



# Churn (A Carter Family Shark Thriller #2)

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**Category:** Horror

**Description:** With sharks as both research subjects and threats, Churn, a short story, explores the fragile boundaries between humanity and nature's fiercest predators. When alliances among sharks beneath the waves shift, Ryan and her future are caught in a deadly tide of instincts she can scarcely understand.

A gripping interlude between Breach and Depth, this story will leave you questioning the limits of the ocean's depth and its creatures' terrifying intelligence.

**Total Pages (Source):** 5

## Page 1

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Ryan had her recurring dream the night before. It always shifted, sometimes leaning into terror, other times overwhelming intensity or what she hated most, deep sorrow that left her a mess. The worst nights were when all three collided into one. Last night was that kind of dream, and to make matters worse, it jolted her awake early, on the morning of her sixteenth birthday.

She bolted upright in bed, her body trembling as cold sweat clung to her skin. The image of her father seared into her mind, speeding away on a jet ski, desperate to save her and her mother. From the depths, a shark, impossibly massive, think megalodon-sized, exploded upward in a single terrifying breach. It swallowed her father and the jet ski whole, its jaws bristling with jagged teeth. In the dream, the shark had roared, a guttural, bone-chilling sound sharks couldn't make in real life. Yet, even now, that unnatural roar echoed in her ears, refusing to fade.

She glanced at the clock across from her bed, a gift from her grandfather for her last birthday. Crafted from an authentic brass ship porthole, it was one of her favorite pieces in the room. Grandpop, she still called him that even now, had turned eighty-five this past year. After finally retiring the year before, he'd become a bigger part of her life than ever. She couldn't imagine how she would have survived her first year of college without him.

Starting college at fifteen was challenging enough, but her family's notoriety made it even harder. Her famous grandfather, Dr. Greg Sawyer, was a towering figure in the marine biology world, his name synonymous with groundbreaking research on stingrays. Adding to the pressure, her stepfather, Dr. Lawrence Cordova, was equally renowned. Lawrence, she never called him anything else, headed one of San Diego's top marine research facilities. Together, their legacies cast long shadows that

sometimes felt impossible to live up to.

And then there were her and her mother, survivors of a great white shark attack, a predator that had taken her father and seemed equally determined to eat them. Calling them a "meal" might be a stretch; her family had latched onto the unsettling hypothesis that the shark's motives went beyond hunger, that it was out for revenge.

Students whispered and pointed as she passed, their curiosity barely hidden. She'd learned the hard way that most weren't interested in her for who she was, just a fifteen-year-old trying to navigate college life. What they wanted was either a shot at working on one of Lawrence's prestigious projects or a firsthand recounting of the deadly voyage that had made her family infamous.

Being homeschooled hadn't helped. Despite her mom's efforts to socialize her with kids her age, Ryan had always gravitated toward adults. That changed when she started college. There, she faced a rude awakening: college students, regardless of their major, seemed to live for parties. Invitations were never extended to her, not even by those who bent the rules and drank before it was legal. It left her feeling ostracized and, worst of all, painfully lonely and desperate for connection.

Even her dormmate largely ignored her. While they'd been paired for their shared academic focus, that connection didn't extend to befriending someone Ryan's age. Navigating campus life alone quickly became her norm. Her semi-weekly calls to Grandpops became her solace against the never-ending loneliness. He must have guessed what was really going on, but he let her hide behind requests for help with coursework she could easily ace or probing questions about his stingray research. Those calls gave her a rare chance to feel like a kid again, soaking up his stories and escaping the weight of her reality, even if only for a little while.

Her mother hadn't wanted her to start college so young, but Lawrence had fought hard for her. The last thing Ryan wanted was her mother's "I told you so" look or the

weight of Lawrence's disappointment if he knew how miserable she was. She loved him just as deeply as she had loved her father. He never pressured her or demanded her affection, but it was there, an unspoken bond born from his genuine love for her and her mother.

In their weekly calls, she always made sure to sound upbeat and enthusiastic about her studies and the friends she didn't have. With Grandpops, though, she didn't have to pretend as much. She could let her guard down, and sometimes her sadness slipped through. He never pushed her to talk about it, but his wisdom, even when hilariously outdated, was like a balm.

