

THE BEGINNING IS ALWAYS TODAY

Chapter 1

The Castaway

Speechless, castaway, and wry, a spellbound oddity am I.

My feet are planted in the clay, my gaze is locked upon the sky.

--Cecelia Dart-Thornton

Mungo McTavish, first mate of the *Nicole Marie*, screamed at the four men rowing the ship's launch: "Row, men! Row, dammit!" What had started out as a mission of mercy was quickly turning into question of their own survival. No matter how hard the men rowed, the wind and current pushed them towards a reef, clearly marked by foaming surf. There was only one way across the reef to the islands beyond, a placid-appearing stretch of darker water. But reaching it was proving difficult. This was their second attempt, and the men were nearing exhaustion.

As experienced a sailor as Mungo was, the vagaries of the Atlantic Ocean had tricked him once again. When the launch had left the *Nicole Marie* to investigate a possible signal fire coming from a small island, there had been little wind and a sky so blue it made you squint. But the wind suddenly picked up and long, lazy rollers became a heavy chop.

Mungo would have abandoned the rescue mission after the first try had it not been for what he had seen on the island's beach as they approached the reef. Although it was still over a mile away, he could see something that appeared to be a person on the beach next to a small

fire. The sailor in Mungo would risk everything to try to save the castaway; he knew that another time it could be him on the beach, dependent on the goodness of some stranger for his salvation.

Slowly, inexorably, the launch headed towards the reef regardless of the men's efforts, steered by a following wind and an invisible current. The men's muscles rippled in their backs and shoulders while their skin glistened with sweat under the tropical sun. Several prayed softly, the verse regularly interrupted when they took deep, panting breaths.

When the launch reached the first breakers over the reef, Mungo yelled: "Pull in the oars! Do not lose them to the reef!" Quickly, the four men pulled the oars from their locks and stored them on the floor of the launch. At that moment, the launch hit the reef with such force that several men were almost thrown overboard. Then the launch spun around as if she were attached to a gimbal, leaving the little boat broadside to the waves. As the first wave broke over the gunwale, it seemed all was lost. Mungo braced himself for the next wave which would surely swamp the boat and throw them all against the razor sharp coral. But then, nothing less than a miracle occurred; the launch spun around again until she was facing the cluster of little islands beyond the reef. And instead of swamping them, the next wave pushed them gently over the reef and into the calm water. Just like that, they were across.

No one in the launch said a word. Mungo looked around at the men, all of whom were wide-eyed and breathing heavily. He waited until his own breathing had settled and then said, "Very sloppy, men. Perhaps we should try one more time?"

Mungo was met with shocked silence. But then one sailor laughed, and the others joined in. A sailor said, "You are welcome to try it as often as you like, Mr. McTavish. But may I ask that you try it with a different crew...?"

With the oars back in their locks, the men rowed towards the small island where a the smokey fire burned. As they neared the island, Mungo stared in disbelief through a telescope at a figure on the beach. He lowered the telescope, wiped his eyes, and looked through the telescope again. But the scene had not changed: there sat a woman on a steamer trunk holding a pink parasol over her head. She was dressed in a long brown skirt and wore a brown rimmed fedora. She neither moved nor called out as the launch approached.

The four men rowing raised their oars as the launch crunched to a stop on the beach. The first mate jumped from the boat and approached the woman. "Ma'am," he said, "I am Mungo McTavish, first mate of the steamer *Nicole Marie*. Are you in distress?"

The woman stared at him for several long moments but said nothing. Then, "Goodness! I thought at first you must be a mirage. I had quite resigned myself to dying on this island." She jumped down from the steamer trunk and held out her hand. "I am Kate Warne," she said, "Pinkerton Detective." But the sudden movement dizzied Kate and the first mate grabbed her elbow to support her. As he led her towards the waiting launch, Kate turned to the first mate and said, "Please do not forget my trunk, Mr. McTavish."

Thankfully, the return trip to the *Nicole Marie* was less eventful than the trip out. While they now faced a headwind which slowed their progress, the sea had calmed as quickly as it had risen earlier. Kate gratefully accepted water from Mungo and sat next to him in the rear of

the launch. Occasionally, she would doze off and awaken to find her head on the first mate's shoulder. He did not object.

