

demons & desperation...

# JACKSON

...love & hope

by Lynn McLaughlin

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By Lynn McLaughlin

COMPLIMENTARY  
Chapter 1



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"Having children just puts the whole world into perspective. Everything else just disappears."

Kate Winslet



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The fictional characters in this book evolved through conversations with many people; those fighting to be mentally well, parents of young adults experiencing mental illness, and breast cancer survivors. Getting to know each of them and walking through their experiences, fears, and triumphs has been heart breaking and inspiring. Sincere appreciation is extended to fellow author, Yvonne Marrs. Many of the perspectives of *Jackson* were developed through her insights, experience, and passion.

## From Yvonne MARRS

As an author and a chronic-illness sufferer, I have the experiences to help people suffering with depression and anxiety, and the ability to make it readable, relatable, and understandable. I really want to produce a book about my own life's experiences in order to help others, and so I was delighted to be able to help shape this tale, so that it will strike a chord with many readers. As with other illnesses, everyone feels differently; people have varying tolerances and thresholds—and therefore boundaries. You cannot second-guess mental health, and you should never try. Never judge someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes, as the saying goes.

Yvonne Marrs



# INTRODUCTION

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all childhood maladies had the simple fix we all remember? Maybe some Tylenol to bring down a temperature or a little bit of cough syrup to ease a croupy cough. If things became more serious, a trip to the doctor or even the emergency room, where medical personnel could tell you both what was wrong and what you could do about it. Behind it all, was the parent's kiss to the forehead, ostensibly to check for a fever but we all knew it provided a wonderful sense of safety and security in the knowledge that our parents were there and would take care of whatever assailed us.

That would be wonderful but unfortunately, life is not always so simple, particularly when a parent and child are faced with navigating the confused, oftentimes terrifying world of mental health.

In the pages that follow Lynn McLaughlin brings decades of experience as a talented and highly respected educator, and perhaps most importantly a mother to the forefront, as she does a deep dive into the lives of June and Jackson. A mother and a son who find themselves wandering through the constantly evolving landscape of acute and chronic mental health.

While *Jackson* is certainly fictional it is no less an accurate portrayal of the unique and personal battle that is undertaken by every family who has undertaken to understand, to help, and to love when faced with the unthinkable. At times painful and frustrating to read, *Jackson* is also a book filled with the characteristic compassion and humanity that McLaughlin herself has brought to every aspect of her own professional and personal life.

Perhaps most importantly this book not only provides a stark and realistic depiction of how mother and son are dealing with



Jackson's mental health, it also provides the reader with a vision of hope — a potential pathway through the systemic and very personal landmines inherent in Jackson and June's world — towards understanding and acceptance. McLaughlin puts a human face on the very fears, anxieties, and self-doubt that are ubiquitous in the world of mental health.

For those of you who have lived this experience, that face will be all too familiar. For those of you who have not, that face will aid you in developing a greater understanding of and compassion for those who demand your support.

For all of us *Jackson* is a stark but clear guide as to how one family found a way to adjust their world view to first acknowledge and then to ultimately accept the realities of mental health and through it all maintain a deep and abiding love for one another.

Rest assured, *Jackson* provides no simple fixes. There is no Tylenol or cough syrup and trips to the doctor or to the emergency room don't always provide much in the way of understanding for Jackson or June. But through it all, McLaughlin provides the reader with her own version of the kiss to the forehead. In its entirety, *Jackson* provides a sense of safety and security in the knowledge that there are pathways through the convoluted and terrifying world of mental health. While there may not be the simple fix of childhood, there are ways that can and do nurture compassion and love.

There is always hope.

Alan Goyette, MSW, RSW

Clinical Social Worker

This book is dedicated to YOU...  
Whether you are desperate to save your child  
or struggling to figure out who you are...  
Talk openly about it.  
Be empowered.  
You are never alone.

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## CHAPTER ONE

"Fear is a powerful beast but we  
can learn to ride it."

