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AUTHOR OF *THE FORGOTTEN GIRL*

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IN

THE

LAKE

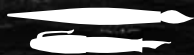




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FOR MY COUSINS, ESPECIALLY THE ONES
WHO HAVE GRADUATED FROM THE
KIDS' TABLE.



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.

“I’ve heard you’ve learned how to swim, Owen!” Howard slaps Owen on the back as a sign of congratulations. Owen smiles a little, glancing at me before he says, “Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, Celeste. Between that beautiful lake and the pool up the road, you’ll be swimming in no time. Maybe Capri can drive you—”

Mama clears her throat and Capri glares at her dad. Then she glares at me. *What did I do?* Uncle Howard is sweating as if he’s said something he shouldn’t say. Or maybe he’s sweating because it’s so hot out here.

“Daisy, I love your dress,” my mom says, trying to change the subject.

“Thank you,” she says. She does a curtsy, like a girl out of a fairy-tale book, and Capri scoffs while Owen and I look at each other. Who does that?

“This girl. Straight out of the past,” Aunt Marlene says. She gives Daisy’s shoulder a squeeze.

We stand there as our parents talk and laugh with our aunt and uncles for a while, then they say their good-byes.

“Have the best time,” Mama says, giving Owen and then me a huge hug. She and Dad look genuinely sad to go. Maybe they should stay here and us kids should go back to our houses, since they have so much fun here.

“My girl. Call me if you need anything,” Dad says. He winks, and somehow I know he’s talking about swimming. So I think he gets it. But it’s not that I’m afraid of swimming, exactly. At first it sounded fun, but my swimming instructor made it kind of difficult for me, and now I just don’t care anymore. Maybe he was right, it wasn’t that hard, and I was just being silly. And not to mention, right after failing, I had a nightmare about falling into a big body of water. It felt so real and now I’m definitely not in a rush to learn how to swim.

“Okay,” I say, hugging him, too.

Capri walks over to us, a scowl on her face. Daisy, Owen, and I all say hi to her, but she just waves us off. I sigh. I don’t want to have to deal with her attitude all week. I always thought Capri was pretty bossy, anyway. I don’t get it. When I’m at home, I’m the oldest and I don’t boss Owen around at all.

We wave as the grown-ups pile into their cars and then disappear, one by one, until all that's left is an old Ford pickup truck and a Jeep. Grandma and Grandad's cars.

I peek around the back of the house to the wide, green backyard. The trees have branches that hang really low and create long shadows across the grass. They back into a wooded area that looks worn down with tire tracks. I wonder if Grandad drives through there to get to town. I wonder if that's where Grandma and Grandad hike. I wonder what's back there.

I look around some more. I see the deck that leads to the lake.

I can't help but admit to myself that the lake is beautiful, with its deep blue and the glitter from the sun. But it's so big, it overwhelms me. It's at least ten times bigger than the pool. Will Grandad make me jump in the lake? I hope not. It's pretty to look at, but the thought of jumping in makes me feel dizzy.

Owen, Capri, Daisy, and I stand in awkward silence, staring at the house, the sparkling lake behind it.

"Come on in," Grandma says. She has a wide smile and nose like Mom.

We walk into the house and it's like all the hot air outside is packed into it. My forehead is still sweaty from standing outside. Their house smells different from our house. It makes a lot of noises, too, lots of creaks and groans. As soon as I walk in, the house sighs really loudly; it almost sounds like a voice saying, "*Hiiii.*" We all stare at the ceiling. Grandma must see our expressions, because she tells us that it's just the "house settling in," whatever that means.

"All of your rooms are upstairs," Grandma says. "You can choose the ones you want and unpack, then come back downstairs for supper."

I already know which one I want: the one with the best view of the lake. Just because I don't want to swim in it doesn't mean I don't want to draw the view.

I run upstairs and into the room on the far left, eager to get the one with the biggest balcony before Capri does. The sun is setting just outside my window, the big oak tree casting a shadow that looks like a big hand over the room.

The floor creaks when I step inside, like the rest of this house. The bed looks comfortable, though,

and there is a huge colorful quilt on the bed. The only things in here are a nightstand, a lamp, a dresser, the bed, and the quilt. I decide to put some things around the room, to make it feel more like home since it *will* be my home for the next week. I put a picture that my friends and I took at my friend Iris's summer slumber party on the dresser, with my sketch pad and colored pencils right beside it.

I told Iris about Stinky-Breath Jared and how he made me feel. She told me that I should've told him right then and there.

"You should've told him just like this!" she said, standing up with her beaded braids clanking together. "First of all, my name is *Celeste*. I've never swum before and that's why it's hard. Duh! And your stinky breath isn't making it any easier. Stop acting annoyed with me and be patient!" And then when you *did* jump in, you could've splashed him." She giggled at the last part.

I just laughed and shook my head. I'm not like Iris. Sometimes it's hard for me to say what I feel.

