

# Saving Charli

By Di Walker

PART 1

## Charli

When I was young, I mean really young, my mum would take me to the pool, and we'd swim – together. It was our thing. Nan said that when she watches me swim it's like watching Mum, when she was a girl. Same arm stroke, same leg kick. I got really good at it and about a year ago, my times were good enough to make it into the swim squad.

I couldn't go.

Mum couldn't take me to the early morning training sessions. Dad said he would try, it never happened; it wasn't his fault. If you can't get to training then you can't be in the squad, you're a backup. I'm always the backup.

That happened about a year ago, the whole squad thing.

I still get to swim, a couple of days a week; Mum can take me in the afternoon, when she takes Freya to the hydro pool. I swim on my own, in the fast lane, in the lane Mum used to swim in when it was just her and me.

I'm a twin. Freya is my twin. Mum now swims with Freya, well sort of; they bob around.

I glide. I dive in and feel the rush of cool water through my fingers and over my body, then the silence under the water that blocks out everything. Sometimes I think about stuff, without anyone telling me what I should be thinking. Sometimes, I just count. Count the strokes, count the laps, count my breaths. Sometimes I wish the pool would just go on and on and I could just keep swimming, away from everything and everyone. But when I get to the end, I always have to turn around and go back.

Out the two of us, out of me and Freya, I'm the oldest. I was born three minutes and twelve seconds before Freya.

Being the oldest comes with a whole lot of stuff. *I'm* the 'responsible' one, the 'reliable' one. Sure, if you ask my best friend Blair, or really, anyone else who is the oldest kid in their family, they will say it's the same for them. Blair has a little brother, Walt. She has to babysit him a lot. I've been there when she does. She makes him a sandwich, sometimes puts him in the bath or they watch movies. That's regular responsibility. It's not like that with Freya.

I'm over hearing people say I should be grateful that I'm me; that I'm the lucky one. People who say that don't understand what it's like to be me.

Even though Freya is three minutes and twelve seconds younger than me, we are hardly twinning at all. She looks different, acts different, is different.

I know it's not her fault. I know she can't help it, that doesn't make it easier though. That doesn't make it okay.

Because Freya is the youngest, she gets away with a lot. Blair says it's the same in her family. She says her little brother Walt is always getting away with a whole lot of stuff.

'It's not fair,' Blair said once. We were walking to school. 'I mean, if I'd gone into Mum's wardrobe and pulled down all of her clothes off the hangers I would've got into heaps of trouble, I mean *heaps* of trouble. Walt does it and Mum thinks it's adorable because he's adorable.'

'You don't have to explain it to me,' I told her, 'I'm always getting blamed for stuff.'

For the last two years of primary school, it was me that had to make sure Freya was okay, that she'd eaten her lunch, that she had friends to play with, which by the way was usually me and my friends. I had to help her carry her bag, unpack it for class, pack it at the end of the day,

take notes to the teachers, bring notes home. Notes about Freya, not about me. Since I was nearly going to high school, Mum and Dad thought I could be even *more* responsible. Now that's a joke.

The teachers were always telling me to help Freya with whatever else she needed. Or if we had to pair up, I always had to go with Freya, because I'd know what she needs, how to help her. We were always put in the same class because my parents said that made it easier for Freya.

I'm Freya's backup.

Nothing was ever about me. Just Freya.

Now we're one week and two days away from starting high school and I really don't want to go.

I tried to fail Grade 6. In July I had an idea that if I failed and repeated the year Freya could go to high school without me. My teacher, Mrs Patinsky, was onto it real quick. She said that'd be impossible. No one ever fails Grade 6. She said I was too smart to fail at anything.

I told Mrs Patinsky how on first day of school, seven years ago, when everyone else was excited about having a new lunchbox and a backpack, Mum said to me, 'Remember, you're the only one who can understand Freya. You're her protector. Got it kiddo.' Then she hugged me. She turned to Freya and said, 'Have the best first day ever, Freya, Freya, dragon slayer.'

