

# 1

## *Southampton, England*

The overheated interior of the security minivan in which Jane was driven across the dock stank of the driver's body odour, and the cigarette he'd obviously been smoking before she got in. The relief she got from opening the sliding door was short lived, and the wind and rain lashed her while she struggled to drag her rucksack and day pack out. The driver had no intention of leaving his seat to help her, and was probably looking forward to relighting his smoke. Her strawberry blonde hair was plastered to her face and rivulets cascaded off the collar of her Gore-Tex parka and down the back of her neck. The bleak day matched her mood. There was no band, no streamers, no crowds of well-wishers, no tearful farewells. Just row upon row of brand-new Land Rovers, awaiting loading on a car carrier.

Her ship loomed above her. At nearly four hundred metres in length, the one hundred and thirty thousand tonne MV *Penfold Son* was hard to miss. The last of its cargo of twelve thousand steel shipping containers was being loaded by a giant crane on the dockside. It was one of the largest container ships afloat and just within the Suezmax

specifications that allowed it to squeeze through the Suez Canal. It was an impressive beast, this flagship of a family-owned line; however, Jane didn't like to think of the word family when she thought of the name Penfold. It made her feel bad, and she wasn't, she told herself for the third time that morning, a bad person. Was she?

The man at the top of the gangway stared down at her as she walked up. Pale-faced and gaunt, with lank, greasy, greying hair that protruded from under his white plastic hard hat, he wore a blue boiler suit and orange safety vest.

He wiped his nose and sniffled as he took her passport from her and opened it. 'Jane Elizabeth Humphries. You are from head office, *da*?'

'Yes.'

'Welcome aboard.' He made a note on a clipboard and handed back her passport.

She thought it a talent of the man to make the word welcome sound like an insult.

'I am engineer, Igor Putin. Name is like former president. I show you to your cabin. Come.'

Another crewman, who looked Filipino, appeared and Putin handed him the clipboard. The man nodded and smiled at Jane, and took over Putin's position at the top of the gangway.

Jane wiped wet hair from her eyes and followed the Russian officer down the narrow passageway. From somewhere far beneath her came the throb of the ship's engines, vibrating up through the deck into the soles of her feet – a far more pleasant sensation than following in Igor's wake, which smelled of cheap aftershave and body odour.

'You are lawyer, yes?' Igor said without turning around to face her.

'Yes.' She'd heard all the jokes and aspersions before.

'I have just got divorced from Englishwoman. I don't like lawyers. No offence.'

'None taken.' She didn't like smelly Russians either, but thought it wise not to upset the crew too early in the voyage.

Igor showed her to the owner's cabin. This was the *crème de la crème* of accommodation on board a working freighter. She'd seen pictures,

but this was her first time on board one of the company's ships, though not her first cruise.

Jane hated flying. It terrified her, so she did everything – anything – she could to avoid it. If she was required to be in Paris for a business meeting on a Monday morning, she would book herself onto the Eurostar train on the Sunday afternoon and stay in a hotel, rather than risk her life on a forty-five minute flight.

She holidayed in England – something that had annoyed and, in two cases, eventually alienated past boyfriends – or took cruises. She'd been around the Mediterranean and Aegean and taken a cruise to Sydney and back on board the *Queen Mary*. She was still paying off the credit card bill from the last voyage, but that was a small price to pay, she reasoned, compared to plunging thirty thousand feet to her death.

Jane considered herself something of a seasoned sea traveller, though this would be a new adventure for her.

The owner's cabin was actually a two-room suite – a bedroom and small sitting room, with an ensuite shower and toilet. She knew it to be thirty square metres and that turned out to be about as big as a very small London flat, minus the kitchenette. There was a double bed, a bar fridge, a television with a VCR and DVD player, an AM-FM radio and an electric kettle and tea and coffee supplies on a small sideboard.

