The Strongest Swimmer

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The chlorine always stays in your skin, no matter how hard you scrub. By fourth period, when the classroom gets warm and the air goes still, I can still smell the blue-water sting of the 5:00 AM squad training session on my wrist.

“Hey, can you help me with question six?” Sarah leans across the aisle, her maths book propped open like a tent. She gives me that look, the one that says she already knows what I’ll say.

“Yeah, of course,” I say. I force a smile into my cheeks. It’s a practised reflex now, like breathing to the left every three strokes. I pull her book towards me, trace the numbers and explain the formula. My voice sounds bright. It sounds like a girl who gets straight As, the girl who never misses a homework deadline, the girl who everyone calls the ‘dependable one’.

Sarah beams, “You’re a lifesaver.” She doesn’t see that I’m the one who needs saving.

When you’re a really good swimmer, people won’t notice when you are drowning. They don’t look for the splash; they don’t look for a hand reaching out of the dark. All they see from the shore is a person who always smiles, makes others laugh, and keeps moving forward. Nobody actually notices the real you; the one behind closed doors at 9:00pm, staring at a blank bedroom ceiling while your chest feels like it’s being crushed by a concrete block.

My phone buzzes. Then it buzzes again. A flood of notifications from the group chat pops up.

Are you coming to the movies on Saturday?

Can you look over my English draft?

Could you help me with my maths homework?

Ask her, she always knows what to do.

I type out quick, bubbly answers. I add the funny emojis. I hit send. I’ve become so good at hiding the exhaustion that it’s become second nature, the mask I learnt to wear before I even got time to memorise my year 7 timetable. I am the ‘helpful friend’. The one who always shows up. The one who carries everyone else’s bags, listens to everyone else’s problems, and keeps my own locked in a box at the bottom of the pool.

“Everything alright, sweetheart?” my Mum asks later that evening, peeking into my room. She looks tired from work, so I instantly pull the mask back on.

“Perfect,” I say, flashing a grin. “Just finishing off some history notes.”

“You’re amazing,” she sighs happily, closing the door. “I never have to worry about you. You’ve always been so strong.”

Her words are meant to be a compliment, but they feel like heavy weights tied to my ankles, pulling me down into the deep end. Because nobody thinks to ask if you’re struggling when you let yourself fail. After all, I’m the one who handles everything. The one who figures it out. The one who never seems to need help.

But nobody seems to realise that the strongest swimmers are often the one who suffer in silence the longest. We don’t swing our arms. We don’t scream for help. We just get better and better at treading water, keeping our chins just a millimetre above the surface, hiding how tiny and tired we feel underneath the waves.

The next morning at 5:30am, I stand on the diving block. The air is freezing. The pool looks dark and scary. My coach yells, “Go!” I dive in. The water hits me like a wall. For just a second, while I am completely underwater and no one can see my face, I let the fake smile drop. I let myself cry into the pool. I let myself feel completely tired. But then my head breaks the surface. I take a huge breath, look at the wall at the end of the lane, and start to swim.