

Neither Sand

Nor Sea



*Neither Sand
Nor Sea*



A Novel By

KATHLEEN
KUBIK

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For my daughters,

with their mother's love.

And in memory of my mother,

with her daughter's love.

—K.K.

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IN THE BEGINNING

there was neither sand nor sea
nor cooling billows,
there was no earth
nor heaven above...

—The Volve's Prophecy
(from Norse mythology)



PROLOGUE

Saturday, May 3, 1997 ☞ Antigua, West Indies

A bottle of Samuel Adams lager sat half empty on the glass-top patio table. He reached for it and took another sip. Room service would arrive in a few minutes with his dinner and an excellent Bordeaux that he had carefully chosen. Curtain Bluff, one of his favorite hotels in the Caribbean, boasted the most extensive wine selection in all the islands.

Captain Erik Andreassen had signed off the cruise ship *Morning Star* this morning and now planned to enjoy a few days of solitude before returning to Norway for his two months' home leave. He had noticed that a few passengers from the ship were staying at the hotel, extending their vacations beyond the cruise. He had greeted them but did not accept any of their invitations to dinner. He had dined with passengers for the last four months. He now wanted to be alone, to relax and unwind without obligations to anyone. Occasionally, he considered himself his own best company.

At thirty-two, he was thought to be an attractive man, tall and at times quite imposing in appearance, especially in his crisp white uniform. His eyes were blue and intense. He had a good sense of humor, but it was frequently masked by his economy of conversation and Nordic reserve. The one inconsistency to this reserve was his hair. Light brown, almost blond, it was wavy and on the long side, looking as if he had just run his fingers through it instead of a comb. No part. "Appealingly disheveled," a friend had once called it.

Erik checked his watch. The *Morning Star* would cruise past the point at any moment now. She had another master for the next four months, but it didn't matter now. She was his—he thought of her as his ship—and was simply waiting for his return.

He reached for the Zeiss binoculars sitting next to the Sam Adams. He removed his sunglasses and focused the magnifiers. He smiled. There she was, in full regalia, her four masts and six sails silhouetted against the luminous sky of the setting sun. The *Morning Star*, a modern-day full sail cruise ship, was as unique and exquisite to him today as she had been when he first boarded her eight years ago as a junior officer. His eyes followed her as she sailed out to open waters and began to slowly melt into the horizon. Soon she would disappear from his sight. He focused a few seconds longer and then set the binoculars back on the table.

He picked up the bottle of beer and flopped comfortably on one of the two vinyl-strapped lounge chairs. He emptied the bottle in one large swallow, lazily stretched, and clasped his hands behind his head.

He was content.

But his contentment would have faded quickly if he had known that the spirit of destiny had already begun its year-long journey to him. Several thousand miles to the northwest in New York City, a decision was being made that would have a profound effect on this man.

Fate had stepped in. The mischievous, connecting thread that would weave its way through unsuspecting lives, opening one door and then another until finally, it would usher Carla Montgomery onto the decks of the *Morning Star* and into Erik Andreassen's life.

A knock at the door.

His dinner had arrived.

A decision in New York.

His fate had begun its flight.

1

Sunday, May 4 ∞ New York City

How ironic, she thought, absentmindedly running her finger up and down the side of her second cup of coffee. How incredibly ironic! Like being run over by some damn ambulance.

Anna Marcel leaned her head against the large living room window of her Manhattan apartment, its rich oak frame encased in seemingly endless yards of green silk drapery. The sun was just beginning to peek over the glass and steel architecture that bordered the shoreline of the East River, and even the birds peppering the morning sky could not induce a smile from her.

Two weeks ago she had assigned the interior design of a new Westchester County development to one of her senior decorators, Marcia Selden. Marcia was a talented, disciplined woman, who specialized in traditional design and went home every night to her husband and three children. She was also a woman who was quite capable of handling the inevitable difficult working relationship with the developer of the Rolling Hills Estates and Country Club, Julian Swann. The job would be done, and done well, and that would be that.

