

a narrow green tunnel. The things always gave him a crushing headache.

‘Yeah . . .’ Wilkes realised the job was only half done. They were going to have to tail the gunrunners and see where they ended up. ‘Damn,’ he said to himself. He was supposed to be back in Townsville the day after tomorrow. Annabelle would be pissed off. Again.

Sergeant Tom Wilkes rolled out of his hammock two hours before dawn. No one needed waking. Within moments, the men were all quietly repacking their gear. Muruk led the way back to the enemy village, the NVGs looking totally out of place on a young man wearing a penis gourd.

The soldiers knew things would be different as they approached the village this time. The two men they knocked on the head would have sounded the alarm and guards would undoubtedly be posted. Muruk kept them away from the trails, which made the going more difficult.

They arrived within twenty minutes of the village just as the sky in the east lightened to purple. The bush crawled with highlanders stalking soundlessly through it with AK-47s, and some with pistols. The advancing dawn eliminated the advantage of the NVGs. Muruk brought the party in a wide arc around the village, but they couldn’t get any closer. Wilkes wanted to get on the trail of the gun traders, or at least see in which direction they were headed.

‘Timbu, ask Muruk if there’s any higher ground around here that’ll give us a view of the village.’

The interpreter put it to Muruk, who gave Sergeant

Wilkes a nod. Half an hour later the men climbed a volcanic outcrop with the jungle spread out below. The soldiers pulled out their binoculars. Wilkes could clearly see the traders, maybe a dozen men, leaving the village. Behind them snaked a trail of natives toting the sacks of marijuana slung between poles. The scene reminded Wilkes of old Tarzan movies. The party was departing to the north, on the opposite side of the village to their observation post. Wilkes and his men kept watching until the column disappeared from view, in case the initial direction taken was a ruse and they doubled back.

By midday, they had picked up the trail. It wasn't difficult. The traders were lazy bushmen, and perhaps confident that whatever they met in the jungle they had more than enough firepower to contend with. Wilkes had Muruk take them on a parallel course – close enough not to lose contact but far enough apart so that the two groups wouldn't stumble on each other. That made their passage through the bush difficult. It was dense, and becoming more so. The traders had it relatively easy, taking the paths maintained by the tribesmen that moved between neighbouring settlements for trading and warring. At the end of the first day's trek, Wilkes and his men were exhausted keeping up with the gunrunners. By the end of the second, they had begun to fall behind. The drop in altitude brought a marked increase in the thickness of the jungle. And the heat. There was no way to move without the help of a machete. They only managed to stay in touch with the traders by carefully probing forward after dark with the NVGs and establishing the whereabouts of the camp.

An hour into the third day, hacking their way through vines and scrubby bush that, at times, presented an impenetrable barrier, they found something interesting.

‘What is it?’ Timbu asked, sawing through a branch that had grown against a hatch, pinning it shut.

‘It’s a plane, obviously, but what type?’ said Wilkes, shrugging, staring at the museum piece in amazement.

‘It’s a US Army Air Force B-17. Heavy bomber workhorse for the Allies in World War II,’ said Littlemore. ‘My grandad was a Yank, flew one of these babies. Have we got time to check it out, boss?’ He took in the wreck wide-eyed.

‘Didn’t know that,’ said Wilkes. ‘About you being a Yankee-dog.’

‘Yeah, well, Pop was stationed in Townsville for a while – met an Aussie. They shagged. Nine months later, my dad poked his head out.’

‘Go for it,’ said Wilkes, his camouflaged face cracking a grin. ‘You got ten.’

‘Thanks, boss.’ Littlemore ducked inside the hatch. Beck followed.

The people they’d been tailing for over two days were heading north, probably trying to link up with a river that would take them to the sea, no other way out that Wilkes could see. He shrugged, and followed Timbu and Muruk inside the wreck. There was time.

Even though it was well over fifty years old, the aircraft was in remarkably good condition. The waist machine guns still contained ammunition and many of the plane’s surfaces held their paint. The men quickly realised that they were inside a gravesite – there were several piles of bleached bones and rotten fabric.

