



## CHAPTER 29

### LUCKING

Like surprised unfortunates unexpectedly swept away by a tsunami and deposited in new environs, Frannie, and I stumbled along teary-eyed and coughing with a puzzled assortment of teary-eyed and coughing fellow tossed tourists on the lawn outside the Mint. There we collided with Mai and party. The fact that we were still panting and dazed didn't stop me from introducing Frannie to them. I was upstaged mid-intro by a loud noise and our heads turned toward the oscillating *whoop whoop whoop* of a siren as it cranked up and an ambulance tore off, its Doppler effect bouncing back in ever diminishing waves.

Excitedly we all jabbered about how amazed and puzzled we were at what we'd just experienced. Our side had to fake half of the befuddlement because we knew a great deal about what had just happened. But actually, we didn't really know what the heck had just happened either so it wasn't that

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hard to fake. After sitting on the grass for a couple of moments, catching our breath, and regaining our composure, we entered into small talk. Frannie said I already know more people in WA than she. She asked Mai where she got the gold pendant. At the Mint gift shop. “Where’d you get that lovely bracelet?” Mai asked. Frannie had made it. Mai said they had come to the Mint from a sumptuous brunch at the Swan Brewery. I was just starting to tell her we had probably passed right by each other there when Techo and Gelar came running over from the street asking for a ride to the hospital. Oh goodness. We’d better go. We have an injured friend. As we ran off I apologized, called out I’d phone. Waved goodbye to Mai and hers who seemed amused at us as we sped off piled in the Porsche looking, I imagine, like four kangaroos in a tea cup.

At the hospital Frannie was on her mobile talking to Samo. I was sitting in the emergency waiting room with Techo and Gelar, two hang-dog lucky reprobates. Gazing at them, a duo of impressions swept into each other like waves colliding—one, a crushing sense of their miserable failure, though failure against formidable odds—as if they were dejected amateur ball players heads down in the locker room who’d just been humiliated by a bruising team. Second was an aura of miraculous good fortune one might feel being in the presence of survivors of an airplane crash. Everything had gone wrong—but no one got in trouble or badly injured. Another of Gupta’s howls came piercing through from the emergency room. Not mortally injured, anyway.

A couple of detectives questioned Gupta and the rest of us and we all just said we had no idea what happened—there was just, all of a sudden, a lot of smoke and noise and yelling and here we are. They thanked us and went off.

A doctor finally emerged from the double swinging doors. She told us Gupta’s okay. He’d been moved to a room upstairs. We took the elevator. I told a buxom blond nurse we’re all close relatives of Gupta’s, making an effort to keep

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my gaze elevated. She eyed us, possibly considering the range of skin colors and accents involved, before leading us into Gupta's room. Techo kept an eye on her. Gupta's arm was badly burned, she said, but it's been cleaned, treated with anti-biotic ointment, and wrapped.

"He is in a good deal of pain," she said.

"It's not a good deal. It's a bad one," mumbled Gupta.

"The analgesics are beginning to take effect," the nurse continued.

"And I'd advise giving me pain killers as well," Gupta suggested in a blurred whisper.

"Hi Guppy," said Frannie. "Hang in there. We're with you mate."

We surrounded Gupta's bed. He gazed up at us gritting his teeth and looking a little dreamy. His arms were on top of the sheet, the right one covered in white bandaging. Frannie leaned down and placed a kiss on it as gently as the touch of a butterfly landing. Gupta was breathing heavily. The nurse said the pain is good, the sign of a second degree burn. That ingot could have easily given him deep third degree burns right through the nerves, she said. No nerves, no pain. That would be much worse and would necessitate skin grafting. She asked him when he got the cut on his lip and the blood under the fingernail and I answered he fell down the Swan Bells stairs. She showed us a paper bag on a table that contained his clothes, shoes, wallet, heavy gloves, and earplugs. I pulled out the flannel shirt with right sleeve sporting a gaping hole with charred edges.

The nurse's beeper beeped and she went down the hall with Techo's eyes following her. She was sending some reporters away, telling them the patient wouldn't be able to see them until tomorrow.

I told Gupta how lucky the three of them had been—not to have gotten caught. He whispered he wants more luck. He wants a happy ending and then said something I don't catch. "Hmm?"

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“He said he fears the only happy endings are in massage parlors,” said Frannie.

He groaned. He was fading, looking distressed and we knew why.

“Mindy,” he mumbled. “Mindy, we failed you. We didn’t get the gold. Now, we need three hundred thousand dollars. At least it’s Australian dollars.”

“Your sense of humor is hangin’ in there,” Frannie said.

“It’s not humor. It’s horror. Fenster’s waiting and Rudy’s coming in a few hours.” He looked at me and sadly said, “Zero minus, minus?”

