A woman with her hair in a braid, wearing a long, light-colored dress with a floral pattern, stands in profile looking out over a body of water. In the background, a large, multi-masted sailing ship is visible on the water, and a full moon hangs in a cloudy sky. The scene is set during sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden light. The text 'The TEA CHEST' is overlaid on the image. 'The' is in a cursive font, while 'TEA CHEST' is in a large, white, serif font. Below the title is a decorative horizontal line with a small shield-like symbol in the center. At the bottom, the author's name 'HEIDI CHIAVAROLI' is written in a white, serif font.

The
TEA
CHEST

— — — — —
— — — — —
HEIDI
CHIAVAROLI

Praise for novels by Heidi Chiavaroli

The Tea Chest

“Captivating from the first page. I couldn’t read this novel fast enough, and yet the beautiful writing compelled me to slow down and experience every line. Dual tales of courage, love, and freedom proved even more poignant for being woven together as one. Steeped in timeless truths and served with skill, *The Tea Chest* is sure to be savored by all who read it.”

JOCELYN GREEN, CHRISTY AWARD–WINNING AUTHOR OF *BETWEEN TWO SHORES*

“*The Tea Chest* brings two women, separated by centuries, face-to-face with the same question: What is the price of liberty? A master at writing dual timelines, Chiavaroli takes us beyond the historical connection between these two women and wraps them together with a shared spirit.”

ALLISON PITTMAN, CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED AUTHOR OF *THE SEAMSTRESS*

“Seamlessly blending both the colonial and contemporary, Heidi Chiavaroli rivets readers with this compelling timeslip novel. *The Tea Chest* opens, unleashing an array of fascinating characters and complex circumstances that will have you turning pages as fast as your fingers fly till the end. I could not put this novel down.”

LAURA FRANTZ, CHRISTY AWARD–WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE LACEMAKER*

“Chiavaroli proves herself a master at the intersection of history and present-day in her new novel, *The Tea Chest*. A gripping tale of the Boston Tea Party and the choices we all must make for truth, the power of forgiveness, and the freedom that comes when we realize to Whom we truly belong. Swoon-worthy romance, heartbreak, and intrigue combine for a thrilling story that will keep me thinking for a long time to come. Bravo!”

AMY K. SORRELLS, AUTHOR OF *BEFORE I SAW YOU*

“*The Tea Chest* is the rare time-slip novel that gripped me equally in both present and historical settings. Chiavaroli is once again home in the era of her evident passion and its echo into our tumultuous present. Brilliantly researched and executed with passion, *The Tea Chest* is timeless and empowering. Long may Heidi Chiavaroli reign over thoughtful, effortlessly paralleled fiction that digs deep into the heart of America’s early liberty and the resonance of faith and conviction she offers as its poignant legacy.”

RACHEL MCMILLAN, AUTHOR OF *MURDER IN THE CITY OF LIBERTY*

“Freedom is an innate need in the heart of humanity, and in Heidi Chiavaroli’s latest novel, she takes her readers on a journey to the darkest moments and the brightest victories in the quest for freedom. *The Tea Chest* is not only a story of America’s birth as a nation, but also one that reflects the clamoring in humanity’s heart to soar unfettered by the weight of chains that bind.”

JAIME JO WRIGHT, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE HOUSE ON FOSTER HILL* AND *THE CURSE OF MISTY WAYFAIR*

“*The Tea Chest* is an enthralling story of beauty birthed from sorrow, hope amid ashes, and healing through pain. Chiavaroli has masterfully weaved a timeless tale that kept me turning pages far into the night . . . and reminded me of the gentle truth that identity and worth are found in the eyes of Jesus.”

TARA JOHNSON, AUTHOR OF *WHERE DANDELIONS BLOOM* AND *ENGRAVED ON THE HEART*

The Hidden Side

“*The Hidden Side* is a beautiful tale that captures the timeless struggles of the human heart.”

JULIE CANTRELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PERENNIALS*

“Heidi Chiavaroli has written another poignant novel that slips between a heart-wrenching present-day story and a tragic one set during the Revolutionary War. I couldn’t put this book down!”

