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.'

Chapter Four

Dr Bryce

'Tonight? *Tonight!* And you didn't think to tell us before now?' Mum's body was rigid with rage.

'I didn't know myself until about two hours ago. Dr Bryce phoned me at work and asked if he could come and see us this evening. What was I supposed to do? Say no?'

'You were supposed to talk to me and Cameron first.' Mum's voice was getting quieter and quieter. She stared at Dad at that moment almost as if she hated him. I turned away. I couldn't bear to watch.

'I've just told you. I couldn't say anything until I knew Dr Bryce would take Cameron's case and I didn't know until a couple of hours ago. If I'd said something beforehand you just would've got upset for no reason.'

'So you knew I'd get upset . . .' Mum's eyes narrowed. Her voice chilled like liquid nitrogen.

'I thought you might, until you'd had a chance to calm down and really think about it—'

'Don't patronize me, Mike,' Mum snapped.

'Look, Dr Bryce will be here soon. And if we don't present a united front then we can all forget it,' Dad snapped back. 'He's hardly going to take this any further if you sit there glaring at him and making it obvious that you're against the whole idea.'

'Then I'll sit there with a blank expression on my face and I won't say a word. Happy now?'

'If you two are going to argue, can I go downstairs?' I sighed. 'I came up here to get away from you.'

Mum frowned. 'Cameron, that's enough. Don't be so cheeky.'

'I'm not being cheeky,' I replied, bitterness spilling out in my voice. 'I'm just tired. Tired of you two fighting about me all the time. Tired of dreading coming home to listen to yet another quarrel. Tired of being piggy-in-the-middle . . .'

My voice trailed off as I realized what I'd just said. *Piggy-in-the-middle . . .*

I couldn't help it. I started to laugh. Dad's lips twitched. Mum looked wry as she too started to smile. She couldn't laugh, though. But me and Dad were laughing, loud, raucous laughter – unexpected and all the more welcome because of it. Then I burst into tears. It was hard to say who was more shocked – Mum, Dad or me. Mortified, I tried to stop. I tried to choke back the tears but that just made it worse. I gulped hard and tried to take a deep breath, but the tears kept flowing.

They ran down my cheeks and under my nose and into my mouth, salty and unwelcome. I wiped my face with the back of my hands, wishing the bed would open up and swallow me.

'Cameron darling, what's the matter?' Mum flew across the room in a moment.

'Cameron, don't cry,' Dad said, anguished. 'Look, I didn't mean to upset you. If you don't want to meet this doctor then you don't have to. I wouldn't force you to do anything you didn't want to do.'

'No. No. I . . . I w-want to meet him,' I stammered.

'What's the matter, Cam? Why are you crying?' Mum asked, her arm around my shoulders.

I shook my head but didn't speak. How could I answer? What was I supposed to say when, for the life of me, I had no idea why I was crying?

'Cam . . .?' Mum got no further. At that moment the doorbell rang.

'Dr Bryce,' Dad said. 'Cameron, are you sure you want to see him? Because if you don't, I'll send him away.'

'It's OK. I'm all right now.' I shrugged away from Mum's arm. 'I'll go and wash my face. I'll see you downstairs.'

Without giving my parents a chance to say another word, I stood up and ran to the bathroom. Once there I locked the door. I needed a few seconds of peace. I still had no idea what had made me blub like that. I

couldn't remember the last time I'd cried. Where had that come from?

'You're just feeling sorry for yourself.' I scowled at my reflection in the mirror above the basin. 'Stop it! Stop it now!'

I turned on the cold tap and allowed the water to run colder and colder into the basin. Pulling the plunger to set the plug, I waited until the water was almost to the top. Then I plunged my face into it. Instantly my skin began to tingle. I opened my eyes and reluctantly straightened up. That was better. It was just a shame I couldn't stay longer with my head beneath the water. I emptied the sink, then sat down on the edge of the bath. As I dried my face, my thoughts turned to Dr Bryce. Something told me that if and when I met this man, my life would change – one way or the other – for better or for worse. And all I had to do was go downstairs. Or I could call Dad and tell him that I didn't want to meet Dr Bryce and that would be the end of that. Life would go on as normal.

And I'd be dead before my fourteenth birthday.

Or I could go downstairs into the unknown and take it from there. I took a deep breath and headed downstairs.

