

The Shark Club (Random House Large Print)

By Ann Kidd Taylor

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“A quintessential summer read.” —*Marie Claire*

A warm and wonderfully vivid novel about taking second chances—in life and in the sea

One summer day on the beach in Florida, two extraordinary things happen to Maeve Donnelly. First, she is kissed by Daniel, the boy of her dreams. Then, she is bitten by a blacktip shark.

Eighteen years later, Maeve has thrown herself into her work as a world-traveling marine biologist discovering more about the minds of misunderstood sharks. But when Maeve returns home to the legendarily charming and eccentric Hotel of the Muses where she was raised by her grandmother, she finds more than just the blood orange sunsets and key lime pies she’s missed waiting for her.

While Maeve has always been fearless in the water, on land she is indecisive. A chance meeting on the beach with a plucky, irresistible little girl who is just as fascinated by the ocean as Maeve was growing up leaves her at a crossroads: Should she re-ignite her romance with Daniel, the first love she left behind when she dove into her work? Or indulge in a new romance with her colleague, Nicholas, who turns up in her hometown to investigate an illegal shark-finning operation?

Set against the intoxicating backdrop of palm trees, calypso bands, and perfect ocean views, *The Shark Club* is a story of the mysterious passions of one woman’s life: her first love and new love; the sea and sharks that inhabit it.

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The Shark Club (Random House Large Print) By Ann Kidd Taylor Bibliography

- Rank: #478710 in Books
- Brand: Taylor Ann Kidd
- Published on: 2017-06-06
- Released on: 2017-06-06
- Format: Large Print
- Original language: English
- Dimensions: 9.10" h x 1.00" w x 6.00" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Named a PopSugar summer read

Bustle, “10 New Books To Pack On Your Vacation This Summer”

Named a *Southern Living* summer read

Refinery29, “Favorite Books of 2017”

***Coastal Living*, “50 Best Books for the Beach This Summer”**

***Marie Claire*, “8 New Page-Turners to Pack in Your Beach Bag This Summer”**

PureWow, “The Best Beach Reads of Summer”

“This one’s a quintessential summer read: It’s based in the Gulf of Mexico so even if you’re only sunning at your local beach, you can still daydream of palm trees and pristine waters.” —*Marie Claire*

“A spellbinding meditation on one woman’s unresolved past . . . Consider it required summer reading for anyone still tangled in the tricky project of growing-up.” —**Refinery29**

“A delicious summer read.” —*Redbook*

“The beautiful descriptions of life under the sea will make you want to take a scuba diving class ASAP.” —*Fodor’s Travel*

“Captivating . . . An engaging novel about the loves that define our lives.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“With humor and surprises, *The Shark Club* moves along briskly as Maeve struggles to forgive, let go of past love, and navigate happiness on her own terms.” —*Booklist*

“A real beach read . . . [Taylor] brings a wealth of sharply observed detail to this novel, from the right way to make key lime pie to the joys of dealing with tourists.” —*Tampa Bay Times*

“A highly-readable mix of marine science and romance, set on the picturesque beaches of South Florida.” —*Birmingham Magazine*

“A great summer read whether you’re on the beach or just wish you were.” —*Charleston Gazette-Mail*

“*The Shark Club* is a captivating story of love and loss, and a beautiful ode to the ocean and those whose hearts are drawn to it. Ann Kidd Taylor—and her novel’s heroine, Maeve—understand the many sublime mysteries of sharks, and how deeply their fate is connected to our own.” —**Susan Casey, author of *The Devil’s Teeth: A True Story of Obsession and Survival Among America’s Great White Sharks***

About the Author

Ann Kidd Taylor is the coauthor of the *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Traveling with Pomegranates*. She lives in Florida with her husband and son.

