

# SAWFEISH



RICK CHESLER

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Rick Chesler

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*Virginia Key, Florida*

“Feeding time!”

Dr. Mason Rayman found it not the least bit unusual he was talking to himself. Well, not to himself, exactly, but to some animals, a group of fish. Very large fish, but fish nonetheless. He felt like he knew them, after all, what with the months of tender love and care he’d given them.

He breezed through the concrete-floored passageway, towing a large cooler on wheels between two rows of enormous round tanks, each about shoulder high. The tanks were not see-through, but made of an opaque blue plastic, open on the top. He was in the semi-outdoor portion of his laboratory, a space with a metal roof to protect the aquaria and their denizens from the rain and blistering South Florida sun, but with walls that were only corrugated metal, leaving open space top and bottom to let in air and light. Beyond the token walls of the marine lab lay the turquoise waters of Biscayne Bay. A long highway bridge, the Rickenbacker Causeway, connected this small island once shaped by hurricanes to the urban hotbed that was Miami.

Rayman heard splashes from the tanks while he walked, his charges anticipating their coming meal. He looked over to his right and saw a slash of gray carve at the water’s surface.

“Hey there, number eight, how’s it going today?” He stopped in front of the tank and opened the cooler. He grabbed two fistfuls of bloody fish hunks and tossed them into the tank, where the splashing grew more intense.

“Glad you like it, number eight! Bon appétit.”

Rayman watched as the lab subject slashed its head back and forth in frenzied, lateral motions. The scientist chuckled to himself. “Easy boy. They’re already hacked up for you, no need to slash it up yourself!” But the fish paid him no mind. It was embedded deep in its nature, buried somewhere in the very biochemicals of its genes to slash and hack and shake its guitar-shaped body back and forth. Its behavior would never change.

A sawfish.

Closely related to sharks but actually a type of ray, their most distinctive feature was the namesake appendage that was actually an extension of the head with a number of serrated teeth on each side.

Rayman heard more splashing from the other tanks as the fish sensed the commotion and knew what was coming. He looked up, eyes scanning the tanks as he addressed his charges. He’d been working with this group of a dozen sawfish for the past two years, part of a minor government grant he’d received to study electro-receptors in fish. Although the tanks and their sawfish took up a lot of space and looked impressive to visitors, they were not the main thrust of his work.

A professional researcher, Dr. Rayman had taken on extra grants in recent years, to the point he no longer even taught classes. His largest grant was, ironically, to study the smallest animals, copepods—tiny crab-like crustaceans. In his grant proposal, he had promised he would find out how gigantism—excessive growth usually due to hormonal imbalance—works in copepods. Turn little critters into big ones—sounds like fun, right?

But as the work went on, Rayman soon found out that it was anything but. Despite many different approaches, the insect-sized creatures stubbornly refused to grow. Although the purpose of his work

was to discover mechanisms of gigantism, none of the methods he'd tried so far worked. Not that I expected a giant to suddenly appear overnight. Any kind of growth spurt would suffice, as these were all adult specimens from their time of acquisition, and adults did not grow in appreciable amounts over short periods of time. Yet, the last he had measured, the length, width and weight of the creature had not been significantly different from when the study had started. He glanced over at the rack of more familiar-looking rectangular fish tanks that lined one wall. Inside them, hundreds of copepods fluttered about like aquatic insects. He shook his head while looking at them.

A disconcerting thought crept over him: *Could that be why the bean counters holding the purse strings have been grumbling lately?* Funding was tight. He and all of his colleagues had heard it over and over in recent months. Results were key. Demonstrating what did not work was not enough. And to that end, his results had been sorely lacking. All these months later, trying different things and hoping copepods were still normal size. He was going to have to admit that—

Something caught his eye in the far corner, Tank #12.

A head breaking the surface of the water. A head with attached saw.

Rayman did a double-take as his brain tried valiantly to process what his eyes were showing him. *No way. What is this?* Then, a second later... *How could I not have noticed this the second I walked in?*

For there in front of him, in the last tank on the right, thrashed a sawfish so large that had he been watching a video instead of standing there in person, he'd have bet his own life that it was some kind of image trickery and not real. But because he was standing here, smack dab in the middle of his own lab, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was by far the largest sawfish he had ever laid eyes on.

He mentally estimated its length as he neared the tank, his feet slowing their pace as he approached the beast. *Gotta be thirty feet long.* But that was impossible. This species of sawfish, the Atlantic Smalltooth, grew to a maximum recorded length of 21 feet in the wild, with the average adult length being closer to twelve feet. But this...

Rayman scoped out the enormous thing in Tank #12. "What happened to you, number twelve?"

His answer came in the form of a wall of water that issued over the lip of the tank and soaked him from head to toe. Rayman's first coherent thought was that a rafter or some piece of the roof had fallen into the tank. On closer inspection, though, he had to admit that he was looking at moving things—a living thing...an animal.

Sawfish.

But that was impossible! At best, the specimen he had in Tank #12 was ten feet long, from the tip of the saw to the tip of the tail. He eyeballed the monstrosity before him, waiting for it to momentarily cease moving while it changed directions so he could get a good look. The saw stuck way out on one side of the round tank while the tail protruded far over the other. He forced himself to stop gawking at the freakish aberration before him and make the calculation. He didn't like the number he came up with.

Thirty feet.

*No sawfish has ever been recorded anywhere near that length. How on Earth...*

He spun and visually checked the other tanks with sawfish, checking for more giants. But all of them were still normal size, most dozing on the bottoms of their tanks, one or two swimming in large circles.

"It's just you, number twelve! What happened?"

Rayman flashed on his work day yesterday. It hadn't been the best of days. He'd gotten a late start thanks to a traffic accident in Miami necessitating a labyrinthine detour, and then when he'd gotten home late and checked his e-mail there had been another all staff message about how their primary funding

agency was making noises again about reviewing the current grant programs to see where cuts could be made, so to be sure and submit progress reports... *Oops, still haven't done that...* Then he'd gotten right to work on the copepods, his bread-and-butter grant. He'd scooped a batch of the little critters out of one of the aquaria...he glanced over to the wall to check on them—were they gigantic now, too—but no, they were normal sized. Then he'd walked them—*wait! No, I remember now... I forgot the specimen box...* This was a plastic, aerated container ideal for transferring the copepods. ... *Didn't want to walk all the way back into the inside lab to get it so I just used the net and walked fast back into the indoor lab to take my measurements.* He pictured the minuscule crustaceans popping around the open net, most of them landing back in it, but one or two falling out onto the concrete floor by the time he reached Tank #12...

Uh-oh.

