

TWO WEEKS ONE SUMMER

The dying sun was bleeding into the ocean as Adam's life bled into the sand of the deserted beach. This was the last thing he had expected on this glorious summer day as he sat on his board in the swelling sea, waiting the perfect wave and pondering his life.

The great white had come out of nowhere. He didn't even see it until he felt the rip as his left leg was sheered off below the knee. For a moment time stopped; everything went into a surreal slow motion. He watched the water around him turn red and wondered briefly what could have caused it.

Then reality hit, bringing horror with it. Frantically, and faster than he had ever done in his life, he paddled for the shore. Miraculously, the perfect wave that had eluded him all afternoon came, picking him up and carrying him to the shoreline. From there he somehow managed to drag himself to above the high water mark, placing himself safely beyond the reach of those fearsome jaws.

He tried to think. He had to force himself to calm down, to somehow stop his heart from beating so frantically. Every beat took more of his blood from him. Breathe slowly. How could he stop the blood? Looking around he saw a plastic shopping bag left behind by some careless picnicker. Breathing a silent prayer of thanks for litterers, he fashioned it into a tourniquet. What else? Seaweed. That might just help to stop the flow. Grabbing a handful he pressed it against the stump. What if he passed out? It would not stay in place: he had to find something to hold it there. A quick search of his surroundings produced another plastic bag, with which he managed to secure the seaweed by tying it to his tourniquet.

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For all his effort, he knew he had little hope. He had lost a lot of blood, and it was still oozing out. His cell phone was two hundred yards down the beach, with the rest of his gear. Not one other person had come near the beach all day, so it was unlikely anyone would now as night began to settle in. He was probably going to die here, alone, unidentified. So much for the great life he had planned for himself.

His mind was becoming foggy, drifting in waves like that dreamlike space between waking and sleep. Suddenly, all he could think of was Laura. He had heard that she lived in Beaconsville, the closest town to this beach. His intention in coming here had been to find her, to try to sort things out, to apologize for being the biggest rat in the universe and to beg her to take him back. What an idiot he had been to get involved with Ashleigh Pemberton! He would give anything to take it all back: to turn back time to the day before he stormed out, saying he wanted to “follow his heart.” Idiot! Total, unbelievable, unforgiveable idiot! Well, he had hoped that Laura would forgive him anyway. He had found her address, but chickened out at the last minute, opting instead to go surfing and give himself time to gather his thoughts before fronting her. Idiot again! If he had gone straight to her as he intended, he would not now be lying on this sand, minus his leg and probably soon to be minus his life. Idiot, idiot, idiot!

He could see her standing above him, her straw colored hair lifting lightly about her face in the breeze, her intense blue eyes sparkling, laughing. Was she laughing with him or at him? Was she really there, or was it his mind playing tricks? She vanished, and blackness crowded in.

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“Sasha, come back here!” George called and called again. The little dog ran back toward him, then dashed ahead again, yapping madly. Following her, George climbed the sand hill and,

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looking down the beach, saw the body. Even in the early twilight he could make out the distinct red stain.

“Good Lord!” he shouted, grabbing his cell phone and punching in 911 even as he ran toward the man. He was still breathing, barely. “Don't die,” George pleaded. “Please, please hang on until the paramedics get here.” Not knowing what else to do, he held the man's hand, talking to him - all kinds of nonsense; the weather, the football results, politics - anything to try to take hold of the mind that was slowly but surely retreating from this life, to make it stay just a little longer.

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Although it seemed an eternity before the ambulance arrived, it was really only about ten minutes. The female officer was the first over the dune, closely followed by her male colleague. A few yards from the body she stopped short, her face ashen, her knees buckling. Jeff, her colleague, was quickly at her side. He was puzzled. She was an experienced paramedic, longer in the job than he had been. Yes, the scene that lay before them was horrific, but they had both seen worse. This reaction from his partner was simply not normal.

“What's up?” he asked, taking her arm to steady her.

Laura gasped, swallowed hard, and in a shaken voice replied, “It's Adam.”

“You mean the rat fink who walked out and dumped you for a younger model?”

“The very one. Jeff, I can't do this. I am too close, too emotionally involved.”

