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Opening extract from

# Water Born

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# Prologue

## Water Born

KERRY, JANUARY 2017

You need eyes in the back of your head with kids, don't you? They're there one minute, gone the next.

Someone nearby shouts and it brings me back to my senses. I look around and she's not next to me. Nicola. I can't work out where she is, but she can't be far away. I only took my eyes off her for a second, didn't I?

Then I see her. See what people are shouting about. My granddaughter. A little black dot on the ice. She turns round and waves. And that's when it gives way. The ice. And she's gone.

I scream, along with everyone else, but I can't move. I can't *move*. A few metres away a young man launches himself on to the lake. He skids with long steps for the first part, then slows, stops, looks. Listens. He lowers himself down, flat on his stomach, and elbows his way towards the gaping hole.

My heart's in my mouth as I watch. He leans over, in, his legs sprawled on the surface, his head, arms and chest underneath, like he's been cut in half. And then he slides forward. An inch. More. Faster. And he slips underwater.

There are louder screams from the bank, but mine isn't one of them. I'm silent now. Struck dumb as I picture him and her, their faces underwater, their limbs thrashing.

Not again. It can't happen again.

And then a hand grips the edge of the ice.

The young man levers himself up a little way and lifts a small, dark bundle on to the shelf. He pushes it away from him, towards the shore, before slithering up after it. Others are edging on to the lake, but he shouts at them to stay away. Flat on the ice, he crawls towards us, pushing the bundle ahead, until at last she's safe.

At last I can move.

'She's mine,' I say. 'She's mine. My granddaughter.'

I push my way through. Someone is feeling for a pulse in her neck.

'She's alive. We need to clear her airways.'

They lie her on her back and push on her stomach. Water trickles out of her mouth. They push until the trickle becomes a flood, and then she gasps and her eyes open. Brown eyes, like her mum.

'Here,' I say, 'give her my coat.'

But someone's got there before me, wrapping her up in a big quilted jacket, cradling her head in the fur-lined hood. She looks like some sort of bug, big eyes staring out from a puffed-up body. I kneel down, and they pass her to me and I hold her like a baby.

'It's all right now,' I say. 'It's all right.'

One of her little hands is sticking out. I go to tuck it in and feel something smooth and cold, colder than her skin. Ice, I think, and I look down, ready to pick it out and throw it away.

Not ice. Metal. A chain spilling between her fingers. I open her fist. There's a silver heart nestled in her palm.

'What the—? Where've you had this from?' I mutter.

Her face is blank, eyes open but unseeing. The face of a doll.

I pick the locket up and drop it in my pocket, tuck her hand into the coat and hug her closer.

I look out across the ice. 'You're there, aren't you?' I murmur. Then, 'Thank you. Thank you for giving her back to me. Thank you for not keeping her.'

But did he give her back, or was she torn away from him by the brave young man?

I rock her gently. *Oh Nicola, you're safe now*, I think, *but you can't ever come here again. And you can't stay in this town. Not now.*

# ONE

## NICOLA, JUNE 2030

Something enters the pool to my right. It pierces the surface. Half a human – the top half, sliced through at the waist. Bright orange. It sinks silently towards the bottom, and as it turns in the water I see its face: bland, smoothed-out features. I can't take my eyes off it as it comes to rest on the bottom of the pool. There's something about the face, the lack of a mouth. It can't breathe. It can never shout for help.

A girl drowned at the weekend, in a reservoir just outside the city. It's been all over the news. I can't help linking the two in my mind. Two lifeless bodies under the water.

I've slowed right down, but now I increase my kick

rate. I want to get away from him. *It*, I tell myself. Just a plastic dummy, that's all. Even so, I plough forward, turning my head to the left when I need to breathe.

I hit the end of the pool seconds after everyone else. We bob at the shallow end, breathing hard. Clive, the team coach, walks down the line towards me. His whistle's in his mouth. His clipboard is clutched to his chest.

'What's happening with you, Nic? You're all over the place.'

The whistle drops out from between his lips as he starts to talk. It dangles on its cord between us, a silver pendulum.

'I don't know. I don't feel right.'

I don't want to be in the water with that thing lying at the bottom. The thing that was never alive. Drowning. I push up on the side of the pool and twist round to sit on the edge.

