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Wake up. For God's sake, wake up. You've been asleep for more than twenty-four hours. Just lying there. I'm not sure you've even moved.

But I can't bring myself to come and look at you. I'm too cowardly, too sick of myself for letting this happen. All because you were trying to help me . . . I know you *will* wake up. You have to. But it's my fault, that you're lying there, dead to the world. Your hand's so bruised it's gone this weird shade of duck-egg blue round the knuckles, where it's not all cut and scabbed up from the broken glass. And there's that long cut down your forearm, the cigarette burn on your other wrist . . . it's going to hurt like mad when you do wake up. I'm not all that bothered about the bruises and stuff, mind you – because, well, they're mostly your own doing, anyway. Serves you right . . . It's just that you're there, like that, because you were trying to help. So asleep you look dead. It scares me, to think what might have happened, if . . . No, fuck that. You're going to be OK. You'll wake up. Of course you will. Any time now.

I actually stopped writing this for a second and went to peer out of my bedroom door into your room, because in any decent set-up you would have woken up the moment I finished that sentence. But guess what? You didn't.

The stupid thing is, I never in a million years thought I'd need your help. It was always the other way round, wasn't it? You'd be moaning about your maths homework, and I'd waltz in and do it without thinking, taking the piss out of you for being so thick. Or – do you remember when I told your horrible little friend I'd scrag her if she wasn't nicer to you? (And yes, I did say *scrag*.) That's how it's always worked, anyway. That's just how it is: I'm the hero, you're the adoring hanger-on. And I hated – still do hate – the idea of needing *anyone's* help, let alone yours . . . Honestly. My little kid sister, for God's sake! Why would I need you, after all, when I'm bigger and stronger and – well, frankly, better-looking and cleverer and more proficient at just about anything you can name? It's all wrong.

Not that you actually *did* help. Not that you actually did anything useful at all. Sure, you made a sweet, valiant attempt to help. And you ended up comatose and covered in minor injuries, and it didn't do a blind bit of fucking good.

Sorry. Not the way I meant to start.

Oh Lord . . . I don't even know why I'm writing this. As an act of faith, maybe. If I write it, then you have to

wake up, so you can read it. No, that's too noble. I'm writing so I can keep telling myself I'm still here. Not faded, not yet. I'm still a person . . . just. As long as I can write, I'm human. I'm myself. Even if I look at myself in the mirror and don't recognise my own face.

I keep going back, remembering over and over. My head's a sort of whirlpool at the moment: I try to think in a straight line, but it won't let me go. I watch everything that's happened again and again, like a damaged DVD player. So all the worst moments keep coming back to me. The ruins; the day in St Jean-le-Grand; that night in the house when Mum and Dad were at the concert; the night before last, when Pete had to lug you to bed, unconscious, covered in blood and bruises . . . Or sometimes even the stuff before this all started – my last afternoon at school, or that fucking horrible morning last winter, when Dad decided to phone Cecilia (may she rot in hell) without checking who was within earshot . . . Whatever you're dreaming about, little sis, it can't be as bad. Everything churns round and round until my brain feels like a washing machine. And that's what's already happened; that's before I even start on what *will* happen. Jesus, I'm scared. I almost envy you, lying there. Almost. You've got no idea how much I miss sleeping.

What's odd, though, is that the thing that comes back to me most is something I hardly even noticed at the time. But now it seems . . . important.

We were driving down through France, about ten days

ago – Jesus, only ten days! – and Mum and Dad were arguing. Remember? Yeah, 'course you do. You were staring out of the window, kicking the back of Mum's seat, and every so often you'd put on your innocent look and say something like, Are we there yet? or, If we're lost, why don't we just go home? I was pretending to listen to my MP3 player but the battery was flat, so I could hear everything, right down to Mum grinding her teeth.

It was one of those arguments. The ones where, sure, they're arguing about getting lost and whether it's the map being out of date (Dad's fault) or slipshod navigation (Mum's fault), but *really* it's an argument about Mum and Dad and Cecilia (may she rot in hell). Like a snowball fight where every snowball has a rock hidden inside it. In any normal family, someone would have the sense to say, All right, I'm sorry, I probably *did* get confused in Périgueux, even if it wasn't true. But oh no, Mum couldn't do that, because *that* would mean she was admitting she might have been partly responsible for Dad having an affair . . .