He looked back to the rim of Tank #12, then to the floor around it. He didn't see any copepods there that he had missed. They were genetically modified organisms (GMOs), so allowing one to escape into the bay via the drain hole in the floor, for example, would be something he'd be held accountable for should anyone find out. But he'd checked very carefully yesterday and was sure he hadn't missed any. Still, he had an uneasy feeling about what must have actually happened. *One of them jumped off of the net and landed in the water of the tank, didn't it? They didn't all hit the floor.* He thought about this for a few moments, utterly transfixed, as a realization took place.

*Of course!*

Some types of copepods were parasites in sawfish, living in the gills. While this fact was coincidental, meaning that he hadn't deliberately chosen to work with sawfish and copepods because of this symbiotic relationship, he did not miss the irony. Here he was, struggling along with a grant to induce gigantism in one species, and he accidentally hits the jackpot with a different species unrelated to the grant.

*I'll be damned.* He spoke to the fish. "Number twelve, you've got a copepod in your gills, don't you?" The fish continued to thrash. Rayman's mouth tugged downward at the corners. As exciting as it was, this unexpected development was a real problem. He didn't have the facilities to care for a fish this large. He could outsource it to a local public aquarium, but that would mean explaining what happened to it, that he'd made a mistake in the lab...

*No... I don't need that kind of publicity right now, what with the funding environment...* He already had a few student protestors over the GMO aspect of his work. Just reactionary kids, really, but this... He gazed at the monster in the tank, shaking his head as he imagined the screens full of forms he'd have to fill out and submit to try and explain what happened, and then have the accident turned into accepted new protocol. It occurred to him, now that he knew how it worked, that it would be much simpler to pretend he came up with the idea of introducing the copepod to the gills of a sawfish as a result of purposeful thought rather than by accident, and apply for a new grant, the chances for approval being boosted by the fact that he already worked with both species involved. *Yes.*

But first he had to do something about this sawfish. It was wild caught from local waters by specimen collectors, but Rayman knew he couldn't just release a GMO organism of massive, head-turning proportions into the wild. He would have to destroy the fish and then he could dump the dead body into the ocean, maybe cut it up first or grind it into chum so even the body wouldn't be found.

He retreated to the indoor portion of the lab and returned to Tank #12 with a hypodermic needle full of poison. *Now how the hell am I going to do this?* The big saw was still flopping around crazily, different parts of its oversized body sticking out over the round tank. Rayman walked up to the side of the tank while the huge fish's side was there, hypo clutched tightly in his right hand, but his movements were far too tentative. By the time he brought the syringe up, the animal was mostly on the other side of the tank. Still, far be it from Dr. Mason Rayman to give up too easily. He hadn't

become a professional researcher by quitting, and he wasn't about to start now.

Rayman was circling around the tank, the needle raised again for another go, when he heard the chime from his desktop computer inside the lab indicating that an email had just come in. *Hmm... could be news on that new proposal I submitted last week. Sure could use some good news right about now...*

"Temporary reprieve, number twelve," Rayman called over his shoulder to the fish as he entered the inside portion of the lab to check his email. He woke up the dark screen by nudging his mouse. His eyes were immediately drawn to his open email program where half a dozen bold subject lines and messages awaited. Most of them were from his assistants, those part timers paid to carry out the lab work of his various smaller grants. The latest mail, though it wasn't a reply regarding his proposal, arrested his attention. His eyes widened as he read the subject line: Notice of grant termination #NSB92283002.

He recognized that number, all right, knew it by heart, he'd had to use it so many times by now to pay for various things, including his personnel wages. Still standing, he leaned on the desk with his left hand. He dropped the hypo onto the desk and lashed out with his right hand to click the mouse, opening the full message. It was long, about a full printed page, full of pseudo-legalese formalities, but he knew how to cut right through that crap and get to the point. His heart clenched as he read: Due to increasingly rare funding opportunities...competitive environment...only most critical studies...grant #NSB92283002 has not been selected for extension...

*Not been selected for extension!* Rayman recoiled from the screen as if it were a venomous snake. Technically, his sawfish grant expired at the end of this week, but he had applied for an extension, meaning that he would have another year to complete the work and be able to spend the remaining funds. He had done it many times before on other grants. It was a routine process, almost a formality, and the last thing he'd ever expected was to be denied the extension.

But there it was. He read the email again to make sure he wasn't imagining things, but of course he had gotten it right. The purse strings had not only tightened, but finally closed altogether. Rayman pummeled his desk in frustration. This meant the end. His other grants were not enough to support full-time work. And then he noticed his voicemail light blinking red on the desk phone. He hit the buttons to check the message, fairly certain of what he would find there. Sure enough, it was the head of the Ocean Sciences Department, the esteemed Dr. Edward Reyes, breaking the news with his characteristic "personal touch" in an attempt to soften the blow he had known was coming before Rayman did.

The marine scientist listened carefully to the message, hoping against hope the man would offer some kind of a lifeline—another grant, perhaps, or even an open teaching position he might be suitable for? Rayman cringed as he recalled his outwardly vocal stance and how real scientists do research, not teaching, but surely they would overlook that at a time like this? But as Rayman heard the rest of the message, it hit home that he would have no such luck.

He looked around at the old white walls, cracked and stained yellow in places, at the rusty filing cabinets, the shelves of science books and technical manuals. He was done. The reflection of the overhead fluorescents glared off the syringe on his desk and he considered jabbing it into his neck. Then he got sick of sitting in front of the computer, knowing the sympathy emails would start coming in next as word got around. No doubt his colleagues would be losing grants, too, but most of them already taught or had a mixture of smaller grants. He had put too much faith in those damned copepods. And the sawfish—large animals that were expensive to care for. He heard the big one splashing now as it circled its comparatively tiny tank, saw sticking over the edge like a wayward chainsaw.



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Dr. Rayman emerged into the wet lab and stood next to Tank #12, syringe clutched in his hand. *You're going to get it now, fish. I'm in no mood to...* But then he loosened his grip on the hypo as a new train of thought settled in. Why should he worry about anything now? This giant GMO monster isn't his problem anymore. Why should he go through all the trouble of euthanizing it, properly disposing of the remains and all that, when they didn't even want him around anymore? He was done, terminated, laid off, released, shit-canned, whatever you wanted to call it. He looked around his lab at all of the tanks. None of this was his problem anymore. They'd have interns probably take care of the fish for use on other projects.

But this guy...he looked at number twelve again, still cavorting wildly in the confines of the tank. He was just too big to stay here, to stay anywhere at the university. Then Rayman caught the glint of sunlight off the ocean beneath the pier that supported the lab, and something occurred to him. *Why don't I set this guy free? They don't want to pay anyone to study sawfish anymore, well, then have fun with this thing. I'm not going the extra mile.*

Rayman walked around the tank to the side that faced the wall, which was itself near the edge of the pier. He smiled as he noticed that the gate leading outside the lab to the pier itself was adjacent to Tank #12. He unlatched the gate and swung it open. He stepped outside, delighting in the refreshing breeze that buffeted his skin. The pier was private, belonging to the university's Ocean Science Institute, so there wasn't usually anyone on it way out here at the end. Nevertheless, he looked around carefully to make sure no employees were present. Satisfied all was clear, Rayman turned back into the lab.

