

KS Augustin



The Check Your Luck Agency (Check Your Luck: Book 1)

Not believing in something doesn't make it go away

In the six months she's worked as a paranormal investigator for The Check Your Luck Agency, Ursula Formosa has found plenty of larceny, blackmail, fraud and threats...but no evidence of ghosts, jinn, vampires, demons or anything else from the spirit world.

That is, until she joins charming, ex-model Shariff Kadir to host a series of ghost-hunting television programs, and finds that a world she doesn't want to believe in has just been waiting for her to turn up.

*(This is Book 1 of the Check Your Luck series, previously authored under the pen-name of "Cara d'Bastian". All books (1 to 5) of the series have been collected together in **The Complete Check Your Luck Agency**, published by Sandal Press)*

The Check Your Luck Agency

Check Your Luck: Book 1

KS Augustin

Chapter One

There's one thing I hate more than being wrong, and that's being right about presuming somebody is as big a scumbag as they turn out to be.

"Are you sure about this, Xiao Chong?"

A small cherubic face looked up at me and nodded vigorously.

Looking at us together, a casual passer by – if they noticed us at all in the crush of people – would think I was merely placing a takeaway order from one of the nearby stalls. The covered open-air food court was noisy with the chatter of hungry diners and the hard surfaces of concrete, plastic, steel and melamine kept all those voices bouncing off each other until they combined and reached a crescendo of sound. It was late, I was hungry and, between my growling stomach and the clattering din, I was getting a headache.

I hate eating when everyone else does, shoving elbows that have intruded into my personal space and my meal. I hated the case Fiona had handed me. But most of all, I hated that I was right.

"I was sitting next to them at the same table," Xiao Chong explained. He held up a small vinyl bag full of round bulges, his gaze guileless. "Playing marbles."

Xiao – or Little – Chong is one of my best assistants. Yeah, that's what I call him. I'm sure others might have different names for it, usually incorporating the words "child" and "exploitation", but he's smarter than a lot of adults I've met. He has the face of an angel and the deviousness of a, well, child, and he can appear completely innocent in places where I would stick out like a sore thumb. I keep such pint-sized informants in most of the major food junctions around Singapore, like Chomp! Chomp!, Maxwell, Newton's and Lau Pa Sat, but Xiao Chong is, without a doubt, the best of the lot.

Crap. What he'd just told me put a whole other spin on the situation. I almost wished I could blame everything on a ghost instead.

"Thanks Xiao Chong."

I slipped him ten dollars and walked out of the food court, glad to leave the bustle behind me.

What my little nine-year old friend had told me wasn't enough to solve the case, but it told me where to start digging to nail the real culprit. I could've gone back to Fiona with my news and that would have been the end of it, but I pride myself on my attention to detail. I like my cases closed so tight there are no little doubts hissing as they escape. In this particular case, I doubted the client would thank me, but that's just how I work.

Considering the crush at Lau Pa Sat, Robinson Road was quiet and serene. On either side of the road, tall office buildings loomed, now half-emptied of their quota of wage-slaves. I had

thought to be one of their number once, ascending the corporate ladder no doubt on the heads of those slower than me, but that was in a different life. In the past two years, I've become a woman of much simpler needs.

Speaking of which, it was high time I went home. At this time of night, just past seven-thirty, most of the Malaysian workers would be back across the border and at home, enjoying an evening meal with their family. The Causeway joining both countries would still be busy, but would have lost that anarchic edge from a couple of hours ago. I walked to the nearest MRT station and took the train up to Kranji.

Kranji is a strange kind of place, an anomaly in super-populated Singapore. Its only edifice of any note is the immaculately landscaped racetrack complex that takes up hectares of valuable land. The station and its surrounds were built with only one purpose in mind, and that's to divest punters of as much money as possible as fast as possible. Competing with the long gleaming row of automatic turnstiles at the station's boundary is a long row of ATM machines just beyond it. Having had opportunity to use one of them in the past, I noticed that they hand out more money than the machines in the rest of Singapore. I suppose fewer trips to the machine means fewer betting opportunities missed.

Usually the area is as quiet as a graveyard but, when my travel schedule coincides with race day, the truth is that I can hardly move in and around the station. The huge paved area that I normally consider obscenely large gets turned into a tightly squeezed mass of excited humans. People spill in and out of the brightly-lit shops along the short arcade and even the spaces along the walls are marked out by hawkers. Unfortunately, such people are not easy to spot until I'm almost on top of them, especially when there's a crowd impeding my progress.

The budget-price entrepreneurs are usually elderly. The women dress in their Chinese floral pyjama outfits and the men in their white singlets and navy blue shorts. They stake out their space with a rug or sheet of plastic and arrange their knick-knacks on top of it in an orderly fashion. Packs of tissues, wind-up toys, herbal tinctures, small gee-gaws. I've never seen anyone actually stop and buy anything from these grandparents, but they appear like clockwork every race day, so they must be able to make a living somehow. I'm sure that it's actually against the law to sell things from a cheap synthetic blanket on the floor of a public thoroughfare, but if the Singapore government decides to turn a blind eye to the practice, who am I to complain? I have enough gripes about what they *do* notice.

Tonight was not race day, so the station was its usual eerie quiet. Only three of us got off on the platform and the two young boys in front of me, laughing and still in their high-school uniforms, were energetic enough to make me feel old and jaded. They bounded down the stairs while I took the elevator, listening to the rhythmic whine of each mechanical wheel as it bore me down to the ground floor.

By the time I reached the turnstile the boys were long gone, although I could still hear their good humour recede into the distance. I slapped my card on the access panel, walked around the corner and came across a large food place, its white fluorescent lights obscenely blinding in

such stillness. I call it a food place because calling it a restaurant, or even a café, would be gracing it with more ambience than it had. It was a place of cheap food on cheap furniture in cheap surroundings. I had passed it numerous times without a second glance but tonight was different. My stomach was rumbling and I was still an hour from home.

I looked in through the large windows and noticed that, as usual, the place was three-quarters empty. Dallying for a while with indecision, I finally succumbed and entered.

The floor was cheap vinyl, blackened at the edges where it met the walls. The few customers already in the shop didn't even look up as I walked to the counter. Behind the stretch of scratched white, the serving woman jerked her head sharply upwards in the universal signal for "what do you want?" She looked tired and angry. I didn't blame her.

After a quick perusal of the menu on the back wall above her head, I ordered a *nasi lemak* and iced lemon tea, figuring it was a combination that was hard to screw up. The food came while I was still fishing for change and I took my tray to an empty table next to the wall but still close to the counter. From that angle, I could see everyone entering and leaving through the door and even movement at the cash register. Of course if someone decided to climb the glass display case at my back, they'd be in a great position to ambush me, but I figured they'd slip on the ever-present layer of grease and do themselves an injury before they got within striking distance.

