

BY JEREMY BATES

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# Merfolk

*World's Scariest Legends 4*

Jeremy Bates



Chillmeir Books

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Merfolk





# PROLOGUE

*Saturday, July 7, 2021*

*The Indian Ocean*

**W**ith his stand-up fishing rod poking out of the holder at the aft of the boat, Karlo Winkler stared dully at the teasers and daisy chains splashing along the water outside the prop wash eight meters away. A light wind blew, causing a gentle swell over the ocean's surface, and the scorching noon sun beat down on the back of his neck. The small fishing boat he'd chartered had left the harbor before first light at four a.m. Eight hours later, and he'd yet to catch anything. Hell, he hadn't even gotten a nibble. In fact, he hadn't seen any hint of marine life. No dolphins, no whales, no sea turtles, nothing. It

was as if the sea were dead.

Scowling at his bad luck, Karlo was about to head over to the ice box to grab another beer when his 120-pound braided line suddenly went heavy. A moment later the fishing pole bent wickedly. The reel spun and screamed.

“Missy!” Karlo exclaimed, grabbing the rod with both hands and raising the tip. “Missy, get your butt over here! I got something! I got something *big*.”

NINETY MINUTES EARLIER

With her face shaded beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat and behind dark sunglasses, newlywed Missy Winkler stared out to the horizon where the vast blue sky met the deeper blue ocean. It hit home just how far they were from civilization. Not that Sri Lanka was a mecca of art and sophistication. What she’d seen of it on the drive yesterday from Bandaranaike International Airport to their 5-star boutique hotel was an impoverished island country.

Missy sighed, longing to be back in the air-conditioned suite in a bubbling Jacuzzi with a glass of chilled champagne. At least she had dinner to look forward to. She would prefer a French restaurant, or Italian; somewhere with class and taste and waitstaff who spoke English. Yet she knew Karlo would insist on something more “authentic,” like last night, which involved sitting on cushions on the beach, eating local seafood, and watching fire performers.

Which, to Missy, was about as touristy as you could get.

She heard Karlo grumble something from where he was casting his fishing line from the port side of the boat, and she called lazily to him, “How’s the fishing, pookums?” Lounging in a deck-chair amidship, she faced starboard, still staring out at the forever-away horizon.



Karlo grunted something else that she couldn't make out above the rumbling diesel engine pushing them along at trolling speed. Missy didn't bother asking him to repeat himself. He'd been in a foul mood for most of the morning because he hadn't caught anything. Despite being sixty years old, he could be a real sook, his moody behavior almost childish. If anything, *she* should be the insufferable, grumpy one. She'd wanted to go to Paris or Milan or Athens for their honeymoon, and instead here she was in some dumpy little boat, God-knows-where off the coast of a third-world country, where she had to have three showers a day because of the damn humidity, and where half the mosquito population likely carried dengue fever.

*Why did I ever agree to come here?* she wondered.

She knew why, of course. Because Karlo wanted to, and Karlo, who was nearly twice her age and worth many millions of dollars, called the shots in their nascent marriage.

Missy said, "Maybe you should try different bait, love button?"

"It's not the bloody bait. It's the location. I thought you said you knew where the bloody sharks were, Chan?" he snapped at the charter boat's skipper. "All the gamefish I could ask for, you told me. Blue and black marlin, sailfish, swordfish, yellowfin tuna, you told me." He huffed. "Well, where the hell are they, mate? On vacation?"

Missy raised her sunglasses and squinted in the bright sunlight. The brown-skinned skipper stood beneath the shade of the paint-blistered wheelhouse, picking at one of his fingernails with the blade of a large knife. He could have been in his early forties or his late fifties. She had no idea. The sun and sea and salt had not been kind to him, turning his skin into old leather, at least what she could see of it behind his scraggly, graying beard. His full given name was Chanidulala, or something ridiculous like that. "Chan" was much preferable.

"Patience, sir," Chan said simply. "They here. They come. We follow birds. Birds follow fish. Big fish follow small fish."

Standing on the aft deck, Karlo was dressed in a white linen shirt, Ralph Lauren khaki shorts, and leather boat shoes. Atop

his mop of silver hair sat a cap embroidered with the logo of the Queensland Maroons, a State Rugby League team in Australia. Missy had met him in October of last year at the Brisbane International Film Festival. She had gone with three girlfriends, all single, all on the hunt for men with fame or wealth (or preferably both). Karlo didn't have much fame, but he had wealth, lots of it. He'd made his money in real estate and was now happily spending it producing Australian documentaries and short films. That evening, at an after-party on his sixty-foot yacht, Missy worked her magic on him, bedded him, and that was that.

Nine months later, she was Mrs. Missy Winkler.

"Maybe we should call it a day, pookums?" she suggested. "Try again tomorrow?"

"I'm not heading back without even getting a bloody bite," Karlo griped. Then, to Chan, "What the hell am I paying you for, mate? You said you knew where the fish were! Patience? We've been bobbing around out here like a message in a bottle since dawn!"

Chan set the knife aside and lit up a cigarette.

"Patience," he repeated around a waft of smoke.

"Not a single bloody bite," Karlo grumbled.

Missy sighed again. If they were going to be stuck out here for however much longer, she was going to make the most of the time and get a proper tan. She reached behind her back and unclipped her bikini top.

She shot the skipper a stern look. "No perving on me, Chan. Got that?"

Chan watched her remove her top, then averted his eyes.

Karlo left his fishing rod in the holder and joined her amid-ship. "What in God's name are you doing, love?" He frowned at her bare breasts.

"You know I hate tan lines," she said. "I've already been in the sun today for so long I'm going to look like a zebra tomorrow. And it's not like I can go topless at the hotel pool. There are kids around." She squeezed some sunscreen from the bottle next to her and lathered her breasts. The cool cream on her warm skin

made her nipples hard.

“Just as long as you don’t take off your bloody bottoms.” He opened the big ice box and retrieved a green bottle of beer. He twisted off the cap and flicked it into the ocean.

Missy frowned. “I don’t think you’re allowed to do that, honey.”

“Huh?” Karlo said, distracted. He looked at her, then at her tits.

“I think it’s illegal to litter in the ocean.”

He scowled. “What?”

“A turtle might try to eat the bottle cap. It could get stuck in the poor thing’s throat.”

“Fuck turtles! I haven’t seen one all bloody morning. Besides, do you know how much trash humans dump in the ocean every year? How much plastic is down there?”

“That’s the point, pookie. You shouldn’t be adding to it.”

“It’s a bloody bottle cap!”

Karlo stomped back over to his fishing rod and slumped into the fighting chair. Missy watched him sulk in silence, wondering if this was what she’d signed up for the next forty years of her life.

*More like twenty*, she thought optimistically, given that Karlo, with all his drinking and cigar smoking, likely didn’t have the greatest life expectancy. *Maybe I’ll get lucky and he’ll croak in ten. Wouldn’t that be something? Ten years of domestic doldrums for a multi-million-dollar payout. Who wouldn’t take that deal?*

A kilometer south of the boat, an island sporting an aquamarine reef rose out of the ocean. Featuring steep, jagged hills covered with emerald-green tropical vegetation, it reminded Missy of something out of *Jurassic Park*, a lost world home to giant lizards or other nightmarish creatures.

It gave her the creeps.

“What do you think about sleeping over there tonight?” Karlo asked out of the blue. He was also looking at the island.

Missy shook her head vehemently, even though Karlo couldn’t see her. “No way, babe. No fucking way.”

“Why not? It would save us the trip back to the mainland and

—”

“No fucking way,” she repeated, thinking again about the chilled champagne and Jacuzzi and air-conditioned suite awaiting her at the hotel.

Tilting his head, Karlo finished his beer in one long gulp and didn't say anything more.



Ten minutes later Karlo's line went heavy and the reel spun and screamed. Something had taken the pitch bait to the left of the teasers.

Karlo grabbed the rod with both hands and shouted excitedly, telling Missy to join him. She hurried over, stuffing her breasts back into her bikini top.

“What do you think it is?” she asked, pressing up against him.

“Give me some bloody room, will you?” he said, shoving her aside. “I have to reel in the bastard. Chan!”

“I'm here, sir,” the skipper said, appearing next to him. “Loosen the drag and let it run.”

“I knew you'd come through, mate! I knew it!”



Whatever was on the other end of line, it was putting up one hell of a fight. After twenty minutes of hard hauling, Karlo had only managed to get half the line in.

“It's a record,” he said, his ruddy face drenched with sweat. “Whatever it is, it's gotta be a record.”

“I'm so proud of you, pookums,” Missy said.

“I haven't bloody caught it yet! And my arms are about to fall off.”

“Should I take over?” Chad asked.

“No bloody way! This bastard is mine.”

Suddenly the rod bent so far Karlo feared it might snap in two.