And what makes it worse is that it's my fault that she knows. If I'd been wise enough not to say anything . . . And they both hate me for it. They keep it out of sight, most of the time – they wouldn't admit it, even to themselves – but they do; and I hate them back. Especially Dad. They love me too, of course. But they'd both be much, much happier if I'd kept my big mouth shut. So would you, probably. And when you add all the stuff about St Timothy's chucking me out . . . We might as well be honest about it. As far as they're concerned, I'm not a Good Thing. Not that I care, any more. In all honesty, it seems pretty trivial now.

Anyway. We're in the car at seventy miles per hour, bombing along a French motorway in what is quite possibly the wrong direction. And Mum's been grunting and sighing over the map in a sort of I-can't-work-in-these-conditions way, but finally she realises Dad's determined to ignore her, so she says something like, This road should be curving round to the left . . . And I watch you peer round the edge of her seat at the road ahead, and I don't even need to see it, because I know from the look on your face that it doesn't do anything of the kind.

And Mum says, I knew you'd turned off too soon on the last road. They must have built that motorway after the map was made. So yes, we're lost. Didn't I say we should have bought another map? Oh no, you said, don't worry, darling, I know the Dordogne like the back of my –

And Dad looks at her and gives her thigh a benevolent little pat with his free hand and says, Please, Helen, my love, there's really no need to apologise. You simply mustn't blame yourself for everything.

And Mum's jaw clenches and she says, I don't see why I should apologise for something that isn't my fault.

Dad doesn't answer, but – I'm not sure if he means to – he treads on the accelerator. I can't see the speedometer from the back seat, but the side of the road flashes by, faster and faster. In the corner of my eye I catch you looking out of the window, then back at the space between Mum and Dad, as if you're not quite sure whether you're imagining it . . . but the car is definitely speeding up, and Mum and Dad go silent, and it gets harder and harder to focus on anything going past outside. I've been in Elliot's car when he did 110 miles

per hour, and . . . well, maybe Dad wasn't going as fast as that. But it was close. I'm sure it was close. And he doesn't take his foot off the pedal, and the car swerves into the fast lane (except that it's on the wrong side of the road, so it feels like the slow lane) and we're driving way, way too fast and *no one says anything*.

I see you holding your own hand as if it's someone else's. Mum's curling up the corner of the map, so the car's full of this weird papery scratching, like something trying to break out of a wasps' nest. And underneath that there's this silence, like no one wants to be tactless and ask Dad if he's trying to kill us all . . .

And suddenly I'm furious. With Dad, Mum, you, me, everyone. We're sitting in the car while Dad drives like a maniac, and no one has the sense, the guts, the – oh, hell, I don't know – the *humility* to say something. We're just pretending it isn't happening. I remember thinking, And if we *die*? Do we just pretend *that* isn't happening, either?

And I'm so fucking sick of it that I press my hands against the back of Dad's seat and will him to go even faster. I tense my whole body like I'm pushing us forward, and imagine the needle on the speedometer creeping past 110, up to 120, 130 . . . And I pray for a tyre to blow, something to hit the windscreen, Dad's concentration to go – anything. I'm so angry I mean it. I say, Crash, crash, *crash* . . . under my breath. I imagine a spectacular skid, the car slewing across the road, a burst and fireball of flame as it flips over, a quick, violent end to all of us. I close my eyes and pray. *Crash*.

The car wobbles. The momentum pushes me against the window as the car swerves, like a hand on my

shoulder. And for a second I think, I've done it. This is it. We're going to die. I hear you make a noise that isn't quite a yelp. Mum says, Edward, for God's sake, keep your eyes on the road! There's real panic in her voice. I stare at the green blur going past the window and I feel the excitement rising, and it's not just serves-them-right (although it is, a bit), it's another feeling too, like flying, like the moment before an aeroplane lifts off, when you feel the speed and the danger and think, yes yes *yes* –

Just for a second. Then Dad sneezes. The car noses back into the right lane, and he sniffs and says, Sorry. Then he slows right down, and Mum relaxes again, and you lean back, and everyone except me takes a big breath. And even though we must still be doing seventy it feels like a crawl.

And I'm so fucking disappointed I could cry.

I lean my face against the window and stare out, at the verge ahead. And that's when I see these people standing at the edge of the road. At least, I *think* they're people, at first; until we get closer and I realise that they can't be. They're too still, too *flat*, somehow . . .

