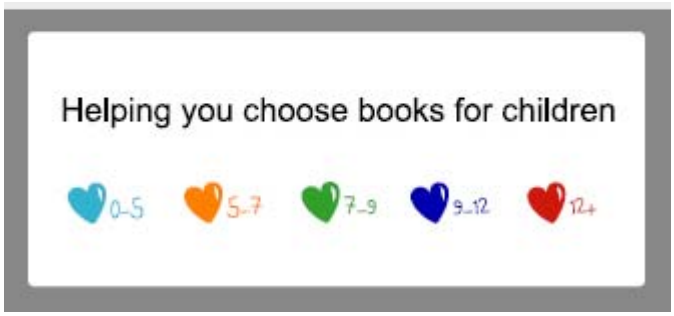
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opening extract from

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Chapter 1

You just know when you've drawn the short straw. The bad luck clouds gather overhead and you can feel the weight of doom settling on your shoulders. I'm there, smiling hopefully as if looking cheerful might make a difference, silently praying my hunch is wrong . . . but, well, I could already tell who was taking me home with them. I just knew.

We've arrived at Vernon station in Normandy, me and my best friend Rachel, and there's two cars waiting for us. One is this gorgeous white open-top Italian sports car, and leaning against it, with her legs crossed at the ankles, is a stunning-looking older woman in sunglasses and a girl my age who might have just stepped out of a perfume ad, both of them smiling. The other car is this bashed up Citroen painted two different shades of blue, with rust around the wheels, and a short, fat man glaring out the

window at me from the driver's seat. The stunning woman strides forward with her arms out to both of us, and says (like there was ever any doubt about it), 'Ray-shell?'

Rachel and I managed to talk our parents into sending us on an educational French holiday. A bit like an exchange, but one-way, for people who've left it too late for the whole exchange thing but want an intense French crammer course before their exams: this was the last summer before our final A-level year. I found the agency on the internet after a journalist my mum always reads had written about her daughter going with them the year before, so Mum was convinced they could be trusted. It was my idea, but better French wasn't really the main reason for going. I just thought Rachel and I would have a blast. We'd get our first taste of independence and frogs' legs while falling in love with beautiful French boys with sexy accents.

This is hard to believe, but it was easier to persuade Rachel's mum that it was a good idea than it was to sell it to Rachel. Anything educational is fine by her mum – she's always put loads of pressure on Rachel to be academically brilliant. Rachel's social life sometimes suffered so she could live up to her mum's expectations, and she was a bit of a late starter in the having fun business. For most of the time I'd known her, she'd been the one who stayed in doing homework or went

out to orchestra practice while I necked with boys behind the chip shop.

'I don't know, Sam, couldn't it be dangerous?' Rachel asked, when I first revealed the France plan to her.

'How is it dangerous?' I asked her.

'We barely speak the language.'

'We'll get better, that's the point.'

'We could get lost or killed before that happens.'

I frowned at her, incredulous. 'How?'

'I don't know. But it's abroad. People get killed abroad. We won't know anyone. We'll be all alone. How is that better than staying at home with our friends?'

I reminded her that after six years of hanging out with exactly the same boys every day at school, we had snogged everyone we were ever going to snog there. Well, for Rachel, that was just Ginger Brian, who played the tuba in the school orchestra. Even that was quite on and off and only lasted two weeks, at which point the pair of them had spent so much of their time together blushing, they'd just about run out of blood. But my, er, more *comprehensive* snogging history hadn't brought me any closer to any love–of–my–life types. We both knew the locals weren't going to play the romantic leads in our future, or even our summer. We needed a change of scene.

* * *

Vernon station. Beautiful French woman throws Rachel's scruffy green rucksack into the back seat, where beautiful French girl has thrown herself. Rachel sends me a sympathetic, worried look and lowers herself anxiously into the sumptuous caramel leather passenger seat. Then her car purrs away and I'm left in the car park with the glaring old man, who finally does get out of his car only to grumpily shrug and grunt about the situation with Rachel's French family, and is now opening his boot for me to put my bag inside. He only speaks to me in French and doesn't smile *ever*. I glance into the boot, which is already nearly full with the following items: two pairs of worn out old man shoes, a big, manky toy tiger (what is that for?), a tartan rug, and what looks like a month's supply of long-life blancmanges in plastic tubs (well hey, what's weird about that? Who doesn't travel with those?). On the floor in front of my passenger seat is a pink see-through plastic (oh, please, no, in the name of all that is decent, NO!) dental plate with two false teeth attached to it. I try to sneak a glance at my driver to see if it belongs in his mouth, while carefully keeping my feet well out of its way. The bad luck clouds have finished gathering, and it's started to rain.

