

Chapter One

Mr Johnson adjusted his notes and cleared his throat. His fingers tapped the microphone. It was on. He seemed to be satisfied.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,’ he began. He attracted the attention of many of the children, and most of their parents.

‘Ladies and gentlemen ...’ he repeated. Savannah didn’t look up. She wouldn’t be included in his speech this year. She hadn’t been amongst the winners. She wasn’t included last year either. The speech had no interest for her. Mr Johnson could talk to the others, she reasoned. He could even talk to himself. She didn’t care.

Mr Johnson’s voice faded into the distance over the loudspeaker.

‘Savannah,’ Mrs Giblett said, snapping at her, jolting her out of her apathy. ‘Now, don’t look so miserable. You did your best.’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Giblett,’ Savannah told her sadly. ‘I guess I let you down.’

‘You mustn’t feel that way at all,’ her coach told her. ‘You’d be very foolish indeed if you thought that way. As I said, you did your best, I’m sure of that.’

‘I did,’ Savannah told her, ‘but it wasn’t very good, was it?’

‘Good or not,’ Mrs Giblett told her, ‘you at least tried, and that’s more than I can say about one or two other boys and girls at this carnival today.’

Savannah shrugged her shoulders. ‘I s’pose you’re right,’ she said, turning away from Mrs Giblett to hide her disappointment from her instructor.

‘Now don’t you go around blaming yourself,’ Mrs Giblett told her. ‘Please remember that I was only able to give you a few swimming lessons last year, and that’s not a long time for anyone to learn to swim properly, or to swim fast, is it, child? Perhaps I was the one who let *you* down.’

Savannah shrugged her shoulders again, and turned around to face Mrs Giblett. ‘I’m sorry,’ she burst out, weeping. ‘I know I let you down.’

‘Silly girl,’ Mrs Giblett told her. ‘How many times do I have to tell you that you let no one down? But you will, you know, if you don’t stop blaming yourself. You did your best, and I’m satisfied with that.’ Savannah sniffled, and smiled weakly from behind her tears. But Mrs Giblett turned from Savannah to listen to the principal’s prize-giving speech.

Savannah had gone to school reluctantly that morning, walking more slowly than usual, along the narrow, dusty country lane from her home. She didn’t want to swim in the carnival. She knew she couldn’t win a prize. She didn’t even expect to finish the race Mr Johnson had entered her in. But at least one race was compulsory for every student. Every student, that is, that the principal could catch up with and nominate for a race. Any race. Full participation by every pupil in the school, she remembered he had told her.

On reaching the school boundary fence, she felt ill, but not from the illness that had left her weak for the past four

years. These days she was feeling much stronger after the exercise program her family doctor had insisted she undertake; almost as strong as any other student at her school. If only she had just a little more strength, she thought, a little more stamina. She had made progress. And wasn't it Mrs Giblett who had encouraged her to take swimming lessons only at the end of the previous term?

Savannah was proud that she could swim twenty-five metres. That was more than she had been able to swim before the end of the previous term. Twenty-five metres was quite a way, wasn't it? Savannah thought. But slow. Very slow. Not fast enough to keep up with the others in the swimming race. Not far enough to complete the distance required. Twenty-five metres short of the total distance she should have swum. That was a long way to her! But her time

'I'm glad you weren't in our team,' Jackie said, pushing past several other children to reach Savannah. She punched her lightly on the shoulder. 'We'd have lost our race altogether.' Savannah looked at her for a few seconds, but she didn't say anything. Her lips quivered, but no words came from them. 'If you had been in our team, we'd have come last. Completely last. At least we came second. And it was only Kerrie who let us down in the last few strokes when she touched the rope. Otherwise we'd have won the race.'

Savannah wasn't sure. She had watched that race, and had admired Jackie's strong strokes, and her speed. But it wasn't only Kerrie who had let the team down. It was both the other swimmers in the relay. Jackie was the one who had pulled the team up so that they at least won a place in

the event. But, Savannah recalled, that team hadn't come second ... it had come third.