MELANIE DOBSON, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *CATCHING THE WIND* AND *MEMORIES OF GLASS*

“*The Hidden Side* is a brilliant portrayal of our country’s worst modern-day nightmare and the struggles of its traumatic birth. A stunning novel, not to be missed.”

CATHY GOHLKE, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *UNTIL WE FIND HOME* AND *THE MEDALLION*

“This page-turner will appeal to readers looking for fiction that explores Christian values and belief under tragic circumstances.”

BOOKLIST

“Filled with fascinating historical details, Chiavaroli connects two women through an artifact of the past. This heartrending tale will engage aficionados of the American Revolution and historical fiction.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Both halves of *The Hidden Side* are singularly compelling, with more of a fine threading between stories than an obvious connection. There is also the shared message that even during times of spiritual darkness, with prayer and hope, forgiveness and new beginnings are always possible.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“Chiavaroli’s latest timeslip novel does not disappoint. Both storylines are fully developed with strong character development and they are seamlessly woven together.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK

Freedom's Ring

“From the Boston Massacre and the American Revolution to the Boston Marathon bombing, history proves the triumph of grace. . . . Evocative, rich with symbolism, honest in its portrayal of human errors, *Freedom's Ring* explores what happens when individuals reach the limit of their own ability and allow God to step in.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“First novelist Chiavaroli’s historical tapestry will provide a satisfying read for fans of Kristy Cambron and Lisa Wingate.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Joy, anguish, fear, and romance are seamlessly incorporated with authentic history, skillfully imagined fiction and the beautiful reminder that good can—and does—come out of darkness.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“A powerful journey into past and present. This masterful love story of God and country both haunts and heals long after the last page.”

JULIE LESSMAN, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE HEART OF SAN FRANCISCO SERIES

“Beautifully written, a riveting debut novel.”

CATHY GOHLKE, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *UNTIL WE FIND HOME* AND *THE MEDALLION*

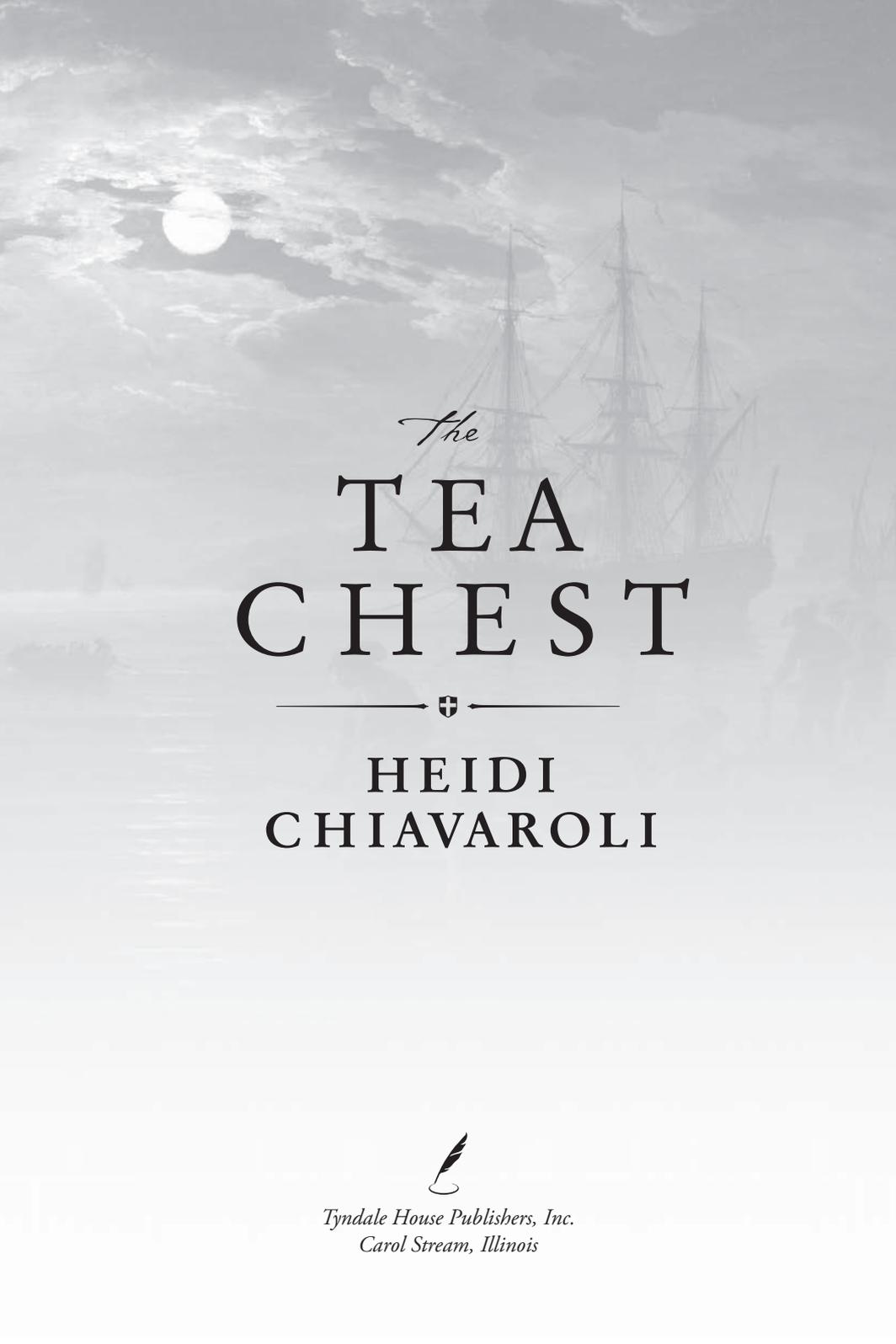
“An intriguing tale of two women separated by time connected through their search for a strength they desperately need.”