"One time, I had a research student so clueless he couldn't even tie his shoes," he'd say, his voice gruff but full of mischief. "He wore those silly Velcro things that belonged on a five-year-old. You know how to tie your laces, right?"

She'd laugh at every joke, the weight in her chest lifting just a little.

One thing kept Ryan going each day: her unshakable fascination with a certain marine biologist who had captivated her mind and quite possibly her heart. She devoured his videos, not just because he was gorgeous (and undeniably too old for her), but because of the way he explained things. His insights went beyond the surface, diving into the deeper intricacies of shark behavior and their dynamic relationships with other sea life. His passion was infectious, and every word he spoke pulled her further into the online world he created.

Ryan knew she sometimes wore a dreamy expression. Her roommate Alyss never failed to point it out. To keep her fantasies private, she stuck to earbuds and her phone's small screen instead of her laptop, even though it offered a better view. The last thing she needed was to give Alyss more ammunition, especially when her roommate wanted the room cleared out for her latest boy visitor.

Instead, Ryan spent countless hours tucked away in the library, hiding in a quiet alcove where she could immerse herself in his videos. It wasn't an ideal life, but it gave her a chance to lose herself in a world that felt far more exciting and meaningful than her own.

Ryan had come home for spring break to celebrate her birthday. Grandpops wasn't sure if he could make it because his bursitis was affecting his joints, but he'd promised to call. The thought of age catching up with him weighed heavily on her. One day, he wouldn't be there, and the idea of facing that reality felt unbearable.

But not today. Today was her birthday, and her mom always made birthdays special. Ryan knew that even when she was fifty, her mom would still find a way to do something outrageously fun and over the top.

She pushed the nightmare aside, climbed out of bed, threw on yesterday's clothes, and headed downstairs, the smell of her birthday breakfast already wafting up to greet her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:18 pm*

Breakfast was her favorite: pancakes topped with her mom's homemade strawberry syrup. It was, without question, the best. Later, her parents were taking her to dinner at her favorite vegan restaurant, The Plot. She couldn't wait to order their famous plant-based fish and chips, perfectly paired with their equally incredible habanero shallot sauce.

Ryan's deep love for the ocean and its creatures left her unable to stomach eating seafood. The Plot, in her opinion, offered the best vegan fish and chips in the world. She was stunned when she got to college and realized how many in her field consumed seafood, despite knowing about overfishing, ghost nets, and the ongoing destruction of the ocean's ecosystems. Still, she understood she couldn't force her perspective on others, or she'd risk alienating herself even further. Her mother and Lawrence were the same way, quietly supportive but not outspoken. Grandpops, on the other hand, was loud and proud about his disdain for seafood and the people who ate it. One day, she knew she'd be just like him.

The day crawled by until dinner, made bearable only by her heartthrob's newest video, which she watched on repeat. He wasn't just smart and good-looking, his sense of humor and passion for the ocean shone through in every lesson he shared. Sure, he was in his forties, but that didn't stop her from daydreaming about what their babies might look like. It was her fantasy, after all, and she clung to it, knowing reality would eventually sink in, probably when she was forty, and he was eighty, surrounded by a pack of grandkids at his knee.

She wasn't even sure she wanted babies, though she couldn't help but dream about his. Her enchantment with the biologist was a deeply guarded secret, one she'd never let anyone uncover.

Coming downstairs ten minutes before they were supposed to leave for her birthday dinner, she heard the front door open. Grandpops stepped in, holding a wrapped box, his face lighting up with a huge grin the moment he saw her.

“You came!” she squealed, rushing to throw her arms around him.

“You thought a little bursitis would keep me away on your special day? You must be getting old,” he grumbled good-naturedly.

Ryan kissed his cheek and hugged him again, squeezing him tight. “What’s in the box?” she demanded, bouncing on her toes with an excitement no sixteen-year-old should openly display.

“Dinner first, young lady. You’ll get your surprise after you clean your plate.”

She gave him a dramatic eye roll, a playful routine they’d perfected over the years. He always teased her about gifts, and she always went overboard with her excitement, maybe to make him feel better. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Her mother rolled up in her wheelchair with a teasing smile. “Are you giving all your hugs to your favorite, or did you save one for me, so I feel wanted?”