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This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected copy proof

One

Tucking away a long strand of hair that floated in front of my scuba mask, I kicked through the blue-green waters of Bimini on the last day of my research term, keeping watch for Sylvia, a five-foot, four-year-old lemon shark I'd named for oceanographer Sylvia Earle. The shards of sunlight that pierced the water earlier had started to wane, leaving the surface brushed with shadows, and I glanced nervously at Nicholas, my dive partner, then checked my watch. We should have seen her by now. Just beyond her juvenile years, Sylvia had begun venturing outside the protective nursery mangroves where she was born, a habit that worried me, but one I also admired.

Back on the small island off southwest Florida where I lived and worked as a marine scientist, they called me Maeve, the shark whisperer. It implied I could somehow get close to these apex predators, even tame them, which was, of course, a fatal kind of lunacy. The nickname had caught on even here at the Marine Field Lab in Bimini, where I'd spent the last six months tagging lemon sharks with passive integrated transponders, then tracking, collecting DNA on, photographing, and cataloguing them morning, noon, and night. I'd monitored close to a hundred of them, but Sylvia was the one I'd grown fond of.

She had a funny habit of scooping up small bits of fish left behind after she'd bitten and gulped them down, as if she couldn't stand for anything to go to waste. Her frugality not only amused me, it endeared her to me. I liked the way she rested on the bottom after the other lemons swam off, claiming a little extra lounge time for herself. Lazy girl. I could usually identify her before I found the scar on her second dorsal, shaped like an upside-down checkmark. She had often swum closer to me than was comfortable, though I knew that theoretically lemons were generally nonaggressive, and it was probably my imagination and not my science that gave me the odd feeling she recognized me as well.

"You two are simpatico," Nicholas had once remarked. He was only half joking.

It was June 12, 2006, my thirtieth birthday. I should have been back in my small room packing or cooking one of those god-awful cake mixes in the communal kitchen to pass around to the other scientists after dinner to at least acknowledge the occasion, but I hadn't wanted to leave Bimini without a farewell dive. Tomorrow morning, Nicholas and I would be on a short, chartered flight to Miami. From there, he would head to Sarasota and his stingrays. Originally from Twickenham, England, he'd come to the United States as a student fifteen years ago and, after a stint in London, ended up in Sarasota at the prestigious Southwest Florida Aquarium. He'd recently become their youngest director of Ray Research at thirty-five. He'd been here at the Field Lab for a ten-month sabbatical—longer than any of us; I could only imagine how eager the aquarium would be to have him back. Me, I would go back to the Gulf Marine Conservancy on Palermo and to my grandmother Perri's hotel, perched beside the Gulf of Mexico.

The Hotel of the Muses, where I'd grown up and where I still lived, was not your typical hotel on Palermo. While the rest of them were predictably nautical—seascapes over the beds, captain's wheels in the restaurants, aquariums in the lobbies—my grandmother's highbrow resort was overrun with books. Her hotel held readings and book talks in the lobby and had its own lending-library system with a trolley that went room to room along with the housekeeping cart. Every one of the eighty-two rooms was dedicated to an author whose work Perri admired—Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Octavio Paz, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Henry David Thoreau . . . The *Tampa Bay Times* had called it "the real buried treasure on the Gulf coast, a library hotel on Ecstasy." By summer's end I would leave all that "ecstasy" once again for whale shark research in Mozambique.

Whenever my research terms ended, everything I'd put aside and ignored—especially Daniel—inevitably returned, rushing in like tidewater to retake the shore. Already I could feel the past washing up: the last, stubborn image of Daniel the day we'd said goodbye, his back framed by the glare of Miami sun on the window, and then all the silence that followed. The memory returned more mercilessly this time. *Thirty*. What was it about that age? All the clocks ticked louder.

Swimming farther from the cobalt-blue bottom of our boat, Nicholas and I came upon a shower of tiny silver minnows glinting like nickels as they darted in unison. Earlier, a redmouth grouper had found Nicholas and me to be objects of fascination, drawn by the bubbles drifting from our tanks, coming so close I could see the inside of its mouth glowing orange. Among fish, as among humans, there seemed to be two basic schools: the venturesome and the cautious.

