

Chapter Twenty-One

Blood

I jiggled about impatiently as Dad asked Dr Bryce about the weather in Yorkshire. When was he going to get to the point?

‘No . . . No, Cameron’s fine. He wants to go swimming tomorrow so I thought I’d check with you first,’ said Dad and, from his tone of voice, it sounded as if he wanted the doctor to say no. ‘Yes . . . OK, I’ll put him on,’ he said reluctantly and handed me the phone.

‘Hi, Dr Bryce.’

‘Hello, Cameron. How’re you feeling?’

‘Fine, thanks.’

‘I’ll be down on Friday to give you your weekly check-up,’ said Dr Bryce. ‘You’re doing so well I think we can make them fortnightly, and we’ll see about your local hospital taking over some of your care.’

‘Great,’ I replied. ‘Can I go swimming tomorrow?’

‘Well, swimming is very good exercise so I don’t see why not, as long as you don’t overdo it. Take it easy and don’t stay in for longer than half an hour. Don’t forget you’ve got to build up slowly. We don’t want to push it.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.’ I grinned down the phone.

‘Could you pass me back to your father, please?’ asked the doctor.

I gave the phone back to Dad. ‘Dr Bryce says I can go,’ I told him and I charged up the stairs. I could make it all the way to the top without pausing or having to stop and catch my breath. I still couldn’t get over that.

‘Dr Bryce isn’t your dad,’ Dad called after me, adding apologetically, ‘Excuse me, Dr Bryce, I didn’t mean to yell in your ear.’

I stuck my head over the banister on the landing. ‘So can I go or not?’

‘Cam, I’m on the phone.’

‘Dad?’

‘Just a sec, Dr Bryce.’ Dad put his hand over the mouthpiece. ‘OK, but I’ll come with you.’

‘No way!’ I was appalled. ‘I’m not dragging you around with me everywhere I go like unwanted luggage.’

‘Thank you very much!’ Dad raised his eyebrows.

‘No, I mean it, Dad. You can’t come with me. I’d never live it down. All the other boys would think I was a right sissy!’

Dad frowned. ‘Oh, all right then. You can go, but only if you promise to—’

‘I promise!’ I called back and ran into my room.

I was going swimming. And this was only the start. At that moment, I really and truly believed I was going to live for ever. And it felt wonderful.

When at last the buzzer sounded, half the class leapt out of their seats before Mr Stewart could finish his sentence. ‘Er . . . complete the next two exercises for your homework and I want it first thing on Thursday morning – and no excuses,’ Mr Stewart shouted above the noise.

He legged it out of the room, leaving us to it. I was going swimming immediately after school but at that moment I wasn’t thinking about swimming. I only had one thing on my mind – Julie. I marched straight over to her table, where she stood talking to her friends.

‘Julie,’ I said, standing behind her.

When she turned, I deliberately coughed in her face without covering my mouth. That would teach her. She shied away, wiping her face vigorously with her hands.

‘I’m just giving you some of my piggy germs,’ I told her viciously.

I walked back to my desk, aware that everyone in the class was watching. As I sat down, Marlon turned to look at me but he didn’t say a word.

Andrew prodded me in the back. 'Cam, that wasn't very nice.'

'Neither was what she said to me yesterday,' I reminded him.

'And that makes it OK, does it?' Andrew asked.

I glared at him, but as I looked around the class I saw something I'd never seen on the faces of everyone around me – dislike. And as I turned to look at Julie, to my horror I saw that she was crying. It was such a shock. I thought she'd flare up or scream at me or call me all the names under the sun – but she was crying. I bent my head and pretended to be looking for something in my bag. But inside I was choking up, I was so ashamed of myself. I felt like dirt. How could I have done that? All day I'd been thinking of some way to get my own back on Julie and everyone else like her who thought I was untouchable so now that I'd done it, why didn't I feel any better? I retrieved a crumpled but clean tissue from my bag and went over to Julie. Without a word, I held it out to her. She knocked my hand away and turned her back on me.

The tissue fluttered to the ground. I went back to my desk, knowing that I'd blown it.

'You've changed since your operation, d'you know that?' Andrew told me as we walked along.

'No, I haven't.'

'Yes, you have.'

'How?' It was as if every atom in my body had become still, waiting for the answer.

'You're more pushy,' said Andrew.

'I think the word you're looking for is *confident*,' I said.

'And you're more arrogant.' Andrew was getting into his stride now.

'Sure of myself,' I corrected.

'Full of yourself,' Andrew amended.

I looked at Rashid and Marlon. They didn't say a word but it was obvious who they agreed with.

'And where did all this come from?' I asked bitterly.

'Before, you would never have treated Julie like that, no matter what the provocation,' Andrew replied without hesitation. 'That was more like something Travis would do.'

That stung. 'So you think all this is because of my new heart, do you?' I asked scathingly.

'I'm not Julie,' said Andrew. 'A heart is just a pump. It's not the real you, that's all.'

'But you're saying that the real me has become pushy and arrogant – just 'cos I can stand up for myself now?'

'I don't know.' Andrew shrugged. 'Maybe It's just the

contrast. Before, you wouldn't say boo to a flea and now it's like you don't take any prisoners.'

We carried on walking in silence. The frown on my face cut deeper and deeper. Any second now and it would be visible on the back of my head. Was that really what my friends thought? Was that really who I was becoming? Rashid and Andrew started chatting about something else and walked on ahead, leaving Marlon and me trailing behind.

I tried to find something to say. I risked a quick glance at Marlon. He had his hands in his jacket pockets and he was looking very smart.

'Nice jacket.' It came out of my mouth from nowhere.

Faster than I could blink, Marlon's face whooshed bright red! I *knew* I was right. Andrew and Rashid were ahead of us by a couple of metres and I wanted it to stay that way. This was between me and Marlon.

'And the shoes are new too, right?'

'Yes,' Marlon mumbled.

'I suppose your whole family have new clothes now. What else did you all buy? A new car? New furniture? A new house?'

'We haven't got a new house. And Dad only sold your story so that we could keep our old one,' Marlon rounded on me.

I frowned. 'What're you talking about?'

'The bank were about to repossess our house 'cos Mum and Dad couldn't afford the mortgage any more. Since Dad lost his job, things have been really hard for us.'

I glared at Marlon.

'I know that doesn't excuse what Dad did, or make it right,' Marlon continued hastily. 'But that's why he did it – so we wouldn't lose our home.'

'Your mum and dad were meant to be friends with my family.' I couldn't keep the frost out of my voice. 'I bet my dad wouldn't do something like that – no matter how close he was to losing his house.'

'Yeah, right!' Marlon began to raise his voice. 'So what would your dad do? Let you all get chucked out on the pavement?'

'He wouldn't have betrayed you to keep his house.'

'Are you sure about that?' Marlon asked. 'Are you telling me that if you were in my dad's shoes, you wouldn't have done exactly the same thing?'

'I . . .' My mouth snapped shut. I thought about Marlon's dad, desperately trying to think of a way to keep his home. Would I really have done any different? Marlon and I walked on in silence. Andrew and Rashid cast the occasional glance

back at us. They were probably wondering what all the raised voices were about.

‘What would *you* have done?’ I asked curiously.

Marlon shrugged. ‘To be honest, I don’t know. I don’t like to think I could’ve done the same thing, but I don’t know.’

‘So did your dad pay off the mortgage then?’ I asked at last.

‘Yeah. The mortgage arrears and all the other debts Mum and Dad had have been paid off. There was just enough money left over for a new pair of shoes for me and Tasha, and a new jacket for me. We’re not about to jet off to the Bahamas for a long holiday, believe me.’

I sighed. What was I going to do? Bear a grudge or let it go? ‘Well, It’s done now.’ I shrugged. ‘My bleating about it isn’t going to change that.’

Silence.

‘So how’s Tasha?’ I asked.

This was ridiculous. Marlon and I were struggling to find things to say to each other. We’d never had to do that before. Usually the two of us could talk about anything and everything and we did. But not today. I wondered if we ever would again.

