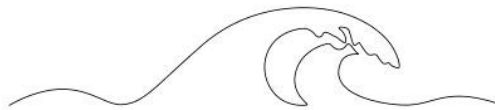


CHAPTER 1



Kat sprinted up the staircase leading to the Government House. Reaching the broad landing, she skirted the marble statue of Christopher Columbus that stood overseeing Nassau Harbor. First-time visitors usually paused and read the inscription proclaiming the Bahamas as Columbus's first landfall when seeking a new trade route to the Far East. During her two years as Minister of Tourism, Kat mediated contentious debates among those islands still wishing to claim the honor, but that wasn't what brought her to Government House this morning. She smiled at the familiar security guard standing beside one of the graceful columns of the portico and flashed her identification badge.

"Good morning, Thomas."

Thomas acknowledged her with a nod and a grin. "You movin' like one of dos mangy ole Potcake nippin' at you heels, Mz Edwards. Must be somethin' important get you riled up dis early."

Kat ran her hands through her hair. "Do I look alright?"

"As always, Mz Edwards." Thomas held the door and admitted Kat to the cool lobby lined with the official portraits of The Commonwealth of The Bahamas prime ministers, beginning with the likeness of the first one, Lynden Pindling. She turned to the elevators and inserted her key card, ensuring she did not leave fingerprints on the mirror-finished brass doors. As the elevator opened on the top

floor, Kat stepped briskly across the immaculate outer office, ignoring an admonishment from the scowling receptionist.

“You can’t go in there.”

Without breaking her stride, Kat beelined across the room, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. She grabbed the brass door handle and pushed open the door to the Prime Minister’s private quarters.

Rollins removed his glasses and regarded Kat. “You know, Lila sits out there for a reason. Among other things, she keeps my daily schedule.”

Kat chose not to respond. If she had learned anything in her last two years in the political spotlight, there were times when silence was her ally.

“And I don’t see a meeting with any cabinet member on my calendar.” The Prime Minister glanced at his opened agenda.

“There is one now. And if there is any truth to this, we have a problem.” Kat dropped the newspaper on his desk.

Rollins fumbled for his readers buried beneath the paper, flipped it around, and read the Miami Sun’s headline.

***Neo-Nazi Cell Alleged to Originate
From Undisclosed Bahamas Location***

Rollins hit the intercom. “Lila, postpone my next appointment for twenty minutes.” He fluttered his hand toward two chairs in front of his desk. “Take a seat, Ms Edwards.”

“Thank you.” To soften her bold intrusion, Kat added, “Sir.” She smoothed her skirt and perched on the edge of her chair.

Kat had once attended a ceremony in the Oval Office at the White House when her father was presented with yet another medal for his military service. Considering that this room held the highest elected official in The Commonwealth of the Bahamas, it wasn’t nearly as impressive. While an imposing desk took up almost a third of it, there was no separate seating area or plush carpeting with a distinctive

crest. What it did have was a view of Nassau's harbor. Windows dominated the east side, and the morning sun reflected on the wall opposite, covered with black and white photographs from an earlier era. While Rollins scanned the article, Kat studied the photos: Nassau's Bay Street with a mix of cars, horse-drawn wagons, and its bustling market. Next was Parliament Square with the larger-than-life statue of Queen Victoria, splendid in her robes, crown, and hand on the hilt of a sword at her side. Kat couldn't suppress her smile; at less than five feet tall and nearly as wide, the queen wouldn't have been able to lift the sword to knight anyone. A third photo showcased Nassau's harbor crammed with distinctive Bahamian fishing smacks and fishermen holding up their morning catch. Kat could almost smell the brackish saltwater and hear the fishermen shouting over each other, "Mahi. Wahoo. Grouper."

Men, white men, in wide-brimmed fedoras and business suits, oversaw it all. Kat recognized these as photographs from the 1940s when the Duke of Windsor was the Royal Governor, and the Black majority lived in the segregated British colony under white minority rule. It was also the time when the duke and Wallis Simpson, his eccentric American wife, were alleged to be Nazi sympathizers. Based on the recent release of archived documents, Kat knew it was more than speculation. The rustling of the paper interrupted Kat's time travel. Rollins had yet to look up, so she continued her prepared remarks.

"Ever since you appointed me Minister of Tourism, I've worked to prove the Bahamas are a safe vacation and cruising destination. These hate-mongers would create an environment hostile to boaters and vacationers, and I hardly think Bahamians would welcome white supremacists."

Rollins straightened the already neatly stacked papers. "I know all that, but you don't need to make this your problem. You only have two months of your term left and already said you don't wish to be reappointed."

"That's true, but I'm not about to let some sloppy journalist

undo the work I've done. After that incident on South Andros, I've had my work cut out convincing tour companies, charter boats, and cruise lines to return to the islands."

"And you've done a remarkable job."

"Thank you."

Rollins swiveled back and forth in his chair. "So, what do you propose?"

Kat tucked a rogue curl behind her ear. While she blamed it on the humidity, her unruly hair never stayed as planned. "I want to uncover whether or not we have a neo-Nazi cell operating from our islands."