MELISSA JAGEARS, AUTHOR OF *A HEART MOST CERTAIN*

“From courage in the face of tragedy to the healing power of forgiveness, this book will leave you with a wonderful message of faith, hope, and second chances.”

SUSAN ANNE MASON, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE COURAGE TO DREAM SERIES

The Tea Chest



The
TEA
CHEST



HEIDI
CHIAVAROLI



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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The Tea Chest

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The Tea Chest is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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PROLOGUE

Hayley

NAVAL SPECIAL WARFARE CENTER
CORONADO, CALIFORNIA

The bell was beautiful.

Brass, harboring a thousand hidden stories, it reminded me of the Liberty Bell in Independence Hall—of the one time, pre-military life, that I'd left my Massachusetts hometown, the only man who'd ever earned my respect beside me.

Somehow, my uncle Joe knew. He knew I'd needed to get away from it all. From the silvery peels of losing scratch tickets and broken rum bottles on the scratched wood of our coffee table, hope transferred to dirty needles, caps off, lying beside them.

My mother, Lena, passed out on the couch, the logo of her Happy Helpers Housekeeping uniform just visible beneath the shiny drool along her chin.

I'd needed to get away from the screaming late at night.

The knife I kept beside my bed in case one of her boy-friends came in . . . again.

The wondering if I'd ever have enough guts to use the knife if it meant protecting myself.

After that trip to Philadelphia, after seeing that cracked, ancient, glorious bell, after listening to the classified stories disguised in fictional form that my uncle Joe used to instill hope, after exploring the exciting beginnings of our country, after knowing he believed in me . . . well, I didn't wonder anymore.

The first time I pulled the knife on Lena's boyfriend, he'd slipped into my room, his cheap cologne filling the thick summer air. His steps came heavy as I pretended to sleep, my hand curled around the knife, waiting for the heat of his hand to graze my bare thigh and inch upward. From experience, I knew what would come next. But instead of succumbing to it, instead of praying that it would all just end quickly, this time, Uncle Joe's stories came to mind. His words.

"Your worth is not in where you come from, Hayley. Your worth is what you already have inside of you—what God put there from the very beginning—the will to live, the will to fight. No one can take that away from you. You have a say in how your life goes."

