

The Trouble on Pleasant Island

'Sometimes things can go terribly wrong, even when you do the right thing.'

President Baron Love Junior

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For my parents

Chapter 1

Santos District

Sunday

Just Before Dawn

Stanley Kupa, a tall, slim, olive-skinned nineteen-year-old native of Naruji had recently returned to his home country from Australia, having graduated college in Brisbane. Australia is where most Narujians go to complete their education since there isn't a college on their island and after that, many of the islanders travel further afield to seek their fortune, see the world and generally wander the planet trying to find a place to pitch their tent. Yet Stanley had returned to his island home and enrolled in the Naruji Police Force as a cadet, hoping to grow a small homestead and raise chickens and boar, just like his parents, while keeping the streets safe and not following in his uncle's footsteps as a politician. Instead, he wanted to stay a pure and honest Narujian.

It was five minutes before dawn as he stood outside the locked front door of the Santos district police department building beneath a starlit sky. His uniform was perfectly ironed, his shoes polished, and his buttons shined. Seeing a distant figure approaching up the path from the one road that circled the island, he puffed out his chest and stood to attention. 'Good morning, sir,' he shouted while

saluting.

‘Stanley,’ said Moses Adegang, the grey-haired portly chief of police, as he huffed and puffed his way up the gentle incline. ‘You’re overdressed and far too keen. Go home. Put on some shorts and a shirt and meet me back here in fifteen minutes. It’s going to be forty degrees by the end of our shift.’

Stanley felt a little disheartened but understood the logic.

At least I’ve made a good first impression, he thought.

After changing into a pair of black shorts and a plain dark red shirt, Stanley joined Moses as they began their patrol by torchlight through Santos, Rapha, Liku and Urugu, the four northern districts of the island.

The Rapha district was something of an oddity on the beautiful island since it was home to the unluckiest and luckiest people on earth: the poor and the dead. It was the graveyard district that housed the graves of thousands, yet it had also been adopted, under duress, by the poorest of the poor as the only acceptable place to dwell. It was a shanty town of huge proportions.

‘The shanty town looks bigger than I remember, sir,’ said Stanley.

‘And the smell has increased also,’ Moses replied, glancing at the numerous campfires and various pieces of butchered meat hanging around the homes on washing lines. ‘When you were

younger the camp was only in one corner of the cemetery but now it covers half the district. The people collect driftwood from the beaches for fires and they fish off the docks and from what makeshift rafts they can put together. Any chickens in there don't last long either. As you can see by your torchlight they have stolen hundreds of wooden railway sleepers from the disused tracks and now use them as benches around their campfires. We are fortunate that they are a peaceful group for the most part, but they do have a leader, Mister Hopo Kinghorn, chairman of the shack dwellers federation. He harasses our government leaders constantly, begging for a proper roof over their heads. Despite his animosity to the government he often runs for election to office. He's a socialist and wants everything for free and redistribution of wealth throughout the island. He hasn't a clue how capitalism works.'

Stanley thought about this for a moment before saying, 'Surely, sir, when people die on the island and a house becomes vacant, the government can allot one to a small family?'

'But, Stanley, they must pay tax and other bills. They object. Many of them are plumbers, electricians and builders but cannot show a payslip to the utility companies. We are lucky those necessities are in place.'

'Why?'

'We'd be mopping up blood every day until all fifteen hundred

of them had a proper roof over their heads.'

With a police force of eighty men and women for a population of ten thousand, Naruji's crime statistics were something of an international success story since they only had three cells in each of the two police stations and apart from the occasional rowdy tourist, plus Denzel the local drunk, the cells were hardly ever used. Naruji had only one murder per decade and one stabbing per year for as long as the locals could remember. And that's how it gained its nickname, Pleasant Island.

Stanley had been a naive youngster before moving to Australia to study but had kept up to date with news from Naruji, yet he still struggled to understand why he had seen the same faces in their online newspaper; the *Naruji Beacon*. In his new role as a trainee policeman, he was keen to know as many of the islanders as possible so asked his captain why.

'It is just like in the politics of the island,' said Moses. 'When people get to a position of power, no matter how lowly elevated that position is, they often appoint other family members to keep the money coming into their households.'

'I see, so George Viliamu is the vice president, agriculture minister and the owner of the island's only petrol station?'

'Correct. However, that poor gentleman is sadly on his last legs. He is currently confined to his bed. He hasn't been seen in public

for months. Personally, I don't like that man, so please don't bring up his name again.'

'Oh, sorry. And Mister Harris is the harbour master and coastguard as well as being the island's top mechanic?'

'Correct again.'

'And his wife is the Naruji Beacon's official photographer? And Mister Flavio Scott, in our district, is the permanent finance minister and owner of all four of the island's supermarkets?'

'Correct again. And he owns the two bars on this side of the island. One of them has a karaoke machine.'

'Wow. And you, sir, any other roles?'

The chief chuckled. 'I own the biggest pig farm on the island. Two hundred tusked pigs in total and I have a fifty per cent share in the islands only nine-hole golf course. The other owner is Amen Taluga, the prime minister.'

'The tusks of the pigs must be worth a fortune? You're rich.'

Moses chuckled, 'I won't have any trouble getting the dowries paid for my children's weddings if that's what you mean.' 'How quaint but mad at the same time. I learned so much about politics while I was in Brisbane, but it seems so logical here since we're so isolated, but what about the president? I've heard a fair bit about him.'

