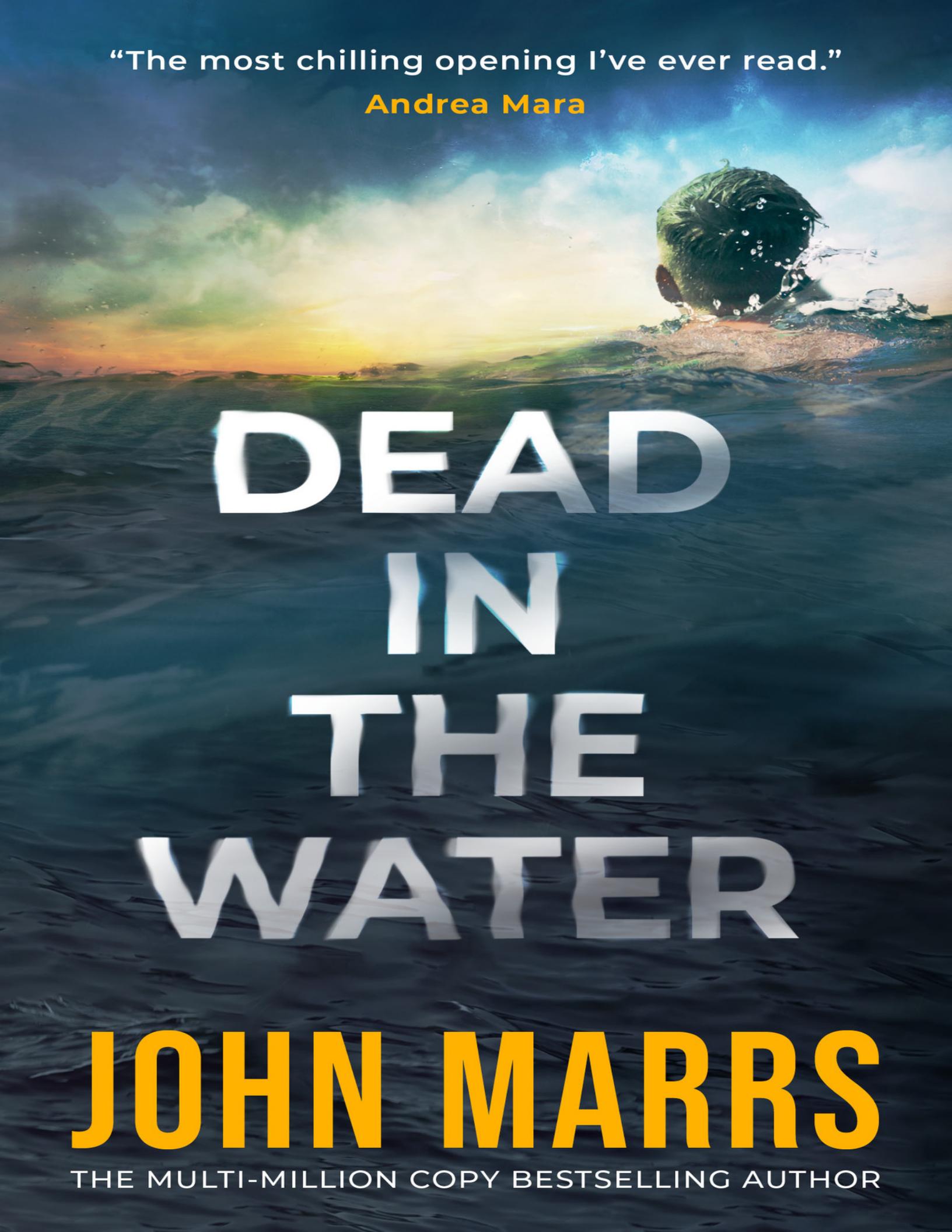


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A dramatic photograph of a person's head and shoulders above the water's surface. The person has dark, wet hair and is looking towards the horizon. The background shows a vast ocean with rolling waves under a sky transitioning from deep blue to a warm orange and yellow sunset.

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**DEAD
IN
THE
WATER**

JOHN MARRS



THOMAS & MERCER

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For Rhian, for swimming against the tide.

