

SEVERED THREADS

Kaylin McFarren

SEVERED THREADS

PRAISE FOR KAYLIN MCFARREN'S THREAD SERIES

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"The crisp writing and sparkling dialogue will hold the interest of any reader who enjoys a good mystery story that's well told." –MARK GARBER, Publisher, *Portland Tribune*

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“With 353 pages of awesomeness, *Buried Threads* is one of the best books I have read in 2013.” – JENNIFER HASS, *Reader Views*

“*Buried Threads*, an erotic thriller, combines the action and adventure found in a Clive Cussler novel, the plotting and romance of Danielle Steel’s books, and the erotic energy and supernatural elements of a work by Shayla Black.” –LEE GOODEN, *ForeWord Reviews/Clarion Review*

“From geishas and Japanese street gangs to women just beginning to realize their inner strength, *Buried Threads* incorporates it all. It sounds almost too busy; but all these elements come together in a logical, satisfying progression that uses life’s slings and arrows, twists and turns to provide an outstanding backdrop to what really matters: *love*. And without giving away the ending of the story (which will take many a seasoned mystery reader by surprise) suffice it to say that ultimately events come full circle, offering both a conclusion and the seeds of new experiences to come in an earth-shaking epilogue that neatly ties everything together.” –DIANE DONOVAN, *Midwest Review*

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Severed Threads

A Pirate's Ditty

Two foreign, fetching, lonely souls
Did meet one day with common goals.
One lived on land, one traveled seas,
Per chanced a glance through chir pine trees.
Two hands, one touch, one swan, one rook,
A kiss exchanged, great risk they took.
Bosoms fused with mutual aim,
To share their hearts—ignite the flame.
Then torn apart to distant shore,
To bid farewell, to love no more.
How cruel this sad, divided fate,
To search once more at heaven's gate.
The blooms may fade, the skin bare bone,
But love will never live alone.
Threads severed once will bind again.
When true love's found, death has no end.

—Kaylin McFarren

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*“The fear of death follows from the fear of life.
A man who lives fully is prepared to die at anytime.”*

—Mark Twain

1

The Adventure Begins. . .

Chase Cohen tumbled over Stargazer's side and into California's cold Pacific Ocean, the riches of which he dreamed so close that he could barely breathe. Five years of diving for corporate salvage companies had taught him to engage his senses as quickly as possible—to concentrate and remain focused on his purpose. Yet every time he entered this icy, underwater world, he found himself briefly caught up in his surroundings. Off to his right, a brown dogfish approached. It hovered close by, apparently intrigued by his trailing bubbles. When he smiled and reached out, he half expected the shark-like creature to dart away. Instead, it swerved and circled around him—an action reminiscent of the daring woman in his life.

Sam Lyons suddenly dropped into view, sending the fish scurrying for safety. Hanging weightless before Chase in his black mask, wet suit and regulator, his partner took on the appearance of a dark avenger. His salt-and-pepper hair swayed in the current above his head,

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matching the rhythm of his large, slow-moving hands. In the muted light in the ocean, his brown eyes were tense with impatience.

He signed, “OK.” Chase mimicked his action.

Deflating his buoyancy compensator vest, Chase followed Sam’s scissoring fins down the length of their anchor line, and in no time, they reached the bottom, eighty feet down. Moss-covered boulders dotted the soft, gray sand. In the distance, the ground gradually sloped into an opaque, bottomless depth. For hundreds of years, the jagged outcropping just beyond them had snagged unsuspecting ships and dragged them beneath the waves. According to the coordinates on Sam’s map, somewhere between the bottomless pit and mountainous rise lay a barnacle-crusted anchor and chain. If his calculations were right, below them rested the wreck of the *Wanli II*—the Ming Dynasty emperor’s lost dragon ship. But aside from an ornately decorated piece of wood that Sam had acquired at a local junk shop, it was still unclear what had led him to this particular spot. Perhaps it was the drunken ramblings of the retired salvager with whom he’d kept company at the Crow’s Nest bar. Or the books he pored over every night. Had he really found the mother lode, as he claimed? Chase had his doubts, but Sam’s unrelenting pursuit of his elusive treasure ship gave credence to the notion that something spectacular lay buried down here—something Sam was so sure of that he’d stake his life on it.

As they swam beyond their own anchor, an occasional fish passed by. But there was nothing of interest in the gray, gloomy water. Following Sam, Chase floated over craggy bedrock into a gully of crevices extending like arteries in all directions. They signaled and nodded before separating to cover more ground, to peer into dark places, hidden nooks and crannies, where evidence or unseen creatures might rest.

For twenty minutes, they surveyed the ocean floor. They fanned boulders and crustaceans, dusting off layers of sediment. The farther and deeper they went, the muddier the frigid water grew. Chase strained his eyes and ran his hands over rocks in the hazy murk, but he could not find the anchor chain.

