

# ONE

Today I catch the eye of the synchro girl with dark hair and good dimples, just before I dive off the starting block. It's the last race of the meet—if I swim my triple-A time now, I've got a shot at the national team.

That is, if Geoff doesn't kill me first.

The girl with the good dimples smiles at me. I smile back. I've been watching the synchro girls for ages, so it's fun that they're all lined up along the wall of the dive tank now, watching me. When I watch *them*, they don't even notice me looking. Well, if they do, they don't show it—and I get it. They're performers. I danced for seven years, so I remember what it was like to be behind the fourth wall.

But they're the dancers now. I'm just a fish. I crouch on the starting block, ready to propel myself into the water.

I wonder if she thinks I belong here. Because some days, I don't even feel like I fit in with the guys on the Rosa Waves team. I don't think like them, or joke like them—and I may be great at long course, when we swim fifty-metre laps, but I don't look the part. I'm the only guy on the blocks with long, lean limbs, the only one with slender shoulders. I don't have a swimmer's hunch. I spent too many years in front of a mirror with my shoulders back, working my core, before I found my way to the pool.

Yeah, I'm the pretty one. That's probably what all the synchro girls are thinking.

*Swimmers, take your marks.* I look down at my reflection, staring back at me from the pool's still, flat surface. Behind me, my best friend, Riley, waits his turn for the freestyle relay.

Then Andy, then Geoff.

The horn sounds.

I push off and dive as far as I can, holding my head down.

When I surface and breathe to my right, the swimmer in the lane beside me is already ahead by a stroke. He's a big guy, shoulders twice my size. It's

okay. I just pull harder. When I breathe left, I glimpse the pace clock.

When I breathe right, Giant Shoulders is still in front by a head. I tell myself I just have to be fast enough for the qualifying time.

Left breath after the turn. The pace clock says thirty-one seconds. Too slow. Pull harder. Kick harder.

Last breath on the right side.

I pull with everything I've got, forcing myself to keep my head down, no more breaths, no more drag. I'm going to make it to nine strokes this time.

Eight more strokes. Seven, six, five, four.

Pull harder.

Three more strokes, then I slap my hand on the deck. Riley dives over my head. Do I have my time? The pace clock says fifty-seven seconds by the time I look up. If the timer has the same time as the pace clock, I made it—but it's too close to know for sure.

I get out, and the timers in my lane are both standing up. The guy's helping the lady dry spilled coffee off of her clipboard, her clothes.

The other two lanes are well behind us now, and the stands are screaming—you gotta love that about a qualifier at your home pool. It feels like all of Victoria's crammed into the stands.

Riley gets out, and I raise my hand for a high-five.

"We could have had first." He shakes his head.

"We might still!"

"You at least get your time?"

I go to look over the timer's shoulder, but the box on the sheet where my time should be written down is empty.

"Hey, sorry ... What happened to my split time?"

"It was an accident," she says. "Someone knocked my elbow and—"

The official walks over to us. "Get off the deck! You know you're not supposed to talk to the timers."

"I know, but ..."

I go to the back of the deck and watch Andy get out, and Geoff jump in. I know exactly what happened.

See, Coach Cragg put me first in the medley so my time could qualify—but that meant there would be no anchor—instead, the pressure's on Geoff to bring up the rear, so he was shooting daggers at me when I got up on the starting block.

Let's just say that, uh ... Geoff takes his racing very seriously. Not that I don't—the national team trials is my program goal, signed by me *and* my mom at the Sports Institute at the start of every school year. I just don't feel like it's worth getting mad at your teammates, you know? But Geoff's been pissed at me ever since I got faster last year.

He bumped the timer's elbow. At just the right moment.

Geoff's giving it everything he's got, trying to make up for lost time. But it's clear. He's not going to make it. Giant Shoulders' team comes in first. Geoff gets out and rips his goggles off. He looks amused.

“So, Princess, you get your time?”

Princess. That's it. “You bumped the timer, you jerk!” I lunge for him, and Geoff jumps back, but he slips, his feet coming out from under him, his head hitting the tile.

I wasn't going to hit him. I swear I just wanted to scare him. But now some officials are coming over here, and Geoff's holding his head as everyone clears tables and chairs off the deck. The meet's over.

“What the—?” Geoff sputters. “Oh my God.”