‘Doesn’t look like this baby’s last moments were too pleasant,’ Littlemore whispered to Wilkes. He pointed to large sections of the fuselage blackened with soot. ‘Been a fire. Check this out.’ He toed a large pile of brass shell casings on the floor. They were several centimetres deep in places.

Aside from the fire damage, the fuselage was riddled with holes from cannon shell and shrapnel, punctured jagged alloy indicating the force of the incoming enemy fire. None of the men spoke inside the plane out of respect for its long-dead occupants. The jungles of PNG held many such downed aircraft, thought Wilkes, remembering the altimeter face jangling from the chief’s neck. He whispered to Beck to recover any dog tags he could find, and left the aircraft to get his camera. There were probably friends and relatives back home in the US who were still hoping that, one day, the fate of their loved ones missing in action would be known.

Sergeant Wilkes circled the plane, taking photos, especially of its identification markings. The plane still had all its engines, although the wing outboard of the starboard engine was missing. He considered marking the B-17’s position on his GPS but decided against it. Best to let the old girl remain hidden. Once wreck hunters knew of its whereabouts, it would be stripped for souvenirs.

A short while later, they were back on the trail. Beck had found four dog tags, which Sergeant Wilkes had placed in his pack. Littlemore told him the B-17 had a crew of nine. Perhaps the other five men had parachuted out of the plane before it crashed. It was a mystery Wilkes knew they’d never solve. If nothing else came of this little detour,

he told himself, bringing these men home had made the trip worthwhile.

Muruk suggested that they climb again to get their bearings. They'd just passed another volcanic outcrop, so they backtracked. The view from its summit was panoramic and their hunch had proved right. The gunrunners had made for a river and a large, sprawling village, no doubt a trading hub for local commerce, that was hacked out of the jungle. Canoes of varying sizes plied the slow-moving black waters. The bad guys were making for the sea.

'We'll let them keep their head start,' said Wilkes, peering through his binoculars. 'We'll bivouac here the night and keep watch. Two-hour shifts.'

'Roger that, boss,' said Ellis, observing the comings and goings along the river through his own pair of glasses. The gun traders would buy boats, if they didn't have them set aside already, and float their cargo downriver. The village itself was still a primitive one. No electricity that he could make out, so no communications and no law enforcement. The Wild West. Still, it was unlikely that the gunrunners would just waltz into town toting a couple of dozen sacks bursting with ganja. That meant they also had to be camped somewhere in the bush, and close by. It would be a tense night.

But the night passed uneventfully. Sure enough, at dawn six long dugouts slipped from the river bank and slid down the inky waters, heading for the coast. The dope was piled up in the centre of the canoes, a man paddling fore and aft. Sergeant Wilkes didn't say anything, didn't need to. He and his men were packed and ready to move,

and this time it was down the main trail, so at least the going was easier. They hadn't gone far before they passed the warriors that the smugglers had used as porters, on their way back home. There was plenty of eye contact, but no recognition from the warriors. Wilkes noted the change in Muruk's easy gate, his muscles flexed and ready to fight. These were the enemies of his people, men who had killed his brothers and sisters and cousins. It was all the lad could do to hold himself in check.

Muruk and Timbu bargained with traders in the village for craft to take them downriver. The price was remarkably good, something Timbu attributed to the fact that he was accompanied by men bristling with weapons they obviously knew how to use. 'I should take you guys shopping more often,' he said to Wilkes as they pushed the primitive boats off the mud and into the slow-moving water. Wilkes, Timbu and Muruk took one boat, Ellis, Littlemore and Beck the other.

According to conversations Timbu had had with locals, the coast was half a day's paddle away through increasingly steep volcanic gorges and, sure enough, the low-lying jungle soon gave way to the rugged, towering cliffs they'd been told about.

'Jesus,' said Littlemore as they paddled through them, jagged black volcanic walls rising out of the river like enormous steak knives.

They weren't alone on the river. Tributaries joined the main flow, bringing other natives paddling downstream. Sergeant Wilkes didn't have a plan, and that was making him uncomfortable.

