

Part 2

Steve

Fiji. Tuesday 16 January, 2007

A jumble of unwelcome images roll through my brain. They are a painful kaleidoscope of rattling guns, pain and helplessness.

‘Steve!’

I hear her. The voice is faint but it is drawing me back to the real world. I smell the tropical humidity in the air. The warm Fijian breeze is gently whispering over me.

‘Mr Flynn? You okay?’

I hear her. I am alive and conscious. It has been that bad dream ... again. I must have been sighing or twisting. I open an eye and smile to thank her.

Cheery Lani’s firm hands return to massaging a blend of coconut oil and frangipani blossoms into my back.

I look out over the turquoise-green of the lagoon. Farther out, a pulsing white line flags the surf, booming rhythmically on the outer reef.

It has been a week since I must have crossed that barrier in a semi-conscious state. Just thinking about it brings a throb back into the still raw scar through my hair above my right ear. I hear myself groan with a memory.

Lani pauses again, with a concerned look. I nod for her to continue.

Aldo Pollock and I were security on board the *Sea Spray 2* for Ingrid, a pop-singing sensation in her mid-twenties. Her second album had just gone platinum in the US. She needed space to develop new material. The next album was due in the stores for the Christmas market. Apparently it takes many months to go from inspired idea to final tracks in shops and on-line.

Already wealthy from music sales, Ingrid had also married money. Her husband – decades her senior – was a seriously rich banker who, presumably had a youthful outlook. But neither Aldo nor I asked such questions. We were the hired help.

Our job was to keep the paparazzi away as we cruised past Bora Bora and Pago Pago. And, just a week ago, we had been off one of the small Fijian islands favoured for the exclusive peaceful resorts of the rich and private.

A chop was getting up with a low pressure system rolling in. The *Sea Spray 2* was luxury – a couple of decks and good cabin space for the musical diva to conjure up her new melodies; large cruising sails for the romance of moving like Polynesians between magical islands; and a powerful diesel engine too, for the days when the wind wouldn't blow.

During daylight hours on board, Aldo and I took turns to monitor the computer and radio waves for potential threats. At night, we patrolled the decks. There was little threat from intrusive photographers at sea, although they would try if we were near a main island. No, the threats at sea were mainly from the elements; and from pirates, who saw easy targets in the wealthy yachting island-hoppers.

The Fijian lady asks me to turn onto my back; which I do, with as athletic a motion as my formerly fit frame can manage. Thirty-four last birthday and less than two years retired from active service with the Australian Army in Afghanistan, Iraq and East Timor.

I adjust my towel to protect Lani's modesty. She laughs at my effort – eyes twinkling. She is a good sport.

Is it alright to touch these scars? She uses her expressive eyes to silently ask the question.

The massaging hands work down the right side of my rib cage. They reach the hardened marks which pepper that side and my right thigh.

What a beautiful dark face she has, sparkling teeth and a cap of tight black curls, providing a backdrop for the red hibiscus blossom behind her ear.

She pours more exotic oil over my battered body. The aromas, the thatched roof of an open-sided *bure*, the warm sea air and the rhythmic soothing of aching muscles seem to belie old and recent violence.

I smile to her to say that it is okay, ignoring my memory of the improvised explosive device which had gone off under our Bushmaster in the cold Afghan desert.

I'd been lucky but the scar tissue is a reminder of hard days. Her massaging hands are gentle. The scents and sounds of Fiji are close to paradise ... but my thoughts had gone back to that night a week ago.

We had watched a burnished sun go down, escaping from scudding clouds.

Aldo and I scanned every horizon. Nothing ... nor on the radar and computer screens. Nothing, except the usual parade of large freighters moving through the shipping lanes and the big rain squalls which were coming from the seaward side.

We wore our thin lifejackets and carried side-arms – normal operating procedure. Automatic assault rifles were in easily accessible lockers on each side of the deck, more to give peace of mind to Ingrid than for any anticipated danger.

The clouds brought an envelope of purply-black gloom over the sea. I could see lights winking on the island – some exclusive resort there, on the edge of the private lagoon. The wind was rising, blowing towards the protecting reef. The skipper had several sea anchors out to counter any drift.

Tomorrow, Wednesday, he had told us, we would head for cover in daylight but for tonight, we would ride out this not too ominous chop.

There had been no warning – just the shock from a stun grenade, almost covering the rattle of automatic gunfire. The raiders had approached on Aldo's side, from the gloom, and he had dropped to the deck. He was gone. Experience tells you that. I fired off two shots at the shadowy shapes.

