

## Offshore Dominican Republic - Thursday Afternoon

'Hey, Jack, you want another beer?'

Jack turned from his position in the fighting chair. 'Sure, where're the bloody fish?' His accent betrayed its origins. Born and raised in south London, Jack was a consummate salesman and a natural trader. 'We've been out here a day and half and not caught or seen bugger all!'

'Yeh, mon, but that's fishing... I'll get you a cold one.'

Orlando, the hired deck hand, looked over at the owner of On a Sales Call. He wasn't much to look at; late 40s, a couple of lunches too many, but one could sense a certain steel in his manner and he knew people wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of him. In the four foot swell he may move around the boat with the grace of a drunken elephant, but onshore his powerful, thick-set five foot eleven-inch frame had purpose. Orlando imagined that this was a guy you'd like on your side in a bit of rough and tumble.

Jack focused his attention to the fishing again and turned to face the back of the boat. He had had On a Sales Call commissioned to be built three years ago; the name tickled him and reflected his background. Were he ever to be asked where he was, he could simply reply On a Sales Call, leaving the listener none the wiser; that's exactly where he was - out fishing. Up close or from afar, at just over 50 feet long with her flying deck sat above a luxurious air-conditioned lounge area she looked and played the part of the archetypal sport fishing boat. Down below, the lounge led to a couple of spacious double en suite cabins; with a top speed of forty knots, the boat could get him to the best spots ahead of the pack when he fished in the Marlin competitions he so enjoyed. Money being no object, rather than going for the cheaper fibreglass hull Jack had opted to have the boat built of polished wood. On A Sales Call attracted envious stares wherever she went and he was suitably proud of her.

Jack could see, around 15 miles to his left, the very faint outline of the Dominican Republic. According to some of his fishing pals this was a good time of year to be fishing for Blue Marlin, his target for the last couple of days. The Blue Marlin, largest of the billfish family, was a prized catch for any sport fishing angler. Jack had caught a few and recalled the thrill of hooking into one; it had become almost addictive. He'd go out looking for one of these rare fish at every opportunity.

For the hundredth time he counted off the lures in the water – and as before, he watched the two close in some 60 feet behind the boat then seek out the remaining three artificial baits. All five of them were designed to imitate small fish or squid with the furthest set some 70-80 yards away, skimming through the tops of the dark blue Caribbean waves behind the boat. Jack never got bored fishing; it was cathartic, and for the umpteenth time he imagined seeing a dorsal fin appearing through a crest making a beeline for one of the baits. He pictured the fish, all 600lbs of muscle and bad temper snatching at his personal favourite lure. In all, about twelve inches long, it was a red and white mixture of rubber, coloured plastic and a four-inch steel hook, reminding him a tube shrimp fly, very much smaller in size, that he might use fly fishing for salmon on the Tweed, another passion of his.

The cold beer arrived before the fish. No change there then, thought Jack; still, life's pretty good, the odd billion in the bank, sun shining, no phones - but he knew in his heart that this idyllic vista could well change abruptly and quite possibly not for the better. He had a nagging thought that what had started out as a simple concept had rather spiralled out of control, and that he had inadvertently jeopardised all that he had worked so hard to build. Unlike the fate that awaited any fish silly enough to have a go at one of the five lures trolling happily off the back of the boat, he severely doubted that, when all that had transpired became public domain, he would simply have a tag stuck on him and be released back to swim the seas.

A quick look at the solid gold Rolex Submariner on his wrist (a present to himself when he made his first million) told him it was nearing 5pm and that he ought to consider calling it a day and make the turn for shore, back to his wife who was waiting in the luxury villa that they had rented for a couple of weeks. Nice place, he thought, with staff to take care of everyone's needs – he was particularly fond of the obliging masseuse who for the odd hundred bucks would ensure that a body massage was a truly memorable experience. He felt no guilt about his more-than-the-odd indiscretion; he was an alpha male and only thought it right and proper to take what he wanted, when he wanted. He had, at least in his mind, earned the right.