'What are you thinking, boss?' said Littlemore, his dirty

red hair burning like copper in the tropical sun. He sensed Wilkes's disquiet.

'Not sure, to be honest,' said Wilkes. 'Our friends are heading somewhere. When we get there too, what do we do? Just paddle up and ask what they're up to?'

'Yeah, see what you mean,' said Ellis, the canoes side by side.

'We know we've got a half-day's paddle ahead of us,' Littlemore said. 'Before we reach the sea, maybe we should ditch the boats and hoof it.'

'That's what I'm thinking,' Wilkes said, looking up at those basalt steak knives. The thought of climbing them didn't appeal at all. The river was far easier but potentially far more dangerous. He didn't see that they had any alternative.

'We should also hug those cliffs, I reckon,' said Beck. 'If we come round a bend and see something no one wants us to, we don't want to be stuck in the middle, out here in the open.'

'Yep,' said Wilkes. He looked at his watch. 'Okay, we'll stay on the river a while longer, then go overland.' The men nodded agreement. Wilkes dug the blade of his paddle deep in the oily water and made for the base of the cliffs.

The sun was directly overhead, beating down fiercely, when they beached their craft on a bank of silt. They were getting close to the sea – the waters had become tidal. They pulled the boats high into the mangroves, above the high-tide line. The men knew they'd had it easy till now

and things were going to get tougher. The volcanic cliffs would be difficult and dangerous to climb without ropes. They also had to climb with full packs. Sergeant Wilkes felt sorry for Timbu and Muruk. They were not SAS and he was asking a lot of them.

An hour of hard climbing later, they reached the top of the cliff face. There were enough handholds and footholds to reduce the danger of the climb, but the volcanic rock was sharp and unforgiving. It was also bakingly hot. Wilkes and his men had shooter's gloves to protect their hands. Timbu and Muruk had to wrap cloth around theirs, but only after their palms and fingertips had lacerated and blistered, especially Timbu's, his hands gone soft from city living. At the cliff's summit, they could see that there was too much traffic on the river, and on the tributaries flowing into it, to be an everyday occurrence. And all of it was heading in the one direction. Another hour's climb and they knew exactly what was going on.

'Shit,' said Beck, 'look at that.'

A deep green bay ringed by the volcanic cliffs spread out below them. And in the centre of the bay, an old white cargo ship with a hull bleeding rust swung slowly at anchor, rising and falling on a lubricious swell. A steady stream of native craft plied to and from the vessel.

'Jesus, all that's missing here is Greensleeves,' said Ellis. 'Mr Whippy's in da house.'

'You had a strange childhood, mate,' said Beck, nose wrinkled under the binoculars as he squinted into them.

'No, seriously. The Mr Whippy guy in my neighbourhood got busted for dealing pot. The parents became suspicious when the fifteen year olds got more excited



than the six year olds every time he drove down the street.'

'You're full of crap sometimes, Gary,' said Beck, snorting.

It was a truly astonishing sight. About thirty dugouts were clustered around the ship and bales of marijuana were being passed up into the hands of waiting crew, in return for which a rifle was handed down. The gunrunning/drug-smuggling operation going on here was far bigger than Wilkes had suspected. Papua New Guinea was a primitive land on the verge of anarchy with many parts of its society breaking down. What effect would a few thousand guns dumped in the place have? Wilkes had witnessed enough of the effects on Muruk's people to have a point of view on that.

'Can I look?' Timbu asked.

Wilkes handed him the binoculars and took out his camera. More tourist photos for the people back home.

Timbu took a deep breath and exhaled. 'This is very bad,' he said.

Wilkes nodded. 'Yes, it is.'

Muruk picked up the sound first and shook Wilkes. The sergeant stopped taking snaps and looked up. 'Wasmara?' he said. *What's the matter?*

'Balus,' said Muruk. *Aeroplane.*

Wilkes couldn't hear anything at first, and then he caught it – a distant buzzing. It got louder quickly. Whatever it was, it was approaching fast.

'Is that a helo?' asked Beck.

And then the chopper burst through the sea opening between the cliffs and banked hard to stay within them, scribing a tight circle around the ship: a BK-117 Eurocopter.

