

BARELY FLOATING

It's time to sink or swim.

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Author of the
Pura Belpré Honor Book *Never Look Back*

LILLIAM RIVERA

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *Never Look Back*, which received two starred reviews, is a Pura Belpré Honor Book, and has been optioned for film by 3Pas Studios and Amazon.

FOR FANS OF *Starfish* and its topics of self-love, body positivity, and swimming.

Lilliam Rivera is a **WELL-ESTABLISHED AUTHOR** whose YA has racked up dozens of accolades and awards. *Barely Floating* is sure to charm middle grader readers with its razor-sharp wit, sidesplitting humor, and a determined protagonist who kids will be inspired by.



LILLIAM RIVERA is the award-winning author of the young adult novels *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, *Dealing in Dreams*, *Never Look Back*, *We Light Up the Sky*, and the middle grade Goldie Vance series. Her work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Elle*, among others. Her novel *Never Look Back* is slated for an Amazon movie adaptation.

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Kokila

KOKILA

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To my synchro water baby, Isabelle

CHAPTER 1



It's 10:30 in the morning, and Roosevelt Pool is packed with people. Big kids. Skinny kids. Babies shrieking because of the cold water while mommies try soothing them with sweet baby talk. Rough kids dunking each other. Girls in long T-shirts, hiding their panzas. Abuelitas sitting on the pool steps, cooling off their wrinkly legs.

Then there's me.

I'm at the far end of the pool. The deep end. That's where the real action is. I'm about to take Beto down. He doesn't know this, of course. Just look at his clueless face, staring out at nothing. Beto is all cheeks, like a chipmunk storing food or like Kiko from that old *El Chavo* cartoon. I'm about to deflate those cachetes with pure muscle. What does El Chavo always say? Beto didn't count on my astucias.

"Hey, Beto, I bet you ten bucks you can't beat me in a race across the length of the pool." My voice is loud enough so that everyone can hear. Beto turns to his group of friends and shakes his head.

“Dude, your sister,” he says to Ramón. He laughs off my challenge.

“Nat’s not playing,” Ramón says. “She means business.”

There are three boys in my family: Ramón is the youngest. Julio, the oldest, is married with a kid on the way. And Raymundo is attending college in Santa Barbara. Ramón is in high school, and so is his ugly friend Beto. Beto is on the water polo team. I’m not on any team. I’m just here to make money.

“Ten bucks says you can’t beat me.”

I lean back against the pool deck. Those around me chuckle or shake their heads.

“Why can’t you just chill for once?” Sheila says.

Sheila is my cousin. Technically, between her and Ramón, they’re supposed to be taking care of me. “Taking care,” however, is forever in air quotes. It’s hard to contain a person like me—especially when you grow up in a house full of stinky, loud boys. Sheila doesn’t get it. She’s an only child who loves clothes and Fenty lipstick.

“Me and you, swimming across the pool,” I repeat. “You know how to swim, right?”

Last week, I made an even twenty bucks outswimming twins. The twins were running their mouths about how there was no way a gorda could swim the full length of a pool. There’s always someone underestimating me. They see my stomach rolls and think, “She can’t possibly be

physically fit.” When I emerged victorious, the twins had no choice but to pay.

Beto looks nervous. If he doesn’t take the bet, he’s a punk. If Beto agrees to race me and I end up beating him, which I will, what does that make him? So much is weighing on those balloony cheeks.

“From here to the full length of the pool,” I say. “C’mon. What are you afraid of?”

The crowd around us grows. I look over at my best friend, Joanne, who sits in our shaded spot reading *Summer Hero*, volume two of the manga series Kurahashi. I haven’t had a chance to read that one yet. I always get the manga after Joanne finishes, and then we dissect every little detail in the story. Joanne shields her eyes now and gives me a timid wave.

“Fine, but I’m only doing this to teach you a lesson,” Beto finally says.

Teach me a lesson? Even Ramón laughs at this statement. Beto hasn’t been around my house much, nor around me. He doesn’t understand that I’m like a shark, relentless. When I was seven, I sold chicles to the kids in my class until another mom told my mom. At ten years old, I found a way to teach kids curse words in different languages. A dollar a curse word. That lasted for a couple of weeks. Now that I’m twelve, I understand the importance of using my skills. I’m fast. I can beat anyone in this pool if I set my mind to it.

Sheila tries to be the timer. No way. I don't trust her. Besides, it's not a good look for family to be involved in business. Instead, I hand the honors to a boy with shaggy curly curls covering most of his face. He parts his hair away from his big eyes. Good. He'll do.

"On your mark," Shaggy Boy says.

Kids slap my shoulders. Girls giggle. Some of them think I'm cool to do this. Others think I'm too much. I'm not doing this to please anyone. I'm doing it because I can beat Beto.

I pull down my goggles.

"Get set."

One more glance to Beto. He's laughing. He thinks this is a joke. I'm going to win.

"Go!"

I propel my legs against the wall and shoot out like a rocket. The start of any race is the most important part. I glide underwater for as long as I can until I have to break the surface for air. Professional swimmers always do that. One quick gulp and I turn to Beto. He's up ahead, but not by much.

Okay, time to catch up.

My arms are like octopus tentacles, stretching as far as they can. I scoop up water and direct it behind me. I kick my legs hard. Every stroke is important.

In this pool, I'm a swordfish. I'm a mermaid. I'm an underwater speed demon.

And this demon is about to take Beto down. Too bad, so sad.

A quick look. Beto is slowing down. He's about to get beat by this twelve-year-old. Where has his training from water polo gone? He finally notices me. We are neck to neck. I bet anything there's fear in Beto's eyes. I dig deep and find the last burst of energy to seal this deal.

And *boom!*

I tap the end of the pool. Beto pulls in seconds later. The crowd around me cheers. I never get tired of this, the part when I'm victorious, when I'm able to prove the haters wrong. "Never underestimate the power of a Latina"—that's what Mom always says. Dudes are always trying.

Poor Beto. He's breathless, practically hyperventilating.

"I won!" I jump out of the water and point to my empty palm. "Pay me!"

"No way," Beto says, pushing my hand away. He's barely able to form words. "I'm not paying you."

"Pay me! I beat you." I don't like where this is going. If you lose, you have to be a good sport. Besides, this is business. "Everyone here is my witness. I beat you fair and square."

Beto tries to brush me off. The crowd eggs him on. They call him weak. How can you let a kid beat you? You let a girl win. I don't care if he's in his feelings right now. I won without any tricks. It was just me in the water.

“You owe me ten bucks,” I say. “Give me my money.”