The food, presented in the traditional pyramid of a folded banana leaf, was surprisingly good. The *ikan bilis sambal*, made from dried anchovies, was the right mixture of hot and sweet. Of course there weren't enough peanuts to accompany the coconut-milk rice (there never are) and the egg was fried. That bothered me because I'm a traditionalist who likes my *nasi lemak* with a hard-boiled egg, not this quick and dirty fried version but, for a couple of bucks, what could I expect? The iced tea was too astringent, with a bitter after-taste. Either they were using low-quality tea or it had been sitting there for at least half a day. No matter, it filled a hole and meant I didn't have to go scavenging when I got home.

I left my tray on the table after I finished and walked out towards the road. The air was still hot, with little relief from any stray breezes, and there was the ever-present aroma of diesel fumes in the air. The road around Kranji is always busy with buses and lorries plying their route between Singapore and Malaysia, and a lot of the vehicles were not that well maintained, but the smell always made me feel nostalgic. It's the smell of home, a scent that was written into my very psyche during my formative years. I breathed in the smoke. Between the heat, lush greenery and the smell, it somehow felt...right.

It was getting dark fast so I hurried to the tall pedestrian bridge and descended to the far side of the road just in time to catch one of the fuel-belching monsters on its way back across the Causeway. Mine was the last stop in Singapore so it was obvious I wouldn't get a seat. I stood, jammed up against other impassive workers on their way home, watching the monotonous darkness go by.

THE CHECK YOUR LUCK AGENCY (Sample)

There are two points of near-panic during any journey across the Strait, both at the border points. It doesn't matter which way. In this particular case, the first occurred as the bus neared the Singapore Customs & Immigration stop. There are always the craned looks from the passengers up front, sizing up how many buses are ahead of theirs and how it will translate to waiting times inside the checkpoint building.

Sometimes the bus will stop metres away from the platform and people will dash madly from the exits, dodging between scooters and other pedestrians on their way to the scanner gates and passport line-ups. On the approach to the entrance of the Singaporean complex, eagle-eyed officials stand and watch the hordes mill past. Sometimes the guards are accompanied by several German Shepherd dogs straining on the leashes beside them. Everybody is careful not to run if the dogs are there.

I've always wondered why the young men with severe crew-cuts care so much. After all, we're *leaving* the country. But this is Singapore, so appearances must be maintained. After navigating the concrete pathway, there are the escalators. At least they work, which is more than can be said about the equipment on the Malaysian side of the border, and we are finally disgorged into a giant processing area.

Despite the number of people wanting to get out of the country, not every Immigration booth is manned. Sometimes the officials like to toy with the crowd, making it appear that they are getting ready to open another aisle. They have their little cases of stamps with them, a clipboard, maybe a binder or two. They approach a vacant booth, stare at it for a few minutes, then move off. The more experienced travellers will shuffle their feet and take furtive looks around, calculating their chances of being first at the new queue, should it open. I've seen old white-haired grandmothers wrestle with the best of them in such a *melée*. With age comes sharp elbows. And surprising nimbleness. Must be all those *tai chi* classes.

In the meantime, the Immigration official can feel the desperation in the damp hot air as something tangible. Anxiety, tension, humidity, the press of bodies, all combine with the failing air-conditioning to produce an ego-boosting meal for our little Immigration officer to feast upon. He or she will cast a bored look around, as if contemplating the architecture, then retreat to a point near one of the far offices. Sometimes this ploy of forward, pace, touch barrier, retreat, can occur several times, an exquisite torture for all those waiting in lines that easily stretch fifty or more individuals long. And while we wait, the buses fill up outside the complex and carry on their journey across the border to the next Customs and Immigration complex, but this time on Malaysian soil.

I had only come to Singapore that night on a hunch, so I wasn't carrying any bags or backpacks with me. That meant that, once I was through the formalities, I could dodge through the workers who were more laden and exhausted than me.

As I reached the top of the queue, I took a look around. Towering above the majority of people were Western tourists, pale and sweating even in their strappy tops, thin t-shirts and cotton shorts. They looked shell-shocked, as if they had been expecting the cool efficiency of Changi

THE CHECK YOUR LUCK AGENCY (Sample)

airport and had instead got...us. I remained impassive while the Immigration official checked my passport before waving me through.

The air in the transport bays felt even hotter after the feeble air-conditioning in the building, compounded by the smoking exhausts of the idling buses.

I scrambled my way onto the closest one taking passengers, flashing my paper ticket at the driver as I boarded, sank onto the nearest seat and headed home.

Chapter Two

I woke up feeling groggy and registered that there was a heavy weight on my chest.

“Good morning, alarm clock,” I murmured. Pretzel the cat, the aforementioned heavy weight, trilled in acknowledgement that I was finally awake. He patted me a couple of times on my chin before considerately moving off my body. Smart creature that he was, he wasn’t going to do anything that meant his breakfast would be one second longer in arriving than absolutely necessary. I didn’t blame him. I’m a bad kitty owner and wonder sometimes what keeps him with me. I’m sure there are other families out there who’d be delighted with the addition of a black-and-brown Maine Coon to the mix. Or maybe, like me, Pretzel feels that he doesn’t belong anywhere else.

I yawned, got out of bed and slipped into a short kimono-style robe that’s called a “happy coat” in these parts. The soft cotton was cool on my skin. I yawned again and headed downstairs to the kitchen, a hopeful cat following eagerly at my heels, relaying complaints of how most of the day had already passed while he spent his time in feline hunger, waiting for me to rise. It was the same routine every morning and, despite the nagging, I was content to play along by making small noises to Pretzel’s meows as if pretending that I understood every sound from his mouth.

My house is a modest terrace house in a nice estate north of Johor Bahru. Because I bought it when the area was still underdeveloped, the price was reasonable. Plus, I was able to snag one of the end houses with a bigger garden allotment. In the year since I moved in, I’ve seen massive changes to what I had considered to be my quiet, backwater refuge. Unfortunately, the upgraded roads have meant more smoke-belching buses on the roads and lots more car traffic, all inching past shopping centres that seem to have sprung up overnight on previously empty pieces of land.

I hadn’t expected any of it. Despite the ambitious plans of the Malaysian government, I hadn’t believed that they’d actually keep any of their promises. In that, I’m no different to the locals, who pass enjoyable hours poking fun at various government apparatchiks. To call the country’s *rakyat* (people) permanently sceptical would be a fair assessment of their prevailing mood.

With this in mind, I had originally bargained on buying a modest place in a newer area of town with good roads and better drainage and was happy to live with the inconvenience of surly taxi-drivers who refused to drive even a couple of kilometres from the city centre without a hefty tip, supermarkets that were thirty minutes’ drive away at a minimum, and few other facilities to speak of. Imagine my surprise when the government bureaucrats decided to turn around and, for once, make good on its promises. With little warning, I found myself in the middle of what resembled a gold rush. There were traffic delays, the percussive thump of pile

drivers that worked long into the night, dust that got into every nook and cranny. And people. Everywhere I looked. People. More and more of them. Where had they come from? Did Malaysia even contain all the crowds that happily crammed into cars that were lined up, seemingly hundreds deep, at every set of traffic lights?

