

BURIED THREADS



KAYLIN MCFARREN

THREADS SERIES – Book #2

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I like to describe my books as thrillers or romantic adventures, but they also revolve around family drama. This is by no means an accident. We all have families—good ones, bad ones, absent ones, indifferent ones—and sometimes members we never knew existed. However, for the purpose of my stories, it really doesn't matter. The connection is easy enough to make, and readers will relate despite inherent complexities. You see, I've learned how to turn my family dysfunction into an interesting garden. If you dig deep, you can find the richest literary soil. It is the place where I sow seeds of distrust, cultivate secrets and misdeeds, and grow vines of tension, twisting and turning in all directions. The thorns of betrayal cut more deeply, pain lingers longer, and the senses are left reeling from the poison of deceit. For an author, this is the gift of writing. This is what I hope to achieve.

So let me once again thank my remarkable family for their patience and understanding. My parents had hopes and dreams for their future together and in their own way provided the encouragement that led me to pursue mine. The children I've been blessed with will forever remain my most prideful accomplishments and have grown to become my true and dearest friends. Yet there is one person who has opened my life to endless possibilities and who has taught me to follow my heart...wherever it leads. This is, of course, my darling husband Junki—to whom this book is dedicated. Thank you for loving me, for your tasty late night suppers, shared bottles of wine, and for allowing me to drift away from time to time to dangerous, exotic places.

BURIED THREADS

Two hungry souls consumed by greed,
Secured by honor, trust, and deed,
Did break the ties bound by a thread;
Succumbed by lust, their hunger fed.

A warrior's heart turned evil green,
Could not abide the troubled scene;
He pulled his sword with great disdain,
And slashed two throats to end his pain.

In foolish haste he'd killed a prince,
Would pay the price, his crime immense;
With no remorse, he took his knife
And joined his cruel, unfaithful wife.

The prince was laid on upturned stone,
Encased in jade to shield his bone;
Then hid within a walled divide,
His secret kept, the truth denied.

The heart of darkness at his side,
Held back the evil blue moon tide;
But greed returned September morn,
Freed the demons, lost and forlorn.

The night will come when all will flee.
Waves will take the dead to sea.
But if two Tridents find the key, A
Shoten monk will set them free.

-Kaylin McFarren

*Some people come into our lives,
leave footprints in our hearts,
and we are never ever the same.*

因果

CHAPTER 1

The mystery begins...

Kenji Ota didn't fit the description of a bloodthirsty killer. Upon meeting him, it would be difficult to believe he'd gotten away with murdering at least twenty-five men. He was intelligent, intuitive, and physically attractive. His black hair was kept short and neat, and from the professional manner in which he dressed and carried himself, he could have been mistaken for a television announcer or successful business executive. He socialized in mixed circles—with stockbrokers, politicians, and street-smart hoodlums alike—and his charming, larger-than-life personality drew the attention of attractive women everywhere. However, after meeting Mariko Abe, his taste in the fairer sex had been spoiled forever. No one in his mind would ever compare to Kyoto's most beautiful geisha or be foolish enough to keep her away from him.

At 8:45 p.m., he stepped inside RAIN, one of the hottest nightclubs in Japan's Roppongi district with his face hidden behind a katou anime mask. He knew that only the "big" people in Tokyo could gain access to this place, and at the age of twenty-nine, he was already considered one of the largest. His loyalty to his yakuza family, the Zakura-kai, carried great weight and had earned him three rankings within the Japanese syndicate:

Kaito Mitsui's bodyguard, his personal advisor, and captain of his own crew of soldiers. Yet his hard-earned promotions were not the result of monies earned, smart business dealings, or his ability to entice new, ambitious recruits. They came as the result of his eight year incarceration on behalf of his boss for a botched extortion scam.

With renewed interest in the noisy scene before him, Kenji pulled off his mask and tucked it into his black studded belt. He ran his hand across the back of his sweaty neck—the irritating result of another muggy August night. Unlike the devoted men in his crew, he shied away from solid black suits by wearing tight jeans and a loose white shirt most days. And although the police had released him only four days earlier, across his back he carried a red wakizashi—a lethal thirty-one inch sword.

