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Gwennie and Kitty Koo

Southwest of New Britain Island, January 2001

Chris MacGregor held on tightly to the wheel of the Cessna Caravan as the winds buffeted it up and down.

"Where'd this storm come from?" Natalie asked as she peered through her side window at the shadows of what appeared to be an island chain below.

"I don't know," Chris replied. "All the weather reports said we'd have clear skies with patchy showers."

"Doesn't look patchy to me," Heather added from the seat behind Natalie.

"It looks like it's going to break just ahead," Chris said as the rain continued to lash across the windshield of the amphibian. "The radar says we're only ten miles from the island. At this speed we'll be over it in six minutes."

"Are we going to miss it?" R.O. asked from behind Chris.

"No, everyone relax. It's just a tropical rain shower. The Aussies taught me how to find atolls like this last week while I was at Cairn," Chris said.

"I bet that training camp was fun," Natalie said, showing her confidence in Chris.

"It was twenty-one days of the most interesting camp

I've ever attended. I was so glad Dad got me into it. Just to think that I got to eat, sleep, dive, fly, and parachute with the Royal Australian Navy Seals was just awesome," Chris said and adjusted the course of the plane slightly.

"I can't remember who you said was there," R.O. said, leaning toward him.

"Just guys and girls my age from across Australia. They all had some connection, like a family member in the military or government, and had an interest in diving or flying. I was the only American, but the fact that Mom is a British subject as well as an American citizen qualified me. You know the Commonwealth thing and all that stuff about the Queen makes us half-British in their eyes. There were a few of us who wanted to fly and dive. But I think jumping out of a helicopter at two thousand feet in diving gear and parachuting into the ocean was the most exciting," Chris described with a big grin on his face.

"More exciting than this? Flying in a tropical storm?" Heather asked in a worried tone.

"Sure, but this is fun too," he replied.

"Didn't we read about Amelia Earhart getting lost trying to find an island?" Heather asked.

"Yea and she was never found," R.O. added. "Some say the Japs got her."

"That's Japanese, Ryan," Natalie corrected. "It's rude to use words like that."

"That's what they called them in World War II," R.O. shot back.

"This isn't World War II, Ryan. So cool it," Heather added.

"Aviation is much more sophisticated now anyway," Chris retorted.

"Yea, but she flew around the world," R.O. said.

"You guys are making me nervous," Natalie added.

"And Chris did fly us across China without a problem."

"There she is," Chris said and pointed out the front

window. "Just as the map and the satellite said, due west of Cape Gloucester and north of Umboi Island. It's a small atoll called Tolokiwa where the Japanese destroyer *Arashio* was sunk during World War II in 1943."

"Was there a big battle there?" R.O. asked.

"Yes, it was the Battle of the Bismarck Sea with both submarine and air attack. It sits just adjacent to the shallow lagoon. The dive master at the hotel said it was a good dive," Chris replied.

The rain stopped and sunlight pierced through the clouds as Chris began a sharp descent. He flew the Cessna Caravan amphibian parallel to the coral reef in the lagoon and dropped down to one thousand feet. The skies opened up and sunlight filled the lagoon, revealing the crystal-clear water, which reflected a bright turquoise color against the white beach and lush green foliage. As the pontoons touched down gently, barely a splash was left in the wake. The daily flying time in Australia had helped polish Chris's aviator skills.

The aircraft glided across the lagoon as if it were an elegant black-browed mollymawk albatross coming in for a landing.

"Where's the dive spot?" R.O. asked and stared out the window.

"The map said that it's on the edge of the lagoon, north-east end," Chris replied. "Natalie, get out the map and we'll anchor the plane near the beach on that end of the lagoon."

"Now remind me how you found out about this wreck and why Mom let us do this," Heather said. "I really did forget."

"I found out about the wreck from the divemaster at the Royal Australian Navy Seal camp. I had told him Dad was going to be involved in the reef management project near Papua New Guinea and Mom wanted to spend two weeks vacationing in the islands. That's when he said we should visit this sunken Japanese destroyer from World War II and then go on to the Solomons to see all the ships there," Chris answered patiently as he drove

the plane across the glass smooth surface of the lagoon.