‘Tasha’s fine. Her class went to the Science Museum today, I think,’ Marlon replied.

We carried on walking in a floundering silence until Rashid and Andrew took pity on us. They took over the conversation then, talking about the last time both of them had visited the Science Museum. Marlon and I lapsed back into silence. I sighed inwardly. It was really scraping the bottom of the barrel when I had to ask Marlon about his younger sister! Marlon and I joined in the conversation but I noticed that we only ever spoke in response to what Andrew or Rashid said. By the time we reached the swimming pool I was desperate for Marlon and me to behave normally with each other again. I tried smiling at him to let him know that everything was OK but although he smiled back, he didn’t seem to have much to say.

Things will be better once we’re in the pool, I told myself. Marlon, Andrew and the others always had fun in the pool, only this time I’d be having fun with them.

‘Who’s on for Daredevil Dive?’ Andrew laughed.

‘I am!’ I got in before anyone else could answer.

Suddenly all my friends’ eyes were on me.

‘Are you sure?’ Andrew asked seriously.

‘Yep!’

‘Don’t you think you should wait a bit first?’ asked Rashid.

‘I mean, you have to dive and touch the bottom of the pool in

the deep end. It's a long way down.'

'Don't worry. I can handle it. And if I can't get to the bottom, I'll just come up again, that's all.'

'Cam, I'm not sure this is such a good idea . . .' Andrew began.

'No, if he wants to play Daredevil Dive, let him.'

I wasn't the only one who was surprised by Marlon's words. Usually he was the first one to tell me not to do things, to urge me to be cautious. I wondered at his sudden change of heart.

'Cam hates people to fuss over him,' Marlon said, looking directly at me. 'Besides, he's probably fitter than all of us put together with his new pig's heart.'

Something inside me went very still and alert when he said that. What was he getting at? There was a note in his voice, a peculiar tone that I didn't recognize.

'If you're sure it's safe . . .' Andrew was still doubtful.

'Don't worry about me,' I said. 'Just prepare to get beaten!'

'Big talk from a small peanut head!' Andrew laughed.

'We'll see who's a peanut head!' I told him.

We all lined up at the side of the pool. I could feel my heart begin to beat faster with anticipation. I was exhilarated – this was something I'd never thought I'd be able to do a few

months ago. But I must admit, part of me was a bit scared. I hadn't been at the deep end of the pool since before my heart went bad. And Dr Bryce had told me not to push it.

'Ready . . .'

Maybe I shouldn't be doing this.

'Steady . . .'

But it was too late now.

'Go!'

We all swam out to the middle of the pool, then dived. I kicked my legs, telling myself I could do it. Two weeks after my operation I'd been on a running machine at Dr Bryce's clinic with pods stuck all over my chest so that the doctors could monitor my heart when I exercised. Every day I'd had to do that. I'd started off with some gentle walking until, by the end of the six weeks, they had me jogging comfortably. Of course, with the jogging I didn't have to hold my breath as well. I opened my eyes, ignoring how they stung because of the chlorine in the water. I could see that Andrew and Rashid were ahead of me. I had time to wonder where Marlon was before my lungs began to protest and I could hear my heart hammering and my blood roaring. I wasn't going to make it to the bottom. If I carried on much further, I wouldn't be able to make it back up to the surface either. I turned in the water

and headed up again. I could see Marlon just behind me. I passed him as I kicked, desperate to try and make it back up to the surface before my lungs exploded. When my head emerged from the water, I gasped in air as if my life depended on it – which at that moment was precisely how it felt. I floated on my back while I dragged breath after breath down into my lungs. When at last I felt my racing heart slow down, I turned and swam slowly back to the side of the pool. I obviously wasn't as fit as I thought I was.

I mean, I didn't expect to win – although it would've been nice! – but I had thought I'd do better. I'd barely made it halfway down. I thought Marlon wouldn't bother going all the way down to the bottom of the pool. I thought he'd come up and gloat – but he didn't. Andrew emerged first, followed by Rashid. Marlon came swimming up last.

'I can't believe it, I beat you.' Andrew grinned at Marlon.

Marlon shrugged. 'Everyone has an off day.'

'And what happened to you?' Rashid asked me.

I smiled. 'I decided it'd be too humiliating for you if I beat you on my very first attempt, so I decided to wait until next week to kick your butt! Same time, same place!'

'You wish!'

'Dream on!'

I looked at Marlon and we both burst out laughing. And as we laughed, the last of the anger and hurt I felt evaporated.

'You think you're bad, don't you!' Marlon teased.

'I don't think it, I *know* it!' I replied.

It was one of the best afternoons of my life. I couldn't do everything my friends did, but I didn't do too badly. And best of all, Marlon and I were talking again. I ended up staying in the water for an hour, which was about forty-five minutes longer than I usually managed. By the time I got out of the water I was as wrinkled and crinkled as a walnut, but I'd never felt better.

I was the first one to get dressed so I bought myself a packet of salt and vinegar crisps from the leisure centre vending machine. I managed to gobble down three-quarters of the packet before the others arrived.

'Who's on for a chicken burger and chips?' asked Rashid.

'You bet!'

'Good idea.'

'Cam, you can have a bacon burger,' Andrew told me.

'Or a couple of pork chops,' Rashid laughed. 'If you don't mind eating your cousins!' Andrew was doubled up with laughter now.

I glared at him, my lips pursed, my face stony. 'Blow it out

your ear, Rashid.' I told him.

They all creased up at that. I had to admit my lips did twitch a bit. Eating my cousins! Yeuch! What an idea!

'I'll just go and phone my mum first,' I said, licking my salty fingers. 'She was meant to pick me up and drive me back home. I'll ask her if I can go with you first.'

'Why d'you need your mum to drive you back home?' Andrew asked.

I looked at Marlon, then immediately looked away again. I didn't want him to think I was blaming him – 'cos I wasn't. 'We've been getting one or two weirdo letters, that's all,' I shrugged. 'Some people out there think Trudy shouldn't have died to save my life.'

'Trudy?' asked Rashid.

'That was the name of the pig I got the heart from,' I explained.

'How d'you know that?'

'It's a long story.' I certainly wasn't going to go into that now!

'These weirdo letters, what do they say?' asked Marlon.

'Just that Mum and Dad and I ought to be ashamed and that we're immoral. That sort of thing. Anyway, if you guys wait here, I'll go and phone Mum.' I walked over to the pay

phone in the foyer before Marlon could ask me any more questions. I could see him getting more upset with every word I said. I didn't want him to feel guilty about it. It wasn't his fault. I stuck my phone card in the slot and dialled Mum's mobile number. She'd written it down on a piece of paper for me even though I told her not to. I was convinced I'd remember it, but in the end it turned out to be just as well she did. Mum's mobile was on the hall table next to our still unplugged phone. Dad would still be at work, so that was all right, but it was a toss-up between who would answer the phone – Mum or my nan. I hoped it would be Nan – then I could go with my friends for sure. Mum would be harder to get round.

'Hello?'

My heart sank. It was Mum. 'Hello, Mum. Can I go for a burger with Marlon and the others?' I asked.

'Cameron, I don't think that would be a good idea.' Mum's reply was immediate.

'Please, Mum,' I begged. 'I'm fine and besides, no one except my friends knows where I am. Please can I go? Please?'

'And how would you get home?'

'I'll phone you from the precinct as soon as we've finished

our burgers. Then you can come and pick me up,' I said eagerly.

'I don't know, Cameron . . .'

'Please?'

There was a long pause.

'OK then, but you're to phone me within the next hour without fail,' Mum said sternly. 'D'you understand?'

'Thanks, Mum.'

'The next hour, Cameron. I mean it.'

'Yes, I know.'

'And be careful. Your face has been all over the telly and the newspapers. Someone might recognize you. On second thoughts—'

"Bye, Mum,' I said and I quickly put down the phone. I'd really get it in the neck for that, but I was having such a good day, I didn't want it to end.

'I can go,' I told my friends.

'Great! What're we waiting for?' said Andrew. 'I'm starving.'

