

**CHAPTER ONE**

The mayday call broke through some fishermen's chatter on channel sixteen. Brushing stray hairs back toward my ponytail, I quieted my breathing and listened. I always left the tug's wheelhouse VHF radio turned up extra loud so that I wouldn't have to feel guilty about missing any calls. Let's face it, towing and salvage is a tough business, and if any calls for tows came in, I needed to get on the horn and make the deal before the competition.

I was down in the head compartment, wedged in alongside the Royal Flusher whose display model had operated so beautifully at the boat show, but once installed, it plugged up regularly every time I allowed someone else to use the head. B.J. was supposed to have been here this morning to fix the damn thing, and instead I found myself scrunched up in the tiny compartment, trying to make sense of an exploded diagram of a toilet.

The radio finally squawked again. "Mayday, mayday, this is the *Top Ten*."

I dropped a washer under the shower grate and banged my head on the porcelain bowl. The *Top Ten*. Neal's boat. And it had been a woman's voice.

I straightened out my legs and tried to extricate myself from the pretzel-like position required to get at the bolts on the base of the Flusher. Please let him be all right, I thought. He should be the one making that radio call; the fact that he wasn't was causing the hairs on my arms to lift in spite of the Florida heat. Where was he? Yet, in the midst of my worry, I couldn't help but wonder who the woman was. Neal didn't actually own the *Top Ten*; she was a ninety-two-foot private motor yacht, and Neal Garrett, all five feet eleven inches of sunny, brown-skinned, blue-eyed smiles, was her hired skipper and my former lover.

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I backed out of the head and made it up to the wheel-house in three long strides. Coast Guard Station Fort Lauderdale was already on the air trying to get the woman to state the vessel's position. Several times their transmission got stepped on by local traffic, and she became more hysterical by the minute. You weren't supposed to call mayday unless someone's life was in danger. The question was, did she know that? I didn't recognize her voice, but I had heard in the Downtowner that Neal had teamed up with some young girl he met there in the bar. Where was Neal?

I wiped my hands on my cutoff jeans and kicked the toolbox closed with the toe of my deck shoe. I wanted to break in on her transmission with the Coasties to ask about Neal, but, of course, that would be against regulations. The Coast Guard radio operators could be so exasperating sometimes. It seemed like they had to know everybody's mother's maiden name before they could determine the nature of an emergency.

"How many persons are on board?"

"Nobody," she said, "at least not now. I don't know what to do. Please, we're getting closer."

He finally asked her what was wrong. The boat was drifting, she said, toward some tall white buildings. Then she broke off, and he couldn't get her to respond.

Now, that's a big help, I thought as I clicked on the VHF radio direction finder, turned up the radio, and slipped out of the wheelhouse. From her description, she could be anywhere along the hundred miles of tall white buildings from Palm Beach to Coconut Grove.

I jumped the gap from the gunwale of my tug to the seawall and then trotted across the lawn to my little cottage to lock up. I looked around for B.J., usually both my mechanic and the best deckhand I knew. The storm shutters were all closed on the big house, where he had been working in the library the day before. I trotted around the side of the house.

I had met B.J. when I used to work as a lifeguard down on Lauderdale beach. A big Samoan, he often surfed after work with a couple of the other lifeguards. When they introduced us one afternoon, he was one of the few people who had recognized something in my name.

"Hey ... Seychelle," he said. "Isn't that the name for some islands?"

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When I explained my dad had named all us kids after islands, he wanted to know if I had a sister named Pago Pago.

I walked out to the gate, but his truck wasn't in the drive. Taking a megayacht like the *Top Ten* under tow would certainly not be easy as a one-man job, but I didn't have time to chase around anymore.

Locking the door to my cottage, I whistled for Abaco, my black Lab. She crawled out from under her bougainvillea bush at the side of the cottage and jumped through the gate in the bulwarks.

The noise of *Gorda's* Caterpillar diesel grumbling to life rolled across the river like nearby thunder. I threw the dock lines onto the grass just beyond the seawall and adjusted the throttle to achieve maximum speed with the least amount of wake. I noted in the log that we were under way at 9:18 A.M., Thursday, March 18. Abaco took up her position at the bow, ears blowing back, tongue lolling out of the corner of her mouth.

