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My Sister's Secret

Written by Tracy Buchanan

Published by AVON

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my sister's secret

TRACY BUCHANAN

AVON

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AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
The News Building
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2015

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-00-757939-6
Set in Minion by Born Group using Atomik ePublisher from Easypress

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



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To Paul and Jessica,
my brother and sister

Prologue

Busby-on-Sea, UK

March 1977

Faith lay still, the rain wetting her face and bouncing off the soft skin of her outstretched palms. She heard voices, footsteps, but couldn't move, couldn't call out. She looked up at the soaking tree branches above. If she narrowed her eyes slightly it almost looked like she was underwater, floating under a submerged tree…

Wouldn't that be wonderful, discovering the drowned forest she and her sisters had spent their summers searching for? She remembered the first time she showed them the map she'd made. Three years ago. She was sixteen, so naïve then, so excited too. She'd hurried down the beach, the pebbles stretching out before her, the sky bright blue above, sun hot and hazy. When she caught sight of her sisters, she slowed down. She liked watching them when they were like this, quiet and still. Her thirteen-year-old sister, Charity – the youngest of the three – lay on a towel, chin tipped up towards the sun, eyes closed, wild black hair a tangle above her head. Her sunburnt legs stretched out from faded denim shorts, her halter-neck top matching her red knees. She

was at that confusing age between girlhood and womanhood that Faith remembered so well.

Sitting behind Charity on a large white rock, her pale knees tucked up to her chest, was Hope. She watched the sea pensively as it foamed against the beach, the end of her pen in her mouth, notepad open in her other hand. The swimsuit she was wearing – an old one of their mother's, swirling colours of green, red and blue – and the turquoise swimming cap that hid her long red hair made her look more like thirty than fifteen.

Faith quickened her step towards them, bare feet scrunching pebbles, the object of her excitement hidden behind her back.

Hope peered up first, face lighting up when she saw her older sister.

'How's the poem going?' Faith asked her.

'I'm stuck on the colour of the sea.' A frown puckered her pale skin as she turned to look back out towards the sea. 'It's such a strange colour today, not blue or grey or green.'

'Ribbons,' Charity lazily murmured without opening her eyes. 'Blue, grey and green ribbons.'

Faith smiled as she sat down next to Charity, pebbles warm beneath her bare calves.

'Ribbons. I like that. You're not so useless after all, Charity,' Hope declared, scribbling in her notepad as Charity stuck her tongue out at her.

'I've got something to show you both,' Faith said.

Charity opened one eye, squinting up at her sister. 'Please not another type of snorkel? Because honestly, they all look the same to me.'

Faith laughed. 'I promise it's not.' She looked over at Hope, impatient. 'Come on, I want to show you both together.'

Hope put her hand up. 'Wait, I have one more line to write.' She finished scribbling then snapped her notepad shut, shouting,

‘Finished!’ Then she jogged over to them, pulling her swimming cap off and raking her fingers through her wavy red hair as it fell around her thin shoulders.

‘So,’ Faith said as Hope joined them. ‘You know we’re going to travel the world when we’re old enough?’

Charity and Hope exchanged a smile. Faith always came up with fun adventures.

‘As Daddy pointed out, we can’t visit every single country in the world,’ Faith continued. ‘That would take us a lifetime. We need a *focus*.’

‘I quite agree,’ Hope said as Charity nodded.

‘Well, I’ve decided what our focus will be.’ She took a deep breath, looking at each of her sisters in turn, drawing out the drama.

‘Oh come on, Faith, don’t torture us,’ Charity said, bouncing up and down on her toes in anticipation.

‘We should focus on visiting submerged forests!’ Faith declared. ‘I was looking through the photos from Mum’s field trip last week in Austria, they’re beautiful!’

Charity went still. ‘Submerged what?’

‘You never listen when Mum tells us about her trips,’ Hope said, rolling her eyes.

‘They’re forests that disappear beneath the sea over time,’ Faith explained.

‘Mrs Tate read a poem in class about a whole town that got flooded in Wales after I told her where Mum was going,’ Hope said. ‘You can still see the remains of its forests when the tide goes out.’ She flicked through her notepad then tapped her finger on a page. ‘Here it is. “When waves crashed on the sea-shore / with thunder in its wake / The bells of Cantre’r Gwaelod / are silent ’neath the wave.”’

‘So these forests are a bit like Atlantis?’ Charity asked.