“Stop winding,” Chad instructed.  
 Karl stopped, and the fish stopped pulling. “What now?”  
 “We wait.”



A few minutes later the rod jerked and the line unspooled blisteringly fast as the fish took off.

“Bloody oath!” Karlo said, holding onto the rod with all his strength, fighting to keep the tip high in the air.

“Let it run again,” Chad said.

When the fish was around a thousand meters from the boat, Karlo said, “I’m running out of line!”

“Tighten the drag.”

Karlo tightened it. The rod bent again, but the reel was no longer spinning. Stalemate. This slogged on, one minute, then two, then five. Every so often Karlo tried jerking the rod to no avail. “It feels like the bloody thing’s hooked to the bottom of the ocean,” he complained. “Maybe it’s dead down there?”

Chan frowned. “Maybe. I’ll put the boat back in gear and try pulling it up—”

Yet even as he spoke, the tip of the nearly U-shaped fishing rod rose slowly.

“It’s surfacing!”

“It’s exhausted. Do you have slack?”

“Some.”

“Then reel it in.”

Despite Karlo’s previous reluctance to share the catch with anyone, he thrust the rod at Chan. “You reel it in. I’m aching all over.”

He gave his arms and back a stretch, then winked and grinned at Missy. “What do you reckon, love? Bloody exciting, huh?”

“It’s wonderful,” she said, though she didn’t look excited. She looked how she had looked all morning: like she wanted to be anywhere else than on the boat.

He pinched one of her nipples through the bikini top.

“Ouch!” she cried, slapping his hand away.

Still grinning, Karlo went to the ice box and retrieved a cold beer. Returning to Chan and Missy, he finished half the bottle, set it on the fighting chair, and snatched the rod back from the skipper.

“Keep winding,” Chan told him. “Not too fast.”

Karlo began winding, thrilled by the massive weight on the other end of the line.

*It's a monster. A bloody monster.*

When he recovered about three quarters of the line, the rod once again bent suddenly, almost to the surface of the water.

“Hang on tight!” Chan told him.

“Don't lose it!” Missy cried.

Away went the line, peeling off the reel at a furious rate.

“Fuck's sake!” Karlo said. “You said it was exhausted!”

“Let it run!”

It wasn't long before the reel was almost out of line for the second time. Karlo locked the drag and held on with all his strength, praying the line didn't snap under the load.

“Shouldn't the bloody thing be jumping out of the water and tail-walking all over the place?” Karlo yelled, as he struggled to gain the line back inch by inch.

Chan shrugged. “If it's a billfish...”

“What the hell else could it be?”

Chan remained expressionless. “Keep winding.”



Nearly a full hour later Karlo spotted the kite, and a few minutes after that, the dropper.

“Take the rod!” he said, shoving it at Chan. He leaned over the hull, gripped the line, and walked it in until he made out a huge shadow beneath the surface of the water. “Jesus Christ...” he breathed softly.

Missy said, “Is that a shark?”

“It’s a great white,” Karlo said, awestruck, as the white-bellied beast rose dramatically to the surface. It floated on its side, one beady black eye staring up at him. The bait, a half-eaten mackerel, protruded from its smiling, tooth-lined mouth. Karlo’s heart pounded. The bloody fish had the girth of a hippo and must have been at least four meters long from snout to tail. “Missy, get your phone! I need pictures—”

The shark thrashed and splashed. The abrupt movement caught Karlo off guard. He didn’t have time to think or react, didn’t let go of the line. The next moment he was flying through the air.

He crashed face-first into the ocean. The cold water shocked his body. He tasted salt in his mouth. Out of panic he kicked furiously. His head broke through the surface. He gasped and flailed his arms back and forth to stay afloat.

“Karlo!” Missy cried, staring down at him with terrified eyes. “Get out of that water right now! There’s a shark in there with you!”

*Not just any shark, he thought. A great white that is probably very pissed off at me.*

Karlo swam madly toward the boat’s stern. His hands gripped the uprights of the metal ladder; his feet found the underwater steps.

“Hurry!” Missy shrieked, bending over the ladder to help him. “It’s right there!”

*Right there! Right where?*

Karlo scampered up the ladder, smashing his knees and elbows in his haste, Missy yanking him by his forearms, his wet shirt clinging to his body, his cap lost. In the back of his mind he knew he was doomed. Any second now the shark would strike. Missy would yank him up onto the deck and scream in horror when she realized he was just a head, arms, and upper torso. Everything below his waist would be gone. He would die moments later with no more dignity than the mackerel they’d used for bait...

It didn't happen.

Karlo lurched up onto the deck, clear of the water and the shark in it, coughing water from his lungs.

Whole.

Missy wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek to his, though this made it harder for him to catch his breath, so he shook her away. He rose unsteadily to his feet, his eyes going to the fishing rod holder attached to the port hull.

It was empty.

"Where's the goddamn rod?" he barked, eyeing the deck with wild eyes. "It's gone! It's bloody gone!"

"Who cares about that!" Missy said. "You're alive."

"To hell with being alive! Did you see the size of that great white? It was the catch of a lifetime and I never got a picture!" He whirled on Chan. "You. This is your fault."

"Me?" The skipper frowned. "I stuck the rod in the holder. The shark must have tugged it free."

"Why did you ever let go of it in the first place?"

"Because you fell into the water, sir! You needed help!"

"Take us back to land!" Karlo barked, stalking over to the ice box and grabbing a beer to help with his jittery nerves. "And don't think you're getting one penny of that bonus we talked about."

"But sir—"

"Don't 'but' me, mate. You promised me gamefish. Instead, you almost got me killed, and what do I have to show for it? Nothing! This has been a bloody fiasco."

"That's not fair, pookums—"

"And you!" he said, whirling on his wife. "You—you two-faced gold-digging bitch! You probably wanted that shark to get me, didn't you? That would have made your day. Yeah, I know. I know why you married me. I'm no bloody idiot." He twisted off the beer cap and launched it, discus-style, as far as he could into the ocean, losing his balance in the process.

"The turtles, pookie—"

"Fuck the turtles!" he bellowed, dropping flat on his ass.



# PART 1

*Colombo*

*"I started early, took my dog, And visited the sea; The  
mermaids in the basement Came out to look at me"  
—Emily Dickinson*

# CHAPTER 1

## *ELSA*

**T**hey call Sri Lanka “the land of eternal sunshine.” This morning it was anything but. Cool, wet, gray. Summer-time was the rainy season, the weather affected by the annual south-west monsoon that brought hard and heady showers until October. Even so, the rain tended to fall at nighttime, leaving the days bright and sunny, hence the country’s moniker.

As the day rolled on, however, the weather would likely follow the usual pattern. The streets would dry, the sky would turn a clear blue, and the tropical humidity would reclaim the island’s southern coast, a sticky and oppressive heat relieved only by the ocean breezes.

Dr. Elsa Montero didn’t mind the year-round humidity and heat so much; she’d take it any day over the frigid, snowy winters of Hartford, Connecticut, where she’d been born and raised. She did miss the annual ski trips her family had enjoyed in Vermont and Maine...and of course a white Christmas. In fact, it had been all too long since she’d seen a sky drizzled with lazy snowflakes, front yards populated with crooked snowmen, and big two-story houses lit up with colorful Christmas lights. These memories sent a pang of sadness through her. Time was slipping away all too fast.

Elsa worked in a two-story white building on Mirissa Beach. It was flanked by a tour operator business on one side and a large hostel on the other. The hostel bustled year-round with foreign backpackers. Music could be heard pumping out of the three-

story structure at all hours, and every now and then Elsa would catch a whiff of pungent marijuana floating on a warm breeze.

In her past life Elsa was an oceanographer and National Geographic explorer-in-residence, famed for her exploration of underwater cave systems throughout the Americas. Now, four years after her husband perished on a dive in Mexico, she worked as a shark scientist for the Sri Lankan Sharks Board Maritime Center (SBMC), an NGO that owned and maintained all of the shark safety gear and nets along the country's southern coastline. It was a small operation with only ten employees, and there was always something to keep her occupied. If you'd asked her ten years ago what she thought she'd be doing with her life at forty-two, would it have been this? No. Nevertheless, she enjoyed her work and was starting to find peace with herself, something that had long eluded her.

Pushing these thoughts aside, Elsa entered the SBMC building through the front door. "Good morning, Christine," she said to the young Sri Lankan girl seated at her desk on the other side of the rectangular-shaped room. Christine, twenty-one, was fresh out of university, bright-eyed, and pretty enough to turn most men's heads.

She pressed her palms together beneath her chin and said, "*Kohomada*, Doctor. Some storm last night! Almost blew the roof off my house."