Nicholas pointed to a pair of southern stingrays sailing by like a scene from *Swan Lake*. The vibration of their wings rushed toward me, reverberating the way all sounds did beneath the sea, blurred and muffled, a strange, slow-motion percussion. Nicholas felt about rays, especially spotted eagle and giant mantas, the way I felt about sharks, and he snapped a picture just before they vanished.

Holding up his palm, he motioned for me to stop, and I thought for a moment he'd spotted the lemons, but he shook his head and shrugged, a signal for "the sharks aren't coming, our air is running out." After working together the last six months, we'd become adept at one another's body cues. I cocked my head to the side and held up five fingers. *Another few minutes?*

He gave me a thumbs-up and pointed to a crop of sea fans on the ocean floor. *Okay, but let's hang here.*

I nodded. I was going to miss him, and that was a surprise. It was always a surprise to miss someone other than Daniel.

As I drifted over the waving garden of fuchsia and pink fans, I watched a green moray eel partially lured out of its rocky home, while a diligent cleaner shrimp worked its magic on the eel's head. The eel looked ancient—wrinkled, scarred, and oddly serene. It was possible the two of us were the same age. Its mouth gaped open, then closed, over and over. "Ommms" only the sea creatures could hear.

When I used to imagine my life at thirty, I envisioned myself doing just what I was doing now, studying sharks. But I'd pictured myself as a mother, too, teaching my child to swim in the Gulf. Buckled up to his chin inside a life vest, my little boy would frogkick beneath clear, spearmint water. Sometimes the child was a girl, locks of wet, dark hair stuck to her cheeks. After swimming I imagined we would walk back to a small house with an orange tree in front, the branches drooping with fat, ripe fruit. I would shake the branches, then poke my thumb into the top of an orange like my dad had done for me. Sometimes he would carve out the top of it with his pocketknife, then etch an *M* for Maeve on the side. I always thought I would do the same for my little girl. She would drink from the orange like a cup. Daniel would be waiting for us in the kitchen, shuffling a pan of porcini mushrooms on the stove.

So far that dreamed-of future hadn't arrived. Maybe it still would—it's not like my thirties put me out of the running to be a mother. But at some point, if it was still just me and the sharks (thank God for the sharks), perhaps I would put the whole family thing to rest. I could be Aunt Maeve to any children my twin brother, Robin, might one day have, and I would marry the sea. A lot of people, including Robin, would say I already had.

If Sylvia was anywhere around she already knew Nicholas and I were here. In limited light, her eyes became stronger, and her sense of smell was ten thousand times better than mine. Rows of sensory cells running along each side of her body would already have detected changes in water pressure and sent the message to

her brain. As she drew closer, she would use receptors around her head and snout to pick up the electrical field emitted from my heartbeat and brain activity, a kind of GPS that allowed sharks to cross oceans by following the Earth's magnetic field. Whereas Nicholas and I were reduced to hand signals and air tanks, Sylvia was magnificently equipped.

Suddenly the eel withdrew into its nook, jerking quickly like a snapped rubber band. I tensed, alert to the fish darting frantically upward. I turned a slow pirouette, noticing Nicholas doing the same, aware of how small we seemed in the vastness of the Atlantic. Taking a few measured breaths, I listened to the crackle in my regulator and stared into the distance, where the water settled into a trio of shades like a Rothko painting—indigo, violet, and near the surface, pale green.

The shark emerged through the swathes of color, its tail waving back and forth with the hypnotic swing of a pocket watch. I placed a vertical hand atop my head, our signal for shark, doing so almost simultaneously with Nicholas.

As the shark neared, I spotted the scar on its second dorsal fin, the scuffed-up snout. Sylvia.

She wasn't alone. A second, then a third shark appeared behind her—Captain and Jacques, two other lemons in my research.