"It's your lucky day, number twelve. Governor called. Stay of execution. You're free to go." He moved to the side where a section of a kids' slide leaned against the wall. Used for moving big fish and small sea mammals such as dolphins or manatees, this sawfish was far too big to fit on it but it would have to do. He leaned the slide up against the side of the tank, one end sticking out the open door onto the pier. He quickly splashed water onto the slide to lubricate it so the fish would move along it easily, removing his hands from the tank at the earliest possible moment.

Rayman shook his head as he looked at the sawfish. He still wasn't exactly sure how he was going to do this. If moving it didn't work, he would have no choice but to kill it in place and then do the work of chopping up the dead fish until he could remove it from the tank. Attracted by Rayman's movements, the great fish jutted its saw out over the side where the slide was. This sparked an idea for Rayman, who ran to the cooler in the aisle between tank rows. He removed the largest whole fish, a small blackfin tuna, and ran back to the foot of the slide. The saw's head was still at the top of the slide. Rayman held out the tuna, aware that he could get seriously hurt indeed if this sawfish were to lunge on him. But he needed a lure. The big fish took the bait and the sawfish jumped over the side of the tank, where its massive body dwarfed the slide, which was only just large enough to guide it down like an oversized train on a track.

Rayman gave the beast a shove along its midsection to help it along, making sure he was well clear of both the head and the slapping tail. As Rayman had hoped, the sawfish slid along the edge of the concrete lab floor out through the open gate onto the pier. The wooden slats of the pier served to slow the creature's slide and it came to a stop a good six feet before the railing meant to protect from accidental falls. Rayman had thought it would clear beneath the lowest bar but was shocked at how



close it came to not fitting. It would just barely make it, but not if it didn't somehow move over another six feet.

Rayman told himself what the hell and lunged at the flopping fish. It made loud percussive sound as its tail walloped the wooden planks. Rayman put his head down like a football linebacker and barreled into the animal. He moved it forward only about a foot, but the impact had the effect of scaring the animal into an even more frenzied motion, bringing it to within two feet of the edge of the pier.

"C'mon, number twelve, you want your freedom or not?" Rayman was talking to his fish again, just like old times. "You gotta go, boy. Born free and all that..."

The huge sawfish turned sideways, and for a split second Rayman thought it was going over the side, but the upper lobe of its scythe-shaped tail hung up between the two lowest bars of the guard rail. The fish was gasping now, its gills working hard to pump oxygen, becoming more inefficient as they dried out. Rayman saw an opportunity. This was it. It wouldn't get any better than this.

He dove for the tail, snatching it with his left hand while his right stabilized his own body by grabbing onto the railing. He yanked on it, convinced that if he could just get the longer, upper lobe clear the rail that it would come free and the fish would wriggle itself over the side. But that's not what happened at all. Instead, the oversized shark relative whipped its gargantuan head around on the pier side, toward the lab. Rayman watched the chainsaw-like appendage, the saw, arcing toward him in a rapid blur.

He rolled, feeling a splinter of wood from the pier dig into his cheek, but he was too late. The toothed blade, perhaps ten feet in length, was two inches from hitting him in the side of the face when the tip of it got caught up in the guard rail, giving Rayman time to put a hand up in defense. No sooner had he done that than he heard the sound of tooth scraping metal and the tip of the saw came loose. Now the fish's weapon completed its path toward his head, meeting his hand instead. Two of the three-inch-long triangular teeth sunk into the meaty part of Rayman's palm. He cried out in pain, reflexively coiling his body into a ball by bringing his knees toward his stomach, fast.

The motion caused his kneecaps to knock hard into the side of the big animal. With the saw and tail now free of the rail, the sawfish rolled to the left with the impact, toward the ocean. The marine biologist gave the beast another shove with both feet at the same time and the creature slid from the pier.

Number twelve twisted in midair like a powerful but ungainly high diver until its body hit the water thirty feet below and instantly transformed into an elegant, efficient swimming machine.

Rayman pulled himself up with the rail and gazed into the sea below. The water in the bay was calm and he could easily see his former charge whipping its tail back and forth in an effort to get far away from the pier as fast as it possibly could. The sawfish gave a tentative shake of its tail and then straightened out into a knife-like posture. It then disappeared into the depths, heading north, toward Miami.

When the fish was totally out of sight, Rayman turned his attention to himself. He smeared the blood off his hand until he could see the triangular, tooth shape of the wound. But something else hurt, too. The wrist on his opposite arm from the injured hand. He had a deep gash there, but it hurt severely.

He wiped the blood from that and was shocked to feel pain in the tips of his fingers that did not go away with wiping. Something was in there. He tried again, more carefully and this time he saw something.

*Jesus. Must be a thick splinter from the pier.* He gritted his teeth, placed his thumb and forefinger together around the shape of the embedded object and pulled. He grunted as the foreign body slid out of his arm until it was held only by his fingers.

*My God...*

He was looking at a “tooth” from the sawfish’s rostrum, although Rayman knew they were in fact not true teeth, but a type of scale known as dermal denticles. A big one, almost an inch across at the base and two from base to tip. Serrations along both sides. Marveling at it, he held the sawfish denticle up in front of his eyes.

“You did me in, sawfish. I couldn’t figure you out in time.” He couldn’t keep from reminding himself that he’d lost his job. “You got me, saw.”

Rayman brought the tooth to the base of his thumb on the opposite hand and sliced it deeply, until a line of dark crimson floated to the surface of his skin. He stared at it for a second and then brought it to his mouth, where he sucked the blood away while watching the sea surface in the direction the sawfish had gone.

He didn’t know what was wrong with him to feel this way, but he’d never tasted anything so good in his life.

*Miami*

Elisa Gonzales pushed herself up from her desk chair and chugged down the last dregs of coffee from her mug that proclaimed, A GIANT CUP OF KISS MY ASS. She would need every drop for her next task. A research grant administrator for the Ocean Sciences Institute at Florida University, it was Gonzales' job to process the many grants which came in to the school's researchers. Usually the job was simple enough, being based on procedures she had been through many times now that she had been here for seven years. But today she had to break some bad news.

That kind of thing went with the territory. The institute paid her to manage the grants, and when the personnel who were funded by those grants could not be supported any other way, then it became her job to formally let them know. She grabbed a copy of a letter signed by the institute head and exited her office. A small, windowless room, it wasn't much to look at but at least it was private, a rare enough thing in these days of manic cost-cutting and "collaborative" excuses for cramming people together into cube farms.