Justine Musk



## *Jackson*

*I was always angry as a kid. I can't describe it in any other way except to say that it was rough. I don't remember why I felt the way I did, only that I did everything I could to control myself so no one would laugh or make fun of me. It was worse in school; I didn't want to leave my desk some days. I didn't even go to the bathroom. At recess, I'd find a way to stay inside and do work or help in another class, so I didn't have to be out there and take a chance at getting picked on. What if someone made fun of me? Laughed at me in front of the whole school? Outside, there was no one close enough to stop kids if they wanted to pick on me.*

*One time, the teacher asked me a question, and I was pretty sure I was right. Why did she ask me? I didn't have my hand up. I always looked down when she asked questions. I hated talking in front of big groups of people. My answer was wrong. When we had to take turns reading out loud, I'd count the number of kids ahead of me so I could practice my part before my turn. Stupid. Idiot.*

*When I got home, I let loose. I didn't care who heard me or if I got sent to my room. I couldn't stand it anymore. None of the other kids were around, so I didn't have to hold it all in anymore. It all spilled out. I blew up again and again, calling my parents names. It made me feel better until the next day. And the next one. And the next one. I knew I was different. Never focussed. Always worried. No one else was like that, right?*

## *June*

As a family of three, our lives were thrown more than enough highs and lows. Craig and I met at a concert on my twenty-fifth birthday. This six-foot tall, slim man with an incredibly broad smile happened to have a seat beside me. Confident young people, entering



our careers, and jumping at each opportunity, we married eighteen months later, madly in love. Craig began his own business as an electrician, and I was establishing myself as an investment counsellor. My new husband was kind in nature, driven, intelligent, and loved to get his hands dirty. He was never one to beat around the bush—telling things exactly as he saw them.

We settled on the outskirts of London, Ontario and were blessed with our son, Jackson. He was healthy, happy, and energetic, playing and learning from anything in his grasp. As he grew into a toddler, with an inquisitive personality emerging, we dreamt of his future; a leader, advocate, volunteer—the world would be his to change. He would be a confident, proud adult, firm in his beliefs, with the highest level of integrity.

As a young child, Jackson's temper tantrums were extreme. He pulled pictures off his walls and clothing out of his drawers, throwing everything around the bedroom. He screamed that he hated us and everyone else. Each time—exhausting. We fell into a routine where one of us took charge and the other stepped back, waiting him out, sometimes for a full hour. Craig and I questioned ourselves and each other as parents. What were we doing wrong? Why hadn't we seen these behaviours coming? What could we change or do differently? From laughing about something that had happened during our day, to an episode which too often ended with one of us blaming each other for triggering our son. We attributed Jackson's outbursts to him not getting his way, which is typical for youngsters. He would outgrow them, or so we thought.

Our son was extremely sensory driven as a child. The seams had to be cut out of every garment because they bothered him. In kindergarten, he would come home from school, take off his clothes, and walk around the house in his pyjama pants, holding a favourite stuffed ninja turd. At bedtime, we had a set routine, which was posted up in his room; snack... bath...brush teeth... snuggle time to read... wall light left on...door propped open...treasured blanket and ninja

## JACKSON

in hand. Anything outside of that routine caused issues and Jackson would call out, unable to sleep.

As he grew older, his tantrums occurred much more frequently and almost always shortly after he arrived home from school. I was working from home, so bore the brunt of his volatility. It's expected as a natural part of child development, isn't it? But to what age?

At dinner one evening, out of nowhere, he began to yell, threw his fork across the room, knocked over his chair, and stormed down the hall, slamming the bedroom door. We were dumbfounded. We had no idea what might have caused such an extreme outburst when all we were doing was talking about an electrical job Craig was working on.

Staring at our food, we stayed at the table as he screamed from his room. For the first time we were both afraid. He could have hurt himself or someone else. Craig and I stared at each other in disbelief, visibly shaken. Craig wanted us to wait him out and I tried. I couldn't stand hearing our son yelling like that. When it sounded as though something fell off the wall, it was too much to bear.

Jackson was sitting on the floor beside his bed crying. I left the bedroom door open behind me but barely entered. He began to calm as I waited. He was sorry for throwing his fork, but would not, or could not, tell me what had caused him to blow up. He did not want to hurt anyone but was so angry. The turmoil he was facing emotionally was becoming detrimental to his well-being and ours. Craig and I both agreed that night that it was time to dig deeper.

We met with school staff who had been seeing no concerning behaviours. They noted nothing but a hard-working, caring child. He was fairly strong academically and had just become involved in track and field at school. Jackson had also been playing house-league hockey in our community. Socially, he had a few friends that stuck together. How could our child behave perfectly well at school and have such extreme eruptions at home ?

