

BANISHED THREADS

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KAYLIN MCFARREN

BANISHED THREADS

© *Threads* Series—Book #3

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Praise for Kaylin McFarren's Threads Series

Severed Threads—Book #1

“With plenty at stake, erotic chemistry, dastardly villains, a lost relic, an unusual setting, and a touch of the supernatural, this indie novel could stand on any romance publisher’s shelf. The full package of thrills and romance.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Crisp writing and sparkling dialogue that will hold the interest of any reader who enjoys a good mystery story that’s well told.” —Mark Garber, president, *Portland Tribune and Community Newspapers*

“I highly recommend this story for people who enjoy romance and suspense. Kaylin McFarren will not let you down! I look forward to future stories in this series.” —Paige Lovitt, *Reader Views, Chicago Sun Times*

Buried Threads—Book #2

“The many levels of this story will engross readers into the world of the Japanese syndicate, a Buddhist monk, and the American couple, while they quickly read to a satisfying conclusion, absorbing the culture the story is set in along the way.” —Angie Mangino, *San Francisco Book Review*

“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 Review/Clarion Reviews*

“More than a murder mystery, this mingles a treasure hunt, an international race against time, a dark prophecy, Japanese culture, erotic encounters, and a clever killer’s modus operandi into a story that just won’t quit.” —Diane Donovan, *Midwest Book Review*

Banished Threads—Book #3

“As with Severed Threads and Buried Threads, book three closes on a cliffhanger—one that indubitably will keep readers on edge. Well written and absolutely enthralling, Banished Threads is a wonderful addition to McFarren’s award-winning series!” —Anita Lock, *Pacific Book Review*

“This intricate escapade is as carnal as it is cerebral. If you’re into vivacious prose and bodice-heaving melodrama, this just may be your cup of tea.” —Joe Kilgore, *The US Review of Books*

“Family secrets, engaging characters, the heat of romance, and a standout suspense plot with a twisty, surprise ending make *Banished Threads* a must-read addition to McFarren’s popular Threads series.” —Kathryn Brown, *Chanticleer Book Reviews*

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Author's Note

As many readers know, novels almost never belong solely to the authors who write them. They are in large part the property of editors, publishers, literary agents, advertisers, distributors, bookstore owners, and various retail outlets. Ultimately, the writers are rewarded with a single-digit percentage in appreciation for their originality, bloodletting, and painstaking commitment to completing a praiseworthy best seller.

By vast comparison, self-published authors have no pressing deadlines, no stagehands, no hand-waving directors, no commission-paid staff, and no designated committee to determine the design of their book covers or the acceptability of their nonformulaic genre-bending manuscripts. Although this might sound attractive to new aspiring writers, grandeur is a fleeting idea that is only realized when one takes the time to read the fine print on one's Willy Wonka ticket. You see, the negative often outweighs the positive when it comes to self-publishing. Although I'm delighted with the notion that I have no barriers or blinding signposts on my journey to minute success, I also lack the advance and marketing team that accompany a lucrative, ego-boosting contract.

My editor is a hired, trained professional, followed close behind by loyal friends who simply enjoy reading and critiquing in their spare time. Distribution is limited to Internet sales, book fairs, and lovely independent bookstores that are willing to take a chance on an unknown author. Worldwide marketing is based solely on social networking, free giveaways, book clubs, advertising dollars, and word-of-mouth endorsements, which means sales are never as grand as one might hope. Yet despite the pitfalls and disappointments incurred on this rocky, misguided adventure, my dedication and ambition remain firmly intact, not as a result of the certificates and wonderful praise that come with writing award-winning books, but from the opportunity to introduce characters who are flawed, multidimensional—in many ways not unlike myself. These remarkable lost souls often possess the ability to overcome any obstacle or catastrophe blocking their paths to true happiness and success—something many of us can only hope to achieve.

BANISHED THREADS

With all of this in mind, I urge your tolerance and patience, as I often get lost while stretching the boundaries of reality and delving into strange, unfamiliar territory. As published authors are known to say, nothing is more rewarding than telling a story well or creating one that remains in the hearts of readers long after the last page is turned. It is the aspiration of every romantic, including this fun-loving, decrepit old soul.

So please sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride you're about to take as this *Threads* series comes to an end. New tales continue to form in the recesses of my mind and are only a night's dream away. Given time, they will materialize into typewritten pages and possibly self-published books. And if the fantastic should come to fruition, they will find their way to bookshelves belonging to wonderful readers like you. In the meantime, I would like to extend my appreciation to all the remarkable people in my life who have never failed to provide encouragement, constructive criticism, or unshakable support. Without each and every one of you, and the love you give freely, this Irish storyteller's voice would never be heard.

—Kaylin McFarren

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Death Awaits

“Whose child is this?” the coachman said.
“Will no one here speak for the dead?”
“She’s mine,” a mournful woman cried.
“The price for wedding vows defied.”

The reaper smiled with thoughtful nods.
If coin should flip, what were the odds?
Sad truth be told, another lied,
An evil heart consumed with pride.

Her crimes would grow—increase with hate,
Allow him time to seal her fate.
The baby’s soul was heaven bound,
But hers would squirm deep underground.

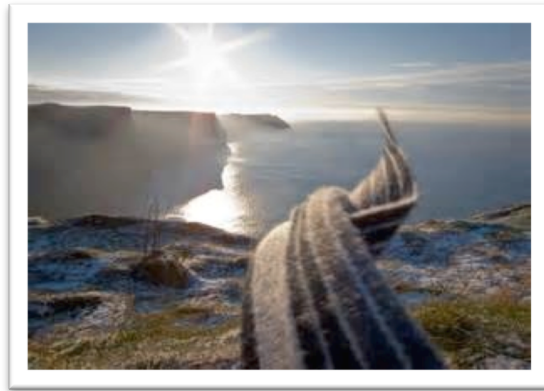
“Dismiss your guilt,” he told the source.
“Forgiveness comes with real remorse.
Torment will find a twisted mind
Whose love was built on cruel design.”

The woman dried her tears of grief.
His heartfelt words brought forth relief.
Time would heal this banished thread,
Repair the loss where pain had fed.

The reaper climbed aboard his ride,
Without a villain by his side.
But one day soon he would return,
Collect a wicked soul to burn.

—Kaylin McFarren

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“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

—Oscar Wilde

Contents

Author's Note.....	iii
“Death Awaits”.....	vi
Prologue: Just Rewards.....	1
Chapter 1: A Storm Brewing.....	5
Chapter 2: Unexpected Alliance.....	19
Chapter 3: Rough Landing.....	54
Chapter 4: Set Adrift.....	78
Chapter 5: Tide Pool.....	103
Chapter 6: Plundered.....	127
Chapter 7: The Game Plan.....	139
Chapter 8: Brief Interlude.....	145
Chapter 9: Landlubbers.....	160
Chapter 10: Revelations.....	179
Chapter 11: Inquiring Minds.....	201
Chapter 12: Boundaries.....	213
Chapter 13: Flight to Freedom.....	236
Chapter 14: Ultimatum.....	261
Chapter 15: Visionaries.....	254
Chapter 16: The Witness.....	279
Chapter 17: The Scapegoat.....	289
Chapter 18: The Advocate.....	302
Chapter 19: The Treasure Trove.....	309
Chapter 20: Absolution.....	319
Chapter 21: Parley.....	329
Chapter 22: Shared Vows.....	338
Epilogue: Husbandly Duties.....	347

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Prologue



Just Rewards

A lone figure stood in the estuary lookout nestled in the trees above the North Sea on the Holderness Coast, waiting with restless anticipation as Gwen Gallagher approached the cliff's edge. A quick adjustment to the night-vision binoculars allowed the watcher a closer view of the twenty-eight-year-old secretary as she savored the last autumn sunset she would ever see. The crisp, cool air picked up speed, leaving her long black hair sailing like a ghostly pirate's flag behind her. It lifted the hem of her black skirt slightly, exposing her white shapely legs and black suede booties to the wintry elements. Her blue eyes sparkled as they swept across the landscape, appraising the beauty surrounding them. She raised her chin toward the darkening sky and smiled, obviously believing the note she had received, inviting her here, had come from her married lover.

As Gwen moved even closer to the edge, the watcher took a deep breath. All that remained between this ludicrous woman and the vividly blue ocean was two meters of solid rock. From the lookout vantage point, there was barely enough light to confirm that she was staring down at the tossing sands and churning water, mesmerized, by the early evening breeze. All it would take was one push, and she would feel the rush of wind through her hair and see the crystal-blue sea one last time as she slammed headlong into the jagged rocks.

The watcher's heart was fluttering erratically now as Gwen stood balancing on the brink of extinction. The sky darkened, and gray waves slammed into the rocks, blasting sea spray high into the air. By all appearances, she had become preoccupied with the black storm clouds collecting overhead and the hard-hitting raindrops striking her cheeks. The wind was whipping now and had started to voice its howling rage. Meanwhile, the watcher climbed down from the lookout and stepped hurriedly across the uneven ground, arriving only six yards away from the scene where Gwen now remained frozen in place. The soles of her shoes held her stoically on the uneven mafic rock as the rising wind

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whipped and swayed her body like a frail willow. For a brief moment, the watcher was uncertain what to do next. Then Gwen turned around suddenly and stared back in a trancelike state. Another step forward resulted in waking her.

“What are you doing here?” she called out. “What do you want?”

The watcher remained silent and took another step forward before pulling out an engraved, freshly sharpened steak knife. A look of fear crossed Gwen’s rain-streaked face, making it impossible not to smile.