Mrs Patinsky nodded and had a small smile flash across her face. I think she was thinking that Freya's nickname was cute. Everyone thinks it's cute.

My parents never gave me a nickname.

Later that week Mrs Patinsky looked across the rim of her glasses and told my parents that she thought Freya would be fine if we were separated when I was put into the acceleration class for the remainder of the year. She told them I was really smart and would enjoy the challenge.

My parents thanked her for taking so much care of me and then said that we were all perfectly happy the way things are.

I know she said all of this because I was sitting right there. I heard her say the words and I saw them nodding as if they were listening. For a microsecond I thought they were agreeing.

Then I saw that smile Mum gets when she's about to politely tell someone to mind their own business without actually saying the words. At least Mrs Patinsky tried.

On the last day of the school year Mrs Patinsky had said to me, 'You're going to have a great time at high school, Charli. And they have a swim team – it will be perfect for you.' She sounded hopeful, she looked hopeful.

I wasn't hopeful, at all.

## Blair

Charli's mum doesn't have a job. Freya takes a lot of looking after. There's always something happening with Freya. She gets a lot of infections and stuff. I said to Charli once that it must be good having a mum that's home all the time. She said I should ask Freya cos as far as she was concerned, she wasn't staying home for her. Charli's changed a lot this last year. She can get really down on her mum sometimes and I think that's really unfair.

Charli's Dad is funny. I mean for a dentist, he's *really* funny. I don't think dentists are meant to be funny, not when they are drilling and scraping at your teeth, I mean it's not the best time to joke around.

I always stop speaking when Charli's dad's around; and that's a really, really hard thing for me to do, not to talk. I think he knows I'm not the best brusher of teeth, I mean I try and everything - there's more important things to be doing than spending hours and hours brushing - like... well I can't think of something right now, but anything is better than that.

Charli and Freya have the best teeth on the planet. I suppose you have to when your dad's a dentist. No one's going to take their kid to a dentist whose own kids have rotten teeth. I bet he makes them brush them *after* every meal. I bet he makes them brush *before* they eat. I bet even when they *think* about food.

When you go to their house, right near the front door, there's a large fishbowl of toothbrushes and mini toothpastes. I've seen that bowl tonnes of times. And it *moves*. Once it appeared at Charli and Freya's tenth birthday party, right next to the party bags. I bet if their dad had his way, he would have put them *in* the party bags - actually there wouldn't even be party bags and if you're not going to have party bags why even bother having a party, that's what I think.

Another time it was on the back seat of the car when he picked us up from school. Our school is only a few blocks from our houses, and we usually walk together. Freya goes by car, because she can't walk that far, actually she can't really walk at all. Charli used to go in the car too, until she got to Grade 4, and then her parents let her walk with me and Queenie. Because her dad drives her, Freya is always there first and waiting for us.

On rainy days he usually picks us all up and that's when the bowl appears, on the back seat, just near where I get in.

He always says, 'Take whatever you want, Blair.'

He knows. I don't say anything. I smile because manners are important; I keep my mouth closed.

'You look like a clown when you do that,' Queenie whispered one time. Queenie is our best friend. We're a trio of best friends, that's what my mum calls us. Queenie said '*the real collective noun is a giggle of friends*' because we're all girls - she likes all that nouns and verbs stuff. I said to Queenie that I didn't really care what we're called as long as we're best friends.

Queenie says a lot of stuff I don't understand. She's really smart like the smartest kid at our school and I get to be sort of smart because she's my friend. A lot of kids don't understand what Queenie says but the teachers do, and they seem to like it. Mrs Patinsky always used to call on Queenie when everyone else couldn't work out something and then Queenie would answer and Mrs Patinsky would smile and slowly nod and say something like, 'Excellent, Queenie,' or 'Well said,' the rest of us would just be like 'What'd she say?'

