

CHAPTER 1

A couple weeks ago

*M*y first week home for summer break, I discovered Lenny Jones had become a lifeguard.

The moment I made it back to my hometown, I'd been dying to get to Rushington Park District's indoor pool. It was the one place in the world that always made my worries not seem so bad. I first started going there for swimming lessons as a kid with my sister. Our support group had suggested to my mom that swimming would be a good form of physical therapy for us; helping us get better control of our own bodies. But to me, it became psychological therapy as well. The pool brought me solace and the water had a cleansing effect for my body and soul. Most importantly, it was something that was all mine. My sister never took to the water like I did, so when our lessons ended, she never cared to return. From that point on, going to the pool was how I got the alone-time I desperately craved.

Hence, after a long first year of college, going for a swim in my old hangout spot was just what the doctor ordered.

I spotted Lenny Jones almost immediately upon entering the pool area. He'd gotten taller, broader, and handsomer since all those years ago when he helped teach swimming lessons to us younger kids.

Reclining in a beach-chair with a towel around his neck, he was engrossed in a book and hadn't noticed me when I approached the pool. In his defense though, it was almost closing hour and no one else was around.

I contemplated saying hello, but something stopped me. My skin prickled with anxiety. I silently unwrapped the towel from around me. In my bathing suit, my skin felt chilled and ached for the familiarity of the warm water. I kneeled down, folding my towel and placing it within reaching distance of the pool.

That's when Lenny finally looked up.

"Woah! Jesus, I didn't know anyone was in here! You trying to get me fired or something?" He set his book aside and stood, tossing his towel onto his chair before heading toward me. The whistle around

his neck dangled at his belly-button, which was surrounded by some rather impressive abdominal muscles.

My face flushed. "Sorry."

"Ch-Charlotte? Charlotte Lakewood?" He looked me up and down with widened eyes.

So he did remember me. I forced a smile and nodded. "Yeah. Hi, Lenny." I lowered my gaze, staring down at my chipped toenail polish as I began fidgeting with the hair-band around my wrist. I had planned to tie my hair back, but couldn't with Lenny standing so close. The self-consciousness I thought I had finally outgrown came back full force; I practically felt like a ten-year-old again, convinced everyone was staring at my scar.

I cleared my throat. "It's not closing time yet, is it?" I asked, trying to distract myself from how keenly I felt Lenny's gaze.

"No. Still open for another forty-five minutes. It's just slow this time of day. I'm usually sitting back reading or dosing off right about now. Don't tell anybody I said that though."

I glanced up, finding him even closer than I expected. I reflexively stepped back, startled by the hungry look on his face, although it immediately disappeared, leaving me wondering if I had just imagined it.

Lenny smirked. His smile was still the same, even if the rest of him wasn't. I can remember admiring his smile from afar in junior high, despite it always being directed at the pretty girls around his own age. Mainly though, the strange pitter patter going through my chest resulted from the simple fact that his smile looked so genuine. I had been so convinced I'd only see animosity or pity in his expression.

"Sorry to stare. I just never paid attention to how much you girls looked alike. I guess because you didn't come around as much..." He shook his head and cleared his throat. "So...H-How've you been?"

His question was so loaded, I could hardly wrap my mind around it. And judging from the way he'd stuttered, it had been just as difficult for him to ask as it was for me to answer.

"Hanging in there," I finally said. "I'm uhm...in school. Just finished my first year of college."

"Good for you." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well...I'm just here."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I see that."

"What can I say? I guess the old neighborhood just won't turn me loose. It does feel a little different now though. Things look different when you're grown, don't they?" He smirked again, and I regretfully felt myself blush.

I wanted to say something, but to my horror, his sister's name suddenly filled my mind and blocked my vocal chords. As I fought back thoughts of her, Lenny's closeness, particularly his swim trunks, bare chest, and rippling stomach muscles, proved to be an adequate distraction. Growing up, every girl in town had a crush on him, myself and Matilda included.

It was surprising that someone like him hadn't managed to move on to someplace bigger and better by now.

I looked into his rich brown eyes and breathed in the fresh smell of soap radiating from his skin. "I was just going for a swim," I said, lamely.

"Go ahead. Don't let me stop you. In fact, mind if I join?"

