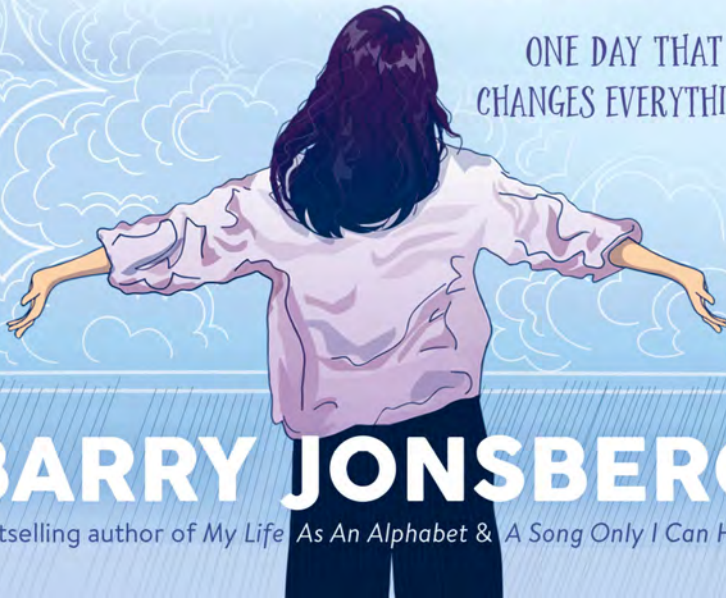


IDENTICAL TWINS.
SHELTERED LIVES.

catch me if I fall



ONE DAY THAT
CHANGES EVERYTHING.

BARRY JONSBURG

Bestselling author of *My Life As An Alphabet* & *A Song Only I Can Hear*

**catch me
if I fall**

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The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull

BARRY JONSBURG

**catch me
if I fall**



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SIX YEARS AGO

The storm had taken out the power again, so Aiden and I were in our beds and Mum was reading us a story by candlelight. I remember thinking that stories were so much better by candlelight because the flame danced and that sent ripples of shadows and light across Mum's face as she read. It's like her moving face was part of the story, that the words changed her expression as if they touched a switch inside her, turned something on and off, on and off.

Aiden had the bedcovers up to his eyes, which were wide, unblinking and fixed on Mum. The candlelight made his hair, black and wavy like mine, shiver against the white of the pillowcase. It's as if there were thin worms crawling and creeping across his scalp and the thought made me giggle and then it made me afraid.

I don't know what the story was about because I'd been thinking about candles and lights and worms, but Aiden was drinking it in, thirsty for every word.

Mum closed the book and we cried out together.

‘Another one! Please?’

But she wouldn’t tell us another one, no matter how hard we begged. We needed to get to sleep. We had school in the morning (though without electricity, we all knew that wasn’t going to happen). We couldn’t bully her. We only ever got one story at bedtime because... *that’s the way it was*. Nighty night. Don’t let the bed bugs bite. But we argued anyway. Because... *that’s the way it was*.

‘Can we keep the candle in here, please?’

Aiden was scared of the dark. I wasn’t, because I was tougher than him. I’m the oldest. By three minutes, Mum said, but that explained a lot. It explained why I’m always the one who makes decisions, why I’m the one in charge. Aiden never argued about this because it’s a fact and facts don’t care if you argue with them and they won’t change simply because you don’t like them.

Aiden was quite smart, though.

‘Ashleigh, tell your brother why you can’t have the candle in here,’ said Mum.

I sat up in bed and took a deep breath.

‘Because it’s dangerous,’ I said. ‘If one of us – probably Aiden because he can be quite clumsy – if one of us knocks over the candle in the night, then we could set the beds on fire and burn the house down and burn all of us to death so that’s why we can only have electric night-lights but we can’t have those because there isn’t any power because of the storm and we’ve run out of batteries.’

I had to take another deep breath then because all those words had ridden on the wave of my last one and my lungs were empty. Mum smiled.

‘A good answer, Ashleigh,’ she said. I beamed. ‘If a little self-satisfied.’ I didn’t know what she meant by that, but thought it was probably good. She turned to Aiden and smoothed his bedsheets. ‘So one of you – maybe even Ashleigh, difficult though it might be for anyone to believe – could have an accident. We have to keep you safe, my babies.’ He nodded, just as another clap of thunder sounded nearby. It made the glass of water on my bedside shake. It was a little bit funny, as if nodding his head made the thunder happen.

‘Anyway, if this storm keeps up, you won’t need any light,’ Mum said. ‘You’ll have more than enough of the natural variety. Think you’ll be able to sleep through it, kiddlypunks?’

We all knew the storm would go on for hours and hours and we probably wouldn’t have electricity to cook breakfast in the morning. That’s the way it normally worked. And we also knew the thunder wouldn’t stop us sleeping. We’d slept through cyclones and this was nothing compared to that.