“Laura, pull yourself together. You are being unprofessional. No matter who the guy is, if he is still alive, he needs help, now. We are it, Laura. Without us, if he isn't dead already, he will be soon.”

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“You're right, of course. OK, let's do it.” From that point things moved quickly. A check of vital signs revealed that Adam was indeed holding on to life, even if by the slenderest of threads. Stretched to the waiting ambulance, he was quickly hooked up to a fluid drip and on his way to the emergency ward.

For several days he hovered on the edge of the precipice, in an induced coma.

Laura kept resisting the urge to visit, to check on him. It was totally unnecessary, she told herself. He was nothing to her now, she told herself. Their marriage had ended five years ago, that terrible day when she finally admitted to herself what she had known for at least a year, his affair with that horrible Ashleigh, and confronted him with it. In a storm of raging guilt he had somehow managed to turn the blame back on her before walking out, never to be seen again ... or so she had thought at the time. Not long after, she had moved here to Beaconsville, joined the ambulance service and begun to build a new life for herself, glad at least that there were no children to suffer through the pangs of divorce. No, Adam was just another patient, one of the hundreds whom she had helped snatch from death and offer a second chance at life. To visit him would not only be unnecessary, it would be unprofessional, she told herself.

Yet the tug remained. What was it? Curiosity? Concern? Surely there could not be a remnant of the love that once was, after his behaviour and all these years? An unwilling smile crossed her lips. They had been so in love. Hopelessly, madly, recklessly in love. Unable to keep either eyes or hands off each other. Defying parents and convention to be together. Building a life from nothing. Blissfully happy - or, in her case, blissfully ignorant. Ignorant by choice. Until that day. How could she not have seen it? Well, really, she knew she had seen it; she had simply refused to acknowledge it. Until that day. Idiot. Now, just because the fool had been stupid

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enough to get himself attacked by a shark, she was going all gooey about him. Idiot. Idiot, idiot, idiot!

Nonetheless, the tug eventually won. He was conscious, though still critical, when she wandered into intensive care. She felt like an awkward schoolgirl. What on earth was she going to say to him? His eyes were closed. He hadn't seen her yet. She could just slip back out the door, pretend that she had never been there.

“Laura? Is that really you? What are you doing here?”

Trapped. “I'm one of the paramedics that dragged your sorry carcass off the beach. I thought I'd better check to see how you are going. What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were a thousand miles away with your darling Ashleigh.” In spite of herself she couldn't help the sarcasm dripping from her tongue.

“Oh my God! I did see you on the beach. I thought I was hallucinating. Thank you, thank you, thank you ...” He slipped momentarily into unconsciousness and she stood waiting, uncertain, unsure of what to do next.

He was back with her a few seconds later. “Laura, I came here to see you. To apologize. To beg you to forgive me. To plead for another chance. I was an idiot: the biggest idiot the world has ever known. You were the most perfect wife, the most perfect lover, I could ever have wished for, yet I let myself fall for someone about as deep as a teaspoon. Please, please, please can you forgive me?”

Trying hard not to be moved, Laura snapped back. “So, you came to see me. That's why you were out in shark country, I suppose. Have you forgotten my dread of the ocean? Out on a surfboard is the last place on earth you would be likely to find me.”

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Adam broke half a grin. “Yeah. Idiot again. I chickened out and opted for some wave time to try to get my head together. Wasn't counting on jaws. If I had come to see you as I planned, I wouldn't be in this bed now.”

“This is all to sudden, too overwhelming. I need some time to think about it all. I'll come and see you again in a couple of days.”

Her mind whirling, Laura retreated to the hospital cafe and a strong coffee. Did he really think he could erase five years of pain with a few words? How stupid was that? Why had she ever agreed to do a substitute shift for Louise that afternoon? If it had not been for that, she would not be facing this dilemma. She was pulled between heart and head. He had deceived and betrayed her once. How could she ever trust him again? And yet ... again, that unwilling smile ... what they had, had been so very special. Second chances. Were they worth it? She had given him a second chance at life, should she give him a second chance at love, too? Could she bear the pain again if it failed?