As they approached the *Nicole Marie*, Kate could see that she was a side-wheeler, somewhere more than two-hundred feet long. She had three masts fully rigged for sails and a smokestack amidships. Kate saw no rust or chipped paint, and the high level of maintenance spoke to a captain with great pride in his ship and himself.

After helping Kate aboard, Mungo gave her more water and then took her to the captain on the bridge. Captain Alvah Gates was shocked by Kate's appearance. He ran over to Kate's side and led her to a small chair near the navigation table, saying, "Please sit, my dear!" Then he turned to Mungo and ordered him to have the cook sent to the bridge immediately. Aboard the *Nicole Marie*, apparently, the cook also served as doctor and medic.

Kate protested, "That is not necessary, captain, as I require no more than some rest." But Captain Gates was adamant that the ship's 'doctor' would check her over. He was shocked by Kate's black eye and the other bruises on her face and neck; she looked as though she had come in second best in a bar fight. And then there was also the sunburn and obvious signs of dehydration.

As they waited for the cook to arrive, Kate and the captain introduced each other. "Ah," said the captain, "your fame precedes you, Mrs. Warne! I read all about your rescue of our late president in Baltimore. Thrilling stuff!"

Kate laughed. "Thank you, Captain Gates, but that was the adventure of a lifetime. Most of my cases are much less exciting."

“So I see,” said the captain wryly. Moments later, the cook walked onto the bridge carrying his first aid kit. He was a young Bahamian man named Adam with quick smile and a strong island accent. He knelt down in front of Kate and quickly assessed her injuries. While he held her injured eye open with two fingers, he asked, “How long ago did dis happen?”

Kate tried to concentrate. *Was it a week ago?* she wondered. *Or yesterday?* After the first two days alone on the island, time had melted like a hard candy in the sun and had lost all form. “Three days, I think. No more than four...”

Adam gently wiped dried blood from Kates face revealing scrapes and deep bruises, but only one laceration required a bandage. When he was finished, Adam stood up and handed Kate some aloe for her sunburn, saying, “Rest, Missus. And drink lots of water.”

The captain thanked the cook and turned back to Kate. “Well, Mrs. Warne, we are equipped to carry some passengers and I am pleased to offer you accommodation until we reach Puerto Rico. Then, perhaps, you should seek medical attention. Adam’s skills do not stray far from sprains, breaks and stomach aches.”

“Thank you, captain,” said Kate. She rose unsteadily to her feet with the help of Mungo who led her to a cabin a deck below. Along the way, Kate said, “I did not know that freighters carried passengers, Mr. McTavish.”

“Aye, Missus, we have several small passenger cabins we grandly call the ‘owners’ suites.’ They are seldom used. Passengers sometimes book passage on freighters like the *Nicole Marie* as a cheap way to travel around the Caribbean, but not often. And the owners, if they visit the Caribbean at all, usually find grander transport.”

Kate found the cabin to be clean but sparsely furnished with a small bed, a dresser with a wash basin secured to its top, and a lantern hanging above the bed. Fully clothed, she collapsed on the bed and was instantly asleep.

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Kate awoke sometime later, disoriented and still dehydrated. She got out of bed and walked unsteadily to the wash basin where a carafe of drinking water had been left for her. Light streaming in through a porthole indicated that it was daytime, but of which day she was not certain. She drank glass after glass of water until her heaving stomach told her it was time to stop. Then she stumbled back to her bed and lay on her back.

Kate lay quietly, willing both her mind and her stomach to settle. Her eyes fixed on the lantern that hung from the ceiling above her. Although the lantern was attached to a three-part gimbal and was actually unmoving as the ship rocked around it, it gave the illusion of being in constant motion. The lantern's apparent movement in the small cabin was making Kate feel quite queasy and she got up and tried to open the single porthole for air, but it was locked. Needing to escape the claustrophobic cabin, she washed as best and as quickly as she could in the basin and then walked over to her trunk—it had taken the First Mate and two men to haul it over the gunwale from the launch—and selected a light linen dress to wear. After brushing her hair, she left the cabin and stood at the railing. The fresh air quickly revived her, and she marveled, as she always did, at the gem-like clarity of the cobalt Caribbean water. Flying fish fled the approach of the *Nicole Marie*, silver flashes jumping between the wave tops. Kate felt an unexpected lifting of her spirits as she took deep draughts of the salty air.

