

Island Perils

By
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**Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace.
The soul that knows it not, knows no release
From little things:
Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,
Nor mountain heights where bitter joy can hear
The sound of wings.
A.E.**

Prologue

The disabled two engine plane crossed just inches above the jagged rocks of the mountain ridge which encircled the island's rain forest. With its nose tilted up in the stall position, the plane slowed as it missed the top of a tall palm. The next palm hit the landing gear. The plane tilted slightly then wobbled in the opposite direction before pancaking onto the treetops of the rain forest.

Leaves and tropical birds flew in all directions as the giant plane skidded and crashed onto the thick mesh of vegetation. Cracking limbs and shrieking birds added to the whoosh of air over the wings creating a cacophony of sound.

Abruptly reaching the end of the thick interlaced mass of

vegetation, the plane seemed about to slam into the side of a mountain. Instead, slowed by the scratching grip of tree limbs, the disintegrating plane nosed over the edge of the forest into the center of a large lake at the mountain's base.

A huge splash sprayed water onto surrounding trees and Cliffside. The plane vanished into the water, leaving a series of waves circling away from points of impact. The wave circles reached the mountainside producing more waves and ripples which crisscrossed spreading turbulence across the lake.

The roughness was subsiding when a woman surfaced. She looked around at the mountain and the thick forest then swam to the shore furthest from the mountainside.

A man surfaced a moment later. He struggled, flopping and splashing in the water. "Help me," he shouted. "My leg is broken."

The woman reached the shore and dragged herself up between low bushes, without responding to the man.

"God damn it. Help me," yelled the man as he feebly dog paddled toward the shoreline beneath the mountain.

"Watch your language," responded the woman, slowly sitting

up, grimacing, and turning to face him. “I cannot risk swimming to you. I may have broken a rib.” She wiped some blood from her forehead. “I also seem to have knocked myself on the noggin.”

The man reached a narrow sand beach below the mountain. He collapsed with his head and chest on the beach and his legs in the lake.

After resting several minutes, the woman managed to lift herself to her feet. Her left hand held onto a low hanging breadfruit tree limb for support. Her right hand was pressed against her side. Her wet flightsuit clung to her slender boyish body. The woman shook water from her short, messy blond hair and then glanced across the lake at the man, who wore what looked like striped pajamas.

“I will go for help,” she yelled.

“Not the police,” moaned the man. “Avoid the police.”

“Our real worry is the Japanese,” responded the woman. “Dying would be preferable to what the Japanese would do to us if they found Americans on one of their islands.”

The woman walked slowly over to the thick bushes at the edge of the rain forest. “I will try to find native people. Locals are

helpful in all parts of the world no matter how pig headed their governments might be.”

She vanished into the thick undergrowth.

The man passed out.

Chapter One

Over Seventy Years Later

I hope my secret place remains untouched by man. Thinking of her hidden lake, the young island woman climbed alone to a high mountain ridge on the Micronesian island of Pohnpei. She looked down over the familiar wilderness stretching across the center of the island.

Tiara had climbed from her grandmother's village, the village of her childhood. She loved her grandmother but the old woman talked and talked and talked throughout Tiara's weekend visit. She needed a quiet break in the peacefulness of nature, in her private Eden, a mysterious lake discovered in her childhood twenty years ago.

Tiara Vanu felt liberated in her shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes. No pilot's uniform. No stockings. No paperwork. The freedom of being alone in open country with a fresh wind blowing in her hair and cooling her skin rekindled her spirits. The exercise from climbing stirred her blood, rejuvenating her. She felt vibrantly alive.

Tiara made her way down into the dense vegetation blanketing the valley. She followed winding, interlaced animal trails through the green semi-darkness. The beauty of diverse plants, including orchids and hibiscus, delighted her. Slight, scurrying, rustling sounds from darkly shaded areas provided the thrill of fearing the unexpected. Brilliantly white sikh birds swooped past her, examining the visitor to their jungle. Hanging vines formed a tangled maze blocking the sun. Tiara brushed the vines aside and avoided the thorniest plants. Damp, pungent jungle smells assaulted her nose with the fragrances of remembered childhood scents.

Yellow striped butterflies fluttered by her. A mist of small white moths rippled the diffused light in a secluded open space. They drifted away as Tiara passed through them.

Although years of growth, death, and rebirth changed details, Tiara knew well the intricate system of rain forest trails. She delighted in each new plant and paused to smell and admire newly blossomed flowers.

After a long, leisurely penetration of the verdant valley, Tiara parted a wall of flowering bushes and stepped between them to her secret lake. Directly in front of Tiara, a waterfall dropped from a sheer cliff, sending out a thin, fragrant, cooling, shimmering mist.

It looks like it always has.

