

★ CHAPTER ONE ★

SWIM TEAM

“MOVIES DON’T COUNT,” Cooper says. “The internet doesn’t count. Magazines don’t count. A real, live, naked girl. That’s the deal. That’s our goal for this summer.”

“Been there, done that,” Sean says.

“Taking baths with your sister doesn’t count either, Sean.” Cooper snorts.

“Screw you, meat stain. I haven’t done that since I was like, two, okay. And that’s not what I was talking about,” Sean says.

We’re walking up to the pool. Cooper, Sean, and me. Bare feet tucked into untied sneakers, ragged towels draped around our necks. It’s our first day of swim practice, which means that summer’s really started. We’ve been friends since kindergarten. We’ve been on swim team since third grade. The Rockville Swimming Association. Six years as Lower Rockville Razorbacks.

“He’s talking about Tina Everstone’s left boob,” I say, as we turn onto Maple Drive and walk along the curb.

“Oh, please. Not that again.” Cooper rolls his eyes.

“It’s true. I saw the whole thing when she was taking off her sweatshirt during gym. Her T-shirt came up just enough . . .”

“And she wasn’t wearing a bra and her left one popped out and you saw the entire thing, nipple and all, and even if I didn’t think you were lying to us it still wouldn’t count,” Cooper says. “I’m talking totally naked. Not a quick flash, okay?”

“Whatever.” Sean shrugs and looks off at the rundown ranch houses like he doesn’t care what we think.

“How are we supposed to see a live naked girl?” I say. “Maybe we better set a more realistic goal for the summer. Like finding Atlantis.”

“Matt, Matt, Matt.” Cooper puts his arm around me like he’s my wise uncle. “That kind of attitude will get you nowhere in life. Don’t you get it? You have to follow the natural way of things. It’s like that picture in our Bio textbook. First there’s the monkey. Then there’s the caveman. Then there’s the human. It’s the same with sex. First there’s internet porn, then there’s seeing your first real naked girl, and finally it’s the dirty deed. You do want to have sex someday, don’t you Matt?”

Every summer there is a goal. It’s tradition. I don’t remember when it started or why. But as long as I can remember we’ve always come up with something we had

to accomplish before the start of the new school year. When we were ten it was riding our bikes fifteen miles away to Perry Lake and skinny dipping. When we were twelve it was going to the Fern Creek Golf Course every day until we collected a thousand golf balls. Over the past few years, the goals have become more centered around girls and sex. Two years ago each of us had to get our hands on a Playboy and show it to the others. Last year the ante was upped to finding an illegal password for a porn site. And now, Cooper's challenge for this summer. Which I can't see ever happening.

Maybe if we were even a little bit cool, or had any chance of getting girlfriends. But that's just not the case. By the time you're fifteen you've either had a girlfriend—maybe even had sex—or like Coop, Sean, and me, you haven't even mustered the courage to ask a girl out. There's also a third group, I guess. Guys who say they've had girlfriends but who nobody really believes. Which just means they're liars who fit into the second category.

We make it to Rockville Avenue Pool just in time to hear Ms. Luntz, our swim coach, calling the team over for a meeting. Ms. Luntz is a gourd-shaped woman who wears her blue and white Speedo stretched to capacity underneath denim shortpants overalls. Her legs are thick and pockmarked and purple worm veins bubble up beneath the see-through skin on her thighs. She doesn't make things much better for herself with her Campbell's

Soup Kid haircut and gigantic, pink-tinted glasses. You could almost feel sorry for her if she wasn't so nasty to everyone.

"Hurry up, people," Ms. Luntz squawks. "Let's go, let's go. Before winter comes. We've got important business to discuss."

Cooper, Sean, and me make our way around "the toilet"—a shallow, oval kiddie pool that's always suspiciously body-temperature warm. My mom says it's warm because there's less water in there and the sun can heat it up faster, but nobody's buying that. Last year, Cooper bet Sean ten bucks he wouldn't bob for a Lifesaver over the painted picture of Elmo, which is where most of the little kids hang out, and Sean did it without blinking an eye. It was pretty sick. Sean kept saying how they put chemicals in the pool for a reason, but there's no way I could have done that. I feel my stomach lurch now just thinking about it.

We walk along the edge of the adult pool toward the deep end where the diving boards are. I breathe in the sharp chlorine smell and watch the swimmers stringing the swim lane dividers and it's like "yeah, I know this" mixed with "Oh, God, not this again."

We hang back at the edge of the crowd that forms around Ms. Luntz. It's all the same people from last year. A sea of blue and white lycra. Guys and girls from seven to seventeen. All of them serious about swim team.

It's different for Coop, Sean, and me. We do swim

team because we've always done swim team. Between the three of us I bet that we have the largest collection of green fifth place ribbons in the entire league. It's not like we try to lose. It's just that we happen to be the three least athletic kids on the team. Maybe even in all of Rockville.