‘Yes, Mamma,’ said Aiden.

‘Of course,’ I said.

Mum sat on my bed again, which was a bit strange and definitely not part of the routine.

‘I think you’re old enough to hear this,’ Mum said, ‘so I want you to pay close attention.’

We both sat up in bed. Was this going to be another story, despite what she said? Whatever it was, it was exciting.

‘You are identical twins,’ she said. We knew that. Of course we knew that. It made us rare and extremely special. We didn’t say anything, though. Just waited. ‘Brother and sister,’ she continued, ‘with an unbreakable bond between you. It’s a marvellous thing. A most marvellous thing.’

I swallowed a yawn. I was tired and this wasn’t very interesting or exciting after all. Well, so far. Of course we were special. I’d always known that.

‘But it also means you have responsibilities towards each other,’ she said. ‘Responsibilities means having sometimes to do things you might not want to do to help and protect the other. Do you know what I mean?’

We both nodded, but I’m not sure either of us quite got it. Maybe that was why Mum gave an example.

‘Let’s say I did leave the candle in here and Ashleigh knocked it over in the night...’ I opened my mouth to protest, but Mum held up a hand in the stop position, so I did. ‘And you woke, Aiden, to the bedroom on fire. What’s the first thing you’d do?’

‘I’d wake Ashleigh and get her out of the bedroom.’

‘Yes. Good. Why?’

‘Because she’s my sister and I have to protect her.’

Mum beamed, leaned over and stroked Aiden’s cheek. A stab of jealousy made me flinch. I could have answered that question. That small sliver of affection was rightfully mine and I felt the pain of its absence.

‘That’s what being brother and sister means,’ she said. ‘It’s what family means. There’s an old saying, children. Siblings are there to catch you when you fall. If something goes wrong – and it doesn’t have to be something big, like a fire; it could be just one of you feeling sad, or having a bit of a bad time – then the other should always be there to help. Always! That’s what I mean about responsibilities. You, Aiden, must always be there to catch Ashleigh if she falls.’ He nodded.

‘And I’ll catch Aiden,’ I said. ‘He’s falling all the time.’ *That’s because he’s so clumsy*, I thought, but I didn’t say it out loud.

‘Yes,’ said Mum. ‘You must promise me that you’ll always look after each other.’

We made that promise with all of a six-year-old’s solemnity. Later, after Mum had blown out the candle and left us to our sleep, Aiden’s hand reached across the darkness between our beds and took mine. He could be so childish, like when he called Mum, Mamma.

We fell asleep holding hands, the lightning flashing silver and black and the thunder playing drumrolls on the bedroom window.



present day...

1

Aiden tried to hold my hand, but I was too old for that. So was he, obviously. I kicked him gently in the foot and he let go, but not before everyone must have seen. Just what I needed on our first day. I wiped the hand he'd held on my dress and clasped both hands behind my back. My face burned and the more I thought about it burning, the hotter it got. Great. Just great.

Mr Meredith stood behind us and placed one hand on my shoulder and one on Aiden's.

'How lucky are we, class?' he said over the tops of our heads. No one said anything, but then I guess it *was* a question that didn't need an answer. 'We don't just have one student joining us today, but two.'

The class gazed at us. It would be good to report that they weren't too interested, that they were staring out of windows or picking at fingernails, but the simple truth is they were staring at us like we were from another planet.

The temperature of my face ratcheted up another couple of degrees.

‘Not only that,’ continued Mr Meredith, ‘but they are *identical* twins.’ There was wonder in his voice as if we were all witnessing a miracle. ‘Who can tell me about identical twins?’

A girl in the front row put her hand up, but Mr Meredith ignored her. I guessed she always put her hand up, the class know-it-all who made everyone else feel small. I’d seen old movies where this happened. A boy towards the back raised his arm, but it was slow and unsure in its journey. Mr Meredith took his hand from my shoulder and it appeared in front of my eyes, index finger pointing.

‘Yes, Daniel,’ he said.

‘Two children born from the same mother who look like each other,’ he said, but his voice was cracking and unsure. There was silence and it was obvious he was expected to say something else. ‘At the same time,’ he added.

‘Very good, Daniel,’ said Mr Meredith. ‘Excellent.’

The girl at the front still had her hand up. Mr Meredith’s sigh played across my cheek.

‘Yes, Charlotte?’ he said.

Charlotte sat up straighter, jiggled her shoulders as if making sure they both lined up correctly.

‘Please sir,’ she said. ‘Identical twins are from one zygote, which splits and forms two embryos, which means that these two can’t be identical twins because you

can't have identical twins of the opposite gender. So they must be fraternal twins who come from two separate eggs fertilised separately.'

