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# Deep Water

Written by Christine Poulson

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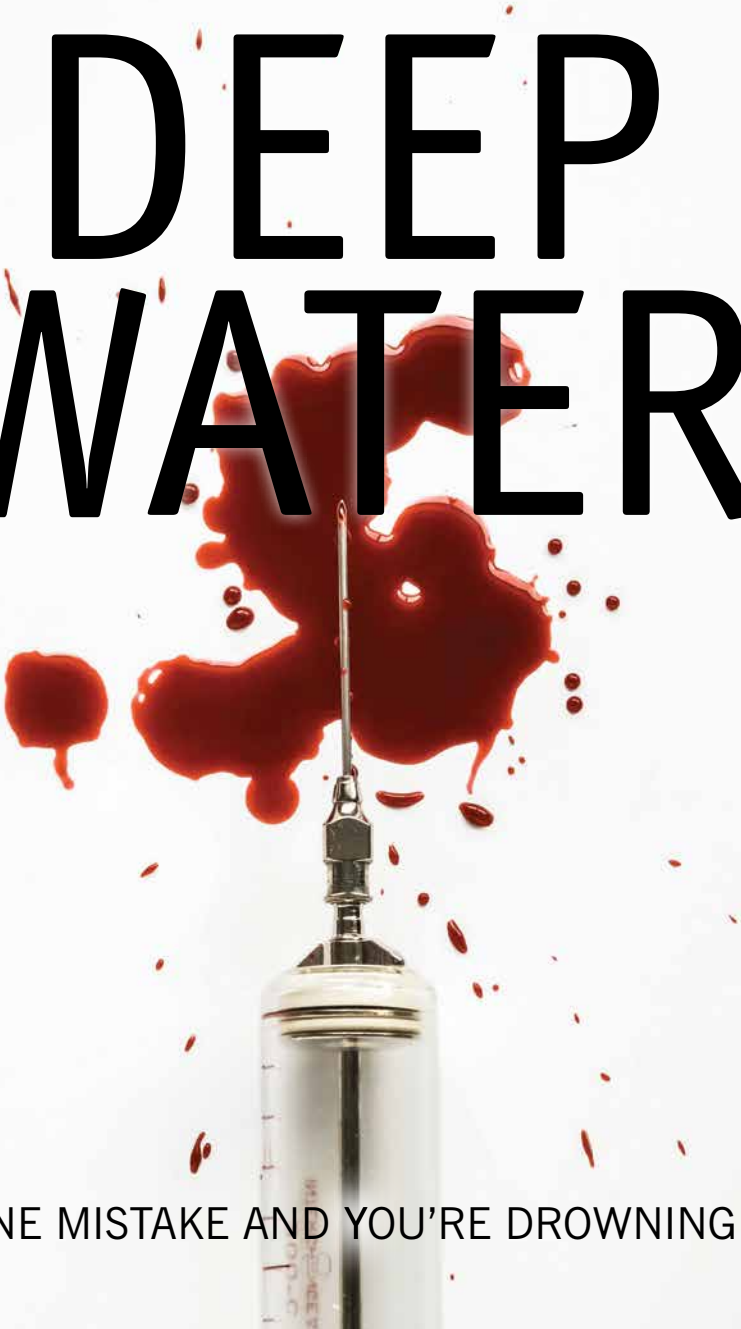
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Christine Poulson

# DEEP WATER

A syringe with a needle pointing upwards, surrounded by a large splash of red liquid, likely blood, against a white background. The splash is centered behind the title 'DEEP WATER'.

ONE MISTAKE AND YOU'RE DROWNING

Christine Poulson

# DEEP WATER

ONE MISTAKE AND YOU'RE DROWNING



LION FICTION

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*To Joanna Bellamy (1953–2013)*

*“Precious friend hid in death’s dateless night”*

**Shakespeare, Sonnet 30**

“The past isn’t over. It isn’t even the past.”

*William Faulkner*

“La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à  
remplir un cœur d’homme. Il faut imaginer  
Sisyphé heureux.”

[The struggle itself towards the summit should  
be enough to satisfy the human heart. One can  
imagine Sisyphus happy.]

*Albert Camus*

## Prologue

Ed was nervous and he hadn't expected that. When he'd talked it over with Melissa, she'd been the one who was uneasy, and he'd argued in favour. But now, as he looked around the sterile little bedroom, small and white and clean like a room in a budget hotel, he would have given almost anything not to be here.

His hand went up to his hairline and traced the line of a scar. It was thirteen years since he had taken a header over the handlebars of his new bike. It had been his eighth birthday. It was the one and only time he'd been in hospital as a patient. You take good health for granted and he'd been lucky, no doubt about it. That was one reason for taking part in the clinical trial: giving something back.