"Okay, so, welcome back and all that crap," Ms. Luntz says, tapping her pen on her clipboard. "It's another summer, which means another chance to make a run for gold. Our first meet is in three weeks. I want us to set the bar high right away. I want us to take first in this year's Relay Challenge."

Coop leans over to me and whispers, "Yeah, and I want to take a whipped cream bath with Miss October. Which will happen way sooner than us placing first."

"I thought you had the hots for Web-Cam Pam."

"You've got me confused with Sean," Coop says. "He likes the chunky girls."

"Hey, she's not fat," Sean says. "That's the wide-angle lens on the web cam."

"Right." Coop smirks. "Besides, I've got enough plump stuff for me and Miss October both." Coop puffs out his soft belly, making it large and round. He puts his two hands on either side and jiggles it. "Ho, ho, ho," he says.

"That's sick, dude." I look away, back toward Ms. Luntz.

"We've got most of our team back this year," Ms. Luntz says. "Just one addition which we are very excited

about. Kelly West from the Dowling Dolphins will be joining us this summer.”

I look over and see a girl standing in between Reena Higgins and Gordon Burrows. I don't know how I missed her before. She rolls a Tootsie Pop around in her mouth and waves at everyone. She is beyond hot. Short brown hair, bright green eyes, small round breasts. I feel my tongue and throat go dry.

“Kelly's family just moved to Lower Rockville last month,” Ms. Luntz says. “She's a gold medal-winning backstroker, so we are very lucky to have her swimming for us.”

“That's not the only reason we're lucky to have her.” Sean stifles a laugh.

I can't wrap my mind around this. I remember Kelly West from last summer's swim meets. She's a skinny girl with freckles and greasy hair and braces, not this hottie who's standing by Reena and Gordon.

Coop says. “That's why you shouldn't slag the ugly ones. You never know when one of them will spring from her cocoon looking like a super model.”

I haven't blinked since I spotted her. My stomach feels funny. My chest feels heavy. It's hard to breathe.

All of sudden, everything's changed.

★ CHAPTER TWO ★

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ADRIFT

“EARTH TO MATT. HELLO? Is anyone home?” Cooper snaps his wet fingers in front of my face.

“What?” I say, yanked back to reality.

We’re resting after our third set of laps, hanging on the wall in the far swim lane. Coop was saying something to me but I zoned out. My mind keeps skipping back, playing the same thing over and over again. Kelly, Kelly, Kelly. All week long it’s been the same. I keep trying to find her in the pool. Swimming breaststroke, swimming backstroke, drying off by the fence, shaking the water out of her ears, padding off to the bathroom.

“I asked you a question,” Coop says.

“I didn’t hear you.”

“I know. I asked you three times.”

“Sorry, I was spacing,” I say.

“Well, focus, man,” Coop insists. “This is serious stuff. I’m talking about our plans this summer. You have any ideas who we could get to see naked?”

“I want to see Kelly. But alone. You guys don’t get to join in.”

Coop rolls his eyes. “Look,” Coop says. “Whatever you’re thinking about Kelly West, you might as well bring it home to the privacy of your bathroom because you don’t have a chance.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s dating Tony Grillo.”

“Oh.” I suddenly feel like a five-day-old balloon. “How do you know?”

“Sean heard from Cathy, who heard from Reena, who knows a guy on the Dolphins.”

“Huh,” I say. “Well, maybe they broke up when she moved.”

“You’re hilarious, dude.” Coop pats out a drum beat on the pool ledge. “If she dates guys like Tony the Gorilla, then she dates jocks, which means she doesn’t date guys like us.”

Kelly run/walks from the bathroom. She shivers, her lips blue and trembling, her arms and hands tucked up close to her body. She makes her way to the pool and slides back into the water.

“That’s too bad,” I say.

“Think of it as a blessing, dawg.” Coop claps me on

the shoulder. “Now you don’t have to torture yourself about not having the balls to ask her out.” He laughs. “Hey, Sean and I were talking about seeing a movie later. You in?”

I shake my head. “I’ve got to go to a funeral for my neighbor, Mr. Hoogenboom.”

“Bummer,” Coop says. “Have you ever been to a funeral before?”

“No.”

“Is it open casket?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“If it is, you should try to touch his face.”

“Ew, dude, that’s disgusting.”

“It’s not like it’s actually him. It’s just his dead body.”

“Exactly.”

“Just pretend that you miss him and you’re saying goodbye. I’m telling you, dude, it’s freaky. It’s like waxy or something.”

“I’m not touching him,” I say. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m a curious person.”

“You’re a disturbed person.”

“Suit yourself,” Coop says, shrugging. “But you’re going to want to feel his skin when you see him. Don’t ask me why. But you will. Trust me.” With that, Coop turns and starts his next set of laps.

I don’t move yet. I try to get Coop’s gross idea out

of my head.

I look across the pool and watch Kelly doing a perfect backstroke. Slicing through the water. Arms windmilling, breasts in the air, long legs kicking.

Man oh man. I take a deep breath and let it out. I push off the wall and do the only thing I can do right now: keep face down and swim.