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Emmi banged on the door of my changing cubicle.

'River,' she yelled. 'Come *on*.'

I gritted my teeth and opened the door. Emmi stood in front of me, her hands on her hips. Tall, dark and impatient, the strings of her dark blue designer bikini were looped in artfully casual bows over her slim hips and tanned shoulders. Grace hovered beside her – all fragile and blonde – in a pretty, pink one-piece.

'About time.' Emmi rolled her eyes. 'Everyone else is outside already.'

'Are you okay, Riv?' Grace asked anxiously.

'I can't go,' I stammered, looking down at my plain black swimsuit. 'I look awful.'

'No. You look nice.' Grace smiled at me.

'Forget nice,' Emmi snorted. 'You look hot.'

I stared at her, unconvinced.

'Oh for goodness sake.' Emmi practically stamped

her foot, then dragged me across the damp tiles of the changing room to the low counter with the hair-dryers chained to the walls. She spun me round so I was facing the nearest mirror.

'Look,' she snapped. 'Look at the way you curve: Boobs. Waist. Bum. You're *all* curves, Riv. It's sexy.'

I stared at my reflection. At my straggly hair and ditchwater-grey eyes. Then down to my knees. I hated my knees. 'I look short,' I wailed. 'And dumpy.'

'I give up.' Emmi grabbed my arm. 'Fine. You look short and dumpy. You're coming outside anyway.'

And she dragged me through the chlorinated foot bath and through the swing door into the main pool area.

It was a pool party. Alex, Emmi's boyfriend, was seventeen today and Emmi had persuaded him he should celebrate by getting his parents to hire the swimming baths for a couple of hours. That kind of expense is nothing to Emmi. She's loaded. So's Alex – at least he's always flashing his money around. His parents bought him *and* all his brothers an iPad each for Christmas.

Anyway, it was the end of January and had been snowing since yesterday. Kind of an odd time for a party at the swimming baths, but it was typical of Emmi to suggest something that nobody was

expecting – and that captured everybody's imagination. Her plan was that we should splash about for a bit, then go for a pizza.

The main pool area was loud with excited chatter. Alex and his friends were gathered on one side with a big posse of girls opposite. Emmi dropped my arm and sashayed towards the boys. I scuttled self-consciously behind her, Grace at my side. Emmi went straight up to Alex and slid a sinuous arm around his middle.

'Happy birthday, babe,' she breathed.

You could practically see Alex's chest puffing up with pride as all his friends stared enviously at Emmi. I backed away and slid into the pool as quickly as I could, relieved to be able to hide my body under the water.

Soon Grace's boyfriend – James Malloy – turned up along with more of Alex and Emmi's friends. Most of the boys were now in the water, mucking about or chatting to the girls. Everyone was shouting or laughing. Having a great time.

I swam a couple of lengths, careful to avoid the noisy male wrestling matches that were going on down one side of the pool. Honestly, they were taking up half the water. And why did they have to be so loud? A large group of girls was watching them – throwing out the occasional comment. My

irritation increased. How idiotic did *they* look? All big-eyed and giggling over the stupid wrestling boys. I guess it was really only a typical party. I just wasn't in the mood for all these people. There was only one person I wanted to see. And he wasn't here.

Flynn.

Flynn's my boyfriend. We've been going out for four months, since we met acting in *Romeo and Juliet* at Flynn's school. Emmi says he's trouble. So does my mum. But he's really just kind of intense.

'Oy, River.'

I looked up. I'd been swimming so intently towards the deep end that I hadn't noticed Emmi walking along the edge of the pool beside me.

'What the hell are you doing?' Emmi waved her arms in exasperation. 'This is a party and you look like you're in training for a race.'

I trod water for a moment, gazing up at her. 'I'm fine,' I said.

Emmi grinned and shook her head at me. Alex appeared at her side, tugging at her arm. Emmi winked as she let Alex drag her away.

'He'll be here soon, River. Don't worry.'

I glanced up at the big clock that hung on the wall above the spectator seats. It was almost six. Flynn was still working – he does loads of jobs outside school, trying to help his mum by earning money.

Today he'd agreed to finish early so we could enjoy the party together.

I reached the deep end and turned round to swim another length. There were so many people in the pool now that I had to keep stopping and swimming around them. I nodded every time I passed someone I knew, but I didn't stay and talk. There was only one person I wanted to speak to.

I lay in the shallow end for a while, watching my legs drifting about under the water. Then I slid lower in the water and leaned my head back until I was floating. I closed my eyes and reached my arms behind me to the shallow groove in the pool wall. My ears were underwater. I could feel the vibrations of people shrieking and splashing. They all sounded so far away.

Hands grabbed me around my waist. I flailed out with my arms and legs, trying to resist, but the hands holding me were too strong. They pulled me upright, steadying me while I found my feet on the bottom of the pool.

It was Flynn. He stood in front of me, his hands still on my waist.

'You look like a mermaid,' he said with a grin.

I smiled back. It was like the whole world had been in black and white and now it was in colour. Even the party around us was transformed. The

noisy boys wrestling along the far side of the pool were just having a laugh, while the girls watching them and giggling seemed charming – not stupid at all.

I drew away to look at him. Flynn's tall. Well, tall compared to me anyway. Long and lean and really muscular. I stared at his beautifully toned arms and his fantastically fit stomach. He looked amazing. It's from all the boxing training he does. It's a big thing to him, working out, though I've never really understood why he feels such a strong need to keep in shape. It's certainly not that he's vain.

Flynn was wearing long dark red swimming trunks. They looked great against his skin.

'Where did you get those?' I asked. 'James?'

Flynn nodded. Well, that was no surprise. Flynn didn't have many clothes and those he did own were mostly second-hand and scruffy. He wouldn't accept a loan off many people but James Molloy, aka Grace's boyfriend, was his best friend.

To be honest, sometimes I wondered if he wasn't Flynn's only friend.

'They look good,' I said.

Flynn pulled me towards him again. 'So do you,' he murmured. I shivered at the low, sexy note in his voice and closed my eyes, ready for his kiss.

A tidal wave splashed up over my face. I staggered back, choking, rubbing my eyes. I couldn't breathe. There was water up my nose. Ugh. Laughter broke out around me. I forced my eyes open, though they stung, thanks to the chlorine. Three boys I vaguely recognised from Flynn's class were standing to my right, doubled over with laughter. Had *they* splashed me? No, they were pointing to where the water was churning violently, a few metres away. As I watched, two bodies rose up, out of the waves. Alex and Flynn. Everyone was yelling. Flynn's mouth was open, gasping for air, as he swung his fists at Alex's face. But Alex was too quick. With a roar he ducked Flynn's punch, then reared up and shoved Flynn under the water again.

'Stop!' I yelled.

But the noise in the swimming pool was deafening. I couldn't even hear myself. Heart pounding, I waded towards Flynn. Alex's muscles bulged with the effort of keeping him under. I had to stop him. The water around them was roiling. Panic gripped me. If I didn't reach Flynn soon, he would surely drown.