"I remember," Heather said unconvincingly. "But that still doesn't explain the parent thing; you know, how you got permission to do this."

"I think Chris proved himself in China," Natalie responded and turned around to Heather and smiled.

"I agree. I just couldn't remember," Heather said giving up on the argument and turning to the window.

Just a few minutes later, the Cessna Caravan was resting still on the water and Chris was dropping a sea anchor down to the white sandy bottom ten feet below just missing a passing school of fish. Heather stood at the door, dove into the warm water, and swam the one hundred feet to the beach. Chris inflated a small rubber boat and started loading diving gear into it.

"You do such good work," Natalie said as she dropped her T-shirt in the cabin, revealing a tropical print bikini. She dove into the water and swam toward the beach.

"Yea, you do," R.O. said and tried to step by Chris.

"Hold it, buddy. You're staying with me," Chris said and grabbed the back of his T-shirt.

"That's not fair," R.O. whined.

"You've got to be quicker and slyer like the girls," Chris suggested and handed him a dive bag. "I'll get the tanks, you get the gear."

"Alright," R.O. said and tossed more equipment into the yellow rubber boat.

It wasn't long before all four kids were on the beach with dive equipment laid out and ready to go. Each one put on their equipment without any help, and Chris stepped out into the small surf of the lagoon with a pair of fins in his left hand and a goody bag in his right hand. He had on a one-millimeter wet suit and twelve pounds of weights. A Nikon® camera dangled from his neck. Each teen had a knife on their right or left leg and a utility belt that held a flashlight and tools for cutting wire and any other object

that they might get tangled into. All had one tank, and Chris left two extra tanks on the beach.

"Everyone ready?" Chris asked into his new radio-equipped mask and looked around.

"Ready when you are," Natalie answered. "No hurricanes or sharks like the last two times I went diving with you." She smiled.

R.O. walked out into the water, put his mask on and sat down to slip on his fins. Heather was last, and soon all four were in ten feet of water and swimming under the airplane. In another one hundred yards, they were leaving the calm part of the lagoon and approaching the reef. Looming in the shadows of the reef was the sunken Japanese warship. The water was crystal clear with visibility to two hundred feet. The temperature was almost eighty degrees.

Beautiful reef fishes swam everywhere. The menagerie of shapes and colors were like an underwater carnival that allowed one's eyes to feast upon nature's beauty. Curious butterfly fish swam up to the teens and schooled along side for a few minutes before darting back to the safety of the reef. A small ray shot across the bottom flapping its pectoral fins like wings in search of a mollusk for a quick meal.

As the kids approached from the starboard side of the Japanese ship, they noticed the cruiser's guns pointed majestically toward the open sea. The tower was only ten feet from the surface with the main deck at fifty feet. Chris had already instructed everyone that this would be a "jump" dive with no decompression other than two minutes at fifteen feet. That meant when they reached the main deck, they had twenty minutes before it was time to come back up. R.O. had received a strong five minutes of instruction from his father, Dr. Jack MacGregor, before they had left Cape Gloucester. There had been no threats of going back to the States and missing the rest of the year-long trip around the world; that tactic didn't work any more. It had been a simple ultimatum any thirteen year

old would understand – behave or your life would become miserable very soon.

The divers moved through the broken opening in the reef where the cruiser had sunk over sixty years ago and were headed down to the main deck at a leisurely kick. The reef had begun to repair itself with new coral everywhere and colorful sponges and tubeworms making a new home on the surface of the ship. From that distance, they could see the hole in the side of the ship that had been made by an American torpedo during a fierce battle.

The hole was grown over with a variety of soft corals and marine life. Anemones had attached to the jagged edges, and orange-and-white-striped clown fish darted in and out of the hole, trying to lure smaller fish into the stinging arms of the anemone that waved in the current.

Suddenly a fifty-pound grouper emerged from the hole, swimming right up to Chris's face and stopping. Its big lips were all puffed out and slowly opening and closing as if it were talking to him. Chris gently reached out and petted him. The big spotted grouper then moved to the side and let him swim closer to the ship. The big fish never left his side for the entire dive as if telling everyone that this was his ship, his home.

