

# **The Papua Incident**

**Alex Hunt, prequel**

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**Dedication**



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The Papua Incident is a work of fiction. Characters, events and dialogue found within are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, either living or deceased, is purely coincidental.



*A dream is only a dream if it's not a reality.  
Here's to all my loyal readers for making my dream come true!  
May we go on many more adventures together!*

## **Chapter 1**

Charles Hunt's heart skipped a beat as he watched the fuzzy flickering on the screen. Life will never be the same. After a decade of hope and heartbreak reality is staring him in the face. Eight more weeks and Izzy and he will finally be parents. Life couldn't be better.

Or could it?

At last he was promoted to Head Archaeologist at Cambridge University. They lived in a better-than-average apartment in the center of London, and their yearning for a baby is about to be met. But deep in his soul, Charles ached to return to the thrilling adventures he and Izzy had become accustomed to; before she fell pregnant and the two of them settled into a life of safety. His days at the university were predictable as anything. Putting together prospective tenders and drafting assessments was the norm. Apart from the odd liaison with clients and the regulatory authorities, his only other task was keeping the university benefactors happy. Yes, Charles Hunt felt trapped in a world without adventure and excitement. He was office bound and buried in papers and mundane tasks. His thoughts trailed off to when they discovered the eighth-century skeleton in Torcello and the tomb of a Mayan ruler in Guatemala. Their work took them far and wide to exhilarating locales around the world. He longed to be out in the field again, to taste the thrill of discovering ancient artifacts; the anticipation of discovering truths behind historical facts. Yes, Charles Hunt knew deep down what he had given up to have this baby.

"You have said little, Charles. What are you so deep in thought over?" Izzy interrupted his silent reflections.

Charles bent over and kissed her forehead, "Nothing more important than you and our baby. She's beautiful."

Izzy smiled knowing her husband wasn't quite declaring the truth. She knew him all too well. He had lost the sparkle in his eyes since accepting his promotion seven months ago. They had just returned from spending almost a year in Tanzania looking for the lost city of Rhapta; a dream she'd had since she was a child. Turning away from her dream wasn't what either of them wanted to do, but having fallen pregnant at last, without medical intervention, was better than excavating a hidden treasure or finding an ancient lost city. Or so she thought. She couldn't risk losing this baby too. For now, their ordinary lives within the safe confines of their office and home will have to be enough.

Still preoccupied with his thoughts, Charles arrived back at his office an hour later. From behind his desk, his eyes settled on his hat dangling from the hook behind his door. It had been seven months since he last wore it and the mere thought of never putting it on again choked him. Archaeology was in his blood. The downright precariousness and rush of the hunt was what he breathed and lived for.

A knock on his door jerked him back to reality.

"Yes?" clearing the lump that had wedged in his throat.

"Sir have you heard?" A young researcher from his team barged in brimming with excitement. "They found the mummified body of the Ice Maiden! It's all over National Geographic!"

The fired-up researcher slammed the latest copy of the National Geographic magazine on the desk in front of Charles.

"Look. They say she was a clear victim of human sacrifice and that her body was perfectly preserved on Mount Ampato in southern Peru. It was a single blow to the head that killed her about five hundred years ago, and her burial goods included macaw feathers and figurines of gold and silver. Look! It's all here," hammering the back of his hand on the double-paged article.

"That's quite the discovery," Charles replied as thrilled as his protégé. He skimmed the pages. "You should make copies and send it to the uni's news desk. This is a significant find we simply have to share with everyone. And get me the number of this fellow who found it, will you? I'd love to get the inside track."

And as sudden as the young man barged in, he left, unaware that his impromptu visit put a brief smile back on Charles' face.

In the crisp night air, a faint knocking on their London apartment's front door woke Charles Hunt. He turned to look at his alarm clock. The neon numbers showed 2:45 a.m. Beside him, Izzy lay fast asleep. He listened. There it was again. His mind wasn't playing tricks on him. There was without a doubt knocking on his door. He fumbled with his robe as he rushed toward the window and pushed his face against the cold pane. The streetlight was too dim, and the rain blurred his vision. Several more knocks hit the door—this time with more fervor.

"Who's at the door? What time is it?" Izzy whispered half asleep touching her pregnant belly.

"Not sure, but there's no need for you to get up, my love. I'm sure it's just some drunk who can't find his way home."

Dismissing it, Charles got back into bed but no sooner had he pulled the covers under his chin and the incessant knocking started up again.

Annoyed he made his way down the dark stairs. The rapping grew more intense sending a slight panic up Charles' spine. If it were a drunk, he would have jabbered and already moved on, he thought. He grabbed his umbrella from the stand and gripped it midway with the sharp end pointed at the door. The keyhole delivered just the slightest silhouette of someone not visible enough to distinguish.

"Yes? Who's there?" he ventured. A dull thump against the door echoed back.

He gripped the umbrella tighter and opened the door with caution.

The dull eyes of his untimely visitor stared back at Charles. As the man collapsed against the doorpost, he recognized him in an instant. It was the owner of their favorite Japanese restaurant around the corner.

"Yuki? What in the world brings..."

Charles caught the rest of his sentence in his throat as Yuki opened his raincoat revealing a large patch of blood across his stomach. He fell forward into Charles' arms almost pushing him off balance.

A second later the light in the entrance hall went on. Izzy, who had been observing from the top of the stairs came rushing down toward the scene.

"Get him to the couch, Charles. I'll call the ambulance."

"NO!" Yuki groaned, cringing with pain. "No ambulance. No police. You help."

Charles wasn't about to argue. Yuki's colorless face revealed he had lost a lot of blood. Somehow he sensed his injury wouldn't allow sufficient time for any help to arrive.

It wasn't hard getting his petite Japanese frame onto the couch, and within seconds Izzy assembled a bowl of water and some swabs in the kitchen.

"What in heaven's name happened to you, Yuki? Were you shot? Was it a burglary at the restaurant?" Charles fired off as he ripped open Yuki's blood-drenched shirt.

The wounded restaurant owner tried to speak.

"Water Izzy. We need to give the man water."

Izzy hurried over from the kitchen and put the glass to Yuki's lips.

"There. Now let's try again. Who did this to you?"

Yuki still didn't answer.

"It doesn't look like a gunshot wound, Charles," Izzy noted. "More like a knife. See here?" Izzy pointed to the narrow two-centimeter slit in Yuki's abdomen.

"Apply pressure, Izzy. He can't afford to lose more blood."

"Yuki, I can't help you if you don't tell me what happened, my friend. Who did this to you? Why?"

It was clear Yuki would not make it. He parted his lips and delivered the faintest of whispers. Charles leaned in.

"Nick Cain. You help," was all Yuki uttered as blood gushed from his mouth and he drew his last breath.

"Yuki? Yuki!"

Charles grabbed hold of Yuki's shoulders and shook his lifeless body.

"He's gone, Charles," Izzy whispered.

Charles looked at the dead man on his couch. Yuki's emotionless eyes stared back at him.

"What did he say?" Izzy asked as she ran her fingers over Yuki's eyes.

“He said *Nick Cain would help*. Who is Nick Cain?” rinsing his bloodstained hands in the bowl of water on the table beside him.

Izzy’s face lit up. “Nick Cain? Did you say, Nick Cain?”

Surprised, Charles looked up at her. “Yes, why? Do you know him?”

“Well, yes Charles, in a manner of speaking. He’s that famous reporter from The Times. You know? The one who does those antique furniture columns? He goes around the world appraising rare antiques and then writes up a whole spiel about the history. Most of the time old Victorian pieces; wardrobes, dressing tables, chairs, the occasional rare brooch...”

“Really? Are you sure? I mean, why would Yuki give us *his* name; on his deathbed of all places? Yuki is—*was* Japanese, so I doubt he had an antique piece of Victorian furniture tucked in his apartment somewhere.”

Charles paced the room all the while keeping his eyes pinned on the dead body on his couch—as if he was waiting for Yuki to wake up and explain everything.

“And why didn’t he want us to call the ambulance or the police? Didn’t that seem strange to you?” A puzzled Charles added, still pacing the tiny lounge.

“It seems rather odd, I agree,” Izzy said as she pulled a throw over Yuki’s lifeless body. “And why come to *us*? I mean, it’s not as if we knew the guy. Yes, we frequented his restaurant and got sushi delivered here every weekend, but that’s it.”

“Well, it’s clear he paid more attention to us than we to him, Izzy. Enough to have brought him to our doorstep in the middle of the night.”

Charles stopped in front of the couch and stared down at the covered corpse. “Well, whatever he was involved with was dangerous enough to kill him.” He paused again. “We must call the police, Izzy. We can’t leave this guy here, and I’m not about to bury him in our backyard either.”