As he unpacked his overnight bag, he reminded himself of what he had told Melissa. There was virtually no risk. This was the last stage in a lengthy process. The therapy had been tested on mice and then on monkeys. Medical students took part in trials all the time.

He discovered a bar of chocolate that Melissa must have slipped in his bag that morning. He smiled: after all, he'd only be away from her for two nights. And with the money he was earning, they'd be able to have a holiday for the first time in ages.

There was a knock on the door. That would be Tom, who had signed up first and persuaded Ed to come along: a chance to revise for their finals. Ed often found himself agreeing to do things with Tom and then half-regretting it. On the face of it, they were an oddly matched pair. They'd first met when they had found themselves in adjacent rooms in their hall of

residence. Ed was short and dark and thoughtful, and his idea of a good time was a concert at the Festival Hall or a foreign arthouse movie. Tom was a roaring extravert, a big burly blond who spent his weekends hurling himself round the rugby pitch. Ed wanted to specialize in psychiatry after he'd qualified. Tom planned to be a cardiac surgeon.

"So you persuaded Melissa to let you off the leash," Tom said, as they walked down the corridor to the ward.

"No, I'm wearing an electronic tag and she's put me under curfew."

The teasing had started after Ed and Melissa had announced that they were getting married after they qualified. There was something unkind about it, an implication that Ed had settled for Melissa too soon and could have done better. Ed had wanted to have it out with Tom, but Melissa had told him to chill out. She said, "Remember how Tom dropped everything to drive you home when your father was taken ill? And have you seen him with those kids in the paediatric ward? No, under all that bluster Tom's got a heart as big as a bucket. He's lonely. That's his problem."

"Lonely! He has a different girlfriend every term!"

"Exactly. We're the lucky ones to have found each other so soon. Tom would love to have a woman who cared enough to boss him around. He's jealous, that's all."

Ed had laughed. "Perhaps you're the one who should be a psychiatrist."

"No, no. GP training for me. Easier to fit round all those babies we're going to have."

Ed pretended to look doubtful. "I'm not so sure about that."

Melissa pursed her lips. "Think you might not be up to it?"

"Might be as well to get in some practice now?"

"Oh, I think so."

And she'd pulled him down onto the bed...

"Ed, Ed," Tom hissed.

Ed came to himself with a start.



## DEEP WATER

They were in the ward now. Tom nudged Ed in the ribs and raised his eyebrows in the direction of the doctor who was conducting the trial.

She was a young Chinese woman with long black hair so straight that it might have been ironed. Ed caught his eye and shook his head as if to say “naughty-naughty”. Tom grinned.

Ed stole a glance at the others: all male, all young. He recognized one of them as a fellow medical student whom he’d met at the chess club and nodded to him across the room. The others were probably students too.

Dr Chan’s voice broke into his thoughts. “I’ll be delivering the injections one at a time at half-hour intervals. That’s in case there’s an unfavourable reaction to the drug. It’s highly unlikely, but we have to follow protocol.” Dr Chan glanced at her clipboard and then at Ed. “I think we’ll take you first. Ed, isn’t it?”

He nodded and rolled up his sleeve. His mouth was dry and he was annoyed with himself for feeling a frisson of – what? Not anxiety exactly, more a shrinking back, a reluctance to go first. He reminded himself again that it was very, very rare for anything to go wrong. That was why it made headline news when something did.

When Dr Chan slid the needle into his arm, he had an idiotic impulse to grab his throat and roll his eyes, but of course he didn’t and in fact no one was watching. A couple of the guys were chatting about the prospects of their football teams. Another was playing on his iPad. One was leafing through a copy of *New Scientist*.

As for Tom, he had equipped himself with a James Patterson novel.

Ed settled back on his bed. Now that he’d actually had the injection, he felt fine. Why on earth had he been so worried?

“What about revision?” he asked Tom. They’d been planning to go over things together.

Tom grinned. “Plenty of time for that later.”

Ed shrugged. He propped himself up on the pillows and resolutely addressed himself to his revision notes. He was soon deep in endocrinology.

At one point Ed was aware of someone else being injected and later that it was Tom's turn.

He couldn't have said how much longer it was before he looked up, disturbed by something unexpected.

It was the sound of Tom's book hitting the floor.

"Tom?" Ed said.

Tom turned his head. He stared at Ed with his eyes narrowed. It was as though he had seen something in the distance and wasn't sure what it was.

A bleeper went off. Heads turned all over the ward. Dr Chan was standing by one of the other men, a syringe actually in her hand. She was about to inject a fourth subject. She dropped the syringe with a tinkle into a tray. She started over towards Tom.

