

Chapter 11

As soon as classes ended for the day, the team assembled on the pool deck dressed in our warm-up suits, swimsuits underneath. The chatter was at a feverish pitch as the girls drifted into their tiny groups, watching as Coach and a few members of the boys' team, including Justin, set up equipment for the first of our dual meets, one team against another. Some of the girls looked terrified, including Charlie, who gave me a weak smile when I said hello. It was her first meet with the big girls, and she'd been talking about nothing else the last two days. She was afraid she'd make a mistake and get disqualified. No matter how much Mel and I tried to convince her she had nothing to worry about, she continued to bite her nails to the nubs and fear the worst.

The seniors staked out their spot in the bleachers, talking, joking, and much more relaxed than the underclassmen. All of them had been on the team for several years. For some, it was their sixth. I sat with Mel and Erica, waiting for Coach to give us our pre-meet pep talk and plan of action. Our opponents had not yet arrived.

Coach joined us with his clipboard in hand. "Come here, girls," he said, bringing us in close. "This is our first meet, and we're lucky it's against the Hawks. We beat them most every time, and this year they're looking thin. They lost their powerhouse senior and haven't replaced her with anyone as dynamic that we know of today. So, feel confident we'll win again, but not too confident because they've got a couple of Chinese exchange students they're keeping under wraps. We don't know too much about them, and they could surprise us. It's happened before. They swim distance and butterfly, so Tatiana and Erica, pay attention to what's going on in the next lane, ok?"

He turned toward the younger swimmers. "I want you all to take a few breaths." He demonstrated some relaxation breathing. "You're going to do fine. You'll each swim one event, and some of you will swim two and a relay." He looked at Charlie. "Just get in the water and do what you know how to do."

An audible sigh of relief passed between them.

"Now, here's the lineup," Coach said. "I had to mix it up a little bit to cover all our bases." He went through the order of events, announcing who would compete in each one. A few moans and a couple of groans came from swimmers unhappy with their events. No one liked to race out of her comfort zone and many preferred to do what she did best. Only a few girls excelled in more than one stroke. I was not one of them. Coach had me in the 200 and the 500 freestyles, plus on the "B" team for the 200 and 400 free relays. No surprises. I figured I'd pace myself to a third or fourth place finish. No way I'd come in last. That never happened.

"Now, everybody in the pool for warm up," Coach ordered.

We jumped into our assigned lanes and started easy laps, warming up our muscles, preparing our bodies for the upcoming races. I moved through the water languidly, stretching my arms and legs as far as possible, taking easy breaths on the third stroke. I shared my lane with four other swimmers, and we stayed out of each other's way. I executed smooth flip turns, not losing any speed, and glided from wall to wall. After about twenty turns, I stopped in the shallow end to catch my breath. Mel was in the next lane.

“Here they are,” she said, out of breath, her face red. Our opponents emerged from the visitors’ locker room in their red and white warm-up suits. In seconds, they stripped to their swimsuits. “They’re pretty big,” I said.

“The biggest ones are seniors, and they didn’t do much last year,” Mel said. “They didn’t even make the championship finals. That small one with the long, blonde hair is their best swimmer. She almost beat Tati in the 200 and 500 free last year. Other than that, no real threat.”

“If you girls are done with your warm-up get out and head to the locker room for final instructions,” Coach said from the sidelines.

Mel ducked under and swam for the ladder.

“You’re looking good, Aerin,” Coach said. “I hope you show me something special today.”

I nodded. It was the first time he’d given me any praise or laid any expectations on me. A tiny thrill was followed by a huge sense of foreboding. Part of me was proud to be recognized, but another part of me longed to remain anonymous. My intention to stay under the radar was still a top priority. Gaining Coach’s attention threatened that, and made me a little uneasy.

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

Swim Meet Order of Events

200-yard Medley Relay

200-yard Freestyle

200-yard Individual Medley

50-yard Freestyle

Thumbs-up Diving

100-yard Butterfly

100-yard Freestyle

500-yard Freestyle

200-yard Freestyle Relay

100-yard Backstroke

100-yard Breaststroke

400-yard Freestyle Relay

By the time the meet started the stands were full of spectators. I looked up to find Aunt Mags and the twins in that maddening crowd and spotted them in the center of the action. Aunt Mags caught my eye and waved. She directed the twins' attention toward me and they waved. I smiled back and gave them a thumbs-up.

"Go Aerin!" Mags called, and the twins echoed her, yelling out my name with a five-year old's exuberance.

The meet progressed as expected. We won the first relay, and then I competed in the 200 free with Tatiana as the top seed in lane four, and a freshman named Kim in lane six. It was an easy 200, and I stayed just behind Tati for the first half before easing up to come in a solid fourth. The Hawks Chinese exchange student took second, and another Hawk took third. Kim came in fifth. I climbed out of the pool, removed my goggles and cap, and squeezed the water out of my hair while I caught my breath. I joined Tati and Kim for a post-event chat with Coach, who gave Tati a high five for her win and patted Kim on the back for not finishing last. He looked at me over his bifocals.