“And say what exactly, Charles? That our local Japanese restaurant owner just happened to stumble to our door in the middle of the night and died on our couch? They’ll think we had something to do with this. No. Yuki said no police. I’m sure he had a valid reason.”

“Have you lost your mind, Izzy? There’s a dead man on our couch. Eventually, someone is going to report him missing and then trace him here. There’s evidence of his blood all over the place. I watch those shows on the telly. Bloodstains never come out of rugs and couches. We can’t hide this.”

Izzy walked over to the tiny kitchen. “Fair enough, but the police will question us anyway, and I’m positive they will query why we didn’t call them sooner.”

“They’d be skeptical if we *don’t* report it. Talk about guilt. There’s no reason to cover it up, Izzy. It’s not like we killed the guy. We have nothing to hide.”

Charles picked up the phone and started dialing the police station.

Twenty minutes later Constable Collins arrived with the coroner and a forensic team in tow.

“So let me get this straight, Mr. Hunt. You say Yuki Hishomara’s knocking woke you up at 2:45 a.m. You looked out the window but couldn’t see anything, went downstairs and found him already injured outside your front door, so you helped him to your couch. But he died before he could say anything or you could call for help.”

“Yes, precisely as you said,” Charles agreed as he looked into Izzy’s piercing eyes that lay thick with the question as to why he wasn’t divulging Nick Cain’s name.

“I see. And what about you Mrs. Hunt? Can you corroborate your husband’s statement?” noticing the silent exchange between them.

“I can, Constable. It’s as Charles said, yes.”

Constable Collins sucked his teeth and scribbled something in his black notebook before slamming it closed. His eyebrow curled up suspiciously as his eyes paused on Charles and Izzy.

“Well then, thank you for your time. If we need anything else, my office will contact you. We’ll see our way out.”

## Chapter 2

At 8:30 a.m Charles Hunt walked into the foyer of *The Times*’ offices and asked for Nick Cain at the front desk.

He had waited two days before he paid Nick a visit. He needed to be sure the police wasn’t watching his house. Charles paced the foyer. His mind worked tirelessly since the incident as he tried to understand what a small-time Japanese restaurant owner and an antiques correspondent from the Times possibly had in common and why Yuki came to his home in his time of need.

“Mr. Hunt?”

A tall white-haired man dressed to the Tee in a three-piece gray suit and a pastel-colored bowtie interrupted Charles’ thoughts. Somewhat startled by his greater age Charles extended his hand to greet him.

“Yes, Charles Hunt.”

The reporter ignored the handshake. Instead, he clamped his hands together in front of his chest, and after an awkward pause, raised his one eyebrow inviting Charles to speak.

Looking around, Charles shuffled uncomfortably. He was quite used to the pompous elitist parents who visited the faculty, so he ignored the icy welcome, but if he was to find out what Nick Cain’s involvement in Yuki’s death was, the busy foyer of the Times wasn’t the place.

“Is there perhaps somewhere more private we could talk Mr. Cain?”

The prim and proper reporter merely nodded and led the way to a small room at the far end of the lobby.

“What can I do for you Mr. Hunt?” making no secret of his annoyance caused by the demands of someone so insignificant.

“I’m not entirely sure to be honest, Mr. Cain.”

Charles walked to the small window overlooking the street before he turned to face Nick.

“Do you know a Yuki Hishomara?”

Nick Cain froze for an instant before he sat down at the small round table in the center of the room.

“Yuki? Yes, kind of. I mean, *know* isn’t quite as I’d describe it. I am a regular at his restaurant. Why? I don’t report on cuisine if that’s what you’ve come here for,” inspecting his perfectly manicured nails.

Charles sat opposite him at the table. “No, not quite. He’s dead.”

Nick paused and folded his arms. “And you’re telling me this why exactly?”

“Well, that’s what I’m here to find out, Mr. Cain. It appears someone stabbed him, and when I asked him who did it, he mentioned your name and then died on my couch.”

Nick Cain’s already stuck-up body stiffened even further.

“I assure you I had nothing to do with his death,” the reporter defended waving his hands as the drag queens do at the theater in Camden Town.

“No one was accusing you, Mr. Cain. I’m simply trying to connect the dots.”

“Well, what’s it to you, Mr. Hunt? Are you a detective or something?”

“Would that make you answer my question?”

Charles sat back in his chair feeling every bit like Columbo—without the lazy eye. Two could play this game and his instinct told him this journalist knew more than he cared to admit.

“Asked and answered,” Nick responded. “As I told you ten seconds ago. I don’t know the man other than eating at his restaurant.”

“I think you do, Mr. Cain. You see, Yuki’s last words were ‘Nick Cain you help,’ and then he died. What did he mean you would help? Help with what exactly?”

Nick got up and took his turn at the window looking out onto the street. He spun around, hands behind his back. His green eyes surveyed his opponent coolly before dashing across the room to close the door.

“Who else knows of this?” Nick asked in a low monotone.

Charles felt his insides tense up. Izzy knew. He had no idea who this man was or what he was capable of. For all he knew he was staring Yuki’s murderer in the face. He had to protect Izzy and their unborn baby.

“No one, just me,” Charles lied.

In an instance, Nick’s strait-laced demeanor all but disappeared as he morphed into an entirely different far more rustic individual.

“You swear you don’t tell anyone what I’m about to tell you,” he whispered as he leaned across the table.

Charles nodded. A giggle threatened to erupt from his throat, but he kept his calm. He wasn’t sure if it was nervous relief or Nick’s sudden lack of Queen’s English that caught him off guard.

“Okay, I’ll tell you everything I know. Yuki approached me about a month ago. I was dining at his restaurant. He had just returned from his father’s funeral in Japan. In hindsight, he seemed rather on edge,” Nick trailed off before continuing.

“In any event, his father left him a single coin with a note saying that it was his destiny to follow the coin.”

Nick’s eyes filled with excitement, whispering across the table as if telling a secret. “I will say this. This coin was unlike anything I have ever seen. Solid copper and beyond question handmade with the most remarkable Arabic etchings. The detail was perfect. I knew right away there was something cloak-and-dagger behind it and it seems I was right. I have no doubt that whoever killed the poor man was after that coin. It must be worth a small fortune! If I have my facts

straight, and I rarely have it wrong Mr. Hunt, this particular coin dates back to WWII. So I did some more digging. Legend has it that a rare collection of coins went missing during WWII. Word has it that they belonged to an African Sultan who had it specially minted for the purpose of maritime trading with the East. Problem is, they disappeared towards the end of the war when his ship got bombed somewhere off the coast of Australia. Apparently the ship's captain and most of his crew made it to an island somewhere but neither they nor the coins were ever found. It is my professional opinion that Yuki's coin was one from that exact collection. How this coin came into possession of Yuki's father, I have no inkling, but what I do know is that there were six of these coins. Yuki only had one which means the other five are still out there somewhere! Do you realize what this means, Mr. Hunt? We're looking for lost treasure dating back to the second world war!"

When Nick finally came up for air, he noticed Charles hadn't said a word. He cleared his throat, sat back in his chair and crossed his arms and legs.

"Mr. Hunt," he started in perfect Queen's English again, "I realize this might seem quite the tall story, but I assure you. I've been in this business long enough to know authentic antiquity when I see it, and there was no mistaking it for anything other than one from a remarkable rare collection of coins. These things do exist, you know, and I don't make mistakes. In my line of work..."

Nick continued for another five minutes of plausible boasting about his impeccable track record and highly esteemed career. Charles, somewhat amused at his ramblings to prove his credibility, finally broke into a wide grin and cut in.

"I get it, Nick. Believe me. Nothing I am not accustomed to, I assure you. It all makes perfect sense to me. You see, I'm Head of Archaeology at Cambridge. At least that's my formal job title. At heart, I'm a treasure hunter. A British Indiana Jones if you will. These 'tall stories' are what gets me out of bed in the morning. Enigma is my middle name. Murder, on the other hand, well, that's an entirely different ball game. But, as these mysteries often tug at my soul, I came here simply trying to figure out why Yuki dragged me into all of this? Instead, I find out that he also went to you, which I assume was to establish the coin's' authenticity and history. But for some reason the man then landed up dead at my door. Why? Why come to me?" Charles walked across to the window again.

"You really can't figure it out, Charles? It goes without saying that Yuki came to you, dear man. He needed you to help him find the other five missing coins! What else?"

Charles drew in a sharp breath, excited at the prospect of having just cause to get back out into the field.

"OF COURSE! You're right. He wants me to find the missing coins to complete the collection. In honor of his late father, naturally."

Charles struggled to control his pulse that quickened with excitement. Might he finally have a reason to get back out into the field? He couldn't possibly turn his back on the man's cry for help. That would be dishonoring his memory.