When the dust finally cleared, I discovered I was now the proud owner of a house in a very popular part of town. Occasionally, I had to fend off an overzealous individual offering to buy my house at double the price I paid for it. Triple the price! It was blackly amusing and I felt like Rip van Winkle, but at Asian development speed, which meant I only had to keep my eyes closed for a couple of months – rather than centuries – before seeing something new when I opened them again.

But, for the moment, it was just past eight in the morning. Pretzel was hungry, *I* was hungry, and I had some serious thinking to do. I put the kettle on and opened a new can of cat food, slopping half the contents onto a saucer and placing it on the floor to one side of the fridge. While blessed silence reigned, I took stock of my pantry. I'd have to go grocery shopping soon but there was still some cereal left and milk in the fridge. I stored the can, took out the carton and made myself breakfast.

The sun rose at the other end of my row of terrace houses and that meant a cooler start to the day. I had loved the subtle silky dawns in England but, in the tropics, they were transformed into instant heat lamps. I'd avoid the oven effect in the morning but, as my garden faced west, I'd bear the brunt of it at the end of the day. To keep away from the incessant heat, in the past year I had turned from a deckchair enthusiast happily soaking up rays in a verdant park to a dweller of dark shadowed spaces in the tropics. It made for a more comfortable life.

Having splashed some milk onto my cereal, I settled myself at the breakfast bar with my bowl of food and started to ponder on my latest case and what my young informant, Xiao Chong, had told me.

According to Fiona Li, owner of The Check Your Luck Agency, the case I was on began with a little old lady called Evelyn Xian. Dear Mrs. Xian was a widow, the wife of a successful food hawker who had originally bought a shophouse with the intent of setting up his own restaurant. He had made the purchase fifteen years ago, but the plans for his new restaurant never came to fruition.

According to Mrs. Xian, her husband had run a prosperous stand at Maxwell Food Centre for more than two decades, dishing out three types of *laksa*. I think I might have even eaten at his stall a few times while on vacation from England and, if I was right, he knew his stuff. His *laksa* was very good, the gravy deliciously spicy and always full of fresh and abundant ingredients. Around the time that ambitious Mr. Xian bought the shophouse, he started having problems with his staff. People hired would suddenly leave and it was difficult trying to entice new people to work for him. I hadn't been given any reason for this but, nonetheless, for the next couple of years, he went through a high turnover of helpers. Even when things settled down, he was afraid that he'd turn up to his stall one morning and discover nobody there to

help him with the serving or cooking. It was that fear, his widow told Fiona, that led him to eventually abandon the idea of opening a restaurant and stick to his smaller stall. He was too afraid of hiring people he couldn't count on.

Rather than sell the shophouse, the Xians held onto it. There were a few reasons for this, but the major ones concerned real estate appreciation and having something substantial in their will to leave to their two children.

Mr. Xian died first, two and a half years ago, and Mrs. Xian found that maintaining their home by herself was becoming a chore. What she wanted to do, she said, was to sell the building, buy herself a small flat close to her daughter who lived on the western side of the island (almost a country away, according to the sensibilities of the locals) and divide the remainder among the grandchildren to help with their education. It's a familiar story in this part of the world, and there wouldn't have been any reason for old Mrs. Xian to visit our half of a rickety third floor of an office building in Chinatown if it wasn't for a sudden spate of unexplainable happenings. As I munched on my soggy wheat flakes, I recalled Fiona relating the whole sorry tale to me.

"So Mrs. Xian says to me, 'I was prepared to sell the property and was approached by a young developer by the name of Wong. He was very keen to purchase the shophouse and was prepared to meet my price'."

Fiona paused dramatically and I remembered shifting in my seat before succumbing to reciting my part in the story-telling.

"But of course Mrs. Xian didn't sign a contract with him," I had said with a sigh, "or she wouldn't have visited you in the first place. What was the problem? The lawyers couldn't execute old man Xian's will for some reason? Encumbrances on the property? A lien from an old creditor she didn't know about?"

Fiona leant over her desk and twitched her index finger at me. Her dark eyes widened. "Much worse. She didn't trust him."

I blinked. Sometimes, Fiona's story-telling could get downright labyrinthine. "Who, her dead husband?"

"*Aiyah*, why don't you listen? The young man, Wong. The property developer. Mrs. Xian described him as 'too eager'."

Fiona sat back in her chair and nodded sagely while I thought back to the trials of selling my parents' house back in England. I contrasted my own memories of the arduous real estate process with what I considered to be the deal of the year being handed to Mrs. Xian on a silver platter.

"That she should be so lucky," I muttered.

"So she said no, she wouldn't sell."

“Of course she did.” I made my voice as droll as possible. “And let me guess. The ‘strange phenomena’ started soon afterwards.”

“No.”

It was only at that point that Fiona captured my full attention and, by the smile that tugged at her lips, she knew it too.

Whatever had unnerved our poor Chinese widow did *not* begin the moment she turned down a lucrative offer for her shophouse. It did not fit the string of blackmail/extortion rackets I had been hunting down for the past half-a-year. Was I finally seeing something different? Something, dare I say it, a bit more *interesting*? My ears pricked.

“I’m listening,” I had told her.

Fiona gave me a satisfied smile, as if a favourite student had just given her the answer she’d been looking for.

“Mrs. Xian had an ally in her misgivings,” Fiona said. “Her next-door neighbour owns a small boutique and he agreed that Wong the Developer seemed untrustworthy. He urged Mrs. Xian not to sell to the greedy young man. After much thought, Mrs. Xian told Wong that she wouldn’t be selling to him and he went away.”

“In that case, I really don’t see why you’re involved,” I said slowly. “If Mrs. Xian didn’t sell, and her friend agreed that she shouldn’t sell, where’s the problem? Did Wong the Developer come back? And if he returned with ‘reinforcements’ to help her change her mind, shouldn’t that be a matter for the police instead of us?”

“Wait, wait. Stop being so impatient, *lah*. The real problems began for no apparent reason four months ago. After sending Wong the Developer on his way, Mrs. Xian decided to hold on to the house for a while longer. She said that the market was growing stronger and perhaps if she waited a few more months, another buyer with more money would come along. In the meantime, she grew friendlier with Chin the Neighbour.

“*Tcha*,” Fiona said suddenly with a frown towards me, “not friendly like that, *lah*! What, you think everybody just wants to have sex, sex, sex, when they get together, even when they’re so old? Get your mind out of the gutter and listen to me.”

I swear I only had the smallest smile on my face while listening to Fiona talk but the woman has the uncanny ability to extrapolate the slightest facial expression to a full-blown monologue going on in someone’s head. It was no surprise that she had a fearsome reputation as a gun *mah-jong* player.

“Anyway,” she continued, glaring at me again to make sure my mind behaved, “she and Chin the Neighbour started to become friends. And then it started.”

“The supernatural whatever-it-was?”