That was how our summer began. It makes me sound *horrible* saying this, but I couldn't help feeling that things should have been the other way around. Not

because I wished toothy-blancmangey-tigery-rusty-car man on Rachel, but because I wouldn't have been as intimidated by the trendy family as she seemed to be, and, well, maybe I'd have appreciated them more. It was a bad start, but I was in France for a month with my best friend, and I wasn't about to let the first little hiccup spoil my mood. Think about it: how appealing would *my* dad be to a French girl if he picked her up from the local train station? And Monsieur Faye – my driver – wasn't the only person I'd be staying with. Rachel and I knew we'd each been put with a family with a girl about our age: mine was called Chantal. I hoped we'd get on. I'd brought her a present – a really dainty crystal-blingy watch with a pink silk strap that fastened with a press stud behind a little bow, so it looked kind of like boudoir jewellery.

Having found the Fayes' address on a map, I knew it wasn't very far from Vernon station, just outside a little town called Giverny. It was famous for being the home of the artist Monet; his house and gardens, where he did all those pictures of ponds and lily pads, were still there, and the fields around me now looked like fields he'd painted. The roads kept getting narrower the further we went, until we were driving on what seemed to be some skinny footpath down the side of a field, so the wheat on the field side brushed the car as we drove

past and the low branches of the trees that stretched over on the other side tapped on the top.

Yes, it *did* occur to me that this was just some French bloke who'd happened to be in the car park at the wrong time, had started talking to Rachel's French family, and had taken advantage of the real Faye family's lateness to abduct and kill me, perhaps inserting the two teeth when the time came to eat my dead body. But Monsieur Faye had introduced himself with the right name, and seemed as unhappy about having to drive me as I was about having to be driven by him. He didn't say anything else as we drove, just twiddled with the radio and tutted when rabbits ran across the road in front of the car. I turned to look out the window at the stunning countryside, the vivid blue sky over poppy fields and distant farmhouses, and tried to guess which one I'd be staying in. Just a few minutes later, we were there.

'*Voila,*' Monsieur Faye said, and scratched his armpit.

Their house was actually a very pretty cottage, in a cluster of little stone cottages that I wouldn't have any idea about the age of – but *old* looking, anyway. Madame Faye opened the door just as I approached it with my rucksack. She had her hair in a high, tight knot and although she smiled toothily and trilled '*Bienvenue!*' in a high, loud voice, she looked unmistakably disappointed to see me, as if she'd ordered a nice sensible jumper from

a catalogue and it had turned up being the wrong size and the wrong colour. And a pair of hot pants.

There was no sign of Chantal at this point, and Madame showed me to my room, insisting we spoke '*en français! Tu vas faire mieux, eh?!*', then around the rest of the cottage, talking too quickly for me to understand everything, although when she started counting things on her fingers, I could tell they were house rules. I stared at her blankly, and she sighed and repeated herself in English.

'You must not be out later than eight o'clock without you let me know where you are. We are expecting you for dinner every eve-er-ning, I demand a reason if you are not there for dinner. You can go out if you wish! But you must tell me! If you are meeting your friend, you want to spend the eve-er-ning with your friend, you tell me *en avance!*'

'Yes, *oui, bien sûr*,' I said. 'Of course I will.'

There were a lot of rules – about the bathroom and when I could use it, the kitchen and what I was allowed to eat out of it. I nodded to everything, whether I understood or not. Then she left me alone in my bedroom to settle in, and I lay down on the hard little bed, staring at the beams in the ceiling. There were grey cobwebs in the corners and I could see a couple of spiders. Like all sane people, I'm afraid of spiders, but there was nothing I could do, no one to call to get rid

of them, and at least they didn't seem to be moving. I could hear the muffled conversation Monsieur and Madame Faye were having downstairs. This was all quite depressing now. Suddenly I was alone in a foreign country; there was no easy, quick way of changing my mind about it all and going home. It didn't feel much like a holiday any more, it just felt like being in a stranger's house. I lay still because moving made the bed creak and I didn't want to remind them I was there. I was afraid of even breathing too loudly.