All that beautiful bell symbolized—freedom and pride and country and everything outside of that stuffy room with this man who kept my mother chained to her addictions—swelled over me. In one swift motion I twirled from my stomach, the knife tight in my grasp, the small lesson my uncle had given me on the best place to kick a man well-rehearsed and executed.

As I stood over the crumpled form, knife unused, I felt a sense of power. And as he backed his skinny, shot-up backside out of my room, promising not to bother me again, I realized something. Something wonderful.

I *was* strong.

And to me, being strong meant one thing: I *wasn't* weak.

I wasn't like my mother.

Now, I glanced at the bell situated prominently in the Naval Special Warfare Center. When I'd come to the facility a week earlier, I'd ignored the bell, put it at a distance from myself. While I'd already made history in becoming the first woman to enlist in Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training, responding to the defense secretary's announcement that all combat positions—no exceptions—would be open to women, I was determined to let that history play out. Now, having passed the intense physical screenings, the country's eyes were on me, or rather the gender I stood for, as my name hadn't been released to the press.

And I'd been determined not to let them down. Determined not to let my uncle Joe down. Not to let . . .

But I wouldn't think of Ethan now. Or of Emma, or the tea chest and the newspaper article Ethan had sent me a few days earlier. They would only serve to ruin my concentration, to ruin everything I'd worked so hard for, to ruin who I knew myself to be.

The wearing down that I had prepared myself for had begun three days earlier. With each derogative comment from one of the men, with each bloodied wound and aching muscle piled upon my sleep-deprived brain an inch away from hypothermia, with each wave pounding us in IBS training and rock portage, I felt it.

And today, for the first time, I imagined walking up to the bell outside the main office, as thirty-two of my classmates had already done, of releasing the melancholy sound from

that old symbol of freedom and laying down my lonely green helmet alongside the rest. Of being done.

Quitting. Maybe even going back home.

My wet pants rubbed sand and sea salt into the open wounds on the insides of my thighs as I did squats with my team. My arm muscles burned as I tried to hold my own in balancing the log above my head, the “Up, down” directions of our instructor hazy in my mind.

I’d read somewhere that if the thought of DOR (Drop on Request) so much as enters your head during training, then you’re not Navy SEAL material.

With that thought, I forced my gaze off the bell, looked instead to the back of my friend Carpenter’s head, his own arms shaking with effort.

The lieutenant paced beside us, stopped alongside me as we stood from our squat. “Ensign Ashworth, that bell’s looking pretty good, isn’t it? A warm bed, maybe a doughnut and some coffee. Oh, that’s right—tea for you, isn’t it, Ashworth? A cup of tea’s looking mighty fine right about now, isn’t it?”

Seriously, this guy didn’t miss a thing. Not my bell fantasizing, or my tea sneaking in the chow hall. I forced my arms stronger, wished I’d left the tea at home. I’d given up more to prove I was one of the guys.

It was just tea, after all.

“No, chief!”

“Then why are you embarrassing your team, me, and my instructor staff with your sandbagging attitude? Your weakness can jeopardize your entire team. Go make a sugar cookie, Ashworth. You have three minutes to hit the surf, get

some sand, and decide you want to help your team. Move, move, move!”

My arms fell numb at my sides, even as the men on either side of me groaned at the heavier weight now transferred to them. “Yes, chief!”

I ran toward the beach, stumbling only once, my arms burning with relief. Sand crusted every inch of my skin—from my chafing toes to the backs of my gritty eyelids. When I hit the cold shock of the Pacific, the salt burned the wounds along my body. I ignored it. That’s what I needed to do—focus past the temporary pain. I forced my throbbing legs forward.

My commander was right. These men—they were my family now. I needed to be strong for their sake. I couldn’t let them down.

As soon as I’d sunk every inch of my depleted body in the water, I trudged to shore, my now-sopping uniform clinging to my skin, and rolled thoroughly along the beach until I was coated with sand. I ran back to where my team held their log.

