

CHAPTER 1



Carter McDowell dropped *Wind Chaser's* anchor disrupting the flat turquoise water. Before the sea regained its clarity, the rippling surface sparkled in the late afternoon sun. Leaning over the bowsprit on the foredeck, he pushed sun-streaked hair out of his eyes and stared vacantly at conch and starfish on the sandy bottom. This was not his usual stop when crossing the shallow water of the Great Bahama Bank to Nassau. What little wind there was had died, sailing was not an option, and Carter wanted to conserve his remaining fuel. There was no land in sight and he was confident this anchorage placed him safely out of the path of any freighter headed through the Bahama Islands during the night.

The newly oiled teak was hot under his bare feet as he walked back along the deck to the cockpit. He shifted into reverse to pull against the anchor, digging it into the sand. Shutting down the engine, he sat in the open air, absorbing the silence and remoteness. Despite having sailed these waters for seventeen years, Carter continued to be captivated by this magical and mysterious expanse of translucent ocean. Miles from anywhere, The Bank, as it was called, was never more than twenty feet deep. The opportunity to anchor with no breeze and a calm sea was rare. Too often, the wind

came up, and waves bounced *Wind Chaser* around, preventing sleep and causing Carter to pull up anchor and head for a protected harbor.

Running his callused hand over the smooth varnished cockpit table, Carter collapsed against the padded seat along the starboard side, and popped open a beer. He wished he had gin or rum but his sudden departure hadn't left time for shopping. The sky reddened with the sinking sun and soon stars appeared. At times like this, his longing for Becca and Claire blocked out the brilliance of sunsets and left him alone with an emptiness in his chest that would never go away.

Wind Chaser was a charter yacht; his livelihood, home, and the only love he had left. Carter wanted this sail to last as long as possible, but the repo men were in pursuit, and most likely, it would be his last before they caught up and seized the boat. As darkness closed around him, he stripped off his worn shorts and sun-faded t-shirt and dove into the warm water. Toweling off on the swim platform, he focused on the faint glow of green starboard lights, two boats passing him in the night, but so far away he couldn't hear their engines; perhaps freighters headed for Nassau.

Carter retreated to the aft cabin, the largest of *Wind Chaser's* three staterooms. The wide centerline berth was a luxury he took advantage of when he didn't have a charter. The hatch and ports were open, welcoming any breeze that would cool the humid night air. The generator, needed for air conditioning, sat idle. He wouldn't waste fuel for that.



In the dark, Carter bolted upright, awakened by a disturbing sound that left him in a cold sweat. He shook his head, trying to clear his grogginess. He often slept fitfully, but this was so real. He swore he heard Claire calling him. "Just a stupid seagull," he muttered, flopping back on the bunk. The hands on his watch glowed two twenty-one, still a long time until daylight. Restless and uneasy, he tossed side to

side and hoped not to be awake the remainder of the night. Nightmares often robbed his sleep.

The cry again. It sounded like a human voice. Racing through the pilot-house, Carter scooped up his spotlight, switched on the deck light, and stumbled up the steep companionway stairs. Sweeping the spotlight in an arc over the dark water, he held his breath, listening. "This is insane. No way someone's out here." Was he hallucinating again? Even with his doubts, he continued to search with the spotlight. The moon had risen, illuminating the ocean, but the sea plays tricks at night and sound travels across open water with few clues for direction or source. Shining the light on the compass, his best guess was the shout came from the north.

"I'm coming," he yelled, still not convinced there was anyone to hear. His heart raced. *Please, let me get there this time.* He ran forward to pull up the anchor by hand, avoiding the clatter of the diesel or whine of the electric windlass which might drown out the voice. Straining, he slowly hauled the heavy anchor on deck.

Once more, the cry, more desperate this time. Carter dashed back to the wheel, checking the direction of the response; definitely from the north. He fired up the engine and pushed it to full throttle without any warm-up. The old John Deere protested the sudden exertion by belching so much smoke from the exhaust he could see it in the moonlight. He knew better than to treat his engine this way. Sweeping an arc with the spotlight as *Wind Chaser* moved forward, he saw nothing. After a couple of minutes, Carter shut down the engine.

