



GOLDFISH

Nat Luurtsema



Feiwei and Friends
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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For Diarmuid

prologue

You'd think it would feel weird being nearly naked in front of so many people, but it doesn't.

I ping my swimsuit straps for luck, once right, twice left, walk out poolside, and take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar tang of chlorine and feet. It sounds gross, but that smell is so exciting. I'm where I belong.

I'm one of the fastest swimmers in my county. That's why I'm here—trying out for a High Performance Training Camp that will set me on my way to Team Great Britain. I've wanted this for as long as I can remember. So . . . you know, no pressure, not a big deal, whew.

I think I'm sweating inside my ears.

I pad along the side of the pool, watching the heat before mine. Older swimmers power up and down; they look so strong—they're not so much swimming as punching their way through water.

We're all in a vast glass room. I want to use the word *palace*. It's a palace made of glass, filled with four Olympic-sized swimming pools! It's basically my dream home. The sounds of splashing and

shouting bounce off the concrete walls. Ninety percent of the people in this room are having the most important day of their lives.

I look around for my best friend, Hannah, and spot her by the changing room. I give her a quick smile. I think she feels a bit queasy, because she does an elaborate mime of puking into the pool. An official eyes her, unimpressed.

I know how she feels. I tuck a stray hair into my swimming cap with a shaking hand.

Hannah rotates her shoulders backward and then forward. She swims butterfly, which gives you really big shoulders, but she's not self-conscious about it; she just wears men's T-shirts. People love Hannah. She's fun. She has huge blond curly hair and big blue eyes and she never stops talking, organizing, and planning. She's been my best friend since we were six, and now, looking at how nervous she is, I find myself feeling protective even though I'm in the same position.

Well, not exactly the same; her parents are really pushy. She ignores it or it would drive her crazy. Mine think swimming is less important than either schoolwork or being a well-rounded human being—we agree to disagree.

Hannah's standing next to me now. She smiles and pulls at the front of my swimming cap. I fold my arms and pretend to ignore her. She pulls the elastic six inches away from my forehead and I brace for her to snap it, but instead she nudges her face next to mine and starts trying to pull my swimming cap over her head as well as mine. Ridiculous human being. This is why I bring spare caps.

I can't keep a straight face. I start giggling and help her pull the thick elastic further over her head. It hurts—her nose is digging hard

into my cheekbone, but I'm determined to get it. *Beep!* Hannah's eyes widen at the sound of the whistle. This is her race!

She hurriedly pulls her head away, making her swimming cap ping off and nearly land in the pool. I can see a couple of swimmers looking very unimpressed at us. Sor-ree. Just trying to lighten a very heavy mood here. I dive to retrieve Hannah's cap while she fights her frizzy mop of hair into a bun.

We hug quickly and she hurries to the nearest pool, where the butterfly swimmers are waiting by the diving blocks. Some impressive shoulders in that group.

Now I'm alone and back to feeling sick and scared about my own race. I tuck my ears into my swimming cap, and everything becomes a smooth roaring noise.

An official comes to check my name against a list she has on her clipboard. I can't help but notice that she has a very fluffy top lip. She catches me staring at it and I quickly look down.

"Louise?" she asks.

"Brown," I say, to her shoe, and she ticks my name off.

She must be one of only ten people in the place who aren't feeling hysterical. If the fire alarm went off, I think we'd all run in circles, screaming and slapping our faces.

My race is called and I join a line of girls who look just like me. Tall girls with no hips, no boobs, and frizzy hair are the norm here. I'm going to fit in so well in the Training Camp! Finally, someone to borrow clothes from.

I look around for Debs, who coaches me and Hannah. She's standing by the pool where I'll be doing my race, arms folded, staring intently at me. She gives me a nod. She's not the most affectionate

person. That nod means “Go on, Lou, I know you can do it! Supportive things, etc.!”

Up on the blocks I scuff my feet and stare dead ahead. You swim no one’s race but your own.

The official nods and I bend into my dive, wrapping my fingertips over the edge of the block and swaying gently to loosen my hips. There’s a pause that feels never-ending, and I focus on the spot in the water where I want my dive to take me.

The starting pistol bangs. There’s an explosion of power from my legs, and I dive hard. I can hear the block rattle as I push away from it with all my strength. A cold, hard slap against my thighs, and I spring into butterfly stroke. Hannah’s faster at this, but I’m pretty good too. I whip my arms up and over my head, my fingers then cutting into the water in front of my face. As my arms pull down, my hips tilt and my legs kick together like a mermaid tail. This is the closest I ever get to elegant.

Backstroke now, my second fastest stroke, and I hold my head steady as I stare up at the ceiling. I practiced this last night when everyone else had finished training. I count signposts on the ceiling so I don’t ram my head into the side of the pool and slow myself down. Debs says this is the mind-set of a consummate pro.

I had to Google *consummate*. It’s either a compliment or a French soup.

I feel so happy when I swim, strong and graceful and like everything is right with the world. This is my Thing.

The individual medley is a strange race—most people are slowest on the breaststroke, fastest on the crawl. I’m the other way around, so I always pull ahead on laps five and six, hopefully opening

up enough of a lead that some freakish monkey-armed girl with a devastating crawl time can't catch me on seven and eight.

And here's seven and eight, harder in a pool where everyone's so powerful. The water is churned up and throwing me about. So much for feeling graceful—this is like fighting water. But I can't sense anyone on the left or right of me, so I must've pulled ahead. Excellent, it's all going according to plan.

Now it's about hanging on to this lead. I carve my right hand back past my face to make a groove in the water just long enough to turn my face and grab a huge, ragged breath. In this choppy water it's difficult, so each time I'm just praying I find air. I can't afford to choke.

Final lap and I'm completely in my rhythm. I know the end is approaching, but I have to keep swimming my hardest so no one catches me. I don't care if I smash my head into the edge of pool—anything to maintain this speed to the end. My wrist hits something hard with a crack that I feel down to my hip, and I've done it.

I've done it! I won.

I fling my head out of the water, rip off my swimming cap and goggles, squeeze the water from my eyes, and look behind me. That's my first thought—how far behind are they?

But there's no one there.

They're all next to me. Everyone. There is *no one* behind me, no one still swimming.

