

ONE

I WONDER WHAT THE shrinks back in the States would say if I told them I was dreaming about a marlin swimming the Serengeti? Ah, fuck 'em—I'm not crazy. I've seen crazier things in my life than some fish where it ain't supposed to be. Hell, I've seen a *little girl* where she wasn't supposed to be and the damn shrinks didn't believe that, either. Besides, what can dreams tell you anyway?

Lost in that phantom conversation with myself, I almost miss it. But Chubby sees her—a beautiful Beneteau sailboat, maybe forty feet stem to stern, off to starboard. I pull back on the throttles and ease the boat over on her starboard chine, making a tight circle back to the sailboat. I'm drawn to the boom as it slams back and forth, the main sheet too slack to keep the heavy hunk of aluminum from pitching to and fro with the waves. Watching the boom from my boat, I'm reminded of a crazy, out-of-control metronome. It strikes me that the sailboat looks sick, or lonely, if a sailboat can look like either. Something is wrong.

When we pull up behind her, the *Miss Princess*, that strange feeling wells up—the one you get when you walk into an abandoned building. You sense the life that was once there but now only lingers in erratic, weak energy. You become aware of it when those pinpricks on the back of your neck start. Combining that feeling with the sound of the sails flapping in the wind and the boom out of control, I know, before I even hail her, that she is abandoned.

Nevertheless, I shout through cupped hands, “Hello, the boat! Hello, the *Miss Princess*!” No response.

Chubby and I look at each other simultaneously and shrug. I pick up the marine radio and hail, “*Miss Princess, Miss Princess. This is Tortuga One.*” Nothing. I repeat my call and still no response. Maybe this is a charter out of Grenada and they don’t know their boat name. “Sailboat at South Gap off Isla Tortuga, please respond.” The sailboat is picking its way into the wind, tacking back and forth in the same manner that a novice might set his boat to heave to. It’s like a wounded animal fleeing.

“Now what?” Chubby asks.

“I have to go aboard and see what’s going on. We may have to take her in. I need to let Callie know what’s going on.” I turn my back to the wheel of my boat to shield me from the wind and shout into the radio, “Callie, Callie, this is *Tortuga One*. Callie, Callie, this is *Tortuga One*. You there, kid?” I wait what seems like thirty minutes, and I feel Chubby moving the wheel under my butt. He nudges the throttles a bit, to keep us in line with the sailboat. I wonder, *where the hell is that kid?* He should still be at the shop working on the air compressor and he should be able to hear the radio. I look in the direction of my shop, Dive Tortuga, some seven miles around the southern end of the island. I envision Cal-

lie sleeping out on the dock while my voice bellows over the radio. I chuckle to myself, knowing it isn't true, but I am still curious about why he isn't answering.

The wind has shifted and is blowing through the South Gap from the southwest. The South Gap is a quarter-mile-wide passage between the main island of Isla Tortuga and the small pinnacle known as South Point Island. The passage acts as a funnel for the wind between the high cliff of the mainland and the smaller, sheer pinnacle. It is like standing in a wind tunnel with the fan on high, and we would have to head into that wind tunnel to get home.

Chubby's impatience escapes its always-tenuous bounds. Acting his role as the impatient fifteen-year-old, it's clear he can't understand why we have to go to such effort for this abandoned boat.

"Isn't this government business?" he asks.

"We just can't let an expensive sailboat wallow out here."

"Anchor it," he demands.

"Dammit, Chub, you know how deep it is here. I doubt that they have seven hundred feet of rode."

He rolls his shoulders. "Where is Callie?"

To move the project along for Chubby, I'm about to give up on raising Callie when the radio squawks, "*Tortuga One, Tortuga One*, this is Dive Tortuga. Come bauk, ya read. Over."

"Dive Tortuga, this is *Tortuga One*. Have Bill meet me at the pier. I'm bringing in a sailboat we found out here by South Gap. Seems to be abandoned. Over."

"Abandoned? Overboard?" Callie questions.

"Yeah, just tell Bill to meet me. We'll be back in about a half hour or so. *Tortuga One*, out."

In deference to Chubby I shut the radio off before Callie can come back. I'm annoyed with him for not answering fast enough and don't want to get into it right then as to why he was so slow in responding to my hail. Actually, I'm annoyed at the whole situation—Chubby's impatience, Callie's inattentiveness, and this damn sailboat owner's recklessness.

Isla Tortuga sees its share of bareboat charters out of Grenada, so I've seen a lot of dumb stuff in my short tenure on the island. Bill refers to these bareboaters as "credit card captains" because anyone can be a captain if their card is platinum. It's amazing that more of these guys don't get themselves killed, considering their skill levels. The sea can be an unforgiving place and Isla Tortuga is an especially unforgiving, strange little island surrounded by jagged pinnacles that, at times, rise feet from the surface like teeth on a saw. I've learned great respect for the waters around this island. They have taken many ships and many lives and I don't want to be another stat on a form, another soul lost at sea. So to see a boat this close to shore, its mainsail cracking like gunshots, and no one responding to my calls makes me more than a little concerned. Clearly, something is not right. I need to do something, as inconvenient as it might be to both Chubby and me. "Look Chub, I just want to get back to the shop and have a beer." A gust of wind reminds me that we need to get moving. "Let's just do this."