I scrutinized Dr Bryce and made no attempt to hide it. But, unlike most grown-ups, Dr Bryce didn't look annoyed or try to give a false smile; instead he met my gaze unwaveringly.

'I'm sorry if we seem a bit . . . preoccupied.' Dad glanced at Mum. 'It's been one hell of a day.'

'Please don't apologize.' Dr Bryce waved Dad's apology aside. 'I should have given you more notice that I was coming, but I have to be very careful, as I'm sure you can understand.'

Dad nodded sagely. Mum gave a closed mouth acknowledgement of Dr Bryce's words.

'Why d'you have to be careful?' I asked bluntly. Mum and Dad might know but I certainly didn't. I was fed up with everyone talking around me and past me and through me. It was as if . . . it was as if I was dead already. And I wasn't.

I wasn't.

'Well, Cameron, we've been trying to solve the problem of the lack of human organs available for donation for some years now.' Dr Bryce spoke directly to me, his tone earnest. 'Some doctors are developing mechanical or robotic hearts. Some are working on ways to prolong the life of an already defective heart. My team and I have tried another approach.'

'Pig hearts,' I supplied.

'Pig hearts.' The doctor nodded. 'But a number of animal rights and animal welfare groups don't agree with what we're doing . . .'

'Why?'

'They feel that we shouldn't be experimenting on animals. They believe it's wrong to sacrifice pigs

and all the other animals we use in our research to help humans.'

'But you obviously don't believe that,' I stated.

Dr Bryce shook his head. 'I eat meat and I see nothing wrong with using animals in medical research as long as it's done in a humane way. We're not cruel to our animals.'

'Isn't that a matter of definition?' Mum asked.

'Cathy, I really don't think—'

Mum interrupted Dad's saccharine smile: 'Mike, I'm only asking. Or would you rather I didn't?'

I winced. They were at it again.

Dr Bryce frowned. 'I'm not quite sure what you mean, Mrs Kelsey.'

'You say you're not cruel to your animals. But you breed them specifically for the purpose of killing them and using their insides to help humans. Some would call that cruel.'

'Do you?'

'I didn't say me.' Mum shook her head. 'I said "some".'

'Chickens, pigs, cows and sheep are bred all over the world for the sole purpose of being killed to feed the human race. We're talking about domestic animals here. Is it any worse to breed them to save and extend human life? Should they be bred for food and food alone? I guess it is a matter of definition but, believe me, I can sleep at night and I have no

trouble looking in the mirror either,' said Dr Bryce.

'Do the animal rights people write you lots of letters then?' I asked.

'Some do. And I don't mind that. Everyone's entitled to their own opinion and I respect that.' Dr Bryce licked his lips before he continued. 'I don't want to alarm you here but you should know what you could be letting yourselves in for. My house has been fire-bombed – twice. We've had faeces through our letter box more times than I care to remember and the house was also flooded when one group put a hose-pipe through our front door. We've had to move three times and as a consequence everyone involved in my project tends to guard their privacy very fiercely indeed.'

'Is that why you didn't let us know you were coming until the last second?' Mum asked.

Dr Bryce nodded. 'And that's why it's crucial that if we do go through with this, none of you says a word to anyone about the nature of the transplant. I wouldn't want you to go through all the things I and the rest of my team have had to put up with.'

'Why do you still carry on?' I asked. 'Why don't you give up and do something less controversial?'

'He's dedicated.' Dad tried to laugh off my comment.

I frowned at my dad. What was the matter? Was Dad afraid Dr Bryce might quit right there and then?

'I can't quit. It's what I was born to do.' Dr Bryce replied to me directly. 'I'm one of the lucky ones who

have found the one thing that makes their life complete. I couldn't do anything else, even if I wanted to. And besides, it's the only thing I'm good at.'

Dr Bryce's tone was intense. His steely-grey eyes focused on me without a single blink. I couldn't help feeling that the doctor was trying to tell me something, but I had no idea what. It was as if there was something else, some deeper, hidden meaning to the doctor's words which was just out of my grasp.

'So how does all this work then?' I said at last.