Nicholas and I watched them without moving. How many times had I been suspended beneath the water just like this as a shark approached? But it always felt like the first time. Sylvia swam toward me, part ballerina, part stealth missile. My adrenaline spiked, and I caught myself holding my breath. It had only been for a second, but even rookies knew that departing from the steady rhythm of inhaling and exhaling was a bad idea and could cause a dangerous expansion of air pressure in the lungs while ascending. Unraveling the knot of air in my throat, I slowly exhaled and began to photograph her long, elegant body, her skin the color of sandpaper. As she passed me, though, the hand holding my camera fell to my side, and I did something I'd never done before. I swam alongside her.

Trailing a respectful distance beside her pectoral fins, I could feel the sheer force of her in the water. The sound her movement made was like thunder coming from far away, yet I felt it shuddering against me. I swam instinctively, not thinking, floating in a half-dreamed place, and what came to me was the quote stenciled on the wall in room 202 of my grandmother's hotel—the Keats Room: "Love is my religion. I could die for that." The sea, its creatures, its sharks—they were my religion. I could die for that.

Sylvia turned and seemed to regard me with interest, and observing her sudden awareness of me was like waking. Though I felt a kinship with her, I couldn't forget for a second she could be provoked into aggression. I drew up, letting her swim away, flattening a hand over my breastbone as she was swallowed into the blue-gray gloom.

Electrified, I kicked my fins.

When I turned toward Nicholas, he was clasping the handles of his camera, and his face mirrored my own. The way his lips stretched into a smile around his regulator reflected my own exuberance.

Two

When people ask me why I love sharks I tell them it's because I was bitten by one when I was twelve. Statistically speaking, the coconut palms around the hotel had posed more of a danger to me than the sharks

cruising the Gulf. Coconuts dropped like torpedoes around there, so it was stranger than strange that I was not concussed by a coconut, but instead, bitten by a shark—a species over four hundred million years old, older than humans, dinosaurs, and trees. It was a blacktip, *Carcharhinus limbatus*, the shark known for breaching out of the water and spinning in midair while feeding on fish near the surface. The bite resulted in a thirteen-inch scar, thirty-three stitches, and an obsession with sharks.

Robin, responding in true twin fashion, became the counterbalance to my morbid fascination, developing a fear of sharks bordering on revilement. I didn't begrudge Perri sending me back to Dr. Marion, a child psychiatrist over in Naples, I still don't, but I did wonder how Robin's hating sharks was viewed as perfectly normal and my loving them was considered detrimental.

If you were hit by a car, would you become a mechanic? Robin used to ask. If you were struck on the head with a rock, would you become a geologist? What about falling off a roof? Would that turn you into a roofer? If you were trampled by a horse, would you become a jockey? His list of catastrophes and careers became an ongoing joke, the kind that weren't really jokes at all. He'd never gotten over almost losing me, and after what had happened to our parents, I couldn't blame him.

I used to fantasize that if Mom and Dad had been alive, they would've downplayed Perri's and Robin's worries over my becoming a sharkophile.

My English professor father, Perri's son through and through, had loved books more than Perri did, if such a thing was possible, and two small volumes of his poetry had been published. He had been the opposite of our sky-minded, engineer mother, whose head had been firmly planted in the clouds, while his had been perpetually bent over books by Keats, Shelley, and Byron.

Mom had had her private pilot's license for two years when the accident happened. Surprising Dad with a weekend in Key West for his birthday, she'd chartered a 1980 Piper, filing a flight plan and arranging for Perri to pick up six-year-old Robin and me at our house in Jupiter, Florida. Their plane had crashed into the Everglades before we'd even arrived at the hotel, before we'd raced through the lobby, up the stairs, arguing over who got the bed by the window, before we'd yanked on our bathing suits and tore down to the beach, giddy over the hundreds of Florida fighting conchs that had washed ashore overnight, squealing whenever some gooeey part of the snail oozed onto our palms.