"Where are you?"

"Over here."

"Holy shit!" He wasn't hallucinating; someone was out there in the open sea and it sounded like a girl. Aiming the spotlight, he caught a glimpse of a person in the dark water. In what must have been a last burst of energy, she splashed aimlessly, struggling toward the boat.

"I see you. Stay there, I'll come to you." Carter restarted the engine, turned the bow, and eased toward her. Shifting to neutral, he coasted the last short distance. He threw the life preserver with its line attached to the stern and pulled her over to the boat. With no

lifejacket and heavy with exhaustion, she could barely lift her outstretched arm. His heart pounded as he reached over the rail and pulled what appeared to be a waif of a girl onboard. She collapsed on the cockpit seat and threw up sea water. Pixie-like dark hair plastered against the sides of her cheeks, framing her face. Her soaking wet t-shirt and shorts clung to her like a second skin, outlining the curves of her body. She was older than he first thought. It was the haircut, her small size, and her face washed of any makeup that made her look so young. He wasn't good at guessing ages, perhaps mid-twenties? Relief that she was alive so overwhelmed him that he said nothing as he knelt beside her.

"Thirsty." Her voice was hoarse.

"Is there anyone else?" Carter felt the slight shake of her head, so he scrambled to his feet and dashed down into the galley. Fumbling in the refrigerator, behind a carton of eggs and a package of cheese, he found the last Diet Dr. Pepper. A sugary drink or orange juice would be better, but this would have to do. She hadn't moved when he returned. Holding her head, he forced her to drink slowly.

"I'm going to put you in a cabin. Can you sit up?" His lanky frame towered over her as he half carried her down the companionway stairs before she could protest. She winced and moaned when he lifted her onto a bunk. As he started to cover her with a light-weight blanket, the light from the cabin revealed bruises on her upper arm and shoulder, welts around her wrists, and blood on her knees. A ball of anger clenched his stomach and mixed with a sense of helplessness; feelings he knew too well.

"Who did this?"

"Hide me." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper, but the strength of her grip on his forearm surprised him. Hiding wasn't a problem; it was what he was already doing.

Carter's mind swirled with questions. "Who's after you?" he asked. Nothing. The answer would have to wait; she'd passed out. Crossing the hallway to the head, he found his first aid kit in the cabinet behind the toilet and bandaged her knees. She was lucky the blood from her legs hadn't attracted a shark. He watched her exhausted sleep, her

arms and legs jerking as she moaned. He knew about running from demons, real or imagined, but he didn't know if he should wake her from this nightmare or not. Finally, he decided sleep was what she needed. He quietly closed the door.

None of this made sense. In all his years of sailing, Carter had never pulled anyone out of the water. He'd heard stories of boaters picking up Haitian refugees whose overloaded, dilapidated boats sank, and of men falling overboard while pissing over the rail, but this was different. She was white, sounded American, and was brave. That touched something deep inside him; a place he thought no longer existed. For the first time in months, he felt a connection to another human being, and until he knew more, he would hide her. After all, what was at stake? She posed no threat to him.

Back behind the wheel, Carter turned off all the lights except the compass. He didn't know if she was being pursued, so he revved up *Wind Chaser's* engine and set a course to the southeast. There was a risk moving without running lights, but this was an uncharted route and it was unlikely he would encounter another boat. Reefs surrounded the shallow Bahama Bank and there was only one way to cross it safely. Carter could maintain this heading for three hours before having to change direction or risk putting *Wind Chaser* aground on coral heads. For now, it was a safe course as long as he kept his eye on depth and time.

Adrenalin coursed through him, but Carter knew that wouldn't last. Now underway, he would be on watch the rest of the night. With the autopilot in control, he went below and fixed a pot of robust coffee, the way he liked it on night watch. Pouring the dark, steaming liquid into his thermos, he grabbed a mug and climbed back to the cockpit. Carter listened to the smooth, reassuring rumble of the engine as the sloop cut through a flat sea under a boundless canopy of stars. Surrounded by a landless horizon, it was as though *Wind Chaser* was in the middle of a shallow bowl, and infinitely small. As he stared over the water, he could only imagine the fear she must have felt swimming toward the unknown with only his anchor light to guide her. She must have been desperate.