“Go away! Leave me alone!” she screeched. She took a final step back to distance herself, just as a massive wave hit. The spray washed over her and sent her plummeting fifteen meters down. The watcher dropped on all fours to maintain a protected position on the slippery, stony ground. Minutes later, the surge passed, and it was now safe to stand. A quick assessment confirmed the dangling binoculars were safe and in excellent working order, but the engraved knife had been washed away. After stepping down to a new viewpoint, it was easy to ascertain that Gwen had been injured from the fall and was now trapped in the jagged rocks below. She looked up at the watcher and called out for help, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Bloody idiot. If someone should hear her, they could interfere, and that would ruin everything.

Five minutes passed as poor Gwen continued to scream. Then, as good fortune would have it, the wind rose again. With the crush of another wave, she was pulled under and swept out to sea.

The watcher smiled and was about to leave when a tiny fraction of light picked up something on the ground. Careful inspection confirmed it was a gold hoop earring, plucked from its owner—a marvelous souvenir to add to the prized, growing collection. After the watcher slipped it into a pocket in the yellow hooded slicker and removed the binoculars, a pleasant thought came to mind. Since it had become a moral right and obligation to dispose of the unworthy and undeserving in the Cumberforge Manor, it wouldn’t be long before Gwen’s lover would be joining her and the rest of the disloyal moneygrubbing fools who had been personally escorted to the bowels of hell.

Chapter 1



A Storm Brewing

On a dreary night in late October, *Stargazer* sliced through the surface of the North Atlantic at fifteen knots, heading straight for the coast of England with Trident Ventures's five-member crew on board. Below deck, in the captain's quarters, Chase Cohen closed his leather-bound journal, set down his pen, and dimmed his reading light. With a filled brandy snifter in hand, he leaned back in his curved armchair and considered his poignant situation. His marriage proposal to Rachel Lyons had come on the heels of a wild adventure in Tokyo that had nearly cost them their lives. In hindsight, he might have withheld his offer had he fully grasped her inability to share his affections beyond their bedroom walls. Yet the thought of losing her in a fight or to another man was unimaginable. He was willing to play the fool for as long as necessary—accommodate her until his patience ran out. But there was nothing worse in his mind than wasting his time by making Rachel a priority in his life while he remained an option in hers.

Minutes slipped away, and Rachel's dreams seemed more troubled under his watchful eyes. She trembled, thrashed, moaned, and cried out as he gnawed on his bottom lip. Then, suddenly, her movements stilled. A loose strand of hair remained delicately resting on her face. Hardly aware of what he was doing, Chase stood and leaned over her to brush the copper strip away.

She remained motionless and reticent and appeared to be unaffected by his gesture. What was going on in that damn mind of hers? Would she ever trust him enough to share? Chase heaved a deep sigh and attempted to disengage his obsession. He looked out a nearby window and saw an orange glow emerging on the horizon.

The brilliant orb expanded, sending rays of white light toward their ship, shimmering like diamonds on the gentle rolling waves. It was a sight he would've enjoyed sharing with Rachel, cuddling under a blanket in a cozy lounge chair on the

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upper deck, sipping steaming cups of coffee and feeling the sun's warmth on their faces. But as usual, her morning ritual obliterated the fantasy.

With the precision of a fine-tuned clock, she awoke, pushed herself upright, threw off the sheets, and ran from the bed. He heard the sound of retching and choking in the adjacent bathroom. From a bystander's view, he watched her neck twist above the low-mounted stool and felt himself cringing inside. Sadly, he assumed full responsibility for her condition. His lack of judgment in not using precautions four months earlier had thrown a wrench in their plans...at least when it came to diving excursions and treasure-hunting expeditions. Personally, he didn't mind the idea of a new baby, especially if it meant keeping the woman he loved in his life. But Rachel hated the thought of giving birth. Not a day went by that she didn't object to his behavior or make her negative feelings known.

"I'm tired of being sick all the time," she had whined. "Between the constant motion on this ship and the smell of Ian's fried fish, I'm lucky to be standing. For crying out loud, Chase, why didn't you listen to me when I told you I wanted to fly to London?"

He shrugged and offered an awkward smile. While charting their course and stocking the galley with champagne, gourmet goodies, and enough provisions to last two months, he'd had a more romantic vacation in mind. One that entailed making passionate love to Rachel for days on end. Instead, reality had climbed on board, blurring his vision for the future. After traveling five weeks, with stops in New York and Montreal, he now found himself haunted by how their eyes never met and how much her cold indifference had grown.

In an effort to comfort her, he wet a washcloth in the sink and held it against the back of her neck. More than anything, he wished he could ease her suffering and encourage her to appreciate the positive aspects of motherhood. But just as his Irish helmsman had predicted, irritability and morning sickness had become a commonplace occurrence. And according to the man's cynical outlook, the worst was yet to come. In less than five months, Chase would be forced to stand by in the delivery room while his sweet, darling wife screamed and cursed him for all eternity.

BANISHED THREADS

Ian Lowe would know better than anyone, Chase surmised. His helmsman had been through the same ordeal twice with the same petulant, ill-mannered hag, he had told him on more than one occasion.

“Left Dublin years ago for good reason,” Ian had claimed. “That devil was always in me business, screaming and cursing. Tearing up the house and tossing me clothes whenever the mood struck her. If I didn’t leave while the gettin’ was good, we’d have killed each other by now.”

Rachel took the cold compress from Chase’s hand and wiped it across her mouth. Chase reached out to stroke her forehead, but she caught his wrist in midmovement in a deathlike grip. “That’s it...I give up. I’ll take the pills Dr. Evans prescribed. But then you have to promise not to blame me...if anything goes wrong.”

Chase considered her words carefully before nodding. He remained in that position, crouched and confused, until Rachel’s harried breathing slowed. She released her hold, and he in turn claimed her elbow to help guide her back to the bed. They sat across from each other, staring into each other’s eyes. Slowly and cautiously, Chase brushed his hand across her warm cheek. Rachel gazed back at him with a peculiar mixture of emotions dancing across her features. Her eyes crinkled in catlike contentment, but her face was marked with indecision. She made no effort to deepen his gesture as he stroked her hair. Instead, she placed her hand over his—cold and clammy in spite of its soft appearance.

“I’m trying to be happy—honestly I am. But it’s hard to get excited without worrying about the what-ifs. Like, what if this trip becomes more stressful than it’s already been? What if something terrible happens, and we end up losing the baby? Even though I try not to think about it, what if we wake up one day and realize the passion we have for one another is gone?”

Although Chase wanted to squelch her fears and assure her that his feelings would never change, he realized his promises meant nothing without a shared commitment. He told himself that whatever love she’d felt for him had been diminished as a result of this ocean voyage—of his inability to put aside his own interests and abide by her wishes. Once again, his lack of common sense had overruled his better judgment. Just

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like the day when he had thoughtlessly swum off in search of sunken treasure and returned to find Rachel's father drowning. The guilt he carried in his heart would always be there...as certain as the marble headstone marking Sam's grave.

Chase released a strangled breath. "That's not something we need to worry about, honey. We're going to be married next month like we planned, and everything's going to be great. You'll see."

"Really? But what if my uncle—"

He pressed his finger to her lips, silencing her. "No more what-ifs. We're arriving in England...a nation filled with shopkeepers just waiting to take our money. We're going to spend the next five days shopping, exploring castles, meeting new people, and making wonderful memories together. As soon as your feet hit the ground, that's all you need to think about."

His gaze dropped to her luscious lips. To the little dimple that played on the corner of her mouth whenever she smiled. *God, she's so beautiful. How could I ever let her go?*

She leaned forward and kissed him softly on the cheek. "OK, I'll try. Even though I can't seem to keep my eyes open more than five minutes at a time. I don't think I've been this tired in my whole life."

Chase smiled. It was time to get out of his head and into his heart—to have faith in his emotions. He couldn't change the past no matter how much he wanted to, but if he was willing to put his fiancée's needs ahead of his own, he could create a good life for both of them. Provide a bright future for his daughter and her new baby brother or sister. Yet be that as it may, everything he could hope for—love, happiness, and security—all hinged on Rachel's ability to trust him.

Outside their cabin window, in the blue skies overhead, the sun's judging eye was all that was left to watch him as he curled up behind Rachel, laid his hand on her tiny bump, and drifted soundlessly off to sleep.



BANISHED THREADS

Two hours later, Chase sat up and glanced at his watch. Apparently sleep deprivation had caught up with him, as it was now 9:30 a.m. His stomach growled suddenly, reminding him of the meal he had skipped the night before. Mindful of Rachel's presence, he eased himself off the mattress and slipped on his deck shoes. Then he pulled his blue nylon jacket over the top of his white cable-knit sweater. After glimpsing her tranquil expression, he closed the door quietly, ascended the stairs, and made his way to the galley. The aroma of fresh-ground coffee, maple-flavored bacon, and scrambled eggs filled the air, stirring his appetite. As he stepped into the room, he spotted Devon Lyons sitting alone in the corner booth with a white steaming mug in hand and concentration darkening his brow. The last thing he needed after his short-lived night was a lecture on the care and feeding of pregnant women from a guy who didn't have a clue. However, despite the man's distaste for idle conversation and useless advice, Devon's presence was an instant reminder that this self-assured former stockbroker would soon be the closest thing to a relative he'd ever known. With the coastline rapidly approaching, more than anything he could use a strong ally to bolster his defense, and who better than a future brother-in-law?