CONTENTS

EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE

PART ONE: ABOVE

CHAPTER 1: SIX MONTHS EARLIER DAMON

CHAPTER 2: MELISSA

CHAPTER 3: MELISSA

CHAPTER 4: MELISSA

PART TWO: BELOW

CHAPTER 5: TWO WEEKS LATER DAMON

CHAPTER 6: DAMON

CHAPTER 7: DAMON

CHAPTER 8: DAMON

CHAPTER 9: DAMON

CHAPTER 10: DAMON

CHAPTER 11: DAMON

CHAPTER 12: DAMON

CHAPTER 13: DAMON

CHAPTER 14: HELENA

CHAPTER 15: DAMON

CHAPTER 16: DAMON

CHAPTER 17: MELISSA

CHAPTER 18: MELISSA

CHAPTER 19: MELISSA

CHAPTER 20: DAMON

CHAPTER 21: LAURA
CHAPTER 22: DAMON
CHAPTER 23: DAMON
CHAPTER 24: MELISSA
CHAPTER 25: MELISSA
CHAPTER 26: DAMON
CHAPTER 27: DAMON
CHAPTER 28: DAMON
CHAPTER 29: DAMON
CHAPTER 30: DAMON
CHAPTER 31: DAMON
CHAPTER 32: DAMON
CHAPTER 33: DAMON
CHAPTER 34: DAMON
CHAPTER 35: HELENA
CHAPTER 36: DAMON
CHAPTER 37: MELISSA
CHAPTER 38: MELISSA
CHAPTER 39: DAMON
CHAPTER 40: DAMON
CHAPTER 41: DAMON

PART THREE: IMMERSED
CHAPTER 42: MELISSA
CHAPTER 43: DAMON
CHAPTER 44: DAMON
CHAPTER 45: DAMON
CHAPTER 46: DAMON
CHAPTER 47: DAMON

[CHAPTER 48: HELENA](#)

[CHAPTER 49: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 50: LAURA](#)

[CHAPTER 51: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 52: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 53: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 54: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 55: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 56: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 57: LAURA](#)

[CHAPTER 58: MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 59: MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 60: MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 61: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 62: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 63: MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 64: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 65: MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 66: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 67: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 68: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 69: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 70: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 71: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 72: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 73: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 74: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 75: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 76: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 77: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 78: LAURA](#)

[CHAPTER 79: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 80: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 81: LAURA](#)

[CHAPTER 82: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 83: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 84: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 85: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 86: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 87: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 88: HELENA](#)

[CHAPTER 89: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 90: MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 91: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 92: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 93: HELENA](#)

[CHAPTER 94: DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 95: THREE DAYS EARLIER MELISSA](#)

[CHAPTER 96: TODAY DAMON](#)

[CHAPTER 97: DAMON](#)

[PART FOUR: BEYOND](#)

[CHAPTER 98: THREE WEEKS LATER LAURA](#)

[CHAPTER 99: SIXTEEN YEARS EARLIER LAURA](#)

[CHAPTER 100: TODAY LAURA](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER 101: TWO YEARS LATER SALLY](#)

[CHAPTER 102: SALLY](#)

[CHAPTER 103: SALLY](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[Preview: *The Good Samaritan*](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

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One day your life will flash before your eyes. Make sure it's
worth watching.

—*Gerard Way*

PROLOGUE

It isn't only the water pouring down his throat and filling his lungs that's killing him. It's her, the person who has him tied in restraints and is forcing his head under the surface.

The ice-cold liquid ignites a burn that spreads inside him. He coughs and splutters as he chokes, his body desperately trying to reject it, to force it back out, but this only draws more water in. He tries to move his arms to push his way back up to the surface, but they are restrained behind him. When he kicks his weakening legs, she climbs on top of him and pushes her knees into the back of his to keep him firmly in place. He twists from side to side, the internal burning intensifying as the pressure in his chest builds, making it feel fit to burst. Nothing he does to try to save himself is making the slightest bit of difference.

She wants him dead.

He fights and fights until he is too exhausted to carry on and the life inside him begins to ebb. He feels his movements slow as he becomes detached from his surroundings.

Surrendering to the inevitable marks the beginning and end for him. Now is when he sees it all. Everything that has gone before this moment. All that has made him who he is, unfolding before him. He's been through this before, so he knows what happens: that all at once, thousands of memories begin playing simultaneously. And somehow, he is able to focus on them all. The people he has loved, the people he has lost, the moments they have shared, the laughter, the passion, the anger, the joy and the regrets. He remembers everything.

And then he sees him. A final image before the water consumes him and it all comes to an end.

The dead child. The one who started all this.

PART ONE

ABOVE

CHAPTER 1

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

DAMON

‘A year of challenges,’ I blurt out. ‘You and me.’ I plant my hands on my hips as if this is the greatest idea of all time.

‘Like what?’ It’s taking Melissa’s gaze a little extra time to focus on me, a sure-fire sign the alcohol is taking its toll.

