



# BOY UNDERWATER







**BOY  
UNDER  
water**

**ADAM BARON**

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



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by  
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2018  
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of  
HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd,  
HarperCollins Publishers  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is:  
[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

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ISBN 978-0-00-826701-8

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Typeset in Sabon 11/18pt  
Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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*Almost all of this novel is dedicated to  
Ben and Ollie Robinson.*

*The first line of page thirty-eight is  
for their parents, though.*







# CHAPTER ONE

Here's something you won't believe.

I, Cymbeline Igloo, have never been swimming.

It's the swimming bit you won't believe, by the way, though if you don't believe my name either, it 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 from *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 RE 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 'picular' and 'sircumstanz'. Her mum's French so she can speak that and her dad'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.