"I see Ian's been busy," Chase said. "I suppose you've already eaten?" He scooped a generous portion of eggs onto his plate and then snatched a few pieces of bacon from the broiler.

Devon watched him from the rim of his cup. "Just finished off a second helping. So how's my sister doing?"

"Sleeping peacefully at the moment. But I know she's eager to get off this ship."

"Well, it won't be long now. By my best estimate and Ian's calculations, it's only four hours till we land."

"Dock," Chase corrected. He stuck a piece of bacon in his mouth and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, I talked it over with Ian, and we agreed that a vacation was long overdue. He's planning to see his kids, and there's this gal living in Kilkenny I used to know. So while Hawkins and the cleaning crew are taking care of things here, we'll be spending a few days in Ireland. For the record, I've never been particularly fond of watching my uncle destroy his enemies."

BANISHED THREADS

Chase released a humorless laugh. “And what makes you so sure that he’s going to tear out my heart and carve me a new asshole? Since I’m the father of Rachel’s baby, don’t you think he’d want her to be happy and our child to be provided for?”

Devon sank back into his seat. “Oh, I wouldn’t play that card if I were you. Like I said, my uncle never got over losing his brother...And knocking up his niece? Well, that’s an entirely different matter. Far worse if you ask me.” He gave a half shrug. “But hey, I could be wrong. With him having his own family for the last ten years, Paul Lyons might have grown a heart by now. You know, he could turn out to be a cool dude with no hard feelings at all.”

“Which explains why you’re not sticking around...”

Devon’s hands were smoothing out the black sweater covering his taut stomach and adjusting it ever so slightly. “Things change, you know. Six months ago, I would’ve told you that you’re wasting your time with Rachel, and just look...here you are trying to make an honest woman out of her.”

“If she’ll have me,” Chase mumbled. He dropped into the seat across from Devon. Then he picked up his fork and rested an arm on the table. “So what do you think I should do? Disappear off the face of the planet after he tells me to go fuck myself?”

Devon chuckled. “Not exactly. You’re going to have to be just as tough and determined as that old man is, but at the same time, you can’t allow yourself to sink to his level. You’re never going to win him over no matter how hard you try. Believe me, I know. He shot me down years ago. But at least you’ve got one thing going for you: Rachel. If she’s willing to convince him that she’s totally in love with you, then you might stand a chance. It all depends on how well she makes her case. Or more importantly, how well you’ve sold yourself to her.”

Chase swallowed a mouthful. “I know this is a dumb question, but do you think it’s possible for her to be happy with me?”

Devon crossed his arms and angled his head. “Are you telling me that after everything you two have been through, you’re still having doubts?”

“It’s just that sometimes she seems so...confused. I don’t know what to do. I love her and just want to make her happy.”

“So, you’re asking for my advice?”

BANISHED THREADS

Chase sat back in his seat and considered Devon's recent exploits, which had been openly shared by the police and discussed by half the population in San Palo, California. Prior to assuming the positions of navigator and mechanic on board the *Stargazer*, the self-proclaimed do-gooder had been kidnapped and held for ransom by drug dealers—the same shady characters he'd been trying to impress to win over his racy girlfriend. To everyone's amazement, she turned out to be the diabolical kingpin who would have killed him without a second thought, if she'd been given the chance.

Devon Lyons should have been the last person to ask advice from, but as it was, no one knew Rachel better than him. At least that was what Chase had come to believe. "OK," he finally said, chewing a mouthful. "I'm listening."

Devon leaned forward on his elbows. "After Mom ran off, our father died, and you skipped town, my sister was diagnosed with clinical depression. She spent time with a therapist working through a shitload of stuff. Even though you're back now and both working together, trust will always be an issue for her. It'll be up to you to erase any doubts in her mind. Despite the fact that you have a seven-year-old daughter and a treasure-hunting career taking you around the world, you'll need to remind her that she'll always be the center of your universe. Now that might sound easy enough to follow through with, but I assure you it won't be. Rachel has always been a skeptic and as stubborn as they come. And what's more," he continued, "it's important she understands that your protecting her doesn't mean surrendering her power and having your baby doesn't mean giving up the independence she values above all else. If you can manage all that and still hang on to your sanity, then you might have a future together. Until then," he said, easing back in his seat, "I wouldn't hold my breath."

Chapter 2



Unexpected Alliance

Paul Lyons awoke to a terrible morning, beginning with a blaring alarm that sent his arm slamming against an antique mahogany nightstand. Shrinking back into his pillow, he nursed the throbbing pain in his limb until it passed and waited for his blurred vision to clear. Dream fragments floated around in his brain—disconnected nightmarish pieces riddled with shadowy faces, littered alleys, and haunting voices screaming his name. The most vivid recollection included the image of Gwen Gallagher perched on the edge of a dramatic cliff, fifteen meters above the ocean. In the harsh light of day, this vision morphed into horrific reality. His heart sank as he was doused with a fresh bucket of disbelief. The woman he was meant to love and spend the rest of his life with had fallen like a wingless angel, leaving him devastated and confused—filled with an endless reservoir of anger and frustration at never knowing the true reason for her death.

Surprisingly, his loud and violent rousing hadn't disturbed his semicomatose wife. Sara wore a green flannel gown arranged neatly around her slumbering form, her auburn dyed hair fanned out over the pillow beneath her head. Her arms lay by her sides, and her chin was tilted up slightly with her lined lips parted, as if waiting to be kissed by a long-overdue prince. In lieu of her nightly regimen, a sleep mask had been pulled down over her dull-brown eyes and orange foam plugs had been inserted into her gossip-craving ears. A quick glance at the prescription bottle and empty water glass on her nightstand confirmed that sometime during the night she had found a cure for his constant tossing and turning. Yet despite the fact that she kept up appearances—portraying the loyal, dutiful spouse—there was no doubt in his mind that she knew about the guilt he had harbored for the past three months.

BANISHED THREADS

With lingering trepidation, he removed himself from the twisted bedsheets, sending the cat scurrying off the mattress and across the hardwood floor. Although Sara had discouraged it, the colorful creature persisted in sleeping on the foot of the bed and would often arrive there in the middle of the night without being heard or detected. But Paul had no issue with Abby's need to be close to them. In fact, he had secretly encouraged it, accrediting the glow from the Abyssinian cat's copper eyes as a remedy for keeping evil spirits away.

Reflecting on the last ten years of his life, he was reminded of the sequence of events that had led up to his incarceration in the Cumberforge Manor, which was about to end, if he so chose. By the age of thirty-two, the ink on his second divorce decree was barely dry when he became involved in a disastrous love affair with his brother's ex-wife. Following their breakup and his promise to stay clear of women, he found himself testing his sexual prowess on half a dozen young women while backpacking across Europe. Two years later, he settled into a leaky sublet in London's East End and managed to save up enough money from assistant teaching and part-time clerical jobs to purchase a reconditioned computer. He typed day and night with mindless abandon, determined to create the perfect suspense story. To his amazement, a literary agent by the name of Max Lancaster saw magic in his words and miraculously signed him. Seven award-winning books followed, and Paul soon found himself thrust into the limelight, sought after for television and radio interviews and jam-packed book-signing events. His story lines and casts of characters drew the interest of men and women alike. He became so enthralled with his own acclaim that the idea of failure never occurred to him. After scraping together funding and investing every dollar he could get his hands on, he presented his *Murderous Madeleine* play at the Steep Theatre. It ran for only two weeks before critics buried it, citing a lack of dramatic tension as the chief flaw in his overly ambitious project.

With his dreams of grandeur stripped away, he took refuge in a popular alehouse near Piccadilly Square and closed it down for two weeks straight on a nightly basis. Occasionally, his agent Max Lancaster would drop by and join him for a drink. But after hearing Paul ruminate over his blunder for more than an hour, he'd pull on his gray herringbone cap, make an excuse, and hightail it out of there. On one particular

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evening, when the place was filled to the rafters, an attractive middle-aged woman stepped through the front door, capturing his attention. Before taking a seat beside him, she smiled demurely and requested her reserved bottle of premium whiskey. She offered him a generous pour after introducing herself as Sara Rafferty. While he listened, she claimed to have seen his play a number of times. Despite what the papers had printed, she had absolutely adored it. She had read all of his novels and would always be his greatest fan.

As she continued to ply Paul with an endless supply of compliments, Max bade him farewell and left the two of them to their business. Time evaporated as the conversation and whiskey flowed. Although he'd been making a point of avoiding entanglements, Paul found himself fascinated by this remarkable woman.

There were only six people scattered about in the dark room when he became aware of the late hour. Sara handed a card to the bartender and asked him to phone her driver. Paul grabbed his cap and was anticipating the long walk home; however, to his surprise, Sara turned to him and laid her soft hand on his.

"I know this will sound strange with us having just met," she told him, "but I have a rather unique proposal I'd like to share that would benefit you tremendously."

"As long as it doesn't involve money," he quipped sarcastically. "I'm as broke as a crackhead on the first of the month."

Sara's hand pulled away, leaving him feeling her absence even though she was right beside him.

Paul placed his hand on her arm. "That was an old joke, my dear."

After a thoughtful silence, she adjusted her posture and resumed her inquiry. "There's no way to present this without sounding completely insane, so I'm just going to say it straight out."

Paul leveled his shoulders, wrapping his defenses around himself like an invisible cloak.

"If you would be willing to marry me no questions asked, fulfill your husbandly duties, and assume the role of a compatible roommate for a period of ten years, I'll provide you with a generous stipend, custom-made clothing, directorship at an art

BANISHED THREADS

gallery, and full ownership of my late husband's Aston Martin One-77 with a price tag exceeding one point eight million."

