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childrensbooks@simonandschuster.co.uk

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AND
THE
STARS
WERE
BURNING
BRIGHTLY

Prologue

Al

When a star reaches the end of its lifetime, it explodes, in this violent supernova. Sometimes, the outer layer of the star blows off, leaving behind a small, dense core that continues to collapse. Gravity presses down on the core so tightly, that the protons and electrons combine to make neutrons and those neutrons combine to make a neutron star. Something born from death, that ripples out, from 33-light years away. The core of the star speeds up, and it spins faster and faster so that eventually the Universe just becomes this blur … a blur of time and space, where nothing can hurt you, cause you don't really exist. Not properly. You're just a floating cluster of subatomic particles, trapped in this perfect world.

This last summer, me and Nate went to the fair. We climbed on to 'The Spin Master', one of those rides with the metal cages that catapults you forwards, and Nate's face was all stretched out and weird. He kept shouting and yelling because he loved it so much. And as the wind hit me in my face I could feel the corners of my mouth lift and then I closed my eyes and I thought

– 'this is the closest you'll ever get to being a neutron star'. Me and Nate, together in this whirl of colour … this speed of light and sound. Pulsating. Rotating. Orbiting. Lifting off the ground.

I held onto the metal, safety gate, and I thought of the patterns that were all around. I thought of the Fibonacci sequence and how everything in life is made up of numbers ... I thought of how you can get the different textures in a painting by blurring out the edges … I thought about how you can time travel in your mind … and how Van Gogh left out the bars on the windows of his room in his painting of Starry Night. How Gustav Metzger would destroy his own art … and how it takes ten million years for a star to form, but only once there's been the perfect gravitational collapse.

And I thought of me and Nate, on the boxing gym roof. Me and my little bro on that roof and my chance to tell him everything, but not being able to find the right words. So I sat back, and I prayed that the ride wouldn't stop. Cause I knew that when it did, I wouldn't be a neutron star anymore.

I'd just be Al.

Al who was nothing.

Al who wanted to disappear.

Al who wanted to be up there … where nothing can touch you, and all you know is helium and nitrogen and dust.

Chapter One

Nathan

One day, little bro, you'll see. It will happen and you won't even realise it. You'll just look up at the sky, and stare at all those stars, burning hundreds and thousands of miles away and you'll think: 'I get it now. I get all that stuff that Al was banging on about, I really do.'

'Orion always comes up sideways,' that's what Al said.

It was the last thing he told me before he disappeared. He said it was some poem he'd been studying in English, and then he ripped it out his school book and tossed it to me. He'd scrawled all these drawings down the sides of the words, cramming his pictures into the margins. All these people he'd drawn with no faces. I hated poetry more than I hated school, so I screwed it up and flushed it down the bog. Then I told Al exactly where he could shove his poetry. I didn't care that he thought it was a good one.

At least, I didn't *then*, anyway. Cause Al was always coming out

with crap like that. Talking to me about some book, or a fact he'd remembered, going into one of his weird moods when he couldn't get one of his drawings right. He'd get all stressed out and start running a hand through his thick afro, pulling at the tufts of his hair. Then he'd screw the whole drawing up and toss it in his bin. His room was full of, half-finished faces and half-finished things, all split in two and scattered around the place, like some weird morgue. He had these proper sketches, but he'd never let me see them. He kept them hidden, locked inside one of his desk drawers.

Al was full of secrets, but that didn't stop our mum from loving him the most. Al would be the one to get out of Wythenshawe. Al would be the one to do something with his life. To stand up in one of those posh university halls and make her proud. Al, Al, fucking Al. Mum loves my little sister Phoebe, probably cause she's the only girl. She loves Saul, probably cause he's the oldest. But with me, it's like she didn't have enough love left to give. Maybe it's cause I look most like our dad that she doesn't love me so much.

I turn over in the dark and I wait for it to stop hurting. Not the kinda hurt when someone gives you a dead arm in school and you laugh your head off, pretending it doesn't sting, even though it kills. This is a

different hurt. One that seems to come from the inside and pull down on me. Like all these different parts of me are slipping away, and I can't do nothing to stop it. It's this hurt that takes over. That splits me right down the middle. That reminds me every minute that Al ain't here, and there's nothing … nothing I can do to change it.