The cabin was immediately below the navigating bridge and faced forward. Through thick glass windows she had a fantastic view across the expanse of stacked shipping containers. At least the view would be fantastic when the rain cleared, she thought.

When she opened the fridge she saw six bottles of vintage Krug champagne and a punnet of strawberries. She closed the door and smiled. As she unpacked she reflected on the last two weeks at work and the way her life had been thrown into disarray.

It had been clear to her, not long after she started her new job nine months earlier, that the managing director and future owner of Penfold Shipping, George Robertson Penfold, wanted to sleep with her.

As the in-house counsel for the London-based international shipping firm, Jane could have reeled off a dozen legal and moral reasons

why this would have been a bad idea, starting with the fact that George was married and had three teenage children. Had she been minded to take his increasingly unsubtle advances in a different way, she could have mounted a good case for sexual harassment. However, Jane had been attracted to George from the moment she'd entered his city office for her job interview.

He was tall, fit – he ran seven kilometres and did a hundred push-ups a day – handsome, rich, urbane, funny, intelligent and well read. At forty-five he was young to be the MD of a company with a profit of several hundred million pounds per annum.

Of course, it didn't hurt that his father was chairman of the board, but George was a man who quite clearly could have been running a similarly sized business on his own merits. Indeed, according to company legend, he had done everything in his power *not* to inherit the business from his father.

George had run away to sea – literally – bunking out of private school at the age of sixteen to work for a rival shipping company. Being the scion of one of Britain's elite shipping families had not helped him on board a rival's vessel; in fact, it had proved a curse for his first few years. He had defended himself and his family name – even though he had earned his father's wrath – in a series of fist fights in ports around the world.

According to George, it had been his wife, Elizabeth, who had talked him into returning to the family fold. By then George was twenty-five and had more than earned his right to serve as an officer on one of his father's ships. He'd risen to captain by the age of thirty-five – no mean feat at the time – and there were few in the industry who would suggest he'd made the rank of Master Mariner by virtue of anything other than merit.

But George missed the sea, or so he'd told Jane when he'd first taken her out for a long weekend on the company yacht. There had been others aboard – the IT manager and chief financial officer – but George seemed to engineer quiet moments when it was just the two of them together. Elizabeth, George said, hated the sea and anything to do with

'boats', as she insisted on calling them. She liked his family's money, George said, but not the family business.

He also suspected Elizabeth was having an affair.

Jane had been shocked to hear him make such a private admission to her. The other members of the executive team were ashore, enjoying wine and seafood in the French port in Brittany. Jane, who loved sailing, had willingly volunteered to stay behind and help George secure the yacht. Their work done, George had opened two chilled Czech pilsners, which they drank in the slanting afternoon sunshine.

'I know I'm away from home on business a hell of a lot, but I do try to be a good husband and father,' George had said, looking back out to the channel.

He was a handsome man whose tan and callused hands attested to the fact he didn't spend more time than necessary in his London office. His broad shoulders sometimes looked constrained in a suit, but out on his yacht in an old T-shirt he looked free and cool, in his true element.

'Elizabeth and I have grown apart, as the Americans would say.'

She'd smiled at his awkwardness.

'It's been . . . well, rather too long since . . . Oh, bugger, this is what my kids would call TMI. I'm so sorry, Jane. I didn't mean to embarrass you.'

'It's fine, George. I like to think we're friends, and you can talk to me about anything. Really.'

He'd laid a hand on her forearm – the first time she could recall him touching her – and it had sent a ripple of electricity throughout her entire body. She'd had to catch her breath.

'God, now I suppose you expect me to say my wife doesn't understand me. I feel like a walking bloody cliché.'

'Does she?' Jane had asked.

'No.'

They'd had dinner ashore at a brasserie George had frequented often enough to be greeted warmly by the *maître d'*. Afterwards, in a boutique hotel he'd booked for the evening, Jane again found herself alone with her boss, over coffee and Cointreau. There were even candles.

