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opening extract from

Before I Die

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One

I wish I had a boyfriend. I wish he lived in the wardrobe on a coat hanger. Whenever I wanted, I could get him out and he'd look at me the way boys do in films, as if I'm beautiful. He wouldn't speak much, but he'd be breathing hard as he took off his leather jacket and unbuckled his jeans. He'd wear white pants and he'd be so gorgeous I'd almost faint. He'd take my clothes off too. He'd whisper, 'Tessa, I love you. I really bloody love you. You're beautiful' – exactly those words – as he undressed me.

I sit up and switch on the bedside light. There's a pen, but no paper, so on the wall behind me I write, *I want to feel the weight of a boy on top of me.* Then I lie back down and look out at the sky. It's gone a funny colour – red and charcoal all at once, like the day is bleeding out.

I can smell sausages. Saturday night is always sausages. There'll be mash and cabbage and onion gravy too. Dad'll have the lottery ticket and Cal will have chosen the numbers and they'll sit in front of the TV and eat dinner from trays on their laps. They'll watch *The X Factor*, then they'll watch *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* After

that, Cal will have a bath and go to bed and Dad'll drink beer and smoke until it's late enough for him to sleep.

He came up to see me earlier. He walked over to the window and opened the curtains. 'Look at that!' he said as light flooded the room. There was the afternoon, the tops of the trees, the sky. He stood silhouetted against the window, his hands on his hips. He looked like a Power Ranger.

'If you won't talk about it, how can I help you?' he said, and he came over and sat on the edge of my bed. I held my breath. If you do it for long enough, white lights dance in front of your eyes. He reached over and stroked my head, his fingers gently massaging my scalp.

'Breathe, Tessa,' he whispered.

Instead, I grabbed my hat from the bedside table and yanked it on right over my eyes. He went away then.

Now he's downstairs frying sausages. I can hear the fat spitting, the slosh of gravy in the pan. I'm not sure I should be able to hear that from all the way upstairs, but nothing surprises me any more. I can hear Cal unzipping his coat now, back from buying mustard. Ten minutes ago he was given a pound and told, 'Don't talk to anyone weird.' While he was gone, Dad stood on the back step and smoked a fag. I could hear the whisper of leaves hitting the grass at his feet. Autumn invading.

'Hang your coat up and go and see if Tess wants anything,' Dad says. 'There's plenty of blackberries. Make them sound interesting.'

Cal has his trainers on; the air in the soles sighs as he leaps up

the stairs and through my bedroom door. I pretend to be asleep, which doesn't stop him. He leans right over and whispers, 'I don't care even if you never speak to me again.' I open one eye and find two blue ones. 'Knew you were faking,' he says, and he grins wide and lovely. 'Dad says, do you want blackberries?'

'No.'

'What shall I tell him?'

'Tell him I want a baby elephant.'

He laughs. 'I'm gonna miss you,' he says, and he leaves me with an open door and the draught from the stairs.

Two

Zoey doesn't even knock, just comes in and plonks herself down on the end of the bed. She looks at me strangely, as if she hadn't expected to find me here.

'What're you doing?' she says.

'Why?'

'Don't you go downstairs any more?'

'Did my dad phone you up?'

'Are you in pain?'

'No.'

She gives me a suspicious look, then stands up and takes off her coat. She's wearing a very short red dress. It matches the handbag she's dumped on my floor.

'Are you going out?' I ask her. 'Have you got a date?'

She shrugs, goes over to the window and looks down at the garden. She circles a finger on the glass, then she says, 'Maybe you should try and believe in God.'

'Should I?'

'Yeah, maybe we all should. The whole human race.'

'I don't think so. I think he might be dead.'

She turns round to look at me. Her face is pale, like winter. Behind her shoulder, an aeroplane winks its way across the sky.

She says, 'What's that you've written on the wall?'

I don't know why I let her read it. I guess I want something to happen. It's in black ink. With Zoey looking, all the words writhe like spiders. She reads it over and over. I hate it how sorry she can be for me.

She speaks very softly. 'It's not exactly Disneyland, is it?'

'Did I say it was?'

'I thought that was the idea.'

'Not mine.'

'I think your dad's expecting you to ask for a pony, not a boyfriend.'

It's amazing, the sound of us laughing. Even though it hurts, I love it. Laughing with Zoey is absolutely one of my favourite things, because I know we've both got the same stupid pictures in our heads. She only has to say, 'Maybe a stud farm might be the answer,' and we're both in hysterics.

Zoey says, 'Are you crying?'

I'm not sure. I think I am. I sound like those women on the telly when their entire family gets wiped out. I sound like an animal gnawing its own foot off. Everything just floods in all at once – like how my fingers are just bones and my skin is practically see-through. Inside my left lung I can feel cells multiplying, stacking up, like ash slowly filling a vase. Soon I won't be able to breathe.

'It's OK if you're afraid,' Zoey says.

'It's not.'

'Of course it is. Whatever you feel is fine.'

'Imagine it, Zoey – being terrified all the time.'

'I can.'