‘Kind of,’ Faith said. ‘But minus the buildings. And they’re not just beneath the sea. You can find them in lakes and rivers too.

There's one in Austria that only appears in the summer when the snow melts. The water floods the trees, and even a park bench. I found a book in the library about them, and drew a map of all the forests I could find in it.'

Faith pulled out what she'd been hiding behind her back and laid it on the towel. It was a large and rather beautiful drawing of the world map, tiny illustrated trees dotted in different locations. At the top, in Faith's pretty looped handwriting, was: 'World Tour of Submerged Forests.'

The three sisters bent over the map, hair trailing across it, dark, red and blonde. They traced their fingers over the trees then all peered up at one another.

Charity smiled. 'This is so cool, Faith.'

Faith's pretty face lit up. 'Isn't it? I can collect samples from the trees as we travel. I'll be a marine biologist by then anyway.' She looked at Hope. 'And you can write poems about them.' Hope nodded, grey eyes sparkling. 'And Charity, you can—'

'Sunbathe after each dive?' Charity suggested.

The three girls laughed.

There was the sound of crunching pebbles. They all looked up to see their friend Niall approaching. The top half of his wetsuit was around his waist, exposing the tanned skin of his chest. His face was very tanned too, his blue eyes even more vivid as a result. He looked like he'd grown up in the weeks since they'd seen him last. Faith supposed he wasn't the annoying little boy they'd first met on this beach four years before. He was fifteen, after all, nearly a man.

She noticed Charity staring shyly at him, her cheeks flushing. Clearly Charity had noticed the change in Niall too. Hope on the other hand was oblivious, rolling her eyes as she always did when Niall appeared.

'Come join us, Niall,' Faith said, beckoning him over. 'We've decided to do a world tour of submerged forests.'

Niall crouched down and looked at the map. 'There's a submerged forest off Busby's coast, apparently.'

Hope looked at him cynically.

'Seriously. A fisherman saw the branches of a tree during a storm.'

'That's hardly proof,' Hope said.

'But it's something,' Charity said, jumping up and shading her eyes as she looked out to sea. 'I'd love to see it.'

Niall smiled at Charity. She bit her lip, looking away. Hope shot her a warning glance, but Faith smiled. It was nice, watching the way they were together. Niall was a good kid, despite his troubled background. It wasn't his fault his parents drank too much and lived on the grim estate at the other end of Busby, was it?

He pulled a pencil from the small blue rucksack Faith always carried around with her and quickly drew a little tree over Busby-on-Sea on the map.

'If we find it, it can be the first forest we visit,' he said.

'We?' Hope replied.

'Yeah, who else will teach you all to dive properly?'

The three sisters looked out to sea, the waves crashing and receding before them. Then Niall picked Charity up, throwing her over his shoulder and running into the sea with her as Faith laughed.

The happy memory dissipated. A tear slid down Faith's cheek. She was so cold, so frightened. Her sisters would find her though. They'd see her bed was empty and they'd come looking for her. Then she'd tell them every little thing that had happened during the past few weeks and they'd figure it all out together, because that was what they always did.

No more secrets, she thought to herself.

She closed her eyes.

Chapter One

Willow

In the middle of the Aegean Sea, Greece
August 2016

My friend Ajay reckons the Aegean Sea is named after Aegea, queen of the Amazons. My aunt Hope disagrees. She says it's named after a famous sea goat.

I know which one I prefer.

In fact, I feel like I'm channelling a female warrior when I do dives like this, all swaddled up in my diving 'armour', ready to do battle with the sea and unearth its treasures. I feel it now as the dive boat we're on bounces over the waves, the sea spreading out around us, the island of Rhodes just a shimmer of land behind us.

'Nearly there,' Ajay says, smiling at me. Without him, I'd have never got on to this wreck dive. I smile back, grateful.

One of the other divers who's with us – an Australian called Guy, all blond hair and muscles – paces the boat, frustrated. 'I might just jump off this boat and swim there myself if it doesn't get a move on.'

The rest of the crew laugh.

I haven't worked with Guy before but I've worked with divers like him, all bravado and testosterone. I can guarantee that by tonight he'll be telling me stories of all the times he's nearly died diving wrecks. Usually that's a sign of someone who puts their ego above competence.

I throw Ajay a 'where'd you find this one?' look. He mouths back, 'He's good.'

We'll see.

'You dived a cruise ship before?' Guy asks me.

'Not a cruise ship,' I reply, standing on my tiptoes as I crane my neck to see any sign of the site.

