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CAPTAIN JACK AFRICA pinched his nostrils to shut out the stench, but the acrid smell of rotting flesh hung so heavy in the humid air he still gagged. Squinting his watery eyes, he took one last look at the purple strands of bloated snapper guts . . . the severed moray eel head, one opaque eye gazing skyward . . . the bony skeleton of a parrotfish, its decaying head and tail still intact . . . all floating in the bloody, icy slush slowly hardening in his rusty Kelvinator freezer.

Jack turned away. Tomorrow, frozen solid and dangling sixty feet below the surface of the sea, that block of ice would be ripped apart in minutes by a score of sharks with razor-sharp teeth and no manners. And at least one of the divers who had paid good money to kneel twenty feet away and watch the gory shark jamboree would probably lose his breakfast. Some folks just didn't have the stomach for the show.

"Buck," Jack yelled at the reed-thin man standing nearby with a bucket of fetid fish scraps. "For chrissake, dump that shit in the freezer. It's time to call it a day."

Buckmaster Jones raised his bucket and then took a step back. “How’d that freezer get so full of guts? Fishing hasn’t been that good.”

Little Man, who had been throwing around forty-pound scuba tanks like Presto logs, grabbed Buck’s pail and dumped the offal into the five-foot-long freezer. “Just because you’re too old to catch much anymore doesn’t mean the other guys don’t.” He slammed the lid shut.

Jack, wearing only a faded maroon T-shirt and black bikini swim trunks, pulled a Belizean five-dollar bill from his waistband and shoved it at Buck, who stared at the money. “Look, Buck, who else would pay you for fish guts? Nobody. But then nobody else in these islands had the smarts to pull off these shark parties, did they?”

Saying nothing, Buck took the five and sauntered across the sand to the water’s edge. A quiet ripple from the bay washed over his feet, dissolving the blood caked on his toes, and spinning crimson swirls into the clear Caribbean Sea.

Jack walked the other direction, past the scuba shack, a tin-roofed, garage-sized building stinking of unwashed neoprene wetsuits and compressor exhaust. A large driftwood slab leaned against the building with Cap’n Jack’s Rum Point Inn painted on it, the letters bleached from the sun. He hadn’t got around to hanging it back up since tropical storm Malvina ripped it off the siding last year.

Ahead, a few steps from the beach, his open-air tiki bar, built from scraps nearly forty years ago, rose from the sand. Blinking Christmas tree lights dangled from

the frayed thatched roof. Stepping behind the circular bar, he reached into a Styrofoam chest and pulled out a Belikin beer, his third of the early evening. At last, the searing sun slipped into the sea, and a cool breeze freshened the air.

Inside his lodge, fourteen guests, mostly from Texas, Colorado, and California, chattered noisily, some nervously, as they dug into Monday night dinner: shrimp Creole, fried plantains, rice, and beans. Twelve were scuba divers. They had flown in for Captain Jack's Shark Week, to swim with sharks and to watch them dance. Tomorrow, God willing, they would do just that.

AT NINE O'CLOCK the next morning, Jack picked up a spear gun shaft and clanged the rusty steel scuba tank hanging from a low branch of a sea grape tree. The divers milled about, picking out weights, tugging their thin dive skins over their swimsuits, some smiling and chatting incessantly, others stone silent, their grim faces hiding their anxiety, but all were staying busy.

Jack, who had stayed up drinking long after everyone else had gone to bed, kept a distance to hide his foul breath. Now, clad only in faux leopard skin Speedo trunks, his leathery, sunbaked skin stretched taut over his thick bones, he climbed atop a splintered and soiled picnic table. He had fashioned his thinning blond hair, streaked with silver and bleached by the sun, into a short ponytail, wrapped tight by a red rubber band. His straggly Van Dyke beard had turned gray. In his left ear, he wore a dime-sized rubber O-ring, a gasket from the

neck valve of a scuba tank. Years ago, he had sported an 18K gold ring in his ear lobe, but when New York City doctors and L.A. lawyers started showing up wearing gold earrings in their pierced ears, he switched to rubber.

“All right, divers, listen up. Sharks. Doing what they do best — feeding with a frenzy.” He surveyed the divers, who were mainly in their fifties, plus or minus, most carrying extra pounds around their waists and their arms, faces, and legs slathered with sunscreen. One couple, twenty-something honeymooners, held hands, focusing on Jack’s every word. A tall, slender woman in a tie-dyed bikini, long, straight brown hair, in her early twenties, listened carefully, her eyes intense. She reminded him of the woman he had fallen for years ago, the one who had never returned.

