

PIG-HEART BOY

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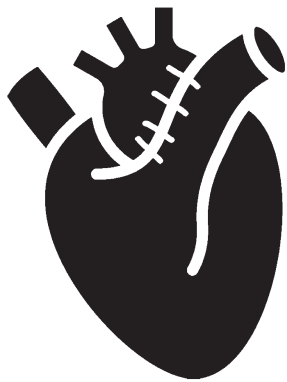
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PIG-HEART BOY

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For Neil and Lizzy, with love

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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 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.

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

TICKING

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 that 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 . . .