My room is all grey and I can hear the muffled sound of the telly coming from downstairs, forcing its way through the cracks in the floorboards. Mum's probably fallen asleep in front of the TV again. Since it happened, she hardly ever goes upstairs. She doesn't even sleep in her room anymore. She spends more time praying though, heading down to this shoddy church round the corner from our house or bringing these old fogeys round. People who've never bothered with us before, who hold her hand, and bring her stuff, and tell her that '*Al is in heaven now. That at least he's with God. That he's in the best place*'. Mum nods and prays with them. Like heaven is better than our house, or Civic town centre, or the pop-up funfair. That Al's better off dead than necking as much alcohol as you can, or getting on the Spin Master or the Miami Wave. And all I want to do is tell her there's no point in praying to some idiot in the sky. That God is just a taker, like one of those fools in your year, who nicks a new pair of trainers even before you've managed to

break them in. God took Al, and if anyone asks, that's all I'd say he is, that God. A taker of brothers and trainers and really important shit. I never believed in God much anyway, but I believe in him less now.

The floorboards outside my room creak. I watch as my bedroom door begins to open and the light from the hallway floods in, making me cover my eyes. And, for a moment, he's there. Al. Standing in the doorway, his afro blocking out most of the light, his body loped to one side, his dark shadow stretched. He shakes his head slowly, like he can't believe what a fool I've been and I think I hear him say, '*Got you!*'. Like this is all a joke. One of the stupid tricks that he'd play when he was messing around. I squint in the dark and my throat tightens.

'Al?' I whisper. 'Al…?' But all I can see is a shadow.

'It's just me,' a small voice says.

Phoebe.

The door opens wider and I blink in the light, suddenly feeling all stupid. Phoebe moves towards me, a bright yellow dressing gown wrapped around her, the end of her long plait slowly unravelling. She's clutching onto this old teddy. This thing that looks like a rabid cat, shoved into a small doll's dress. Al bought it for her one Christmas. I hadn't seen it for years, but the night *it* happened, Phoebe came into my

room with the teddy. She didn't speak, she just lay there. Curled up on her side with it pressed to her chest.

'I can't sleep,' she says. 'I can hear mum crying again.'

I move over and peel the covers back. I don't mind Phoebe coming into my room cause at least then there's something I can do. At least there something I can try to fix.

Phoebe climbs in next to me.

'It smells funny in here,' she says.

'Well, it was fine before you came in.'

'It's not my fault that you don't wash.'

'Nah,' I say. 'D'you want me to kick you out, or wot?'

Phoebe goes quiet and even though she doesn't say anything, I can tell that she's thinking.

'Nate,' she says. 'Where do we go when we die?'

I shrug. I'd never thought about it before. 'Heaven,' I say.

'I know *that* … but how do you get there? Do you just wake up and you're there? Or does an angel come and take you away? Or do you just die and then…'

She pauses, and I think of Al for a minute. Drifting upwards, so awkward and lanky that if you do float up to heaven, he'd probably

get caught on something on the way up. Tangled around an electricity wire like the old socks or school shoes that people throw up there. The thought makes me smile for a minute, numbing all those bits inside me, but it soon stops.

'Do you think it hurts?' Phoebe says. 'Dying … do you think it hurt Al? Do you think he wos in pain?'

I look up at the plastic Glow In The Dark stars on my ceiling. Al got them from one of those crappy pound shops the day Dad left. He'd stuck them down, taking ages to get them in the right places. He'd said that when things didn't make sense or if he didn't understand life, he'd just look up at the stars and, somehow, everything would just feel different. It would feel okay and that he wanted me to have that too.

Then he started telling me that there was no point in having stars in my room, if they didn't look like the real thing. He kept going on about all these names. Saying how there was some star named after this guy called Ryan, and how something or other was shaped like his belt. It took him ages to get it arranged just right, and when he'd finished he just had this one thing left. A comet that he ended up sticking in the corner on its own. He said that he didn't know what to do with it, but that he could tell that it didn't want to be with the rest of the stars.

