

**PIG
HEART
BOY**

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For Neil and Lizzy, with love

Consequences

Chapter One

Dying

I am drowning in this roaring silence.

I am drowning.

I'm going to die.

I look up through the grey-white shimmer of the swimming-pool water. High, high above I can see where the quality of the light changes. The surface. But it is metres above me. It might as well be kilometres. The chlorine stings my eyes. My lungs are on fire.

Just one breath. Just one.

I have to take a breath, even though I know that I'll be breathing in water. But my lungs are burning and my blood is roaring and my whole body is screaming out for air. If I don't take a breath, I'll burst. If I do take a breath, I'll drown. Some choice. No choice.

I close my eyes, praying hard. And kick, kick, kick. I open my eyes. The surface of the water seems even further away.

I'm going to drown.

A fact. A fact as clear, as real as the silence around me. Part of me – a tiny, tiny part of me – laughs. I am going to drown.

After everything I've been through in the last few months, this is how I'm going to bow out. One thought rises up in my mind.

One thought . . .

Alex . . .

I stop kicking. I have no energy left.

I stop fighting. I'm so tired. I can feel my body begin to sink.

Now for the hard part.

Now for the easy part.

Now for the hard part.

Give in. Let go.

Just one breath . . .

Just one . . .

Just . . .

Cause

Chapter Two

Tickling

The noise was deafening. Shouting, screaming, laughing, shrieking – it was so thunderous. I thought my head was about to explode. I took a deep breath, breathed out, inhaled again, then dipped down until my head was completely under water.

Silence.

Peace.

It was like a radio being switched off. I sat down at the bottom of the swimming pool and opened my eyes. The chlorine in the water stung, but better than not seeing what was coming and being kicked in the face. I would've liked to stay down there for ever, but within seconds my lungs were aching and there came a sharp, stabbing pain in my chest. My blood roared like some kind of angry monster in my ears.

I closed my eyes and stood up slowly. If I had to emerge, it would be at my own pace and in my own time – no matter how much my body screamed at me to take a breath as fast as I could. I was the one in

control. Not my lungs. Not my blood. Not my heart.

‘Cam, are you all right?’

I opened my eyes. Marlon stood in front of me, his green eyes dark and huge with concern. I inhaled sharply, waiting for the roaring in my ears to subside. The pain in my chest took a little longer. ‘Course! I’m fine,’ I replied a little breathlessly.

‘What were you doing?’

‘Just sitting down.’

Marlon frowned. ‘Is that smart?’

‘I was just sitting down. Don’t fuss. Sometimes you’re worse than Mum and Dad,’ I said.

‘If your parents find out that you’re here every Tuesday instead of at my house, I’m the one who’ll get it in the neck – and every other bodily part,’ Marlon pointed out.

I smiled. ‘If you don’t tell them, I won’t.’

‘How can you be so calm about it? Every time we come here, I’m terrified some grown-up who knows your family is going to spot you and tell your parents.’ Marlon looked around the pool anxiously, as if expecting his words to come true at that precise moment.

‘Marlon, you worry too much.’ My smile broadened as the pain in my chest lessened.

‘How long were you under water?’

‘A few seconds. Why?’

‘I really don’t think you should . . .’

I'd had enough. 'Marlon, bog off!' I snapped. 'You're getting on my last nerve now!'

'I was just . . .'

'I know what you were doing, and you can stop it,' I said firmly. 'You're beginning to cheese me off.'

Marlon clamped his lips together tight and looked away. He was hurt and we both knew it. I fought down the urge to apologize. Why should I say I was sorry? Marlon knew how much I hated to be clucked over. But, as always, I caved in.

'Look, Marlon, I—' I got no further.

'Hey, Marlon! You on for Daredevil Dive?' Rashid called out.

'Yeah. Coming!' Marlon replied. He turned to me. 'See you in a minute.'

And with that he swam off towards the middle of the pool. I waded over to the stairs, the water sloshing around my thighs. I rubbed my eyes, which were still stinging, before climbing out. I turned to where Rashid, Nathan and Andrew were all splashing about. Marlon had just reached them. I didn't want to watch but I couldn't help it. I couldn't bring myself to look away. Instead I sat down at the edge of the pool, my legs dangling in the water as I watched my friends. I sidled a bit closer until I could hear them as well. Kicking out leisurely with my legs, I looked straight ahead, although I was listening to every word Marlon and the others said.

