



MEGALODON

The Coast of the Asiamerica-Northern Landmass (Pacific Ocean)

Long ago ...

FROM THE MOMENT the early morning fog had begun to lift, they sensed they were being watched. The herd of Shantungosaurus had been grazing along the misty shoreline all morning. Measuring more than forty feet from their duck-billed heads to the end of their tails, these reptiles, the largest of the hadrosaurs, gorged themselves on the abundant supply of kelp and seaweed that continued to wash up along the shoreline with the incoming tide. Every few moments the gentle giants raised their heads like a herd of nervous deer, listening to the noises of the nearby forest. They watched the dark trees and thick vegetation for movement, ready to run at the first sign of approach.

Across the beach, hidden among the tall trees and thick undergrowth, a pair of red reptilian eyes followed the herd. The Tyrannosaurus rex, largest and most lethal of all **terrestrial carnivores**¹, towered twenty-two feet above the forest floor. Saliva oozed from the big male's mouth; its muscles quivering with adrenaline as it focused on two duckbills venturing out into the shallows, isolating themselves from the herd.

¹ **terrestrial:** Land **carnivore:** meat eater

terrestrial carnivore: land-based meat eater.



With a blood-curdling roar the killer crashed through the trees, its eight tons pounding the sand and shaking the earth with every step. The duckbills momentarily froze, then rose on their hind legs and scattered in both directions along the beach.

The two hadrosaurs grazing in the surf saw the carnivore closing in on them, its jaws wide, fangs bared, its bone-chilling trumpet drowning the crash of the surf. Trapped, the pair turned and plunged into deeper water to escape. They strained their long necks forward and began to swim, their legs churning to keep their heads above water.

Driven by hunger, T. rex crashed through the surf after them. Far from buoyant, the killer waded into deeper waters, snapping its jaws at the incoming swells. But as it neared its prey, the T. rex's clawed feet sank deep into the muddy seafloor, its weight driving it into the mire.

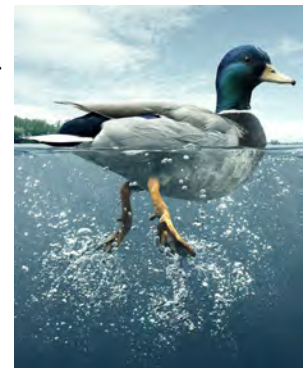
The hadrosaurs paddled in thirty feet of water, safe for the moment. But having escaped one predator, they now faced another.

The six-foot gray dorsal fin rose slowly from the sea, its unseen girth gliding silently across the dinosaurs' path. If the T. rex was the most terrifying creature ever to walk the earth, then *Carcharodon megalodon* was easily lord and master of the sea. Sixty feet from its conical snout to the tip of its half-moon-shaped caudal fin, the shark moved effortlessly through its liquid domain, circling its outmatched prey. It could feel the racing heartbeats of the hadrosaurs and the heavier *thumpa, thumpa* of the T. rex, its ampullae of Lorenzini—gel-filled sensory pores located beneath its snout—detecting the pounding organs' electrical impulses. A line of neuro-cells along its flank registered each unique vibration in the water, while its directional nostrils tasted the scent of sweat and urine excreted from its floundering meal-to-be.

The pair of hadrosaurs were paralyzed in fear, their eyes following the unseen creature's sheer moving mass which circled closer, creating a current of water that lifted and dragged the two reptiles into deeper waters. The sudden change panicked the duckbills—the beasts quickly reversing direction, paddling back toward the beach. They would take their chances with the Tyrannosaurus.

Legs **churning**² water, they moved back into the shallows, feeling the mud swirling beneath their feet. T. rex, in water up to its burly chest, let out a thundering growl, but could not advance, the predator struggling to keep from sinking farther into the soft seafloor.

² **churning**: Moving with or producing (or produced) by vigorous agitation. Stirring up or mixing something (such as water or mud) with force. Examples: The horse's hooves are churning up the sod. The motorboats are churning the water.



The duckbills neared the reptile's snapping jaws, then suddenly broke formation, striding in separate directions, passing within a few harrowing feet of the frustrated hunter. The T. rex lunged, snapping its terrible jaws, howling in rage at its fleeing prey. The duckbills never stopped, bounding through the smaller waves until they staggered onto the beach and collapsed on the warm sand, too exhausted to move.

Still sinking, the Tyrannosaurus had to struggle to keep its huge head only a few feet above water. Insane with rage, it lashed its tail wildly in an attempt to free one of its hind legs. Then, all at once, it stopped and stared out to sea.

From the dark waters, a great dorsal fin was approaching, slicing through the fog.

The T. rex cocked its head and stood perfectly still, instincts telling it that it had wandered into the domain of a superior hunter.