And we all headed for the exit.

'I'm sorry about all those weirdo letters you've been getting,' Marlon said as we walked out of the leisure centre.

'You didn't write them, so it's not your fault,' I said.

'But if I'd kept my mouth shut . . .'

'Let it go, Marlon.' I smiled. 'I have.'

Marlon looked at me and smiled back. I made a fist and playfully tapped him on the jaw. He made a fist and did the same. Then we both grabbed each other and had a wrestle down on the ground.

'Aahhh!' Andrew gave a mock sigh. 'A Kodak moment!'

Marlon and I sprang up at that and told Andrew where to go! We all ended up walking along the road in fits of laughter.

'Are you Cameron Kelsey?'

I turned my head, still beaming away. A woman with light-brown hair, a smart charcoal-grey suit and a smiling face stood behind me. I turned all the way round.

'Are you Cameron Kelsey, the pig-heart boy?' the woman repeated. She had a nice smile, a friendly smile.

Her smile was all I could see as I nodded. Was she a journalist seeking an interview? Maybe she wanted my autograph? The woman brought her hands out from behind her back. Then all time slowed right down. I could see everything, hear everything, because each second seemed to last so much longer. I was surprised to see she had a bucket in one hand. The woman used her free hand to steady the bucket as she raised it. I saw it had something red in it. Red

liquid, sloshing around. Red paint? Some of the liquid spilt over the side of the bucket and hit the pavement, splashing up onto my white trainers. The woman raised the bucket higher. Suddenly aware of what was about to happen, I raised my hands in protest. I opened my mouth to say, NO! And in that moment I was drenched. The red liquid hit me full in the face like a stinging punch. It filled my mouth and stung my eyes and ran down my face like a red river. Only it wasn't paint. I could taste it. It was blood.

‘. . . murderer! Murderer! MURDERER!’ The woman kept screaming at me, over and over. Over and over and over. I spat, then retched all over my shoes and the pavement. My salt and vinegar crisps mixed with the blood at my feet. Wiping the blood out of my eyes, I stared at the woman.

‘MURDERER!’

By this time Marlon was at my side and shouting abuse at the woman. And then, just like that, we were suddenly surrounded. Yet I couldn't take my eyes off the woman before me. She was still screaming at me, ignoring Marlon, and never before had I seen such rage, such hatred on someone's face. Rage and hatred directed at me. Without warning she flew at me, but a man and a woman in the crowd around us pulled her back – which was probably just as well. I couldn't

have moved if my life had depended on it.

I don't remember much after that. The police arrived and I was asked a lot of questions that I didn't answer because I couldn't open my mouth. Marlon did a lot of talking for me. Then I was bundled into a car and the next thing I knew I was at the casualty department of my local hospital. And still I couldn't speak. It was as if I was floating outside my body, watching everything that was going on but unable to take part in any of it. I was taken to a cubicle where I was cleaned up and then helped up onto a hospital bed. After the nurse had taken my temperature and blood pressure and checked me over, a cup of hot, sweet tea was forced into my hands. I drank it because one of the nurses told me to – and because I was so cold. My whole body was freezing. Not numb where you can't feel anything, but cold enough to feel as if my body was burning. The tea scalded my lips and burnt my tongue but I drank it anyway. The tea helped a bit, so when they offered me another cup, I nodded immediately. When I looked up from my empty cup, Mum and Nan had arrived. I don't remember much about what happened then either. Nan came and sat down on the chair beside my bed and she held my hand without saying a word. Mum left the cubicle to talk to the doctors and nurses and then to the two policemen

who'd brought me to the hospital. I could hear her voice but I couldn't tune in to a single word she was saying.

After I don't know how long I turned to Nan. 'I want to go home now, please,' I said.

Nan stood up and put her arm around me.

'Nan,' I whispered, 'was it worth it?'

She instantly knew what I was talking about. 'Cameron, only you can decide that,' she told me.

'Would you have done it?'

'What? Had the transplant operation?'

I nodded.

'To be honest, I don't know,' Nan replied, 'but I don't think so. I don't think I'm as brave as you.'

Funny but that was just what Travis had said. I remembered how I'd cut him dead and swanned off. Andrew was right. I was no better than Travis. I slid down until I was more lying than sitting and pulled the white cellular blanket up over me. Inside I was still cold. 'I'm not brave, Nan. Stupid maybe, but not brave.'

'Don't say that.' Nan rounded on me at once. 'It took a great deal of courage to go through with that operation.'

'Desperation, you mean.'

'Cameron, that's enough. That woman earlier was

obviously a couple of eggs short of the full breakfast. Are you going to just curl up and give in now? Are you going to let her do that to you?'

Long moments passed as Nan and I looked at each other. Finally I forced a smile. 'I suppose not.'

'Pardon?'

'I guess not.'

'I still can't hear you.'

'No!' I replied.

We both started laughing at that. Nan had heard my first answer. She just wanted me to say it until I believed it. As my smile faded, I did feel slightly better but I still didn't have the answer to my question. I still didn't know if all this was worth it. I wondered if I ever would.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Holding On

Hello, Alex,

Yes, it's me – your favourite brother. Actually, I'm not in a very jokey mood at the moment. I'm not in a very smiley mood either. A woman, a stranger, threw a bucket of blood over me today. It turns out it was pig's blood. The police are still trying to find out where she got it from but apparently she's not saying a word.

She didn't have much to say to me either when she threw the bucket of blood all over me. She just kept saying one word over and over. Murderer. She called me a murderer. I'm not a murderer. I'm just a boy, doing the best I can. I'm against animal experiments where it isn't necessary and I think using animals to test cosmetics and perfumes and that sort of stuff is obscene, but I read on the Internet that there have been major medical advances that have depended on animal research – like anaesthetics and the diphtheria vaccine and drugs for asthma and drugs for high blood pressure and heart transplants and insulin for diabetics and treatments for leukaemia and . . . and penicillin to treat

infections.

Is all that wrong? I don't know any more. I feel I don't know anything any more. I think of that woman and I can't even hate her. Maybe I will later. Maybe I'm still in shock. I don't know what I would've done if my friends hadn't been there – especially Marlon. We were having such a great time. Then it all got spoilt.

Because of her.

Because of me.

We'd all been swimming. I used to be quite good at swimming before I caught the viral infection that started all this. We played Daredevil Dive – that's where you have to dive to the bottom of the deep end and then come back up and race to the side. I didn't make it to the bottom. I ran out of breath. Marlon usually comes first when it comes to Daredevil Dive but today he came last. D'you know, I've only just realized why. I think he stayed back deliberately to keep an eye on me. I wonder why I didn't realize that at the time.

So, here I am – clean again. I swallowed some of the blood that woman threw at me. My mouth, was open and it went in my mouth and ran down my throat. I was as sick as a . . . a pig . . . afterwards, but how do I know all that stuff is

out of my stomach? The doctors tried to reassure me that I only swallowed a minute quantity and because I was sick immediately afterwards It's very unlikely that any was left in my system – but how can they know for sure? I had a shower when I got home. A shower that lasted for an hour and a half. I let the water run into my mouth and down my throat. I don't think I should've done that. Shower water isn't the same as tap water, but I couldn't help it. I can still taste that foul stuff in my mouth. I've used up a brand-new tube of toothpaste brushing my teeth for half an hour. I'm all clean again, so why do I still feel so dirty? Why do I still feel as if I'm only holding on by my fingertips?

I asked Dad what had happened to the woman who threw the blood. He told me she's been arrested. I can't help wondering where she got the blood from. Dad doesn't know. She wouldn't have killed some poor animal just to throw its blood over me, would she? Anyway, Dad was all for going to the police station first thing in the morning to press assault charges. I must admit, I thought she'd have to have hit me with her bucket to be charged with something like that, but Dad says it is still assault. You should've seen Mum and Dad's face when I asked them not to press charges against the woman. Even now I don't know why I did that.