"And you're basing this on the validity of one article from an American journalist you don't even respect? That doesn't sound like you. Your research is usually so thorough it's scary."

"There's more. The NY Times reported on Brazil's crackdown on neo-Nazi factions, stating these groups were aided by American Hammerskin members."

Rollins opened his mouth, but Kat didn't give him a chance to interrupt. "And papers in both Texas and Tennessee reported on rising neo-Nazi incidents, citing the Proud Boys and the Patriot Front as hate groups. Texas went so far as to list the names of individuals involved."

"None of that links the Bahamas to anything," Rollins said, flipping his pen around in his fingers.

"Maybe not. But there's this." Kat leaned forward and pointed to the last paragraph in the Florida paper. "It's buried at the end because the FBI is probably embarrassed that Martin Higgs, a white Bahamian with dual citizenship, evaded apprehension. It would be a reasonable assumption that if the group is looking to relocate, the Bahamas would be perfect, with its many uninhabited islands. Martin probably knows where to find abandoned resorts that would be a great base for a new operation."

Rollins put his pen down. Kat had his attention. "As I see it, the Bahamas should be taking the lead to either confirm or dispel this

rumor,” she continued. “How long before some reporter contacts you asking for your statement? I’d like you to be able to say more than, ‘I can’t comment on an ongoing investigation.’” Kat needed to tread lightly. There was more she wanted him to agree to. “I’d like to see if Martin Higgs is back in the Bahamas and at least question him.”

“It’s hardly a job for a cabinet member.” Rollins’ brows wrinkled. “It should be a police matter.”

“You’re right, but do you want to move to that level of exposure until we know more? It could be carried out more quietly if done by an investigative journalist, which, as you recall, was my profession before you asked me to join your cabinet.”

“And you think this makes you qualified?” Rollins’ pen was back in his hand, and he drummed it against the desk. “Well, I’d hoped to recruit you to look into the cruise ships anchoring near various Out-Islands. Their presence is stirring up controversy among environmental groups. You know, dumping waste overboard, fuel spills, and tourists leaving trash on the beaches. With Earth Day celebrations coming up and my promise to protect our diverse ecosystem, I’d like to have this sorted out.”

This seemed like a non-sequitur to Kat. Where was he going with this? Was he launching into one of his well-known persuasive discourses to distract her? She shifted restlessly in her chair. She didn’t need a review of his environmental program. She agreed with it, and she had heard it all before.

Rollins was speaking. “It’s of interest to your department, helping tourism and all. Looking into the cruise ship issue will make a sound cover for you to flit about pursuing this Higgs character, but promise me if you uncover anything threatening beyond Higgs’ whereabouts, you’ll call in the police. Caution isn’t one of your greatest attributes.”

Kat kept her face expressionless, but inside her head, she rolled her eyes. “I like to call it investigative curiosity.” Kat watched as Rollins let out an audible sigh. It wasn’t the first time she had tried his patience.

“Okay. I’ll make a seaplane available.”

This wasn’t as hard as she expected; still, her foot jiggled against the hardwood floor. “I have a better plan.”

“You know, I am the Prime Minister here.”

Kat ignored his sarcasm. “I want to be less conspicuous—simply, Kat Edwards, a novice sailor on a charter boat, not The Honorable Mary Katherine Edwards, esteemed Member of Parliament.” She paused to judge his reaction, then asked, “I wonder where *Wind Chaser* is right now?”

Rollins glared. His elbows were on this desk, and his fingers laced together, forming a bridge. In Kat’s head, she saw the newer of the two bridges that spanned the harbor linking New Providence with Paradise Island. Three blasts from a cruise ship’s horn signaling departure from the Nassau dock broke the silence in the room. Rollins raised his voice.

“I know where this is heading, but that I can tell you. Captain McDowell will dock at Nassau Harbor Club later this morning to let off his latest charter.”

That surprised her. “You keep track of charter boats?”

“Not usually, but my younger brother and sister-in-law are on board. Visiting from Pennsylvania. He’s a doctor in Philadelphia,” Rollins said proudly. “They fly back tomorrow. I’m meeting them tonight for dinner at Graycliff.” Housed in a legendary colonial mansion and tucked away from the glitzy cruise ship docks and casinos, Graycliff was Nassau’s only five-star restaurant. “A perfect ending for their trip, don’t you think?”

Kat plastered on her social smile, one she had perfected while being part of the political arena, but she didn’t want to discuss restaurants or his brother’s success. “I want to charter *Wind Chaser*. It’ll save money, and I already have experience crewing for Carter.”

Rollins opened his mouth to protest, but Kat had devised her plan before she burst into his office. Finally, he asked, “Are you sure about that?”

Kat stopped her wiggling foot and crossed her arms. After

everything they had been through the last time she was on board with Carter, she wasn't sure how it would work again, but she answered, "Would I ask if I wasn't?"

Rollins ran one hand over his tightly coiled gray hair. "Well, I don't know if he has another charter lined up, but call him and see what you can work out."

"I'd rather surprise him. Can Lila call and say you want to extend your charter? Maybe your brother wants additional time on board."