It had felt like a huge club hitting my head above my right ear but I hadn't seen anyone near me. I was falling into the darkness. The warm Pacific tasted salty with a hint of vegetation. My numbed body rolled slowly to the surface under the control of the lifejacket. Cool air blew across my cheeks pushing the water to the sides of my wet face. Nothing worked. Not arms or legs. Just deadening; as if all the messages from the brain had been short-circuited. My head throbbed, a stinging pain bit into the open wound.

It had all happened so fast.

As my left eye opened, I could see the *Sea Spray's* lights disappearing – and yet the yacht still seemed to be bobbing, straining at the sea anchors.

Then I got it. It was not the boat disappearing. I was being floated away, driven by the rising wind towards land.

Through my one functioning eye and with my dazed mind lapsing in and out of consciousness, I could see figures on the ship and hear the chatter of raised voices – but they were receding fast.

I was being washed towards the shore, towards the barrier reef which surrounded the lagoon. But there was no huge boom of waves crashing – nothing except the wind gradually growing in strength.

When I looked again for the *Sea Spray*, it had gone. Much as I tried to turn to see where I was heading, I couldn't move. No visibility; lost in this turbulent warm ocean; I drifted out of consciousness again.

Alison

Central Queensland, Australia. Tuesday 16 January, 2007

Alison Wood is a court reporter. She looks too gentle a woman to be listening to the procession of petty criminals who pass through the magistrate-court system.

She sits comfortably on the padded vinyl cushions in the Emerald courtroom. It isn't crowded. The list has the usual drunks and driving charges.

In the next case though, the police are seeking to have an alleged robber remanded in custody. He has apparently been involved in a mugging earlier that morning, in the area known to every Central Queenslander as the Gemfields, just to the west of Emerald.

He appears a bit rough, unshaven, a few scratches on his face and his clothes look as if they have been slept in – which, it seems, they probably have.

Alison has her thick notepad on her knee as she records only the salient facts. Court reporting can be really boring work at times.

She hears, in the background of her attention, that the magistrate is having trouble clarifying the police request. The man has apparently not spoken, except to say, 'Nein', when given an instruction to move into the dock. Based on that word alone, the magistrate has assumed he is German.

The magistrate says something to the policeman about the accused needing reasonable representation. The duty lawyer says the accused doesn't appear to understand English.

All of this exchange clearly raises the frustration level of the judge who wants *clean processes* when applying for someone to be remanded in custody. He remonstrates with the lawyer, 'Haven't we got an interpreter who can speak with the accused?'

The tone in the magistrate's voice snaps Alison to a full attention. *Perhaps there will be some excitement*, she thinks. She does enjoy it when justices and judges get frustrated with young lawyers who often *cut their*

teeth by practising in country court-houses – much better to be bounced in a remote courtroom than to be exposed to a much more public humiliation in getting the protocols wrong in the busy Brisbane courts.

‘Is there no-one who can speak German and interpret for this man?’ the magistrate asks.

The young lawyer blushes with embarrassment. Why did he think that he would be able to just roll this case through as a routine remand? He should have checked to see who the presiding officer would be. It could make all the difference between an easy or a hard life. They all have their individual quirks. The law can often be a matter of who is interpreting it.

Usually magistrates take the advice of the police and legal aid. This is the routine. Just his luck to catch a judge who wants to be picky. He hasn’t thought to get a translator. This isn’t the city. There is no list of court interpreters out here. That is why he wants him remanded to Rockhampton. Surely, that is obvious.

Alison notices a thin young man stand up in the public pew in front of her.

‘I’ll give it a try, your honour,’ he says to the magistrate, in response to the request for an interpreter.

‘Your name?’ the court officer asks.

‘Mick,’ replies the thin man. ‘Mick Stone.’

Alison thinks he has the look of a well-meaning farm dog about him; eager to please but not quite sure of the right way to do it – as he shuffles awkwardly from his pew to the waiting welcome of the clerk-of-court. The court officer appears relieved that he has this community volunteer. What a stroke of luck to have someone who can get the glares of the magistrate off him and all the other court officials.

‘Thank you, Sir,’ says the magistrate with a relieved tone in his voice. He lowers his head to his paperwork. His whole persona and manner give an impression that he is a judicial officer who wants this case dealt with and that he is tired of the slack processes which are slowing the efficient management of his court.

‘Please ask him his name, Sir,’ he commands without lifting his head.

Alison watches the slim young man raise his body erect, giving him a sense of ill-fitting importance as, she thinks, he is trying to recall his German words.

