

THE CAPSULE

BY

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LAUNCH DAY

On the day of the launch, Remi stood on the deck of a pristine, white, 70-foot catamaran floating two hundred miles southwest of Guam and seven miles above the deepest place on Earth. She leaned against the white metal railing at the front of the boat, away from everyone else, and stared over the side into the watery abyss. The movement of other passengers, mostly media people, barely registered in her peripheral vision. Most of their chattering and laughing were drowned out by a high-pitched ringing in her ears, followed by the sound of her pulse rapidly beating a rhythm against her eardrums. Remi shuffled and adjusted the thick parka she had draped over her arm and the heavy, overstuffed backpack she had strapped to her back. She had a brief vision of losing her balance and plummeting headfirst over the railing into the frigid water below but blinked the thought away and stepped back from the railing, sucking in deeper-than-necessary breaths.

Days before the launch, Remi had handed the keys to her apartment over to her younger sister, Mia, to house-sit. “This is, by far, the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Mia said. “Diving seven miles into the ocean to live in an *experimental* science station for thirty days is—is suicidal!”

The opportunity to be one of the first people to spend a month on the edge of the Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench was too good to pass up. It was something Mia would have never understood. Documenting the inaugural expedition to The Capsule would be the story that catapulted Remi from being a C-list journalist to a Pulitzer-prize-winning documentarian.

She looked ahead, staring at the expanse of water and sky in front of her while salty sea winds blasted her in the face, threatening to rip off the eyelash extensions she now regretted getting. The breeze died down, and she tried not to think about the fact that she wouldn’t feel the wind, see the sky, or be anywhere that could be considered expansive for a whole month.

Her chest tightened, squeezing the rest of the air out of her lungs. Her hands shook as she dropped her parka onto the deck and slid her backpack off, searching through the pockets with trembling fingers to find the bottle of Xanax she'd been prescribed for the trip. She thought she wouldn't need it. She was wrong.

"Remi?"

She jumped and turned around, fumbling the bottle before it hit the deck with a rattle. She stooped and quickly snatched it up, her cheeks heating.

The first thing she noticed about the guy standing in front of her was his blue-gray eyes fringed with long lashes. She'd seen those eyes before but couldn't place him.

"Hey, I'm Charlie." When she didn't respond, he said, "Your camera guy."

"Right! Yes, of course. Sorry." She reached out to shake his hand.

"Austin's here too, somewhere."

She nodded. "Our fearless producer, I assume."

"Yeah..." He tilted his head as he let go of her hand. "You good?"

She attempted a smile but abandoned it halfway through, exhaling heavily. "No."

He suppressed a laugh, giving her a closed-mouth smile instead.

"To be honest, as excited as I am about this project, I'm terrified of the whole thousand-atmospheres-of-pressure thing. And the submersible is a lot smaller than I expected. It looks barely big enough for four, so I don't see how they're going to squeeze eighteen people in there?"

He nodded slowly. "Claustrophobic?"

"Not really," she lied. "But these are pretty extreme circumstances. I mean, are you not a little freaked out?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I haven't thought about it much."

Her dark eyebrows shot up her forehead. “Haven’t thought about it?!”

“Well, no. What’s there to think about?”

She took a moment to analyze Charlie. He was completely at ease. Like maybe *his* psychiatrist gave him Xanax, too. But no. His Zen was natural.

“I envy you,” she admitted. “I’ve imagined every scenario and outcome, thought about the possibility of things going catastrophically wrong, attempted to calculate the odds of various failures, researched what it would feel like—”

He let out a low whistle. “Wow! You are *way* over-thinking this. It’s a four-hour ride to an underwater hotel- “

“Science station.”

“Science station, hotel, same difference. If something goes wrong, we’ll never even know it.”

The breeze kicked up, gently tousling his overgrown blonde waves into his eyes. He pushed them out of the way with his fingers.

She squinted at him through her own hair, which had been swept up in the same breeze. It formed a dark chocolate hair tornado before being blown back down directly into her face, sticking to her eyelashes and mouth, making her sputter.

He laughed. “Let me see if I can find Austin. Submersible leaves in an hour, right?”

She nodded and watched him go before retrieving her parka and wandering off to find water to take her pill.

Remi found a deck chair away from everyone else and sat down. Watching the other journalists and media people buzzing around gave her a smug sense of satisfaction. Most of them

had probably been asked to take the dive for 30 days, but none of them were brave enough to go through with it.

Many people had turned down the opportunity to be on this expedition. Not just the journalists but even Remi's usual film crew refused to participate, and finding replacements was exceedingly difficult. Though she would have preferred seasoned professionals, she ended up recruiting two guys fresh out of film school. Charlie, the 20-something with a genius-level portfolio, and Austin, a thirty-ish guy who ditched his accounting job to enroll in film school, were the only two people who didn't run screaming when she explained what they would be filming.