‘Everyone ready?’ asked Rashid. ‘OK, let’s do it. First one to dive and touch the bottom, then come back and touch the side of the pool wins. Ready . . .’

‘Steady . . .’

‘GO!’

In an instant all four boys disappeared under the water. I held my breath as I watched, until my lungs started to ache and my heart started to pound and I couldn’t stand it any longer. And still none of my friends had emerged from the water. I gasped, my whole body screaming in angry, pained protest as I concentrated on filling my lungs.

Slow down. I’ve stopped holding my breath now, I told my heart. Just slow down.

I knew that within the next few weeks I’d no longer be able to come swimming with Marlon and my other friends. I knew it as surely as I knew my own name.

Because my heart was getting worse.

So I had to hang on to these last moments of independence – even if part of it was just me fooling myself. Travis, our school moron, was right about that at least. I was a weed. And a feeble one at that.

Long moments later Marlon and Andrew emerged from the water, quickly followed by Rashid, then Nathan. Some swam, some thrashed for the side of the pool. Marlon made it back first, laughing and gasping. Marlon always made it back first.

‘I win! I win!’ Marlon shouted.

‘Let’s do it again!’ said Andrew. ‘Only this time we have to go down and come up, then do the same again before we make for the pool side.’

I gave the water one last, vicious kick, then stood up slowly. I couldn’t bear to listen to any more. It was as if there was a glass wall separating me from the rest of the world. All I could do was watch and envy my friends as they swam and dived and did whatever they wanted without a care in the world. They never bothered to ask me if I wanted to join them. They all knew I couldn’t. I was weak and feeble and had to stay in the shallow end. I shouldn’t have been in the pool in the first place – and we all knew it.

I turned and watched Marlon and the others play Daredevil Dive again. They were in the middle of the pool, not the deep end. The bottom of the pool sloped down gently from the shallow end for three-quarters of the pool, then came a sudden drop like the end of an underwater cliff and after that the water was really deep. That’s how they played Daredevil Dive. They had to dive and touch the bottom of the pool at the deep end before emerging from the water. The deep end of the pool was several metres down so there was no way I could join in. I wondered bitterly what it must be like to kick your legs and dive down without fear that your heart would give out before you got to the bottom. What was it like to dive with a body that *could* do as your mind commanded? I would never know again.

I walked back to the changing rooms, my mind swimming as my body could not. By the entrance to the pool there was a full-length mirror. I caught sight of myself, my shoulders drooped, my mouth turned down, my eyes . . . miserable. I looked at my torso. I clenched my fist and banged it against the left side of my chest in what started off as a slow tattoo, but which grew increasingly faster and harder.

In there. I couldn't see it. But I could hear it. And feel it. And it was ruining my life. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't run, I couldn't dance, I couldn't play football, I couldn't swim – and it was all because of my heart. I hated it.

'Here, Cam! What're you doing?' Marlon called out from the pool.

Only then did I remember where I was. 'Er . . . nothing. Look, Marlon, I'm going straight home. OK?'

'Are you all right?' Marlon was immediately concerned.

'I'm fine. I'll see you in the park tomorrow,' I called back.

'Oh, OK.' Marlon still didn't sound completely convinced. 'We'll have a good game of football for you to watch tomorrow. We've challenged Manor Park.'

My smile faded. 'I'll be there,' I called out. Without waiting for Marlon to respond, I walked into the changing rooms.

Marlon had automatically assumed that I would be a

spectator. But then what else could I do? I wasn't much use for anything except watching. Everyone, from Travis Cross – our school year's worst bully – to my best friend, Marlon, said so. Oh, Marlon never said so in so many words. He didn't have to. His correct assumption that all I'd do at the football game tomorrow was watch, was enough. That was all I ever did – watch and listen. I was always a spectator, never a participant. I didn't call that living. I was alive – but that was all.

'There's got to be more to it than this,' I muttered from beneath my shower. Warm, foul-tasting water ran into my mouth. I spat it out and closed my eyes. There was a song I'd heard once, a song that I remembered more and more often these days. Not all of the song. Just one line: '*Is that all there is?*'

I clenched my fists until my ragged nails bit deeply into my palms.

I was alive. I was. *Alive!*

I wasn't going to let my heart beat me. I had to do something – anything – to show that my body, my energy, my very existence wasn't just down to my heart. I had to have more control than that. But what could I do? Something for myself. Something that was mine and mine alone. Something that no one else could take away from me. There had to be some way that I could be in control without others telling me what I could or could not do.

