Fearless

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Fearless

Adventures with extraordinary women

BLOOMSBURY SPORT
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY SPORT
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2023

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3994-0118-0; eBook: 978-1-3994-0120-3; ePdf: 978-1-3994-0119-7

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Cover photographs courtesy of Louise Minchin, with the exception of:
Front cover – James Appleton (top), Vivienne Rickman (bottom left).
Back cover – Vivek Khanzode (right).
Author studio photograph by Rachel Joseph.

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd., Croydon, CR0 4YY

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To the many courageous women whose stories are yet to be told, and to my own fearless friend Jay, without whose support and encouragement this book would never have been written.

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Fearless – The Back Story

It is 5.16 in the morning. I am balancing a bowl of congealed porridge in my left hand, juggling a pile of scripts in my right. I have to be dexterous, taking care not to drop the 40 pages because that will waste precious time. And time is not on my side.

The sheaf of paper is a printout of my briefing notes, packed with information which I need to speed-read for a dozen different interviews by 6 a.m. I am aware in the back of my mind that around six million people will be watching me presenting *BBC Breakfast*. As always, I need to get this right. The pressure is on.

The selection of guests and stories is pretty average for the show, something I am familiar with after nearly 20 years of waking up and going to work at 3.40 a.m. An interview with a government minister, an item on wind farms, 10 minutes with an '80s popstar making a comeback – and at the end, a classic, a programme perennial, an uplifting interview about a fearless endeavour.

Those stories are always my favourite part of the show.

This morning, it's about a brave man attempting to climb a mountain in his bare feet.

And that's when it hit me!

I surprise myself, saying out loud: 'Not again! What the actual hell?' (I've toned the swearing down; this is a book!)

Liz, who has expertly and with infinite patience been trying to do my make-up while my eyes flick across the words, asks: 'Are you OK?'

'No, I'm not, I've had enough! I cannot interview yet another man about his adventures! What about all the women doing incredible things? The fearless females? Why don't we talk to them? Why aren't they on the sofa being interviewed? Why don't we hear their stories?'

That was the moment for me, the moment I decided to write this book. I was fed up of being complicit with the narrative that it is only men who deserve to be celebrated, only men who are brave, only men who stretch the limits of what is humanly possible. I was done with telling only one side.

Why? Because being talked about and being seen matters. If you don't hear it and you don't see it, how can you be it? We need equal representation. I had to write this as a journalist, as an endurance athlete and as a mother to two daughters because, with respect to all the men I have interviewed, women and girls need heroes too. Heroes who look like them. And by the way, I'd argue that men like to hear the stories of heroic women too!

I had already fought and won some important battles for equality during my TV career, including a bruising and long-winded fight to get paid the same as my male co-presenters sitting next to me.

The other battle was to make sure that women presenting *BBC Breakfast* were allowed occasionally to lead the programme. I had noticed that almost every day my male colleague was given the prestigious task of saying hello at the top of each hour, introducing the programme, doing the first interview.

Once I had noticed how often it happened, I couldn't unsee it. Why was it happening? Why was I always the second person to speak, even though I was older and more experienced? What message did it send to all our female viewers? That I wasn't as

important as my male counterpart? That I was second fiddle? That I didn't deserve to be there? What implication did that have for their own lives, and their own careers? I thought it was unfair, unequal and also immensely damaging.

So, I set out to try and change things, gently at first. I asked our (mostly male) directors if maybe, every now and then, I could start the programme? Ask the first question? Take charge of the most important story of the day? Some let me, others didn't. When they didn't, I asked why.

The most coherent answer they had was this: 'Because this is the way we have always done it.'

There it was: age-old, systemic discrimination built into the fabric of the programme.

For the next three months I took notes of dates and times, who did which interview and when. My hunch was right: it was almost always the man who took the lead. Armed with the facts I arranged a meeting with my boss at the time, which went like this.