They're dark shapes, life-size, but blank, like black cut-outs . . . two tall ones, two smaller ones, like a family. Like our family. They stand frozen by the side of the road, watching, waiting . . . They give me the creeps. I don't know why they're there. It feels like they're looking at me, even though they don't have faces. Trying to tell me something. *Beware*. Or, *go back*. Shadows without people to cast them, warning me.

Coincidence, of course. I worked out later that they mark places where people have been killed. I suppose

the French government puts them up, as a macabre sort of way to tell you to drive carefully. Anyway, they're all over the place. So – coincidence. Of course.

But I first saw them – *then*. At that particular moment. Maybe that's why it seems so important. Just as I was thinking, Yes. Yes, I want to crash. Yes, I want Dad to kill us all. Yes, I want to get killed. Maybe – if there was something – if . . .

Oh, fuck it. Even if it *was* a warning . . . it didn't do much good, did it? Well, did it? Anz?

Jesus, Anz. Why don't you *wake up*?

One

If she looked at it the right way, it was beautiful. Annis could see that. The long curve of the valley below her, spirals of mist coming up from the trees like smoke, and on the other side the rise of the fields, bleached summer-yellow, and the long road, and the towers of the chateau opposite . . . Yep. Very nice. Picturesque. She said to herself, *Wow, countryside*, hitting the first syllable like a hammer. *How lovely. As long as I don't turn round, I can pretend I'm in a painting or something.*

Of course, if she moved her head, the whole picture-postcard thing fell apart. On her right, in the grass in front of the house, there was a pile of the rubbish they'd cleared out of the barn, which was definitely *not* picturesque. And if she looked straight ahead, towards the trees and the bulge of the hill . . . Not that it wasn't pretty, but you could just see the chimney of the derelict house, and . . . It felt like a kind of blot on her retina, a sort of dark patch, making her uneasy. She thought, *Stop it! This is nonsense, just because Mum and Dad have absolutely forbidden us to go down there* . . . But it wasn't that. She was obedient, fair enough, but not *that* obedient,

not enough to make her feel on edge, just seeing the ruin through the trees. There was something . . . She didn't like looking at it, that was all. It didn't fit in with the rest of the landscape; it wasn't pastoral and summery and aren't-we-middle-class, converting-a-barn-in-the-Dordogne? like everything else was . . .

She made herself stare into the trees until she could make out the ragged edge of a wall, and the white flash of the *DANGER: DEFENSE D'ENTRER* sign. Nothing moved. *See? Nothing to be scared of. Anyway, Zach's always down there. He likes it.*

She finished the last of her bread and cheese, and leant her head back against the cool stone of the wall, wondering whether it was worth going inside for some more food. It was so quiet she could have fallen asleep; except that quiet wasn't a good thing, because it meant the builders weren't here, and that meant –

Somewhere behind her, Dad shouted, 'Helen! *Helen!* What's the French for guttering? This bloody idiot is pretending not to understand –'

Annis heard the measured, cool murmur of Mum's voice, too low to make out what she was saying.

'Fine. Where's the dictionary? You had it last night – you remember, when you were –'

Mum's voice again, slightly louder now. 'I'm trying to work, Edward. Find it yourself.'

'Oh, so that's *proper* work, and talking to the builders isn't?'

A pause. Annis put her chin on her knees. She wasn't hungry any more.

Dad cleared his throat. 'Look, Helen, love, if you could just find the dictionary for me, we really need this sorted out by – *fuck*.' A dull crash, like he'd

kicked something. 'The fucker's just hung up on me. For fuck's sake.'

Mum said, 'Edward.'

'What? Stupid fucker. I mean, we're *paying* them, for fuck's sake, they ought to at least fucking talk –'

'Please don't swear like that. Annis might hear you.'

Annis almost got up and went inside, just so she could point out that she had, in fact, heard the word *fuck* before. But that would only make things worse, so she stayed where she was. She heard Dad come out of the front door on to the grass, on the phone again, talking French so slowly it sounded like his batteries had gone. That was him trying to be polite. She pressed herself back against the wall and pretended she wasn't there.

Mum called after him, 'And did you speak to Zach? Edward? Did you . . . ?' but Dad didn't answer. Annis heard him kick the rubbish as he walked past it, and the slow slither of something falling off the top of the heap. Then it was quiet again. *Only now*, she thought, *it isn't even approaching idyllic sunlight-and-birdsong-filled silence, it's the same bloody silence we had in London. The we-hate-each-other silence. Silence like someone's* died.