The water flowed in a wide, luminous sheet over a high ridge, and then divided into thousands of individual descending droplets surrounded by translucent mist. The fragrance from the falling water was sweetened by tangles of flowering wild hibiscus and wedelia encircling the water at the cataract's base. Tiara had never encountered another person here. The eighty foot wide lake's glistening water was well hidden by thick foliage. The lake had no exiting stream, which was strange, considering the volume of water pouring in. Only the cataract's throbbing roar might give away the lake's location. But waterfalls were

numerous on Pohnpei.

Tiara pushed through waist high grass toward the shoreline of her lake. The grass brushed against her like a thickened wind. Nearing the water's edge, she was startled by a flash of light from deep beneath the clear water, as though sunlight had reflected off metal. She thought it would be terrible if strangers had violated her sanctuary with trash, like defacing a cathedral.

Tiara walked to a nearby breadfruit tree. She hummed as she slowly removed her clothes and hung each item neatly on the branches overhead. She then returned to the water's edge. Looking down, the young woman saw her own face and the scattered white clouds above her in gently undulating reflections. Tiara unmistakably had mixed blood. The blue of her eyes was in startling contrast to her golden skin and flowing black hair. Her ancestry had brought pain. She had been shunned by some of her schoolmates which resulted in a feeling of not quite fitting in. Standing there feeling a warm breeze on her naked skin and looking at her reflected image in the lake, Tiara wondered again who her father had been. Neither her mother nor her grandmother would ever tell her.

Oh, well, it doesn't really matter, she lied to herself, sticking a toe in the water to ripple away her reflected image. She slipped into the cold water. As she drifted around the lake, lazily kicking and paddling, she pushed past water lilies and thought about the glint of metal. It puzzled her.

I hope civilization's trash has not found my lake.

Tiara leaned back in the water getting her sleek black hair wet. Her full round breasts rose above the surface of the water as she arched her back. She glanced toward a small sand beach on the far side of the lake. Someday she would examine it closer. Not now. Turning over, she swam under the waterfall. The pounding water massaged her back and tossed her about. Tiara laughed her high musical laugh, loving the turbulence immediately under the falls. It contrasted with the calm of the rest of the lake. She tingled all over. The water glistened on her golden skin.

Tiara decided to dive to find what had caused the glint of light. If she found something, she could remove it, returning her lake to its natural state. Diving in the ocean for oysters in her youth had strengthened Tiara's lungs enabling her to stay under

water for long periods. Once, when she mentioned her diving abilities and strong lungs, some idiot said, “Yeah, those look like two great lungs to me.”

Men could be such jerks.

She built up several breaths, inhaling slowly, exhaling quickly. Finally, after a very deep breath, she dove at the edge of the calm area beyond the waterfall. As she descended, Tiara opened her eyes. Numerous small blue and yellow fish swam slowly around, and then darted away. A strange pure light permeated the water’s depths.

Down, down she went, surprised by the depth of the lake. In the past she swam only on the surface, entranced by the beauty of the waterfall and the surrounding luxuriant vegetation. As she reached the smooth sandy bottom, she saw an unnaturally curved shape sticking up from an otherwise flat area. Again she saw the flash of light as a ray of sunlight struck the curved object. Swimming over to it, Tiara recognized it as the top of an old airplane’s tail fin. She made out the vague letters “NR” on the side of the fin.

The rest of the plane’s “N” number must be further down. I

wonder if the whole plane is down there. It would be hell getting it out.

Tiara felt a surge of panic that someone might be in the plane. But she instantly realized the crash must have been very long ago for the plane to be buried so deeply. It seemed strange nobody had searched and found the plane at the time of the crash.

As Tiara slowly swam up following the bubbles of her breath to the surface, she wondered if anyone had survived the crash. If they had, the villagers of Sapwalap might know. The inhabitants of her grandmother's village were the nearest people to the crash site. Tiara surfaced and swam to shore. Certainly she knew of no plane crash near the village while she grew up there. Perhaps it crashed before she was born, during World War II, when the Japanese controlled Pohnpei. She would ask her grandmother, who had always made it her business to know everything that went on in the village.

Yes, Grandma I Leah will be the person to ask about the plane at the bottom of the lake.

Chapter Two

Grandmother's House

“*Kaselehlia*, Ileah.” Tiara called hello in Pohnpeian to her grandmother as she approached Ileah’s thatched roof house.

“Speak English, I need learn,” called back the elderly woman.

“Grandmama, I have a question,” Tiara said as she entered the house.

“Hair all wet. You get sick,” responded Ileah, rising from her favorite pandanus mat. The elderly woman used her remote control to turn off *Desperate Housewives* on her wall mounted plasma TV. The 50 inch set hung directly above her altar to Nahnsapwe, the God of Thunder. Auxiliary speakers were behind the statue of the god.

“Shorts too tight, too short,” exclaimed Ileah, “Take off bad clothes. Put on *koahl* grass skirt. Air self out. You home. Let self be comfortable.”

“I am comfortable, Grandmama. These are comfortable clothes.”

