

Undertow

Chapter One

July 1965

The hot wind blasted sand against Annie's legs as she trudged toward Lake Erie, pail in hand. She felt the grit in her mouth, would have spit it out if it was polite. It was her job to fetch the water for the castle's moat, a job she recognized as useless. Each time Annie filled the trench with water, the sand gulped it up, then waited, parched once more.

Her fair skin was sticky with the sunscreen her brother, Frank, had insisted she apply. Maybe she should have said no to that. She was ten. Old enough, she thought, to make her own decisions and too old to build a sandcastle, but she hadn't argued with Frank about the sunscreen, and she hadn't argued with Rosie about the castle. Why spend one moment being grumpy, when Frank was finally home?

The relentless south wind on the vast, shallow lake created rolling whitecaps that crashed to shore higher and fiercer than any Annie had seen before. The waves reached far onto the beach before retreating. Frank had warned her not to go in without him and she'd said she wouldn't.

She glanced behind her — past her cousin Rosie who sat by the castle scooping sand into a mold, and past the picnic table where their bright towels, secured under rocks, flapped in the wind — to the blanket where her brother lay beside Lily. She wondered how teenagers kept from

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being bored, lying there doing nothing, but then Frank moved, almost on top of Lily, and she had an uncomfortable feeling about the kind of game they were playing.

She knew Frank had missed Lily more than her. Sometimes it didn't seem fair. Annie had cried from missing Frank more times than she could count. The brother-sized whole he left in her got bigger and scarier every year he was away. Sometimes she was so afraid he wouldn't come back that even lying under the chestnut tree, talking to it, listening to its song, didn't reassure her for long.

But to Annie there was no mystery in her brother loving Lily best. For Lily was magical — if she read a story, the fairies came alive; if she fixed a scraped knee, the pain disappeared; if Mom was after Frank or Annie, Lily knew a place to hide. Frank loving Lily most was as natural as the sun rising each morning behind the railway bridge at the end of their street. And Annie loved Frank as surely as life itself, maybe more.

Annie couldn't be jealous — she was joyous, dancing inside, because Frank was living at home again. Last night he'd read to her in bed, like he had before he'd gone away, even though she could read for herself of course, maybe better than him. He'd kissed her goodnight and she had stayed awake, curled up in happiness, until she heard him begin to snore like a grownup. It reminded her of the sounds and the smells of their dad before he had left, and it made her sad and happy to think that with Frank being almost a grownup, it was like having her dad back too.

She wished Frank had agreed to build the castle with her and Rosie instead of going to the blanket with Lily. She knew he would have built the best castle — tall with towers and turrets where they could stick leaves for flags. The castle that she and Rosie built was a dull, squat thing, the shape of a pail.

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She turned back to the water, stood at the edge, and dipped her small bucket. But the wave rushed out as quickly as it had come in, and her pail came up empty except for a little sandy sludge in the bottom.

Annie took another step until the water swirled around her calves as it pushed in and out. The force of the undertow was such that she almost fell. Still her pail came up not full enough.

Noise, the constant howl of the wind and the pounding, crashing sound of the water, came at her and enclosed her. She looked back again at Rosie who glanced up, waved, and seemed to be saying something. It was impossible to hear. There was no point in trying. She took another step forward; she wasn't certain why. She had almost forgotten the bucket in her hand.

She looked out on the lake. Normally on a hot day, there would be dozens of kids, big and little, swimming, and pleasure boats anchored just offshore, but today there were no boats and no swimmers. The water was above her knees now and she felt the power of the waves, first pushing her backwards as they crashed to shore and then underneath the surface tugging her down and forward. She stumbled and almost fell. Deciding it was time to go back, she dipped the pail, lifted it, and began to turn. But as she did the undertow grabbed her legs and pulled her down.

As the water spun her, Annie thought she would be okay because she could swim. But it was impossible to tell which way was up, which down, or which direction to go. She tried to shout but her head was already under water and her lungs filled with liquid as she gasped. The undertow continued to pull her as though it had strong hands wrapped around her thighs. Maybe Frank would come into the water to save her. Annie fought to try to find the surface so he would see her. She struggled, flailing, until she was exhausted. Her legs and arms felt like weights outside of her control.

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She had an idea she might be able to crawl to the shallows where she would be seen. She put all her will into finding the sandy bottom and, for an instant, she touched it. But the churning water caught her again and she spun and twisted until there was nothing but lake above and below her. She told herself she should breathe; she tried, but she couldn't, and her chest hurt. She wouldn't try again.

A deep calm overtook her and the pain that had filled her body disappeared. For a moment, or an eternity, everything was black and then she was outside her body, watching it bump and move along the sandy bottom of the lake. It didn't look like something real and alive, not like the sunfish which she saw in glittering schools, or the water weeds which swayed in rhythm to the waves. Her body was a dead thing, of little interest to her. She could tell which way was up now and she rose above the waves, above the beach.

A peaceful ecstasy embraced Annie. She knew, if she chose, that she could become one with that ecstasy and it would be a homecoming. But something drew her back and kept her looking down to the action on the beach. She had no sense of time. She saw everything at once: the thing that had once been her being carried out of the water and laid on the shore; people kneeling beside it, others standing. She watched an ambulance and a police car drive onto the beach. Men in white lifted the body onto a stretcher and into the ambulance and drove off. She had no desire to follow it.

She watched Frank as he talked to the policemen, and as he stood watching the departing ambulance. She knew he was sad and when their uncle put his arm around Frank's shoulder, she wanted to tell them, *I'm okay*. Frank slipped out of the crowd where Lily and Rosie were being embraced by their parents and he walked to the trees that separated the beach from the boardwalk. He leaned his forehead against a tree, a willow, like the ones in her favourite book.

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As Annie narrowed her focus, she could see his shoulders heaving. She sensed the waves of pain that pulsed through him.

She felt joy waiting for her, pulling her away; she wanted to let it have her. But not yet. She found that it was within her power to reach for Frank. Annie put out her hand.