“I'm so sorry, man. So sorry.” I try to catch his eye, but Geoff just keeps his head down. When he opens his mouth, there's blood.

“Oh, Geoff—I think you're bleeding.”

“Cause you made me bite my fucking tongue, you asshole!” Geoff kicks my shin.

“Ow!”

I look up at Coach Cragg, who's telling the others to back off. Great. Then he helps Geoff stand up and sits him on a deck chair. Coach checks his eyes

and holds up fingers to see if Geoff's concussed. When he decides he's okay, he turns to me, and stares. Everyone on the team is quiet. I hear the screams of the kids in the wave pool and the thwanging of diving boards. I feel stapled to the ground under his glare.

"That's it, Bart."

"I'm sorry, Coach. I didn't mean to hurt him. But he sabotaged my *time*—"

"I don't care." Coach shakes his head. "You don't breathe when I tell you to breathe, you don't focus, you stare off at the bloody synchro team when I'm trying to get your attention, and now you're playing around like you're in god-damn Aquatots or something. How old are you?"

"Sixteen, sir."

"You're not acting like it."

I stare at the tiles by my feet. I can't look at anyone. Certainly not over at the pool, where the girl with the good dimples could be looking at me and thinking I'm a wound-up jerk. Not at Riley, my oldest friend, the one who got me here, into the racing pool. My eyes drift up to the empty spot on the plaque where my name's supposed to go at the end of this season. As long as this shit with Geoff doesn't screw it up.

"Go get changed, Lively. You're done for today."

"You want me to leave?"

"Yeah, get out of here. Get yourself together. Come back next week."

"*What?* You're suspending me?"

"Yes. And when you come back, I want you here every day, doing your best. No picking fights. You hear me?"

"This is unbelievable! What about Geoff? Did you see what *he* did? I don't have my time because of him."

"I don't care. I can't be concerned about your time if you're going to attack your teammates." Cragg shakes his head. "You're up for national competition for God's sake."

Fine. This is bullshit, but I know better than to push it with Cragg. When I do, it just gets back to my dad, which leads to him calling me from

the oil patch for the express purpose of making me feel like crap. Then Mom gets on the phone and yells at him. They might as well still be married.

I take off to the warm pool to do a few laps to get the stress out of my system. Then Geoff stops on his way to the locker room.

“Geoff, look, I’m sorry about your head. I really am.”

“You wanted me to hit the deck.”

“I did not!”

I keep my eyes on the synchro girls swimming laps of egg beater kick across the dive tank.

“You know, you’re such a fucking ballerina, you should just go join them.”

“Who?”

“The goddamned water ballet, Bart. Isn’t that what you want?”

“No! Geez.”

“Oh, come on. You’ve been staring at them every chance you get.”

“Well? So what?”

“So ... it’s Try It day. You should go.”

The sandwich board’s at the edge of the dive tank like it is every Sunday in September: *Synchro Swimming—Try It! Free session, Sunday, 11 a.m.* And for the first time, I’m not in a practice with the Rosa Waves.

But this is a trap. Geoff just wants to get more fuel for teasing me.

On the edge of the dive tank, Chelsea Gates, Synchro Star and Queen of the Sports Institute, is doing that weird thing synchro swimmers do with their arms to run through a routine—they call it land drilling. When she stops I try to catch her eye, but she’s not looking at me. Maybe *won’t* look at me. That’s nothing new—Chelsea’s always looked past me to the real athletes. The buff guys. We’ve been going to school together since grade six, and I know she’d never look at a slim and bendy fish like me.

“It’s okay, Princess. If you’re too scared to go over there and join them, I understand. Those girls *are* pretty scary. Especially that one.” Geoff nods at Chelsea, who slips into the water with her teammates.

“Don’t call me Princess.”

Geoff just grins. “Look at you. You *are* scared—but, of what? The girls? Or doing what you want?”

His question guts me. So Geoff thinks I’m some chickenshit? That’s it. I am so sick of him, and Coach, and all the macho guys on the Rosa Waves giving me a hard time—and for what?

“I do what I like.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Watch me.”

Before I can fully appreciate what I’m doing, I start crossing the ten tiles between our pool and the dive tank. Halfway there, I think, *Crap. What am I doing?*

Geoff calls at my back, “Enjoy your holiday, Princess.”

I flip him the bird over my shoulder.