

CHAPTER 4 – 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?’ 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; '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 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 xenotransplantation. 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 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 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 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.’