'I have noticed that my co-presenter almost always seems to do the first interview of the day. Could we change it so I can do it occasionally?'

'That's not the case. They don't.'

I knew him well.

'I thought you might say that, so I've made notes. We can do one of two things. I can show these to you, and you can change it. Or you believe me and just change it?'

He never asked for my notes, and from that day on it was set in stone: every other day, the woman on the sofa was allowed to lead the programme, to be in charge.

I believe passionately that what you see in front of you matters: it shapes your view of the world and your value in it. That is why I was so incensed that the same thing that had happened to me was happening with one of my favourite parts of the programme. Almost every story about a bold or brave adventure starred a man.

That moment in Make-up, when my eyes were opened to the repeated pattern, galvanised me. I decided right then to go on a mission to find the women who were fearless, the women who were intrepid and courageous; those women whose stories had seldom been told; whose achievements had barely been recognised; and who had never had the opportunity to grace the famous red sofa and inspire us by sharing their experiences.

I would find them, talk to them, celebrate their stories.

As soon as I started, I was inundated with examples of courageous women from hugely diverse backgrounds. Undaunted women taking on awe-inspiring challenges: climbing the highest mountains, running superhuman distances, swimming in shark-infested waters just for fun and setting Guinness World Records while they did it. And doing this without praise, without accolade, without headlines or front pages, just because they were badass enough and fearless enough.

To get to the heart of who they are, and what motivates them, to be able to tell their stories better, I decided to do it the way that I know best, by taking part, spending time right beside them to experience the things they love.

Each chapter is dedicated to a different courageous woman and a different extraordinary adventure.

I have feared for my life while cycling across Argentina. I have gone freediving under ice in the pitch dark in Finland. I have found myself covered in mud playing rugby in the rain in southwest London. I have re-enacted the dangerous escape from Alcatraz and swum to San Francisco.

The women in this book have taken me far out of my comfort zone. It has been a roller coaster, both physically and emotionally. It has been exhilarating, inspiring and, sometimes, terrifying. I have learned so much, I have forged firm friendships and, best of all, I have been able to witness first-hand the indomitable power and tenacity of the female spirit.

This book is filled to the brim with inspiring stories of their endeavour, endurance, and bravery. *But* these fearless women are not alone. There are many others who deserve to be celebrated; many more than I can't fit into the pages of this book; many more that I would have liked to meet.

There are 18 women here. Follow their lead. Be inspired.

This is just the beginning.

18 extraordinary women, 17 incredible adventures…

1

Anaya and Mitali Khanzode

Escape from Alcatraz

San Francisco

I feel like a really common misconception is we're fearless and we're not scared. I feel like we are scared.

I'm trying with all my might to pull myself through the choppy grey water, but the skyscrapers on the distant shore stay resolutely as far away as they were when I held my breath and jumped feet first off the side of a ferry. And now, even as I try to focus on them, the fog clinging to the city threatens to make them disappear. I am using every ounce of energy, breathing hard every second stroke, but it feels as if I am making no progress at all. I feel like I am stuck, going nowhere, unable to escape – as in one of my recurring nightmares where, despite all my increasingly desperate efforts, I can't get to where I want to go.

Something soft brushes gently against my left calf, almost caressing it. I think it must be another swimmer struggling as I am in the vast bay, but it feels different to the grasping hands

I am used to pulling at my feet in the washing-machine start of a triathlon. Different to the rough and tumble that is so familiar. I roll over onto my back to see if the person – I assume it is a person – who touched me is OK. There is no one behind me. Instead my view is filled by the foreboding sight of an inhospitable island. It is dominated by the shell of an imposing but dilapidated three-storey building. Perched in front is a lighthouse jutting out over the rocks, precariously but perfectly placed to warn passing shipping that this is a dangerous place, there are fast currents that can kill.

One glance at the distinctive rocky outcrop would tell you this is Alcatraz, America's infamous maximum-security prison where some of the most notorious gangsters, including Al Capone and Machine Gun Kelly, were incarcerated. Its fearsome reputation was immortalised by Clint Eastwood in the 1979 film *Escape from Alcatraz*.