"I expected a little more today, Aerin," he said. "Something tells me you haven't hit your stride."

I met his gaze and shrugged. "I did my best, Coach."

We maintained eye contact for a moment, and he was the first to look away. "Get ready for your next event," he said, dismissing me.

Erica won the IM, and we took third and fourth. In the 50 free a Chinese swimmer touched out Mel in two one hundredths of a second, a pitiful loss.

"Next time," I told her.

We had a few divers on our team, and they were good, all qualifying for the championship meet last season where two of them placed in the finals. The rest of us put on our warm up suits and cheered them on. Coach was strict about the no talking rule during diving. The divers needed silence to concentrate on their moves. After they hit the water we could clap and cheer. Our divers took the lead, placing first, second, and fourth. The score was now 49-29, our lead.

Erica won the fly, and our swimmers took third and fourth place. Next, we took second, third, and fifth in the 100 free. By the time I went on deck for the 500 free, we had a nice cushion, 67-43.

"Listen, girls, I want you to keep it steady," Coach said as Tati, Kim and I huddled together by the blocks. "Tati, you've got this, and Aerin, you should be able to come in second. Kim, if you focus on your turns and do what we did at practice, you could come in third. Their distance swimmers aren't that great, and they're starting to look tired. You girls have the advantage. Now get out there and show them how it's done."

We took our places in our lanes, and I did some last-minute warm-ups, stretching my arms overhead and doing lunges to loosen my legs. I took a few deep breaths and fastened my goggles and cap, making sure they fit right and wouldn't slip off. The starter blew his whistle and we took our places on the blocks. I was in lane two. Tati was two lanes over in lane four. Kim was at the other end of the pool in lane six. I looked at the swimmer to my left, a scrawny little thing, a middle schooler. She didn't look at me but stared straight down into the water, knees knocking. I turned to my right. The swimmer was about my size and

stared back at me, her gaze challenging, her body poised on the block, ready to hit the water. She was Tati's competition, the same Chinese student who had come in second in the 200 free.

The starter asked for silence, announced the event, and the buzzer pierced the air. I flew off the block, my body a perfect streamline as I glided halfway across the pool before coming up for air. I took a big breath and started churning through the water, no longer hearing the sounds from the pool deck, the cheering crowds, or my teammates at the pool's edge urging me on. All I heard was the sound of my arms slicing through the water and my legs kicking up a small wake behind me. I hit the wall, did a perfect flip turn, and started back. I did it again and again, focused only on my breathing and the execution of perfect turns. I lost sight of the swimmers on either side of me. I did not know who was in the lead or who was behind. I counted the laps – 5 – 8 – 10 -12 - 15 -18. A clanging bell signaled that the lead swimmer approached her final lap. I was not far behind. Was I in second place? Did I want to be in second place? No, I decided. If I came in second, Coach would start putting on the pressure for me to strive for first, taking away the joy I got from swimming. I slowed down a bit to take a couple of extra breaths, and the swimmer in lane three raced past.

My final turn was sloppy. I tried to make it look like I'd run out of steam. I pushed toward the finish and punched the wall: fourth place. Tati had won. The Chinese swimmer in lane three came in second, and Kim came in fifth.

Short of breath but not winded, I pulled myself out of the pool and joined my 200 free relay team, again in lane two. Coach had placed Tati, Kim, and I in the event as a cool down.

"What happened to you?" Tati asked. She was the lead swimmer, followed by me, Kim, and Mel as anchor. "You were right behind me. You had it nailed."

"I don't know," I said. "Guess I miscalculated my energy."

"Guess so," she said turning away to prepare for the race.

We came in first. After the relay, I went with the other girls to hear what Coach had to say, dreading the conversation. He congratulated Tati on her win in the 500, then said, "Nice relay, girls. You looked solid."

All smiles, Tati, Kim, and Mel walked away to join the rest of the team. I followed, but Coach stopped me.

"What was that all about?" he asked. "You had second place in the bag. Did I miss something?"

I shrugged, unwilling to meet his eyes. "I guess I lost my steam. Maybe I started out too fast. I tried to keep up with Tati, but she was flying."

"You did an excellent job keeping up with Tati, and if you can pull that off meet after meet we can take first and second in the 500 every time. The only person who comes close to Tatiana just lost to her, so the field is wide open. I want you to concentrate a little harder on your pace and your turns in the second half. Got that?"

I nodded, my heart sinking. So much for keeping under the radar. He'd already spotted I was a close second to Tati, and now the pressure was on. He wouldn't let up until I proved him right, or lost big-time. He was counting on my pride and drive to win to motivate me. Little did he know I was determined to lay low. The pool was my sanctuary. I would not have it turn into a battleground.

"I'll do my best," I said to placate him, but he had already moved on to the next event.

Back on the bench, I dried off and put on my warm-up suit. I had one race left, the 400 free relay. I wanted to rest a while, clear my head, and watch the other events.

"What happened to you, Apple, can't keep up with the big girls?" Jordan had sidled up beside me.