The Tyrannosaurus felt the tug of current caused by thirty tons of circling mass. Its red eyes followed the gray dorsal fin until it finally disappeared beneath the **murky**³ waters.

T. rex growled quietly, searching through the haze. Leaning forward, it managed to free one of its thickly muscled hind legs, then quickly freed the other.

On the beach, the hadrosaurs took notice and backed away—

—as the towering dorsal fin rose again from the mist, this time racing directly for the T. rex.

The reptile roared, accepting the challenge, its jaws snapping in anger.

The wake kept coming, the dorsal fin rising higher ... higher, while underwater, the unseen assailant's head rotated slightly, its jaws hyperextending seconds before it slammed into the T. rex's soft midsection like a freight train striking a disabled SUV.

T. rex slammed backward through the ocean, its breath blasting out of its crushed lungs, an eruption of blood spewing from its open mouth seconds before its head disappeared beneath the waves.

With a *whoosh* the dinosaur fought its way back to the surface, its rib cage crushed within the powerful jaws of its still-unseen killer, the T. rex choking on its gushing innards.⁴

And then the fearsome land dweller vanished beneath a swirling pool of scarlet sea.

The hadrosaurs had watched the scene unfold. They waited for their stalker to reappear, their bladders releasing in fear. Long moments passed, the sea remaining silent. The spell of the attack

³ **murky**: (Referring to liquid) dark and dirty; not clear.



⁴ **gushing**: The act of flowing out suddenly, forcefully and/or in large amounts.

innards: The internal organs of a human being or animal; entrails.

broken, the duckbills abandoned the beach, lumbering toward the trees to rejoin their herd.

An explosion of ocean sent their heads turning as the sixty-foot shark burst from the water, its enormous head and upper torso quivering as it fought to remain suspended above the waves, the broken remains of its prey grasped within its terrible jaws. In an incredible display of raw power, the Meg shook the reptile from side to side, allowing its upper front row of seven-inch serrated teeth to rip through gristle and bone, the action sending swells of pink frothing water in every direction.



No other scavengers approached the Meg as it fed. The predatory fish had no mate to share its kill with, no young to feed. A rogue hunter, territorial by nature, the shark mated out of instinct and killed its young when it could, for the only challenge to its reign came from its own kind. A marvel of nature that had evolved over hundreds of millions of years, it would adapt to and survive the natural catastrophes and climatic changes that caused the mass extinctions of the giant reptiles and countless prehistoric mammals. And while Megalodon's own numbers would eventually dwindle, some members of its species would manage to survive, isolated from the world of man in the perpetual darkness of the unexplored ocean depths ...



THE PROFESSOR

November 8, 5:42 p.m.

**The Scripps Institute, Anderson Auditorium
La Jolla, California**

JONAS TAYLOR STOPPED the projector as the image of the Megalodon feeding upon the T. rex began to pixelate on the big screen. The house lights came up, allowing the thirty-seven-year-old paleobiologist to look out at his audience of just under fifty attendees, most of the seats empty.

“I hope you enjoyed our little ‘match of the titans.’ For the record, T. rex and *Carcharodon megalodon* never actually shared the same time period on our planet. Tyrannosaurus rex lived during the late Cretaceous and died off about sixty-five million years ago after an asteroid struck Earth. The Megalodon’s reign began during the Miocene period, about thirty-five million years later and lasted until the dawn of modern man. Other than that, the film is fairly accurate. Megalodon was a real monster, the prehistoric cousin of our modern-day great white shark, only it was fifty to seventy feet long and weighed close to seventy thousand pounds. Its head alone was probably as large as a Dodge Ram pickup; its jaws could have engulfed and swallowed half-a-dozen grown men whole. And I haven’t even mentioned the teeth—razor-sharp, six to seven inches long, each possessing serrated edges like a steel steak knife.”

The former deep-sea submersible pilot loosened his collar and took a slow deep breath, knowing he had his audience’s attention. Of course, lecturing in front of a sparse crowd was disappointing. Jonas knew his theories were controversial, that there were as many critics in the audience as there were supporters.

Still, just to be heard, to feel important again ...

“Fossilized Megalodon teeth found around the world tell us the species dominated the oceans over most of the last thirty million years. Some experts believe the species perished about two million years ago as a result of the last Ice Age. Others have found teeth that date back a mere hundred thousand years. From a geological perspective, either estimate is just a tick of the clock, and there’s little doubt our two species shared the planet at the same time.

The big question, of course, is why did the most fearsome predator in Earth’s history die off at all? If the great white shark survived the last Ice Age, why not its prehistoric cousin?”