Our first medical appointment with the family physician resulted in a referral to a pediatrician. Rating scales, check lists, and a full

physical check-up were done. All new to us but we did what was recommended. I began to consult with his teachers more often, by phone and in meetings right after school, documenting every outburst or concern. We wondered if there was something happening behind the scenes socially. Jackson disclosed that he did not use the bathrooms at school all day. He thought they were dirty. Explosive episodes escalated and we thought we were coping, until the day Jackson punched his fist through a wall in his bedroom as he screamed obscenities. Enough was enough.

At this point we requested to have a full psychological assessment, which was completed over several sessions with Jackson, Craig, and me. I had been keeping everything in a file and at first, I pulled out some of my notes. What would she think of us as parents? I ended up sharing everything with her, begrudgingly. The psychologist concluded that Jackson was an anxious child. Anxious? Wouldn't he have wanted to stay home, not go to school or play sports? We learned that anger is one of the ways that anxiety can manifest itself. Jackson was excessively worried and didn't have the skills to cope, which led to frustration and anger. There was no formal diagnosis, but we were given recommendations to help him and the family deal with his fears. They included keeping him active in sports and maintaining regular appointments with a child therapist, who would teach him strategies and techniques. We would follow up as recommended, learning as well. Hoping that by knowing what to expect would lessen his worry, Jackson was given advance warning if our routine was changing in any way.

Although he was successful in school, the build-up of stress over the day was not healthy. It made sense to us. Jackson was excessively worried about things, to the point where he felt defeated. He held his emotions in all day, until he came home to where he felt safe and could release what had been building up for so many hours. While we were relieved to finally understand what was happening to our son, we wished we had sought help much sooner—Jackson had been suffering.

## JACKSON

The child counsellor worked with Jackson over several months to help him understand his own emotions and learn to use strategies to de-escalate. Teachers were supportive in giving him breaks when needed, checking in on him more often to ensure he understood instructions and providing the positive feedback he needed.

At that time, Craig and I made a decision—one that I regret today. We chose not to share the formal written report with our son. He was twelve years old and we thought the medical jargon would be overwhelming. We did not want to focus on the label of “anxiety,” but on what we could do to teach our son to be aware and proactive.

Were we protecting Jackson or was it our way of postponing acceptance? Did we think that the counselling and follow up would “fix” our son? It was a mistake. I wish we would have asked the psychologist to meet with all three of us. She could have helped Jackson understand her findings in language he would have understood at that time. If we used the term anxiety naturally as we did with any other illness, perhaps Craig and I could have worked with the child counsellor to help Jackson accept and learn to cope with this diagnosis from the beginning.

### *Jackson*

*I thought I was supposed to be learning to calm down. At the beginning, he kept asking me to play a stupid card game with him. It wasn't a regular game. I picked a card that told me to finish the start of the sentence or another one with a question. I had done a couple of paintings and he asked me how they made me feel or why I drew something the way I did. I just painted. It didn't mean anything. Seemed like a total waste of time.*

*After a few meetings, though, we started to play a game he called mindfulness. That was a new one for me. We pretended I was upset about something and I practiced taking time to think about what I needed to do and say then we talked about it.*

*When we were almost done our meetings, Mom or Dad came in to join us. It was kind of fun then. At school, I tried to remember what I was learning. It felt like it was helping a little bit.*

## June

Secondary school increased the complexities of Jackson's life. There were new rules to learn, new subjects, new ways of working through the day. The school building itself was almost new and it was large, easily confusing for incoming students. It created an anxious frame of mind in our only child. "I'll never find my way to class. I'll never get to the cafeteria in time to join the lunch line. I'll never remember my timetable or my locker number. I'll never find the gym." To cope with these anxieties, he visited the school several times with friends the week before school started. Feeling a combination of excitement and fear, he walked the halls and located the classrooms, his locker, and any other place of interest. We also suggested he meet with his resource teacher, who would be his go-to person when he needed help with his courses.

