

DEAD MAN'S
FLOAT

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CHAPTER ONE

Sam stood at the end of the world, knees knocking, her breath coming in short bursts. Even with her eyes squeezed shut, she could sense the cold emptiness stretching out before her. A void just beyond her reach. She dared a peek through the slits of her eyelids and almost lost her balance. The height was dizzying, the water frighteningly far away. It was still and dark beneath her, a mirror reflecting her impossibly tiny self.

“Are you gonna jump?” a voice called up from below, echoing off the rafters. “Or are you too scared?”

Sam gulped as an unlikely wind brushed across her bare shoulders, causing a fresh wave of goose bumps to sizzle and pop along her neck. The taunt confirmed that she didn’t have a choice. She was a prisoner condemned to walk the plank. She had nowhere to go but forward. And down.

Her toes curled over the edge of the platform as she took

another look at the pool below. Ten meters wasn't so bad. Only a few stories. She'd seen divers throw themselves from this height, twisting and flipping, contorting their bodies into painful pretzels and then breaking through the surface headfirst. If they could survive all that, then surely, she could survive one jump.

"We're waiting," the voice rang out again. But this time it was followed by a stage whisper loud enough for even Sam to hear. "Told you she'd chicken out."

A few laughs rose from the pool deck, and Sam knew she couldn't stall any longer.

Sucking in a deep breath, she inhaled the moisture and chlorine in the air, the familiar scent burning her lungs and steadying her nerves. She closed her eyes again and listened for the water as it beckoned to her, lapping lightly, trickling and moving in nearly imperceptible currents. She listened until her legs stopped shaking. Until a calmness washed over her.

Then she reached up, plugged her nose, and took that final step off the ledge, solid ground disappearing underneath her in a heart-stopping second.

Falling was the terrifying part. Wind rushed through her hair, yanking it to the sky, letting her know that she'd made a grave mistake as it tried to pull her back onto the platform. Her stomach flipped and her mouth puckered into a grimace. But she didn't scream. She didn't make a sound as she plummeted. As a memory flashed in her head.

Her six-year-old self. A leap from a pier on a summer day. Laughter bubbling up in the muggy afternoon. A plunge into murky lake water, cold and consuming.

She sank into that chilly darkness, the water covering her shoulders and then her head. She opened her eyes and saw another pair of legs next to hers. She spotted another arm sculling through the water. Long strands of brown hair rippled in the depths and Sam dove down, following her best friend, Kasey, as if they were mermaids.

The water grew colder as they swam deeper, the summer sun not strong enough to penetrate all the way down to the bottom of the lake, where long, ropy reeds sprang up in bunches, blocking their way. But they just pushed them aside, using their hands to part the vegetation like curtains. The grassy stalks tickled Sam's arms as she moved past them, as she searched for sunken treasure. Goose bumps exploded up the back of her neck, a thrilling chill even as her lungs tightened, as she realized she was almost out of breath. She reached forward and tapped Kasey's foot, pointing up toward the surface. Her cheeks bulged as a mouthful of air escaped her lips. Kasey nodded in understanding, and they both turned, the reeds swirling around their kicking feet, getting one last touch in before Sam and Kasey rocketed to the surface.

But as they pushed off the muddy bottom of the lake, the reeds didn't fall away. They wrapped their slimy tendrils around their ankles and held tight, trapping them under the surface as

the seconds ticked by, as their lungs contracted, as panic rose in their chests and they tried desperately to pull themselves free.

Sam looked over at Kasey, her eyes wide and scared, her lungs on fire. But she didn't know what to do. The harder she kicked, the more tightly the reeds wound around her ankle, creating an ironclad hold that anchored her in the deep. That kept her from a lifesaving breath.

A sharp ringing had pierced her ears as the pressure in her chest built, as her vision grew blurry, as realization stole over her, despair. She lifted her head and screamed, losing the rest of her air, the gas escaping in a violent jellyfish bloom that rushed to the surface, her last breath abandoning her.

And then she started to slip deeper, the water turning icy cold even as her chest burned with an excruciating pain. She kept sinking, the reeds pulling her under, until the darkness enveloped her completely. Until, suddenly, she couldn't feel anything anymore.

She could still conjure up that strange sensation, that new numbness. Like she'd been transported to a different dimension. She had been all alone, floating in a vast emptiness. Even Kasey had disappeared from her side. It was a horrifying place devoid of sights and sounds and all feeling, where she seemed to float on and on in an utterly black ocean, the fathomless nothingness more frightening than the pain she'd been in before.

Oblivion.

Sam crashed through the pool's surface, the drop from the ten-meter platform over in only a couple of seconds. The impact stung the soles of her feet and jarred her back to the present. But as she let herself sink deeper under the water, she recalled how, just when she'd given up, her father's arm had appeared out of nowhere and dug her from that lake grave. His strength had been enough to snap the reeds' hold, to pull her to the surface and onto the dock, where she'd taken heaving breaths until she'd thrown up, her vomit green and chunky like she'd exorcised a demon.

But he hadn't been able to get to Kasey in time.