Beto, along with my brother, walk over to where Sheila and her friends hang out. They try to ignore me. I will not let up. Beto can't renege on this deal.

“I'm not leaving until I get my payment.” I stand in the middle of their group, right on some girl's towel. I'm a Taurus, and we're known for our willingness to get into people's faces. I will not move from this spot until Beto places some crisp bills on my hand. The girls complain about me standing on their towel. Beto pleads to my brother.

“That's enough, Nat,” Ramón says. My own blood is not even willing to back me up. Honestly, what's the point of having brothers when they won't stand up for what's right?

“Go play with your friends,” he says.

“No,” I say.

If Ramón won't help me, then I'll have to get ugly. I jump on Beto. “You owe me.”

Beto doesn't know what to do. He knows well enough not to hit me, but he also doesn't want his eyes scratched out. So there is a whole lot of awkward wrestling going on.

“Give me my money!” I yell. Beto is obviously stronger, but like I said, I'm a shark. I will not stop.

“You have an interesting sister.” I overhear a girl say to Ramón.

I peel myself off Beto and turn to face the girl. “Well,

you have an interesting *face*,” I yell. If she wants in on this, I will gladly include her. Before I can jump her, my brother pushes me away from the group.

“Go away, Nat.” Ramón has Mom’s face. The serious, not-in-the-mood-for-this face. I head to Joanne, who places an arm around my shoulder.

“I can’t believe it!” I say. I’m so angry.

“You can’t win them all,” Joanne says. She tries her best to protect her manga from getting wet.

“Of course I can win,” I say. “Mom says if I work hard enough, I can do and be whatever I want. Beating Beto was just a tiny part of today’s goal. Besides, if I don’t get paid, then everyone else will think they can do the same. Know what I mean?”

Joanne gives a slight nod.

“Sure, but there will be other chances to make money,” she says.

I love Joanne, but honestly, I wish she could see things from my point of view. Joanne doesn’t like confrontation, which is funny because confrontation is basically how we met. It was in first grade at Sagrada Corazon Elementary School. A sweaty boy in our class kept pulling Joanne’s hair. The teacher did nothing. Instead, Ms. Castro said this weird thing to Joanne, like, “He probably likes you.” I couldn’t stop thinking how Mom says, “Your body, your permission.” So when the boy decided to touch Joanne’s hair, I grabbed his hair and wouldn’t let go. Mom was

called in. The incident brought a quick end to my Catholic school days. It was worth it.

Joanne eventually ended up in the same middle school as me, and we've been best friends ever since. I'm always ready to defend us, no matter what, and Joanne would rather hide behind a book and wait things out. Somehow, the relationship works.

"You should have seen his face. He couldn't believe it," Joanne says. "Anyway, we have more than enough money."

It's true. I'm saving money so we can go to the big anime con on October 30. For the past two years, Joanne and I have attended and cosplayed our favorites. Because Joanne's parents don't believe in spending money on "dumb" stuff, I save enough for both of our badges.

"I want to make sure we can buy cool manga at the con," I say. "Beto's going to pay. I just have to figure out how."

"Oh, here you go." Joanne digs through her tote and pulls out a brown paper bag. She hands the bag to me.

"Yes! You remembered!" I give Joanne a side hug and quickly pull out the latest issue of *Vogue*. Although my fingers are dry, I still wipe them off on the towel, just in case. Manga is really Joanne's scene. I just like the cosplay because I get to wear really awesome costumes and makeup, which Mom only allows for the con. Mom thinks girls don't need to wear makeup to feel empowered. It's

the reason why I hide the *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines I ask Joanne to buy for me. Mom hates those things. She thinks they add to self-esteem issues and a “distorted view of the body.”

I understand what she means. I do. I just wish Mom could be more understanding. Every time I try to state why I love makeup and fashion, she shuts me down with big words and statistics. She’s really good at winning arguments. It’s hard living in a house where you have to outsmart the smartest woman on earth. I really just like pictures. I can’t wait to go through this issue. I’m starting to feel a little bit better.

Joanne returns to her reading, and I try my best to concentrate on the fashion candy before me. I hear Beto’s cackle. He needs to pay. It’s not over until I say it is.

Christian the pool manager interrupts my scheming. “Everyone, we have a special treat today. The city’s only Black-owned synchronized swimming team is here to give a short demonstration.

“Synchronized swimming,” I say loudly. “What’s that?”

“Just you wait,” Christian says.

The pool-goers are reluctant to get out of the deep end, but they eventually do. A group of six swimmers wearing matching electric-blue swimsuits march across the deck like soldiers. The swimmers are all different shapes and sizes. They look older, like high schoolers, but there’s one who looks about my age.

Christian gives a thumbs-up, and music starts to play. It's Beyoncé's "Break My Soul." Then the swimmers do the wildest thing: They jump into the water and start to dance. Actual dance. Hands up in the air. Wrists snapping. One swimmer slightly lifts another by the waist. The swimmer who is lifted waves to the crowd like no big deal. There are more twirls and leg lifts and all kinds of cool movements timed to the song. I can't believe it!

The crowd claps and sings along. The swimmers go underwater and kick their legs straight up at the same time. Heads turn to the left, then to the right. The music reaches its climax and the swimmers dive deep into the water. There's no sign of them. It seems like we are all holding our breath in anticipation. I know I am. Then she pops up. A sole swimmer, standing on the shoulders of another. She's the one who looks like my age, and here she is being lifted straight up high. As if that's not amazing enough, she smiles before doing a flip in the air. A FLIP!

In all of my twelve years of life, I've never seen anything like this. Ever.

"Wow," I say.

"Wow," Joanne says.

The swimmers pull themselves out of the pool and then stick their hands up at the same time and wave. One of them addresses the crowd.

“Hi, my name is Yvette, and I am part of the L.A. Mermaids, an artistic synchronized swimming team, but you might know the sport as synchronized swimming. If you’ve ever wanted to learn how to dance in the water, we will be holding assessments next week. You don’t need experience. You just need to have basic swimming skills. There will be flyers up on the bulletin board with a number to call if you have any questions. I hope to see you there.”

Synchronized swimming team. How cool is that?

“That was amazing,” I say.

“Yeah,” Joanne says. “It probably costs lots of money.”

Maybe it does. Maybe it doesn’t. I’m here for being the center of attention. To be strong and beautiful while dancing in the water. To be lifted up to the sky. You probably have to be so fit to do the things they did. Imagine dancing in the water.

Before I head home, I make sure to grab a flyer.