‘The president and the prime minister both own the two newest cars on the island and the PM is also the fire chief as well as the prison minister, plus a few other roles I can’t remember. They are also the only two surviving members of the islands’ army.

‘Wow, I never knew that.’

The chief chuckled once more, adding, ‘The PM’s wife also runs the annual best garden award. An award she has won for five years in a row... strangely.’

‘Ahh, like that is it.’

A few moments passed as they shone their torches left and right in the darkness and the only sound was their boots tapping the gravel on the road as they proceeded until Stanley heard the unmistakable clacking of a coconut crab’s feet scuttling across the tarmac.

Stanley knew the giant crab, commonly known as the Uga, is a national icon and revered as sacred by all natives and protected by conservation laws. He also knew it was forbidden to kill them and they even had right of way on the roads in the mating season. The average adult was about two feet long from claws to the thorax and three feet wide, weighing in at nine pounds. Stanley spun around and shone his torch to see a majestic blue and green whopper navigating its way from the beach to the nearest coconut tree.

‘That was amazing, captain, and it’s not even mating

season. Did you see it?’

‘It is mating season,’ Moses corrected.

The tone of Moses’ voice and the topic brought Stanley back to focus on the induction his boss was giving him.

‘Stanley, our island has been conquered, invaded and switched sides so many times, especially during the Second World War, when we were run by the Japanese and then the Australians. But we were run by the Germans for thirty years even before that. We still have international issues today.’

‘Really? They never taught us that in school.’

‘Only last month an unexploded bomb was found on the grounds of the refugee detention centre. And this place we call home used to be the second richest country in the world at one time, per head of capita, thanks to our phosphate mines,’ Moses continued, ‘but sadly those days are long gone. Our president and prime minister are indefatigable, trying to re-establish the good old days. Good moral men working tirelessly to revive our nation, and you and I will defend them and our constitution to the bitter end... or at least until the next government gets voted in. In three weeks. But the constitution remains no matter what.’

‘And Flavio Scott? He used to be the President –’

‘Don’t get me started on that piece of –’

Moses seemed to shrug, but Stanley couldn’t work out if it

was to shake off the cold or to change the subject.

As they walked side by side along the single tarmac road that circled the island, Stanley, out of the corner of his eye, felt he saw something out at sea. The dawn's early light had hardly inched its way over the horizon but there was something out there, a darker patch of black, blocking the silver light on a few wave crests. A ship perhaps? He aimed his torch and narrowed the beam at the waves, hoping to illuminate anything reflective.

At the same moment, a voice shouted over the radio clipped to Moses' belt.

'All eyes. All eyes. A boat is adrift North, North East of Santos. It is not one of ours. Not one of the islanders. Any available hands please respond.'

'Who was that?' Stanley asked as he focussed on the horizon while taking his binoculars from his rucksack.

'That is Mister Harris, our coast guard,' said Moses after replying to the radio message. 'I forgot to mention that he also owns the garage in the Urugu district and he's also the postman for our end of the island. He's probably out walking his dog while delivering the mail.'

'I've been monitoring it for ten minutes and there are no lights on it, but it's definitely a ship adrift,' Mister Harris added.

'Thank you, Mister Harris,' said Moses, 'I'll inform the rest of

the force.'

'Captain, I see it,' said Stanley, passing his binoculars to Moses. 'It could be the mail boat or a refugee boat... I don't know.' Despite the poor light of dawn, they both saw the catamaran bobbing its way to shore. No lights were visible on the mast or from portholes.

'I'm rather hoping it will be the parts we need for the morgue,' said Moses, handing the binoculars back.

'Parts? Morgue?' said Stanley.

'Don't go dying on me today, boy. The refrigerators and air-con are busted in the morgue so if you die today, we have to bury you today.'

* * *

Naruji District 7 am

Mornings in Naruji dawned just a little bit slower than in most other countries. Not because the populace was lazy or because of the time zones but because the dormant Strato volcano known as Ancient Wu-Hu, on the nearby island of Tegua, a mile to the east, cast its enormous shadow over Naruji. As the shadow receded the dawn's early light illuminated the mirror in the bathroom of His Excellency President

Baron Love Junior.

He took great pleasure in shaving in front of his newly imported bathroom mirror. Each stroke of the cutthroat razor felt smooth as it sliced through the remnants of stubble left over from a gruelling week of party-political speeches and shaking hands with the residents in the fifteen districts of his beloved island. He was up for re-election in three weeks and as president of the world's smallest independent republic, a Micronesian micro nation that had seen better days, monetarily, his work was never-ending. His district, being the only one with a deep-water harbour and international airport, was the most industrialised part of the island. They had a supermarket, two bars, two restaurants, one tennis court shared between three small hotels, an open-air market, mainly for tourists and a derelict rusting phosphate processing centre that the agriculture minister was encouraging trees and ivy to grow around to cover it up for aesthetic reasons. Unemployment was at ninety percent and their phosphate mines were depleted. If they didn't have immigrant processing centres and detention camps for asylum seekers and refugees trying to get into Australia, they would be bankrupt. These days, having a shower and a shave were some of the only pleasures he had.

After drying his jowly face, Baron put his eyepatch on to cover the sunken hollow where his left eye used to be and continued to dress, preparing for another day of inspiring the masses. The latest

reports provided to him by Prime Minister Amen Taluga, his trusted fire, fisheries, prison and science minister showed that he was narrowly ahead of his brother-in-law Flavio Scott, The Permanent Finance Minister. Both had been presidents in the past. Such is the way of micro nations that families elect family members and so on, and, as of this morning's report, Flavio was in line to possibly strip him of his hard-earned role.