"Is everyone O.K.?" Chris asked into the microphone in his mask.

After a response from everyone, he continued to lead them to the Imperial Japanese Navy ship *Arashio Maru*. Heather was just behind him with R.O. at her side. Natalie pulled up the rear and glanced at her depth gauge; it read forty-five feet. Her dive computer on her wrist told her she had fifty-two minutes at depth before decompression would have to begin. Chris looked her way, and she gave him a hand sign to check his dive computer, forgetting that she could talk to him. He did and waved back.

"Use your microphone. Did you forget?" Chris asked.

"Yes, I am so not used to having it," Heather replied.

"I'm not. I love telling everyone about what I find," R.O. chimed in.

"You guys are so spoiled," Natalie said and waved to Chris.

They were approaching the main deck of the warship, and the big guns loomed in their faces. Attached to the main deck was a catapult loaded with a Mitsubishi AGM2 fighter, also known as the Zero. As the kids swam closer, they could see that it was draped with an assortment of marine organisms, ranging from tubeworms to exotic sponges.

R.O. reached out and touched the gill extension of one of the worms, and it retracted instantly into its cavernous and protected covering. Chris shook his finger back and forth as if to tell R.O. "No." All the kids wore protective diving gloves. They were experienced divers knowing that the sea is the home of hundreds of animals whose natural protective devices can be toxic to humans. A simple touch could lead to a swollen hand the size of a head of cabbage.

"Heads up everybody. We've got twenty minutes left at fifty feet," Chris said into his radio microphone-equipped mask." He then followed with a hand signal to everyone just to be sure he was understood. Everyone responded with an O.K. and continued along the war-torn deck, pockmarked with holes from American aircraft trying to sink the mighty destroyer before a deadly torpedo found its mark.

As Natalie passed by an open door, another large grouper lunged out and startled her. She let out a muffled scream. Everyone else smiled. Chris entered the main part of the ship just below the tower and found himself inside the radar room, which had equipment that was considered beyond its time in 1944. R.O. swam in behind him and stayed about five feet from Chris's yellow fins. Chris stopped next to a hatch that looked like it had been pried open recently with a tool of some sort. He pointed to the scratches and tool marks on the edge of the door. Pulling it open a little more, he looked inside and turned on his flashlight. R.O. did the same, and the room was illuminated instantly.

From the size of the compartment and the location next to the communications center, Chris guessed that it might be the captain's quarters. He swam through the opening and into the large room where he saw that the invertebrate life, which had grown on the surface of the tables, cabinets, and metal furniture, had been disturbed as if someone had been looking for something. The big grouper followed behind R.O.

"I think I'll name you," R.O. said.

"Natalie, Heather, check in," Chris spoke.

"We're good," Natalie replied. "Just checking out the airplane on the deck. Where are you?"

"We're just under the tower. There's an open hatch door. Follow it in here. We've got ten minutes left," Chris answered back.

He then turned and saw R.O. with his knife out, poking into the remainder of a cabinet on the far wall.

"What is it?" Chris asked.

"Just a tunnel of some kind. I saw a black-and-orange fish swim into the hole, and I was just looking to see how deep it went," R.O. replied.

"Let me help." Chris got out his long multipurpose tool and wedged it against the edge of what looked like a shelf of some kind.

A beautiful Achilles Tang, also known as an orange doctor fish, instantly swam out. Its black, sleek body was accented with a false orange eye seemingly painted next to its tail to distract a predator into charging toward its tail fin, allowing the fish to escape in the opposite direction.

"That's it," R.O. said. "Really cool, huh?"

"Yea, Dad would love to see that specimen," Chris replied.

Chris kept pushing and suddenly the metal cabinet began to move; then the wall began to move.

"Watch out," Chris yelled into his microphone.

The entire wall fell forward, kicking up sixty years of silt

and debris. Both boys froze as they were suddenly in a very dark room with only about a foot of visibility. After waiting for the water to partially clear, Chris swam back toward where the wall had been and was confronted with the front door of a safe.

