

Summer 1929

The lake is silky smooth, lapping gently around the legs of the jetty. The knobbly planks beneath my toes are thick and warmed by the sun. Karl is on the bank, wriggling into his shorts under the towel Mutti is holding around him.

‘Careful, Hetty,’ Karl shouts. ‘The water’s deep out there.’

‘I’m just looking,’ I call back. ‘I want to see the big fish.’

I shuffle right to the very end and curl my toes around the edge. Crouching low, I peer into the water. I can’t see the bottom of the lake. Maybe there isn’t one. Perhaps the dark green water goes all the way down to the middle of the earth where savage monsters lurk, waiting.

Walter swims towards the jetty. He splashes his arms around then floats on his back, pale toes bobbing up out of the water. He pops up again, grinning at me, pushing his wet hair off his face. I wish I could have swimming lessons like Karl, then I too could glide like a fish, instead of splashing about in the shallows, stubbing my toes on jagged stones and slipping on slimy weed.

From my perch, I watch Walter swim further out into the lake. He disappears from sight, hidden by the solid wooden pillar of the jetty. I move to try to see him, but I lean too

far and topple forward. My hands fly out, clawing at empty space, and I'm falling, down, down, down.

Belly first, I crash onto the stone-hard surface. I gasp with the iciness, but instead of air, there is only rancid lake water.

'Help!' I splutter, splashing hopelessly, blinded by blurry flashes of light and dark.

'HELP,' louder now, but the water boils and churns, closing over my head and the monsters suck me down to their deep, green lair.

Gripped by panic, I scabble and kick, fighting back up to the surface. I manage a breath. There are voices in the distance. I thrash wildly, but it doesn't keep me up, and I'm swirling, round and round. The voices fade as I'm dragged down again, lungs screaming, but the water – sickening, cloying, heavy – fills them and I'm drowning.

Darkness folds in.

Something scabbles at my costume and scratches my back. There's a tugging, and I'm pulled up to the surface. Someone is holding me and I'm retching and coughing in the lightening-white sunlight until I think my insides are going to spill out. With a rasping choke, air surges into my lungs and water pours from my nose. The person holding me is kicking hard, keeping both of us up, panting and grunting with the effort. The hands turn me onto my back and there's a strong body beneath me, keeping my head above the water.

'Don't struggle, you're safe now.' A voice in my ear. Walter's voice. 'I'm swimming you back to the shore.' He wraps his hand around my chin and tugs.

I try to lie still, but water laps in my ears and I wobble as he jerkily swims on his back, huffing with the effort of

keeping me up until we reach shallow water. Dimly, I hear cries and shouts from nearby. Walter's body is solid and safe. He begins to wriggle out from under me, but I cling desperately to him, our tangle of legs sinking to the lake floor.

'It's all right, you can stand now,' he says, propping me upright. The mud squishes between my toes as I try to stand but I'm shaking, and my legs collapse beneath me. Walter holds me, and I lean against him. My throat stings from the coughing. Water trickles from my nose.

Mutti runs through the shallows, soaking her skirt, but she doesn't seem to care. She lifts me up, hugging me tight against her body, and we stagger back to shore. She wraps me in a warm towel.

'Hetty! Are you okay?' Karl is here too, patting me on the back, peering at my face. 'I told you to be careful!'

'Oh my poor darling.' Mutti sinks down with me still in her arms. She rocks me back and forth as though I were a baby, not a big seven-year-old. My ear is pressed to her chest and I can hear her breath, ragged and fast, in her throat.

Walter stands close by, watching us, silent and dripping. Mutti turns to him.

'You saved her life, Walter. Thank heavens you're such a strong swimmer. If you hadn't been there so fast...' She begins to cry.

'It was no problem,' Walter says, quickly looking away.

'I'm going to tell your mother how brave you've been.'

'There's no need. Honestly.' He grabs his towel and begins to dry himself.

Mutti wipes her eyes and helps me to dress. The back of my nose and throat are rough-raw, as if I have swallowed concrete.

‘Perhaps Hetty should have swimming lessons,’ Karl says into the silence.

Mutti sniffs and nods.

She bustles around, laying out the blanket and picnic things. I’ve managed to stop shaking and try some raspberry *pfannkuchen* and milk from her flask.

I finally gather the courage to look directly at Walter. His wavy blond hair is half dry, half wet. He’s saying something to Karl, but then he turns and looks at me and his face breaks into a smile.

His eyes are the warmest, kindest blue.

Later that night, Mutti tucks me into my narrow bed, pushed against the wall in the bedroom I share with Karl.

‘Good night, my darling.’ Mutti kisses my forehead. ‘You *are* all right, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, Mutti.’

‘Good.’ She smiles and strokes my hair.

She turns out the light and closes the door gently behind her.

I keep my eyes open. Through the gloom, I make out the lumpy shape of the wardrobe against the wall and Karl’s empty bed below the windowsill. With him in the room, the menacing shadows can’t harm me. Each time my eyelids droop I’m back in the lake and the water is sucking me into its murky depths, choking and clogging my lungs. My heart thrums and my eyes ping open. *Stay awake. Stay awake. Stay awake.*

The door creaks sooner than I expect.

‘Karl?’

‘Hetty? You’re still awake.’

‘Can’t sleep.’

‘I wondered. Listen, I have something for you. To make you feel better. I was saving it for your birthday, but I want to give it to you now. I’ll get you something else for your birthday.’ He snaps on the light and I blink at the sudden brightness.

Karl scrabbles under his bed and emerges with a brown, rectangular paper bag.

‘Here,’ he says, placing it on top of my blankets as I push myself up to sit. He perches on the edge of my bed. His cheeks are pinched and his forehead wrinkles beneath his dark fringe.

‘I wish I’d saved you today, Little Mouse,’ he says, ‘but I was too far away.’ I know he means it because, as he looks into my eyes, I can see straight into his soul. The worry has made his pupils huge and black and I can tell he’s crying inside, like me. I nod so he knows I understand.

‘At least Walter was there. And he is your best friend.’

I look at the paper bag, bulky in my hands.

‘Open it then,’ he urges.

The paper crackles as I uncurl the folded bag. I slip my hand inside and my fingers brush the hard cover of a book. It’s a journal, the type a grown-up might have. The front is covered with a rich patchwork of shapes in different shades of browns, oranges and blues. The paper inside is creamy white.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I whisper. ‘Thank you, Karl.’

‘There’s something else in there too.’ Karl smiles.

Resting at the bottom is a silver and blue fountain pen.

‘I thought you could write all your secrets in there. Or

stories you make up with that wild imagination of yours,' Karl says, searching my face.

'I'll try and write some really good ones. But maybe not about drowning.' I smile at him. I want him to know everything is okay.

As I settle my head back on the pillow, I know that it *is* okay, but some things are changed.

I nearly drowned and Walter rescued me.

That makes everything different.