It had taken an airboat to reach their bodies. The National Transportation Safety Board reported Mom had encountered a thunderstorm wind shear. For a while, the sight of a small plane droning overhead, even the mention of an airboat would summon the scene of my parents strapped in their seats, dead, stuck in the muck with the alligators. Gradually, the image stopped haunting me. I can picture them now as they'd been before the accident: Dad, reading poems to us at the kitchen table that were fathoms over our heads. And Mom, routinely dragging us outside on clear nights in a semifailed effort to teach us the constellations, lying beside us on the lanai by the pool calling out Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Orion's Belt.

After their funerals, Perri had sold our Jupiter house with the lanai where we'd named Mom's stars and the kitchen table where we'd listened to Dad's poetry, and she'd brought us to Palermo to live with her in the Hotel of the Muses. Perri commandeered four rooms on the second floor, knocked out the walls, and reconstructed it into an apartment for the three of us. "It will be an adventure. Like the Swiss Family Robinson," she'd said, rousing herself for the sake of two sad little kids. Night after night, we crawled into her bed, where she read us the Johann David Wyss story, followed by *Peter Pan*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Secret Garden*, and a trove of other classics.

Losing Mom and Dad devastated both of us, but we had grieved very differently. Robin's grief had been quiet and hidden, only screaming out of him unconsciously in his sleep, while mine had been open and

expressive. In over her head and desperate to help us, Perri had put us into the capable hands of Dr. Marion. That was my first go-round with therapy; years later when I found myself back in his office after the shark bite, I already knew the drill.

Robin and I spent hours sitting side by side on Dr. Marion's green sofa, Robin in silence, refusing to draw the pictures that were supposed to help us express our feelings. The more he withdrew, the more I talked of alligators circling our parents' plane, of their caskets closed tight. And the more elaborate my drawings became. Sometimes it seemed everything that would go wrong with Robin began with those drawings. One in particular roiled up from a dark corner inside of me. While Robin watched, I had pulled crayons from the jumbo box and begun by creating the same horror scene as usual—a tangle of green jungle, black sky, brown water streaked with red, a gray airplane half immersed, and beneath the water, two broken stick figures.

"You sure you don't want to draw, too?" Dr. Marion asked Robin, holding out a blue crayon. "It can be anything you want. How about your room? What does that look like?"

Robin glared at him, arms folded over his six-year-old chest, then took the crayon. He might have actually drawn something that day—the stuffed frog on his bed, the *Empire Strikes Back* poster on the wall, the baseball cards on the bulletin board—but he was distracted by the surprising addition of a third tiny stick figure I was drawing beside the other two.

"Who's that?" he asked.

I scribbled a mess of red on the little body.

"*Who is it?*" Robin said, and I heard the frantic tone, but still, I didn't answer him.

"Do you want to tell us?" Dr. Marion asked me. "You don't have to, but your brother . . . he's interested."

"It's me," I said, the picture starting to distort through my tears. "I don't want to be here if they're not here."

"You want to die, too?" Robin's voice sounded small and faraway, and then he began to cry, terrible gulping sobs, the first tears he'd shed since our parents' deaths. His whole body shook, and seeing what I'd caused, I began to sob with him. I knew even then, I didn't mean what I'd said. I didn't *really* wish I'd been in the plane, but wishing it seemed the only way to convey the power of my distress, to communicate how much I missed Mom and Dad.

Dr. Marion told us it was okay to cry, but that seemed to backfire on him as the tears and wails went on and on. In the end he summoned Perri from the waiting room. She squeezed between us on the sofa, gathering us against her. When the outburst was finally over, Dr. Marion tried to help Robin understand what I'd meant, but I don't think Robin ever understood. My confession landed on him like a betrayal, like a brutal rejection. After that we saw Dr. Marion separately. I never knew what happened in Robin's sessions. Revealing my awful wish that day was the beginning of mending myself. My grief morphed from excruciating sadness into a kind of resignation, and finally into peace. Perri became my greatest solace and closest confidante. But the plummeting planes in Robin's nightmares continued, though our parents were no longer in them; now, it was only me. He would bolt awake shrieking my name, once so loudly a hotel guest called the front desk. Terrified by his screams, I would crawl into bed with him and grip his hand beneath the covers. "I thought you were dead, too," he would whimper.