That was the worst thing. Not the fights – although they weren't much fun either. The silence, that filled the whole house and settled on everything like a layer of grime, thickening and thickening until she thought it would bury them. It was even worse here than at home. She kicked at the grass, digging a trench with one heel, and thought, *For God's sake! Whose bright idea was this, anyway? I know, we're a dysfunctional family, let's go and renovate a barn together. Never*

mind that we can't stand being in the same room for five minutes . . .

She wouldn't have minded so much if Zach –

No. She was determined not to think about Zach. She was sick of thinking about Zach, frankly, because it just made her miserable, and it wasn't as if she could *help* . . . He'd made that perfectly clear, those horrible weeks after he got expelled. Those awful, awful weeks, while Mum had taken him round all the private schools she could find, trying to get him a place for next year . . . It was scary; like someone else had taken over his body, and didn't know what to do with it. He didn't smile or speak. He used to hold himself rigid, as if anyone coming too close would give him some appalling disease. He stopped coming into her room to help her with her homework and take the piss out of her posters. Once, she asked him, did he really want to sell drugs, or . . . was it because, did he really do it because of Dad . . . ? For a second, when he looked at her, she thought he was going to tell her properly. Then the ice formed again over his expression and he shut his bedroom door in her face. All those weeks she watched him not eating and not talking and thought, *I have never seen anyone so unhappy. He's dissolving.*

And . . . She thought, *If it was anyone but Zach . . .* Sure, she'd have been sympathetic. But for it to be Zach . . . She couldn't bear it. It made her feel physically sick, to see him like that. *Zach*. Zach, her brilliant, funny, popular brother . . . it was all *wrong*.

And Mum and Dad made it worse. Mum treated him like a five-year-old who'd stepped out in front of a car, furious and solicitous at the same time, when

even Annis could see he just wanted to be left alone. And Dad . . . he was so *polite* to him. Polite and distant and official, as if he couldn't remember what it was like to be Zach's father and had to settle for being his bank manager instead. As if Zach had betrayed him so totally there wasn't even any point being angry . . . She felt a wave of anger herself, thinking about it, because – for God's sake – what was Zach *meant* to do? Say, 'Yes, fine, Dad, I won't tell Mum, 'course not, hope you and Cecilia-the-tart are really happy together . . .'? It was so unfair she wanted to scream. But Dad probably wouldn't notice if she did.

He didn't really bother with Annis, these days. No one did. They didn't even see how nice she was being. That might have made her feel better, but no one had enough room to notice. Mum was too busy being obsessed with Zach's chequered school career and Dad's love life, and Dad was too busy feeling guilty and hating everyone for making him feel guilty and worrying about whether his bosses at the ad agency knew that he'd been having an inappropriate relationship in the workplace . . . and Zach . . . After a fortnight she'd said to Zach, trying to make a joke of it, '*You* can still see me, right? You know, 3-D and everything?' The old Zach would have looked round blankly and said, 'Hello? Hello? Is someone there?' but the new Zach just looked straight through her and nodded.

You had to hand it to him, though. He'd never, ever blamed anyone else for getting expelled. It was like he thought he deserved it; like he'd *wanted* it, almost, although that didn't make any sense. Annis

remembered overhearing Mum and Dad arguing, a few nights after Zach had split on Dad; Mum shouting, 'You bastard, this is all your fault, how can you have done this to our family?' – and Dad yelling back, 'Jesus, Helen, if you weren't such a frigid bitch, do you really think I'd have needed to go to someone else?' She hadn't meant to listen, and she'd clapped her hands over her ears and pelted upstairs again, afraid Dad might say something about Zach. But she couldn't get the words out of her head. After that, she was almost too scared to eavesdrop, the evening Zach got expelled, but he didn't say anything except, 'Yeah, I screwed up.' That was all. 'I'm sorry. I screwed up.' And then, over and over again: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*, until the words stopped meaning anything.

She bit the top of her forefinger, remembering the expression on his face as he came upstairs that night, walking past where she was sitting on the landing as if he didn't even see she was there. A year before – three months before, when no one knew about Cecilia-the-tart – he'd have taken a good long run up and thrown a kick at her, stopping just short; she'd have rolled her eyes, grinning, said, 'Zach, you tosser,' and reached for his ankle, trying to grab him before he had time to step over her . . . But then, three months before she wouldn't have been sitting on the landing, listening to Mum bawl him out for drug-dealing. And she wouldn't have seen that look on his face, strained, desperate, only – somehow – *vindicated* . . .

She bit harder, until she realised how much it was hurting and took her hand hastily away from her mouth. Shit. She was thinking about Zach, *again*.