"Well, this is pretty irregular."

"Thank you, Sir." Before he could draw in a breath and change his mind, Kat stood and headed to the door.

"You've got two weeks," Rollins shouted to her back.



Just before four that afternoon, Kat stepped out of the black limousine at the marina, a duffel slung over her shoulder. Walking down the dock, she could make out Carter's familiar outline in *Wind Chaser's* cockpit, working on something she couldn't see. Even if she closed her eyes, she could recall the details of her favorite captain: hair styled by the wind, lean, tanned body, the saltwater smell of his skin, the tilt of his head as he scanned the horizon, and the way he moved with the boat as though they were one. His unfailing honesty added to his charm. Not many knew his quiet demeanor covered a deep-seated sadness that would forever be part of him.

From the finger pier alongside *Wind Chaser*, Kat squared her shoulders and took a deep breath to steady her voice. "Permission to come aboard."

Carter's head jerked up, dropping the marlinspike that he was using to splice a line. It clattered against the cockpit floor.

Kat slipped off her shoes and stepped onto *Wind Chaser's* teak deck without waiting for Carter to respond. "Bad you," she said. "You said you'd call when you were in Nassau. I heard you were here, so I

decided to surprise you.”

“Well, you certainly did,” Carter said.

His nearness did nothing to slow Kat’s heart. She dropped her bag and wrapped him in a hug.

When she released him, Carter stumbled back, tripping on the lines on the cockpit floor. “You look great.”

“Great? That’s it?” While he faltered, Kat said, “How about terrific. Dazzling. Alluring.”

Carter laughed as he pushed sun-streaked hair off his forehead. “Are you fishing for a compliment? I intended to call, but this will be a quick turnaround. I have a charter arriving any time now.” He checked his watch.

“Wait no longer. Here I am.” Kat spread her arms wide.

“You’re my charter?” Carter’s eyebrows shot up.

“In the flesh. You still need that first mate?”

“Well, it’s just...I mean...”

“You weren’t expecting me? Of course not. I get it.” Kat suppressed a laugh. She had never seen him so unsure of himself on his boat. She watched as he used his thumb to rub a scar along his first finger. A new scar and a new habit. She wanted to ask how it had come about, but before she could, she heard footsteps on the companionway stairs behind her. A leggy young woman emerged from the boat’s main cabin dressed in khaki shorts and a tight white T-shirt, gripping a tray with sweating glasses filled with what looked like Bahama Mamas, the standard welcome drink. She seemed as surprised as Kat. “Well, well,” Kat said, staring.

“This is ...,” Carter started.

“I remember,” Kat said. The German bottle-blond. “South Andros Beach Club. You were crewing for Senator Coggins on his mega yacht.” Kat snatched a drink from the tray. “It’s Willow, right?”

“Yes, and you’re Kat,” Willow replied politely.

Kat hadn’t expected to see Willow again, and certainly not on *Wind Chaser*. Kat tried to keep her expression neutral as her eyes flicked between Willow and Carter. All three stood awkwardly.

Questions swirled in her head. How long had Willow been crewing for Carter? Where had they met? And, more importantly, was something going on between them? This wasn't the time to ask; for now, she needed to dampen down the jealousy gremlin. Kat couldn't think of any substantive conversation, so she entertained herself by drawing patterns in the condensation on her glass. Finally, Carter bent down, retrieved his marlinspike, and picked up Kat's duffel.

"I'll put this in the aft cabin," he said.

This was the largest of the three sleeping cabins, and Kat knew it was reserved for charter guests. She called to the back of Carter's head as he disappeared down the companionway steps. "I'd like a little time with you to go over my itinerary. We can walk to the Poop Deck for dinner. Willow can join us in, say, a half-hour."

Carter's voice carried up from the cabin. "It's your charter."



Carter was glad they had to walk single file along the broken sidewalk facing the fast-moving traffic on Bay Street. He had imagined meeting up with Kat again in a hundred different ways, but none included while there was another woman on his boat. Kat stirred up all kinds of emotions, from the joy of having her back at his side to anger at her sometimes rash and impulsive behavior. When danger lurked, she had proven herself to be as steadfast as his Rocna anchor, but she was headstrong and could be a real pain in the ass.

Carter didn't know if he wanted to throw her down on a bed and rip off her clothes or throw her overboard without a life jacket. They had only met once since their narrow escape from the cave on Andros, and that was at the groundbreaking of the new Hemingway Museum, a public event. Their earlier relationship had flourished with the immediacy of a war romance, but their war had no winners, and both had needed time to heal. Would she even want to take up where they left off? Did he?

Now, it was complicated by Willow, who was reliable,

inexperienced, and eager to learn. She certainly was attractive if you liked long-legged blonds. Other sailors reminded him of it every time he pulled into a marina. He couldn't put his finger on it, even though they had been together on the boat for a month; their relationship didn't meld the way it had with Kat. Willow did whatever he asked, but she seemed closed off. True, she didn't aggravate him, but she also didn't stir his emotions. Now Kat was back, and he needed time to process her unexpected appearance.