The following year his night terrors ceased, giving way to all sorts of misbehavior and acting out—biting and shoving classmates at our new elementary school, mouthing off to the teacher, and once lashing out at Perri when she ordered him to clean his room, yelling, "Don't tell me what to do. You're not my mother."

In time, he returned to something resembling normalcy. He, Daniel, and I formed our alliance, hanging out on the beach and roaming the hotel. I have a memory of Robin doing his Rocky Balboa impression for hotel guests, one of his many budding charismas, but his grief never seemed to heal, not really, and he never became comfortable talking about Mom and Dad, as if his mind just couldn't go there.

Troublemaking would be his go-to method of expressing his grief, and I believe writing must have been an outlet for it, too. He did both, on and off, with great aptitude.

I'd never stopped feeling bad about that drawing, never stopped feeling responsible.

Perri liked to say that some kids just had swing sets in their backyards, but we had the Gulf of Mexico. The island and every living thing swimming in the Gulf became my Eden. And Daniel, he became my Eden, too.

Daniel's mother, Van, worked at the hotel reception desk when she wasn't teaching ballet. Daniel was always at loose ends in the hotel, lugging his skateboard around, occasionally rolling across the marble floors in the lobby. Almost a full year older than Robin and I, Daniel was the first friend we made on Palermo. It didn't take long for the three of us to become inseparable. His father had been the high school baseball coach on the island, and from all appearances, a reasonably good father. Until he left one day, simply disappearing from Daniel's life, a cataclysm that he rarely talked about. Robin, Daniel, and I shared fatherlessness—whether from abandonment or death—like some tragic glue that cemented us in ways none of us really understood. Constantly mistaken for our older sibling, he had a mess of dark hair like us that the sun leached to golden brown. Robin liked being confused for Daniel's brother, but I never wanted to be Daniel's sister.

The shark attacked on July 30, 1988, early in the morning, when the air was hazed with mist and the beach deserted. Daniel and I had wandered to the water's edge to investigate a washed-up horseshoe crab, when I spotted a brown-and-white-striped osprey feather nearly a foot long floating on the waves ten or so yards out. Maybe I wanted to impress Daniel with how audacious and unfettered I could be; maybe I just wanted that magnificent feather; but I waded out in my shorts and T-shirt until the water lapped a cold circle around my waist.

"What are you doing?" said Daniel, gaping at me from the shoreline.

"Are you worried about getting a little water on your shorts?" I teased, plucking the feather off the surface and using it to wave him in.

Grinning, he treaded out to where I stood, lifting his arms and bare shoulders to stave off the chill. He swiped the feather from my hand and stuck it in the band of my ponytail. "There," he said.

I reached back, feeling for it, aware of how close he stood to me, his shoulders peppered with freckles, his skin caramelized brown, his eyes the color of a blue tang fish. Leaning up, I kissed him, jolted at how he kissed me back, at the salt air on his lips. For a moment I felt dizzy, like the world I'd wakened in had fallen away, and I had become someone else. It thrilled me and it scared me.

"I think I'll love you forever," I said.

Daniel glanced back toward the beach, where Robin and Perri were beginning to set up lounge chairs beneath the chickee huts that studded the sand in front of the hotel. "Me, too," he said.

Suddenly, he pitched forward in the water like he'd been struck behind the knees. "What was *that*?" he said. I thought he was trying to scare me, but whatever had bumped into Daniel then collided into me. I lost my balance and dropped beneath the water as an unfathomable force attached to my leg. I held my breath and flapped my arms, trying to fly right out of the water like the diving seabirds I often watched splash up into the air. I could see it very clearly, the top of the shark's gray head, its teeth clamped into my leg, the fin's black tip, the tail ruddering back and forth.