Elsa wasn't sure whether the girl was speaking figuratively or literally, though she suspected it was the latter. Christine had yet to move out of her family home, a cinderblock structure with a corrugated iron roof in a shantytown overrun by wild fowl and stray dogs. She lived alongside three older brothers and a younger sister, which was most likely why she was always the first to the office building in the morning and one of the last to leave in the afternoon or early evening.

"I didn't even hear the storm," Elsa admitted. "I sleep like a baby, I guess."

"I never get that saying," Christine said. "Babies wake up at all hours of the night, don't they?"

“How about...like a log?”

“Do logs sleep?”

“Too early for this, Christine.” Elsa dropped her handbag at her desk. “I haven’t even had my coffee yet. Speaking of which, got you one too.” She handed the girl one of the two coffees she’d picked up at the seaside town’s only Starbucks.

Christine’s big eyes lit up; on her salary, Starbucks was a rare luxury. “Oh! You didn’t have to!” she said, accepting the paper cup, popping off the lid, and looking inside.

“It’s a cinnamon latte.”

“Yum!” She sipped, then said, “Mark caught a shark in one of the Matara nets about an hour ago. He’s on his way back to shore right now.”

Elsa’s mouth twisted in concern. She was pleased the safety nets worked to protect swimmers from possible shark attacks. Yet at the same time, every dead shark weighed on her conscience. Far from being the monsters of the deep portrayed in Hollywood movies, they rarely attacked humans, and when they did, it was usually a case of mistaken identity, confusing humans for their regular prey. Most importantly, sharks were essential to the overall wellbeing of the ocean’s ecosystem, and any dramatic change to their population would have a devastating effect all the way down the food chain.

“Was it another whitetip?” she asked. They’d caught two oceanic whitetip sharks in their nets over the last three weeks.

Christine shook her head. “Bigger.”

“A thresher?” Elsa said, naming another common endemic species of shark that sometimes got entangled in their nets. Larger than the oceanic whitetip, threshers grew up to six meters in length, though much of that was due to their unusually long caudal fin.

“No, not that either, Doctor. It’s a *great white*.”

Surprise crossed Elsa’s face. Although great white sharks were largely coastal territorial predators, they had a knack of staying out of the shark nets that lined the beaches up and down the southern coast. In fact, in all of Elsa’s time at SBMC, out of the

dozens of sharks caught in the nets over that time, not one had been a great white. “Mark’s sure of that?” she asked.

“He sent me a picture. Have a look for yourself.” Christine tapped on her mobile phone’s screen and brought up a picture of a huge shark floating on its back next to Mark’s thirty-two-foot vessel. Sure enough, it was a great white, evidenced by the white underside, conical snout, and large jaws lined with deadly triangle-shaped teeth.

A *huge* great white, Elsa thought, a little starstruck.

“She must be close to twenty-five feet...”

“She, Doctor?” Christine said.

“Sexual dimorphism is present in great whites. Females grow larger than males, and I’ve never heard of a male reaching...well, this one has to be—”

Just then Christine’s phone rang. She answered it in Sinhala. Elsa could hear Mark’s voice on the other end of the line. Christine spoke easily and with a smile on her lips, causing Elsa to wonder, not for the first time, whether the girl and Mark were romantically involved.

When Christine hung up, she said in English, “He’s transferring the shark to his trailer right now. Should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

Elsa nodded. “I’ll meet him in the shed.”



The shed was attached to the east side of SBMC’s main building and accessed via an internal door. The large interior resembled a morgue, with a cement floor and cinderblock walls and shelves stacked with all sorts of miscellaneous items. An oversized stainless-steel necropsy table dominated much of the space. Elsa flicked on the bright overhead fluorescents, then pressed a button that raised the roller door facing the beach. A gust of briny, saltwater air blew into the shed, tousling her blonde, shoulder-length hair. The moody sky, she noted, was al-

ready breaking, revealing patches of bright blue. The aggressive surf foamed where it crashed and retreated against the beach.

Two hundred yards to the east, Mark's Toyota Hilux sped easily over the hard-packed sand close to the waterline, pulling a flatbed trailer burdened with its large cargo. He slowed as he angled toward the shed, the truck's tires chewing through the loose sand. When he stopped before her, Elsa couldn't take her eyes off the great white laying on its side on the flatbed. She estimated it to be at least fifteen feet from snout to forktail, its weight pushing one and a half tons. The crescent-shaped tail alone had to be at least six feet tall, the pectoral fins over three feet. The absence of clasper fins on the bottom of the body, which were used by males during mating, indicated it was indeed a female.

From the corner of its tooth-lined mouth protruded a black hook and two feet of trailing braided line. She lifted the line in her hands disapprovingly. The red marks around the shark's nose were likely caused by the steel line scraping across its skin as it thrashed.

"Snapped, not cut," Mark said, hopping out of the cab and coming to stand next to her. He was a fit young man in his mid-twenties, cleanshaven, with short, black hair parted neatly on the left, and a curl that had a habit of dangling across his forehead. His broad mouth was often spread in a confident, carefree smile, as it was now. Nothing ever seemed to get him down, making him pleasant to work with.

Elsa said, "I've never heard of anyone catching a great white on a line before."

Mark nodded. "It's not common, but it happens."

"You think whoever caught this one was fishing specifically for sharks?"

"We won't know until we look inside and see what kind of hook is in her belly."

Back inside the shed, Elsa climbed into the cramped cab of a mini-crane and drove it over to the flatbed so the short boom angled above the shark. Mark secured the cable around its caudal fin. When he gave her a thumbs up, she maneuvered the

monster specimen to the stainless-steel table. They hosed it off, then collected parasitic copepods that liked to attach themselves to areas of low velocity on the body, particularly behind the pectoral fins and on the ventral side of the tail. They placed them in a dish (and would later send them to a laboratory for identification), then performed a morphometric assessment of the shark, which involved measuring nearly every inch of its torpedo-like body. Given that scientists rarely had the opportunity to examine great whites up close (in large part because the animals didn't float when they die and thus don't get washed up on shore), measurements were vital to gathering a better understanding of the growth and evolution of the species.

As she worked, Elsa lamented the slow progress of shark conservation in Sri Lanka. While efforts had been made to combat unregulated overexploitation, the country still lagged years behind the conservation efforts undertaken by neighboring countries such as the Maldives. The biggest impediment was the world's demand for shark fins, meat, and liver oil. Over the past ten years alone, Sri Lanka exported fifty-nine metric tons of shark fins annually. However, that was only the official report. There was also a flourishing black market, with many more tons of fins being exported as dried fish.

The cruelty, greed, and ignorance boiled Elsa's blood. She didn't want to put an end to the country's shark fishery altogether, yet it wasn't sustainable in its current form. This was the reason she joined SBMC in the first place. It was an opportunity, however small, to educate regulators and fishermen about the need for conservation while also promoting the ecotourism of sharks as an alternate revenue model to fishing for the local economy.

"Doctor, come have a look at this," Mark said, tugging her from her thoughts.

Elsa joined him where he was bent close to the shark's head, snapping a photograph of the milky white throat. "See that?" He pointed to what looked like a black puncture wound in the V-shaped scales. "Something's stuck in her."



“Let’s find out what it is.” She went to the steel shelves lining one wall and returned with a pair of needle-nose pliers. She pinched the lodged object between the tips of the tool and slowly extracted what turned out to be a four-inch-long bone with serrated edges. It was shaped like a pen, with one end tapering into a sharp point.

“A stingray barb,” Elsa said, unsurprised. Sharks often preyed on stingrays.

Mark was nodding. “And look, another one.”

She extracted the second barb, this one located farther down the throat, near the gills. It was roughly the same size as the first. “Want to wager what we’ll find in her stomach?”

“I’m not a betting man, Doctor,” Mark said. “But I will guess things didn’t end very well for the stingray. I’ll get the preparations underway for the necropsy.”



Two and a half hours later Dr. Elsa Montero stood inside the brightly lit shed, looking out at the excited audience packed beneath the marquee that Mark and two other colleagues had erected on the beach. Elsa performed all her shark dissections in public, as it was one of the best ways to educate locals and tourists alike about the misunderstood creatures. Typically, a shark necropsy attracted a dozen or so curious spectators. Today, however, the great white had drawn a record crowd. She guessed there must be at least twenty people beneath the tent, as well as another twenty or so fifth graders from a prestigious international school. The students, all dressed in mauve shirts and navy shorts or skirts, had been on a field trip to the beach to participate in various sporting activities. Upon hearing there was a great white in the shed awaiting dissection, they had swarmed the roll-up door, shoving at one another and standing on tiptoes to steal a glimpse of the apex predator.

One brave girl with blond pigtails poking out from the sides of

her head ventured into the shed to stand right before the shark. She studied the fish's beady black eyes with apprehension, as though she thought it might somehow be watching her.

"If it's dead," she said without looking away from it, "why doesn't it close its eyes?"