‘Vot isst your name?’ says the young man.

There are moments of silence in life which are quite profound. To Alison, that is the silence in the courtroom at this very moment; a pregnant few seconds, as the magistrate’s head slowly rises from his papers – the realisation dawning through a bemused mist that the young man has not spoken German at all. Is this a joke? In his well-run courtroom where due processes are always followed?

Even as he looks in those intensely quiet seconds, the magistrate can see there is no joke in the face of the slim man. He has the look of someone who thinks he has asked his question well and is waiting for the answer from the man in the dock – the man with the confused expression on his face.

The lawyer and the policeman stand stunned. Even more so when the young man repeats, ‘Vot isst your name?’ with some impatience, or is it pleading, in his tone.

Before he can sense the slightest of tittering chortles move into the stifled smiles around the room, the magistrate takes control.

‘You don’t speak German?’ he says, more as a statement than a question – and certainly in a tone that stops any nascent giggles in the audience. The magistrate realises in one glance at the simple young man that he is not a practical joker. Indeed, young Mick appears as a good, if not overly bright, local who has been trying to do the right thing.

Alison can see in his slightly bewildered expression that his television diet of *Hogan’s Heroes* has led him to believe that Sergeant Schultz was speaking proper German when he said in an accent, *I know nothing; nothing*.

She gives the magistrate grudging admiration for his sensitive and rapid appraisal of the situation.

‘Thank you. This case is adjourned till the afternoon sitting – by which time I expect you will have acquired the services of an interpreter. Thank you, Sir, for your assistance.’ He says this with a gentle smile to Mick who seems bewildered, relieved and a little happy as the clerk-of-court ushers him outside.

Alison is one of several who just make it outside the courtroom door before dissolving into a scarcely controlled spasm of laughter. *Vot isst your name?*

Every so often in a court reporter's work there is a gem. She thought it has taken a Gemfields' case to produce one.

It had apparently started with the triple zero emergency call which had come straight through to the Rockhampton call centre. It was at 2.05 am. 'It's a fire. Main Street, Rubyvale. It's a fire!' That's what the call had said. It was recorded on tape for the police and the court to check.

Within seconds, the alert had gone to the police station at Anakie, in the Gemfields of Central Queensland. The small town had only a volunteer rural fire service but the police mustered the sleepy men by using their emergency beepers.

The police car, followed by the Anakie ambulance, travelled north, sirens blaring, covering the few kilometres of bitumen road very quickly. The fire engine would be a bit slower and a second engine had been called from Emerald, just in case.

The message, before it had been cut off, had given no indication of how serious the fire might be. Rubyvale is a few kilometres north of Anakie but it always seems farther in reality than it looks on a map.

Main Street in Rubyvale is perhaps the smallest Main Street anywhere. There are only a few buildings with tourist attractions for the many visitors who come to this area daily to look at the sapphire mining and perhaps to find a cheaper than usual gemstone. A longer street runs at right angles across Main Street. There but for a quirk of history, it should have been the main street. Together, the two streets have the full range of gemstone cutting and shops selling souvenirs from the cheap through to the sparklers worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Security on all of these premises is well maintained. A fire in these streets could be very costly for a community which often regards itself as just a little different.

The settlement has the feel of the prospector, the sense of the self-made man or woman who has found the elusive glistening bluey-green or

sometimes bluey-yellow or, if very lucky, the deep-blue sapphire which would set them up for life.

In daylight, the police car and ambulance would have whizzed past old spoil heaps; *mullock heaps, tailing heaps*, they are called; and rusting brown machinery where the waste gravel from small mining ventures has been picked through, washed, riddled and sorted to find any small gemstones – and there are always many small sapphires in the cast-off dirt. If there were big stones to be found, they would be faceted; polished and set in gold, silver or platinum mountings – protected by the high-security of the gem dealers' premises.

But it was dark; and the emergency vehicles only saw the reflection of their red and blue flashing lights bouncing off gum trees, fence lines and occasional buildings.

As they turned the corner into Main Street, there was no sign of a fire.

An agitated mob had gathered in the shadows. A couple of gesticulating men directed the police car and ambulance towards an area where a crowd was milling around.

'Where's the fire?' the constable asked.

'What fire?' came the puzzled response.

'They got one of the bastards down there,' another said, and the two policemen pushed their way through the parting group to find a huge man sitting on top of a pinioned unshaven person whose face was squashed into the dirt. He looked wet. Sweat or water? It was hard to tell. And blood. He appeared as if he had a bit of bark knocked off him by the mob.

