

## A Stroke of Kindness

By Mary Ann Koontz

“Duck, airplane, soldier.” I repeated the instructions to myself. Struggling to move my arms and legs in one smooth stroke, I bent them up like a duck, out like an airplane, then straight down like a soldier. I glided across the crystal blue water on my back, wondering if I was still headed in the right direction. Suddenly, I bumped into my instructor, Kim.

“Good,” Kim congratulated me. She touched my shoulder with a tanned arm, and I felt for the bottom of the pool with my tippee toes. Kim’s blond hair, tied up in a ponytail, swished with every turn of her head.

I liked her already. She was always smiling, not like my swim instructor I had last year. That one was tough.

“Now try the crawl stroke back to the side, Alissa.”

It was only the second day and Kim knew all eight of our names. I was impressed. I’ve lived with my parents for nine years and they still call me by my sister’s name half the time.

I swam back toward the edge of the pool, lifting up my head too much, but habits are hard to break. The smell of chlorine hung in the air as I grabbed the side.

“Okay, Meg, it’s your turn.”

I bobbed up and down and watched the new girl to my right. She came late, two days into the lessons, and looked like she’d been asked to jump from a twelve-story building.

“I c-can’t,” Meg stammered.

“It’s alright,” Kim said. “Just relax and when you feel like trying, swim out to me.” Then Kim called for the boy next to Meg to continue.

While Kim was busy with him, another boy, Brian, began making chicken noises. “Bawk, bawk, bawk,” he clucked. It was just loud enough for Meg to hear, but not the instructor. I knew Brian from school, and his favorite hobby seemed to be making fun of others.

“I think the aqua babies have room for one more,” he teased.

“Knock it off, Brian,” I told him. Last year it was my stomach in knots at swim lessons. I don’t know why, but I did better when I was by myself.

“If you close your eyes and pretend we’re not here, it might help,” I offered to Meg.

After a minute, she shut her eyes tight, wrinkling up her whole face. With a deep breath, she flopped onto her back and pushed off, moving gracefully.

“That was great!” Kim applauded Meg. “Now crawl stroke back.”

Meg closed her eyes again, gulped some air, and shoved her face in the water. I saw the long, smooth strides and the timed breathing of someone who belonged on a swim team.

“Way to go,” I told Meg as she wiped the water from her eyes with both hands. Meg grinned and I saw Brian’s mouth hanging open.

Just then, Kim called Brian’s name, but he didn’t move. Instead, he bit his lip and looked down through the water at his feet.

After waiting another uncomfortable minute, Meg finally leaned near him and whispered something in his ear. Was she giving him a taste of his own medicine? After all, who could blame her?

Slowly, Brian turned and faced the side of the pool. At first I thought he was going to be sick, but then he looked at Meg and squeezed his eyes closed. Releasing his tight grip on the pool’s edge, he floated on his back and began making strokes, sending ripples through the water that touched us all.