Part of it is that I don't want any more fuss. I don't want a big, drawn-out case with my face in the paper every two seconds. But it was more than that. I want to prove to everyone – and myself, I think – that I'm better than that. Not in a superior, stick-my-nose-in-the-air kind of way, but I've forgiven her, so what's the point of prosecuting her. And I really have forgiven her – which, I must admit, I find astounding! But Nan was right – life is too short to bear grudges. You remember that!

But, Alex, I don't know what to do or where to go from here. All I do know is that I have to get fit and stay fit. I must. I have to show that woman, and Mum and Dad and the whole wide world that all this is for a reason, a good cause. Otherwise, it was all for nothing and what's the point?

You see, Alex, for the first time I'm beginning to wonder if I made a mistake in going through with all this. D'you think I made a mistake? I don't know any more. I don't know anything any more. I just want to . . .

It's all right, I'm not going to cry.

I'm not going to cry . . .

I'm not going to cry . . .

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Favour

‘Marlon, could you do me a favour?’

‘What’s that?’

Five weeks had passed since the bucket of blood incident and unfortunately, for a while, it had stirred up a whole lot of interest in me again. Now Mum insisted on driving me to and from school every day. And going to the leisure centre was out of the question. Mum and Dad wouldn’t hear of it. I could still see Mum and Dad’s faces when we got home that night. Mum ranted and raved and raged for a good hour, while Dad stood by the front window watching the crowds outside our house and silently seething. Only Nan recognized how I felt. She understood why I wanted to go back to the leisure centre. She understood why I wanted to get things back to normal as soon as possible. But Mum and Dad wouldn’t hear of it. And now that Nan had gone back to her own home, I had no one on my side. So the way I saw it, Mum and Dad left me no choice.

Thankfully, the second pig-heart transplant had taken place at Dr Bryce’s clinic so I was no longer the sole focus of

attention. It made what I was doing easier. It was simple really. I had some problems of my own to sort out.

‘Marlon, could you cover for me again tonight?’

‘You’re not going swimming again, are you?’ Marlon asked, upset.

I could tell he wasn’t happy with me for the position I was placing him in. Every day for the last week I’d phoned my mum to tell her I was going to his house after school. Then, after my swim, I’d go to his house for ten minutes or so, then phone for Mum or Dad to come and pick me up. I knew that sooner or later I’d be found out, but with a little luck it would be later.

I’d suddenly become obsessed with swimming. Well, not so much with swimming as with Daredevil Diving. I still hadn’t made it to the bottom of the pool, but I was going to. I was determined. I had no idea why it was so important to me, but it was. It was as if, by touching the bottom of the pool, I’d be proving something to myself and the rest of the world. Only I had no idea what.

‘Cam, you can’t keep doing this. You can’t go to the leisure centre every evening.’

‘Watch me,’ I said.

‘But suppose someone sees you?’ Marlon said unhappily.

‘So what? Besides, things are back to normal now. The crowds have gone from outside our house. Our phone’s been plugged back in. Nan’s gone home. Why should everything else be allowed to return to normal except my life?’ I argued.

‘Going swimming after school every day isn’t normal unless you’re training for the Olympics,’ said Marlon. ‘And you won’t even let me come with you.’

‘You’ve got to stay at your house just in case my mum or dad phone,’ I said.

‘Sooner or later they’re going to twig. Grown-ups are stupid but they’re not stupid all the time.’

‘I know. But I’ll have finished by the time Mum and Dad catch me.’

‘Finished what?’

I didn’t answer. ‘So will you cover for me?’

‘You know I will.’ Marlon replied.

‘Of course I know you will.’ I smiled at Marlon. ‘Cos I know I can trust you.’

Marlon smiled at that but the frown didn’t take long to return to his face.

‘Marlon and Cameron, would you like to stand up and share your conversation with the rest of the class?’ asked Mr Stewart. ‘I’m sure we’d all be fascinated to hear what’s so

riveting that you have to speak while I’m trying to teach.’

I said the first thing that came into my head. ‘I was asking Marlon if he’d written a poem for his English homework.’

‘And had he?’

‘No, sir.’

‘And have you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Let’s hear it then,’ said Mr Stewart.

I stared at him. ‘Er . . . It’s not really finished yet.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Let’s hear it.’

‘It’s not very good.’

‘Let’s hear it.’

‘Sir, It’s dire!’ I admitted.

The rest of the class tittered at that.

‘I’m even more intrigued now. Get it out,’ said Mr Stewart. I scowled at him but he wasn’t going to change his mind. Reluctantly I dug into my desk. I couldn’t believe he was really going to make me read it out. I always knew he was a sadist and here was my proof.

‘Sorry, sir. I must’ve left it at home,’ I lied. No way was I going to read out my first attempt at my homework. It was a poem about a butterfly, for goodness’ sake. No way was I going to read out anything so weedy.

'That's a shame. I'll have to make sure I ask your English teacher to show me this amazing poem worthy of all that discussion just now,' said Mr Stewart.

'Sorry, sir,' I mumbled.

Mr Stewart got on with the rest of the lesson. Me? I couldn't wait for the lesson to finish. I was desperate to leave and go swimming. Under the water nothing and no one could touch me. Nothing could trouble me. Thank goodness this was the last lesson of the day. As soon as the buzzer went I would make sure I was the first one out of the classroom. In fact the others wouldn't be able to see me for dust. One of the advantages of having a new heart – even if it was from a pig: it made me healthy enough to get out of the class in a hurry.

Take a deep breath, I told myself. And another. And another. Now go!

I struck out for the middle of the pool, kicked back with my legs and dived. Kick, kick, kick. Down, down, down. The water stung my eyes and the further down I went, the more it felt as if giant hands were wrapped around my chest and squeezing. But I kept going. I could see the bottom. Just a little further. But from the pounding of my heart and the raging of the blood in my head, I knew I'd have to turn back now or I wouldn't be able to turn back at all. Cursing my

weak body, I headed back up towards the surface of the water, desperately disappointed. Would I ever make it to the bottom? I was beginning to wonder. But I had a more immediate problem – the surface of the swimming pool looked as if it was miles away. I kicked harder, forcing myself to go faster. I broke through the surface of the water just as I thought my lungs must surely burst. I tried to float on my back, but my body was having spasms from trying to drink down air into my starved lungs. I swallowed some water and started coughing and spluttering as I tried to clear my mouth. I twisted round, forcing myself to float, forcing my body to calm down. My heart, which had been racing so fast it seemed to consist of just one continuous beat, began to slow down. But I had a pain in my left shoulder and the left side of my neck. I felt sick and my lungs were hurting and the pain didn't ease as I began to breathe more normally. I made my way to the side of the pool and hauled myself out. Even that was a major effort. I was so tired. I went back to the changing rooms, had a shower and decided to head straight home.

By the time I put my front-door key in the lock the pain in my shoulder had passed, but I still felt a bit sick. I'd been feeling vaguely nauseous for a few days now and it was getting worse, not better. As I closed the front door behind

me, I could hear one of Mum's favourite Lenny Kravitz songs playing softly from the living room. I tiptoed to the living-room door, which was open. I peeped through the crack between the door and the door-frame. Mum was sitting on the sofa with her feet up on Dad's lap and Dad was massaging her toes – again!

'That's very relaxing.' Mum smiled at Dad. 'Alex has stopped kicking me and gone to sleep.' She patted her bulging stomach.

'I can't believe I'm massaging your smelly toes again. You are such a smooth talker!' said Dad in his lovey-dovey voice. 'You could talk the man in the moon into giving you a green cheese sandwich!'

'I don't want the man in the moon. I just want you.' Mum smiled, making me want to throw up!

'What is it with you two and toes?' I asked, going into the room.

Mum frowned. 'What're you doing here? I thought you were at Marlon's?'

'I was. I decided to come home by myself.'

Mum swung her feet off Dad's lap. 'You came home by yourself?' Her voice was sharp.

'Yes, I did – and nothing happened,' I replied.

'Cameron . . .' I could tell Mum was winding up for a megarant.