"Because unlike you and I," Elsa replied, "great whites don't have eyelids. What's your name, little girl?"

"I'm not little. I'm ten, and my birthday's in July."

"My mistake, young lady. So what's your name?"

"Julie," the girl replied, finally glancing up at Elsa. "I'm not afraid of sharks."

"Have you ever touched one before?"

She shook her head. "Can I?"

"Be my guest."

The girl stepped forward and extended her hand. After a brief hesitation, she patted the great white's snout as though she were patting a dog. Giggling, she glanced back at her classmates, who were watching her with a combination of amazement, amusement, and alarm.

Elsa said, "Try moving your hand in the opposite direction."

The girl cried out, "It's sharp!"

Elsa nodded. "A little like sandpaper, isn't it? That's because the shark's skin is made up of thousands of tiny teeth, or what scientists like me call denticles. They're covered in a hard enamel and packed tightly together with their tips facing backward to reduce the water's drag on the shark's body as it swims through the ocean. From an evolutionary standpoint, these little teeth are the same as the big ones in its mouth."

The girl's eyes went to the great white's mouth, which hung partly open, exposing the many rows of thin, savage teeth. "Can I touch one?"

"If you're careful," Elsa said with a smile, pleased to see the child's curiosity outshine her fear. "They're very sharp."

The girl pressed her index finger to the plane of one triangular tooth. When it wobbled freely and unexpectedly, she snatched her hand back. "It moved!"

Elsa nodded again. “Sharks don’t chew, so their teeth aren’t attached to their jaws. This allows for forward and backward rotation and retraction, which is perfect for tearing off chunks of flesh from their prey that they can swallow whole—”

“Ow!” The girl had touched the tooth again, only this time she had run her finger over a serrated edge. She glanced up at Elsa accusingly. “It bit me!”

“It didn’t bite—”

“Mrs. Jayawardene!” the girl wailed, jabbing her finger in the air. “It bit me! The shark bit me!”

The three teachers who had been conversing amongst themselves turned to face the shed. The short, scowling one—Mrs. Jayawardene, presumably—said, “What are you doing in there, Julie? Come out right now! In fact, everyone get in the shade of the tent and take a seat!” She clapped her hands loudly. “You heard me!”

Julie and the other students went obediently to the marquee and plopped down on the sand at the front of the standing-room-only audience. The teachers began straightening them into two lines.

Julie, Elsa noted, was excitedly showing her classmates the finger the great white had “bit.”

When the students were settled, and it didn’t appear as though any more spectators would be joining the gathering, Elsa nodded to Mark, who turned on his handheld video camera and pointed the lens at her. The feed was being sent wirelessly to a large flat-screen TV set up on the sand so everyone under the marquee would have a detailed view of the dissection.

Elsa switched on the lavalier microphone clipped to the collar of her blue SBMC polo shirt, stepped to the threshold of the shed in her rubber Wellingtons, and said, “Thank you all for joining us today. We have quite the show for you.” She spoke with a professional cadence and authority, honed through the many scientific seminars and presentations she had given over the years. “I’ll begin the necropsy of this great white shark in just a moment, but first I always like to ask my audience, what do you

already know about sharks?”

“They eat people!” the blonde girl blurted out.

“Hand up!” Mrs. Jayawardene instructed.

Julie’s hand shot up above her head and wiggled fiercely.

Elsa nodded at her. “Yes, young lady?”

“They eat people!”

Her classmates snickered nervously.

“No, that’s not exactly true,” Elsa corrected her. “The film *Jaws* convinced millions of people that great whites were cold-blooded monsters. But the truth is, they hardly ever attack human beings. In fact, you have a better chance of being killed by your kitchen toaster than a great white. Yes, they do occasionally attack swimmers or surfers, but marine biologists will tell you they don’t like the taste of us. Most attacks are little more than ‘test bites,’ as they attempt to establish what we are. And because of our ability to get out of the water and get medical attention, most of these attacks aren’t fatal. Those who do die, sadly, die from excessive bleeding. It’s very, very rare for a great white to eat anybody alive.”

“What do they eat then?” asked an Asian boy who was holding his backpack on his lap.

“Peter, hand!” Mrs. Jayawardene admonished, and Elsa realized the woman’s scowl might just be a permanent fixture on her face.

The boy raised his hand.

“They have a varied diet,” Elsa told him. “But their main prey are pinnipeds such as sea lions and seals, dolphins, porpoises, other sharks, and even turtles and sea birds.”

“Dolphins?” Julie griped. “But I *like* dolphins.”

“Julie, quiet!” Mrs. Jayawardene snapped.

“You might be surprised to learn,” Elsa said, “that great whites are also eaten themselves. Orcas, otherwise known as killer whales, hunt even the largest great whites. They bite off the great white’s tail from behind and finish it off when it can no longer swim. If the great white gets away unharmed, it won’t return to that hunting ground for up to a year.” She clasped her

hands together behind her back. “What I want everybody to take away from today’s dissection is that great whites—and sharks in general—aren’t the fearsome creatures of the deep that they’re often portrayed as. We shouldn’t fear them or stigmatize them. They’re simply a part of the circle of life, part of the food chain, doing what they have done for millions and millions of years, long before humans were around. In fact, many of them now need our help. Because of overfishing, some species are critically endangered and might one day go extinct, and nobody wants that, do they?” She smiled. “But enough talk. Is everyone ready for the dissection?”

This was greeted with cheers and a splattering of applause.

Elsa went to the stainless-steel necropsy table and picked up a large, thin filleting knife. Mark followed her with the video camera.

“You should all have a good view on the TV out there,” she said, the microphone amplifying her voice with only the tiniest trace of feedback. “If anyone is squeamish seeing blood, you can look away or close your eyes. But remember, this is just a fish, a big one, but just like the fish you see on ice in the supermarket. One big piece of sushi. Now, I’m going to begin with the snout.”



Elsa expertly sliced off the end of the great white’s snout (to some gags from the crowd), revealing a cross-section of the complex system of tiny jelly-filled pores that processed olfactory information. She explained that sharks didn’t use their noses for breathing—they used their gills for that—only for smelling. The pores picked up vibrations in the water and the weak electromagnetic fields produced by the muscle contraction and movement of potential prey. They were so sensitive they could detect a half-billionth of a volt in electric fields, as well as traces of blood from as far as four or five miles away.

Next Elsa began removing the shark’s jaws. Just as its teeth

weren't fused to the jaws, the jaws weren't fused to the skull. This allowed it to spit out its gums, bludgeoning its prey and enlarging the size of its bite. While she made incision after incision, she kept up a steady commentary of facts and biology. She also added her usual jokes to keep the dissection light-hearted. "Why do sharks live in salt water? Because pepper makes them sneeze!" was one of her cringe-worthy favorites.

When she freed the jaws from the shark's head, Elsa and her colleague, Lasith—a local fisherman and marine biologist with a nicotine-stained moustache—lowered them to the cement floor carefully. A great white's jaws were worth \$10,000 to \$20,000. This, along with the substantial monetary value of their fins, and the prestige involved in catching such a notorious predator, was part of the reason they were currently listed as a threatened species on the IUCN Red List.

Crouching beside the gaping maw to show that she fit neatly inside it, Elsa explained that despite the massive size of the jaws, great whites didn't have a particularly powerful bite compared to other animals such as saltwater crocodiles, jaguars, or spotted hyenas. This was because, as she'd told Julie earlier, they didn't chew, and their razor-sharp teeth could slice through anything they came in contact with.

Standing up, she exchanged the filleting knife for a bone saw and performed the laborious task of decapitating the great white. She extracted the brain from the cartilage cranium and held it before her, allowing Mark to capture a combination of slow pans and tight close-ups that elicited a mixture of delight and repulsion from the audience. She then placed it in a white bucket with a wet thump. Later, she would take measurements and perform a detailed examination to compare its major regions to other, better understood, shark species.

The great white's heart was also in its head. Elsa removed the pink organ and again held it before her for Mark to film. Like the brain, it was relatively small in comparison to shark's body size, though the aorta still dwarfed a human finger.

"How's everyone faring so far?" Elsa asked the crowd as she

rinsed blood from her gloved hands in the shed's sink. "Nobody's fainted yet, I hope?"

"It's gross!" shouted Julie, and several of her classmates echoed this sentiment.

"Remember, the dissection is for science. Have you all learned something so far?"

There was a general chorus of agreement.

"Then it's been worthwhile," she stated. "And now it's time to take a look inside the great white's body." She returned to the necropsy table and made a long cut along the shark's abdomen. With Lasith's help, they lifted back the thick layer of skin and tissue to reveal the shark's enormous liver beneath. It was the size of a human and filled almost the entire gut cavity. Unlike other fish, sharks lacked gas-filled swim bladders that controlled buoyancy. Instead, they relied on giant, fatty livers packed with oil to keep them afloat, which was why they sank when they died and rarely washed up on shore.