At first, Paul had laughed openly, believing his demented friends had hired a struggling actress and brought her there to torment him. But when Sara Rafferty's full lips curled into a disapproving frown, he sensed the wealthy widow really had come there of her own volition and was perfectly serious. Oddly, loneliness seemed to be her singular motive, yet it still didn't make sense. Why would someone so confident, classy, affluent, and well-spoken suggest such a thing?

"So what's the catch?" he asked. "Nothing comes that easy. Not without strings or a shitload of trouble attached."

"There's nothing of the sort," she assured him. "And I'm certainly not looking to cause problems, sir. I'm only interested in acquiring the companionship of an educated gentleman who appreciates the fine arts. I am fully aware of who you are, Mr. Lyons, and your present situation. Despite everything, I believe you're qualified for the position, provided you limit your drinking and smoking and abide by a few simple rules. When our contract expires, you'll be free to leave and keep the assets you've earned or you can elect to extend your stay, if we're both in agreement. Either way, I'm sure you wouldn't mind the benefits you'd receive in exchange for your time and commitment. That is, if you're willing to accept my offer."

Paul leaned in closer. "This isn't some kind of joke? You're really serious?"

One swift, curt nod was the only reply he got.

He tilted his head as he looked at her. "What you're asking for is—"

"More than you're willing to give?"

His eyes failed to meet her direct gaze. "You might be surprised to know that I've heard that before," she said, "but I never let it stop me, especially when I've made up my mind. Just know that I've done my homework, Mr. Lyons. I'm very confident about you and the decision you'll make."

"Oh, really?" With his brain in a fog, Paul was tempted to lean forward and kiss her, but that would leave the wrong impression—make her believe the answer was yes when it definitely wasn't. At that moment, he needed to get some fresh air, think

BANISHED THREADS

clearly, and act accordingly. “I’ll consider your offer, Sara. But I can’t promise anything, especially if a job offer should come along...”

“Suit yourself,” she said.

As one might expect, they parted company the same way they had arrived. But when his angry landlord met him at his front door demanding his overdue rent money, Paul realized he had no options at all. He stuffed his clothes into a black bag and spent the night shivering under his coat on a park bench. First thing in the morning, while still feeling his drink and the ache in his back, Paul called Sara and arranged for a meeting. Her lawyer witnessed the strange exchange as he signed his freedom away. According to the legal document, they were required to exchange their vows within forty-eight hours and did so in a very quiet, very private wedding. With all common sense thrown to the wayside, Paul slid into the limo beside Sara and departed for a honeymoon in North Wales with none of his friends or his literary agent being the wiser.

Surprisingly, Paul enjoyed their candlelit dinners, playful bedroom antics, and long morning walks. He even managed to overlook Sara’s extreme mood swings, as no more than ten minutes would pass before her anger would subside and his sweet, adoring fan return.

After fourteen absorbing days and thirteen exhilarating nights, their honeymoon came to an abrupt end. With their bags loaded in the boot of Sara’s limo, they traveled through the countryside and eventually rolled through the manor’s automated gates. An antiquated housekeeper and a green-eyed, redheaded little girl met them at the front door. As Paul soon learned, Sloan Rafferty was Sara’s orphaned granddaughter—a ten-year-old child who had been born to a dying mother and spent the last two years in a French boarding school. According to the housekeeper with frizzled gray hair, Sloan’s expulsion was the result of mischievous pranks, and until other arrangements could be made, she would be joining them in their new marital arrangement.

Paul felt a little dizzy and mildly nauseous. He couldn’t focus on anything, especially the crossed-armed waif standing before him. Despite what Sara might have hoped for, he had no interest in assuming the role of a grandfather or disciplinarian of

BANISHED THREADS

any kind. In his mind, the string that Sara had cleverly kept hidden had the potential to become a knotted rope, strangling him with the consequences of his actions.

By the week's end, his fears had been fully realized. The little hellion had managed to rummage through most of his personal effects. She'd scribbled on his manuscript, buried his car keys, and drowned his cell phone. When confronted in the main entry about her invasion of privacy, she had the audacity to stand before him with jaw set and arms akimbo in a damp, ink-stained dress swearing her innocence to the high heavens.

As years came and went, so did a bushel of frustrated tutors. The lead housekeeper attended to Sloan's needs as best she could while Sara concentrated on tennis lessons, fund-raisers, and country-club galas. With absolutely no control over his life, Paul was physically and mentally drained—a store looted and left with bare walls. Then one day, when he thought things couldn't get any worse, Sara returned home from her monthly weight-loss hypnosis session acting strange and overly excited.

"Dr. Bradshaw is bloody amazing!" she raved. "After surpassing my goals, I called my buyer at Harrods and ordered a spanking-new wardrobe. You really should take him up on his offer, you know. Stop that filthy habit of yours. I don't know why you're so damn determined to keep smoking anyway. It's ignorant and passé. My friends absolutely detest it. They're just too kind to say so is all."

Paul pulled a lighter out of his shirt pocket and lit the cigarette dangling from the corner of his lips. He took a deep drag, blew smoke to the side, and then looked directly into her face. "Are you finished now?"

She heaved a disgruntled sigh. "There's no need to be rude, Paul. I simply wanted you to know that he has a talented young client who is desperately in need of a job. I told him you could use the help, and he—"

"Damn it, Sara, you didn't. What happened to promising to stay out of my business?"

Sara looked down and pursed her lips, feigning disappointment. "Up until this moment, I've never interfered, and I have no intent of starting. It's just that Peter has looked after me for years. He's been incredibly kind, you see, and he's always asking after you."

BANISHED THREADS

Paul snorted a laugh. “You don’t say.”

“Please, darling, do this one little thing for me. Why, we could even take that vacation we’ve been talking about for years. You still wanted to see the canals in Venice and the Palace of Versailles, didn’t you?” With the tilt of her chin and slow curl of her lips, his hard-edged defenses were crushed. Once again she had gotten her own way, and he had unwittingly allowed it to happen.

The very next day, a raven-haired beauty arrived at the art gallery at 2:00 p.m. sharp wearing a tight-fitting blue dress, tan strappy sandals, and the wisp of a smile. Her eyes like oceans bore into his soul, and, with a simple, soft-spoken hello, his heart was instantly taken. For nearly a month, he tried to distance himself by issuing outside assignments and painstaking clerical-work. Yet in spite of how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Then one day, the soft brush of her hand during an innocent lunch meeting sparked an irresistible impulse. As soon as they stepped out of the hillside restaurant, he pulled her in close and kissed her lips hard, leaving her limp and breathless.

Paul’s gut twisted in fervent misery at the recollection—memories of lewd, adulterous acts. Even though their trysts had been a weekly occurrence and were reduced to obscure cut-rate hotel rooms, they’d shared their most intimate thoughts and secrets while wrapped in each other’s arms. Yet there was no implication the relationship was merely a sexual one. It was emotional, endearing, and basically unforgettable. He had found his one and only, the true love of his life, and now she was gone...forever. Even though the team of investigators and medical examiner had attributed her death to suicide, he held himself accountable—the underlying cause of it all—leaving him questioning his reason for carrying on with his own pointless existence.

He glanced at Sara still sleeping soundly as he moved quietly through the master bedroom. After reaching the sink in their bathroom, he noticed his hands were shaking more than usual. Perhaps it was the aftereffects of the dream he’d just had. Whatever the problem, he dismissed it and climbed into the shower.

As soon as he finished and the steam in the room cleared, he began shaving and nicked his chin as he always did when he was nervous or preoccupied with personal

BANISHED THREADS

matters. A few beads of blood dripped into the basin, and he quickly wiped them away. He didn't have to look into the mirror to know his worries from the past few months were etched on his forehead and at the corners of his light-hazel eyes.

With a dot of tissue adhered to his chin, he stepped into the closet and picked out a gray Hermès turtleneck sweater and tweed jacket, matching the color of his thick, slicked-back hair. The black tailored slacks were a bit loose in the waist, reminding him that he had skipped a few meals and dropped a few pounds in the process. But despite Sara's urging, food had become lackluster, just like the identity he had regrettably assumed. Nothing, including the maid's apple strudel, would make up for that day...that horrible moment when he was told that a homeless beachcomber had discovered Gwen's broken body lying in a heap beneath a fifty-foot drop.

Somehow, in spite of the stories in the local press, Paul had managed to hide his sorrow and forge on in his usual buttoned-up fashion. He attended an opening at the art gallery two days after Gwen's funeral, deflecting the ugly rumors from community leaders and the gossipy women in their ranks. Why, oh why, did he allow it to affect him so?

Paul drew another deep breath and exhaled slowly while counting to ten. *Steady your nerves*, he told himself. *Today is another day, like any other*. After securing his black leather belt, he wandered downstairs to make himself a cup of strong coffee. To his surprise, the pot was already brewing, and the washer was whirling in the adjacent laundry room.

"Hello?" he called out.

No answer. Red roses had been placed in a tall cylinder vase, and bags of fresh vegetables were resting on the granite countertop.

"Hello?" he called again.

Several women from the house staff had arrived an hour earlier than usual, puzzling him, until he remembered that his niece and her crew of treasure hunters would be showing up later that evening. Normally, he wouldn't mind seeing a few friendly faces, but with his emotions in turmoil, he had no interest in entertaining a houseful of excited, chattering guests...especially when they included the likes of Chase Cohen. The idea of Rachel marrying the despicable scavenger was

BANISHED THREADS

inconceivable—a foolish, irresponsible act on her part. And now she was intent on coming here, expecting a blessing he had absolutely no intention of giving.

