

ATTACK OF THE GREAT WHITE

“All I could see, really, was its teeth out of the corner of my eye. It struck me so quickly I didn’t have any idea what was going on. When it first hit me, it was such a hard blow. I mean, it really hit hard. Only then did I realize that this huge shark – it must have been fifteen feet – had bit me in the back and chest and was shaking my body violently. But as quickly as it began, the attack was over. The shark just let go of me and I came to the surface, and the water was turning dark all around me with blood....”

“Dude, what are you watching?”

Chad Cain jerked up from the couch, startled by the arrival of his best friend, Mick Kincaid, who had let himself into the house after he had knocked on the front door and found it unlocked.

“Man, you scared me,” said Chad. “I’m watching this intense show on shark attacks. This surfer was just describing how he was attacked by a great white off the coast of California.”

“Cool,” said Mick as he plopped into an easy chair next to the couch.

Their eyes now glued to the wide-screen TV in the Cains’ family room, the two teens whistled in awe as the attack victim showed off a crescent-shaped scar that stretched from his back to his chest. Moments later, when underwater footage showed a great white attacking an iron cage that was protecting a photographer, the show’s narrator said, “They strike with no warning and little chance of escape.”

Turning away from the TV, Chad asked Mick, “How many great whites have you ever seen when you’re surfing or snorkeling?”

“Maybe one, but it wasn’t very big. How about you?”

“I’ve seen as many great whites as the number of times Maria Cortez has agreed to go out with me – zero, *nada*.”

“Maybe it’s time you gave up on her, dude.”

“I’ve only tried twice. I can’t give up yet. She’s smart and funny and pretty....”

“And she’s flirting with Bud McAllister, who’s smart and funny and...no offense, dude...prettier than you.”

Chad grabbed a cushion off the couch and flung it at

Mick, who caught it with one hand and fired it back at his friend. “Enough about sharks and girls. Come on, Chad, put on the Lakers game.”

Chad glanced back at the TV screen. A shark expert was explaining what to do in case of a shark attack: “The odds of someone drowning at a beach in the United States are one in three and a half million. The odds of being attacked by a shark are one in eleven and a half million. If a shark actually gets you in its mouth, I advise you to be aggressive. Playing dead does not work, so pound the shark in any way possible. Try to claw at the eyes and gill openings because they are two very sensitive areas. If the shark releases you, do all you can to exit the water as quickly as possible because with your blood in the water, the shark could very well return for a repeat attack...”

“Hey, dude,” Mick said to Chad, “the game?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Chad hit the remote and switched to the Lakers game. “So what time are we going tomorrow?”

“My dad says we should leave no later than eight A.M. We’ll pick you up. It looks like the ocean will be calm, so it should be a great day for fishing. I hear some boats are coming back with white sea bass and yellowtail.”

The two high school sophomores, who lived a few blocks from each other, had been best friends since

third grade. Tanned, lean, and sporting bleach-blond buzz cuts, they could pass for brothers, although Mick was a little shorter and chunkier. They shared a common love of the water – fishing, snorkeling, and surfing. They used to be members of a competitive swim club, but they quit because it was taking too much time away from their favorite pastimes. And now that Mick’s dad had a 30-foot fishing boat, the boys spent even more time together on weekends.

After watching the Lakers fall to the Detroit Pistons, Mick got up to leave. “So, you’re really not going to the party at Joel’s tonight? What’s up with that?”

“I can’t. I have to eat dinner at my cousin’s in the Valley.”

“Too bad. I hear Maria will be at the party. See you tomorrow. Peace out.”

The next morning, Chad woke up groggy. He had tossed and turned all night and wasn’t sure why. There were no upcoming tests or term papers pressing on his mind, no big worries. *Maybe I ate too much at dinner*, he told himself. But he knew that wasn’t it. For some reason, a strange uneasiness had enveloped him. He really wanted to go back to bed and start the day over again, but much later. He shuffled toward the window, hoping it would be so cloudy and windy outside that the fishing trip would be canceled. But when he opened

the shade, he was blinded by the morning sun and a bright blue sky.

So why do I feel so jittery? he wondered. Why don't I want to go fishing? I always want to go fishing. Am I coming down with something?

Chad put on his UCLA T-shirt – in honor of the college he hoped to attend – and a pair of shorts, sports sandals, and a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap. He bounded down the stairs, gobbled a couple of health bars, and washed them down with a tall glass of orange juice. Then he grabbed his tackle box and two of his favorite poles, said good-bye to his parents, and walked outside just as Mick and his father arrived.

Chad threw his gear in the back of the pickup and climbed into the rear seat of the truck's three-door cab. On the way to the marina, Mick talked almost nonstop about Joel's party, but Chad's mind was elsewhere. He still had an eerie suspicion that something bad was going to happen. As Mick jabbered on, Chad was hearing only bits and pieces about the awesome band, the delicious tacos, and the major squabble between Hartley and Samantha, and...“Oh, I almost forgot. Dude, you're gonna love this. Maria Cortez asked why you weren't there.”

That brought Chad out of his funk. “She did? What did you say?”