There were also other minor political parties that pinched votes from the ballot box which worried him. Some were joke parties that wanted to elect chickens or goats to office, but on the other hand, there were serious contenders. The Green Party, for example, wanted off shore wind farms and to put in street lighting plus give every home solar power for hot water and electricity. They also wanted an end to the Australian immigration detention centres in the centre of the island. That last point always kept him awake at night.

As he pondered his new strategies and speeches his wife Rose came into the bathroom and kissed him on the cheek, saying that she was going to the fish market by the airport with their two daughters and would be back soon.

'Take the car, my love,' he said, his voice a deep baritone rumble, 'today I am being Mister Humility and will take the bicycle.' Just before she closed the door, Rose reopened it again.

'Oh, I forgot to say,' she said in her usual cheery voice, 'I heard

whale song this morning. Very haunting. It's so good to hear them migrating again.'

He kissed her on the cheek and gave his daughters a gentle hug before turning back to the mirror. The migrating whales were a big tourist draw and he felt elated that he could add it to a few speeches in the coming days.

Despite being the president and the highest earner on the island he wasn't the richest. He knew that money was scarce. The paper money on the island had changed hands so often that it was threadbare and almost see-through. Long gone were the days when the exports from their phosphate and guano mines brought in countless millions to their twenty-sixty square kilometre island. Back then he commanded three hundred men as Colonel of the Naruji 1st (and only) Battalion. These days they no longer had an army, just eighty policemen, and now it was all about foreign aid from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Yet despite their troubles, and the massive unemployment figures, his country was an Eden paradise with forests, palm trees, coconut crabs, freshwater caves, crystal clear waters and, thanks to him, tourism was increasing.

The island did have its share of natural troubles though and last week's cyclone had only taken one life, despite flattening thirty homes in the centre of the island near the immigration detention centre, and thankfully no one had escaped. More homes had been scattered to

the winds in Rapha but that tended to happen even in a mild breeze.

The refugee and immigration camp in the Ares district, in the centre of the island, and nationally known as Guanamo bay, due to the nature of what used to be mined there and what now housed the migrants, was the best and worst thing that had happened to his beloved Naruji. When the money ran out from strip mining the centre of the island, his brother-in-law Flavio Scott, the president at the time, had offered up its interior to Australia. There they built an immigration centre to house the hundreds of illegal immigrants that had tried to move to Australia. The Australian government paid them handsomely to look after every man, woman and child and it had created hundreds of jobs for the people of Naruji but at the same time, the mismanagement of it, not to mention the bribery and corruption among the government and mistreatment of inmates had made headlines around the world. The prison, run by the prime minister, was staffed by foreign ex-military, mercenaries, and military contractors as well as the Red Cross and Baron was determined to keep it working and process the inmates faster, therefore generating more income. He also had other considerations and pledges to keep, and the list in his pocket was growing ever longer.

Out of his bathroom window, he saw in the distance the nation's Naruji Airlines jumbo jet take to the skies and disappear into the blue. It would be another week until he would see it again and

seeing as it was cyclone season, he knew it was taking the last of the tourists and a few exports of pork as well as the mail bags.

After dressing in his finest grey flannel suit with its razor-sharp creases he collected his golf bag from the hallway closet and placed it in the trailer attached to his mountain bike in the driveway.

He was preparing to set off towards the golf course in the Liku district where he was due to give a speech about Naruji's hope for the forthcoming Olympics since Narujians always won medals in the weightlifting contests. Following that he would have his customary game of golf with Amen Taluga, the prime minister.

He didn't bother to lock his front door. No one ever did in Naruji. There was hardly any crime, and everyone had everything they needed right on their doorstep. *Another day in paradise*, he thought, but just as he put on his sunglasses and swung a leg over the saddle Moses Adegang, the chief of police, approached from the top of his driveway on his police bicycle. 'Moses, are you okay? You look frightened,' Baron said.

Moses paused, panting, holding up a hand to ask for breathing space before finally saying, 'Sir, forget golf, cancel everything. We have a situation in the Santos district.'

'A situation?' Baron replied.

'Just before sun up I took the rookie on a patrol and we saw a boat, a catamaran, adrift at sea. The current was bringing it to shore

so we waited to see what would happen. It's a big boat, about fifteen metres long and not one owned by any of the natives. I sent the rookie to borrow Mister Harris's rowboat and by the time they got back to the beach it had crashed into the corals.'

'Low tide is a bitch if you don't know these waters,' said Baron, half to himself, 'but why the urgency?'

'The ship has been adrift at sea for weeks and there are two survivors. Doctor Croaker is on his way to attend to them now.'

Baron felt elated that he would be able to offer the services of his country, his people and its hospitality to two shipwrecked mariners. He turned to the house next to his and shouted over the bushes to the open window on the ground floor, 'Amen,' he called, waiting for his friend the prime minister to appear.

Amen appeared a minute later, swinging the window wide open, 'Good day Baron, what's up?'

'Fancy going to the Santos district instead of the golf course? Moses says we've got a shipwreck on the coast.'

'Right behind you, Baron.'

'But bring your bicycle, it's a good day for it.' 'Just give me a minute to pump up my tyres.'

He unhitched the small trailer from his bike and left it in the driveway. Turning back to Moses he said, 'When will the modern world catch up with us.'