Queenie's mum teaches violin, or any other instrument you can think of. She plays in the philharmonic in the city, so of course Queenie plays the violin and the cello and half a dozen other instruments as well. They even do mother and daughter duets at weddings.

Queenie says she's going to busk in the city when she turns fifteen. When she does, I'm going to walk past her and put in some money and say to people that she is the best busker ever, and then more people will give her money. She'll be rich – but I think I might take my money back.

Her dad is a professor. And that's what I call him. I say, 'Hey Professor, how are you?' or 'See you later Professor.' He's really, really smart. He doesn't play any instruments, just reads a lot. Their house is full of books, the old ones that have turned yellow and have an old smell, not the ones you see in book shops in the bargain bin or the new release section. He reads books that have words in them that don't even make sense unless you're really smart too – even Queenie says she doesn't understand what he reads sometimes so it must be really, really hard.

One time I was over there, waiting downstairs for Queenie so we could go back to my place and have some of the pistachio ice-cream my dad had left over from the restaurant, not that it's my favourite of all the ones he makes, but you know, ice-cream is ice-cream, and I said to him, 'So, Professor, what are you reading?' He'd been reading for a real long time without getting out of his chair and Queenie was taking forever, so I thought I'd make conversation.

He said to me, 'Right now, Blair, I am reading from a collection of economic essays, and this particular one is titled *Cointegration and Error Correction: Representation, Estimation and Testing by Granger, James and Engle.*' He looked at me.

'Sounds great,' I said. I didn't mean it, but I didn't want to be rude; manners are important.

'It is. There are some excellent points that will have me pondering for quite some time. Would you like me to read some of it to you?'

'Nah. I'm good, thanks Professor. Think I'll go and see what Queenie's doing. She's taking a long time.'

'Some other time,' he said.

'Sure thing, Professor.'

Queenie has a bookshelf in her room with hundreds of books on it. Old books too. She's like her dad, they love old books. When we were in Grade 4, I said to her she should try and read something about ponies or fairies, something relaxing. I was only teasing; she went to her bookshelf and got down two books.

'I do,' she said. '*Black Beauty* and *The Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Do you want to borrow them?' She said it with a serious face. She's so like her dad.

When I first met her, I remember thinking that she's serious all the time and she wasn't much fun. Now I know her better and I know she just has a different way of being funny. It's a serious funny. Charli's Nan says Queenie has an old head on her shoulders. That makes me laugh - I picture a really, really old, oversized head on Queenie's body. I know that's not what Nan means.

Queenie seems a lot older than everyone else. I reckon that's because her dad has always read to her and he doesn't strike me as the Winnie the Pooh type. I bet he read her Shakespeare or something like that even when she was little. I know he read her something about some guy trying to fly with wings to the sun. Even I know that's a fail of an idea – I didn't need to read that old book to know how it ended.

She hardly ever watches television. Sometimes she watches movies with Walt and says things like, 'Actually Blair, this is a very funny movie. You should watch it.'

And I say, 'Well I did, when I was five.' It's not that they don't have a TV, it's just they aren't that sort of family.

Anyway, I said I didn't read books that were that old and had that strange smell and had small writing and not many pictures. She said I should give the classics a try. Then for my next birthday she gave me a copy of *The Railway Children*. It had a great cover and was brand new – not an old one like she reads. Inside she'd written:

*Blair, New things are waiting to be discovered when you look past the cover. Queenie.*

After I read it, she told me it was written over a hundred years ago, so I can like old books too. I did like it. It has three kids in it - one is a boy so they can't be a giggle like us, and I told Charli she should read it too and gave her my copy. A week later she gave it back to me. I don't think she read it cos when I asked her if she thought Bobbie was just the best, she shrugged her shoulders and said she thought *he* was kind of all right, so I know she didn't read it because Bobbie is a girl.

During the last term of primary school, we had to write a book report on a book that changed our lives. I thought that was a big ask, of a book and a group of twelve-year olds, not that I told Mrs Patinsky that, I didn't want to be rude.