This is pointless! Diving 101 had taught Chase the necessity of maintaining visual contact with his diving partner and carefully monitoring his time, but growing impatience tempted him to blaze his own path. He signed to Sam before veering off and heading due north. He continued groping along, his flashlight illuminating the particulate, floating like dust in the

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narrow beam of light. As he mindlessly continued his search, minutes ebbed away along with his youthful enthusiasm. He'd considered circling back to catch up with Sam when something took shape before his eyes. His hand closed over the metal object, an iron ingot half buried in silt. Believing it had been used as ballast for an ancient ship, his avidity returned. He brushed the sand away, scanning for porcelain shards, chain links—anything to confirm Sam's boisterous claims. But his efforts proved fruitless. The marker stood alone—an ancient, deceptive decoy. He glanced at his watch and quickly realized time had evaporated. Worse yet, his partner had completely disappeared from view.

Damn it! Chase shook his head, frustrated by his lack of common sense. What was he thinking by wandering off? He noted the position on his compass and checked his gauge. By his calculations, he had barely five minutes to spare. Just enough air to clear the surface. To reach the ship and waiting crew.

But what about Sam?

As he curled back around to locate him, Chase's breath suddenly caught. He felt a wall hit his lungs, the stream of oxygen halt in his regulator. *What the hell?* He briskly tapped on his gauge, but the impenetrable problem remained.

Equipment malfunction? The gravity of his situation sunk in with the weight of lead. Reacting purely on instinct, Chase triggered the inflator on the buoyancy compensator in his vest. He sucked on the backup mouthpiece. Then, willing himself to sustain a controlled ascent, he rose through the swirling cloud of silt he'd kicked up from the ocean floor.

Halfway mark, he assured himself.

Out of nowhere, a current took hold, blasting him sideways into the grip of an abandoned fishing net—a ghost trap set adrift by an absent ship.

Oh, shit! Tank tangled, he struggled to break free. But the woven trap held tight. He grabbed the knife strapped to his ankle and slashed wildly above him, behind him, all around until the web gave way. With his heart pounding, he quickened his strokes.

Almost there. Almost there. Racing his small cluster of rising bubbles, he calculated his required safety stop. Miss it and he'd be facing decompression sickness and a whole heap of pain.

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When he reached ten feet, he slowed his strokes and hovered. For an eternal minute of strained, rationed breaths, the silhouette of Sam's ship taunted him from above.

Come on...come on. Finally, he kicked his fins to rise. Reaching upward, he emerged in the choppy surf and spat out his mouthpiece. He gasped for air. Salty air. Air that had never tasted so good.

"Bloody wind's comin' up," the Irish helmsman barked at him. "Callin' it a day."

On board, the crew feverishly looped anchor lines. Froth-tipped waves rocked the ship back and forth, as Chase bobbed in the restless surf. He slid his mask back over his dripping, blond hair.

"Gauge is busted," Chase yelled. "Get me some new gear. I'll head down and grab Sam."

Within a matter of minutes, Chase reached the bottom. He retraced his path and spotted his partner twenty yards out.

Up, Chase repeatedly motioned.

Sam shook his head. He signaled, "Not OK." Yet rising bubbles indicated that his oxygen was still flowing.

Chase grabbed him by the harness to maintain contact.

Hang on, Sam. As they ascended, Sam began moving his arms and legs. Then his limbs went limp. After ten more feet, his regulator fell out of his mouth. Heavy lids sealed his glazed eyes, indicating he'd lost consciousness.

Come on, buddy. Don't do this. Chase's brain scrounged for information, a practice drill from the certification classes he'd taken years earlier. Classes he should have taken more seriously.

Damn it! This wasn't ever supposed to happen. Chase shoved Sam's regulator back into his vacant mouth. He pushed the purge button, forcing air down Sam's throat. Escaping air bubbled around his slack lips, a clear indication that he wasn't breathing. Chase punched Sam's chest repeatedly. But his efforts proved useless.

God no, God no. This couldn't be happening. Not to Sam. Not to Rachel's father. Not when Chase had assured her that he'd look after him.

Fifteen feet under the ocean, Chase struggled to keep his calm. He seized the lifeline and secured Sam to it. He removed his weight belt and inflated his BC. With one huge push, Chase

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shoved Sam upward. *Go!* Then remaining in place, he hovered—decompressing himself for the longest minute of his life. All the while, his memories filled with Sam. The only man in his life whom he had allowed himself to trust. The only father figure he'd ever known. Without hesitation, Sam had offered him a job. He had opened his home and welcomed him like a member of his family. How could Chase have been so careless? So completely self-absorbed?

His reeling thoughts centered on Sam's daughter. The moment Rachel had stepped into his life, all the bad that ever was had vanished. Of all the women he'd allowed himself to become involved with, she was the one who had found her way into his heart. How could he possibly explain this fiasco to her? What words could he use to excuse his actions? Sam and Rachel were the most important people in his life, and in a matter of minutes, that could all change.

Be all right, Sam. Please, be all right. Chase tucked away his anxieties and headed for the surface. With each determined stroke and kick, he prayed that his partner would survive. By the time he boarded *Stargazer*, the crew had already hoisted Sam onto the dive platform. They had radioed the San Palo Coast Guard station, only fifteen minutes away, and one of the crew members had taken over the helm. As they blazed a path toward shore, Chase breathed in oxygen to help purge the excess nitrogen from his system. His gut wrenched as he watched the bulky helmsman aggressively work over Sam's body. Exhaled breaths, rhythmic chest compressions. Ian's relentless attempts continued for an eternity with no visible response from Sam. Then Ian checked Sam's vitals. He closed his eyes and shook his downcast head.