Dr Bryce leaned forward, eager to explain. 'The major problem with xenotransplantation . . .' At my blank look he explained, 'That's what we call it when you take the organs from one species and transplant them into the body of an animal from another species. Anyway, the major problem with xenotransplantation is the risk of rejection. Our bodies are very good at recognizing anything that isn't a natural part of us - including transplanted organs - and getting rid of it. So we had to think of a way to trick human bodies into believing that transplanted organs from other animals really did belong. Several years ago we introduced fragments of human DNA into some pig embryos and implanted them into a sow. When the sow's litter was born, four of the nine piglets had significant changes in their hearts and other organs, giving them key human characteristics.'

I watched Dr Bryce carefully. He'd obviously

given this speech before. It was word perfect, set in layman's terms, spoken without hesitation. No stumbling, no mumbling, just facts – enthusiastically and confidently told. An informative, precise and very detached speech. I wondered what Dr Bryce felt about me or anyone else who might be a possible candidate for this pig-heart transplant. What was in it for the doctor?

'The results were very encouraging so we continued our experiments with a lot more pigs. We're now on our fourth generation of pigs with organs that are more of a match for humans. What we're trying to do is grow pigs whose organs contain human DNA so that when the organs are used in human transplants, they're not rejected,' the doctor continued.

'Why pigs? Why not chimps or monkeys or dogs or cats or cows or something?' I asked.

'Now, Cam, I'm sure Dr Bryce didn't come here so you could ply him with questions,' Dad admonished.

'I did actually.' Dr Bryce smiled easily. 'Cameron has an absolute right to ask as many questions as he likes. And, to be honest, I'd be a bit wary if he didn't.'

'So why pigs?' I repeated. I knew my tone was terse but I wasn't in the mood to beat about the bush.

'It's a very difficult question to answer. Chimps and other primates would be a much better bet in xeno-transplantation. In fact there's only about a two percent difference in the genetic engineering of humans and

chimps. They're closer to humans on the evolutionary scale – but that's also the problem,' Dr Bryce began.

I frowned. 'I don't get it. If chimps and gorillas and orang-utans and that are more like humans than any other creatures, why are you using pigs?' I really hoped the doctor wasn't going to talk any more medical gobbledegook. I was having a hard enough time trying to keep up with him as it was.

'My lab and most research projects involved in the same area rely on funding. We only get funding if we can persuade large organizations or wealthy individuals to part with their money. They won't part with a penny if we use chimps or monkeys or baboons because of the bad publicity we'd all get. They're *too* closely related to humans, that's one reason. Plus some types of primate are actually endangered now – so using them is out of the question. Most people would find it totally unacceptable. But pigs, on the other hand . . .' The doctor smiled drily. 'Pigs are not an endangered species, their organs are very close to humans' in size and, as they're already bred for food, we thought it would make sense to use them in our line of research.'

'And do they work? I mean, pig hearts transplanted into humans – do they work?'

'We've never done one before. We've transplanted pig hearts into a number of chimps and baboons over the years but no humans.'

'And what happened to the chimps and baboons?' I asked.

'After a while, they all died,' Dr Bryce replied without hesitation. 'But we've improved our techniques and developed a new anti-rejection medication since then. And last year we transplanted the heart of a pig into a chimp. That chimp is still alive.'

'So you want to use my son as a human guinea-pig? Is that it?' Mum's voice cracked like a whip.

And there was that word again. Suddenly everywhere I turned, there was that word.

Pig . . .

'Not at all, Mrs Kelsey,' Dr Bryce insisted. 'I wouldn't be here if I wasn't confident that the procedure stood every chance of success.'

'How can you be so sure?' Mum persisted.

'It's not guaranteed,' Dr Bryce replied. 'I can't say I'm one hundred per cent certain of success—'

'But you can't say that about anything, can you?' Dad interjected. He gave Mum a warning look. Her lips pursed in angry mutiny for a moment, but she didn't say anything more.

'I'm hoping that this transplant procedure will become the norm – as common as an appendectomy or having your wisdom teeth removed, but to begin with we have to move very slowly and carefully. If we rush in now, we could set people against us rather than for us,' said the doctor.

'Dr Bryce, how many people do you have in mind for this first operation?' I asked.

'I've narrowed it down to two likely candidates. I'm considering you and a woman in her twenties.'

'Why're you considering the woman?'

'She's strong. She's an artist who has a husband and son. She has a lot to live for.'

'And why're you considering me?'

'You're young and strong and I feel you would derive enormous benefit from the transplant if we were to go ahead. You have your whole life ahead of you if we succeed.'

'And as I don't have much longer to live anyway, neither you nor I have anything to lose,' I supplied.