When I checked my mobile, there was a text from a French mobile company welcoming me, in French, to its network. Nothing from Rachel. I sent her a text:

Holy crap! Scary people here. How did you get so lucky? Or didn't you? What's your house like? What are they like? Chantal not even here, not actually sure she exists!

I waited for a few minutes for a reply. When there wasn't one, I went to the bathroom to freshen up. We'd been travelling since the very early morning – train to King's Cross, Eurostar through the chunnel, another train from Paris – and I was grungey with static-y hair and sticky-feeling hands. I faced my reflection in their mirror and felt sorry for myself.

Then I realised the loo wouldn't stop flushing.

It just kept filling. I started looking around, trying to work out which towels it would be least bad to use

to mop up if the water spilled over the sides. I realised this must have been part of the long bathroom explanation I hadn't paid much attention to. Finally, I took the lid off the cistern. There was a daddy long legs perched inside that seemed to look up at me, as if saying, 'Yeah? What do you want?', or, because it was a French daddy long legs, *'Oui, alors?'*. I tried not to think about what I'd do if it made a sudden move, just reached in and pulled on a little hook thing. The water stopped running and I almost cried with relief.

When I finally opened the bathroom door, Madame Faye was standing there waiting for me to come out. She looked suspiciously around me at the loo, which was now behaving itself.

'Chantal is back,' she said in French. 'Come and say hello.'

She took me to Chantal's room, knocked once and shouted that I was there. The door was opened by a very small goth. She leaned on the door frame and looked me up and down with amused eyes but a rather sulky pout, tucking her long blue-black hair behind one ear, which was pierced about fifteen times.

'Hi,' she said. 'It is nice to meet you.' I returned the compliment and the up and down look, taking in her pointy lower-lip stud, black shorts and heavy black boots. I wondered when I should give her the pink glittery watch.

Chapter 2

But I didn't really click with Rachel straight away, either, when we first met. She joined our primary school in the final year, and was a stranger-than-usual new girl. She carried what looked to us like an old lady's shopping bag (the rest of us had all got the exact same satchel with Japanese cartoons on it, which we thought was, like, total and utter coolness in 3D with Dolby surround sound) and she wore funny glasses and a full length raincoat, belted at the waist. She looked serious. Someone said that her dad was dead.

She mostly hung out with our gang, although a few other girls tried to adopt her. I liked her. She seemed a lot more mature than my other mates – not necessarily in a good way, though: sometimes she talked like your auntie, coming out with mottos or bits of advice or whatever, that just weren't the way the rest of us talked – but then she and I would find stuff funny that no one

else did in quite the same way. When that happened, we'd try to explain, but only end up finding it funnier, and our voices would get higher and higher and we'd lose it a bit and our mates would look at us as if we were completely insane. She still wasn't my best friend, or even totally one of us, at that point. It was quite a nasty thing that led to her making that jump.

Rachel had this tracksuit that she brought with her for games lessons. It was a horrible burnt-orange colour and, like with so many of her other things, it was quite old lady-ish. None of us wore tracksuits – we wore little skirts and aertex shirts – but because she was new she had no idea about the way the school worked, and why her bag was weird or her coat was wrong. Although we liked her, we giggled about the tracksuit behind her back. And – I'm still ashamed when I think about this, in fact it makes me screw my face up and want to scratch it all off – one of the reasons we giggled was because she always got these massive sweat rings under her armpits when she wore it, which showed up really badly.

Anyway, so, my thing was drawing. I had a reputation for being quite good at it and I used to do little doodles of us all on request. They were cartoony and supposed to be funny, but they weren't supposed to be mean. One week I drew a picture of our gang playing netball in my jotter. I made sure to feature my big nose and my friend Hester's frizzy hair and,

obviously, Rachel in her silly tracksuit. Rachel saw it along with all my mates and laughed as much as everyone else who was in it. The picture got passed around the class a bit because it wasn't bad, but when I got my jotter back, someone, I don't know who, had drawn in sweat rings on Rachel's tracksuit and wiggly whiffy lines coming from her armpits. I wasn't happy about that at all, but I just didn't let anyone else take it away to look at it, and I suppose I forgot about it.