Still, this was going to suck and she knew it. *Buck up, sister. That's why they pay you the big bucks, remember?* The sarcasm worked. She actually cracked a smile as she headed out of the office and walked through the large administration building until she reached the first floor lobby. She exited onto a tiled stairway and took that down to a brick-lined path that wound its way across the sunny campus. She reached her car in the lot, a Chevy Volt electric vehicle. Leased, of course, not actually hers yet, but close enough. She plugged it in every night, it took her to work and back every day, and she never needed to stop for gas. That was good enough for her.

Gonzales got into the car and checked the rear view mirror as she was about to back out. She cringed at the bags under her big brown eyes while she did her best to tame those auburn curls with her hairbrush. *Good enough.* She eased out onto the street and made her way onto the Rickenbacker Causeway, glancing at the Port of Miami off to her left, where the industrious activity of crane loading and unloading humongous cargo ships was nonstop.

She switched lanes at the sign for Virginia Key and exited onto the small island. She didn't come here all that often, maybe once or twice per year for a meeting, but she knew the way well enough. This was the first time she'd had to come out here for something so unpleasant. She took a deep breath as she merged off the island's main road onto the private drive for the Ocean Sciences Institute. She parked in the lot, much smaller than the one where she worked on the main campus, and got out of her car.

"Hey Elisa, your golf cart's still putting along, eh?" Despite the faux insult, Gonzales cracked a smile and turned toward the source of the voice. An elderly gentleman with thin white hair and a sparse Colonel Sanders style beard to match continued walking past as he waved.

"Afternoon, Dr. Overton. Yep, it putted me all the way over here from main campus."

"And saving the world as the wheels turn. Good for you!"

She bid him a good day and headed for the main building of the Ocean Sciences Institute. She had always found it to be an odd combination of rustic-looking wood and modern, green-tinted glass, like old meets new or past meets future. She strode up to the reception desk where one of the undergraduate students would be directing calls and visitors for a few bucks an hour that should be going to offsetting student loans but probably ended up in the local night clubs. She didn't recognize

the girl presently sitting there, but that was no surprise.

~~“Can you direct me to Dr. Rayman’s lab, please? He used to be out at the end of the pier, is that still his? I know you guys just shuffled things around over here.”~~

The student looked up from her smartphone long enough to smile and say yes, that was still his lab. Gonzales thanked her and headed back outside where she strode out onto the pier, feeling the fresh sea breeze pick up as she went. Still, the pleasant environment couldn’t keep her from thinking about what she was about to tell Dr. Rayman. Well, she knew what she was going to tell him, but *how* she was going to say it was on her mind. Should she hand him the letter first or just come right out and say it? *Pack your stuff, Rayman, you’re on the next train outta here.*

She smiled a little as she walked past a couple of smaller labs near the beginning of the pier. She had never been fond of Dr. Rayman, but she would never make light of anyone’s job situation, even if she didn’t like the person. She trudged on, her mood returning to a more somber state by the time she reached the largest building on the pier, the lab that Dr. Rayman had called home for the last five years. She shook her head at the seeming unfairness of the situation. You’d think that if a guy had occupied the same lab for five years that he’d be pretty safe, funding-wise, but not anymore. There were all manner of researchers practically foaming at the mouth for a chance to use that facility. The building wouldn’t go to waste without Dr. Rayman—Rayman would go to waste without it, was more likely. The guy didn’t want to teach, so what did he expect?

While she walked up to the door, Elisa steeled herself for the imagined pushback or at least the resentment she would probably get from him. But then she saw that the door had been boarded over. Wasn’t that where the door had been? She wasn’t sure, it’d been years since she’d been out to the building. She shrugged and proceeded to walk around the side of the building facing the ocean, figuring there’d be a door on that side. She heard the sound of a hose being sprayed as she walked along. *Good, at least there’s somebody here.* It occurred to her that maybe Rayman took his cue from the grant agency email and decided to jump ship early. It occasionally happened when people were so upset over the situation that they didn’t want to see anyone. Somehow Rayman didn’t strike her as being that type, though. He seemed more like a fighter who would demand she jump through all sorts of red-tape hoops to make it as difficult as possible for everyone involved because they should know better than to get rid of him.

But as she neared the end of the lab building and prepared to turn the corner, she lost this train of thought completely. There was a man wrestling a gigantic fish by the side of the pier. Looked like he was losing too, judging by his curses and the way he was getting walloped by the gigantic fish. She had never seen such a giant fish in her life. She was about to shout and ask the man if he needed help when she recognized two things: one, the man was Dr. Mason Rayman, and two—the fish was a sawfish, the same type of fish she’d processed a grant for Rayman to work with.

Elisa took out her smartphone and activated the video camera. She pointed the lens at Rayman and watched the struggle play out, knowing it was being recorded. She had assumed that he was trying to get the fish away from the side of the pier, but as she watched, it became clear that the opposite was true. She crouched behind a car to keep from being seen by Rayman, and not long after that he pushed the sawfish over the edge. Rayman peered over the edge for a minute, then he pulled something from his hand. After that, he jogged back into his lab.

Elisa stopped the video and then continued walking until she reached the open door to the outdoor section of the lab. She called out, not wanting to spook anyone.

“Dr. Rayman? Hello?” She heard the hose stop. She yelled again and this time heard the sound of wet footsteps on concrete.

“Yes?”

She recognized the male voice. “It’s Elisa Gonzales, from Contracts and Grants.”

“Oh, come in.”

She stepped over the threshold, aware that a visit from a grant officer could be either a very positive or a negative thing. She felt bad that right now he still had hope for the former, a false hope that she would soon dash. Inside the lab, she looked around but still didn't see anyone. Only the rows of those big round tanks. Ah, the sawfish. She remembered submitting that grant. She wondered what would happen to all those fish now, but it wasn't her problem. She needed to stay focused. But wait a minute...there used to be a sawfish in each of the dozen tanks. She was sure of it. She knew that because it was stated in the grant application that Rayman need access to a facility that could house twelve sawfish. But the tank nearest to her was empty. The water still sloshed around heavily inside of it. And what was that big plastic thing on the floor...a slide? Was the sawfish she had just witnessed Rayman tossing over the pier the same one that used to reside in that tank? Couldn't be, though, it was much too large to fit in this tank.

Suddenly, a man exited the inside lab space and walked toward her. “Hi there.” Dr. Rayman walked over to her and extended a hand.

Gonzales looked away quickly from the empty tank and forced herself to keep her demeanor professional yet subdued. The fish thing was weird, but none of that really mattered anymore. The semi-fake smiles she usually offered him would work against her here by giving him the impression that everything was okay. “Good afternoon, Mason.” She glanced down at the paperwork in her hand. Rayman's gaze followed hers.

