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Opening extract from

Car-Jacked

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Travelling through a small clearing, Ross could see the sky. In it were two bright searchlights. The helicopters were out. And even at this distance Ross could tell they were tracking along this very road.

'How many minutes now?!' he yelled at Jack, flooring the accelerator to get them back under tree cover.

'Slow down!' the kid squeaked back, clinging to the upper strap of his seat belt with both hands.

'How many? How many minutes?!'

'Two thousand, three hundred and seventy-eight!' gasped Jack.

Ross could see the bright lights getting bigger. He let out a volley of curses. The tree cover was too sparse here. He bawled at Jack: 'Hang on! We're going off road!'

The next few seconds were like a bucking bronco ride before a violent lurch and a skull-rattling impact ended the fun. A second later they were hurtling into a black, bottomless gully.



For Clair (our family genius)

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ONE

'Beethoven sucks,' said Jack.

Other kids might have sworn or shouted, 'I hate you!' Maybe kicked repeatedly at the back of the passenger seat in front. But this was much, much better. Genius, in fact. Because **a)** Mum loved Beethoven and **b)** Mum hated him using American slang.

Yes, it was perfect. The best way to create an explosion in the front seat. And it didn't fail.

'JACK!' Mum swung around, furious. Outside Dad carried on putting the fuel into the car. Jack could hear it squirting and gurgling down into the tank. 'Sometimes it's very hard to believe that you have an IQ of 170!'

Jack grinned at her. 'Mensa believes it!'

'Mensa never had to sit in a car with you while you talk like a four-year-old,' snapped Mum. Her face was pink and a little blue vein was throbbing in her right temple as she twisted further around to glare at him. 'For your

information, Beethoven does *not* suck. For a start, that phrase has literally no meaning unless you're observing whether or not Beethoven is capable of drinking through a straw or inhaling through a tube. And given that he is dead, it's fair to say he can do neither. If, however, what you *mean* by "sucks" is that Beethoven is somehow *lacking* in any way, then I think we can perhaps remember that he is the most important classical composer of the eighteenth century—and was recognized as such when he was even younger than *you*.' She ended her short lecture with a tightly controlled exhalation.

Jack rolled his eyes and considered picking his nose. But Mum was ramping up enough already. It wasn't over yet.

'I would have thought,' she said, managing to speak entirely through gritted teeth, 'that you would have some kind of appreciation for Beethoven, as he too was a child prodigy.'

'Was he a child prodigy?' murmured Jack. 'Or just a child *podgy*?'

'That isn't even grammatically *correct*!' Mum took another deep breath and let it out slowly through her teeth, screwing up her eyes as if it hurt to look at him. 'WHY do you have to be SO loathsome whenever we take a holiday, Jack? Why?'

Outside, Dad put the petrol nozzle back into the pump

with a clunk and screwed the fuel cap back on. He was whistling, trying to be jaunty, when he must know that all hell was breaking loose inside the Prius.

'Because I want a REAL holiday!' said Jack. 'You know—theme parks—tourist attractions—fast food!'

His mother looked as if he'd just said, 'You know—kicking puppies—setting fire to pensioners—hard drugs!'

She let out another long breath and struggled to keep control. 'Jack,' she said, using her *I am supremely calm voice*. 'We don't *do* tourism! We don't take you to tacky little attractions offering to deafen, maim or poison you! We take you to the *real* places. Mountains—forests—fossil-filled coastlines—wildfowl reserves. Other twelve-year-olds *might* get to ride the Fatal Nemesis Vampire of Oblivion at Walton Towers, but you—*you* get to see a *real eagle*!' Her voice became reverential. 'An *eagle*, Jack—in its *natural Scottish habitat!*'

Jack knew that seeing the eagle was a *huge* deal for Mum and Dad, but for him it had just been a blurry brown thing through the viewfinder of the binoculars. It hadn't really lived up to all the screaming and hyperventilating his parents had been doing. You'd think they'd been on the Vampire Nemesis themselves at that moment, instead of just bouncing slightly on a tartan rug on a hillside.

