Henry and Tom Excerpt

Chapter Two

Earlier that morning while Tom and Sydney were still sleeping, two sperm whales, a cow and her calf, were swimming close to the surface five miles to the west of Pacific Beach. Out to sea there was no fog, so the night was warm and clear. The full moon was illuminating the calm water. They were not moving towards any specific destination. Their pod, three other cows and two more calves, traveled up and down the California and Mexican coasts year-round.

Food was plentiful in the area. Large squid could be found in abundance in deeper waters. Fish of many varieties as well as octopus and skates could be taken closer to shore. The cows had no enemies here and the calves were rapidly reaching the size where even the largest sharks and orcas were no threat to them.

The cow communicated with her calf and sister whales by clicking. The pod's coda (group of clicks) was unique both in terms of its language and its messages, which represented objects, information and actions pertinent to the whales. Their eyesight was very poor and used only for short distance object recognition. The whales used echolocation to scan and interpret their ocean environment.

The whales could hear the whishing sound of objects traveling on the surface of the water moving towards them. They were accustomed to encountering these objects and sounds. The whales knew that the small creatures that lived on land used these objects to carry themselves over the waves.

There was, in the collective memory of the pod, a notion that these land creatures that moved on top of the water could be dangerous, even a predator, but it had been a very long time since any whale in these waters was attacked by these creatures. In fact, the whales had recent memories and thoughts about these land animals being very curious about them. Especially when the sun was at its highest point in the sky, smaller floating objects with many land creatures in them could often be found sitting still on the surface as the whales swam by.

The mother cow clicked to her calf. They would not be joining the rest of the pod as they dove to feed. For now, they were content to swim along at a slow but steady pace. They would rejoin the rest of the pod after a period of time.

The U.S. Navy had three surface ships in the area on maneuvers, all cruisers. Their mission was to test the latest mid-frequency sonar. Active sonar, the method the Navy had used for decades to detect and track submarines, now had insufficient range. Especially when used at levels above 235 decibels, the new mid-frequency sonar was proving to be highly effective at finding and tracking nuclear submarines.

Somewhere in the general area a Navy attack sub was running silent and deep. When the exercises began, the cruisers' job was to use their new sonar to find and track the sub.

The sound made by a Saturn V rocket taking off is around 235 decibels. Sperm whales can also produce sounds of this magnitude and often do when communicating with other whales over long distances. Within and across pods, sperm whales have a system of ethics that they strictly adhere to regarding echolocation. Unless there is sufficient separation, a sperm whale will not blast

another sperm whale with a deafening coda. If the whales did not practice these self-restrictions when broadcasting their clicks they could easily deafen or otherwise injure each other, especially their calves.

The water was relatively quiet as the cruisers approached the cow and calf. Off in the distance the cow could hear her sisters sounding as they dove, but their clicks were faint. The cow could tell that the objects that moved on the surface were getting closer to them, so she stopped and signaled her calf to stop as well. They were hovering twenty feet or so beneath the surface.

Without warning, a cruiser let loose a blast of sound in excess of 250 decibels. They were beginning their exercise. After a few seconds interval, a second cruiser released another deafening ping. The third cruiser followed up with a third sonar burst.

The cow had no warning that she was about to be hit by these sound waves. She was two hundred yards away from the first cruiser when the sonar blasted her. The calf, because he was swimming closely by her side away from the ships, was shielded a bit from the sound, but he was also stunned. The cow stopped moving and slowly floated to the surface. The lead cruiser was headed straight for her.

For whatever reason, perhaps due to the dim pre-dawn lighting, the first cruiser did not see or otherwise detect the whale's presence. The cow was regaining some of her senses and while she could not move quickly enough to avoid getting struck by the ship, she was able to shove her calf away at the last second. The cruiser's bow struck the cow mid-body, opening up a terrible gash. Then the propellers ripped another hole in her on the top of her head. The calf was still stunned from the sonar blasts, but he was not hit by the ship.

The ships immediately stopped. The cow floated to the surface; she was deafened and severely injured. The calf sent out his codas to his mother, but she did not respond at first. Bright lights coming from the objects that were floating on the surface now lit up the ocean all around the whales. The calf could see blood flowing from his mother into the water – the sea all around him was turning red. Slowly, the calf was regaining his hearing.

Time passed as the objects on top of the water circled the whales. The cow gradually regained some of her senses and signaled to her calf. The calf responded by nudging his mother, encouraging her to swim. But the cow was mortally injured. While she could move to a small degree, she would never swim again.

When the light was about to rise in the sky the objects on top of the water left the area. The cow was losing a great deal of blood and the blood trail now extended for half a mile. She sent out a repeating set of codas to her calf and nudged him away from her. The calf responded to these nudges by moving closer to his mother, not farther away.

After a period of time and extensive clicking by the cow, the calf eventually moved off to a position a hundred feet or so beneath her. He then let out a series of loud codas directed towards the depths and to the west of their position. He was signaling to the pod. He signaled once more, then again. He heard nothing in return.

When the calf swam back up to rejoin his mother, three Great White sharks were circling the cow and posturing for attack. The first shark tore into the cow near her mid-body injury, removing a large hunk of flesh. Then the second bit the cow near the same wound. The third joined in the feeding frenzy.

The cow was sending out codas in rapid succession – the same message over and over. The calf was receiving the message, but he was not responding. The sharks continued to rip into the cow. All the calf could do was to watch the horror helplessly from below.

Suddenly two more Great Whites showed up. They bit the cow from the opposite side, as if to avoid conflict with the other three sharks. The mother whale let out a very loud series of sound blasts as if she was screaming at her calf, imploring him to do something.

As the calf hovered, he felt a sharp pain in his fluke. Reacting, he turned in the water and saw a Great White right behind him. The shark had just taken a chunk out of his tail. Another Great White joined the first and began to circle the calf.

The calf suddenly turned east and swam as fast he could. He was sending out codas as he swam. Two of the Great Whites pursued him. As the calf headed east, he could see the light penetrating the water just above him. His fluke was bleeding profusely, which kept the sharks engaged.

Because the calf had a head start, he was able to keep in front of the pursuing sharks. He could still hear his mother calling out, but her sounds were growing faint. Her message was the same, however. Her coda had not changed. The calf was moving at near top speed, twenty miles per hour, and the sharks were no more than thirty yards behind him.

The sea was rapidly getting shallow. The calf knew that the water eventually ended and land began. To get so close to shore was dangerous, but the sharks were still in hot pursuit.

The calf was in a panic, completely traumatized by watching his mother get struck by a ship and attacked by the sharks. He did not slow down until he could swim no more because now he was stranded on the beach.