BOY UNDERWATER

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Adam Baron
(Franklin, Vi and Frieda's dad –
you know, the one who coaches Year Four football)

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<dedication to come>

Chapter One

Here's something you won't believe.

I, Cymbeline Igloo, have never been swimming.

It's the second bit you won't believe by the way, not my name, which really is Cymbeline Igloo, and you have to believe that because it's written on my schoolbag and in my jumpers and on lots of other things like my passport. You won't believe I've never been swimming because I mean totally never. Not *ever*. Not once, in my whole life. I am nine years old! I am the third-best footballer in Year 4 (joint) and the second-best at roller-skating after Elizabeth Fisher and she goes to a club on Sundays. I am fit and healthy and totally normal in every way (apart from my name) but I have never set foot in the sea, a river or a lake, not to

mention an actual, normal, everyday swimming pool.

Not in my life.

Until last Monday.

I BLAME my mum. Totally. She's just never taken me. Not as a baby, not as a toddler, not when I was at nursery or when I was in Key Stage One. When I've asked why she's come up with rubbish excuse after even *more* rubbish excuse. We don't go to the beach because she's allergic to sand. Rivers, *she says*, are where crocodiles live (we live in south-east London). Lakes, she *tells* me, are like lochs, which could contain things like the Loch Ness monster, which is so dangerous (not) that no one has ever actually SEEN IT (sorry, Scotland, but it's true: your monster is rubbish). As for swimming pools, chlorine (what's that?) can make you itchy and you often find clumps of other people's hair in swimming pools and some of it doesn't come from their heads but *other places*. That last bit is actually the most convincing argument for staying away from the whole swimming thing, though it's still not good enough and Mum SHOULD HAVE TAKEN ME. This is something that was made spectacularly clear last Monday when something happened that I can only describe as

A COMPLETE AND TOTAL DISASTER.

'Line up, everyone. Chop chop, hurry along now.'

That was Miss Phillips. *Last Monday.* Before I tell you about her, though, I think I'd better answer a question that has probably popped up in your head like toast. Surely, I hear you think, if my mum refused to take me swimming, then my dad could have taken me instead. I sometimes forget that most people have two parents, something you mostly only ever really see at Parents' Evening, or the school play. A mum and, next to her, a dad. Looking bored or checking his phone. My best friend Lance, who is joint third-best footballer in Year 4 with me, actually has FOUR parents, because his mum and dad split up and then married other people, who are now his step-mum and step-dad. This of course is not fair, as it means he's got three more parents than me, something that is true because my dad died when I was one and I don't remember him. He's just pictures on the mantelpiece and the reason Mum starts crying sometimes. Christmas Day. My birthday, especially. Wail wail, sob sob. I mean, I do feel sorry for her but it doesn't exactly help if you're really trying to enjoy your new Lego.

So no dad to take me swimming to make up for the fact that my *mum* simply *never has*.

'Have we all got our togs?'

'Togs, Miss?' Lance asked.

'Swimming things. Towel, goggles, costume.'

'*Costume?*'

'Trunks, in your case, Lance. Not sure a bikini would suit you. Well? Cymbeline, have you got yours? You look a little pale.'

'Yes, Miss,' I said, my voice sounding a bit funny.

'Right then. It's only a short walk. Keep up, everyone.'

And off we went. To the swimming pool.

This was *last Monday*, though before I fill you in on that I'd better take another step back to the week before, which I'm really sorry about but I've just started to realise that this telling-stories gig is HARD. Miss Phillips again, the Friday before last Monday:

'Children, you'll be dismayed to hear that we won't be doing any more R.E. on Monday mornings.'

Once the cheering died down, Lance asked why not.

'Because, Lance – finger out please – we'll be starting swimming lessons.'

'*We?*' Danny Jones asked, quite a lot of fear in his voice.

'I mean you. I'll be watching.'

The relief at not having to see Miss Phillips in a swimsuit was almost overwhelming. Everyone started chatting with excitement and Lance turned and grinned at me.

'I wonder if we'll be joint third best at swimming too.'

'I . . .'

'What is it, Cym? You look . . . Are you all right?'

'Yes of course. But I don't think we'll be joint good any more. Not at swimming, Lance.'

'What? Oh no. I bet you're *really* great at it, aren't you, Cym?'

'Er,' I said. 'Well.' And then I said, and I don't know WHY I said it, 'Yeah, I'm like really epic at swimming.'

'I bet you're not as good as me, Igloo,' said Billy Lee, checking that Miss Phillips wasn't looking before elbowing me in the stomach. Billy Lee does that. *Always*. He's a super-horror is Billy, sort of like a purple Minion but there's nothing you can do to make him go back yellow. 'I can do butterfly,' he went on. 'Can you do butterfly?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Course.'

'And what else?'

'Er . . .' I thought hard.

'Well?'

'Moth?'

