

CALLING DOWN THE LIGHTNING

1

The young woman Robert Kirkland intended to kill sat just three rows in front of him on the *American Eagle* flight from Miami to the island of Grand Bahama.

He watched her closely, his gaze never straying, never deviating. It was only a fifty-minute hop to the Bahamas, but in fifty minutes things could go wrong, and he might lose her. Especially when disembarking, when she could get lost in the crowd of tourists crossing to the islands from mainland USA. He had to stay alert.

Kirkland guessed from the inclination of her head that she was killing time reading. He hoped it was something worthwhile and not just the in-flight magazine. It could be the last thing she ever read. He was fully expecting to receive the termination order once they landed, and it would be sad if she wasted those last precious moments of her life reading advertisements for perfume.

The sound of the engines changed as their descent began. Soon the single runway and the large green-roofed terminal building that constituted Grand Bahama International Airport came into view through the window. He didn't bother to look out. It didn't interest him. Instead he stayed focused.

Three rows down the young woman rose from her seat, and opened the overhead locker. He stared at her. She was really quite attractive; chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail from a tanned face, but it was her eyes that made her stand out from the crowd. They also betrayed her mongrel bloodline. Almond-shaped with a slightly oriental cast, possibly Chinese, but intense blue – not Asian at all. For a moment those eyes met his.

What she saw was a nondescript man – medium height, medium weight – wearing a cream, linen suit, with neatly cut salt and pepper hair. His cold grey eyes were hidden behind wraparound Ray-ban sunglasses. She looked at him, but no recognition registered in her eyes, and her gaze slid over him, catching the eye instead of one of the flight attendants. The attendant made her way forward, and for a moment there was muted conversation. With a smile of thanks the woman reclaimed her seat, and strapped herself in for the landing.

Kirkland thought about the pretty face of Billie-Jean Martinez and how it would look with a bullet hole in the middle of her forehead. A desecration and a waste perhaps, but the hundred thousand dollars he'd receive for putting it there would go a long way to salve his conscience. He tightened his seatbelt and settled back to wait for the final descent.

Grand Bahama International Airport was crowded; sunburned tourists pushing trolleys stacked high with bulging suitcases, and polythene carrier bags filled with cheap drink and souvenirs bought during their vacation on the island. Others were doing precisely what Stevie Bailey and I were doing – waiting for flights to arrive to pick up friends and relations coming in from places in the US, Miami in our case.

The air was filled with noise. A general hubbub comprised of squabbling couples with fractious children, rowdy groups of young people with too much booze inside them, disgruntled businessmen complaining about cancelled flights, all overlaid by the tinny public service announcements blaring out from loudspeakers. A joy it was not.

I glanced at my watch. ‘What time did you say Billie’s flight was due in?’

Stevie sighed impatiently. ‘For the *third* time of asking, in about five minutes. Listen, Harry, if I’d known you were going to gripe like this I wouldn’t have asked you to bring me. I could have got a taxi.’

‘You *could* learn to drive.’ I said it with a smile on my face, and in any case I was happy to be waiting with her.

She glared at me. ‘She should be landing any minute now, and then she’ll have to pick up her bags, so she won’t be long. Go and get a coffee if you’re bored.’

‘No, I’m fine,’ I said. ‘I’ll wait with you.’

‘Thanks,’ she said sarcastically. ‘Don’t do me any favours.’ She punched me playfully on the shoulder.

I run a small charter business out of Freeport, and Stevie had been crewing for me since she was fifteen. She was now twenty-two, a junior partner in Beck and Bailey Charters, and had developed from a feisty, cropped-haired teenager to a feisty cropped-haired woman.

Stevie was one in a million; a very attractive young woman, slim and lithe, with a pretty face and a slightly up-turned nose that was just the right side of cute. She was also a pretty terrific mechanic who liked to get her hands dirty, and she kept our boats running smoothly. We were close friends; we’d dug each other out of various scrapes over the years. Seven years on, and we trusted each other without question. We had each other’s backs. So hanging out at the airport together wasn’t such a big deal, gripe though I might.

We were waiting on the arrival of Stevie’s girlfriend, Billie-Jean Martinez. It was a relationship that had begun almost three years ago, and flourished despite the fact that Billie was based over in Florida, and Stevie was stuck working with me.

‘What have you two got planned while she’s over here?’ I asked. Stevie had booked a few days off so I wasn’t expecting to see her at work.

She was staring at the Arrivals gate. She glanced round at me. ‘Just chilling out, and having lots of sex,’ she said, with a grin.

‘Too much information,’ I said. It was good to see Stevie so happy and excited.

‘Well, you asked. Besides I haven’t seen her for three months. What did you expect we’d be doing?’

‘Touring the islands, showing her the sights.’

‘We might do that as well, if we have time. But I know she’s been pretty stressed at work. She’s working on a big case at the moment. A career-maker, she said. So I don’t think she’s going to want to be tearing around here, there and everywhere. More rest and relax.’

‘What’s the case?’

‘She can’t tell me, but I think it’s something to do with organized crime. Only a hunch; I can’t ask her outright, that’s the nature of her job, she’ll tell me when she can.’

Something flashed on the indicator board.

‘That’s it. She’s landed,’ she said, and the excitement in her voice was palpable.

Fifteen minutes later Billie appeared, pushing a suitcase on a trolley, and grinning from ear to ear as her gaze alighted on Stevie’s excited face. As Stevie ran forward, Billie pushed the trolley to one side and the two young women embraced, Stevie lifting Billie off her feet and kissing her squarely on the lips.

‘Okay, break it up you two or I’ll have to hose you down,’ I said.

Billie broke the embrace. ‘Hello, Harry,’ she said with a smile, and gave me a peck on the cheek.

‘Good flight?’

‘Bumpy in places, but otherwise a piece of cake. Too many tourists though.’

‘Par for the course. Here let me.’ I took her trolley. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s get you home.’ And, pushing the trolley, I led the way through the airport.

‘How’s Katy?’ Billie asked, as I loaded her suitcase into the back of my Jeep.

‘Yeah, fine,’ I said evasively. ‘Stevie told you about her dad, Max?’

‘Sad,’ Billie said. ‘Stevie said he was only sixty-five. Heart attack wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, it was all very sudden. I think Katy’s still reeling from it.’ I knew she was.

Max Donahoe, my father in law, had died suddenly three months ago while shooting skeet from his yacht, *The Minotaur*. A wealthy businessman, his passing had left his daughter, Katy, very rich – not that the money she inherited was in any way compensation for losing a father she adored. His death had affected her more deeply than I think she was prepared for.

When I looked across at Stevie she was scowling. She had never really liked Katy – she’d witnessed her putting me through the wringer too often – and now, after countless mornings of hauling me out of my bunk on the boat, where I often chose to sleep these days instead of going home, that dislike had deepened to something close to hatred.

‘And did Stevie tell you she’s moved into my old bungalow?’ I said.

‘Yes, she did,’ Billie said, a hint of disapproval in her voice.

‘It’s closer to the harbour,’ Stevie said, almost defensively. ‘It made sense.’

‘I liked your old apartment,’ Billie said to her. ‘It had good memories.’

‘We’ll create new ones in the bungalow,’ Stevie said reassuringly, and squeezed her hand.

They were seated in the back of the Jeep. I climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. ‘Home?’ I said.

‘Actually, I’m famished,’ Billie said. ‘Could we go somewhere to eat first?’

‘Don’t you want to freshen up?’ Stevie asked her.

‘Food first,’ Billie said. ‘And then a long, hot shower.’

‘Hmm,’ Stevie said. ‘Sounds like fun.’