"As an archaeologist, it is my duty to preserve the history and what type of leader would I be if I turned my back on a man's dying wish, right? No. A real leader leads by example."



Charles finished the rest of his dialogue in his head. Izzy would have to understand. He could take a short leave of absence and be back before the baby was born.

“Yes well *Indy*, let’s not forget a man got killed over these coins. As capable as I’m sure you are, it’s not to be trifled with.”

Charles forced himself back to the reality at hand as he realized Nick was right. “Who else knows about the coins?”

“I would presume his mother. He came back with the inheritance. Beyond that, I couldn’t even hazard a guess,” waving his hand in the air.

Nick straightened his bowtie. “So, are you taking on the challenge, Mr. Hunt? Perhaps our dear restaurateur teamed us up to find the missing coin together.”

“Together? You mean to say you want to come *with* me?” Charles chuckled. “Out of the question, Nick. You said it yourself. This is a serious matter and forgive me for saying this, but judging from your appearance, you’re not the type of individual to get his hands, or shall I say nails, dirty. You’d best leave this to me.”

Charles shifted the conversation back to the coin. “Do you happen to know where the coin in question is?”

Nick Cain’s demeanor instantly turned to panic. “You didn’t find it? You mean to say the entire collection is now missing?”

“Well, there’s no proof of that, Nick. It could be at his house or at the restaurant in his safe or something. But the police checked his pockets after he had died and there was nothing.”

“Police! I can’t have police snooping around here. I have a reputation to uphold.”

“Relax. I didn’t tell them about you. They have no idea your name was mentioned or even that anything went missing.”

Nick wasn’t appeased. “What if the murderer thinks I have the coin and then comes for me? Yuki only briefly showed it to me but that was it. I don’t have it!”

“Calm down Cain. I’m certain they know nothing about your meeting. You would have been tortured or possibly even dead by now if they thought you might have it.”

Charles found Nick’s exaggerated panicked state somewhat humorous and couldn’t resist the urge to have fun with it.

“However, if Yuki might have said something to them while he was under duress, well, then you should watch your back. I’d stay indoors and add some extra security if I were you.”

Nick’s face drained as pale gray as his neatly combed-back hair. He looked as though he might faint or, at the very least, scream like a girl.

“Relax, Cain. I’m just kidding. My guess is they have the coin already. Yuki is dead after all. Now, we best get cracking. I need you to send me whatever information you have on the coins; last whereabouts, the history and any pictures or a sketch, if you can. This is my private email,” ripping a page from his notebook. “It is best not to discuss this with anyone; for your safety and mine. I don’t think I’d want your blood on my couch as well. Don’t call me. I’ll call you, and remember to delete the email once you sent it. I’ll be in touch once I have it and I’ll make sure you have the exclusive. Deal?”

Nick's face declared the absolute inner turmoil he was in but the exclusivity sweetener was enough to have him shake on it before they quietly turned and left the room together.

## Chapter 3

Tokyo's Narita airport was bustling as Charles stepped off the plane. He pulled the paper napkin from his pocket and read the name of the village Yuki's head chef at the restaurant had scribbled down. That now familiar feeling that he was being followed had his stomach in a knot, but he couldn't be sure. He dismissed it; putting it down to being overly zealous. After all, Izzy was the only one who knew where he was and he had made sure she was safe with her mother in the countryside before he left. The university granted him a small leave of absence assuming the couple needed to prepare for the baby's arrival, so they were none the wiser as to his whereabouts.

But he wasn't at ease. He might have been away from the action for almost a year, but he still had his instincts. So he erred on the side of caution and watchfully made his way to the busy train station.

An hour later he stepped out onto the platform checking the name written on the scrounged up napkin in his hand. Unlike the other train stops this one was quite desolate with only a few elderly locals boarding the train. Charles lingered and waited for the doors to close behind him. He looked left and right several times. Aside from him, no one else got off.

A dilapidated wooden sign displayed the faded name of the village he needed to get to. There was no other signs and no one in sight; no notice board that presented any bus or train schedules, no information kiosk, nothing. He took a seat on the narrow wooden bench under the sign. If the cook's information were accurate, he'd be in time for the last bus to the village.

It was clear that it was a case of semantics between him and the chef when fifteen minutes later, his mode of transportation arrived. The cook's reference to a bus nowhere near resembled one, not even to a slight extent. Between clouds of dust stood two water buffaloes strapped to a four-wheeled timber wagon. Two benches lined the insides of the already crammed cart, and the flat bamboo roof carried several cages of chickens and food baskets. Apart from one surprisingly young mother with a baby at the breast, most of the travelers were elderly locals on their way home from work. The wooden floor planks creaked under his feet as he climbed on and squeezed into the only space available between two elderly women. The sharp smell of fish filled his nostrils. There was no doubt that they worked at the local fish farms.

Every eye in that wagon was on him. It wasn't the norm for a westerner to visit these remote parts of Japan. He smiled in an attempt to win them over but got blank stares in return. Above his head, the chickens cackled as the driver snapped his leather straps on the buffaloes' backs. Unlike a horse buggy, the speed at which they traveled was much slower. Excruciating in comparison to the equally obsolescent train he had traveled on from the airport. But, what seemed like an

eternity, the rustic drive along a somewhat hair-raising dirt road in parts, eventually delivered him safely to the village.

Quaint and submerged in rural Japanese tradition, the small wooden houses stood perched along the banks of a narrow river. There was something incredibly endearing about the poverty-stricken village that was so far removed from the modern extremities of Tokyo City. Women were washing clothes in the river while kids joyfully splashed in the water next to them. Goats, water buffaloes, and chickens were bundled together in a single enclosure on the outskirts. It was unsophisticated. But rural as it was, it was busy.

Charles pulled out the napkin from his pocket. It revealed nothing other than the name of the station and that of the village. He searched for a signpost, but there was nothing to indicate he was in the right place. No name, no street names, nothing. Behind him, the wagon was already unhooked from the buffaloes, and the last of the villagers offloaded their belongings. He crumpled the napkin back into his pocket. In front of him were at least fifty houses, one of which belonged to Yuki's mother. Which one, he had no clue.

The question barely left his mind when Charles felt a small tug at his shirt. Next to him was a young boy roughly eleven years old with a smile so full it could melt the sun.

"You lost, mister?" the wide-eyed boy asked.

"You speak English?" Charles replied with surprise.

"Of course. Japan like India, mister. We clever."

Charles giggled at the young boy's candor.

"Indeed you are, lad."

"So. You lost?" the boy asked again.

"Perhaps. I'm looking for someone. Think you can help me?"

"I know all. Who you want?"

"Mrs. Hishomara. Do you know her?"

Without any hesitation, the boy pulled him by the hand and dragged him along the footpath.

They wound among the stilted houses and stopped at one that stood at the end of the third row from the back.

"There," the boy pointed.

Charles reached into his pocket and slipped the boy a hundred Yen.

"Thank you for your help. Stay close though. I might need you again."

The boy flashed another broad smile and held the note up against the sun; checking if it was real.

"My name Kaito. Means helping man. What yours?"

"Helping man, huh? Indeed you are. Well, Kaito. My name is Charles. Don't go flashing your money around okay? Put it someplace safe."

Deeply satisfied with his unexpected earnings the boy dashed off, and Charles soon heard the excited cheers of his friends.

Pausing at the bottom of the wooden ladder leading up to Mrs. Hishomara's house, Charles wondered if she knew of Yuki's passing. It had only been a week since his fateful demise. Delivering such undeniably devastating news to a mother was something he was ill-prepared for. Especially since she had barely buried her husband.

Charles took a deep breath and ran his hands through the bamboo chimes hanging from the floor of the house. He waited. When no one opened the hatch above his head, he rang again but still no one answered. Perhaps he should just wait for her, he thought. She can't be far. But Charles couldn't push that niggling voice in his head aside. He lifted the hatch and peered into the house across the floor. His eyes skimmed over the small wooden house's interior that lay in disarray. The short-legged dining table was split down the middle and smashed plates and kitchen utensils were strewn across the floor. Every conceivable basket or box was overturned.

"Mrs. Hishomara? Hello? Anyone here?"

The sliding wall panel which separated the bedroom from the rest of the house dangled from the wooden frame; the opaque paper torn to shreds and lying scattered across the floor. He stepped over it into the bedroom, and his eyes caught sight of her feet sticking out from underneath the upside down futon that lay in the corner on the floor.

"Mrs. Hishomara!"

He leaped across the floor and yanked the heavy futon off the small-framed woman who lay face-down on the floor. There was no blood anywhere. He turned her onto her back and felt for a pulse in her neck. She was still alive. Charles skimmed over her body for any visible injuries, but apart from a severely bruised and swollen eye, she seemed fine.

"Mrs. Hishomara, can you hear me?"