It was noisy under the water, sounds and vibrations whipping off both our bodies. Blood coursed from my leg like a can of teargas going off. Nothing at all went through my head, only a primal, ferocious instinct to live.

Stretching my neck toward the surface, I glimpsed one of the shark's eyes—a small, black, unblinking night. I felt certain the shark regretted sinking its teeth into me, or did that thought come later? Its eye disappeared under a lid that closed from the bottom up, and then as suddenly as the commotion had begun, it all ceased.

The shark let go of my leg and swam off. I had no idea why. Now I know it was exhibiting classic hit-and-run behavior: a bump, a single bite, and then a retreat when it realizes its prey is not food, but a case of mistaken identity.

The bite had been oddly painless at first, but then a searing sensation ripped through my leg. I wanted air. I needed air. Breaking the surface, I gasped and tried to stand, but my right leg was useless. I floated on my back using my left foot to push against the ocean floor.

Panting frantically, I couldn't raise a single sound from my throat. Water sealed my ears. I thought I heard someone yell, "Maeve! Maeve!" Daniel grabbed me under my arms and began pulling me to shore, running backward.

"A shark bit me and swam away," I said as calmly as if I'd suffered a jellyfish sting.

Daniel shouted for Perri, his voice hoarse with terror. Water rushed into my nostrils, filling them with salt sting, causing me to choke, but the pain in my leg had dwindled to a strange burning sensation from my hip to my toes.

Daniel laid me on the sand. I gazed at him bent over at the waist with his hands on his knees, his eyes filmed with water. "A shark bit me and swam away," I said again.

Struggling onto my elbows, I stared at my leg. The back of my calf was ripped open, ragged and bloody like a science class dissection gone horribly wrong. I flopped back onto the beach as Perri reached us, morphing into one of those women you hear about who become superhero strong and unflinchingly clearheaded in times of crisis, lifting cars off children and barking orders like General Patton. "Robin, run to the hotel. Call 911. Daniel, get towels!"

A little border of darkness began to close in around everything. I shut my eyes to make it go away. Perri pushed a web of hair off my face. "Maeve, honey, open your eyes."

I concentrated on a V of pelicans that glided across the high blue dome of sky overhead, their wings unmoving, all of them ready to turn at once if their leader changed course.

Daniel dropped a stack of towels in the sand, and Perri twisted one and tied it tightly around my thigh. Her bobbed hair was swinging across her face in a white blur. "We've got to stop this bleeding," she said, her voice starting to take on more urgency.

As Perri applied pressure against the wound, the dull burn in my leg erupted again into a blaze of exquisite pain. I rolled my head to the side as a terrible keening sound filled my throat. I began to flail.

Robin dropped beside me, his face blanched and terrified. He put his mouth by my ear. "You're okay." He went on repeating it. "You're okay. You're okay."

Perri hovered over me, blocking out the sun. She shouted at the crowd that was beginning to gather, "Somebody give me a belt!" She lashed it above my knee. "You're going to be all right," she said. "Take a deep breath. Come on." She nodded at me and I sucked the air like I was drowning. "There you go. Slow down. That's good."

Perri placed her hand on my chest, and something inside of me unclenched. I felt safe.

"Let's get her warm," she said, and instantly a coral-colored canopy snapped open above me and the hotel emblem, an oyster shell with a small pearlish-looking book inside stitched in navy, fluttered down.

Searching for Daniel, I pressed my cheek against the sand and saw him a few feet away. "The shark pulled her under," he was saying to Perri. "I tried to get to her. It was all so fast. I—I couldn't get to her."

"How long was she under the water?" Perri asked. "I don't know. Five seconds? Ten?"

It had felt so much longer.

Much later, Daniel and I would talk about what that day was like for him, how the Gulf had never felt as deep or endless as when I vanished beneath it, how he'd looked underwater for me, afraid of what he might see in the water muddled with a storm of blood and upturned sand.

In the seconds before I lost consciousness, he turned and looked at me, and I saw he was holding the osprey feather that had come loose from my hair.

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