“Exactly. Strange sounds on her roof at night. Funny smells in her bedroom. Two days ago, she

woke up and discovered blood on her bathroom floor.”

“Blood?” I sat up. “What did she find? A body? An injured animal? Did she call the police?”

Fiona gave me a pitying look. “She’s old. She was too scared. There was nothing in the bathroom except for the blood splashed on the walls and on the floor. She cleaned it all up then visited an old friend, asking for advice. The friend suggested she come to me. When Mrs. Xian visited the agency and told me her story, of course I said I’d take the case. Something means to do this poor old lady harm. And we’ve got to stop it.”

Chapter Three

The Check Your Luck Agency is a funny kind of business that could probably only exist, and survive, in Asia. It does exactly what's advertised on the door in cheap black stick-on letters. It checks a person's luck.

Somebody comes to the Agency with either a good-luck or bad-luck story and it's up to us to find out the truth behind the string of mishaps or, more rarely, strange run of good luck that has unnerved these prospective clients. Because luck is such an intangible thing, and Asia such a superstitious continent, all the cases Fiona takes on usually have some connection with paranormal activity. Hauntings, possessions, bad spells, love potions. Whenever someone feels they've been afflicted by a malady of the supernatural variety, they approach the Agency to have it checked out.

If I were to describe my job to a complete stranger, I'm sure it would sound exotic and interesting and a little exciting. In reality, it's more digging up paperwork than digging up bodies. The truth of the matter is, for every ten cases that Fiona accepts, nine or ten of them don't have anything to do with the supernatural at all. Blackmail, extortion, manipulation, exploitation. In all the cases I've been involved with over the six months, none have had any kind of spooky, otherworldly connection.

None.

By the time Mrs. Xian's little problem came along, to say that I was jaded and resigned to living in the archives of municipal offices for the rest of my life would have been the grossest of understatements.

But I'm not giving acknowledgement where it's due and, in order to do that, I have to describe the environment in a little more detail.

Despite Asia being overwhelmingly populated by superstitious people, there is little scope for a civilian outfit trying to break into the lucrative theological market and I credit Fiona Li with having the kind of true dogged, entrepreneurial spirit that would start up a business like the Agency against all odds.

While I was still in the UK, I read about young people starting their own companies. Older people (that is, anyone over thirty) were generally perceived as being too mentally fossilised to do the same. That kind of attitude would never fly in Asia. While there *are* young people involved in various start-ups, they don't make up the majority of successful business owners. As I was to find out once I moved back, there is a steady pace at which people approach tasks and goals, one which others underestimate at their peril.

The first step on the way to being a business owner is to get a solid, paying job. In that way,

the young employee is able to save up some money while learning the ropes from a hopefully experienced employer. There is more than just money that's on offer, however. There are also connections. If the business is simple and the networking can be done at a fast pace, say at a hawker stand, then the young employee can move on and start up their own stand in a few years. That's a bad example, because hawker stands rise and fall on the quality and consistency of their food, and quick connections can't guarantee long-term success, but the general rule stands about ventures that require a small start-up capital and a lot of hard work to make up for it.

The more complex the business, the more time is needed, and there is nothing strange in hearing about a public servant retiring at the age of fifty-five in order to start his or her own business. In fact, it's almost mandatory.

Fiona was, to my mind, in that age bracket. She's a small but sturdy woman with pale skin, a downturned mouth, curly dark hair and piercing black eyes beneath thin eyebrows. She looked like my idea of a stern headmistress. For all I know, she might have even *been* a headmistress. It wouldn't have surprised me.

Considering I had only been with the Agency for six months, I admit that I didn't know her complete history, except that there was a dead husband somewhere in the mix. Whether he left her a tidy sum of money, or whether she made it all on her own, is still a mystery to me. Her nest egg may not have been enough to buy her a penthouse apartment on Sentosa Island, but it was enough to secure half an uneven third floor in Chinatown and cover the Agency's wage bill for the first few months.

I was not the first to be employed. In fact, I'm the most recent Check Your Luck addition, hired to help take care of an increasing backlog of cases. If there's one thing that can make any Asian entrepreneur weep, it's seeing a prospective cash cow saunter away to a competitor, and Fiona wasn't going to let something like that happen. Enter, Ursula.

Going back to what I said earlier, even though the Agency was paying for itself, it still hadn't started as a sure thing. If someone ran into some kind of paranormal problem, the first person to consult would be that person's imam, priest or monk. In that way, they'd keep it all in the same ideological family, so to speak. Approaching an external commercial venture, like Fiona's, was definitely not the norm. But as long as there are people with secrets, there will always be a need for advice "outside the family" and that's how Fiona first started her business two years ago.

The second problem with starting up a business like the Agency is how to staff it. Theology is a highly respected career path. There are rarely imams, priests or monks who can't afford a Mercedes or Audi or a lush retreat that just happens to sit on some prime seaside land near a sparkling white beach. Just regularly reading the Hong Kong papers is enough to familiarise oneself with the current financial scandal involving previously highly respected Buddhist monks. Such stories break in the news almost every month. And, of course, with people like that already involved in their own rackets, they see no need to freelance for a decidedly

agnostic outfit like Fiona's.

Fiona's big employee break came with a scam artist called Alfred Long. Scam artist to me, that is. To the rest of the population, Long is a well-respected *bomoh*, a witch-doctor or shaman by any other name. He'd had his own practice for decades from what I'd heard, and obviously thought that joining Fiona was a good way of hitching his own carriage to a prospective gravy train. *He* was her very first employee, bringing a few of his own clients through her door. I still don't understand exactly why Long joined Fiona if he was supposed to be successful in his own right. Maybe his reputation was built on a load of bullshit. Stranger things have happened.

Speaking of strange things, that also applies to the Agency's second mystery employee.

Ashida. She's so secretive, I don't even know her last name. She's supposed to be independently wealthy and some kind of super-researcher, although that doesn't appear to include the corridors of government archives where I've spent an inordinate amount of time. Fiona won't say much about her, except that she never goes anywhere without her Sikh bodyguard, and we haven't worked a case together yet, so she remains exactly that. A mystery.

The Agency's receptionist is an old biddy by the name of Betty. Singapore doesn't have an elderly pension system, so a lot of retired souls take on other jobs to make ends meet. I've seen wizened grandmothers and grandfathers clean the counters in fast-food hamburger joints, collect cardboard boxes by roadsides and pick tin cans out of rubbish bins. The Agency's "grandmother" works for six hours a day, six days a week, tending to the paperwork and tackling phone calls. Because Betty comes from a different era, she speaks English fluently, as well as Malay, Mandarin and Cantonese, with a smattering of Hokkien and Tamil thrown in for good measure. I'm deeply impressed by her composure, but even that took a beating the day Deepak's parents came to visit.

Deepak is the youngest member of the Agency, and so is the one most likely to cause trouble. And, in that regard, he didn't disappoint.