* * *

Santos District

8 am

Doctor Croaker, a fifty-year-old New Zealander who currently lived in the Nuku district with his Narujian wife, parked his twenty-year-old Land Rover outside the Santos district police station, grabbed his hefty leather medical bag from the back seat and strode calmly toward the waiting police officer.

Seeing someone new up ahead he straightened out his white lab coat and gave his greying hair a brief tidy-up. 'You're new to the island, officer. I've not seen you around before.'

'I'm Cadet Stanley Kupa,' said Stanley, shaking the doctor's hand. 'I joined the police force just the other day. Please follow me.'

Croaker felt he saw a family resemblance to some of the islanders in Stanley, but he had more pressing matters. 'How are the two mariners?' he asked as Stanley opened the door for him.

‘They seem to be okay, but they clearly show signs of dehydration, overexposure to the sun and malnutrition. They’re in the medical bay awaiting your inspection.’

He followed Stanley through the reception area to the back of the building toward the medical bay where he saw two men that had clearly seen better days. They were both asleep on separate gurneys and his first impression was that their clothes had once been expensive, their fingernails were overly long and their lips, surrounded by thick beards, were split and cracked. He was happy to see they had bottles of water next to their beds and their personal effects had been collected and piled up on the nearby table. ‘Can you turn the lights down please Stanley, I’m sure they are overly sensitive to bright lights at this time and I need to gently rehydrate them with saline, sugars and intravenous infusions. This will take time. I must tiptoe around their condition until I know more, and I don’t want their kidneys overloaded.’

‘There’s a phone on the desk, doctor,’ said Stanley, ‘I’m sure we can bring everything you need from the hospital.’

‘No need, young man. I have it all in my car and my trusty bag here,’ he said, slapping the leather. ‘By the way, they look South American to me, possibly Brazilian. Do they have passports?’ ‘We haven’t found any yet, doctor. I’m waiting for Moses to arrive before I go through their possessions.’

‘Wise lad. Alright, leave them to me and I’ll have them up and about in no time.’

Just as Stanley was leaving, Moses Adegang, the chief of police, appeared in the doorway, out of breath but waving frantically and silently ushering Stanley and him into the hall with a finger to his lips.

‘What is it?’ Croaker whispered.

Moses ushered them into further silence while pushing them away from the medical bay.

At the end of the corridor, Moses gently placed a hand on Stanley and Doctor Croaker's shoulders. ‘They are drug dealers. We found five machine guns, three handguns and about one hundred bundles or packets of cocaine on the boat.’

‘What?’ Stanley shouted.

‘As of now,’ said Moses, keeping his voice low, ‘those two men are under arrest. The rest of the northern police force is on its way and we will separate the two sailors. One will stay here in the Santos police station while the other goes to the cells in the Naruji district.’

‘And what of the cocaine?’ asked Doctor Croaker. He felt elated at the thought of free medical supplies arriving.

‘We assume it’s cocaine,’ said Moses, giving the doctor a knowing nod. ‘However, I need you to come with me to assess what it is and, more importantly, help me decide what the hell we do about

it. Stanley, you stay here and guard the sailors. I'll send another officer to help you.'

* * *

Santos district

9 am

The catamaran, tethered to the quay of the Santos district harbour, looked as battered as the sailors to Doctor Croaker. With a hole in the port side hull and a shredded mainsail, it was a wonder the men had made it to land.

Next to the boat on the stone jetty, five officers stood around the three piles of narcotics. Each man looked proud, standing over the hoard as if they had just found pirate gold. They had piled the numerous plastic parcels, which were each about the size of two shoe boxes, onto three wooden pallets. The officers had also taped off the quay from the public.

Doctor Croaker took a small Swiss army knife from his belt pouch and cut it into the first bag he selected. 'It certainly isn't marijuana,' he said to the chief as a small trickle of white powder flowed from the hole. After a brief sniff he turned to Moses, 'Yep, that's cocaine alright. I'll take this bag back to the hospital to run further tests but in the meantime get it locked away. I'm going back to

the patients.'

* * *

Flavio's home

Santos district

Midday

In stark contrast to the Naruji district the Santos district was less industrialised; no factories, no docks full of containers or an airport. It had two bars and only the best white sand beaches lined by thirty homes, beautiful palm trees and a few guest houses.

Flavio, the Permanent Finance Minister, had been fast asleep until he was woken by the sound of heavy knocking at his front door. He rubbed his eyes and recalled hearing, about an hour ago, not one or two, but three vehicles speeding past his home. He sat up as fast as his stomach muscles would allow and stared out of the window to see another perfect blue sky. His wife Anolani lay fast asleep so he slid out from beneath the sheet and edged toward the window. To his amazement, he saw a catamaran moored at the harbour wall next to two police quad bikes and Moses' battered police Land Rover. This amounted to news on the island and that was confirmed when the next set of knocks were louder and faster.

He cut a slender dashing figure when dressed in his finest grey

suit. His white hair, white eyebrows and white goatee beard were reminiscent of the stress throughout his life and contrasted deeply with his dark olive skin. Yet he felt unnerved and completely unprepared by the sounds and senses his ears were waking him up to. And there wasn't enough time to get dressed properly while the knocking continued.

After putting on his white shirt and shorts from the chair next to the bed he headed across the cool wooden floor of his home to the front door and was surprised to see the president, vice president, prime minister, chief magistrate, Doctor Croaker and the chief of police all trying to get in at the same time.

'Morning gentlemen,' he said as they thundered into his living room.