“You’re going out on the *Shark Hunter* with me and Little Man and Smokey, the guy in the dreadlocks over there. Charlie, my dive instructor, who took you out yesterday, never comes on these dives, so you won’t be seeing him.” Jack wasn’t about to tell his divers that Charlie wanted nothing to do with turning wild animals into circus performers. Frankly, neither did Jack, but it was his only shot at keeping his doors open. Too many divers had stopped coming to Rum Point when all he could show them was fished-out, algae-covered reefs, so Jack had done what he needed to do and began orchestrating shark feeds.

“Little Man, here, is our videographer.” All of five feet, four inches tall, Little Man, his head down, eyes averted, flexed his considerable biceps. “He will be on the bottom shooting video as you descend. It’s sixty feet down.

Then it slopes another fifteen feet to where the vertical wall starts. If you go over that wall, you can swim a mile straight down . . . but if you do, you're on your own. I won't be coming after you."

The divers laughed, a nervous laugh, Jack thought. Good. It's the nervous ones who buy the shark videos.

"Little Man will show you where to kneel 'round the circus ring. You must get your buoyancy under control. I don't want anyone bouncing up and down like a blob in a lava lamp.

When you're settled, we'll push over the ice block and let it dangle ten feet off the bottom. The ice is like a time-release vitamin capsule. The goodies drip out for thirty, maybe thirty-five minutes, and it's party time for the sharks."

A woman in an XL *Divers Do It Deeper* T-shirt that almost covered her knees waved her hand. "Has anyone ever been bitten?"

"Of course not." Jack wasn't about to tell her about the Chicago guy in the Bahamas who had bled to death a few years back after being bitten in a shark feed. Nor would he mention the Hawaiian divemaster who lost her forearm when she tried to feed a shark by hand. Not good stories to tell the tourists.

"They don't want a piece of you. Fish heads are what they want because your flesh is too bland. Now, if one of those boys gets too close for comfort, bump it with your camera or punch its snout. He'll run off. But remember your training. Don't freak out and hold your breath. That's a no-no. If you rise a few feet, that air in your lungs will expand like a balloon and

bubbles will lodge in an artery.” Jack paused. The divers stared at him, each breathing harder. “That’s an embolism, folks, and it’s no way to end your life.”

Heads nodded.

“Now, you will be having the time of your life, but don’t stir up the sand because Little Man needs clear water so he can get a good video of you in the middle of the shark rally. When you check out Saturday morning, you can buy your own shark dive DVD for only sixty bucks a pop. Your friends will never forget it.” Jack was pleased. None of the divers was a serious photographer; one had an old video camera, two more had point-and-shoots with some video capacity in cheap housings, and another, who had just learned to dive, had an expensive housed Nikon he said he had never operated underwater. Little Man’s dive DVD should bring in enough to meet payroll.

“One last thing. Do not, I say, do *not* swim up to the boat if the screws are turning. Stay clear. Don’t become a one-armed diver. OK?” Heads bobbed. “Now grab your gear and let’s get wet.”

AN HOUR LATER, the 42-foot *Shark Hunter*, its twin engines leaving a trail of black diesel smoke, arrived at Shark Alley. From the flying bridge, Jack could see sixty feet down where two reef sharks, their dorsal fins tipped in white, circled slowly. The boat was half a mile off the nearest island, Goofy Bird Caye, and to keep shark fishermen away, Jack had never marked the site with mooring balls. Once satisfied he had positioned the *Shark*

Hunter over the exact spot, he waved and Little Man lowered the anchor.

Jack watched the divers gear up, keeping an eye on the novices, their jaws tight, their moves unsure. One wetsuit-clad diver with his tank on his back sat on the railing, a leg over the side, fiddling with his dive computer. Sweat dripped from the tip of his nose. "How much weight are you wearing?" Jack asked.

"Ten pounds."

"What's that then?" Jack pointed to five two-pound lead weights strung on a black belt lying on the deck. "Looks like you forgot to put it on."

"All right, the first six of you sit on the railing," Jack said. "On the count of three, back roll over the side and then kick out about twenty feet away from the boat to make room for the next wave of divers. Stay on the surface until I say, dive."

Below, the sharks were congregating, accustomed to being fed. Eight gunmetal-gray reef sharks zipped about, disappearing as the divers hit the surface, then reappearing just as quickly. The last of the divers hit the water and bobbed to the surface. After they had adjusted their equipment, all twelve signaled OK to Jack. "Dive," he shouted.

A crimson stream trickled through the scuppers at the boat's stern. Smokey leaned against the ice block and shoved, losing his footing and slipping to his knees when the block failed to budge. "Smokey," Jack shouted, "I told you to lay off the ganja in the morning. Divers are down. Get this thing moving."

Smokey pushed again, and this time the block

slid off the transom, hitting the water with a bloody smack, scattering the sharks in all directions. But it was a clarion call. Four more sharks streamed up over the wall, their bodies shuddering like cats when they hear an electric can opener turn. Dangling from the hawser, the sharksicle slowly sank, a gory lure.