'Willow dived the Russian tanker with me,' Ajay said.

Guy looks me up and down. 'Oh yeah? Pretty risky salvage dive. Big payout though, right?'

'Not bad,' I murmur.

That was a good job. I was in between contracts in Brighton at the time, whittling away the money I'd accrued from my last gig on a North Sea oil rig. I'd seen the tanker on the news and wondered if the commercial diving company Ajay worked for would be hired to salvage it. It looked like a risky dive, lots of wielding and moving of heavy equipment…lots of opportunity for that equipment to tumble on top of the crew. When Ajay called asking if I was free to work on it, I hadn't hesitated. It wasn't just the job, it was Ajay too. We'd clicked straight away when he was my diving instructor. He's one of the good guys – and he never once tried it on with me after a few too many beers.

'This job will be risky too,' Guy says, eyes lighting up. 'Why's it been allowed to stay under for twenty years, anyway?'

'The cruise company went bust so couldn't pay to salvage it,' one of the other divers shouts over. 'The Greek authorities couldn't afford it either.'

'I heard a mystery benefactor stepped in to pay,' Ajay says.

I look at him. 'Really? You didn't tell me that.'

'Just found out this morning, Foivos told me,' he says, gesturing to the old Greek guy captaining our ship.

'How many casualties?' Guy asks.

'A hundred and eleven died,' I say.

'Rogue wave, right?' Guy says. 'Dived a ship in the Atlantic Ocean that was taken down by one of those. Must've been big news at the time.'

'Very big news.' I pick up my stabiliser jacket – or stab jacket, as we call them – checking it all over.

'The rich dude who owned it died too, didn't he?' Guy continues. I give Ajay another look. This man talks too much. 'Man, I can't wait to get under.'

Ajay shoots him a look. 'Remember to keep the excitement in check. Safer that way.'

'Yep, you won't get much diving done when you're dead,' I say.

'You didn't tell me what a firecracker we have on our hands,' Guy says to Ajay. 'Was she this bad when you were training her?'

'Worse,' Ajay says, smiling.

'I am *here*, you know,' I say.

Ajay looks contrite. 'Sorry, Willow.'

'You will be sorry when I kick your arse at table football tonight.'

Everyone laughs. This is what I've learnt working as a diver the past few years. Let them know when they've gone too far then lighten the tone, no hard feelings. The commercial diving world is tight and it's hard to fit in, especially as a woman. I manage though, I've even made some good friends, my 'tribe', as I call them.

Guy catches my eye and shoots me a sexy smile, his blond hair hanging in his eyes. I ignore him. Ajay thinks I'm too fussy when it comes to men, comparing them all to my dad. But it's hard when every time a man looks at me, I think of the way my dad looked at my mum when they were young.

One of my earliest memories is of us all sitting in our huge garden. I watched my parents gaze at each other beneath the willow tree I was named after. Then my dad noticed me watching them so he pulled me into his arms, telling me he loved me over and over.

I loved those summer days at the cottage. That memory of my parents still haunts me now.

We all grow quiet as the buoy marking the ship's location comes into view. I take a deep breath.

Finally, we're here.

I focus on the routine of preparing for the dive to calm myself, pulling the shoulder straps of my stabiliser jacket down so it's nice and snug. Then Ajay helps me get my air tank on. I check my diver computer on my wrist, pressing the small buttons around its large clock face to set all the measurements up. Then I pull my weight belt up and grab my fins before walking to the edge of the boat and looking down at the calm sea. The ship is right under my feet, right here. I press the button to inflate my stab jacket, feeling it expand against my chest. Usually that feeling sends a thrill of excitement through me: time to head in and grapple with the sea. But I'm suddenly feeling apprehensive, even *reluctant*, to jump in.

Ajay squeezes my shoulder, looking me in the eye. 'All set?'

'She can handle herself,' Guys says. 'You said yourself she's dived worse wrecks.'

'This is different,' Ajay says.

Guy nods. 'Yeah, I guess the fact no one's dived it since the rescue operation makes it more dicey.'

'It's not just that,' I say, glancing at him. 'That rich dude who owned the ship? That was my dad.'

Shock registers on his face. 'No way.'

The rest of the crew are quiet as they watch me. I've been wanting this for such a long time, campaigning the Greek authorities to

let me dive it as soon as I got my first set of qualifications when I was eighteen.

And now here I am.