Grandpops let go of Ryan and bent down to kiss her mother on the cheek, pulling her into the hug she had shamelessly guilted him into. Lawrence stood back, watching with an amused smile. When he finally had a chance to step forward, he shook Grandpops’ hand and pulled him into one of those side hugs men seemed to specialize in.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at the restaurant. Her mother had made reservations, so they were seated right away. As always, Ryan’s family teased her about ordering the same thing every time they came, but she didn’t care. She knew

what she liked, and she wasn't about to change it.

They laughed and talked throughout dinner, the conversation flowing easily. Ryan fielded questions about college, and when the attention lingered too long on school, she deftly redirected by asking Lawrence about his research. He gave her a knowing wink, aware she was trying to shift the focus, though not quite sure of the exact reason why.

"I cleaned my plate," she announced proudly, flashing a grin at her grandpops, daring him to tease her again.

"So you did, young lady," he said, glancing theatrically around the room. "Now where did it go?" He gestured to the chair beside him where the box sat in plain sight, pretending he had no idea where it had disappeared to.

Ryan sat patiently, waiting for his humor to play out, a smile tugging at her lips. She loved him so much it made her heart ache.

Finally, he handed over the gift. "This is from all three of us," he said warmly.

Ryan turned to her mother. "You knew he was coming tonight, didn't you?"

Kate grinned. "I have no shame," she admitted with a twinkle in her eye.

Ryan looked down at the box, her fingers itching to dive in. "Can I rip the wrapping paper, or should I act demure like a proper sixteen-year-old?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at her grandpops.

"If you don't tear into it, I'll do it for you," he teased.

With that, she shredded the paper in one giant rip and lifted the lid. Inside was a



stunning new wetsuit, its colors swirling like the ocean itself. Her breath caught, and for a moment, she could only stare.

“It’s beautiful,” she exclaimed, as she fingered the neoprene and shook her head in wonder.

“The best gift is underneath,” Grandpops said.

She lifted the suit out and found a large envelope with her name written in script. She opened it and pulled out a card. She looked up. “No way would car keys fit in this,” she said with a huge grin. Her mother had asked her if she wanted a car, and she had joyfully declined. She was happy taking the bus and using the transit system in college. She would get a car if she had to after she graduated.

The adults laughed and waited for her to open the final gift.

“You have been selected for the marine biology trip of a lifetime,” the card began. “On March 30, 2024, you’ll join Dr. Graham Stirling from the Pacific Horizon Research Institute aboard the Queen Velvet for a two-week voyage of discovery. As one of the brightest talents in your field of study, this journey will push your skills and knowledge from the moment you step aboard. You will receive a packet in the mail a month before launch. It’s important you read, sign, and bring the notarized agreement with you. Welcome to the crew.” It was hand signed by Dr. Graham Stirling.

Her eyes locked on the name: Graham Stirling. She read it again, her mind struggling to believe what she saw. This couldn’t be real. Finally, she looked up, her voice barely above a whisper. “How?” she asked. His annual voyage was reserved for graduating students. She had dreamed of this for years, but always imagined it was still far off and worried she’d never be accepted at all.

“Your Grandpops pulled some strings,” her mother said with a smile. “And we pitched in to cover the fee.”

Ryan’s hands trembled as the reality sank in. She was going to meet him . Her secret crush. In person. Her face burned, and before she could stop herself, she shot up from her seat, running around the table to hug and thank each of them, her excitement spilling out in words of love and gratitude. This was a dream come true and the best birthday ever.

Six months later

Pacific Horizon Research Institute

Kendra Ellison's eyes lit up as she watched the screen, excitement bubbling as she realized what she was seeing. Two male great white sharks, JX-170 and NX-642, were swimming together again after a two-year separation. They had been tagged five years earlier, spotted off the San Francisco coast just weeks apart. Kendra had been part of the tagging teams for both sharks, an experience she still considered one of the highlights of her budding career. They were large for males, and not the younger juveniles they were accustomed to. JX was actually their largest male on record.

For three years, the great whites had traveled the Pacific Ocean together eventually parting ways. Now, the pair had reunited, their sleek bodies cutting through the water side by side, or so the blips read. It was a moment that left her in awe, a reminder of the ocean's mysteries and the bonds that even its most formidable creatures could form.

So far, these friendships had only been observed in male great whites. Female relationships remained an enigma, and even the dynamics among males were only partially understood. The sharks appeared to hunt together, but much more research was needed to unravel the full complexity of their interactions.

