

Excerpt of Sink or Swim
By Stacy Juba

Chapter One

Cassidy Novak stared into the seething water. It couldn't end this way.

Gray waves buffeted against the 179-foot schooner and fog billowed through the spiderweb of rigging that snarled skyward. Heavy white sails furled, the *Atlantic Devil's* triple masts lumbered in formation like dead trees.

Gabriel stalked from the bow to mid-ship, his black turtleneck and slacks contrasting with his pale face. Cassidy's pulse hammered in her throat as she searched his sober expression.

His full lips curled into what would have been a grin for most people. For Gabriel, the Grim Reaper, it mimicked a sneer.

He withdrew a saber from the metal sheath belted at his waist and gripped the hilt beneath the curve of the scoop-shaped hand-guard. Above the main mast, the black and white skull and crossbones flag thrashed in a wind dance.

Cassidy glanced at Reggie, the last surviving competitor besides herself. He rubbed the back of his shaved head and connected his fingers behind his neck. Her own posture locked tight. One of them would go home a millionaire.

The other ... she wouldn't reflect on that.

After three months isolated from society on the new reality show *Sink or Swim*, Cassidy wanted that prize money and the fame that accompanied it. Hope fortified her very bones. Maybe her days of scrambling to pay off debts and working a lousy job were over.

It's yours. It has to be.

Just then, Gabriel caught her eye and gestured over his shoulder. Cassidy followed his index finger toward the gangway. To the plank.

Cassidy's daredevil smile, practiced in the mirror before setting sail, faded like mist.

Her clever comebacks, which she'd imagined quoted at the water coolers of America, were not heard.

Her cascading red hair that she'd tossed like a drama queen – an invention strictly for TV – went taut around her finger.

She'd lost. The overall point tallies had come in, and she'd lost. Her dreams weren't coming true after all.

"Game over. You lose. Close call though, Reggie beat you by five points." Gabriel dragged her across the deck by the arm and pushed her up onto the wooden board that projected over the water.

Cassidy winced, emptiness invading her body like a physical hurt. Five points. If only she hadn't screwed up furling and unfurling sails during the first episode, or if she'd done a better job mopping the deck that time she had a cold. After all Cassidy had been through, two simple mistakes cost her the game.

She'd been five points away from a new life.

Under the show's set-up, twelve contestants had competed in four teams. The crew awarded marks based on skill and neatness, with team members pooling their numbers to

win privileges like movie nights or dinners in the officers' mess. Every Monday, a low-scoring contestant walked the plank and went home on a rendezvous ship. Cassidy had lasted until the final cut.

Gabriel's sword blade brushed her back. Not only were her dreams drowning, she was about to undergo torture. The humiliating kind.

Her breath rasping, she eyed the twenty-foot drop. The end of the plank seemed miles away, though it was only ten feet. Trying not to look down, Cassidy inched forward. At the verge, she halted and willed her gaze toward the dark cold water below.

Gabriel stepped up behind her and touched the cold sharp steel to the nape of her neck. "Time to sink or swim."

Don't show emotion. You've got to lose with dignity. Cassidy said a silent prayer, folded her arms across her chest and vaulted off the plank. Ice cold waves pressed around her shoulders as she thundered underwater. Cassidy gulped a mouthful and shot back up into a straight line, desperate to break the surface.

Stinging water overflowed her eyes and Cassidy pawed her eyeballs with wet hands. She squeezed her clogged ears with her fingers, swallowed to ease her raw throbbing throat.

Treading water, Cassidy hiked down the sopping shorts that rode up her legs and adjusted her soaked tee-shirt. She swam over to the rope ladder dangling against the side of the ship and craned her neck. Dozens of faces gaped down at her.

She climbed the ladder, the rungs burning her hands and bare left foot. Her right canvas shoe slipped on each notch; Cassidy's other shoe had floated away. Teeth chattering, Cassidy extended her leg over the railing and dropped onto the deck with a bang. A production assistant tossed her a Navy blanket. Muttering her thanks, Cassidy wrapped herself in the scratchy warmth.

She had to cheer up. Even though the amount was a mystery, the runner-up won a prize. Maybe it would be a hundred grand. Even \$25,000 would help to eradicate her college loans and car payments.

But, it wouldn't finance an affordable private health club where participants could work out with personal trainers, a pilot site that could have eventually blossomed into a full-blown franchise via all the endorsement money and popularity showered on savvy winners of Top Ten reality shows.

It wouldn't propel her into an overnight success.

Cassidy turned her back from her shipmates, hoping the production crew got the hint that she needed a few minutes. She didn't like losing, whether it was a game of Trivial Pursuit or a reality TV show with million dollar stakes. Teachers had always called her a perfectionist who expected too much of herself. Cassidy never thought it was too much. She should have learned her lesson by now. The universe didn't want to work in her favor.

Besides, she'd had enough of the cameras and microphones in her face every minute. The tallies were in. Somehow, Cassidy had to get over it before opening her mouth on national television. She snagged a towel off a deck chair and rubbed her limp red curls.

An assistant passed her a steaming mug of coffee. Cassidy cradled the mug between her fingers, whispers of heat curling into the air as rivulets dripped down her bangs.

Cassidy never drank coffee unless it was decaf, and even then she rarely accepted the stuff, but now she brought the cup to her lips. Black bitterness warmed her throat and

she took another sip. They'd arrived in New York Harbor the one cold dreary day in August.

Clasping the mug in one hand, Cassidy wiped her eyes with a corner of the blanket. Here they came. Cameramen advanced from opposite directions, ready to zoom in and capture her disappointment. Technicians trudged behind them, hoisting portable studio lights. This would air tonight, the plank and all the other footage collected that morning interspersed during a special live broadcast/cast reunion. Cassidy's stomach muscles clenched.

In less than ten hours, America would witness her making an idiot out of herself.

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