'Cathy, you can't spend the rest of your life hovering over Cam like a hawk,' Dad said gently. 'Sooner or later he's got to start doing things for himself again. You can't do everything for him.'

'I'm not trying to. I just . . .'

Dad smiled and with that smile Mum's voice trailed off.

'Are you OK?' she asked me at last.

'I'm fine,' I lied. My nausea hadn't passed but I wasn't about to give Mum an excuse to smother me again. I wished Nan was here. I badly wanted to talk to her. 'Mum . . .' I began.

The doorbell rang.

'I'll get it,' I said.

'No,' Mum said at once, 'I'll—'

'Cathy . . .' Dad admonished gently. 'The crowds have gone, the police have gone and most of the letters have stopped. We can't spend the rest of our time in this house hiding and living in fear.'

I saw Mum take a deep breath. 'I thought you were going to open the door,' she snapped.

I smiled. I knew the snap wasn't directed at me. Even if I

lived to be ninety, Mum would still be fussing over me. I went back out into the hall, thinking how nice it was to walk into the house and not hear a major argument going on between Mum and Dad. Things seemed to be working out after all. I opened the front door.

‘Dr Bryce!’ I said, surprised. ‘We only saw you a week ago. You’re not due again until after Christmas.’

‘I need to see you and your parents,’ Dr Bryce told me, with no trace of a smile.

One look at his face and I could see it was serious. Without a word, I stepped aside. Dr Bryce came into the house and headed straight for the living room. I closed the door slowly behind him. I stood out in the hall for a few moments. I didn’t want to go into the living room. I was afraid of what I would hear. Maybe if I stayed out in the hall, then whatever it was wouldn’t be about me and wouldn’t affect me. But it didn’t work that way. Whatever it was, it wouldn’t go away just because I wanted to do my ostrich act and bury my head in the hall carpet. I walked into the living room.

Mum and Dad were sitting on the sofa with Mum’s feet now firmly on the ground. Dr Bryce was in the armchair. They all watched me as I sat down next to Dad.

‘I’ve got some bad news.’ Dr Bryce didn’t even attempt to

beat about the bush. He turned and looked directly at me. ‘To put it simply, Cameron, your white blood cell count is way up.’

‘My T-cells or my B-cells?’ I asked.

Dr Bryce was too worried to be impressed. ‘How much do you know about the way your immune system and your white blood cells work?’

‘Only what we’ve done in biology and what I’ve read in books and over the Internet,’ I admitted.

‘Hang on. What does all this mean exactly?’ Dad asked quietly.

A deep silence filled the room. ‘It means—’ Dr Bryce began.

‘It means that maybe my body is starting to reject my new heart,’ I interrupted, never taking my eyes off the doctor.

‘Not necessarily. It may just mean that we need to rethink the dosage and content of your anti-rejection and immunosuppressant drugs. The trouble with all these drugs is that it’s a fine balancing act between what and how much of each drug you should get.’

‘I thought you said you’d developed a new drug, a complement blocker that would stop Cameron’s body rejecting his heart.’ Mum’s expression was stony.

‘We have. I think, *I hope* we just need to amend the dosage.

Cameron, I've brought you a new series of injections which I'd like you to start taking immediately. I'll take the old ones back with me.'

'More injections.' Mum said, dismayed.

'We've reached a deal with a pharmaceutical company only this week. They've agreed to start manufacturing the drug in tablet form from the New Year. We don't have the resources at my clinic to do that, so hopefully the injections won't be for too much longer. Cameron, I also want to change the immuno-suppressant tablets you're taking. I think we need to be more aggressive.'

'Will all this work?' I asked.

'It's impossible to tell. All we can do at this stage is monitor you closely, and keep fine-tuning the dosages of the various drugs you need to stop your body rejecting your new heart.'

Dr Bryce dug into his large briefcase and brought out a clear plastic box full of vials. 'We don't want your body to reject your new heart but at the same time we don't want to leave your immune system so weak that you couldn't fight off a cold if you caught one.'

'I understand.' I nodded.

'How have you been feeling, Cameron? Have you been feeling more tired than normal? Or maybe a bit ill?'

'No.' I shook my head. 'I've been feeling fine. Great in fact.'

'Hmmm!' Dr Bryce studied me. 'I think I should go back to seeing you weekly rather than monthly.'

'But what about my fortnightly check-ups at the local hospital? D'you still want me to go there as well?'

'Yes, I think so. I'll speak to the hospital. I also want to change a few of the tests you regularly have.'

I shrugged. 'OK. If you think I should.'

'I do,' Dr Bryce replied.

'Well, I'd better go upstairs and get on with my homework,' I said, jumping to my feet.

No one told me to stay, so I didn't. I left the room and forced myself to run up the stairs, even though I was dog-tired. When I got to my room, I chucked myself down on my bed, gasping for breath. My heart was pounding again. I told myself that the stairs weren't responsible for my racing pulse, it was Dr Bryce's news – but I knew that was only partly true.

I thought of Alex downstairs waiting to be born, but the thought hurt. So I turned my thoughts to the swimming pool at my local leisure centre instead.

'I'll make you a deal,' I spoke to my new heart. 'I'll play Daredevil Dive just one more time. If I manage to touch the bottom of the pool then you have to stay inside me and not

cause any more trouble. And you . . .’ I spoke to the rest of my body. ‘And you have to leave my heart alone and let it get on with pumping my blood around my body. OK, everyone? I’ll try to touch the bottom of the pool just one more time. And if I manage it, then we all live together until we’re ninety. Agreed?’

It was agreed.

I’d go to the pool after school tomorrow. I was in control once again. Not my body, not my heart – but me. All I had to do was touch the bottom of the pool. My future was now back in my own hands.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Losing

‘Marlon, I still don’t know why you’re here,’ I said crossly.

Today of all days, I didn’t want any company while I swam. Today was too important. I was scared but determined. Touching the bottom of the pool was like tossing a coin. Heads I win. Tails I lose.

‘I like to swim occasionally too,’ Marlon replied.

‘But it’s not even Tuesday. You and the others only ever come swimming on a Tuesday.’

Marlon smiled at me. ‘There’s no law that says I can’t come swimming on a Thursday instead.’

I was about to argue but I thought better of it. If I protested too much, Marlon might realize that I was up to something. But I was still annoyed. I bundled my bag and my clothes into a locker and banged it shut.

‘So what’ve you been doing here every afternoon, anyway?’ asked Marlon as we both made for the pool.

‘Just kicking about and swimming. I’ve been trying to build up my strength and stamina. Swimming is brilliant exercise,’ I replied, in what I hoped was an off-hand manner.

'Fancy a race? Just a width but underwater?' Marlon challenged.

Under normal circumstances I would've snatched his hand off, but these were hardly normal circumstances. I didn't want to waste any of my energy on a race. I knew I didn't have that much energy to spare.

I smiled. 'Maybe later.'

I sat down at the edge of the pool and slipped into the water. It was cool, verging on cold, and made me gasp. I held onto the bar which ran around the side of the pool and kicked out leisurely with my legs to warm myself up a little. Marlon dived straight in and immediately struck out for the other edge of the pool. I watched him for a few moments. I was so glad Nan had talked some sense into me. It was a pain that Marlon had insisted on coming to the pool with me today, but I was glad we were still friends. I think if it hadn't been for Nan I might never have had sense enough to let go of my anger. It was strange the way things turned out. Before my heart operation, everything had seemed so clear. I didn't have long to live so I knew what my priorities were – my family and my friends. Yet after my operation, for a while my priorities had become completely messed up.

So what was important to me now?

I couldn't see past touching the bottom of the pool. My friends had all done it, but that wasn't the reason. It was a challenge I'd issued to myself. It was my way of proving that I was as good, as healthy, as deserving of life as anyone else. I looked across the pool. Marlon had almost reached the other side. I'd have to act fast.

This was it! Now or never. Do it now, while I was still fresh and had the energy. I let go of the bar and began to tread water.

One . . . two . . . three . . . go! I swam to the middle of the pool, took several deep breaths and dived down and down and down. I didn't stop, even when my lungs screamed at me for air, even when my heart shrieked at me to turn back, even when my blood roared at me to stop. I kicked my legs and went down further.