Chase could hear voices all around him asking questions, but his fear muted them. He shoved Ian out of the way. "No!" He took over breathing into Sam's gaping mouth, hammering Sam's chest with his fist. "Breathe, Sam, goddamn it! Breathe!" he yelled. Chase knew that people could be revived without brain damage after as long as an hour in cold water. He couldn't give up. Not when it meant losing his closest friend.

They finally reached the dock and someone had the courage to pull Chase off Sam. Hold him at a distance as a team of professionals took over.

"Looks like cardiac arrest," a coast guard officer announced.

The words reverberated in Chase's ears. He grasped the ship's railing to keep from collapsing. He watched as they transferred Sam's spent body into a waiting ambulance. Then

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he forced himself to follow closely behind, his rubbery legs barely cooperating. He begged to ride with Sam, but the same officer assured him that nothing more could be done.

Chase stood barefoot in the gravel lot of the marina, watching the white emergency vehicle drive away. As soon as it disappeared from view, he fell back against a parked car. All sound had been siphoned from the air. The only thing registering was his throbbing brain and the radiating pain in his chest.

Why Sam? He was a healthy fifty-five-year-old man. He had over twenty years of diving under his belt and knew the ocean better than anyone did. With no threatening divers or reported sharks in the area, Chase couldn't imagine what had caused Sam's heart to stop cold.

What did I miss? Chase racked his brain for answers. He'd personally checked Sam's tank and regulator after picking it up at the dive shop. At the time, everything had been in working order. He was sure of it. Yet, if equipment failure were determined to be the cause of Sam's death, Chase would be held accountable. Even if the court let him off, he would always believe himself responsible.

Chase's eyes dropped to a white plastic bag, bouncing and rolling across the ground—a discarded and insignificant piece of life.

"Mr. Cohen?"

A man's voice turned him around. The coast guard officer had been making inquiries, taking statements. Checking their dive equipment. The crew members were now huddled at the far end of the dock, casting wary looks in Chase's direction.

"Would you like to come with me...to explain all of this to Miss Lyons?" he asked.

God, Rachel. The worst was yet to come. He glanced at the ship's fantail, now vacant except for Ian. The mountainous man stood hunched over, his face in his hands, sobbing.

"I'll tell her," Chase said. He waited until the officer turned and walked away. Until he was completely alone. Why had he agreed to do such a thing? Knock on Rachel's door. Tell her that he was responsible for taking away the only parent she had left.

Watch the love in her eyes turn to hate.

Although he loathed his decision, he chose the coward's way out. He flipped open his phone and auto-dialed her number.

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Rachel's voice came on the line. Confident. Captivating. Unaware. "So, don't tell me. Another fool's errand, right? I swear my father will never grow up."

Chase remained silent for an eternal moment. And in that moment, he wished for the strength of Goliath—to rein in his quaking nerves, to give him the courage to spill the words that refused to form.

"Chase?" Concern edged her tone. "Chase, are you there?"

He forced another swallow. "Rachel, listen," he began in a rasp of a voice. Rustled from panic, from guilt. From disbelief. "Something happened. It...it's your dad."

2

Four Years Later

San Palo Archaeological Museum

Dread traveled on Rachel Lyons's rapidly clicking heels. With each breath, she drank in the musty smells of ancient relics and discovery. Her gaze dusted the familiar terra-cotta warriors and inscribed cuneiform tablets that lined the plastered walls. As she rounded the museum library's sharp corner, a woman's shriek and the thundering boom of falling books jolted her.

"Good Lord!" Eleanor Briggs, Dr. Ying's silver-haired assistant, clutched her chest. "I didn't realize anyone was in the building." Her eyelids fluttered beneath her yellowed bifocals before recognition took hold. "Please excuse me, dear."

"Sorry, Eleanor. I didn't mean to startle you."

"What's that?"

Rachel repeated her words loud enough for the woman to hear. “I said I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Not to worry. That’s what I get for not paying any mind.” Eleanor’s translucent blue eyes dropped to the scattered textbooks around her feet. “Goodness. Would you look at the mess I made?” Her slight frame wobbling, she gingerly lowered herself. She planted a blue-veined hand on the floor for balance and reached out to collect the nearest volume.

Rachel stole another glance at her watch and her muscles tightened. Only two minutes left. But what choice did she have? Without assistance, Eleanor might keel over from exhaustion.

“Here, let me get those for you.” Dropping her briefcase, Rachel knelt and gathered the books into her arms. *Imperial History*, *Swift Explorations*, *Treasures of the Deep*.

She stacked the professor’s texts on a nearby table, and then reached a hand under Eleanor’s bony arm and guided her back onto her feet with care. A thirty-year museum veteran with more knowledge than the entire basement archives, the woman was an exhibit in and of herself.

