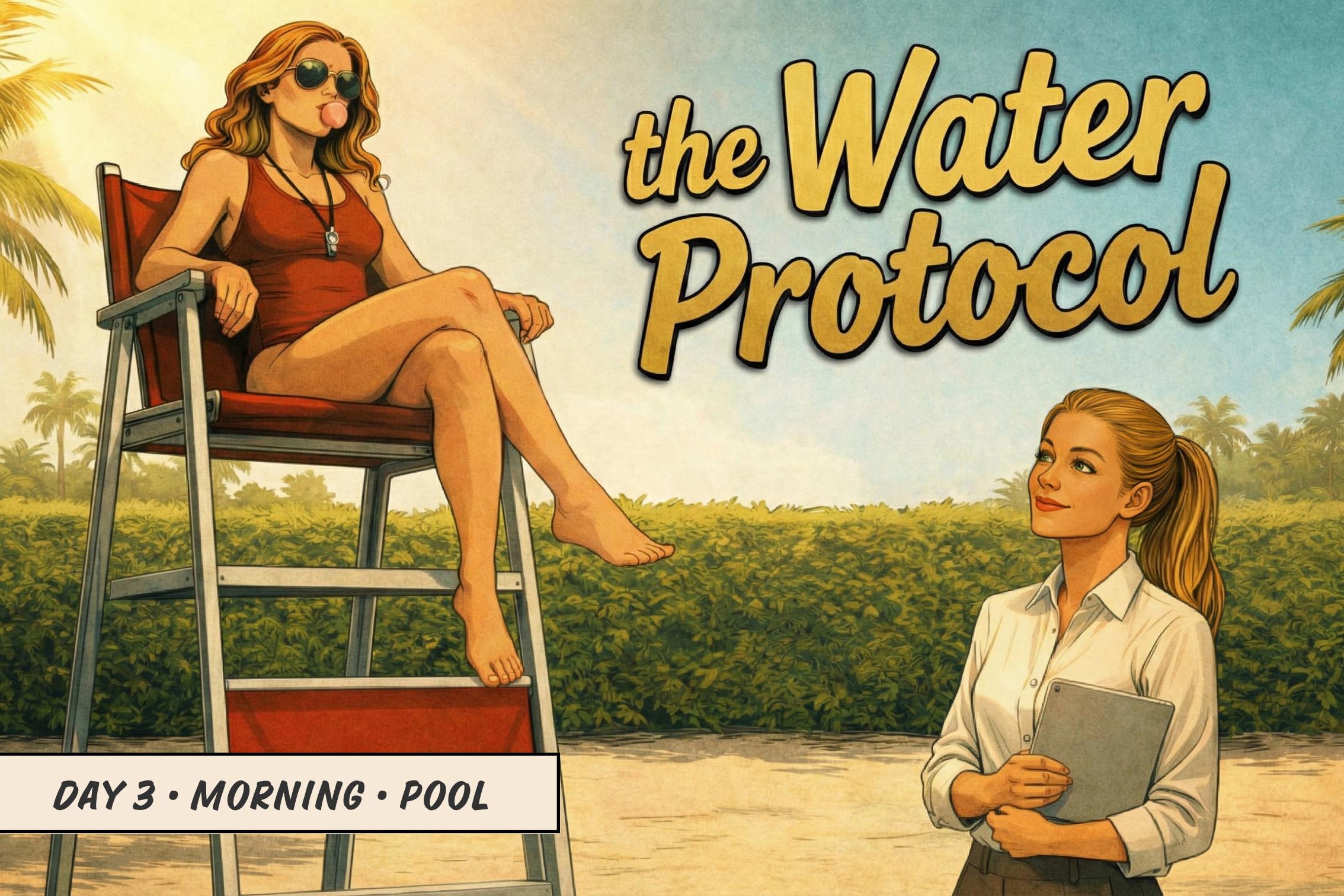


the Water Protocol

DAY 3 • MORNING • POOL



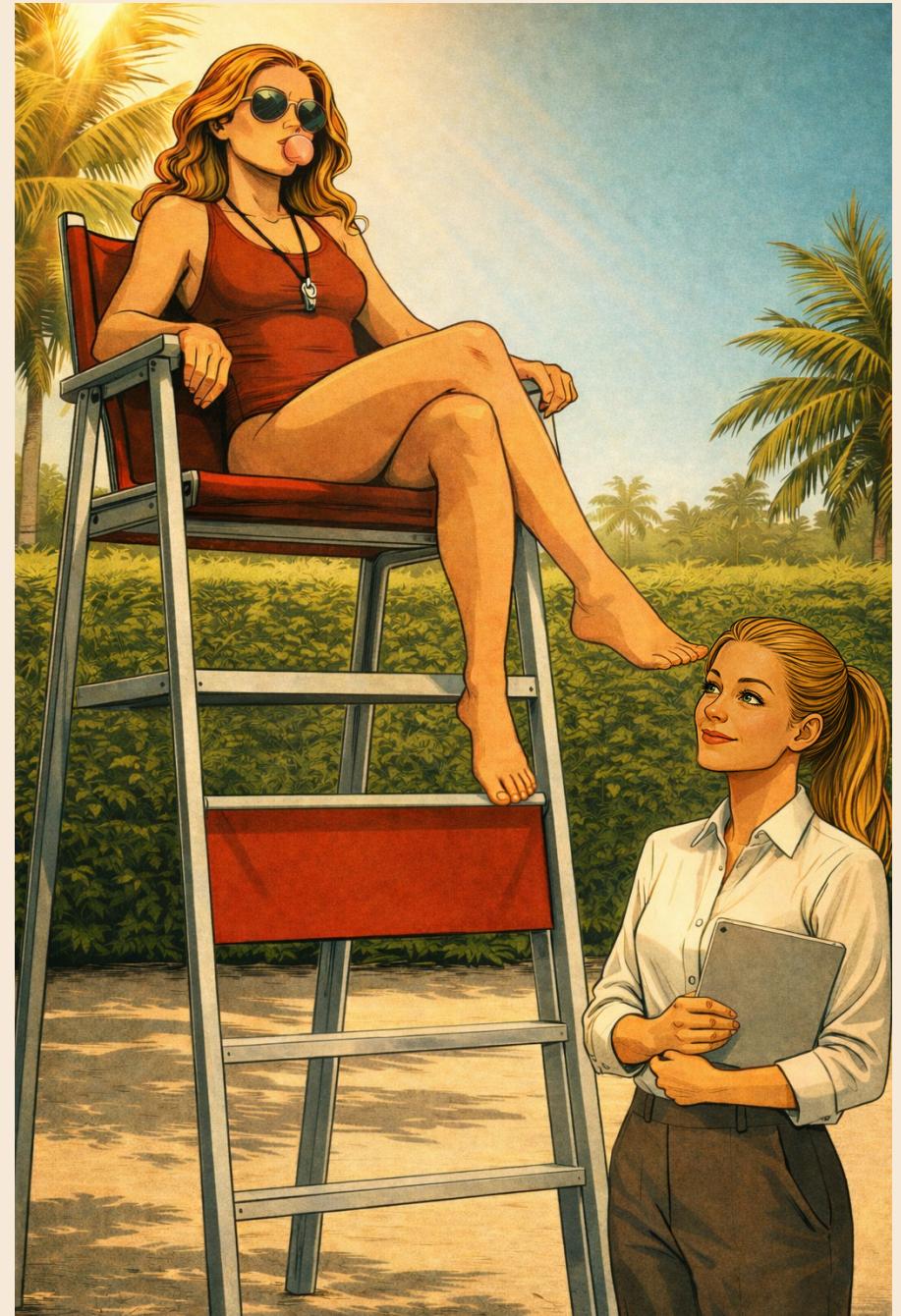
4. The Water Protocol

The sun over the pool was a white-hot weight, bleaching the world until only the stark concrete and the clinical turquoise of the water remained.

The pool was empty. Most women were still lingering at breakfast or sweating through Kylie's yoga class. According to the employee handbook, this was the designated time for the lifeguard to clean the skimmers or align the sunbeds.

Which was exactly why Sophie was sitting at the very top of her tower.

She sat there like a monarch on a throne of aluminum and red canvas, primarily because it was sweltering down below, and up here, ten feet in the air, there was a breeze. Plus, from this height, she could plausibly pretend she didn't see the leaf skimmer lying on the deck. She wore a high-cut crimson swimsuit, mirrored aviators, and an expression of supreme boredom. She chewed gum with a slow, rhythmic indifference, popping a bubble every forty-five seconds.





She saw Rebecca coming from a hundred meters away. Anyone else would have climbed down to meet her halfway. Sophie deliberately leaned back, crossing her legs. If "The Engineer" wanted something, she was going to have to work for the elevation.