'Couldn't I just—for *once*,' he said, closing his eyes in the

dramatic way his mother often did. 'Only *once* . . . have a McDonald's?'

There was a long silence. He opened his eyes and found Mum looking at him as though she simply did not recognize him as her son any more. Her lips were compressed and her nostrils flared. Jack wondered whether he'd pushed her too far this time.

But honestly, what was the point of being one of the cleverest kids in Britain if you couldn't even score a cheeseburger out of it? Sadly, his mum and dad believed that McDonald's was the work of the Devil. Well, as good as. And eating a burger was much the same as slaughtering an infant over a chalk pentangle on the floor, while howling at the moon.

'It's just minced beef, Mum,' he muttered. 'Squashed into a round shape, fried and put in a bun with a bit of cheese on it. How much harm can it do me?!'

'If you don't understand the harm of giving in to fast food and becoming part of an international epidemic of obesity, then I just don't know *what* to say to you, Jack,' she concluded, turning back to face front and end their conversation.

'So—I guess a Mars Bar's out of the question too,' he said.

Mum screamed. Something quite rude. In Latin.

'If you're going to say things like that, perhaps you'd better find a language I *don't* understand,' he pointed out.

'If you keep this up,' she hissed. 'You can just *forget* the peat bogs!'

'Leonie!' Dad's shout from the petrol station shop distracted Jack from this horror (*Oh no—take anything from me—just not the trip to the peat bogs!*). 'My card won't work! I've forgotten my PIN again. Bring the other one will you?'

Mum grabbed her handbag and got out of the car, slamming the door behind her. Her angry stalk across the forecourt was ruined slightly when one boot-heel skidded on a puddle of oil, but she regained her poise within a second and was in the shop with Dad moments later. Through the shop window Jack could see a weary look on Dad's face which made his heart sink. He didn't want to ruin Dad's holiday.

He knew his little protest was pointless, anyway. Once Mum's mind was made up it was impossible to change. She had made up her mind, for instance, that Jack would be in college by the time he was fourteen. And as he'd already taken his first ten GCSEs—and passed them all with A*s—he guessed he would be. And then he would take around six A Levels in one year before zooming straight into Oxford or Cambridge by the time he turned fifteen. Mum couldn't *wait*.

So, while his cousins, Jason and Callum, were hanging around the skate park and worrying about spots and girls and how to get a better score on Halo or Call of Duty or whatever

they were into by then, *he* would be hanging around with eighteen-year-olds who wouldn't want anything to do with him. Not because he was deeply uncool (which, of course, he *was*) but because his *MOTHER* would be meeting him every day after lectures and making sure he wasn't sloping off for a junk food frenzy.

Jack groaned, lay down on the back seat and pulled the tartan car blanket over him from head to foot.

Ten seconds later the door opened and Dad thumped heavily into the driver seat, keyed the ignition at speed and shot out of the petrol station so fast that Jack was flattened into the upholstery in the rear.

Wow! Dad and Mum had had their rows before but this was obviously a bad one. As far as Jack could recall, Dad had never actually *abandoned* her before. He must have snapped.

He lay staring at the chinks of light in the blanket, wondering what to say to Dad. He felt a bit guilty. He had deliberately wound Mum up because he'd been fed up with her idea of a 'holiday'. . . but he didn't really mean for it all to go off like *this*. Dad sometimes lost it with Mum . . . but to leave her all alone at a petrol station in the middle of nowhere?

Jack knew he should say sorry. Tell Dad it was his fault; say he should go back. He would apologize to Mum and make it better.

He began to burrow out of the blanket and then froze. His first peek between the front seats showed a hand grasping the gearstick and wrenching it violently forward as the car veered around a tight bend on the narrow road, at breathtaking speed.

The hand was large and masculine. It had long lean fingers and blood smeared across its knuckles.

It was not his dad's.