“My, my,” Eleanor said. “It does seem a bit harder to get up than it used to.”

Rachel flashed a smile while collecting her bag. “Dr. Ying? Is he in?”

“Oh, yes—of course. Come with me.”

She linked one of her arms through Rachel’s and shuffled beside her down the never-ending corridor of coin collections and metal implements. Rachel battled the urge to break into a sprint.

Nearing the museum director’s office, Eleanor released her hold. “Just one moment,” she directed. After a rap on the door, she opened it a crack and peered inside. “Professor, excuse me. Miss Lyons is here.”

Rachel slipped off her black beret and tucked it into the pocket of her tan overcoat. Noting a dust mark on the knee of her black slacks, she gave the pressed seam a brush.

“Go on in, my dear.” Eleanor widened the door for entry.

Rachel edged past her guide and made her way toward Dr. Ying, a compact, sparse-haired man. He stood beside the crowded bookcase in his tiny office. Dark circles weighed heavily under his eyes. When their outstretched hands connected, Rachel’s feet deepened behind

his thick, black-rimmed glasses. He offered his usual warm smile, which today only added to her discomfort.

"I can't thank you enough for stopping by." He waited for Rachel to seat herself before rounding his desk. "We've been busy with preparations for the maritime reception tomorrow night. I hope you're planning to attend." His executive chair creaked under his weight.

"Oh, right. I'm looking forward it." *Make that dreading it.* She hated attending formal affairs, subjecting herself to idle chitchat. At the moment, however, even banal conversations sounded more appealing than the one she was about to have.

Eleanor was suddenly at her side. "Shall I fetch you any coffee or tea, Miss Lyons?"

"None for me, thanks." Rachel watched as Eleanor confiscated a scarred, red saucer filled with cigarette butts from atop the professor's cluttered secretary. Eleanor gave him a reprimanding but caring shake of her head before she left the room. Apparently, his vow to abstain from his two-pack-a-day habit had fallen to the wayside since Rachel's last visit. At least the scent of vanilla from the air freshener on a shelf behind him masked any airborne evidence that hadn't escaped through the partially opened windows. She unfastened her briefcase and pulled out the manila folder.

Time to get this over with. With four more stops to make and a dozen phone calls to return before noon, she had barely ten minutes to spare.

"You know," he said, "I've been meaning to ask you about that old house you're living in. Have you made up your mind about selling it?"

His question threw her off balance. She rested the file on her lap, debating how to answer. "I haven't decided yet."

"Mmm..." Dr. Ying nodded thoughtfully. "Well, if you do, I'm sure it will go quickly. Your dad used to say the sea captain who built that place put his heart and soul into it."

Dr. Ying had been a close friend of her late father, so it was no surprise that he wanted to reminisce. But the subject threatened to unearth the trove of guilt she'd prefer to keep buried.

"Shall we get down to business?" She extracted his application—the first and only of his applications that had given her pause. Hall expansions and artifact acquisitions were one thing, but this project was quite another. Raising her head, she found Dr. Ying studying her over the rim of his blue, oriental teacup. "I'm afraid, professor, we...have a bit of a problem."

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He sighed. “Don’t tell me I missed a line or two. I asked Eleanor to double-check it for me. But then, these days neither of us is—”

“Actually,” she broke in, “your grant application was in perfect order.”

“Oh. Good.”

“But,” she quickened the pace of her rehearsed words, “as you know, the board of trustees can’t be responsible for the majority of your funding. And they typically don’t get involved in speculative proposals. There’s no doubt in my mind that they will *deny* your request this time.”

Tea spilled from the professor’s cup. The brown puddle seeped toward a stack of files on his desk. He mopped it away with a scrunched piece of notebook paper as he glanced in her direction. “I’m sorry. What did you say?” His strained voice shot out an octave higher.

She swallowed. “The Warren Nash Foundation provides funds to museums to bid on collections *after* they’re evaluated by official committees. Although it’s common knowledge that Mr. Nash encouraged exploration projects, he never would’ve financed acquisitions based solely on assumptions and unsubstantiated claims.”

Dr. Ying froze, bewilderment in his dark eyes. “But this...this isn’t a *tugboat* we’re referring to. This is history in the making.”

“I understand your disappointment, especially since the board has always been such a strong supporter of your work.” An attempt to soften the blow. “Our office would be more than happy to look at other—”

“Rachel,” he ran over her words, “maybe I didn’t make myself clear. What we have here is an incredible discovery that’s going to bring international recognition to our museum...to our city and community.” He took a breath, gathering himself. “Please understand...an opportunity like this doesn’t come along every day. I know Sam would’ve *loved* to have been part of this.”

Rachel’s stomach churned as she realized that her father’s name had just been tossed for leverage. And for what, a few gold coins and some ceramic knickknacks she could find on eBay?

She shoved the paperwork back into her file. “I don’t know what else I can say, Dr. Ying. Perhaps the American Maritime Association can be of assistance.”

