

# Salvaged



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# SALVAGED

**By Jeri Ellen**

## **PROLOGUE:**

The captain of the Japanese heavy cruiser Yurikaze looked aft from the port bridge wing. His damage control parties had worked miracles. It was a tribute to the skill, dedication, and courage of his crew. The fires were now nearly out and his ship was still making some headway.

The Yurikaze was a fine ship. She was the last of the Myoko class, two stack, 12,000 ton heavy cruisers. This ship had been kept out of the war and had not sailed with the fleet for the attack on the American base at Pearl Harbor. Instead the Admiralty had kept her sailing in Japan's home waters to train new recruits fresh out of their respective schools.

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He had moved up rapidly thru the ranks as the ship gained a reputation for turning out highly skilled, well trained crews. His last promotion to captain had come after completing her retrofit in November of 1943 and he had been personally congratulated by Admiral Yamamoto himself.

He walked back to the center of the bridge and put his binoculars up to his eyes. At best they were making only two, maybe three knots. They were not going to make the harbor but he hoped to beach his ship so that the top secret cargo that had been loaded the night before in the forward magazine could be unloaded and transferred to another ship to be taken back to Japan.

A shout from the lookout had them all diving to the deck as the starboard anti aircraft guns opened fire. The bridge was soon whip lashed with machine gun fire from the attacking American fighter plane.

Oblivious to the sharp pain in his left knee he looked to his right to see the lookout lying face down in an ever widening pool of blood. The lookout to his left was lying on his back grimacing in pain with both hands clasped together trying to stop the flow of blood seeping thru his fingers from his stomach wound.

Pushing himself to his feet the captain saw the American fighter's engine begin smoking and its left wing come apart because of the accurate anti aircraft fire from the port guns. It suddenly pin wheeled and crashed into the sea.

It was like trying to kill a swarm of mosquitoes with a fly swatter the size of a postage stamp. For every one you kill there seemed to be a dozen to take its' place. He pushed himself to his feet and hobbled over to the first aid canister on the bulkhead.

He took out a bandage and removed it from its' sterile wrapping. After tearing the left pants leg open he applied the bandage to the gash along his knee cap and wrapped it tightly around his leg.

The port side anti aircraft guns opened up again and he looked up to see an American torpedo bomber drop its' torpedo and bank left away from the cruiser it's pilot seemingly unaware of the heavy barrage of anti aircraft fire that was coming at them.

The American pilots were just as courageous as he had expected. There seemed to be no end to the number of pilots and planes while on the other hand Japan was running out of both

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He turned and hobbled quickly to the passageway that led to his cabin. When he was half way there the torpedo hit and the shock of the blast knocked him down. For a minute he lay still. He got up and staggered to his cabin. Once inside he closed the door and went over to his desk.

From the lower desk drawer he took out a bottle of Sake and removed its' cap. He winced from the pain in his leg as he took several gulps of the rice wine. The bandage he had applied was blood soaked but at least the bleeding had stopped.

Worse than the pain in his knee was the knowledge that his mission had gone uncompleted and that this once proud ship was in her death throes and may not even make the beach so the cargo could be transferred to another ship and his could possibly live to fight another day.

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Reaching up to the top shelf above him he took down the double picture frame. The left side was a picture of him and his wife on their wedding day. The other side was a picture of his wife with his infant daughter sitting on her lap.

She had been born the day they had set out for the Philippines Islands. Due to the urgency of his top secret mission he was not able to go to see them both before he left. He knew that he was never going to see them again.

Upon arriving in Philippine waters they had been attacked by American SBD dive bombers. He had skillfully maneuvered his ship and despite two bomb hits had successfully brought his ship into the harbor where his crew made what repairs they could.

The first bomb had struck the rear main gun turret but there had been no damage below decks. The second had hit the seaplane on its' catapult and exploded just after it penetrated the main deck. They had been very lucky that they were still afloat at all.

Because of their top secret mission there had been no time to make any major repairs. At this stage of the war spare parts were hard to get anyway. The important thing was to get the top secret cargo loaded and then head back for Japan as quickly as possible.

The Americans were not going to be stopped. He knew the war was lost after the debacle at Midway but he had continued to do his duty without complaint and inspired his crew to do theirs as well. It had been a long, hard road and he knew the war was not going to end well for Japan.

He was grateful that his wife and children were no longer in Tokyo. With the new long range American

bombers no Japanese city was immune from their attacks but at least his home port of Nagasaki was a smaller city and he hoped that they would be safer there.

Before leaving Japan some of the big shells from the forward magazine had been moved into the passage way to make room for the cargo. The cargo was supposed to have been loaded shortly after they had arrived but due to Allied aircraft it had not been brought aboard until after midnight.

