

BANISHED THREADS



...secrets can be deadly.

KAYLIN MCFARREN

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© *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.

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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.

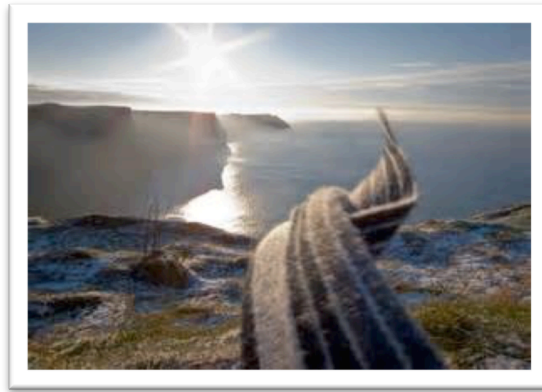
“Dismiss your guilt,” he told the source.
“Forgiveness comes with real remorse.
Torment will find a twisted mind
Whose love was built on cruel design.”

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

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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,

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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 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

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enjoyed sharing with Rachel, cuddling under a blanket in a cozy lounge chair on the 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.

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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.