The film is a dramatised account of an audacious attempt to escape from the penitentiary in June 1962 by Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin. Over many months they hatched an elaborate plan to crawl through the air vents at the back of their cells, leaving dummy heads made of plaster and real human hair for the guards to find in their empty beds. After climbing through a ventilator shaft, onto the cellhouse roof, they shimmied down the bakery smokestack making their way to the shore. There, in the dead of night, they launched a makeshift raft, fashioned from stolen raincoats, into the water. They were never seen again. Whether they made it to safety is still a mystery. Investigators found debris of their raft and a packet of letters sealed in rubber, but their bodies were never recovered.

Right now, I am attempting to do what they tried to do: escape from Alcatraz and make my way to San Francisco but without the help of a raft.

Alcatraz is located on what is called The Rock, a site chosen to make its prisoners feel both psychologically and physically isolated. They were so close to land that when the wind was right they could hear laughter spilling into the night from the New Year's Eve parties in the Bay. A chill went down my spine hearing that on the island yesterday. It seems like an especially cruel kind of separation: to be so near but yet so far from freedom.

Right now, that's how I feel: isolated. I have no idea where my two companions are. We had braved the 1.8-metre leap off the deck of the Red and White ferry within seconds of each other, but fighting the current, in the choppy dark water I lost them as the horn sounded to mark the start of the race. They are nowhere to be seen in these relentless, nausea-inducing waves.

I knew it would be unlikely we would stay together. Anaya Khanzode is a world-class swimmer and had told me that she would make a break for it and try to get out ahead of the group, all 200 of us. Mitali, her older sister, is fast too but said she would be more likely to stay mid-pack. Right now, there seems to be no pack at all – or if there is one, I am not in it. I seem very alone in this expansive waterway, and after that brush on my calf, I am trying not to imagine what other creatures might be keeping me company in the water.

Of the infamous legends of Alcatraz, one of the most repeated, is that it is surrounded by shark-infested waters, a terrifying prospect. I know that sharks live here, and tried to calm my fears via Google. According to what I can find, it is shark *inhabited*, rather than *infested*. There have been no reports of attacks on swimmers for many years. Which seemed reassuring enough when I was safely at home researching on my computer, but not so reassuring now that I am all alone floating in the middle of an expanse of very deep and very dark water.

Both Anaya and Mitali admitted they have similar fears.

As we huddled together on the stone steps of the stands overlooking the circular bay of the Maritime National Historical Park, Anaya told me:

'It is really hard not to think *What is under me?*, because you can't see anything. I feel like a really common misconception is we're fearless and we're not scared. I feel like we are scared.'

Mitali backed her up. 'Yeah, we just hide it a lot better, we have irrational fears and there are things that can put us off. Like last time I swam there were lots of jellyfish. They don't sting or anything, they are moon jellyfish, but don't worry, they shouldn't even touch you. We never even see them.'

At the time of this conversation, I was sitting wrapped up in my dry robe ahead of the swim beside the two of them. The mention of jellyfish did nothing to calm my rising nerves, nor did Anaya's next comment.

'I'm much more scared of hypothermia because that's a very real thing that could happen. I think to myself, *OK, a shark is not going to bite me*. You know what I mean? But I could very easily get hypothermic. We take it really seriously, because we swim skins. So, if we are cold, we are, like, *we're getting out*. If I can't move my fingers, I know I am too cold.'

I am taking no chances with hypothermia today. I am not doing this swim in skins; I haven't trained enough in cold water. *Skins* means that all they will be wearing for the challenging crossing is a swimming costume and a hat. By contrast, I am zipped into a wetsuit that covers me from my wrists to my toes. It should be more than enough to keep me warm. The water today is expected to be about 17°C, a similar temperature to the sea in Cornwall in the summer – and cold enough to take my breath away. Not something I want to experience today.