He tapped her other cheek lightly, but it had no effect. With his ear over her mouth, he heard shallow breathing. She seemed only unconscious and should be fine, he thought. It was clear that whoever had done this only intended on shaking her up. She was too petite to put up any fight so they could have easily killed her if they wanted to. Charles had no way of guessing how long she had been lying there unconscious, and being on her own, no one came looking for her either.

He flipped the futon over and lay her on top. He'd have to tend to her himself until she woke up. She was bruised but at least alive.

He spent the rest of the evening tidying up and making sure she was comfortable. Apart from a few soft groans, Mrs. Hishomara was out cold. Her right eye had swollen completely shut, and the once blue bruise across her cheek had turned a deep purple. Charles wondered if she'd be able to identify who did this to her. Perhaps it was the same person who had killed her son.

It was only when the screeching crow of a rooster woke him in the early hours of the morning that Charles realized he had drifted off into a deep sleep. The village was deathly quiet. Yuki's mother still lay unconscious in her bed. Her breathing was slow but steady. With any luck, she would wake up soon. She had to.

He pulled Nick's research file from his bag and skimmed over the pages. Who would want the coin so much that they'd kill for it? Where are the other five and how did it come into the hands of Yuki's father? He needed answers. Answers perhaps only Mrs. Hishomara could provide.

It was late afternoon as Charles made himself a cup of tea. He was thankful to have recognized the mixture of green leaves and roasted brown rice as that being similar to what he once tasted in Yuki's restaurant.

It was the faintest of Japanese ramblings that came from the bedroom that alerted him to the fact that his 'patient' was waking up. Mrs. Hishomara was sitting up looking somewhat disorientated as he knelt beside her. She winced and curled up into a ball.

"Shh, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

The frightened woman withdrew even further.

"Okay, it's all good. I'll back off."

He dashed into the tiny kitchen and brought back a cup of tea which she eventually took from his hands.

"I'm Charles. I'm a friend of Yuki."

The mention of her son's name had tears streaming down her battered face. She knew. Somehow word of his death had already got to her.

"I'm so sorry Mrs. Hishomara. I'm here to help find out who did this."

Charles paused. Her blank stares confirmed that she didn't understand a word he said.

"I'll be right back, okay? Stay," pushing his palms out conveying his words through sign language.

Not long afterward, Charles returned with Kaito whom he was fortunate enough to have found tending to the chickens.

"What this?" the boy asked in shock. "You do this? No nice you."

"No, no, I found her like this last night. I've been taking care of her. Ask her, and she'll tell you it wasn't me."

A quick exchange between them confirmed it, and Kaito apologetically turned to Charles.

"She ask what you want, mister?"

"Tell her I'm a friend of her son and I've come to help."

The boy translated the message as instructed. Charles continued.

"Yuki came to me before he died and asked me to help him find the rest of the coins. Someone killed him, and I suspect, stole the coin he inherited from his father. It's quite possibly the same people who assaulted you."

Charles paused as Kaito caught up with the translation. Mrs. Hishomara nodded in agreement and said something in reply to Kaito.

"What did she say?" Charles nudged.

"She angry. She not know of other coins. Only one Yuki get."

"Ask her if she knows how her husband got his coin?"

"He found on last mission in war. She not know anything. She say you go now."

Disappointed in the lack of information Charles complied and allowed Kaito to walk him out.

"You look for treasure, mister? I help."

"Help? Treasure? I'm not even certain there is a treasure to find, young man. And even if there was, how exactly do you propose to help me?"

"Come. I show secret."

Before Charles could protest, Kaito turned the corner between the houses.

"Wait! What secret? Where are we going?"

"You see but you no talk. Okay? Secret."

Charles was too curious not to take the bait. He agreed and followed Kaito behind the animal pen to the other side of the river.

## Chapter 4

They were a good thirty minutes' walk away from the village when Kaito stopped at a dried up well.

"Here," Kaito pointed to the well.

"Here what? It's an old water pit. I don't understand. What's so secret about it?"

"You not clever. Where you from?" the boy replied with a condescending tone.

"Well, clever two-shoes. Why don't you show me what I'm missing here?"

Kaito shook his head and climbed down into the well. Moments later he ascended clutching a wrapped parcel under his chin.

"Here. This Mr. Hishomara's. He come here to meditate. Every day. Then he die. No one take this. You take. Maybe treasure."

Charles caught his breath in his throat. Could this be the missing coins? Could it have been here all along?

The boy pushed the parcel into Charles' hands, "For you, mister. Take."

Neatly wrapped in bamboo leaves and tied with a thin rope, it was well preserved and protected against rain and sun. Beneath the sheets, a rectangular shaped object was encased in a brownish colored rag. The rag looked like it might have been part of a military uniform. Charles was perplexed. The parcel wasn't heavy, and it didn't feel like a wooden box with coins. He fervently unwrapped the meter of fabric to reveal a weathered brown leather journal.

"Well, fancy that! It's his journal. How did you know it was even here, Kaito? Actually, don't answer that. Read it; let's see what it says."

Kaito held out his hand.

"Right, so this is business then, is it?" Charles said slipping him another fifty yen. "You get the other half when you translate it for me."

In the back of his mind guilt set in over reading a dead man's private journal, but if he was to find out who killed the man's only son, by his account, it was forgivable. The boy flipped the journal open and sat down against the well. His eyes skimmed through the pages of black Japanese writing.

"He talk about war. Enemy not nice. Kill his friends. Missing family."

"Can you find anything there about how he got the coin?"

Kaito skipped several pages. "Mr. Hishomara was very sad man. He force to kill people. He not like."

"That's unfortunate. The war forced many young men into killing their enemies. Either kill or be killed. It couldn't have been easy."

"This blood?" Kaito pointed to several pages glued together by dried blood.

"Certainly seems like it. What's he saying on these pages?"

Kaito kept reading.

"He say the plane crash somewhere in Papua New Guinea. He hurt bad on leg. His friend also hurt."

"Friend? Which friend?"

"Kajiwara. He gunner pilot."

"Good, good. What else?"

“They not safe. They chase them.”

“Who? Who’s chasing them?”

“He not say. Just say very dangerous. They hide in trees. Now they find old ship. Many food. They happy.”

Kaito stopped and held out his hand again.

“You need to finish first, lad then I’ll pay you.”

“No. You give now. I read treasure next.”

“He found the coin? It’s written there? Read on, boy!”

Young as he was, Kaito wasn’t about to miss an opportunity. He slammed the journal closed and sat in silence.

“Fine. You drive a hard bargain. But that’s it for today, okay?” Charles produced another note and, as if he slipped money into a vending machine, Kaito started reading again.

“They find wooden box with six coins.”

“Yes! That’s it, lad. Ha-ha! They found the coins. It adds up to Nick’s research. That’s how he got the coin. Wait. You sure it says they found six coins? Not one?”

“I read well, mister. Six coins.”

“So they must have taken all six then. What next? Read on, lad.”

“No, they hide box. He take one and friend take one.”

“They each took only one coin and left the rest there? Why not take three each? Makes no sense. Read it again. Maybe we missed something.”

Kaito did as he was told and reread the pages.

“It say they took one coin each then the army rescue them. He come home. He never see Kajiwara again. The end.”

“That’s it? There’s nothing else?” Charles grabbed the journal and flicked through the empty pages that followed. The last entry was a sketch of what he assumed was their plane.

“There’s a page torn from it. We’re missing a page.”

Annoyed he slammed the journal shut, wrapped it and buried it under his shirt in his pants’ waistband.

“Come. I need to find out more about this Kajiwara fellow. Hopefully, I can track him down. Assuming of course that he’s still alive. Heck, he might even have the rest of the coins for all we know.”

Charles shouted over his shoulder as he briskly set off down the hill towards the village leaving Kaito scrambling after him.

“You can’t tell anyone about this journal and what you read in it. Understand? No one! There are dangerous people after these coins. They killed Yuki for his coin and most likely were the very people who assaulted Mrs. Hishomara. If they know you have information about it they’ll torture you until you tell them. Or kill your family. Or both. Silence is the only way you’d stay safe. We’re going to pay one last visit to Mrs. Hishomara. Perhaps she knows where we might find Kajiwara. I’ll contact my buddy back home and see what he can come up with, but for now, you don’t say anything to anyone.”

Charles stopped and turned around to face Kaito who was in a light jog trying to keep up. “Not even your best friend. Do I make myself clear?”

The stern look on Charles' face was one Kaito instantly knew to take seriously. His usual cheeky bravado was quickly replaced with shocked silence yielding a timid nod in reply.

But the brief visit to a still shaken and bruised Mrs. Hishomara produced nothing more than a single letter she had gotten from her husband when the war ended; stamped and cleared by the squadron he was stationed at.