Or, rather, his parents didn't. They turned up at the agency a few months ago, wide-eyed and timid-looking but still determined to vent their parental disapproval of Fiona, her agency and their son working for it. I didn't blame them. As a parent, I could only imagine what had gone through their heads when their twenty-two year old had declared that he'd found employment at some place called The Check Your Luck Agency. I tried to imagine them mentioning the name during the family Deepavali, birthday and wedding celebrations and came to the conclusion that they probably lied and told everyone Deepak was an articulated clerk for some vague-sounding law firm on the opposite end of the island.

Deepak's mother was portly with black braided hair that showed only an occasional strand of grey. I'm sure she blamed Deepak for each and every one of them. She dressed in conservative Indian fashion, which meant no modern suits for her. Oh no, if a brown-and-gold sari was good enough for her mother and the generations of women before her, it was good enough for her.

Deepak's father, and family spokesperson, was the matching round pepper pot to his wife. His

skin was darker, his hair slicked back and gleaming black, his moustache thick and bushy. He took a deep breath before each pronouncement and you could see his chest rise with the amount of air being pulled into his lungs.

They didn't look happy.

Deepak's father tapped the faux timber reception desk so hard with his index finger that I heard the percussive thunks at my desk, four metres away. Betty was still on the phone. She looked startled at the interruption and used the universal "index finger up" gesture to suggest a person wait a moment, but the man wasn't having any of that. I saw his shoulders tense as he tapped the desk again.

I couldn't hear what Betty said to her caller but she looked apologetic as she put the handset down.

"Yes?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "May I help you?"

"I believe Fiona Li owns this," Deepak's father looked around with barely concealed contempt, his glance thankfully skipping over me, "establishment?"

"She does," Betty replied evenly.

"I want to see her. Now."

This was language Betty understood, and she instantly moved into receptionist-with-wings-of-steel mode.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Li is busy at the moment. Could I—"

"My son works here! I want to see his employer now!"

"I'm afraid she's—"

"My son's livelihood is at stake! I demand that she see me now!"

"But she's—"

"Does she own this company or not? If not, I'll report her to the police. If so, I demand to see her immediately!"

We're not used to raised voices in south-east Asia. Confrontation is more a sideways glance and a stiletto in one's hand rather than a fist to the face. Betty was used to a more genteel clientele, one that clearly understood the rules of engagement. I could see she was starting to flail in unfamiliar waters.

On that particular day, I was supposed to be investigating a possible insurance scam, but I wasn't going to miss this show for the world. Fiona versus two irate parents? Just point me to the entrance and give me some popcorn as I pass.

Throwing the manilla folder of my current case to one side, I leant forward, waiting for the fun to begin, but the tableau that presented itself wasn't encouraging. Deepak's parents were still irate and Betty was staring blankly at them, wondering what she needed to do to defuse the

situation. It occurred to me that the fun would not begin without my personal intervention. And it didn't help that Deepak, the usual office fixture, wasn't around. His parents must have told him that they were intending to pay his employer a visit and he had made like the good son and got the hell out of there long before his parents were scheduled to turn up.

Rising to my feet, I pinned a polite smile on my face, pretended that I hadn't noticed the marked similarity between Deepak and his mother, or the conversation that had just occurred, and asked if I could perhaps help them. Betty shot me a sideways look of gratitude.

"As we've said before," Father-of-Deepak said, putting his hands on his hips and turning to glare at me, "we're here to see the owner."

"Sure," I replied. "Would you like to, er..."

I cast a panicked gaze around. I had never had to entertain clients before and hadn't really noticed the shabby condition of the so-called reception area. I looked at the worn vinyl couch with its scratched and pitted timber armrests. That piece of furniture had already been decrepit back in the fifties, but there was no helping it.

"Please have a seat," I beamed, gesturing extravagantly to the sunken orange cushions. "I'll let Mrs. Li know you're here."

As Deepak's parents sank into a piece of furniture beyond the bounds of upholstery, I sidled my way across to the closed door of Fiona's office, giving it two knocks before turning the knob and slipping inside.

Fiona was at her desk, a pair of spectacles perched at the tip of her nose. She was concentrating on entering figures into a ledger, a calculator by her side. If I was a bit more materially inclined, I would have tried to read the figures that were displayed upside-down in spidery script under each neatly delimited column, but I had my principles. Besides, I was waiting for the afternoon performance to begin. There was no advantage in keeping the two parties apart.

I cleared my throat and Fiona looked up, a frown of annoyance marring her still smooth brow.

"Yes Ursula?"

"I have a couple outside who wish to see you," I replied.

Her eyes brightened. "Clients?"

I grimaced and attempted a look of sympathy. "Ah, they're Deepak's parents. Betty and I tried to hold them off, but they're not taking no for an answer."

She was silent for a moment, frozen in pose, before slowly removing her spectacles from her face. "I see."

At that moment, I saw the steel beneath the scatter-brained manner that normally seemed to characterise Fiona and felt a brush of the strong determined character that set up the agency, despite its – no doubt – many naysayers. Maybe this battle wasn't going to be as one-sided as I had expected.

“Please show them in.” The tone of voice she used was centuries old, harking back to the time of emperors, empresses and concubines. In comparison, as the child of a race with only six hundred years of history, all I could do was acknowledge her words with a bow that, I hoped, wasn’t too obsequious, and back out of the room.

“Mrs. Li will see you now,” I told Father-of-Deepak and Mother-of-Deepak.

Hoisting his waistband further up his body as he stood, Deepak’s father led the way. He stopped abruptly as he was about to enter, waiting on the threshold of Fiona’s office for his wife. His exasperation was barely contained. Suddenly, trying to imagine the domestic scene that all the non-verbals implied, I was consumed with sympathy for Deepak.

I closed the door quietly behind me just as the social niceties began, knowing it wouldn’t stay that way for long. Then I walked back to my desk and made myself comfortable. Betty, I noticed, had also given up any pretence at doing work and her bright eyes were fixed on Fiona’s office door.

The better position for eavesdropping on the drama of the month would have been at the door itself, but it was half-frosted with glass. If I edged up there, I’d be embarrassingly visible. The best I could do was to head back to my desk and hope for an increase in the volume. I’m sure the same had occurred to Betty.

When it came to eavesdropping, Deepak’s father wasn’t the problem. He would have had a fine occupation moonlighting as a train station public address system. But his wife’s voice – and Fiona’s – were much softer in tone. I was going to have to fill in the blanks as best I could.

“Now, Mrs. Li, I’m sure you run a very lucrative and professional business—”

Code for, *I really don’t think you have a clue about what you’re doing, woman!*

“—but you must understand the position of our son, Deepak.”

He’s stupid, but he’s ours.

Then Fiona’s soft Chinese lilt, saying something reassuring no doubt.

“Yes yes, we know that Deepak is a wonderful boy, but we wouldn’t be good parents if we also didn’t look out for him.”

Fiona, a little bite edging into her tone. Probably along the lines of, *Are you saying I’m not looking out for your son?*

“Mrs. Li,” Deepak’s mother this time, in a voice that was surprisingly strong, “we worry about Deepak. Ever since he was a little boy...and then when his brother...and his teachers told him...”