I did my report on *The Railway Children* because it did change the way I looked at old books; I wouldn't go so far to say it has changed my life. Mrs Patinsky said she was super impressed that I had chosen it, read it and that my book report was well set out. She gave me *Excellent* with two exclamation marks. I'd never had an *Excellent* before and definitely not two exclamation marks. I usually got *Good work*, or *Much Improved*.

Queenie did *The Diary of Anne Frank* and said her report was about the dichotomy of the inner and outer selves, whatever that means. I asked Charli if she knew what that means, and she said she did. I had to look it up in the dictionary. Anyway, Queenie got an *Outstanding* with a *Special Award* sticker, which everyone knew she was going to get.

Charli didn't even hand in a report. She told Mrs Patinsky she didn't have a novel, so Mrs Patinsky said she would lend Charli her own copy of her favourite novel of all time, *Anne of Green Gables*. Charli said she couldn't read because it was too hard, which is a dumb thing to say because everyone knows Charli is a great reader. She has become really, really weird and I haven't told anyone this, but I think I know why.

## Charli

People talk a lot about how twins have a special bond; I don't know what I think about that. Nan says me and Freya do that when we were younger I was the one that knew what Freya needed. I don't seem to know that anymore. If we had it then it's disappeared or changed.

Now sometimes I wish I never had a twin. I dream about it; being an only child, like my other best friend Queenie.

Twinless.

Queenie has her own space, does her own thing, and doesn't have to look after anyone. Her parents are always at her concerts or the university and if she need it they help her with her homework.

When school finally finished, I was the only kid in our class who wasn't looking forward to going to high school. I told Mum that I didn't want to go, and she said, 'You and Freya will love it – you'll both have a great time.' You see, it's never just about me – it's always the two of us.

Mum said we could go to the pool once the holidays started. When Mum used to go, with just me, we would swim laps, then at the very end she'd say, 'Race you.' She wouldn't wait for an answer and I wouldn't give her one - we'd both take off, as fast as we could. She would usually win. Then one day, a couple of years ago, I beat her for the first time ever. After that whenever we raced and I came first, she would touch second and say 'Draw!' Then we'd laugh. She looked right at me, just me.

On the way out of the pool we'd get ice cream – Mum got vanilla and I got caramel swirl. We'd eat it on the way to the car and talk about our laps and times and stuff. We'd talk about me.

Then a year or so ago some new doctor suggested Freya should go to the hydro pool. No more races. No more ice-creams. No more just Mum and me.

The only good thing about school holidays is that my Nan always moves in. I like it when she comes. She cooks breakfast every morning and she always asks me first, what I want.

One school holiday she taught me how to knit. I don't think knitting is my thing, I just like sitting on the sofa next to her, our knitting needles making small clicking noises, hers go a lot faster than mine.

She showed me how to make colourful little squares. We made heaps of them. Nan and her knitting friends make them and then sew them together to make little cot blankets. They send them to another country that needs them for sick babies. I knew exactly what she meant because she made one for me and one for Freya when we were born.

One day, last year I noticed that Freya's blanket was bigger. I asked mum where mine was and she said that it had been joined to Freya's, ages ago, to make hers bigger and then Nan added more and more to it. She said, 'Don't you remember?'

I wanted to go and get that big blanket and rip my part off. Take back my blanket. I didn't do it, of course, even though I wanted to.

Mum has talked about getting a part time job. Nan said it would be good for mum to have something else to think about other than Freya's temperature and all her doctors' appointments and stuff. I said she could think about me, spend time with me, I could be her part time job. Nan thought I was making a joke, because, you know, we're always joking around in our house.

I wasn't joking.

It was Mum's idea to have the tent in the backyard. Dad put it up on Christmas Eve and said it could stay up all summer holidays. He said it was mine to hang out in. He said Nan would take me to the pool anytime I wanted. I knew Mum wouldn't – she would only take me when Freya goes.