Before I took my position, Lieutenant O’Donnell got in my face. “There ain’t no room on this team for sandbagging. You hear me, Ensign Ashworth? This is a school for warriors, understand?” His warm breath met my face with each shouted word. “I don’t care where you come from—I don’t care where any of you come from. What I do care about is your commitment. Your attitude. If you don’t have it, then get out right now.”

“Yes, chief!”

“And that goes for each one of you. Decide where you stand now, before Hell Week—are you on the quitting team,

or will you give everything you have for this team . . . and your country?”

He left my side and I got back under the log with my team, held my own.

And kept my gaze far from that bell.



I bit into my ham sandwich with all the etiquette of a lion, chewed fast so I had enough time to eat the rest of my meal. I swigged down an ibuprofen with my water. During the first few days at the training center, some of the guys had introduced themselves, were civil, encouraging even. Others gave catcalls or the occasional crude sexual remark. There wasn't much I hadn't learned to tune out over the years. And like it or not, we were bound to one another. In the depths of training, we would need to depend on one another. Prove our loyalty. Prove our strength. When life and death were at stake—when our Tridents were at stake—a small thing like gender didn't matter.

At least that's what I kept telling myself.

Carpenter sat beside me, dark hair shorn, with the type of physique only earned by doing two hundred push-ups—one hundred on each arm—every night. There was something genuine about him. Like he didn't care about the other guys and their catcalls when he was talking to me, like he wasn't interested in getting in my pants.

Here at the training center, there wasn't any room for such things, even if one were to allow for sexual encounters, which I did not. If I was to make it through BUD/S, I needed to

be one of the guys. To dish out the crude comments as fast as they came. Sure, sometimes it felt like an act. Then again, I'd acted so much in my life it was hard to tell where the real me ended and the fake one began.

After a minute of eating, the scent of our unwashed bodies now a familiar accompaniment to our food, Carpenter nodded in my direction. "Makes the confidence chamber look like a walk in the park, huh?"

If I hadn't been so exhausted, I would have managed a smile at the reference to basic Navy training, the exercise where all trainees huddled in a small room with their class and donned gas masks. After a tear-gas tablet was released, we'd been ordered to take off our masks, throw them in a trash can, then recite our name, rank, serial number, and date of birth. Hard, but yes, so much easier than this.

"You're doing good, Ashworth. Most of the guys didn't think you'd make it this long."

I hid the pleasure I felt at his words—like gold to me in this moment. Some hadn't rung the bell—they'd been kicked out because they didn't swim well enough or run fast enough. I'd passed it all, though at times just barely. Part ashamed, I wondered if the instructors thought to let me slide because they might be accused of kicking out their first female recruit. "You too, Carpenter. Ready for next week?"

"Hooyah." He responded with a confidence I didn't quite feel.

Next week—Hell Week. Five and a half days of torture. Cold, wet operational training done on less than four hours of sleep. Trainees had been known to fall asleep in their food. Well more than half of my comrades would end up

ringing the bell, giving it those firm three tugs that would echo through the compound, signaling failure. The rest would go on, more than likely, to get their Tridents. I'd vowed to be counted among them, but truth be told, I was scared.

As I lay in my bunk that night, wishing for some hot water to soak a tea bag in—hot water to soak my entire body in instead of the cold blast of the decontamination unit that passed for showers—I berated myself. I *could* do this. Sure, physical strength mattered, but determination—mental strength—mattered more. Those who wanted it the most would get it. If I could make certain my mind didn't give up, then my body would follow.

I flipped over, every muscle feeling the pain of the last two weeks of training. My breath echoed hollow in the musty bunk room, as I was separated from the rest of the men at night only. Somehow that seemed counterintuitive to the entire “Never leave a man behind” mantra.

I thought of Ethan, my conscience niggling, hurting. I forced the vision of his face aside, knew it would only distract me from the task at hand.

I thought of Uncle Joe instead. He was part of the SEAL Team Afghanistan raid that had taken down bin Laden. He'd encouraged me, believed in me, and trusted me to do this honorable thing. Trusted me to make history, to not be among the two-thirds of my comrades who would ring that bell.

