

Mauled

The sun was dropping behind the mountains in the west, the bright yellow-white orb succumbing to the late afternoon hues of vibrant orange and red. Seagulls glided through the clear sky and gathered on the warm sand. They chatted amongst themselves, searching for a feed. Some probed the shallows for baitfish, while others scavenged for food scraps left over by beachgoers.

A gentle, cooling breeze stirred the air, helping to dissipate the heat of the day.

Belinda Somers' eyes fluttered open and she lifted her head off the towel. She blinked a few times as she casually gazed around. As she looked over her bikini-clad body, she pressed her fingers against the skin on her stomach. The imprints the pressure left behind turned white, then a pinkish-red.

"I got a little burnt," she announced, her flowing brown hair dancing lightly in the breeze.

Stretched out on a towel beside her was her boyfriend. His body was tanned a dark brown that accentuated his short blonde locks.

Steve Bailey barely moved. He angled his head slightly in her direction and eyed her slim, curvaceous form appreciatively. "Looks good," he commented. "You needed a bit of colour anyway. You were a bit pale."

"There's nothing wrong with being pale," she countered. "The last thing I want is skin cancer."

"You're being paranoid. One little bit of pinkish sunburn isn't likely to kill ya."

"Paranoid? People die all the time from melanoma these days. It's the ozone layer or something."

Steve sighed, but refused to enter the debate further. Belinda could really sink her teeth into any subject and not let go. He knew better than to get too deeply into it.

"I'm only twenty-one," Belinda went on. "I have to take care of myself now so I don't suffer later."

Steve closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of the cool breeze against his bare skin. "Maybe you should sue the sunscreen company?"

"Huh?"

He opened his eyes again. "Well, you had sunscreen on. Obviously it didn't do the job properly."

"Hmm," she responded, pondering that suggestion.

Hopefully that shut her up, Steve thought.

He sat up then and gazed out at the surf. The ocean was smooth and glassy, its surface reflecting the colours of the setting sun. One metre high waves peeled off banks left and

right. Quite a few surfers and swimmers were still out there enjoying the summer twilight.

Steve glanced to his left, where his bodyboard lay on the sand beside him.

Belinda propped herself up onto her elbows. "Can we go now?" she asked.

He looked at her, then back out at the ocean. The smooth, clear water and peeling waves looked inviting. He subconsciously started shaking his head.

Belinda said, "Is that a no?"

"Huh?"

"I want to go now," she repeated.

"Yeah...soon. I just want to go for one more quick surf."

She sighed. "You shouldn't go out in the water this time of the day. It's dangerous."

He shot her a look that said: What the hell are you talking about?

"It's almost twilight," Belinda said, as if that statement explained everything.

"So?"

"So that's when the sharks come out to feed."

"You're kidding, right?" Steve scoffed. "How many years have I been surfing and swimming in this ocean for? Fifteen? Sixteen? I've never even seen a shark out there."

"Doesn't mean they're not there," she returned.

"Look, I know you want to go. And we will...soon. I'll only be twenty minutes, half an hour tops. It'll be dark by then anyway."

Belinda shrugged her slender shoulders. "Whatever. You win."

Steve got to his feet, snatched up his bodyboard and headed down to the water's edge. Once in the shallows he strapped on the Velcro wrist band that was attached the leg rope. He waded out into the shore break. The water was a nice temperature, cool and refreshing after the heat of the day. He passed several swimmers and boardriders who were on their way out of the water. A few surfers remained out the back, awaiting the next set of swells. Steve jumped over some whitewater and paddled out toward the surfers.

A faint moon was already appearing over the horizon. Behind him the sun was steadily being consumed by the mountains.

Steve duck-dived under an oncoming wave. He broke through the back of the swell and kept paddling. Further out to sea he could see the water undulating. The next set of swells was on its way. He paddled harder, wanting to reach the bank before the swells arrived.

He didn't quite make it. A wave started to peak thirty metres in front of him. He watched as a surfer paddled onto the wave, stood up and rode it most of the way into shore.

The next wave broke right in front of him. Steve pushed himself and his bodyboard under it and emerged out the back. He'd now reached the bank just as another wave peeled through. He went to paddle for it, but a boardrider had already beaten him to it. Steve pulled off from the wave's lip. Instead he made a dash for the next swell. Paddling hard, he slid down the face of the four foot wave. Following it right, the breaker arced over him and formed a barrel. Steve shot out of the tube, performed a re-entry and then, as the wave died out, flicked off the back of it.

Feeling exhilarated, he quickly paddled out in time to latch onto the next swell. This one he got onto a little bit late. He felt himself being caught by the lip. Next thing he knew he was flipped upside down, the wave pitching him out and slamming him down heavily into

the trough, the force of the swell proceeding to pummel him under the water.

Steve eventually broke the surface. He felt like he'd just gone a few rounds with a washing machine.