I stare at the stars and think of how Al looked when I'd found him. The bluish tint to his face. The green and black school tie knotted around his neck. His silver Prefect badge glinting in the light, and the faded stupid school motto written on his blazer: *In Caritate Christi Fundati*. I could hear all these other kids playing in the street outside. Someone kicking a ball against a fence, the wheels of a bike skidding around a corner, the slapping of a skipping rope on the pavement, the *thud, thud, thud,* of music from a car in the distance. The chanting of '*Who are ya? Who are ya? Who are ya?*' '*Touch me again and you're dead.*' I think of how Al and me had had a row that morning. How he'd called me after school and I'd cut him off. Ignored his call, then turned my phone to silent. All cause I wanted him to stop bothering me and piss off. All cause I was having too much fun, drinking and smoking in the park. All cause I wanted to stay with Kyle and these two fit girls we were with.

Al had always been there for me, but when he'd needed me the most, I'd cut him off.

I feel Phoebe tug at the sleeve of my t-shirt and my eyes begin to sting.

'Nate, do you think it hurts?' She asks again.

I stare up at the comet, separate from all those other stars.

'Nah,' I lie. 'I don't think it hurts at all.'

I listen to the sound of Phoebe's breathing until she falls asleep, her head resting on my arm. I close my eyes and try not to think of Al, or how I'd let him down.

Afterwards, these two Police Officers had come round to get me to write a statement to explain what happened. '*Routine*,' they'd said. '*To establish that Al's death was an accident*.'

An accident.

I didn't tell them about the phone call. Or that before they'd pulled up, with their loud sirens and flashing lights, before they'd got out their car, or placed a hand on Al's neck, or written down his time of death, or zipped him up in one of those white bags, I'd noticed something.

I'd seen it on the floor, when I'd found Al. It was resting beside the leg of his wooden desk chair. I didn't know if he'd left it there on purpose or if it was a mistake, but I'd picked it up anyway. It was the last thing Al had done before he killed himself. A drawing … He'd drawn himself, alone, sitting in a corner. He'd scribbled out his face, but I knew it was him because of the afro and he was wearing his favourite

navy hoodie. He was hunched over, his hands pressed over his ears, and there were all these people surrounding him. Towering over him. He'd scribbled out their faces, too, but there were loads of them, covering most of the page. Then, towards the bottom, beside the tip of Al's shoe, were two words. *Help Me*.

I pull the covers down and get out of bed, trying my hardest not to wake Phoebe. I touch the corner of my bedside table, and open the drawer. I move all these things around – my iPhone, a lighter, some old headphones, until my fingers brush over Al's drawing. I pull it out and make my way to the bedroom window, pushing the curtain aside to let the light from the streetlamp shine into my room. I open the crumpled, piece of paper. I must've looked at it a thousand times, probably more. Each time hoping to find something different. I dunno wot. Maybe an answer or a clue. Something to tell me why Al did it, or how to stop it from hurting so much, or wot I'm supposed to do now. How I'm supposed to just carry on … even though Al's torn this hole right through me and I'll never be the same again.

None of us will.

I hold the drawing against the window so the paper goes this weird off-white colour, and I stare at the picture of Al. Scared and hunched

over. I move my finger over the words. *Help me. Help me*. Wot if Al had been in trouble and I hadn't even known?

The screeching sound of car tyres coming down the road makes me jump. I hear the low beat of some rap music, and I watch as a dark blue Corsa pulls up outside the house. The car door opens and Saul stumbles out, the music getting louder. I see some of his mates, all crammed into the tiny car. Saul slams the door, pulling the collar of his leather jacket up, around his neck. The driver presses down on the horn, beeping it in tune to the song, shouting and jeering.

'Shut up, you bellend,' Saul says. 'You'll wake my mum up and that.'

There's more noise from the car, and one of his other mates sticks his head out the window, chucking a cig stub into the night.

'Oooh,' he says. 'Don't wanna wake mummy up. When are ya moving out?'