No concerns, no personal involvement with the client, no second thoughts.

And Anna Marcel had slept peacefully with her decision. Until now.

“We’re moving to the West Coast,” Marcia had told Anna on Thursday. “The transfer came up rather quickly. Neil is going out in a few weeks, and I’ll follow with the kids when school ends. I’ll never be able to complete the project before we leave, and besides, I’ll need the time to finish up what I’m

already working on. I'm really sorry, Anna." And then the haunting words: "You know, Carla could handle it. I know Julian Swann can be a tough guy to work for, but I think she can do it, and I don't think she's quite as tied up with clients as the rest of the group. I haven't presented any ideas to Swann yet. The whole project is just getting started. And Carla's work is good, really interesting. She's ready for a major design. Why not give the job to her?"

One of God's little jests, Marcia resigning at this time. Just at this moment in time when Julian Swann would be arriving in New York. Just at this lousy, rotten moment in time when the boy would be back in town.

And then Marcia's suggestion to give the project to Carla. The last thing Anna Marcel wanted. The assignment of that particular decorator to that particular client.

She mulled over her alternatives, giving serious thought to reassigning the project to one of the other four designers in her department. But they were all heavily involved with clients and would not be able to take on a project the size of Rolling Hills in addition to their already overworked schedules. She toyed with the idea of shifting things around. Maybe take so-and-so off a job, put Carla on it instead, then give so-and-so the Rolling Hills project. But it would not be good business, and she knew it. The clients were happy with their decorators, the designers were happy with their clients. And how could she possibly answer the legitimate questions that would be raised?

She herself was consumed not only with her managerial duties but with several impatient clients, as well as the renovation of one of Manhattan's leading law firms, whose demands often took her out of the office for days at a time, enveloping her in the inferno of corporate litigation. The law firm had specifically requested "the talented Anna Marcel." Otherwise she would consider giving that account to Carla and taking on Rolling Hills herself.

So, she arrived at the decision that she dreaded having to make. There was no recourse. She had known that yesterday,

after exhausting all other options. Carla Montgomery would get the Rolling Hills project.

Assignment by default.

Irony, indeed!

Anna sipped at her coffee and shuddered at its mouth-burning taste. Still too hot. She returned to the kitchen for another ice cube, pausing to glance at the rather ornate mirror hanging in the large foyer of the East Side apartment. She sighed, the morning sigh of her short dark hair all askew and announcing the birth of two more gray strands silently weaving their way through; and of a face without makeup, the absence magnifying a few fine lines. Two more gray strands and a few fine lines, and all virtually unnoticeable except to her. At forty-two, Anna Marcel was still quite girlishly pretty, and there was a dulcet gentleness about her that offered a useful if not perfect façade. Her gentle appearance often belied her true nature—she was a forthright and formidable woman. Her husband had labeled her “the Iron Butterfly.” “Says it all,” he had laughingly told her, much to her annoyance.

She envied Paul right now, still contentedly sleeping. The dogs, instinctive by nature, also lay huddled in dreamland and oblivious to her concern. An intense concern, one that had so crippled her sleep last night that she finally gave up and sought the solace of strong black coffee and the tail end of an old Esther Williams movie, delighting in the absurd, magical fluff of the beautiful Esther swimming, singing, and smiling at the same time. A gold-beaded bathing suit that never weighed her down, a glittering tiara that was never off center, mascara that never ran, lipstick that never smudged. A brief, wonderful distraction for all of twenty minutes at six o'clock in the morning.

A forties movie, hot coffee, ice cubes, fine lines, gray hairs. A wistful smile crossed Anna's face. Such silly, ridiculous things offering a much needed and welcome respite. But only momentary, for her smile quickly dissipated into the air, like the steam of her hot coffee. Here it was again. That aggravating,

restless feeling. The uneasiness of the past two days that continued to crisscross through her mind because she and Carla Montgomery were friends. Good friends. And weren't good friends supposed to watch out for each other?