'Cam!' Mum and Dad spoke in unison. For once they were in complete accord.

'Cam, don't say that . . .'

'Cam, that's not true . . .'

Mum and Dad fell over themselves to deny my words.

'I wish that for once, just once, someone somewhere would *tell* me the truth,' I protested. 'I know the truth already, don't you understand that? I'd just like to hear it from someone else for a change.'

My words echoed in the stunned silence of the room. First the tears, now the outburst. Where was all this coming from?

'You're right of course, Cameron.' Dr Bryce was the

first to speak. 'The transplant does carry its own risks – every operation does – but it's a question of carefully weighing the advantages and the disadvantages and seeing which side comes out ahead.'

'And in my case?' I asked.

'In your case, you have everything to gain.'

'And the only thing I stand to lose is my life,' I said quietly.

'But I promise you I'll do my very best to make sure that doesn't happen.'

'But as you said earlier, you can't guarantee it.'

'No,' Dr Bryce agreed after a short pause.

'Cam, I really think—'

'No, Dad,' I interrupted. 'It's my body and my heart so I have a right to ask questions and say how I feel.'

'What's got into you today?' Dad asked, bewildered.

'I was wondering that myself,' Mum added.

'I realized something today,' I said. 'I'm running out of time. Every breath I take is a countdown. So I haven't got time to pretend to feel happy when I'm not. I haven't got time to keep quiet when all I want to do is shout at the top of my lungs. I haven't got time for any more *lies*.'

'My God . . .' Mum breathed the words, stunned. 'Cameron, we don't lie to you.'

'We never have,' Dad agreed.

'You don't tell me the whole truth though. You leave things out. It adds up to the same thing.' I knew my

mum was hurt and upset and so was Dad, but I was too tired to search for the right words to water down my feelings. Prevarication and skirting around the truth took strength, patience and stamina and I was running out of all of them.

'D'you have any more questions for me, Cameron?'

Any more questions? Just a billion and one, that was all. 'Are you going to operate on this woman or me?' I asked.

'That's what I'm here to assess,' said Dr Bryce.

I looked from Mum and Dad to Dr Bryce. That's the end of that then, I sighed inwardly.

'I need to know how you feel about the possibility of undergoing this transplant operation.'

I started with surprise. Was Dr Bryce really still considering me after all the questions and the snapping and the bad atmosphere so evident in the room? It would appear so.

'It's entirely up to you, Cameron. Your parents may sign the consent forms but it's your decision.' Dr Bryce smiled.

This was it. The moment that I had been anticipating – and dreading. But, as my Nan said, it was time to tinkle or get off the potty!

'While Cameron's thinking about it, what about you two, Mr and Mrs Kelsey? How do you feel about it?'

'I have every confidence in you, Doctor,' Dad gushed.

'I want whatever Cameron wants,' Mum replied quietly. And although Mum's answer was very diplomatic, it was still crystal clear how she felt. 'I'm just . . . I just feel that it's a Pandora's box you're trying to open here. I wonder if you've really thought about the implications of what you want to do.'

At my blank look, Mum explained. 'Pandora was given a box and told not to open it, but curiosity got the better of her and she did. The box contained all the evils of the world like spite and hatred and intolerance.'

'But remember, it also contained hope,' said Dr Bryce. 'And that's what I think our research team will give the world with our new methods – hope.'

'How many genetically engineered pigs have you got altogether?' I asked.

'We have over a hundred, but only about twenty are suitable for human organ donation.'

'D'you know which pig you'd use for the transplant?'

Dr Bryce nodded. 'We have two pigs who are particularly suitable – their names are Paul and Trudy – but I think we'd use Trudy. She's very special. I think she's our best bet. And once the first transplant is a success, there'd be nothing to stop us doing more. But Cameron, you have to decide whether or not you want to be the first one to undergo this operation.'

First . . . I'd rather be second or third or fourth. That way, any mistakes they made in the first operation could be put right for the next ones. But I didn't have time left to slip further down the queue. It was go first or not at all.

'I think . . . I think, yes. I would like to be considered for the transplant,' I decided.

'I'll just go and make some tea.' Mum left the room abruptly.

I looked at my dad, who looked down at the carpet.

'Dr Bryce, I'd like the transplant very much,' I said. 'It's quite simple really. I want to live.'