I thought of my high school years, every academic and extracurricular decision leading me to this goal—to be the best at military life.

I closed my eyes, imagined the gold Trident pinned and shining upon my uniform, representing the elite family I was being welcomed into. I'd been sifted, proven strong. Though I told myself it didn't matter, I imagined the press release from the Navy.

WOMAN MAKES HISTORY IN BECOMING FIRST FEMALE MEMBER OF ELITE NAVY SEALS

I imagined the pride on Uncle Joe's face, the look of respect I would receive from enlisted comrades and officers.

Yes, five and a half days of hell would be worth it.

Again, I forced thoughts of Ethan from my mind as I mentally recited the SEAL code, long ago memorized, exchanging the pronouns and nouns to fit my gender.

In times of war or uncertainty there is a special breed of warrior ready to answer our nation's call. A common woman with uncommon desire to succeed.

Forged by adversity, she stands alongside America's finest special operations forces to serve her country, the American people, and protect their way of life.

I am that woman.

Knowing at any moment I could be awakened to go for a run or a swim or to polish the bunk floor or have my stuff tossed about and then told to clean it back up, I still refused

to let myself fall asleep until I'd recited the entire code, the last line foremost in my mind.

I will not fail.



FOUR DAYS LATER

HELL WEEK

The stench of so many men wore on my stomach. This—sitting in a stuffy, near-ninety-degree room among my fellow trainees—would likely be the most pleasant experience of the next five days. I looked at the clock on the wall. 2200. None of us could fall asleep, all of us too busy fully anticipating what was to come to allow our minds rest enough for a nap.

I jumped from my seat at the loud shout from outside the room. A man in black kicked open the door and entered, a machine gun going off at his hip.

I dropped to the floor alongside Carpenter, prostrate, legs crossed, ears covered with the palms of my hands as we'd been trained to do. More gunfire. The sound of it stripped me bare.

More men. More guns. And while I knew they were our instructors, it felt so very . . . real. Like maybe the compound had been taken over. I swiped the thought from my mind, quick. This was one of the ways we'd be tested. Doubt. Doubt toward our instructors, doubt toward one another, doubt toward ourselves.

The sharp scent of cordite smoked the room, and I pressed my face further into the crook of my arm. Yelling again, then a familiar voice: "Welcome to hell, gentlemen."

Then came shouts for us to leave the room. In a daze, I moved with the rest of the trainees toward the door and out to the grinder, the blacktop square in the middle of the compound.

Gunfire. Whistles. Artillery simulators.

A blast of cold wetness slammed into my middle, burning at the same time that it knocked me to the asphalt. I struggled to my feet, sputtering, but another high-pressure hose knocked me down again.

I lost my sense of direction. All I wanted was to get away from the freeze of the spraying hoses, run for the ocean. If the instructors gave us directions, I could handle that. But we were just being pummeled, hitting the grinder in our defensive positions, rubbing water from our eyes and trying to breathe in air and stay with our fellow classmates amid the goading and shouting of the men behind the hoses.

I began to shiver, the cloth of my uniform slick against my skin.

We'd been in Hell Week all of half an hour.

More whistles came, then orders to grind out a set of twenty push-ups, then fifty sit-ups. Orders to crawl onto the beach. Sand flew in my face from the movements of the trainee in front of me. Briefly I wondered where Carpenter was. My elbows burned.

We were ordered into the water for flutter kicks.

Swearing from our instructors. "The bell's right up the hill for any of you who want it. Come on, you maggots. You got more in you than that. Give it your all or ring the bell!"

Into the sand, then back into the water. Over and over

again. A guy who'd been one of the toughest talkers in the bunch headed for the main office and the bell. Others called at him, begging him not to give up.

He kept walking.

Six others followed him within the next fifteen minutes.

The sound of the bell rang through the compound, three solid chimes for each trainee.

The whistles finally called us out of the water. We grabbed boats, wrangled them to the ocean, where we paddled for hundreds of yards and back. My arms burned with tingling pain. We got out, carried the boat, ran with it, crawled with it. The wet sand ground itself into my bloodied elbows and knees.