CHAPTER 2



The only good thing about growing up with a bunch of boys is I get my own room. My sanctuary. The sign attached to the door actually reads NAT'S DOMAIN. No one is allowed in unless they knock—even Dad respects my space. He always uses a special knock. He bangs to the rhythm of an old hip-hop song called “La Di Da Di,” like he’s doing right now. His tapping allows me more than enough time to hide the new *Vogue* issue. God, I love the looks this month. I tuck the magazine into my hiding place between the mattress and the box spring.

“Enter,” I say.

“Reina, breakfast is about to be served.” Dad always calls the women in our house queens. He’s really into compliments and positive reinforcement. He wears an East Los Angeles College T-shirt. He owns way too many of them. My guess is they’ve given him one every year he’s taught there.

I sit at the dining room table while Dad serves me French toast with a huge glob of melting butter in the

center. Saturday is the only day Mom sleeps in, which means Dad is in the kitchen doing what he loves to do: cooking. Breakfast is his specialty, so weekends are the days he goes all out. How lucky am I to wake up to bacon sizzling and extra-syrupy French toast?

Ramón saunters in with his usual explosion of curly hair. When we walked back from the pool yesterday, I wouldn't let up about his friend Beto owing me money, to the point where Ramón handed me five dollars to shut up. I reminded him the bet was for ten, but at least I got paid something.

“Good morning,” he mumbles, and joins me at the table.

I live for mornings like this one. I love knowing Mom is sleeping in her bedroom, not stressing about the next important meeting she has to attend or the pile of work she has to tackle. I like how Ramón has a sleepy face and electric hair. And I like how happy Dad gets eating his French toast.

Joanne's family is not like this. Her father has been in and out of their lives ever since she was a baby. Her mother works at a factory in Vernon. There's never enough money. That's why I always bring a little extra money with me whenever we meet at the pool, just in case Joanne wants to eat a bag of potato chips.

It's not like my family is rolling in dough. We're not, although my parents make sure we get to do the things we like.

“Joy is revolutionary.” Another one of Mom’s favorite lines.

While we talk about our plans for the rest of the day, we hear the bathroom door shut. Dad heads to the kitchen and soon returns with glasses of orange juice for Ramón and me and a large mug of black coffee for Mom.

Mom.

She’s wearing an ELAC T-shirt, too. It’s so oversized, it’s a minidress on her. Even though she just woke up, Mom radiates. Her long wavy hair is up in a messy bun. Her glasses are nestled atop her head. Her complexion is only slightly sun-kissed. I think my favorite Mom is this Mom. The one in a tee and not in a suit. The one who doesn’t have her cell phone stuck to her hand. The one who isn’t in front of a microphone about to give an angry speech.

Mom ruffles my hair and gives Ramón a kiss on the forehead.

“Good morning, my loves,” she says. “I feel like I haven’t seen you both in forever.”

Mom works as an administrator at ELAC. She’s also involved in what seems to be a part of every single community-run organization. There’s always a meeting or an action. A local newspaper ran a feature on her. They called her the Energizer Bunny of East L.A. Mom complained to the newspaper about them equating her to a bunny, but I think she secretly liked it.

“Mom, I beat Beto in a race yesterday. The full length of the pool,” I say. “It was easy.”

“She also tried to extort money from him,” Ramón says.

Dad hands Mom a plate of scrambled egg whites with a slice of avocado. She gives me a disapproving look, the one I always seem to get. “Nat, we talked about this. No gambling.”

“I’m not gambling. I’m betting them that I can beat—”

“Same difference,” Ramón interrupts.

“No, it’s not.”

Why is Ramón defending his dumb friend instead of praising me for outswimming him? Why does he always do that?

“Enough, please,” Mom says. “First, I’m glad you were able to teach Beto a lesson on gender roles. However, there is no need for you to do so for money.”

“Yes, there is,” I mumble.

“Excuse me?” she says.

“Mom. I consider his payment to be a contribution to my, um, like a scholarship to those who can’t afford to attend cons.”

I am almost certain she loves my answer because she’s trying really hard to hide her smile behind the coffee mug. Ramón shakes his head.

“No more gambling.”

“Yes, Mom,” I reluctantly say. I wish Mom would understand my point of view. It’s not gambling. I’m getting

paid for educating Beto. It's services rendered.

"Besides that, what is going on?" Mom says. "Ramón?"

Ramón is spending this summer taking an online course on creating video games. Plus, he's in a band (he plays keyboard). Ramón is similar to Mom in that they are always working on five hundred things at once.

"Is it okay if Sheila takes Nat to the pool and back?" Ramón asks. "I was hoping to catch up on some of my work from the course."

"Hmm, I don't know how I feel about that," says Mom. "We agreed you would earn money this summer by being in charge of Nat. Laying the burden on Sheila just because she's family is not fair or what we discussed."

Mom has her business voice on. She does this even with me. I think she doesn't feel Sheila is a good influence on me. I like Sheila, though. I can talk to her about makeup, which is especially important when I'm not even allowed to wear lip gloss.

"It's not for the whole summer—just when I'm behind," Ramón says. "I will pay Sheila out of the money I get from you."

Dad joins us at the table. "I'm okay with it."

"Do I get a say in this?" Dad and Mom look over to me. Sometimes I feel as if I'm a small bullet point in their large schedule of life. Ramón hates me because he's the last of the boys and stuck with me. I just want to be free to do whatever I want—earn money, look at my magazines,

and talk to Joanne. And try to avoid getting into trouble. “Why can’t I just go to the pool by myself? I know where it is. Joanne and I can walk there together.”

Mom and Dad smile.

“Nice try,” Dad says. “You’re too young.”

A ding goes off on Mom’s phone. That’s it for our family reunion. She has to get ready for a meeting about an upcoming rally. Mom gulps down her coffee and gives Dad a long kiss. Ramón makes a gross vomiting noise. I don’t. My parents are in love. I think it’s nice. After they kiss, I follow Mom to her bedroom.

“You okay, fierce one?” she asks as I plop myself on her bed.

Mom and I have very different shapes. She’s thin, while I’m a gorda. There are times when I feel people judge us, as if they think I should be as thin as Mom, as if my weight is some sort of failure on her part.

One time at a community action to save a park, I went up to the food vendor to order a second helping of tacos. They were delicious, and I wanted more. I had my money. The lady, for whatever reason, said this to me: “No tacos for your mom? You don’t have a problem eating. Ah! You’re eating more than enough for both of you.” Then she patted her belly while looking at my stomach.

She was joking, I guess. I’m fat and proud, but something about the way she talked to me made me doubt things. I was in such a good mood until her words started

to poke at me. I sat down next to my mom and just stared at my plate. I didn't feel like eating anymore. Mom knew something was wrong right away, but I didn't want to tell on the lady. Why was I protecting her? I guess maybe I thought she was right, that I was eating too much.