It was frustrating not being able to hear every word. I leant forward as far as I could and froze in my chair to stop it from creaking. My bum started to protest from being in an uncomfortable position, but I ignored it.

“...so you see, we think that our son has not...prospects...”

Fiona’s next two sentences came through the half-frosted glass door so clearly I almost jumped in my seat.

“So you’re saying you’d like me to fire your son? So that he can find a ‘proper’ job?”

My eyebrows rose and I wondered if I should interrupt the three of them and dash in, fire extinguisher in hand. It was obvious from her tone of voice that Fiona was through being the calm and reasonable person I knew she could be, especially in front of prospective clients. I heard “such a thing as free will”, “if you can’t communicate with your son”, “being able to ‘control’ him is not my problem”, and “adult, capable of making his own decisions”.

That last phrase was the kicker. Asian parents *never* believe their children are capable of making their own decisions, not even Fiona herself. But they weren’t discussing Fiona’s son, Edward, and when discussing someone else’s offspring, all bets were off.

There were more heated comments, unfortunately most of them too indistinct to hear. Ten minutes later, Deepak’s parents stormed out of the office, accompanied by Fiona, and I swore I could see billows of steam being emitted from their collective ears. I hastily sat back and reached for my manilla folder. Insurance scam. Right. But over the smooth edge of stiff beige, I watched the continuation of the drama play out in front of me.

“Please,” Father-of-Deepak said, although the word sounded more like a command than an entreaty, “all we want is what’s best for our son.”

Mother-of-Deepak plucked at the sleeve of Fiona’s floral blouse. “He’s a good boy. He just needs guidance.”

Fiona took a step away from the questing fingers. Her back was ramrod straight. “I suggest that if you want to offer your son guidance, you take it up with him and not with me. Good-bye.”

Her piercing gaze indicated the front door in a movement that couldn’t be missed.

Father-of-Deepak, still not done but unable to see a way out of Fiona’s pointed hint, looked around desperately. As our glances met, I quickly frowned and looked down. There was no way I was getting involved in a family argument of this magnitude.

“You haven’t heard the last of this,” he finally puffed and strode out the door, leaving his hapless wife to follow in his wake. They slammed the agency’s front door behind them as loudly as they dared without risking breakage. We all knew Fiona wouldn’t hesitate billing them for a replacement door should anything happen to it.

I lifted my head again, a cautious foray above the trench line.

“So stupid what!” Fiona said loudly to Betty. “You want to talk to your son, you talk to your son. You don’t come to your son’s place of business and make trouble there.”

Trapped, too far away from the door to make an unobtrusive exit myself, I remained silent. And wasn’t surprised when Fiona spun around and arrowed in on me.

“What are you supposed to be working on?”

“Er, insurance scam.” I fluttered the beige folder in front of me.

“The English school you went to must have been very fancy, *ah?*”

The question threw me. “Pardon?”

She jerked her head. “Teaching you to read insurance reports upside down.”

She didn’t wait for a response. With a guttural Chinese imprecation spat out between her teeth, she turned and went back into her office, slamming the door behind her.

I held the folder away from me and finally focused on the papers. Oh dear. Then I closed the file and looked at the large black letters handwritten on one side. Upside down.

* * *

The visit of Deepak’s parents had been four months ago. Deepak hadn’t been sacked. His parents had not returned. True to Asian tradition, Fiona didn’t take the time to have a conference with the staff for suggestions on what to do about the parental problem. As head of the agency, she firmly believed that it was her decision, and hers alone, what happened to the youngest member of our small team. In other words, she ran the company like her personal fiefdom and I could either get used to it or get out. The problem was, everybody else in the region ran their own businesses the same way and at least Fiona wasn’t too stingy when it came to paying for expenses. I got used to it.

If it hadn’t been for Deepak himself, I wouldn’t have known anything about how the situation got resolved. He had been chewed out by Fiona of course the moment he showed his youthful brown face in the office the following morning. Eavesdropping on this conversation was less amusing and more painful than the one from the day before. I heard Fiona’s low growling tones and Deepak’s higher pleading voice. Then there was silence and Deepak walked out of the office with a relieved smile on his face.

It took me another month before he finally disclosed what had happened.

“I got a pay rise,” he told me, a white grin flashing on his face. “Now I earn more than my two older sisters.”

“That’s great,” I said. “But what about your parents? Aren’t they keen on you getting a different job?”

“No,” he said with a wave. “They appreciate the fact that I’m out-earning Lakshmi and Shilpa. They’re telling people I go outstation a lot and that I’m training to be a marine engineer. Actually, that was Fiona’s idea.”

And Deepak’s parents agreed to it? Judging by how they had parted, I thought they would have

preferred to see my boss burn at the stake rather than take a single word of advice from her. “And what does a marine engineer do?” I asked.

Deepak laughed. “That’s the beauty of it. Nobody knows!”

And the conflict, in very Asian style, was solved.

Chapter Four

Due to Mrs. Xian's general frailness, and her amply funded bank account no doubt, Fiona decided to move her case to the top of the queue and I got the file. One week ago, I paid a visit to the Xian shophouse in the Geylang district.

Geylang used to be quite notorious at one time. Still is. It's the usual place both tourists and locals head to when they're of a mind to grab some sexual action. Hetero, homo, transsexual, it doesn't matter. Choose a *lorong*, cruise down it in a car and pass by a dozen single-storey terraced premises, all open for business. I say "premises" because it's hard to think of those buildings as houses, as places families were meant to inhabit.

The entire atmosphere around the lanes is seedy. Badly parked cars often line the already crowded street, interspersed by small knots of men smoking cigarettes and talking furtively near the houses' cheap iron gates. The men look caught between staying in the darkness between streetlights and daring to enter beneath one of several dimly lit porches. True to stereotype, there are usually tattered red lanterns hanging either from a gatepost or the awning that leads to the front door.

Another stereotype is the separate bunches of men standing between the road and the house. Unlike the first lot, these men aren't afraid to show their faces. They are the pimps and enforcers of their particular brothel and it's their responsibility to screen and negotiate prices with the punters in the driveways before letting them through to the house. With all that cigarette smoke, testosterone, anxiety and aroma of sex around, the atmosphere in the lanes is a mix of muted sound and leashed violence.

It was obvious that Mr. Xian had been a bit of a gambler, because the shophouse he bought for his grand restaurant skirted an edge of Geylang that was quite renowned. It wasn't directly within sight of the notorious lanes but it wasn't too far away either. And I knew why he'd bought it.

The problem with Singapore's red light district is that it's close to town. Easily and conveniently close to town. If someone was thinking ahead, predicting a time when proximity to the centre of the city would outweigh any personal distaste for the surroundings, then Geylang was set to be the next booming district.