Jonas loosened his collar a bit more. He rarely wore suits, and this eight-year-old wool jacket itched like crazy.

“Those of you who read my book are aware of how my opinions often differ from those of most paleobiologists. Many in my field spend a great deal of time theorizing why a particular species no longer exists, while I prefer to focus my research on how a seemingly extinct species might still exist.”

A broad-chested man in his mid-fifties stood from his seat in the first row, demanding to be heard. Jonas recognized Lee Udelsman. His former colleague at Scripps had become an outspoken critic.

“Professor Taylor, I spent twenty-nine ninety-five on your book and read it from cover to cover, I was left with the impression that you actually believe *Carcharodon megalodon* may still be roaming our oceans. Is that true?”

The audience murmured, waiting for the answer they had come to hear.

Jonas composed himself. *Be careful. The wrong quote will kill your credibility, not to mention book sales.*

“Do I believe vast numbers of Megs may still be roaming our oceans? Not at all, Professor Udelsman. I’m simply pointing out that, as scientists, we tend to take a rather short-sighted ‘if we haven’t seen it, it doesn’t exist anymore’ approach when it comes to declaring certain marine animals extinct. For instance, scientists once believed the **coelacanth**⁵, a species of lobe-finned fish that thrived three hundred million years ago, had gone extinct over the last seventy million years. That so-called fact held up until 1938, when a fisherman hauled a living coelacanth out of the deep waters off South Africa. Now scientists routinely observe these ‘living fossils’ in their natural habitat.”

Lee Udelsman held his ground. “Professor Taylor, we’re all familiar with the discovery of the coelacanth. But I think you’ll agree, there’s a big difference between a five-foot bottom-feeder and a sixty-foot predatory shark.”

Jonas checked his watch, realizing he was running behind schedule. “Yes, I agree. My point was simply that I prefer to investigate the possibilities of a species’ survival rather than add to any unproven conjecture regarding extinction among marine dwellers. I often hear critics state that if Megalodon were still alive we’d have seen one by now—at least a dead one that washed

⁵ **coelacanth**: A species of lobe-finned fish that thrived three hundred million years ago, and believed to have gone extinct over the last seventy million years.



ashore. The statement is ridiculous. First, the oceans are vast and sharks have no reason to surface just to show a passing boat their telltale dorsal fin. As far as the remains of a dead Meg washing ashore, it's a physiological fact that dead sharks don't float, they sink. Other predators devour the meat, leaving behind the cartilage, which dissolves in seawater. All that's left are the animal's teeth, which end up buried on the seafloor."

"Agreed. But you still haven't answered my question, Professor Taylor. Do you believe Megalodon is still alive?"

The audience applauded.

Jonas glanced at his watch. *Ten minutes late ... Maggie's going to be pissed. Toss Udelsman some red meat, sign a few books, then call it a night.*

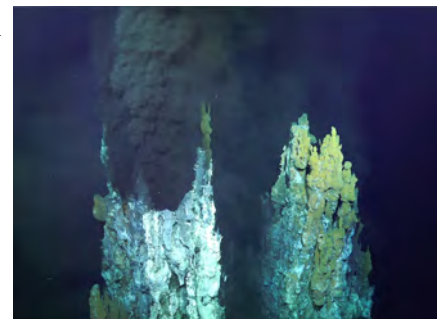
"From strictly a logical scientific standpoint, yes, Professor I believe it's possible. We know Megalodon's major food source—whales—was still quite abundant following the last Ice Age, so there was plenty to eat. As far as colder temperatures affecting the creatures, we know that the internal anatomy of larger sharks like the great white functions like an internal heat factory. The Meg's moving muscles could channel gobs of hot blood into its extremities through a process known as gigantothermy, enabling it to adapt to even the coldest temperatures.

"The question is—what happened? Obviously there was a great die off. In my opinion, Megalodon's thirty-million-year reign was terminated by the rise of the killer whale. Pods of orca numbering twenty to forty adults decimated Meg nurseries, which were relegated to the shallows. Over time the adult sharks died off and the species bottomed out."

His former colleague wasn't through, turning Jonas's night into a two-man show. "You're contradicting yourself, Taylor. You just said Megalodon might still be out there."

"Correct. A decimated population doesn't necessarily equate to extinction. Orcas may be the wolves of the shallows but they can't inhabit the mid-waters of the ocean, let alone the abyss. Prior to 1977, many scientists—no doubt you among them—believed the abyss was actually barren; after all, how could life exist without light ... without photosynthesis? When we actually bothered to take a look, we discovered **hydrothermal vents**⁶—miniature volcanoes of life-giving chemicals—spewing mineral-rich waters at temperatures that exceed seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit. In some cases these minerals will level off about a half mile or so above the seafloor, creating a layer of insulation that keeps in the heat, forming what we

⁶ **hydrothermal vents**: Fissures or crevices on the seabed from which geothermally heated water discharges. They are commonly found near active underwater volcanoes.



now call a hydrothermal plume. In essence, you have an anomaly of nature, a tropical oasis of life running along the very bottom of the ocean, separated from the surface by a frigid layer of water. These hydrothermal vents and their minerals anchor vast chemosynthetic food chains, some of which, could support a subspecies of Megalodon.”