The girl on my left looks bored; the one on the right is casually cleaning her goggles with spit. Oh my . . . *one of them is already out of the pool?! I did that once, against a crap team in Swindon that was so slow I got out before the last girl finished. Debs yelled at me for that. Unsportspersonlike, she said.*

Debs! Where is she, where's my coach? Maybe I swam extra lengths by mistake? Of course, that must be it. Hilarious, of course that's what happened. Dumb but understandable on a high-pressure day. This is *not* a Big Deal. Should I talk to someone, an official? Where is everyone going? Coach! *Debs!* Hello? No one is looking me in the eye. Did I *die* in that pool? Am I a ghost?

I might as well have. I came in last. For the first time since I started competing at ten years old, I was the slowest swimmer. I'm weak and cold. My legs are heavy as the adrenaline drops out of me. I don't know what to do . . . where to go. . . .

I have to find Hannah, and I look around frantically for her. There she is! She's throwing back her hair, laughing and shaking hands with an official who's handing her a slip of paper. That means she won. She catches my eye and her smile fades.

My best friend and I want to kill her.

chapter 1

my pillow smells. I should've changed it weeks ago, but I haven't, and now it smells like my head. Which I did not realize was so smelly.

I can hear my family moving around downstairs, slamming drawers and clattering bowls. I'm not used to these morning noises because I'd usually be up at five a.m., grab my swim kit, and be training by six. Forty lengths of breaststroke, forty backstroke, forty crawl, ten butterfly, then a quick shower, sleepwalk through school, and be back in the pool by four p.m. YOLO!

But I haven't swum since the time trials three weeks ago, and now I'm stuck with a surprising number of useless hours. Who knew days were so long? I sometimes used to wonder what I was missing as I pounded out the lengths in the pool. Now I know. *No-thing.*

Except I'd never met our mailman before. He has a lot of nose hair. That's it.

My name's Lou and I am a fifteen-year-old ex-swimmer. I have

an older sister, Laverne. Yup, Lou and Lav. We have a brother called Toilet.

That's a lie. It's just me, Lav, Mom, and Dad, in a small semi-detached house in the most boring town in the world.

So this summer I stopped swimming and I met our postman. And I finally got all that crying done that I've been meaning to do for ages, so that's good, isn't it? Plus I really explored the concept of Lying in Bed All Day Feeling Nothing but Despair. A summer lived right to the edges.

It's the first day of school. I'd mark the occasion by wearing a dress, but I don't own one. In our most private moments Hannah and I have accepted that the only way we'll find a dress to fit our shoulders is if we go to that cross-dressing shop in town. They've got nice stuff in the window; we'll cut the labels out.

It's also my first day without Hannah, as she's already left for the High Performance Training Camp in Dorset. She'll be there all term. Mom says that now that we're separated for a bit, I'll come out of Hannah's shadow. But she doesn't understand—I liked it there! I was very happy hanging out in it.

Going back to school would be fine if Hannah hadn't got through the time trials either. We could face it together, maybe hint that the competition was a big conspiracy. That we were *too* fast and we'd have threatened international relations at the next Olympics when we smashed everyone out of the water with our awesome times.

"Yeah, well, Russia," we'd have said, with careful looks around us. "They do *not* like silver, if you know what I'm saying." Then we'd have tugged our fedoras down and skulked off to double physics.

Wonder if the other side of my pillow is less smelly? I flip it. No.

But now Hannah has gone to the High Performance Training Camp without me and I won't see her all term. We're so far away from each other! She's in Dorset and I'm in Essex. She's heading to the Olympics; the most exciting place I'm heading is the bathroom.

Miraculously, it's free—pretty impressive in a house of four people, three of whom take showers you could time with a calendar.

I'm still using that special harsh shampoo for swimmers, the stuff that strips the chlorine out of your hair. Money is a bit tight at the moment, so Mom won't chuck it. I have to use it all up first, and we seem to have found a never-ending bottle. I soap my head and reflect that it really doesn't help that the smell reminds me of my old life.

I step out of the shower, fold a towel dress around me (the only kind I fit in, because it's sleeveless), and scuff my feet along the hallway. The carpet is worn in patches, so I'm careful not to catch my toe on a snagged thread. No one needs to start their day hopping and screaming.

I open my clothes drawer and drag out some jeans and a T-shirt—I don't have any "nice" clothes. Since I was eleven I've been caught up in some desperate, endless growth spurt. There's no point buying decent clothes, because they probably won't fit in a month's time. I'm five ten and *still* growing.

It's fine; if I ever get a boyfriend, I can carry him when he's tired.

I stab a wide-toothed comb gently into my hair because I don't have time to cut it out if it gets tangled. My hair doesn't grow down; it goes *out*, like Hannah's. We don't look like the princess in a fairy tale. We look like the enchanted vines that covered her castle for a hundred years.

It was always comforting to have a best friend who looked as different as I do. And we never minded, because we had swimming. We had a Thing. Now my Thing is gone and so has my friend.

I can't delay this much longer. I'm going to have to eat some breakfast and then . . . gah . . . *school*. I swing around the end of the banister and can't help smiling when I catch sight of my family.

The kitchen is too small for the four of us—we only fit in there if everyone stays very still. If you actually want to *move*, then elbows will get bumped and cereal will get tipped down backs. You know your house is cramped when you can start making a sandwich and end up in a food fight.

Dad is cooking (carefully), Mom's reading a book, and Laverne is troweling makeup onto her ridiculously beautiful face. They are such a good-looking family; they look like they're in an ad. They don't need a Thing. Everyone's just grateful they get to look at them.

I'm proud of them, but I wish I didn't look adopted.

Mom is half Indonesian, all curves and shiny brown hair and skin, while Dad's a bit less dark, and he's chiseled like a doctor on a TV show. Admittedly, he has a bit of a belly these days, but he just holds his breath for photos. Laverne is sixteen, with glossy black hair, actual boobs, and a tattoo that Mom and Dad don't know about.

Nature made her and then, a year later, took the same ingredients and made me. It's baffling. Good thing they didn't have a third child; it would probably have a face like a knee.

"Morning . . ." I sigh at the room, and they mumble back sleepy responses. Dad slides a brick of scrambled egg onto my plate as I sit down. Mom subtly slides Lav's makeup bag away from her.

"Enough, Laverne."