Mitali and Anaya didn't always swim in skins. When they first started on their open-water journey, they had to wear surf wetsuits, because they were so young that they couldn't find triathlon or swimming wetsuits small enough to fit them. Anaya was only 8 when she swam her first Alcatraz, and Mitali 10. When I meet them, they are 17 and 20 respectively – and Anaya has done the swim we are attempting today 77 times and Mitali 76. She missed one of the races last year because she had COVID.

Since they first started training with Water World Swim, they have gone from strength to strength and are now both accomplished long-distance swimmers. Three years ago, in tandem, they swam the challenging 16-kilometre Strait of Bonifacio between Corsica and Sardinia. It took them four hours, 25 minutes to navigate strong currents and vicious stinging jellyfish. Anaya has recently swum 17.7 kilometres across Lake Tahoe which, because it is at altitude, makes the distance even tougher.

I ask Mitali what persuaded them to start their swimming careers here in San Francisco, tackling one of the most infamously dangerous bays in the world, over and over again.

'I think it is the reputation that comes with Alcatraz, the prison, the escape attempts, the prisoners disappearing. It's the backstory. The reason they built a prison on Alcatraz was so no one could escape, and if they did, they would die. It is kind of awesome to be able to say I have done that not once, not twice but multiple times. I think once you have swum Alcatraz you have earned a lot of bragging rights. There is something iconic about its shock value.'

The girls are accompanied today by their mother, Leena. She is a bundle of enthusiasm and infectious positive energy, and I realised she was their mum when I saw her giving generous greeting hugs to friends. This is obviously a close-

knit community. It feels warm and welcoming, as if I am in the middle of a huge extended family. Leena and her husband Vivek moved to America from Nagpur in Central India in the 1990s when they were in their early twenties, and they have lived here ever since.

Her daughters having a passion for swimming was something Leena never imagined. 'I am terrified of water. I used to take Mitali swimming when she was three or four years old, and she absolutely refused to get in the water. She had the same fear as I did, and we sat on the side of the pool for more than a month, basically trying to desensitise her. Eventually she got in and look, here we are now, and I can't keep them out of the water!'

Mitali told me, 'I don't remember being scared, but I do remember being very young, growing up with swimming. I started swimming competitively in the pool and then in open water, and once I started open water, I realised that the shoulder problems I had in the pool were really alleviated because it was very cold. It's almost like you're icing your body while swimming. I had a lot less trouble with my shoulders, so I was like, *OK, this is meant to be for me. This is where I deserve to be*, and after that I just started pursuing longer distance in open water rather than in the pool.'

Very quickly Anaya, who is three years younger, followed in Mitali's wake. 'As Mum didn't have time to take us to two different places, whatever Mitali liked I did the same, and I just really loved it. At the start Mum used to say, "It's dangerous, don't do this." I don't blame her. If I was a parent, I would do the same and say, "You are not getting in the water, this is very cold water and you're six years old." So, she was really apprehensive at first, but the coaches actually really helped. Yeah, they're super nice.'

At this point, and as if hearing our conversation, we were interrupted by a shout for silence from Coach Mike, in charge of the swim and about to deliver the safety briefing.

This race is called Swim with the Centurions. Today is the 20th annual opportunity for anyone to swim with those who are aiming to make the crossing 100 times. There is a round of applause for Levy who is 76 years old and about to do his 91st swim. It's clear that he is much-loved. Anaya tells me she has to jump from the ferry directly behind him, because someone has landed on him before, and he only trusts her not to do so.

The first thing that is clear from the briefing is that safety is paramount. It needs to be. The tides between Golden Gate Bridge and Bay Bridge are fast and furious, and when the current is at its peak, it can run at 6 knots per hour. Put simply, if you didn't swim a stroke, you would be swept a mile downstream in less than 10 minutes. It goes without saying that someone unlucky enough to be caught in the water with no rescue boats on hand, wouldn't stand a chance. That and the threat of sharks are two of the reasons Alcatraz was such an effective place for preventing prison escapes. The environment is lethal.