And I touched the bottom.

It was icy cold beneath my fingers but I had reached it. Elated, I turned round and kicked against the bottom of the pool to give myself an extra push back to the surface. Except the surface was a long way away. And halfway up through the water, I knew I wasn't going to make it.

Walking on the Moon

When I opened my eyes, I was lying flat and a brilliant white light was blinding me. I thought I was dead, I really did, until I heard a scraping sound beside me and then Dad's anguished face swam into focus above my own.

I smiled at him but he didn't seem to see it. He stared at me, misery clouding his eyes. I tried to speak, to tell him I was glad to see him, but my mouth didn't seem to want to work.

I'm all right, Dad. I hoped my eyes told him what my mouth could not.

In fact I was better than all right, I was *alive*. The rest could wait. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

When I woke up, Mum, Dad, Nan, Dr Ehrlich and Dr Bryce were all standing around my bed.

'What happened?' I whispered, confused. Then I remembered the swimming pool. 'How did I get out of the pool?'

'Marlon saved your life,' Mum told me, her expression grim.

‘Oh . . . First Dr Bryce, then Marlon.’ I tried to laugh, but my throat was still hurting.

‘It’s not funny, Cameron,’ said Dad. ‘When you get out of here, you and I are going to have a long talk.’

And at that, Mum burst into tears.

‘Mum, don’t cry. Please don’t cry.’ I tried to sit up but I didn’t have one gram of strength in my body. ‘Mum, you’ll upset Alex,’ I pleaded. ‘Please don’t cry. I’m OK now. Really I am.’

‘Cameron . . .’ Dr Bryce began. He and Dad looked at each other across my bed and I knew in that instant what was coming. ‘Cameron, your body is rejecting your new heart.’

‘Is that why I’ve been feeling tired and sick?’

‘How long have you felt like that?’ Dr Bryce asked me sharply.

‘Just a week or so.’

‘Why on earth didn’t you say? Why didn’t you tell me the truth yesterday? We could’ve taken you into hospital. We could’ve amended your anti-rejection drug therapy earlier,’ Dr Bryce said, distraught.

That was exactly why I hadn’t said anything. I needed to finish what I’d started.

‘It’s not his fault, it’s yours.’ Mum rounded on Dr Bryce.

‘Why did it take you a week to get the results of his last blood tests?’

‘The first set of results got contaminated,’ Dr Bryce answered. ‘We had to run all the tests again.’

‘Mum, it’s OK.’ I smiled. ‘It wouldn’t have made any difference.’

‘You don’t know that,’ said Dad.

And yes, he was right. I didn’t know that – not for sure, but I felt I was right. ‘So what happens now?’ I whispered. ‘D’you give me more anti-rejection drugs?’

‘I don’t think we can do that. It would just postpone the inevitable. Your heart is fighting a losing battle. The only way forward now is to have another heart transplant,’ he said. ‘And we have to act within the next few days before you become too weak to survive the surgery.’

‘Another pig-heart transplant?’ I asked.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Is that the only way?’ asked Dad.

‘I’m afraid so. I don’t think Cameron’s heart will last much into the New Year otherwise,’ said Dr Bryce.

I smiled at him. I liked the way he was as blunt as ever. The poor man didn’t look any happier than my mum and dad. I realized that his brusque manner was his way of coping with

things. He must've been through a lot with all the abuse he'd received over the years, with all the abuse he was probably still receiving. 'How's the other heart-transplant patient doing?' I asked.

'She's doing fine. It took her longer to recover than you but now she's making excellent progress,' Dr Bryce replied.

'Good. I'm glad.' And I was. 'I'd hate for all your research to have to stop now.'

Dr Bryce turned to my mum and dad. 'I've spoken to the senior registrar here and she reckons Cameron can probably go home tomorrow – Saturday or Sunday at the very latest. I think if we arrange for Cameron to come back up to the clinic on Tuesday, we'll schedule the surgery for Wednesday and—'

'Dr Bryce, I don't want another transplant operation.'

Dr Bryce wasn't the only one who was shocked by my words. He frowned deeply. 'What're you talking about?'

'I don't want another operation.'

'Why not?'

'Cameron, what're you saying?'

'Cameron, you can't give up now . . .'

'Cameron, have you thought about this . . . ?'

The only one who didn't jump down my throat was Nan.

'Mum, Dad, I don't want another transplant,' I said. 'It's

hard to explain but . . .'

'Try,' Mum said immediately.

It really was strange the way things worked out. Mum had been so against the operation at the beginning and now she was the one really pushing me to have another one. 'Would it make a difference if your second transplant was from a human donor rather than a pig?' Dr Ehrlich asked me.

'No,' I replied at once. 'No difference at all.'

'Then why not?' asked Mum.

'Dr Bryce, if I had the second operation, how long would I have to take all those drugs you've been giving me?'

'Probably for the rest of your life – but isn't it worth it if they keep you alive?'

'But they're making me sick and I'm beginning to get tired all the time,' I said quietly. 'It's like before my operation.'

'But as I said, we can fine-tune the dosage until we hit upon a drug regimen that suits you,' Dr Bryce argued.

'But I don't want the rest of my life to be made up of pills and powders and injections and nothing else. I don't want to feel sick and tired all the time.'

'That won't necessarily happen,' said Dr Ehrlich.

'But the second transplant has less chance of succeeding than the first.'

Dad frowned. 'Where did you hear that?'

'I read it on the Internet,' I said.

'You can't believe everything you read,' Dad told me. 'You know that.'

'Yes, I know that. But a while ago, Mum said something about me being special. She told me that I'm not just special because of my heart and I shouldn't think that. But I began to. I began to think that my new heart was all I was. That's why I wanted to touch the bottom of the swimming pool, to prove to myself that I was something more.'

Dr Bryce shook his head. 'I don't understand.'

'I'm not sure I understand myself,' I admitted. 'All I know is, it's the quality of your life that counts, not the quantity. I've been very lucky so far and thank you for everything you did for me, Dr Bryce. I really do appreciate it. But enough is enough. I want my life back. Even if it's only for another few months.'

'And what about Alex?' Mum asked.

'I'm going to try to hang on long enough to see her or him. After that, whatever happens, happens.'

'So you're going to give up?' Dr Ehrlich said.

'Of course he isn't. He just wants to fight in his own way,' said Nan.

I knew Nan would understand.

'But . . .'

'I'm not going to stop taking the anti-rejection treatments,' I said.

'They'll just slow down the process, they won't stop it,' Dr Bryce protested vehemently. 'Cameron, your body will still reject your heart. All you'll do is buy yourself a few more months.'

'That's all I want.' I smiled. 'I want to be able to say goodbye to Alex in person.'

'I don't think you've thought this through . . .'

 Dr Bryce began.

I tuned him out of my head. I looked up at Nan. She smiled at me and took my hand.

'I want to speak to Cameron alone. Could you all disappear for a while?' she said.

Reluctantly Mum, Dad and the others left my bedside.

'You do understand, don't you, Nan?' I asked anxiously. I hadn't been wrong about that, had I?

'Oh yes.' Nan sat down on the side of my bed. 'You set yourself a goal and now you've achieved it. You've touched the bottom of the swimming pool.'

Something in her voice kept me silent.

‘It’s a shame you never knew your grandfather. You were named after him, you know.’

I nodded. ‘Yes, I know.’

‘He died of lung cancer.’

I knew that too. What was Nan driving at?

‘He wanted to live so much. He tried everything. He finally gave up his precious cigarettes – although he left that too late. He had chemotherapy, drugs, you name it, he tried it. He wasn’t going to give up.’

‘And you think that’s what I’m doing?’

‘Well, you’ve touched the bottom of the swimming pool.’ Nan smiled. ‘What else have you got to live for? What else is there worth fighting for?’

I frowned at her. ‘That’s not how it is.’

‘I know,’ Nan said gently. ‘You feel sick and we both know you’ll probably get sicker. You’re in pain and it’ll probably get worse.’