Savannah went on thinking. She knew now why she had felt ill earlier on – she expected the rest of the class to tease her. She hoped that Mr Johnson wouldn't allow her to be teased too much. He was aware of She took her mind off her treatment.

Other children that she had regarded as her friends didn't allow her to dream of the past for long. They brought her back to the present, back to the teasing. Then she saw Bill, who had won three races, and had swum so fast that his relay team won by many seconds. Nearly half a minute, someone had said. If she had had another thirty seconds, at least she would have finished her race.

She wasn't alone. Her three best friends had all swum badly too. They had been friends from the day she had first started school, six years ago. They were Mrs Giblett's pupils too. She thought of Carter, who had lost his race. He was finishing the first lap of the pool when the winner was declared.

She hated Caruthers for his teasing. She hated him because he could do so much; he could win everything. He knew his strength. So did the other students. He made sure they did. He told them often. Some believed him, and admired him for what he could do. Some, like Savannah, despised him because he reminded them. She also despised him because he was right. He was good.

She joined Carter. And Jayden was there too, talking to him. And so was Olivia. She felt comforted by the company of her best friends – Mrs Giblett's students, all of them. The others in her class ... or was it the whole school, she asked herself, hadn't needed Mrs Giblett's lessons last year. They

had learned to swim early in their school days. And why not, she reasoned. There was the river that flowed through the town, with its banks in places like beaches—sand brought down from the mountains and dropped where the river lost its speed.

And only a couple of kilometres out of town it was quiet too, along that part of the river. She often went there with her friends and swam under the willows. Even when the sun was hot, the trees shaded the water. It was pleasant there. And scenic too, with the island across the channel, surrounded by swamp and reeds and thick clusters of tea trees. But its treacherous shores kept people away. The channel on the other side of the island was deep, she had heard. And dangerous, with its rocks, its rapids and strong current. No one went to the island, not even in boats.

On the town side of the island, the river was safe, and the current weak, almost unnoticeable. Even Savannah felt relaxed in the river as it flowed past the island.

Not like upstream, she thought, recalling the narrow and dangerous rapids, where the banks were close together, with the rocks that broke above the surface of the water. She remembered the drowning a couple of years ago, upstream, where the current was swift and strong. A holiday-maker, she recalled. Someone from out of town, who didn't know the reputation of the river.

But the sandy bank of the river would have to wait until after Mr Johnson had finished his speech. He hadn't given out any of the prizes yet, either. There would be lots of them for the winners.

'And the prize for the boys' one hundred metres freestyle race goes to ...' Mr Johnson glanced through his notes for the name of the winner of that race. His notes

fluttered gently in the warm February breeze. Savannah didn't bother to listen. The winners of the races didn't matter to her. Only the losers mattered. Others, all three of them, like herself.

Other names were called. She knew the winners. Each one would walk proudly up to Mr Johnson to accept the award, a spoon, or a trophy. Or a certificate, hurriedly prepared with the winner's name written in the neatest of handwriting. The winners almost queued up in front of their principal. Savannah held back, far enough away not to be noticed, far enough away not to hear the list of names. Names that Savannah knew would come to sneer at her and her friends for losing. But not only for losing, but also for disrupting the race. She felt guilty at intruding on another swimming lane, and for running another friend into the rope dividing her lane from the next. But it was alright though, because Sandra still came second in her heat, the position she was in when Savannah swam into her.

And then it was over. Mr Johnson stood down from the lectern and mixed with the parents, and with the winners. Savannah tried to remain hidden. She was invisible for a few moments. Peter, with his ever sharp eyes, picked her out. She wanted to hide. She'd had quarrels with Peter before when he had been successful. Now ... she watched him approach, then turned to talk to Olivia. She was too late. He had noticed her. He approached. He didn't say anything. He grinned at them both. Words didn't matter anyway. The grin said it all.

Savannah sighed as the ceremony finished early. There were still several hours of daylight left, long enough for her to retreat, to escape the grins and the sneers.

'C'mon,' Jayden said to her. 'Let's go down to the river. At least we'll be able to swim our own race there.'

'And in our own time, too,' Olivia added, turning around as she walked away from the happy crowd.