Wilkes snatched his binoculars from Timbu, who was staring at the helo open-mouthed.

‘Now, that’s flying,’ said Littlemore.

Tape covered over the helo’s registration markings. Whoever it was didn’t want to be identified. A man hung in the open doorway facing the ship. ‘What the hell is that guy doing?’ Wilkes asked no one in particular. The helicopter swept around the bay, its jet turbines roaring, blades beating the air with a deafening clatter.

The helo’s sudden arrival had an immediate effect on the ship’s company. They started firing up at it with hand guns, rifles – whatever was available and loaded. Wilkes watched as a man sprinted to the forward deck and threw back a tarpaulin. A large calibre machine gun mounted on a pillar lay beneath it. It looked to Wilkes a lot like the US .50 calibre M2 heavy machine gun. If so, the chopper was in a lot of trouble, especially if the gun was loaded with SLAP rounds. Saboted light armour piercing ammo would turn a civilian chopper with no armour plating into confetti. The man cocked it, aimed and fired, and a new sound filled the bay. High velocity slugs spewed from the weapon peppered with red tracer rounds that reached up for the helo. The machine gun followed the chopper as it circled, a spray of bullets pulverising the rock barely metres below Wilkes and his men.

‘Jesus Christ!’ said Littlemore as he scrambled for cover, his face cut in several places from flying stone chips.

The pilot jinked his aircraft around in an attempt to fool the ground fire. At first he succeeded, the tracer missing its mark. But soon the man behind the machine gun began to lead the target rather than follow it. The helo

made three circles and was heading back for a fourth when its aluminium skin was punctured repeatedly by the deadly fusillade. A loud mechanical bang followed a screeching whine that filled the bay. Smoke poured from the helo's jet exhausts and black transmission fluid fouled its flanks. One more blast from that machine gun and the 117 was fish food.

Wilkes cracked the launcher, punched in a flash-bang, aimed and fired. The trackless ordnance arced towards the ship below and exploded above its decks with a thunderous crash that echoed around the bay. Some of the men dropped their guns and took cover, thinking they'd come under attack from some massively powerful gun or mortar. The man firing the machine gun dropped to the deck, hunching his head into his arms.

As it scabbled desperately for height, the thump of the helo's rotor blades thrashing the air combined with the screeching howl of jet engines tearing themselves to pieces. The aircraft somehow managed to clear the lowest of the volcanic spurs ringing the bay and then disappeared from view behind it. Wilkes and the others held their breath, waiting for the explosion the helo would make when it hit the water.

And then . . . nothing. The deafening noise that had filled the bay only moments before evaporated with a few final small arms pot-shots in the helicopter's general direction. The crew wandered about the ship, dazed, holding their ears. Wilkes trained his binoculars on the man who had fired the machine gun. He wasn't Asian, and he wasn't a local. A thick beard covered his face and a baseball cap kept his eyes hidden in shadow. 'Who are you?' Wilkes

said quietly. Within half an hour, the commerce was underway again: bags of dope for a rifle. It was as if what had just happened, indeed, what was happening, was the most normal thing in the world.

## The Persian Gulf

Commander Steve Drummond pulled the Panamanian registered tanker, *Ocean Trader*, into focus. ‘Has she decided to come clean, X?’

‘Negative, sir,’ said the executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Angus Briggs. ‘We’re getting the same crap about agricultural supplies.’

‘What’s she steering?’ asked Drummond.

Briggs leaned back and checked the figure on the screen. ‘No change, sir.’

Commander Drummond examined the vessel looming larger in the Zeiss lenses. HMAS *Arunta*’s high power cameras were trained on the tanker, presenting it clearly on the bridge’s colour monitors, but Drummond preferred to use the binoculars, a present from his wife when his command of the brand new Anzac-class frigate had been confirmed. *Ocean Trader* was an oil tanker, an old clunker long overdue for the boneyard. Who was its master kidding? thought Drummond. HMAS *Arunta* was making twenty-five knots to the tanker’s fifteen, running down the rust bucket like a young lion tackling an old wart-hog. The commander did the calculations in his head. It’d take thirty minutes to close the five nautical miles between the two ships.