I left the shower and went back to my cubicle to get

dressed. What now? I didn't want to go home yet – that was for sure. Home to yet another argument between Mum and Dad. I couldn't stand it. It was as if each of them blamed the other for the way I was. It was driving me crazy. So I'd think of somewhere else to go first. The question was – where?

I walked up my quiet road, dragging my heels. So much for all my big talk! As usual, I'd done nothing. Instead I'd hopped on a bus and headed straight home. I didn't even bother to daydream the way I usually did on my way home. No wild adventures, no safaris, no starship expeditions occupied my mind and my time.

Today I thought about the viral infection I'd caught almost two years ago now. A viral infection that had affected my heart. And now, oh so slowly but surely, my heart was weakening. I'd had drugs and pills and potions up to yahzoo. I had to hand it to the doctors at the hospital – they had tried. But their best wasn't good enough. So here I was, just me and my heart, where every beat was like the tick, tick, ticking of a clock counting down my life.

TICK tick tick tickticktick . . .

Chapter Three

News

As I turned the key in the front door, I could hear at once that Mum and Dad were at it again. ‘Now there’s a surprise!’ I mouthed silently, adding, ‘I wonder what they’re arguing about today.’

As if I didn’t know!

Shutting the door quietly behind me, I tiptoed through the hall to the living-room door.

‘No, I won’t allow it!’ Mum raged.

I recognized that tone of voice. It burnt like a laser. I winced, aware of how my dad would react to it. I wasn’t wrong.

‘Don’t talk to me like that. I have some say in this too. And I’ve weighed up all the consequences. I’ve listed all the pros and cons. We don’t have any other choice—’

‘*We?* This has nothing to do with *us*. You went ahead and did this all on your own – as usual.’ Mum’s voice was lemon-bitter.

‘You make it sound as if all I was doing was thinking of myself.’

‘Weren’t you?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Now why don’t I believe that? My mum has a saying – “Never stick your head where your backside can’t follow.”’ Mum wasn’t letting Dad get away with anything. ‘But that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re getting us into something we’ll never get out of – and you didn’t even *ask* first.’

‘It’s for Cameron’s own good. It’s for the good of this whole family,’ said Dad.

‘Because you say so?’ Mum scoffed. ‘From where I’m standing it looks as if what you want to do is deform your own son . . .’

I nodded grimly. I’d guessed what Mum and Dad would be arguing about and I was right again. I hated always being right. Mind you, I hadn’t heard this particular argument before. This one seemed to be a new track on an old CD.

‘What d’you mean “deform”?’ Now it was Dad’s turn to hit the roof and pass right through it. ‘How dare you say that? You wouldn’t say that if this was a human heart—’

‘But that’s the whole point. It’s not, is it? You want to make our son a pig-heart boy.’

A pig-heart boy? What on earth was Mum talking about? I frowned as I leaned in closer.

‘Better a pig’s heart that works than a human heart that doesn’t,’ Dad argued. ‘Better that than no heart at all.’

‘You think so?’ said Mum.

‘Yes. Don’t you want our son to live?’

A slap, like the crack of a whip, made me flinch as if Mum had slapped me instead of Dad.

Silence echoed throughout the house.

‘I’ll never forgive you for saying that to me. Never.’ Although Mum’s voice held quiet fury, there was more than a little hurt in it as well. ‘I love Cameron desperately. I’d do anything for him – anything. If I could give him my heart, I would. But I won’t let you use him like this.’

‘Cathy, don’t you think I’ve thought about this?’ said Dad. ‘Don’t you think I’ve lain awake at nights thinking about this? I’ve thought of nothing else but Cameron for the last two years. Our son has a year to live – at most. There aren’t enough human organ donors to go around. So we have a simple choice. We can allow our son to have a pig’s heart or we can watch our son die.’

‘You’d really let them implant a pig’s heart into our little boy—?’

‘I don’t want to see him die,’ Dad interrupted. ‘And I’ve been reading up about it. The doctors have been using pigs’ valves in heart surgery for years.’

‘A valve is different to a whole heart,’ Mum argued.

‘Not so different. They use pigskin for skin grafts on humans, pig insulin is supplied to diabetics, pigs’-heart valves are used all the time, so why not use a whole pig’s heart?’