I don’t really have an answer, so I wing it. ‘Once a month,’ I grin, ‘we’ll take turns to challenge each other to do something completely out of our comfort zones.’

Her top lip curls, suggesting she already hates the idea. She looks to Adrienne, the only other woman in our group of ten or so mutual friends, like she’s hoping she will offer her a valid excuse to get out of this. Adrienne gives a playful shrug, as if to tell her she’s on her own.

Melissa raises her voice to be heard. ‘Damon,’ she says firmly, ‘aren’t we already about to step further away from our comfort zones than we’ve ever been before?’

I look at her, puzzled. One of her fake lashes is coming unstuck.

‘Our baby plans,’ she says.

‘But that’s different,’ I reply. ‘And it’s also why this might be our last opportunity to do something for ourselves. We can organise challenges that won’t break the bank. Remember, you were the one who told me we needed to be more spontaneous. Try new things before we hit our thirties and get stuck in ruts.’

The truth is I’m not so much stuck in my rut as firmly cemented inside it.

‘I meant signing up for cookery classes or going to more gigs,’ Melissa says. ‘Not wing-walking on bloody biplanes. Every penny counts for us right now.’

Elsewhere in The Abington, our first pub of the night, Steve has selected Neil Diamond’s ‘Sweet Caroline’ on the jukebox, and now our friends are singing along with the *ba-ba-ba*’s. I put my arm around

Melissa's shoulders to offer a persuasive squeeze. 'I promise we won't do anything that's going to cost us an arm and a leg, or that'll find us in mid-air. So what do you say?'

Her hesitation means I'm winning her round. 'Okay, if I really have to,' she concedes.

I clink her glass with mine to seal it. Truth be told, I expected her to put up more of an argument.

'Who's going first?' asks Tommy. 'You or Mel?'

'Anyone got a coin to flip?' I ask the group at large.

None of us has. Apple Pay killed coins.

'I've got a coin-tossing app,' Tommy offers and opens his phone.

'Millennial wanker,' I say.

'Heads,' says Melissa. She lets out a huff when it lands on tails.

'So what's it going to be?' Tommy asks me.

It has to be something that won't so much push her from her comfort zone as hurl her. Something cheap, cheerful, spontaneous – and that she'll hate me for. Because where's the fun in serving her something she'll enjoy?

A smile spreads across my face. I've got it.

Ten minutes later and we are in the back room of an ill-furnished but hospitable karaoke bar in Northampton town centre. It's three days after New Year's Eve, and most people are hibernating at home or launching a dry January to pay for their alcoholic sins. Only a handful of punters are here, listening to a woman perform what has been, until this moment, a passable rendition of Whitney Houston's 'I Will Always Love You'.

'I think the climax has eluded her,' I whisper to Melissa.

'Story of my life,' she deadpans.

Two others are waiting to sing before it's Melissa's turn. I've never seen her down a pint so quickly. Dutch courage.

I've chosen karaoke for two reasons. One, I know how much she hates being the centre of attention, and two, she kind of scream-sings, and it's bloody hilarious. Somehow, she can hit notes Mariah Carey could only dream of, only not necessarily on purpose or in the right order. To rub salt into the wound, I've chosen Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody', a song with more key changes than a locksmith.

When she at last receives the call, she nervously makes her way to the stage and turns her back on us all. Even after the first *Mama*, I can hear Freddie Mercury's moustache bristling as he turns in his grave.

Excruciating, and delicious. When she finishes caterwauling some six minutes later, we can finally stop cringe-laughing and applaud. She hurries off stage and I high-five her. That's why I love this girl. She has bigger balls than me.

But something's off. She's not glaring at me with as much loathing as I hoped for. After an uneasy beat, the reason for her suspiciously cheerful demeanour strikes me: she has something worse lined up for me.

This woman knows me inside and out: my loves, my longings, my likes and my loathings. And there's a list of the last a mile long.

Perhaps these challenges weren't such a great idea.

'Come on then,' I tell her. 'Put me out of my misery.'

She smiles. 'Aren't you just dying to know?'

CHAPTER 2

MELISSA

If looks could kill, Melissa knows she would already be carried away by the rolling waves lapping at the beach ahead of them.

She knows swimming in large bodies of water makes Damon anxious. In fact, he hates it almost as much as mayonnaise, eating meat from the bone and the crackling of static electricity.

After all the years they've spent together, there is very little she doesn't know about him. Though he can swim, and barely tolerates pools, the mere suggestion of paddling about where his toes can't touch the bottom is enough to bring his skin out in red-and-pinkish blotches.