Drummond touched the computer screen at his elbow, calling up the Gulf's merchant schedule for the week. Yep, there it was, the *Ocean Trader*. It was indeed due in the Gulf waters at this time, but according to the schedule, it wasn't a tanker. Yet here it was, an oiler and low in the water with its belly full of what was most likely crude stolen from Iraqi fields. And it was attempting to make a run for it, for Christ's sake. How stupid was that?

'What does *Franklin D* say?' the captain asked. The American battle group to which the *Arunta* was attached, headed by the aircraft carrier USS *Franklin D Roosevelt*, was steaming in the opposite direction, keeping an eye on Iran and Syria.

'Sir, they have no record of *Ocean Trader* being challenged. This one's kept its nose clean.'

The captain continued to keep his eyes on the quarry. 'Officer of the Watch, what other surface contacts do we have on radar?'

'Sir, there's nothing much in our immediate vicinity. Aside from the *Ocean Trader*, there's a fishing boat in its lee, currently heading in the opposite direction.'

'What's the separation between them?' asked Drummond.

'Three miles, sir, and it's roughly on a parallel course.'

'What are you silly buggers up to?' Drummond said to himself. The tanker was still churning the water. 'What do you think, X?'

Angus Briggs stood beside Drummond and glanced again at the monitor behind him. 'Nothing makes a lot of sense here, sir. We've raised its master on the radio, but it doesn't look like he's got any intention of heaving to.'

‘Okay, enough already,’ said Drummond, his mind made up. ‘We’ll board her. And get that fishing boat on the line and tell him to get the hell out of there in the nicest possible way.’ Drummond turned back to their quarry and considered the closing angles of the two vessels. ‘Nav, bring us round on a parallel course.’

Briggs waited till the course changes had been completed and then said, ‘Quartermaster, get the gunner of the watch up here.’

‘Aye aye, sir,’ said Teo, the only Australian of Asian origin in the ship’s complement of sixty, and nicknamed ‘China’ by the crew.

‘Who’s on today, China?’ Briggs asked.

‘Sean Matheson, sir,’ said Teo from memory.

Briggs then called up Leading Seaman Mark Wallage, a twenty-year-old electronics whiz-kid in the ship’s operations room. ‘Mark, get us a firing solution on our tub.’

‘Aye aye, sir,’ he said. Wallage touched the computer screen on the steel bench in front of him, activating the weapons system. A small pair of crosshairs appeared on the screen and Wallage repositioned them amidships on the *Ocean Trader*’s waterline. It was as simple as that. The *Arunta*’s weapons systems could attack several ships at once, all while defending itself against hostile aircraft and their inbound missiles, track enemy submarines, and lay chaff and electronics countermeasures to confuse opposition attack systems. Dropping a couple of shells on this old girl’s hull was a doddle.

Moments later from up on the bridge, Briggs observed the barrel of the frigate’s foredeck-mounted 127mm Mark 45 Mod 2 gun swing forty degrees clockwise and drop almost level with the horizon.

'Gunner of the Watch, Leading Seaman Matheson, sir,' announced a tall nineteen year old appearing on the bridge.

'How's it going, Sean?' asked Briggs.

Matheson relaxed slightly, the hint of a smile on his sunburned lips. 'Good, sir.'

'Glad to hear it. We need you to stitch the water ahead of our noncompliant friend over there.'

'Aye aye, sir,' said Matheson. He'd been watching the chase, helping the boarding crew get kitted up, waiting for the summons to the bridge for a good fifteen minutes. He enjoyed firing the Browning, the power of it never failed to amaze him. Matheson stepped out of the bridge onto the port wing and into the salt-loaded twenty-five-knot wind generated by the *Arunta's* passage. He fitted the earplugs and slipped on the anti-burn balaclava and gloves, followed by the Kevlar helmet. The Browning .50 cal heavy machine gun was locked in place on its gimbals, the cover removed and folded. Being the gunner of the watch, Matheson had checked this weapon, so he already knew that the gun was serviceable, well oiled and the barrel clean and clear. Nevertheless, he quickly gave it another once-over, removing its red-flagged safety pins as he went. Matheson unlocked the gimbals and checked that the weapon's movement was full and free. 'Ready, sir,' he said to Briggs, who had joined him on the wing.