And it was. While some avenues of brothels clung stubbornly to the established way of doing things, times for the world's oldest profession had moved on. There were now scores of hotels that offered rooms by the hour. Business could be arranged via mobile phone and text messages. Crowded karaoke bars and glitzy clubs were the new front for working girls. And, furthermore, there was a lot more of it around. Arranging for a discreet visit by a prostitute was as easy as making a call, sitting back and waiting.

The advances in technology and the boom in small hotels meant a depopulation in Geylang that coincided with its gentrification. And Mrs. Xian's shophouse, that the original owner had probably been desperate to get rid of for a figure in the high tens of thousands, was now worth many hundreds of thousands of dollars, maybe even early seven figures depending on how it had been maintained. With this in mind, I was naturally curious about the state of the building. The day after my initial briefing from Fiona, I was strolling down the street and looking around with obvious interest.

If I hadn't been checking the signs, I could have believed that I had stepped into a low-key government-funded renovation project, instead of Mrs. Xian's street. There were small trucks everywhere, full of wooden supports, cabinetry, boxes marked "Fragile", and worried-looking men frowning at clipboards.

The Xian shophouse was three shops from the end of the street, at the opposite end to the development work. I stepped off the pavement onto a small tiled rectangle of pavement that separated the public thoroughfare from the front of the house and looked down at the square glazed tiles. They were decorated with a floral pattern in red and green with a background of blue flecks. It was one of the more traditional designs, but not well maintained. Near the edges of the rectangle, for example, the tiles had chipped and some were missing from the centre of the panel, making the surface uneven.

The shophouse to the left looked to be in the same condition. From the pairs of slippers casually strewn on either side of the coir mat in front of the main doors, it also looked to be inhabited. I wondered if the residents had heard or seen anything strange.

When the little old lady opened the front door upon my knock (nothing as modern as a door bell here), I could understand why Fiona had moved the case to the top of the heap. Mrs. Xian used a walking stick to carefully step from place to place and she was as thin and as small as a sickly pigeon. I thought if I exhaled too hard I might have sent her flying across the room.

"Good morning, Mrs. Xian," I greeted, in English. I'm still picking up bits and pieces of the local patois, but English is the language I do best in. "My name is Ursula Formosa. I'm from," I tried not to cringe, "The Check Your Luck Agency. May I come in?"

"Please. Thank you for visiting me at home." The voice quavered a little. The diction was perfect. I had ceased to be surprised by the realisation that the elderly Singaporeans spoke better English than their supposedly more sophisticated grandchildren. I smiled my thanks and walked across the threshold.

It's at this point that most people would probably imagine a ghostly wind blowing up from out of nowhere, or a chill that attacked the back of my neck, raising goosebumps. Neither happened.

The interior of the house was dark, made even darker by the heavy furniture that populated the rooms. I cleaved through the mingled aromas of burnt incense sticks, fish, stale fried garlic and Chinese medicine, following a hesitant old woman through a small doorway.

“What do *you* think is going on, Mrs. Xian?” I asked, once the preliminary greetings were taken care of. I was sitting at the circular dining table on a timber chair that had no cushion. I always wondered about that. The Chinese don’t appear to have buttocks that are better upholstered than the rest of the population, yet they seem quite happy perching on any hard piece of wood that masquerades as a piece of furniture. I shifted my bum, trying not to think about it, and concentrated on the question I’d just asked.

“What’s going on?” she repeated. “That’s a question I’ve been pondering every waking moment of the day. What is the reason for this haunting? Have I done something wrong? And why start now? My only conclusion is that it must be my husband, trying to give me a message.”

“And why would you say that?”

Her hands fluttered above the small cups of green tea she had just poured for us.

“What else could it be? Maybe my husband is angry that I didn’t sell the house to that young developer. Or maybe he’s jealous that I’m friendly with my neighbour. He was always the jealous type.”

I tried to nip that conversational tangent in the bud. If I started to question Mrs. Xian about her husband’s various eccentricities, I’d still be around for the next New Year. Once they get started, old people are notoriously difficult to shut up.

“Tell me about what happened. I believe this all started...a month ago?”

“I didn’t really notice at first,” she replied, looking into the contents of her teacup as if for guidance. “It was the smell I think. Like rotten vegetables. And then later, rotten meat. I would wake up to go to the bathroom and the smell would fill the air.”

This was what Fiona had told me, but there was no harm confirming the information from the source itself.

“And could you find the source of those smells? Maybe somebody had been transporting rubbish in the laneway behind the house?”

“Oh no.” She was quite adamant. “All the neighbours have been here for years. We know each other’s habits and movements as if we are family.”

“There is a lot of development going on in the area,” I prompted.

“But they only work in concrete and brick, Miss Formosa. And dust.” She looked around and sighed. “Dust everywhere.”

“So you couldn’t find the source of the smells and they would seem to disappear in the morning?”

“That’s right. I could only smell that fetid aroma at night. And only on some nights.”

“Then you said you began hearing strange noises?”

“They were very rhythmic. It sounded like a hammer hitting something, but would change in tone every now and then, as though missing its target.”

I went back over my recollections of her neighbourhood on the walk down, wondering if there was a sports field or factory nearby, but there was nothing. Unless the prostitutes and their pimps had decided to branch out into percussion music, there seemed to be no logical explanation for the thumping.

“And where did the sound appear to come from?” I prompted.

“It was very difficult to say. From the walls themselves, but loudest from the ceiling I think.”

I thought of the old terracotta tiles that covered the roof and wondered if I’d have to take a walk along the fragile u-shapes. I hoped not.

“And...the blood?”

I really hadn’t wanted to ask about that and my misgivings were vindicated when the old woman started turning the cup, round and round as if it was on a turntable. She didn’t look at me.

“I think I could have coped with everything else,” she said, and her voice was soft and thready. Without thinking, I put my hand out and rested it on hers, on the one that wasn’t preoccupied with the teacup. She didn’t even notice, lost in recollection.

“I had many thoughts about the source of the smells. Many lies I wanted myself to believe. Maybe a new restaurant had opened nearby and their freezer had broken down. Or some rubbish from a wet market was being carried away past my house. Maybe someone doing the renovation down the street had discovered something old and buried. Then, one morning I woke up, walked into my bathroom and I saw it.”

She stumbled to a halt and, in the ensuing silence, I heard the sonorous ticking of a large clock close by.

“I know it’s painful for you, Mrs. Xian,” I prompted gently, “but I have to know the details and only you can tell me. What did you see?”

“It was horrible,” she said. “Everywhere over my clean white tiles. Blood. The edges of it had already dried and was that dirty brown colour.”

“Did you take any pictures of it?”

I already knew the answer to this question, but just wanted to be sure. She lifted her head and her eyes flashed at me.

“What kind of a person do you think I am?”

Obviously not the record-keeping kind, but I bit my tongue and continued with the required line of questioning. Sometimes I feel no better than an actor playing at being policewoman on one of the local crime dramas. Speaking of which....

“And you didn’t call the police? Tell them what had happened?”