Give it one more Robusto, Jack mused. Smoking cigars was one of his favourite pastimes. He'd given up cigarettes in his early twenties and now managed to get through five or six of the hand-rolled luxuries a day. He pulled himself, less than gracefully, out of the wooden fighting chair which, though fixed firmly to the deck, allowed the occupant to swivel a full 360 degrees when playing a fish. The seat dominated the aft of the boat. Its recent occupant climbed up the twelve-step ladder onto the flying bridge.

'Craig, take us out on more loop, please – we'll give it another hour and then call it a day.'

'Sure, Jack, whatever you say.'

Craig had been the Captain of On a Sales Call for just over two years; he knew that his boss was going to be in a pretty foul mood having two consecutive blank days but he reasoned that there was not much he could do about it. He'd quartered the water thoroughly and had ensured that Orlando had kept up a stream of fresh dead bait on two of the lures. He knew that Orlando would be working desperately hard to catch a fish in order to secure a healthy tip from his tenure as a temporary member of the crew. There wasn't much work to be had on the island outside of tourism and sugar plantations, so the deck hand would certainly be keen to impress... nope, the fish just weren't in a helpful mood today.

Craig didn't know the waters here as well as his home patch off the shores of his beloved Cape Town. A consummate pro, he knew the capabilities of the boat and could read weather and water conditions extremely well; if there were fish to be had he'd normally return a good result. Fishing and the sea were in his blood; he'd fished all over the world with Jack and for the most part had thoroughly enjoyed being in this powerful man's employ. They'd met by chance in truth; Jack was at a loose end, having finished his business dealings earlier than expected, and had shown up on the quayside at Hout Bay in the Cape looking for some sport. Apparently, an associate of Jack's had recommended Craig's chartering business over dinner the preceding evening.

For the past seven years, before he met Jack, he had been taking anglers of mixed abilities out to the confluence point of the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean about 30 miles south of the Cape of Good Hope. It was a prolific place to fish, Yellow Fin being the most common catch ranging in size from five or six kilos up to

eighty or ninety. Occasionally he would get the bonus of hooking into a giant Blue Fin tuna which could run up to an enormous 350 kilos, or 750 pounds in old money. Hook one of those and he was in for a really good day as there was always a willing market in Tokyo for fresh Blue Fin. To keep them fresh for the sashimi restaurants he'd call ahead as he was making his way back to port. Waiting for his return there would be specially designed "tuna coffins" waiting on the dock which would then be flown, with their expensive contents, overnight to Japan.

His simple "lifestyle" business model was designed to let him go fishing every day and get paid for it; he'd give the paying passengers a good time and then pocket the money from selling any fish that they caught. In truth, business had been patchy and when, after a good day's fishing, he and Jack started chatting he couldn't believe his good fortune.

Jack's offer was something of a no-brainer; money no object and lots of freedom to fraternise with whichever locals he could find in the various ports he hung out in while waiting for the owner to come aboard.

At thirty-two, he married a gorgeous South African model who'd taken a shine to his honed body and laid-back approach to life – in the end he couldn't keep up with her hectic lifestyle and had little time for the flaky friends with whom she circulated in the world of high fashion. Karen had rung him from an assignment a year after their wedding and confirmed the inevitable, something to the effect that whilst she loved him it wasn't going to work out in the long term and it would be best for them to go their separate ways – and that was it: a phone call, some paperwork arrived a few weeks later and he was a single man again. No tears, no bad feelings, some happy memories and no alimony – well, he was too proud to tap into all the money that Karen made, so at least she was happy to have got away without huge expense.

On a Sales Call turned through 180 degrees back into the gentle swell and headed back out into the open ocean.

'C'mon fish!' screamed Jack as he lurched down the ladder and slumped back into the fighting chair – he was content puffing on the Cuban cigar and drinking cold beer. He counted off the lures again, wiped his Revo sunglasses on his t-shirt, reset his cap which he invariably wore backwards and let his mind drift

off to contemplate the rather concerning phone call he'd taken from the office in Hong Kong that morning.