"Fierce one, what's wrong? Did something happen?" Mom asked.

"No, just that . . . the taquera said something, you know, about me eating for both of us. She was trying to be funny," I said, feeling shy and uncomfortable. "It's okay. I'm not really hungry."

"Oh? Come with me." Mom took my hand and walked right up to the woman. "Don't you ever make my daughter or anyone else feel bad in regards to their eating. She's her own person and she doesn't have to look like me or anyone else."

The taquera was insulted at first. "No pasa nada," she said, not really looking at us. Mom stayed calm. She didn't raise her voice once. Plus, she did it all in Spanish. "My daughter is beautiful," Mom said. The taquera nodded. "Now, please apologize to her." The woman was slightly annoyed, but she did say sorry. Mom is pretty badass.

"What do you think about synchronized swimming?" I ask now, from her bed.

Mom barely looks up from her phone.

"Do you mean synchronized swimming, like Esther Williams?"

“Esther Williams? Who is that? No, I mean like dancing in the water. Girls doing the same thing at the same time.”

She takes a sip from her favorite mug. The mug reads GREATEST CHINGONA OF ALL TIME.

“In the fifties, Esther Williams popularized synchronized swimming in the movies,” she says. “It’s very beautiful and glossy, but I think the sport overlooks strength for stylized costumes and streamlined bodies. Go look at some videos and you’ll see what I mean.”

Mom always talks to me like an adult. Class. Body positivity. These are important topics in this house. What she doesn’t know is that I spent last night looking up synchronized swimming videos, and I couldn’t stop playing them over and over. The sequins. The wild makeup. The expressions. It was awesome. I guess I should have known Mom would think there was something demeaning about dancing in the water in public. I still like it, though. Does it make me less of a feminist if I like something so pretty?

Mom continues to get ready for her meeting.

“Anything else you want to tell me?” she asks.

“Nope. Just that it was fun beating Beto, that’s all.”

She laughs, shaking her head a bit.

“My rebel,” she says, hugging me. “Have a good day. Make good choices.”

I head back to my room.

Now to find out who Esther Williams is.

CHAPTER 3



I'm on my third viewing of the old movie *Million Dollar Mermaid*. Now I understand what people mean when they say a movie was made in Technicolor. The colors are so intense, it's as if the movie people decided to use a special filter to make them super vivid. As for the costumes, I've never seen anything like them. It's all so extra. *Extra extra*. I love it.

Esther Williams is the star and she's wow. It's exactly like what those synchronized swimmers did in the pool the other day, but way more intricate. The swimmers look like a gang, a gang of girls ready to out-flip whoever dares approach them. Imagine being in the middle of those girls. Me, in the center of a circle of swimmers.

I stand in front of my full-length mirror. It's been a while, but I think I can still do a split. I do a couple of quick stretches and then start to slowly lower my body.

When I was in third grade, I bet this girl Rosa her school snacks for a week if I could do a complete split. She said my stomach was too big, there was no way I could be

so flexible. She said girls like me couldn't even touch their toes. I didn't even hesitate. I dropped right down on the cafeteria floor. For a whole week, Rosa forked over a bag of chocolate chip cookies every day, just for me.

"What are you doing?" Ramón asks. He just entered my room without knocking, which is a huge violation.

"Get out!"

"Sorry. We need to go. Please, Nat, for once, will you work with me?"

Because he apologizes, I let the trespassing infraction pass. I dust myself off and gather my things. I really need to work on my split. I'm too rusty. Ramón waits by the door.

"What's the big rush?" I ask.

"Band practice and homework. Sheila is going to look after you."

My brother's band is called the Boyle Heights Brothers. I've heard them play before. They aren't very good. I think they're going for an old-school vibe like Chicano Batman minus the matching suits. Dad thinks they have talent. Then again, Dad wants Ramón to live out his own rock and roll dreams.

"Hey, did you know Esther Williams was from Inglewood?"

Ramón has extra-long legs. It's hard to catch up to him while he walks. We first have to head over to Sheila's house. We'll pick up Joanne on the way to the pool.

“Who?”

“Esther Williams, the synchronized swimmer. She was big in the fifties.” I pull up an image I saved on my phone. Ramón takes a quick look.

“She’s pretty,” he says. “Why Esther Williams?”

The cool thing about Ramón is even when he’s slightly annoyed about being stuck with me, he doesn’t always treat me like the plague. Sure, he didn’t stick up for me with Beto, but that’s not always the case. There was that time I almost came to blows with my next-door neighbor. The boy insisted on calling me Natalia instead of Nat, even after I corrected him multiple times. I guess one day I wasn’t having it and I lost my cool, but before I did something I would really regret, Ramón took the boy aside and explained the importance of names and naming. The boy shrugged and apologized. Ramón is pretty calm, like my dad. I could use some of that. I need to learn how to be a bit more diplomatic.

“No reason. I just think it’s cool. Kicks and jumps in the water,” I say. “Mom thinks it’s too belittling to women. Synchronized swimming, that is.”

Ramón chuckles.

“Yeah, well, Mom thinks everything is questionable. Remember when she wouldn’t let me take you to watch the movie *Coco* because she thought the afterlife shouldn’t have any borders or border patrolmen?”

It took a while for Mom to give in, but eventually she let

us watch *Coco*. I liked the film, but it's hard to completely fall in love with something when someone points out a wrong in it.

I keep sharing Esther Williams trivia and Ramón doesn't seem to mind.

Sheila wears the reddest lipstick ever. It makes her lips look like stop signs. Her tank top is blue and her cut-off jeans barely cover her nalgas. I'm kind of in awe. Ramón's friends always follow Sheila around like puppies.

"What's the name of your lipstick?" I ask her.

"It's called Stunna."

Stunna. Imagine having a job where you come up with names for lipsticks. I would be so good at that.

Ramón hands money to Sheila, and we head on our way to pick Joanne up. Adventures at the pool. I only hope there are new victims I can take on. There's money to be made today. I feel lucky. I can feel it in the air.

"Ever heard of Esther Williams?"

Sheila shakes her head. "No, who is Esther Williams?"

I go on about Esther Williams and how she couldn't make it to the Olympics. Instead, she ended up training alongside the guy who played Tarzan on television. Someone noticed her swimming skills, and she joined the Aquacade, a synchronized swimming team.

"Then a movie guy discovered her and put her in films. Pretty cool, huh?"

Sheila eyes the picture on my phone. I can tell she likes

it just like me. Sheila and I are alike. I need someone on my side who loves fashion and beauty as much as I do. She knows about my stash of magazines. To avoid getting busted by Mom, I hand them over to her when I'm done. Sheila's mom is not like my mom. She allows Sheila to wear pretty much whatever she wants. Sheila has kissed boys before. She's cool.