The timing of our swim is going to be crucial. We will be getting into the water on a dying ebb tide, which means if we are fast enough, we can take advantage of the slack to get to the beach within about 40 minutes. If not, we will be carried away from our target (and towards Treasure Island) by the incoming tide – or, as Coach Mike more alarmingly calls it, 'the flood'. He takes out a huge map with arrows showing the different stages of the tide. If you can time it right, there is pretty much a straight line from Alcatraz to the Fontana Towers, which stand like homing beacons behind us.

If any of us are what the coaches describe as 'aquatically challenged' – a slower swimmer – the likelihood is that we will be

pushed in the wrong direction by the flood, and will have to take a longer, curving route. If we stray too far and get dangerously out of position, the kayakers will pick us up and reposition us for our own safety.

'They are not trying to ruin your day!' Mike insists.

The currents aren't the only issue: the channel we are navigating is also a busy shipping lane. The day before our swim I had watched eyes wide in horror as a vast ship laden with containers cut through the water at some speed, exactly where we will be swimming today. Coach Mike reassures us that the Coastguard knows our intentions, so there should be no big ships coming through this morning. We also have what he calls a flotilla of fishing boats, kayaks, paddleboarders and two cops from the San Francisco Police Department on jet skis to escort us. I love it!

While there is no mention of sharks, there is talk of sea lions. Coach Pedro, the older statesman of Water World Swim, says there is no need to be concerned. 'We very seldom see them, especially if there is a group of people swimming. They don't approach anybody. If you're swimming by yourself, they get closer to you. But we have done various events and we haven't seen anybody be approached by a sea lion.'

I have seen the size of the sea lions that live here: they are ginormous and not to be messed with! I have watched them sunning themselves lugubriously in piles, their cumbersome bodies stacked on top of each other on the wooden slats of the piers. Some of them look the size of fully grown hippos. I don't need to encounter one in the water.

The atmosphere on our 20-minute journey to Alcatraz is an intoxicating mix of nervous excitement and camaraderie. We made a strange sight doing what Coach Mike described as the 'massive march' to the ferry, either bare foot or in flip-flops and carrying only goggles and swimming caps, looking out of place

among the early morning jet-lagged tourists visiting Fisherman's Wharf.

Now we are passengers on board, we look even more strange. Apart from a handful of volunteers and supporters, including my husband David, everyone is either dressed in a swimming costume, Speedos or a wetsuit. As we stand chatting and jostling for space, I can feel the temperature rising from the body heat of bare arms, shoulders and torsos. It is a strange sensation; I have never been surrounded by so many people wearing so little. It feels like a warm and wonderfully unselfconscious celebration of the human body in all its shapes and sizes. Most of us are sporting bright green swimming hats and I notice Anaya has a white one. She tells me that everyone under 18 must take one. It is an extra safety precaution for the youngest among us, and I suppose it makes them easier to spot in the water.

I ask them both how they are going to navigate the infamous currents.

Anaya says: 'I feel like we have the upper hand, we have done it so many times, it just feels like we know what to do. Wherever you feel like being pushed, you have to adjust accordingly. You just want to feel the water. The water doesn't lie, so if you feel the water, you will know where to go.'

Mitali explains it a similar way. 'I have been swimming for longer than 12 years, and since we have been swimming for so long, we know what almost all of the different types of currents feel like and what to do.'

The way they speak – echoing each other's thoughts, one picking up where the other left off without so much as a pause for breath – is enchanting. They remind me of the way best friends can have a telepathy and finish each other's sentences. Anaya is the one that carries on when I ask what they mean by 'feeling' the water.

'I think it is one of our little like secret talents, that we can both be in the water for a minute or two and we could tell you how many knots the current is and the temperature down to the degree. Yeah, it's pretty cool, we are very good at that, I think we have had to get good at it.'