There was a sprinkle of laughter. I guessed it was at the mention of eggs. Charlotte spun in her chair, anger on her face.

'It's true,' she said. She swung back towards us. 'Isn't it, sir? I'm right, aren't I, sir? Tell them.'

'Indeed you are, Charlotte. Perfectly correct.' The teacher moved in front of us and clasped his hands together. 'I imagine the laughter came from the mention of eggs. Hard-boiled, fried, scrambled, yes? Delicious on toast. But Charlotte is, as always, right. We all came from eggs, children. But this doesn't make us chickens, does it? Do anyone of us really feel the urge to do this?'

He crouched down, knuckles on each hand touching, elbows wide. He strutted in front of the class, elbows pumping, head jerking backwards and forwards, clucking and clucking. The class groaned at first but then laughed harder and harder as he turned in front of them. I felt a smile on my lips. This teacher was either going to be the best or really annoying. It was early days so I only smiled.

He straightened up.

'Well, *I* felt the urge, obviously, but that's just me, children. When I am on yard duty outside and watch you play, I see running, I see jumping, I see skipping. But I definitely do not see chicken impersonations.' He paused. 'At least, not yet.' Mr Meredith turned towards

us and spread his arms wide. 'But I am being very rude to our guests who almost certainly want to get out of the spotlight. Please welcome two new members of the class. This is Ashleigh Delatour and her twin brother Aiden Delatour. Can I hear how lucky are we, children?'

Everyone clapped, which made my face go redder. I glanced over at Aiden, but his face was emotionless, as always.

'Would you like to sit together?' Mr Meredith bent and whispered to us when the applause had died down.

'No, thank you,' I said. 'We are quite independent.' I was trying to be confident, but my voice was a little shaky. The teacher nodded.

'Then pick a place,' he said. 'Anywhere you like.'

I looked around the room, but it wasn't a difficult decision. I was desperately in need of a friend and it seemed obvious that the girl at the front, Charlotte, was probably in the same boat. Know-it-alls, I thought, would be left alone during playtime on the grounds that you got your fill of them in class. Plus, it was a good strategy to sit towards the front. Not only did it allow you to hear everything better, but those at the back, from what I'd read on the subject, often got a reputation. Not a very good reputation. Charlotte beamed at me as I sat down, but I placed my hands carefully on the desk and looked straight ahead.

Aiden, it turned out, sat at the back.



‘Mr Meredith can be a bit of a spoilsport at times.’

Charlotte and I sat on the school verandah, under a huge fan. Mr Meredith had checked his tablet coming up to lunchtime and told us we couldn’t go out to play because the UV levels were dangerous. This was no surprise. The UV levels were *always* dangerous. The class had groaned and offered to wear extra sunblock and legionnaire caps, but he still wouldn’t let us.

‘And a chicken,’ I pointed out.

Charlotte laughed.

‘Yes. He does that kind of stuff all the time. He’s funny. You know, with some teachers it would be like he’s trying too hard to be funny, but he’s...I don’t know. He’s genuine. He *likes* kids. And there are too many teachers who seem to hate us.’

This was true, but I hadn’t really thought about it until Charlotte said it. Quite a few of my old teachers had obviously not liked kids at all, judging by the way they treated us, even in distance learning when we were all hundreds of kilometres away from each other. I wondered why they’d gone into teaching in the first place. It’d be like a farmer who doesn’t like animals or crops, or a doctor who doesn’t like medicine.

‘Why’s your brother sitting by himself?’

I glanced over at Aiden. He was about ten metres away and he was alone because everyone else was as close as possible to the fans. He doesn’t seem to care about the heat. He just sweats and mops his face with a handkerchief. Sometimes, when we go for a walk around

our garden, he gets big circles of sweat under his armpits. That's more than a little gross.

'He's a bit of a loner,' I said.

I didn't tell her that he was under strict instructions to keep his distance while we were in school. Everyone thinks that just because we're twins we've got this kind of crazy bond between us. I mean, we do. We do *have* a bond. But it's not one that means we have to spend every second of our lives together, despite the fact that Aiden would be happy if we did. He's needy. Me too, I suppose. But the difference is I need my own space and I need my own friends. It's Aiden's problem if he can live without either.

'I'd love to have a twin brother,' said Charlotte. 'It's horrible being an only child.'

Everyone said this and I'd learned not to argue. I didn't tell them that they didn't have to share parents' affection or that sometimes being by yourself was a kind of heaven, that if they knew the problems they probably wouldn't be so keen to grow up with someone who looks just like you and has similar ways of thinking and speaking. Having said that, I'm a different personality to Aiden. Totally different. He's quiet and he's always considerate of my feelings. I'm not so quiet, though I *am* considerate of my feelings. I told him that once but he didn't get the joke.