Freya doesn't like being outside in the heat. She gets heat rashes and Mum always worries about her getting sunburnt and dehydrated; and that was fine with me.

Dad never changes jobs. He's a dentist and he's had the same office for as long as I can remember. It's not far from our house and he can block out time to fit in with Freya – like to see specialists or something or pick her up from school and stuff.

Blair is really strange about her teeth – I think it's become a thing with her now.

'I think he knows I don't brush my teeth,' Blair said when she was over for a sleepover.

'He sees teeth all day. He really doesn't want to look at more teeth when he gets home, and anyway you do brush them,' I said.

'Not like you do - I'm not letting him see them, ever.'

Blair is funny. She's what my Nan calls, 'a breath of fresh air.' My Nan starts laughing as soon as Blair arrives. Not in a mean way or anything. She says that Blair has that type of personality that makes everyone happy. My Nan makes this amazing chocolate peppermint slice and one time when Blair was over, she told Nan that it was the best thing she had ever eaten in her entire life, which is a big statement considering Blair's dad's a chef.

'This is soooooo good, Nan,' Blair said, exaggerating everything as usual. She calls my Nan, Nan too. 'You should start a shop or something, and this is the only thing on the menu, the only thing you sell. I would come in every day and buy some.'

My Nan is not going to open a shop; she chuckled at Blair's suggestion and said, 'Maybe I will, Blair. And you can serve behind the counter.'

'You could pay me in slice!'

Nan makes it every time she comes to stay at our place. Every holiday, there's chocolate peppermint slice in the fridge, for Blair. I like jelly slice, Nan says that it's a bit fiddly for her to make now, she had trouble getting the jelly layer just right. I had to pick something else for her to make; I'm still thinking about it.

Blair loves music from the eighties. Her phone is full of Springsteen and Duran Duran. I don't mind some of the songs but song after song can get a bit boring. One night, in the tent, Blair was doing her funny Egyptian dancing to the Bangles song, and we could hear my parents outside on the deck. When we went to see what they were doing they were both singing and dancing too.

It was so embarrassing.

'Hey Blair, got any Springsteen?' Dad asked.

'Are you kidding, Doc? Of course, I do. *Dancing in the Dark*. How perfect is that song for tonight!' Blair replied, not worried about him seeing her teeth since it was dark. Blair says there's an eighties song for every occasion. I don't doubt her because she plays them all the time so she would know.

When she put it on, my parents kept on dancing. I wanted them to go inside and stay away from my friends. I'm tired of sharing my two best friends.

Queenie and I have been best friends from birth. Her mum and my mum were in the same mothers' group after we were born. I don't remember anything about it, how could I? We were

babies. I've heard stories about how Queenie's mum would come over and help out at night, to give my mum a break. It was one thing to have twins but a completely different when one of them is Freya.

I've seen this one video of me and Queenie sitting on the floor. We look like we're not even a year old. We both have that funny wobble babies have when they are learning to sit up without falling over but you know that at any minute they could fall. I'm chewing on something, and there's a big dollop of drool coming out of my mouth and running down my hand. Queenie is sitting up holding a little cardboard book. You can hear our mums in the background.

The first few times I saw it it's hard to hear what they're saying. Now I've watched it so many times that I know exactly what they're saying.

It starts with all three of us in the shot. Freya, lying on her back, looking around, Queenie reading her books and me drooling. Then the camera pans to Freya. It zooms in. You can see her large dark eyes staring straight into the camera. Her eyes are always staring. Then Mum says, 'She speaks with her eyes, you know. I can understand everything she is saying.'

'She's beautiful,' Queenie's mum says.

'Queenie is so adorable. Look at how she is holding that book, as if she's going to read it.' They chuckle.

No one says anything about me. Not even my massive drool gets a mention. I guess drool can't compete with speaking eyes and a super brainy kid who can already read.