Down below, at the pool's edge, Rebecca stopped.

Dressed in full office attire - dark linen trousers, a silk blouse buttoned to the throat, and holding a tablet like a shield—she looked like a glitch in the vacation matrix. She was sweating, just a little, a fine sheen on her upper lip, but she refused to acknowledge it.

She replayed Brianna's advice from last night's massage session in her head. "Don't just stare at her from the bushes, Rebecca. Engage. Challenge her. She likes bite."

Challenge. Rebecca could do challenge. Challenge was just optimization with eye contact.

"Sophie," Rebecca called out, squinting against the glare.

Sophie sighed so loudly it was audible on the sunbeds three rows away. She didn't look down immediately. She finished

scanning the horizon, then slowly slid her glasses down to the tip of her nose.

"What now, Rebecca?" Her voice was raspy, dry as the heat. "Did someone run? Is the water too wet? Did a leaf fall in Zone B?"

"It's the pH," Rebecca said, stepping up to the ladder of the tower. She climbed two rungs, bringing her face level with Sophie's bare feet. She tried very hard not to look at the way wet hair dripped onto Sophie's shoulders, creating dark tracks on her tanned skin. "I reviewed the automated logs from this week. Last night, the chlorine levels dropped 0.4 units below optimal."

Sophie rested her chin on her hand, looking down at her with heavy-lidded amusement.

"And nobody died, right?"

"It's a question of standards," Rebecca straightened up, gripping the hot metal railing. "Unstable pH leads to grout corrosion and irritation of mucous membranes. If you want, I can program a reminder into the system so you don't have to remember to check it manually."





Rebecca tightened her grip on the cold metal of the ladder until her knuckles turned white. She adjusted the collar of her silk blouse, a sharp, nervous movement that served as her armor. This was her offensive: an offer of optimization, a shield of pure competence she hoped Sophie could read.

But Sophie's expression didn't shift toward admiration. If anything, her gaze grew colder behind her aviators, as if she were watching a toddler try to explain a pair of scissors .

"Rebecca," Sophie said slowly, as if speaking to a toddler holding a pair of scissors. "I know how to operate a pool. I've been doing it for five years. The water is fine. The women are happy. If you want to help, go get a drink and stop stressing the water. It can feel your blood pressure."

Rebecca felt a sting of disappointment. Logic wasn't working. Time to pivot to direct confrontation. She likes bite.

Rebecca climbed another rung. Now she was encroaching on Sophie's personal space. The scent of coconut oil and chlorine was overwhelming here.

"You're very relaxed up here," Rebecca said, her voice dropping a register, trying for 'sultry' but landing somewhere near 'interrogator'. "Almost too relaxed. Are you actually monitoring the swimmers, or are you just working on your tan line?"

Sophie stopped chewing. She turned her head fully toward Rebecca.

"I can do both. Multitasking. You should try it sometime instead of micromanaging the atmosphere."

"I'm just wondering about your reaction time," Rebecca pressed, leaning in. Her eyes traced the line of Sophie's neck. "Hypothetically. If there was an incident. Right now."

Sophie raised an eyebrow behind her glasses.

"An incident?"

"A cramp," Rebecca suggested, the word feeling clumsy in her mouth. "Say... I decided to swim laps. And I got a cramp. A severe one. In the deep end."

Sophie looked Rebecca up and down, taking in the linen pants and the silk blouse.





"You're dressed for a board meeting, Rebecca. If you jump in there, you'll sink like a stone."

"That's the point," Rebecca insisted, her knuckles white on the railing. "If I sank. Would you dive in? Without hesitation? Or would you finish your gum first?"

It was a challenge. A question about duty, yes, but underneath it, a desperate question: Would you save me? Do I matter enough for you to get wet?

Sophie popped a bubble. The sound was sharp.

"I'd weigh the paperwork," she drawled. "Rescuing you means filling out three forms. And you'd probably critique my swimming form while I was dragging you to the surface."

"My buoyancy is excellent," Rebecca defended automatically. "And I wouldn't critique. I would be... grateful."

She let the word hang in the humid air between them. Grateful. Rebecca felt the weight of it in her lungs, a sudden, sharp lack of oxygen that had nothing to do with the heat. She didn't look away, her pulse a frantic drum against the metal of the tower.

Sophie looked at her. Really looked at her. For a second, the cynicism cracked. She saw the flushed cheeks, the desperate intensity in the Engineer's eyes. She realized, with a mix of horror and amusement, that this—the critique, the pH levels, the hypothetical drowning—was Rebecca's version of a pick-up line.