Associates who were below Kenji's rank moved quickly aside and bowed in respect as he passed. On more than one occasion he'd proven himself a deadly adversary with his sweeping blade, the most memorable occurring ten years earlier. Boss Mitsui had called a meeting between Katsu Nagura and all the underbosses in the Zakura-kai to discuss territorial issues. Foolishly, Nagura had challenged their supreme leader, bringing him to his feet.

"You're not even worth killing! You stupid ingrate!" Kaito Mitsui yelled at the top of his lungs.

Dedicated to his mission to protect his boss at any cost, Kenji appeared in front of Nagura in the blink of an eye. He whipped out his sword and slashed the yakuza boss's face twice across both cheeks. Within seconds, four of his men jumped in and were dropped to their knees with gaping wounds and severed arteries. The ones that could stand scrambled to get out of there. The two that couldn't were carried off and deposited in a common grave. Strangely, the whereabouts of these men were of

no interest to local officials or members of Nagura's group. Kenji was never confronted for his part in the bloody incident and was left to conduct business as usual in the Zakura-kai with the same unaffected attitude he exhibited tonight.

As he neared the DJ's booth, the bass-infused rock music grew louder. Hundreds of bodies bounced to the techno beat. Dresses shimmered beneath flashing strobe lights, and the surrounding bar was filled three deep with thirsty customers. By Kenji's estimate, it was unusually busy for a Monday night, even with the discounted drinks and rockabilly theme.

While he continued to eye the club's glitzy interior, contemplating owning it one day, two girls crossed the dance floor and headed straight for him. "Ken-chan, come dance with me," the girl in the skimpy red dress called out. She was swaying her hips to the music provocatively and angling a come-hither look. Her friend in a blue micro skirt joined in, matching her move for move. In his book, with their thigh-high stockings and hemlines barely covering their assets, they looked like Sasebo bargirls. But another quick look around convinced him they weren't alone in their meat market attire.

"You promised last time," the girl in red persisted.

Right. Kenji feigned a smile. He knew these girls belonged to Tak, a "family" member who enjoyed cheap whores and spending his money in by-the-hour love hotels.

"He's not interested in you," the other girl said, tugging at his arm. "He promised to dance with me. Right, Kenji?"

He hadn't, of course. He had better things to do and would have remembered if he'd made a promise to anyone...especially these two. He pulled his arm free with little effort. "Sorry, Tak's waiting. Maybe another time." Kenji could hear their annoying little whines as he stepped away. Hustlers like these were more

disappointed in the watered down drinks you didn't buy them than the time you weren't willing to spare.

He edged his way around the crowd and spotted his friend at the back of the room. As usual the acne-scarred rebel was holding court in one of the club's high-back chairs with drinks on the table and two girls seated before him hanging on every word.

As he drew near, Tak's eyes lifted. "Hey, man! Been waiting for you. What took you so long?" Unlike most of the people Kenji socialized with, Takashi Bekku lacked proper manners. He was slow at paying tabs unless there was someone at the table he needed to impress. Although he was street smart, his education had ended at junior high. The knife scars on his arms and cheek came from his father and not from gang members as his girlfriends were led to believe. But despite it all, Kenji Ota valued their friendship and was confident that if worse came to worst, Takashi would be there for him—watching his back all the way.

"Sorry I'm late," Kenji said. "I had some business to take care of." He pulled up an empty chair, and two new girls came over to join them. They giggled, prattled away, and patted his shoulder, but he paid them no mind.

By the look of excitement in Tak's eyes, he knew exactly what Kenji was talking about. Earlier that night, Mitsui-san had ordered a hit on Nobu Kimura. He was a retired detective who had spent half his life trying to bring down the Zakura-kai. The man was clever, considering he was old, half blind, and favored a leg from a childhood injury. But he was also brazen and secretly corrupt. He had raided their clubs, planted wires, and hassled their business associates. He even went so far as to interrupt the boss's birthday party just when his cake arrived. All because Mitsui refused to drop a dime—hand him a boss on a silver platter to make him look good with his department heads.

Of course it came as no surprise when Kenji got the order to get rid of him. Yet the recollection left him grimacing. He didn't mind taking care of the competition or squirrely guys in the organization, but this was different. Kimura was an outsider, a well-known official people were likely to miss.

Tak was grinning over the top of his drink. "So how'd it go? As good as I'm guessing?"

Kenji glanced away, recalling the white bathroom's blood-splattered walls. He grew anxious and started bouncing his heel under the table. Like chewing on fingernails, he found it hard to sit still and not move when surrounded by people.