"For today, do not get into any fights," Sheila says.

"I can't promise anything."

She shakes her head. "There's going to be a time when you will no longer feel the need to fight."

I can't stop laughing. Mom says we are in a constant struggle, and I'm born to be a warrior. A WARRIOR. Also, I don't view my confrontations as fights. I view them as misunderstandings and teachable moments.

"You ever been in a fight?"

Sheila flips her hair. She spends a lot of time making sure her hair is blow-dried straight. It would be a dream to be able to commit to beauty every morning like Sheila, but Mom would never allow it. If Mom would let me, I would spend so many hours figuring out what to wear and doing my makeup. If only.

"Yeah," she says. "Her name was Brenda. She kept talking about me at school, so I had to put her in her place."

See. Even Sheila can't deny that teachable moments have to be forced.

“I ended up suspended from school *and* punished at home.”

“*But* it was worth it,” I say.

“No, it wasn’t it. Brenda still talks about me behind my back. It didn’t stop her. Haters will continue to hate,” Sheila says. “If they’re talking about you, it only means they’re jealous. Don’t forget it.”

I guess she’s right. Sometimes I don’t like it when kids call me names. The only thing that stops their dumb mouths from going on is a fist. My skin isn’t thick enough. Words hurt.

“Hi, Nat!” Joanne says.

Only Joanne would bring a heavy bag filled with books to the pool. She’s gearing up for the con, reading up on everything, including everyone who will be attending. She also studies which booths will be giving out freebies so we can scope them out first. Today we are deciding which panels will be worth attending. The conference is not until October, four months from now, but it never hurts to be prepared. Besides, I have to figure out what I will wear. The costumes take time to create.

“I feel lucky today,” I whisper to her. Joanne never joins me in my bets. Joanne is way too shy for any of my business propositions. She’s good for advice, though, and I go to her for everything.

“I have to tell you something,” Joanne says. This doesn’t sound good. I feel my nerves tighten.

“What’s going on?”

“Mom was let go at her job.”

Man. The worst news ever. Joanne doesn’t cry, but it looks like she’s about to. I place my arm around her shoulders. Her bag is so heavy. I take it from her and carry it.

“I’m so sorry. What is she going to do?”

“Look for another. Dad left early this morning, but I heard them arguing. They want me to try to find a way to make money.”

Make money? How can Joanne get a job? There are laws against kids our age working.

“How?”

“I have an aunt who just had a baby. I’ll probably have to help her with him.”

“But what about our summer? The pool? The con?”

Joanne wrings her hands. I know enough to stop talking, because although this is the way I deal with things, I think things out loud, this only makes her feel worse.

“Hey! I have more than enough saved to take care of us at the con and whatever else we’ll need,” I say. “Things will work out.”

Joanne nods. Money woes are a heavy burden for anyone to deal with. I wish someone could sponsor her life. I make a note in my head to ask Mom about possible jobs. Mom is a great connector of people. I’m sure she will know someone. I don’t want to spend this summer without Joanne by my side.

We arrive at the pool and she drops the subject.

Inside, Sheila places her towel in a shady part. The pool is its own world. The abuelas are ready to take a water aerobics class with Flavio. I notice Beto chatting up some girl. I give him the stink eye.

That's when I spot her. My next victim. The girl is probably a couple of years older than me. The girl is white, so she sticks out more than most people. It's okay. I don't discriminate when it comes to making money. When she enters the pool, she casually swims across. Her strokes are a little on the lazy side.

I swim over to her and give her a nod.

"Hi," I say. "You want to race?"

I ask her this quietly. There's no need to alert the masses. Sometimes business interactions can be done on the hush.

"Sure."

We do a lap and I let her get ahead of me. I want her to believe she's a better swimmer. We race again and she beats me by only a few seconds. The third time is when I lay out the rules.

"I think I can beat you. Want to bet?"

The girl eyes me with apprehension.

"Ten bucks. Swim the full length of the pool. Want in?"

A few minutes later, the girl hands me the crumpled ten dollars. She's not like Beto, who is a sore loser and will never amount to much of anything because of his weak

self. Or at least it's what I want to imagine. I hand the money over to Joanne, who places it in her bag. I scan the pool for another person to race.

"Who's that talking to Sheila?" asks Joanne.

Sheila is arguing with a boy. Oh no. I don't like the way he keeps pointing his finger at her face. Joanne and I walk over.

"Why you being such a b—?"

That's it. The one word I cannot stand. I don't care how big he is, how old he is, or whatever. He doesn't get to call my cousin the B word. Before Joanne can even try to stop me, I'm in the guy's face.

"How dare you!"

Maybe I'm in my feelings about Joanne. Maybe I don't like the way this boy keeps calling my cousin disgusting words. I don't know what comes over me, but all I see is red. I jump him and start pounding. The boy is on the floor. He tries to protect his face, but I am using him like a punching bag. I'm giving him everything I got.

Someone drags me away. There's a crowd now. When I look over at Sheila, I expect her to be happy. I'm defending her. But no. The look she has is far from happiness. She's pissed because I did the one thing I wasn't supposed to do: I got into a fight.

CHAPTER 4



Roosevelt Pool is off limits to me for a whole week, maybe even two. Christian the pool manager actually wants to kick me out for good. Sheila tries to convince him otherwise.

“There’s no fighting here. You know better than that,” Christian says. We are in the pool office. “How long you’ve been coming here? Since you were barely walking. Your parents used to hang out here. Your grandparents. How do you think they would feel knowing you out here fighting people?”

My grandmother’s nickname was Shorty. They called her Shorty not because she was short, although she was. They called her Shorty because she had a short fuse, as in she would blow up really quickly. Her real name was Natalia. I’m named after her. Although I was very young when she passed away, I’m almost a hundred percent sure she would have done the same thing.

“What about him?” I point to the boy who is getting a

talking-to at the far end of the room. “What happens to him?”

“See? This is the problem,” Christian says. “You shouldn’t worry about what happens to other people. Keep your side of the street clean.”

I like Christian because there were times when he let me come in to the pool right before it opened. Joanne and I had full access to the whole place. Of course, right now I can’t stand his guts because he is not listening to me. The boy was disrespecting my cousin. I had to do something. Didn’t I?

“What am I supposed to do with her for a whole week?” Sheila says. “This is our only outlet. “

Christian is not budging. Not one bit. This isn’t the first time he’s had to call me in to his office. I don’t understand why today is different. Usually, he would just give me a good talking-to and send me home to return the next day.

