

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.