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In an instant, the man was on his feet. “If you could just give me a minute...” He pulled a worn textbook from his desk and flipped through the pages as he moved toward her chair. “This isn’t a Spanish galleon, mind you. It’s an ancient Chinese vessel, similar to the *Nanhai No. 1*—an eight-hundred-year-old merchant ship that was involved in arms smuggling before it sank fifty-eight meters under the Java Sea. Copper guns and cannons—which weren’t uncommon on ocean-faring vessels at the time—were discovered near the wreck site. Ah...here’s a sketch.” He placed the book on her lap, anchoring her. “Besides a cargo of valuable tea, our ship was carrying more than 10,000 pieces of *kraak* porcelain in the lower decks as ballast. According to the historical data I have here somewhere...” He turned and briskly leafed through a hefty stack of paperwork.

“Oh, now I remember,” she said. “I read about the recovery of that ship years ago. The survey and lifting cost of the artifacts alone was over ten million dollars.” She set the book aside and rose. “Doctor, this sounds fascinating, truly, but like I said...”

Abruptly, he straightened. The intensity in his gaze stilled her. “The point is, Rachel, it’s a phenomenal find. I’ve acquired an ancient manifest and trade records. They indicate the *Wanli II* had miraculously reached the Sea of Cortez before a storm ripped through her sails and buried her under the ocean. What’s more, there’s gold and treasure on board worth more than anything you could ever...” He pressed his glasses up a notch. “It’s priceless.”

Rachel released a closely held breath. She felt like the executioner of the man’s lifelong dream. The same damn dream her father had held onto for most of her life. She wouldn’t have accepted her exasperating job or been placed in this awkward position if not for her family’s tragedy. If not for the promise Dr. Ying had made to her father years earlier.

But what if she was proven wrong? If the professor’s project was more than wishful thinking? It certainly wasn’t the first time wreckage had washed up along the California shore. A discovery of the magnitude that the professor claimed this was could make all the difference to San Palo’s disintegrating township. “And you have proof, I assume, of everything you’re telling me?” The question slipped from her mouth before she could stop it.

He nodded with enthusiasm. “I’ve been meeting with the lead diver from Trident Ventures on a regular basis. The artifacts he’s in the process of collecting should help validate the ship’s identity.”

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Trident Ventures. There was something vaguely familiar about the name. “So this is a reputable firm? A company that would give credence to your proposal?”

“Absolutely. But unfortunately, the owner has run into a few glitches. The cost for additional supplies and recovery equipment has slightly exceeded his expectations.”

Exceeded by how much? She was afraid to ask.

“I know this seems a bit unorthodox, but he’s actually due here any moment. I’m sure all your questions will be answered if you could just—”

“Wait!” Eleanor’s shrill voice echoed in the hallway. “One moment, sir.”

“It’s all right, ma’am. I’ll let myself in.” The man’s deep, captivating voice pulled Rachel’s face toward the opening door. “Sorry I’m late, Doc, I was—” His words broke off when his gaze found Rachel’s.

Her shoulders coiled. *Oh my God*. It couldn’t be.

Trepidation flowed hotly into her cheeks as her gaze traveled over his face. Years had passed, yet he appeared as irritatingly handsome as ever. His sun-bleached hair still fell into a natural part above his lucid blue eyes. The ever-present five o’clock shadow rimmed his contemptuous jaw.

“Rachel,” he finally said. “It’s been awhile.” A satisfied glow replaced his look of surprise.

She shot a pained look at Dr. Ying before facing him again. “You’re Trident Ventures?”

A confident nod of his head was his only reply. Word had it, Chase Cohen, the renowned treasure hunter, was more determined than ever to leave his mark. He’d rifled ocean plots stretching from Spain to Key West, selling off remnants of other people’s lives. She had hoped their paths would never cross again.

So much for that wishful thought.

The professor’s worrisome voice broke the thorny silence. “Well, now that we’re all here, maybe we could get down to the matter at hand.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Her intense stare carved lines into the professor’s chin. Clearly, he was now wishing he hadn’t finagled this meeting. Knowing full well the history Chase and Rachel shared, his manipulation only further demonstrated the extent of his desperation.

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Chase threw on a crooked grin and sauntered across the room. He braced himself against the desk. “Did Doc show you the piece of china I found last week? Got real worked up over that one, didn’t you, pal?” he tossed over his shoulder.

Her eyes raked over Chase’s snug T-shirt, tattered jeans, and weathered cowboy boots, which were crossed at the ankles. His golden tan served as testament to the time he’d spent frolicking outdoors. *Some things never change.*

“Found it only ten miles off the coast. Even though it wasn’t marked like we hoped, after the storm we had last week, there’s no telling what’s going to turn up.”

This was California, not Micronesia. Every sunken ship, half-buried skeleton and carefully mapped wreck site had been fully played out. She wasn’t about to be fooled or charmed into backing a hopeless cause. She stared daggers at his face, hoping he’d be forced to look away. But nothing seemed to faze him.

“Came real close to going over a sheer drop-off. Then we figured it out...where the *Wanli*’s been holed up all this time. Man, I can’t wait to show you—”

“How you’re still exploiting what my father taught you,” she finished.