The others laugh, I recognise most of them from our estate.

'Piss off,' Saul says. 'Your mum asked me to move in, but I'm not sure how your dad would feel about that.'

'There's more laughter from the car and Saul walks towards the house.

'In a bit,' one of his mates shouts. 'I'll come check for you

tomorrow, yeah?'

Saul lifts his hand up to wave, and they rev the engine, turning the music up even louder and pressing down on the horn as they go. The car disappears down the other end of the road, and I see Saul shake his head. He must feel me watching, cause he looks up, towards my bedroom window. He stares at me for a minute, scrunching up his face, and then he flicks the V sign in my direction. I don't do it back.

Saul's key turns in the front door, and then I hear the sound of his footsteps towards the kitchen. There's the noise of pots and pans, banging, the microwave going. And I can't help but feel all this anger inside me. It's like Al meant nothing to Saul. Like he can just forget about what happened and move on. Pretend that Al never existed. Our brother's only been dead for ten days and Saul's acting like he don't even care. When our dad left, Saul just said that 'shit happens,' and we needed to get used to it. Well, maybe having your dad walk out is normal, but it's not *normal* for your brother to kill himself. Is it? Not when he's seventeen … when he had all this stuff he wanted to do. Not when it's Al.

I fold the drawing in half, and drop it inside my drawer. Then I climb back in bed, next to Phoebe, and stare up at the plastic comet. I stare at

it, until the shape starts to blur and my eyes get heavy. I hear Al's voice inside my head. *'You wouldn't know it, but all stars, all of them, are in this constant conflict with themselves. Like, all the time. There's gravity and the mass of the star pulling it inwards but then there's this other force pushing it back outwards against the gravity. Then, in the middle, where they meet, you get this fusion. That's where the energy comes from. The star collapses in on itself, and another one is born. Imagine that. Something in so much conflict all the time, so much pain, but it still creates something so … so… beautiful.*

***

There's this tingling feeling, creeping upwards, all over my body. I'm standing at the bottom of the staircase that leads up to the attic room, the darkness closing in around me. I place my hand on the wall, feeling the coldness of it spreading through my fingers. I take one step at a time, until I'm outside Al's door. His bedroom light is on. I walk into his room, staring at the walls, covered in old blue-tack marks. I pass all these maps that he'd stuck down, of the places he'd wanted to visit – the Atacama Desert, Death Valley, The Empty Quarter, The Brecon Beacons. All the places where he could go and see the stars. He'd drawn

this route across the map, going out of Manchester, and across the world. Like he wanted to escape, like he wanted to get as far away from this place as possible.

I stare up at Al's paintings, at his revision notes and an exam time table he'd highlighted. His bed hasn't been touched, and his clothes are still neatly folded at the bottom. Above his bed, there's a hanging mobile of stars he'd made out of cardboard. I walk over to his desk, looking at this open sketchbook and I see that picture. Al cowering in the corner, surrounding by all those people with no faces. My throat tightens and I turn a page of the sketchbook, the bodies are there again, but the faces get darker. I flick faster, going through page after page. It's like the drawing are coming to life, moving across the paper.

And then I see the words, '*Help me*' again and again.

I can't stop myself from flicking through. Like I've got no control over my hand. The words get bigger, darker, *'Help me.' 'Stop them.' 'Help me.' Please'*. I want to stop, but I can't. I just keep going, and then, I hear it. A sound from somewhere above me, so faint, that it's almost a whisper.

'Nate,' I hear. 'Please … please...'

I move my eyes upwards, and I see him.

Al.

His green and black tie wrapped around one of the wooden roof beams. His desk chair placed just beside his feet, his skin pallid and waxy. I stare up at his body, at the way that his feet hang, at the laces of his school shoes that are undone – frayed and trailing down. His eyes are open, and he's kicking, struggling, like he's trying to move through water – or something thicker. Treacle. Quicksand. Tar.

'Help me,' Al says.