The executive officer nodded and stepped back onto the bridge. The *Ocean Trader* now loomed large in the captain's binoculars. Into his boom mic Briggs said, 'Captain, gunner of the watch is ready. Operations also have a firing solution with the one-twenty-seven.'

‘We getting any compliance from the *Trader*, X?’

‘Negative, sir. Still proclaiming innocence. Tractor and irrigation parts, apparently.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said the captain to himself. There was something that just didn’t add up about this chase, something more than the obvious.

‘Sir,’ said Briggs, ‘operations ask if we want fish tonight?’

‘Pardon, X?’

‘Have a listen to this, sir. It’ll make your day. Channel twenty-seven.’

Drummond touched his command screen to change the communication channel on his phones.

‘I have lovely peesh! You love peesh! You buy from me! Very good!’ The man was yelling into his microphone in order to be heard over the unsilenced diesel chugging away beneath him. ‘You buy, you buy!’

‘It’s the fishing boat, sir,’ said Briggs.

‘Great timing,’ said Drummond. It happened occasionally, or rather, used to happen. The locals would sell their catch to the allied warships on Gulf duty, and then one blew itself up while alongside a British navy supply ship in port – an oiler loaded with diesel that went straight to the bottom with most of its hands. Everyone had wised up since. Under the brilliant sky, steaming on a perfect blue ocean, it was easy to forget sometimes that they were fighting World War III, a different kind of war that didn’t distinguish between soldier and civilian, fought out with increasing brutality and guile across the globe.



The *Ocean Trader's* master, a Pakistani, had his binoculars trained on the warship now steering a parallel course off his starboard stern. It'd been closing at a fifteen-degree angle. The course change, along with the final warnings over the radio, could only mean one thing. He shifted the view to take in the fishing boat. It would be touch and go, he thought. 'Give us more speed,' he said through the intercom to the ship's engineer.

'That's it. I'm very sorry to tell you, but we're going as fast as we can,' said the engineer, who also happened to be the master's brother-in-law. It wasn't his fault that the tanker's massive engines were long past their use-by date.

'Well . . . do what you can,' said the master.

Briggs spoke briefly to Drummond through his mic and then nodded at Matheson. The gunner of the watch pulled back the Browning's bolt, arming it, and sighted the barrel on a point roughly seventy metres ahead of the *Ocean Trader's* bow. He squeezed the trigger and the Browning bucked. A burst of tracer spat from the weapon's muzzle.

The master brought the binoculars back to his eyes in time to see the muzzle flashes from the warship's bridge. Moments later, red tracer arced through the air well ahead of his bow. If this went on, the warship would get serious and, rather than a machine gun, the large gun on its bow would be employed. If that were to happen, he would probably lose his life, as would his crew. The Americans and their allies were becoming increasingly impatient

these days. His ship would burn for days if it didn't sink, leaking a million barrels of oil into these beautiful, deadly waters. 'Have I been paid to die?' the master asked himself aloud. *No, I have not.* Indeed, there were now two million American dollars in a Cayman Islands bank account waiting for him. The fishing boat was out of harm's way and his job was done. 'Give us full astern,' he said distractedly into the intercom, keeping the binoculars trained on the warship.

'Full ahead and now full astern,' muttered the engineer. It was likely the engines wouldn't survive this treatment, but the ship's master knew what he was doing, didn't he? Besides, the engineer had been promised a huge bonus just to make the voyage, so why argue? He made the appropriate adjustments on the engine's control panel and the enormous cylinders wheezed to a stop momentarily before reversing. There was a sickening shudder through the thick steel decking under his feet. Yes, he thought to himself, this would be the *Trader's* last voyage.

Commander Drummond saw the white water swirling under the tanker's stern as its monstrous propellers began making turns in reverse. He was relieved that its master had finally come to his senses. 'Okay. *Trader* has pulled over, X. Let's go breathalyse her, shall we?'