"A little more highlighter and blush and I'm *done*, I swear."

Mom keeps reading as she drops the makeup bag into a drawer next to her. Lav looks mutinous, but she's still got her mascara wand, so she makes good use of it before Mom reunites it with the bottle.

The mood in the kitchen is a little, well, moody. Lav's grounded because she was texting a boy late at night. I never have any boys to text, regardless of the time of day.

I poke up a forkful of egg and stare at it. Eyes down, I say, "Um. Caaaaan I . . ."

"No," Mom says.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

Mom imitates my voice with annoying accuracy. "Can I not go to school today or maybe ever, can I just lie and get a job instead and we'll tell everyone at school that I changed my name, had plastic surgery, and made it onto Team Great Britain after all?"

Damn. Spot on.

Laverne finishes applying her thirty-second coat of mascara and leans toward me as if she's going to impart the secret of immortality.

Expectations low, I lean toward her.

"It's going to be OK at school," she says.

"Really?"

"Yes. Because no one cares about your swimming. Only you think it's a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal."

"Shut up, I'm trying to help you. I swear, if anyone even *mentions* swimming—which they won't—and you tell them what happened, they'll say, 'Huh.' And they won't ever think of it again. It's boring. No one cares. Amelia Bond from eleventh grade? She had her big hairy face mole removed over the summer. *That* is interesting."

I'm unconvinced but not willing to have an argument about it. Lav's wrong; it's not true that no one cares. Hannah cares. Hannah understands that swimming is extremely important. But thinking about Hannah feels like poking a blister, so I make myself stop.

Dad slings the frying pan into the sink. He does all the cooking. Mom's specialty dish is food poisoning.

"You girls ready to leave for school in ten?"

"Shotgun!"

"Lav! You always sit in the front!"

"Yes. Because I always call shotgun. Please stop me if this confuses you."

"Fine. Infinity shotgun!"

"You can't call infinity shotgun—everyone knows that," says Mom. "Now off you go."

"Are you home tonight, Mom?" I ask.

"Uh, no, I have a . . ."

"Daaa-ate," we all chorus.

"So go on, what's his name?" Lav asks.

Mom hesitates.

"It's OK," says Dad kindly. "If you don't know it, you don't have to pretend."

"You can check his wallet when he goes to the bathroom," Lav suggests.

"Though if he takes it with him, he's possibly not coming back," I finish.

Mom gives out three death stares and returns to her book.

Yeah, date. So it's a little odd in this house.

Mom and Dad divorced when I was little but are the nicest divorced couple. They never fight and they get along really well. I'm not sure why they divorced, but I don't want to ask in case the answer involves sex and I'll *never* stop being sick.

Dad lost his job last year and he had to move in with us until he finds a new one. It's taking a lot longer than he thought it would. Sometimes when he leaves his email open, I see all the rejections in his in-box.

It's not ideal. Lav and I have to share a room, but we don't say anything because we don't want to hurt his feelings. I worry about him. He gets up early every morning, like he's still got a job, and dresses in a suit and then just . . . I don't know . . . waits for the day to pass until we come home.

It's like having a professionally dressed but depressed dog.

Between me and him, this house hasn't been much fun this summer. No wonder Lav and Mom are dating like men are off to war.

We call goodbye to Mom and trudge out to the car. Lav forces me into the back, which is not easy. Three-door cars are such a lie; you can't call it three doors unless you see the trunk as an acceptable way to enter a car.

Laverne fiddles with the radio until she finds a pirate station. It sounds like people shouting in a cramped space. As if she doesn't get enough of that at home.

"Oh, Lav, you're so alternative. I cannot get my head around how nonmainstream you are." I sigh from behind my knees. "Move your seat forward."

Lav squeezes the lever and slowly pushes her seat back as far as it goes, crushing me into an even tighter S shape.

“It’s garage, idiot.”

“Is that the name of the music or just *where* they are? Come on, Lav, seat forward!”

“*Laverne!*” says Dad. “Move the seat forward or you can walk the rest of the way. Do you want to walk in those shoes? *Can* you walk in those shoes?”

I peer around to see what Dad’s talking about. She’s wearing black, studded, chunky boots—it looks like she’s got weapons on her feet.

“Yes, I can! Not very far, or fast, or . . .”

“I don’t know why you do that to your feet,” Dad sighs.

“You don’t get me, Mark,” she sighs back dramatically.

“Dad!” he corrects her.

“No, Lav, *everyone* gets you,” I say, defending him. “You’re so instantly gettable that if you were an exam question, everyone would be happy to see you. And that’s the only time they would be happy to see you, ha ha ha—ow! Legs legs legs!”

As Dad approaches the school gates, I can see a tall boy with long hair loitering. Lav slumps in the seat.

“Drive, drive, drive!” she hisses at Dad.

“What?” he asks, but drives past the school gates.

“Ah . . .” Lav sighs.

“Was that Beau Michaels waiting for you?” I say.

“Yes, and shut up. Dad, can you drop us at the back entrance, please?”

“Wait.” Dad is puzzled. “Someone named their son *Beau* and that was allowed to happen?”

“Daaa-aad.” Lav rolls her eyes.

“Like, no one was arrested? They were just allowed to do that to an innocent child?” he asks.

“You’re not funny,” Lav tells him firmly.

Dad circles a mini traffic circle and heads back to the school entrance.

“No, no, no!” Lav slumps down in her seat again. “I mean you’re hilarious, Dad! Really, very witty!”

“I thought so,” he agrees serenely, and we sail past the entrance again, poor Beau Michaels watching us with the dawning realization that all is not well in his love life.

Dad pulls up at the back entrance to school. Lav hops out and flips her seat forward, and I unfold myself into a normal shape. Well, normal for me.

“Come on, LouLou,” says Dad.

I pick at some dry skin on my lip and look down. Maybe Dad will get bored of waiting and just let me sit quietly in the back of the car for a few years. Eventually I’ll be old enough to shuffle forward and share the driving.

Lav leans down at my window.

“I *swear*,” she says, “this isn’t a big deal unless you make it a big deal. You *nearly* got to the Olympics. That’s the closest anyone I know in this crappy little town has ever got to achieving anything! No offense, Dad.”

“No, that’s fine,” he murmurs.