Kate turned at the sound of footsteps and watched the first mate approach. When he reached her, he touched the rim of his top hat and said, “Good evening, Missus.”

Kate gave him a warm smile. “Is it not a beautiful evening, Mr. McTavish?”

“Aye, a bonnie one for sure, Missus Warne. If you are feeling well enough, the captain was hoping you would join us for dinner in the saloon... say one hour? We will send a crewman to fetch you.”

“Please tell the captain that I would be delighted.” As the First Mate began to turn away, Kate asked, “Can you tell me how long I have been resting, Mr. McTavish? I seem to have lost complete track of time.”

“Why, more’n 24 hours, Missus.”

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Kate had noticed how clean and well-maintained the *Nicole Marie* was. And there was an unmistakable air of practicality and no-nonsense to it. She did not see a single object that was any larger or more ornate than was necessary for it to serve its purpose. Until the crewman led her into the dining saloon, that is.

Kate stopped and her eyes swept the room. The walls were covered with a fine wood paneling with mirrors, silver sconces and flickering candles. Dominating the room was a large table—easily large enough to seat twenty people—which had been covered with a white tablecloth. On one end of the table, there were three places set, each with China plates and bowls bearing the name *Nicole Marie* embossed in gold around their rim, silver flatware, and crystal glasses, for both water and wine.

Captain Gates and the first mate were already seated, but when Kate entered, they jumped to their feet. Captain Gates rushed over to her and took her hand. "Mrs. Warne," he said. "You must be famished! How glad we are that you can join us."

Kate rewarded the captain with a bright smile. "How glad I am to join you, captain."

The captain seated Kate to his left, across from the first mate, and took the chair at the head of the table. When they were all settled, Captain Gates said, "I believe you have met Mr. McTavish, Mrs. Warne?" Kate smiled across the table at the first mate. "My savior," she said. Mungo blushed, and Captain Gates smiled. He rarely saw the first mate embarrassed or intimidated by anyone or anything. Before Mungo could respond, there was a knock on the saloon door and a crewman in a white apron entered with a large pitcher of water and a bottle of French wine. He quickly filled the glasses and left the room. When he was gone, Kate said, "This is all wonderful, Captain Gates, but you should not have gone to such trouble."

The captain shook his head dismissively. "It is rare that we have such lovely company, Mrs. Warne. How are you feeling?"

"Sunburned, dried up and mentally frazzled, but happy to be alive. I am very grateful to you and Mr. McTavish for coming to my rescue." Kate took a sip of water and added, "But I do look forward to the day when I no longer gaze upon a glass of water as a starving wolf would a rabbit."

The conversation was light and easy. Even with her cuts and bruises, Kate's beauty was not obscured, and she easily drew conversation and confidences from her male audience. But no mention was made of the circumstances surrounding Kate's rescue; good manners required

that business not be conducted until after dinner, and then best if accompanied by a fine port or brandy.

Captain Gates told Kate that he was going to retire. "In fact," he said, "this is my last voyage. I have already purchased a small farm in Vermont and my wife is in the process of making it into a home for us."

"How wonderful!" Kate said. "But do you not think you will miss this? The sea, I mean."

Captain Gates smiled and said, "Are you asking if I will end my days wishing to stand one more time upon a heaving deck? I am afraid not. I respect the sea—I have seen too many men perish who did not—but I do not love her. Who could love such a cruel mistress, anyway, who caresses you with soft breezes one moment and then tries to drown you the next?"

"Why, captain," said Mungo, "I have never heard you use such flowery language! Perhaps you will miss this 'cruel mistress' more than you admit."

Captain Gates laughed. "It must be the company of the lovely Mrs. Warne that brings out the poet in me." He raised his wineglass in a toast. "To Mrs. Warne."

"To Mrs. Warne," repeated Mungo.

Dinner was simple but, Kate thought, delicious. The main course was some sort of white fish that had been expertly seasoned and cooked. "Caught today," the captain said proudly. "Our cook, Adam, is a wonder at providing for the crew. While we waited for the launch to return with you from your desert island, he caught enough fish that we all eat well tonight."

"Adam is truly a man for all seasons," Kate said. "Well, please give him my compliments. The dinner is wonderful."

When the dishes had been cleared, a crewman appeared with a bottle of port wine and placed it in front of the captain. After the captain had filled everyone's glass, Kate said, "I suppose you must be wondering how I came to be marooned."