Paul raked his fingers through his gray hair and stood before the kitchen window staring out at two fiery-red maple trees in the garden. “Bloody hell,” he grumbled aloud. “If she has any sense at all, she’ll do the right thing by leaving on the same ship I entrusted to her.” As if hearing his thoughts, the wind suddenly picked up and tossed a dozen dead leaves in the air.

“Why do they have to come today of all days?” He opened the cupboard above the sink and was about to collect his cup when the sound of footsteps in the hallway jolted his senses. Turning toward the source, he spotted Margaret, the sixty-nine-year-old housekeeper who had become a fixture in the mansion. Her gray hair was pulled back in a messy pinned bun, and her arms were filled with the wet towels she had been gathering while visiting the bathrooms scattered throughout the house.

“Good morning,” Paul said. “Please tell me you made the coffee.”

“Oh yes, sir.” Margaret said, smiling warmly.

“Thank goodness. For some unknown reason, my wife seems to lack the skill.”

“Heidi and I have been trying to anticipate your wife’s needs, but she’s more determined than ever to take care of you herself. Anyway, I hope I didn’t startle you, sir. There’s a young man at the front door asking for you.”

Paul retraced her steps to the entry, where the door stood slightly ajar. Opening it wider, he was surprised to find a uniformed messenger waiting on the doorstep with a clipboard and large envelope in his hands. The man was clean-cut, straight-backed, and broad-shouldered and had the youthful appearance of a third-year college student.

“So, what are you advertising?” Paul nonchalantly asked.

“Nothing, sir. Although I did sell subscriptions before becoming a soldier,” he said diplomatically. “And now I’m a full-time messenger. One must find a way to make ends meet in this economy, you know.” He stepped forward with his clipboard and silently watched as Paul signed his name on the delivery receipt. Then he surrendered his envelope, and with a quick two-finger salute, he climbed back inside his vehicle and drove away.

BANISHED THREADS

Paul closed the door with his eyes fixed on the packet. He turned it over and was trying to decipher the return address when Sara suddenly appeared in the entry. Her mink-trimmed mask had been pushed back on her head, and for a brief moment, she seemed dazed and confused—perhaps from the pills she had ingested the night before. However, when her dull-brown eyes landed on the object in his hands, they instantly brightened.

“Is that for me?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.” He ripped open the package and dumped out a folder containing a business proposal. A yellow sticky note was attached to it with a scribbled message from Max Lancaster thanking him for taking a look.

“So what is it?” Sara asked. “A signed contract from a new artist?”

Paul flipped open the folder and quickly scanned the pages. “It’s information about that development I mentioned to you. The one Max wanted you to invest in.”

“Oh, you can toss that, darling. I make it a practice to never get in bed with strangers. Aside from my husband, of course.”

“But you told me you would take a look. That it sounded promising. Are you saying you’re not interested now?”

“I never was, Paul. I just told you that so you would drop the subject.”

There was an awkward silence, and the space seemed to stretch between them. As if realizing the hurt she had caused, the corners of her mouth lifted in a slow, deliberate smile. “I set the timer for your coffee, darling. Go have a nice cup and relax. I’ll be down in a few.” Then she turned and hurried back upstairs, shutting the door quickly behind her.

Paul crossed his arms over his chest and huffed to further display his displeasure. He considered going back upstairs to argue the point when her face suddenly appeared above the railing.

“Don’t forget about your lunch date, darling. Of course I would go with you if I didn’t have my dress fitting and foundation meeting this evening. And then there’s the hospital luncheon to attend. I’ve missed three in a row and would hate to disappoint all the members. But putting all that aside, I’ll be most interested in hearing what Sloan has to say. Especially when she discovers her funding has been cut off.”

BANISHED THREADS

“Are you really sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve thought it over carefully and come to the conclusion that there’s no other way.” With that said, Sara closed the door again, ending any further discussion.

Damn it! Paul wandered into the living room and plopped down on the sofa. Why in hell did he agree to do this? It was Sara’s idea, not his. But somehow she had made it seem like they’d shared in the decision-making process. For the next five minutes, he watched the second hand on the mantel clock above the stone fireplace. He laid his head back and cursed at the ceiling. It seemed more apparent than ever that the comfortable lifestyle he had traded his freedom for had come at the price of his pride and self-worth.

He glanced mindlessly at the cat contentedly licking her paw. “What’s keeping me here, Abby? I should pack my bags and stow aboard the *Stargazer*. By tomorrow night, I could be long gone before anyone noticed.” However, the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that no purpose would be served by his leaving. And being locked away with Chase Cohen on Rachel’s luxurious yacht could turn out to be more troublesome than attending to the needs of his imperious wife.

In his own contemptuous way, Paul had grown accustomed to being distant, unappreciated, and unaffected by public opinion. Loneliness had become his security—his way of tolerating the wealthy people he’d been forced to cater to on a daily basis. Settling the way he had would never advance his career, and for all intents and purposes, he was losing ground fast.

In less than eight days, though, the terms on his marriage contract would end. He would finally be free to walk away and resume his old life. Maybe be the person he always wanted to be. But reengaging in the world would mean getting up and moving on...opening his mind to new possibilities.

After all these years, with his wife controlling the purse strings and every aspect of his life, Paul knew he didn’t have a leg to stand on or an identity to assume. Any future he might have hoped for had fallen off the edge of a cliff months earlier, and now he felt confined once again in a loveless, dead-end marriage with forgiveness being dealt out in small increments, especially when it came to Gwen Gallagher and the affair Sara had conveniently chosen to ignore.

BANISHED THREADS



Paul peered over the top of his *London Times* at his wife's nineteen-year-old granddaughter, who was scowling and studying the basket of rolls on the table. After living with a collection of photos chronicling her mother's life, he could easily determine where this fair beauty had inherited her good looks. But sadly, these looks also came with a foul mouth and an explosive temper, which he'd had the unfortunate experience of witnessing on more than one occasion.

"I suppose you came here to lecture me," she said, watching him with her brilliant green eyes. "As usual, Gran must have had more important things to do." Sarcasm dripped from her words. She eyed the croissant in her hand before tearing it tremulously apart. After dragging a large piece across the marinara sauce on her plate, she popped it into her mouth. "So, I take it she still hasn't forgiven me for that shoplifting thing."

Paul cleared his throat before answering. "I guess she hasn't made up her mind yet." He almost added, "Can you blame her?" but skipped it, knowing the cruel gibe would only add fuel to the fire. "So how's that job search going?" He folded his newspaper neatly in half and set it aside. "I hope you found something more lucrative than—"

"Emptying store shelves?"

The girl's insolence had worsened with age. Whether she was attending a formal dinner party or gallery show or seated directly across from him in a popular upscale restaurant, Sloan turned the air more sour than curdled cream with her paranoia and tedious self-pity.

Paul shifted in his seat. "Given the chance, I was going to say the perfume counter at Fenwick's." His eyes fell on the green and black snake tattooed around her wrist—a symbol of teenage rebellion designed to impress her delinquent friends.

"Well, it was an easy mistake," she said. "Veronica called while I was trying on wraps. I just stepped outside for a moment. I didn't need to be strip-searched like a

BANISHED THREADS

common criminal. If given the chance, I would have returned it..." She brushed her long bangs out of her face, but they fell back in place, burying her left eye.

Paul snorted. "That wrap, as you call it, was a dress that cost nine hundred dollars. You're just lucky the security guard was an old friend of mine."

She rolled her eyes and smirked. "Oh yeah...I almost forgot. Thanks for adding rubbish collecting to my glowing résumé."

You ungrateful brat. Paul bit back his anger and was instantly reminded of her most humiliating transgression. At the age of fifteen, she had an argument with a young neighborhood girl over a stupid boy and retaliated by smearing dog feces on her front door. If Paul hadn't swore up and down that Sara's granddaughter was visiting a nonexistent relative, the police would have hauled her in years ago.

Ah, yes...dear, sweet Sloan. There would always be an excuse, someone else to take the blame. A dozen reasons to be given another chance. She was moody and morose and had snapped at the cabdriver who had brought her here, claiming she'd been deliberately overcharged. Today, of all days, she seemed in an especially bad mood. Anything he might say or do would rub her the wrong way, leaving him bitter for days. But there was still the matter of delivering Sara's wonderful birthday news—the solution to everyone's problems.

Or so she had claimed.

"Since you'll be turning twenty next week and plan to live off your grandmother's trust," he said, "I thought it most important to inform you that—"

"—it's none of your business," she finished. "If that's the reason you insisted I come here, then you might as well—"

"What? Go fuck myself? Or better yet, leave before you do something we'll both regret?" He shook his head and looked away to hide his frustration. A fresh group of customers was coming through the front door laughing, closing their umbrellas, and removing their rain-drenched overcoats. The room had reached full capacity with the bar and every table now filled. Paul turned back to face Sloan and found her nonchalantly spinning her fork.

BANISHED THREADS

“As I was saying,” he continued, “last week your grandmother met with her attorney. I thought you’d like to know that she’s arranging to have your trust revoked as soon as possible.”

Sloan’s first bite of spaghetti dangled from her gaping mouth. Not just a fetching strand but a dripping gobful. By all appearances, it seemed the insolent young woman was determined to eat in record time, as if feeding at a pig trough.

“I could be a drug addict...or a raving lunatic,” she said indignantly. “Don’t you both realize how lucky you are?”

Yeah, real lucky. Paul was about to shut her down when he noticed a bald, heavysset man seated across the room in the dimly lit corner. Out of all people he hated most in this town, Neville Murdock topped his list.