"Quiet, I'm watching the race." I motioned toward the start of the 100 back, Taylor's top event. The official started the countdown and the buzzer went off. Taylor sprung away from the pool wall in a graceful arc and disappeared under water.

Jordan came closer. "You can't beat Tati," she said.

I ignored her, focusing on Taylor. She broke through the water's surface and started backstroking in long, flowing movements, her torso twisting left and right in perfect synchrony. In seconds, she was in the lead.

"No one can beat Tati," Jordan said. "She's going to win the scholarship. I just know it."

Taylor made her first turn, and I stopped watching to look at Jordan. "So? I don't care if she wins it or not. I don't care about it at all."

"Didn't look that way," she said. She twisted a piece of her bleached blonde hair between her fingers. "You stayed tight with Tati, almost to the end, like you wanted to win."

"I don't care how it looked," I said, turning my attention back to Taylor and her race. She made her second turn, still in the lead. "I just want to swim. I don't care about winning."

"You don't care about winning? Give me a break. Everyone cares about winning. That's what brings us here every day."

I looked her straight in the eye. "I don't," I said. "You've got nothing to worry about."

"Oh, I'm not worried," she said, rising. "I'm just telling you not to waste your energy trying to beat Tati."

"Okay, Jordan, whatever you say," I said. Taylor was in her final turn and heading back on the last 25 yards, still in the lead. "Tati can win all the races, the championships, and the scholarship. I don't care. I just want to swim."

"I'm glad we have an understanding."

"Why do you care so much, anyway? What's in it for you?" I asked.

"Tati's my best friend. I'm not going to let some outsider come in and steal her place on that leaderboard." She pointed up at it. Allison Singer's record seemed lit from behind, dominating the board. It was just my imagination, but the numbers 4:52.50 almost blinded me.

"Like I said, I'm not here to win."

At that moment, Taylor reached the finish, and the crowd erupted in shouts and applause. She took first, and two of our swimmers placed third and fourth. We racked up eleven more points and knew we'd won the meet with two events left.

"Don't you have a race in a minute?" I asked Jordan.

She slipped out of her warm-up suit and grabbed her cap and goggles off the bench. "Remember what I said," she whispered, and sauntered off to the starting blocks.

I leaned my head back against the wall and closed my eyes. What was with this team? Why was everyone on my back? Didn't they see I just wanted to be left alone?

"Hey," Mel said, and I opened my eyes. "Where's Charlie? She's in this race."

"She was here a minute ago," I said, getting up to look for our Little Sister.

"She better get on the block or they'll start the race without her," Mel said.

I headed toward the locker room thinking she might have gone in there, but before I was halfway she walked out and met me.

"Ugh, you look awful," I said. "What's wrong?" Her face was a nasty shade of green, and she looked like she'd been crying.

"I threw up," she said, her eyes glossy with tears. "I'm afraid, Aerin. I don't want to do the race. I want to go home."

"Get a hold of yourself, Charlie. It's just a race. You can do it in your sleep. No problem."

"I don't want to race Jordan," she said.

"Jordan? She should be worried about you."

I kept her walking toward the starting blocks, Coach watching our every step. He gestured for me to hurry and I quickened our pace. "Now, get in there and do what you know how to do. You can beat Jordan. You may even beat the girls on the other team."

"But Jordan said I'm toast. She told me I'd sink before the second fifty. She said I had no business trying to swim against her because she's a senior and I'm just an eighth grader."

I clenched my fists. Jordan tried to intimidate everyone, but picking on Charlie was the last straw. Charlie was the best breaststroker on our team, and Jordan had never been in first place. Just because the previous top breaststroker had graduated didn't mean Jordan nabbed the top spot. You had to earn that spot, and Charlie had already proved she was stronger and faster than Jordan.

"Charlie, Jordan's a bully, and she's afraid you're going to make her look bad. She doesn't want to lose to an eighth grader, but she's about to, so she'd better get used to it. Now, get on that block, take your place, and swim as fast as you can, okay? I'll be cheering for you. Listen for my voice and don't listen to anything Jordan says ever again. Got that?"

She looked up at me with the biggest brown eyes I'd ever seen and nodded, her chin trembling.

"Now go!" I said.

Less than two minutes later, Mel and I had her wrapped in our arms as our teammates rushed to congratulate her on taking second place. Jordan had come in fifth, and after throwing her cap and goggles onto the pool deck plopped down on the bench next to Tatiana, her head buried in her hands.

“So much for the Little Mermaid,” Erica snickered.

Mel glared at her from over Charlie’s shoulder. “Be nice, Duke,” she said. “It hurts all of us when someone doesn’t perform at her best.”

“She’s not as good as she thinks she is,” Erica said.

“Let her have her moment,” Mel said.

I gazed at Mel in admiration. As our captain, she showed great leadership. As much as we disliked Jordan, we didn’t want her to lose because it hurt the team. Still, as a senior Jordan should have been able to brush off her loss.

The final event was the 400 freestyle relay. We’d already clinched the win, so Coach went easy on the Hawks and put our slower swimmers in the lineup. The Hawks won with much cheering from the stands, and the meet was over.