The president, his brother-in-law and political rival, took a seat almost immediately while the prime minister and the vice president headed straight for the decanters of whiskey and brandy on the sideboard. Bruno Bruce, the Australian Chief Magistrate assigned to Naruji, planted his oversized backside on a creaking wicker chair by the open French doors to keep cool.

Flavio turned his attention to Moses who had followed Bruno across the room and slid the glass door shut. Moses stood by the door as if to stop anyone from leaving. He was the only one who seemed calm, yet all their expressions were grave.

‘Trouble at the harbour?’ Flavio ventured.

‘Flavio, my old friend,’ the president began, ‘it would appear that our humble little nation has got itself into a bit of a predicament. A few hours ago, a boat beached on our shores carrying two shipwrecked mariners, or should I say smugglers and a cargo of cocaine.’

‘What?’ Flavio replied, giving serious consideration as to why the chief of police was still standing by the door. ‘So why are you here at this hour? What does this have to do with me?’

The president glanced around at his colleagues while taking a glass of whiskey from the PM, ‘For a debate. Flavio you have got our island out of many a financial scrape in your position as permanent finance minister and past president. The six of us are at a deadlock.’

‘How much is it worth?’ asked Flavio.

‘We have no idea yet, but it is precisely that kind of question that brought us to you.’

‘I see.’ Flavio’s voice trailed out slowly.

Baron stood up and approached Flavio, ‘Moses, Amen and I are keen to burn it while Bruno, the doctor and George are wondering if you would know of a way it could help revive our fortunes. I strongly insist that you side with me over this to see that the good, moral, upstanding and right thing is done.’

‘Ah.’

‘I see you are in a bit of a dilemma,’ Baron added.

‘Yes.’ The word Flavio uttered was drawn out to the extent that all in the room were hanging on his next words. It was also evident that since George the VP had been resurrected from his sick bed this was a national dilemma. ‘If it was a bag of cocaine you wouldn’t be here. If it were a sizeable amount you would have debated it in parliament or put it up for public debate. I take it this is... considerably more.’

‘Vast is the word I used for it,’ said Moses, the chief of police. ‘We need to send the drug mule’s photos to Interpol.’

Flavio instantly raised a defiant finger in his direction, ‘Not until we know how much it is worth. Who can give us an estimate of its weight? Who has it now and where is it?’ he asked. ‘But more importantly... who knows about it? I can’t do a thing about it if the world knows. Secrecy is of the utmost importance.’

Baron turned back to his colleagues and pointed a finger at them, one at a time, to get their response.

‘The police are sworn to secrecy,’ said Moses. ‘We must burn it.’

‘My wife doesn’t even know I’m here,’ said Bruno, the Chief Magistrate. ‘But I say we gain from it.’

‘We will burn it and that is the end of the matter,’ said Amen.

‘I can use it at the hospital,’ said Doctor Croaker, ‘and pharmaceutical companies will buy it from us.’

‘We’re broke,’ said George, the Vice President. ‘We need the cash.’

‘I do not concur,’ said Baron. ‘The international public will applaud our efforts in reporting this find or destroying the drugs and handing over the mules to the proper authorities. ‘Now, Flavio... which way will you cast your vote?’

Doctor Croakers’ mobile phone chirped, interrupting the shouting.

‘It’s William, my understudy at the hospital,’ said Doctor Croaker, taking the call. ‘He’s been testing the drugs to see if they are what we think they are. I’m putting you on loudspeaker doctor,’ he said, setting the phone on the glass coffee table. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Thank you, doctor,’ said William. ‘I’ve tested the sample you gave me and I can tell you it is one hundred per cent pure. I had a chat with one of the police that helped bring it to the cells and we estimate the entire lot is over one thousand one hundred kilos in weight. This stuff is worth –’

‘How much?’ said Baron and Flavio at the same time.

‘I can’t answer that at this instant but I’m sure, based on the size of this haul, that the owners of it will want it back. Hang on... I’m just checking the web. Okay, wow, I’m looking at a few news items

and I'm estimating about thirty to thirty-five, give or take.'

'Thousand?' Baron laughed. 'Million, Mister President.'

The room was silent as each man looked at one another.

Flavio waved a hand at Doctor Croaker, indicating that he should close the call. This was what he was best at... accounting. 'With unemployment at ninety per cent, I think your public would hate you for setting fire to thirty million dollars, Baron. That's about three thousand dollars per person. Let me work my magic with Wade and I'll get back to you.'

'No!' Baron shouted back, with a wagging finger. 'I cannot let you. I know you have helped us in the past, but this is immoral.'

'I will use my right-hand man, Wade, and we will find a suitable buyer,' said Flavio as calmly as he could.

'Wade? Wade Calvo? The slimy accountant who's always hanging around the finance ministry? That man is a snake and I wouldn't touch him even with my gardening gloves on.'

'But, your Excellency, he is a genius at using the underground, darkest corners of the internet. The dark web. He's also a practising lawyer. He's very discreet and perhaps he could find us a suitable pharmaceutical company or even a cartel to buy it from us. Hey, who knows, perhaps someone just won the lottery in Europe and wants to have a party?'

'No, we must burn it,' Baron shouted. 'We must live within our

means. We cannot profit from it. The world would never forgive us if we did.’ Baron huffed as he paced around the room.

After a long pause Flavio said, ‘As you’ve just said, our people would never forgive us. But they’re broke. And your votes are tied. You came to me for the swing vote... Yes?’