Which is why Melissa has chosen the sea for his challenge.

Damon has employed an increasingly desperate array of excuses trying to wriggle out of it, but she has no intention of allowing him to do so. A deal is a deal.

She has, however, granted one concession she now sincerely regrets on this slate-grey February day: the only way she could get him this far was to agree to go in with him.

Melissa is the first to reach the shoreline of Brighton Beach. Having dispensed with her dressing gown and trainers a few metres back, she tiptoes across the pebbles in a plain black swimsuit. The first wave licks at her ankles – it's exceptionally cold. *Winter*, she reminds herself. *What'd you expect?* At least, from behind, Damon can't see her tightly pulled face.

She turns to find him still some distance from the waterline – stationary, arms firmly folded, a belligerent toddler protesting at bath time. Clamped to his skinny chest are two off-white towels they borrowed from the bathroom of their bed and breakfast. He's wearing brightly coloured orange-and-white shorts he bought at H&M earlier today, because he 'accidentally' left his at home. This pair are comically large on him; the leg holes flap in the wind.

'I look like a sodding traffic cone!' he says, and she doesn't disagree.

‘Come on,’ she says, and beckons him towards her. But it’s as if his feet are encased in solid concrete.

‘The sooner we do this,’ she says, ‘the sooner we can go back inside.’

‘I don’t want to!’ he yells. ‘It looks rough out there.’

‘It’s only a few waves.’

‘It’s okay for *you*, Miss Former Olympian. You know what you’re doing. I’m built for land, not water.’

She rolls her eyes. ‘I swam for the county when I was fourteen,’ she clarifies, ‘which hardly makes me Rebecca Adlington.’ She’d been rake-thin back then, she recalls, with broad shoulders and a permanent smell of chlorine about her that she’d try to mask with Body Shop shower gels and cheap perfumes endorsed by the popstars of the day.

She’s yet to win another step from him. He can be so maddening. ‘Let’s not forget,’ she calls to him, ‘whose stupid idea these challenges were. *Yours*, remember? What’s the worst that could happen?’

‘My testicles never descend again?’

‘The way you’re carrying on, I’m doubting you had any in the first place.’ With that, she turns around, holds her breath and begins her descent towards deeper water, where a tall wave promptly catches her unawares with a cold slap across her thighs and chest, raising red pinpricks in her skin. She quietly curses.

As if in answer, Damon appears beside her, letting fly a string of expletives of his own, only he isn’t keeping anything under his breath.

And then, like Melissa, he’s up to his neck in the water.

‘How far are we going?’ he asks, and adds a theatrical gasp.

She gazes ahead, towards the circular bright yellow swim buoys arranged loosely in a box formation.

She nods at them. ‘There and back again.’

‘They’re miles away!’

‘Bah. A hundred and fifty metres at the most.’

She leads the way, choosing breaststroke over front crawl as she doesn’t want to leave him behind and offer him another excuse to complain. She turns to check he hasn’t tiptoed back to shore, just as a wave engulfs his head. ‘Fuck this!’ he yells and spits out a mouthful of the salty water. Her smirk is good-natured, though.

Onward.

Melissa assumed that once she began to swim, her body would warm up or she'd grow acclimatised to the temperature. But neither has happened. The current is challenging but she's strong enough to persist until finally she reaches the string of buoys, each with the words 'swim area' painted in black lettering across the sides. Damon arrives soon after and they both tread water, hanging on to the ropes that link the buoys.

'See, that wasn't so bad, was it?' Delivered while panting, this is less than convincing. Melissa holds her hand up in the air and he reluctantly high-fives her. 'It's invigorating,' she adds. 'Ready to head back?'

'Hell yes,' he replies. 'Does Uber run a jet ski service?'

They begin their return journey as they came, with her taking the lead.

This route, however, proves more challenging. The tide is against them and she's forced to shut her eyes as she swims into the waves. 'Not much further,' she yells over her shoulder. She suspects Damon is silently cursing her, because she hears nothing from him. She can only begin to imagine the fresh hell he is concocting for March's challenge.

'I said it's not much longer,' she repeats, and turns her head.

Only, she can't see him behind her.

'Damon?' she shouts, scanning the sea for him. She expects to spot his head emerging from a wave and for them to continue. But there is no sign of him.

Fear envelops her in the space of a heartbeat.

'Damon?' she shouts at the top of her lungs, then focuses her attention on the beach, in case somehow she became disorientated and he's swum past her. But he's not there either.

There is only one other place he can be.

Under the water.