As Mark filmed the oil oozing out of the organ, Elsa said, "You may be surprised to see there are no bones inside the great white, only cartilage. This is the case with all sharks. It allows them to be light and flexible in the water, while also enabling them to become the largest known extant fish species in the oceans. Whale sharks, for instance, can reach a length of sixty feet and a mass of twenty tons. That's about the weight of three elephants, thirty cattle, or a whopping two hundred and fifty people. Thankfully, they pose no threat to us as their diet consists mostly of plankton and small squid or fish."

Elsa, Lasith, and four other colleagues heaved the great white's liver from the gut cavity and plopped it down on a blue tarp stretched across the floor.

After catching her breath, Elsa said, "All right, ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls. I'm happy to announce that we've finally made it to the stomach! This is my favorite part of any dissection. Some of you older folks out there might recall that in *Jaws* Richard Dreyfuss found a crushed tin can and a license plate in the stomach of a tiger shark. Although that's just

a movie, some strange stuff has indeed been found inside the stomachs of sharks over the years, including old boots, car tires, a bag of money, and even a full suit of armor! Any guesses as to what we'll find today?"

"A dolphin?" Julie called out.

"I hope not. But anything's possible. So let's get cracking, shall we?"

Elsa slit open the shark's stomach and nearly retched at the putrefying smell. Scrunching her nose in disgust, she sifted a gloved hand through the partially digested sludge inside the muscular sack.

"Much of this appears to be...half-digested whale blubber," she said, tasting the offending odor in her mouth. "Which means this great white had likely been scavenging on a floating whale carcass not long before it died..." Her fingers brushed something hard and heavy. She removed a piece of bone the shape and size of a small boat propeller. "Ah ha! I was right! This is a whale vertebra. By the size of it, I'd say it was part of a backbone at least twenty feet long. We'll send it off to a laboratory for proper identification." She handed it to Lasith, then stuck her hand back into the goop. A few moments later she cried out again when she discovered the rest of the fisherman's line that had trailed from the great white's mouth. She pulled it fist over fist until a nasty fishing hook emerged from the rotting whale blubber. She showed it to Lasith. "What do you think?"

He examined the hook closely. "Good news—the angler was not fishing for sharks," he said in his Sri Lankan English, colloquially known as Singlish. "This line and hook, it is for gamefish—sailfish or marlin. Bad news—the damage to the hook means the white tip put up a strong fight until the line broke. The escape would leave it exhausted."

"Exhausted enough to ride a current to shore and get tangled up in the Matara safety nets?"

"Yes, I think so. Struggling for oxygen the entire way. You will probably find high levels of stress hormones in the blood sample you took from the liver."



Elsa sighed, disappointed but not surprised. “Sharks,” she explained to the audience, setting aside the hook and tugging off her yellow latex gloves, “need water moving over their gills to breathe. If they stop swimming, they drown. This great white, it seems, exhausted itself getting off the fisherman’s line, which left it—”

“Doctor,” Mark said, holding the video camera in one hand and his nose with the other as he peered into the shark’s stomach. “I think I see a second bone...”

Elsa joined him at the necropsy table. “You’re right,” she said, snapping a glove back on. “Most likely another of the whale’s vertebrae...” She plucked the bone free from the sludge—and frowned in momentary shock.

“Oh, no,” Mark mumbled. He quickly recognized what she held in her hand and averted the video camera, but not before the human skull appeared on the outdoor television screen.

The crowd erupted in bedlam.

# CHAPTER 2

## MARTY

**D**r. Martin Murdock stood on the aft deck of the RV *Oannes*, the smoke from his corn cob pipe drifting away from him into the briny air. He was staring out at the vast expanse of the Laccadive Sea to where it kissed the vermilion evening sky. Marty had purchased the twenty-two-meter ship from a local businessman who had been in the process of retiring his ragtag fishing fleet. At the time it had reeked of fish and showed its age in every grubby plank and window. Now, after a thorough retrofitting, it was a state-of-the-art research vessel featuring scientific equipment, high-tech electronics, and both a wet and dry laboratory.

The *Oannes* was also his permanent home.

It had never been Marty's intention to live aboard a boat, but his work often kept him there late into the evenings. When he found himself spending the night in the master stateroom more often than not, it became redundant renting a house in the city. And so he adopted the life of a sea nomad, waking each morning to the squawks of herons and spoonbills and seagulls, showering with spotty hot water, and bobbing around like a rubber duck in a bathtub during Sri Lanka's frequent tropical storms. It was an unusual lifestyle, but not an uncomfortable one.

"Wishful thinking never caught anyone a mermaid, *mon capitiane*."

Marty turned as his sprightly, short assistant, Pip Jobert, emerged from the companionway to the lower deck, where she

had been working in the dry lab. Her typical outfit on any given day was a grungy tee-shirt, torn jeans, and an Australian slouch hat (one side of the brim pinned up with a rising sun badge) to keep the equatorial sun off her tanned face. Today she wore the slouch hat and torn jeans but with an oversized Metallica singlet that revealed her bra straps. A pair of Ray-Ban Aviators shielded her sea-green eyes. Her coffee-colored hair, which fell nearly to the small of her back, was braided into two individual ponytails. On her feet were a pair of sun-bleached flipflops so well-worn they had holes in the soles beneath each of her big toes.

Marty had never known what to make of Pip's Salvation Army fashion. Nevertheless, he didn't give it much thought anymore. The idiosyncratic clothing had come to embody her in the two and a half years they'd been acquainted—and in his mind she would be somehow diminished without it.

What mattered most to Marty, of course, was that Pip was a sonar technician bar none. The day she first showed up at the *Oannes*, unannounced, and told him she was replying to the help wanted ad he'd posted on a number of online job forums, he'd explained the spot was filled (this was not an excuse because she'd looked like she'd spent the night in a trash can; he had actually hired a Colombo University graduate student two weeks prior). Yet Pip persisted, bragging that she was the best sonar technician in the city, and she'd work the first week pro bono to prove it. Although being skeptical, Marty agreed to give her a trial run, as the grad student had taken off the week to study for an upcoming exam.

That week, Pip worked every day from dawn until dusk, chipping away at the massive amount of acoustic data he'd compiled during his research trips along the island-nation's west coast—and proved that her boast of being the best sonar technician around wasn't hyperbolic.

"Wishful thinking?" he said to her, removing the pipe from his mouth.

"That is right," she replied in French-accented English. "If you are not glued to a computer screen analyzing your sonar read-

outs, Marty, you are standing out here daydreaming about catching mermaids.”

“In fact, I wasn’t thinking about anything.”

“I cannot believe that. People are always thinking of something, yes? You are not a rock.”

“Thank you for pointing that out, Pip. Tell me then. What are you thinking about right at this moment?”

“I just told you. I am thinking that you are thinking about catching mermaids. But what I think you mean is, what was I thinking about *before* that? I will tell you. I was thinking about clownfish.”

“Clownfish?” he said, amused.

“I watched a Disney movie last night, the one with the clownfish. It reminded me of a paper I wrote when I was a university student. My thesis questioned why some marine animals such as clownfish forgo their own reproduction to help others in their society reproduce. Very strange, yes?”

“Any ideas?”

“Of course. Do you think I wrote a paper without answering my thesis? I posited that the largest nonbreeder from an anemone inherited the territory when a dominant breeder died and left a breeding vacancy. Thus it assumes its own breeding role and contributes genetically to the next generation of clownfish.”

“And what about the smaller nonbreeders from the anemone, or even nonbreeders from elsewhere? They simply cede this territory?”

“That is right.”

Marty shook his head. “Sorry, Pip. You get a B for effort, but that’s all. Ask any behavior ecologist and they’ll tell you that nothing in the animal kingdom waits to inherit a breeding position. They contest it immediately. The guy gets the girl, the loser skulks off into the bush. It’s why we have a little something called natural selection, not future selection.”

“I am glad you were not my professor, Marty, because *he* liked my thesis. He gave me an A.” She flicked a wave as she started down the gangway to the pier. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you, Pip.”

Clamping the stem of his pipe back between his teeth, Marty entered the ship’s salon through a set of bi-folding doors. When he’d decided to call the *Oannes* his permanent home, he’d wanted a living area that felt homey, so he’d decorated the previously spartan salon—the main social cabin of a boat—with teak joinery and luxury textiles, plum velvet, button-tufted leather, Art Deco mahogany furniture, and objets d’art from around the world. He liked to believe the finished product was a Neo Baroque masterpiece reminiscent of gentlemen’s yachts from the 1930s (though Pip always complained it felt like a room lifted from *The Addams Family* home).