SIXTY FEET BELOW, twelve divers were kneeling on the bottom. Those with cameras had positioned themselves elbow-to-elbow twenty feet from the block, ready for action. The other divers had spread out behind them, the more timid sitting in back near the reef's top, as far away as they could get. Little Man kneeled at one end, filming the suspended ice block, and then turned the video camera on the divers.

Eight reef sharks circled the block warily, like cinema Indians circling a wagon train, looking for an opening. A dozen more, both whitetip and blacktip reef sharks, lingered in the background while a nine-foot hammerhead, a long ragged scar down its side, crossed above.

A whitetip reef shark bumped the ice with its round gray nose, testing it, making sure it wouldn't fight back. Its second nose-bump broke off a chunk of scarlet ice. A ten-foot bull shark shot up over the wall, scattering the other sharks, then shut its eyes as it ripped off a dangling snapper head. Now the block was under attack as reef sharks, the hammerhead, and the bull shark tore at it with the rows of saw blades in their mouths.

A black-tip ripped off a hunk of offal, leaving a two-foot eel tail hanging free. Quickly, the bull shark

returned, rushing the block, hitting it with such force that it swung into the head of a small blacktip, momentarily stunning it. The blacktip sank toward the sand, then gave a quick tail flip and disappeared into the blue.

The vicious hammerhead returned, speeding in from behind the divers and slapping a diver's snorkel with its powerful tail fin. Another diver ducked, but the hammerhead had passed so close he could have run his hand along the scar on its side.

Not only sharks came to feast. Dozens of mottled Nassau groupers hung below the ice block, catching droppings. Yellowtail snappers swirled around the sharks, scurrying above the divers, between them, past their faces, everywhere. Rainbow wrasses, striped grunts, and French angelfish darted around the ice block and nosed into the sand for scraps. One excited diver opened his mouth so far that his mouthpiece fell out. Before he could panic, Little Man grabbed it and stuck it back in.

Over the roar of exhaust bubbles growing louder as the divers breathed faster, the sharks smacked the ice, ripping out globs of entrails. The frenzied sharks, so lost in their own senses, jerked and shivered and shook, oblivious to the divers, electrified by the smell of rotting fish corpses. Sand clouds began to obscure the action as a six-foot nurse shark, its tail propelling its outsized club head, dug into the sand for remains.

At the bottom of the block, what appeared to be a long, slender moray dangled from the ice. One blacktip locked it in its jaw, twisting his head violently to rip it from the ice. The hammerhead's tail hit the black-tip

across his head, knocking the eel loose. A bull shark, snatching it in mid-water, surged toward the divers. It was not a moray eel. The shark's jaws were clamped on an arm—a human forearm.

As the bull shark passed over the kneeling divers, the hand on the arm waved in the turbulent water. In shock, some divers dropped to their hands and knees, while others bolted upright. One diver started toward the surface, but his partner grabbed his fin and held him back. Another diver, with vomit oozing from her mouth, yanked out her regulator, engulfing herself in an opaque cloud, but shoved the mouthpiece back between her teeth as she kicked toward the surface.

Exhaled air bubbled, gurgled and streamed upward, bouncing around like silvery flying saucers as flailing divers kicked to escape. One diver grabbed another's hand—she had been sitting motionless, paralyzed by the horror—yanking her so hard that her mask nearly slipped off, but she hung on as he pulled her upward toward the boat. A dozen sharks continued to rip at the icy coffin.

As a human foot became visible, a frenzied bull shark tore out the remains of a leg. When a black-tip uncovered a human torso, it jammed its snout into the belly, clamped its jaws, and shook its head viciously. Human bowels popped free like so much sausage, unfurling in the currents created by the rushing animals.

When the last bull shark swam over the rim of the wall with a human head in its mouth, no one was watching. On the surface, divers clamored into the boat, screaming, crying, stunned. One woman scampered up

the ladder still wearing her fins, only to slip on the top rung and fall backward, landing on her husband floating on the surface. Blood spurted from where her tank valve had creased his skull.

A diver crawled on his hands and knees across the deck, sliding through pools of his own puke. Off the stern, one diver bobbed like a cork, his eyes shut, his head held above the surface by his inflated vest. The first to reach the surface, he had shot up too fast, but the others had ignored him in the chaos. Little Man, the last diver up, swam to the floating man and pushed him to the boat. Jack dragged him over the transom and then helped the last diver clamber up the ladder.

“Smokey, get the oxygen,” Jack shouted, but Smokey, his jaw slack, could only stare at the limp diver on the deck. Jack whacked him, and he jumped into the cabin, returning with the oxygen bottle and mask. Little Man climbed the ladder to the bridge and fired up the *Shark Hunter* while Jack strapped the mask on the injured diver’s face and turned on the oxygen. Little Man started the full-throttle run back to Cap’n Jack’s.

Only then was someone finally able to tell Jack what had happened below.