A middle-aged woman stood, her teenage son squirming in the seat next to her. “You’ll be happy to know my son, Brandon agrees with you about Megalodon still being alive. However, as a middle school marine biology teacher, I’d like to know if you actually have any proof these monster sharks are residing in the abyss.”

Jonas forced a smile while he waited for the crowd’s applause to subside.

“Ma’am, let me show you something that was discovered in the abyss more than one hundred years ago.” From a shelf inside the podium Jonas pulled out a glass case, roughly twice the size of a shoe box.

Inside was a triangular gray tooth that was as large as his hand.

“This is a fossilized tooth of *Carcharodon megalodon*. Scuba divers and beachcombers have turned up fossilized teeth like this by the thousands. Some are tens of millions of years old. This particular specimen is special because it’s not very old. It was recovered in 1873 by the world’s first true oceanic exploration vessel, the British *HMS Challenger*. Can you see these manganese nodules?” Jonas pointed to the black encrustations on the tooth. “Recent analyses of these manganese layers indicate the tooth’s owner had been alive during the late Pleistocene or early Holocene period. In other words, this tooth is a mere ten thousand years old, and it was dredged from the deepest point on our planet, the Mariana Trench’s *Challenger Deep*.”



The teen pumped his fist. “Ha, told you, Mom! You owe me twenty bucks.”

Jonas held up his hand, attempting to quiet a dozen side conversations as his eyes shifted to a beautiful blonde making her way carefully down the center aisle in stiletto heels. Tan and in her early thirties, she was wearing a **topaz**⁷ evening gown which hugged her flawless figure. Her male escort, also in his thirties, trailed behind, his long dark hair slicked back into a tight ponytail which contrasted with his conservative tuxedo.

Jonas waited for his wife and friend to be seated in the second row.

“Please, if you’ll give me a minute I’ll explain my theory, which is detailed in my new book, then I have to wrap things up.”

Silence took the room.

“Following the last Ice Age two million years ago, Megalodon pups inhabiting the shallow water nurseries along the Mariana **archipelago**⁸ could have gone deep in order to escape pods of killer whales. Descending to the Mariana Trench, these juvenile sharks would have discovered warm bottom waters insulated by hydrothermal plumes. Given these variables, members of this Megalodon nursery might have chosen to remain in the deep, surviving to breed a new generation of deep-water monsters. Scientists may or may not agree with my theory, however any answer rendered without a scientific investigation behind it—meaning an actual expedition into the Mariana Trench—is simply worthless conjecture.”

“What nonsense!” Mike “the Turk” Turzman, a popular local radio talk show host specializing in cryptozoology stood from his tenth-row seat, shouting to be heard. “There are no hydrothermal vents in the Mariana Trench. None!”

⁷ **topaz**: A gemstone, consisting of a fluorine-containing aluminum silicate. Although typically yellow or pale blue, the stone may be found in other colors, as well.



⁸ **archipelago**: An area that contains a chain or group of islands scattered in lakes, rivers, or the ocean.

Jonas shook his head. He had heard excerpts of the Turk's recent interview with Richard Ellis, a painter and self-proclaimed expert on all things nautical who had lambasted Taylor's research.

"You're wrong, Mr. Turzman. The Ocean Exploration Ring of Fire Expedition recently used satellite aperture radar to survey the Mariana Trench. They discovered more than fifty underwater volcanoes, ten of which possessed active hydrothermal systems. These hydrothermal systems were quite different from those found along the mid-Atlantic Ocean ridges, potentially harboring all sorts of exotic life forms. So maybe the next time one of your guests decides to publicly critique my research over the airwaves, you'll do some fact checking of your own."

A smattering of applause escorted the Turk back to his seat.

"Professor Taylor, an important question—"

He looked up, searching the auditorium for the woman calling out his name.

It was an Asian-American beauty in her late twenties. Her long jet-black hair was pulled into a tight bun, her white blouse tied around her midriff, revealing a taut stomach, her jeans—torn at the knees—ending in Gucci heels.

I know her from somewhere ...

"Yes, go on please."

"Before you began studying these Megalodons, your career was focused entirely on piloting deep-sea submersibles. I'd like to know why, at the peak of your career, you suddenly quit."