“So please, just don’t even *mention* it. Now the school day begins, and you do not know me.”

She wobbles away on her monstrous shoes. She looks like a baby gazelle. I can’t imagine how dumb I look when I clump

along behind her. Gazelle and the mammoth, off on their adventures.

That thought makes me even sadder, so I push it aside and give Dad a brave smile. My dry lip splits and bleeds.

“It’s going to be a good day,” he promises.

“OK,” I mumble through blood and a semiclean tissue I found in the door handle. I clamber out of the car and follow Lav at the agreed-upon distance of six feet.

chapter 2

Weez!! I can't believe I've been here a week, time is flying!
People are nice, but I haven't scoped out any real friends
yet (you have no grounds for jel). I'm learning so much, I
thought everyone would be terrifyingly good, but I'm OK, you
know? Not saying I'm the best but I think I've got a chance.
I MISS YOU.

Hxxxxxx

av and I don't hang out at school—she's in the grade above, and we're so different I'm not sure people know we're related. She's pretty popular but seems to get in endless long-running fights with other girls. She thinks they're intimidated by her maturity.

I think it's because she flirts with their boyfriends. We agree to disagree.

I used to head into school with Hannah, exhausted and damp from swimming, do some work, chat with some people (well, she

would; I'd hang out in her shadow—*happily*, thanks, Mom), then head back to the pool. Hannah and I always treated school like a chore, a little like the Queen snipping a ribbon on a hospital wing.

I don't think we missed much; our school is very ordinary. A horse walked onto the soccer field six years ago and people *still* talk about it.

But despite my whining, I have resolved to make an effort. Today I'm launching Operation: Make Friends. I'm an idiot for having only one friend. I needed a spare!

I'm so used to having Hannah's arm slung round me as she makes me laugh with nine years' worth of stupid private jokes. I've got all my halves of those jokes and nothing to do with them.

I feel shy as I enter my homeroom, so I check my bag to make me look busy, not lonely. Classic move. I delve through it, looking at my books and pencils. Yup, all there. Hi, guys.

I get so carried away with my acting that I trip, my backpack swings around with surprising force, and eight small objects fall out. What eight small objects, you ask? Oh, you *know*.

Eight tampons.

ARGH!

What is *wrong* with tampons? Seems like every time I open my bag, they leap out in a group suicide bid. I haven't even started my period yet; they're just in case. My face burns with a blush as I crouch and start shoveling them back into my bag, desperate for this moment to end. It couldn't get worse.

Yes, it could. I feel a light tap on my head—someone is “helping” by throwing an escaped tampon at me.

And *then* Mr. Peters races in late. Perfect—the nicest teacher in school (and not bad-looking, actually, if you like cardigans) begins

his morning by falling over me as I scabble on the floor, chasing tampons and trying not to cry.

The class falls silent as he gets up and helps me to my feet. I like Mr. Peters; he's one of the few people in school taller than me, and not in a stooped, have-to-get-my-shoes-specially-made sort of way.

I give him a "thank you and that never happened" smile and weave through to our desk at the back. *My desk, now.* Teachers always knew they could sit Hannah and me there. We weren't particularly *good* students, but we were quiet. You don't need to pass notes to someone you've known that long.

I sit down, face still burning, and hope everyone develops amnesia by lunch. I don't want to be Tampon Brown all semester.

"Did you see that video I posted on your wall?" The two boys in front of me chat, and I lean forward to join in. After a bad start, Operation: Make Friends begins *right now*.

"Yeah! That guy looked so much like Hatsy it blew my mind."

"That's why I put it up there!"

"Oh, right! But everyone looks like Hatsy."

They collapse into quiet hysterics. For some reason.

I'm watching the conversation go back and forth, feeling the smile die on my face.

Who is Hatsy? Is it funny that everyone looks like him? Apparently. And what was that video? This conversation is like code; there's no way I can join in.

"Double history next, nightmare!" I say to the back of their heads in a friendly, eye-rolly sort of way. But too quietly, so they don't realize I'm talking to them. I look out the window and bite my nail. I'm not embarrassed, I'm busy! Busy biting this nail.

“Sorry, did you say something?”

I nod, suddenly choking on a piece of nail. Now I’m coughing right in his face. *Right in his face.*

“No talking in the back!” Mr. Peters calls over. The boys turn back, one of them frowning and wiping his face.

I sit, stunned by my own social idiocy, and wonder if I will ever stop blushing or if my family can use my head as a radiator and cut their heating bills.

Then I’ll have to be homeschooled, right?

My phone vibrates (it’s up my sleeve) and I slide it out for a peek. It’s a text from Mom, a picture of a badly stuffed otter. She may be grumpy in the mornings (and some afternoons and evenings), but she gets me—bad taxidermy always makes me laugh.

There’s a picture of an annoyed-looking stuffed fox holding a handbag that never stops being funny, no matter how many times I look at it (and I needed to look at that fox a lot this summer). I scroll around my phone and then tap my in-box.

I really should reply to Hannah’s last message. We’ve been chatting every day, but she starts all the conversations and I feel like everything I write is fake—things like *I’m sooooooo happy for yoooooo!* *Xxxxx.*

I’m a very bad liar.

After the time trials, I did my best to seem OK. I sat at the front of the minibus instead of at the back with Hannah, because I had suddenly developed “car sickness.”

I kept staring up at the ceiling, because the fake car sickness was also making my eyes water. “Anyone else have wet eyes? I think it’s the air-conditioning. Look, my eyes are so wet they’re actually *leaking!*” (Sniff.)

Hannah had always been good, but I never realized she was much better than me. I think she swam one of her fastest times ever that day. I don't know my time; officials don't chase after the girls who come in last.

Hannah was so excited and I didn't want to spoil it. That night I texted her loads, things like: *I'm so proud of you my fish!!! Xxxxxxx*. Which is a bit fake and gushy, but *You stole my dreams* is not a cool thing to text your best friend, even if it's true.

And I am happy for her! I'm just sad for me.

"Louise?" I look up. Mr. Peters is staring, and the kids in the class are starting to turn and roll their eyes. What have I done *now*?

"Yee-urp?" I say stupidly, and he smiles at me, a little exasperated, and says, "Sasha Burrows?"

Oh. The attendance. Right.