Maybe if I start to cry. If only I can be like those tele-novela actresses who can squeeze out the tears at the drop of a hat. I try to think of all kinds of sad things, but nothing works. It’s probably because I still want to punch the guy.

Outside, Joanne presses her face against the window. She uses her book to cover her head from the glare of the sun.

“Why do you have to make things so difficult? The guy is an idiot. I was handling the situation,” Sheila yells. “I

didn't ask you to come over and hit him in the head. Did I?"

No, she didn't ask, but I've been taught that every single person must defend those who are defenseless. Also, family before anything. However, I know well enough to keep quiet when Sheila gets like this. Anything I say or do will only anger her more.

Sheila pleads with Christian to let us back in. They take their conversation over to the side, away from me.

The boy who called Sheila the B word is about to leave. Sheila and Christian are too busy with their talk. I look over at Joanne. She can tell what I'm thinking, and she vigorously shakes her head.

I don't care. I walk over to the guy anyway.

"You better stay away from us. The next time I won't be so kind."

He doesn't say anything.

"Nat!"

Oops.

"Get over here!" There is nothing Stunna about Sheila's expression right now. I grab my bag and follow her as she storms out. Joanne trails slightly behind.

"Why? Nat, why?" Sheila says. Her arms flail about as if she is delivering an important speech. "I asked you not to fight and what do you do? What am I going to say to Aunt Angela?"

The solution is simple to me: Don't tell Mom. She

doesn't have to know what's going on. Not at all.

Sheila stops in front of the Artic Hotspot Café, then goes in. Joanne and I wait outside.

"She's really mad," Joanne says.

"Yeah."

"Have you been trying the meditation app?"

The last time I got into a fight, Joanne took it upon herself to send me a bunch of links to articles on how to manage your anger. The meditation app was one of the suggestions. I tried it. The woman's voice was way too suspicious-sounding. I kept thinking how I didn't trust her. Now, if the app came in my mother's voice or someone who sounds like me, then maybe.

"I think my situation is beyond the help of an app." I'm starting to feel the weight of my actions. I wish I could be like Joanne. Why can't her quietness rub off on me? Why do I always do things without thinking them through first?

"What should I do?"

"Well," Joanne says. "You have to say sorry. First, make sure you understand why you are apologizing. Sheila can tell when you're lying."

Joanne is right. Sheila can smell when I'm putting on an act.

"C'mon." Sheila exits the store and heads to the park. The heat is really soaring now, and I wished more than anything that I was in the cold, chlorine water.

Sheila plops down on a bench and angrily sips her juice. We sit in silence. In the quiet, I can see where I went wrong. There's no pause button. I immediately react. Dad says it's because I haven't learned how to filter myself. He thinks that will come with experience and age. I'm almost twelve. If I'm not filtering myself now, when will I be?

Joanne nudges me.

"Sorry, Sheila." I mean it, too. My anger always finds a way of getting me in the worst trouble. "I didn't mean for us to get kicked out of the pool. I should have minded my own business. The guy wasn't talking to me. I need to keep my side clean, like Christian says."

Sheila was basically the first girl in our family. She once told me Mom used to baby her like she was her own daughter. When I came along, Sheila did the same to me. I was her doll until Mom didn't appreciate the overly feminine dresses Sheila insisted I wear.

She lets out a long sigh.

"That idiot's been asking me out for days. When I finally told him I wasn't interested, he played himself. Men can be so predictable," she says. "I'm glad you hit him, just not glad you got busted for it."

"Do you have to tell my parents?"

Sheila pulls out her mirror and reapplies her lipstick. I can't wait until I will be able to do the same.

"What am I going to do with you?" she says. Sheila

won't rat me out. A true cousin through and through.
"You're too much."

"Maybe if you would do some chants, we wouldn't be in this predicament," Joanne says.

Joanne shows Sheila the meditation app. Sheila can't stop laughing. She taps the app and places an earbud in her ear. The other one she gives to me. I listen to the voice. It's so hard. I just want to run up and down the park. I want to scare the pigeons. I want to go down the slide.

"Close your eyes, Nat."

"What if someone walks behind us and tries to scare us."

"Close. Your. Eyes."

I finally shut them and try my best to concentrate on what the suspicious voice says. It's hard to quell the noise in my head, but I give it a chance. Really listen to the words: "As you breathe, just feel your body soften. Notice the feeling of your body, your weight pressing down on the seat. Notice the sounds around you. . . ." We stay like this for what feels like an eternity. How are people meant to stay calm? If anything, I feel extremely nervous and wired. When the session is done, do I feel changed? Not really. I guess I should try to do it every day. I don't know.

"Now what?" I ask. It's still too early to go home. Sweat is pooling on my neck. I don't want to go home, and I can tell Sheila doesn't want to go, either.

“Screw it,” she says. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” Both Joanne and I say this at the same time.

“Ouch!” I scream when Joanne punches me on my arm to break the jinx. “So where we going?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sheila says. “Follow me.”

Before we know it, we are boarding the bus heading to Exposition Park. We’re taking a total detour and I don’t know what to expect. Joanne and I giggle as we follow Sheila.

When we arrive, we press our faces to the gate. Although I’ve been to the nearby Natural History Museum, I’ve never been to the Exposition Park pool. The place is way bigger than Roosevelt. There is an Olympic-size pool with a splash pad for kids and so much room.

We join a line of people waiting to pay admission to get in.

“This is going to be good,” I say. Joanne agrees.

Sheila pays the entrance fee and we enter. We walk over to the front desk to ask for information from the pool clerk, who has super-short hair and a nice smile.

“Are you sisters?” the pool clerk asks.

“No. Cousins and friends,” Sheila responds. “It’s on me to take care of them.”

“Cool. Well, there’s always something happening here. You won’t be bored,” she says. “My name is Kim. Let me know if you need anything.”

Joanne and I spend hours in the splash pad. I think we

are totally regressing—to the point the little kids give us side-eye.

“Do you think Sheila will bring us here for the rest of the week? Roosevelt doesn’t compare at all,” Joanne asks.

“Who knows? Maybe she wanted a change,” I say. “I’m fine with that. Okay, I got to pee.”

We walk back inside and use the restrooms.

“Are you hungry?” I say. “I’ll be right back.”

While Joanne is in the bathroom, I explore. There are a bunch of pictures taken from when the Olympics were held here. Swimmers in their retro bathing suits. It’s just like in those Esther Williams films. I wonder if she ever took a dip here. I can imagine the crowds of people cheering on the swimmers.

I find the vending machines and buy a couple of chocolate bars. One for Joanne. One for me. I walk over to the bulletin board and spy a familiar bright-orange flyer.

