

FEEDING FRENZY

The Farallon Islands were only 26 miles off the coast, but we couldn't get there fast enough. They may as well have been halfway around the world. Fortunately, the crew leader of the *Santa Maria* had a scary story to keep my head spinning. His name was Jake.

Jake said the largest shark in history was called Megalodon. The massive leviathan roamed the seven seas 1.5 million years ago, gorging everything that wasn't tied down to the ocean floor. At more than 49 feet long, it could swallow the world and bite it in half at the same time, with serrated teeth the size of dinner plates. But that was then, this is now. Great white sharks would have to do.

I watched water churn in the *Santa Maria's* wake as I counted the seconds. The fire under my ass was hotter than a blast furnace, and the cocaine was raising the temperature into the stratosphere. I checked my stash in another one of the discrete pockets I'd created, wondering if the high would last me through my rogue dive. It didn't really matter; I was going to toot up in the can again anyway when we reached our site just off the coast of South East Farallon Island, where most of the feeding took place.

I paced across the deck, smiling at the crew, envying the four in the wetsuits. I really wanted to be out there like I was supposed to with flippers and a mask, but taking the time to get certified was out of the question.

Along with one other middle-aged man with a protruding gut and a Sherlock Holmes pipe, I was the only "topsider." Toppersider is a euphemism for a lame-duck bystander who has to watch all of the action from the deck. But Jake reassured me that there would be ample entertainment from above.

The seal and sea lion attacks usually happened at the surface, where we “topsiders” could experience a white shark ripping a 300-pound animal to bloody shreds in a matter of seconds.

While checking the cage and the airlines, Jake dialed back the hype to tell us about the tragic misunderstanding of the great whites. Everything had been blown out of proportion by pop culture and the media, he explained. Great whites were not swimming versions of Charles Manson and Ted Bundy. They were large fish like any others, filling their role in the ecological food chain. Attacks on humans were honest mistakes. In a wetsuit with kicking flippers, humans were dead ringers for seals and sea lions, the sharks’ primary food source.

I got up from my seat and paced the deck from bow to stern; I was in no mood for a marine biology lesson from Jacques Cousteau junior. But the portly man with the Sherlock Holmes pipe needed a sympathetic ear.

“Doc said I’m supposed to be able to laugh in the face of my fears.” He said. “Ever since we rented that stupid movie they made out of Peter Benchley’s book I haven’t been able to take so much as a bath without breaking into hives.”

“So you take showers.”

He pointed at me and pulled a very generous bag of tobacco out of the side pocket of his windbreaker. It looked big enough to hold a softball. When he was finished stuffing his pipe to the brim he shoved the bag back into his coat and smirked. Lighting the pipe wasn’t going to work on deck with wind blowing in his face. He walked underneath the galley canopy and sparked up.

“This is the perfect time of year,” Jake said to us as the boat came to a stop at our destination. The triangular rock formations of South East Farallon Island poked through the surface like granite teeth. “It’s mating season,” Jake said, pointing to the shore.

Dozens of sea lions, sea elephants and seals covered the beach with their bellies up, sunning themselves. It looked like the island was covered with pillows. "It's a good bet we'll see some live feeding today," his first mate Benny said, fiddling with his mask.

You very well could Benny. And you may not need the seals.

I walked through the galley and into the bathroom for two more hits, one in each nostril. I checked my pulse. 90 and climbing. I wanted it well over 130 by the time the sharks started getting frisky.

When I came back Benny was pointing off starboard to two large dorsal fins sliding through the water twenty yards away. I clung to the railing and leaned over, doing mini push-ups.

"Think it's Tom and Jerry?" Benny asked.

"Let me get the glasses," Jake said. He came back out with a pair of binoculars and pointed them at the fins, fiddling with the focus. "Yeah, it's Tom and Jerry all right," he said, slapping his first mate on the back. "Those two big mouths."

"You can tell just by the fins?" Diver one asked.

Jake handed the binoculars to him and diver one focused in.

"Tom has a nick at the back of his fin and Jerry has a long gash at the base of his. See?"

"Oh yeah," diver one said.

"Should we give them a little encouragement?" Benny asked, pointing to the sea lion decoys strapped down on the deck.

Jake stroked a tuft of goatee that was poking out from underneath the rubber of his diving suit.

"Let's give them a few minutes." He said. "I think Mother Nature may provide all the encouragement they need."

Jake and Benny turned their attention back to the cage, getting it ready for the first diver rotation. Although the cage could safely hold four divers (or so they claimed), our fearless leaders wanted to keep it

to two at a time so there would be more elbow room to get up close and personal with Tom, Jerry and whoever else decided to join the party.

Jake and Benny tightened straps on what appeared to be a half-dozen modules mounted on the corner poles.

“Cameras?” Diver two asked.