By now the line of swells had subsided. Only three other surfers remained, the rest having gone into shore.

Steve paddled over to them and floated on his board a few metres away. He looked out to sea. The moon had risen well above the horizon now and had evolved into a glowing yellow ball, reflecting the remaining light of the dying sun. By the time the next set of swells rolled through it would be almost dark.

Letting his arms and legs dangle in the water, Steve let the gentle current carry him. He slowly drifted away from the other three surfers. He felt relaxed, serene. The ocean had that affect on him. It was fun, exhilarating at times, yet pacifying as well.

Suddenly there was a commotion. Steve looked over toward the boardriders, who were now some twenty metres away. One of them spun round and made a beeline for the shore, his arms churning through the water with powerful strokes.

"Probably just a dolphin, Chris," one of the remaining riders called after him.

Chris glanced back over his shoulder.

"Maybe," was all he said and kept stroking for the beach.

Steve was looking all around him, scanning the water. Obviously the guy making for shore had spotted something. A shadow of something big. He saw nothing. The water was dark now with the absence of sunlight. He couldn't make out anything.

Suddenly Belinda's concerned words popped into his head: *Twilight. That's when sharks come out to feed.*

He pushed his chest up off the board and propped himself up on his hands. There he scanned the water again, trying to spot something but at the same time hoping not to. Steve gently paddled over to the other surfers, deliberately trying not to splash too much and attract the attention of any predators lurking below.

"Did you guys see something?" he asked them.

Both men shook their heads respectively.

One spoke. "Chris saw a shadow or something pass under his board," the guy explained. "Probably just a dolphin. We see them out here all the time."

Now the other man piped up. "Chris panics a bit. Has a bit of a phobia about sharks. He often thinks he sees them."

"Really," Steve said. He looked all around him once more, scoping for shadows. Again nothing. "So you guys didn't see what he saw?" Basically he repeated his earlier question.

Again shakes of the head.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," the first man said.

There was a splash. All three of them snapped their heads in the direction of the sound. Steve saw ripples spreading out in concentric circles a few metres behind the second surfer. He was about to say something when he heard another splash; a sound like the flick of a fish tail breaking the surface.

Then all went dead silent.

The three men searched the water all around them, each man looking and feeling as

uneasy as the next. Steve's heart was racing. He could feel his pulse beating away rapidly at his temple. Quick, shallow breaths escaped his lips as fear started to escalate.

The second surfer spoke, "It was probably just the dolphin swim."

His sentence was cut short when his surfboard suddenly lurched out of the water from the rear. It crashed back down on the surface with a slapping sound.

"What the fuck?" the second man exclaimed, startled.

"Dolphins don't usually do that," said the first surfer.

All three of them were shaking with nerves and fear now. Heads darted erratically left and right, front and back; all scared of what might be below them.

"Time to head in," Steve said, almost in a whisper.

Both the surfers nodded silently.

The trio started paddling slowly for shore, trying not to stir up the water too much and cause vibrations. If there was a shark down below they didn't want it to get a fix on them and home in for an attack.

They'd only managed to travel about five metres when they all heard a splash behind them. Then there was a flurry of splashes as the second surfer's board was hit from beneath and lifted out of the water. The guy tumbled off and into the sea. Steve and the first surfer paddled to his aid. It was as they were helping the second surfer back onto his board that the monster struck.

Steve felt something slam into the side of his right leg, just below the hip. The impact was like being struck by a missile. He was propelled through the air and into the water, a tremendous weight hanging off him and pulling him under. Pain seared through his right thigh. It felt like a thousand needles were piercing his flesh all at the same time; a burning, intense prickling sensation.

The leg rope snapped hard against his wrist as he was pulled several metres below the surface, the bodyboard's flotation fighting against the battle below. Steve felt himself being thrashed from side to side like a rag doll locked in the death grip of a savage dog. Frantically he felt down his right side with his hand. He touched something rough and rubbery and big.

There was no mistaking the snout of a shark.

It had its powerful, unrelenting jaws locked around his entire upper leg. A sticky, viscous substance oozed from around those jaws. It was his blood.

A thought suddenly flashed through his mind.

What if there are more of them?

The shark continued to thrash about, side to side, twisting and turning, as if trying to separate Steve's leg from the rest of his body. With agonizing pain, he felt a big chunk of flesh start to tear from the bone. Steve was also running out of air and his lungs burned. He never had a chance to take a breath before the shark took him under, and the impact had knocked most of the air from his lungs.

He pulled against his leg rope in a vain attempt to haul himself to the surface. The shark was extremely heavy, even in the water. He had no idea how big it was. He couldn't see as the water was far too dark. The shark had the advantage too; it was in its natural environment, Steve was not. The leg rope stretched, the board bobbing around on the

surface like a buoy.