'Where's the fire?' the policeman repeated.

'What bloody fire?' the huge man asked back. 'We've got one of the thieves. The other bastard got away.'

As one constable called the fire brigade to advise of a false alarm, the other handcuffed the alleged thief. The ambulance people checked him for injuries. He didn't answer any of their questions nor did he look particularly frightened – more just not understanding what was happening. A resigned look as if he was letting the world wash by, a world beyond his comprehension.

A lean gnarled man explained that he had been the victim of a robbery. There were two of them. How had they known he was carrying the *Balkan Blue* on him? He had no idea how that could be. They had seized him as he was walking quietly to his car. They weren't casual muggers, he assured the police. They knew what they were looking for – a big sapphire, partially cleaned; found only last week on his little mining claim. He said that his name was Drago. He had named the stone after his European ancestry.

When they had started to clean the gem, it became obvious that this was *a big one*, good quality, maybe worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

They had stopped work on the stone. The final job would need to be assessed by skilled faceters. No-one wanted to get the cut wrong and reduce a valuable gemstone to a few fragments of industrial quality.

So Drago had carried the stone on him in a small bag, under his clothes, around his waist.

'They knew where stone vas,' said Drago. 'Vas all they vas interested in. I screamed. These blokes came and caught vone of them. Other got away with my stone.'

'Why did you call triple 0 about a fire?' asked the policemen, while noting everything that was being said.

'Vot fire?' asked Drago. 'I said, *It's sapphire! Main Street Rubyvale* but the phone, it conked out.'

'A sapphire?' The policeman nodded, as he began to understand. Not *a fire! Ts sapphire*, he would have said with his Balkan accent and stress on a different syllable.

It was nearly three in the morning. The crowd was starting to disperse. No-one was quite as sharp as they would be later in the day. Anyone on the streets of Rubyvale at this hour was probably *tired and emotional* at best.

The handcuffed man was securely restrained in the back of the police car. The ambulance officers briefed the central emergency control in Rockhampton. A police car was already on its way from Emerald. The alleged thief would be held in custody to face court the next day.

Drago was then being treated by the ambulance men. The shock of what happened had started to sink in. Prospectors dreamed of the day when they would find the stone that would make all the difference. It was what kept

drawing them down into their cramped little tunnels, chipping away at the hard rock, recognising the potential in a new seam, dragging the pickings to the surface and checking each one carefully. Usually it was only disappointment and the thought of *next time*. But this stone was a beauty. When the jeweller suggested it needed someone really skilled to look at it, Drago understood that he had found a blue sapphire of unusual quality. He could feel the weight.

He called it the *Balkan Blue* after its full deep ultramarine colour, after the land of his birth and after the legendary story of the Mohács Blue – a huge deep-blue gem given to his ancestors and stolen by Napoleon Bonaparte. That Corsican thief was cursed and died in ignominy on an Atlantic island. Drago wanted to curse the thief of *his* stone, the *Balkan Blue*.

Whom had he told?

Well, there was the jeweller – but he would have told no-one.

Confidentiality is paramount in the jewellery business.

There was Mick, the slim eager young man who stood beside him as Drago received first aid. Mick did lots of labouring jobs for Drago and helped translate for him sometimes. Drago has trouble understanding everything that is said by these fast-talking Australians with their broad nasal accents.

Mick had grown up in Central Queensland. He was one of those young lads who doesn't quite fit; never really knowing the right things to say at times. He is slower than others in understanding the punchlines in jokes – but Drago makes him feel valued. Mick knows that Drago relies on him for much of the heavy work and the companionship that only two committed fossickers can understand. They are more than workmates. They are friends; the wily Bosnian, Drago, and the slower, kind-hearted Mick.

They'd had a drink to celebrate in the hotel over from the railway station in Emerald – a pretty old cream and maroon building with lovely lace iron-work and a wooden façade. It was like going back in time to the beginning of last century to look out of the pub window at the beautifully-preserved, fully-functioning station. No, they hadn't told anyone in the pub. It was just Drago and Mick and a few beers.

Maybe, they had talked too loud. But that was days ago and nobody had said anything. Naw, they hadn't told anyone about the *Balkan Blue*. But, as

the policemen came back to the ambulance to check on him, Drago vowed with angry intensity, 'I call curse on stealers of my sapphire. Even French Napoleon had curse on him ven he stole perfect sapphire from my homeland. Greed. Look vot happen to him. I call *Napoleon's Curse* on the thieves.'

And the policemen each noted Drago's words in their report.