"C'mon, gimme the gory details," his friend insisted.

Kenji leaned in and lowered his voice. "I sliced his neck from ear to ear like I'm gonna do yours if you don't shut up."

Tak laughed and slapped his fist into his hand. "Aw, man! Nice. Quick death. Now if it was me, I would've delivered slow torture."

"Yeah, that sounds like you. Anyway, you didn't ask me to come here to discuss Kimura. There must be something else on your mind, right?"

The girl on his left handed him one of the beers from the table. He nodded his thanks and twisted off the cap. After a long pull, he sat back and waited for Tak's answer. "I heard Satoru Yamada hooked up with an American treasure-hunting company and is flying in from Los Angeles tonight. The lead diver showed up three days ago and has been real tight with your sister Yuki ever since. They've been buying gear and going to libraries. Checking out history and treasure hunting shit. No one seems to know much, but I got a good feeling about this one."

Kenji listened closely, thoughtfully nodding.

"Anyway, it turns out this guy has been trying to line up a dive boat. Since you got one stored in that marina

you own, this could be your chance to pull in some real dough...maybe even throw a few crumbs my way."

Kenji snorted a laugh. "Yeah, right. What else do you know?"

"They're getting together for a meeting on Friday night and Yamada is planning to invite that geisha Mariko Abe to join them. One of my guys saw him checking out rings in Los Angeles a few days ago. Before the night is over, they might be celebrating more than a partnership."

Shit. Kenji swallowed hard. He lowered his crossed arms but managed to keep his eyes level, knowing the slightest sign of weakness could undermine his position.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"So far. I'm going to do a little more snooping around to see if there's anything worthwhile to report. Just wanted to give you a head's up."

Ah...now it made sense. The real reason Tak had called and insisted he show up. It wasn't about his sister forming an alliance with Yamada. They'd been friends for years and were always covering for each other. But when it came to his boss, if the American was here to recover something of value, stealing it and handing it over to Mitsui could result in gaining his favor. Maybe even expedite a promotion.

"So where's this meeting going to take place?" Kenji asked. "If it's anywhere near the Tanahashi mansion, you won't make it in there alive. There are hundreds of guards surrounding that place. You'll be cut into tiny pieces if you take one step on their ground."

Tak was quick with a comeback. "No way in hell. You think I'm stupid? My connection at the Garden restaurant said they're due at six thirty."

"Fancy. Yamada must've swindled some rich gaijins out of their money," Kenji said. "So you got any idea what they're after?"

Tak half shrugged. "Not a clue."

"Well, if you hear anything, I'd be interested in knowing."

"Sure, you got it. Anyway, I'm thinking of crashing their party."

Kenji huffed a laugh. "Why would you do that?"

"Firsthand information, of course."

"Well, good luck with that." Kenji stood up to leave.

Tak reached out and grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute! I need your help."

"No way. It doesn't matter how much I hate Yamada, I'm not going anywhere near him. Not without the boss's say-so."

Tak's eyes narrowed. "Whatever I find out could benefit the Zakura-kai," he reminded him.

It was no secret Kenji would do anything for the family: infiltrate investment companies, circulate meth, demand protection money...even destroy their enemies should he be called upon to do so. And even though friendships were short-lived, they were equally important. He didn't want to waste the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. Too many years had been spent that way.

Kenji heaved a sigh. If he didn't go along to keep Takashi Bekku out of trouble, the next execution order he received could have his name written all over it. "All right," he finally said. "What do you want me to do?"

"You'll love it. I picked up a wig and borrowed some women's clothes. I heard they're looking for wait staff, so I thought we'd sneak into the restaurant pretending to be servers."

Kenji unleashed a cynical laugh. "You're kidding, right? Women's clothes? And who do you think is going to wear those?"

Tak's brow furrowed. "You got a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Kenji thought about Yamada and Mariko, and the promise he had made to himself to never let anyone have her...especially that

ridiculous self-serving monk. "I might have to clean out half my bank account before I'm through," he said, "but in the end, it will all be worth it."

The doorbell buzzed again. Kenji laughed and walked to the front door of his apartment with his towel draped over his shoulder and his white shirt unbuttoned. He was getting ready to tell Takashi he wasn't interested in his stupid plan or in hearing more about the container he was in the process of loading. But by the time he'd pulled the knob and begun to swing the door open, he realized he really didn't know who was on the other side and almost slammed the door in the face of a nerdy-looking guy.