Chapter Five

Decision

'Are you nuts? Are you completely round the twist?' Marlon couldn't believe his ears.

I didn't answer. I bit back the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

'You're not going to do it, are you?'

'What d'you think?' I replied.

Marlon stared at me. 'I don't know,' he said at last. 'I . . . I'm sorry I reacted like that. It's just that . . . you took me by surprise.'

I shrugged, then added quickly, 'But this is between you and me, right? You're not to tell anyone, not your sister, not Rashid and Andrew, not even your mum and dad. Promise?'

'I promise.' Marlon raised his right hand. 'What're you going to tell everyone – after it's over?'

'I'll tell them I had a heart transplant – which will be true.'

'And what happens when people ask where the heart came from?'

'Why would anyone ask me that? And besides, if they do, I'll just say a suitable donor was found at the last minute. And I was lucky enough to get the heart.'

'But from a pig!'

'No one will know that – unless you tell them.'

'No, I won't,' Marlon denied quickly. 'But isn't it bound to come out?'

'I don't see why. Dr Bryce said that after the transplant he'd wait six months before announcing it to the media, and even then, he wouldn't tell them my name.'

'But suppose they find out? The newspapers and the TV have ways of digging and digging until—'

'Whoa! We're getting a little ahead of ourselves here. Dr Bryce hasn't even chosen me yet. He said he'd get in touch with Mum and Dad at the end of the week to let them know his decision.'

'D'you want it to be you?'

Eyebrows raised, I tilted my head to one side as I regarded my friend.

'I'm sorry. I guess it is a silly question,' Marlon mumbled.

I shook my head. 'Not really. It's just that you and Mum and Dad and all my other friends are perfectly healthy. From where you're standing, you're going to live for ever. But from where I'm standing, I can't see myself here this time next year.'

Marlon turned away, the way he always did whenever the subject of my life span came up. I tried not to mind,

I really did. After all, Marlon certainly wasn't the first to do that and I knew he wouldn't be the last. It was such a common reaction. Mum and Dad argued. My Aunt Louise always had to go to the bathroom and everyone else turned away or changed the subject – or both. Except for Nan. But then she was always talking about death and dying. She said that at her age it was a topic that interested her! In some ways, it made a refreshing change. It was just a shame she lived over 200 miles away in Bolton. And pouring out my troubles to her on the phone rather than face to face wasn't the same. I longed for someone – *anyone* – I could just *talk* to. Someone who would listen while I said all the things that boiled and bubbled deep inside me but which had never been said out loud. All the things that felt like molten lava just waiting to erupt – and then, watch out! But that person didn't exist. It made me feel alone, and very lonely.

'But from a *pig* . . .' Marlon still couldn't get over it. 'Don't you mind? I mean, I know it's a chance for you to . . . to be healthy and all that, but don't you *mind*?'

'Marlon, if it was the heart of a cockroach, I'd still want it,' I told him straight.

'Yes, but a *pig* . . .'

'Marlon, you're not listening to me,' I said patiently. 'I don't mind. The truth is I don't care. If it means I'll live longer . . .'

'But aren't you afraid that the pig's heart will somehow . . . *change* you?'

'Change me - how?'

'I don't know. Maybe it will . . .' Marlon trailed off, anguished.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. 'Turn me into a pig? D'you think I'll start walking on all fours and grow bristles and turn pink?!'

'Cam, it's not funny,' Marlon fumed. 'You don't know what that thing will do to you once it's inside you.'

'I know it won't turn me into a pig – that's for sure. My brain will be the same and my soul, the thing that makes me *me* – that'll be the same.'

'You believe you've got a soul?'

'Of course,' I said, surprised. 'Don't you?'

'I don't know. I don't know much of anything. You confuse me.'

'I don't mean to,' I sighed.

'I know. But you . . .'

'Go on . . .'

'Never mind.' Marlon looked away.

'Marlon, I'll be exactly the same after the operation as before, except I'll be fitter - that's all. Nothing else is going to change.'

'You reckon?'

I stared at Marlon. For one brief instant I thought that maybe he was on a wind-up, but his expression was deadly serious. 'Marlon, look at me,' I ordered. 'Take a good look.'

Marlon looked me straight in the eye.

'Physically, I'll change. That's the whole point. I'll be healthier. But inside, I won't. I mean, of course I will. I'll have a new heart. But inside where it counts – I won't change. Don't you believe that?'

'I guess.'