'I know it's wrong, but I'm attracted to you, Jane.'

She'd had a moment of panic. She, too, was drawn to him, though she had never in her life been with a married or otherwise attached man. She told herself she was not the kind of woman who'd try to take another's man, though she'd never actually found herself in such a situation. She thought of Elizabeth and the children, and said, 'I'm so sorry, George.'

'Forgive me,' he'd blurted out.

'No, no. I'm flattered, believe me, and I do like you, George. I really do. And I'm not just saying that because you pay me an inordinate amount of money.'

He'd laughed it off, but she'd had the distinct feeling he would try to woo her again. She was right. Two weeks ago after sharing two bottles of wine at a posh restaurant, she'd gone with him to the empty company flat in Soho and they had made love.

She pushed thoughts of George from her mind for the moment. There would be plenty of time to think about him on the long voyage to Africa.

The normal route from the UK to Cape Town would have taken the *Penfold Son* down the west coast of Africa, but there was nothing normal about this voyage. George had his sights set on acquisitions in Africa and north Asia. The *Penfold Son* would be taking a slow trip, through the Suez Canal, across to Mumbai and then back to Africa, stopping at Mombasa, Durban, Port Elizabeth and, finally, Cape Town. The costly voyage was as much about public relations as it was about trade. 'Britannia used to rule the waves,' George had told *The Times* recently, 'but in the twenty-first century it's going to be Penfold in charge.' George wanted to show off his new ship and let his competitors know that he was a major player with money to spend.

Jane wasn't sailing away to forget George, so much as put some distance between them while she thought through a lot of things.

There was also a business reason for her travel to South Africa. Penfold Shipping had begun negotiations to purchase a South African company, De Witt Shipping, and Jane would play a key role in the talks.

A round of intensive meetings was planned for the end of the month and George and other members of the senior executive team would be flying out to Johannesburg. Jane, of course, would rather jump out the window of her twenty-third floor London office than be stuck on an aircraft for nine hours.

The cruise on the *Penfold Son* – which had been named after George by the old man – would arrive in Cape Town three days before the meetings were due to begin. Jane would then catch a luxury train, the *Pride of Africa*, from the Cape to Johannesburg.

She'd come to an arrangement with George about taking so much time out of the office. She would, in fact, be in contact with her colleagues and boss by satellite phone and email while on board. She unpacked her laptop and booted it up. Her BlackBerry beeped in her handbag, reminding her she was still very much on the job, but it would soon lose its signal. As a goodwill gesture she had offered to take two weeks' leave as well, but George had refused.

'It's high time you got a look at the sharp end of this business. Call it an extended familiarisation trip. Besides, you're saving me the cost of a business class airfare by taking a slow ship to South Africa,' he'd said.

There would be time to relax, though. Plenty of time, in fact. She unpacked a dozen chunky paperbacks and stacked them on the shelf next to the bed. She opened her handbag and checked the BlackBerry.

*Hi. Hope you've settled in and Igor hasn't offended you too much. They're a good bunch and you'll get used to washing dishes and swabbing the decks soon enough. George. x*

The kiss at the end of the message struck her as slightly improper, even in such a relaxed, abbreviated form of work communication.

Improper, but exciting. Just like George.

## *Indian Ocean, off the coast of South Africa*

‘Two targets, six miles ahead,’ Hans, the first mate, said.

Captain Are Berentsen put down his cup of coffee and shifted his position on the bridge of the MV *Oslo Star* so he could see the radar screen. ‘No AIS,’ he said – neither boat displayed the Automatic Identification System code that any vessel of substance would display. That wasn’t unusual, though, in African waters, where the transponder was a luxury not everyone could afford. ‘Fishermen, I suppose.’

It was the mate’s watch and Are had come to the bridge to drink his coffee with his old friend, and to find an excuse to get away from the computer and the paperwork that was sadly so much a part of a master’s job these days. A lookout, a Filipino able seaman, stood at the far end of the bridge.