'*What?*'

'I can do that. Moth. As well as . . . butterfly,' I said.

Lance cracked up at that and slapped me on the back, though I don't know why. *Butterfly?* I thought we were going swimming, not out in the park to wave nets about. I hid my ignorance though and stared at Billy Lee's flat smirking face as he said, 'Right, we'll see about that. Monday morning, me and you, Igloo.'

'What?'

'A swimming race. Crawl.'

'I thought you said swimming.'

'The stroke crawl, dib-head.'

'Of course,' I said. And by the end of lunchtime it was all around the class. I, Cymbeline Igloo (likeable, friendly, supportive classmate to all) would be taking on Billy Lee (brash, snide, downright bully when he can get away with it) at a *SWIMMING RACE* at Lewisham Pool.

'The loser's a total dib-head,' Billy Lee said, but I felt like one of those already.

Me, in a *swimming* race? When I had never, not once, EVER been swimming, and against someone a foot taller than me whose parents signed him up for *every sport going*? What – bangheadondesk – was – bangheadondesk – I – bangheadondesk – thinking? I kept asking myself that all day, racking my brains for some way out of it, desperate until something amazing happened. It was home time. I was in the playground. Just standing there when . . .

VERONIQUE CHANG CAME RIGHT UP TO ME.

Veronique does not come up to people. Not even Miss Phillips, whose grammar and spelling she is often known to correct. Miss Phillips thanks her when she does this but I don't think she really means it. Veronique's this rare unapproachable genius. She can spell words like 'piculear' and 'sircumstanz'. Her dad's French so she can speak that and her mum's Chinese so she can also speak . . . Satsuma (I think that's what it is). Or is it Tangerine? Never mind. She's FIVE whole GRADES ahead of me at piano (she's on Grade Five). And she's . . . No one's looking, right? I can say it . . .

REALLY PRETTY. She's got this long black hair that's so glossy you can almost see your own face in it and she smells like someone somewhere is eating candyfloss.

I was so psyched by Veronique just coming up like that, that I forgot how I'd managed to get myself into the worst situation of my entire life. Until, that is, she spoke, and my insides slopped over like a badly cooked pancake.

'Cymbeline, I really hope you win.'

'Sorry?'

'On Monday. Against Billy. He lives near us and

he's *such* an idiot. I hope you smash him,' she said, smiling at me.

When I didn't answer, Veronique gave me an odd look and walked off, after which my mum appeared out of the crowd and started to interfere with my hair.

'Did you have a good day, Champ?'

'Yes, Mum,' I answered. 'Perfect. I spent it thinking about how you are, without doubt, the best mother in the entire world.'

'Ah . . .'

'NOT!'

'Cymbeline? Cym? Is there something wrong?'

'Nothing YOU can fix,' I said, and stomped over to the gate, where Billy Lee was smirking at me.

'See you on Monday,' he said.

Chapter Two

Google Search: how to crawl.

Result: baby may spend time rocking forwards and backwards initially but by between eight and twelve months she should be crawling confidently and pulling herself upright.

What? A *baby* can do it and I can't? No, wait, that's not swimming crawling, is it?

Google Search: how to *swim* crawl.

Right, here we go. That looks doable. Swimwell.org says you have to lie in the water face down and move your arms like two windmills. You tilt your head from side to side to breathe. Fine. How hard can it be?

Shut computer.

'Mum!' I called from the living room.

'Yes, Cym?'

'I need to have a bath!'

I heard a teacup smash on the kitchen floor before she came rushing through.

'Cym, are you okay? Are you feeling all right?'

'Yes, why?'

'It's just that, well, you *asked* to have a bath.'

'I know, I, er . . . I just feel that being clean is very important.'

'Of course. Well, I'm glad you've finally woken up to that. But won't a shower do?'

'Not on this occasion, no.'

Upstairs, I ran a bath and began. Head down, bottom up. I probably shouldn't have added the bubble bath, though. Pretty soon I was rubbing my eyes and spitting out mouthfuls of foam. The problem was that it just wasn't deep or long enough. Or wide enough. My arms hit the sides when I tried to windmill them and I kept banging my head on the end. Swimwell.org had mentioned something called tumble-turns, for swapping round and going the other way. But when I tried one of those I pulled the plug out with my big toe and kicked the bubble bath out of the window.

'Have you gone mad?!' Mum screamed, running

in. There was more water out of the bath than in it.

'At least I'm clean,' I said. Whereupon Mum just shook her head and picked up the shampoo bottle.

'Eyes,' she said.

I turned round and let her wash my hair without complaining (much) and when she finished I asked what we were doing that weekend.

'What would you like to do?'

'Can we . . .?'

'Yes, Cym?'

'Go swimming?'

Mum went quiet. Then she said, 'Well, we'll see. Perhaps. Though I was thinking of taking you to Charlton tomorrow afternoon. Early birthday present.'