The deplorable hack reporter was a notorious gossip that made his fortune selling trumped-up stories to scandalous rags. After reading the insidious articles he’d written about Gwen’s death, Paul was convinced the weasel would enjoy nothing more than adding another nail to her coffin.

Unfortunately, he realized too late that he’d already been spotted. Murdock was on his feet, crossing the room in seconds flat. “What a coincidence finding you here, Mr. Lyons,” he droned. “Did you get the messages I left? I called your house last week. Like I told your wife, our readers would be very interested in your response to hearing about the recent robberies in town. Especially with you being a gallery owner and all. But then come to think of it, that’s not entirely true, is it? The way I understand it, your wife still owns the place.”

Paul half expected a wretched insult to follow but then quickly realized that was exactly what he’d been served. He took note of the elderly couple seated nearby before feigning complete ignorance. “Robberies, you say? I’m sorry, but I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

Rather than reveal possible suspects, missing artworks, and burglary locations, Murdock stole Paul’s valuable time to expound on the government impact. “According to the British police, organized groups are targeting art in the United Kingdom. With the estimated loss at three hundred million pounds in the last three years, it’s become the second-highest-grossing criminal trade in the country. I’m honestly surprised you

BANISHED THREADS

weren't aware of the problem. But then you didn't seem particularly interested when I brought up the subject of rising murder and suicide rates in our quiet community."

Paul glanced at Sloan, holding her knife and casually smearing butter on a fresh roll. "As you can see, Mr. Murdock," he said, "we're having a nice lunch here. I really don't believe this is the right time or place to discuss such matters. Perhaps you could stop by the gallery...after making an appointment, of course." He had hoped to silence him, but Murdock remained relentless in his pursuit of idle gossip.

"I just thought you should know the head of Scotland Yard's Arts and Antiques Unit has his hands full. It seems quite unlikely that they'll get this problem under control before your art exhibit opens tomorrow night." Murdock lowered his dark eyes and shook his head, simulating deep concern. "The fact that you're featuring Morris Graves paintings is even more disturbing, Mr. Lyons. He may have earned a degree of notoriety in the United States, but here in England, the public will find him extremely controversial in light of his political views."

Paul leaned forward a little, palms flat against the table, and raised his chin in defiance. "So now you're an art critic? I thought you only wrote slander for a living."

Sloan choked on a half laugh.

"Joke if you like," Murdock fumed. "You're not above the law. No one in your family is, Mr. Lyons. Plagiarism, murdering husbands, destroying private property...and then there's always the curious matter of Gwen Gallagher and the reporter who vanished from the face of the earth."

"What? When? Are you talking about Ned Healey?"

Sloan shook her head. She wasn't having any part of it. "My, my, Mr. Murdock," she scoffed. "Narrow-minded, tiny-dick men like you never fail to amaze me. Why anyone would care what a creepy old man like you has to say is beyond me...especially when your shitty stories come from rubbish bins and self-serving creeps. One of these days, you're going to be bitten by the same snakes you keep company with, and no one's going to give a damn." She picked up her fork and speared her salad, but her eyes never left his. "Before it becomes necessary for my grandfather to jump up and beat the shit out of you, I suggest you move your fat ass

BANISHED THREADS

back to wherever you came from. You're ruining everyone's appetite...including mine."

While three young women giggled at the next table, Murdock openly glared. Paul made a quick move, as if intending to charge him, and the portly man nearly fell over. He scampered back to his safe corner while the roomful of customers stared. Then he hid like a wounded child behind his oversize menu.

A half smile lifted the corner of Sloan's lips. "Nicely done, Gramps," she said. Then she picked up her fork and returned to her meal.

For the next five minutes, Paul peered over the edge of his coffee, watching her with curious fascination. Not until that moment had it dawned on him that behind her tough-girl facade lay a wary heart. She was the scarred product of her cruel environment—damaged by rumors, falsehoods, and conjecture, not unlike him.

She finished off the last bite on her plate and returned her napkin to the table. Then she rose to her feet, preparing to leave. "Thanks for lunch. We really must do this again sometime."

In another place and time, he might have been hurt or disappointed by her catty tone. But after realizing the truth behind her actions, he could only smile.

"I want you to know that grandfather thing...It was purely for effect," she said. "Nothing for you to get worked up over, Paul."

He snorted a laugh. "Of course. As I'm sure you're more than aware, I never signed on for that role. But I have to admit it was nice to hear you say it just the same."

"Yeah, whatever." She slipped her arms into her charcoal wool coat and wrapped her black knitted scarf around her neck.

"Oh, and by the way, I'd like you to have this." He held out a thick envelope containing the gallery's weekly receipts. After peering inside, her eyes grew wide with disbelief. For a few seconds, he was sure she would hand the money back, calling it an insult to her integrity. But apparently, forced emancipation had leveled her pride and resolution.

"It's not a lot, mind you," he said, "but maybe it will help...until you get back on your feet." He flashed another quick smile, but she didn't seem to notice. With her gloves gripped in one hand and the envelope in the other, she stared down at the

BANISHED THREADS

ground, presumably plotting her next move. However, when she lifted her chin, a trace of hesitancy showed in her eyes.

“It’s all right to take it,” he assured her. “No one’s going to care.”

The perky blond waitress returned with a coffeepot in hand eager to refill his cup. But Paul was quick to wave her off, preferring to hear what Sloan had to say.

For an endless stretch of time, she remained silent, as if stumped by the degree of his generosity. After glancing around the room at occupied diners, she slung her graffiti-covered backpack over one shoulder and jutted out her chin. In spite of their show of strength against a common enemy, all evidence of an alliance had vanished in a flash.

“I just want you to know that I can take care of myself,” she said, “just like I always have. It’s never been about the money...my sticking around. Gran can keep every pence of my inheritance as far as I’m concerned. I was just hoping she’d see me—give us a chance to talk things through before I left town.” Her facade remained firmly in place, safeguarding her emotional wounds. “Maybe you could pass that along. If you really care anything about her, that is...”

Sloan’s brilliant eyes were locked on Paul as he adjusted his posture, flipping one leg over the other. He forced himself to remain calm and collected—untouched by her icy indifference. “Sure,” he said. “I suppose I could do that.” Then he picked up his newspaper and feigned interest in the latest European trading report.

As Sloan approached the door, he lifted his eyes to watch her leave. He found himself wondering why after all these years they couldn’t manage to get along for a lousy twenty minutes. Perhaps it was the result of their inability to compromise—to give each other the benefit of the doubt. Or maybe it was the fact that they’d lost their ability to trust another human being and believe anything good could come of this world.

As Paul picked up a whole-wheat muffin and smeared it generously with marmalade, he came to the conclusion that, much like him, Sloan was drifting mindlessly through this world, an empty soul searching for the right balance of sanity. If someone didn’t come along soon to set her on the right track, she could turn out to be as lost and ineffectual as he’d become.

BANISHED THREADS

“Paul?” A man’s small voice pulled his attention to the opposite side of the room. Max Lancaster was standing next to the bar wearing a thin blue sports jacket and wrinkled gray slacks. The white dress shirt he had on looked unlaundered and slightly frayed at the neck. His white beard was cropped close, and his white eyebrows overhung his soulful brown eyes. “Hi. I thought that was you,” he said. “Mind if I join you?”

“Hello, Max,” Paul said with forced joviality. His former literary agent was down on this luck and was sure to be even more so with the news he was about to share. “Help yourself.” He gestured at the seat across from him and moved his newspaper out of the way. “Can I get you some coffee? Something to eat?”

“I don’t want to take up your time,” Max said, removing his herringbone cap from his shaved head. “I know you’re a busy man.” When the waitress came by with a fresh cup and pot of coffee, he declined the offer.

“What can I do for you?” Paul asked.

“I was wondering if you got the papers I sent. You know, about that place over on Brighton Avenue. I think it’s going to be a real winner...bring in a killing for both of us.”

Paul swallowed hard and looked down at his strong black coffee, knowing there was no easy way to destroy Max’s dream, especially after shooting him down four months ago for a loan and 60 percent stake in a get-rich-quick scheme. “I’m sorry,” he said, lifting his eyes. “Sara didn’t bite on this one, old man. I tried, but she just...” Paul shook his head and curled his lips. “I don’t know what to say. I wish I could help you. I honestly do. But you know the situation. I don’t have access to the kind of money you need.”

Max dropped back in his chair. His eyes lowered to the top of the table and stayed there for endless seconds. When he looked up, his lips were fixed in a tight, thin expression, and his brown eyes were darker than usual.

“I see,” he murmured.

Paul pulled out his wallet and looked inside. He had given all the cash he had to Sloan with the exception of seventy-five euros. He had considered keeping something for his tab but realized he could cover it with a credit card.

BANISHED THREADS

“I’m sorry...This is all I have with me,” Paul said as he laid down every last bill. “I wish I had more that I could give you, but...”

Max glanced down, shaking his head. “Keep it. I don’t need your charity.” His voice was low and unfamiliar. He looked dejected and offended, but most of all, he had the look of a man who hated the world. “I don’t want to owe you anything.” He slipped on his cap and came to his feet. Then he turned and walked out the door.

Paul watched him through the window as he traveled up the street and climbed into a dirty white van. As it pulled away from the curb and continued on its way, he realized that if Sara hadn’t come along when she had, he could have ended up as destitute, bitter, and miserable as his unfortunate former friend.