Jonas was taken aback by the directness of her question. "First, I didn't quit, I retired. Second, my reasons are my own. Next question?" He searched the audience for another raised hand.

"Pretty young to retire, weren't you?" Heads turned as the Asian beauty approached from one of the side aisles. "Or maybe it was something else? You haven't been in a submersible for what? Seven years? Did you lose your nerve, Professor? Inquiring minds want to know."

The audience chuckled. No one was leaving—this was getting good.

Jonas felt trickles of sweat drip from his armpits. "What's your name, miss?"

"Tanaka. Terry Tanaka. I believe you know my father, Masao, CEO of the Tanaka Oceanographic Institute."

"Tanaka, of course. In fact, I think you and I met several years ago on a lecture circuit."

"That's right."

"Well, Terry Tanaka, since your inquiring mind insists on violating my privacy, let's just say, after almost ten years with the Navy, I felt it was time to stop risking my life piloting deep-sea submersibles. And so I went back to school to pursue my doctorate degree in order to research prehistoric species like the Megalodon."

Jonas collected his notes. "Now, if there are no other questions ..."

"Dr. Taylor, please." A balding man in his fifties wearing bifocals and a UCLA hooded sweatshirt stood in the third row off to his left. "You mentioned the Mariana Trench as a potential habitat for any surviving Megalodon. Has the trench ever been explored?"

“Unfortunately, no. There were two manned expeditions back in 1960, but in both cases the bathyscaphes⁹ merely went to the bottom and resurfaced. It’s important to understand just how big this gorge is and how dangerous it is to access. We’re essentially talking about a fifteen-hundred-mile-long canyon that is over forty miles wide, located seven miles below the surface. The water pressure alone is sixteen thousand pounds per square inch. We actually know more about distant galaxies than the bottom of our own oceans.”

“Well stated. But Professor, aren’t you forgetting about a few more recent descents into the Mariana Trench, specifically the *Challenger Deep*?”

Jonas stared at the man, red warning flags fluttering in his head. “I’m sorry?”

“Come now, Professor, you made several dives there yourself. Seven years ago, to be exact, before your so-called-retirement from the Navy.”

Jonas felt the blood drain from his face as a buzz of excitement took the sparse crowd.

From the front row, Maggie motioned impatiently at her watch, her eyes tossing daggers his way.

“I’m not sure where you’re getting your information, but I have another engagement and—”

“I’m getting my information from the same source that told me you were dishonorably discharged from the Navy following a three-month stint in a mental ward. Something about post-traumatic stress brought on by the death of two civilians aboard a deep-sea Navy submersible ... a submersible you were piloting in the Mariana Trench.”

“How could you know? That information’s classified!”

Chaos erupted as the audience yelled out questions and three photographers rushed forward to snap photos, blinding Jonas with their purple flashes as he searched for his wife, who was already making her escape back up the center aisle with his friend.

Climbing down from the stage, he attempted to chase after them, only to be cut off by students calling out questions and Mike Turzman demanding answers. He was forced to sign three books as he apologized for having to run, then managed to squeeze his way up the aisle before the Asian beauty intercepted him at the auditorium doors.

“We need to talk.”

“Call my literary agent, Ken Atchity. He’s in the book.”

Pushing past her, he exited through the lobby to the street, banging his knee as he jumped in the back seat of an awaiting limousine.

⁹ **bathyscaphe**: A navigable submersible for deep-sea exploration having a spherical watertight cabin attached to its underside. The *Trieste*, pictured here, was the first to reach the bottom of the Mariana Trench in 1960.





MAGGIE

THE LIMOUSINE RACED along the Coronado peninsula.

Jonas sat across the aisle from his wife, his back to the driver. Maggie was seated next to Bud Harris, who was concluding a business transaction on his cell phone. He watched as his former roommate at Penn State University absentmindedly fingered his ponytail like a school-girl before glancing at Maggie.

Maggie Taylor looked very much at home on the wide leather seat, one tan slender leg slipping out from the side slit in her dress, a glass of champagne balanced in her fingertips.

Jonas allowed his mind to wander, imagining her in a bikini, tanning herself on his millionaire friend's yacht. "You used to be afraid of the sun."

"What?"

"Your tan. You used to say you were afraid of skin cancer."

She stared at him. "I never said that. Besides, it looks good on camera."

"What about your sister's melanoma—"

"Don't start with me, Jonas. I'm not in the mood. This is probably the biggest night of my career, and I had to practically drag you out of that lecture hall. You've known about this dinner for a month, and look at you—why are you wearing that piece-of-crap suit? I should have tossed that in the Goodwill bin years ago."