Kendra was proud to be part of Dr. Stirling's exploration of the unique relationships between sharks. It was groundbreaking and innovative. She was living her dream and the sighting of these two sharks reconnecting would push their research forward.

Were they friends, family? Was there a further bond science didn't understand?

Kendra's cell phone chirped, pulling her from her thoughts.

"You going out today?" a familiar voice asked.

"Yeah, I'm heading to Fort Point."

"Want shredder company?"

"You wish, you old salt," she teased. "See you there in an hour."

"I'm hurt," he replied with mock indignation. "Heading out now, and I'll teach you a thing or two if you're lucky."

Kendra didn't reply. She was already focused on documenting her findings for Dr. Graham Stirling. He wouldn't be in until noon, but she wanted him to have the data waiting when he arrived.

The waves were calling, and she grabbed her gear as soon as she finished the note. It looked like she wouldn't be riding them alone today and she felt the thrill even before leaving the lab.

She had chosen Fort Point on the fly because the sharks had pinged about ten miles away. None of the other tagged great whites appeared to be in the area, making it the perfect spot for a bit of surfing.

Fort Point was her favorite for a reason. The left-breaking waves and jagged rocks kept the kooks away. Only seasoned wave maniacs dared to take on its breaks, and she loved the challenge. Today promised not only solid waves but also a chance to imagine the life of the sharks she'd been tracking, a rare combination that had her

adrenaline building.

Kendra navigated through the Presidio, winding down Long Avenue to Marine Drive before pulling into the parking lot beside the fort. The murky weather draped the Golden Gate Bridge in a hauntingly beautiful shroud, a mesmerizing view that momentarily stilled her thoughts. She jumped out of her Outback and swung open the hatch, pulling out her gear.

She was dressed in thermal leggings and a moisture-wicking top, her go-to base layer for chilly days like this. San Francisco might not have the warmth of L.A.'s sun-soaked beaches, but it had her heart. The Bay Area, with all its raw edges and breathtaking vistas, was where she felt most alive.

After a quick round of stretches, she flipped her wetsuit inside out, preparing to slip it on. Starting with her legs, she eased the neoprene up, feeling its familiar resistance. At her hips, she adjusted the material carefully before pulling it snug over her torso. A few tugs here and there ensured a perfect fit, the wetsuit becoming a second skin, readying her for the cold embrace of the Pacific.

She slid one arm at a time through the wetsuit's sleeves, her hands gliding into place with practiced ease. A few quick adjustments smoothed the neoprene over her shoulders and chest. Securing the zipper with a firm tug, she folded the flap into position, ensuring a good seal. Finally, she double-checked the zipper, running her fingers over the area to make sure everything lay flat, ready to keep out the frigid Pacific.

Kendra paused, her gaze shifting to the waves rolling in with steady rhythm. The energy of the ocean always calmed her, even as it built her anticipation. Just then, the rumble of another car broke her focus. A familiar face. William pulled into the lot, his hand lifting in a casual wave.

She grabbed her surfboard from the rack, its weight comforting in her hands, and began waxing it with deliberate strokes. The repetitive motion grounded her, the sticky texture of the wax a palpable connection to what lay ahead. From the corner of her eye, she watched William emerge from his car and start his own pre-surf ritual, mirroring the steps she had just completed. She didn't rush him, content in the quiet companionship of having a surf buddy for the morning.

A handful of other surfers were already out, bobbing in the lineup beyond the break. She glanced at the small cluster of vehicles in the lot, none of them familiar. She likely didn't know the other surfers, but that didn't bother her; the ocean always felt like neutral ground.

"You set?" William called as he finished waxing his board and tucked the bar back into his gear bag.

"I've been ready since before you showed up, you old fart," Kendra teased, grinning as she adjusted the leash on her ankle. She turned her face into the breeze, the sharp chill biting against her cheeks. Even in August, the windchill at the Point was relentless, a constant reminder that San Francisco never played by the same sunny rules as L.A. But that was part of its charm. The colder, harsher edges of the Bay Area had become as much a part of her as the ocean itself.

William shook his head, his lips curling into a knowing grin at Kendra's playful mockery. Without a word, he took off at a jog toward the water, and she followed, matching his pace. The energy of the morning charged the air between them, a shared thrill of what lay ahead.