There is no time for more of their welcome advice. Our chat is interrupted when, much earlier than I had anticipated, the throbbing of the engine below our feet comes to an abrupt stop. I can feel my heart rate rising with nerves, which are not helped by a few anxious minutes of waiting and listening for instructions. We were warned that this would happen, that the captain would be coordinating with the Coastguard to decide where to drop us.

I see a double door on the side of the ferry open on my left and then bodies press against me, pushing me forwards towards the exit. There is no easy way to turn back now. It is all too late. I am going to have to jump, or I will be pushed over the edge. We have been told make the leap two by two, leaping away from each other so as not to cause any injuries. I am right behind Anaya and Mitali as they jump in together, perfectly in sync. I wait a couple of seconds and then feel the hand of a volunteer on my shoulder. Time to go.

I don't look down but look ahead towards Bay Bridge, raising one hand as if in alarm with the other pressed against my goggles to make sure they don't get pulled off my face. When I surface, spluttering and trying to make sense of where I am, I can feel the current pulling me like a magnet towards the ferry. I don't want to be pushed up against its sharp bow which rears alarmingly above my head. I can feel it drawing me in and struggle to get out of the way. I can see I am not alone; Mitali and Anaya are trying to do the same.

I have just managed to manoeuvre myself out of the way when I hear the loud blast of the second klaxon rippling across the water,

heralding the start of the race. There are no words from anyone; in unison we put our heads down and swim.

I always find it hard to control my breath and settle into a manageable pace at the start of any race, but there is nothing more alarming than being dropped in a swathe of deep dark water with nothing between you and the shore over 2 kilometres away. I feel discombobulated, not sure of where I am going and breathless. The rising feeling of alarm makes my lungs constrict, and the fact that it is much choppier than I had expected doesn't help. I am being buffeted by nausea-inducing waves.

I try to settle myself down and swim steadily. It's not working, and that alarming brush of something along my calf, followed by an accidental gulp of salty water when I rolled over to see if it was another swimmer, has made things worse. The double rush of adrenaline and rising panic switch my brain into survival mode. I need to concentrate and use my skills and experience to get myself out of here. I remember what I have been told by both the girls and the safety crew: head for the Towers. I can just about see the dark shape of the square buildings in the far distance and set my course, but they seem an impossibly long way away.

As I calm myself down, I think over what they have both said about swimming being their happy place and remind myself it is mine too, if only I could relax and start enjoying it.

Anaya told me that the cold water particularly is a very important part of her life, a vital stress-reliever. 'This is the only place where I feel like I am, truly, truly happy. Nothing from school or my personal life is bothering me, and I am in the water, just swimming and being in the present moment. This is the only place where I can really, truly do that. It is also the thrill, the fun of it. We are thrill seekers.'

Mitali feels the same. 'This is very therapeutic and relaxing for us, because it forces you to think on your feet and to be fully

present in the moment. Swimming is not like academic work; it is more spontaneous. You get to use more of your critical thinking in an on the fly manner. It feels like you use different parts of your brain or different ways of thinking to succeed. And that is really good for us.'

That thought about being present, makes me stop for a moment and take in the view. I tread water and with my head slightly above the waves am delighted to see that I am at last making good progress; I am about halfway across. Alcatraz is falling into the distance behind me, and a squadron of pelicans are wheeling above me. The way they fly, necks tucked in and wings outstretched, reminds me that their ancestors are dinosaurs.

To my right I can see the unmistakable ochre towers of the Golden Gate Bridge suspended in the fog. It is eerie but beautiful. Ahead of me is the metropolis of San Francisco. Now I am a bit closer, I can make out some of its extraordinarily steep streets which look almost vertical from my position semi-submerged in the Bay. It looks like an optical illusion – but having struggled to walk up them, I know it is not. I chuckle to myself at the sight of two San Francisco Police Department officers scudding about on their jet skis, blue lights flashing. The whole scene is surreal but brilliant.