"Kenji Ota? I'm here about a plumbing issue. Sorry, am I interrupting?"

What the hell. Kenji looked him up and down. "Yes to the first, no to the second," he said sternly. The guy had brownish hair, which was scattered ambiguously about his head. His face was freckled and he appeared to be middle-aged with neither the build nor the dress of a yakuza gang member. All in all he looked perfectly harmless. Still, Kenji reflected, so had the others.

"I'm in charge of maintenance," the man explained. "My name is Daiichi Asano. As you may know, there have been some concerns about possible water leakage in the building. We're having a terrible time trying to find the source, though, and we're reduced to looking at any suspect blip in our readings, no matter how insignificant. Uh, have you noticed anything leaking in your apartment?"

"I was using the shower earlier," Kenji said. "Would that do it?"

Daiichi sighed. "Ah, yes. I believe it would." He fiddled with the seam in his pants, then seemed to notice himself and swiftly placed his hand in his backpocket.

"Did you want something else?" Kenji said.

"Well...I know this is a bit of a bother, but might I take a look around, just for appearance sake? If I can't tell my boss I gave this an inspection, even a cursory one, he'll have my head."

Kenji hesitated, but decided that he might as well let the man take a look rather than arouse any kind of suspicion, however small. "Sure, help yourself," he said.

Before Daiichi could respond, Kenji immediately walked into the kitchen. He took Kimura's watch from the counter where he had left it and slipped it into his back pocket. When he looked up, Daiichi was peering around the corner, scrutinizing his movements.

"You keep this place pretty neat."

"Well, you know...confirmed bachelor here," he said with forced cheer.

The man nodded and flashed a wry smile, showing he didn't have a clue. He followed Kenji through the kitchen and looked around. Surprisingly, his gaze passed over a steak marinating on the counter and the diamond-inlaid tanto knife Kimura had confiscated from a local hood—the same one Kenji had reclaimed on his sister's behalf and intended to flaunt at their next meeting.

"Getting dinner ready?" Daiichi asked.

"Yeah. I hope you're not planning on joining me."

The man turned away with no comment. He stepped into the living room and didn't seem to find anything of interest. Then he took a quick peek into the bedroom before withdrawing into the hallway.

"Well, I think we're good here," he said, smiling the wide smile of someone who didn't really want to be there.

Kenji nodded and smiled back. He walked toward the entry and waited for Daiichi to follow. But as the

inspector passed by the bathroom, he halted. "Oh, mustn't forget!" he said.

Before Kenji could stop him, Daiichi ducked inside and took a look around. Kenji rushed after him, thinking up distractions. By the way the man was staring, it was obviously too late.

"What on earth is this?" he asked.

Wrong question, Kenji thought. The sudden urge to take this little man and put his head through the wall threatened his self-control.

"I don't believe it!" Daiichi said. "Have you been washing clothes in here?"

Kenji had the sense to look at the floor, feigning deference and biting the corner of his lip to hide the smile that was threatening to break out. "Yes," he managed at last. "As a matter of fact, I have. Exactly. God, how embarrassing."

"Mr. Ota, while I doubt that this habit of yours has anything to do with the water leaks, it sure isn't helping to prevent them. We have washing machines in the basement to take care of your laundry needs. Why don't you use them instead of wasting water and doing this in your own home?"

While he was talking, Kenji had been staring at him, but now he glanced back at the pile of clothes in time to notice a tiny thread of blood weaving its way down the drain.

Daiichi's eyes were stretched wide in horror.

Great. Kenji sensed that he was about to say something that would undoubtedly evoke a negative reaction. His faithful wakizashi was still hanging on the back of the bathroom door. It would only take two seconds to grab it. One quick swing and this annoying little creep would be silenced forever.

"Oh that," Kenji said, following his line of vision.

Daiichi tilted his chin. "Exactly. What's been going on here?"

"Relax, Mr. Asano. I work part time as a butcher. I ripped a carcass wide open earlier today and had to rush home to change for a date. Normally I wear an apron when I work...especially when there's a mess to clean up. But as you can tell, I left everything in the wash."