I quickly go over the plan with Chub, telling him to take the wheel of the *Tortuga One* as I prepare to jump aboard and investigate.

When on board, my plan is to take a cursory look belowdecks and see what, if anything, I can find. I really don't expect to find anyone—we've been behind the boat for some five minutes now,

shouting and calling on the radio with no response. The boat is abandoned.

After that, I figure I'll motor the sailboat around the point and back to Pelican Bay. Sort it out there in the calm of the bay, with a cold beer in hand. And that will allow Chubby to drive *Tortuga One* back to the shop and let him get on with his oh-so-important life.

Really, I shouldn't be so hard on the kid. He's worked his ass off this past week in some pretty rough sea conditions with some fairly unpleasant French divers. Yesterday was their last day of diving so Chubby was looking forward to having today off, but I pressed him into service, making him help me with a dive site marker buoy that had a frayed line. I was concerned that the line would snap and we would lose the buoy.

Plus, I haven't been sleeping very well lately. Weird dreams.

The short version is last night I dreamed of Africa. I was alone on safari, wandering the bush, hunting big game. I came across a pride of lions in the open savannah. There were at least six lionesses with cubs. As I drew closer, I saw they were feeding on a fish, a very large fish, maybe twenty feet long. It looked like a shark, but the curve of the tail was beautifully formed, a sickle. It was a marlin. The lions looked at me with little concern, as if they were expecting me. Then I woke up.

And it's been variations on that theme for a couple of weeks now.

The *Miss Princess* is wallowing badly, as boats do that are at the mercy of the wind and currents. My plan is to board her from the swim platform. It will be tricky; Chubby will have to inch up slow and close so that I can jump from the bow of the *Tortuga One* to

the swim platform, and all of this when the two boats are in a hollow of a wave so that the platform will be relatively level.

The odds are good that I'll get wet. I do. Chubby does his part, gets me up close, but just as I pounce, a shore-reflected wave tilts the platform, effectively swatting me into the sea. I bob to the surface to see Chubby looking over the side of *Tortuga One* with an obnoxiously broad smile on his face.

You try and do a good deed, I think to myself as I sidestroke to the sailboat. I pull myself up onto the platform, slog my way up to the companionway and poke my head down the opening. "Hello. Anyone home?"

No answer, just the sound of sails and hardware rattling and banging as the boat pitches in the confused seas. So with both hands I push my too-long bangs back over my head and make my way toward the mast. Holding onto the portside stay, I discover the mainsail halyard winch is jammed. Smashed, actually, with the wire halyard miserably wrapped and kinked in the broken winch. It looks like someone has been at it with a sledgehammer. I know I'm not going to get the sails down with it looking like that. Not easily anyhow. From where I stand on the coach roof, I can tell that the jib is badly furled on its roller-furling headstay, bumpy and offline. The jib sheets, the ropes that control the sail, are chopped off, unraveling in the wind, flying like crucified snakes at the clew of the sail. What is going on here?

Hell, I muse, just run the damn thing in and be done with your Good Samaritan deed for the day.

I retrace my way back to the stern of the boat when an unexpected gust of wind rolls the boat and makes me reach for the wheel for support. I then notice—I'd walked right past it be-

fore—that the wheel is bound with rope, very distinctive rope. It is polyethylene, with red and blue threads wound around a white core. I've never seen this kind of line on a boat before. It looks like thick clothesline. Strangely, the rope binds the wheel to the compass binnacle, a very rudimentary autopilot, especially for such a nice boat. My eyes drop to the throttle, fully forward—wide open. The transmission lever is down, forward for a sailboat. My eyes scan the gunwale for the fuel gauge and I sink when I see it reads empty. Someone set this boat off motoring full steam ahead and it ended up here, at South Gap, when it ran out of fuel. My great plan of motoring the boat in is shot now, and I can't sail it in with the all the hardware out of commission. The only other option is to tow it.

I turn my attention back to the rope securing the wheel. *Man, this is strange*, I think to myself. I look back at the gunwale. The boat is equipped with an electronic autopilot, so why the rope? Didn't the owners or charters know how to use the autopilot? Unlikely, but possible.

I pull my Leatherman tool out of its sheath, open the serrated knife and begin cutting the rope. As I saw away, I yell to Chubby, "Hey buddy. Bad news."

His head drops to one side, registering his frustration. "What?" he says, plaintive as a small child.

"I'm sorry, but we've got to tow it in. It's out of gas and it's unsailable."

"Can't we call someone? Can't the police tow it in?"