Something changed then. Steve felt extra pressure on his wrist. The leg rope was pulled taut. Slowly he felt himself rising through the water as he was raised from above. Momentarily the shark had ceased its wild movements. It just clung to his leg as they both came to the surface.

Steve's head broke free of the water. He quickly sucked in air. The two surfers were floating on their boards next to him, both men clutching Steve's rope.

"It's got my leg," Steve managed to utter.

Then, with a violent burst of aggravation, the shark thrashed its powerful tail and rocketed Steve through the water. His head skimmed momentarily along the top, then the shark dove and he was dragged under once more.

The tension on the leg rope eased as it was obviously torn free of the grasp of the surfers. There was still drag from the bodyboard, and in a small way, the bodyboard was helping keep Steve from being dragged too far under.

He didn't feel much in his leg now, it had grown numb. He wasn't sure if the numbness was from severe nerve damage, or just his brain switching into defensive mode and shutting down the pain sensors. What he did know was that he had to get free of the beast's iron-clad grip or he would surely die.

He tried punching it but the water resistance slowed the blows down to a pathetic and feeble effort. Next he searched out one of the shark's eyes, feeling along the sandpaper-like skin until he found it. Probing hard with his thumb, he pushed inward with all his strength and felt a jelly-like substance pop and give way.

That action served to put the shark into a frenzy. It thrashed wildly a few metres below the surface. The pain in Steve's leg returned in full force. He cried out in agony, but only precious bubbles of air came out of his mouth. Next thing he knew he was on the surface again, being tossed back and forth like a rodeo bull rider. In the remnants of twilight and the luminance of the moon he could see the water was coloured with his blood.

Steve was beyond fear now, was fully in survival mode and running on pure adrenalin. He had to get away.

The now one-eyed shark slowed its movements a little and remained on the surface. Steve seized the opportunity to lash out with a flurry of quick blows to its angry snout. He could see its teeth glinting in the moonlight; some ivory white, some blood red.

By now the two surfers had paddled over to the scene and were also raining blows onto the stubborn predator from the deep.

Steve felt the grip of the jaws slowly weakening. He didn't know if they were truly weakening the shark or whether it was just getting tired of it all. At any rate it was working. The creature twitched and thrashed a couple more times, then finally let go of Steve's tattered leg and slipped back down into the depths.

The men grabbed Steve under the armpits, dragged him out of the water and laid him across their surfboards.

Panting and bleeding profusely, Steve said, "Is...it gone?"

"Think so," said the first surfer.

The second surfer kept his eyes on the water, searching for shadows or telltale ripples.

The drone of an outboard motor reached their ears, and moments later two surf lifesavers pulled up beside the trio in an inflatable rescue craft.

“We got word from someone on the beach of a possible shark attack,” said one of the men.

Both lifesavers eyed Steve’s ravaged leg briefly, then gently brought him aboard the rescue craft. His bodyboard was still attached to his wrist by the leg rope.

The second lifesaver spoke, “You two guys better jump aboard as well,” he looked all around at the water, “in case it’s still out there.”

The two heroic surfers didn’t need any further persuasion. They climbed into the rubber craft, surfboards and all. Once everyone was aboard, the craft motored full-throttle back to shore, where the flashing lights of an ambulance waited to greet them.

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A distraught and frantic Belinda had met the boat in the shallows. She’d cried with despair when she’d seen the injuries to Steve’s leg and had to be treated at the scene for shock.

The ambulance officers worked on Steve immediately upon his return to the beach. They managed to stem the flow of the bleeding somewhat and gave him a morphine injection for the pain. He was then rushed to the nearest hospital for emergency surgery. Belinda rode with him.

The two surfers met up with their mate, Chris, back on the beach. It had been Chris and Belinda who had alerted the off-duty lifeguards to the possibility of a shark attack in progress. An ambulance had immediately been called and the rescue craft dispatched.

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Two Months Later:

Steve was hobbling around on crutches. He’d just finished a physiotherapy session, something he had to do on a daily basis for the next several months at least. His right thigh had been badly damaged. He’d lost a considerable amount of muscle from the hamstring and quadricep, as well as receiving some damage to the femur. Arteries, tissue and nerves had been reconstructed, followed by a series of skin grafts. The leg looked lumpy and a weird shape, but it was working. Soon he’d be walking without the aid of crutches, though he’d always have a limp, he was told. And the leg would never be pretty.

However, he hoped to regain as much strength in the limb as possible so as to lead a relatively normal and active life. Maybe even venture back out into the surf; though probably not at twilight. He had to pay Belinda on that one.

The car pulled up to the side of the road and parked. Belinda went around to the passenger door and helped Steve out onto the pavement. Together they walked toward a cafe where three young men rose from a table laden with cappuccinos. Steve greeted each man with a hearty handshake and a masculine hug.

Steve and the surfers now shared a special bond. These men had helped save his life.