While Sam was still throwing up on the dock, her best friend's body had bobbed to the surface and floated there, face-down, lifeless. The empty shell of a girl. And even though Sam knew that there was nothing she could have done to save Kasey, that she'd barely made it out of that accident alive, she still blamed herself. She was only six years old then, but she should have been stronger. She should have been able to rip Kasey from the reeds' grasp. She should have swum them both to the surface. To fresh air. To safety.

Sam's toes grazed the bottom of the pool and she let herself settle. She exhaled a stream of air and sank deeper, tilting her head back and squinting to look up. The ten-meter platform seemed even farther away from down here, but it didn't frighten her anymore. She felt calm and at peace. Powerful, even.

The water didn't scare her like it had when she was six.

She'd mastered that fear. Made it her dominion. She might have failed Kasey, but now, nine years later, she wouldn't let that happen again. She wouldn't let anyone else drown on her watch.

The shadows of her new teammates swayed above her, their bodies gathered around the edge of the pool, peering down at her, most likely looking for any sign of weakness. But Sam didn't care what those girls thought about her. She wasn't a coward and she'd proven that. Practice would start tomorrow, and she'd show them what she could really do. How fast she could go. No one would care about how long it'd taken her to jump off the high dive then. No one would whisper that she was chicken.

Feeling her lungs starting to cave, Sam blew out another stream of bubbles. Then she raised her arms and pressed them into a straight arrow. She bent her knees and pushed off the bottom of the pool, dolphin kicking to propel herself faster through the water until she broke the surface, sending up a spray in every direction. She breathed in and out as she treaded water, looking until she spotted the owner of the voice that had taunted her earlier—the girls' team captain: Bailey Miller.

"What a rush," Sam chirped, laying it on thick as she watched the girl squirm.

Bailey stood there with her arms crossed and a scowl contorting her lips into something unpleasant. She was clearly upset, and Sam had to dip her chin lower in the water to make

sure she hid her grin. Because if Bailey was mad now, she'd only feel worse after practice tomorrow.

"We've all done it," Bailey scoffed, uncrossing her arms and picking at her fingernails. "Now hurry up and dry off. We've gotta get out of here before someone catches us. We aren't supposed to be in here."

And they weren't. But somehow Bailey had a key to the pool—probably something the outgoing team captain had passed on to her—which they'd used to break in after school. Every new swimmer had been told to strip down to their suits and jump from the ten-meter platform, a plunge in the dark that had taken some people longer than others, and that a couple of people hadn't attempted at all.

"Let's go." Bailey clapped her hands together, everyone jumping into action as the crack echoed off the pool walls. She took one last disapproving look at Sam and then turned, making her way to the door without a glance back.

Sam watched as everyone started moving, and then she waded to the wall and pulled herself up in one motion. She grabbed her nearby towel and wrapped it around her shoulders, using it to dry off her hair, which she kept short so it'd fit under a cap more easily. No one seemed to notice her as they filed out, which was fine. She didn't need to be the center of attention. She preferred to be left alone. She had one goal and didn't like distractions.

She peered back at the pool, the waves she'd made smoothed

over already so that the surface looked clean and clear and crystalline. Her fingers itched to slice through the water. Every pool was different. They had their own personalities. And she wondered what this one might hold.

Something dripped into the water, and Sam looked down, puzzling over the swirl of color there, the red fading to pink before it eventually dissipated. Another drop fell, this one crimson and impossible to mistake.

Sam's hand flew to her face, and her fingers slid over the warm slick of blood dribbling over her lips and down her chin. Panic thundered in her ears, and she leaned her head forward, sniffing as she pressed her towel to her nose. A metallic tang still managed to seep down her throat and she gagged, choking on the bitter taste. Her eyes darted from side to side, but no one seemed to have noticed. Most everyone had already trickled out. Which was good. She could deal with this. She'd been getting nosebleeds for what felt like her entire life. She had a supply of cotton balls in her bag. She just needed to wash off real quick.

Sam startled as she caught sight of a reflection in the pool. It wavered in front of her, mirroring her shadow. But it wasn't her. Its hair was too long. Its eyes red embers that glowed like drops of blood in the water.

Kasey, Sam thought, fear prickling the hairs on her scalp as her hand reached up to clasp the thin necklace pressed against the wet skin of her collarbone.

But then she remembered herself. Remembered that Kasey was dead. That her guilt was playing tricks on her.

With a quick motion, Sam dipped her hand in the pool and dispelled the reflection. She cupped a handful of water and splashed it against her face. She used her towel to pat her cheeks dry, and then jumped to her feet, her head tilted down, sucking in breaths through her mouth to keep the blood at bay. She waddled over to her bag and dug through it until she found the cotton balls, pushing one into her nostril and feeling almost immediate relief. Crisis averted.

Wiping her nose and chin again, Sam turned back to the pool. It'd look different tomorrow morning, with all the lane lines put in and the backstroke flags flapping. But it'd be home. Or, at least, a home away from home. Her new training ground.

She gave herself a final pat down, then pulled on her sweat-pants and a hoodie. She draped her towel over her wet hair, doing her best to hide the cotton ball stuck up her nose. She'd take it out when she got home. But right now she couldn't afford to show any weakness. She wanted to get off on the right foot with these girls. She wanted them to know that she meant business. She didn't play around in the pool. Hopefully, they'd respect that. Because she needed them to push her. She needed their help to make herself faster. And if they weren't serious, then they better stay out of her way.