I hoped Neal had surfaced from wherever he was and the emergency was over, but until I heard otherwise, I'd keep the steam on. The *Top Ten*, at ninety-two feet, was a custom Broward yacht, replacement value somewhere near five million. In today's market, unfortunately, her new owner would be lucky to get two to three for her. But if she were in danger of going on the beach, the salvage claim could be in numbers I hadn't seen in a long time.

I had not heard any radio transmissions since I cast off and got under way, but I knew very well that even at nine in the morning, Perry Greene had been sitting in Flossie's Bar and Grill with his handheld VHF on the bar next to his can of Bud. Just as I was pushing the speed limit down the New River, Perry was headed down the Dania Cutoff Canal in *Little Bitt*, his twenty-eight-foot towboat.

Perry Greene wore greasy T-shirts and ripped blue jeans that showed off the fact that he never wore underwear. He had an IQ about as high as the winter temperature after a cold front, and he'd beaten me out of too many jobs lately. The *Little Bitt* was always piled high with slimy lines, old hemp fenders, and various broken engine parts, but Perry knew how to get the most out of an engine, and she was fast. I tapped the throttle forward a notch. Marine salvage was a no-cure, no-pay business; whoever got there first would get the job. No way Perry was going to beat me out of this one.

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Coast Guard Station Lauderdale came back on the air and began calling the *Top Ten*. For the longest time the girl's voice didn't answer their call. Then her voice broke in sounding weak, but the transmission was so clear, I would have thought she was within a few hundred yards of me.

“Oh, God, help me ... please ...”

Then nothing. The transmission ended and the radio remained silent for several long seconds. When the Coast Guardsman's voice came back on, calling the name of the boat in his monotone, I jumped, but *her* voice never came back on the air. I wished I could just climb into my fifteen-foot Whaler and fly on out there to see what was going on. While *Gorda* had plenty of raw power in her diesel, she would never get up and plane over the waves like a dinghy. But then again, I wouldn't be able to do much good in the Whaler if that ninety-two-footer was in the surf line.

The run down the river had never taken quite as long as it did that morning. At best, with the current with me, my dock was a good twenty minutes from the harbor entrance, but because I was fighting the incoming tide, the harbor markers seemed to crawl past even more slowly. Early as it was, the river stink was already overpowering the smell of the newly cut grass and flowering trees of the multimillion-dollar homes on either side of us. It hadn't always been that way along Fort Lauderdale's New River—the smell, I mean. Even I could remember when kids caught tarpon off the Davie Bridge, and the crabs the locals pulled up in their traps didn't have a deadly dose of mercury in them. But nowadays, between the agriculture runoff and the hundreds of live-aboard yachts dumping all their sewage overboard, there were days, quiet mornings like this one, when the river was a real bacteria bath.

Finally, I turned south at the mouth of the New River and headed for the entrance to Port Everglades. For a Monday, there was a fair amount of traffic on the Intracoastal Waterway, and I got a break at the Seventeenth Street Bridge. Though *Gorda* could get through without a bridge opening, the traffic jostling for position often forced me to slow way down. This morning I joined the line of sailboats and sportfishermen and steamed straight on through without touching the throttle.

When I'd almost cleared the last inner harbor beacon and was ready to turn out the cut, I looked to seaward and saw, three-quarters of a mile offshore, a gigantic,

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gray, V-shaped ship lined up on the channel markers, a tiny pilot boat bobbing next to it like a remora attached to a shark.

“Goddamn!” I cut back the throttle and started to make a wide turn back into the ship turning basin. No way did I want to share the channel with an aircraft carrier. Two big harbor tugs churned past me, headed out to the ship.

*Gorda* slowly lost way and began to drift toward the south side of the harbor entrance. I checked down the Intracoastal toward the Dania Cutoff Canal, and sure enough, there was Perry Greene’s blond hair flying around his head, just visible over the windscreen of *Little Bitt*. His boat was throwing up a three-foot wake, and as I saw it, I had a choice: pray for the harbor police to stop him for speeding in a manatee zone, or try to beat him out the cut.