‘Is this meant to make me change my mind?’ I raised my eyebrows.

‘It’s meant to make you think. Cameron, life is very, very precious. Don’t let go of it. I watched my grandad fight and lose – but at least he fought. He fought every step of the way. Can you say the same?’

I turned my head away from her, disappointed. Nan’s gentle fingers turned my head to face her again. ‘Cameron, you’ve touched the bottom of the pool – and good for you. If that’s what keeps you going, find another challenge. And another one after that. And another one after that. I’m not going to lose you too. Besides, the world needs more Camerons!’

I looked at Nan. My eyes were hurting. ‘I’m so tired,’ I whispered.

‘I know.’

‘And I’m scared,’ I admitted.

‘I know that too. But Cameron, dear, you’re allowed to be scared. You’re just not allowed to give up – not without a good fight. So put your fists up and come out slugging.’

Silence.

‘I can’t.’ I turned my head away again.

‘Cameron . . .’

‘No, Nan. I’ve tried and tried and I can’t.’ I faced her and it was one of the hardest things I’d ever had to do. ‘I don’t want to drag this out any longer than necessary. Please don’t ask me to. Once I’ve seen Alex, I’ll be happy.’

Nan leaned back in her chair. She didn’t smile. She didn’t frown. Her face was a mask as she studied me, but I knew she

was disappointed. She sighed and stood up. 'Cameron, I could talk to you until I'm blue, green and purple in the face but it wouldn't make any difference,' she said. 'I would give my life if it meant you'd be well again but it doesn't work that way. You have to want it. *You* have to fight. No one can do it for you – not even me.'

'Just now, you said to the doctors that I was fighting in my own way,' I reminded her.

'Lying on your bed feeling sorry for yourself and getting ready to give up is one way of fighting – the easiest, the least productive, saddest way,' Nan told me.

'It's accepting things as they really are, that's all.'

'Rubbish!' Nan retorted. 'But you'll change your mind. I believe in your strength and your common sense. But as I said before, the final decision has to be yours. Just don't let me down or I'll have to give you a good swift kick – and I can do it too! Now let me go and get your mum and dad. You have to decide what you're going to tell them.'

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand as I watched Nan leave. Touching the bottom of the pool. It seemed so silly now. It was hardly in the same league as walking on the moon or discovering penicillin or some thing like that. But it had meant so much to me.

Why?

I mean, some people wanted to be millionaires when they grew up and they spent their whole lives trying to achieve that goal. Some people wanted children, some wanted to be doctors or lawyers or to drive a fire engine. Maybe, deep down – so deep down that even I wasn't consciously aware of it – I had never expected this operation to work. Was that it? Or maybe I'd begun to suspect that something was going wrong in the last couple of weeks.

Is that why I came up with something just outside my grasp? Something to work for, something difficult to achieve, but not impossible? Touching the bottom of the pool was my version of walking on the moon.

So what next? Nan was right. Only I could decide that one.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Creeping

When I entered my bedroom, Nan was busy arranging some fresh orange carnations in a vase on my work table.

‘Hi, Nan,’ I said, eyeing the flowers with suspicion. ‘Why’re you putting flowers in my room?’

Nan smiled. ‘Just to brighten up the place.’

I hadn’t seen her for two days – not since our talk at the hospital – and I’d really missed her. But as I looked at her, I couldn’t help feeling worried – because she looked frail and very tired. ‘Are you all right, Nan?’ I asked.

‘Of course.’ She grinned at me – and suddenly she didn’t look fragile at all.

Just looking at her, I knew she was OK. Nan’s whole personality shone from her eyes. She was a whirlwind that nothing and nobody could stop.

‘And what about you?’ asked Nan. ‘Have you changed your mind about the operation yet?’

‘No, and I’m not going to either,’ I said.

Nan sniffed. ‘If you say so.’

‘You’re not going to start lecturing me, are you?’ I asked

anxiously.

Mum and Dad had gone on about nothing else since I’d let them know of my decision, until I was sick up to the eyebrows of hearing about it. I didn’t want the operation and as far as I was concerned, that was that.

‘I wouldn’t dream of wasting my breath,’ Nan told me loftily. ‘Besides, you’ll change your mind.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I mean, you’ll see sense and change your mind. Just don’t wait too long.’

‘I am not going to change my mind.’ I admit I was peeved. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘Now if I told you that, you’d know as much as I do.’ Nan winked at me. And it was such a sly wink, I couldn’t help laughing.

‘Cam, is there anything I can get you? How about some chicken and a nice salad?’

‘No thanks, Nan. I’m not hungry,’ I said. ‘Besides, I think Mum’s downstairs cooking dinner for all of us already.’

‘In that case, I think I’ll go for a lie down before dinner and catch forty winks – although at my age I need more like eighty!’

Nan removed some imaginary dust from my bedside table

and headed for the bedroom door. She stopped before she got there though and gave me a very strange look. 'Cam, you do know you're my favourite grandson, don't you?' she told me.

'So far, I'm your only grandson,' I pointed out.

'True.' Nan chuckled. 'But you do know I love you?'

'Yes,' I said uncomfortably. 'And why are we getting mushy all of a sudden?'

'A little mush now and then never hurt anyone,' she told me. 'Now let me give you a kiss.'

'Do I have to?'

'Yes.'

Reluctantly, I bent my head so that Nan could kiss my cheek. Then she rubbed her fingers over my skin as if she was sanding a rough piece of wood.

'Are you shaving yet?' she asked.

'Nan!'

'Only teasing, Cam. Your skin is as smooth as a baby's bottom – but not as wrinkle-free!'

'Nan, I thought you were going for a lie down.'

'I can take a hint!' Nan smiled. 'See you later, darling.'

'Bye, Nan.' I held the bedroom door open for her.

'Trying to tell me something?'

'No. Just go,' I said.

Nan and I smiled at each other before she headed for the spare bedroom. As I closed my door, I wondered for the first time what Nan did at her home in Bolton. Was she lonely? Did she have many friends? What did she do all day? Nan was never one to sit still, that was for sure. I'd have to ask her when she woke up.

I could hear her now: 'Why the sudden interest? You never asked before.'

'I'm asking now.'

'And I'll think about whether or not I'm going to tell you!'

Just playing the imaginary conversation in my head made me smile. I could talk and argue with Nan in a way that I couldn't with my parents. Not that Nan stood for any nonsense – she wouldn't go for that at all. But she didn't talk down to me and she didn't talk to me like a parent.

'Cameron, could you come downstairs and help with the dinner, please?' Mum yelled.

I sighed. Help with the dinner, my left foot! She and Dad just wanted another chance to try and persuade me to change my mind. Slowly I made my way downstairs. I paused at the kitchen door, took a deep breath and walked in.

An hour later Mum said, 'I think we're about ready to eat now.'

I eyed Mum and Dad with suspicion. What was going on? They hadn't said a single word about Dr Bryce or the operation or anything even remotely medical. I'd just spent the last half an hour washing every salad ingredient we had in the salad crisper and chopping, slicing and dicing. Tonight, for the first time, making the salad was totally down to me. Mum raised an eyebrow, but she didn't say a word when I dropped lumps of chunky peanut butter into the salad. I caught Dad miming sticking his fingers down his throat though, when he thought I wasn't looking.

'Have you put out all the cutlery on the table?' Dad asked.

I nodded.

'Fine.' Mum smiled. 'You can go and get your nan now. If she's still asleep wake her up *gently*.'

What did she think I'd do? Burst into Nan's bedroom with a marching band? I ran up the stairs but only made it three-quarters of the way up before I was out of puff and feeling a bit sick and my heart was sledge-hammering inside my body. I'd almost forgotten what that was like – getting out of puff just going up the stairs. I'd become so used to not just running up them but taking them two and three at a time with energy to spare. Once I began to get my breath back, I walked up the few remaining stairs, a deep frown cutting into

my face. Was I really prepared to give it all up – the healthy, lively feeling it had taken me so little time to get used to? A crowd of images burned through my mind – images of me jumping and running and playing football. They were all worth holding onto – weren't they? Yes, there was a downside – pills and medicines and doctors and hospitals and Julie and animal rights extremists. But the upside was *life*. A life worth something. A life worth living. And surely a life worth living was a life worth fighting for. I stopped on the landing, totally confused. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I wanted the operation and yet I didn't. I wanted to fight on and yet I was so tired. What was the matter with me? I wasn't usually so dithery. Was Nan right? Was I changing my mind?