The last part they needed for one of the engines had arrived and was installed just before dawn. He had hoped to leave in the dark so they would be miles away before the American planes would arrive in daylight.

Now the trip to Japan would be like running a gauntlet. He doubted but could only hope that they would make it safely back to their home port.

The truck carrying the top secret cargo was guarded by a second truck of soldiers. The third truck contained a dozen Philippine laborers. A general had greeted the captain and they sipped some tea while the Philippine laborers placed the cargo in the back of the forward magazine and then placed some of the big shells in front of the boxes concealing them from view.

When the job was finished the general left the ship. His soldiers lined up the laborers along the pier and then shot them. After the bodies were put in one of the trucks the soldiers drove away.

The deck tilted some more to the left as he took two more swigs from the bottle of Sake. He had failed in his mission and knew that he couldn't face his superi-

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ors. There was no excuse for this failure and now there was only one thing left to do.

From the right hand drawer he took out the holster. He took another swig of Sake and then removed the pistol. He looked again at the picture of his wife and baby girl. Tears filled his eyes as he flipped the safety off. The deck tilted sharply to the left as the lights flickered and then went out. He placed the barrel of the pistol to his temple and squeezed the trigger.

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The earliest recollection of my childhood was of two smells. The first was the smell of fresh baked bread or cookies coming from my mothers' kitchen. The other was the stench of manure from the cow barn that seemed to be everywhere outside.

As a toddler I was scared to death of those animals and one trip to the barn to watch my dad start the milking was enough for me. Fortunately the next year dad had a big auction selling off the dairy herd and all of his dairy equipment.

Ethanol plants were springing up like weeds and there was more money in raising corn than in producing milk. The auction settled some of our debt and mom got a newer car. I was just glad I would not have to smell that stink again.

As I got older I never cared much for the manual labor the farm required though I helped my dad out as much as a kid could. I was much happier in my mother's kitchen helping her cook or wash dishes. I enjoyed helping her clean the house and do laundry as well.

On a farm there was no such thing as “women’s work” or “men’s work”. It was all work and everybody pitched in like it or not. I wanted to be useful and pull my weight just like any other farm kid.

Because of where we lived I had no friends outside of school. I would see them in the morning when I got on the bus and again at night when the bus took us back home. I was comfortable with that and didn’t mind spending most of my free time alone.

I guess that was part of the reason I came to like being outdoors so much. I would walk thru the field to the edge of our property and sometimes sit in the woods just up the bluff from the end of our property line. I felt very at peace there and no matter what was bugging me at the time I always felt better after spending some time outdoors.

Summers my dad’s brother Allen would take me fishing. We fished the smaller lakes around the area that were less crowded. I liked the quiet of being on the water. Uncle Al would bring me home and several hours later he would return with a pan of fish all cleaned and ready for the pan.

For Christmas he bought me a pair of military surplus night vision glasses. The next night I bundled up and walked to the end of our property. Away from the glare of the yard lights I put on the glasses and was amazed at how well I could see with them. I saw several deer standing at the edge of the tree line watching me.

The next summer for my birthday he bought me a pup tent to go with the sleeping bag my folks had given me. At the back fence line we walked up the bluff and he showed me how to pitch the tent between

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two huge oak trees. After I dug a drainage ditch around the tent he left me alone for the night.

As soon as it got dark I put on the night vision glasses. I watched in awe as the deer came out of the woods. There were numerous apple trees around the neighbor's back property line that adjoined ours and it was fun watching them as they ate completely oblivious to my presence.

It was just after one am when I went back to the tent and crawled into my sleeping bag. I had just closed my eyes when I heard a man curse in a loud voice. I lay still for a few minutes and then crawled out of my sleeping bag to see what was going on.

I put on my night vision glasses but could not see anything so I unzipped the screen and got out of my tent. I crawled over to the edge of the bluff and saw two men walking along the fence line. Each man carried a long handled shovel and between them a small satchel that appeared to be heavy.

They stopped at the bottom of the hill directly in front of me. My pulse was racing and I froze as they looked up the bluff to where I was laying. They put the satchel down. Turning their attention away from me they began cutting a three foot by three foot square in the sod.

When they finished they lifted the sod patch out and started digging a hole. When it was about two feet deep they put the satchel in the hole and covered it up with dirt. They scattered the excess dirt around and then put the square of sod back in place.

One of them took off his hat and wiped his forehead. He looked around and then took something out of his pocket. Kneeling down he took a hammer from

the side pocket of his overalls and began pounding something into the fence post. When he finished they both looked around again and then walked back the way they had come.