The morning begins with a double block of history, where I learn a lot of really cool things, like how *I know nothing about history* and *I am basically as educated as a piece of toast*.

See, *this* is the problem with planning to be a professional swimmer for the rest of your life; you don't think that you might need an education. Basically, the moment I could read, I felt educated enough. After that I used school time to relax in. Can't believe I hadn't noticed how behind I'd got. Clearly, Han and I were oblivious in our bubble of idiot.

My history teacher corners me after class to say, "How exciting about Hannah. You must be so proud!"

"Yes, yes, I am, I really am!" I say back at her, nodding hard with big, fake eyes.

History is followed by physics, because this school believes in putting the *boring* in *educa-boring-tion*.

It's amazing how little I know on this subject too. I listen hard and take lots of notes. Maybe I'm an academic genius; perhaps *that's* my actual Thing, not swimming after all.

"Any ideas? Anyone?"

I shoot my hand in the air.

"Louise!"

"Potassium!"

"No. Pota . . . what? I haven't mentioned potassium once this lesson."

"Oh, OK."

People snigger. The physics teacher stares at me, baffled. "Did you mean *phosphorus*?"

"Uh. Yeah?"

"That's still wrong."

Finally the morning's over and it's lunchtime. I follow the smell of cabbage until I'm at the cafeteria. (We hardly ever have cabbage; there's just this lingering smell. Mysterious.)

I look around. I knew this would happen. There's no one to sit with, and every table "belongs" to a friendship group, so I wouldn't just be eating there—I'd look like I was trying to join their group. I don't want to be ignored or, worse, told to get lost.

Can I bring my own little table into school every day?

I buy a sandwich, stick it in my backpack, and head outside, day-dreaming about my new (unlikely) future as a physics genius. My first breakthrough would be to disprove its credibility as a subject, forcing thousands of unemployed physics teachers to rethink their snotty attitudes.

I walk in a circle around school, eating my sandwich. It's boring to have no one to talk to. I take out my phone. I'm tempted to call

Hannah, but then we'll have to talk about training camp, and the thought of *that* makes my food stick in my throat.

As I'm choking and spluttering, eyes watering, phone in hand, Mr. Peters appears next to me. He raises his eyebrows at the phone, which I'm not allowed to have out during the school day. I wave it weakly and whisper, "Ambulance." He gives a snort of laughter and keeps walking.

He stops and turns back.

"Lou, you *are* joking?"

I nod, putting my phone away. He makes a "phew!" gesture and keeps walking.

Great, I've found someone I can chat to—and they're paid to talk to me.

As I'm putting my phone away in my bag, I realize I've stopped in front of the one place that can help me.

The library.

Home of the introverted and people too quiet to say, "No, Lou, I don't want to be your friend. Leave me alone to read. Get that friendship bracelet *off* me. No, *you* shush!"

chapter 3

I settle down in one of the booths and feel myself relaxing for the first time all day. I quietly finish the last of my sandwich, eyes darting around for the librarian. She's a small, nervy, hissing woman, and if that makes her sound like a terrifying animal, then *good*.

I'm in the sports section. It's only about a shelf long, but there's a tattered old book there called *Swimming for Women and the Infirm*. Brilliant! I pull it down and start reading. It smells musty and is adorably nuts, focusing on "making elegant, ladylike shapes" rather than actually going anywhere. I'd love to see the look on Debs's face if I tried this. "Personal best? No, I'm making a star shape, wheee!"

I haven't seen Debs in weeks. After the time trials she suggested I "take a break" from swimming, which was a pretty unsubtle dumping. My team had been training before school, after school, sometimes during lunchtime and on weekends, and we'd all been working toward these time trials. Now that I'd flunked, there didn't seem to be much point in carrying on training—I clearly wasn't good enough. I'd just get in everyone's way, being slow, crying, trailing ribbons of

snot behind me. . . . I thought of asking for another chance. I could always try out next year, but what if I came in last *again*?

I told Hannah this on our last sleepover of the summer. It was still warm out, so we were camping—our last chance before she'd be off to Dorset. As I babbled on about my worries, she looked uncomfortable. Of course, she's my best friend; she wasn't going to say, "Yeah, train for another year! I'm sure you won't choke *this* time!" But she also couldn't say, "Give up, pal, you're clearly awful."

We sat, chewing in silence. I was eating cereal out of the box. Hannah was eating concentrated Jell-O, which is disgusting, but she thinks it stops her nails from splitting from all the chlorine in the pool. Plus side, she always smells fruity.

Thankfully for her, she was saved from giving me career advice.

"SLUG!"

There was a huge one shuffling its disgusting belly up the inside of our tent. Our screams brought Hannah's mom out to the yard. (Because, yes, of course we were camping in the backyard—we're not heroes.)

Barbra'd just got in from a shift at the hospital and she wasn't in the best of moods. When you work in the ER, two girls crying over a slug can seem dumb. She flicked it mercilessly into the hedge, ignoring our pleas to (a) be gentle and (b) escort it to a leaf ten or twenty miles away, please.

Babs (as I have *never* dared call her) then popped her head back into the tent and stared at me for a moment with a concerned look on her face.

"Lou, have you *done something* to your hair?"

She looked horrified. Classic Babs. She's got all the tact of a brick, as Mom said when she thought I wasn't listening.

“No,” I said honestly, trying to flatten it.

“Bye, Mom!” said Hannah pointedly. Babs made a face like “What have I done *now*?” and went back to the house.

It’s not a competition, but I definitely win the moms.

After a quick debate about the chances of that slug sliming to the top of the tent and falling into one of our sleeping mouths—which we had to stop because Hannah was laughing and dry-retching so hard I thought she might choke—we returned to the all-important subject of *me*.

I told her I was going to stop swim training and how it was actually exciting because maybe I’d find something that I’d be really good at, something cooler than swimming, I said pettily, and immediately felt bad as she started trying to help.

“International supermodel?”

Yes, well, obviously, I said. That’s plan B. But I’m scared of flying.

“Local supermodel.”

Hannah chewed thoughtfully on a cube of Jell-O. “The thing is,” she says, “you’ve been swimming since you were like eight . . . ?”

“Seven,” I corrected her.

“Right. So there’re so many options you haven’t explored! Loads of things you could be amazing at!” She was so excited by how brilliant I’d be. It made me feel tired and irritable and not very brilliant.