I spied a wall clock. “It’s one fifty-one,” I said—not trusting my natural sense of the time for fine tuning as important as this.

“Mindy is still kidnapped and in danger and we’ll have to tell Rudy.” His slurred words were getting hard to understand. “Call the police. Call Rudy. We should have told Rudy from the first. This has all been a big... Go save her. Mindy. Three hundred thousand dollars—Mindy, three hundred thousand dollars—Mindy, three hundred...”

“I’m gonna call the funeral home and ask for more time. Maybe I’ll go there. I think Fenster’s there—appeal to him directly. And Frannie said Samo has got some ideas,” I said, pretending Frannie had said that Samo has got some ideas. He was on his way so it was close to true but Gupta’s morphine took over anyway and his eyes glazed over. We left him, for the time being, out of it, moaning, mumbling about Mindy and three hundred thousand dollars, his mantra for the time being.

We met Samo out in front of the building. Immediately the talk went to how long we had till he brought in the police. His friend in the force was ready to move. He said it’s not the first time they’ve been on call for a family to change its mind in a kidnapping.

“What time is sunset?” I asked. “Fenster said to bring the money by sunset.”

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Techo got a paper from a nearby stand and checked. "Five fifty-seven," he said.

It was three minutes past two. Almost four hours. We agreed to spend one more hour looking for alternatives.

"Let's brainstorm," I said.

We sat on the steps and I stared at a raven that circled us and flew to the entrance to a bank down the street.

"I haven't had time to tell you I hardly recognized you this morning," said Frannie to Techo. "And," she added, "how handsome you look with your new hairdo."

Back in the hospital room, Gupta lay quietly passed out. The door opened and two men in suits entered with the nurse whose beeper went off so she did too. One of the men wore thick glasses and the other had thin ones.

"He looks okay," said the man with thick glasses. "Sleeping like a baby. The nurse says he'll be out of here tomorrow. He'll be fine."

"She also said it's a severe injury that will take a long time to heal. This is serious. Don't kid yourself. You're the director of the Mint and can't afford to underestimate the potential this case has for a catastrophically high award."

"I guess that's the arm that was burned," the director said.

"Yes," said the other with condescension, "the arm that is not wrapped," here he slightly lifted Gupta's left arm, "would be the arm that wasn't burned, whereas the arm that is wrapped with bandages," he pointed, "would be the one that was burned."

The director lifted the bandaged right arm a little to examine it.

Gupta's eyes opened and he groaned pitifully. The director dropped his arm in fright and Gupta shrieked louder and more pitifully.

The nurse stuck her head in, "What's happening in here? Is he alright? Are you alright sir?"

Gupta groaned softly and lay there.

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“Have you talked to him yet?” she asked.

“We’re just about to,” said the man with thin glasses.

Her beeper went off again and she departed.

Gupta mumbled, “Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars,” so softly and incoherently the men didn’t notice.

“Maybe it was carelessness on his part,” said the director.

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars,” Gupta groaned again below the radar.

The lawyer pulled the director aside and whispered firmly, “Him careless? Sitting in his seat where he was supposed to be and your employee drops an 800 degree gold ingot on his arm? Carelessness is the right word—gross carelessness—and not his. Now you start thinking about a settlement right now and forget about shifting the blame—or get another lawyer.”

As they talked, Gupta continued to repeat softly, “Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Well let’s ask him—he seems to be awake.” He moved in closer to Gupta. “Who do you think is responsible for your injury sir?”

“Mindy...”

“He said ‘the Mint.’ I heard him clearly. He thinks the Mint is responsible,” said the lawyer. “Now stop that approach.”

“What do you think he’d settle for?” asked the director.

“Three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Did you hear that?” asked the lawyer.

“Hear what?”

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

“There, he said it again. Listen.”

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Is that what you think is fair?” asked the lawyer.

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

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“Look,” said the lawyer, “He keeps saying the Mint and three hundred thousand dollars. He’s clearly thought about this while he’s lying there.”

“What do you think?” asked the director, and then, leaning over Gupta again. “Would you settle for one hundred thousand?”

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Two hundred thousand?”

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Okay,” interrupted the lawyer. “We’ve got a deal.” And then quietly to the director. “He’s not budging. You’d better run with this. He’s obviously delirious and doesn’t really know what’s happening now. But that’s clearly what he wants. If a lawyer gets a hold of him they could go for a million or more. I’ve got a form here that will do.” He pulled out a piece of paper from his briefcase. “Just add the date and the amount and his name. What’s his name?”

“It’s on his chart here—Jackie Gupta.”

“Jackie Gupta and three hundred,” he wrote on the paper. “There we are.”