I laid there for a few minutes listening to my own heartbeat. I got up and walked back to my pup tent. Once inside I found it hard to go to sleep. I finally dozed off and when I woke up to the sound of my wrist alarm I wondered if it had all been a dream.

I took my tent down and rolled up my sleeping bag. When I got to the bottom of the bluff I looked at the fence post. Near the bottom was a nickel that had been nailed to the fence post. He had marked it so it would be easy to find when they came back to dig up whatever they had buried.

Back at home I said nothing to my parents about what I had seen. The two men had been very careful about hiding that satchel so obviously it contained something valuable. Whatever was in that satchel couldn't be used or sold right away so I just assumed it contained ill gotten gains.

The next night on the news I got my answer. A local man had reported a burglary and the only thing taken was his coin collection the exact value of which had yet to be determined. I couldn't be certain that what was buried near that fence post was the coin collection

I stewed for several days thinking about whether or not I should call the police or go back out there and dig it up myself. I had other things on my mind.

That stash could be used to help me resolve a personal problem that I had kept to myself for sometime. Something so deep and personal I knew there was no

one around me that I would feel comfortable talking to about.

That weekend two men were arrested in connection with several burglaries in the area. The pictures of the two men could have easily been the two I had seen that night burying the satchel. If so it might me some time before either or both of them were going to be able to come back and get their stash.

A month later their sentencing came up. They had been involved in a number of burglaries in the area and a search warrant for a storage area had produced enough stolen property to clear up a significant portion of the police's backlog.

In addition during the commission of one of their burglaries they had been surprised by an elderly man who had a heart attack as they ran off and his death as well as a substantial amount of narcotics found in their storage area had prompted the judge to levy a sentence of eighteen years on both of them. Those eighteen years would give me ample time to decide what to do with whatever they had buried.

That night I fantasized about what I was going to do. Let's just say for the sake of argument that the stash would bring me \$50,000.00. If it was indeed the missing coin collection I could sell it off a little at a time. That would not arouse any suspicion.

I wasn't sure how best to use the money to find a solution to my very personal problem. Even a young child sometimes feels that they cannot confide something to their parents or teachers. Instead they try to find answers themselves with little options available to them.

At a very young age I didn't feel right. I knew I was a male but I wasn't interested in a lot of "guy" things. I hated that thing between my legs. I always felt I should have been a girl but here I was trapped in a boys' body that would someday be a man's body.

How was that possible? I continued to ask myself without of course ever getting an answer to what I had begun to recognize as an almost impossible situation. My internet searches when I was alone provided some answers but no path that would lead me to resolving this situation.

I knew there had to be something but as a kid I figured that I would be stuck in the wrong body for awhile until I could get the means to solve this problem. That stash could conceivably be a very helpful part of that solution.

That February my Uncle Al had been found dead by my dad. He had shot himself. He had filed his taxes and got his refund. After he had cleared up his bills, he sold his boat, motor, trailer, pickup truck and made out a will.

He had been disabled since serving in Vietnam. His sickness had gotten worse over the years. I had read about the effects of something called "Agent Orange" but didn't know his illness was caused by it and for a long time the government had denied that it did too.

We went to the visitation. On the board at the entrance were pictures from his youth holding up a stringer of fish and one of him wearing a cub scout's uniform with all his merit badges. There was also a nice portrait of him in his soldiers' uniform.

Several of the pictures were from his overseas tour showed him in green pants and a green tee shirt stand-

ing next to a pile of sandbags while holding a machine gun along with several other young men who were similarly dressed.

Many of the men in attendance wore military caps and medals. Some were disabled and they spoke in low tones. It was almost as if they all shared the same secrets that none of the rest of us knew about. It puzzled me but I never asked them any questions.

Following a brief service we went out to the cemetery and after the chaplain spoke a few words the American Flag was taken off of his coffin, folded up, and handed to my dad. Uncle Al had been divorced for some time. He and his wife had never had children.

After the gunshots had died away the casket was lowered in the ground and we went home. I felt very sad. I had enjoyed the time he spent with me but had never spoken about the war or his sickness. I guess like me he kept things pretty much to him self.

He had no debts and after the funeral expenses were paid my dad divided the money up between me and him. My savings account now had just over five thousand dollars in it and I would be able to use it for school expenses, clothes or whatever I wanted.

In addition he had left me a metal detector, a pair of headphones and some books on treasure hunting. All of his other possessions had been either sold or given away before he killed himself.

The cold weather lingered. I spent some spare time reading the manual of the metal detector as well as two treasure hunting books and one about deep sea salvaging of old wrecks, primarily in Florida. I couldn't wait for the warm weather to arrive so I could go outside and see what I could find.