Anna could not pinpoint precisely when she and Carla had crossed the tenuous, invisible lines that separate a casual acquaintance from a genuine friend, with the awkward phase of "we're friendly but not really friends" sandwiched in between. It took several years for the evolution to reach the final plateau of true friendship, several years of slow and gradual delineation of character and substance. Anna had little faith in those who referred to everyone they knew as their friends. Utterly ridiculous, in her mind. If you had three or four real friends, you were blessed, and she chose her friends with remarkable care.

Their age difference didn't matter, although it surprised many that a woman Anna's age could have a true friendship with a woman of twenty-seven. But Carla often seemed older than her years and their similarities far outweighed their differences. They tolerated the minuses they found in each other, since the pluses were numerous. During the past five years from the day Carla had applied for a position in the interior design department of Bachman & Company, the two women had gingerly moved through the three stages until finally the evolution was complete.

Quite simply, they meshed. With the mutual caveat that their friendship would never, could never, interfere with their work. And there was the kicker, the crux of the problem, the core of Anna's sleepless night.

Carla. Still in Florida. An extended weekend, first the interior design convention in Miami and then a long-overdue visit to an old family friend. She was probably walking the beach right now, Anna thought. With her long dark hair pulled through the back opening of a Mets baseball cap and her warm, brown eyes fondly following the seagulls. Reminiscent of Carla's childhood in Montauk, walking the beach, feeding the seagulls. "I like the beach in the morning, and I

love to watch the gulls. It's amazing how they grab a mussel, soar about twenty feet up, and then let it drop so the shell will crack when it hits the beach and they can eat the meat. Some mornings I help them out a little and throw them bread." And then Carla would add with a laugh, "Sentimental slush, I know." Sentimental, yes. Endearing as well. And unfortunately, harboring a childlike vulnerability that occasionally surfaced, a naïveté that Anna wished Carla had left behind on the rockbound shores of Montauk. Carla would have to completely disown it in order to work with Julian Swann.

Carla facetiously but lovingly referred to the sleepy little fishing village of Montauk, on the tip of Long Island, as a Brigadoon coming to life only once a year, in the summer, when the tourist season began. "New York City is my home now," she would defiantly proclaim. But Anna suspected that a corner of the young woman's heart would always be with the sand dunes, sea grasses, and soaring seagulls of Montauk, although she hadn't been there in over a year, not since the death of her mother. "I'm not ready to go home yet," Carla would always reply when Anna asked. A reply in a voice that was full of sadness, sometimes tinged with anger. A reply that Carla refused to explain. Unusual for her. She was always so talkative. "Put a lid on it," "Zip it up once in a while," "Ask one more question and I'll strangle you," were among Anna's thoughts or outbursts. That degree of talkative. One of the minuses of their friendship. Yet her conversation was salted with spunk and sass, traits that Anna liked, even sought, in her relationships. And there was usually an element of fun. Carla often huffed feigned indignation, ran her thumb and forefinger across her lips as if pulling a zipper, turned an imaginary key, and tossed it over her shoulder. "Happy now, Anna?" Spunk, sass, and fun.

The ice in Anna's coffee had melted, and she returned to her living room to flop down on the sofa. She leaned back into the overstuffed cushion and closed her eyes. Maybe Marcia was right. Carla had paid her dues, done the small piddling jobs, and was ready to undertake a major design. It

might be unfair not to give her the project. Their friendship could not, should not, play a role in this business decision. The reverse, unexpected side of their mutual caveat.

Anna sat up, opened her eyes, rubbed her forehead, sipped her coffee.

Besides, what choice do I have? she reluctantly wondered.

But dammit, did it have to be this project?

Did it have to be with Julian Swann?