"My gosh. Look at this R.O.," he said just as his dive computer began to beep and tell him it was time to ascend to fifteen feet.

"A safe. Let's open it," R.O. said excitedly.

"We don't have the tools or the air. Girls, head to the rendezvous point above the bow of the ship. We'll ascend together. We'll change tanks and come back for the safe," he said and winked at R.O.

"What safe?" Natalie responded.

"Yes!" R.O. said and turned toward the door in the silt-laden room.

Within minutes, everyone was suspended weightlessly above the bow and headed for a brief decompression stop at fifteen feet. It was just a precaution to get all the small bubbles out of the bloodstream. R.O. couldn't stop talking the entire two minutes about how he had once again discovered a treasure.

"It probably has nothing in it but the silt left from decayed papers and paper money," Chris said.

"Who knows, Chris, there might be some gold coins in there," Natalie said, fueling R.O.'s excitement.

"Well, whatever is in there was being sought by some other diver who pretty much tore up the skeleton of the room looking for it. We just got lucky and pried in the right spot and brought the whole wall down," Chris replied and pointed up for everyone to surface.

Like a school of fish, the four teens slowly rose to the surface and then put their snorkels in their mouths for the short swim to the beach. Just as they reached the beach a de Havilland Beaver buzzed them, not fifty feet in the air. They recognized the plane as the same model belonging to Jessica

Gailey in Alaska, but this one was painted canary yellow.

As they stood up out of the water and took off their equipment, Chris looked up in the sky as the de Havilland lined up to land in the lagoon next to them.

"I sure hope those aren't the people who were looking for that safe," he said.

"Me too," Natalie agreed as she walked over next to him, wringing the water out of her hair.

The amphibian cruised smoothly across the waves, touched down without a bounce, and then powered across the water toward them.

"I'm scared," Heather said softly.

"Well, everyone get ready to swim to the plane when I say go," Chris said, tensing up.

The yellow amphibian came to a stop about ten feet from the beach with its pontoons lightly digging into the sand. The propeller wound down, and the door flew open. To their surprise, a reddish-yellow cat jumped from the inside of the airplane and landed in about a foot of water. It quickly swam to the beach and shook off; then it turned toward the kids and gave them a big meow.

"What on earth?" Natalie asked.

"That's Kitty Koo, and she's telling you that she's hungry," shouted a gray-haired old woman now standing on the pontoon.

The teens stood with their mouths wide open, realizing that this elderly woman had just landed the amphibian in the lagoon. She turned back to the airplane and pulled out an already loaded pneumatic spear gun. The kids stepped back. She pointed down toward the water, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

"Dinner's coming, Kitty Koo," she said and reeled in the line with a ten-inch fish on the end of the spear. She then stepped down into the knee-deep water and walked up to the beach. Taking a knife from her belt, she quickly lopped off the head of the fish and cut out its organs. In one smooth

motion, she tossed the fish to the cat, who immediately began to tear into the flesh.

The kids were dumbfounded and speechless.

"My name's Gwendolyn. My friends call me Gwennie. What are you kids doing out here?" the old woman asked.

"Just diving on the wreck," Chris responded.

"I work for the Papua New Guinea Department of Historical Preservation, and I need to see your permit," Gwennie said.

"We didn't know we needed a permit," Chris answered back.

"Young man, just because we're hundreds of miles from anywhere you'd reckon to be civilized doesn't mean you can come in here and act like you own the place. If you don't have a permit, then I'll have to issue you a warning. Next time it will be a five hundred dollar fine," she said. "I can also sell you a permit for one hundred dollars."

"One hundred dollars!" Heather exclaimed.

"Yep, that's a whole lot cheaper than the fine. And if you had brought up anything from that Japanese ship, then I'd have to fine you and call for someone to come arrest you," she said.

"Arrest us?" Natalie asked.

"That's right. You kids have hearing problems?" she replied.

"We're good," Chris said, "And thanks for the warning. I'll get my billfold out of the airplane and pay you."