Just as she started to get restless again, an announcement was made through the crackle of a megaphone: It was time to board the sub.

Remi, now wearing her parka, joined the others on the deck near the taxi-yellow and lime-green submersible. She struggled to shove her bulky arms through her backpack straps.

"Hi! I'm Marci. Can I help you with that?" The white-blond girl in front of her didn't wait for an answer. She grabbed one of the backpack straps and shoved it upward as she yanked hard on Remi's sleeve. As uncomfortable as it was, it worked.

"Thank you," Remi said, giving Marci a close-mouthed smile.

"You're the one making the documentary, right?" Marci blinked her large blue eyes up at Remi, who felt like a giant next to the petite scientist.

"That's me. Remi Martell," she said, holding out her hand.

Marci ignored her hand and grabbed Remi in a tight hug. "I'm so excited! Aren't you?!"

Remi stiffened until Marci let go. "Yes, I suppose you could say that."

She beamed up at Remi and then turned to speak to another scientist, whom Remi recognized from the dossier she'd been given as Brianna, the marine geologist.

Remi began to sweat almost immediately under the thick layers of her parka. It wasn't cold on the boat, but the deeper they dove into the ocean, the colder it would get. She was told that while the sub and facility would be heated, it would only occasionally reach a maximum temperature of 65F. Unoccupied areas of The Capsule would be kept "above freezing."

Charlie appeared in the crowd and pushed past a few people to stand beside her just as the frizzy-haired, leathery-skinned woman in charge of the launch event yelled out, "Squeeze in a bit, everyone!"

Remi felt everyone close in around her, which amplified the heat trapped inside her jacket tenfold.

The photographers and journalists grouped up in front of Remi and Charlie, who were squished together with the scientists and engineers. As the photographers began shooting rapid-fire with their cameras, Remi did her best to keep her eyes open. She had a terrible habit of blinking at the wrong time.

"Austin's out," Charlie said through a tight smile.

Remi's amber-brown eyes were beginning to water from holding them open in such breezy conditions. She tried not to react to Charlie, but her wide, watery eyes widened even further. Her nervous shaking went from 2.0 to an uncontrollable 5.9 on the Richter scale. She gripped her backpack straps to try to make it stop. "What do you mean *out*?"

"He said he can't do it. He was freaking out like you were earlier." Charlie grinned as if he only just noticed the cameras.

Remi's breaths started coming in short, shallow puffs again. Her smile began to falter. "Well, did you even try to calm him down? Did you tell him how it's just an underwater hotel?"

He laughed. "He didn't find much comfort in that."

“Why are you *laughing*?” She hissed through clenched teeth, her smile reduced to a terrified grimace.

Charlie turned to her, even though they were still being photographed. “Just the absurdity, I guess. We’re dodging death from the day we’re born until it finally catches up to us, and we die. You’re in danger of dying right now, in fact. Space junk could come crashing down and annihilate this boat and everyone on it, or in your case, you could drop dead from a heart attack. The point is, you can’t control it, and you can’t stop it, so shut up and enjoy the time you have.”

Remi paused, finally allowing herself to blink. “That’s what you said to him? Because that’s not comforting at all.”

Her nerves were back with a vengeance, completely overriding the Xanax she had taken earlier. She boarded the sub last, and the hatch immediately closed with a clang. They were sealed in just like that.

She couldn’t help noticing that the ceiling of the sub was too low to stand up all the way. Everyone was still bumping into each other, struggling to find a seat and arrange their belongings comfortably. Remi tried to ignore that there was absolutely no room for anything besides the bench seating that lined both sides of the submersible’s bright orange walls. The would-be white lights mounted to the ceiling reflected off the walls, making everything appear to glow a sickly orange.

The world began to tilt under Remi’s feet.

She looked for something to distract herself, but there was nothing except those awful bench seats that took up so much space. Everyone had to hold their bags in their lap or put them on the floor where their feet should have been. And when people sat across from each other, their knees touched.

Everything is fine. I’m fine. This is all...good. This is what I wanted.

Remi's vision started to darken around the edges, and she stood, hitting her head against the ceiling. She shook her backpack off and began frantically clawing at her parka.

No. No. This is the stupidest thing I've ever done! And for what? A shot at a Pulitzer? Eternal fame and glory? Mia was right!

She gulped in air, finally breaking free of the suffocating coat. It was too little, too late, though. Everything blurred as she dropped into her seat with a thud and slumped over against Charlie's shoulder. The darkness closed in, and the last thing she saw through her pinpoints of vision was Charlie.

"You're sweating."