The first steps into the water sent a sharp chill slicing through their wetsuits. The cold was bracing but familiar, a momentary shock before their bodies adjusted. As the thin layer of water trapped inside their suits warmed, the insulating effect kicked in, easing the discomfort. With steady paddling, their muscles warmed, and the ocean

became an extension of their bodies. In no time, they reached the lineup, joining the other surfers poised to catch their first waves of the day.

A guy from the lineup waved, catching Kendra's attention. She recognized him from past sessions, his face vaguely familiar under the morning haze. She nodded back with a smile, then glanced over her shoulder. A clean wave was forming behind her, its rise promising a good ride. She held back, not one to dominate the break, and watched as the guy caught the wave with ease.

Kendra turned her gaze back to the horizon, anticipation humming in her veins. The rhythmic push and pull of the ocean guided her focus, sharpening her senses. Then she saw it. A smooth, rising swell rolling toward her with unrelenting energy. Her heart raced. This was the one.

She paddled hard, the burn in her arms growing as the wave surged closer. When the energy of the swell lifted her board, it was as though the ocean had locked onto her, drawing her into its power. Her nerves flickered, excitement bubbling over as she committed. With a decisive motion, she popped to her feet, her movements fluid and confident.

The connection was instantaneous. The wave gripped her board, and gravity pulled her into its momentum. In that moment, she wasn't just riding the wave, she was part of it. The sensation was pure magic.

She flew across the water, her board carving into the face of the wave with precision. The wind whipped past her, cool against her cheeks. The thunderous roar of the wave filled her ears, drowning out everything but the pulse of the ocean beneath her. Leaning into a turn, she sliced through the water with effortless grace, her body instinctively syncing with the wave's rhythm.

Time stretched, each second feeling infinite yet fleeting. The wave began to crest, a

shimmering wall of water lifting her higher before starting to fade. There was no barrel this time, but it didn't matter. She let out a cry of pure exhilaration, the joy of the ride washing over her like sunlight breaking through clouds.

When the wave finally dissipated, Kendra kicked out, her board slicing cleanly through the water. Her heart thundered, her body buzzing with the afterglow of the ride. This was the moment she lived for; intimate, fleeting, and powerful. Paddling back out, she scanned the horizon, eager for the next wave. The ocean, with its infinite energy and untamed beauty, always had more to give.

This wasn't just surfing; this was her celebration of life, her communion with the raw, untouchable force of nature.

William wasn't far behind, catching a wave not long after hers. She glanced back and saw him carving through the water, his form confident and fluid. The sight spurred her competitive streak. With a playful grin, Kendra stretched out her arms and paddled hard, every stroke fueled by the determination to beat him back to the lineup.

She reached the spot first, her breath coming fast but her spirits high. Moments later, William joined her, shaking his head with a laugh. His exhilaration was written all over his face, a reflection of the same joy coursing through her.

"Not bad," he said, leaning back on his board as he caught his breath. "But you're gonna need more than a head start to stay ahead of me."

Kendra smirked, water dripping from her hair. "Keep dreaming, old man. You'll be lucky to keep up."

Their friendly banter floated on the breeze as they turned to scan the horizon once more. The waves kept rolling in, each one a new opportunity, and neither of them was about to let the other take the next ride uncontested.



The impact came without warning; sudden, violent, and utterly disorienting. Kendra's board pitched sharply to one side, nearly throwing her off. For a split second, the world dissolved into chaos, the ocean erupting around her in frothy, churning violence. The familiar rhythm of the waves was gone, replaced by a primal force that felt hostile and unforgiving.

Then came the pain. It was searing, an agony that tore through her leg with merciless ferocity. She realized too late what was happening. The shark's jaws clamped down, its razor-sharp teeth slicing through the wetsuit and deep into her flesh. The pressure was unimaginable, a crushing, vice-like grip that sent shockwaves through her body and shattered her focus.

Another bite followed, this time on her side, but the agony and pull on her leg didn't stop. The predator's teeth tore through her like jagged knives, ripping away not only flesh but the fragile tether of reality. The agony blurred into something otherworldly, surreal in its intensity.