“I told her the truth – that you decided it was more important to stay home and organize your tackle box than to go to some cool party.”

Chad snatched Mick’s baseball cap off his head and playfully smacked him.

By the time the Kincaids’ boat, the *Yeah, Baby*, was zooming toward Catalina Island 28 miles away, Chad gave no more thought to his earlier weird feelings of foreboding.

Shortly after anchoring off the island coast, the trio began catching small calicos and blue perch, using squid for bait. In the near distance, the rocky shore was teeming with a gang of barking seals. By midafternoon, the anglers had caught plenty of fish but no sea bass. “Boys,” said Mr. Kincaid, “I’m going to take a little nap. Wake me in fifteen minutes and then we’ll head home.”

“I’ve had enough fishing for the day,” said Chad. Taking off his sandals, shirt, and cap, he told the others, “I’m going to cool off.” Then he did a backflip off the starboard side and plunged into the brisk water. Going from the sunbaked warmth on the deck of the boat into the chilly water jolted Chad’s body, and he let out a loud whoop.

Mick tossed him a Boogie board to lie on. Then Mick lowered another Boogie board and jumped in.

As he lay on his stomach, Chad thought, *This turned out to be a perfect day—except for not getting any sea bass.* He had forgotten all about the uneasiness he had experienced earlier that morning.

“Hey, I think I see a turtle,” shouted Mick, who was lying prone on his Boogie board. “I’m going to take a closer look.” Using his arms and kicking with his legs, he was quickly out of sight on the other side of the boat, which was about 50 yards away from Chad.

Just then, Chad felt a slight change in the motion of the water below him. *It must be a passing turtle,* he thought. He looked down, but he saw nothing other than the emerald-blue sea. He didn’t hear the faint, sucking rush of water beneath him, nor did he see what was hurtling from below at astonishing speed, its jaws widening.

Suddenly, a great white shark slammed into him. He felt its powerful jaws clamp down on his right thigh. The impact was so strong that Chad, the Boogie board, and the shark literally flew out of the water. He was still gripping the board when the shark flipped him over and pulled him under.

Oh, God, this can’t really be happening to me! Through the gurgling white foam, Chad saw the shark’s body arching above his. The shark’s teeth were sinking deeper into Chad’s flesh while the great white began

to thrash back and forth with its human prey. The enormous pressure on Chad's leg felt like he was being gripped in a vise, full of nails. The impact had knocked the air out of Chad's lungs, and he was now struggling to reach the surface so he could breathe. *Air! Get air!* His head broke the surface and he gulped a frantic breath before he was dragged under again.

Don't panic! What did that TV show say about shark attacks? Pound on its nose. He twisted around and slammed his fist on the shark's snout once, twice, three times, but it did little good. *Hurry! Do something!* Then he saw the gills—five slits on each side, below and behind the eyes—that a shark needs to breathe. Now he remembered: *Go for the sensitive areas.* Chad reached over and grabbed one of the gills, which was the size of his hand, and yanked on it. He kept pulling on the gill in a desperate attempt to get free. Chad was running out of air. *Let go of me! For God's sake, let go!* By now, Chad's lungs felt like they were burning. He had only a few seconds left before his body would force him to open his mouth, resulting in death from drowning. But then, with no more than a second or two before the teen's lungs gave out, the shark miraculously relaxed its jaws and released him.

Chad burst to the surface again, coughing and gagging. His Boogie board had popped to the surface,

too, so he swam to it and climbed on, not noticing that a chunk of the board's side had been bitten off.

Focused on survival, Chad didn't feel any severe pain because the cold water and the shock from the attack had dulled the hurt. It didn't matter, anyway. His only goal now was to get out of the water as fast as possible. Frantically, Chad started paddling toward the boat. He glanced behind him briefly and saw that his right leg was severely gashed and bleeding badly.

His eyes turned back toward the boat. *Oh, no!* A big, dark, torpedo-shaped shadow was coming toward him. It skimmed the surface, showing off its telltale gray dorsal fin. The shark, about 10 feet long and 3 feet around its girth, had set its sights on Chad. The teen stared into its large cold eyes, their black pupils centered directly on him. It didn't look curious. It looked like it knew what it wanted – Chad. And then it opened its mouth, revealing row after row of its 3,000 crooked, razor-sharp teeth – wide and serrated like a hunting knife designed to cut easily through tough flesh and bone.

The shark whooshed straight at him with the alarming speed of a freight train. Pounding in Chad's brain were the words of the narrator of the shark program: *They strike with no warning and little chance of escape.... Well, I'm not ready to die.* Chad braced himself

and at the last instant turned sideways so the bottom of the Boogie board was now out of the water and took the brunt of the attack. Once again, when the shark slammed into him, the impact lifted Chad out of the water. He held on to the board, though, and when he landed on the surface, he kept stroking with his arms. *I've got to get out of the water!*

He was about 20 yards from the boat when he began yelling, "Shark! Shark!" But Mick was on the other side of the boat and couldn't hear him, and Mr. Kincaid was still asleep. "Shaaarrk!" Chad screamed again.