Chapter 3



Rough Landing

Chase Cohen closed his pale-blue eyes behind a pair of dark aviator glasses, tilted his head back, and blew out a deeply held breath. After surviving sword-wielding yakuza gang members, ghosts, goblin sharks, man-eating eels, and complete culture shock in Japan, he was grateful to be in London, where the streets were safe and the conservative populace spoke old-fashioned Americanized English. Granted, a number of expressions and terms were different when it came to naming the subway and various parts of an automobile, among other less relevant things, but for the most part, he could navigate through any uncertain British terminology and unforeseen challenge with his beautiful partner at his side.

En route on the *Stargazer*, Chase had perused dozens of travel books and watched an equal number of videos, educating him on the highlights of England, and now that he and Rachel were finally here, moored on the banks of the Thames at Saint Katharine Docks, he could more fully appreciate the city's beauty and the ancient history surrounding them.

With his first step on British soil, he had the energy of a young boy—eager to see and experience everything in the eight days they had allotted themselves. But of course their visit with Rachel's uncle would have to come first. Paul Lyons's blessing on their forthcoming nuptials was the true purpose of this trip, not touristy sightseeing attractions. If he had any hope of surviving the man's wrath and walking away with his precious prize, he needed to appear strong, completely focused, and self-assured.

Remarkably, as he and Rachel walked by dozens of restaurants, bars and shops in central London, his enthusiasm rose to a new level. He couldn't help but feel a vibrant pulse of humanity resonating within. "This place is incredible," he said. "If the right job came along, I'd have no problem living here."

BANISHED THREADS

Rachel wrinkled her nose and halfheartedly shook her head. “Really? After barely an hour in this place, you see yourself drinking tea, wearing soggy raincoats, and scuba-diving in the countryside?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but now that you’ve mentioned it, I did read an article a few days ago. Seems there’s a multitude of flooded quarries in this country, and divers come here to explore them all the time. Who knows? There might even be treasure hidden in one.”

“Yeah, right...if you don’t mind diving in frigid waters.” She glanced up at the dark, threatening clouds gathering above them. “Which is what we’ll be standing in if we don’t find our way to the train station soon.”

Chase looked up at the dark clouds and felt a few sprinkles on his face. While Rachel waited, he opened a neatly folded map and searched for directions. “Looks like a twenty minute walk or we can grab a bus ride to the London Bridge station. It picks up in front of that gray building over there.” He motioned with his head before stowing his map and claiming their luggage. Then he watched her lift the handle on her rolling duffel bag. “You sure you don’t want me to take that too?”

“No, I’m keeping it close to me. Got all my essentials inside.” It didn’t take much imagination to know she was referring to her impractical high-heel shoes, starched shirts, pressed slacks, and bangle bracelets—all necessary components for surviving the elements. As she wobbled across the cobblestones in her five-inch heels, towing her bouncing bag behind her, Chase followed closely, smiling all the way.

They reached Thomas Moore Square and stood inside the bus-stop shelter to watch for the next arrival. However, to their dismay, they soon discovered that all the buses were traveling full. Worst yet, the waiting taxis were demanding a ransom to make the twenty-minute drive. They’d both been warned by Devon to avoid the gypsy cabs lurking about—the cars painted black to look like taxis but lacking company-marked license plates.

As they waited, five minutes turned into ten and then dragged into fifteen. Eventually, a cab pulled up, dropping off a happy Asian couple. Rachel asked the smiling driver to use the meter. He agreed, and they set off for the train station lickety-split.

BANISHED THREADS

“You have an interesting accent,” Rachel told him. “Can I ask where you originally came from?”

The driver paused for a lengthy moment before answering, “Pakistan.” Then he picked up his cell phone and carried on a loud conversation in Urdu, a language Chase had overheard during his travels. It seemed the man’s personal life had taken preference over his job. Any effort to communicate with him would be wasted.

Rachel rolled her eyes and shook her head. She sat back in her seat and watched Chase thumb through photos of tall ships they’d seen earlier that day in the harbor. After a while, her interest waned. “What’s this all about?” she asked.

Chase looked up from his digital camera only long enough to notice the driver’s practice of giving way to other cars at every possible opportunity. “I’ve heard of being polite on the road, but this is ridiculous,” he said.

The short drive had grown to thirty minutes by the time they reached an intersection near the train station, and Chase was somewhat surprised to notice that the meter was rapidly approaching forty pounds. As Devon had informed him, cabs in London, much like those in China, had two costs: the distance meter and the time meter. The distance ticked up while the car was moving, and the time meter counted in seconds whenever the cab was stopped in traffic. As they slowed for a rail crossing, Chase watched the time meter double and the total price increase accordingly. After he pointed this out, the driver frowned and sullenly stared straight ahead without saying a word.

“It’s all right,” Rachel whispered in Chase’s ear. “I’ll pay his ridiculous fee...as long as we arrive in one piece.” But Chase wasn’t interested in being swindled. He sat forward in his seat, grumbling.

“I think we’ve gone far enough,” he told the driver. “Let us out here.”

Instead of following his instructions, the Pakistani driver sped up dangerously, circled the station, and came close to sideswiping another car. They jerked to a quick stop, and the driver pointed at his meter, which had jumped to an astonishing eighty pounds.

BANISHED THREADS

“Give me a receipt,” Rachel told him. “I’ll pay what you’re really owed.” The paper slip came out of the machine, and the driver handed it off. While he waited, she fished inside her purse and extracted forty euros.

“That’s only half,” he said. “Where’s the rest?”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed. “There doesn’t seem to be a driver’s ID on the dashboard or back of your seat, which tells me you didn’t earn a driver slot legitimately. If you don’t want to take what I’m willing to pay, then so be it.” She pocketed her money, opened the door, and dropped her duffel bag on the street. Then she jotted down the license-plate number and stole a quick snapshot of the driver while Chase called the number of the taxi company printed on the receipt.

“We have no record of that license plate,” the dispatcher said on the phone. “Are you sure you’ve written it down correctly?”

“Yes. I’m sitting in the cab with that number.”

By now, the trapped driver had become extremely agitated. A small crowd had gathered behind the elderly taxi wrangler at the drop-off point at the station. Chase had remained inside the car and was calling the police when the driver panicked. He jammed on the accelerator, hitting the wrangler in the leg and sending him reeling across the ground. As the cab sped away with Chase hanging out the open passenger door, he saw Rachel staring after them in shock. From a side street, a truck pulled out in front of the cab, bringing it to a screeching halt. Behind them, adrenaline had kicked in: Rachel was now sprinting toward the car with a group of bewildered witnesses close behind. Meanwhile, Chase weighed whether he should go for the driver’s throat or drag him from his seat and smash his head on the concrete curb.

“Chase!” Rachel screamed. “Get out of the car!” Suddenly, people were coming from everywhere, shouting at the driver and threatening him bodily harm. As Rachel reached the rear of the cab, Chase stepped out calmly. The driver took one quick look in the rearview mirror before stomping on the gas pedal and careening down the street with the back door wide open.

“Are you all right?” Rachel asked, still panting and obviously shaken. Chase threw a protective arm around her shoulder and drew her close.

“Not even a scratch,” he said. “And do you know what’s even more amazing?”

BANISHED THREADS

Rachel gazed up at him solemnly and slowly shook her head.

He half laughed at the absurdity of the situation. "The cab ride was free."

Rachel took a step back. "But the rest of our luggage wasn't."



As they disembarked from the train at Whitchurch and stepped through the station's main door, Rachel's excitement rose at the prospect of seeing her uncle. He was a younger version of her father with the same chiseled good looks. He would have been easy to spot, even in this busy place. But from her vantage point, he was nowhere to be seen. Believing he had forgotten about her arrival, Rachel's heart sank. She turned to Chase and was about to voice her concern when she caught sight of a handsome man in the passenger-loading zone: white cable-knit sweater, tight jeans, in his midthirties, shaggy brown hair, rugged jaw, easy smile, dimples, and unforgettable emerald-green eyes. He was leaning against a silver Mercedes, flashing his perfect white teeth and holding up a sign reading, "Welcome to England, Rachel Lyons."

For a moment, she could hardly breathe and wondered if it was possible to fall over and die from shock. Or maybe from the idea of coming face-to-face with the last person on earth she ever expected to see. Although she had spoken to his Irish mother at a fund-raising event years earlier and was told that Killian was living with relatives in Northampton, she had convinced herself that the chance of meeting him was as unlikely as the sky turning green.

Killian Reed. His shimmering eyes were loving and warm and full of laughter. Rachel gasped and dropped her purse and overnight bag. She pulled off her high heels and ran to him. He swept her up and spun her around. When he set her back down, she buried her face in his chest and hugged him with all her might. She took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scent of bay-rum aftershave. He kissed the top of her head, and she gazed up at him. She didn't realize she was crying until he reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"I can't believe it's really you," she whispered, gratified to see unshed tears in his beautiful eyes.

BANISHED THREADS

“It’s me, seaweed brain,” he said. “I’m really here.”

Rachel stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. He put his arms around her waist and held her close. His hand smoothed her hair as he whispered, “I missed you, girl.”

She looked up at him and smiled, and it suddenly dawned on her that you meet all kinds of people in your life. Some you never think about again. Some you wonder what happened to and if they ever think about you. And then there are some you wish you never had to think about again, yet somehow you do. Killian Reed just happened to be one of those disconcerting, unforgettable beings. He was part of her past: a distant, bittersweet memory that had lingered for years.

With their last parting, they had grasped each other’s hands with a rush of melancholy and tender, inexpressible feelings and had gone their separate ways.