“Sir, are you prepared to sign this?” the lawyer said to Gupta who was still mumbling the same line. “Sir!”

Gupta looked up.

“Sir, are you prepared to sign this agreement to settle with the Perth Mint for three hundred thousand dollars?”

“Mindy—three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Yes—that’s right. With the Mint for three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Huh?” said Gupta coming to.

“Just sign here. Can you see?”

“No. Glasses.”

“Here use mine,” said the director.

“Ahhh,” said Gupta throwing them off with his left hand.

“Too strong,” said the lawyer putting his own on Gupta.

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Gupta looked at the paper, read a few words, then nodded off.

“Wake up, sir.” The lawyer picked up his left hand. “Are you right handed?”

“Right handed?”

“Oh it doesn’t matter,” said the lawyer, and he helped guide Gupta’s left hand to sign. “Good. Good.” He picked the paper up and handed it to the director. “Now you sign it.”

The nurse walked in. She was conscripted as a witness and signed it. Her beeper went off and she left. The lawyer whipped out a blank check, made it out, the director signed it, and the lawyer placed it in Gupta’s left hand.

“Here. We’ll give you a copy of the agreement later today.”

They departed.

Gupta looked at the check. His brow furrowed. As he dropped off to sleep again he pulled the check and his arm under the covers, rolled onto his left side and was silent.

Techo had gone off with Samo to check out the Brewery one more time—just to be sure. Frannie, Gelar, and I went back to Gupta’s room and were by his side when he woke up. Frannie asked him how his arm was. He started moaning and crying about Mindy and then told us haltingly, “Dreamed... check... my hand... three hundred... check... to get Mindy... back.”

“I think I understood him,” I said. “He’s delirious.”

“It would be a good dream to come true,” said Frannie.

Gupta slowly pulled his hand out from under the covers. In his grip was a rectangular piece of paper. We all three moved in and peered. It was a government check signed by the director of the Perth Mint and it was for \$300,000. After a moment of making sure we were seeing what we were seeing and convincing Gupta it wasn’t an opiated dream, we realized there was no time to think about it, wonder about it, rejoice



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about it—we had to get him out of there and to a bank to cash that check right away. The clock on the wall said 3:32.

“I don’t think Fenster would take a third party check,” I said. “What time do the banks close?”

“It’s Thursday,” said Frannie. “At four.”

Gupta wasn’t supposed to leave. We didn’t want to cause any commotion and I don’t think he’d have been considered aware enough to discharge himself. We slid him out of the bed and Gelar into it. We had Gelar roll over on his side and covered him. Carefully as we could, we put on Gupta’s clothes including the shirt with the burned hole in it. I rolled back the sleeve. He only cried out at a moderate decibel level a few times. We stuffed his hospital gown into the bag and we were off—the poor fellow staggering with me propping him up by his left side, Frannie protecting the right. We breezily chattered to each other and him hoping to make the fact we were dragging a drugged and delirious unchecked-out patient less obvious. We were as careful as possible not to bump his arm not just because we didn’t want to hurt him but also because we didn’t want him loudly vocalizing exclamations of pain and thus drawing attention to us. Stealthily we passed doctors, nurses, orderlies, administrators, patients, and guests and they passed us as well, all too busy to notice anything. We probably could have dragged a corpse out of there.

I was gonna get that money one way or another. But I wasn’t thinking about it. I was channeling something, maybe just my own moxie, but I could feel it rising and telling me what to do, deciding what to do. We trudged to the nearby bank propping up groaning Gupta between us. It was the only one we had time to make it to before closing. It was an awful lot of cash we wanted but it was the headquarters of a big bank. As Frannie and I trudged with Gupta toward the door like some six-legged animal, a long-haired vender selling hand made jewelry on the sidewalk came over to help us up the steps. As we walked up to the door the guard was just lock-

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ing it. I yelled. He saw me. I begged. He pointed to his watch. I pointed to Gupta's bandaged arm and that did it for some illogical reason. The guard opened the door. Frannie and I dragged the half-conscious Gupta to the teller. Soon we were at the door of a vice president. I told Frannie I'd take it from there. I plopped Gupta into a chair and told the startled bank officer what I wanted. I showed him the check and Gupta's passport, which he always carried thank goodness. Gupta was falling over on me. The vice president told me with discomfort they can't just cash this check on the spot. I insisted, saying it's a government cashier's check signed by the director of the Mint. It's as good as cash. I suggested he call him. We need it now. The VP called the President in.

The President listened to the VP's account of what we wanted and was about to launch into his reasons why they can't do it when he got a better look at me and exclaimed, "Ross Bolleter's friend! What an honor! Please come into my office! I've been wanting to see you again!"