‘It’s not the same . . .’ Mum insisted.

‘What’s different?’

‘Well, if you don’t know then I can’t tell you.’

‘Look. This is Cameron we’re talking about here. Our son. Our only child,’ said Dad.

I leaned against the wall and looked down, way down past my feet, past the carpet, to a place far, far below me where I was totally alone. My stomach was churning like a liquidizer. Beads of sweat prickled on my forehead like hot needles.

A pig’s heart. What was the phrase Mum had used? Pig-heart boy . . .

‘Cathy, it’s not as if they go to the nearest pig farm and pick out any old pig. They have pigs which’ve been especially bred for this.’

‘And that makes it all right, does it?’ asked Mum bitterly.

‘Yes, it does. That’s the whole point,’ Dad replied.

‘Stop it! Stop it, both of you!’ I shouted.

I couldn’t bear to listen to any more. I turned and raced up the stairs, stomping down with my feet as hard as I could as I ran. I only got halfway up the stairs before I started hurting, so I slowed down, but I didn’t stop.

‘Cam? Cam, wait,’ Mum called out.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. But I wanted to let both of them know that I was here. They were talking about me as if I didn’t have a mind of my own, as if I couldn’t make my own decisions. How could they? *How dare*

they? It was my body. My heart.

I threw myself face down on my bed. I'd barely caught my breath when there came a knock at the door.

'Cam, can I come in?' asked Dad.

'I suppose so,' I muttered.

Dad walked into the room, followed by Mum.

Without preamble, Mum asked, 'Did you hear what we were talking about?'

'I think the whole street heard,' I replied as I sat up.

Dad sighed. 'I'd rather you hadn't heard the idea that way . . .'

'What way?' I asked.

'With your mum and me arguing about it,' he replied.

I didn't see what difference it made. At least by eavesdropping I'd heard the truth as both Mum and Dad saw it. But now they'd change their way of talking. Now they'd talk to me in a way they thought I could understand. A way suitable for a teenage boy – all false smiles and falser promises.

'Cam,' Dad began as he sat down on the edge of my bed. 'Cam, a few months ago I wrote to a man, a doctor, called Dr Richard Bryce.'

I looked across at Mum, who was leaning against the door. 'Who's he?'

'He was a surgeon, but now he's an immunologist specializing in transgenics.'

'Huh? What's that? What's trans . . . transgenics?'

‘Transplanting the organs of one species of animal into another.’

‘Why would anyone do that?’

‘Because there aren’t enough human organ donors,’ Dad explained carefully. ‘So people like him are trying to find other ways of keeping people like you alive.’

People like me . . . I winced at Dad’s phrase.

‘I mean, people who need hearts or kidneys or livers to have a decent quality of life,’ Dad added.

I said slowly, ‘So you want me to have a pig’s heart?’

‘I want you to have a heart that will allow you to do all the things you want to do. All the things a boy of your age should do. And that’s where Dr Bryce comes in. Transplants are his area of expertise. I wrote to him via a newspaper to tell him about you and your case. I thought he might be able to do something to help you. I also sent him a letter of permission so that he could get your notes from our doctor and the hospital.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘I didn’t know if Dr Bryce would want to help you. I didn’t want to raise your hopes only to see them dashed again. We’ve been down this road twice before when we thought you’d be able to get a heart transplant from a human donor – remember?’

Yes, I did remember. How could I forget? Once, I’d even got as far as the hospital, only to be turned back. A greater emergency had required the heart. I had been pipped at the post. Mum and Dad were furious. They

stood and ranted at the hospital staff for a good thirty minutes. It wasn't their fault. The heart had been diverted to another hospital. There was nothing they could do about it. And then Mum had burst into tears. No, I wasn't about to forget that little episode – not if I lived to be ninety.

I sighed. 'Dad, I still wish you'd told me.'

'Don't worry about it, Cam. He didn't tell me either,' Mum piped up from the door.

I looked at her. She was so unhappy, so tired and unhappy. This was what I was doing to her. Doing to my family. Tearing them apart.

'So what's happened? Has Dr Bryce agreed to do the heart transplant then?' I asked.

'It's not that simple.' Dad shook his head. 'Dr Bryce has agreed to come and see us to talk about it. I certainly wouldn't agree to it without talking to you first.'

'So when does Dr Bryce want to see me?'

Dad looked from me to Mum and back again. 'He's coming to see you tonight.'