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Freshwater

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Class of 2015

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Freshwater

Rachel Martinelli

As I licked the pretzel-salt residue from my fingertips I realized that the heat of the sun was becoming more pronounced than the conversation. Not that there was little to discuss—the uncertainties we were packing for college provided sufficient small-talk material—I just found the sensation of sweat trickling down my hairline too difficult to ignore, and the cool promise of lake water beckoned me.

With an apologetic smile, I discreetly withdrew from the small circle of patio chairs and headed for the dock: just a quick stroll through Kelli's backyard. A stream of multicolor blankets and beach towels lined my path to the water's edge while the lingering scent of burnt-out incense drifted through the air. "Spirits By the Lake" was the title of the birthday party—a nod to Kelli's love of astrology and the supernatural. The day had been filled with aura readings (mine: a bright orange), spirit animal identification (a falcon), and tarot card predictions (drugs and promiscuous sex in my future). It was harmless fun—a relaxing end to my senior year.

I soon reached the wooden dock. I tiptoed along the rotting planks as my eyes skimmed across the stagnant water. An inflatable island floated at the center about fifty yards away. Some of my friends had already gathered there so I decided to join them. Though I had asked everyone not to dive into the shallow water (my first aid skills didn't cover broken necks), I figured years on a swim team and instruction on diving technique exempted me from my own rule. I took a few steps back, aligned my body, and leapt through the air.

That second after contact with the water has always been my favorite; that moment when gravity reverses: your body sinks through the air and then the remaining breath in your lungs pushes you back to the surface. I held still and allowed my body to glide, savoring the water's cool caress. An intake of breath later, I was making my way towards the colorful, plastic island.

It took only a few strokes in to realize that I wasn't alone. Directly in my path, about twenty yards away, were two floating heads. Ben's blonde curls were immediately identifiable and it was no surprise to see Dior at his side—the couple had been inseparable for months. I increased my pace and reached them within a few seconds.

"You guys done with the island?" I asked with a big, oblivious smile.

“We were going there, but Dior isn’t a great swimmer,” Ben replied with a grimace. “I’m trying to get him back.”

“Need help?”

I never noticed how silent Dior was during the exchange, how clouded his normally vibrant eyes were. I only noted Ben’s grateful face as I waded beside Dior, allowing him to grip my shoulder so that I could tow him back to shore.

We had only moved a few feet when Dior started to struggle. Still ignorant of the situation, I stopped and tried to calm him down.

“Dior...Dior it’s fine. Calm down...Di-”

Then I was under.

I’d always imagined drowning would be similar to hypothermia—ice spreading to your extremities—but it’s more like burning alive. The water that had relieved me of the sun’s heat was now searing my insides. Like fire, it exhausted all the air in my lungs—I would not float to the surface this time. I started struggling, frantic to yank free from Dior’s grasp, but my legs had no leverage, only open water. It was disorienting; I couldn’t see anything, didn’t know in what direction I was lashing out. I could only blindly writhe like a fish on a hook.

My mind leapt back to lifeguard recertification class.

“Always have your flotation device,” the instructor warned. “Never let a panicked swimmer get a hold of you. It doesn’t matter if it’s your friend. They will push you under to stay afloat.”

Was Dior going to drown me?

The violence in my twisting and jerking grew. Lifeguard training had not prepared me for this. I was off duty, wearing my black bikini instead of the red one-piece; had no flotation device; no whistle. A few hours earlier, my friends had laughed at the swimming rules I’d jokingly laid out and my insistence that I would not save anyone who disobeyed them. Suddenly, it no longer seemed funny.

I was near unconsciousness, but just as red flares were erupting behind my eyelids, a chance punch hit its target and the death grip loosened, allowing me to break free. I kicked and clawed my way to the surface. When I pierced through, I was overcome by a vicious bout of coughing as I expelled the liquid from my lungs. I took in a deep breath, and the crisp air chilled the fire that had been consuming my bones. My body numbed, but my mind suddenly focused.

I had to do my job.

I let out a blood-curdling scream to alert my oblivious friends still conversing on the patio, one that nobody could mistake for a prank. In attempt stay afloat, Dior was now grasping for Ben. I rushed back to his side so he could take hold of me instead. This time I was ready.

I went under again.

Keeping calm, I angled my body so my kicks would propel us forward. Meanwhile, Ben had grabbed hold of Dior's other arm. He pulled; I pushed; and we inched towards land. Every twenty seconds or so I resurfaced to breathe and check on our progress. I saw my friends scramble towards the water's edge then gather abandoned plastic inner tubes, then someone threw one that landed about ten yards ahead of us. A goal in sight, I plunged one last time, kicking my shrieking legs with the remainder of my strength.

It was enough.

The vise grip released from my shoulder, clinging instead to cheap plastic. I waded to the shallows where my weary legs could safely rest. Everything that followed was in a haze, as though it occurred beneath that murky lake. My friends surrounded us, led us inside the house where there were fresh towels and comfortable seats. Everyone was talking at once and my hypersensitive ears melded all the voices together into an incoherent mass of alarm and confusion; it was overwhelming.

Surrounded by that mob of concerned eyes, I felt as though I had escaped drowning only to die of exposure. Those eyes were dragging me back to those watery depths and, suddenly, I couldn't catch my breath. I had to get away.

"Are you okay?" someone asked me.

"I'm fine."

While everyone focused on the still silent Dior, I escaped to the bathroom. I locked the door behind me and leaned back against it. Only there, in that quiet isolation, did I at last feel safe. For a few moments, I just stood there. Then I doubled over and released a gut-wrenching sob as the fear and adrenaline poured out of my body. The rest of the world melted away as I cried in that tiny blue bathroom. I couldn't think about what might have been or how lucky I was. I could only stand there and drown in lukewarm tears, thankful for the harmless taste of saltwater.