“Exploiting?” Chase cleared his throat. “That’s not exactly true, Miss Lyons.” He dropped his chin, the tension around his eyes softening. “It’s still *Miss*, isn’t it?” Before she could respond, he continued. “My crew might move a little sand around, but whatever we find ends up benefiting everyone, I assure you.”

Oh, really?

Rachel pulled the scarf from her neck. The arrogance in the room was suffocating. “Not everyone benefits from your actions, Mr. Cohen. All your shifting around does a ton of damage too.”

“We *are* talking about diving here, right?”

She reared back. “What did you say?”

Chase coughed. He shot the professor a wary glance before returning his attention to Rachel. “I just meant that this expedition...it’s important.” A plea settled in his eyes.

“In that case, you shouldn’t have any trouble finding someone else to help you. For future reference, gentlemen, our foundation won’t be supporting *any* projects involving Trident

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Ventures. Good luck to you both.” Snatching her briefcase, she spun on one heel and stormed out of Professor Ying’s office.

As she strode into the parking lot, Rachel was agitated to see Chase following closely behind. Nearing her vehicle, she blew out a heated breath and fumbled for the keys in her bag. Just as she located them, Chase inserted himself between her and the car. She reached around him, trying to grasp the door handle. But with a flick of his arm, he deflected her hand.

She felt her entire body flush. “Get out of my way,” she ordered.

“Two minutes. Just give me two minutes to explain,” he implored.

“I don’t have time for this.” She meant it in more ways than one. His nearness rekindled the pain; it unearthed the argument she’d had with her father only hours before he died. Her thoughtless outburst had clouded his judgment and driven him to take an unnecessary risk. In her mind, there was no other explanation for his death.

“Rachel, I’m not going to lie to you. I heard you’d given up diving. That you were working for the Warren Nash Foundation. But I honestly had no idea you’d be here.”

Her spine stiffened.

“And as for your dad,” he continued, “not a day goes by that I don’t feel responsible for what happened. Sam was a good man. Like a father to me.”

She bristled. Her gaze burned with emotion. “Oh, really? Then why didn’t you have the decency to show up at his funeral?”

Chase’s gaze slid from her face. His brows met when he looked up again. “Look, I really wanted to come. It’s just that after the investigation and everything—”

Her anger ripened. “Yeah, right.” His scrawled note had left her brooding for weeks. *Something urgent came up...have to leave town.* After professing his love for her, he had turned out to be the scoundrel her brother, Devon, had painted him. Her teeth clenched at the memory. “You were a complete asshole. Now get out of my way.”

Using both hands, she shoved hard against his taut chest, but he rocked right back into place. He grabbed hold of her wrists and pulled her in close. “You have every right to be

angry,” he said quietly. “But there was a good reason why I stayed away. Why I never called you.”

An involuntary shiver ran up her spine. She turned her head and looked toward the marina, wishing the drifting fog could shield her from his soul-searching gaze. She didn’t want him to see how broken she’d become. Or that, deep inside, she had never stopped yearning for his touch.

“It had nothing to do with you and me,” he insisted.

She stepped back, breaking his grip. “It *still* doesn’t.” Venom dripped from her words.

Chase nodded slowly. “Maybe not. But right now, I need this job. More than you know.” His blue eyes intensified. “What will it take for us to get past everything? An apology? You have it. My promise to stay clear of you? Done.”

His words reminded her how easy it was for him to dismiss her. She’d been such a fool for allowing his charm to blind her. He obviously cared about no one but himself. And deep down inside, no matter how hard she had tried to dismiss it, they both shared the blame for her father’s death. Nothing would change that.

She drew in a deep breath. “There *is* one thing that would make me feel better.”

His face relaxed. “You name it. Anything you want.”

She pulled back her arm and swung with all her might. Her palm connected with his cheek so hard that it stung her hand to the bone.

“Damn!” He grabbed his face, wincing from the blow.

She pressed her palms together, nursing her own pain, and addressed him again.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a long time. If you think you can just show up and expect me to—”

Before she could finish, he pulled her into his arms. His lips found hers, launching a current through her veins. The parking lot was spinning out of control, and he was the driving force. Her legs quivered, leaving her unsteady on her feet. When he finally lifted his head, she leaned against him, breathless, betrayed by her body’s weakened state.

His warm breath brushed her cheek, lifting tiny hairs on her skin. “And I’ve wanted to do *that*,” he whispered raggedly, “from the first moment I saw you in Doc’s office.”

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Of course. His agenda. Her senses sobered. She distanced herself and firmed her tone. "Nice try. But you're still not getting a dime from me."

Chase bent his head and seemed to be strategizing his next move. When he looked up, his crystal eyes chipped away at her soul. "For what it's worth, Rachel, I really am sorry...for everything. Should've said that a long time ago." He rubbed the back of his neck. An emotion resembling disappointment crossed his face. "Believe me; I would've stuck around if I could have."

She was surprised by his show of sincerity. But nothing he could say would lessen the pain she still felt over his abandonment when she had needed him most.

She jutted out her chin. "It was just a summer fling. A mistake from beginning to end. We should have ended it like adults, is all."