"Tom!" Ed swung his legs off the bed. "What's the matter?"

Later, when Ed tried to recall what had happened next, the memories were disjointed and he couldn't even be sure what order they came in. He saw Dr Chan's face as she bent over Tom, serious, absorbed. Tom was struggling, trying to pull off the electrodes, to brush away the people who were crowding round his bed. Ed caught a glimpse of his face – it was not fear he saw, he thought afterwards, but bewilderment.

Another alarm went off.

There was the rasping sound of Tom trying to get his breath.

Then Ed and the other subjects were hustled out.

Two days later, when Ed got round to unpacking his backpack, he came across the James Patterson novel. He had no idea how it had got there.

He stared at it, weighing it in his hand as though he'd never seen a book before.

"Plenty of time for that later," he heard Tom saying.

## DEEP WATER

But there wouldn't be plenty of time later. There wouldn't be any time at all. The long years of friendship that might have lain ahead had been wiped out, deleted.

Big, brash, wise-cracking Tom, who only a few days ago had been making bad jokes about carving people up, was lying in the hospital mortuary, awaiting his own post-mortem.

# Chapter One

## Two Years Later

The bed was rocking and someone had their elbow in Daniel's ribs.

He clung to his dream, but it was dissolving, slipping away. He knew only that he was young, everything in front of him, and a beloved woman was beside him. He tried to get back to her, but it was too late. He broke the surface of his sleep. Only the aura of the dream remained, a sense of being warm and cocooned, and yet there was something wistful about it too.

He wasn't as young as he had been in the dream, he knew that. He was thirty. But no, he wasn't. *I'm nearly forty*, he thought with a pang of regret. *How did that happen? How did I get to be this old?*

The bed *was* rocking, or it had been; it was just a very gentle motion now.

It came back to him. He was married to Rachel and the elbow in his ribs belonged to their four-year-old daughter, Chloe, who yet again had climbed in between them in the middle of the night. How could he have forgotten Chloe for a single second, even in a dream? And with that thought he was fully awake. He was on the boat. It was the wake from some passing cruiser that had rocked the bed. He eased himself up onto his elbow and looked at the clock: 7.00. They were on holiday. No need to get up yet.

On the other side of Chloe, squashed against the hull of the boat, Rachel murmured and shifted in her sleep. She turned over, pulling the duvet with her. He tugged it back, rearranged Chloe's sprawling limbs so all three of them lay like spoons in a drawer, and tried to settle back into sleep. But it was no good.

Gently, he disengaged himself and slipped out of bed. He pulled on a heavy woollen jumper over his pyjamas. He padded into the galley and put the kettle on. Who was the woman in the dream? It hadn't been Rachel. He felt vaguely guilty – but he wasn't responsible for his unconscious, he told himself. It didn't really *mean* anything. Just a bit of flotsam and jetsam tossed up to the surface. Just debris.

He got out the map to plan that day's journey. They had stretched the holiday out as long as they could, but they had to be back in Ely that evening. That still left plenty of time to meander back along the waterways.

The kettle switched itself off. He spooned ground coffee into the cafetière, and filled it up with boiling water, relishing the fragrance. He took his cup of coffee to the wheelhouse, shivering in the chill of a November morning. Mist was rising from the water. A startled moorhen paddled rapidly away.

He let himself have a few minutes before the demands of the day began, then he went back for his iPhone and brought it up on deck. The deal with Rachel was that he only switched it on once a day, and fair enough, they were trying to have a proper break. It wasn't as if anything urgent was likely to come up. He was a lawyer, yes, but not the kind whose clients were liable to need him at any hour of the day or night. Specializing in patents tends to be a nine to five thing.

When he switched it on he was surprised to see that it was clogged with text messages and voice mail and emails.

Most of them were from the office, but one phone number appeared increasingly and his heart gave a jolt. Dad. He had rung every quarter of an hour from ten the previous evening and the last call had been at one o'clock in the morning. The fact that he was still up at that hour wasn't in itself remarkable. Since Mum had died a few years ago, he had become more and more nocturnal. But what could be so urgent that he was ringing so late? Though of course if anything had happened to his father, he wouldn't be ringing himself.

## DEEP WATER

Daniel listened to the most recent message. All it said was, “Ring me as soon as you get this, son, whatever time it is,” but he heard the anxiety in his father’s voice.

He returned the call.

His father picked up on the third ring. “Daniel!”

“What is it, Dad? What’s the matter?”

There was a hesitation at the other end. “You haven’t heard, then?”

“Heard what? Dad, what’s going on?”