“Come on, baby!” I pushed the throttle forward all the way to the stops. I couldn’t remember ever running *Gorda* flat out at max RPM. I turned her around and lined up, midchannel, head on and closing with the carrier. As *Gorda* picked up speed, her stern started to squat in the water, and the wake we were throwing up made Perry’s look like bathtub play. The fishermen on the rock jetties grabbed for their bait coolers and scrambled for higher ground.

“*Securité, securité,*” the radio crackled, “this is Port Everglades Harbor Pilot. All traffic please clear Port Everglades entrance channel, this is Port Everglades Harbor Pilot, clear.” The pilot’s voice on the radio sounded convincing, but I could barely hear him over *Gorda*’s screaming engine. And if the growing vision out my windshield didn’t stop me, nothing would.

It just didn’t look like it could stay upright. The damn thing looked like a skyscraper, and it narrowed down to this knifelike bow that dwarfed the harbor tugs I knew to be more than twice *Gorda*’s size. Fortunately, the massive ship was moving at no more than two or three knots. I’d read somewhere just how many miles out those babies had to start slowing before they could come to a complete stop. They’d probably throttled down somewhere off Bimini.

I glanced at the oil pressure and temperature gauges; the engine seemed to be handling it.

“*Securité, securité,* attention all vessels . . .” I tuned the radio out and tried my best to ignore the five-story-high, thousand-man floating city that was bearing down on me.

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Water color. I concentrated on the color of the water and the size of the wind chop as I cleared the towering condos at Point of Americas and edged over as close as I dared to the north side of the channel. The end of the breakwater came into view surrounded by pale yellow-green water. Shallow, sand bottom. Six feet of water was what *Gorda* needed: aquamarine. While there was plenty of depth in the channel, on either side the bottom shallowed up quickly. We were hitting the wind chop now, and waves were exploding into rainbow-tinted mist off *Gorda's* bow. Abaco deserted the bow and stationed herself in a corner of the wheelhouse, watching me with big black doubting eyes.

I nearly tripped on the doorframe when the carrier blew her deep, deafening horn. What, did they think I couldn't see them?

Then there it was. Turquoise water. Twelve feet or better.

They blew their horn again and again. Five blasts in all, signaling "get the hell out of the way." I couldn't see the deck of the ship now, only this titanic gray wall of steel closing the narrow band of water that separated us. Although fine at the bow, the ship fattened amidships to fill the channel. And both in the air and through the deck, I could feel the throb and bite of her screws as they idled into harbor: *thunk, thunk, thunk*.

I turned the wheel and *Gorda* slipped around the end of the jetty, from the dark blue channel into the turquoise water. The tug's squatting stern lifted up and began to surf on the swell of displaced water the carrier pushed in front of her. I eased off the throttle and watched the gray wall slide past. I stepped out of the wheelhouse and squinted up at the deck where small white-capped faces peered over the side. One sailor waved as the great ship filled the harbor entrance behind me. Perry hadn't followed, thank God.

Now I had a tow to locate.

It was early in the day, but once offshore and clear of the tall stucco wind-breaks, the wind was blowing a good ten to fifteen knots out of the southeast. High, clean-looking trade-wind clouds chased each other off toward the Glades. I slid the binoculars out of the case attached to the bulkhead and, steadying the wheel with one hip, I scanned the horizon, first to the north out the wheelhouse window.

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I got lucky. It was not difficult to make out the distant bright outline of the *Top Ten*, apparently adrift. Looked like they'd made it no farther north than the Galt Ocean Mile before trouble stalled them. She was too close to shore. The *Top Ten* drew over seven feet, and with the onshore breeze, I figured she'd hit bottom within the hour. The problem was, it would take me half that time just to reach her.

I pushed the throttle back up to fourteen hundred RPM and checked around for any of the other boats from the local towing services. Off to the east the *Cape Coral* was towing a water barge back from Bimini, but this wasn't her kind of job even if she were free. Perry was still the one I had to worry about.