Her final words hung in the air. A nerve jumped at his temple. "I didn't know you felt that way," he said.

Chase's kiss still simmered on her lips. His nearness threatened her resolve. It wasn't in her to be cruel, but she had hurt far too badly to back down now.

"So...now you do." The lie tasted bitter in her mouth.

Chase's eyes darkened. He gave a rueful nod. "Good thing we got that cleared up. Wouldn't want to make any more mistakes."

As he strutted toward his truck, anger gathered in Rachel's chest. Anger over his words, his deeds, his presumptuous kiss. Over the fact that for a split second, he had made *her* feel like the bad guy. Mentally, she threw daggers at his back. "Damn you, Chase Cohen."

She slid inside her silver Kia and slammed the car door, grateful that the museum's security guard was now watching from a distance. If he hadn't been, she might have acted on a homicidal impulse and run Chase over, the manipulative jerk.

In fact, it made her feel better just to imagine it.

3

Chase pulled the heavy wooden door shut behind him and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Through the white spots dancing in his vision, he made his way toward the towheaded helmsman, Ian Lowe. Two months after leaving San Palo, they'd miraculously crossed paths and ended up working on one of the largest salvage operations in the West Indies. But now, they were back in the States, more determined than ever to make it on their own.

As was his usual practice, Ian was parked at the far end of the bar, beside the swinging kitchen doors. Chase dropped onto the barstool next to him.

"Whiskey," he called to the female bartender, who was busy pulling bottles off the top shelf. In his present circumstances, he'd be wise to hold onto the few measly dollars clinging to the inside of his pocket. But thanks to his unexpected run-in with Rachel, the need to quench his thirst won out.

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Ian's shoulders remained slightly hunched as he rocked a raw egg back and forth in his half-filled beer mug—a crude remedy for his apparent hangover. His heavy-browed eyes studied Chase. “Didn’t go well, I take it?” The gravel in his brogue suggested he’d come straight from bed to the Crow’s Nest Bar.

“An understatement,” Chase muttered. “You won’t believe this, but Rachel Lyons was there. Just as stubborn as ever.” A glance around the room reassured him that no one in the musty bar had the slightest interest in their exchange. To his left, a young couple was sharing pancakes. In the corner, a scrawny guy was typing away. And scattered about were leather-faced fishermen who appeared to be leftovers from the previous night.

By the time he turned back, Ian had finished his drink. “Gimme another pint of wet stuff, darlin’,” he sang out.

“Be right with you two,” Naomi McKenzie tossed over her shoulder. She inched her way down the ladder.

“And how *is* Miss Lyons these days?” Ian asked.

“Let’s just say I don’t know anyone who can leave an impression like she does.” Chase massaged his cheekbone while working his jaw. No doubt, the blow she’d delivered had been well deserved. Still, he was glad he’d stolen a kiss before she’d trampled his ego.

“Ah, so ya finally fessed up.”

“She didn’t want to hear any of it.” And personally, he hadn’t had the stomach to unload on her. Not with her brother, Devon, holding a world of secrets over his head. Secrets that no woman, especially Rachel, could possibly understand.

Ian pursed his lips, clearly working up more bum advice about women.

Chase quickly steered him away from the subject. “So where’d you end up spending the night?”

“Down in Whistler, acting the maggot. The skirt’s husband was supposed to be gone for a good two days. Ended up climbin’ out a window with me pants in tow. Swear I heard a trigger cock as I was roundin’ the corner at Main.”

“Shit, I hope you’re not leading any of those guys back to my boat.”

Ian scratched his grizzled face and then slapped Chase on the back with his meaty palm. “Maybe I should. We could knock ‘em out and shake ‘em for change.”

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A smile tugged the corner of Chase's mouth.

"That is, unless you've got a better plan, Cap'n."

"I wish to hell I did," Chase grumbled. "*Alegria's* pump's busted, fuel's nearly gone. Won't be long before someone slides right under us." He released a sharp breath and stared down at the bracelet on his wrist. Christ, he'd give anything to stop thinking about money and his fledgling business for one lousy day.

"Ah, no point mopin' about, mate. Go to yer woman. Convince her to change her mind. With her company's money, we'd be back on the water in—"

"Not an option," Chase cut in, although he couldn't deny wanting any excuse to see her again.

The day she'd walked into her father's office, grinning over new algae she had discovered, he'd been completely captivated. Sure, she was smart, sexy, and drop-dead gorgeous, with her long, cinnamon hair and moist, kiss-me-now lips. But it was the depth in her hazel eyes that had arrested his thoughts, making it impossible to throw two coherent words together. Then she shook his hand, and the softness of her skin had melted away every last ounce of tension.

Too bad he went and screwed it all up. Just like everything in his life.

"With *gobshite* bankers avoidin' us like the bloody plague," Ian persisted, "what other remedy is there?" He leaned far back in his seat, oblivious to Naomi, who was now standing behind him, trying to access the kitchen.

She shifted the cumbersome tray in her arms. "Ian, sit up. You're blocking the door."