"No...Uhh, I mean, sure," I stammered. "I don't own the pool. You can swim if you want. I remember how good of a swimmer you were."

Lenny nodded. "Yeah, but since becoming a lifeguard, I actually don't do much swimming these days. It's become too much of a job instead of something fun, you know? But every now and then, I try to remind myself why I love the water. It's so peaceful. Relaxing. You can let all your problems float away in it."

I started to tie my hair up, but caught Lenny looking at the exposed area between my left temple and ear. I hastily let my hair back down, making sure it fell back into place for coverage. But Lenny reached out and brushed my hair behind my ear, re-exposing the area. Delicately, he trailed a finger along the scar, his touch so light that it tickled. I stood, completely frozen.

"Does it hurt?"

I shook my head. "N-no."

"Your sister's was just like this, but on the right side." I blinked, surprised that he remembered such a detail. Finally, he lowered his hand. "I remember you taking swim lessons, so you know it's much easier to swim with all this hair out of the way. I've got swim-caps if you want one...By the way, you should know that you're beautiful and no small imperfection can change that."

He slid his hand down my arm before taking my hand in his and giving it a gentle squeeze.

I couldn't decipher the feelings running through me all at once. Confusion. Elation. Longing. Repulsion. I had no idea how to respond to him. Insecurity had always made me something of a loner, and for as long as I could remember, I'd always been afraid to let people get too close. So what was I supposed to do now, when Lenny Jones of all people, was holding my hand? His easy acceptance of me indicated that finally, bygones were bygones. He clearly wasn't dwelling on the past, regardless of who our sisters were.

But perhaps it had everything to do with who our sisters were. Neither of us wanted to be judged for the sibling that had been born with or to us.

“Maybe we can get something to eat once we’re done here?” Lenny suggested, lowering himself into the pool with his eyes fixed on me.

My first instinct was to say ‘no’ because I had only been in his presence for a short period of time and a part of me felt he was trying too hard. But for some reason, I decided to take a chance and nodded. “Okay.”

I then lowered myself into the pool and joined him for a swim.

Imagine my shock when he drowned and streaks of red swirled through the water.

CHAPTER 2

The subsequent days passed in a blur, but one of the things I remember most before Lenny

Jones died was sitting at his bedside in the hospital while he had still been in a coma.

I can't for the life of me figure out how someone like Lenny Jones, an expert swimmer, drowned. Equally disturbing is the fact that I was there when it happened, yet have no recollection of it.

Shock. That's the explanation everyone gave. They said I couldn't remember because I went into shock. At least that was the story before people started acknowledging the elephant in the room—that I was the last person to see Lenny before he drowned. I was the last person to see him before he slipped into the coma. Basically, I was the last person to see him alive.

That's part of the reason why they wanted to collect a DNA sample from me. What a way to spend my 19th birthday. The other part was because of what supposedly happened when I went to visit him in the hospital two days after he drowned.

After being given a visitor's pass to his room, I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone as I sat beside him. I guess I should have listened to my mother. She told me it probably wasn't a good idea for me to see him like that, but I thought she was just worried that I was too fragile, given all I'd been through. Now, however, I wonder if she had foreseen an issue I hadn't. Words can't describe how much I wished I had followed her advice when I saw Lenny lying in that hospital bed, hooked up to machines essentially squeezing a few more days out of him. His jaw had been lined with stubble, which just reminded me of how much time had passed since my childhood crush on him.

I reflected on when we were kids. Although his sister had been horrible to me and Matilda, he never showed us any unkindness. I used to marvel at how he could be so decent, while Rachel had been such a nightmare. I'd caught his expression of blatant disapproval toward his sister more than once, and it had made me wonder if he ever hated her as much as we did.

I always wondered how well they got along after the accident, and whether having her arm amputated changed her.

Staring at Lenny's motionless face, I had wanted nothing more than for him to open his eyes so I could see their pretty brown tone one last time.

The next thing I knew, his nurse was shrieking. I hadn't even noticed her enter the room. A petite woman with shiny black hair and dark eyes, she repeated the same question three times before I caught that she was asking: "*What did you say?*"

I instantly panicked. Though I didn't know what happened, that moment proved to haunt me once Lenny's death became a criminal investigation.

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