Suddenly a shadow loomed against the side of the tent, and Hannah’s dad, Damian, called our names. He unzipped the front flap.

“Are you girls smoking?” He looked at us narrowly.

“No!”

“Make sure you don’t. It’s a filthy habit.” He zipped us back up and left me and Hannah rolling our eyes at each other. Her parents

are so weird. You can't just randomly bark at your daughter, "Don't do drugs! Don't smoke! Don't get pregnant!" and call it parenting.

I laugh out loud now, remembering how last month Dad thought Laverne was pregnant because she was so tearful and shifty. He very sweetly said we could cope with anything as a family.

Lav cried, hugged him, and confessed she'd left her eye shadow in her jacket when she put it in the wash and now all his clothes were glittery.

I suddenly remember I'm in the library, laughing like a loon by myself. The librarian narrows her eyes, and a gang of girls stare at me like I'm insane. I duck my face behind *Swimming for Women and the Infirm* and pretend I'm engrossed. *Oh look, she's floating and pointing a toe. What an athlete.*

The rest of the day is OK; it doesn't get better, but it doesn't get worse. I had been dreading going back to school, thinking everyone would be all, *Oh my god, you came last in the time trials?! But Hannah got through? That's so embarrassing for you, are you OK, are you going to cry? What are you going to do now? What's that coming out of your eye, are you crying??*

But, I hate to say it, Lav was right. No one cares. I don't think anyone even notices. And if that makes my first day back at school sound a little boring, then BINGO! That's because it is.

I see Laverne heading toward the parking lot at the end of school with a gaggle of friends. I want a gaggle. I join her and give her friends a little wave as they leave, which they're too cool to return.

They're the sort of people who always make me feel sweaty and worry that I smell like food or I've got something between my teeth.

"How was the first day?" Lav asks.

I give a bland little "meh." That sums it up.

“I was right, wasn't I?”

I have to admit it. “Yeah, no one really cares. It's not a big deal.”

“No, about Amelia Bond's hairy face mole. She looks normal, but you know something's missing.”

“Like there's a ghost on her face?”

“Yes!”

chapter 4

The next few days get a little less “meh”—I make an effort to chat with people in my classes, and they’re not unfriendly. It’s just everyone already has friends and they’re not looking for new recruits, so I spend my lunchtimes hanging out in a largely empty library. I even read the occasional book—seems rude not to—but it’s not the same as having a real-life friend.

By Thursday I’m thoroughly bored of eating a sandwich hidden in a book, and all morning I’ve been thinking about going to see Debs, my coach. Ex-coach.

Three and a half weeks is the longest I’ve gone in years without seeing her, but I felt shy after the time trials. She says things like “Silver is just first place loser!” so I wasn’t sure how she’d treat an *actual* loser.

Plus I didn’t have swim training, and I didn’t feel I could just turn up on her doorstep: “Hiyaaaa. Let’s ignore the twenty-five-year age gap and hang out! You can blow your whistle at me and I’ll wear wart remover strips if that makes it less weird.”

There's a public pool next to my school; the school swim team trains there. I've been stumping my way up this path every morning for years, with a heavy sports bag over my shoulder and sleep crust scratching at my eyes. Today I buy my sandwich and head there instead of to the library, rubbing my eyes out of habit.

It seems empty, but I can hear some noise in the distance, girls chatting. I wonder if it's the girls I used to train with. We weren't best friends, but after a lonely week, I'd be really happy to see them now. As long as Cammie isn't there—she's rude, rich, and mean. She intimidated me and Hannah and we hated that she did.

I follow the sounds and it takes me to the changing room. I push my way through the heavy door and get a big whiff of chlorine and shampoo.

The door shuts loudly behind me and fifteen half-dressed girls with wet hair go quiet and stare at me. The silence hangs, heavy and awkward and smelling of feet.

Not such an exciting smell anymore. Oh, and there's Cammie. Great. One leg up on the bench, moisturizing her legs, she's halfway through a story and looks up to see who's dared to interrupt her.

A couple of girls give me small smiles, but they look a little embarrassed. It's weird when semi-naked people are embarrassed for *you*.

I suddenly feel I'm not meant to be there; this isn't the welcome I'd expected. Everyone goes back to getting dressed. Cammie picks up where she left off, loudly. Following her lead, everyone ignores me.

"All right, Lou?" says a tall, muscular girl who's drying in between her toes. She says it quietly, like she doesn't want everyone to hear.

One person cares! (But I can't remember her name. Aargh!)

“Yeah, I’m good, thanks.” Mellie? Probably not. Who would call a kid Mellie? It rhymes with Smelly.

“I . . . uh . . . just came to say hi. So . . . hi.”

“Hi,” says Smelly. (Mella? Maybe.)

“And also I forgot my . . . this. Yes, this.” I’m babbling to fill the awkward silence as I open my old swimming locker and find a dusty nose clip. “Excellent,” I say, and pop it in my pocket.

Cammie frowns and says, “Why do *you* need *that*?”

There’s a shocked silence and a couple of embarrassed giggles, swiftly muffled. (It would’ve been more polite to *not laugh*, but whatever.) My heart starts beating harder and I can feel my ears going red with anger, but I don’t let it show.

“Just to block out that smell, Cammie. You reek of eggy hair-removal cream.”

Zing!

Shame I only thought of it before I fell asleep that night.

My actual “sassy retort” was to give a weak smile and leave, closing the door gently behind me. Oooh, *burn*.

This place is my *home*, or it used to be. But clearly my pathetic performance at the time trials makes me an embarrassment to the team. Wish Lav could’ve seen that, her and her “no one cares, it’s not a big deal.”

I see how shallow they are. I’m full of rage about how the world isn’t Winners or Losers, we’re all just people, guys, special snowflakes with a lot to offer the world!

To enjoy this self-righteousness, I have to forget that I was *exactly* like this until two months ago. La la la la la, let’s just ignore that uncomfy fact.

I head for the pool to find Debs. After Hannah, she’s the closest

thing I've got to a friend. As I enter the pool area, I can hear the splashing of the next swim class. These guys are younger, but they're still good. I watch them dart through the pool with swift movements and slightly shaky tumble turns.

