

LAND OF THE GREAT WHITE CLOUD

Elke Bartlett

Lexa Harvey-Smith didn't care for politics until it was almost too late. She was a marine biologist by trade, spending most of her days and some nights in the Cook Strait in a little boat named Hector. Even environmental lobbying and policy-making didn't interest her, and she'd never be caught dead using social media. Hector had satellite internet, but only for when her species manual failed her. When the prime minister Andrew Matlock asked to take a short trip in her boat as a publicity stunt she had to google who he was. She suspected she was only chosen because a pretty young woman came off better on the news than some grimy old guy who looked like he'd as likely sexually harass a dolphin as do any meaningful scientific research. Still, she agreed, but only because they were paying above her hourly rate.

The day of, Lexa, Matlock, a nervous little camera-bearing intern, and a tub of fish guts boarded her boat. She didn't intend on letting the day go all to waste, so she'd still be getting some of her shark research done. Most were microchipped by then, so Hector displayed a live tracker of their locations. She was pleased to see that an unusual number of Great Whites had gathered in the Cook Strait that day, all the better to collect data on. She pointed this out to the intern, whose eyes grew even wider. Matlock didn't much appreciate it either.

The trip was underway. Lexa stood at Hector's bow, her heels slightly lifted. She faced the wind, her few untied strands of hair blowing backwards. The tips of waves lifted and sprayed her face, only to be dried by the midday sun. She felt like she was weightless. Matlock too stood nearby, though less exposed. But the little intern was still hiding in the cabin. He too, she thought, should experience this joy.

"Hey sharkbait!" She yelled, "Come take a gander at this view!"

He didn't say a word, just looked through the cabin window with fearful eyes and shook his head.

Half an hour in, the camera came on and Matlock launched into his spiel. Apparently National would balance prioritising the interests of businesses with conservation. Lexa was hiding in Hector's cabin as she'd been unable to hold back her contempt on the first two takes. So much for looking good on the news. She re-checked the shark meter. And again, in case it was broken. She couldn't believe it: every Great White shark nearby was racing towards the boat! They'd be there in less than five minutes! For a second, she wondered if the boat was attracting them; had the fish guts spilled? But no— no Great White would swim so fast for longer than a short burst by choice. Something was making them swim like this. The microchips? She knew it was possible— she herself had hacked them just a few months ago, just to see if she could. Not that she'd ever actually use such a power— and if anyone else found out it could be devastating for the species. She'd even emailed the deputy prime minister to let him know— but clearly nothing had been done about it. What was she to do?

"Matlock! Sharkbait! Stop filming and get in here now! In one minute I will start the boat at top speed and if you're on the deck when that happens you will die out here!" Annoyed as they were at their best take so far being interrupted, the seriousness in her voice convinced them. Thirty seconds later, the boat took off. Lexa skittered around. She took photographs of the shark syzygy on the sonar map— the sharks only three minutes away now—, the email sent to the

deputy, an explanation of how unlikely co-discovery of the microchip hack would be. She turned on the satellite internet. “Andrew, I need to use your phone.”

“What for? Use your own!”

“I need to call the deputy prime minister. He’s the only one who might be able to stop the sharks. And they’re after you. Look!” She pointed at the sonar map, showing the sharks now barely two minutes from the ship. “So you can hand over your phone, or we’ll have no choice but to throw you overboard to sate their appetites.” Reluctantly, he gave it to her. The intern leaned over and vomited into the fish guts.

Bruce Wardeth reclined in the Prime Minister chair, quite pleased with himself. In the wake of prime minister Andrew Matlock’s tragic death in the maw of several Great White sharks, he would benevolently guide New Zealand into a new era. His administration would not be remembered for the tragedy with which it began, but with the unheard-of success of its first-time Prime Minister. He didn’t want to have to kill Matlock, but he knew otherwise he’d never get a chance to prove himself. National just didn’t appreciate his genius. His phone rang—Matlock!

“Bruce Wardeth speaking.”

“Bruce, I have a folder full of evidence that you’ve sent those sharks to kill the Prime Minister and satellite internet. Unless you call the sharks off, I’ll send it all to every newspaper in the country. You’ll be arrested.” What the fuck? This was not what he had planned. But he tried to keep a cool demeanour.

“Please. There’s no way you have nearly enough evidence.”

“I have the emails you sent me. Simultaneous discovery is highly unlikely.” Lexa’s voice remained measured even as she glanced, panicked, towards the map. 45 seconds till a Great White apocalypse.

“That’s hardly proof— if you even have that! I reckon— well—”

“Even the accusation will destroy your career. You’ll never be prime minister.” *30 seconds.*

The intern screamed: “I see the sharks!”

“Your threats don’t work on me.” *15 seconds.*

“Fine. I’ll send it then. Three, two, one—”

“Wait!”

“Yes?”

“Fine. I’ll call them off. But if I see you’ve posted it they’re coming straight back.” It wasn’t over yet, Bruce thought. He might still get another chance to rule.

“Deal.” Lexa ran to look out onto the sea. In the water, the shark fins turned and sunk beneath the waves, though their ripples still spread out across the surface.