"Hey, lighten up. This was my biggest book signing event, and you came prancing down the aisle like Madonna—"

"Whoa, guys, time out." Bud powered off his cell phone. "Everybody take a deep breath and let's all just calm down. Maggie, this was a big night for Jonas too—maybe we should have just waited in the limo."

"A big night? Are you serious? Bud, you know how long I've waited for this opportunity, how hard I had to work while I watched my husband flush his career down the toilet? Do you know how many times we've had to refinance the house, live off credit cards, all because Professor Taylor here insisted on studying dead sharks for a living? Now it's my turn, and if he

doesn't want to be here, that's fine by me. Let *him* wait in the limo. You can be my escort tonight—at least you're dressed for it.”

“Oh, no, keep me out of this,” Bud said, reaching for his drink.

Maggie frowned and looked out the window, the tension hanging in the air.

After a few long minutes, Bud broke the silence. “Hey, uh, I spoke with Henderson. He thinks you're a shoo-in for the award. This really could be the turning point in your career, Maggie, assuming you win.”

Maggie turned to face him, managing to avoid looking at her husband. “I'll win,” she said defiantly. “I know I'll win. Now pour me another drink.”

Bud obediently filled Maggie's glass, then offered the bottle to Jonas.

Jonas shook his head and sat back in his seat, staring absently out the window at the passing scenery, wondering who the blonde stranger seated across from him was.



Jonas Taylor had met Maggie Cobbs eleven years earlier in Massachusetts during his deep-sea pilot training at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Maggie had been in her senior year at Boston University, majoring in journalism. The petite blonde had at one time vigorously pursued a modeling career, but lacked the required height. Upon entering college, she had reset her sights on making it as a broadcast journalist.

Maggie had read about Jonas Taylor and his adventures aboard the *Alvin* submersible. She knew the former college football star was a celebrity in his own right and found him physically attractive. Under the guise of doing an article for the university press, she approached the naval commander for an exclusive interview.

Jonas Taylor was amazed that anyone like Maggie Cobbs would be interested in deep-sea diving. His naval career had left him little time for a social life, and when the beautiful blonde showed signs of flirting, Jonas asked her out on a date. The following week he invited Maggie to the Galapagos Islands during her last spring break. She accompanied him on one of his dives in the *Alvin* submersible, after which things got hot and heavy.

Maggie was impressed by the influence Jonas wielded among his Navy peers, and loved the excitement and adventure associated with ocean exploration. Ten months later they married. The couple moved to San Diego, where Jonas began training for a top secret naval mission in the western Pacific.

For the small-town girl from New Jersey, California proved to be the land of opportunity. Within three years she'd branched out into investigative journalism working as a correspondent at a local ABC flagship station.

And then disaster struck.

Jonas had been training to pilot one of the Navy’s deep-sea submersibles into the Mariana Trench. On his fourth dive in thirty-five thousand feet of water, the veteran pilot had panicked, surfacing the sub too quickly. Pipes had burst, causing pressurization problems that led to the deaths of the two scientists on board. Jonas had survived—barely—only to learn his commanding officer blamed him for the incident. The official report called it “aberrations of the deep,” and the incident ended Jonas’s career in the Navy. Worse, it permanently scarred his psyche.

Three months in a mental hospital were followed by a dishonorable discharge and a severe bout of depression. A year of private psychiatric sessions eventually helped refocus the goal-oriented former naval officer, who decided to pursue advanced degrees in paleobiology. Jonas would earn his doctorate degree, eventually writing a book on the subject of extinction among deep-water species.

Without Jonas’s naval income, Maggie’s lifestyle quickly changed. The San Diego position turned out to be a dead-end job, and her life was suddenly thrust into the mundane.

Then, by chance, Jonas ran into Bud Harris, his former roommate at Penn State University. Harris had recently inherited his father’s shipping business in San Diego. He and Jonas took in a few football games, but the paleobiologist was constantly doing research, leaving Maggie to entertain her husband’s new best friend.

Bud used his father’s connections to get Maggie part-time work as a writer for the San Diego Register. In turn, Maggie convinced her editor that Bud’s shipping business would make an interesting article for the Sunday magazine. It was the excuse she needed to follow the bachelor millionaire around the harbor, with trips to his facilities in Long Beach, San Francisco, and Honolulu. She interviewed him on his yacht, sat in on board meetings, took a ride on his **hovercraft**¹⁰, and spent many an afternoon learning how to sail.

The article she wrote became the Register’s cover story and was syndicated across North America. Bud Harris’s charter business boomed. Not one to forget a favor, Bud helped Maggie secure a weekend anchor spot with a San Diego television station, doing two-minute fillers for the ten o’clock news. It wasn’t long before she was promoted, producing weekly features on California and the West Coast.