The water turned red in an instant, a cloud of crimson blooming around her, vivid against the churning surf. It rose toward the surface, even as she was pulled deeper. Her ears filled with the relentless pounding of her heartbeat, and she screamed; a raw, guttural sound swallowed instantly by the water. Salt stung her nose and throat as she inhaled a panicked gulp of seawater. Her body convulsed, every instinct screaming to fight, to survive, but the attack was too quick, too brutal.

Her hands flailed uselessly, striking nothing but water. The leash of her board tugged against her ankle, a cruel reminder of what she was leaving behind. In her last moments of awareness, she saw the faint outline of the board floating above her, growing blurrier with each second as the shark dragged her deeper into the abyss.

The pain dulled, her body succumbing to shock. She was barely conscious when the predator gave a final, bone-shaking thrash. Something else struck her, hard,

unrelenting, but Kendra didn't register it. The darkness had already taken her.

She was gone. The ocean, indifferent and unforgiving, swallowed the evidence of her struggle as if it had never happened.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:18 pm*

Pacific Horizon Research Institute

Four months later

Dr. Graham Stirling stared at Kendra's note, his eyes scanning the familiar lines for what felt like the hundredth time. JX-170 and NX-642 teamed up again. Even now, months after her death, his mind struggled to fully grasp the brutal reality of the attack that had taken her life.

She had been so young, too damn young. Research assistants had come and gone over the years, but Kendra was different. Her love for the ocean and its creatures was contagious, an enthusiasm that could light up even the duller days in the lab. Yes, she had the quintessential California surfer look: sun-kissed skin, blonde hair that always seemed to catch the light, and a smile as sharp as it was charming. But that wasn't what had drawn him to her.

Their relationship had been built on intelligence that turned into a friendship, and not attraction. She was 26, full of life and energy, and he, two decades her senior, had found no temptation in her youthful beauty. What had captivated him was her ability to connect with the sea, and the very heart of the work they did. Her joy, that infectious spark, had been irresistible in the best possible way. Now, the silence she left behind felt like a gaping wound he couldn't mend.

The findings from Kendra's death investigation lay spread out before him, a collaborative effort from an array of agencies: local law enforcement, marine safety officials, the medical examiner's office, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, forensic experts, the Coast Guard, and finally, the International Shark

Attack File (ISAF). Their separate conclusions had been distilled into one meticulous, 213-page document. He'd poured over every word countless times, each reading an attempt to extract meaning from the senseless.

It always circled back to two identifiers etched into his mind: JX-170 and NX-642. The reports didn't explicitly state it, though they confirmed two distinct shark bite patterns on what little was recovered of Kendra's remains. Yet, deep in his soul, Graham knew the truth. Those sharks hadn't just found her, they had killed her.

Graham had never believed in coincidences, and yet here he was, staring at what could only be described as the most extraordinary fluke in marine biology history. Beside him sat another thick report, this one over a decade old. Eleven years prior, a great white shark had systematically stalked and killed a man, narrowly missing his wife and young daughter. Now, that same daughter was set to join his yearly research program, a program designed for graduating seniors focusing on elasmobranch studies, the specialized field of sharks, rays, and skates with his own narrowed research of shark partnerships at the forefront.

Ryan Carter wasn't yet seventeen and wouldn't officially graduate for another year, meaning she was completing a four-year degree in just three. It took many students six years. Her IQ was almost off the charts, and she outpaced even Graham, who's own had been considered exceptional in his field. He begrudgingly acknowledged that her brilliance was evident. Still, he anticipated challenges. Ryan was, after all, a Carter. Her grandfather, who was known for his work on stingrays, was another figure Graham held in reluctant esteem. They weren't what you'd call friends, but their paths had crossed in professional circles, and twice they'd spoken at the same conferences. Dr. Sawyer reached out and asked if Ryan could join his team, which Graham had reluctantly agreed to.

And then there was Ryan's stepfather, a man who had rankled Graham's nerves for years. The man had beaten him out for an award Graham felt was rightfully his,

publishing a groundbreaking paper on male shark relationships just as Graham was finalizing his own research on the subject. It still stung. But here was Ryan, stepping into his program, and Graham wasn't sure if it was brilliance or a marine biology family legacy that would stir the waters most.

