

## Chapter 1

It was the first Friday of the school year and although it was the last month of summer, the weather was still very hot. Week one was going fast and today Jackson arrived earlier at school because his Mum had dropped him off, since he had sport and had been instructed to bring a towel, goggles and swimsuit in his sports bag. All students were being timed.

When Jackson's Mum arrived to pick him up at 3:15, she noticed her son looked upset. He tried to hide his tears, but even if he had been able to, his eyes looked way too red. At first, his Mum thought it was due to the water but, knowing her son well, it took her only a moment to realise that the reason for the redness was not related to the water - well, not in a physical way, at least.

- *What happened?*

- *I came 3rd.* - He said in a slightly angry voice.

- *You came 3rd? That's very good!*

- *No, it's NOT! That's HORRIBLE!* - Jackson bellowed back, opening his bag and getting his earphones, then plugging them to his iPod, giving his mother a clear sign that he wasn't in a chatty mode.

They both stayed in silence for the rest of the ride. When they got home, Jackson's Mum tried to start talking about it again:

- *I know you're an exceptionally good swimmer, but you were competing against many other boys. There are FOUR year nines this year. How many other boys are there?*

- *Mum, you don't get it!*

- *I get it that you're upset about your result. But I think you're being too demanding of yourself!*

- *No, Mum. I'm not! I came 3rd, and the first 5 get to represent the school. Now they want me to swim for them.* There was a short pause. Jackson swallowed, trying to control his anger and then went on - *which means I have to be there every Saturday morning. Starting from tomorrow.* - He paused again, resting his hands on the kitchen bench, curving his back until his head was buried between his arms. *I DON'T WANT TO SWIM FOR THEM! And the inter-school swimming carnival's in 6 weeks' time!*

Jackson's Mum was visibly shocked and disconcerted. She hesitated, trying to decide what to say, adjusting to this new reality. She had got it all wrong. "*Well, I am still very proud of you! You've been selected to represent your school*".

- *Exactly! Except I don't WANT to. Don't you get THAT?*

She went quiet for a moment and then continued.

- *Why don't you want to swim? Why is it so bad? You used to be so involved in sports...I don't understand.*

*- I don't want to represent anyone. I don't want to belong to any group. I don't want people to know me. Like, 'oh, look! That's the boy who swims for the school'. I just want to be me, OK?*

*- Other kids would be thrilled to be in your place...*

*-Yeah, but I'm not 'other kids'. Why do I have to feel the way they'd feel?*

*-You're right. You don't. And if you really don't want to swim, I'm sure you'll be able to pull out.*

*-Yeah? How? You're gonna rock up to the school and say "Sorry, but my son is not swimming for you 'cause he doesn't want people to know him'?"*

*-No, we don't have to say you want to be anonymous.*

*-Anonymous? I don't want to be anonymous. I'm not hiding from anyone.*

*-Well, you want to be unknown. When you read a text that has no author? We say it's anonymous.*

Jackson looked thoughtful. He'd just remembered having read that word recently, but in a different context: someone had received an anonymous card and a group of classmates were "playing detectives" in order to find out who the sender was.

*-I thought that word was only for things, like letters and stuff.*

*-Well the person who doesn't want to be identified as the author too. We can say that this person wants to remain anonymous.*

*- Oh! OK. I get it. Just makes me feel like I'm being secretive or hiding something but I just don't want to be swimming for anyone.*

*- It's just a word, Jackson. Anyway, as your parent, I'll probably have to go to the school and discuss it with them. I don't know what it involves, but they can't force people to take part in any activity. We'll just say you're not interested. That you have other extra curricular activities and you don't want to interrupt them and that adding swimming would take up too much of your time and that you also want to focus on your studies. Is that fair enough?*

*- I suppose. - He replied shrugging.*

*- Alright. We'll sort it.*

*- What about tomorrow?*

*- You have basketball anyway. Say you have a previous commitment. It's true!*

Jackson looked calmer and felt relieved.

*- Thanks Mum. And sorry that I was so grumpy. Is there anything I can help you with?*

*- That's OK, everybody has a bad day...I don't need anything for now, J-J. I'm going to dip my legs in the pool, but I'm sure you don't want to join me, right? - Jackson's Mum asked with a smirk.*

-Yes, you're right - He said, reciprocating the smirk, and then added, unprompted:  
- But I'll come out and take the leaves out of the pool for you.  
-That's very nice of you! Watch out or **you'll** be the one getting anonymous cards!

She winked and they both laughed, sharing a look of complicity, displaying the intimacy that exists between two people that have known and loved one another for a long time. The kind of love that is so strong that neither can rest while the other one is unwell. The kind of love that can only grow, but never perish.

