

Chasing Betty

A Garrison Chase Novel
by
Jason Prugar

CHAPTER I

I hate Thursdays. Sure, it's close to the weekend, but sometimes you think it's Friday, and you go out Thursday night. The bars don't help, having all these specials. So you go out, have fun, meet a gal, or get the spins, and you're stuck on Friday with a hangover, blue balls, or regret. Then you're back to work, feeling like you got run over by a truck, and still expected to put in one last nine-to-five for the week.

At least I don't work in an office.

On this particular Thursday afternoon, I'm lying flat on my stomach on the surface of a dock at the end of a boathouse, my right hand outstretched, my left clutching the edge of the dock, splinters burrowing into my fingers. I'm risking my life trying to retrieve a jewelry tin containing a

“priceless” necklace given to a young woman named Cara from her late grandmother. The picture of the trinket box the client showed me looked like something you’d get at the twenty-five-cent vending machine at the supermarket, but one man’s trash...Hey, even the small jobs pay the bills, which we all need to do, especially those of us without steady work.

I’m not a fan of water, either. Or rather, I prefer not to drown in water, like my father and his best friend did. It’s days like today I hate my job; thankfully they’re rare.

I’m Garrison Chase. Many of my clients and sometime even my colleagues call me “janitor” because I clean up messes. And occasionally, I find lost things. For a fee, of course.

Don’t worry, I’m sure you can afford me. I’d rather help my neighbor than a Wolf of Wall Street. It’s not like those greedy suits are around here much anymore, thank God – and the Migration.

I am trying to grab my client’s jewelry box without having to swim after it. Lake water is gross. I think I got the runs from ingesting some once. Sure, Twin Lakes were beautified at the end of the Twentieth Century, the pride of the local community- a fact nearly every sign likes to remind me of- but I’m not taking any chances.

Having a ship bearing down on the object of my search doesn't help, either. The captain's eyes are on me, waving in my direction and yelling. Who's he kidding? The ship's too damn loud to miss. I'm aware I could lose limbs if I jump in after the tin.

It's my own fault. I can't say no to the ladies, certainly not ones like Cara. Sweet girl next door, smile, and a figure that knocks your socks off. I wish *my* socks were off right now instead of sweating. The air is soupy near this muck they call water. Did I mention that the whole area smelled like a potpourri of shit and fresh garbage?

I hear the incoherent yelling of the boat captain and I turn all my focus on the tin. Trying to reach as far as I can without falling into the water is tough enough. But with the boat and its frantic captain bearing down on me, even if they're coming to a stop, didn't slow my heart rate.

Gripping the dock as tight as possible, I took a deep breath and reached out for the tin. No dice. It started to move further away, despite the boat pushing the water inland.

"Forget this," I said as I leaned back to the dock, pushing myself up into a seated pose. The boat captain saw me sit back and ceased his annoying shouts. Sadly, I wasn't done yet. The definition of insanity and all that jazz. I removed my right boot,

the same boot I've had since my Army days. It was one of the few things I could count on in life. I needed it now.

I got down on my stomach again, leaning over the water, much to the dismay of the captain, who resumed his throaty protests. I did my best to ignore the noise as I took my belt off and tied it around my thigh, which was against the dock post. I grabbed my boot and leaned out as far as I could. I don't own a seven-foot wingspan, and the waves the boat was making didn't make it easy, but the tin was within my grasp.

I held the boot by the toe. It didn't dawn on me right away that I could hear the captain's curse-filled rant, which is a good thing, because the boat was within five hundred feet of me. "Shit!"

I put the boot on the water and grabbed the laces, tying them around my finger. I lifted the boot out of the water and swung it back with as much grace as I could muster. That wasn't a lot. I dropped my arm toward the water.

Success on the first try! I scooped the tin into my boot and tossed the box on the dock. Why didn't I have this luck at the county fair when I was on a date with a pretty girl? I removed my belt from the post and climbed up in time to see the boat starting the docking procedure.

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I sat there and opened the tin. A wet, ugly-looking necklace was inside. It was faded, looking like a penny when it starts to green. I'm talking the Statue of Liberty green. If there was any luster to it, it went the way of the Dodo. I sighed in relief and saw the dozen passengers staring at me. I managed a nod and wave and took off out of there.

"What the hell were you doin', pal?" the captain, who could've been mistaken for The Skipper from Gilligan's Island. "Didn't you see my dinghy coming in?"

"Sorry 'bout that," I said, holding up the tin.

"You coulda asked me to get it," the captain said, holding up a pole with a net on the end of it. "Or, I don't know, jump in? It's only about five feet deep."

I stood up and waved. "I'll remember that next time," I said. *And hire someone else who doesn't mind being neck deep in this death trap.* I didn't hear the rest of his constructive criticism as I walked as fast as I could away from the lake.