Just then Mick came into view about 15 yards away. "Hey, dude, don't scare me like –" Mick stopped midsentence when he saw Chad's bloody, mangled leg. "Oh, my God!"

Mick was only a few feet away from the boat, but he started to paddle out toward Chad to help him. "No! No! Get on the boat!" Chad shouted. Without looking back, he yelled, "Do you see it?" Mick shook his head. Seconds later, Mick reached the boat and scrambled aboard.

Standing on the deck, Mick gasped. The shark's dorsal fin broke the surface and was closing fast on the plume of blood that trailed Chad. "I see him!" Mick shouted. "He's right behind you! Hurry! Paddle hard! Hurry!"

Mick reached into the cooler and pulled out several fish that they had caught earlier and flung them off the

bow, hoping they would attract the shark and divert it from its main target. But the great white zeroed in on Chad. Meanwhile, Mr. Kincaid, who had been jolted awake by the boys' shouts, clutched a gaff—a long iron hook used to pull in fish—and leaned over the side, ready to strike the shark.

When Chad neared the boat, Mick shrieked, "He's right behind you! Pull in your legs!"

The shark opened its mouth and chomped on the Boogie board just as Mick and Mr. Kincaid pulled Chad into the boat. The shark spit out the board, whipped its tail, and slid under the sea.

For several seconds, no one moved or said a word. They were too stunned, their reeling brains trying hard to sort out what had happened and what needed to be done. Then Mr. Kincaid snapped into action. He poured ice on Chad's wounds and wrapped them in towels. Next, he radioed authorities of the attack and made arrangements for paramedics to meet them at the harbor in Catalina. He gunned the engine and roared toward the island.

"Hang in there, dude," Mick told Chad, who was lying on his stomach on the deck.

"I will," said Chad. "I'll get through this." Then images of the attack flooded his mind. The impact, the bite, the thrashing, the gasping for breath, the second

strike, the race to the boat. And those teeth, those deadly sharp teeth. The pictures in his mind were so fresh and real that Chad began to hyperventilate (breathe hard and too rapidly) until he became dizzy. As the agonizing pain set in, his heart pounded as though he had just swum the hundred-meter freestyle in record-setting time.

When the *Yeah, Baby* reached the harbor, Chad was transferred to a waiting helicopter that flew him to the mainland, where he underwent surgery for his injuries. He required more than 200 stitches to close the wounds to his right leg and buttocks.

As he lay in his hospital bed, he recalled the eerie foreboding he had experienced earlier that morning. He started to shiver. *I knew something bad would happen to me today. My body and mind were telling me not to go fishing today. I should have listened to myself.*

He tried to get some sleep, but those horrifying images wouldn't go away. As soon as he closed his eyes that night, he saw the great white shark charging from the depths, its mouth wide open, threatening to bite him in half. Finally, the medication kicked in enough to put him into a deep slumber. But even in his sleep, he saw the shark attack again and again, like a constant loop on a video that keeps repeating the same scenes.

The next morning, a marine biologist visited Chad. After listening to the youth tell the story, the scientist said,

“In one hundred years along the West Coast from Mexico to Alaska, there have been fewer than one hundred and twenty-five confirmed unprovoked attacks by sharks on humans, and they were mostly divers and surfers.”

“Oh, great,” said Chad. “I’m the lucky one this year.”

“Sharks don’t like to eat humans. Usually, when a shark takes a bite out of a human, it lets go because it realizes it’s not good food. Great whites prey primarily on rays and bottom fish. But when these sharks reach a length of 10 to 12 feet, they feed almost exclusively on pinnipeds.”

“Pinnipeds?” asked Chad. “What are they?”

“Sea lions and elephant seals, the kinds you see on Catalina Island. Because elephant seals give sharks more blubber for the bite, they are the preferred target. Typically, great whites rely on stealth and camouflage, sneaking along and blending in with rocky bottoms, striking their unsuspecting prey at or near the surface. They usually take a big bite out of their victim, like a sea lion, and then wait for it to bleed to death before dining on it. The majority of attacks on humans have occurred on divers and surfers at or near the surface. I suspect the shark attack on you was a case of mistaken identity.”

“But if that’s true, why did it come back for another bite?”

“Occasionally, a shark becomes quite aggressive, usually out of fear.”

Mick, who entered the room during the conversation, interrupted them. “Dude, I think the shark got ticked off after the first bite because you tasted so bad. It came back a second time to eat you out of spite.”

“Well, I doubt that,” said the scientist. “All we know for sure is that sharks are wild animals and can be unpredictable.”

“Up until yesterday, I had never seen a great white in the wild before,” said Chad.

“Chances are you will never see one again,” said the scientist. “The safest areas for tourists are sandy bottoms, away from dense populations of pinnipeds.”

For the next several days in the hospital, Chad was given pain medication and antibiotics and took physical therapy sessions. He also welcomed many visitors, most of whom arrived with colorful balloons and candy. But there was one gift that meant more to him than all the others. It was a stuffed animal – a fuzzy great white shark – that was personally delivered by Maria Cortez.