Debs is striding up and down in tiny shorts (all year round, tiny shorts—maniac!) shouting at anyone who stops. You can't stop during training. Your muscles cool down and you're less effective; you've got to just power through the pain. Debs always said that was one of my great strengths.

She spots me and I wave.

She shouts something that I can't hear over the thunderous noise from the pool.

"What?" I smile and point at my ears.

"No outdoor shoes."

Um. Right.

"I'll go, then. I just came to say hi!"

She gives me a brief smile and goes back to watching the swimmers. She was never one for the soft and cuddlies, but I was expecting at least a hug, perhaps a circling back pat at the end? (I would *like* a hug with a circling back pat at the end, dammit! I deserve one. I've had a very hard summer and she should understand.)

She doesn't look up again, but that's cool—she's busy, and I don't want to be paranoid. So I sit on a bench at the back of the viewing platform and eat my sandwich (quickly, as the humidity makes it soggy. Bit gross.)

I try to add up how many hours I've spent at this pool: an hour a day before and after school five days a week, plus the odd lunch hour, then two hours on Saturday morning pretty much every week

since I was seven. My mind boggles and I get out my phone to use the calculator.

I think, (a) no wonder my hair is so crispy—that’s a lot of chlorine, and (b) I can’t do math either! What I don’t know would fill a barn, as my old gran would say.

I’ve never sat in the viewing area before. I watch the swimmers and feel drowsy at the repetitive splashing, broken up with occasional short, sharp pips from Debs’s whistle. After all these years I know exactly what each sound means. “Go faster, you’re slowing down, I’m watching you, keep your arms crisp, don’t drag those legs! ALWAYS SWIM FASTER!”

Debs doesn’t have a sound for “You’re doing really well, guys, and remember it’s just a sport, let’s have some fun!” I snicker to myself at the thought of what that would be—a snotty squeak as she choked on her whistle.

My head droops in the warmth. It’s dull watching people swim, and I think about the hours my poor family has spent up here on these uncomfortable benches, slapping supportive looks on their faces like they could *not* think of anywhere else they’d rather be on a Saturday morning. “What, the *park*? On this sunny day?! You must be kidding. Let’s go sit somewhere noisy and damp. I’m happy to hug the dishwasher or we can watch you swim *again*.”

Dad and Lav can both sleep sitting up. They probably learned how to do it here.

My phone vibrates. I *bet* it’s Hannah. I go to tell her about the girls in the changing room. Then I realize that if *she* walked in there, everyone would be excited to see her.

I’m suddenly too proud to tell her. I stare at the water until my

eyes go blurry and I force myself to not blink, when I have that unmistakable feeling that someone's looking at me. I must look demented, like I'm in a staring competition with the water.

I glance over my shoulder. There's a field outside the swimming pool, and right now there's a boy on it. He's a few feet from the window but close enough that I can see he's good-looking, small and sort of cool-without-trying. His skin is so clear he looks like a model. I finger my chapped lips.

He's kicking a ball against the wall, which I could do—however, he's looking up at me while he's doing it, and I'd lose a tooth to a misaimed kick if I tried that. I stare at him gormlessly.

Just then a bigger version of him walks past the door. Aaah, I knew he looked familiar; he must be related to Roman Snell. Roman is two years older than me. He is *basically* physical perfection, and if I had more of a grasp on sex (so to speak), I'm sure I'd be feeling all sorts of inappropriate things for him.

I don't know Roman; he's never spoken to me. But I've overheard him talking to older girls and he's pretty rude—blunt and prickly. (*Why does that make him more attractive? I don't make the rules—it just does.*)

Roman takes his sweater off to reveal broad shoulders and muscled arms. The shorter boy catches me staring at aforementioned muscles and smiles at me. Even by today's low standards this is embarrassing. I give him a small, no-teeth smile back. This smile says, "Yup, I was staring at your brother like a dog at a sausage. Let's never mention this ever again."

A third boy joins them, pulling off his sweater too, which makes his T-shirt ride up over a muscled chest. I examine my cuticles. It's hard to know where to look around here.

The *new* guy, also quite ridiculously handsome, is fidgety; he pulls his T-shirt down, then takes the ball from Small Roman and starts doing keepee-uppies. The three of them seem dejected and look like they're arguing in a halfhearted way.

Actually, I recognize that third boy! He's not at our school anymore; he must be three years older than me. But a couple of years ago, when he was still an upperclassman, I had won some big county competition. I'd been messing around in the car with Mom, wearing my medal and pretending her Ford Focus was doing a victory parade for me. I'd forgotten to take the medal off when she dropped me at school, so I sneaked in late to assembly still wearing it. This guy had seen me and said something that had made everyone around him stare at me and then laugh 'til they couldn't breathe.

I'll never know what he said, and he probably wouldn't even remember, but it ruined something important to me.

Pete. That's his name.

Remembering that is the last straw for me today, and I shoulder my backpack and head back to school, I doubt Debs even looks around. I keep my head down and don't talk to anyone, don't answer any teachers' questions, for the rest of the day. Operation: Make Friends is on hold, possibly forever.

I *suspect* this school is tragically and unluckily full of dickheads and is no place for me to find a friend. Maybe I'll just sit tight and hope Hannah flunks out of training camp!

I don't mean that.

I think I do.

She could just get a muscle injury. Not disabling, but permanent, so she'd have to give up on her dreams and I'd have someone to talk to at lunchtime. (No, *you're* selfish.)

That night Dad makes us savory pancakes because Mom is out on her date. I lie about how well school is going (I'm sure Lav knows the truth, but she says nothing) and head upstairs after watching a movie with Dad.

I lie in bed listening to Lav texting and WhatsApping (so many pings!) and settle down to sleep. I can hear Mom come in. She must've had a few drinks, because she's loud, clattering around getting her shoes off.

I know, without even checking, that Dad was waiting up for her. She heads straight to the kitchen, immediately in full flow, ranting about her evening. Not a great date, I guess. I hear Dad laugh, the fridge clunks, and then there's a *tiss tiss* as two beers are opened.

I hear my parents chatting and laughing as I drift off. It's nice. I'm glad they're still friends. I remember when we were younger and they'd have polite conversations over our heads, Mom gripping my shoulders so tightly it hurt. I remember . . .

