



HONEYMOON *The real story behind the tragic honeymoon death of Tina Watson* DIVE

LINDSAY SIMPSON and JENNIFER COOKE

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*This book is dedicated to Sandra Harvey,
an amazing woman, co-author of both of us.
For Lindsay she was the best friend anyone
could hope to have.*

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PROLOGUE

The Great Barrier Reef, at around 2300 kilometres in length, is so large that it is the only living formation to be seen from outer space. Divers from all over the world are drawn to this part of Australia. Apart from the spectacularly coloured coral gardens, there are more wreck dives on the north-eastern coast of Australia than anywhere else in the country. Nothing remains of the wooden sailing ships, battered in cyclones and wild weather, except for their ballasts and scattered coral-encrusted fittings. Ranked among the best wreck dive sites in the world, however, is a massive steel ship that has survived for almost a century on the ocean floor despite the shifting sands. On 23 March 1911, the SS *Yongala* steamed straight into the heart of a cyclone off Cape Bowling Green, south of Townsville in North Queensland, and sank with 121 souls on board who still lie entombed in their cabins.

Even on the sunniest day in the tropics, this lonely sweep of water is prone to fickle changes of wind and currents, making the seas treacherous for larger ships as the ocean suddenly bottoms out in shallower waters.

In the colourful wonderland above the ocean floor the

and to Rob Webster from Pleasure Divers. Lastly, thanks to our patient editor Brianne Collins, copy-editor Claire de Medici, publisher Tom Gilliatt and agent Lyn Tranter.

We are indebted to Truman Capote, pioneer of 'creative non-fiction'. We have drawn extensively upon primary sources such as transcripts, video footage, media accounts, interviews with eyewitnesses and discussions on internet sites to research this story. We have also visited key places of importance in the book.

May the truth come out so those people whose lives irrevocably changed after Christina Mae Watson's death can have some resolution.

When the SS *Yongala* sank in a cyclone almost a century earlier, the Marine Board of Queensland stated that its fate 'passes beyond human ken into the realms of conjecture, to add one more to the long roll of mysteries of the sea'.

Unlike the fate of the *Yongala*, however, there is one person who knows exactly what happened beneath the same ocean on 22 October 2003.

6000-odd divers who arrive each year to dive on the wreck can be carried away in a matter of minutes. That is, unless they cling to permanent mooring lines or anchor lines set up by visiting dive boats. But the unforgettable sight of the dark, ominous shape of the iron bow emerging 15 metres up from the seabed covered in coral and oysters, its manmade shape curiously clumsy compared to its swirling, colourful, native inhabitants, never fails to reward those who venture below.

Gabe Watson first heard about the SS *Yongala* at the dive shop where he had booked all his certification courses in his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, in the United States. Gabe had wanted to dive the Great Barrier Reef since he was in high school. In five years, he had progressed through his open-water dive certificate to the status of certified rescue diver, one qualification below a dive instructor. His wedding date of 11 October 2003 was planned around the best diving conditions on the reef, a perfect destination for a scuba diving honeymoon. October was also when the green sea turtles began nesting, an important factor for his fiancée, Tina Thomas.

Gabe Watson is a big man, more than 1.9 metres tall, with a chubby, unremarkable face, close-set eyes, thin lips and, almost to offset the blandness of his face, a surprisingly aquiline nose in profile. The high school gridiron and basketball player is the eldest of three boys. He had spent much of his life sheltered by his parents from the harsher realities of life.

A few years earlier, Gabe would have been the sort of man fair-haired Tina Thomas, with a spontaneous, dimpled smile, would have spurned. Gabe lacked Tina's effervescent

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social skills, often traded sarcasm for conversation, and could be surly and withdrawn. But as her twenties crept on, Mr Right became more elusive. Tina had plenty of beaux, including a broken engagement. By her twenty-sixth birthday, however, she was still not betrothed. Tina had been her younger sister's maid of honour and a bridesmaid at girlfriends' weddings. Gabe, also twenty-six, didn't believe in long engagements. When his proposal finally came, the booking of the honeymoon, the purchase of a marital home and the wedding date all occurred within six months, giving Tina little time to plan for the event she had spent most of her life dreaming about. As well as preparing for her marriage, her husband-to-be had insisted that she gain her open-water dive certificate so she could scuba dive on their honeymoon.

In October 2003, the newlyweds joined the two million annual international tourists to visit the Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest World Heritage area, to dive on the wreck that had been dubbed Townsville's *Titanic*. The Watsons left Townsville late on the evening of 21 October 2003 aboard the *Spoilsport*, the 30-metre catamaran that would transport them to the wreck.

On deck in the early morning light, the passengers were swallowed by the endless sea and sky. Cape Bowling Green shimmered on the far distant horizon to the west, a whisker of land cast up by another epoch. The ocean changed from shades of aqua to turquoise with the climbing sun, its depths hidden where the water became an impenetrable blue, hiding the ship's graveyard below.

By 11.27 a.m. on the day of her first ocean dive with her rescue diver husband, Tina was pronounced dead, after

being pulled from the bottom of the ocean by master scuba instructor Wade Singleton.

Later, Gabe would tell police that he knew little about the conditions around the wreck until after Tina's death, in spite of the evidence from other passengers about the in-depth briefings that morning. It was to be the first of many inconsistencies in his recounting of what happened after he abandoned Tina to her freefall towards the ocean floor.

But it would be more than five years until Gabe Watson was charged with his new wife's murder, and another year before he was behind bars serving time for her manslaughter.