The captain smiled and said, "It had crossed our minds."

Kate took a sip of the wine. "I was chasing pirates," she said simply.

For several moments, no one said anything, but Kate did not miss the glances that passed between the captain and first mate. "Do you think me sun-addled, gentlemen?" she asked.

"You must understand, Mrs. Warne, that the era of piracy in the Caribbean ended some thirty-odd years ago," said the captain. "And I have heard no reports..."

"Do you think I stranded myself, captain?" Kate interrupted.

Now it was the captain's turn to blush. "My apologies, Mrs. Warne, for I have no reason to doubt you or your story."

The first mate rushed in to rescue the captain. "Can you tell us the name of the pirate?" he asked.

"Not with any certainty," answered Kate. "But he signed a note to us as 'El Pirata.'"

Captain Gates looked shocked. "Does that mean something to you, captain?" Kate asked.

The captain stood up and walked over to a locked cabinet. He opened it with a key and withdrew a bottle of brandy and three glasses. "It looks like we will need something stronger than port to finish this conversation." He poured a glass of brandy for Kate, but she declined.

"So, you do know of him?" Kate pressed.

“Everyone in the Caribbean knows of him, particularly if you have spent any time in Puerto Rico. He was an island hero by the name of Roberto Cofresí y Ramírez de Arellano, a patriot who fought against the Spanish by stealing their gold and, supposedly, giving it to the island’s poor.”

“Was?”

“El Pirata and most of his crew were executed by a firing squad in 1825.”

Kate sat back in her chair. “Now, I think I will have that brandy, captain.”

“Perhaps if you told us the whole story, Mrs. Warne,” said the captain as he handed Kate a snifter glass of brandy, “it might help us all understand what is going on here.”

Kate gave him a rueful smile. “How much time do you have, captain?”

Captain Gates glanced at the First Mate who said, “Twenty hours to Puerto Rico, captain, if the breeze holds.”

Kate laughed. “Then I hope, gentlemen, you have more than just one bottle of brandy...”

Chapter 2

Three Months Earlier...

The Blue Water Sailor

I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship. --Louisa May Alcott

“Gybe ho!” yelled Kate as she turned the sailboat through the wind. The sail moved smartly from port to starboard and gave a loud crack as it refilled with wind.

“Well done, Missus!” John Frost shouted back. He watched Kate with a proud smile and leaned back against the gunwale. Only Kate’s third sailing lesson and already she had mastered the basics. *She will be sailing solo soon*, he thought.

Kate gave a cry of pure delight as the boat surged forward, a fine spray of water reaching across the gunwale to give them both relief from the heat of the Florida Keys. Even John Frost, a sailor since he was a little boy, could not resist Kate’s enthusiasm. “Take her into a beam reach, Missus, and let her fly!” he yelled over the wind noise. Kate needed no encouragement, and she turned the boat perpendicular to the wind. The boat immediately began to heel over and gain speed. Laughing like schoolchildren, Kate and John Frost mentally urged the boat on to ever greater speed.

Kate felt like the boat had become an extension of her body: she felt every slap of water against the hull and the tiller was a leash by which she was barely restraining a living thing. The

tiller vibrated with life and fought against her every demand, acquiescing only to brute strength and will power.

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The sailing lesson over, Kate and John Frost sat sipping beer at a bar at the marina. “She needs a name, you know,” said John Frost. “Bad luck, t’otherwise.”

Kate glanced over at where her boat was moored. It was a fine boat of a style called ‘catboat’ because she carried a single mast set well forward in the bow. The boat was nearly thirty feet long with a beam of fifteen feet and had a fixed keel. She carried only one sail which had been configured with a Bermuda rig—easily sailed by one person alone.

“I know, John, but I simply cannot make up my mind.” Then, after a moment, “Must a boat always be named after a female?” Kate asked.

“No, course not. Why, I knew several skippers who named their boats after male deities and such, and I am still friends with their widows and orphans.”

Kate laughed. “You are teasing me, John.”

John Frost laughed with her. “There are all sorts of ideas why boats and ships carry female names, but I can speak only as a sailor: mother nature is clearly female, so we seek to honor her by using female names. A jilted mother nature is never a sailor’s friend.”

“Ah,” said Kate. “Then I shall give it more thought.”