Daichi's eyes dropped to Kenji's ripped abs and the claw marks tattooed on his chest. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down with his audible swallows. "Right...okay...great. I think we're done here," he said. "But if this happens again, I...well, never mind. Just finish what you need to get done."

"Thank you," Kenji said, smiling. "I always do."

He shut the door behind the maintenance inspector and peered through the keyhole. As soon as Daichi was out of sight, he leaned against the wall. This time it had been a little too close. His confidence was making him bold and careless. But at least now he had a faithful ally—someone who would vouch for his innocence, if it ever came to that.

Kenji wiped his damp forehead with the towel from his neck. He went into the bedroom and mused over how easy it was to convince simple-minded people of anything. Their naivety wouldn't allow them to see the worst in mankind. He knelt down in front of his closet, opened it, and reached deep inside, grabbing a small box hidden behind his shoes and spare arsenal. It was heavy, and its contents clinked as he pulled it out. He removed its lid and dropped the watch on top of all the others. Then he stood back and looked into the dresser mirror.

"How sad," Kenji said aloud. "People just have too much faith these days."

CHAPTER 2

Rachel Lyons arrived at the LAX international departure gate just as the plane was boarding for the 11:30 a.m. flight to Tokyo with 15,800 yens in her purse, a heavy Coach duffel bag, and a growing sense of apprehension over Trident Ventures' new assignment. In preparation for her trip, she'd read dozens of books on the Christian crusades and absorbed as much basic Japanese as her brain would allow. She'd forced herself to appreciate the nuances of exotic Asian cuisine—although anyone's interest in eating raw squid when it could so easily be cooked would forever remain a mystery.

During her meetings at the San Palo Archeological Museum, Rachel had learned that her company had been hired by a Buddhist monk and about the obstacles she and her fellow crewmembers would face during their search for the missing green Templar stone, or Heart of Darkness as Dr. Ying had called it. Prehistoric-looking goblin sharks and Japanese street gangs were on the top of his "watch your back" list, leaving her cringing and wishing Chase Cohen had stuck around long enough to be fully briefed. With their recent success at recovering the ancient Wanli II shipwreck and the Heart of the Dragon diamond hidden onboard, it seemed she and her new partner were quickly becoming recovery agents for missing hearts in some of the most dangerous places in the world.

“Good morning,” came from the petite blond flight attendant in the plane’s open doorway. “Do you know where you’re seated?”

“I believe so.” Rachel extended her boarding pass and was quickly directed to an aisle seat in the twelfth row on the left side of the main cabin.

Great. Few things made her happier on long-distance flights than discovering an empty seat next to her. As she jammed her carry-on bag into the overhead bin, she peeked at the attractive Japanese businessman next to the window, completely absorbed in his newspaper.

“Is this seat taken?” she asked. It was her intention to spread out a few books, healthy snack bars, her laptop, and her research file. She half-expected her well-dressed seatmate to laugh good-naturedly at the pile trapped in her arms. Instead, he remained somber and tilted his head to one side.

“It’s all yours.” Surprisingly, his words revealed only a hint of an accent, leaving her curious about his background and occupation. As she settled in for the eleven-and-a-half-hour flight, he silently watched, revealing little aside from his tan complexion, trendy haircut, gray pinstriped suit, and polished Gucci shoes. He was definitely a “metrosexual man” by Tokyo standards, at least according to the New York Times article she’d recently read. In any event, the elegant stranger seemed harmless enough.

The cabin flight attendant passed by a second time, checking for secured seat belts and reminding passengers to silence their electronic devices. When the plane finally took off, Rachel arranged her in-flight office and alternated between reading books, munching granola bars, and scanning the materials she’d spent close to three weeks assembling. She fell into a comfortable, relaxed state of mind before glancing to her right. To her dismay, she saw that her handsome neighbor seemed to be exuding all kinds of nervous energy. When not glancing out

his window, he was turning his iPad on and off, rocking his heel, tapping his fingers, and flipping through one in-flight magazine after another.

Rachel accepted several complimentary drinks, packets of mini pretzels, and a cold chicken salad from two flight attendants and their rolling carts during the next three-and-a-half hours. Oddly, her plane companion refused every offer, and eventually her curiosity got the better of her.

"Excuse me. Do you mind my asking you something?"

"Not at all," he said.