A twinkle gleamed in Ian's green eyes as they latched onto the bartender's ample cleavage. "Not at all, darlin'. Feel free to sit on me lap anytime and rest that top-heavy load of yours." He grinned, as if his retort was among the cleverest ever spoken.

"The only thing I'm gonna be giving your lap is a swift kick. Now, move it."

The threat was a powerful one. He immediately scooted his chair out of the way. "Was meant as a compliment, ya bleedin' weapon."

Chase mentally applauded the gutsy broad.

She blew out a huff as she made her way past them. "Can't you afford any better friends, Chase?"

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“Not at the moment,” he replied flatly.

The scrapper Chase had aligned himself with definitely had his flaws. His mischievous flirting and sexual promiscuity provided constant reminders of why his wife and two sons had booted him from their home in Dublin ten years ago. Yet when it came to friendship, no one was more loyal or forgiving.

“Ya know, me friend, there *is* another way,” Ian said. “Was in Dolan’s Pub two nights ago, when this burly gent saddled alongside and offered to wet me whistle. Turned out to be a loan shark. Charges interest steep as bunkers. Still an’ all, I could convince him to give us a shot.”

“Yeah, he’d give us a shot, all right. In both kneecaps.” Chase shook his head. “Just give me a few more days. I’ll come up with something. I always do.” He spoke with confidence that didn’t extend past his words. His credit was tapped. Bill collectors would be calling again any day now. Everything he had was tied up in the sixty-foot Delta secured to the dock outside. If he sold his only possession of value, he’d forfeit a lucrative reward for the treasure that was sitting on the ocean floor—just out of his reach. But what were his options? At that moment, he’d sell his soul if there were a way to reel it back in.

Chase spotted the bartender chatting it up in a dark corner. “Naomi, did you forget us?” he called out.

The petite bartender sashayed back to her post. “Now how could I forget about you, sweetheart?” She flashed a smile before setting the fresh pint and amber shot glass before them.

Ian grinned. “Aren’t you joinin’ us, darlin’?”

“Too early for me.” Naomi pushed her unruly red curls off her sweaty brow. She lifted a water bottle and sucked it down in nothing flat. Then she resumed her chores behind the bar. As Chase watched her with renewed interest, he recalled the first time he’d laid eyes on the plucky woman.

Macy’s Café. Chase had joined Sam for a cup of coffee, and Naomi was sitting in the booth beside him. She ogled and fussed over the old man, who was clearly twice her age. Although Chase had gone there to discuss Sam’s job offer, for the better part of an hour

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Naomi had given both of them an earful. He'd never met anyone who took so much pride in the amount of gossip she could spout. Aside from Ian, anyway.

"So, today's your birthday?" Chase quizzed.

Her smile brightened. "How'd you guess?"

He nodded toward the black T-shirt she wore. In white script, the words *Over the Hill* were stretched thin across her chest.

Ian nearly choked on his drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Here I thought you were advertising yer assets."

"God, Ian. You're such an ass." She dragged the blue towel off her shoulder and over the bar's splattered surface. "Can't you get your mind out of the gutter for one minute?"

Chase jumped in to save his friend from further humiliation. "So," he said to Naomi. "You still heading back to Alaska?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "Doesn't look like it. My sister made a ton of money last spring, but according to her, fishing's gone all to hell. With trawlers pulling in half empty, her regulars completely dried up."

For half a second, Chase saw dollar signs in her eyes and considered asking if her sister might be willing to invest in his ailing business. But somehow, soliciting money from the town's "ceiling expert" seemed a little too desperate—even for him.

"Still chartering your boat?" Naomi asked, wiping her hands on the white tied around her waist.

He shrugged and ran his thumb over the shot glass rim. "For the time being."

"My cousin, Blaine McKenzie...over there in the corner...he just flew in this afternoon and plans to stick around all week. He's looking for someone to take him out."

Chase glanced over his shoulder. It was the scrawny guy in his early twenties, hunched over a laptop computer. With his rolled-up shirtsleeves and round, black-rimmed specs, he resembled a contestant on some nerd reality show.

"That pip's yer *cousin*?" Ian blurted.

Chase actually had had the same thought. The idea that the two shared DNA was staggering.

"We share a last name, but he's a distant cousin through marriage," she replied.

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The shaggy-haired kid glanced up and smiled. He seemed undaunted by the three sets of eyes that were now fixed on him.

“Believe it or not, Blaine’s intellect is highly sought after,” she went on. “He’s some kind of software genius up in Seattle. Every now and then, he manages to fly in for a visit.”

“Ya don’t say,” Ian muttered, returning his focus to Naomi’s shapely figure.

She set Ian’s empty glass behind the bar. “He’s planning to stay on for a full week this time. If you’re interested, he’s got his gear stowed in his plane outside.”

Chase had just tossed back his high-octane drink. “His *plane*?” he squeezed out, certain he’d misheard.

She jerked her thumb to the bar’s picture window. “That’s it right there.”

Both Ian and Chase craned their necks to look. There, tethered to the dock, sat a beautiful, red-and-white Grumman Mallard seaplane, and in the corner of the room, still smiling, sat the solution to all their problems.