John Frost studied Kate as she finished her drink. It had been nearly two years since he had last seen her. Although she was still beautiful by anyone’s standard, the tragedy of her husband’s murder had clearly taken its toll; her hair showed some grey at the temples and her complexion was sallow. She wore a sailor’s canvas jumper and pants and she seemed

indifferent to her overall appearance. John Frost signaled to the waiter for another round and asked, "Will you be staying in the Keys for long?"

Kate shrugged. "I honestly do not know." She took a deep breath of the flower-scented air and said, "I do love it here."

"Aye, Missus, you either love or hate the Keys; I have yet to meet anyone who merely 'likes' them."

Kate smiled but did not say anything. After a few moments of silence, John Frost said, "I do not want to impose, but I do want you to know how sorry I am for yer loss. Mr. Cowles, he were a good man."

Kate covered John Frost's hand with her own. "You can never impose, John. Always remember that you are my hero of 'The Battle of Little Torch Key.' You saved us all."

John Frost blushed. "I saved myself too, Missus." Kate remembered well that day when she and Merritt had gone in a sloop captained by John Frost to reconnoiter a small island called Little Torch Key and had come under intense sharpshooter fire. John Frost had remained at the exposed tiller while everyone else sought cover. Kate knew that if the sloop had run aground, the sharpshooter would have picked them all off, one-by-one, at his leisure.

John Frost did not press Kate further about her plans. He had been surprised when she suddenly showed up in Key West a few weeks earlier, looking sad and lost. She seemed so emotionally fragile that he had readily agreed to give up his free time to teach her to sail. He had even helped her find a small boat to purchase. When the drinks arrived, he raised his glass: "To the newest sailor in the Keys: 'To the ships we sail, the crew we sail with, and the people we love. May God keep them safe.'"

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After John Frost left, Kate walked over to her sailboat and stepped aboard. The boat was designed for cruising rather than fishing or hauling cargo and therefore had a larger than normal cabin. Kate started to enter the cabin, but a wave of heat rose up to greet her. She quickly opened two small portholes to let the hot air out and left the boat to seek shade ashore.

Kate found a small spot of shade with some grass and sat down. *What are my plans?* she asked herself. But perhaps making 'plans' was not descriptive of her needs. She had come to Key West more or less on a whim, tired of the cold winds and rain in Chicago which depressed her. Alan Pinkerton, her boss at the Pinkerton Detective Agency, had readily given her indefinite time off, hoping that she might find time to heal and come to some peace within herself. But Kate could not deny that she had another reason beside the weather: Key West was the only place that she and her late husband Merritt had had time to take pleasure in each other's company and to enjoy the simple joy of being in love. Every soft breeze reminded her of Merritt's fingers on her face and every multi-colored sunset represented the love that had once made her heart swell. Walking down a familiar street, Kate might remember some witty remark Merritt had made and smile at the memory. But at other times, memories only begat overwhelming feelings of loss and loneliness.

Kate had loved only three men in her life, and all had died early and tragically. She often thought wryly that she should only fall in love with men she hated. But she was only in her twenties and there still burned in her soul, albeit dimmed by past events, the hope that love and happiness still awaited her. And while Kate would not actively pursue them, neither would she hide away, unreachable.

Kate spent her days devoted to honing her sailing skills and the evenings spent in cafes near Mallory Square watching the sunsets with the locals. She quickly graduated to solo sailing and John Frost suggested she try a day trip to a nearby Key. It turned out to be an unexpectantly transformative day; heading out from Key West, she had watched the water change from a soft turquoise to a light blue to a dark cobalt and something had changed in her forever.

One evening, she tried to explain the feeling to John Snow. "I know it must sound strange, John, but I was deeply affected by something as simple as the change in the color of the water. Not that I had not seen it many times before..."

"Aye, Missus, but you never crossed into deep water when you alone held the tiller and had no company other than God hisself." Kate looked confused and John Frost added, "Words ain't my thing, Missus, but look at it this way: shallow water holds its own hazards, but yer never too far from help and safety. But when the bottom drops away, and the land disappears behind the horizon, yer life depends solely on yer own skills and courage." John Frost finished off his beer and asked, "Were you afraid? When the water darkened, I mean?"

Kate thought back to that magical moment. "Not afraid, exactly, although I did feel some apprehension."

"But you kept going anyway. And now you will always know you can."