"I couldn't help noticing that you've been sitting here for hours without even having a drink. Aren't you bored?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Not really."

"Wow...unbelievable. Personally, I can't sit on a plane without feeding my face. I guess you must travel a lot, huh?"

The gentleman laughed softly. "I guess you could say that. I'm on this flight once a month. After awhile, you just settle into a routine."

"Once a month? That's a lot of traveling, especially with the distance and time difference. Japan is sixteen hours ahead, right?"

"Last I counted."

She was silent for a few seconds, determining an eloquent way to ask her next question. "I hope this isn't intrusive, but what kind of job do you have that brings you to Japan so frequently?"

"I guess you'd call me a recovery agent," he said, "since I locate the misplaced and ensure they reach their rightful home. Shanghai, Egypt, New York, Paris, Hong Kong...I've traveled the globe on my missions. Even though economic conditions have been affecting everyone, I've got more work than I can keep up with."

Ah...a private investigator. And a mysterious one at that.

"So perhaps we should be introduced?" He thrust out his right hand. "I'm Shinzo."

Without hesitation, she took the proffered hand. "Rachel Lyons." She bristled at the man's touch—the strange sensation it evoked. Although she wanted to draw her hand away quickly, his other hand closed over hers and held it tight. After an endless moment he released his grasp and leaned back in his seat, giving her the space she craved.

How odd.

He pointed at her files and borrowed copies of Emperors of the Han Dynasty and The Knights of Templar. "Looks like you've got some heavy reading to do. We definitely have a lot in common."

She quirked her brows. "We do?"

"In regard to your interest in history. So what is it you do, Miss Lyons?" He flashed a wide, disarming smile.

She hesitated before answering. "I find missing things too...under the sea."

"You're a treasure hunter?" he asked.

Rachel nodded.

"That sounds intriguing."

She opened her file and felt his gaze sharply, as if he had reached out and touched her skin. She sensed that he wanted to delve further into her life, but for the next two hours she studied ocean topography and reports on strange sea creature sightings, and made a point of not sparing him more than the briefest of glances. The lights on the plane were eventually dimmed, and all around her window shades were pulled down.

It had been three long days since Chase left their warm bed in her father's beachside cottage for salvage preparations in Japan. His absence and the anticipation of her trip had left Rachel completely exhausted. As the air thickened and the cabin stilled, her eyelids fought gravity. The gentle swaying and steady hum of the engines lulled her into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Eventually the sound of the breakfast cart jolted her awake. Still groggy, she forced her eyes open and inhaled the enticing aroma of hot coffee, reminding her of freshly ground heaven. However, her calm was short lived. With one look to her side, she realized the file she'd been reading prior to drifting off to sleep had been tucked into the seat pocket in front of her.

You've got to be kidding me. Rachel studied Shinzo while he sheepishly sipped his coffee. His concerted effort to avoid eye contact left her wondering if he'd taken advantage of her carelessness by snooping through her confidential papers. Everything she'd been sworn to keep secret might have been exposed to this invasive stranger, endangering not only Trident Ventures' project but also the individual who had risked his life to hire them.

She hesitated before asking, "Did you by chance move my file?"

"Your papers fell," he answered. "By the looks of them, you might want to keep those close to you, Miss Lyons."

His inference was unnerving. Although tempted to ask if he'd found anything of interest, she simply mumbled, "Thank you."

With that, Shinzo turned his view to the window.

Mindful of the cart's proximity, Rachel stood abruptly and pulled down her carry-on. She emptied the seat next to her, zipped her bag shut, and returned it to the overhead bin. Then she resumed her seat and stared straight ahead with her hands clenched in her lap. Buried anxieties surfaced by the second, curbing her appetite. She shook her head, declining breakfast when it arrived in the hands of the blond flight attendant.

"That looks delicious," Shinzo said, lowering his tabletop. Rachel watched as a tray containing a cheese omelet, blueberry yogurt cup, croissant, and strawberry jam was set down before him. The flight attendant returned a second time with coffee, cream, and sugar.

Wonderful. Rachel picked up the in-flight magazine and flipped blindly through its pages. She rocked her heel nervously, anxious for this tortuous ride to be over. Her cheeks warmed at the practically pornographic noise that came from her seatmate as he threw his head back and munched gratifyingly, his eyes closed in contentment. She noticed a spot of jam on the corner of his mouth and looked away determinedly.

