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Opening extract from

In at the Deep End

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Published by

Barrington Stoke

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For Jill Bubb

First published in 2016 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

This story first appeared in a different form in *In Deep Water*
(Viking, 1992)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-502-1

Printed in China by Leo

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Chapter 1
The Pool

Ben felt nervous as he stepped out of the men's changing room and headed for the big pool. As he walked, he tried to shake the tension out of his arms.

Most of the lanes were roped off, and at the far end, men and women with clipboards sat under a big banner. They all wore the same red Swimathon T-shirts as the pool lifeguards.



Ben took a deep breath and walked along the side of the pool, past the white plastic chairs and up to one of the men.

"Are you the lap counter for the 12 to 14 group?" Ben asked.

The man smiled up at him. "I am. And you are?"

"Ben. Ben Stevens."

The man ticked Ben's name off the list on his clipboard. "So, where's the rest of your team?" he asked.

"They're coming later," Ben told him. "I'm swimming the first 100 lengths and they're sharing the next 100 between them."

"OK," the man said and he waved at the pool. "You're in lane 4. That's the second one from the far side. If you'd like to wait over there."

‘No sweat,’ Ben thought, and he strolled over to one of the chairs. He sat down and draped his towel round his shoulders.

Not that he needed it to keep warm. It was boiling and the air was hot and humid. Ben twisted the red swimming cap he’d been given between his fingers and gazed past the rows of flags hanging above the pool to where the clock hung on the wall. Nearly two. He dropped his shoulders and blew out a few breaths. ‘Relax,’ he told himself. ‘No sweat.’

Just then, pop music began to blare out of speakers at either end of the pool. Ben whirled round and shaded his eyes with his hands. The lights seemed brighter than usual, and there were more of them. Balloons surrounded the baby pool. It was now boarded over, and people were sitting at white tables and chairs on the boards, drinking tea and eating biscuits.

To Ben's surprise his stomach was already fluttering. He mustn't get too nervous. Nerves could wear him out.

To pass the time, Ben decided to size up the teams on either side of his lane. He looked at them as if he was looking with Jack and Harry's eyes, and he couldn't help but smile.

On one side were four young men aged between 16 and 18 years old. A stocky man in his 40s was giving them a pep talk. He was waving a stopwatch around as he tried to rev them up. From the man's peaked cap, Ben guessed they were from a youth club. Boy Scout stuff.

Ben, Jack and Harry didn't need to join a club. They just got on and did things. No sweat. Ben felt very proud just knowing that he was at least four years younger than the youth club lot.

'Just look at them,' he thought, 'hanging on the coach's every word, as if this was an Olympic relay final.'



The young men began to shake their legs and stretch out their arms to warm up.

'Daft that they're all here at the same time,' Ben thought. The ones that were swimming the 3rd and 4th legs would be worn out from watching the others by the time their turn came.

At first Ben couldn't see anyone from the team on the other side of his lane. But when he did, his jaw dropped.

The first member of their team was an old woman with curly grey hair. A wrinkly!

Ben turned away and tried not to smile. He was going to be swimming next to a team of wrinklies! He could hear Jack and Harry shriek with laughter and imagine them crashing their powerful elbows into his ribs.

Ben struggled to control himself. He mustn't start rolling around in hysterics. He'd

never finish swimming even one length if he did.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ben watched her take off a heavy white robe and pull on her Swimathon cap. It was embarrassing to see someone so old in a black swimsuit.