But time had moved on, and there was someone else in her life now—a silent observer patiently standing by, watching their every move with an annoyed pinch between his brows.

She took Killian by the hand and led him to Chase. More than anything, she hoped they would become fast friends, but as they shook hands, Rachel found it difficult to ignore the frowns tugging at the corners of their mouths. They both took a step back and just stood there, regarding each other silently, the air now seeming as cold as a razor blade.

“So...I guess we should head out,” Rachel said, hoping to ease the tension between them. “I can’t wait to get my feet up. It’s been a long, trying day.”

Chase’s head turned. An unreadable expression filled his eyes. “I think you meant to say *trip*.” She watched him collect her bag and purse and deposit them in the back of the car.

Killian tossed his head toward Chase. “Don’t let that bother you,” he said in a hushed tone. “A little rest will do everyone good. I’m sure things will look better in the morning.”

Rachel offered a weak smile. “We can only hope.”

“So where’s your luggage?” Killian asked. “That bag can’t be the only thing you brought.”

BANISHED THREADS

Chase joined her before the open rear door. "Long story," he mumbled. "Nothing you need to worry about...unless you're a cop." He extended an arm toward the rear bucket seat. "After you, dear," he told Rachel, sarcasm laced in his tone.

She tried her best to ignore him by turning her attention toward Killian. "I'll be curious to hear how you ended up here. I didn't even know you were still in the country...let alone working for my uncle."

He waited for Rachel and Chase to be seated before shutting the car door behind them. As soon as the key was in the ignition and the engine was running, he glanced into the rearview mirror.

"I don't usually do this, Rachel. Your uncle's driver called in sick this morning, so I offered to pitch in. For the past two days, I've been helping to set up the new show at his gallery. Now that everything's done, I plan to head back to my studio and finish painting myself."

Chase snorted a laugh. "Working on a self-portrait, huh?"

Killian smiled in the mirror. "No, Mr. Cohen," he said lightheartedly. "I'm a plein-air artist. I'm not sure if you're familiar, but critics have likened my work to John Constable's. My publisher and agent are always after me to paint more. With my work represented in more than twenty galleries and most of my shows selling out, I have a hard time keeping up."

Chase humphed. "Must be tough being so wonderful."

Rachel glared at him. "Really? Are you kidding me?" She shook her head in disgust and dropped back in her seat.

Killian stole another look in the mirror. "I understand you spend most of your time traveling around the world looking for buried treasure on Rachel's yacht. How's that working out for you?" Although his question sounded innocent enough, Killian had found Chase's greatest weakness by delivering a jab to his pride. Rachel glanced to her left and noticed that his lips had tightened and his nostrils were slightly flared. A growl rumbled low in the back of his throat. She clamped her hand on his forearm.

"Actually, it's *our* ship," she corrected. "Chase and I are business partners, and soon we'll be more than that."

BANISHED THREADS

“Heard about that. Been putting in some long hours. Didn’t mean to sound rude. Congratulations, by the way.”

Rachel turned to Chase. “We good now?”

Chase’s eyes were fixed on Killian’s reflection in the mirror. “Since you’ve spent a lot of time with Rachel’s uncle, what’s your take on how he feels? About us tying the knot, I mean.”

Killian flashed Chase an uneasy look before returning his attention to the highway. “You sure you want to know?”

“Yeah, I do. Is there a problem?”

Rachel slid her hand up to his shoulder. “Honey, there’s no reason to go into this. I’m sure it’ll be fine...after we settle in and I’ve had a chance to talk to my uncle.”

Killian cleared his throat. “For your sake, I sure wish it were that easy, Rachel.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked. “Did he say something to you about our engagement?”

“You know it really doesn’t matter, does it? I mean if you’re both in love and want to get married, whether your uncle approves or not shouldn’t make a difference. Not unless you’re planning to be single for the rest of your life.”

Chase sank back in his seat. “You don’t pull any punches, do you?”

“Sorry, man, but it happens to be the truth.”

“Which you would know because...”

“Because I asked permission to marry Rachel when I was eighteen. Her father blew me off as a stupid kid, and his brother told me to go screw myself. If by some miracle you receive Paul’s blessing for marrying his niece, you’re a far better man than me, Mr. Cohen.”

Chase’s gaze dropped then swung back to Rachel.

“That was a long time ago,” she said. “We were just kids. My uncle was a guest in our home. His rudeness was inexcusable and completely uncalled for. But it doesn’t really matter. As it turned out, I wasn’t ready to settle down. Not with anyone.” She reached for his hand and held onto it. “Not until now.”

Killian rolled up to a stop and turned in his seat. “You know, Rachel, given how your uncle feels about you, I could have read him all wrong. He might surprise

BANISHED THREADS

everyone and welcome both of you with open arms. If you told me three years ago I'd be working with him, hell, I would've said you were crazy." He flashed her a quick, easy smile.

Chase shifted in his seat. "Yeah, right. He's going to welcome me into his home with a big smile and knife behind his back."

Rachel glimpsed the rearview mirror and spotted Killian's eyes looking larger than normal. "I don't know why we're worrying about all this," she said. "I'm sure my uncle will give Chase the benefit of the doubt. After a few days, he will see we're meant to be together and will have no reason to object. In the meantime, let's just forget about the past and talk about more pleasant things, shall we?"

Chase whispered, "What happened to having no secrets between us?"

Rachel let out an exasperated sigh and rubbed her forehead. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You never mentioned being engaged."

Six months ago, when she made a promise to share everything in her life, she never expected to see Killian again or to have Chase questioning her better judgment.

"What...no answer?"

"It doesn't deserve one." Rachel shifted her view to the side window and focused on the stately manors and rolling green hills in the distance.

Killian cleared his throat. "I'd love to hear about your trip. I imagine you had quite an adventure."

Rachel leaned forward and placed her hand on the top of the seat. She chose to answer for both of them, skipping over their monthlong journey to describe their gypsy cab ride. When she finished her tale, Killian shook his head.

"I'm just glad you're both all right. The cops are sure to be on the lookout for that maniac driver. If things turn out as they should, you might even get your bags returned before the night's over."

"I sure hope so. Chase lost all his clothes, and I only have enough for a few days."

"If you don't get word back by tomorrow, I'll make arrangements to take you shopping. I've had a few bags disappear at airports myself and know exactly how you feel. There's nothing worse than losing everything you brought with you."

BANISHED THREADS

“We would appreciate that very much.” Rachel eased back in her seat and squeezed her hands in her lap. She glanced at Chase’s scowling face, confirming the matter between them was far from over.

“Our trip here has just started,” she said quietly. “Can we please make peace?”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a quirked smile. “I’m just curious why you never told me about your former fiancé”

Rachel glimpsed Killian’s reflection in the mirror before giving Chase her undivided attention. “Why can’t you wait until we get there? Until we’re completely alone?”

“Ah, that sounds familiar. Always another time, another place. You know what? Better yet...just drop me off at the next town. When you’re ready to talk, you’ll know where to find me.”

They were obviously suffering from cabin fever after being cooped up on the *Stargazer*. There was no other explanation for the pointless tension between them.

“Ah, come on,” Killian told him. “Loosen up, mate. There’s no need to get carried away.”

Chase scowled. “Do I look like your mate?”

Rachel leaned into Chase. “I’m asking you to stop this. *Right now.*”

Chase looked down at his cowboy boots. He seemed to be mulling over her words and slowly coming back to his senses. “Why can’t you just tell me what’s bothering you straight up? Then maybe all the fighting between us would end.”

Rachel sealed her lips and clenched her teeth, caging her instinctive retort. As far back as she could remember, she had always kept her personal dilemmas a secret. Whether she stayed single or chose to marry *any* man, handing them over would never be an option. She pressed her palm against Chase’s warm cheek and turned his face toward her. When their eyes met, she kept her voice level and tried to sound sincere. “Love comes from the depth of one’s being. I don’t take it lightly. I don’t abuse it. And I don’t think it’s necessary to prove I love you on a daily basis. When I say I care about you, take me at my word, Chase, or don’t take me at all.”

Without warning, he grabbed her head and pressed his lips on hers in a hard, possessive kiss. Then he bit her lip and sucked on it, sweeping his tongue under it and

into her mouth, touching every area as if trying to memorize the taste and texture of her. She kissed him back with newfound hunger that would have amazed her had she been in any state to consider it. But she wasn't. Her head swam. Her bones turned to water and her soul ignited. Deep inside, her body throbbed and ached.

Rachel suddenly became aware of Killian's gaze in the mirror and pushed Chase away. She felt the rush of heat to her cheeks as she lowered her lashes, her embarrassment preventing her from holding his look.

Chase grabbed her chin again and stared down at her lips. "The reason why relationships end is because one person tries to do everything in his or her power to save it while the other looks for any excuse to end it. I don't want to wake up one morning and discover I've been written off as another mistake." He raised his eyes to hers, released his hold and sat back.

What the hell? Rachel fell back in her seat, simmering in a stockpot of emotional turmoil. She couldn't help but notice Killian's arched brows in the mirror, plainly amazed by Chase's actions.

Damn it, Chase. As much as it pained her to remain calm and unaffected, there was no escaping the undeniable truth. She glanced down at the yellow diamond resting on her finger—the same engagement ring she had reluctantly accepted and now found herself nervously twisting. As each day had passed on board the *Stargazer*, Chase's disbelief in her ability to love had become more apparent and his determination to somehow control her a constant threat. He had become the king of mixed signals, delivering romantic promises with fervent ultimatums, while she withdrew into her cocoon of apprehension, becoming the queen of second thoughts.