Suddenly: "Just to block out that smell, Cammie. You reek of eggy hair-removal cream" pops into my head.

And a minute later:

Melia! That girl's name is Melia.

Thanks, brain.

chapter 5

The next day I wake up feeling less pathetic. I'm going to have a talk with Debs. I was her favorite swimmer—I will *make* her care about me again! I'm going to catch her when she's not busy, first thing in the morning, before classes start. When I head downstairs, there are four empty beer bottles in the kitchen. Mom and Dad will be grumpy this morning. Glad I'm missing that.

I leave Dad a note saying I'm walking to school and head off, feeling adventurous in the chilly, damp morning.

I go straight to Debs's office, which is unlocked and has coffee cooling on her desk. Excellent, she should be back soon. I sit in a chair (although not the one behind her desk—I wouldn't dare). She takes ages. I'm stuck eyeing her bookcase full of trophies for fifteen boring minutes. Eventually she walks in.

"There you are!" I shout.

"ARGH!" she shouts back. OK, that was a little bit of an ambush.

She holds her heart and looks irritably at me as she heads to her seat and flips open her laptop.

She doesn't seem delighted to see me, which is pretty flat lemonade from a woman who threw me in the air when I won gold at the County Championships last year. No one has attempted to throw me anywhere since I was in diapers, and even then there were probably anxious people yelling, "Lift with your legs, not your back!"

"Nice summer, Lou?"

NICE SUMMER?! How very dare she.

"Not great, Debs."

"Have you spoken to Hannah?"

Woohoo, someone else who wants to talk about Hannah.

"Yeah, she seems fine. Now, *I . . .*"

"I hear she's shaved a second off her personal best in individual already. I've said if she stays focused, she can almost certainly take another one off, although of course it won't be as quick as the first improvement. It never is."

She looks at me intently as she talks about Hannah. *Now* I have her full attention. I feel small. I look down at my hands and pick at a cuticle.

"Aaaaanyway, Debs." (Back to me, please.) "It's weird not training every night. I don't really know what to do with myself."

I'm hoping she'll understand and say something helpful. I look up from my hands and all I get is a view of the top of her head. She's checking her email.

"Yeah, my last bunch of burnouts said the same. I think they all got boyfriends!" She laughs as if she's said something funny. I must've missed that part.

"I'm a burnout?" I say, noticing how wobbly my voice has gone. She finally looks up.

"Lou, are you *upset* with me?"

“No,” I lie. “Are you disappointed in me?”

“No,” she lies. “But your turns weren’t tight enough and your backstroke was nowhere up to your usual standard. Your arms just weren’t strong enough on the day. So you got the result you got. You burned out, it happens.”

I stare at her. “OK, Debs, only winners welcome in here. I get it.” I stand up to leave, really slowly, giving her time to yell, “*Lou!* I didn’t mean it to sound like that! Of course I don’t care if you win or lose; we’re pals. I was just being tough love with you because I care and I want to help you get over this.”

I bend down and tie my shoelaces in silence, then retie them because emotional outbursts can’t be rushed. Especially from a woman with the tenderness of a rock. I finally look up and realize that she’s not teetering on the edge of anything emotional—she’s just checking her email again.

Well, this first week at school has sucked, but it has taught me many things:

1. I have no friends.
2. This probably won’t change, as no one in my class likes me, except as a tampon dartboard.
3. I am basically uneducated.
4. I’m *really* good at pretending I’m not about to cry.

I put number four into practice as I leave Debs’s office. I don’t want to enter my homeroom with a wobbling chin and blotchy eyes—“Damn this early autumn hay fever, right?” I don’t want to go home and worry Mom, and I don’t want to cry in public. That just leaves the one place that still makes me feel safe.

I scoot along the corridor to the pool, head down, hoping no adult will stop me and question my loose interpretation of the school rules. I'm glad to hear nothing from the locker rooms and there's no one in the pool, so I'm left in peace to sit on one of the poolside benches and watch the steam floating over the top of the water.

I start to cry, and it very quickly turns into one of those enjoyable sessions. When it's a relief to let it all out and you feel so much better. I think of every sad thing that's ever happened to me and wallow in self-pity.

Once I reach our dog, Mr. Hughes, who died peacefully of fat old age, it's clear I've run out of things to cry about.

After a while I subside into hiccups and dry my eyes. I root around in my bag for a tissue and find an old bathing suit, zipped up in an internal pocket and forgotten. Oh well, I think, it's not like I'll be using this again. So I blow my nose in it.

I feel much better, though I can tell that my face has already gone puffy. I'm such an ugly crier. I look like boiled ham glazed in snot.

I hear a noise across the pool and I freeze, holding the bathing suit/hankie to my streaming nose. Pete is lounging in the open doorway of the swimming pool. I think he's flicking away a cigarette.

I don't want him to see me covered in snot. (Admittedly, who *would* you want to parade your snotty face in front of?)

Cammie appears out of the changing room; she must've had extra training. She gives him an approving look.

"Waiting for me?" she asks, flirty and confident.

"Nope," he says. She smiles; he's obviously joking.

But he looks around as if the person he wants to see isn't there, and heads off down the sloping field to the parking lot. Once he's

there, he gets into an old Mini that I remember him driving when he was at school.

Cammie looks outraged. She obviously can't believe he was that rude to her. I wonder how much angrier she'd be if she knew I'd seen that. I sit very still. *Please don't look back.*

My phone vibrates with a text, and her head whips around to me. She looks embarrassed but quickly recovers. If she were a cat, she'd be popping her claws out.

"Oh my god, are you sitting here *crying* over the swimming pool?" she asks with an incredulous smile. I grab my bag and scramble for the door Pete left through.

It's undignified to run away from Cammie, but I can't bear the thought of being laughed at. I stumble through the door and run down the slope, picking up speed as I approach the parking lot.

I'm running so fast now that I couldn't stop if I wanted to, which is a real shame, because suddenly a car swings toward me as it pulls out of the lot. I try to jump out of the way and land on the hood of the car, sliding all the way across it and landing on my feet on the other side.

I'm OK! I half laugh, half gasp in shock, and look back at the driver. It's Pete. His mouth is hanging open, there's a muddy smear across his hood thanks to Yours Truly's butt, and I think he's going to yell at me. I do the only thing I can think of: I run away.