I would have loved to have been able to swim alongside Anaya or Mitali, but in my confusion I have lost both of them, so I carry on alone. The current seems to have weakened as have the waves. I am finding it easier and feel more relaxed until my left hand bounces off a jellyfish I hadn't seen in the murk. It gives me another frisson of fright but, as they promised, it doesn't sting, and I continue making solitary progress.

When, finally, the seawall marking the entrance to Municipal Pier is within striking distance, I catch the welcome sight of

another swimmer in front of me. I can see they are making steady headway. They have a powerful, rhythmic stroke and their strong kick is making an impressive wake of white water behind them. I try to accelerate to see if I can catch them up, and slide into their slipstream. When I get closer, I notice a bit more detail. They are wearing a white hat, and I spot the straps of a pink swimming costume crossed over their back. Wow!

I know Anaya was wearing a white hat and remember the flash of her pink swimming costume as she jumped off the ferry. What are the chances that I would find her 300 metres from the finish? Is it her? I can't be sure, but I am not losing a companion now. I stick like a shadow behind the swimmer, delighted that they are taking a perfectly straight line towards the flags marking the exit on the beach. They clearly know what they are doing, and I feel safe with them. The water is flatter and feels warmer. This is the type of swimming I love; I have found my happy place.

I stumble onto my feet, dripping and dizzy, half a second behind the anonymous swimmer and run as best I can across the sand to the official finish line. I see Leena on my left running too, chasing Anaya, rushing to get a photo. My gut instinct was right; it *was* her just ahead of me. Unbelievable!

We hug each other in celebration as glittering silver medals with a giant sea lion emblazoned on the front are hung around our necks. I see Anaya whisper something to her mum, who scoots off immediately to fetch her an inhaler. I had noticed her coughing earlier but didn't know she has asthma. That makes me even more in awe of her achievements.

Mitali is a couple of minutes behind us and the first thing she says is: 'Did you see the sea lions? One kind of brushed my leg, so I stopped with a kayaker, who said I was surrounded by them. They are not aggressive, they are so nice. Usually they are small,

and they like to play with you. They always feel really gentle, it feels like an arm or something.'

That explains the mysterious caress I had felt along my leg! She has described it perfectly: so gentle it couldn't have been a human hand. Not only have I swum from Alcatraz, but on the way I have also had a close encounter with a sea lion!

We wait for the medal ceremony, wrapped up in towels and robes and with our teeth chattering from the cold. There is a special prize given to a girl who is only 10 and who has just swum her first Alcatraz. She was inspired to do it specifically by seeing Anaya and Mitali, and is made up when they stand with her for a photo, beaming on either side.

They are touched too.

I ask Mitali what it feels like to be a role model. 'We don't see many people like us, especially in this sport. We are young women, we are people of colour, that is just not common in the sport at all. And so, it's nice being representative of that in some way, and we are very aware of it. But at the same time this is just something we do for fun. It is great that it has an impact on young swimmers, but we do it first and foremost because we love it and everything else comes second.'

I bid goodbye to them as they chat to the 10-year-old who is smiling as much as they are, and I walk away with the knowledge that their legacy is safe. They are making waves in the world of swimming, which will continue to ripple.

In the Bay behind them, the tide is now in full flood, whipping past Alcatraz towards Bay Bridge. Small sailing boats are scudding over the water, sails billowing and making use of the strong tide and the blustery wind. If we were swimming now, we would have no chance of safely making the crossing, we would all be swept away, helpless, downstream. I think about those audacious prisoners who entered the Bay in the dead of night, whose bodies were never found. Could they have made

it? From what I know of these foreboding waters, I think it highly unlikely.

I walk back to Fisherman's Wharf buoyed by endorphins, and celebrate by tucking into a steaming fish chowder served inside a warm, hollowed-out sourdough loaf. I remember what Mitali says about bragging rights as I look at my medal and think they are the ones that deserve them, not me.