When my father Red Sullivan, built *Gorda* over twenty-five years ago, his was the only boat to enter the business of towing luxury megayachts between the boatyards and marinas of Miami and Fort Lauderdale's New River. Our next-door neighbor, a harbor pilot down in Port Everglades, told my father about the new regulations that would require every motor yacht with a draft greater than seven feet to be assisted by a tug. So when Red retired from the navy, he started building the aluminum hull over in a corner at Summerfield Boatworks. Mother often told us how thrilled she was to get him out of her house. She had grown accustomed to her life as a navy wife, to his long absences, and she was chafing at having him home all the time. Red had never intended the forty-foot tug to be an oceangoing salvage vessel, but as the luxury yachts grew bigger and more numerous, more towing companies jumped into the business. Eventually, he started taking *Gorda* out on breakdowns and salvage jobs just to stay busy.

The fathometer registered twelve feet when I pulled alongside the big slab-sided yacht. The brisk wind was throwing up quite a chop and, just drifting as she was, it put the *Top Ten* broadside to the slop. That, with the easterly swell, had *Gorda* rolling the rails down as we circled the ninety-two-footer. I blew the air horn a couple of times, but I couldn't raise anyone on deck. There was an inexplicable stillness about the ship.

I drew in close to the swim step aft. Abaco tilted her head up and sniffed the air, then looked at me quizzically.

"I don't know where Neal is, girl. I wish I did."

One hundred feet of three-quarter-inch nylon line lay coiled on the foredeck. Backing off from the megayacht, I dashed out of the wheelhouse, threaded one end

of the line through the hawser hole in the bulwark, and tied it securely with several hitches around the large aluminum post on the foredeck. The other end of the line I wrapped in a loose bowline around my waist, and I made it back to the wheel before we'd drifted too far.

When I'd eased *Gorda's* bow up to within a few feet of the *Top Ten's* swim step, a squirt in reverse stopped the tug from colliding with the motor yacht. I shoved the throttle into neutral and ran out of the wheelhouse, climbed up on the bow bulwark, coiled some slack line in my hand, and leaped down onto the swim step at the stern of the big yacht.

I lost my balance and collapsed in an awkward heap, slamming my shoulder into the gold-leaf T painted on the yacht's transom. My heart felt like it was trying to break out of my rib cage, and it was several seconds before I drew a normal breath. Great landing, Sullivan, I thought. *Gorda* was drifting back rapidly, and if I didn't hurry, the line around my waist would soon pull me right into the sea. Quickly I stood and untied myself. Apparently the only one who had seen my bumbling arrival was Abaco, her head cocked to one side and her legs spread for balance, watching me from the tug's bow.

I climbed up the ladder to the aft deck and secured the line, adjusting the slack so that *Gorda* drifted angling off downwind, about forty feet off the big yacht's stern. Then I called out, "Hello. Hello. *Top Ten*." Neither the engines nor the generators were running, and in the shallow water, beam on to the wind, I could hear the vessel creaking and groaning as the hull wallowed in the swell. Yet even with that noise, the utter lifelessness seemed even more oppressive now that I was actually aboard.

Stepping over a puddle of water, I made my way forward up the starboard side. I hadn't been aboard the *Top Ten* since Neal and I broke up, and every detail I observed kindled a small memory.

I cupped my hands to the glass on my left to try to see through the glare. The main salon was empty; a half-eaten sandwich on a paper plate and a romance novel with a gaudy cover rested on the glass table. Neal had served us charbroiled dolphin on that table the first night he came aboard as captain. That night we'd been so happy about his new job, and we celebrated on the huge bunk in the owner's stateroom, blissfully unaware that it was that job that would be the end of us.

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A stainless ladder led to the bridge on the upper deck. I held tight to the rungs as the boat rolled, and I swung out, the water visible beneath my back. I used the momentum when the boat rolled back to pull myself up through the bulwarks, grabbing hold of the speedboat in chocks on the upper deck, but my sweaty hands slid across the smooth fiberglass. I dropped to a crouch to regain my balance.

The voice of the Coast Guardsman calling on the bridge VHF radio startled me at the same time I saw the hand at the base of the companionway door. The fingers were curved upward in a distinctly feminine curl, soft and relaxed. As the yacht rolled, the hand rocked slightly, showing a flash of red nail polish on the thumb.

“Hello,” I called out, feeling stupid as I did. Clearly, she wasn’t going to answer me.