She cleared her throat and looked up at Rayman, whose gaze still lingered on the paper. “As you know from the emails...” She hesitated while she searched for just the right words...until Rayman filled in the blanks for her.

“...my main grant has been denied an extension.”

She nodded. “That's right. I'm very sorry, Dr. Rayman. I double-checked everything to make certain there's nothing we're overlooking that could be done. But the agency isn't budging on this. An uncomfortable silence settled over the two of them. The hum of pumps and bubbling water filled the air.

“So what do I need to sign?” Rayman tipped his head toward the papers.

“Oh, it's the form that formally notifies you of your grant termination and then another one that severs your employment with the university since you will no longer be funded for full-time research and teach no classes. I'm sorry, Dr. Rayman. I really am.”

He pursed his lips flat but reached for the papers. “Lemme take a look.”

As he reached out to take them, Gonzales couldn't help but notice that his hand had blood on it. A lot of it. “You okay, Mason?”

The scientist looked up from his paperwork, distracted. “Huh? Yeah, sure. As fine as anyone who's just lost their job, I guess.”

“No, I mean your hand.” She pointed at his left hand, where a three-inch gouge oozed blood. No doubt as the result of his battle with that huge fish.

He followed her point. “Oh that. Cut it on the edge of a tank I was positioning.” He withdrew the pen from the paper, where he'd been about to sign. “Last chance for worker's comp, right?” He grinned at her.

Gonzales did her best to return the smile out of courtesy but clearly her heart was not in it. “Go see a doctor if you need to, while you're still covered.”

Rayman narrowed his eyes ever so slightly and then grabbed a clipboard with water data from a post that supported the roof. He put the form on the clipboard and put his signature to it. He shook his head while handing the paper back to Gonzales.

“I'm sorry, Mason,” she said again. “Truly.”

Rayman's expression suddenly changed. His eyes bulged slightly from their sockets, his face reddened, his carotid arteries grew more prominent. "Will you please stop saying that? What do you care, anyway? You're funded by the department, not a grant. Your job is secure."

Gonzales took a reflexive step back at the change in attitude and personal direction. "Excuse me? My job?"

Rayman shrugged. "Yeah. Your job. It's secure. It must be easy for you to walk around and get paid to tell other people they don't have a job anymore."

Gonzales put her hands on her hips. "Look, Dr. Rayman, you've made more money in the last year than I've made doing my full-time job here for the last five, if that makes you feel any better. You're only shooting the messenger. Good bye, and good luck." *Asshole.*

She turned and breezed out of the lab onto the pier. Rayman followed her out there after waiting a few seconds. He watched her walk toward the road at the foot of the pier. Then, satisfied she was actually leaving, he stared out over the sparkling blue bay.

*Crandon Park Beach, Key Biscayne*

“It’s one mile, Harry, we can do it. We’ve been doing the half-mile runs for months now. Let’s give it a chance.” Mrs. Harry Olivera glanced at her husband of thirty-five years as he pulled on his white swim cap. Around them, about a dozen other seniors, the most avid members of the Key Biscayne Senior Swim Club, began trotting into the water that lapped against the dry sand.

At sixty-five years old, the Oliveras were healthy and in good physical shape for their age. Having retired to Florida last year from Ohio after 9-5 desk-bound careers, they’d made a pact with each other to get in shape and stay in shape once they moved to Florida. To this end they’d joined the swim club which also offered the benefit of a social scene. But part of that social scene involved peer pressure to participate in the swims. Most of it was good-spirited camaraderie, but Harry in particular felt that there was actual pressure that made him feel like he was somehow less of a man were he not to participate in the longer swims. It didn’t help matters that his wife was all for it, seeming to take the water like a fish from the get-go and enthusiastically signing up for each new swim.

So here they were, standing on the beach at 4:30pm, ready to enter the water at the south end, swim to the buoy line about a hundred feet from shore, and then head north just inside the line until they reached the parking lot at the end of the beach a mile away. It was twice as far as they’d gone so far. But the day was beautiful, the sun still up and glittering across the water, the sky blue with a smattering of puffy white clouds. The ocean was calm as could be, with a glassy smooth surface to the horizon.

The leader for today’s swim, a punchy 79-year-old by the name of Chancy McCray, waved his arm to gain the club’s attention. “All right, everybody... Swimmers ready!”

There were hoots and hollers as the oldsters stepped into the shallow water and began to walk out along the firm sandy bottom. “Stop yer lip flappin’ and let’s get to it, Chancy!” one of the men called out.

“First one to the finish gets a martini on me at the club.” He held an arm up and yelled, “Three...two...one... Swimmers go!”

The shallow water churned into foam and sand with the passage of dozens of stomping legs. “Nice and warm,” one of them commented. Those who had been fastest to run in were now pushing off the bottom into a shallow dive to kick-start into swimming mode. Each participant started to swim with a splash into the ocean, most of them employing crawl strokes. Soon the water’s surface was pockmarked with whitewater displaced by legs and arms.

Chancy and two others reached the swim line first and made the left turn to the north. Harry and his wife followed suit a couple of minutes later. As was his habit, Harry reached out and touched one of the swim line buoys, his fingers slapping the smooth wet plastic, before following the prescribed course. Normally, he swam with his eyes closed, forgoing the use of goggles, but he liked to open them once when he reached the line to see how clear the water was, and he did that now. Even though they were a little ways from shore, the water here was only about eight feet deep.

Harry put his head down in the water and opened his eyes. What he saw was blurry, but he still thought that something was off. *It shouldn’t be this shallow here.* It looked as though the bottom was only three feet or so below him, like if he put his feet down he could stand. He was about to try ju



that when suddenly the bottom appeared lighter in color and also deeper down. *What the...am I in sand cloud or something?*

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Then he caught movement and the bottom was once again darker colored and closer. He lifted his head out of the water. Heard the splashy sounds of the swimmers both in front of and behind him. He turned and saw his wife, kicking off down the swim line. She wore goggles and he wanted to ask her to take a look down there. As he opened his mouth to call her name, he felt a surge of water rushing against his body, and then something hard and sharp hit him in the head.

He didn't know what it was, but he knew it was bad. He could feel his warm blood sliding down his face, a lot of it. His thoughts automatically turned to what had happened. His first thought was that one of the swim-line buoys had knocked him in the head. Sometimes if there were swells, they could move up and down with some force and he did make a point to maintain some distance from them. But still, they were just little plastic balls, they might hurt a bit, but gash his head open?

He brought a hand to his neck and held it in front of his eyes. Blood poured from his fingers. He took his other, blood free hand and swiped it across his forehead and it, too, came away smeared with crimson.

That's when he heard the first cries. "Shark!"