Blood pounds in my ears, and my breath echoes all around me, filling the room, pressing hard against my chest. I feel like there's this balloon inside me, that's being blown up and up and it's gonna burst any minute. My palms begin to sweat and I climb onto the chair, my legs trembling, reaching for Al's tie. I touch the rough fabric, trying to undo it, but my fingers slide over the knot again and again. I can see the air slowly leaving Al's body, his face tensing. I pull and tug, trying to undo the material.

'Hold on,' I tell him. But it's wrapped around too tightly, cutting into his neck, hurting him. I shout for help, pushing my fingers against Al's neck, trying to loosen the tie, slacken it, unravel it, just a little.

'Hold on,' I repeat, I can feel my chest tightening and the tears starting to come.

I shout for help again, but no one's there.

Al struggles, his face turning this weird colour, his hands raised up towards his tie.

'Hold on,' I shout at him. 'Bro, you're gonna be okay. You've just got to—'

I pull and I tug, but my palms are too wet and I feel tears falling down my face. I shout and I scream, but I can tell that it's too late. That *I'm* too late. I scream louder, shouting Ali's name. Trying to stop him somehow, trying to keep hold of him, and then I feel it. A hand pressing down hard on my shoulder…

'It's all right,' a voice says. 'Nate, I've got you, yeah.'

I open my eyes. My bedroom light has been switched on and the room is so bright, that I have to move a hand to cover my face. I'm drenched in sweat and the bed sheets are tangled and wrapped around me. Saul is there, his fade starting to grow back, a love bite on his neck. I pull at the edge of my duvet cover, wiping away the sweat. I stare around my room, no maps stuck to the walls, no revision notes, no route leaving Manchester. No Al. I pull myself upwards, resting my head in

my hands.

'I couldn't save him,' I say. 'I couldn't save Al.'

I start to cry. I feel stupid, fucking stupid for crying, but I can't help it. It's like something's broken inside me and it won't stop. Saul sits down next to me, making the mattress sag beneath his weight, his muscles showing beneath this thin vest. He pulls me towards him, wrapping his arms around me and I close my eyes, breathing in his cigarette and aftershave smell. Wishing it would all go back to how it used to be.

Wishing I'd just answered Al's call, or left school earlier, or fucking noticed that something was up. Wishing I'd been a better brother. I don't know how long we sit there but I suddenly feel all awkward and it's like Saul doesn't know what to do. I move away, turning to look at the tangled covers and the space in my bed.

'Where's Phoebe?' I say.

Saul begins to crack his knuckles. 'You started screaming, so she ran to get me. I put her back in bed.' He pauses, and begins to open and close his fist, watching his muscles tense. 'It really scares her, y'know. When you start screaming like that. Saying those things … saying Al's name,' he stops. 'It's like you're possessed or something.'

I stare at him. 'Wot, you think I start screaming for the fun of it?

Cause I've got nothing better to do?'

'I never said that,' he says. 'It's just … I'm worried.'

'Well, we can't all be like you, y'know. We can't all just go round pretending like none of this happened. Like Al ain't gone.'

Saul turns to me and I can see how angry he is. 'You fucking think I ain't upset?' he says. 'That I'm not hurting. Fuck, Nate. Not a day goes by where I don't think about him. Where I don't wish … I miss him too. Just as much as you do.' We sit there, in silence, staring into space.

'Why do you think he did it?' I say.

Saul stiffens and shifts over on my bed. 'I dunno,' he says. 'How am I supposed to know that? How's anyone supposed to know,' he pauses. 'It ain't like he left a note, or nothing.'

I think about the drawing and my throat tightens.

'I suppose,' I say. 'But don't you wanna find out? Don't you wanna know? Wouldn't you feel better, yeah. If you knew the reason?'

'How can we?' Saul's words come out cold. 'Al's dead, Nate. It ain't like we can ask him, is it? And even then, wot will it change?'

I shake my head.

'Look,' Saul says. 'I didn't mean it like that. It's just … wot difference will it make? Even if we did find out, it won't bring him back. Shit

happens, you know that.'

I stare up at the comet on the ceiling. It's the same words as before, so I know he's not just talking about Al, he's talking about our dad walking out, too.

'You can spend all your life trying to work out why someone does something. Trying to find answers and in the end none of it matters. That's just people.'