Carter watched the phosphorescent glow of his wake and the dim red light of the compass, and after verifying his heading and the absence of traffic, he decided to check on his guest. She was still out but breathing evenly. Her t-shirt read 'Enjoy Life'. *God, I wish I could*, Carter thought. Then he realized her shorts and shirt were soaking both her and his mattress, so he tried to rouse her. As a charter captain, he was well aware of the threat of hypothermia, and this girl had no extra padding to guard against the cold. He touched her shoulder and raised his voice.

"Hey, you need to get out of those wet clothes."

There was no response. He checked her pulse and found it strong and steady. He knew he should get her into dry clothes, but he just couldn't do it. Already he felt like a voyeur. He rolled her gently side to side, tucking the blanket tightly around her. It would have to do.

Looking at her sleeping so deeply, he let his imagination run, but he couldn't come up with any scenario that would put her in the water, miles from anywhere, swimming for her life. Had she jumped overboard to avoid—what? Or been thrown? That stuff was only in movies or cheap novels. Who was she running from? He knew the Bahamas had pirates, but these modern-day thugs were into drugs and stealing fast boats, not tossing young women overboard. All he knew about her was that she was probably ten years his junior, slim, and wore a wedding ring. Obviously, she was a strong swimmer; if another boat had passed close, he would have heard it. A captain, like the mother of an infant, has a sixth sense that sleep doesn't close off.

Still leaning against the arched door frame, Carter glanced at his watch and realized two hours had passed since he'd set his course. He needed to change direction and head toward the Northwest Channel Light and back on the route to Nassau. On deck, he entered a course that would steer him through the narrow opening in the reef north of the light and into deep water. Carter hoped he'd avoided the usual route long enough to evade whoever might be after the gutsy young woman, if someone was. The moon had set; stars filled the darkness. Then he focused on something that surprised him. For the first time in months, he was clear-headed; the sluggishness that sapped his

energy was gone. His sailing had a purpose. He would get her to Nassau where he now had to stop for fuel and where she would be safe.



Many people told Carter they were envious of his ability to find a way to make a living doing what he loved. He was proud of his yacht charter business: McDowell's Charters. It was different from the nuke and puke catamarans operating out of Nassau. Those boats took twenty or thirty college kids, operated on loud reggae music and lots of alcohol. They kept a tight schedule and never shut down the engine. Putting up sails was only for show. Carter took guests who were disappointed when he had to start the engine. Since the winds in the Bahamas were predominantly from the east, he offered a one-way charter. He would motor out against the wind from Fort Lauderdale while the guests flew into a location of their choice in the southern Bahamas. Then, they would island-hop back through the many cays that made up the Exuma chain.

Meeting new people and sailing to his favorite places was exciting, when he had his wife and daughter. Although Becca occasionally took the helm, she mostly took care of their guests. She was an excellent cook and created meals in the small galley that continued to surprise him. Claire was home-schooled. Her constant enthusiasm for adventure was contagious, and paying guests caught her mood. She was a fearless swimmer, and even at nine, she could run the six horsepower outboard on the hard-bottom dinghy. Along with Carter, she led their snorkeling trips. It worked well for everyone.

Then everything changed. Maybe it was a mistake to keep the charter service going on his own, but it was all he knew. Now guests snorkeled or explored isolated beaches while Carter remained onboard to prepare meals, wash dishes, maintain the engine and generator, and scrub saltwater from the teak deck and brightwork. There were always chores and repairs, and he couldn't afford crew.

Memories of Claire haunted him. The Bahamas were filled with

them. There was no island he could visit without dredging up visions from their many escapades. Night sailing with Claire was etched in his mind. There was nothing but the sea, the sigh of the wind in the sails, and the gentle slapping of the waves against the hull. Claire would sneak out of her bunk and into the cockpit to sit in his lap. He'd let her take the wheel as they sailed under a blanket of stars undiminished by city lights. He'd give anything to have those days again, but time doesn't move backward. Now, even if it was only temporary, he was glad not to be alone on the boat.