'It's simple really. This is my chance at life and I'm going to grab it.'

Marlon smiled faintly.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'You like saying that, don't you?'

'Saying what?'

'"It's simple really"! That's your catchphrase.' Marlon's smile broadened.

'Is it?' I hadn't realized.

'Everything to you is always "simple really",' said Marlon. 'You're one of the brainiest in the class, your house is brilliant, your mum and dad think the sun shines from your nostrils and you're always so cheerful. How do you do it?'

'It's my natural wit, charm and sophistication,' I said, my tongue firmly planted in my cheek. 'Marlon, sometimes you come out with some real rubbish. My mum and dad are always too busy arguing with each other to notice the sun shining from anywhere – including my nostrils. Our house is always a tip and as for being one of the brainiest in the class, it's just that I do a lot of reading. I don't have the energy to do much else. I wish I did. And that's what this is all about. D'you understand?'

Marlon looked at me and nodded slowly. I sighed inwardly. Had Marlon got the point now? Maybe on a very basic level, but how could he or Mum or Dad or anyone else not in the same boat understand just what I was going through? How could they know what it was like to drink in every sight, every sound, every taste, every word around you, because it might be the last time you had that experience? No one else could begin to imagine what it was like to go to sleep each night, wondering if you'd see the morning.

'I guess it's lucky you're not a Rasta . . .' Marlon said wryly.

'Or a Muslim.'

'Or a vegetarian.'

Marlon and I both began to chuckle.

'There you are. My luck's getting better already!'

A strange thought entered my head. At least Rastafarians and Muslims and vegetarians believed in something. What did I believe in – except life and living? Life and living . . . Surely that was enough . . .

'Maybe you'll change your mind when the crunch moment arrives,' said Marlon.

'And maybe I won't,' I countered.

'Cam, are you scared?' Marlon whispered.

I considered the question, then nodded. 'I'm scared in case Dr Bryce says no. And I'm scared in case Dr Bryce says yes.'

'You can't win, can you?' Marlon sighed.

'Not so far,' I agreed sombrely, my smile all but gone. 'Not so far.'

The longest three days of my life followed. Each night I sat at home waiting for the phone to ring. Each morning I was the first one at the door when the letters dropped through the letter box. But nothing. I felt as if I was going quietly crazy. If I didn't hear something soon, my heart would give out from all the anticipation! I found myself wondering about the woman who was the other candidate for the heart. What had Dr Bryce said? The woman was an artist? And she had a husband and a son too. Surely the doctor would give the heart to her. The artist woman seemed to have a lot more going for her than I did. How would Dr Bryce make up his mind? And why couldn't he hurry up about it?

Even Mum and Dad weren't arguing as much any more. A stillness had descended on our house as each of us waited for some word from the doctor. More than once I caught Mum watching Dad, her face an unreadable mask. For me, it felt like the calm before a storm.

And then, on Thursday evening, I came home from school and entered the living room to find Dr Bryce there waiting for me. I searched for clues on the faces of my mum and dad but had no luck.

'Hello, Dr Bryce.'

'Hello, Cameron. How are you?'

'OK.' I couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Would you like to sit down?' The doctor indicated a chair as if it was his house, but my mum and dad didn't even notice. I realized that they were as much in the dark over the doctor's decision as I was. I sat down, my legs suddenly shaky.

'I felt I should be here to tell you of my decision in person,' Dr Bryce explained.

It's not me . . . *It's not me* . . . The words spun in my head. I wasn't surprised. I had no right to be surprised. But the sense of intense disappointment I felt was overwhelming.

'. . . so I've decided that you should have the heart transplant. I thought about it long and hard in consultation with my colleagues and . . .'

I stared at the doctor. His words faded to nothing. I could see his lips move but I couldn't for the life of me hear a word he was saying. It was as if, with a snap of the fingers, I'd been dragged to somewhere outside normal time. I saw Dr Bryce turn to my mum and dad and continue to talk. Dad leaned forward, eager and impatient to catch every word. Mum sat back, her arms folded across her chest. I could even see myself, nodding at what appeared to be all the right moments. Dr Bryce turned and asked me something directly. And with that I jumped right back into the present. I stared stupidly at him. I had no idea what the man had just said.

Dr Bryce smiled as if he knew what was going on.

'It's OK, Cameron. I know it's a lot to absorb in one go. Do you still want to go ahead with the transplant?'