While Jonas Taylor floundered as an author, Maggie Taylor was becoming a local celebrity.



¹⁰ **hovercraft**: A vehicle or craft that travels over land or water on a cushion of air provided by a downward blast.



Bud climbed out of the limo, extending a hand to Maggie. “Maybe I ought to get an award. Whaddya think? Executive producer?”

“Not on your life,” she replied, handing her glass to the chauffeur. The alcohol had settled her down a bit. She smiled at Bud as they ascended the stairs of the Hotel del Coronado, Jonas lagging behind. “If they start giving you awards, there won’t be any left for me.”



They passed through the main entrance beneath a gold banner announcing “The 15th Annual San Diego MEDIA Awards.” Three enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the vaulted wooden ceiling of the Crown Room. A band played softly in the corner while well-heeled guests picked at hors d’oeuvres and sipped drinks, wandering among tables draped with white-and-gold tablecloths.

Jonas suddenly felt underdressed. Maggie had told him about the gala a month ago but had never mentioned it was a black tie event.

He recognized a few television people in the crowd, provincial stars from the local news. Harold Ray, the fifty-four-year-old co-anchor of Channel 9 Action News at Ten smiled broadly as he said hello to Maggie. Ray had helped secure network funding for Maggie’s special about the effects of offshore oil drilling on whale migrations along the California coast, and now the piece was one of three competing for top honors in the “Environmental Issues Documentary” category.

“You just may take home the Eagle tonight, Maggs, Ray said, his eyes wandering over her tantalizing cleavage.

“What makes you so sure?” she cooed back.

“For one thing, I’m married to one of the judges.” Harold winked, then turned to Bud. “And this must be Jonas. Harold Ray—”

“Bud Harris, friend of the family,” Bud replied, shaking his hand.

“Bud’s my ... executive producer,” Maggie said, smiling. She glanced at Jonas. “This is Jonas.”

“Sorry, big guy, honest mistake. Say, didn’t we do a piece on you a couple years ago? Something about dinosaur bones in the Salton Sea?”

“You may have. There were a lot of news people out there. It was an unusual find—”

“Excuse me, Jonas,” Maggie interrupted, “I’m just dying for a drink. Would you mind?”

Bud pointed a finger in the air. “Gin and tonic for me, J.T.”

Jonas looked at Harold Ray.

“Nothing for me, Doc, I’m a presenter tonight. One more drink and I’ll start making the news instead of reporting it.”

Jonas forced a polite smile, then made his escape to the bar. The air was humid in the windowless ballroom, and Jonas’s wool jacket felt prickly and hot. He asked for a beer, a glass of champagne, and a gin and tonic. The bartender pulled a bottle of Carta Blanca out of the ice. Jonas cooled his forehead with it and took a long draft.

He looked back at Maggie, who was still laughing with Bud and Harold.

“Another beer, sir?”

Jonas looked at his bottle, suddenly realizing he had emptied it. “Give me one of those,” he said, pointing at the gin.

“Me too,” a voice said behind him. “With a lime.”

Jonas turned. It was the balding man from the book signing and lecture.

He looked at Jonas, peering over his wire-rimmed bifocals with a tight grin on his face. “Funny coincidence, meeting you here.”

Jonas regarded him suspiciously. “Did you follow me?”

“No,” the man replied, scooping up a handful of almonds from the bar. He gestured vaguely at the room. “I’m in the media.” He offered his hand. “David Adashek. Science Journal.”

Jonas ignored it. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Mr. Adashek.”

“How so?”

“What is it you want?”

The man finished a mouthful of almonds, washing it down with a swig of his drink. “My source told me you made the Mariana Trench dives; what he didn’t tell me was what you were looking for.”

“Who’s your source?”

“Former Navy guy, just like you.” Adashek slipped another almond into his mouth, chewing it noisily like a stick of gum. “Funny thing, though. I interviewed the fellow about it four years ago. Couldn’t get a word out of him. Then last week he calls out of the blue, says if I want to know what happened I ought to talk to you ... Did I say something wrong, Doc?”

Jonas’s brown eyes blazed at the shorter man. “Be careful; I wouldn’t want to see you choke on your nuts.” He turned, locating Maggie and Bud at their table.

From the other side of the room, a pair of dark Asian eyes followed Jonas Taylor as he made his way across the ballroom, watching as he took a seat next to the blonde.



Four hours and half a dozen drinks later, Jonas found himself staring at the Golden Eagle now perched on the white tablecloth, a TV camera clutched in its claws. Maggie’s whale film had beaten out a Discovery Channel project on the Farallon Islands and a Greenpeace documentary on the Japanese whaling industry. His wife’s acceptance speech had been largely a passionate “save the whales” plea. Her concern for the **cetaceans**¹¹ fate had inspired her to make the film, or so she said.