Her laugh was short and full of disbelief. “And what was I supposed to say, Miss Formosa? That my dead husband is haunting me? The last thing they want to hear is some cockeyed story from an old woman. They’re paid to deal with robberies and murders, not exorcisms.”

“Is that what you expect me to do?” I asked. “Conduct an exorcism?”

“I expect you to find out why my husband is so unhappy after resting peacefully for almost three years.” Her voice was back to carrying its original energy. “You’re called ‘The Check Your Luck Agency’ and I’m paying you to check and find the source of my bad luck.”

I could have told her that while the Agency was *paid* to check someone’s luck, it didn’t necessarily mean that there was anything we could *do* about it, but it was too early to start splitting hairs.

“May I have a look upstairs?” I asked. “You don’t have to come with me.”

She sighed and touched the warm bowl of her porcelain cup. “If you don’t mind, could you go up by yourself? I’m staying with my daughter till this is over and it took immense courage merely to unlock the front door this morning.”

I patted her hand again and rose, heading for the stairs.

I had originally conjectured that a well-maintained shophouse on the edges of Geylang could command a seven-figure sales amount, depending on how close it was to existing gentrification projects. I was wrong in my estimations. For a start, the Xian shophouse was only two storeys high, not three. Secondly, it looked as though Mr. Xian had done some minimal renovations to the interior, but nothing that looked finished. Maybe he had thought to wait until he finalised his plans for his grand restaurant before spending any serious money. It showed. And thirdly, it was still a little too close to the notorious lanes that attracted scores of the wrong kind of crowd. But there was potential in the solid walls and floor, even I could see that. The place had good bones. Now to see if it hid anything else.

The stairs, timber and stained dark but polished and glossy, creaked as I ascended them. There was a small landing at the halfway mark to the floor above and, sure enough, a grandfather clock stood in one corner. I noted that it was still keeping good time and moved on.

At the top of the stairs, I took a sharp right turn, heading for the back of the house. Ideally, it should have been brighter inside, with light coming into the house from the open courtyard that usually bisected such buildings but Mr. Xian, or his predecessor, had obviously decided that one sliver of unfettered light was one too much. Where I should have seen sky, there was only the underside of corrugated sheets of metal, tilted to form the underside of another pitched roof. It turned the house into a cheap, vaulted mausoleum, dark and stuffy with the musty scent of Chinese medicine and five-spice powder. I tried not to think of what I would’ve done with the same space had I been given such an opportunity.

The glossy timber floors, worn back to their natural matte finish along the line of the most

frequent foot traffic, creaked as I stepped on them. Fiona's initial briefing had noted no sounds of creaks or groans within the house. That's almost one of the first questions on the Agency checklist. I touched the walls but they appeared solid enough. I considered returning to carry out a more comprehensive examination but, with Mrs. Xian agitated enough just by being here, I was determined to be as quick as possible during my initial visit.

I continued walking down the long corridor until I came to the bedrooms at the back. Choosing the door closest to me, I opened it and walked in.

The light that streamed in through the back window was shaded by an awning but brought welcome illumination to the room. The floor was bare and what little furniture was on it was placed with military precision. On the floor next to the double bed was a small thin rug in a floral pattern. Large red roses on a field of green leaves. The bedhead, the two standalone cupboards at the other end of the room and the dressing table to my left were all made from the same dark timber as the furniture downstairs. I wondered if the Xians had managed to score a package deal from somewhere. It certainly seemed like it.

I walked over to the dressing table first. It was old. So old that the mirror in the metal clasps was spotted with age, the edges black from losing their silvered finish. I ran my finger along the dresser's surface. The table had been dusted recently and only a hair brush, small tin of talcum powder and a container of moisturising cream sat on the hard glass table-top. Between the timber of the cabinet and the glass lay two white woven doilies.

I didn't bother looking in the small drawers but moved to the cupboards that lined a wall. The locks on the cupboard doors were small and rusty, secrets held on not much more than a word of honour. I opened the doors and looked inside, but felt no chill along my arms, no headless apparition about to attack me with upraised arms and certainly no corpse, half-mummified and about to fall on me. I saw neatly hung clothes and, on the floor of the cupboard, shoes arranged in two orderly rows. The other cupboard showed the same kind of organisation and contents.

Continuing with walking the circumference of the room, I reached the windows next. There was no glass in the windows, only painted metal grilles, the round metal wires crisscrossing each other to form a regular square pattern. The wooden shutters, now open and secured by newer-looking stainless steel hooks and clasps, were painted dark green. I looked out through the metal squares. Facing me were the backs of another line of shophouses. I peered down and could see the edge of a laneway. The regular thumping sound Mrs. Xian had heard, hammer on metal, could be coming from one of the other houses but they had a vacant look about them, and the laneway below wasn't wide enough to take anything more than two scooters riding side by side. I doubted anybody was using the access lane as an open-air workspace. I made a mental note to check the neighbours and moved on.

The bathroom.

It was positioned between the two bedrooms, with doors leading into it from either side. I was ready for some kind of reaction when I entered the small room but, again, there was nothing. I

raised my eyebrows and looked around. White glazed tiles reached from floor to ceiling. The only natural light came from a small window set high on the wall. Five fixed rectangular panes of frosted glass were set into the frame, although the top two were missing. Not that it mattered, this high above the ground. Only Spiderman could have climbed in. Above my head, a short single-bar fluorescent tube provided the only other source of light.

It was an old house but, besides a mild depression at soaking in someone else's aesthetic sense – or lack of it – I felt nothing. Walking down the stairs, I mulled over my options.

“Did you find anything?” Mrs. Xian asked as I stepped onto the floorboards of the ground floor. “Did you see my husband?”

I shook my head but tried to mollify her with a slight smile.

“This is only my first visit, Mrs. Xian. If you don't mind, I'd like to come back and perhaps bring a colleague with me.” I was thinking of Deepak, our young Indian gofer. Being a native of Singapore, he often had insights into things I missed.

“Of course,” the widow replied, as polite as ever, but she couldn't hide the disappointment on her face. I lay the blame on television. Every problem in the world appears insurmountable, until you make a TV series out of it. Once that happens, no crisis takes more than one hour to solve, time for commercials included. It means people are more impatient and less likely to wait for answers.

Forget children. Television had a lot to answer for when it came to adults.



www.KSAugustin.com

www.SandalPressOnline.com

The Check Your Luck Agency

ISBN 978-0-9871445-1-5

© Copyright KS Augustin 2014

Cover art: Sandal Press

Editors: H Hammond, John Young

A Sandal Press book

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living, dead, undead or residing in this, or another, galaxy or metaverse is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. This ebook has been made available without DRM, subject to individual retailer conditions. Please don't reproduce in any form. (An exception is the use of brief quotations for the purposes of critical articles and/or reviews.) That includes printing, photocopying, scanning, uploading to torrent sites or any other practice that is somehow meant to circumvent a royalty being rightfully paid to the author. Believe it or not, the vast majority of us authors probably earn less than you.

The author and cover artist have asserted their respective rights to be identified as the author of this book and producer of the cover artwork.