"Kitty Koo, want another fish?" the old woman said and walked up the beach to a fallen tree and sat down. The reddish-yellow cat ran up to her with the remains of the fish in its mouth and rubbed up against the elderly woman's wet pant leg. The kids walked over as Chris swam out to the airplane to get the money for the permit. Within a few minutes, he was back, dripping from the swim. He handed her a wet one hundred dollar bill.

"Do you have any identification so we know that

you're not just taking our money?" Natalie asked.

"Honey, I've got all the identification I need right here," Gwennie said and took off her straw hat.

She reached inside the crown, pulled out a laminated piece of paper about the size of a credit card, and handed it to Natalie. Natalie looked at it and handed it to Chris who perused it carefully.

"Well, you are who you say you are Gwendolyn Zorger. This says you live in Cape Gloucester. That's a long flight out here," Chris said, handing her card back to her.

"This is the farthest I fly. I normally don't come out this way but once a month, but we've had reports from the locals on these islands of some suspicious boats and aircraft over the last couple of months. There are five of us flying this area; I just happened to see that bright red Caravan floating out there and thought I would drop in for a visit," she said.

"What if we had been some bad guys?" Heather asked with a smile.

The old woman reached behind her bulky khaki shirt and produced a Taurus 9mm-automatic pistol.

"She's small but she makes a loud bang and a sharp sting if I need her. With these seventy-two-year-old blue eyes I can shoot an eye out of a coconut at fifty feet," she said.

"Cool," R.O. chimed in.

"But I could see you were a bunch of kids so I wasn't afraid to come down," she said as she put the gun away. "Besides, Kitty Koo was hungry, and we wouldn't be stopping for another hour to refuel before flying back to Cape Gloucester tonight," she said.

"That's where we're staying. We just got there yesterday, and my friend, Chris, couldn't wait to come out here and dive," Natalie said.

"Is there a good place to eat when we get back?" Heather asked. "I'm sure I'll be hungry by then. In fact, I'm hungry right now."

"That's a ditto from me," R.O. added as he petted the

cat and took the fish spine from its mouth gently.

"Billy Fly's. Best island food around," Gwennie replied.

"Billy Fly's? What's that?" R.O. asked.

"Billy's an old friend who's been around here for about twenty years. He and his pal Bill Hill, whom everybody calls by his Indian name, Young Deer, own the restaurant and pub on the beach. Great food," Gwendolyn said.

"Billy and Bill. I knew two women named Ginna and Regina," R.O. said.

"Don't go there again," Heather said, showing her annoyance with her little brother.

"Can you get them confused?" Chris asked.

"Nope. Billy Fly is the old guy with a tan like a lizard and white hair down to his shoulders. Young Deer is the young guy, I think Cherokee or something like that. He's got long black hair and is about six foot two. Come here Kitty Koo," Gwennie said. The cat jumped into her lap. "Time to go. Here's your money back young man. I'm going to give you a break this time. Tell your folks to buy a permit next time," she said and handed him the one hundred dollar bill back.

"Well, I guess we've all been rude," Natalie said. "We didn't introduce ourselves."

"You're Chris MacGregor, and these two are your brother and sister, Ryan and Heather, and you must be Natalie Crosswhite," Gwennie said.

The kids stared at her in amazement.

"The numbers on the airplane checked out I guess," Chris said.

"Yes, son, they did, and your mother said for the four of you to high tail it back to the resort pronto," Gwennie replied.

"Mom. Is there no place on this planet we can escape her?" Heather said and rolled her eyes.

"Moms know everything, see everything, and well, you know," Gwennie said as she waded back to the de Havilland with Kitty Koo under one arm and her spear gun

under the other. "Don't just stand there, come give me a push out of the sand," she barked at the kids.

Within a few moments, the amphibian aircraft was floating free and the spry old woman had the airplane fired up and turning slightly in the surf until she was pointed out toward the long end of the lagoon. Five minutes later, she was climbing to five thousand feet and heading back toward Cape Gloucester on the island of New Britain. Kitty Koo, her belly full of fresh fish, was curled up in the passenger seat already asleep.

While in the deep below awaited the secrets of the safe long ago forgotten or so they thought.