"There's nothing better than warm bread and eggs in the morning," he said, recovering from his omelet orgasm.

Rachel glared at the annoying man, willing him to be sucked out the window. But then she'd never know his whole story. "You're not a private investigator, are you, Mr. Shinzo?" she grilled.

He picked up his torn roll and smeared it with more jam. "I never said I was."

"But you inferred as much."

"That was never my intent. If you recall, I never told you what I actually recover."

She shook her head and sarcastically laughed. "Oh my God...you're a treasure hunter, aren't you? I've been sitting next to my competition this whole time."

Shinzo chuckled. "Not quite."

"So what do you collect then?"

"I think you'd have a hard time believing me if I told you."

"Try me," she said then inwardly cringed at her insistence.

After another well-chewed mouthful, he looked directly at her and replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "Souls."

CHAPTER 3

What? Rachel looked at Shinzo warily. There was a sense of unease about the whole situation. Still, he hadn't done anything threatening—at least not yet. She swallowed thickly and forced herself to remain calm.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, not at all," he said.

"You actually collect souls?"

"In a matter of speaking."

No way! Tiny hairs on her arms lifted. He had to be joking.

"It seems to me you have a rational mind," he said. "I knew you'd have a hard time understanding. But not everything can be understood rationally or explained away by science, especially when spirits are involved."

"Spirits? What exactly are you talking about?" This was crazy. "Are you some kind of ghost hunter? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

He laughed. "Perhaps it would be best if we didn't discuss this right now."

"No please, enlighten me. I'm totally interested." Disturbed was more like it. She glanced to her left to see if anyone was paying attention, but all the nearby passengers were engrossed in their meals, finishing their movies, or filling out customs forms. Obviously they hadn't heard his shocking reveal.

"What do you want to know, Miss Lyons?" he asked. The repeated mention of her name was becoming

increasingly annoying. She lowered her voice to ensure her obscurity.

"How do you go about gathering souls? And for what purpose?"

"I'm assigned by my superior to various places around the world. Usually it's where the greatest number of lives have been lost as the result of battles or major disasters. Through meditation and energy transference, I help trapped souls ascend to heaven. You see, we're all descendants of Moses, no matter where we come from. Religious beliefs are simply a matter of interpretation." He spoke quietly, but the words thundered in her ears.

After extracting eight large photographs from a manila envelope, he handed them to her and added, "Perhaps these will explain better."

Rachel examined each one. Within the quarter-inch border, the main focus seemed to be Egyptian pyramids until Shinzo pointed out the recurring anomalies. Glowing white orbs hovered above the massive triangular structures, resembling something from a sci-fi movie.

"I've heard of this before," she said. "Some people claim they're spiritual beings, but it's actually dust reflected on a digital camera lens."

Shinzo was quick to correct her. "These time-stamped photos were taken with a friend's disposable camera while I was praying for tortured souls. You might notice in the last two pictures the orbs become fewer and lighter until they completely disappear."

Rachel shivered, feeling as if she'd just fallen down the rabbit hole. "And you actually make a living out of this?"

"Oh yes. It's all about awareness...not just noticing what's going on around you but what's going on within you as well. People are incredibly grateful, especially when I provide them with insight into their past lives."

Past lives? Curiosity drove Rachel to ask her next question—one she would have been wise to avoid. “So can you tell me something about myself?”

“If you wish.” Shinzo pressed his palms together in prayer fashion and closed his eyes tightly. He lowered his head and was quiet for a few seconds before his whole body began gyrating. Rachel anxiously looked around and considered signaling for help, but then his seizure ended and he opened his eyes. He appeared to be calm and collected, as if nothing strange had just happened.

“Your name was Junko and you were twenty-three years old living in Okinawa,” he said. “You were walking near the beach with your two young children. It was an early morning, just after dawn on October tenth and the basket of fish you were carrying was heavy in your arms. You heard a rumbling sound in the sky and looked up. Four American carrier planes passed by directly overhead. Minutes later, bombs hit an airfield three miles away and the ground under your feet shook. Smoke filled the sky and you were frightened for your safety. You wanted to run, but one of your daughters was missing. A sneak wave had caught her and pulled her out to sea. You dove in trying to save her, forgetting you couldn’t swim. As you struggled to reach the surface, your throat filled with water, making it impossible to breathe. Unfortunately, you drowned...along with your child.”