Sophie leaned forward, her face inches from Rebecca's. She smelled of salt and heat.

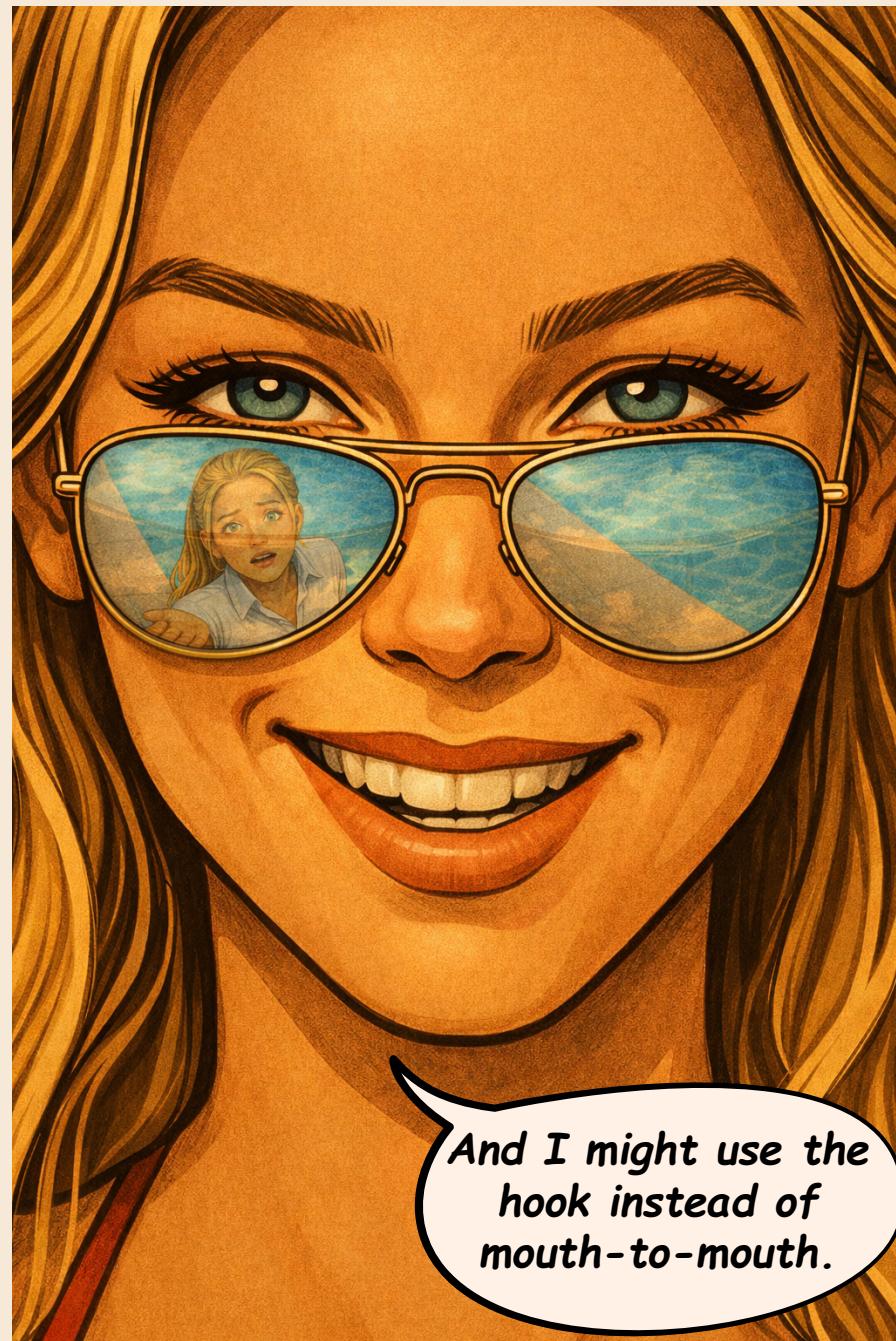
"Listen, Engineer. If you fall in, I'll fish you out."