Berentsen picked up a pair of binoculars himself and scanned the horizon. Beneath his feet the twenty-one thousand tonne deadweight Pure Car and Truck Carrier, or PCTC as it was known, was packed with row after row of new motor vehicles, tractors and earth-moving equipment. The fifteen-deck floating car park’s last stop had been Port Elizabeth, where she’d taken on scores of South African-manufactured Hummer H3 luxury four-wheel drives bound for Australia. They’d take on some more cars from the Toyota plant at Durban and disgorge half-a-dozen mining trucks before the long haul across the Southern Ocean through mighty swells spawned in the empty expanses between the Antarctic and Africa.

‘They’re not moving.’ Are lowered the binoculars and rubbed his eyes. They were close to shore, less than three nautical miles, hugging the coast in order to stay out of the Agulhas current. No, it wasn’t unusual to come across a couple of trawlers here. So why was the hair on the back of his neck suddenly prickling to life?

‘Captain, I see them.’ Hans pointed to the tiny specks.

Berentsen refocused his own glasses and saw two fishing trawlers, line astern and close to each other. A streak of smoke scratched a path from the lead boat across the otherwise perfectly empty blue sky. ‘Orange flare. Try to raise him on the radio.’

The mate repeated the *Oslo Star*'s call sign three times into the radio handset and asked the trawlers to identify themselves. There was no reply. He picked up his binoculars again. 'He is flying N over C, Captain.' The flags – and the orange flare – were internationally recognised distress signals.

Berentsen swore to himself. Any delay in their tight schedule meant money, but he was obliged to render assistance to any vessel at sea that needed it.

'Turn into the weather, starboard five, dead slow ahead,' Berentsen said.

'Turn into weather, starboard five, dead slow ahead,' Hans repeated, signalling he had understood the order to use engines and the onshore breeze to starboard to slow them down. Had they simply stopped the ship's single engine, it would have taken more than two kilometres to stop the *Oslo Star*, which had been travelling at close to twenty knots. By turning away from the stricken fishing vessels Are was using the elements to reduce his speed.

Having dropped to just six knots, Are gave the order for the mate to turn to port, back towards the fishermen. He blinked away the glare and refocused the glasses as they neared the two fishing boats. They were both sizeable trawlers, he noted. It was a sad coincidence that both vessels' diesels had given up.

'Stop engine,' Are said.

'Stop engine,' Hans said. 'Captain, should I ready the rescue boat?'

Are rubbed his red-gold beard. Through the binoculars he could now see a white man on the lead boat waving frantically. He saw, too, the flash of sunlight on water and steel as a cable between the tow boats was pulled taut. Some instinct from generations of ancestors who had sailed the open seas since Viking days made him hesitate. 'Radio MRCC. We'll stand off.'

The Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre at Silvermine near Cape Town in South Africa was responsible for organising assistance for vessels in trouble. If the fishermen had been able to send a signal before losing radio communications there could be a rescue vessel already on

its way. If not, then the MRCC might task the *Oslo Star*, as the closest vessel, to render assistance.

‘Smoke, sir. The rear boat’s on fire!’

Are couldn’t ignore the greasy black plume erupting from the towed boat’s engine compartment. He focused on the trawler and saw the lick of orange flames. No mariner would be stupid enough to set fire to his own vessel as a ruse. ‘Hans, sound a general alarm. Ready the rescue boat and fire hoses.’

The mate gave the orders while Are kept watch as the *Oslo Star* closed slowly on the stricken trawlers. He lost sight of the trawlers as smoke engulfed them.

It took his brain a few precious seconds to realise something was very wrong.

‘Boat’s ready to launch, Captain. Lowering now,’ Hans said, having just been talking on the radio to rescue crew in the forward mooring station, where the craft was stowed.

‘They’re moving!’

‘Captain?’