She did not wait a couple of days to visit him again. She was there the next afternoon, and they talked. He told her how he had quickly realized that Ashleigh had nothing to offer but a gorgeous body, and he tired of that very quickly. He had realized within months that he was an idiot, that he had thrown away gold and diamonds to grab paste and plastic, but he was too embarrassed - too proud to seek Laura out at the time. It was only as the years passed and the ache in his heart grew that he realized that he had to take the chance to try to put things right.

She told him about her move here, how she had embraced the hardest job she could find and thrown her whole being into it, in a desperate but unsuccessful effort to bury the pain. She talked about the guilt she had felt, wondering what she had done to cause him to wander, and

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berating herself for not having recognized and acknowledged the problem sooner.

Together they recalled their ten years together: the laughter, the struggle, the tears, but most of all the love. They talked again the next day, and the next. By the end of the week Laura had no more questions or hesitation. She knew, as she had known the first day they laid eyes on each other, that they were meant to be together.

Then, the very day after she had laid the last of her qualms to rest, she was about to walk into his room when she saw Ashleigh Pemberton bending over his bed kissing him. Idiot! What kind of pathetic fool was she to believe his lies? Idiot, idiot, idiot! Well, at least the revelation had come before she committed to restoring the relationship, she thought, as she stormed down the hospital corridor, hot tears pouring down her flushed cheeks. She would never go near him again!

But she did. Unable to resist the urge to confront him, she stamped into his room later, eyes flashing and jaw set.

“Scumbag!” She spat the word at him. “Think you can have Ashleigh AND me? Think again, buster! This is definitely an either / or proposition, and this “or” is opting out. Goodbye forever, don't even think about contacting me again. And if you are ever stupid enough to lose another leg to a shark, do the world a favour and die!” With that she was gone, allowing him no opportunity to protest.

Next day she was passing his room on her way to visit another patient, when again she saw Ashleigh. She was not normally an eavesdropper, but this time she felt compelled to listen.

“Ashleigh, it's no good,” he was telling the tearful girl. “We have nothing in common. I was wrong to leave Laura for you in the first place, I destroyed both her life and yours. I was

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totally wrong, and I am so, so sorry. I came here trying to put things right with Laura, but now because of you coming to see me I have lost her forever. I can't complain, it's only what I deserve. But I am not going to fall back on you as second best. That would be wrong for you and wrong for me, too. Goodbye, Ashleigh. Have a happy life.”

The girl pushed past the stunned Laura, leaving her shaken. Now it was her turn to apologize. She stepped uncertainly into the room.

“I'm sorry.” They spoke together.

“Ashleigh saw coverage of my accident on the news.” Adam broke in before Laura had a chance to continue. “She came hoping we could get together again, but there was never any chance of it happening. I'm sorry you saw her. I'm sorry I hurt you again, though this time I really didn't intend to.”

“No, I'm the one who needs to apologize this time. I didn't give you a chance to explain. And that horrible, horrible thing I said to you. How can you ever forgive me for that?” Those intense blue eyes were sparkling, but it was with tears, not laughter.

“I guess we both have a long way to go, and trust once broken takes a long time to rebuild. Are you willing to give it a try?” She nodded. Yes, she had to give it a chance.

During the rest of that week they spoke as often as possible. Adam's injuries were beginning to yield to the treatment he was receiving, and though he still had a long journey to full recovery, he was feeling more himself every day. On the Friday, exactly two weeks after his accident, Adam was sitting up in bed when Laura arrived.

“I have something important to ask,” he said, making his face as serious as possible. “I can't get down on one knee, because it's the only one I've got. And this is all I can afford at the

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moment, but I promise to upgrade it as soon as possible.” He handed her a matchbox containing a plastic ring from a cereal packet, which he had cajoled a staff member into saving for him. “I can only offer you broken, second hand goods, but if you will have me I promise I will love you with all my heart and soul, as long as there is breath left in this body. Laura, will you marry me again ... please?”

All hesitation was gone. “Of course,” she said softly, bending to kiss him on the lips.

Adam grinned. “Not everyone can say the love of his life cost him an arm and a leg, but it was worth it.”

“Don't exaggerate,” she said, pretending to slap him. “It was only a leg. The arm will go if ever I hear the name of Ashleigh Pemberton again.”

He squeezed her hand. Both of them knew that his arm was safe.