

I have heard the sweep  
Of the offshore winds,  
And thresh of the deep-sea rain.  
I have heard the song: How long? How long?  
Go out to the sea again.  
Anonymous

## CHAPTER ONE

Atlantic Ocean, east of Montauk Point, NY

I've done a lot of things in my life. Seen a lot of the world. But, being an eighth-generation fisherman, here, on eastern Long Island, has finally brought me back full circle. Hell, I love my job. Getting out on the ocean on my charter boat a few days a week clears my head and feeds my soul.

Of course, even out here it's not always possible to get away from world-class idiots. This was one of those days.

My boat is the *Finest Kind*, a forty-two foot sport fisherman of my own design. There were four paying customers on board today. The biggest one, Derek Donovan, was fast into a good fish that had taken the deep-trolled bait and was keeping the fight deep, refusing to come up to the surface and show itself. We were fifty miles east of Montauk Point. The ocean was green with a gentle swell and the day was getting hot. I was watching the fight from behind the wheel up on the flying bridge. It was a billfish for sure. Probably a blue or white marlin. A damned big one, too.

Before we left Montauk this morning, I knew that Donovan was going to be a problem. The big man was the alpha male among the group of stockbrokers who had chartered my boat, and he wanted to maintain his "big man" image. He had been obnoxious from the time he had set foot on the boat, and now that he was half drunk and struggling to hold the bucking rod up as he leaned into the heavy fish he was becoming even more abusive. A real jackass, I thought, as I nudged the boat forward to help keep pressure against the fish.

"Hey captain! Whoa! Slow the boat down, you're breaking my fucking back," Donovan shouted. His partners whooped and laughed drunkenly.

"Hang on, Derek," one jabbed at him, "Keep your rod tip up and show that fish who's boss. It's probably a big sardine."

"My money's on the fish, Derek. Let me know if you want me to take over," another said.

Bill Lester, the *Finest Kind's* mate, stood behind Donovan and offered advice. "Just pump and reel and keep facing the fish, Derek."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the drill, Matey," Donovan muttered.

Lester's broad face reddened and he turned to look up at me. He was shaking his head and clenching his jaws. "The name's Bill, Mr. Donovan. And, if you think you can do this all by yourself, I'll go below and have some lunch."

"Whatever," Donovan sneered. "I just want to whip this sucker's ass and hang his carcass on my office wall."

Lester shrugged and eased his big frame into a deck chair. He sat watching the action in silence.

I tried to smooth things over a little. "Bill's giving you good advice, Donovan. This fish isn't going to roll over for you. It still has plenty of fight. You're going to have to beat it or hand your rod over to somebody who will."

Donovan shut up and grunted with the strain.

The fish was still deep and not moving now so I gave the throttle a quick nudge forward forcing Donovan to bang his knees up against the port rail as he strained and cursed. I smiled, winked at Lester, then continued to use the throttle, easing in and out of gear to keep maximum pressure on the fish and to make Donovan sweat. Of course the big man didn't realize that the boat is what really beats the fish. If I sat back and let the boat drift the fish would drive Donovan to his knees inside an hour. Right now it was a big temptation to do just that, but I didn't have time to waste on assholes. I wanted to get the fish alongside as fast as possible so my clients could get their pictures before I tagged and released it.

Thirty minutes later, Lester began pulling on a pair of stout, canvas gloves as he stood up behind Donovan. "The fish is almost ready. When the leader swivel breaks the surface I'm going to grab it. But, stay alert in case he wants to make another run. Keep the rod up high until I tell you to drop it. And the rest of you guys, stand back from the rail and give me room."

Sweat poured down Donovan's straining face and his shirt clung to his brawny body like wet tissue. "Jesus! This sonofabitch is strong. Get out to the way, you idiots. I want this fish on the deck pronto."

Lester carefully slid his hand down the leader and began hauling. I slapped the boat in neutral and grabbed a tail-roping device. By the time I slid down the ladder to the deck, Lester had gotten a grip on the sword of the blue marlin and was holding him alongside the boat. The big fish was on its side. Its rows of lateral stripes glistened in the sun. It was a beautiful fish. Then I slipped the rope around the muscular base of its tail to hold it steady. Its enormous eye looked up blankly at me.

"Holy shit!" one of the clients shouted. "It looks like a fucking submarine. What'll it weigh, Captain?"

I did a quick calculation. "Probably seven or eight hundred give or take fifty. A big female. Damn big for these waters. You got yourself a prize Donovan."

Donovan shoved his way through the crowd, still holding the rod in one hand. "What the fuck are you waiting for? Haul its ass into the boat. I did my work for the day."

I looked up from the fish and fixed Donovan with a hard gaze. "Get out your camera and take all the pictures you want, Mr. Donovan. Bill and I will hold her steady."

"Pictures! What the fuck do I want with pictures? I want this fish mounted."

I knew trouble was coming. I sighed. "Yes, of course you do. And taxidermists now make beautiful reproductions from photographs and measurements."

The blood rose in Donovan's face until it looked like he would have a stroke.

"Reproduction? I don't want no reproduction. I want the real thing. I caught it."

By now I had had enough of the guy and dropped all pretense of being polite. "This fish is going back where it came from, Donovan. You're not worthy of taking its life." I took one hand off the rope and braced myself. I'm not a real big guy but I can handle myself. Donovan had thirty pounds and two inches on me so I wanted to be ready if he made a move.

"This is absolute bullshit! We paid good money for this charter and I demand that you kill this fish." He looked around at his friends for support, but no one else said anything.