I shrug. 'Suppose,' I say. But I don't mean it. It all matters. *Reasons* matter, Al mattered.

'It's not like when we were kids, Nate,' Saul continues. 'Things ain't that simple anymore.' He gets up, and heads over towards my bedroom door. 'Try and get some sleep, yeah?' he says. 'It's almost three. The birds are gonna start chirping and shit soon.'

I nod. 'Right,' I reply.

Saul pauses. 'We'll get through,' he says.'Same way we always do.' He stands there for a minute, like he's going to say something else, but he doesn't. He just gives me this weird smile then switches off my light and closes my bedroom door. I lie back, and I stare up at the dim shapes on my ceiling – the half-moon, the plastic planets, a shooting star with a curved bit at the bottom. I don't like it when I'm left alone, cause then

it's just me and all these thoughts. Me and all these feelings, that I don't understand.

Maybe Saul is right, maybe there ain't always a reason why people do things, maybe there ain't always an answer. And if I would've showed him Al's drawing, then he would've said that it was just a stupid picture, that I was reading too much into it. But I know Al. He was one of the smartest people that I know … knew. And he wouldn't have left that drawing there unless there was a reason, unless there was something he wanted me to find out.

And wot else do I have?

I breathe out slowly.

'Eh, bro,' I say, and I dunno if I really think Al can hear me or not, but it feels good to say it out loud anyway. 'I promise I'll find out what happened to you,' I say. 'I promise I'll find out why.'

Chapter Two

Megan

The first time I met Megan, I told her, that everything in life is maths. That when you think about it, and you look closely, you see all these patterns, and numbers, and shapes. The same number patterns showing up in art … or nature … or even the number of cells in the human body. And you see it everywhere you go. Patterns and numbers, repeated again, and again, and again. Bleeding in to every part of your life, if you only take the time to look properly.

It's funny, and I don't mean funny in a – *ha, ha*, way. I mean it in a weird way. A way that I don't *really* understand, like those confusing questions you get on a Maths exam paper: *'So and so is going to make an apple pie, so they buy five hundred and seventy-eight apples. What is the percentage of filling compared to the ratio of pastry?*' Or some crap like that. Anyway, when I'd found out wot happened with Al, I thought it must have been some sort of joke, or that someone had got it wrong, cos I'd only been

talking to Al the day before. We'd been messaging back and forth on WhatsApp and he never said anything ... not a single thing. I didn't get that he was upset, or that anything was even wrong. Then when he didn't turn up to class on Tuesday, I thought that something must've been a bit off, cos Al never missed school. And he *never* would've missed it on a day he had art. But I just thought that maybe he was sick, so o I messaged him saying: *'I missed you in art, big head! Where were u?*' But I know he didn't see it, cos only one of those ticks appeared. And when I had a look at the top of our messages, it said - *Last seen yesterday, at 15.42*. Then I found out that Al was dead. And that just made me think that all the time I'd been messing about on Snapchat, or scrolling through Insta looking at someone's story, thinking that Al was being an idiot for not getting back to me. All that time ... Al had been dead. And I just couldn't get my head around it. I just couldn't believe that I'd lost someone else.

I still remember the first time we spoke properly. Al was sitting in the far corner of the art class, mixing all these powdered paints together and he was really taking his time. Measuring out the paint like it was *really* important for him to get the right shade, like it meant … everything. There were all these other kids messing about, but Al was sitting on his

own and you could tell that art was his thing. That he didn't just pick it cos he thought it would be easy. He actually loved it. Just like I do. But I know how to have a laugh, too, and Al didn't really have that. I never saw him hanging around with anyone, so I felt sort-of sorry for him at first. Cos imagine having no mates at all. It's sad. Really sad.