The weekend went very fast and on Sunday night Jackson was finishing "The Daydreamer", the book he had to read in term 1, when Alex, his Mum's partner, walked into the living room and sat next to him:

-What'ya reading?

- "The Daydreamer".

-Any good?

-It's OK. There are some funny bits - he replied, closing the book and showing it to Alex.

-Oh, Ian McEwan! I didn't know he wrote books for young readers.

-D'you know 'im?

-I've read a couple by him, yeah. But they're definitely adult books!

-Why? What are they about?

-Well, ... I remember 'Amsterdam' ...It was a bit sad and it dealt with aging and euthanasia.

- Like suicide?

-Well...They're not exactly the same thing, Jacko!

-Aren't they?

-No. When people commit suicide, generally, well, we don't really know for sure because when they do it...we can't ask why they did it, if they succeed...But generally people get into a rather desperate state, mentally...emotionally...and they come to the conclusion that they no longer wish to live and that death is the best prospect.

-That's horrible!

-It is, I agree.

-Have you ever met anyone who did that?

- I was friends with a lady whose husband took his own life, yes...But anyway, in euthanasia there is one considerable difference. Generally there is a serious health issue and the person feels that perhaps there is no dignity left in their lives, or that there is no purpose, for instance, if someone is kept alive by those hospital machines...so, the idea is to relieve extreme suffering...sometimes the person feels they are a burden to the family...So they make the decision to terminate their own life. But it's an illegal process in most countries. You can imagine why...

- Because it's like murder?

- Well....Who can determine what someone's life's worth? And who can prove that the subject in question really wants to die? And say if this particular person is in a coma...there is no way of checking whether they've changed their mind...So, it's not an easy issue...Anyway, glad you're enjoying your reading and that it's funny. Perhaps I'll read it after you've finished.

-Yeah, sure!

- I'm going to bed. Need to get up at 4 to be at the airport at 5:00.

- When do you come back?

- Tuesday. Flying out again Thursday, but then I get to spend the whole of next week here.

- Do you still think it's really cool being a pilot? Like, travelling SO much?

- Yes and no. Of course it's good to be paid for traveling...but it can be very disruptive for your family life...So when I'm here I try to dedicate myself as much as I can to you and Linda. And it's also good that we're able to travel often, although I can't stay with you guys for the whole time. But it's still fun. Anyway, let's get some sleep. D'you want to come into the bedroom to say goodnight to your Mum?

-Nah! I said good night a while ago. She had a headache so she may even be asleep. Good night, Alex.

- 'Night.

They each went to their own bedroom and it didn't take long for Jackson to fall asleep. He got into his bed and picked one of his *Naruto* books and started flicking through, as it was an easier read than the book he'd been reading before - especially because he'd already read all his *Narutos*, more than once, but still enjoyed them. Gradually, he started dozing off and didn't even turn his lamp off, which was a common thing, although most mornings the lamp would be off by the time he got up, either because he'd do it himself if he woke up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet, or because his Mum, who'd always get up at 5:30 in order to do her work-out, would come inside his room, contemplate her son for a few seconds, then turn the lamp off and leave very quietly so as not to wake him. At some point into his reading, his neck relaxed 100% and he fell into a deep sleep. If there had been someone else in his bedroom looking at him, that person would have seen the motion through his eyelids, which apparently suggests brain activity. Jackson started dreaming. He was at school and he had to swim. There was an eight-lane swimming pool and he was competing against 7 other boys. As he stood on the starting block, he began to feel nervous. He waited for the signal so that he could dive into the pool but it wouldn't happen. He felt more and more anxious and wanted to dive, but he was also aware of the risk of a false start. Eventually, he heard the starting signal and in no time he was in the water, swimming as fast as he could. At first, he wanted to win, but then he remembered he didn't want to swim for the school, and he didn't want people to be talking about him, so he started feeling more and more distressed. To slow down would be cheating, so he kept doing his best, wondering what the consequences would be. When he finally finished the race, he realised he'd come first. There were people congratulating him, cheering for him, but instead of feeling excited or proud, he was apprehensive. He looked around and there were myriads of people who'd been watching. Some of them were holding flags, but somehow the flags started to change

and instead of the colours of the Australian flag, his own image appeared. Everywhere he looked he saw his own face. His coach reached out to help Jackson out of the pool and as Jackson was about to get out of the water, he realised he was naked. He panicked and looked around at the people and now the flags were displaying his whole body, his whole naked body, rather than his face only. Not knowing what to do, he let go of his coach's hand. He then noticed that the rest of the people started to walk away from him, although they were still facing him. They were all walking backwards, but the 'flags' remained there. All the other swimmers left too. The coach was the last to leave, with a puzzled expression, not sure of what was happening, but thinking that if everyone else was leaving, he'd better go too. Jackson was by himself for quite some time and started to feel cold. He decided to get out of the pool and wrap one of the flags around him. As he did that, he noticed the flag had become see-through. That took him to the edge of desperation. Perhaps he'd have to use 3 or 4 layers. He had to be quick. He had to do it before someone came back and saw him naked. Just as he'd grabbed the fourth flag, which had magically shrunk down to the size of a hanky before his eyes, Jackson woke up.