A good idea, but the weather isn't cooperating. I'm not too thrilled with the prospect of waiting for relief on an uncontrol-

lable boat. It could easily end up smashed on the rocks, and I'd be swimming before help would arrive.

"I'm sorry. I don't think we can chance it. We should tow it in. I'll make it up to you. I promise. Hey, dinner on me at the Beachcomber, huh? How does that sound?" *Pretty damn generous to me*, I think. It seems to soothe him. He doesn't respond. With Chubby, I've learned that no response is a tacit agreement. "Start setting up a bridle for towing. Use the dock lines in the back bench." I finish cutting through the rope on the wheel, and as Chubby searches out lines, I decide to check belowdecks.

I skip down the four steps of the companionway into the salon area, and realize suddenly that this is the first time I've been below. I'm surprised at myself, slightly, for not checking there first. Someone could have been hurt below, but I presumed no one was aboard when I shouted down earlier. I didn't see the need.

"Hello!" I shout. I'm right, no one at home.

It smells musty below, like a damp cellar. The sliding companionway roof is pushed forward and the protective boards at the steps are not in place—the boat is open to the weather. I notice salt stains on the sole, irregular white blotches, evidence of intruding saltwater. A good storm with high enough seas could have downflooded the boat and possibly sunk her.

The companionway stairs put me almost directly in the middle of the boat. From this vantage point, I quickly scan the area. Nothing unusual. Everything seems in place. The navigation table is directly to starboard; I think that a good place to start. I can at least get an idea where the boat is from by reading their charts.

I find nothing. I lift the lid to the navigation table, not a single chart or note. In fact, not even a set of parallel rulers or di-

viders. Odd. Whoever was sailing the boat, no matter their skill level, would need to have these basic navigational tools. And they would want the charts of the area out and ready. Hell, I know these waters pretty well after six months but anyone new to the waters would use—no, need—a chart to avoid the ever-present pinnacle or sandbar. I open the cabinet above the table and find three charts rolled neatly in tubes. I pull out the one on the left, unroll it, and find that it is a sectional chart of the area, but with no course plotted. In fact, the chart looks brand new, never used.

“Hey boss? I’m ready up here!” Chubby yells from the *Tortuga One*.

“OK!” I yell back. I can hear the wind whistling through the rigging topside and I quickly calculate that with towing we are about an hour from the bay and a safe harbor. I decide that a thorough search of the boat will have to wait until we got back into calmer waters. I roll the chart back into its tube and latch the door of the cabinet.

When I pop back up on deck, Chubby is staring at me.

“The weather, boss,” Chubby says.

I look at the water and the tops are starting to blow off the chop. We need to beat it around the point. There, we will be protected from the wind, in the lee of the island.

“OK, toss me the line.” He tosses me a two-inch line that is about twenty feet long—just long enough to allow the *Miss Princess* to settle behind the wake of my boat. Good choice. The sailboat won’t get tossed considerably in the wake so we can chance running at a faster speed. Chubby is thinking. But then, despite his age, Chubby is an experienced seaman.

I find what look like brand new dock lines in the starboard lazarette and then walk the towline up to the bow of the sailboat as Chubby putters alongside. I tie off the *Miss Princess's* dock lines to the base of the mast and lead one starboard, one port. I lead them around their respective bow cleats and then make them fast to the towline. Chubby keeps some slack, being careful not to foul our props with the dangling line. I need to get back to my boat and it is clear I'm going swimming. I strip my T-shirt off and catch Chubby's sidelong glance at the scars on my chest and shoulder, and I reflexively cover myself, hands crossed at the wrists, wet shirt swinging slowly. He turns away, ashamed, and I stuff the shirt into the back of my cargo shorts. As I brace myself to dive in, I hear a crash belowdecks directly beneath me.

I decide I better go back below deck to secure as many things as I can to limit the amount of stuff that will get tossed as the boat pitches and wallows during towing. "Just a minute, Chub." I move quickly back down the side deck to the companionway.

As I half jump down and half slide down the stairs, the door to the main cabin at the stern of the boat swings open and slams against the wall. The noise startles me so much I nearly fall into the salon as I spin around. The Beneteau has a double stateroom layout: one cabin in the bow, the other cabin astern. From topside, I heard the noise in the forward stateroom, but the door to the rear compartment just swings there, open and close, open and close, periodically slamming violently into the wall, as if it were waving me to come in. I step to the door and grab it on one of its closing cycles and hold it half open. Curiously, I lean against the door and the jamb of the door, my modest six-foot frame just fitting into the opening, and peer into the cabin. The bed is made,

and everything, like the rest of the belowdecks area of the boat, seems in order. Something catches my eye.

As if someone flicked it out with a finger, I see a pacifier roll out from the far side of the queen-size berth. The pacifier is opaque blue and with every passing wave, it lolls back and forth on its hilt, like it is waving to me. It is a halting sight, and an even more halting realization. There had been a baby aboard this boat.