Jonas had wondered if he was the only one in the room who didn’t believe a word she was saying.

Bud had passed out cigars. Harold Ray made a toast. Fred Henderson stopped by to offer his congratulations, adding that if he wasn’t careful Maggie would get snapped up by a major station in Los Angeles. Maggie feigned disinterest. Jonas knew she’d heard the rumors ... she had started many of them herself.

They were all dancing now. Maggie had taken Bud’s hand and led him onto the floor, knowing Jonas wouldn’t object. How could he? He didn’t like to dance.

Jonas sat alone at the table, chewing the ice from his glass and trying to remember how many gins he’d downed in the last few hours. He felt tired, had a slight headache, and all signs pointed to a long evening still ahead. He got up and walked to the bar.

Harold Ray was there, picking up a bottle of wine and a pair of glasses.

“So how was Baja, Professor?”

¹¹ **cetacean**: Any member of an entirely aquatic group of mammals commonly known as whales, dolphins, and porpoises. They are characterized by large head, a tapering body like a fish, nearly devoid of hair, forelimbs like paddles, no hind limbs, and a tail ending in a broad horizontal fin.



Jonas wondered if the man was drunk. “Baja?”

“The cruise.”

“What cruise?” He handed his glass to the bartender, nodded for a refill.

Ray laughed. “I warned her three days was no vacation. Look at you, you’ve already forgotten.”

“Baja? You mean ... last week.” Then it hit him. The business trip to San Francisco. The tan. Bud Harris.

“Too many margaritas, Professor?”

Jonas stared for a long moment at the glass in his hand, then scanned the dance floor for his wife. The band was playing “Crazy,” the lights dimmed low, the couples dancing close. He located Maggie and Bud, clinging together like a pair of drunks. Bud’s hands were caressing her back, working their way down. Jonas watched as his wife kissed him on the lips.

Blood rushed into Jonas’s face, the veins in his neck throbbing. He slammed his drink down, then made his way awkwardly across the dance floor.

Oblivious, Maggie and Bud continued their slow dance grind.

“Maybe you two should get a room”

The couple turned slowly to face Jonas, Bud’s lips smeared with Maggie’s lipstick. “Hey, pal—maybe you should file for a divorce.

Maggie giggled. “Bud look—he’s actually thinking about hitting you.”

“In that sports jacket? I think Dustin Hoffman wore that in *The Graduate*. He’d have to tear those elbow patches off before he could throw a punch.”

Jonas threw.

In one circling motion, Bud pulled Maggie aside with his left hand and caught the roundhouse with the blade of his right. Stepping inside the telegraphed punch, he gripped the inside of Jonas’s wrist while using his opponent’s momentum—

—before suddenly snapping back the opposite way—

—Jonas suddenly finding himself air born, tumbling into the legs of another couple.

The band stopped playing.

The lights came up—

—revealing two armed security officers dragging Jonas to the nearest exit.



Jonas stepped out the front entrance and ripped off his tie. A uniformed valet asked him for his parking stub.

“I don’t have a car.”

“Would you like a taxi, then?”

“He doesn’t need one. I’m his ride.” Terry Tanaka stepped through the door behind him.

“Man, when it rains it pours. What is it you want, Tracy?”

“It’s Terry, and we need to talk.”

“You talk, I need to puke.” He staggered down the block, searching for a trash can, settling for the back of a dumpster.

Terry turned her back as he heaved his dinner. She searched her purse, then tossed him a pack of gum when he finished. “Now can we talk?”

“Look, Trixie ...”

“Terry!”

Jonas sat on the curb and combed his fingers through his hair. His head was throbbing. “What is it you want?”

“Following you here ... it wasn’t my idea. My father sent me.”

Jonas glanced back at her. “Masao’s an old friend. Find me on Monday, we’ll talk. This isn’t exactly a good time ...”

“Ever hear of UNIS?”

“Is that your sister? No wait ... it’s some kind of deep ROV (Remotely Operated Vehicle), isn’t it?”

“Unmanned Nautical Informational Submersible. UNIS. Our institute holds the patents. They’re made for deep-water assignments, their hulls able to withstand nineteen thousand pounds per square inch of pressure.”

“I’m happy for you. Now I need to find a cab and a bottle of aspirin.”

She removed a manila envelope from her purse and shoved it in his face. “Look at this.”

He opened the envelope and pulled out a black-and-white photograph taken underwater. The image was of a UNIS, lying on its side, its hull crushed almost beyond recognition.

Jonas looked back at the woman. “Where was this drone deployed?”

“The Mariana Trench.”