The L.A. Mermaids practice here. How freaking cool! Today didn’t turn out to be totally crap. The flyer also states the time of their next meeting. **ALL ARE WELCOME** is written in bold letters.

“You need to be in good shape to be able to do that.” The man’s voice comes out of nowhere. I try to ignore him, but he won’t stop talking.

“It’s a whole-body sport,” he continues. “You must be able to swim and dance and be strong.”

I turn to him. The man gives me the up and down, but the funny thing is, both of our bellies stick out. Maybe he thinks just because I'm fat, I can't do it.

"Are you in charge of the team or something?" I ask.

The man shakes his head. "I've been going to this pool for longer than you've been breathing," he says. "If you are even considering joining the team, you got to stop eating those."

He points to my chocolate bar. So rude. Out of spite, I take a big bite, then I snatch the flyer from the bulletin board and stomp over to the front desk.

"Can I go to this meeting?"

Kim reads the flyer and nods.

"Of course you can. It's tomorrow, upstairs in conference room B," she says, and then leans in. "And don't listen to him. All he does is swim one lap a day and spend the rest of his day giving advice. He swears he's a better swimmer than Michael Phelps."

Jerk. At least I didn't do what I normally would, like throw the chocolate bar in his face. The meditation app must be working.

I go looking for Joanne and shove the flyer in her face.

"This!"

She reads it. "What does this have to do with me?"

I point to the guy who is about to do his one lap.

"He thinks I'm too fat to join the synchronized swimming team," I say.

“What do you care what he thinks?” Sheila says.

Sheila or Joanne don’t get it. Although I’ve never met this random person before, he’s issued me a challenge. He doesn’t know this, but he did. He thinks I can’t do it. I am here to prove him and every other guy that I can.

“You’re not going to join the team, are you?” Joanne asks.

Joanne’s giving me a worried look mixed with a little excitement. Out of everyone in the whole wide world, Joanne knows all too well that something is about to happen. She can feel it. So can I.

“Why?” I ask. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“I know you can do it,” Joanne says. “That’s the problem.”

“The meeting is tomorrow. We are coming back tomorrow, right, Sheila?”

Sheila presses her Stunna lips together. Kim from the front desk walks past us and gives us a nod. Sheila smiles at her.

“Maybe.”

Her maybe is a definite yes. We’ll be back. And tomorrow, I will check out the L.A. Mermaids.

The guy does his one lap and starts to guzzle down a Gatorade bottle as if he completed a swim competition.

Just you wait, Mr. So-Not-Michael-Phelps.

CHAPTER 5



Last night I dreamt I was wearing an Esther Williams getup, the one in the final swim sequence of the mermaid movie. In the dream, Esther Williams decided to hand over the spotlight to an unknown swimmer, a brown girl who never stepped foot into a pool before but for some reason was a total natural. I, of course, was the brown girl. Everyone told her she was making a mistake. No one wanted to see this fat girl in the water. The other swimmers complained how they didn't want to lift me. It didn't matter. Esther Williams was adamant. I was going to be the one.

On the verge of tears, I decided to go on with the show. Before I did, I gave this amazing speech about loving your body. The haters started to cry from emotions. Then we did our perfect water dance and they lifted me up in the air. I was a total perfect ten.

Unfortunately, I awake not in an Esther Williams sequin outfit, but in my messy room.

The meeting for the L.A. Mermaids is today. Restless

butterflies invade my stomach. It's the same feeling I get before the first day of school, but way more intense. I get up from under my pile of clothes and start to get ready.

"Did you get kicked out of the pool yesterday?"

Ramón corners me on my way to the bathroom.

"Not necessarily." I need Ramón to keep this conversation on a whole other level of quiet.

"Beto said you were fighting a guy and Christian blacklisted you."

"His facts are wrong. It's not what happened."

Ramón pulls me into his room. Unlike my room, where it's an explosion of crap everywhere, Ramón's room is immaculate. Nothing is out of place. I sit down on his desk chair.

He turns the chair to face him. "Spill it."

"C'mon, Ramón, this is silly."

He crosses his arms and glares. He's not fooling around. I have no choice but to tell the truth.

"I got into a fight and Christian kicked me out for a week," I say. "The cool thing is I downloaded this great meditation app, which I will be using every day from now on. I swear. Problem solved."

Ramón and I like to attend MMA fights. In fact, we have tickets to a bout in a couple of weeks. Dad likes the fights, too, but not Mom, who only approves "fighting the man." So maybe there have been times when Ramón has taught me some wrestling maneuvers. Maybe we've looked up

YouTube MMA moves and practiced. Technically, my fighting stems from these things. Don't they? Isn't he a bit to blame for my maladjusted ways?

"Don't worry. Sheila took us to the Exposition Park pool," I say. "It's all good."

"This wasn't what we agreed on. If Mom finds out about Roosevelt, we're both going to get in trouble."

I don't see how my getting blacklisted from the pool affects his world. Sheila is still taking care of me. I haven't even had a chance to tell him about the synchronized swimming team yet. Ramón stresses out too much. Everything will work out. My dream was a definite sign.

"It's only for a week. Please don't tell her."

Ramón grabs my shoulders.

"Will you take a breather before reacting? Pause."

"Pause," I say. "I promise."

Before I came along, Ramón was the baby of the house. He said when I first arrived from the hospital, the first thing he asked Mom was if they could exchange me for a boy. I think he's held on to that resentment.

"I'm going to be playing my first gig," Ramón says while he gathers his stuff. "Gotta practice every chance I get. With work and summer school, there isn't much time."

"Are you getting paid?"

"Exposure."

Exposure? Who does anything for exposure? Ramón needs a manager, someone who can look out for him.

“I can help you get exposure.”

“No!” he cuts me off before I continue. “Nat, I know you mean well, but why don’t we stick to the things we need to do this summer—you staying out of trouble, and me finishing this summer course. Deal?”

“Sure, big brother.”

I decide not to tell Ramón about the meeting. There’s no point. He asked me to pause, and in doing so I didn’t find any valuable reason to tell him. Besides, I probably won’t be able to join the team, so there’s no point.

Today Sheila’s lipstick color is called Ya Dig. It’s this intense blue. Instead of letting her long hair down, she has it in two French braids. To match her lips, she wears her cutoff jeans and a blue tank top.

“Where’s your sidekick?” she asks.

Joanne’s babysitting gig starts today and there’s nothing I can do about it. I told her I needed her for the meeting, but she couldn’t come.

“Joanne is not my sidekick. We’re equals,” I say.

“Okay, what’s going on? Are you upset or something?”

