

LIMITED TIME

Excerpt

Whenever Leah Tanner felt exceptionally nervous, the fine blond hairs between her eyebrows stood on end. As she walked toward the starter's block to take her mark in the finals of the hundred-meter butterfly, the downy hairs were fully erect. Aware of the idiosyncrasy, she stopped momentarily, ran her hands across her eyebrows, and looked out into the packed three-thousand-seat University of Colorado aquatic center until her gaze stopped on her father. Nathan Tanner was seated in the same front-row seat he had occupied during three days of the U.S. Olympic team's swimming and diving trials. Anthony Rontella, Leah's boyfriend, was seated next to him. Watching Anthony wink and her father wave, Leah dropped her hand, smiled back at them briefly, and then continued walking, trying not to think about the intermittent back spasms she had been having.

She had beaten every one of her competitors at least once during her collegiate career, and she knew that she only needed a second-place finish to be guaranteed an Olympic spot. She had already won the two-hundred-meter butterfly, and she had a lock on at least one other relay race. If she won the current race, she'd be a shoo-in for a second team relay race, and then Anthony's three-gold-medal mantra might actually become a reality. Her nervousness had less to do with winning the race or three gold medals than with the mysterious back spasms she had been experiencing. She hadn't had a spasm in hours, but she remained concerned because the last time one had surfaced she had been exhausted, and now, after the semifinals, she was nearly dead on her feet.

She stared down at the slick ivory-colored tile, ignoring the possibility of a spasm and thought about how far she had come. There was hardly a trace of the reticent twelve-year-old who, after her mother had died of a massive stroke following a New Year's Eve party, had for years trailed her powerful corporate-lawyer father around in his downtown Denver 17th Street high-rise offices after school and accompanied him on business trips halfway around the world. There was little remaining evidence of the girl who had cried herself to sleep every night for years, begging God to return her mother to her side. Years of counseling had helped with bouts of anorexia, and then, at just the right time, Anthony had entered her life. Her metamorphosis now almost complete, she watched the water slip between her toes and tried to relax, telling herself that she had absolutely no reason to be so concerned over a simple muscle cramp.

Her arms dangling loosely at her sides, Leah shook her hands back and forth vigorously in an effort to release any remaining unfocused energy. Glancing up one final time at the partisan local crowd, she wondered how she would be received by the Australians at what Anthony was calling her Olympics. She was still pondering the question when the familiar baritone voice of the race starter announced, "Swimmers, please move to your starting blocks."

Immediately she climbed up onto her starting block above lane two, well ahead of the rest of the swimmers. Blocking out the crowd noise, she waited for further commands from the starter. When she heard the familiar call, "Judges and timers ready," her earlier unsteadiness disappeared and a surge of calmness swept through her body.

"Swimmers, take your mark."

Leah bent into her starting crouch, arms swept behind her, her toes gripping the edge of the starting block. The noise of the starter's gun and her smooth entry into the water were nearly simultaneous. By the time her first powerful half-dozen strokes cut into the water, she knew she was on a record pace. She made it a rule to never look for other racers until she had completed her first turn. Another half-dozen strokes and she was ready for the turn. She eyed the pool's bulkhead, made her turn, and was halfway into the second twenty-five yards of the race before she surveyed the lanes next to her and realized that she was half a body length ahead of everyone.

Her lead held coming out of the second turn and through the entire third lap, but her lungs began to burn and her head started throbbing when she completed her final turn and broke for home, a full body length ahead of her competitors. The crowd was screaming, most of them on their feet and out of their seats as they sensed that Leah was about to shatter the NCAA individual medley record. Nathan Tanner and Anthony Rontella were shouting, arms extended in the air, as Leah devoured the last fifteen meters of the race.

As Leah tagged the bulkhead, the time clock on the wall above the judges froze, brilliant orange, its numbers recording a new NCAA record. Groggy and spent, Leah rested her head against the pool's gutter, gasping for air. Without warning, a spasm of pain filled the small of her back. Panting, she reached for her back as the painful knot exploded, doubling her over. She told herself, Relax, but she couldn't. Suddenly a phlegm-rattling cough rose from the depths of her stomach and her eyes rolled back in her head. Rubber legged, she lost her grip on the side of the pool and slipped beneath the water.

Anthony was over the first-row railing and racing for her by the time the two swimmers in the adjacent lanes realized that Leah was in trouble. Grabbing her by the arms, they struggled to keep her head above the water. A corkscrew of pain shot down her spine as a surge of fluid burst up from the pit of her stomach. Fuzzy-headed, she told herself that throwing up was something that sometimes happened after an energy-expending race. A second muffled gurgle brought up not stomach contents but a gush of blood. The two swimmers at her side screamed and Anthony jumped into the pool.

By the time a hysterical Nathan Tanner reached poolside, her coach, Ellis Drake, had helped Anthony pull Leah from the water. Blood streamed from her mouth as she jerked in a series of uncontrollable convulsions. Two paramedics raced toward her, one carrying oxygen and a crash bag, the other pulling a collapsible stretcher. As Anthony and Nathan Tanner leaned over her convulsing body, Leah stared up into their faces with a terrified look that begged for an explanation.

"Paramedics are on the way," said Anthony, water dripping from his face onto Leah's.

"Hang on, baby," said Nathan Tanner, his ashen face drained of blood.

When Leah's eyes closed and the puzzled look on her face began to fade, Anthony stood up and screamed, "Hurry!" But by the time the paramedic with the oxygen knelt down to probe for an airway, Leah Tanner was already dead.

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