‘My entire parliament is encouraged to engage in robust debate for it is the contest of ideas that underpins our democracy,’ Baron shouted.

‘And yet other countries sell arms to one another that cause more harm and certain death than cocaine can bring,’ Flavio calmly replied.

Baron huffed again and took a step towards Flavio, ‘Hand over your passport.’

‘Or what? You’ll arrest me? On what charge?’ He glanced over to Moses who was unfolding his arms and stepping forward.

‘Dealing in stolen goods,’ Baron shouted, before adopting a Mussolini pose with his fists on his hips.

Flavio stepped over to his sideboard and lifted his whiskey decanter, which was now considerably lighter than it had been ten minutes ago and poured the remnants into a fresh glass. ‘It won’t stick, your Excellency. The drugs are in government cells, no doubt, not in my possession, and if you do arrest me, I’m sure my wife – your sister – will sue you in return for possession of narcotics. Go on, slap

the cuffs on... or you could give me a few days to revive the fortunes of our once noble Isle. Besides, by your admission, you are an accessory.'

Baron huffed again and downed the last of his drink. He occasionally forgot that Anolani was married to Flavio.

'How would we negotiate something like that without the world knowing?' asked Bruno.

'The dark web,' replied Flavio. 'Leave it to me.'

'Above all, gentlemen, we must keep this to ourselves,' George added. 'Bruno, you need to draw up contracts for each of us, including the police, to keep them sworn to secrecy.'

'Give me an hour and I'll have them done. They will be gentleman's agreements for now until I can draft the full documents.'

'Good,' Flavio added. 'So, at this juncture, I see that we in the majority should embark on trying to acquire a buyer —'

'No! All of you are insane,' Baron shouted. 'For the moral good, we must burn it.'

'For your re-election, you want to burn it,' Flavio retorted with a curl of his lip.

'You too are running for election as president, Mister Scott. Do you want to be the first-ever president elected after a huge drug deal?'

‘If I can sell it to a big pharma company then I’m on a better moral ticket than you. Plus, I’ll put money in the back pocket of every person in this country. You can’t beat free. Deal with it.’

Baron held out his right hand in Flavio’s direction once more. ‘Hand over your passport.’

‘What? Why?’

‘I don’t want you leaving the island for two reasons. One, I don’t want you going overseas trying to broker deals for this and two, I don’t want you to be able to evade the police when I’ve thought up a better charge to arrest you on.’

With a monumental sigh and a thoroughly over-dramatic slump of his head, Flavio reached into the back zippered pocket of his shoulder bag, took out his passport and flung it in the direction of Moses. ‘You’re going to regret this, Baron. One day you’ll see I was right.’

Police HQ

Naruji District

2 pm

‘Hey, we’re just mules, man,’ said Enzo Vento as he sat on a rickety wooden fold-down bed staring at the two policemen through the bars

of his cell.

His clothes were encrusted with sea salt and he guessed the drip attached to his arm was for his benefit so left it where it was. The policemen in front of him had been polite and courteous brought him a cup of black coffee and had already introduced themselves. He found their appearance rather similar to undercover cops back in his home country, but their mannerisms seemed to convey hints of excitement and fear instead of the usual bullish “don’t mess with us” attitude. He realised he was in the presence of two rather naive men. Inwardly he smiled.

‘Where were you sailing to and how did you get here?’ the man he knew as Stanley asked.

‘How did I get here? I don’t even know where here is, man,’ he replied.

‘Welcome to Naruji,’ said the policeman he knew as Moses who handed him a tourist guide map through the bars. ‘You’re in the third smallest country in the world and we’re in the South Pacific, just south of the equator. Right now, you’re in the holding cells in the Naruji district. You’ll see it on the map next to the airport.’

Enzio looked around the cell and saw that it only had a toilet, a sink and the bed he was sitting on. If he stretched out his arms he could touch both white brick walls with the flat of his hands. Behind him, he could hear the chatter of Micronesian birds and crickets

through the barred but glassless window.

In all his years in the narcotics business, he'd never seen the inside of a police or prison cell yet his first thought at seeing these two well-mannered cops was to ask about his brother José.

'Your brother is in the Santos district police cells in the north,' Moses replied. 'He's being looked after so we came to see you first since you seem in better shape than him. The doctor tells us he's still asleep.'

That was a huge relief. He did a quick assessment of his personal effects and realised the police had left him with his belt, shirt and shoes which meant he had some money and his hidden Tools to enable escape, but what he wanted now was a cigarette. Glancing past the shoulders of the two men he saw his phone and scrappy rucksack on the table behind them. 'Can I smoke in here?' he asked. 'My cigarettes and lighter are behind you.'

Stanley and Moses shared a brief glance before Moses leaned back and grabbed the bag. After a brief search through it, he handed over the metal cigarette case with its inbuilt lighter. 'Enjoy them while you can. You only have two left.'

Enzio inhaled, closing his eyes as he did so. The cigarette was divine. He studied the tourist map for a moment, making mental notes of routes to the airport and where his older brother was incarcerated. Flipping through its pages he saw what looked like a

“face-hugger” from the Alien movies. It sent a chill through him and he glanced at the open barred window. ‘What the heck is that?’ he asked, showing the picture to the two men.

‘That is our sacred coconut crab, the Uga,’ replied Stanley. ‘They are native to our island and are a protected species. They climb trees, crack coconuts with their claws and generally scuttle about the place. Even traffic stops for them. You get a curse from the Gods if you kill one.’