Good lord. It's that man from Ross's concert. Oh yes, I remembered his name. "Good to see you again Mr. Vargas," I said. "I'm sorry my friend, Mr. Gupta, is in such poor condition. He had an accident at the Mint."

"Oh yes, I heard," he said. "An American was injured in some terrorist attack. A shame those Muslims got away. I'm so sorry this has happened to you, Mr. Gupta. It is most unfortunate. Please come have a seat in my office."

"Thank you," I said, dragged Gupta in, and deposited him in a chair where he slumped over.

"The last time I saw you, you were talking with Ross Bolleter on the balcony of the Fremantle Performance Hall. What a glorious concert. I wrote to my good friend Robert Duvall about it and suggested we stage another concert so Robert can hear Ross Bolleter's magnificent interpretation of Astor Piazzolla's music. Robert is a consummate tango dancer."

"I've read that."

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“Since then I’ve been trying to play the piano more but I am not talented.”

“I’m sure you’re being overly modest,” I said.

“And I’ve purchased some of Mr. Bolleter’s ruined piano CDs. Most curious. Not melodic at all but strange and otherworldly. I could never be so original.”

He served us strong, good coffee. I actually got Gupta to take some sips, thinking it might help to get him somewhat mobile—he slumped over again. Mr. Vargas asked if I knew when Ross’s next concert would be, opened a window wider, and lit up an American Spirit after asking permission. I not only gave him permission but requested one for myself, which he was happy to provide. Gupta was leaning over drooling. I took a tissue from Vargas’s desk and wiped the dribble from his face—Gupta’s, not Mr. Vargas’s. Vargas went on about Ross and tango meanwhile not paying any attention to Gupta. Finally Vargas asked about the money. I explained to him briefly this was a matter of life and death that I could not discuss and urged him to call the Mint to talk to the director to make sure the check was good. Vargas said that would not be necessary, that Ross’s friend’s word is good enough, the check is a cashier’s check, the VP would have to call anyway to get the cash—company policy. Of course they’d cash it. But it would still take a day.

“I must explain the exact situation then so you can understand the urgency involved,” I said in a hushed tone leaning in closer to Vargas. He leaned in closer to me.

“I can’t say exactly who we’re working with, Mr. Vargas, but Mr. Gupta and I were in the process of apprehending those terrorists at the Mint when they caused that great commotion, wounded Mr. Gupta, and got away.” I leaned over closer to him and lowered my voice. “Can you be trusted with top secret, classified information known only to Australian and American intelligence operatives, something you can never tell anyone?”

He nodded gravely with furrowed brow and wide eyes.

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“You might think that, being clandestine agents in covert work of such extreme importance, that we have unlimited amounts of cash at our fingertips, but we are still constrained by bureaucratic red tape.” I looked at him with a disgusted scowl and he shook his head with angry sympathy. I continued. “It would take us at least a day to get this money from our sources. Mr. Vargas, those evil-doers are holding Ross Bolleter. Now, they are demanding the \$300,000 Mr. Gupta received from the Mint in return for Mr. Bolleter’s release. They want it by sunset today or... or.... Mr. Vargas, do it for Ross, do it for Australia...” I breathed heavily. “Do it for tango!”

“Mission accomplished,” I told Frannie who was waiting at the door to the bank with the helpful jewelry craftsman when we exited. I quickly thanked him for his assistance and told her Gupta and I would go right away to the funeral home. I refused to let her come. Too dangerous. No room anyway. Don’t like having the Porsche over-booked. It was parked right in front of us. She gave me directions. It was way out by the airport. She said she’d go back and get Gelar out of the hospital.

Gupta was regaining consciousness. As we drove off he asked me the time. I looked at his watch and told him it was four fifty, one hour and seven minutes before sunset. Plenty of time.

“Go to airport,” he said.

“What for?”

“Locker.”

“I get it. Good idea. You’re more aware than I thought.”

Traffic was at a standstill. The lights were so screwed up they’d been turned off. Cars took turns at intersections. We saw the aftermaths of fender-benders. I pulled over to the side, rode up on the sidewalk, back to the street, sidewalk again, over to the wrong side of the street, and in this cava-

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lier manner, made better time, hoping the police were too busy to notice.

“Gupta, you got change for ten dollars?” I asked. “The large lockers are ten dollars but medium is all we need and it’s six.”

He looked at me with disgust through slitted lids. “Speed, not money stupid. You more out of it than me.”

“Good. You’re beginning to speak so I can understand you.”

A moment later I hurriedly got back to the Porsche. “Okay, we splurged with large.” I slammed the door.

“Ahhh!” He groaned in pain.

“Sorry.”

“Firk you.”

We sped off with only a key as ransom.