched her nose and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The summer sun had lightened it already.

'Ariel? Come back here! What did you just say?'

I headed for the kitchen.

'I'll start some dinner,' I said over my shoulder, glad to disappear.

It was my night to cook.

'Hold on.' Katie stood up and went to the stairs. 'Ariel?' she called up.

'Nothing! It was nothing!' came our daughter's voice from above.

Katie fixed her eyes on me. 'What's going on?'

I raised my shoulders and dropped them again, then stared at the floorboards of our old house. Katie inherited it from her mother. Our cat, Cassandra, also inherited, was eyeing me with suspicion. She started up her low cat growling.

'Pasta? Or shall I make a big salad? It's getting warmish again, isn't it?'

'You're stalling.'

‘Right. Well, I can make a lentil stew. Would you prefer that? Something hot?’

‘Ariel?’ She called upstairs again. ‘Come down here, please.’

‘I’ll get started chopping—’

‘Not so fast. Since when, do *you* start making dinner at 3:30?’

Katie had her arms crossed. Cassandra’s tail was swishing back and forth, menacingly. Her eyes were green slits.

Ariel came tumbling down the stairs. She was practicing her rolls from gym class. Impressively, she landed on her feet.

‘Ta-da!’ she cried, arms out wide.

I clapped wildly.

‘Stupendous! That was great! Wasn’t it, honey?’ I grinned at Katie. ‘And no injuries!’

‘Oh, the day isn’t over yet.’ My wife narrowed her eyes at me. ‘Who’s going to tell me about Nee How? I want to know – now.’

Katie was using her courtroom voice. Ariel and I both knew what that meant. No horsing around. Ariel pointed to me and batted her eyelashes. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but my daughter beat me to it.

‘Dad’s just helping me learn Chinese. Ni Hao. It means hello in Chinese.’

I had to admire the save. It wasn’t a lie. I *was* teaching her a little of the language.

‘You’re learning *Chinese* in school? In Year One?’ Katie asked, somewhat incredulous.

Ariel stroked Cassandra’s head. Our ginger cat was big with white paws. She usually liked being petted, but today she was having none of it. She jumped off the back of the sofa and went off in a sulk.

‘We learn all kinds of stuff at school.’ She was my daughter all right. I liked her evasive moves. Ariel looked up at the ceiling and started dancing around. Which she was prone to do.

‘You’ve got homework. Right?’ I said, hopefully.

She stopped. ‘Yes, I do.’

‘Go on upstairs then and get started. I’ll be up to help a bit later.’

‘OK!’ She turned and raced up the stairs. ‘Hua bié!’

I closed my eyes.

‘Well?’ Katie folded her arms.

‘It’s amazing how fast she picks it up. Chinese! Right? I was just messing around with her.’

‘Teaching her Mandarin?’

I laughed – one of those guilty, girlish laughs.

‘Come on, Grant! Tell me!’

‘Gosh. Katie. All right. All right. I’ve been waiting for the right time—’

‘Now. Now’s a good time. Just tell me.’

The intensity of Katie’s sea-green eyes when she’s after information is like that of a cobra. There is no escape. No place to hide. Every muscle in my body went rigid with tension. I put up my hands in surrender.

'Let's sit down. It's not bad. I promise. It's good news!'

'Oh, is it now?'

She folded her legs under a petite, athletic body and sank into our well-worn sofa. Katie still surfed just about every morning, no matter what the weather. It kept her in good shape. She's very strong.

'I got an email from a former colleague, about a photography gig.'

Katie raised her eyebrows.

'Oh?'

'Yes.' I sucked in my lips and then puckered them out again.

'And? Where is it?'

'Well...China.'

'China.'

'Kunming, mostly. The Yunnan province. South of Beijing.' Now I was doing the eyebrow-raising, rolling my eyes a bit. 'Can you believe it?'

'For how long?'

I folded my hands together, then unfolded them and rubbed the back of my neck.

'Three weeks.'

Katie let the words hang in the air. She didn't move.

'That's a long time.' She swallowed and shifted on the sofa. 'What kind of pictures are you expected to take?'

'Documenting. A group trip. Bunch of American teachers are going. They'll want pictures of what they do and see, and pictures of the Chinese teachers and students.'

Katie shifted in her seat.

'Why did they ask you to come? How did they know about you?'

I dropped down before her on the floor and gently put my hands on her knees.

'I told you. Someone going on the trip knew me. A former colleague. She's... a history teacher—

Katie's eyes grew wide.

'No.' Then wider. 'Not...Charon Fields. Your old girlfriend?'

I stood up.

'It was a long time ago, Katie.'

She went into the kitchen and took out pots and pans. She banged them down on the stove. I followed her but stayed a safe distance.

Her voice was raised in that highly controlled way she has when she's really mad.

'You've been emailing your ex and you didn't TELL me?'

'I didn't want to upset you. See? You're upset!'

She slammed a cupboard door shut.

'Of course, I'm upset! You want to go away to China for three weeks with your ex-girlfriend! Are you sharing a room too?'

'No. No! Or...well, I don't *know* exactly what the sleeping arrangements will be...'

I cringed. *Shouldn't have put it like that.*

Katie pulled out another pan and dropped it to the floor with a crash. She then went upstairs, stomping all the way. I knew what was coming. She came back down a few minutes later in her wetsuit.

'I'm not hungry. Have dinner without me.'

'What should I feed Ariel?'

'Oh, whatever you feel like. You can make all kinds of decisions without *me*. Right?'

'Katie. I haven't made any decisions. We're just talking about this now. You and me.'

'You're learning Chinese! You've obviously decided you're going!'

'Oh, come on, Katie. It's a good job. Good money. I just have to document the trip. They're paying my way. I'll get £5000 for three weeks work. Come on – you should be excited. This is a good gig!'

Katie glared.

'It's great. All good, except for Charon NEE HOW Fields!'

Katie went out the front door and slammed it after her.