I turn back to contemplate the sea. It's gentle and aqua-coloured, tempting me in. I know how deceiving it can be, how in one moment it can turn into a death trap, like it did for my parents.

'Ready?' Ajay says, standing beside me as the rest of the crew line up.

I take a deep breath, channelling that queen of the Amazons, then put my snorkel into my mouth.

This is it.

I jump in before I can stop myself, the warm salty water splashing on to my face. My inflated jacket makes me bounce up and down for a few moments, then I start deflating the stab jacket and the weights around my waist pull me under.

The sound of the boat's engine, birds squawking above, the rippling sea all disappear as I descend. There's just the deep quiet, that special quality of silence that only comes with being underwater.

The colour of the water around me changes the further down I get, from aqua to green to deep blue then misty black. The warmth dissipates a little and everything seems to slow down.

Is this how Mum and Dad felt before they were eaten up by the sea? I try to picture them. The last time I saw my mum, I was so tired, I barely took it in. Why had I been so bloody tired? If only I'd held on to wakefulness just a few moments longer, there would have been more than just fragments of memory to grasp at: the red of Mum's lipstick, that crooked tooth of hers. If I'd been more awake, I could have held tight to her, told her not to go away, cried and begged.

Then Dad. I still remember the feel of his soft fingers against my forehead as he brushed my fringe away from my eyes a few

days before, the smell of his citrus aftershave as he leant down to kiss me, green eyes like the sea. Maybe he would have delayed the launch if I'd begged him to? Aunt Hope said he was like putty in my hands, one of the country's richest businessmen and his daughter had him wrapped around her little finger. Would it have been enough, my desperate plea for him to stay?

How different things would have been if he had.

Ahead of me, I see the yellow of the other divers' fins. The mist disperses and Ajay swivels around, his long legs like reeds. He shoots me a thumbs up and I do the same.

At first I can't see the ship, it's so murky down here. But then it comes into view. I grab the torch attached to my wrist and shine it ahead of me. The ship is vast, stretched across the ocean floor like a white beached whale. Half its upper deck is smashed into the ocean floor's surface, the side of the ship with its name – *Haven Deluxe* – emblazoned across it is tilted towards me. What was once floating is now submerged, wood and metal as one with the seabed as it rests on its side in the foggy sea. My aunt Hope says the ship's dead, an underwater coffin. But it still feels alive to me, as though any moment it might pounce into life and spill out all the memories from my parents' last night alive.

I stare at it, feeling an unbearable sadness. The first time I saw it was on the front of the brochure. Even at just seven, I could sense my dad's excitement. Finally the cruise ship he'd dreamt of building was ready for its maiden voyage. He used to read the brochure to me like it was a copy of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

The next time I saw that same photo, it was shown alongside photos of the ship languishing at the bottom of the sea the week it sank. My aunt Hope had been looking after me in the ramshackle pebbledash house she and Mum had grown up in in Busby-on-Sea. We got the call in the middle of the night to confirm they'd died.

'They're gone,' she said as she peered up at me in the darkness.

I've never quite forgiven her for that. *They're gone.*

I hadn't been able to process it properly, I was so young. I remember running to my room and slamming the door, saying 'no' over and over. My aunt didn't come to comfort me. Instead, she went outside and knelt on the shore, smashing her fists into the waves as though she was punishing the sea for taking her sister away from her.

The memories dissipate. I can't get caught up in them, I must stay focused.

So I continue swimming towards the ship, trying to stifle my grief and sadness. After a while, I see the hole in the side of the ship that the rescue divers must have made all those years ago. The lights from our torches join up to illuminate the area in front of us. The hole's ragged and just about wide enough for two to swim through without snagging skin.

Am I really about to go in there?

I stop a moment, floating in the water, staring at the ship. Then I kick my legs hard and head towards the hole. Guy goes to follow me but Ajay holds him back. I know why he's doing it: I have to be the first one in there. My heart clenches at that.

Thank you, Ajay.

I slide my body through the hole and the ship's once grand dining room is right there in front of me, an eerie shadow of what it once was. I find it hard to breathe for a second, my chest struggling to take in the air being pumped from the tank on my back. The tank itself suddenly feels heavy, too heavy, and my heads swims slightly.

I try to focus on my breathing as I look around me, the rest of the divers are spilling into the hall behind me and spreading out around the area, cameras ready to take photos, to assess what needs doing. Some divers have large nets to bring items of note

up to surface. But my camera stays floating from my belt. I need to see this with my own eyes, not through a camera lens.