His skin began to crawl, his limbs felt paralyzed but he knew he must not be because he was still keeping himself afloat in a swimming position. He also knew his blood would attract sharks. He opened his mouth to call for his wife again. He saw her, only a few strokes ahead. She was calling his name now, and looking terrified beyond belief.

"Harry, look out! It's behind you!"

Shock was setting in for the elderly man, and he was slow to react. By the time he turned around, he saw a massive shape that he mistook for a small boat (*did I get hit by the propeller?*). But even to his unsettled mind, it seemed strange that this boat came up from the depths rather than plowed along on the surface. *Maybe it's sinking after it hit me?* These strange semi-logical thoughts plagued him until it was too late.

Harry was turning around when he was hit again. This time, the force was greater than before and again, focused on his head. He didn't see what hit him. One second, he was in full panic mode wondering what was happening, what to do. The next, he was dead.

About a half dozen swimmers who hadn't yet reached the swim line turned around and headed back to the beach at the sight of the attack. Those at the front of the pack, including Chancy, stopped and treaded water, but were too far away to help. Harry's wife and two men who had been not far in front of her swam back to help. She got there first, was the first to reach the body, although she didn't yet know he was dead.

"Harry! Harry, I've got you, c'mon, let's get you back to the beach." Concerned he was face down in the water for who knew how long, she scooped an arm under his left shoulder and flipped him over. Suddenly, she felt her husband's body move sharply away from her. She gripped him by the arm but continued to pull away, like she was in a tug of war with an unseen force. The man who had been right in front of her while swimming now reached her and grabbed onto Harry's other arm. "Flip over, the other way!" He indicated Harry's right side.

"Something's pulling on him."

"Three, two, one, now!" Harry's wife pushed and the newcomer pulled, and together they felt the body pull free of whatever had been holding it. A fresh cloud of blood stained the water as it flipped over.

"He's got some bad gashes along his side," the male swimmer said. "We've got to get him to—"

Harry's wife shrieked, a bloodcurdling vent of emotions that had people turning heads on the beach.

Harry had no head.

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*Coconut Grove, Miami*

Dr. Mason Rayman stared listlessly at his TV while he sat on his couch with a microwave dinner untouched on the coffee table. A bachelor in his mid-thirties who'd never married, with no kids, he'd given his life to his career, which had now come to a screeching halt. He took another pull from his imported European microbrew (*going to have to switch to domestic cans soon*) as the local news started up with its hyper theme music.

*Breaking news: loser scientist gets funding cut, has no job, no family*, he thought sourly.

He drifted off into unpleasant thoughts about all the things he'd have to do in the near future—find a new job, transfer his 401k, maybe apply for unemployment, while he ate his dinner without tasting it. Maybe he'd even have to move somewhere else and apply to a school that would let him teach *Jesus*. He'd always been a researcher and didn't know how he would think of himself if he did something else. It just didn't seem right.

Lost in these unpleasant thoughts while crushing his bland food into submission, it was some time before Rayman glanced up at the TV. When he did, the screen was filled with a beach scene, where a crowd stood on the wet sand by water's edge. An elderly woman sobbed with her face in her hands, the hands of those consoling her on her shoulders while men wearing jackets emblazoned with *Medicine Examiner* on the back loaded a sheeted corpse into an official vehicle. On screen, the live shot peeled away to a studio reporter, a Hispanic brunette with shoulder-length wavy hair and the fashionable conscious outfits common to Miami television news.

"Let's break away now from that live scene on Crandon Park Beach, where a Miami-area resident is confirmed dead from a suspected shark attack. A warning to younger or sensitive viewers, the footage you're about to see, shot earlier today on Key Biscayne, is graphic in nature."

Rayman set down his fork and focused on the screen. *Look at this, someone's having a worse day than me, who would have thought?*

The tape ran on screen and Rayman actually reared back in his seat as he processed what he was looking at. *Wow, TV stations are really pushing the limits of what they'll show in the name of ratings. Never would have seen this level of detail when I was a kid.* The point of view was from a shoulder camera, shaky while the cameraman moved to frame his shot. The pale, thin body lay in the wet sand on its stomach, still within reach of the water lapping onto shore. Rayman squinted as he looked at the figure. Something about it just wasn't right, it was as though the head were buried in the sand...

Then the camera angle shifted and it became clear the victim no longer possessed a head. It was missing altogether. *What the—*Rayman stood and walked closer to the TV. He never was much of a TV watcher and the screen was small. *Won't be upgrading to a larger one anytime sooner, either.* He stood a couple of feet in front of the set and studied the body while a male reporter provided a voice over from off camera.

"The victim, Harry Olivera of Miami Heights, was pulled from the water this afternoon while participating in an ocean distance swim as part of a Miami Beach Silver Swim Club event. His wife reported that he was swimming along without problems shortly after the swim began, but suddenly called for help. Soon after that, he disappeared below the water for a short time, and then blood was seen in the water along with a large shark. The type of shark has not yet been identified."

The camera zoomed in on the corpse and panned along its bloody length. Rayman sucked in his

breath as he realized that, in addition to completely missing the head, the body featured a series long and deep slash-like wounds along the torso. He unconsciously stroked the stubble on his chin—he liked to keep himself smooth shaven to avoid showing his gray hairs—he had enough on his head already, didn't need them on his face, too—while he studied the injuries.

*Shark?* His face took on a doubting expression while he gazed at the macabre scene of death. Those wounds didn't look like the shark attack bites he'd seen in person, although even on his little HD TV the level of detail offered by the live shot was simply not there. There were triangular cuts, but the teeth would have to be ridiculously massive for it to be a shark, and the distance between tooth tips was all wrong. No, this was more like...chainsaw injuries. Maybe this guy fell asleep on the beach and was run over by a sand grader? It had been known to happen. Yet the eyewitness testimony from several persons attests that he was definitely in the water and was attacked there, in a shallow, sandy area just off the beach, by a creature thought to be a shark.

*So what caused those injuries?* Rayman rubbed his face as he considered it while the camera angle expanded to show the entire corpse. The news footage didn't offer any real detail, but it looked at least superficially like a chainsaw type bite... Not a *bite*, per se, though, but a series of slashing wounds. With a saw. But not a chainsaw... a *sawfish*. And then he had to kneel on the floor when the possibility hit him.

To Rayman's considerable knowledge, sawfish were not known to attack humans. Not a single documented attack existed so far as he knew. A sawfish caught fishing and hauled into a boat was known to pose a danger as it thrashed around, certainly, but an in-water attack on a human, like a shark attack? Unheard of. Nevertheless, sawfish *could* cause wounds like that, couldn't they? Theoretically, they were capable of it. He nodded to himself and stared down at his wounded hand. The news broadcast cut away from the tape of the victim back to the newscaster in the studio, but Rayman was no longer listening.