Cut to a month later, and Rachel and I were sharing a textbook in a geography lesson, and we had to research a question about South Africa and I remembered I'd written down something about it in my jotter a few weeks earlier. When I flicked through to find it, Rachel stopped me on the page with the games cartoon, just to have another laugh at it, and I didn't remember till it was too late that the cartoon had been mucked about with. I flicked over the page as quickly as I could and pretended I hadn't seen and hoped and hoped she hadn't. But she clammed up immediately, and for the rest of the lesson sat about as far away from me as you can get on a two-person table, and I knew she'd seen plenty. It may not sound like a really big deal, but I was genuinely mortified and felt horrible. I didn't know whether to say something, but she rushed straight out without talking to me again, and I didn't get the chance.

Geography was the last lesson, and I didn't see her before she went home. Because she didn't come and join in the usual see-you-tomorrows, and because I was the last person who'd seen her, people asked me if something was up. I didn't tell them.

When I got in, I found her home phone number in my address book, and called. She gabbled something really quickly about not being able to talk now, and then she hung up before I could say anything. I heard the receiver clatter and bounce on the phone, but she hadn't put it down right and the phone was still connected. Then I heard her crying, properly crying like a little kid . . . which I suppose we sort of were, then. I called her name and she couldn't hear me, so I cupped my hands around the receiver and shouted and shouted. I was really panicking and upset by now and crying too. Eventually she heard me shouting, picked up her phone again and answered shyly.

'Sam?' Rachel said.

'I'm still here,' I said, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Oh. OK.' She went quiet too. 'Well, I'll just be hanging up properly now . . .'

'Don't go yet!' I said. 'Listen, that stupid drawing – I didn't do that . . . other stuff on it.'

She sighed. 'You know, it doesn't really make any difference who did it.'

'It does to me,' I said. 'Because if you believe me, there's a chance you'll speak to me again. And I don't want to lose a friend over this.'

The line stayed silent.

'It's OK,' Rachel said finally. 'It was always going to happen. You wear a tracksuit like that, a lot of people'll get jealous . . .'

We both laughed, although I could hear that her laugh was still wobbling on the edge of crying, and we were both a bit snuffly-nosed now. She said she had to go, and I changed the subject because I really wanted to keep her on the phone and didn't want her to go until I knew we were OK. Rachel was different on the phone from the way she was in school – she was relaxed, funnier, she talked more. We ended up on the phone for hours, opening up about all our stupidest anxieties, feeling the importance of us both being only children, and by the end of the conversation, everything felt fixed. More than that, it sort of felt like we were both in on a secret – a good secret – and I knew already that I wouldn't talk about this to our other friends. (My mum told me off for keeping the line engaged all evening.)

It probably all seems a bit overdramatic and girly now, but friendships can be quite intense and . . . almost *romantic*, especially in the beginning, when you don't really know each other and are just like God, I *love* her! and telling everyone you know about them. Soon after

that, as best friends, we'd take the mickey out of ourselves mercilessly, and that day in particular, me accusing her of being hysterical, her accusing me of being evil. But I was secretly sentimental about the whole awful, embarrassing thing, because it was the first time I felt I'd had a true connection with another person.

Sometimes it's the difficult things you go through with someone that pull you together.

What I really admired about Rachel was that she never conformed, even when she could have. She could have bought the same Japanese satchel as the rest of us, or imitated the way we all talked. *I* knew – because I was her best friend – that she didn't like to bother her mum for new things. According to Rachel, her mum got pretty seriously depressed and just shut down after her dad died. Even though she was really young at the time, Rachel had to take over and get things done, and it was really hard for her. There were just the two of them in the house and Rachel said sometimes their relationship got close to imploding – I've felt tension between them every time I've been round there. They feel more like equals than me and my mum, by which I mean that Rachel always seems to spend as much time looking after her mum as the other way round. But anyway, I *know* that's not the reason she never bought into being the same as everyone else. Despite her

shyness and reputation for extreme sensibleness, Rachel has never been afraid to be true to herself. When I was on a giddy/funky rollercoaster of emotions over some boy, she'd tell me what she thought, not what I wanted to hear. When I was trying to get over a life-threatening case of embarrassment because of something that had happened at school, I looked at the way she handled being teased – she met things head on and didn't pretend to feel whatever the people who were making fun wanted to feel, just to get off lightly. I know that when I'd been bullied, however mildly, I pretended to be a good sport when I wasn't at all, or blushed and covered my face with my hair. Rachel talked back, she explained herself, sometimes she even bored people into withdrawing what had been quite offhand intimidation – that was quite cool. It's weird, because you don't really associate being brave with shyness, but they go together pretty well.

Rachel was my best friend because she was the best person I'd ever met. I'm not so sure I know why she liked me.