But she can't. How can she possibly, when she has her whole life left? I hide under my hat again, just for a bit, because I'm going to miss breathing. And talking. And windows. I'm going to miss cake. And fish. I like fish. I like their little mouths going, open, shut, open.

And where I'm going, you can't take anything with you.

Zoey watches me wipe my eyes with the corner of the duvet.

'Do it with me,' I say.

She looks startled. 'Do what?'

'It's on bits of paper everywhere. I'll write it out properly and you can make me do it.'

'Make you do what? The thing you wrote on the wall?'

'Other stuff too, but the boy thing first. You've had sex loads of times, Zoey, and I've never even been kissed.'

I watch my words fall into her. They land somewhere very deep.

'Not loads of times,' she says eventually.

'Please, Zoey. Even if I beg you not to, even if I'm horrible to you, you must make me do it. I've got a whole long list of things I want to do.'

When she says, 'OK,' she makes it sound easy, as if I only asked her to visit me more often.

'You mean it?'

'I said so, didn't I?'

I wonder if she knows what she's letting herself in for.

I sit up in bed and watch her fiddle about in the back of my wardrobe. I think she's got a plan. That's what's good about Zoey. She'd better hurry up though, because I'm starting to think of things like carrots. And air. And ducks. And pear trees. Velvet and silk. Lakes. I'm going to miss ice. And the sofa. And the lounge. And the way Cal loves magic tricks. And white things – milk, snow, swans.

From the back of the wardrobe, Zoey pulls out the wrap-dress Dad bought me last month. It's still got the price on.

'I'll wear this,' she says. 'You can wear mine.' She starts to unbutton her dress.

'Are you taking me out?'

'It's Saturday night, Tess. Ever heard of it?'

Of course. Of course I have.

I haven't been vertical for hours. It makes me feel a bit strange, sort of empty and ethereal. Zoey stands in her underwear and helps me put on the red dress. It smells of her. The material is soft and clings to me.

'Why do you want me to wear this?'

'It's good to feel like you're somebody else sometimes.'

'Someone like you?'

She considers this. 'Maybe,' she says. 'Maybe someone like me.'

When I look at myself in the mirror, it's great how different I look – big-eyed and dangerous. It's exciting, as if anything is possible. Even my hair looks good, dramatically shaved rather than

only just growing. We look at ourselves, side by side, then she steers me away from the mirror and makes me sit down on the bed. She brings my make-up basket from the dressing table and sits next to me. I concentrate on her face as she smears foundation onto her finger and dabs at my cheeks. She's very pale and very blonde and her acne makes her look kind of savage. I've never had a spot in my life. It's the luck of the draw.

She lines my lips and fills in the space with lipstick. She finds some mascara and tells me to look right at her. I try to imagine what it might be like to be her. I often do this, but I can never really get my head round it. When she makes me stand up in front of the mirror again, I glitter. A little like her.

'Where do you want to go?' she says.

There are loads of places. The pub. A club. A party. I want a big dark room you can barely move in, with bodies grinding close together. I want to hear a thousand songs played incredibly loud. I want to dance so fast that my hair grows long enough to trample on. I want my voice to be thunderous above the throb of bass. I want to get so hot that I have to crunch ice in my mouth.

'Let's go dancing,' I say. 'Let's go and find some boys to have sex with.'

'All right.' Zoey picks up her handbag and leads me from the bedroom.

Dad comes out of the lounge and halfway up the stairs. He pretends he was going to the loo, and acts all surprised to see us.

'You're up!' he says. 'It's a miracle!' And he nods grudging respect at Zoey. 'How did you manage it?'

Zoey smiles at the floor. 'She just needed a little incentive.'

'Which is?'

I lean on one hip and look him right in the eye. 'Zoey's taking me pole dancing.'

'Funny,' he says.

'No, really.'

He shakes his head, runs a hand in circles over his belly. I feel sorry for him, because he doesn't know what to do.

'OK,' I say. 'We're going clubbing.'

He looks at his watch as if that'll tell him something new.

'I'll look after her,' Zoey says. She sounds so sweet and wholesome I almost believe her.

'No,' he says. 'She needs to rest. A club will be smoky and loud.'

'If she needs to rest, why did you phone me?'

'I wanted you to talk to her, not take her away!'

'Don't worry,' she laughs. 'I'll bring her back.'

I can feel all the happiness sliding out of me because I know Dad's right. I'd have to sleep for a week if I went clubbing. If I use up too much energy, I always pay for it later.

'It's OK,' I say. 'It doesn't matter.'

Zoey grabs my arm and pulls me behind her down the stairs. 'I've got my mum's car,' she says. 'I'll bring her home by three.'

My dad tells her no, it's too late; he tells her to bring me back by midnight. He says it several times as Zoey gets my coat from the closet in the hall. As we go through the front door, I call goodbye, but he doesn't answer. Zoey shuts the door behind us.

'Midnight's OK,' I tell her.

She turns to me on the step. 'Listen, girl, if you're going to do this properly, you're going to have to learn to break the rules.'

'I don't mind being back by midnight. He'll only worry.'

'Let him – it doesn't matter. There are no consequences for someone like you!'

I've never thought about it like that before.