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The days became weeks, and Kate's sailing skills constantly improved, and she made friends with many of the locals who called her "Katie." Her dark hair became streaked by the sun and her complexion took on a healthy glow. She began to heal, ever so slowly, and the

world—once colorless to her—became exciting and inviting once again. Not that there was no scar tissue; anyone who sought her love again would have a difficult fight to reach her heart.

Kate realized that she must leave the Keys soon. As stunning as they were, the Keys were equally beautiful and enervating. It was too easy to let the days blend one into another and to abandon ambition. The Keys would always be a joy and comfort to her, but she knew that her career, and her fate, lay elsewhere. She sent the following telegram to Allan Pinkerton:

The American Telegraph Company

From

KATE WARNE. C/O THE FLEMING INN. KEY WEST.FL.

To

ALLAN PINKERTON. C/O THE PINKERTON DETECTIVE AGENCY. CHICAGO.IL.

DO YOU HAVE WORK? KATE.

In less than an hour, Kate had her answer:

The American Telegraph Company

From

ALLAN PINKERTON. THE PINKERTON DETECTIVE AGENCY. CHICAGO.IL

To

KATE WARNE. C/O THE FLEMING INN. KEY WEST.FL.

AGENT BORRELLI WILL BE IN TOUCH WITH YOU. WELCOME BACK. ALLAN PINKERTON.

That evening, Kate sat with John Frost watching the sun set at Mallory Square. John Frost glanced at the telegram from Pinkerton and handed it back to Kate. "Are you sure you are ready for this, Missus?" he asked.

Kate shrugged. "If I do not return to work soon, I never will."

"Do you know this 'Agent Borrelli?'"

"I only met him once when Merritt and I were chasing the payroll robbers here in Key West. The Keys are apparently his duty station. Probably the whole Caribbean, actually."

John Frost drained his beer and stood up to leave. "Be careful, Missus."

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Two-days later, Kate sat in the garden of *The Fleming Inn* with Joe Borrelli. Kate had recognized him instantly as he approached where she sat on a bench: he was dressed much as he had been when she had last seen him on the wharf in Key West nearly two-years earlier, in a light-colored linen suit, a white shirt, a white planter's hat and dark grey sunglasses known as *verres de cocquille*. "Mrs. Warne," he said, "how nice to see you again."

"Please," said Kate, "sit down." Borrelli removed his hat and sunglasses and sat down on the bench beside Kate. Borrelli wasted no time: "Mr. Pinkerton tells me that you have expressed an interest in returning to work."

"That is so."

"Well, this may interest you, although it is hardly on the scale of your previous assignments." Borrelli handed Kate a packet of papers in a sealed envelope.

"May I ask the general nature of the case?"

“Theft,” he answered. “A local shipper has had consignments disappear before reaching their destination. He has conducted his own internal investigations but has been unable to determine who is responsible.”

“A local shipper? Here in the Keys?” Kate asked.

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“I had rather hoped to return to the mainland.”

“Ah,” Borrelli said, “I have no knowledge of that. Mr. Pinkerton sent me a telegram asking that I give you these papers. He said you might find them particularly interesting.”

Kate looked at the envelope curiously. “He did? I cannot imagine why.”

Borrelli stood up to leave. “Do you have a message for Mr. Pinkerton that you would like me to relay?” Kate stood up as well and shook Borrelli’s hand. “No, thank you, Mr. Borrelli. Let me review these papers and I will notify Mr. Pinkerton of my impressions.” Borrelli tipped his hat and Kate watched him as he made his way back through the garden. When he was gone, she returned to her room and sat at the writing desk, the envelope still unopened. *What is Mr. Pinkerton up to?* she wondered.

With no small amount of curiosity, she opened the envelope and withdrew a thin casefile. She checked it first for authenticity. Pinkerton’s initials should be in the upper right corner followed by a roman numeral, and they were where they should be: ‘AJP III.’ The roman numeral gave the official copy number of the file she was holding. She would be expected to destroy it or return it when she was finished; Pinkerton took the security of his investigations very seriously.

There was only a single sheet of paper in the file, a form the Agency used to open new cases. It gave the date they were approached by the client, the name of the agent who conducted the first interview with them, and a summary of the complaint. The complaint read 'theft of property;' the Location was given as 'No Name Key,' Florida; and the client's name was 'Theodore Miller.'