He wasn't even certain why he'd agreed to let her join. She had the grades and determination, but maybe it was the potential to glean some insight her stepfather, Dr. Cordova, might have missed. Maybe it was the chance to push his own research further with a mind as sharp as hers. Or maybe, deep down, he just couldn't resist the intrigue of having Ryan Carter in the mix. Whatever the reason, one thing was certain, this was going to be a year like no other.

The desk drawer had been taunting him all day. With a resigned sigh, Graham opened it and pulled out the bottle of whiskey nestled inside. He'd never considered himself much of a drinker, but since Kendra's death, the amber liquid had become his crutch, his way of enduring the endless hours in the lab and the even longer nights where Kendra being eaten alive filled his dreams. He poured a generous measure into a snifter, downed it in one burning gulp, and poured another, repeating the ritual with mechanical precision.

The warmth spread through his chest, dulling the edges of his thoughts. He set the glass down with a soft clink and turned his attention to the Carter report. Flipping it open, he stared at the familiar pages, deciding to read through it yet again. Kate Carter, Ryan's mother, had refused to let her daughter be interviewed after the attack. Graham had understood the decision. She was only five at the time, after all, but he couldn't help wondering if Ryan's precocious intelligence had picked up on details others might have overlooked. It was a thought he dismissed as quickly as it came. He was an idiot for giving the idea any credit.

His hand drifted back to the glass, and he took another long sip, the bitterness mirroring his mood. No, he didn't look forward to having Ryan Carter in his

program. She would be a spoiled prima donna, coddled by her family's name and their reputation. She'd be a disruption, a problem he didn't want and certainly didn't need. Yet, despite himself, a part of him remained curious. Whether she lived up to his low expectations or surprised him, Graham knew one thing for sure: her presence would make this year anything but ordinary.

While his head spun, Graham flipped through the Carter report, skimming pages he had all but memorized. The words blurred together: Sam Carter, killer shark, and the infamous breach. A shark breaching onto a human had never been recorded or witnessed before Sam's attack. It was a singular event, one that defied every precedent in marine biology. And yet, Graham wasn't sure if he believed it. There was an account of the shark breaching again when Kate Carter was lifted out of the water. He also found that hard to believe. The systematic destruction of their yacht was another anomaly. He respected the intelligence of sharks, and understood there was a vast ocean of knowledge science had yet to uncover.

His thoughts drifted to the groundbreaking advancements in animal communication. The speaking buttons now being used with dogs and cats were a phenomenon, offering tangible proof of mammalian intelligence and reshaping what was understood about non-human cognition. Whale communication was another frontier slowly being deciphered; researchers were on the cusp of unlocking the complex coding behind their songs.

But sharks. They were different. They lacked the vocalizations of mammals or cetaceans, yet their ancient lineage spoke volumes. Sharks had existed for over 400 million years, predating the dinosaurs and surviving mass extinctions that wiped out nearly all other life. Their evolutionary resilience and adaptability made them one of the most successful species on Earth.

Graham leaned back in his chair, the weight of the report heavy in his mind. The more he studied, the more he questioned. If science was unraveling the intelligence of

whales, dogs, and even household cats, who was to say sharks didn't harbor their own complex, uncharted intellect? He'd been on the cusp of proving it for ten years, and it somehow escaped him. He flipped the page. Perhaps the breach on Sam Carter wasn't an anomaly after all. Maybe it was a glimpse into something humanity wasn't yet ready to understand.

Graham poured another snifter, the amber liquid sloshing against the glass as his hand wavered. He decided he'd sleep it off in the small bedroom tucked away in the institute's back wing. A space that had become a refuge during these endless, haunted nights. The pages of the report blurred before him, and his elbow bumped the bottle, sending it teetering dangerously before he steadied it with a clumsy grab.

Even the alcohol couldn't dull the vivid horror of the images in his mind. Kendra, being eaten alive, her screams swallowed by the churning sea. She would have known. Of course, she would have known what was happening. Did she see the second shark coming? Was she still alive as they tore her apart, or had she mercifully bled out or drowned before the final terror? The questions gnawed at him like predators in the dark, relentless and unanswerable.

Dr. Graham Stirling knew he would carry these thoughts for the rest of his life. The weight of them would never lighten, and the answers, if there were any, would likely remain forever out of reach.