More calisthenics, then back into the water. I'd never been so cold in my life. My body shook and I became certain I would never be warm again, certain I was on the verge of hypothermia. I looked at the ambulance up the beach, waiting for its need.

In the chow hall, I could scarce shovel in my eggs. No one spoke, just ate. Either that or stared in a trance at their food. Shivering, I felt in a dream. An apparition appeared before me—Lena, sticking a needle into her arm, a look of shame on her face.

I swatted at her but really just wanted to fall forward into the flawed warmth of her needle-marked arms. There had been a few precious times when those arms had comforted. When they hadn't been a source of bitterness or stress. Yet even now, with exhaustion upon me, something deep inside rebelled at the thought of seeking my mother for assurance and security. Embers of anger glowed within me and I fanned

them to life, for I knew it was here—in my wrath—that I'd find strength to continue.

The whistles blew again and I looked longingly at my still-full plate, knowing if I reached for a last bite, I would be punished.

The instructors led us to the steel pier, where they ordered us to jump in and tread water. I forced my moving limbs to keep my head above water.

I could do this.

Mental strength, that's what I needed. It would keep my muscles going when nothing else could.

I would not fail.

Back onto land for more calisthenics, then into the sand and water. The morning dawned murky with large drops of rain spitting on us.

Daylight came and went. Another meal, more cold pool exercises including a drown-proofing practice where our hands and feet were bound before we were thrown into the water, and then night again.

I longed for sleep. I longed for rest. The past six weeks—Ethan, Emma, the tea chest—it all seemed like a dream. And in my sleep-deprived mind I wondered if it had been.

It was dark when I passed out in the middle of crawling onto the beach. The cold rush of the sea woke me, bits of sand in my mouth and nose. Disoriented, I tried to push myself up from the sand, to follow my team toward the O course.

I knew what waited there. A place of cruel force, the obstacle course was used by veteran SEALs to prepare for deployment—rope climbs, walls, vaults, sixty-foot cargo net, barbed wire, rope bridges. Hell.

THE TEA CHEST

This time, when Ethan's face appeared in my mind alongside an image of the tea chest, I lay in the sand, knowing I would need to get up and continue on, knowing I would not—could not—ring that bell. Yet I couldn't find the strength to shove the memories away. If I were honest with myself, maybe I didn't want to.

CHAPTER ONE

Hayley

SIX WEEKS EARLIER

REVERE BEACH, OUTSIDE BOSTON

I stripped my socks from my sweaty feet and tucked them in my sneakers. I plunged my toes into the sand of Revere Beach, America's historic first public beach. I inhaled the salty sea air, felt my mind wandering to California.

Only a few more weeks and I'd be at the prestigious training base, putting action to my dreams. BUD/S training was no joke, but I was prepared. I would make it happen.

There was only one thing I needed to do before I could clear myself for takeoff.

Too bad the thought of seeing Lena made my stomach tie itself in knots.

I sighed, leaned back against the sand, just beginning to warm from the cool night air. The sun rose early at the beach, and already it began its climb upward. I closed my eyes, listened to the lull of the shore. A seagull's call came from above. The muted sounds of lifeguards chatting a stand over, then two women talking as they passed—something about hot flashes and sweaty sheets—competed with that of the waves crashing on the shore.

Maybe coming to Massachusetts hadn't been a good idea after all.

Surely I could accomplish training without my past hanging over me. I could become the first woman SEAL by simply looking forward, by focusing on the goal instead of what lay behind. And I could do it all without laying eyes on my mother, without facing the weak little girl I used to be.

But while I owed Lena no amount of loyalty, perhaps I did owe that scared little girl some.

I suppressed the temptation to book a flight out of Boston. I'd come all the way here for something. And the woman I wanted to be—the strong woman who would soon possess one of the most honorable positions in the military—would not back down.

I sat up, my abs still sore from the sit-ups I'd done that morning. I squinted against the sun, to where a child of about five years jumped over a small wave not far from the shore.