“It’s Jennifer.”

“Jennifer?” he echoed. It was the last thing he was expecting – that she’d be in touch with his father. “What did she want?”

“Not... it’s not... she’s not... you won’t have been following the news. I know this is going to be a shock, son. She’s dead. Jennifer’s dead.”

Dan groped for the bench that ran round the wheelhouse and lowered himself onto it. “How? What?”

“A car crash. Sunday evening. I saw it on a news website.”

How many times had he told her that she was driving too fast? He felt that he had always known something like this would happen. At the same time it was incredible, fantastic... Jennifer dead... no...

“Was there another car involved?”

“It seems not. It had been raining. The road was wet. Looks as if she took a bend too fast. She came off the road and hit a tree.”

There was a sound behind him. He turned to see Rachel climbing up through the hatch. She was wearing a heavy woollen dressing gown over her nightdress and her short hair was ruffled from sleep.

Her smile froze when she saw his face.

“Dan, what is it?”

“It’s alright.” He turned back to the phone and heard his father say, “Is that Rachel? Give her my love. And Chloe.”

“I will, Dad. Thanks for letting me know.”

"I didn't want you to hear about it from someone else – or see it on the news."

"Look, you did right. I'll ring you later, OK? Rachel sends her love too."

"What's happened?" Rachel said. "Is he alright?"

"He's fine." Daniel ran his hand over his unshaven chin. "He rang to tell me that Jennifer's been killed in a car crash." Even as he said the words, he thought that it couldn't really be true. This kind of thing didn't happen to people you actually knew. But then, didn't everyone think that?

Rachel stared at him.

He could see she was wondering what this would mean to them, to him and Rachel. He was wondering that, too. And the truth was that he didn't know what it meant. It wasn't something he could take in all at once. It was too big, too unlikely...

"A car crash..." Rachel said. "How?"

"She ran her car off the road."

Rachel came over to stand by his side. She slipped an arm around his waist.

The phone buzzed. Another call was coming in. It was from his secretary. He had forgotten about the backlog of calls from the office.

He answered the call. "Alison?"

"I thought I'd never get hold of you. Everyone's running around like headless chickens. Can you get into the office for ten?"

What had this to do with Jennifer? He couldn't make sense of it.

"Haven't you listened to my messages?" she said. "We had a call from Lyle Linstrum yesterday."

"It's not about Jennifer?"

Now it was her turn to sound bewildered. "Who's Jennifer? Daniel, Lyle Linstrum's flying in from Texas overnight. He'll be in the office at ten and it's you he wants to see. Mr O'Donnell

said I *had* to track you down.” In as far as Daniel had a boss, it was O’Donnell, one of the senior partners. “Daniel, you *can* be there?”

“I’ll ring you back, OK?” He looked at his watch. Amazingly, it was only 7.30. “Ten minutes max.”

During the conversation Rachel had gone back inside.

Of course: Alison had only been working for the firm for a year. Even if she’d seen the news about Jennifer, there was no reason why she should have connected it with him. There was no question that Daniel would have to go into the office. And in practical terms getting back was no problem – a taxi would get him back to Ely in less than half an hour, which would leave him ample time to go home and get into a suit.

Rachel came back with a cup of coffee in her hand.

“That was Alison,” he said. “They want me in the office. It’s urgent.”

“Had she heard about Jennifer?”

He shook his head. “A new client, an important one – if he throws business our way it’ll be huge for the firm. He wants to see me in the office at ten.”

She frowned, but he guessed that she was simply working out what it meant and what adjustments would need to be made to the day. It was a relief to be back on the solid ground of solving little problems and making practical arrangements.

“Would you be able to manage OK getting back to Ely?” he asked, though he knew that she would. They were at the Lazy Otter moorings at Stretham, only about five miles from Ely, and there weren’t any locks. It was her boat – she’d been living on it when they first met – and she’d have no trouble managing it for that distance. But in this, his second marriage, he tried not to take things for granted.

She nodded, acknowledging his tact in phrasing it that way, and answered the question he’d really been asking. “I don’t mind. It’s the last day anyway.”

“Chloe...”



“I’ll tell her I’m promoting her to first mate. She’ll be thrilled.”

“I’ll go and shave,” he said.

“Daniel?”

He turned. “Yes?”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes... no...”

“Stupid question, really. It’s bound to be a shock.”

He shook his head, at a loss for words. That it should end like this. The golden girl – that was what he used to call her. How could someone so full of life just be gone, snuffed out in a moment of carelessness?

As he ducked his head under the hatch to go down to shave, vestiges of his dream came back to him: that beloved female presence; had it been Jennifer?