Enzio took a second look at the photo and realised it was being held by a man but the crab was enormous, at least half a metre wide. He shook his head and shuddered before tossing the pamphlet to the ground. Thieves, murderers and other evil criminals he could handle, but he wished some of Mother Nature’s creations never existed. ‘So now I guess you have a lot of questions for me, huh?’ he asked.

Moses leaned forward with a look that suggested he’d seen every episode of Colombo and had his repertoire worked out for just this occasion. After sending Stanley to make more coffee he took a notebook from his shirt pocket and said, ‘You’re not mules. That’s an Armani shirt and although battered, your rucksack is designer too. Half of your drugs are in the two cells next to you. Close enough, but still out of reach. The other half are in the cells next to your brother in the northern police cells. You’re full of shit and within twenty-four hours the drugs will be burned and your faces will be on Interpol for

the world to see.'

Enzio felt his bowels loosen. Sweat appeared on his forehead and without thinking or saying a word he dashed from the bed, dropped his trousers and planted himself firmly on the tiny metal toilet in the corner.

Chapter 2

Santos District

Monday

7 am

Flavio had risen at an hour that he hadn't seen in months. It was nearly 7 am as he drove to the parliament building in the Naruji district at the southern tip of the island. He was hoping to retrieve certain legal documents for a plan he needed to enact should Baron try to scupper his own plans for selling the drugs. Parliament wasn't due to start until 10 am so he had plenty of time.

He looked at the parliament building with fresh eyes. What had once been the place he called home was now looking more like a pile of logs. The best word he could find to describe it was *quaint*. It certainly wasn't a porking great edifice like the American Congress building or the UK's Houses of Parliament.

Naruji's parliament building was entirely made of yellowish wood except for the terracotta tiled floors and the tiles on the roof. Its fifteen car parking spaces out front were a testament to how humbly they were seen on the international map of geopolitics.

He deliberately parked in the president's parking space by the entrance for three reasons; it used to be his, the president wasn't due here for another couple of hours and finally because he was rapidly

losing respect for the man. He sauntered toward the front doors where a burly policeman stood guard. 'Morning officer, have you seen Wade this morning?'

'Morning Mister Scott. I've been here since 6 am and no one's been in or out, sir.'

'Thank you.' Flavio knew that his right-hand man, Wade was seldom seen anywhere other than at his desk, so the news was gratifying. He instinctively knew that the man would be at his post in the finance ministry so after the policeman let him in, he headed straight for his own office. As he was nearing it, he saw his old friend Wade through a doorway, sitting in his wheelchair behind his antique wooden desk and staring at his three monitors.

Flavio never considered Wade an attractive man by any standard, he sported tightly curled black hair and a handlebar moustache that you could hang game on and his portly gait and jowly cheeks were forever covered in sweat, no matter what the weather, but he had a mind that was almost as cold, hard and brilliant as his own. He had never been married, he was almost agoraphobic, and rumour had it that he was the second wealthiest person on the island after himself, yet he never openly showed it, and they both had enough knowledge of each other's past crimes to prevent one or the other exploiting the knowledge for personal gain.

Wade tucked in his shirt and adjusted his waistcoat as Flavio

approached. 'Don't get up my old friend,' Flavio said in his amiable yet mocking voice.

'A situation has arisen that could be explosive if handled badly but could potentially be the best thing since guano was found on the island.'

'Oh, you mean the drugs?' said Wade in his own high-pitched voice.

'How the fuck do you know about that?' exclaimed Flavio. 'Thirty-five million Australian dollars' worth according to my source,' said Wade, matter-of-factly.

'But... but, how?' said Flavio, 'Have you bugged my house again?'

'You know I haven't, you daft idiot. We have an agreement, remember?'

'Oh yes, of course. Sorry. But how?'

'Blackmail is my favourite form of coercion. Dead men tell no tales but people in fear of their marriages and jobs speak volumes.' Wade winked at him.

'Good man. Keep it to yourself, for now, at least. Now, we need to find a way to sell the drugs to help get me re-elected.'

'You want to risk political slander and international condemnation? I could not advise it,' said Wade as he made a note on a scrap of paper.

‘But I’ll line the pockets of every man, woman and child on the island,’ Flavio smiled back. ‘When it comes to elections, you can’t beat free.’

‘I’ve changed my mind. I like it,’ said Wade. His eyebrows raised for a brief second. ‘If we’re successful I want my usual cut.’ ‘You know that goes without question, my old friend. Update me on the hour as to how easy or difficult it may be to offload this stuff.’

Flavio didn’t open his office door just yet. Instead, he walked past a further two doors toward the Law Office. A second after opening the creaking wooden door he could smell the ancient books, and the dust in the air and saw the tomes of Narujian law dating back to when they had warlords and tribal elders when everyone was upgrading from reed huts to log cabins and finally brick.

The room itself was fairly dim inside since every window had heavy white linen drapes to block out direct sunlight. There were also no light switches, yet there were fifteen fire extinguishers. Apart from the glasses on one’s nose, it was forbidden to bring plastic bottles of water, drinking glasses or anything that could possibly focus the sun’s rays onto the ancient dry paper since their humidifiers had stopped working long ago. As long ago, in fact, as when the last new legal book had been added to the collection.

He stepped as quietly as he could across the bone-dry floor to the half-populated shelves that had remained untouched since 1984

when Australia reclaimed the islands as a protectorate of the British Empire. The hard-backed dark cherry leather book he selected was as wide as his fist and three times the height. Its spine had faded but the front and back were both pristine.