I'd run away before. It was time to make amends. Or at least put the past to rest. If I couldn't tackle these mental and emotional demons, how could I expect myself to tackle the biggest challenge of my life?

“Does he need help?” An older woman in a sun hat clutched the hand of a big-bellied man and pointed farther out from where I’d just seen the child playing.

Only the child was no longer there.

I stood, immediately on alert, searching the waves. From behind came the deep yell of a man. “Braden!”

I ran toward the water, seeing flailing arms much farther out than I had just been searching, and I knew the undertow had taken him.

I sprang into action, my high school summer job as a lifeguard all coming back to me. I stripped off my khakis, swimsuit underneath, seeing the girls on the lifeguard stand scrambling down out of the corner of my eye. They had the rescue buoys, but I could likely swim faster—could get to the boy in what might be lifesaving seconds.

I ran past the couple and made for the bobbing head with steady strokes. Determination and a foreign desperation pulled me forward. This was one mission I could not fail.

The cold pull of the undertow slowed me, but I forced my burning muscles on.

Closer. Closer still.

The boy went under again and didn’t come back up. Terror seized my chest as I forced my kicks strong, then dove down and opened my eyes against the burning salt of the sea.

Nothing.

I came up for air, dove again, promising myself I wouldn’t surface without the child.

I swam deeper and hit bottom. In the murky distance, I

spotted a shadow and swam for it. My lungs pinched, on fire within my chest. I released a small amount of air, measuring, knowing once my lungs emptied, I wouldn't have more than fifteen seconds.

The figure floated farther away. I emptied the last of my breath, grasped at the hazy form. My fingers grazed a clump of hair. Lunging for it, I fisted it tight at the same time that I pushed off the sandy bottom.

We both came to the surface, but I was the only one gasping for air. From behind, I slid both of my arms beneath his, locked them firmly, made certain his mouth and nose were above water, and used all my core body and leg strength to kick toward shore.

"Here." One of the lifeguards was behind me with her rescue buoy, offering to take him. I gave the boy over, swimming alongside the guard, making sure she kept the child's mouth from the water.

After what seemed an eternity, I felt bottom again. We carried the boy to the beach, the father beside us, his clothes soaked.

"An ambulance is on its way," another guard said.

My breath came hard as we laid the boy down. Was he alive? The guard dropped to her knees but hesitated. I pushed her out of the way, alongside the child's father. "I'm trained," I said, tilting his mouth and chin back, his skin not quite a normal color. I crouched close to listen.

No breath met my ears.

I placed my hands in the middle of his chest. Hard and fast, I used my body weight to deliver multiple compressions. A woman behind me started praying aloud, and the sound of

her words beseeching a mighty God nearly undid me. I pushed my emotions away—would they forever be my downfall?

I tilted his head again, lowered my mouth to his own small one, sealed my lips over his, and breathed two long breaths.

More compressions before finally he choked and spluttered, seawater spewing into my face. I swiped at it. Someone offered their towel and I took it. After several more chokes and gasps, the boy started breathing.

I sat back on my heels, relief soothing my tight insides as color returned to the child's face.

"Thank God," the man beside me said, scooping the boy up in a hug.

I placed a hand on his arm, pushing him away slightly. "Give him some room for a few minutes, okay?"

"I don't know how to—" The man looked up at me, his words cut short as his gaze met mine.

No, it couldn't be. Not him. Surely I would have recognized his voice when he'd shouted his son's name. Surely I would have recognized his form as he was in the water with the child. No matter the urgency of the moment. I would have known.

He straightened, looked to the boy again, who seemed to be breathing clearly. He opened his mouth, slow. "You."

I looked away, ashamed. It didn't matter that I'd just saved his son's life. It didn't matter that years had passed since I'd last seen him. My guilt felt fresh now, his shock piled upon recognition making me realize that while I had been able to ignore what I'd done to him years ago, he hadn't possessed the same gift.

THE TEA CHEST

Perhaps my mother wasn't the only one I needed to make amends with.

I forced a small smile, but only one corner of my mouth lifted, and it felt fake. So very fake.

“Yeah . . . me.”