Kate read the signature twice and then smiled. *Teddy! Well, she thought, it looks like I will linger in the Keys for a while longer.*

Chapter 3

No Name Key

“You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family.” — Trenton Lee Stewart

Kate had intended to sail herself to No Name Key, but John Frost talked her out of it. “No Name Key is more’n 35 miles from here, Missus. Navigation aids is far and few between and hazards is plentiful. Besides,” he added, “from the water, most all the lower Keys look alike. Best to go the first time with someone that knows their way.” Reluctantly, Kate had booked passage on a medium-sized freighter, a sloop called the *Sophia Joy*.

Kate sat in the bow as the *Sophia Joy* tacked her way out of the harbor and made her way to the south-southeast. With her newly acquired ‘sailor’s eye,’ Kate watched with a new appreciation as the four crewmen expertly worked the lines and sails. Soon, they turned east-northeast and began to parallel the islands that comprise the Florida Keys. They were on what sailors’ call a ‘close haul’—the ship heading nearly into the prevailing easterly winds—so their progress was slow.

Kate sat with her back against the gunwale in the shade of the mainsail. The rocking of the boat relaxed her, and she soon fell asleep, her sleep dreamless and deep. It was restful to her in a way that most nights were not: for the first time in a long time, she did not awaken with tear-streaked cheeks from memories both good and bad that had accosted her in her

sleep. Instead, she awoke to the smell of tar and saltwater, scented by the tobacco that the sailors smoked in their clay pipes.

In addition to their slow speed, the sloop had made three stops to drop off cargo before reaching No Name Key; and so, it was nearly sunset when the *Sophia Joy* anchored in deeper water off the Key and unloaded her cargo, and Kate, by longboat. Kate stood on a small wooden wharf with her suitcase at her feet, uncertain where to go next. She did not hear the man walk up behind her and was startled when he touched her shoulder. "Sorry, Missus," he said, "I did not mean to scare you. My name is Amos Semissee and Teddy asked me to bring you to him." Amos glanced at the lowering sun and added, "I was beginning to fear you would not arrive today."

"I am sorry if I kept you and Teddy waiting, Mr. Semissee. The trip was slow, and we made several stops before arriving here."

Amos shrugged and smiled. "Here in the Keys, we prefer that time work for us and not the other way 'round. To a pretty day, we might grant a full twenty-four hours, while a stormy day is rarely worth more'n 4 or five." Amos laughed and continued, "But when a pretty woman is involved, well, what meaning does time have at all?"

Kate smiled. "You are too kind, Mr. Semissee."

"Well, let us get you to Teddy's house. You must be exhausted." Amos picked up her suitcase and lead Kate down the little wharf and towards the village. By now, the sun had fully set. There were no streetlights, and the only illumination came from the windows of small cottages that lined the street. Amos said nothing more and Kate thought about the last time she had seen Teddy. As she recalled, that was about 2-years earlier when she had testified at

his murder trial in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia; but their history was more complicated than that. Teddy had helped her—reluctantly at times—to bring a gang of guerrillas to justice during the waning days of the Civil War. Kate had later heard that Teddy had married and moved to the Florida Keys to protect his family from retribution. The South healed slowly, she knew, and had a long memory.

Amos stopped at the walkway to a small cottage close to the middle of the village. Light spilled out of an open door and onto a small porch where Kate saw two rocking chairs and several potted plants hanging from the porch ceiling. “We are here, Missus,” Amos said, turning onto the walkway and walking up onto the porch. He started to knock when Kate held his arm. “Wait. Please,” she asked. Through the open door, Kate saw a scene of such domestic tranquility that tears sprang from her eyes. Teddy sat cross-legged on the floor drawing on a slate for a small boy who looked to be no more than two-years-old. Sitting behind him, her hands resting on her swollen belly, a pregnant Eugenie—whom Kate had met at the murder trial—gazed at her two ‘men’ with obvious affection. The little boy giggled at whatever picture his father had drawn for him and both Teddy and Eugenie laughed with him. Then Teddy sensed someone watching them and looked up to see Kate standing on the porch. “Kate!” he exclaimed, jumping up from the floor. “And Amos! Why did you not knock?” He rushed over and wrapped his arms around Kate, lifting her off her feet. Laughing, Kate said, “I am sorry, Teddy. I stopped Mr. Semissee from knocking so that I might watch you all a little longer.”