My tone is off. I guess I’m angry. I wish Joanne was here and not babysitting. I wish money wasn’t ever an issue in her life. I wish I can win the lottery.

“Sorry. I must be nervous.”

“Nervous, you? I can’t believe what I’m hearing. This is the same girl who outswims everyone, young or old. The same girl that not two days ago defended me from

some loser. Just jumped right in,” she says. “You’re pretty fearless. Just remember, try not to punch anyone.”

I don’t necessarily feel fearless. Although my mother is all about empowering me, I’m still filled with doubt. Mom tells me to use my rage to get what I want. It doesn’t work all the time.

A couple of years ago, there was an incident at school. A group of kids decided my name was going to be Fat instead of Nat. Pretty clever, huh? I tried my best to ignore them. It was tiring to hear them call me that, even in whispers. So instead of wearing my normal uniform of the tightest clothes, I started to wear oversized shirts. It was a dead giveaway that something was wrong.

At dinner, Mom, Dad, and Ramón asked me what was up. I tried to keep it to myself. I even got mad at them. I told them not everything can be fixed with a fight. Sometimes I just want to be left alone.

“Never allow others to silence your beauty and your strength,” Mom said. “They don’t get to win. We do.”

Soon after, the school was notified. Parents called in. It was kind of a big deal. Still, in a tiny spot hidden way inside of me, I feel maybe I shouldn’t always be so in your face. I don’t know. With Ramón telling me to pause, Sheila telling me to stop, and Joanne with her meditation app, signs are pointing me to practice taking way less space.

“Sheila, what if they say I can’t join because of, you know?”

Sheila stops walking. She turns to me and I can see a little of how we are related. I mean, she's light-skinned, not dark like me, but we have the same eyes and nose.

"Do you want some lipstick?"

I feel like bursting out of my body. Yes, I want to feel Ya Dig. Have my lips painted blue like a science-fiction road warrior.

"I'm only going to put a little bit. Just enough to be noticeable, okay?"

When she's done, I stare at my reflection using my phone. "Fearless" is the word that comes to mind.

The conference room is located upstairs on the second floor. Joanne said I should walk in with a pen and a notebook so I look professional. The only notebook I could find has a picture of Justin Bieber on the cover. I have inked an anime hairdo on him because no one should judge me for being a Belieber way back when.

Outside of the conference room are a bunch of girls. The L.A. Mermaids. A few of them are braiding each other's hair. Others are listening to music on their phones. One of them nods a hello to me. I nod back.

"Okay, Joanne, I'm going in. Wish me luck," I text.

Joanne sends me a whole bunch of emojis before I turn on the Don't Disturb on the phone.

I peek inside the room. There are barely any chairs left. Mothers, some with their younger kids, occupy most of the seats. I hold tight to my notebook and walk in.

“There are seats in the back.” A young woman motions to an empty seat. Before I go, she also hands me a stack of papers. Schedules, rules, the history of the team. Another woman moves her handbag from a chair and I sit down.

“As I said, welcome to all the potential new L.A. Mermaids and returning families. My name is Renée Williams, and I’m the founder and owner of the L.A. Mermaids artistic swimming team,” she says.

Renée is Black, tall, and wears a bright orange T-shirt with L.A. MERMAIDS on it. Her arms are muscular like an MMA fighter’s, and I wish mine looked just like that. But I’m confused.

“I thought it was called synchronized swimming?” I call out. “Am I in the wrong room?”

Renée chuckles. “No, you’re not. In 2017, the Swimming Federation changed the name, but between us, I sometimes call it synchronized swimming. Okay, let’s move forward. There’s a lot to cover.”

Thank goodness. For a second there, I thought I was in an art class. Moments later, a tall, lanky boy walks into the room and sits beside me. He looks about my age.

“I like the blond tips in your hair,” I say. I do. It’s pretty cool. I went through a period of wanting to dye my hair purple or blue, but natural is always best, Mom says.

“Thanks.”

His mother, or I think it’s his mother, shushes him.

“Last year was one of our strongest competitive years. This year, we will be including trips to San Diego, Arizona, and of course, the goal is to make it to the Junior Olympics. And we’ll do it! I feel really good about it.”

A young woman beside her translates what Renée says into Spanish. Renée explains how she started synchronized swimming when she was seven years old. Seven years old! I wonder if she had a pool in her house. How else would she be able to practice?

While Renée prepares to go over another topic on her agenda, I look around. The adults are from all backgrounds. Latines. Blacks. Asians. It’s a real mix.

The boy next to me doodles a tiny sketch of the coach right beside his notes. The drawing is pretty good. His notes are so neat, too. I should probably take notes.

“Are you joining the team?” I whisper.

“Maybe,” he says. “My name is Daniel.”

“Hi, I’m Nat. Nice to meet you.”

His mother also shakes my hand and introduces herself. She’s way younger than Mom.

“Is your mother here?” she asks.

“No, she couldn’t make it. She’s busy.”

The mother nods in understanding.

There’s a handout for each topic Renée talks about. I try my best to keep up. Swimmers must be between the ages of seven to nineteen. There will be a Saturday dedicated to testing the levels of swimmers. I wonder

what level I would be. I'm fast, but I don't think I can do those underwater flips or ballet legs or whatever other stuff Renée talks about. Sometimes she uses terms I've never heard about, but others in the room seem to get it. Synchronized swimming is a whole new world and one with its own language.

Then Renée comes to the part I was waiting for—money talk.

“Once you pass the assessment, we'll have another meeting to go over monthly dues and fees. I hope to see you this weekend.”

What? I was really hoping she would cover numbers. I can't really make a commitment if I don't know how much it's going to cost. After about an hour and a half, the meeting ends. Renée is surrounded by people asking her questions. I need to get my question in there, too. I shove myself to the front of the crowd. A couple of the adults look annoyed, but who cares. I need to know about the money.

“Excuse me. Excuse me, Miss.”

Renée finally notices me.

“Hi. I saw you walk in,” she says. “What's your name?”

I tell her my name and she asks if I'll be at the tryouts.

“Maybe, but first, how much is this going to cost?”

Renée laughs. “Tryouts are free. The other costs we will have to go over, once you get on the team.”

I don't know. I'm not feeling good about this. I like

things to be spelled out, especially when it comes to money.

“Just take a chance,” Renée says as if she’s reading my mind.

I still need to know if this team is legit.

“Do you know who Esther Williams is?” I ask.

“Of course I know who she is,” Renée says with a grin. “But have you ever heard of Anita Alvarez? She competed in the 2016 Olympics, and she’s Mexican American.”

My eyes practically fall out of my head. A Latina.

Oh, it’s so on.