'You're better than this. You can *do* better.'

'I know. I'm not . . . I dunno . . . I can't . . .'

'Are you ill?'

He's giving me an out.

'Yeah, my stomach . . . I just . . .'

'Do you want to leave the session?'

I've never seen anyone just walk out. I don't know how serious this is. If I walk out, will they let me back next time?

'Yeah, I don't think I can swim like this,' I mumble.

He rests his hand on my back. 'It's nearly time anyway. Go and get changed. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Relieved, I get to my feet. As I do so, I look across the

pool. The lifeguards are clustered on benches. Training's almost over. Harry, tall and lean and blond, is preparing to dive in and rescue the dummy. He teeters on the edge, looking into the water at the rippling orange shape below. His skin is almost golden, kissed by the sun, his abs perfectly sculpted. His hands are by his sides, a moment of calm before he launches in. He looks up, checking that he's got an audience, looking along the bobbing line of seal-headed swimmers, and our eyes meet. He raises his eyebrows – a silent question: *What's wrong?*

Despite the heat I've got goosebumps up and down my body now, aware that he can see me – all of me, my shape, my curves – in this swimsuit. I like him looking and I hate it too. My self-consciousness hunches my shoulders and buckles my knees. I look away from him and start to scuttle across the tiled floor towards the changing room like a soggy hobbit.

When I glance back, he's leaning forward, arms behind him now, knees bent, ready to spring. He's poised, waiting for something. Then he sees me looking and he dives – arcing into the water in a perfect, beautiful movement, half-athlete, half-dancer. And in that moment, I know that what he was waiting for . . . was me.

His colours move through the water. He's almost at his orange target. It's too blurry to see the details, but in my mind's eye I see him reaching forward, wrestling the blank, mute doll into the right position to be hauled back to the surface. But the doll can never be saved. It never had life and never will. Why wasn't someone there to rescue the girl in the reservoir?

I've got the changing room to myself as I shower. The water pressure's pathetically low. It takes ages to get the shampoo out of my hair. Sometimes I wonder if I should cut it short – it would make washing and drying it so much easier. But I know I won't. Long, black and straight, a waterfall of hair, it falls halfway down my back. It's part of who I am.

The other girls pile into the room when I've nearly finished putting on my school uniform.

'What happened to you?' Nirmala asks.

I don't want to tell anyone about the way my mind flipped back there. I wish I could forget it ever happened.

'Stomach ache. You know . . .'

She nods, grabs her stuff and heads for the shower. We each follow our own rituals in here, the routines that make this kind of life bearable. I've worked my way through mine like I always do: deodorant, pants, bra, school shirt, skirt, short white socks, shoes, tie and watch. I'm warm from swimming, and I know that even though it's still early it will already be heating up outside. I'll leave my blazer until the last minute.

I squeeze the water out of my costume into the drain on the floor and wrap it up in my towel together with my swimming cap, then I move over to the sinks. There's a bit more banter now, a bubbling soundtrack to the business of mascara and moisturiser, hairdryers and lipgloss. Christie's preening, messing about with her hair, taking up too much space. Shannon and Nirmala step in front of her in a pincer movement, blocking her view.

'Hey! I was here first,' Christie protests.

'Yeah, and you've had your turn,' Nirmala says.

'I need to look my best. I need to look *spectacular*.'

'Why?'

'You know who's on duty,' Christie says.

'Who?'

'Who do you think?'

'Hotlips Harry?'

'Shuttup, don't call him that!'

I glance across at her. She's blushing, like I did when Harry caught my eye. He was looking at me, not her, but I don't need to brag about it. It's our secret. It's better that way.

'In your dreams,' Nirmala says.

'He's into me, he really is,' Christie says, slicking on rose-pink lipgloss expertly, pouting for the mirror.

'He fancies anything with a pulse.'

As we spill out of the changing room, I check my watch. Seventeen minutes to get to school. Perfect.

In the corridor, I'm in front of the others. I almost bump into someone, look up and it's Harry.

'Whoa!' he says.

'Sorry.'