Rachel huffed. “That’s horrible. Why would you tell me that?”

“Not all past lives are pleasant ones. However, if we close our eyes and listen to them, they can tell us something about ourselves. Maybe even explain the fears we have and feel the need to overcome.”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, that’s one story I would have preferred not to hear.”

“Actually, I think it explains your anxieties over being a mother and why you believe you lack the ability to protect children. This, of course, is perfectly natural

since abandonment issues have come up more than once in your life.”

Rachel shifted her weight, distancing herself from him. “What?”

“Your mother and father both deserted you, didn’t they? Your desolation left you drowning in guilt, afraid of the water and the happiness you truly deserve. But you needn’t fear, Miss Lyons. You’ve beat the odds, and you’ll do so again...while cave diving in Japan.”

“How...how could you know that? Who told you? Did you read my papers while I was sleeping, Mr. Shinzo?”

A strange smile came over his face, as though he was enjoying a private joke at her expense. “I’m sorry. I really should have been up front with you. Although at this point you’d probably prefer otherwise, I should tell you...I’m actually your employer.”

Yeah, right. Rachel’s gaze slid from the strange man to the two flight attendants chatting at the front of the plane. She considered asking one of them for the air marshal, but inquires would serve no purpose other than dragging her into an international incident.

With narrowed eyes and a tilted look in his direction, she said, “I don’t know who the hell you are, but if you toss out anymore crazy notions, I’m going to have no choice but to—”

“Hopefully hell has nothing to do with it,” Shinzo interrupted. He pulled a card from his pocket and extended it with his two thumbs in Japanese business fashion. His action exposed the brown prayer beads bordering his shirtsleeve. “My real name is Satoru Yamada, but most people call me Shinzo. I believe you’ve already met my brother.”

Rachel’s mouth sagged. “You mean you’re really a monk? But how’s that possible? You’re not even wearing a robe, and your hair...”

He simply smiled.

"So you've been sitting here this whole time knowing who I am?" Her face was suddenly warm, recalling her derogatory remarks and murderous thoughts.

He nodded. "Actually my brother Akio went to great lengths to ensure I was seated next to you. It's important to evaluate the people you plan to work with, don't you think?"

Yeah, right. Even the fruitcakes that hire you. She accepted a cup of coffee from the passing attendant and listened quietly as Shinzo expounded on her skepticism, stubbornness, and reluctance to change her mind.

"All in all, you're more intellectual than creative, but you're very passionate too," he assured her. "And you have a beautiful aura, by the way. Very strong."

"You got all that from our conversation?" she asked.

He smiled again. "Your handshake actually. Over the years, I've discovered there are mysteries within the soul, which no assumption can uncover and no guess can disclose. We must trust our instincts to look into another's heart...to know their true passion."

Her brow furrowed as he elaborated, basing the distrust she had exhibited on her father's tragic death, her former boss's unwarranted advances, and her turbulent relationship with Chase Cohen—which in his opinion would ultimately find resolution if she were more honest about her feelings.

"All right, I admit it. I'm extremely impressed," she said. "You've obviously done your homework. But everything you've said from my father's death to my previous job at the foundation could have easily been read in newspapers or discovered by researching my history online."

"True enough. But let me ask you something else, Miss Lyons. Does your father still come to you in your dreams?"

Rachel choked on her coffee. He handed her a napkin, and when her coughing subsided, she managed to squeeze out, "How could you know that?"

"He's always with you, Miss Lyons, watching out for your safety."

She glanced impulsively to her left. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, she looked back, more perplexed than ever. "Are you telling me you've actually seen him?"

Shinzo angled himself toward her. "No, but he's always there...within your heart and your memories. Remember that and whenever you feel most alone, close your eyes and quiet your mind. Connect with his spirit and you will feel his eternal, infinite love. He is guiding you on your journey, Miss Lyons. That's how I know you were chosen. You see, no one is more protected than you."

She had her doubts about that and even more over her new employer. But she was here on a paid assignment. His religious organization had already supplied a substantial advance and would be footing the entire bill along with a tidy bonus when she and Chase were through. It was time to ignore all the craziness surrounding this nontraditional monk, time to set aside her apprehensions and focus on the task at hand, no matter how many ghosts might be floating around in his crystal ball.