"She say she only marry husband after war. He very broken so never talk about war. She only see coin for first time when husband very sick before he die. She not know anything, mister."

It was clear she was telling the truth and that she never met Kajiwara. The name of the squadron was all he had to go on.

"Now, when's the next wagon out of here?"

"Two days."

"Two days? That's not going to work. I need to get out of here tonight. Is there any other way back to the station? A horse, a mule?"

"No, mister. Only buffalo taxi on Monday. Hundred Yen and I take you on bicycle. Train to Tokyo come very early in morning."

Charles knew he was being exploited, but without Kaito, he wouldn't have been able to get this far. Cunning as a fox, he was, but he liked the boy, and at the end of the day, he wouldn't find his way back to the train station without him.

"You're a great help Kaito, thank you. I accept your services."

When Charles got back to his hotel in Tokyo the following day, it was a welcome relief. Kajiwara might be his only lead at this point, but he had no idea where to find him or even if the man was still alive. A brief email instruction to Nick gave him some hope, but there was no guarantee that he would find Kajiwara; however talented he claimed to be. Without Kajiwara's full name, it was like finding a needle in a haystack. But, at the very least, he had a name and a squadron, and that was a start.

It was a quick taxi ride to the Yushukan War Museum. Thousands of names lined the wall behind the shrine. Each of them honoring the name of one of the thousands of soldiers killed in action and who never made it back home. When the museum attendant searched her computer, there were only eight other soldiers with Kajiwara as their first name; much to Charles' relief, all of whom were stationed in different squadrons. Satisfied it confirmed that the Kajiwara in question might still be alive, Charles headed back to his hotel.

"You have a message, Mr. Hunt," the front desk informed him. It was from Nick; an address in Papua New Guinea.

"Well, what do you know. The son of a gun found Kajiwara," Charles mumbled under his breath.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed a man in the hotel lounge staring into a newspaper. Casually dressed with bright red hair and freckles, it was blatant he wasn't a native, so Charles found it rather odd that he'd be reading a Japanese paper. Instead, he dismissed it for being a curious tourist. He had more pressing matters at hand, and a plane to catch.

But his hotel room showed evidence that someone other than the hotel's maid had been there. His few items of clothing lay scattered across the floor, and next to



the cupboard, his small carry-on was upside down on the floor. It didn't take a genius to conclude that someone had been rummaging through his things and was possibly watching his every move. He knew he wasn't followed to the village so whoever was after him had to have been waiting for him at the hotel. An image of the redhead in the lobby flashed through his mind. The man stuck out like a sore thumb. With hair like that he could only be from somewhere in the United Kingdom—most likely Scotland, which meant Constable Collins might be tailing him. Losing him shouldn't be too hard if his Japanese newspaper was his only decoy. He was not the brightest tool in the Scottish shed.

His suspicions were confirmed when Charles spotted the redhead follow him out of the hotel. From what he could tell he was on his own and he wasn't doing a great job at tailing him. Even the taxi driver asked halfway to the airport whether he wanted to stop so 'his friend' could ride along.

"Oh he's not my friend, thank you, but I tell you what. Lose him, and I'll add an extra ten percent to the fair."

"Done!"

The taxi driver, young and eager to prove his worth, took a rapid turn to the right immediately followed by another shift in the opposite direction. He whisked through the back roads narrowly escaping crossing cars. But it wasn't enough. The redhead must have presented the same challenge to his driver when his vehicle popped up three cars behind theirs.

"Seems your colleague drives better than you, lad. You're going to have to do more than cut a couple of corners to beat him," Charles taunted his driver. It was an underhanded tactic to provoke the young man, but he had no choice. Having this guy catch up to him and follow him to Papua New Guinea was just going to slow him down. Besides, his motives or provenance was unconfirmed; based only on the assumption that he was British police.

As anticipated the young taxi driver took the bait and zigzagged between the cars. The streets of Tokyo were manic leaving little room to increase speed. He veered off onto the highway. Crossing lanes gained little distance between them, but the young driver wasn't about to be defeated. Watching from the rear seat, Charles was convinced the guy had teleported into a Need for Speed video game. Laser focussed and maneuvering the car like a pro, it was evident he had something up his sleeve. On point, he crossed to the outside lane, waited for his opponent to come up behind them and slammed on the brakes. His sudden halt forced the redhead's driver to swerve out and cross to the opposite lane at which point Charles' driver took the exit off the highway.

"Ha-ha, lad! You did it!" Charles exclaimed.

"Eat my dust, sucker!" the driver shouted out the window; fist in the air.

"You clearly have skills, lad. I'm impressed. Now please get me to the airport before I miss my plane."

## Chapter 5

Papua New Guinea had a certain eeriness to it when Charles stepped out onto the tarmacked road outside the airport. He wasn't a particularly spiritual man, but somehow the atmosphere lay thick with other-worldly energy that sent shivers down his spine. His chest was tight, and his shoulders felt heavy. If he had a sixth sense, this would be it and all the hairs on his neck were telling him he was about to walk into something he was not prepared for.

As he braced himself against the dark powers at be, a man bumped him in passing, and Charles felt a sharp pain in his side. Sudden nausea set in and he bent over to expel his stomach contents on the pavement. His head whirled. A series of confused sounds filled his ears. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the screeching sound of tires followed by loud screams from passersby. His knees caved underneath his body and he fell to the tarred ground. Paralyzed he lay in his own vomit and vaguely became aware of being helped into a car. But then everything around him went black.

The sharp sunlight did little to rid the pounding headache that forced Charles to shut his eyes. He tried to rub the back of his head but couldn't. A second attempt brought him to the realization that his hands were bound behind his back. So were his feet. He tried opening his eyes again; squinting against the fierce daylight that streamed through an opening in front of him. His mouth was dry and a revolting bitter taste plagued his tongue. When he finally managed to open his eyes, it took him a moment to see that he was lying on the floor of a stable. The putrid smell of soiled hay filled his nostrils. Panicked he searched for the horse but was relieved to discover he was alone. He shuffled into a sitting position against the wall. In the opposite corner, a black water pail lay empty and on its side. The straw beneath him was stale and showed signs of desiccated manure.

If he managed to get himself to the door somehow, he might have a chance of escaping. The wall behind him served helpful as he pushed himself up and made a series of small jumps towards the door. There wasn't a single horse or human to be seen. The door wasn't locked either, but he didn't have an inkling of a chance of getting anywhere with his feet and hands tied. His eyes caught a rusty hook sticking out from the wall where the water bucket might have been hanging from once. It wasn't going to cut through the ropes as quickly as he'd want but it was worth a try, he thought. But to his surprise, the rope gave away easily, and it wasn't long before his hands and feet were free.

He searched his side where the stabbing pain set off the chain reaction of events that got him there. Apart from a tiny hardened bump similar to a mosquito bite, there were no wounds or blood visible.

"Bloody buggers," he murmured to himself when it became clear he was stabbed with a poison-filled syringe. By whom, he didn't know, but he wasn't about to wait around for them. Stretched out in front of the stall was a large pasture with several trees. The sun's position indicated it was mid-morning. He landed in the afternoon. At best, he was out cold for the night. At worst, it could have been days. Skimming the outer perimeter of the stall, he popped his head around both sides. In the far distance he could see a small rustic house between the trees and on the opposite side a steep decline to a nearby river. That was his best chance. Once he got to the river he would follow it upstream. There was bound to be small villages along the banks.

He spat on the ground next to him in an attempt to rid his mouth from the bitter poison left on his palate. It was a firm two-hundred-and-fifty yards sprint to the river. He'd have to do it in sessions; taking cover behind the trees. Adrenaline rushed his veins as he charged across the field and took cover behind the first tree. With his heart in his throat he took a deep breath and dashed towards his next refuge point. There was no sight of anyone. Hope sprung as he raced the last stretch down the hill toward the river.

When he finally stopped running, Charles flopped on the bank of the river to drink some of the water. It was cold and refreshing; providing a welcome relief from the sweltering sun and bitter taste that still lingered in his mouth. Sitting on the embankment, he estimated he'd run at least a mile upstream. There was still no indication of any villages nearby. A rustling sound in the wetland behind him instantly got him to his feet. Roughly four yards in front of him was an alligator the size of the Titanic making its way to the river. Charles froze; barely breathing as he evaluated the situation. The gator hadn't spotted him yet. His eyes skimmed the banks for any more alligators and then realized he was knee-deep in the river. He could be surrounded by reptiles for all he knew.