The renovations had cost a small fortune, but money had never been an issue for him. His grandfather had been a successful treasure hunter known for discovering several famous shipwrecks. Old Alfred Murdoch hit the motherlode in 1981 when he located the wreck of the *RSS Republic*, a steam-powered ocean liner that was lost off Nantucket in 1909. He successfully salvaged US gold Double Eagles and other valuables from the ship’s rotting holds—appraised to be worth close to half a billion dollars at the time.

When Alfred died in 1983, the fortune was divided amongst his widow and three children, one of whom was Marty’s father. As a child Marty split his time between a Georgian mansion in the heart of London and an even grander riverside estate in Oxfordshire. He attended one of the most prestigious private schools in the country, and the University of Cambridge after that, where he earned an undergraduate degree in marine biology and a doctorate in zoology. Thanks to a thirty-million trust fund he’d received on his twenty-fifth birthday, he was able to privately fund field research expeditions around the world, gaining a reputation as a foremost expert on ecology and conservation.

By his mid-thirties he became fascinated by a little-known hypothesis called the aquatic ape theory. First proposed by a marine biologist named Alister Hardy in 1960, the theory pos-

ited that about ten million years ago a branch of primitive ape-stock was forced by competition from the forests to the shallow waters off the coast of Africa to hunt for food, and these semi-aquatic apes became the ancestors of *Homo sapiens*. The idea stemmed from the fact that modern humans had several aquatic adaptations not found in other great apes. A lack of body hair. A layer of subcutaneous fat. The location of the trachea in the throat rather than the nasal cavity, as well as the overall regression of the olfactory organ. The propensity for front-facing copulation. Tears and eccrine sweating. Webbed fingers. The theory went so far as to argue that bipedalism evolved as an aid to wading through water, and that the use of tools evolved from using rocks to crack open shellfish and sea urchins.

Despite the aquatic ape theory being ignored or deprecated as a pseudoscience by academics and scientists, Marty took it seriously. He published a paper in a special issue of the *Journal of Human Evolution* in which he argued that the aquatic ape ancestors of modern humans were, in fact, not extinct but had evolved into fully aquatic mammals.

The scientific community's response was swift and harsh. Biologists, anthropologists, evolutionary theorists, paleoanthropologists, and other experts pounced on the hypothesis, many calling it "crank anthropology" akin to alien-human interbreeding and Bigfoot.

Nevertheless, all publicity is good publicity, as they say, and Marty began packing lecture halls in the UK and US as a guest lecturer, while also conducting interviews on radio stations and podcasts and major television stations.

Within a year, he had become an international name and the face of a newly coined scientific discipline, sirentology—the study of mermaids and mermen, collectively known as merfolk.

In 2017, at the height of Marty's popularity, a well-respected filmmaker contacted him, claiming to possess video evidence that supported his merfolk theory. Marty was initially skeptical. Despite the filmmaker's credentials and reputation, the timing of the video evidence (surfacing just as the idea of merfolk was

capturing the public's imagination) seemed too coincidental. Even so, Marty agreed to meet the filmmaker, and when he saw the footage with his own eyes, his skepticism vanished.

The video had been taken just after dawn by an American man walking his dog along a remote stretch of beach in southern California. It began with the man spotting three beached whales (the US Navy had been testing sonar blasts two kilometers off the coast at the time, which were believed to have killed the whales). The man filming the footage was speaking to someone on his phone. His voice rose in excitement as he spotted something farther down the beach. He hurried toward it before slowing to a walk and steadying the camera on a beached bottlenose dolphin.

Partly obscured by its smooth, gray body was some sort of large fish.

The man was about ten meters away from the dolphin and the fish...only the second animal was now clearly no fish, as it had two very distinct arms protruding from its sides. As the man drew closer, the camera revealed more of the bizarre creature. It lay on its chest, facedown. Its head was covered with scraggly black hair. Its tightly muscled upper body resembled a human's (especially the arms, ending in huge, webbed hands). The skin was a light shade of blue. From the waist down the legs fused into a powerful tail that terminated in a forked fin. This was covered in horny skinfolds like those found on armadillos.

The man closed the final few feet to the creature very slowly. He nudged its shoulder with a toe. It didn't move. He crouched, panning the camera up and down the thing's body. He reached a hand under its shoulder. Grunting, he rolled it over onto its back. The face was humanoid...yet horribly different too. There were no eyebrows or facial hair, and the forehead seemed broader than a human's, the jaw slimmer. The ears and nose were almost non-existent, and the mouth was a lipless slit. The large, wide-spaced eyes, black and pupilless, stared blankly at the camera.

Then it hissed.

The man fell backward. Gasping, he scrambled away, gained

his footing, and ran a short distance before swinging around. He focused the camera on the creature. It was twenty or so meters away, flopping across the sand toward the ocean in the awkward, clumsy way of a seal on land. It reached the foaming surf and splashed through the shallow water. A wave crest crashed over it. When the water flattened in the subsequent trough, the creature was gone.

A thousand thoughts had run through Marty's mind while he'd watched the astounding footage, and for the next hour he bombarded the filmmaker with questions. When the man pitched Marty a Netflix documentary based on the footage, and asked if Marty would be interested in narrating it, he agreed without hesitation.

That decision turned out to be the biggest mistake of his life.

"Dumb bastard," he muttered to himself, catching his reflection in an ornate mirror. The middle-aged man looking back had skin the color of copper, craggy yet cultured features inherited more from his grandfather than either of his parents, and dark stubble. There was a tiredness in his blue eyes these days, a weariness borne from a dwindling lack of purpose and the recognition that his best days were behind him. He still believed wholeheartedly that merfolk existed in the planet's oceans and seas; he simply no longer believed he would be the one to ultimately uncover the evidence. Years of fruitless searching could erode even the most determined man's optimism, and despite being only forty-five, he felt as though time were running out. The world was turning without him, moving inevitably forward, while he remained trapped in a bubble, longing for the past and a life that no longer existed.

Setting aside his pipe to burn out, Marty withdrew a bottle of Scotch from the liquor cabinet below the mirror and allowed himself a generous pour. He went to the baby grand piano in the corner of the salon, sat on the padded bench, and stared at the sheet music propped on the rack before him without seeing the notes.

He set the glass on the piano's glossy top board and tapped a



white key. The solitary, mournful note carried eerily in the darkening twilight.



An hour and four drinks later Marty's spirit was buoyed, and his fingers danced over the piano keys as he played Dire Strait's "Walk of Life," singing along in a nobody-is-listening, gruff baritone.

He didn't realize his phone was ringing until it had gone silent. He looked around the salon, waiting for it to begin ringing again. It didn't.

He got to his feet—and almost fell flat on his face as he lost his balance while lifting a leg over the piano bench. He found his phone atop a stack of *National Geographic* magazines piled haphazardly on an Edwardian writing desk. He was surprised to see the missed call was from Jacqueline DeSilva, a reporter for the *Daily Mirror*.

Marty had met Jacky at a scientific ichthyology conference not long after he'd arrived in Sri Lanka. After the final panel of the afternoon concluded, he was making a quiet exit from the hotel's packed conference room when she approached him. He was surprised and alarmed when she called him by his name. He hadn't told anyone from his old life that he had moved to Sri Lanka. Even so, he kept his cool, making polite chitchat. When she excused herself to use the restroom, he ducked outside and had been in the process of flagging down a taxi in the helter-skelter traffic when she found him again and convinced him to join her for a drink at a nearby bar. They ended up having a good time, and he invited her back to the *Oannes*, where they had an even better time. Marty was looking forward to their next date—until Jacky sent him a link to a feature article she'd written about him in the *Daily Mirror*. It was generous and well-researched... and made him tremble with rage. To be fair, he'd never told her not to write anything about him, yet he thought he'd made it

clear he'd come to the country seeking anonymity.

As he expected and feared, the story was picked up by major newspapers around the world, including London's *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, with one headline blaring "THE MERDOC FOUND WASHED UP IN SRI LANKA" and the other "DISGRACED MERDOC LOOKING FOR MERMAIDS IN INDIAN OCEAN." ("Merdoc" was a pejorative play on his name that the media had gleefully applied to him after the Netflix documentary was exposed as a fraud...and one they had apparently not tired of.)

Marty cut off all communication with Jacky, ignoring her calls and texts until she stopped trying to get in touch with him altogether.

And that had been that.

Nothing for nearly three years.

He'd all but forgotten about her.

*So why is she calling me now?*



Marty was considering ringing Jacky back when his phone rang first. It wasn't Jacky though; it was Radhika Fernandez, the woman Marty was currently pseudo seeing. He'd met her about a year after the Jacky fiasco. He'd been at his preferred local pub, an unpretentious place popular with all rungs of society, including a good number of expats. He'd been minding his own business in a corner booth when Radhika slid into it across from him and began complimenting him on one thing or another. She was clearly drunk. He was too, which was probably why he couldn't remember what they talked about. But it must have been interesting because they remained at the pub until closing. After that night, they began getting together every week or two. She didn't recognize him as The Merdoc, and he didn't tell her anything about himself that might give away his identity. However, the more time they spent together, the more aggressive her inquiries became, until he bluntly explained that his past was off limits.