Running his index finger under the title of the first page he chuckled as he read it. 'It's been years since I thought I'd ever need you. I hope you've still got a couple of loopholes I can use.'

The book was entitled: *Kotter's Laws of Naruji: 1874-1894, for the morally sound and legally bound*. He placed the book into his shoulder bag and slipped out unseen, heading for his own office to get the accompanying legal briefs before paying a second visit to Wade.

As his sandals slapped against the terracotta tiles he heard a booming voice echo down the corridor behind him.

'You are hereby banned from Naruji's golf course!'

Flavio span on his heels to see the president in the centre of the corridor flanked by two policemen. Baron had his fists on his hips the way he always did when addressing someone he despised, and the two flanking officers had their hands on their holstered handguns.

'Your Excellency, why the hostility?' Flavio asked.

'You parked in my parking space. You're a man without respect for your country and your president.'

'I wasn't expecting you to be here for hours and I was only just popping in for a minute.'

‘Nevertheless, you still intend to capitalise on the sale of the drugs. I cannot allow it. Men, seize him.’

The president’s pointed finger left no doubt in Flavio’s mind that Baron meant every word. He loved that golf course as much as any man that could afford to use it, so he had to retaliate, and the look on the officer’s faces left no doubt that they were willing to carry out the president’s order.

As the two officers approached he raised his hands but shouted over the heads of the police at the same time. ‘I know these men are sworn to secrecy, your Excellency, so perhaps we can all relax. After all, you wouldn’t want me to ban you and your family from my shops, would you?’

‘You wouldn’t dare,’ shouted Baron.

‘As per the Naruji edict of 1879, all arguments pertaining to parliamentary, agricultural or financial matters of the republic that are being discussed must not be discussed once the chambers are closed so that all elected witnesses are present. At this time parliament is closed and you, if you wish to discuss policy, governance or matters of national interest, must do it in front of parliament. Back to you, Baron. In fact, sod it. You and your family *are* hereby banned from all of the shops that I own.’

Flavio inwardly rejoiced as Baron called back the two officers.

‘I’ll stop you one way or another, Flavio.’

‘I’d bet on me in the next presidential election, your Excellency.’ And with a gentle mocking bow and nod of his head, Flavio turned back toward his office as a huge smug grin appeared across his face.

As he stepped inside, closing the door behind him, Wade turned one of his three monitors in his direction, showing him a graph.

‘Flavio, a bidding war has already begun between rival drug cartels from Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela.’ Wade tapped the monitor enthusiastically, pointing at the graph, ‘And a pharmaceutical company in America is keen to get their hands on it also. This is fantastic, sir.’

‘Good God,’ said Flavio. ‘Are we still anonymous in this side?’

Wade gave him a look that said it all.

‘Sorry Wade, I’m just in a panic. That’s all. I trust you. Now, hourly updates to my mobile phone and the world is a happy place. I have some serious political campaigning to do.’ He paused on his way to the door and turned back to Wade, ‘What are the bids up to so far?’

‘You won’t be disappointed. Whenever you walk past my desk I’ll either nod or shake my head to let you know how

successful we are. This may take all week.'

'Thanks, but how did you know? Please tell me it wasn't idle gossip at the shops.'

'Not at all. I haven't been to the shops in days.'

'Then how?'

Wade picked up his packet of cigarettes from the desk, pulled out two, and threw one to Flavio. After lighting both he smiled, saying, 'The harbour master, Mister Harris, has been in my debt for years. He updates me on every import and export.'

Flavio shook Wade's sweaty hand before heading to his own office.

Barons home

2 pm

'We need to discuss the implications of burning the drugs, what social unrest there might be and whether would it be political suicide,' Baron said to Amen and Moses. 'We'll just have to tell the people no good will come of it and that Australia might shut the internment camps if we profit from

the drugs.’ He added a little chuckle to the statement, but it wasn’t a heartfelt one.

‘But I heard a rumour that it might happen anyway,’ said Moses, meekly. ‘I have also heard the same rumours from the military contractors that guard the camps.’

‘But they don’t need to know that,’ Baron said with another chuckle. ‘Get Bruno the Chief Magistrate in here and we’ll ask him as well.’

‘But he’s in favour of selling them, sir,’ said Amen.

‘He still works for us,’ Baron and Moses said at the same time.

‘A valid point, sir,’ Amen added while pushing his thick glasses back up his nose, ‘But you just stated that Australia need not know. However, I must add that to elevate you higher than your rival, Mister Scott, and to rejuvenate your followers, well, how can I put this, if you wish to destroy the narcotics it must be televised, broadcasted and, do I have to spell it out? You know the rest...’

Baron huffed and pursed his lips. He knew Amen was right. *Damn, what’s next? A televised debate? No, that will not do. This must remain a secret.* ‘Leave me please, both of you. Let us reconvene tomorrow at nine.’

As the two men he trusted most departed, shutting the door behind him he dropped to his knees and began to weep.

Without hearing a sound, without any sense of movement within his home, a strange sensation befell him. A gentle hand stroked his back, and moved across his shoulders, clutching him in a loving embrace. He wiped tears from his eyes and looked up into the loving eyes of his wife Rose and his two daughters.

Wiping more tears away he asked, 'I know we are not rich, but is... am I... doing the right thing? Darling, my babies, please tell me.'

Rose brushed his cheek and smiled, 'Baby, you've always been right and good for us and our country. Tomorrow. Kick some political ass and do what's right.'