Backing up into the river was not an option. If there were one, there'd definitely be more scattered across the banks. Charles was trapped. He swallowed as the gator lurked closer and closer. The slightest noise or movement will alarm the animal. He stared at the water behind him. There was no sign of any others, but he couldn't take the chance. He hunched down against the riverbank and slowly moved sideways up the river, careful to not make too much movement in the water; his eyes peeled for any other unwanted hosts. Once out of the alligator's path, and with a seemingly clear way out, he ran toward one of the trees and climbed as far up as he could. A birds-eye view would be his best recourse now.

Wedged somewhat awkwardly between two spiky branches, he saw another massive gator slide into the water just about at the same spot where he had met the first one. He was lucky, very lucky. Charles scanned the perimeter. He'd have to head inland and try to find shelter for the night. The tree and multitude of gators beneath his feet spelled imminent death. He'd have to make a run for it and keep his eyes peeled. It's a massive chance but one he'd have to take.

With his feet on the ground he moved as stealthily as possible through the wetland to where the grass eventually became drier and the trees more sparse. He should keep heading north, he thought; the same direction as the river. About an hour or so after his narrow escape from the gators, the vegetation became denser. Unlike the swamp he just came from, his environment changed into a lush jungle bustling with ants and insect noises. The chirping of jungle birds and chirring of hidden insects was quite deafening. Not even the dry mud on his hands and face repelled the millions of mosquitoes that bit his neck and behind his ears. He was starving and thirsty and the last of the sun's rays fell through the dense trees. It would be dark soon. He'd have to find a safe place for the night, or he'd be eaten alive.

A sudden whooshing sound penetrated the loud insect choir as an arrow narrowly missed his head and settled in the tree in front of him. Charles ducked behind the tree and tucked his elbows into his sides in an attempt to make his body as small as possible. Another arrow swooshed by, this time just missing his

thigh. That was too close for comfort. He ran toward a larger tree trunk and ducked behind it. Beads of sweat sat on his lips and forehead. His legs were shaking as his eyes frantically searched for a way out. Moments later another arrow slashed through the leaves inches from his body. He held his breath and remained motionless. He turned his head sideways in an attempt to plan his next move and saw what he least expected to find. A half-naked man, face painted white with evil looking eyes that had each been circled with black paint was taking aim with another arrow. Cannibals!

Charles Hunt ran as fast as his feet could carry him. His adrenaline spiked as his feet flew across the dense jungle floor. Run was all he could do. Deeper into the jungle. He couldn't let them catch up with him. Not now. He had come too far and risked too much.

He ducked behind the nearby tree, scarcely missing another arrow. His eyes searched frantically for a way out but there was no way but forward. They were gaining ground and fast. How many, he didn't know. Deciding to make another run for it he sprinted across a small clearing. The ground was soft in places and threatened to give way under his feet. Panic started to set in as another arrow whistled by his left ear. He kept running. He had no idea where to, but there was no time to stop and think. Frantic for any way out he ran toward the dense trees further up ahead. It should provide better cover but likewise, it could also offer quite a challenge to navigate through. He'd take the chance. The leaves slapped hard across his face leaving a painful sting behind. His legs kept going as he pushed through the jungle foliage. His feet fought hard through the roots that threatened to have him break an ankle. Jumping over a protruding root, he seized a split second to look back at his enemy and felt the ground give way as he did so. His body lurched across the cliff's edge and thumped hard onto the steep rock face. Unable to stop his momentum he rolled down several yards until his body became light as air before plummeting over the cliff. Vaguely aware of the rushing sounds of a river below he turned his body mid-air to avoid hitting the water headfirst. The icy water stung as his feet hit it. He gasped for air before the current pulled his body and he disappeared beneath the surface, dragging his body under.

Fully submerged the strong currents churned his body causing him to lose all sense of direction. His eyeballs ached from the icy cold water as he tried to find his bearings. His hands touched a large rock. Scrambling he grabbed onto it and managed to steady his body just enough to see that he was upside down. The current was strong. He pushed his feet against the rock and thrust his body toward the surface. Much needed air filled his lungs for a brief moment before his head went under again and the current dragged him further down the river. His hands searched the water mass for anything to grab onto. He couldn't see much if anything in the murky water and he needed air, fast. His fingers skimmed over what felt like roots. Extending his arms, his hands clutched at his only lifeline. It worked. The current pulled his feet from beneath him as his arms extended over his head. Using every last bit of his strength, strained under the lack of oxygen, Charles pulled his body against the fighting current toward the banks of the river.

Exhausted but finally able to breathe again, he crawled out over the muddy river wall and turned onto his back. The dense forest canopy of the Papua New

Guinea rainforest stared back at him in all its glory. This expedition nearly cost him his life—more than once, but instead of feeling defeated, Charles' body exploded with excitement. He had cheated certain death again, not to mention the cannibals' dinner pot.

## Chapter 6

Charles woke up as the early morning sun pushed through the leaves above his head and settled on his face. It took several seconds for him to fully wake up, momentarily forgetting where he was before he flipped over onto his stomach. He needed to stay hidden until he knew he wasn't enclosed by alligators or cannibals. His heightened senses focussed on his surroundings. It appeared quiet and he let out a small sigh of relief. He contemplated whether he was in his right mind to have taken on this suicidal adventure. He nearly lost his life twice, three times if he counted the syringed kidnapping that he had also somehow escaped. How many lives did a human have?

But he wasn't a man that threw in the towel in the middle of a fight. He had to finish what he started. He popped his head up again, pausing briefly to do a final check that the coast was clear. Satisfied he got up and washed his face with the river water at his feet. It was too fast flowing to house any gators and it was clear, not muddy. He took a mouthful but spat it out as soon as it hit his palate. It was salty—seawater. Being as thirsty as he was, he should have cursed it, but he didn't. He was elated and enthusiasm rushed through his entire body. Somehow he made it from the pits of marshland hell to the coast of the island. The river would no doubt take him directly to the ocean mouth and from there, he'd undoubtedly find civilization.

It was midday when Charles still hadn't found a village or any sign of civilization. The sun was hot and hunger gripped his body. The jungle floor had made way to white beach sand and the trees were sparse. Disappointed he slumped down against one to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow. He had no idea where he was or how he was going to get out of there. As he contemplated his fate a low voice behind him startled him to his feet.

"You had to poke your nose where it didn't belong, didn't you?"

Shocked, Charles came face to face with a man roughly in his early thirties. He was of Japanese descent and surprisingly well-groomed considering he was in the middle of nowhere.

"Who are you?" was all Charles could come out with.

"Who I am doesn't matter, Mr. Hunt. What matters is that I have your family and that you are going to help us find those coins if you ever want to see them alive."

Sudden anger surged through Charles' being as he lurched forward to clamber the stranger. Only to be stopped by three armed men who came out of nowhere from behind him and held him back.

"You... where's my wife? What have you done with her?"

“Oh don’t be such a child. I told you. I have her and your unborn baby safely tucked away, for now. Do as you’re told, and you’ll be back with them sooner than you think.” The stranger ordered his men to back down. “Do I have your attention now, Mr. Hunt?”

Charles fought back the panic that weighed heavily on his chest. This jerk had his pregnant wife and was blackmailing him with the coins.

“I don’t have the coins,” Charles answered with a pinched mouth.

“Oh, that I know, Mr. Hunt. But you know where they are, don’t you?”

“Actually, I don’t. I came here to hopefully determine that for myself. Now, who are you?”

He didn’t answer him. Instead, the man tilted his chin toward his men who instantly took hold of Charles and pulled him toward a four-wheeler that stood thirty yards away.

“Where are you taking me?” Charles asked with a shaky voice. “Who are you?”

“All in good time, Mr. Hunt. Now get in.”

Charles was too weak to fight back and even if he could, where would he run? He stiffened his body and reluctantly got into the vehicle’s rear seat. Annoyed that he was too complacent to notice the thugs or their car earlier, he contemplated his next move. He needed to know if Izzy and their baby were safe.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth? I want to speak to my wife first.”

The man spoke Japanese to his sidekick and laughed sadistically.

“You don’t. And you won’t either. Not until you help us find the coins.”

His assailants wouldn’t budge, that was sure, so Charles settled back into the seat and shot up a silent prayer for Izzy to be safe.

When they soon after arrived at a mansion-like residence secured by an army of armed security guards, Charles understood the magnitude of his assailants. They weren’t ordinary people. More like a mafia tucked away in the middle of Papua New Guinea. The car rolled through the expansive gates and stopped in front of the entrance.

“What is this place?” Charles demanded.

Instead of an answer they pulled him out of the car and stuck a gun into his back.

“Walk,” the guard with the gun instructed as he shoved the barrel harder into Charles’ back for emphasis.

Charles didn’t argue and followed the well dressed Japanese man into a poorly lit study inside the mansion.