Ileah wore only a grass skirt at home and disliked seeing Tiara in shorts. She considered it immoral to show the leg above the knee.

Tiara attempted her question again: “Grandmama, I saw something interesting today.”

“You should come here more often. To know things you must be here among them, looking close at them; not flying above pretending you bird.” The ancient woman flapped her hands like a pair of wings.

“You’re right, Grandmama. By looking closely I discovered an old airplane on the bottom of a lake.”

Ileah shook her head, clicked her teeth, and said, “Forget that, Tee, finding old airplanes bring trouble. Let me give you coconut milk. You look thirsty.”

“Get the milk later; first tell me about the airplane.”

“I know many things,” said the elder, sitting down at the small grey Formica kitchen table, “and I have sense to keep mouth shut.”

“But Grandmama, bodies might be in that plane. They should be reported to their relatives for proper burial.”

“No bodies in plane,” asserted Ileah.

Tiara sat at the small table. Ileah had bought the old table and two chairs of a four chair set at a rummage sale. Two chairs were enough. She had few visitors; most of her contemporaries in the village had died of old age years ago.

“Tell me about the plane, Grandmama. You know how stubborn I am. I’ll find out one way or another.”

“You just like your mother. You not let thing rest,” said Ileah as she rearranged items on the table. “With her it was flying. Everyone told her it impossible for native island girl to be pilot. She do it anyway. Then women not leave island, except to marry. She convince missionaries send her off for education. But she trick them, instead of bible school she went aviation school. And it all because of that plane you find today and because of the woman.”

“Woman? What woman, Grandmama?”

Ileah put her hand over her mouth. “I say too much.”

“Now that you’ve said this much, you’ll have to tell me the rest.” Tiara leaned across the table toward her grandmama.

“Particularly after saying it was that plane and some woman who inspired Mother to fly.”

The old lady was silent and shook her head sadly, as if remembering something. Then she shrugged. “Maybe it time for truth. But you tell anyone else, curiosity seekers and foreign people come crawling all over us. I’ll have to wear top or worse; pose without one for tourists.”

“Demand for your beauty poses may have dried up in the last seventy years.”

“Like my body,” she said, looking down at her shriveled skin. “But when I young I amazing good. National Geographic photographer think I something special, a big deal. I world famous.”

“You were a thrill for American boys in that repressed time. You were a nameless topless Pacific island native.”

“Yes, but my beauty admired more than any other nameless

native. I top drawer.”

“Do you still have that old National Geographic?” asked Tiara.

“Of course.” Leah paused, “Let me think where it is.” She stood, turned toward some wall shelves, then turned again, and shuffled toward the only door in her small home. “Time for afternoon walk,” said the old woman. “I need go flower the grove.”

Tiara jumped up and dashed over to stand in the doorway. She remembered her grandmother’s mysterious habit of placing a bouquet of flowers in a notch in an old tree in nearby woods.

“Grandmama, you can’t go out like that.”

“I been told that a lot. Once some fool call police. You know everybody walk around like this in old days.” She gestured toward her drooping bare breasts as she returned to the table and sat back down.

“Times change.”

“Not for better. The outsiders have won.”

“Yes they have and you must live with it. But now we’re not talking about social trends, we’re talking about that plane. Tell

me about the plane, Grandmama. First, what happened to the people who were in it?"

"Man killed," said Ileah, moving the items on the table back to where they had been originally. "Woman survive crash except for couple broken bones. We brought her to village and she seem better. Of course we hide her from Japanese."

"What about the plane? Why didn't the Japanese find it?"

"Back then very large lake cover most land between mountains. Plane crash in lake. It quick sank. All left now of large lake is small piece, on other side of valley; the lake you swim in."

"How do you know where I swim?"

"You think I old fool?"

"Don't I have any secrets?"

"Probably not."

Tiara was silent for a moment. She imagined crowds of people, including her grandmother and other village elders, peeking through the bushes at her as she swam naked. She saw herself drifting innocently while they pointed and whispered.

Forcing her thoughts back to the old airplane, Tiara said,

“The plane is still beneath the lake. At least its tail fin is. How did the crash happen?”

“People not meant fly,” insisted I Leah, “Planes fall from sky because they break law.”

“What law?”

“Law of gravity,” said I Leah, blinking her eyes to hold back tears. “Your planes violate gravity too. Someday you fall out of sky, just like your mother, just like dear Kalea. Remember: I always right; you keep flying, you crash. I curse the day your mother leave you her stupid flying service business.”

“The woman you mentioned earlier, Grandmama, were her injuries treated here in the village?”

“Yes. In our house. Right here. Your mother young girl then. She fascinated by American woman. The American very kind; she play with your mother for hours.”

“What became of this woman, Grandmama?”

“Some fool tell Japanese. Soldiers come and take her away.”

“Do you know any more about this woman? Can you describe her? Do you know who she was?”

“Of course I know who she was. She was Amelia Earhart.”