“You betcha,” Benny said. “If our hands get busy we’ll still be able to get all the action.”

“You can’t be nervous,” Jake chuckled at me as he lowered the cage with the winch. Benny and diver one got in; they would be the first group to submerge.

“I know,” I said, making quotations with my fingers. “I’m just a ‘topsider.’” Or so you think, captain of mine. I laughed and jogged in place, trying to speed up my blood.

It was only minutes after the cage was fully submerged before the underwater fireworks began. A tailfin thrash broke the surface with a mouth of white razors behind it.

Jake pointed, but I was already transfixed. When the shark’s head broke the surface again, a twitching and punctured seal corpse was spurting blood in its mouth. “That’s Jerry!” Jake said.

All hands were on deck, except for Sherlock Holmes guy. Jake, diver two and me—we were gripping the railing hard enough to turn our fingers white. I glanced behind, wanting to tell Sherlock what he was missing. He sat with his face in his hands at the galley table, his pipe rolling next to him.

Thrashing continued on the surface; I made out several great white tailfins. “Three of them!” Diver two said, slapping his palms on the railing and his fins on the deck. “Three!”

The sharks were no more than ten yards from the boat in front of the cage. A triangular mountain of white flesh pierced the water a stone’s throw from my reach. I’d never seen so many teeth in my life.

“Who the hell is that?” Jake asked.

“That mouth’s three feet wide!” Diver two yelled.

More thrashing in front of the cage. Diver two poked Jake in the ribs, giggling like a kid on Christmas morning. The cocaine and adrenaline were mixing beautifully in my arteries and veins; the magical biological nitro boost was ready to turn me into a human rocket. I put two fingers to my carotid artery and felt the blood thumping, pounding to be free. Just a few more seconds. I gripped the railing, leaning over. The others were too preoccupied to notice my entire torso pointing into the water like an arrow.

Jake frisked himself. “Where the hell’s my camera!”

The ocean surface was a frothing, foaming morass of white bellies, fins, teeth and bubbling blood. Crimson belched to the surface and spurted in a gut volcano.

Diver two grabbed Jake’s wrist and they both jerked back from the railing, taking no notice of me. Now’s the time. I gripped and pulled the swimming goggles out of my pocket, snapped them over my eyes and took a deep breath. I squeezed my hands together in front of me and dove in.

The underwater cyclone was straight ahead, churning and thrashing. I flailed deliberately, sending out my distress signal while swimming for the middle of the blood cloud. One of the sharks tore a chunk from a sea lion’s flank and torpedoed to the side of the carcass, chomping with a steel trap jaw that moved forward and down at the same time with 3,000 pounds of pressure per square inch.

Sandpaper scraped my left hip, twisting me around. A tailfin slapped me in the head and shark number three passed, a submarine with fins. Heartbeats throbbed in my head, arms, legs, feet and hands. I circled my right arm, taunting them, teasing them. Shark two banked and took the bait. I flailed and kicked, amping my distress signal.

The divers in the cage clanged their prods against the steel bars, trying to distract the shark. Nothing doing. The leviathan kept coming, his black eyes piercing with fatal accusation. What the hell are you doing at my dinner table, they said. I hate party crashers.

I had to come up for air, but all I needed were a few seconds. I pulled my shirt to my shoulders and hunched my back, exposing as much flesh as possible.

With a flick of the tail the shark changed course, aiming for my head. The divers clanged madly on the cage bars with their prods. Too late.

The point of the shark's nose hit me in the forehead, a two-ton dart. I looked down into a conveyer belt of teeth.

There's no exquisite pain, no gushing release of blood, no sight of my life being torn limb from limb before my eyes. There are only a few drops of water on my forehead, compliments of Jake's goatee. He's leaning over me.

"Breathe!"

I coughed up water. Someone raised me to a sitting position and I coughed up more while looking down at the expanding puddle on the deck. I extended my arms. Nothing was missing, except for my severed pinky courtesy of The Fixer. No gashes, no cuts.

"Roger?" Jake asked.

I nodded to a collective sigh of relief from everyone, including Sherlock Holmes, who had half a hand in his mouth.

Jake slapped me on the back and I spurted two more swallows of sea. "What happened?" I asked, looking up into his face.

"Jake dove in after you." I heard Benny say behind me.

I pulled my hand across my face; my goggles were missing.

Diver two grabbed my wrist and squeezed right on top of my blood brother scar. "Scariest fucking thrill of my life."

I nodded. That's the whole point my friend.

"Can you stand?" Jake asked.

He and diver two helped me to my feet.

Benny came back with the underwater camera. "We've got it all on film—one man versus three great whites in open water!"

I felt my muscles relaxing, my heartbeat slowing, my blood vessels opening up. I walked over the railing and looked into the sea. There are no fins to be seen, no teeth, no blood. Jumping in again would be pointless.