I unroll my picture of Simone Manuel, the Olympic gold medalist swimmer, and stick it on the wall with a

roll of tape I found at the bottom of my bag. I hope that she will inspire me to gather up the nerve to at least *jump* in the pool this summer.

I look around the room and try to get used to it. Even though it's so old, it still feels new to me. And quiet. And hot. The warm air is so thick, it makes the room feel crowded, like someone is in here with me. I look around, twice, even though I know I'm the only person in here. I open a window to let some air in.

I hear a knock at the door. "It's time for dinner," someone says, and then I hear feet running away. The voice is strangely old-fashioned—Daisy, I guess.

"Coming," I call. I go back into the hallway, the floor still creaking under my feet.

The door slams behind me.

I jump. Then I remember I left the window open. Sometimes at home when I leave the window open, my bedroom door slams, too.

I hear low giggling behind one of the doors and stop for a second to listen. It's probably Daisy again. Or maybe Capri got her phone to work.

I shake my head. I keep stopping and looking around

at random things. I just need to let myself get used to this house and new-to-me bedroom.

I walk downstairs. When I reach the door to the kitchen, I see everyone in the house is already sitting at the dinner table, settled in.

That's weird, I think. Then who's upstairs laughing? I guess it's just more creaking noises from this old lake house.

"Oh, Celeste! That's funny, I thought you were already down here." Grandma furrows her brows together, looking around at the dinner table, as if she sees me sitting there.

"Me too," says Daisy. She looks at the same empty seat that Grandma looks at.

"I was upstairs, starting to unpack," I say, sitting in the chair between Daisy and Owen. I look at Daisy. "I thought..." But I don't finish because Grandma is placing the last dish on the table.

Grandma looks around at us and smiles. "Who's hungry? I made a big dinner and a pitcher of fresh lemonade for us to enjoy."

My stomach growls in response. I hold Daisy's and

Owen's hands as Grandad leads grace. After we say amen, I help myself to the dinner spread around the table and try to decide what to start with. I pick up an ear of sweet corn and bite into it.

"Capri, I hear congratulations are in order," Grandad says, a twinkle in his eye.

Capri looks up, her frown replaced by surprise.

"Your father told me you're the new track team captain!"

"Thanks." She smiles, but then frowns again, like she just remembered something. She goes back to eating her food.

"Y'all eat up and sleep good tonight," Grandad says, looking around the table at us. He is super tall with a big booming voice and a gray beard. I haven't seen that smile in a little while, but I've missed it. "There's so much for us to do this week!"

"Like what?" Capri grumbles. Her phone is lying beside her on the table, untouched. I guess she gave up on trying to get cell service. There's no Wi-Fi here, either.

"Why, all types of things!" Grandad opens his arms wide, his voice getting loud across the table. "For starters,

we have a lake. Good for boating and swimming!”

He looks at me and winks. I smile back and put my head down, a little embarrassed. I know I’m the only person at the table who can’t swim. I just know that Mama set this trip up so I could learn.

Owen clears his throat. “A boy at school told me that he never knew Black people had their own lake houses and he didn’t believe me when I said you had one. He still thought I was making it up. I can’t wait to show him photos of this place when I get back home.”

I take another bite out of my corn on the cob, trying to stay silent, but the crunch is too loud. I glare at Owen, trying to get him to stop talking about swimming and water, but once he gets started, he can’t be stopped.

He’s still babbling. “He said it doesn’t make sense for us to have our own lake houses because most Black people can’t . . . swim.” And that’s when he looks up at me and gives me an apologetic smile.

Too late now, Owen. I continue eating my corn on the cob.

Grandad takes a bite of chicken and wipes his mouth off with his napkin. He looks straight at Owen. “You tell

that fellow to learn his history. There's a reason a lot of Black people don't know how to swim. There was a time when Black people weren't even allowed in public pools. Do you all know the famous actress Dorothy Dandridge?"

Owen shakes his head, Capri shrugs with a frown, and Daisy gasps. "Oh, I love her!" she says. She's so quiet, I'd almost forgotten she's here.

"She was a legendary entertainer. And legend has it that an entire pool was drained at a Las Vegas hotel that she was supposed to perform at, because she stuck her toe in it. Can you imagine?"

"So Black people can't swim because they wouldn't let Dorothy Dandridge stick her foot in a pool at a hotel?" Capri asks, still frowning. I stare at her. I wonder what her problem is. She acts tough, but I can tell she really wants to know.

"It's more than that," Grandma says. "Once, Dr. King was arrested for integrating a restaurant at a motel. Peaceful protesters decided to wade into the motel pool to support him. Do you know that the pool owner poured acid in the pool while the protesters

were inside it?” She shakes her head. Owen’s eyes are wide. I know he can’t wait to tell his friends this later.