*What if the experimental procedures had somehow modified its behavior?* He doubted it. Even if they were true, a normal adult sawfish of the Atlantic Smalltooth variety wouldn't leave such massive gaping wounds. It was highly likely that this man would have died from the slash wounds to his torso alone, even if his head hadn't been removed.

The marine biologist mentally pictured a dead whale being attacked by a sawfish that he had witnessed while scuba diving. The way it slashed and tore at the thick hide with that natural weapon—the saw. The ragged but orderly gashes it left...like a chainsaw. The jagged ripping pattern was similar to what he'd seen on the news video, but he'd have to get a closer view to be certain.

He flashed on his struggles with his recently released specimen, number twelve. He watched it in his mind as it slithered over the edge of the pier into the water of Biscayne Bay and swam away. Was it large enough to produce these kinds of wounds? Perhaps. And then, as the news story ended altogether, switching to a piece about a drug-crazed homeless man biting another's face on the side of the road in Miami, Rayman had a most disturbing thought indeed.

*Maybe it wasn't large enough the last time I saw it. But what if it kept growing after I released it? What if it's still growing? It's not like I had ample time to study the effects of this gigantism.*

He thought about going to city authorities with what he knew, so they could at least consider looking for a sawfish instead of a shark, but that wouldn't exactly be good for him, would it? He was the one who had not only created the sawfish, if that's what was responsible for this, but had released it, too. Besides, he mused, now turning off the TV altogether before sitting down to the rest of his cold dinner.

*It's not my job anymore.*

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5:45 A.M. Next day, Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park

Surfcasting. It was a type of saltwater fishing where practitioners waded into the ocean surf in order to cast their lines far out into the waves hoping for a big fish. Paul Matheson had been doing this when he could for the better span of four decades. Now retired after a successful career as a long-haul trucker, he and his wife had settled in South Florida to enjoy their golden years in a retirement community populated with fellow seniors. A couple of them were Paul's on-again, off-again fishing buddies, but if he couldn't find anyone to go with him, he would go alone. He couldn't even count the hours he'd spent dreaming about fishing from the confines of his cab on some lonely Midwestern highway, and now that he finally had the chance to go pretty much whenever he wanted, he was going to go, alone or not.

Especially on a weekday, which he now preferred to weekends when it was more crowded. At this early hour, he was the only soul on the beach. He tried the odd Saturday or Sunday and found it over-crowded with a litany of other fishermen vying for the best spots, while swimmers, beach exercisers and even scuba divers all used the beach in their own way. The fishermen always got the dirtiest looks. No one wanted to get hooked in the water, no one wanted the fearsome ocean predators they imagined were attracted to the bait cast into the sea. So he concentrated on weekdays, when, if he went early enough, he might have this scenic stretch of beach with only the automated lighthouse on the point to keep him company.

Paul bent down and scooped a live baitfish from a five-gallon bucket fitted with an aerator to supply oxygen. He hooked the mullet, a large one about a foot long, through the mouth, knowing that most predators attacked their prey head on. Then he waded out into the gentle surf. The water was clear and it was high tide, which he preferred to low tide because it meant he had a shorter distance to walk to get into deep water, and also that the fish would be brought in by the currents.

The hip waders he wore prevented the water from coming into contact with his skin, but he knew it was warm. He waded out further, shuffling his feet to prevent stepping on a stingray. Better to nudge them out of the way than to come right down on them and get the stinger as it whipped up in fear and surprise.

By the time he was waist deep, he was past the churning surf and the water was nice and clear. He grinned at a school of baitfish flitting about, some of their number jumping out of the water a few feet from him. *Always a good sign to see signs of life like that. Where there are little fish, there are big fish.*

Paul cast his line further out into the sea. Although he couldn't see it, he imagined his hooked mullet sinking slowly to the bottom, stunned from flying through the air during the cast and slapping the water, and probably only just now starting to swim, a few inches above the sandy bottom. Slowly at first, he began turning the crank on his reel, feeling the tension as the line took up on the spool. Then he got into a rhythm, smoothly winding in monofilament at a faster pace, visualizing his bait thrashing around on the hook.

He had that feeling again, the one where his inner sense told him something was about to hit the line. He didn't know what that sense was, how to define it, really, but it was almost always right. After decades of fishing, he'd learned to recognize it. Sure enough, not three seconds later, he felt the

familiar tug—tentative at first while the fish picked at the bait, before switching to a full-on tug war as the fish swallowed the offering and ran with it.

Paul jerked back on the rod hard, setting the hook. As he did, he got his first look at what he hoped would be his first catch of the morning, as a large silver fish launched itself into the air about fifty feet from him.

Tarpon!

He hadn't really been expecting to hook one of those, but they were one of the most famous sport fish in South Florida waters, well respected not for their value on the dinner plate but for the incredible aerial fight they put up when hooked. Also known as the Silver King, a tarpon preferred shallow, sandy water such as sandbars. Paul knew right away that this fish was something special. Very large, even for a tarpon, when he saw it leap from the water for the first time it took his breath away. Had to be pushing 100 pounds. A monster fish, nearly six feet long. The retired trucker knew he was in for one hell of a fight.

*You're too old for this thing... Come on, you can do it. This'd be your biggest Silver King yet. Wait till the guys back at the club see this trophy...*

He settled in to the battle, letting out some more line, giving the fish room to run while it still had all of its stores of raw energy. Paul walked a little further out to sea, until the water reached his waist. *That's enough. Any deeper and the reel will be underwater.*

The tarpon leapt again, a low dash just over the surface of the water this time, straight out in front of him. And then, only a few seconds later, a grand vertical jump, water cascading off the fish's body in the morning sunlight as it reached for the sky. *Wow, he's really going crazy, never seen one do—*

Suddenly, the water darkened in front of Paul, like a shadow blanketing the day, only the sun was still visible on its morning rise. A massive shape rose from the water. Paul had trouble processing what he was looking at, but saw teeth, lots of them, an expanse of grey, and then his tarpon falling back to the water only to disappear into the goliath form, which itself fell back into the water, still moving fast.

Paul felt his fishing line snap and go limp in his hands. It wasn't the first time he'd had a bigger fish eat a fish that had been on his line. One time, he was reeling in a yellowtail snapper only to have a small hammerhead shark rip the fish off the hook. But this...it was unimaginable, he'd never seen anything like it. So immense, he had a hard time making sense of it, but there was no time to reflect on it because suddenly it was coming at him, preceded by a sizable swell of water being pushed ahead of it as it moved.

Paul dropped his rod, turned and "ran" towards shore, but one couldn't really run in waist deep water wearing hip waders. He just sort of hopped along as fast as he could, the water becoming shallower at a frustratingly slow rate. He was looking up onto the beach to see if anyone was there who saw what was unfolding, but there was only a lone figure practicing yoga almost a hundred yards away. Then his right foot landed in a depression in the sand and he went down, his floppy fishing hat coming off and floating away when his head splashed into the water.