'Yeah,' I said. 'It's cool. But we *are* identical, you know.'

Charlotte shook her head.

‘You may look very similar, but you can’t be identical. Trust me. I know about these things.’



Dad personally picked us up from school. Mum was away in Melbourne at a business conference. She’s often away, which is a bummer in one way but good in another. Dad is a much better cook than Mum and he doesn’t mind baking chips. Mum is very anti chips. In fact, she’s anti everything except vegetables, which we grow in our vegetable plots behind the house. I’ve pointed out that chips *are* vegetables, but it makes no difference because she thinks veggies have to be green (with a few exceptions, not including chips). I don’t *mind* green vegetables, but I’ll have them fried given half the chance. Aiden doesn’t care one way or the other, since he doesn’t eat anything. Well, he does, but it’s not food as we know it.

Aiden and I went for a swim in our pool, while Dad made dinner. Vegetable frittata and chips, he said. One of my favourites.

I have to be honest. If there’s one thing that Aiden is better at than me, it’s swimming. He can go the whole length of the pool underwater and when he’s really trying he can crush me at freestyle. I know this because I watched him once when he didn’t know I was around and he was part-dolphin. There’s no way I could come close to him. But when we have races, he always lets me win. By a little bit, as if he was really trying but just came up short. Sometimes I like that and sometimes

it annoys me. Today we only did a few laps of lazy breaststroke.

‘What did you think of school, Aiden?’ I asked.

He shrugged and brushed wet hair from his face.

‘It’s okay,’ he replied. ‘I think Mr Meredith might be nice. You know, Ashleigh? *Really* nice.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Silly in a way grown-ups normally aren’t.’

‘He likes his students.’

‘That’s what Charlotte said.’

‘Is Charlotte going to be your friend?’

This time I shrugged.

‘Maybe. It’s early days.’

Suddenly, I didn’t feel like talking, so I bobbed about on the edge of the pool and watched, through tinted windows, the hills in the distance. They were purple, patched with green and cottoned by heat haze. The early evening air swam. Aiden did laps, left me to my thoughts.



Dad quizzed us about school over dinner. The frittata was delicious and the chips were crisp and crunchy, so I ate them one nibble at a time, savouring their earthiness. I’d pulled those potatoes from the ground myself. Aiden left most of the talking to me, as always.

‘Well,’ said Dad. ‘I’m glad the first day went well. The school has a great reputation and it wasn’t easy to get you enrolled.’

I knew that. The fees were huge, though Mum and Dad could afford them. But they didn’t take just anyone. I have

no idea how difficult it was to get the school to accept us, but Mum and Dad had interview after interview, as well as dishing out plenty of money. When we lived in Queensland, we'd started with School of the Air tuition because the place we lived in was pretty much cut off from civilisation. Since moving to Sydney, though, we'd had tutors come to the house and that was okay in a way, but not okay in another way. I wanted to make friends with other girls and although Mum and Dad told me I was lucky I had a friend in my twin brother – and that plenty of people would be *very* envious of us for that – I made it clear that it wasn't enough. I love my brother, yeah. But he's not a friend. He's not someone I can share ... well, girl things with. Obviously. This school will change all that. I think Charlotte will become a friend, but maybe others as well. It was my first day after all and I'd made a terrific start in the friends department.

Mum video-called us at bedtime from her hotel in Melbourne. She and Dad had a chat first and then he put us on when we were in bed reading.

'How was your first day at school, kiddlypunks?'

I wished, for the thousandth time, she'd stop calling us that. It's embarrassing.

'It was great, Mum,' I said. 'I think I made a friend already.'

We told her everything about the day, the classes and what we'd learned and especially about Mr Meredith. Mum smiled, nodded and told us she'd be back the day after tomorrow, assuming flights weren't disrupted,

which was a big assumption. She told us she loved us and to make sure the bed bugs didn't bite and we told her we loved her and that there weren't any bed bugs and then we handed her back to Dad.

Aiden wanted to talk, but I wasn't in the mood. I thought it was crazy we still had to share a room when we were twelve years old. It wasn't like there weren't plenty of bedrooms in our new house, but Mum and Dad wouldn't hear of it. *You can look out for each other during the night*, they said. *We're asleep*. Duh, I pointed out. Didn't make a difference.

I switched off my bedside lamp and turned towards the wall, mainly to discourage Aiden from talking. He wouldn't say anything if he thought I was going to sleep. But I wasn't going to sleep just yet. I was going to go over in my head the entire day, relive every moment. And I knew that when I did fall asleep, I'd dream of school, Mr Meredith and Charlotte. It would be delicious.

Aiden doesn't dream. Or so he says. Maybe he doesn't remember them. That's equal parts weird and sad, if you ask me.