His head drooped forward, the glass slipping from his hand and landing with a dull thunk on the desk. He passed out moments later, a lightweight in a world of heavyweights, his exhaustion and grief wrapping around him like the crushing depths of the sea.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:18 pm*

The larger shark, JX-170, circled slowly, its sleek body cutting through the water with ease. Hunger gnawed at its belly, a sharp, familiar ache that demanded satisfaction. It sensed the smaller shark, NX-642, moving in tandem, just outside the periphery of its vision. They didn't communicate in words or sounds, but in the rhythm of their movements, a silent understanding bound them.

The water is alive tonight, JX-170 thought, the faint electric signals of distant fish twitching through its ampullae of Lorenzini. It veered slightly to the left, picking up on something larger. A stronger pulse. Mammal, perhaps. Slow. Vulnerable. Closer.

NX-642 mirrored the motion, smaller but equally precise, its hunger sharpening its focus. It could sense JX-170's intent, a deep pull of purpose shared between them. The two had hunted together before, and each time was the same: the larger one led, the smaller one shadowed, waiting for the signal.

The scent hit them simultaneously; a faint trace of blood carried by the current. It wasn't strong, but it was enough. Enough to trigger the primal drive that surged like a tidal wave through their senses. NX-642 darted forward, impatient. Hunger must end. Now.

JX-170 slowed, pulling rank with its sheer size, a subtle flick of its tail sending a warning. Wait. Don't waste the energy yet. It adjusted course slightly, honing in on the scent, the signals, the subtle disturbances in the water. It could feel the prey now, the vibrations of a creature swimming, unaware. Weak, tired, or simply unlucky, it didn't matter.

NX-642 complied, falling back, its own body thrumming with anticipation. Close. So



close. Its thoughts were simpler, driven by raw need. It knew its role, the finisher, the one to clean up what JX-170 began. The larger shark always claimed the first strike, a breach of speed and power that startled the prey into shock. The smaller shark thrived in that chaos.

JX-170 began to rise, its body tightening like a coiled spring, ready to explode upward. Now. The decision wasn't conscious, it was instinct, honed by millions of years of survival. It surged, water parting around its streamlined body as it breached the surface. The prey, a seal, barely had time to react before rows of serrated teeth tore into flesh, dragging it down.

NX-642 was there in seconds, its jaws snapping at the thrashing meal. Mine too. Together, they tore the prey apart, their movements harmonized in an ancient dance of survival. The taste of blood filled the water, rich and metallic, satisfying the primal hunger that had driven them.

JX-170 glided through the dark water, its thoughts sharper than the hunger that remained in its belly after sharing the meal. The scent of blood always lingered in its memory, not the faint, fleeting trails of prey that barely filled its maw, but the rich, intoxicating essence of those who got away. The ones who were more than a meal. It remembered them, not with emotion as humans understood it, but with the deep, instinctual drive etched into its ancient mind.

It also remembered its other companion. Its ally. Not that it understood the concept of friendship, but there had been something between them, an unspoken coordination, a shared purpose in the hunt. The thing above water had killed it. JX-170 had searched for the ones who controlled the thing, swimming through miles of endless water, but it had never returned. The absence lingered, a void that only heightened its awareness of what had been lost.

That was how it found the creature, the one that had placed the thing on its body. The memory was seared into its being, as vivid as the first breach. The cold, unnatural

grip of the device had wrapped around its dorsal fin, stripping it of its freedom, its dignity. They had pulled him from the water, exposed him to a world it didn't understand, and in doing so, humiliated its brilliance. The weight of that thing had marked it, driven it, until it was gone, torn away over time, just as it had disappeared from NX-642.

But JX-170 hadn't forgotten. It never would.

It had found one of them, the creatures that walked on land, that dared to think themselves beyond reach. And it had ended them, its jaws closing with finality, its power proving their weakness. The memory was satisfying in a primal, visceral way, but the satisfaction didn't last. The ocean was vast, and there were others. Always others.

Now, it swam with purpose, the blood trails faint but promising. Beside it, NX-642 followed, a smaller shadow sharing its silent mission. The thing they had left on their bodies was gone, but the scars ran deeper. JX-170 would hunt, feed, and continue to remind the ocean, and those who dared enter it, that nothing was above the oldest predator on Earth. Nothing.

The ocean was vast and unyielding, and the hunger that spurred his search would return. It always did.