Still affected by the strong emotions from his dream, he got out of bed and walked into the kitchen to get a drink. Everything was dark and the time on the microwave read 3:47. He opened the fridge and got out a bottle of juice, unscrewed the cap and started drinking from the bottle.

*-Drinking from the bottle again, Mister?*

Jackson got a start, so badly that he spilled some of the drink.

*-Mum! You scared me!*

*-I'm sorry. But I did catch you red-handed, right? She said smiling.*

*-I know. But there isn't much in the bottle so I thought I'd just finish it...*

*-Yeah, yeah!* - She said in a mocking tone, scuffing the top of his head with her open palm and messing up his hair, which wasn't exactly looking very neat. After she smiled at him in a way that only a parent does, especially when seeing herself in her own child, she went on:

*- Why are you up? Do you know the time?*

*- I had a terrible nightmare, Mum.*

*- Oh, no. Not again!*

*- Yeah...I don't really want to go back to bed right now...*

*- D'you wanna talk about it?*

*- Aren't YOU tired?*

*- I was going to take Alex to the airport anyway. It's nearly time.*

*- Can I come too?*

- *Don't you want to sleep? I mean, are you sure you want to stay up?*

- *Yes, I wanna come with you guys! Alex always goes by cab, so I never get the chance...*

Not long after, the three of them were in the car. Just after 5 they dropped Alex off and then started to make their way back home. Jackson was now sitting in the passenger seat, next to his Mum. The day was just starting and the sky still had hues of pink, the *blueishness* imposing itself gradually.

-*You know what? How about we try to find a cafe that's open and have breakfast somewhere?*

-*Yes! That'd be awesome, Mum!*

-*Then you can tell me about your nightmare, if you want, and when we get home we can have a shower and I'll take you to school.*

- *Or I can ride.*

- *Or you can ride.*

Linda drove through the heart of Fremantle looking for an open cafe. A few people could be seen on the streets, all of them fairly young, looking tired, as if they'd had a big night.

- *Wow!*

- *What is it?*

- *Those people!*

- *What about them?*

- *I can't believe they all get up so early! I didn't know so many people started work so early.*

Linda giggled and then tried to explain in a way that did not sound patronising:

- *No, Jackson, they're not going to work.*

- *What do you mean? How do you know?*

- *I'm pretty sure they're actually on their way home.*

- *From where?*

- *From wherever they have been of course!*

- *But where would that be?*

- *Oh, Jackson! You are SO cute! I wish I'd been that innocent when I was your age! ...Those people were probably partying. Heavily. The whole night. And now it's time to go home...*

- *No way!* - He said in disbelief.

- *Yes, way!*

- *Really?*

- *Yes! Really - She said, feeling amused.*

- *So the party goes on all night?*

- *Sometimes, yeah...*

Jackson's face looked perplexed, like what he'd just heard made little or no sense. Eventually, they found a bakery that was open and went inside. Jackson ordered a mixed berries smoothie and pancakes and Linda had a regular *Flat White*.

- *Aren't you eating?* Jackson asked his mum.
- *I'm not really hungry.*
- *Come on! That's not breakfast! I want you to eat with me!*
- *Alright* - She said in resignation.

Linda got up to order again and got a small pastry. After both their drinks had arrived, she asked Jackson if he wanted to tell her about his nightmare.

- *I dreamed that I was swimming and then when I tried to get out of the water, I noticed I was naked. It was so embarrassing! And lots of people were watching, and then they were holding flags, except that the flags weren't actually flags. I mean, they were, but then they weren't, like they changed.*
- *Into what?*
- *Into pictures of me. It was so weird! Like the people holding the flags actually knew me.*

After a short pause, Linda was the first to speak:

- *I'm so sorry you had a bad dream again. Are you feeling alright now?*
- *Yeah I'm fine.*
- *Were you scared when you woke up?*
- *I don't know if I was scared...It was weird, though.*

Having finished eating, they went home.

- *Do you want me to take you to school today? We still have almost two hours, there's no rush. But I've got to go to your school at some stage anyway, to talk to the Head Mistress about the swimming.*
- *Would you mind very much if I went by myself?*
- *No! Do whatever you want. I know it's not 'cool' to be seen with one's Mum at school* - She winked at Jackson as she spoke.
- *Thanks, Mum. And thank you for breakfast.*
- *My pleasure.*

Each of them walked away and disappeared into their own bedrooms to get ready for the day.