“When my sister and I were younger, so many pools had Whites Only signs on them,” Grandma continues. “How could we possibly learn to swim? If we tried at all, we had to swim in rivers and that could be dangerous. Years of not being allowed in pools or having the police being called on us for simply *being* in a pool, we rarely had the opportunity to learn. So we weren’t able to pass that knowledge, or the simple joy of having fun in the water on the weekends, to our kids. All we could pass was the fear of the water or getting in trouble for something we just wanted to enjoy. So your classmate was right, in a way, that many Black people can’t swim. But it’s important that you know why, and that we work to change that. After Ellie—”

She stops, looks at Grandad, and sticks her fork into her macaroni and cheese. The sudden pause makes all of us look up, including Capri.

“Ellie?” Capri asks.

“Celestine. Your Great-Aunt Ellie,” Grandma says.

“Oh,” I say. That’s who I’m named after. My full name

is Celeste Anne Cooper. I love my name because it's fun to draw lots of swirls around the C's and the E's. My great-aunt was named Celestine Johnson. I know that everyone called her Ellie for short, but I don't have a nickname. I'm just Celeste. I'm reminded again of the swimming instructor—always getting my name wrong, then asking me to jump in the pool. How could I trust someone to catch me when they couldn't even pronounce my name right?

“What about Great-Aunt Ellie?” Owen asks.

“Nothing, baby.” Grandma shakes her head. I know she died when Grandma was younger. I guess it still hurts for her to talk about her.

“Your grandmother wanted to make it her duty to get her entire family swimming,” Grandad continues. “That's how we met, you know. I was a lifeguard at the local community pool and she came to learn. Love at first swim.” They exchange a smile.

I'm still eating all this good food, but I can't help but feel a little guilty. All Grandma's ever wanted is for her grandchildren to learn how to swim, and here I am, failing at swimming lessons.

“You look just like her. You know that?” Grandma says. I look up and she’s staring right at me.

“Me?” I glance at Owen and he shrugs.

Grandma is still staring at me and I don’t know what to say. I’ve never even seen a picture of Great-Aunt Ellie before, so I don’t know if I really look like her. People say I look like Owen, but we only have the same eyes, Mom’s hazel-brown eyes. Otherwise, I don’t see it.

It’s like Grandma reads my mind, because she asks me if I’d like to see a picture of her.

“I’ll bring out the photo album after dinner,” Grandma says. She wipes her mouth with a napkin and smiles. “She’s the reason your grandfather built this place for me.”

As the conversation moves on, I finish my food. I’m stuffed and ready for the first night in my new bed. Grandma puts a sweet potato pie on the table for dessert, but I don’t know if I can eat a bite more. Owen, of course, takes a piece and puts it on one of the small dishes Grandma brought out.

Grandma disappears and comes back with a big

black book. She wipes some crumbs off the table before she gently places it down. Grandad steps behind Grandma and looks over her shoulder. Daisy scoots her chair closer to the table and Capri leans in.

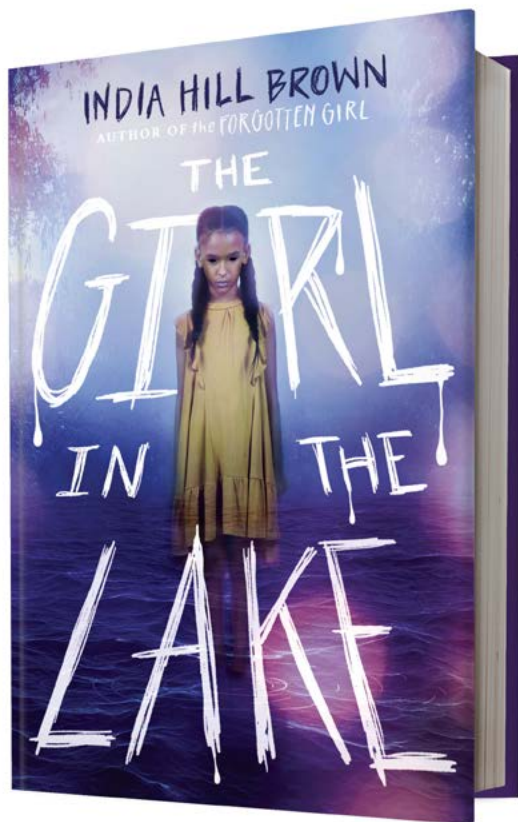
We flip through some pictures I've seen copies of before, of my mom and aunts and uncles, running around under fire hydrants, playing in the pool, diving off the diving board, fishing and smiling in canoes.

Grandma smiles really big, looks at me, and hands me the photo album. "There she is. My big sister, Celestine," she says. "Have a look."

I look, ready to say something polite about how pretty she is or how nice she probably was. But when I see the picture, I scream. My heart beats fast and I hear Owen yell, Daisy squeal, and even Capri gasps.

I'm looking at a picture of myself.

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