After days on the run, the soft leather sofa they pushed him into was welcoming under his body. Charles looked around. The furnishings were impeccable and quite lavish. Whoever owned this place had money; lots of it. As he waited, a younger Japanese girl served him with fresh water. Surprised at how well he was being treated he gulped it down in one swig. They needed him alive if they wanted him to find the coins. That was a relief. But Izzy and the baby were still in trouble. If indeed they took her, he’d have no choice but to comply.

A wooden sliding door behind him opened and Charles patiently watched as a much older Japanese man took a seat opposite him. Charles guessed his age at about ninety, although the Japanese usually carried their age well. The

distinguished man had the guards at his feet as they swiftly moved into formation behind him. Charles felt like he was in the presence of royalty.

“Mr. Hunt, I believe you’ve been looking for me,” the man spoke in an authoritative voice that sounded much younger than ninety.

“I have?” Charles responded puzzled. “I’m not sure. Who are you?”

“Forgive me, Mr. Hunt. Allow me to introduce myself. Akeno, Kajiwara Akeno.”

“Kajiwara, you’re *Kajiwara*? Hishomara’s gunner pilot?” a surprised Charles queried.

“Indeed, Mr. Hunt. First Chinkai Naval Air Group of the Imperial Japanese Army Air Service, proudly serving 1941 to 1944.”

It took every ounce of restraint for Charles not to jump to his feet with joy. His eyes widened and he was at a loss for words.

“Kajiwara. Well, I’ll be... I don’t know what to say. I guess I was looking for you, yes, just not under duress.”

“You’re not my prisoner, Mr. Hunt. You’re free to go. But if you want a wife and baby to go back to, then I suggest you stay.”

Charles felt the anger push his insides against his chest. His temples pulsed as the thought of losing Izzy took over his mind.

“Where I come from, Kajiwara, that’s blackmail and I’m your prisoner. No two ways about it.” Charles swallowed hard before he spoke again. “How do I know you have my wife and that she’s unharmed?”

Kajiwara snapped his fingers and his younger protégé pulled a tablet off the desk and opened it to a video recording. Charles watched in anguish as a clip of Izzy played out. She was locked up in a small room that looked somewhat like a closet. There were no bruising to her body or anything that indicated she might have been hurt in any way.

Charles wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and spoke with a shaky voice. “What do you want from me? I don’t know where the coins are. That’s why I came to find you.”

“You’re going to help me find them. I’ll tell you what I know, and give you whatever you need. Once you bring me the coins, I’ll release your family.”

The old man wasn’t open to negotiation. His face was stern and his eyes cold.

“Do I have a choice?” Charles asked rhetorically, rubbing the back of his hand over his wet eyes. “So tell me what you know, and let’s get this over with.”

Kajiwara clicked his fingers again and his sidekick produced a wooden box. It was roughly the size of a flattened shoe box; rectangular and hand carved from Blackwood. Kajiwara opened it to reveal a tan leather lining with six round hollows. In one of the depressions lay an ancient copper coin with Arabic etchings. The palm-sized coin stared back at Charles. His skin tingled with excitement like it often did when he lay eyes on an ancient relic.

“So this is what the fuss is all about,” Charles remarked with sarcasm, playing it cool.

“This is my coin, Mr. Hunt. One of the six coins Hishomara and I found on the ship that day.”

“Where’s Yuki’s coin?” Charles asked.

“That I do not know. When my men went to meet with him, he was already dead and the coin was missing.”

“Missing? So you didn’t kill him and take the coin?”

“Mr. Hunt, I learned many things in the war. We were forced to kill people or be killed. Innocent people died because of the war. I am many things, but I’m not a murderer.”

Charles was perplexed with his confession but in that also immensely relieved to know Izzy won’t be harmed.

“Tell me how it happened that you found the coin.”

Kajiwara sighed heavily and settled into his chair.

“Our plane was shot down by the Australian Air force and we crashed here on the island. We were both injured but managed to make it out alive. Our communications were down but we survived for two weeks off the rations we had with us on the plane. One night we were attacked by cannibals and we had to run from the plane. We were lucky we had our guns and managed to get away alive. I don’t know how many days we wandered the swamps but we eventually got to the coastline and found a damaged shipwreck. We assumed it was bombed and that somehow the currents had brought it to shore. It was abandoned except for the captain. He had a gun in his hand and a gunshot wound to the head. We figured his crew jumped ship and he chose to die with it. So Hishomara and I took shelter in the ship. We found the box with six coins in his cabin and knew it was worth a fortune. But we couldn’t take the entire box when we finally got rescued. The army would have seized it. So we each took only one coin and sewed it into the linings of our jackets and planned to fetch the rest once the war ended. We agreed to meet up so we could go back for the rest. But he never made contact with me again.”

Kajiwara stopped talking and slowly walked over to the window.

“And yet you have the box. Where are the rest of the coins?” Charles prompted with suspicion.

Kajiwara slowly turned to face Charles. “That’s why you’re here. Hishomara double-crossed me. After we got rescued we were split up into different infirmaries until the war ended. I tried contacting him but he never responded. So I went out to the shipwreck myself to retrieve the coins before anyone else found it.”

“But they were gone, right? The bugger got to it before you.”

Charles didn’t need to get an answer. Kajiwara’s face said it all.

“We were friends. We made a vow to each other, and he deceived me. I never heard or saw him again until the army informed me of his death.”

“So why take my wife and hold me ransom? Why not just enlist my help?”

Kajiwara’s next statement left Charles cold to the core.

“I didn’t take your wife, Charles. It seems I’m not the only one looking for the coins.”

## Chapter 7

Charles couldn’t speak. Fact is, he wasn’t even sure if he was still breathing. His body trembled all over and when he finally spoke, his voice was filled with fear.

“I don’t understand. You showed me the video clip of my wife. You said you took her because you needed my help.”



Kajiwara clicked his fingers for the girl to pour Charles a drink while he continued.

“The video was emailed to me by an unknown sender. A day later I received a second one of my son who is also held in captivity by them. His body was mutilated and tortured. As I sit here I’m led to believe that my son is still alive, but I don’t know how much time he still has. A few days ago, Hishomara’s wife got hold of me through the army, telling me you were there looking for me and that you were here on the island. So I sent my men out to find you. Circumstances are forcing us to work together, Charles. Neither of us have a choice in the matter. I need your help and you need mine.”

Charles threw back the drink and composed himself. “But your men stuck a gun in my back. You led me to believe you had my wife. Why?”

“Put yourself in my position, Charles. I needed to know what you knew and whose side you’re on. I’m too old for this. All I ever wanted was to leave a legacy for my son and find out why my friend betrayed me. For years I’ve been tormented by his betrayal but I finally let it go. Until his death dredged it all up. And there’s no other way out of this. We need to find those coins, for your wife’s sake and my son’s.”

This time Charles walked over to the liquor trolley and threw back another glass before slamming it back on the tray.

“Do you have any idea where Hishomara might have hidden the coins?”

Kajiwara slipped a yellowed paper from underneath the tan leather mold in the coin box and handed it to Charles.

“What’s this?”

“A map that I believe will lead to the coins.”

“Where did you get it?”

“When Hishomara died, I went to repay my respects; find closure. When I saw him in the coffin I noticed he had his bomber jacket on. Of course I knew of the coins we sewed into our jackets so I felt the lining to find his coin. Instead, I found this map.”

Charles studied the map. “It’s here, on the island. Why not just follow it?”

“Oh I did, Charles. I can’t figure it out. That’s where you come in. I think it is close to where our plane crashed but I don’t have any idea where that might be. The army, search parties, my men; no one has ever been able to locate our plane. It’s been lost on the island for more than sixty-five years. Papuans call it the Swamp Ghost.”

A sudden surge of adrenaline rushed through his body as Charles recalled an image he saw in Hishomara’s diary.

“Swamp Ghost. Yes. It was in his journal. The very last entry he made had a sketch of a plane. The name on the plane was the Swamp Ghost. There were coordinates below the plane. The next page was torn from the journal. Look!”

Charles dropped his pants to his knees and yanked the journal from his thigh. He had the presence of mind to duck tape it to his body when he first arrived in Papua New Guinea after he got off the plane. He paused, shaking his head.

“That was you, wasn’t it? You poisoned me outside the airport.”

“You’re a bright man, Charles Hunt. I’m afraid it was. But then you somehow escaped and it took just about everything for my men to track you down again. We could have had this meeting much sooner.”

“Well, perhaps you should work on your people skills, Kajiwara. All you had to do was ask nicely, not stab me with a needle and kidnap me. But, if truth be told, I’d probably do the same if I wanted to know who I was getting in bed with.”

Charles unwrapped the journal and flipped to the last entry.

“There it is, the plane. And these I believe are its coordinates.”

Kajiwara’s voice next to Charles was devoid of emotion when he finally spoke. “He knew all along where the plane had crashed. Of course he did. He was the pilot.”