Instinctively I clenched my right fist and the sinews of my forearm must have sent a signal. Donovan took note of it and I saw some of the fire fade in the stockbroker's eyes as he

considered his chances. I looked back at the fish. It was still lying quietly on its side as I quickly threaded a spaghetti tag through its pectoral fin and released the tail rope. Then I reached over with a pair of pliers and twisted the hook out of the bony mouth. Donovan shouted "NO!" and lunged to reach down over the side just as Lester let go of the sword. The big fish arched half its body up out of the water and caught Donovan on the side of his head with the full force of the scimitar-shaped tail. Then, with a mighty thrust of that tail, the big marlin disappeared into the green depths. Donovan would have fallen in after it had Lester not grabbed his belt and hauled him, sputtering, onto the deck.

"You can have your money back, less my expenses," I said as I climbed back up to the bridge. "This charter is over."

The four-hour trip back to Montauk was mostly in silence. The seas had built up with a strong S/W wind and two of the clients moaned with seasickness inside the salon. Donovan and the other executive sat morosely out on deck drinking beer, smoking cigars, and occasionally muttering into the wind.

Lester put the rods and reels in their holders, did a quick cleanup and climbed up to the bridge holding two long-necked beers in one hand. His wide face was permanently sunburned above a graying beard and behind the dark, wraparound sunglasses favored by deepwater fishermen.

"So, what do you think, Bub?" He said as he settled his bulk into the helm seat next to me. "Is this jerk going to make a big stink?"

Lester is a Bonacker just like me, descended from a long line of fishermen who came from England—some as early as the 1600's—and settled in the East Hampton area of Long Island, around Accabonac Harbor. "Bub" is part of the old language that we reserve for friends. It used to be that "Bonacker" was a term of derision, kind of along the lines of "redneck", "cracker", or "Okie". But, those days have faded now. The "correct" side of Montauk Highway—that is to say the south side, near the ocean beaches—has plenty of rich lawyers, stockbrokers, and even celebrities who dress down on the weekends, drive pick-up trucks, and are happy to be mistaken for natives like us.

I lifted my long-billed fishing cap and wiped the sweat away from my eyes; it was only early June but the mid-day sun was already heating up. "Frankly Bub, I don't give a damn," I said out of the side of my mouth in my best Rhett Butler imitation.

Lester brightened. "You know what they call a Wall Street guy on the bottom of the ocean, don't you?"

"I know. I know: A good start."

We both smiled at the old joke and then went back to focusing on our cold beers and the wide horizon. Behind us, the long wake of white, sea foam spread out in a V across the empty ocean. Lester and I have been friends since childhood and silence on the water comes as easily between us as conversation.

The rumble of the big Allison diesels was mesmerizing and Lester soon dozed off. I sat thinking about the big fish. I was glad we had set it free, something I would never have done twenty-years ago when I was fresh out of the Navy and running my first charter boat. Back then, it was standard operating procedure to kill anything that could attract customer attention at the dock or be sold to the Japanese fish buyers. Now, just the thought of that great fish swimming with the Gulf Stream, circumnavigating the Atlantic Ocean every year made me both happy and envious. I lifted my beer out of the gimbaled holder. "Here's to you, old girl," I said as I drained it.

Land was still too far in the distance to see, but a high formation of cumulus clouds marked its presence off to the northwest. I watched the slow mutation of cloud shapes through polarized glasses. Their abstract composition was like a Rorschach test, only a lot prettier. Below the bow, the water began changing hue from deep ocean aqua to a milky jade. Montauk Point was straight ahead, but the emptiness of the ocean was still broken only by a distant, outgoing cargo carrier off the portside. The GPS showed the *Finest Kind* moving slowly across its blue chart screen, though I didn't need it since I've been navigating these waters from the time I was a teenage deckhand on my grandfather's boat more than thirty-years ago.

By the time we rounded Montauk Point the sun was dipping low in the sky. The old lighthouse cast a long shadow that pointed straight out to sea.

The sight of home waters as I turned down the channel into Lake Montauk, coupled with the lowering sun, started to put me in a somber mood. Soon it would be the tenth anniversary of Kate's death. A decade was gone in a flash and the memories were still haunting me.

My thoughts were interrupted by the roar of a plane's engine a few hundred feet overhead. It was a yellow seaplane and as it swooped towards the harbor it wagged its wings. I looked up and waved.

"It's that crazy bastard Zeke Tredia," Lester mumbled as he came awake and squinted overhead.

"It's Zeke, all right. He must be running a charter. I don't know any sword fishermen who are using a spotting plane this early in the season."

"You're right, Erik. I can see people in the passenger seats."

The dock was pretty crowded with pale-skinned tourists waiting to see some giant of the deep tossed, dead, onto the planks. Once they realized there wouldn't be a show they moved out towards Gurney's Dock where the big, open boats were discharging passengers with buckets of bluefish and fluke.

Our passengers staggered ashore with their coolers of lunch and leftover beer. There were complaints about "bad treatment" and "Captain Bligh", even some lame threats about filing complaints with who knows who. But, most of the bluster and all of the fight had drained out of Donovan and he was happy to get a refund—minus my expenses—and be on his way. I handed the \$500 expense money to Lester; he wasn't going to get any client tips today and he needed the money more than I did.

"Thanks, Erik, and good riddance to them," Lester muttered. "I think you treated them too nice." I grinned. "Yeah, well, Bub. I guess that's why they call me Mr. Nice Guy. Besides, they have to go back to Wall Street tomorrow. That should be punishment enough."

"That's true," Lester nodded. "And we get to panhandle for another fare."