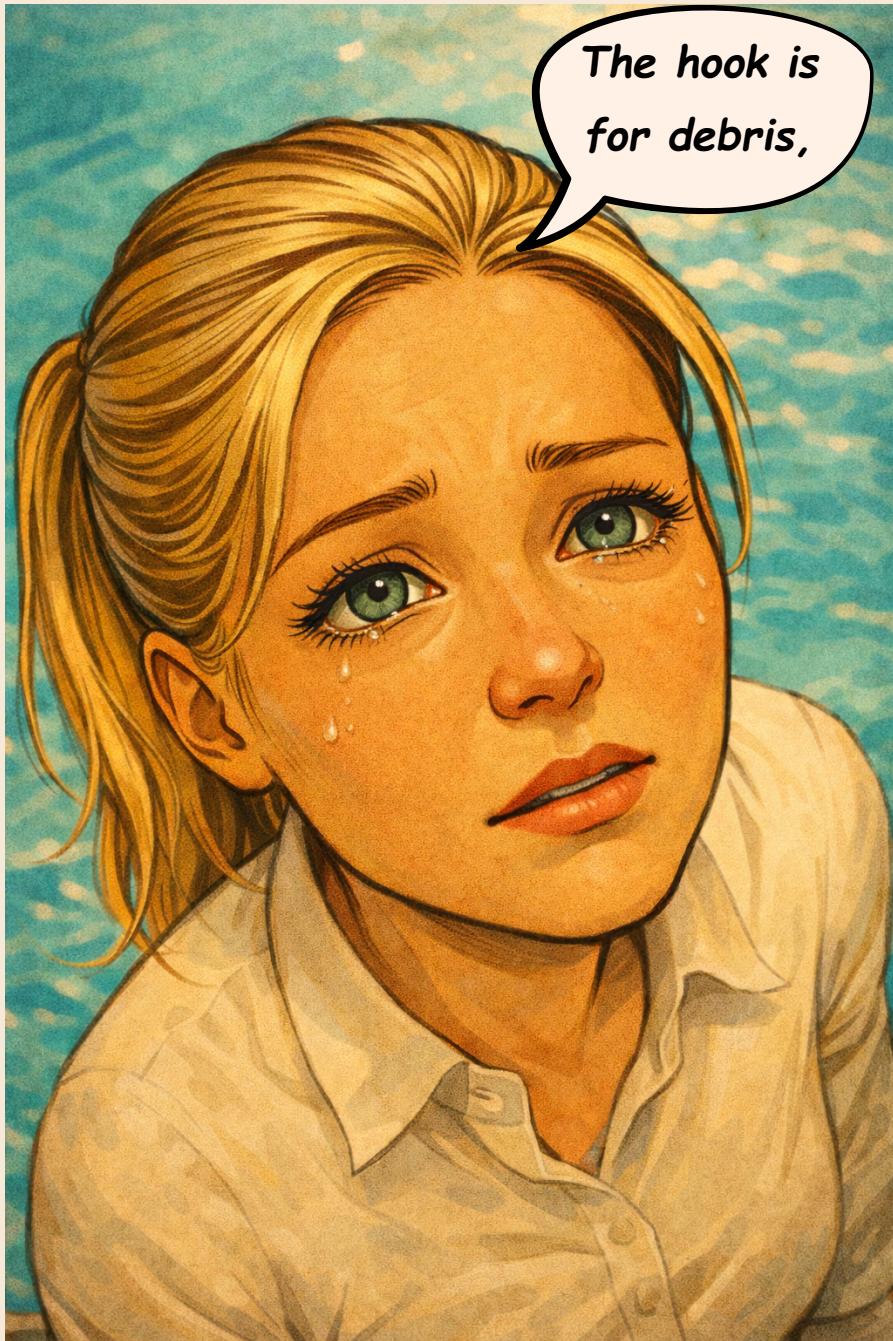
Rebecca's breath hitched.

"But," Sophie added, a cruel smirk playing on her lips, "I'm definitely finishing my gum first. And I might use the hook instead of mouth-to-mouth."

Rebecca stood frozen, processing the rejection mixed with the promise of rescue. It was confusing. It was inefficient. It was thrilling.

"The hook is for debris," Rebecca whispered, her voice shaky.





"Exactly," Sophie winked. Then she leaned back, dismissing her. "Now get down. You're blocking my view of the pool. And you're scaring the women."

Rebecca retreated down the ladder, her heart rate elevated to 130 beats per minute. She adjusted her blouse, smoothed her hair, and walked away with a stiff stride.

In her head, she logged the interaction: Subject engaged. Physical proximity achieved. Promise of rescue secured. Success.

On the tower, Sophie watched her go, shaking her head.

"Jesus Christ," she muttered to herself, then popped another bubble. "She is going to be the death of me."