'Yes, sir,' said Briggs.

'Carry on, X,' said Drummond, glasses still trained on the tanker, way coming off it quickly now. *What's bugging me about this?*

The fisherman swept the tanker and then the warship with his old brass telescope, the one that had belonged to his father and his father's father. The ploy had worked as they said it would. A tanker obviously full of illegal oil *and* claiming to be a cargo vessel? It was the perfect decoy, the perfect diversion – almost too perfect. Perhaps this warship was a recent arrival in the Gulf, its captain too keen to charge in. The fisherman allowed himself the moment of smugness, if only because the terror of being discovered had passed. Calling the warship up on the radio and volunteering to be inspected by offering to sell the infidels his catch was an enormous risk. But it had paid off. The reality was that he had been heading away from the warship as fast as his old diesel could manage. Also – and this was the level of risk he was playing with – the fish in his hold were old, their eyes cloudy. If the warship had called his bluff, it would have been the end. Fortunately, the manoeuvring had concluded in his favour. The warship was engaged in boarding the tanker and, because of this, he had escaped detection. They'd seen him as a harmless fisherman, which, ordinarily, he was.

The approach had been made via the company that most often bought his catch, even when the harvest from the sea was thin. They had asked him not to fish on this trip, but to rendezvous instead with the *Ocean Trader* and take on a different cargo. The meeting had taken place before sunrise, under floodlight. The fisherman had been worried about his little wooden boat being dashed against the side of the steel tanker by the swell of the sea. He saw the first load being lowered in by rope netting: around a dozen wooden crates wrapped in heavy clear plastic. The

contents, he was told, were urgent medical supplies, but he knew better. Medical supplies had United Nations approval. And they didn't need to be smuggled into Saudi Arabia. Besides, he had seen crates like these before and he knew they contained guns.

They then asked him to turn his back as the next load came aboard. Whatever it was, they didn't want him to see it. But, as chance would have it, a rogue wave arrived, picked up his little boat and slammed it against the side of the tanker. In the confusion that followed, the fisherman turned to make sure his boat had survived the contact and, in that moment, he had seen two steel drums in the netting swing precariously and clang noisily against the rusting sides of the tanker. The fisherman looked away again, like he was told. Next came the ice, several tonnes of it, covering the contraband, followed by the fish. It was a good disguise, only the fish had been dead at least a week.

The fisherman knew he was being used, but he didn't mind. There was a war on and the faithful had been called on to defend Islam. He loved Mohammed, may His name be praised, but he was not a fanatic. And he needed a new boat. The money he would earn from this trip would buy one, as well as a new home for his wife and six children – soon to be seven children. The fisherman sighed. More soldiers for Allah.

The transfer had been completed just before dawn. An hour later, the warship was bearing down on the tanker with just enough separation between his boat and the *Ocean Trader* for the fisherman's vessel to avoid suspicion. Even so, his heart was still beating like that of a frightened

bird, not so much for the detection and arrest he'd just avoided, but for the evil that now seemed to hang about his boat like a limp and blackened sail.

## Manila, Philippines

Jeff Kalas sat by the pool at the Manila Diamond Hotel and watched the waiters scurry from guest to bar, shuttling drinks. The hot sun danced on the inviting blue water fed by a waterfall tumbling through faux rocks. The guests lounging poolside were the usual mix found at five-star hotels throughout the region: businessmen of various nationalities, but mainly Japanese and American, accompanied by wives with dimply thighs and designer costumes, and a family or two with noisy children. One particularly attractive blonde also occupied a chair, her every languid movement kept under surveillance by the married men who wished they weren't and spent the day dreaming of what might have been had their wives stayed home.

*Jones and Smith. Smith and Jones.* Kalas wrote the names on a napkin already covered in figures, the record of his meeting with the pair. An unlikely duo, a camel jockey and a power point. Kalas was unsure of the source of their wealth, but it certainly wasn't legal. The question Kalas asked himself was whether he wanted to know *what* that source was, and immediately decided that, no, he did not. They obviously had money and plenty of it, with more to come. Surely that was all that mattered?