She wasn't happy with this declaration, but she accepted it.

Marty held the phone to his ear. "Hello, Rad," he said.

"Feeling lonely, mister?" she said playfully.

In fact, he was. With the piano muted, the salon seemed suddenly lifeless and uninviting. "Want to come by for dinner?"

"I've been playing tennis at the club. You don't mind if I'm in my whites?"

"No dress code here. You've seen my assistant."

"I'll be there shortly."

Marty hung up and went to the dinette off the starboard side of the salon. It was appointed with stainless-steel appliances, a stone bench, and a butler's pantry. The fridge was stocked with freshly caught seafood, and he went about prepping deviled crabs, hot butter cuttlefish, and jasmine rice. Everything was almost ready when Rad arrived. He mixed her a vodka soda with a slice of lemon and joined her out on the foredeck, sitting in a steamer chair facing the sea. It was dark now, a wash of stars glittering overhead as far as the eye could see. Vintage brass lanterns washed the deck in warm hues.

"You got here quickly," he said, handing her the vodka. Her white top clung tightly to her breasts and thin waist, while the matching miniskirt showed off her toned legs. She had a pale, aristocratic face. Her hair, parted Cher-like in the middle of her head, fell straight down over each shoulder like black water. Designer sunglasses were pushed up on her forehead, and fancy silver earrings dangled from her earlobes.

"The nice thing about having a driver," she said, her brown eyes twinkling, "is that they're always waiting at the curb, waiting to take you somewhere."

Marty frowned at Rad. Her voice was raspy, like she had woken up with a hangover. He hadn't detected it on the phone, though it hadn't been the best connection. "You okay?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?" she said, staring out at the sea.

"Let me see."

"See what?"

“Your throat.”

Sighing dramatically, she tugged loose the scarf she had wrapped around her neck. Ugly purple and brown bruises marred her throat.

“Jesus, Rad,” he said, shaking his head.

Marty knew what the bruises were from, of course. Rad was into erotic asphyxiation. He’d learned this on their fourth date, when she’d asked him to choke her during a session of spirited lovemaking. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, and they continued on as if she’d never asked. Only she *had* asked. And the request had made him uncomfortable. He spent much of the following days thinking about it. He couldn’t get his head around why anybody in their right mind would want to be choked during sex. Everybody had their quirks, and he wasn’t afraid of trying new things, but choking pushed the bounds of acceptability in his mind.

Despite his apprehension at Rad channeling *Fifty Shades of Grey*, he continued to see her. She didn’t bring up the choking stuff during their next few dates, and he was thinking it had been a one-off request, when during another spirited session of lovemaking she’d blurted in a throaty, frantic voice, “Hurt me!” He asked her to clarify what she meant, which killed the mood. When she told him to choke her, he once again refused, which *really* killed the mood. She began calling him out, saying, “Don’t be a wimp, Marty!” and “Be a man, Marty!” Finally out of frustration and anger and a sense of emasculation, he wrapped his hands around her neck and squeezed. Immediately her taunts stopped. Her eyes rolled back in her head with pleasure. Her body language—her sensuality and her passion—shot to a new level. It was easily the best sex they’d ever had. Probably the best sex he’d ever had.

The next day, after some research on the internet, Marty decided Rad was getting turned on by the thrill of looking over the edge, and of forcing him to look over the edge alongside her. Indeed, she was an adrenaline junkie by nature. She had more adventure-filled stories than anyone else he knew, and in each

one she was always pushing the limits of what was safe and responsible and sane, from cage-diving with saltwater crocodiles to walking along the wing of an airborne plane.

Understanding what drove Rad's desire for erotic asphyxiation, and understanding that the deviant sexual activity was a lot more common than he'd previously believed, Marty felt a little better about his complicit participation. Yet choking was not his "thing" and never would be. Sex should be sensual and romantic, he thought, not violent. What they were doing could not be called lovemaking. They were fucking, plain and simple.

Which, for the time being, was fine with Marty—and fine, apparently, with Rad too.

"Who did that to you?" he asked her, surprised to find it bothered him that she had been with another man, despite the two of them acknowledging their open relationship.

"What does it matter, Marty?" she said. "You don't know him."

"Your tennis partner?"

"You're cute when you're jealous."

"I'm worried for you, Rad."

"You do the same thing to me!"

"I've never left bruises."

"Would you prefer if I had him pull a plastic bag over my head?"

"I'd prefer if you gave up the damn fetish altogether." He saw that his words had surprised and stung her, and he added, "Sorry. I guess I should check on the food."

He went to the dinette, turned off the stove burners, and slid the food into the oven to keep warm. When he returned to the foredeck, Rad was plucking a small silver case from her clutch. She lit up a cigarette, blowing the smoke over her shoulder. "How was whatever you do here all day?" she asked him.

What little he'd told Rad about himself was this: he was a university professor on an indeterminate leave from teaching while he searched the seas for new species of marine life. This wasn't far from the truth—he was simply leaving out the fact that the new species of marine life was merfolk. "Pip discovered a pod of

whales that came by this way last year, only now they were two members short.”

an “A regular Einstein, that girl.”

“She’s an excellent sonar technician.”

“Do you like her?”

“Excuse me?”

“You work together all day, just the two of you. Isolated out here...”

“Enough, Rad.”

“Why don’t you want to talk about her?”

“What you’re implying is nonsense.”

“What do you talk about with her other than sonar?”

Marty filled the bowl of his pipe with tobacco and lit up. “Clownfish,” he said around a mouthful of pungent smoke. “We discussed their breeding behavior today.”

“Breeding behavior, huh? Do clownfish have any particular fetishes?”

“No, but they have some peculiar fishishes.”

Rad stared at him, her eyes disapproving.

“It was a joke. Fetishes, fishishes—”

“I got it, Marty. I just didn’t find it funny.”

“Look, Rad, I’m sorry I mentioned—”

“Forget it.” She stubbed out her cigarette in an ashtray on the table between them. “Is the food ready—?”

Marty’s mobile phone rang. He took it from his pocket and checked the number.

It was Jacky.

“I should probably take this,” he said, standing.



“Martin speaking,” he said, entering the salon.

“Professor Murdoch. It’s Jacqueline DeSilva—we met a couple of years ago.”

“I remember. Long time.”

"A very long time. How are you, Martin? Marty?"

"Marty's fine, and I'm good. It's nice to hear from you."

"Is it?"

He glanced through the window to the foredeck. Rad was facing away from him, watching the sea, which was now indistinguishable from the black sky.

"Marty?"

"I'm here. And, yes, it is nice to hear from you."

"Where are you?"

"At home."

"On that boat of yours?"

"That's right."

"I know this is out of the blue, but I need to talk to you."

Marty wondered what she was up to. "I have a few minutes right now."

Dead air on the line for a moment. Then, "No, in person."

Marty's curiosity got the better of him, and he said, "I'm free tomorrow morning—"

She said, "I'd rather we talk tonight. I have a flight tomorrow morning."

"I can't tonight. I'm with someone right now."

"It's important, Marty. *Really* important."

Marty's heart stopped. *Was he a father?* No. Impossible. What a ridiculous thought. They'd only had that one night together on the *Oannes*, and they'd used protection... Besides, if he'd gotten Jacky pregnant, the kid would be more than two years old already. Why would she wait so long to tell him such news? "I'm sure it can wait until—"

"Who are you with?"

"A friend."

"A woman?"

"Yes." He glanced through the window again. Rad was fiddling with her phone. "And I should get back to her."

"Marty—"

"I have to go, Jacky. If this is as important as you say, call me tomorrow."

“Marty—”

“Talk then.” He hung up and returned outside.

Rad set her phone aside as he took a seat.

“Business or pleasure?” she asked, lighting a fresh cigarette.

“Someone I knew once. She wanted to talk.”

“About what?”

“She wouldn’t say.”

“Did you tell her you’re on a date?”

“Is this a date?”

“I didn’t know you were seeing anybody, Marty.”

“I’m not seeing her, Rad. We went on a single date three years ago. I haven’t spoken to her since.”

“Then what does she want to talk about?”

“I don’t have a clue.”



After eating and washing up, Marty and Radhika retired to the salon. He’d been teaching her how to play the piano, and now they attempted to play Sonny and Cher’s “I Got You Babe.” When Rad hit a B-sharp instead of B-flat, she laughed and said, “Enough for me, Marty. Night cap?”

“Sure,” he said, locking his fingers together and cracking his knuckles.

Rad went to the liquor cabinet and poured two sherries.

She handed him one and said, “What’s her name?”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

He chuckled. “You’re still going on about her?”