Socially, he had a core group of friends who were strong students, athletes, and well rounded. Jackson was successful in joining the hockey team and even in grade nine was on the ice for a lot of the game. He drew energy from his teammates and became one of the most recognized players in the school. He put incredible pressure on himself to be the best—to never be benched. In some ways he drew strength from his talent, but he endured a great deal of stress, never wanting to disappoint his team or coach. If he made a mistake, which was rare, it was written all over his face. Jackson was harder on himself than anyone else could ever have been.

Outside of hockey season, he became a very committed runner. I can't recall the number of times I suggested he go for a run when he was upset. It clearly calmed him, and I think, kept him somewhat grounded. Although I'm not a runner, walking in the fresh air on

trails always helped me to reduce my own stress. Being in nature does make us feel better emotionally. No noise, nothing drawing us in. It's made a difference in my own daily outlook.

## *Jackson*

*Part of our training when I was on the track and field team was running as a warmup. I ate it up, not wanting to run with anyone else and keeping a quicker pace. I started running on my own, to stay in good shape and escape. I ran at least three times a week and got stronger and faster.*

*When I ran, I thought about my problems. They just seemed so much clearer to me. If I was in a bad mood or pissed off, I felt a lot better. If I had a headache, running got rid of it. I got pumped up as I reached each goal. My parents would tell me to go for a run if I was angry or grumpy. They were right, I came back feeling happier and less tense. Springbank Park became my favourite running route. I usually stayed on the path, but sometimes took off, running through the nearby forest. The river flowing... trees hiding me from everyone ... wild animals scampering to find food... quiet sounds all around me. It was calming and cleared my head. I never felt out of control when I was running.*

## June

Jackson was permitted to go to a small room to write all his tests at school, which alleviated some of his academic worries. He did not hesitate to do so, and often met with teachers to get extra help. When oral presentations were required, he gave them after class with only the teacher present, or he handed them in electronically. Blow-ups still happened, but the frequency diminished. By then we understood they were linked to his stressors. We no longer considered them "behavioural."





Lynn McLaughlin is an award-winning author and host of the podcast, "Taking the Helm". Through her own experience, collaboration with other writers and hundreds of hours of research, Lynn has created "Time to Publish". She offers a program that is broken into four components which guides aspiring writers towards publishing their manuscript.

A professional speaker and advocate, Lynn has spent her life devoted to ensuring each of us meets our full potential.

Lynn has recently retired as an educator after 31 years, serving in many roles including Superintendent of Education, Principal, Vice-Principal, French and Special Education teacher. Mother of three grown children, she currently lives with her husband in southern Ontario. She is an active Rotarian dedicated to community causes. Lynn is also a member of 100 Women Who Care Windsor/Essex and works tirelessly to support the goals of the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada. She strives to meet each new personal goal and has just completed her first Detroit International 'A Marathon in November 2019.

Lynn is driven by a single mission: to lead and empower people to make conscious and positive choices. She writes with passion, sensitivity and insight, never losing sight of the reader. Her first book, "Steering Through It" and the experiences she shares, have become the catalyst for her work in advocacy today.

Every author hopes to receive reader reviews. It would be appreciated if you would kindly consider posting your review of "Jackson" for our reading community to enjoy.

Enjoy a free resource by going to Lynn's website and signing up for her mailing list. There is always something each month in "Lynn's Blitz" for you to enjoy as we learn from and with each other.



Lynn's webpage

Enjoy this excerpt from the epilogue of another one of Lynn's books, *Steering Through It*.

"My tumour was meant to be. I clearly had lessons to learn in this life. I still do. I don't pretend to know what the future holds but do view things differently now. I consciously choose to make the best out of any given situation; not judge others but seek to understand; and find every opportunity to laugh, give support and love. We all have our trying moments, but if you've had to look in the mirror and wonder whether your life is coming to an end, you quickly realise that many things you once considered to be crises do not matter in the least. They are trivial in the grand scheme. Trust me. It's people that matter. Don't wait for that moment when time stops. As yourself, "Am I living a happy, caring, fulfilling life that gives to others?" If we each could answer that question honestly, and be true to ourselves, can you imagine the possibilities?"

Lynn's Amazon Author Page

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Jackson's battle to take control over his own mind and life portrays what millions of people are fighting with around the world: mental illness. His mother, desperate to free him from his own demons, faces her own turmoil and anguish, doing anything possible to save her son. After countless emotional and heartbreaking moments, June still cannot accept that only Jackson can save himself.

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