

SEVERED THREADS



...the truth lies below.

KAYLIN MCFARREN

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PRAISE FOR KAYLIN MCFARREN'S THREAD SERIES

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“Kaylin McFarren's latest novel is a fast-paced mixture of romance, mystery and adventure, with more than a dash of the paranormal tossed in for good measure. It's also provides the reader an exciting introduction into the worlds of deep sea diving, treasure hunting and Far Eastern vs. Western culture. Readers will quickly be drawn in by multiple plot lines that intertwine and ultimately lead to a very satisfying conclusion. 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*

"An intriguing tale of mystery, deception and murder."

• *REBECCA READS, Austin, Texas*

"Sizzling adventure awaits in this wonderfully fresh story from Kaylin McFarren."

• *RHONDA POLLERO, USA Today bestselling author*

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Author's Note

I've often been asked, "What inspires you to write?" Most authors have a pat response. It might be the people they've known, the circumstances in which they find themselves living, books they've read over the years, a favorite movie, or their desire to live in another time and place – a romantic, undaunted, and unpretentious era. For me, oddly enough, stories develop in the recesses of my mind, becoming a pageant of dreams, often reoccurring and continuing like a weekly series on television. I find I'm compelled to write because my brain keeps me up at night with possibilities. Unfortunately, there isn't an on and off switch. Once I have a story in my head, I'm completely consumed. This might sound egotistic and self-promoting, but if I don't put it on paper or on my computer, I'm convinced I'll be haunted by the failed opportunity to impact other people's lives – to produce insight into resolving broken relationships and damaged emotions. However, by no means does this qualify or allow me to advise and counsel the general public. There are accomplished specialists trained to address those specific needs. My purpose is simply to entertain and to open the mind's eye, allowing a frosted view inside the average woman's thought process. I've simply been given the gift of a vivid imagination, taking me on journeys better shared with good company.

This one's for you, baby – the man who's always in my corner, never letting a day go by without reminding me how much I'm loved.

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

One

The adventure begins...

Chase Cohen tumbled over *Stargazer's* side and into California's cold Pacific Ocean, his dreams of riches so close he could barely breathe. Five years of diving for corporate salvage companies had taught him to restore 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 him in his black mask, wetsuit and regulator, his partner took on the appearance of a dark avenger. His salt and pepper hair swayed in the current above his head, matching the rhythm of his large slow-moving hands. The muted light in the ocean framed his brown eyes, now tense with impatience.

He signed, "Okay." 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 were tucked into the soft gray sand. In the distance, the ground gradually sloped into an opaque bottomless depth. The jagged outcropping just beyond had snagged unsuspecting ships and dragged them beneath the waves for

hundreds of years. According to the coordinates on Sam's map, somewhere in between the bottomless pit and mountainous rise lay a barnacle-crusting 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 Sam had acquired from a local junk shop, it was still unclear what had led him to this particular spot. Perhaps the drunken ramblings of the retired salvager he'd kept company with at the Crow's Nest Bar. Or the volumes of 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 he was so sure of 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 a pile of craggy bedrock into a gully of crevices spanning 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 further and deeper they went, the muddier the frigid waters grew. Chase strained his eyes and ran his hands over rocks in the hazy murk but the anchor chain was nowhere to be found.

This is pointless! Diving 101 had taught him the necessity of staying within visual proximity of his diving partner, to carefully monitor his time, but growing impatience tempted him to blaze his own path. He signaled to Sam before veering off and heading due north. He continued groping along, his flashlight bouncing off the particulate, floating like dust in the narrow beams 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, he 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.

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 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 okay." Yet rising bubbles indicated 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 supposed to ever 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 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 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 shoved Sam upward. *Go!* Then remaining in place, he hovered – decompressing himself for the longest five minutes of his life. All the while, his memories filled with Sam. The only man in his life he had allowed himself to trust. The only father figure he'd ever known. Without hesitation, Sam had offered him a job. He 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 now 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 his 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 them 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 his chest with his fist. "Breathe, Sam, goddamn it! Breathe!" he yelled. Chase knew people could be revived after as much as an hour in cold water without brain damage. 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. 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 gun-rail to keep from collapsing. He watched as they transferred Sam's spent body into a waiting ambulance. Then he forced himself to follow closely behind, his rubbery legs barely cooperating. He begged to come along, but the same officer assured him nothing more could be done.

Chase stood barefooted in the graveled 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. With no threatening divers or reported sharks in the area, Chase couldn't imagine what had caused his 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 was in working order. He was sure of it. And yet if the cause of Sam's death was ruled equipment failure, he 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 weary 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, 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 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.

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, a rasp of a voice. Rusted from panic, from guilt. From disbelief. "Something happened. It...it's your dad."