Anyway, while Al was mixing these paints, I'd been trying to draw this picture of my dad, but no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get it right. I couldn't make it look like him and that was really important to me. I'd used my rubber so many times, that all the paper was furry, and there were all these black bits everywhere, and I was so annoyed, so flipping pissed that I couldn't do it, that I just threw the rubber and started swearing. Swearing the whole classroom down, cos it's annoying, when you're trying your hardest to do something, when you want something to turn out perfect, but it just doesn't work

Then Al came and sat next to me, even though I never asked him to, and he said '*You know, everything in life is Maths,*' which is a pretty weird thing to say when you think about it. He pointed at the picture of my dad that I was trying to copy from the screensaver on my phone: '*You're trying too hard to make it perfect. No one's face is a perfect oval. Faces don't work like that. They're more of an egg-shape … with this bit that goes out towards*

the bottom … this bit that expands.' Then he picked up my pencil and showed me.

And at first, I could feel myself getting even angrier, cos I didn't know him and there he was, coming over to my table, insulting my dad's face, and thinking he knew everything. I was just about to tell him where he could go, but then I looked at the drawing. I almost couldn't speak. It was like Al had brought my dad back to life. Like he'd captured the way that I remembered him. He'd managed to draw my dad's stubble in and these tiny lines a the corner of his eyes.

And I knew then that Al was special. I thought he would say something else, but he just got back up and sat down at his table, like it was nothing. He put his headphones in and I couldn't stop staring at him. Not cos I fancied him or anything like that, but cos he was so … different. Like, he didn't have his hair shaved like most of the other boys, and he never wore a cap, and he didn't have one of those Nike bags, or a tracksuit hoodie, and he didn't even try to get away with wearing trainers instead of proper school shoes. Even when he spoke, he didn't sound like he was from Wythenshawe. You just knew that he was gonna do something proper special with his life. You know, when you can just tell that some people are gonna go on and do something…

amazing?

So when I got that snap off my mate Tara - cos she'd heard from Chloe, who'd found out from Lauren, who knew cos she was going out with Al's big brother, Saul – I couldn't believe that Al had killed himself. And I thought how I'd never sit next to him in art class again, That I'd never get to see him draw, or talk about the right shade of paint or his weird nerdy science stuff. I didn't know what to do, but I knew I wanted to do *something*. Something to help Al live on forever, to keep his memory alive … just like he'd done for me with that drawing of my dad.

Maybe it's cos I know what it's like to lose someone. How it feels when someone's in your life one minute and everything seems proper normal, and then they're just gone.

I don't know why I thought that a Facebook page would be the best way to do it. It's not like Al had loads of friends or anything, but I thought that at least everyone could see him, and remember him. So it would be like he was still here. Al was always hiding in real life, trying to stay away from people or blend into the walls of the corridors and I didn't want him to do that anymore. He deserved to be seen.

So I went through Al's profile pictures and stole one, then uploaded

it to a page I set up. And then I remembered that he was *always* going on about the stars and that. He had loads of places he wanted to go, but the first place on his list was the Brecon Beacons, cos it was only in Wales and he'd said that would be the easiest for him to get to and from there he'd be able to see all the stars you can't see in Wythenshawe. I spent *hours* on Google, going through all these images of the place, trying to find the perfect picture, cos I wanted to make sure that it was the right one. There were loads, like hundreds of star pictures, and most of them looked the same, cos once you've seen one star picture, you've seen them all. But when I found it, I knew. It just felt right.

It was this sky, with mountains in the distance, and a wide-set valley, and looking at it, I could tell why Al wanted to go there. Cos it was so much nicer than living in this one, tiny place. There was all this open space, and millions and millions, of tiny stars, in the background. So I uploaded it to the page with the photo of Al and I stared down at his face. His brown skin and afro. His hazel eyes, shining out against the Brecon Beacons, and it made me feel sort-of proud. Cos if you squinted it almost looked like Al was up there - in the sky. That he was one of those stars, looking down on the valley, and I know he would've liked that. That it was just perfect for Al. And I just sat there for a minute,

staring at the page, and I wanted this moment, where it was private, where I was the only one who knew about it, I wanted it to last forever.

Like the days out I used to have with my dad, when it was just me and him.

But I took a deep breath, pressed *'publish'* and wrote the first comment. The first few sentences on a blank wall:

R.I.P Al, the smartest guy in Wythenshawe. I know you're shining bright, from way up there. xxxx