

THE
GIRL
IN THE
LAKE

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FOR MY COUSINS, ESPECIALLY THE ONES
WHO HAVE GRADUATED FROM THE
KIDS' TABLE.

The title 'CHAPTER 1' is written in a hand-drawn, sketchy font. The word 'CHAPTER' is in all caps and larger than the number '1'. The text is centered and surrounded by several vertical, irregular lines that resemble paint drips or ink splatters, extending from the top and bottom edges of the page.

CHAPTER 1

Every time Grandma Judy or Grandad Jim called, whether it was to wish us happy birthday or Merry Christmas or just to talk with Mama, they'd always make us promise to come visit their lake house "next summer."

"Next summer" is finally here. Just a couple of weeks after I failed my last swimming lesson.

I don't think that's a coincidence, either. Grandma Judy and Grandad Jim are huge on everyone in our family loving the water and learning how to swim. So of course, when I fail my swimming lesson and decide I won't be swimming again, it's the summer we actually visit the lake house.

"You can't fail a swimming lesson, Celeste," my dad tells me after I failed it. But as a dad, he's supposed to

say that. My brother, Owen, learned really fast, and he's ten and I'm twelve. But at the end of my last lesson, I still didn't know how to swim, which seems like failing to me.

I told my dad afterward that I don't want to swim anymore, but I should have known better than to say that.

"You know how important swimming is to our family," Mama said. Her dad, Grandad Jim, was a life-guard. Mama says she's been swimming for so long, she doesn't even remember learning. Dad was afraid of swimming until after he married Mama, when she convinced him to finally learn, so I thought he'd understand how hard it was. But instead he says, "If I can learn, you can learn."

I think I get my swimming genes from Dad, because every time my instructor, Stinky-Breath Jared, told me to jump into his arms, I'd freeze up. Eventually, he'd get annoyed.

I did *not* like Jared with the Stinky Breath. He sighed way too many times when I wasn't brave enough to jump into his arms in the swimming pool. Like I was taking too long. But I didn't get it. For the next forty

minutes, he didn't have anywhere else to be. Why was he rushing me?

He pronounced my name wrong, too. He would always say it like "Cel-es-tee." Until I worked up the nerve to correct him.

"It's Cel-*lest*," I finally told him, staring at my reflection in the rippling blue water.

"Just come on," he said. I could tell he was getting annoyed. "You can do it. It's not that hard."

I didn't have the guts to tell him that it *was* that hard for me. I wanted to tell him that my name wasn't that hard to pronounce, either, but he kept messing that up, and I'd never jumped in a body of water before. I wanted to tell him that since he seemed so annoyed with me, I didn't trust him to catch me if I messed up. So I didn't say anything.

Just forget it, I thought to myself.

I wouldn't move an inch closer to the water. I just stood there, smelling the chlorine. One time I heard someone giggle and it was a toddler. She had on a swimsuit that was made to look like a strawberry. She was laughing at me. Then she jumped into her

own daddy's arms in the pool without a care in the world.

After that last lesson, I suggested that my daddy teach me how to swim instead. I'd feel way more comfortable jumping into his arms than Stinky-Breath Jared's. Or Mama's, since she's so good at it.

"Grandad will teach you," she told me. Then she stopped herself and says, "Grandad *can* teach you." After she said this, she asks Owen and me how we'd feel about spending the week with our grandparents and cousins. And that lets me know that's the whole reason we're going to the lake house this summer.

Now I'm in the car with my mom, my dad, and Owen, on the way there. It used to be a place where my mom and her brothers and sisters would play and swim all summer long with our grandparents. Then when my grandparents stopped working, they moved there full-time. I love our grandparents, but since we moved a little farther away, we don't see them as much. Our cousins will be there, too. They are from different states

and I haven't seen them in a couple of years. I just remember Capri being bossy and Daisy being quiet.

Owen must realize we're getting closer, because he finally stops telling us every single fact he knows about trees, lakes, and hiking trails and just stares out the window. If Grandma and Grandad were going to make me swim, then they were probably going to make Owen hike, too. My brainiac brother is usually totally logical, but for some reason hiking is the one thing he's really afraid of.

Our car bounces up and down on a dirt road, the trees closing in on either side of us. I never knew a road could be so bumpy. We pass a town library, a small grocery store, and then pretty soon, I don't see much of anything except for houses every now and then.

"We're here," Mama says. She turns around and smiles at me and Owen in the back seat. I try to return her smile. Mama always talks about how she and her brothers and sisters—my aunts and uncles—loved to come here and swim when they were younger. I guess she thinks it's going to be the same with me and my cousins.

We pull up to a big white house with black shutters. I can see the lake peeking out from behind the house, sparkling in the sun. It's a beautiful setting, but seeing the water makes my stomach flip. There's a window at the very top of the house—I guess it's the attic. As I'm looking, I see something shine from the attic window, like a shadow with a really bright outline. *What is that?* I wonder. It's probably just the sunlight glinting off the glass.

“There's Grandma and Grandad!” Mom exclaims happily. “And there are your cousins.” She points to the group of people clustered near the door. “They can't wait to see you. And look at my brothers and sisters! Let's go say hello.”

We step out of the car and stretch the achiness out of our limbs. Even with the cool breeze coming from the lake, it's definitely hotter here than it is back home. Mama can't hide her grin as she and Daddy walk over to my aunts and uncles.

I see my uncle Howard getting bags out of a car parked right in front of ours, so I guess my cousin Capri is just getting here, too.

My eyes land on Capri. Her legs are twice as long as they were the last time I saw her, and the muscles in her calves are twice as big. I know her sixteenth birthday is coming up this fall. She'll probably be taller than Uncle Howard next year. She does not look like someone who "can't wait" to see me. She walks from behind Uncle Howard's car in some slouchy jean shorts that are just the right color blue, have the right amount of rips, aren't too tight, too loose, or too long. Her braids hang down her back and she's wearing gold hoop earrings, the really big ones that Mama won't let me wear yet. She's busy doing something on her phone and then I see her suck her teeth—probably when she realizes there is no cell phone service out here. I already realized that in the car.

Then there's my cousin Daisy. She is standing beside my aunt Marlene and uncle Steve wearing a white sundress with big red polka dots on it. She has an old-timey look, like she just stepped out of a black-and-white film. She always has—especially in her baby pictures, when she stared into the camera with her big round eyes. She has fluffy, bouncy curls and perfect posture, and looks straight ahead as she walks. Not down.

Almost like she's floating through the air. I could bet money no one ever told her to "sit up straight." She's kind of old-fashioned; she likes record players and stuff. Sometimes my dad would joke and say, "She seems like she's been here before." Whatever that means.

Owen and I walk over to them.

Daisy looks up, her hair blowing in the wind.

"Hello," she says. She is eleven, a year younger than me. She sounds so formal, like we aren't all cousins who used to play together a lot when we were little. But maybe that's just her personality.

"Hi," Owen and I say in unison.

She stares at us, taking us in. Her eyes feel like they're looking straight through me, like she can tell what I'm feeling.

"Owen and Celeste have grown a whole foot since I've seen them!" Uncle Howard's voice booms over ours as he laughs. He looks and sounds just like Grandad.

"Haven't they? And look at Capri's long legs! They will definitely get that Hawthorne height, that's for sure," Mama says, laughing as she hugs her brother.