*Get up, you old fool!* Paul pushed hard off the bottom with both hands until he could spring to his feet. He knew he should keep moving toward the beach, but he could feel water raining down on him from above, and a large wave pushing against him. He spun to look behind him and an enormous flat-bladed club slammed into the side of his face, severing his left ear. He felt the warmth of his blood for a split second before it was washed away when he fell sideways into the water again.

His eyes were still open but everything grew dark and then he felt himself being lifted up, thrown into the air like some kind of toy, until he splashed back into the waves again. Something closed over him, it was all happening so fast that he couldn't get it to gel in his mind what it meant, but then he felt horrible pain as multiple flat molar-like teeth crushed his body in myriad places.

Paul Matheson had lured his last fish.

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*Virginia Key*

Rayman parked his red Ferrari 308, the vanity plate reading ICHTHY, in the space outside the lab the one that was usually never available. He wondered if that was because today was his last day and they wanted him to be able to carry out his stuff quickly. Bastards. He left the trunk open as a show of goodwill to anyone who might be watching that he was indeed preparing to clear out, grabbed a couple of empty cardboard boxes, and then stepped into the lab building. *Last time I'll be going through the door.*

Inside, he went straight to his office rather than the actual lab, since that's where he had most of his personal effects. He sighed heavily as he looked around at the well-used room. It was an old building and he could practically feel the toil that had gone on here, not just from his own years, but from the decades of those who had come before him. And the room would go on supporting more work, he knew. Someone would be moving in here shortly after he left, he didn't know who, but they'd find somebody.

He started with the obvious, the personal photos on the desk and wall. A shot of him scuba diving to collect samples, another of him with an old girlfriend in front of some pyramid in Mexico. He framed diplomas. He stashed those in a box and moved onto the desk itself (*all these pens are mine damn it*)... My old Swingline stapler—*metal, not the cheap plastic crap they hand out these days that's coming with me.* So on and so forth it went. He was surprised at how much stuff he had accumulated over the years, and by how hard it was to walk away from it all. He could just leave it for them to deal with, but he actually wanted some of this stuff. He busied himself with filling his boxes and a few minutes later failed to hear the footsteps approaching his door until he heard the voice.

#

“Excuse me? Dr. Rayman?” Elisa Gonzales rapped softly on the closed office door, the one that led from the lab, not from the outside. She'd heard Rayman come in and considered that he may be pretending not to hear her. It was his last day, after all, and so who knows what he might do. But probably he would just be trying to slink out of here. Or, maybe he was trashing the place, who knew. She saw him chuck that big fish right into the ocean, got it on cell-phone video, even—*oh my God and then the attacks started!* Her hand froze in midair over the door as the realization consumed her those news reports—first one yesterday and then one this morning already. She hadn't paid all that much attention to them, but knew they involved people dying at the local beaches after being attacked by some kind of sea creature, probably a shark. But what if it wasn't a shark? *Could it be?*

She called his name again and this time heard him walk to the door. He opened it and smiled the thin, fake grin of his he seemed to reserve for anyone who hadn't won a Nobel Prize, but especially for a lowly admin worker like herself. She usually enjoyed working for the university, helping professors and researchers with the non-science aspects of their work so they could focus, but Rayman was always a condescending jerk. It was for that reason Elisa didn't feel quite as bad as she normally would when someone unexpectedly lost their job.

Suddenly, the door opened and she had to go from thinking about Rayman to talking to him.

“Hi, Elisa. Clearing my stuff out. Almost done.” Rayman turned his back on her and resumed rifling through the desk drawers.

She cleared her throat as she walked into the room. “Dr. Rayman...” He still didn’t look up from what he was doing. ~~The bastard wouldn’t even give her the courtesy of eye contact on his last day.~~ Figured. *What comes around, Dr. Rayman, what comes around...*

He paused suddenly and looked up at her. “Do you need something? I signed the exit paper already, right?”

*Wow. True to form right ‘til the end.* She sighed, making no effort to hide her exasperation. In fact she made no effort to even be friendly anymore. Why should she? It was his last day. She didn’t like him. He was an ass. *Let him have it.* “They want me to take this office after you leave, so I was just checking to see how much longer it’s going to be. Also, I need you to turn in your keys and sign here.” She handed him a form saying that he had relinquished his keys.

The narrowing of Rayman’s eyes was short lived yet immensely satisfying to Elisa. He pulled the keys out of a drawer—clearly he’d already separated them from his personal ones—and handed them to her.

“You’re going to be working in here?” He signed the form without reading it and shoved it back at her.

She nodded. “That’s what the powers that be tell me.” Meaning the Institute. Deal with it.

Rayman shrugged and glanced around the smallish space. “Where? I don’t see how there’s room for two desks in here.”

“There isn’t going to be two desks in here.”

“Well then where—?”

She understood. All of a sudden, she put herself in the mindset of this pompous bastard and there was... *He thinks I meant that they’re going to cram me in here to share space with whichever researcher moves in next. Try not to gloat too hard.* “They’re not putting me in here with someone else. Just me by myself.”

Rayman appeared confused. He tossed some books into one of his boxes and then straightened up, finally giving her his undivided attention. “You mean this is going to be your office now—all yours?”

She nodded. “Space is short and they have me taking care of more and more people all the time. *Thankfully, not you anymore.*”

Rayman wagged his head back and forth. “Premium research space with direct ocean access going to admin staff. Makes a lot of sense. Looks like I’m getting out at the right time.” He went back to packing.

Elisa felt the fury well up inside her and knew she was going to lose this battle with her inner Zeke. She supposed that part of the reason he was mad was that he was partially right. Who was she but a pawn to be moved around by the Institute as they saw fit? The truth was that they had already told her this would be a temporary location for her, until the search for Rayman’s replacement was complete. That could take a few months, but still. And it wasn’t like she was making lots of money, like Rayman and some of these guys. Miami wasn’t a cheap place to live, and her modest salary didn’t go very far at all as a single mom. Rayman had only himself to worry about. Sure, he had earned his degrees and worked his way up, she understood that, but to be so callous and rude about it just rubbed her the wrong way. Today, especially.

She pulled the phone from her pocket, swiped up the video she’d taken and held the phone out toward him with it playing. “So I saw on the news last night that a swimmer was killed by a big fish.”

He nodded without turning around. “Shark is what they think, yeah.”

“And then this morning there was another suspected *shark* attack, also in Biscayne Bay.”

At this, Rayman turned around. “This morning, you say?”

She nodded and took a step closer to him, holding the phone out. His eyes narrowed for a second but he stepped closer. “That the news report from this morning?”

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