“Ah, then all the better that you did not catch us at nap time.” Teddy walked Kate over to Eugenie. As they exchanged greetings, Kate bent down and kissed Eugenie on the cheek.

Then she turned to the little boy who was hiding behind his father's leg. "And this," said Teddy, patting his son's head, "is Eli."

"Named after your father?" Kate asked, smiling at the little boy.

Teddy was pleased that Kate remembered his father's name. "He is. Even though Daddy was a quiet and contemplative man and young Eli has, so far, shown neither of those traits."

Teddy turned towards Amos. "Come on in, Amos! Why are you standing out there?"

Amos said, "I must be getting home, Teddy, a 'fore my wife suspects me of committing some mischief." He bowed slightly to Kate and told her he looked forward to seeing her again.

After Amos had gone, Teddy and Kate sat at the kitchen table while Eugenie put Eli to bed. Kate and Teddy caught up on the details of each other's lives, exchanging condolences for losses and congratulations for successes. Kate was pleased to learn that Teddy was on his way to becoming a very rich man. He had formed a corporation with Bahamian farmers on Upper Matecumbe Key to grow pineapples, tomatoes, various root vegetables and several different tropical fruits. Teddy provided a small fleet of sloops to provide the transportation of the crops to market. Their pineapple crop alone was already bringing in more than \$100,000 a year.

When Eugenie returned to the kitchen, Teddy jumped up to pull her chair out for her.

"Kate and I were catching up," he said.

Eugenie smiled at Kate and covered her hand with her own. "Teddy told me of your husband's passing. We are both so terribly sorry."

Kate felt the darkness begin to rise anew in her soul. *Will I always live no more than a knife's edge away from despair?* She wondered. She thanked Eugenie and quickly changed the subject. "Mr. Pinkerton gave me only the barest outline of your case. 'Pilfering,' he said." Teddy

and Eugenie exchanged glances. "It started out that way," Teddy said. "But I am afraid it has progressed to something much worse."

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Later in the evening, Teddy led Kate to a smaller cottage in the back yard of his house. "We keep this for our relatives when they come to visit. You are welcome to stay here as long as you like." Kate looked around gratefully at the small room with a comfortable-looking bed. She was exhausted from her travels. "Thank you, Teddy, I am sure I will be most comfortable."

Teddy placed her suitcase next to a small armoire. "Then I will see you tomorrow. Sleep well." But Kate did not sleep well. As tired as she was, the story Teddy had told her kept running through her mind. After an hour of tossing and turning, Kate wrapped herself in a blanket and walked out onto the little porch of the guest cottage. It was so quiet that Kate could hear the palm fronds rubbing against each other in the breeze. Stars twinkled in the open spaces between high clouds, seeming to turn on and off at random, and the air was soft and made fragrant by an array of topical flowers at whose names she could not even guess.

Kate sat down on the single step leading up into the cottage and thought more about her conversation with Teddy. He had told her that he had first contacted Pinkerton because of an on-going series of petty thefts; missing cash, missing equipment, that sort of thing. 'I had a suspicion of who was responsible,' he said. 'But I have worked hard to earn the trust of the Bahamian farmers and thought it best to use a third party to handle the investigation.'

'Is their trust so fragile that it warranted the expense of private investigators?'

Teddy shrugged and said, 'The Bahamians did not fare well under British colonialism, and they risked everything they had to come to the Keys and start a new life. It is understandable that white men are often viewed with skepticism, especially by the elders.'

Kate loosened the blanket around her shoulders. It was cooler outside than in the cottage, but only barely. She had sensed a deeper concern in Teddy, and had pressed him: 'Why is it I feel there is more to this story?'

Teddy gave Kate a slight smile and ran a hand through his hair. 'It all started out as I said, just petty theft. But two weeks ago, my best sloop, the *Princess Anne*, and its crew of six disappeared on its way to St. Augustine.'

'Disappeared? As in, sank?'

'I do not know. There were no storms reported at the time. But an accident is always possible, I suppose...'

'But you do not think so,' Kate said, more a statement of fact than a question.

'No, I do not think so. Captain Russell—Isaiah Russell—is one of the best skippers in the Keys.'

The sky had already begun to lighten when Kate finally stood up and made her way back to bed. *How*, she wondered for the umpteenth time, *does a ship and its entire crew disappear without a trace? Surely, it must be some sort of accident.*