For a few seconds his hands are on my shoulders. Fending me off, or holding me just where he wants me? I start to step sideways and as I do, he leans a little closer. 'You okay?' he says.

'Yeah,' I manage.

'I was watching you today. I always keep a special eye out for you.'

His voice is so low I'm not sure what he's saying. I keep

my eyes down, but my mouth tightens into a little smile. I keep walking down the corridor and out of the front door, and it's only when I'm across the tarmac that the words finally sink in. The heat from the sun matches the burning in my cheeks.

I knew it! It's me, not Christie. I look back over my shoulder, but the reflections in the glass stop me seeing anything – any*one* – inside. The other girls have fallen silent. Christie's staring at me with her eyebrows halfway up her forehead.

'Nearly bumped into him,' I stutter.

'Or he nearly bumped into you . . .' Nirmala says. She purses her lips and fans her face.

'No,' I say. 'Just an accident. I wasn't looking where I was going . . . oh, there's my dad. See ya later.'

Dad's beaten-up Fiesta is parked by the side of the road, like normal. The driver's door is painted a different colour from the rest of it. He always watches from the gallery, and then fetches the car while I'm changing, so he's ready outside like a getaway driver.

I sling my swimming bag on to the back seat and get in the front. My second breakfast is waiting for me: a banana and an energy bar on the dashboard, a strawberry milkshake in the cup-holder. I reach for the milkshake as the girls walk past the car. I catch Christie's expression in the wing mirror. She looks like she's sucking on a lemon.

'What went wrong in there? You poorly, Princess?'

I certainly don't want him to know about my freak-out. I had to fight to get my parents to agree to my swimming lessons. They were compulsory at school in

years five and six, but Mum and Dad wanted me to opt out, although they'd never tell me why. I didn't want to be different, so I stood up to them. In the end they gave in and, when I tried it, I found that I was a natural. It was like the water had been waiting for me all that time.

'It's nothing. Just got a bit of a stomach cramp. I'm fine.'

He's nudging out into the traffic as we talk. Somebody blasts their horn, loud and startling through our open windows. Dad raises his hand, half-thanks, half-apology.

'Thank you!' he says, then mutters under his breath, 'Idiot.'

'Da-ad.'

'Hot and bothered already,' he says to me. 'Them, not me.' He glances across at me. 'All right now, Princess?'

I'm too busy eating to do more than grunt. I check my watch again: fourteen minutes to go. The traffic's bad, but it always is. To be honest I could walk it, but Dad's always here for me and I kind of like it. He makes sure my kit is ready, he drops me off and picks me up. He keeps his own records of my times and celebrates every improvement. It means as much to him as it does to me. Sometimes I wonder what else he's got.

The local news is on the car radio.

'Police have issued a warning to young people not to swim in open water, following a spate of accidents over the past few weeks. The hot spell has seen five deaths from drowning in the Midlands in canals, rivers and lakes, the most recent being the tragic death of teenager Sammi Shah at Turley Reservoir at the weekend. Inspector Ravi

Patel said that the temptation to cool down in open water is irresistible for many, particularly youngsters, but there are often hidden dangers under the surface and it's easy to get into trouble.'

I reach up to the radio to switch stations, see if I can find some music – something, anything else – but Dad catches me by the wrist. 'Leave it,' he says.

'Da-ad, the news is so depressing . . .'

'It's important. Ssh . . .'

We sit in silence until the end of the item.

'. . . so the message is, stay away from open water.'

Dad presses the mute button on the radio. 'Nic, you have to be so careful around water.'

'I know, Dad. I always am.'

'Yes. Yes, of course you are. We should know that by now, shouldn't we, with you doing so well? Our little mermaid? But even so . . .'

We pull into the lay-by near the school gates at the same time as my phone pings. Incoming text.

'I'll see you later,' Dad says, and leans over and kisses my cheek. 'You coming straight home?'

'Yeah, Dad. Early tea and an eight o'clock tonight.' He knows anyway. He's got my schedule off by heart. 'See ya.'

I grab my school bag and my blazer. As I glance back, he's pressing the mute button again and the news is back on. He sees me looking and waves. I wave back, then check my phone. It's from Harry: *Lookin gud this morning.*

I smile, pocket the phone and join the tide of people streaming into school.