Are swung to check out the lead boat again and noted a cable rising from the ocean’s surface between the two craft. ‘That bloody fire’s a fake. It hid the exhaust smoke from the lead trawler. He’s moving and the fool’s heading straight across our bow.’ He pushed the button to sound the ship’s alarm and let the glasses drop so they hung from their neck strap.

‘Engine full astern.’

‘Engine full astern,’ Hans replied.

Are didn’t like this. The car carrier was as manoeuvrable as an elephant in quicksand and she couldn’t take evasive action to avoid the other vessels. He punched the typhoon air horn button on the console in front of him and sent out five short blasts, signalling he couldn’t understand their actions.

‘Retrieve the rescue boat,’ Are said.

Hans looked at him. ‘Captain?’

‘Just do as I bloody say. Get that boat back.’

Are sounded five more blasts on the horn. The tow cable flickered in and out of sight between the two fishing vessels, which were set on a course to intercept them.

Something clicked in Berentsen's mind. 'Engine full ahead.' He pushed the general alarm signal and klaxons started blaring throughout the ship.

The mate's face had turned ashen. 'Captain, if we keep on this course we'll ram them.'

'That's exactly what I'm trying to do, Hans. Faster . . .' Putting the engine astern had all but stopped the ship. They were moving forward again, but painfully slowly.

The fishing boats chugged on. The lead vessel increased its speed slightly, until the tow cable was raised taut between it and the smoking boat behind. Are assumed they were in radio contact. He switched channels to try to pick up their private conversation.

*' . . . ease off. Now make fifteen knots. That's it. Hold it.'*

'Got you,' Berentsen said.

*'Cut your engines in five, four, three, two . . .'*

Are looked away from the radio's speaker, which had mesmerised him for a second. Surely this couldn't be happening to him.

'Idiots. They're stopping in front of us, Captain. Why would they, now they have power? Don't they know we're going to hit them?'

'That's exactly what they want us to do. Get ready to go full astern as soon as I tell you . . .'

'But Captain, why don't we stop now, and —'

'Shut up, damn you.' Berentsen turned and strode towards the rear of the bridge.

Are clapped a hand on Hans's shoulder in a gesture of apology. 'Steady. Here it comes. Pray we have enough speed to cut that cable or pull them under on either side of us.'

The fishing boats held steady, using their throttles to keep in position across the path of the oncoming leviathan. The tow cable's wet steel strands glittered and winked in the sunlight like a strand of dew-covered spider web.

Are Berentsen held his breath as the blunted, overhanging prow of his mighty ship obscured the cable from view. Even at this height, nearly forty metres above the water's surface, he and his crew heard the agonising scrape of metal on metal. 'Come on, my beauty,' Berentsen willed his ship. For a moment the captain thought he had won.

The cable had snared the *Oslo Star's* bulbous bow which jutted forward of the hull beneath the water and Berentsen had not been able to summon enough speed to snap the stout wire rope.

'Captain, look,' said the Filipino lookout who had been wise enough to stay silent so far. 'That boat's coming right towards our port side!' There were several different nationalities in Berentsen's crew but English was the common working language on board.

Berentsen knew very well what was happening without seeing for himself. Both smaller vessels would have cut their engines, allowing the onward progress of the mighty *Oslo Star* to draw them in against either side of her hull. Are tapped the keys of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System on the control panel and scrolled down the menu on the small screen through a list of possible problems that a ship at sea could face. When he came to 'piracy attack' he selected it and hit the key that sent an emergency signal to the MRCC in Silvermine. He supposed help would come from Durban, but he had no idea how long it would take.

'Engine stop, Hans. Astern full.'

Below them the engine protested the sudden commands, sending vibrations all the way up through the car decks to the bridge high above. 'Where are you going, sir?' Hans said to his captain's back.

'To get a weapon.'

'But why, sir? Who are these people?'

'Pirates.'