'Nan?' I called softly into the darkened room as I opened the door. 'Nan, dinner's ready.'

I peeped into the room, which was dark except for the low-wattage light coming from the bedside lamp. Nan lay on her side on top of the duvet and facing the door. Her eyes were closed. She was fast asleep. I tiptoed into the room, careful not to make any sudden noises and frighten the life out of her. Up close, she looked so peaceful. She actually had a slight smile on her face. She was obviously having a good dream!

‘Nan?’ I placed my hand on her upper arm and nudged her gently. ‘Dinner’s ready. And I made an extra special salad to go with it!’ I could just see Nan’s face when she found out exactly what my special ingredient was.

‘Nan!’ I nudged her a bit harder. Her arm, which was resting on her side, slipped backwards off her body and her hand flopped into the duvet, palm up. I stared at her.

‘Nan?’ I shook her a bit harder. Her whole body tipped over so that she was lying on her back, her eyes still closed. A feeling raced through me – as if every drop of blood in my body had turned to Arctic water. I stepped back, unable to take my eyes off my nan, not even able to blink. Do something. I had to do *something*.

‘MUM! DAD!’ A scream ripped from me. And once I’d started I couldn’t stop.

Dad came bounding up the stairs, closely followed by Mum.

‘What is it? What’s the matter?’ Dad asked anxiously.

I pointed at Nan. Mum took one look at her before rushing over. Dad ushered me out of the room. My feet barely touched the carpet in my haste to get out of there. Because I was frightened. More frightened than I’d ever been before in my life. Even more frightened than I was before my heart

transplant operation. As soon as I was on the landing, Dad went back into the spare bedroom, shutting the door behind him. I put my hands against the closed door, praying desperately that I was wrong. That Nan was just asleep.

Please let her be all right. Please. *Please . . .*

My hands fell to my sides as I waited for something, anything to happen. What was going on in there? What were Mum and Dad doing? I turned and walked towards my room, but I didn’t make it. Halfway there, I leaned against the wall, before sliding down it. My face was soaking wet with silent tears, and all at once I couldn’t keep silent any more. I howled like some kind of wounded animal and curled up in a ball on the floor, where I cried and cried and cried.

I didn’t even know Dad had left Nan’s room until he sat on the carpet next to me and held me tight.

‘I-Is Nan O-OK?’ I gulped out. But I already knew the answer.

‘Cameron, she’s dead,’ Dad said as gently as he could. ‘But she died peacefully, in her sleep.’

I cried and cried some more, while Dad rocked me without a word.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

See You Soon

Hello, Alex,

Yes, it's me! It's the New Year and I'm still standing – well, sitting, at any rate. I know it's gone but – Merry Christmas! And a very happy New Year! And it will be a happy New Year. D'you know why? Because the New Year will bring you. It's been a while since I've had the camcorder on to talk to you. A lot has happened. First and worst – Nan died a few weeks ago. I'm sorry to say it bluntly like that, but there is no other way to say it really, is there? Nan died in her sleep. Even now, I wonder if she knew something was going to happen. I keep replaying in my head all the things she said just before she died. I can't get over the feeling that it was as if she was saying goodbye. Is that silly? It probably is, but I've had a lot of time to think about it since. I shall miss her – desperately. I've never had anyone close to me die before. For a long while, I thought I'd never get over it. That doesn't mean I'm over it now, 'cos I'm not. Even now, it sort of makes me choke up. Nan was so full of life. I guess I'd convinced myself that everyone close to me was

going to live for ever. Mum and Dad try to tell me that Nan had a good innings and it was just her time, but that doesn't really help. I didn't expect it to hurt inside quite so much. But it is getting better. I never thought that would happen either.

It's funny the way things work out, isn't it? My first transplant didn't take, so I had to decide whether or not I was going to have another one – a second transplant. Another pig's heart. To be honest, I wasn't going to, but a couple of days after Nan's death I decided that I would. I must be a glutton for punishment. The papers had a field day. Poor Dr Bryce has been called a butcher and there have been calls for him to be struck off and struck down and struck out and all sorts. I'm not supposed to know that, but one of the nurses told me.

You see, his second pig-heart patient died.

I didn't know her. I don't even know her name. All I know is that she was an artist and she was married with a son. I wonder how they're feeling now. No, I don't mean that. I know how they're feeling now, but I wonder if they still feel it was worth it. I guess they do. When you get right down to it, it's simple really. A chance of life against no chance at all. And although I didn't know her, I must admit that when I

heard, it did upset me. I wonder what Trudy and the second pig – I think his name was Paul – would've made of all this. Wherever they are, they're probably laughing themselves stupid. But then again, maybe they're not. Spite and vindictiveness like that is more of a human thing than a pig thing – unless pigs really do think like the ones in Orwell's Animal Farm. I think I prefer the pigs that Dick King-Smith writes about, to be honest.

So why did I change my mind about the transplant? It had a lot to do with what Nan said to me on that last day, but I think it was mostly her dying. That sounds terrible, doesn't it? What I mean is, Nan's death made me realize that I was giving up too easily. I still have too many things to do and too many places to see and too many people to meet before I let go. I decided to have the operation for Mum and Dad and Nan, but mostly for myself.

But I'm not doing so well, this time around. It's taking me a long time to get my strength back. And I still get tired very easily. They only let me record this message because I promised to keep it short. I'm hoping to be around when you're born. I reckon that's do-able. If I'm not around, it won't be for want of trying. But whatever happens, Alex, just remember that I love you; I did from the time I knew

about you.

You might hear things about me, things about this second operation and what happened before it and why I did it and such like – things that might upset you. So I'm going to tell you exactly what happened.

The papers are saying I tried to commit suicide by drowning myself in my local swimming pool. That's absolute rubbish. I didn't try to commit suicide. I wanted to touch the bottom of the pool and then I couldn't get back up to the surface, it's as simple as that. Some of the papers are trying to make out that I became so disgusted with the idea of having a pig's heart in my body that I wanted to bow out. But journalists will write any load of twaddle to try and sell their newspapers. So if someone tries to tell you that that's what happened, you tell them to go and play with the traffic or something.

Mum and Dad are outside waiting for me to finish. They're doing a lot better now. They're a lot calmer. And they're always kissing and cuddling. I think you did that, but I like to think that I had something to do with it as well. Perhaps, by watching me, they remembered how important, how precious every moment of every day is. D'you think I'm just full of myself? I probably am – but why not?! If I don't

like me, then who else will?

I fancied Julie, but she went off me after my operation. She said I wasn't the same because my heart had changed. That upset me for a while. I think that played a big part in that pool business. I wanted to show her and Mum and Dad and mostly myself that I could do it. That not only was I the same, but I was better – not worse.

There's a lot of nonsense about me and Mum and Dad floating about at the moment. But if you want to know the truth, you ask one of us. Promise you'll do that. I can't wait to see you. I wish you were going to be born tomorrow. But then again, maybe I don't. You're the next challenge I've set myself. I know that doesn't make much sense to you – and it doesn't have to. Just know that I'm determined to hold you as soon as you're born. That's my new challenge and I like this one! It's a lot less strenuous than touching the bottom of my local swimming pool but a lot more work and much more uncertain. Still, it wouldn't be much of a challenge if it was easy, would it? When you're born in April, I'm going to hold you tight and say, 'Welcome to the world, Alex. I'm your big brother

Cameron Joshua Kelsey. And I hope one day you'll be as proud of me as I am of you.'

I'll see you soon, Alex.

This is Cameron Joshua Kelsey – signing off