I nodded. I couldn't trust myself to speak.

'Good.' Dr Bryce's smile broadened.

'Will you be doing the operation?' Dad asked.

'Yes. My colleagues and I will be carrying out the procedure.'

'Are you qualified?' Mum asked.

Dad squirmed as the doctor answered.

'Yes, of course. I was a doctor, then a heart transplant surgeon before I ventured into transgenics.'

'And where exactly will all this take place?' said Mum.

'We have a clinic and private hospital wing attached to our research facility. I would anticipate carrying out the procedure there.'

'Where is this research facility?

'In Yorkshire.'

Mum still didn't look satisfied. She opened her mouth to ask another question but Dad got there first.

'When d'you reckon all this would happen?'

'I was thinking sometime in the next two to three weeks,' said Dr Bryce.

I wasn't the only one to be stunned.

'So soon?' Mum squeaked, dismayed.

'I see no reason to delay now that we've all made up our minds.' Dr Bryce shrugged. 'I'd like to take Cameron into our hospital sometime next week, when

we will run extensive tests, and after that we can arrange the date to perform the procedure . . .'

Why did he keep calling it a 'procedure'? That word was beginning to get on my nerves. Why couldn't he just call it an operation like any normal person?

Mum frowned. 'What exactly will you be testing for? I mean, is there still a chance you might change your mind?'

'It is extremely unlikely. We've had Cameron's notes from his doctor and from your local hospital, so I'm not anticipating anything, shall we say, untoward.'

'Are the pigs at your research facility too?' I asked.

The doctor nodded.

'Including the one whose heart I'll get? What was her name – Trudy?'

'Yes, to both questions!'

I considered. 'Can I meet her, please? Can I meet Trudy?'

'Why on earth do you want to see the pig?' Dad asked, astounded.

'I just want to see her,' I said.

'There's no reason for it, Cam.' Dr Bryce's voice was gentle but insistent. 'Besides which Trudy and the rest of her family are kept in a controlled environment. It would take all kinds of wrangling to get you in to see her.'

'If I'm going to get her heart, then I'd like to see her first,' I persisted.

When Dad opened his mouth to argue, I shook my

head quickly. 'No, Dad. Don't try and talk me out of it. I want to see her, I really do. I'm not going to back out or turn into a vegan. I just want to see what I'm getting myself into. *Please*.'

Dad scrutinized me, then sighed. 'You're really serious about this, aren't you?'

I nodded. We all turned to Dr Bryce, whose brows were creased in a deep frown.

'Cameron, I would rather you didn't . . .'

'But I'm going to be there next week anyway, so why can't I?' I pointed out. 'I'm not going to change my mind or smuggle the pig across the Yorkshire moors or anything. I promise.'

'I don't think . . .'

'If he wants to see the pig, I don't see what harm it could do,' Mum said firmly. 'In the light of all the things you intend to do to my son, I think granting this little request is the least you can do.'

'I don't think it's a good idea,' Dad argued.

'But Cameron does and, as you keep saying – this isn't about you or me, it's about Cameron.'

Dr Bryce didn't look at all happy. 'This is against my better judgement, but all right then. I'll see what I can do.' Even now he looked as if he was searching for a way to get out of it.

Mum and Dad glared at each other.

'Are you really sure you want to see Trudy?' Dr Bryce asked intently.

I nodded. I was hardly likely to change my mind in the space of five seconds. I didn't know why I wanted to see Trudy. If Trudy had been human . . . But she wasn't and there was no point in speculating. Trudy was a pig. There were no ifs, ands or buts about it. I couldn't work out how I felt about it. That's why I had to see Trudy. Maybe then my mind would clear and I'd know how to *feel* about it. I couldn't think beyond that. I'd go and see the pig and take it from there.

'Very well then.' Dr Bryce stood up. 'I have to go now but I'll be in touch.'

I watched Mum and Dad leave the room as they escorted Dr Bryce to the door. I could hear them whispering out in the hall but I couldn't be bothered to eavesdrop. The whole situation was so bizarre. I wasn't sure whether I was on my head or my heels. And what would all this do to my family? It already felt as if we were all only holding on by our fingertips. This whole business might be the extra tap on the wedge needed to drive my family apart permanently.

I live in a house full of unhappy people, I thought sadly.

And a pig called Trudy was meant to change all that.