“I’m sorry your friend betrayed you. But let’s focus on getting your son and my wife back alive. We can’t change what he did but let’s not allow him to take your son to the grave with him.”

Charles lined the torn map up with the page. Below the coordinates a horizontal line lay across the page and onto the map, running dead into a spot simply marked with a symbol. The marking was a small circle with an arrow at the top.

“I’ve never seen this symbol. Would you know what it means?”

Kajiwara held the map closer to his face. “Yes, it was our symbol for an enemy mortar. I don’t understand. Why would he mark that on the map?”

“Buckle up Kajiwara. We’re about to go treasure hunting.”

“Sir, this is the place indicated by the coordinates on the map. Shall I set us down?”

The helicopter pilot waited for Kajiwara to give him permission to land before he set them down exactly where the journal’s coordinates pointed. The area was covered by marshland and spiky blades of grass. Charles checked the map to confirm their location.

“Where’s the plane? There’s no plane here,” Kajimara questioned.

“Nothing is ever at the surface, my friend. It’s here. We just need to comb the area with the metal detectors.”

It wasn’t long before Charles and Kajimara’s men each had a machine in hand and spread out. Several false alarms had them digging up nothing but mud and some metal shards, but a few hours later, two of the men excitedly yelled that they had found it. When the crew dug up enough to expose the planes tail number and confirm it was theirs, Charles joined Kajimara where he was waiting in the helicopter.

“It’s conclusive. This is your plane. Now the mortar symbol lies to the south of here. From his scale I reckon about a hundred-and-fifty feet. Stay put. I’ll take a couple of the men to go with me.”

At first the detectors didn’t pick up the mortar. It was only when Charles poked the ground with an iron bar that he hit something hard under the surface. When they dug the spot it delivered a rectangular metal box which lay buried under thick layers of muddy soil.

“Help me lift it out,” Charles shouted to two of the men.

The metal crate had the faded markings of a numerical code next to a hardly visible union jack in the canton on its blue background. It was Australian.

“Careful, if it’s a bomb in there it could still go off,” Charles cautioned the men as they lifted it out of the hole.

Once out, the metal clasps on the box popped open easily, as if it had only been buried a year or so. Charles slowly lifted the lid to reveal the full length of an Australian mortar.

“Stop. Don’t touch it!” Charles shouted as he stood back.

Though perfectly preserved, the bomb was unexploded. While Charles was no expert in the field, he did know that it had an impact fuse which, when pushed upward, used detonation cord to ignite the TNT. Sweat trickled down his right temple. His heart raced and his palms were sweaty. There was no bomb squad to call for help. It was up to him and there was no room for error. When he finally plucked up the courage to inspect it up close, he swallowed the nervous bile that had pushed up into his throat. Relief washed over him when he noticed the fuse had been removed, rendering the bomb non-threatening. He instructed the men to close it up and carry it back to the helicopter.

“Guess what we found Kajiwara?” Charles yelled out in excitement as he approached the stationary helicopter.

His eye caught the large blood splatter on the cockpit window followed by the pilot’s lifeless body slumped over the control console. Charles felt that familiar bile push up and his heart pounding against his chest as he ran toward Kajiwara in who sat in the rear. He gasped as his heart jumped three or four beats. The old man lay back in his seat, eyes cold and rigid and his throat slit from one ear to the other.

Behind him a gun discharged three rounds and Charles heard the metal box fall to the ground. Disorientated with the surprise attack he took shelter behind the helicopter door but the shots seized. Charles looked back at Kajiwara’s corpse.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about him, Charles. We don’t need him anymore.”

Charles flung around at the familiar voice behind him.

“Nick! What on earth are you doing?” Charles yelled.

“I don’t need him anymore, Charles. I’ve got what I needed,” Nick Cain answered back with sarcasm dripping from his voice.

“You? You’re behind all of this? Have you lost your mind?”

“Au contraire, dear Charles. I know precisely what I’m doing. Now stop your whining and open the mortar. If my suspicions are correct, the rest of the coins will be inside.”

In his mind, Charles replayed the former events in a desperate attempt to make sense of what was happening. His mouth was dry and his body as lifeless as Kajiwara’s.

“Where’s my wife?” Charles responded, his face ashen as images of what could be flashed through his mind.

“Our dear Izzy is fine. For now. Open the mortar.”

His entire body was trembling but Charles slowly fell to his knees in front of the metal box and did as Nick ordered.

The bomb was far heavier than it actually was as he picked it out of the metal crate. His entire life lay in his hands, pulling his shoulders to the ground. If the coins weren’t there, he had no idea what would happen to him or Izzy. How did he not see this coming? How was it that he fell for Nick Cain’s conceited reporter

portrayal? Was he so blinded by his own self-indulgent desires that he placed his family's lives at risk?

"Quit stalling, Hunt. Open the bomb."

Nick's harsh voice echoed through the air. Charles unscrewed the tail fin from the projectile body and reached inside. Moments later he retrieved a black velvet pouch and pulled the gold drawstring open. From within he took out the four remaining coins.

"Ah, didn't I tell you it was unlike anything you've ever seen? Now hand it over."

Charles put the coins back in the pouch and tossed it to Nick.

"Scotland Yard! Put down your weapons!"

Instantly shots flew through the air and Charles fell to the ground with his hands over his head. Nick fired back when the bullets hit two of his men and they flopped dead beside Charles. Helpless on the ground, Charles felt strong hands under his armpits as he got pulled behind the helicopter. Through the windows he caught sight of the redhead from the Tokyo hotel lobby, running after Nick and eventually pinning him to the ground.

## Chapter 8

"Are you okay, Mr. Hunt?" the redhead asked as he restrained Nick and handed him over to his team.

Charles was floored. Who would have thought the redhead had it in him?

"Where's my wife Cain?" Charles ignored the redhead and shouted out to Nick where he was being arrested.

"We've got your wife, Mr. Hunt. She's at HQ, out of harm's way."

Stress left Charles' fragile body and he was able to breathe for the first time since he had left her.

"Thank you. Now who are you exactly?" Charles asked, still somewhat confused.

"Detective O'Malley... Scotland Yard. Nice to finally meet you."

"O'Malley. Indeed. Nice to meet you too. I thought I lost you on my way to the airport."

"You did a great job shaking me, Mr. Hunt. But my man placed a tracker on you."

"Your man, which man?"

"Your cabbie. He was one of us."

Charles belched a laugh so loud his stomach hurt. "And here I thought you didn't have it in you, O'Malley. Joke's on me isn't it lad? Well done Mate."

"We couldn't have done it without you, Mr. Hunt. Mr. Cain here will be convicted of multiple counts of murder and assault, not to mention international theft. We've been tailing him for years as part of an international relic smuggling syndicate. Yuki's staff mentioned he had met with the victim so we knew he was involved. We've had him under surveillance for years."

Detective O'Malley handed Charles the black velvet pouch with coins as well as Kajiwara's wooden box. "I believe these belong to you."

Charles placed the four copper coins next to the fifth one inside the wooden box.

“Pity there’s still one missing,” Charles commented.

“Mr. Hishomara’s coin is at HQ. We retrieved it from Mr. Cain’s apartment. As soon as we’ve processed his arrest, we will return it. Unfortunately, it is evidence proving motive.”

Charles snapped the wooden box closed and walked over to where Cain sat cuffed on the ground.

“Why did you do it, Cain?”

“Why? All my life I’ve traveled the globe assessing other people’s antiques and precious items and all I ever got was my name printed below the articles. Forty years! That’s how long I’ve worked as a reporter. Reporting and earning peanuts only to see my name printed in a useless newspaper. I’m facing retirement and what do I have to show for it? Nothing.”

“So Yuki was your final ticket out. He came to you for help, Cain. Instead, you killed the man. And for what? What good did it do, huh? Well, guess what? Your precious name will now be etched in the criminal records forever. And your retirement? Life behind bars, Cain. How is that worth it?”

Nick Cain spat on the ground next to him. “You’ll die an old man, Charles Hunt with nothing but photo’s to prove your precious relics’ existence.”

“Au contraire, dear Nick. I might never own more than my house, but my name will be printed in the history books as the man who discovered all these ancient relics and preserved our history forever. And every day I’ll see the sun come up and feel the rain on my face, and know, that I have traveled the world and preserved history.”

“Take him away and throw away the key,” O’Malley ordered his men.

When Charles was finally reunited with his pregnant wife, he hung his hat behind his office door and stared at it for a while. For the first time he was satisfied knowing that his life was destined for far greater things—he was about to become a father. And that was an adventure of a whole different kind. The corners of his mouth curled up as he relished the thought.

Adventure was always going to find him, and once his baby girl was old enough, he’d pass his torch and teach her everything she needed to know.