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I had offered to meet Cara at her house, but she declined. No, I'm not creepy. She's going through a divorce and any man in the house could muddy the waters for her, pun intended. We'd agreed to meet at the Paisley Tea Room in town.

I opened the door to said tearoom, and

immediately chortled. The walls were not paisley, but rather a light pink. They reminded me of my grandmother's bathroom. When I was a child, she'd sing to me as she dried my hair after a bath. Those were great memories.

The walls also reminded me of Pepto Bismol, which I sometimes downed after jobs took a detour I had not expected. I wagered I would need some after this gig.

The four other patrons eyeballed me as I entered and took my seat on a pink, frilly cushion they'd likely have to throw out once I left. I wanted to think my chiseled jawline, mane of black hair and looking younger than my thirty-eight years had something to do with it. In reality, the stares my way were due to me being the only male there, with one of my boots soaking wet, and me sweating and smelling like the lake.

I'll give my waitress credit for being as polite as possible while looking repulsed. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Coffee, black," I said.

She gagged and covered her mouth. I didn't think I smelled *that* rancid. Did I?

"We are a *tea* room, sir, we serve tea."

"Earl Grey with sugar," I said.

She wrote my order down and couldn't walk away

fast enough. I shook my head as I smelled my coat, which *did* stink. I made a mental note to add dry cleaning to Cara's bill.

"Mr. Chase?" I turned and Cara, perky with a side of sunshine, stood there.

"Please, call me Garrison," I said, motioning for her to sit.

She did. Though her sun dress was comely, I couldn't help but stare at her legs as she crossed them. The waitress set my tea in front of me, which allowed me to stop staring. I didn't want to, but I also don't want to be that creepy guy. Creepy guys don't get the girl, or in my field, rarely get the job.

"Peppermint and a scone, please," Cara said to the waitress. "To go."

The waitress smiled at her and turned to leave, but not before rolling her eyes again at me.

She's not getting a good Yelp review, I can tell you that.

"Thank you so much for meeting me here," Cara said. "This is one of the few places my husband wouldn't go with me."

"I understand," I said, clearing my throat and sliding the tin across the table. I'm not a Superman and my friend Jed says I'm only a Casanova in my head, but I will do all I can to stop a man from hurting a woman — physically, emotionally, or

otherwise.

Cara smiled so hard I thought her face would be stuck that way. She opened the box. She fingered the necklace inside and let out an orgasmic sigh. I took the necklace for something out a vending machine at Denny's. I had stains worth more than that thing. But you can't put a price on sentiment.

"Thank you so much," Cara said, putting her hand on mine.

My blood went to war. Half wanted to go to my face, the rest a bit further south. My face won.

"This means the world to me."

"My pleasure," I said.

"My great-grandfather gave this to my great-grandmother right after World War II. He said he found it in Paris in a storefront. He couldn't afford an engagement ring yet, so this had to do.

"My mother didn't want me to get married to this guy, but she wanted me to be happy. This heirloom made her happy. My husband knew what it meant to me and I'm convinced he took it."

Not the worst story I'd ever heard. "Glad to recover it."

She looked at me, her nose crinkling. "What's that smell?"

"How about we leave it at I do what it takes to get the job done," I said.

“Speaking of which,” she said, “I can’t afford your entire fee right now.”

Of course she couldn’t. Just then, the waitress came to refill my tea, and to drop off the bill.

Cara grabbed the bill from the waitress before I could reach for it and her hair fell in front of her face again. She re-tucked it behind her ear. “I’ve got this,” she said.

Yes, she did. I didn’t care about the bill, but appreciated the gesture.

“I will make it up to you, of course, but with the divorce and attorney fees...”

“I guessed as much.”

“I can pay you some now.” Cara reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope with a few Benjamins inside. More than I expected.

“I also have a 15-year-old bottle of Scotch in my car,” Cara said.

My ear perked up at that statement. “Really?”

“My husband left two things behind. His pride and that Scotch.”

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Cara pulled the Scotch from a compartment in the trunk, treating the bottle with the same care as her dime-store jewelry. I wondered if she treated everything that way. If so, he cheated himself by cheating on her.

Every day, couples break up and one partner leaves. Some deserve it, don't get me wrong. But most people don't. Cara was one of these. I didn't do that much for her, but I am glad I did what I could.

"Thank you again Garrison," she said, hugging me. This time the south won the battle of my rushing blood, but only after she pulled back.

"I'll be in touch about the rest of my bill." She got in the car and drove away.

"No, you won't," I said. I'm a sucker. I do good for everyone but me.

I keep eyeing the Scotch. I tore the cap off and took a swig. The warm sensation of a new Scotch hitting your gullet is unparalleled. I hated it and spat it right out.

I watched Cara's car disappear around the corner. I was going home alone.

I hate Thursdays.