'Seriously?'

Charlton is our local team and the side I will be playing for one day. I'll be the captain, like Johnnie Jackson is now, though I'll have to share it with Lance of course as we're equal. Danny Jones (second best) and Billy Lee (best, grrrr) will be playing for Chelsea in the Premier League so I don't have to worry about them. The thought of going was brilliant, especially as, being an EARLY birthday present, I would surely get my other special treat AS WELL (more on that later).

I thought about my birthday. The fact it was still a whole massive week away was almost like torture. Funny, isn't it, that the nearer your birthday gets the more it seems like it's never ACTUALLY going to come?

'Thanks, Mum! Did you get tickets?'

'Not yet. I only just thought of it. I'll go online in a bit. They don't sell out.'

'Fab. What about Sunday afternoon?'

'For what?'

'Swimming.'

'Are they open on Sunday? No, I don't think they are.'

'Oh. Well, maybe not Charlton then this weekend. Perhaps we could go next week instead . . .'

But Mum wasn't listening. She got me out, plonked a towel over my head, and hurried downstairs. By the time I got there she was smiling up from the computer.

'Got them,' she said. 'West Upper Stand, your favourite.'

'Thanks, Mum,' I said.

That night, after tea, Mum let me stay up with her and we curled up on the sofa watching the first *Harry Potter*. I like Harry Potter as much as anyone

but there's something no one else seems to think about when they're banging on about wanting a Firebolt or how they wish they could apparate. He's got no mum or dad. They're dead. I don't think about my dad much, but sometimes it's like he sort of thinks about me, makes me remember that he's not there. That he's dead. It happens when I read stories like *Harry Potter*. I don't wish I had a super-fast broomstick or that I could move around in a magic way. I just wish I had photos like he has. That move. Then the man on the mantelpiece might mean a bit more to me. He might feel like my dad, not just some bloke in a check shirt with his arm round someone who looks like she must be my mum's younger sister. Also, Harry Potter knows what happened to his dad but whenever I ask about mine everyone says it's not something I need to think about until I'm older (like offside). Lance asked me once and I was a bit embarrassed to admit I didn't know so I just told him he got ill.

'And I don't suppose they had Calpol then, did they?' Lance said.

When the film finished I expected Mum to tell me it was bedtime. I even started to get up from the sofa but she just smiled and asked if I wanted to see the

second one. I didn't ask why we were getting to watch *two films in a row*. I just nodded and we watched it all, though I could hardly stay awake. When it was over she carried me up and I saw that the clock in the hall said half past eleven. I'd only stayed up that late once before, last year at Uncle Bill and Auntie Mill's joint 'significant' birthday. It was half ten when I woke up in the morning and nearly midday by the time Mum had got the pancakes made and we'd eaten them.

'What about the pool, Mum?' I said, when I couldn't stuff any more in.

She looked up at the clock and sighed. 'Sorry, love, don't think we'd get there and back before kick-off, do you?'

I didn't answer. There wasn't any point. She just wasn't going to take me. I started to get mad but, when I looked up, Mum had tears in her eyes and she was staring at me. I saw her swallow and then move towards me, her soft arms going round my neck.

'I love you,' she said, and I believed it so much I didn't mind about the swimming. Not then, at least, though on Monday it was different, believe me. In the meantime, though, I had Charlton to look forward to, come on, you Addicks! It was great, which meant my

real birthday trip was going to be epic. We got chips and Mum let me have a battered sausage. I heard three swear words, one of which was completely new to me but, somehow, I still knew it was a swear word. We were drawing with Rotherham 1–1. when Johnnie Jackson scored a header in the last minute. Yes! That would have been me, not Lance. He's good at doing crosses but he runs away from headers and pretends not to at the last moment, when the ball's already on the ground. I might be a bit better than him, actually.

'How's this term shaping up?' Mum asked on Sunday night. We'd been up in town all day doing art workshops at the National Gallery. Mum's an artist and this is one of her jobs. She talks about a picture to kids, then takes them off to a different room to do some art based on it. I don't mind. I like drawing and making things, but what I really like is watching Mum talking. I like watching everyone else listening to her. I saw a man there who'd been before. In fact, he'd been the last five weeks with his two little girls. He spent a long time talking to Mum about the pictures and he really thanked her a lot at the end. One of the little girls grabbed hold of my leg and wouldn't let go.

I pretended to mind but she was cute, actually.

'This term? 'S all right.'

'But what are you going to be doing?' Mum asked. 'I missed the meeting about it because I was working and they haven't emailed the list through yet.'

'Romans,' I said. 'And something called reproduction. Miss Phillips said we're not allowed to be embarrassed when we do that but she went red when she said it so I think I'm going to be.'

'Oh well. Anything else new?'

Children, you'll be dismayed to hear that we won't be doing any more R.E. on Monday mornings.

'Nothing worth talking about,' I said.