Faded Garden of Eden murals line the walls above, a large staircase winds its way up to a gilded balcony. Nearby, a huge chandelier lies on its side, its smashed crystals glinting in the light from our torches. To my right are tables and chairs embellished with gold leaf, piled on top of each other. And in the middle of it all, now lying on its side but once lying across the dining room floor, a glass viewing pane that's splintered and thick with sea moss.

Survivors said the first wave hit as dessert was served that evening.

I imagine the whole area coming to life before my eyes as it does still in my nightmares: the tables and chairs righting themselves, silver cutlery clinking into place, fragments of glass floating back together to form large wine glasses. I pass a smashed piano and can almost hear the soft lilt of music echoing in the background, the sound of laughter and chatter around me.

Maybe Mum would have been sitting at one of these tables in her long black dress, the silver mesh purse I'd got her for her birthday clutched in her lap. Dad would be dressed in his smart tux, his blond hair swept over his forehead. He'd be whispering something to Mum and she'd laugh in response as they clinked their champagne glasses together. This would have been a big night for them, the launch of Dad's ship. In those last few months, he had worked into the early hours. Mum often waited up for him, and I sometimes watched her without her realising. She'd be curled up on the sofa in her silk nightie reading a book, glasses perched on the end of her nose. When the key turned in the door, her face lit up and Dad would walk in, twirling her around in his arms as she laughed.

A few nights later, they were here, in this very dining room.

But then the scene disintegrates, chairs splintering, tables collapsing, glass and silver smashing apart as my parents fade away

until I'm back in the foggy depths of this sea coffin again, still an orphan, still alone.

This is harder than I thought. I've wanted it so long I've lost track of what it really means: I'm here, in the belly of the ship where my parents died.

The yellow of Ajay's fins catch my attention. He's filming the scenes around him for the video we'll all watch later to assess just how much work needs doing. He heads down a corridor leading away from the dining room and I follow. Some paintings are still secured to the walls, including one of a woman in her fifties with black hair and penetrating blue eyes. My grandmother from Dad's side. Like my other grandparents, she passed away before I was born. I slide my fingers over the canvas and it bubbles under my fingertips.

In the distance, I see the remains of a bar, stools toppled on to their sides. A large balcony appears on my right, providing a route out on to the ship's decking area and the sea beyond.

There's a loud creaking sound. Ajay and I both pause, his limbs floating, almost disappearing into the haze. One of the pictures falls from the wall, bobbing towards me. I push it away.

Another creaking sound.

Ajay waves his hand from side to side, the diver signal that something is wrong and we need to head back to the surface. My first chance to see the place where my parents died and I have to leave after less than five minutes here?

I shake my head. He grabs my arm. We look at each other through our masks, my eyes pleading with his to give me more time. He shakes his head and points towards the surface.

In the distance, the other divers start heading back. I feel like taking my snorkel out and screaming. Instead, I follow Ajay out of the ship.

Before I head towards the surface, I look back once more and say a silent goodbye to my parents.

That evening, I walk into the restaurant of the large beachside hotel where we're staying in Rhodes. People turn to stare as I pass them. I suppose I look out of place here among all these tourists, a lone wolf, as Ajay calls me, pale skin, tattoos and short black hair. Wait until they see all the other divers pile in.

Ajay and Guy are already here, sitting in a quiet corner, two bottles of beer nearly empty already. I slump down across from Ajay, unable to hide my disappointment.

'It sucks, doesn't it?' Guy says.

'Sure does,' I say, trying to get the attention of a waiter, desperate for a beer too.

'So you must have been young when your folks died? Did you have family who took you in?'

I nod. 'My aunt.'

I spent that first week after my parents died imagining them coming back, found and safe. Then my aunt had come to me one morning, her bag slung over her shoulder. 'Right,' she said. 'Let's see your new school'.

That's when it hit me, my parents were really gone and the wonderful life I'd had with them gone too. Waves of grief overwhelmed me and the emptiness of the life that lay before me seemed to unravel. I yearned for the huge cottage I'd grown up in just outside Busby-on-Sea. I yearned for my lovely room with its aqua walls like the sea. I yearned for my dog, Tommy, but Aunt Hope had refused to take him in. I didn't want this decrepit old seaside town with its soulless school and strange homeless woman with her trolley full of shoes.

I'd burst into tears. My aunt had to postpone the visit I was such a mess.

The only thing that got me through those first few months was imagining the grey sea outside my aunt's house was the Aegean