“What’s her name?”

“Why?”

“Maybe I know her.”

“Why would you know her?”

“You know how cliquy Colombo can be among certain circles.”



"You don't know her," he assured her.

"So tell me her name," she insisted.

"Jacqueline DeSilva. She's a reporter for the *Daily Mirror*."

Rad was immediately on her phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Googling her."

"You're cute when you're jealous," he said, throwing her words back at her.

"I'm curious, that's all. Is this her?" She showed Marty the photo she'd found. It was the one Jacky used in her bylines.

He nodded.

"She's pretty. Did she break up with you?"

"It's complicated."

"Entertain me."

"We were incompatible, that's it."

"That's not complicated. What aren't you telling me?"

"Do you want to go out somewhere?"

"You're changing the topic?"

"How about Beach Wadiya?"

"My Lord, you mean you're serious about actually setting foot off this ship? You're not going to burst into flames when you touch land, are you?"

"I go to Wadiya once a week. It's where we met, if you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten. Fine, let's go—"

"Hello?" someone called.



Marty and Rad went to the gangway. The silhouette of a woman was visible down on the pier. She waved, saying, "Ahoy, mateys!"

"Bloody Christ," Marty muttered. He couldn't see Jacky's face, but he recognized her voice. "Wait here," he told Rad, and stalked down the gangway. At the bottom, he unclasped the "PRIVATE:

NO BOARDING” sign hanging on a chain and stopped in front of Jacky. She had always reminded him of a bird of prey, her nose beakish, her eyes quick and sharp.

“Good evening, Dr. Murdoch,” she said, a smile lifting the ends of her lips and dimpling her cheeks.

“What are you doing here, Jacky?” he demanded. “I told you we could talk tomorrow morning.”

She peered past him. “Do I know her...?”

“No, you bloody don’t.”

“She looks familiar. Why don’t you invite her down?”

“We’re heading out.”

“Stop being so damn stubborn, Marty!”

“I’m being stubborn, Jacky? You’re stalking me!”

“Why don’t you want to hear what I have to tell you?”

“We haven’t spoken in three years. I’m sure whatever you have to tell me can wait another day.”

“It really can’t.”

“Do we have a child?”

Jacky stared at him before bursting into laughter.

“Right,” he said, turning away from her.

“I’m missing all the fun, it seems,” Rad said, coming down the gangway and blocking his way up it.

“Let’s go,” Marty told her.

She stopped next to them. “Aren’t you going to tell me what’s so amusing?”

Jacky said, “Marty believes I’m here to tell him he’s the father of my child.”

Rad chuffed. “Being the prolific lover that Marty is, I’m sure it’s hard for him to keep track of just how many children he has fathered.”

Jacky extended her hand. “I’m Jacqueline DeSilva.”

“Marty mentioned that,” she said, shaking hands. “I’m Radhika Fernandez.”

“I *do* know you. You have a show on ITN...? I knew I recognized you!”

The Independent Television Network was a Sri Lankan state-

governed network that broadcast content in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Rad was a longtime host of an English travel show that chronicled her travels throughout South Asia.

“Mad Rad, that’s me,” said Rad. “Would you care to join us for a drink?”

“Sure—”

“I don’t think so—”

“Don’t be so rude, Marty.” To Jacky, “Have you ever been to Beach Wadiya?”



Beach Wadiya was less than two blocks away from the pier, located along a stretch of Galle Face that overlooked virgin beach. It was a Thursday night and the pub was crowded. The hostess showed them to a table that was being cleared of dishes and wiped down. A waitress promptly came by, and Rad and Jacky ordered the same cocktail.

“Marty?” Rad said.

“Nothing for me.”

She said to the waitress, “A Scotch on the rocks for Mr. Grumpy Pants here.”

“No, thank you,” Marty told the girl.

“Yes, please,” insisted Rad. “In fact, make it a double.” Then she sat down at the table with Jacky, and the two of them began chatting like old friends. The waitress blended back into the milling crowd. Reluctantly Marty sat as well. For the next several minutes he listened silently to Jacky and Radhika’s animated conversation. Jacky was asking about an episode of Rad’s show filmed in the mountain range that ran parallel to the west coast of India. Rad and her crew had been exploring a cave when they came across a twelve-inch-long centipede hanging from the rocky ceiling by some of its feet and feeding on a dead bat. It had devoured most of its meal in about three hours (which Rad’s production team had time-lapsed down to a handful of seconds).

“It makes my skin crawl thinking about that little horror,” Jacky said, shivering. “And you pitched your tents right outside the cave! Weren’t you afraid that the centipede might crawl into your sleeping bag at night?”

“I made sure my tent was zipped up. Besides, centipedes, no matter how large, don’t attack humans unless in self-defense. They prefer more manageable prey like frogs, mice, birds, small snakes.”

“I think you’re incredibly brave. You’d never catch me in half the places you’ve visited.”

The waitress returned with the drinks. Marty immediately took a burning sip of his Scotch, while Jacky and Radhika clinked their blue cocktails in a toast.

“Lovely meeting you, Rad,” Jacky said.

“Likewise, Jacky,” said Rad.

“Did you two want to get a private room?” Marty quipped.

“Ooh, a threesome,” said Rad. “I’m up for that! I’ve been trying to get Marty to be a little more adventurous in bed for some time now!”

He scowled. “That’s not what I meant—”

“How long have you two been together?” Jacky asked.

“We’re not together,” Marty said promptly.

“No, we’re not,” Radhika said. “More like friends with benefits.”

“I see,” Jacky said.

“Can we change the topic?” Marty said.

Rad frowned at him. “Why are you being such a sour puss?”

“You know I’ve slept with both of you, right?”

“That’s a conversation starter,” said Jacky.

“My point is, you should feel uncomfortable around each other. You shouldn’t be acting like best friends.”

“Would you prefer for us to fight over you instead?” Rad asked playfully. “Pulling hair and ripping clothes and rolling around on the sand?”

Marty took another, longer sip of the Scotch, leaving little more than ice cubes in the tumbler. “Why don’t we skip the

small talk and get to the point of why you're here, Jacky."

"Absolutely." She folded her hands together on the table. "I take it you haven't watched the news today, or you'd know why I'm here."

Marty rarely watched the news. CNN and the BBC were the only two English-speaking channels that his TV received. Sometimes he put them on as background noise, or when he wanted the simple pleasure of hearing people (other than Pip) speaking English. But that was about the extent of his interest in the wider world. "I had CNN on today for a while," he said, "but I wasn't paying much attention to it."

"I'm talking about the local news."

"I never watch the local news."

"You should, Marty. You're living in Sri Lanka. You should watch Sri Lankan news."

"It's in Tamil, which I don't speak."

"You should learn! You're living in—"

"What's the big news?" he asked impatiently.

"I recorded the segment. It's better if you watch it."

Jacky brought up a video on her phone and handed the device to him. The paused frame showed a woman standing in front of a weather map. "Did you come all this way to tell me there's a tropical storm on the horizon?" he said sardonically. "Should I be back at the *Oannes* battening down the hatches?"

"Press Play."

Rad leaned close to see the screen. Marty tapped Play. The weather segment ended, replaced by a reporter standing in a shed with a microphone held up to her bright red lips. He didn't understand a word of what she was saying.

"I told you I don't speak—"

"Just watch."

Soon the camera panned to a decapitated great white shark lying on a steel necropsy table. The shot cut to a bleached-white skull on a blue tarp and next to a wooden ruler. The lower jaw was missing, as were all of the teeth. Yet this specimen was clearly human, as demonstrated by the globular cranium,

the zygomatic arches below the eye sockets, the triangular nasal cavity, the maxillary bones, and the hard palate in the front of the mouth.

*Except, he thought, his brow furrowing, the frontal bone that formed the forehead protruded far too much to be...*

The shot cut back to the reporter.

Marty jabbed the screen, pausing the video. He dragged the buffer bar back several seconds. When the skull appeared again, he zoomed in on it.

Without looking up, he said, "Did this skull come from inside the shark?"

"Indeed it did."

Rad said, "What's wrong with its forehead?"

Jacky said, "Ask Marty what he thinks."

Rad looked at him. "Marty?"

He finally pulled his eyes away from the small screen. He blinked, stunned.

*Can this be what I think it is?*

"Was there a body too?" he demanded.

Jacky shook her head. "Only that skull."

"Who dissected the shark?"

"An American oceanographer. I spoke with her earlier today."

Rad grimaced. "What's gotten you all worked up, Marty? You haven't dumped any enemies in the ocean recently, have you?"

Marty didn't reply. He was finding it hard to think straight. His thoughts were moving too fast, contemplating too many possibilities at once.

"Seriously, Marty," said Rad, touching his forearm. "What's gotten into you? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I don't think that's a human skull," he told her flatly.