After being so determined that she wouldn't . . .

Dad was stamping back towards the house. She heard his phone snap shut; he started to shout before he got into the house. 'Helen! Tuesday! That's the soonest they can do, because of the weekend, which evidently extends through Monday. Tuesday for the barn, but the guttering'll have to wait. OK?'

A murmured answer. Annis yawned. When she opened her eyes she was looking right at the chimney of the ruined house; she felt something inside her flinch. She narrowed her eyes, squinting through the trees. The sun had moved, fractionally, so she could see it quite clearly. It was just a chimney – just a perfectly normal, if rather badly maintained chimney . . . but it made her feel odd, looking at it. Zach would be down there somewhere. He'd listened to Mum and Dad do their that-ruined-house-is-very-dangerous-it-could-collapse-at-any-time spiel, deadpan; then the first time they turned their backs he'd been off to explore it, more excited than she'd seen him for weeks. Now he spent most of his time down there, reading and chain-smoking, probably. He didn't let Annis follow him – which was fine, because she didn't want to, anyway. She had better things to do than hang around in death-trap buildings. Like . . . er, like . . .

Oh, for heaven's sake . . . ! It wasn't fair. It really wasn't fair. Everyone else was in Majorca. Jenny, Suze, Caitlin, Penny . . . They were probably on the beach at this very moment. Jenny was probably writing her a postcard. *Dear Annis, sorry you couldn't come, hope you are having fun and lots of fit French boys are helping your parents with the barn.*

Embrasse-les from me! Garçons, I mean, pas tes parents! J xxx.

Annis had bought a bikini especially. She'd tried it on in the shop, and Jenny had said, 'Hmm, well, pale and interesting and your bikini line needs a teensy bit of attention, but otherwise, wow, you are *gorgeous*, sister.' And when Annis turned round and looked at herself, she had to agree. It made her feel like a model or something. When Mum told her she couldn't go to Majorca after all, she was going to take it back to the shop; until Mum said she'd give her the money for it – 'And in any case, the house has a swimming pool, so you'll be glad to have it anyway, darling.' But it was so *unfair* . . . After Zach's GCSEs he'd biked round Morocco for three weeks on his own, and Annis couldn't even go to Majorca. OK, to be honest, Mum and Dad *thought* he was staying with a friend on the Isle of Wight – she remembered the row there'd been afterwards, and grimaced – but it was the principle of the thing. Her first holiday with her friends, and it got cancelled because she had to come to France and help *renovate a barn* . . . She had a mad, uncontrollable urge to storm into the house, wait until Mum looked up from her computer, and say, 'So, Dad had a bit of posh tottie on the side, and Zach got chucked out for selling hash to his mates, and, Mum, you're a complete emotional mess . . . so what am *I* being punished for?'

But she didn't move.

Voices, again. Although not shouting, this time. Mum: '. . . not the baguette, the other loaf, I think it's going stale,' and Dad: 'Yes, fine, whatever. I just need to try Pascale again . . .'

Then Mum was coming round the side of the house, towards her. 'Annis! Lunch! Where's Zach?'

Annis said, 'I'm not sure.' Which wasn't quite a lie.

'He didn't tell you where he was going?'

Yeah, because he just adores the way you try to keep track of him . . . She said, 'No. I don't know, maybe he's gone for a bike ride or something . . .' She could see Zach's bike leaning against the wall of the barn, her rucksack draped over one handlebar. 'Or he could be having a swim.'

'That boy! I'm at the end of my tether.' Mum said it on the edge of a laugh, but it sounded true. 'I *said* lunch would be at two – I wanted us all to eat together.'

Annis said, 'Oh, yes,' and tried surreptitiously to brush the crumbs off her T-shirt.

'It really isn't much to ask!' Mum stood with her hands on her hips, staring down at the valley. 'If only he'd start taking responsibility for himself! Honestly –'

Which means, Annis thought wearily, *doing what you tell him* . . . She said, 'He'll come back when he's hungry, Mum. It doesn't really matter, does it?'

Mum swung round. 'How dare you tell me what matters and what doesn't!'

'I only meant –'

'Don't you *dare* talk back to me, young lady! I have worked *so hard* for this family. Don't you dare try to tell me what to do – who the hell do you think you are? I am giving Zach *parameters*, trying to impose some *discipline*, because he's clearly in need of some, and I don't have time for you to undermine me, do you understand? Don't – you – *dare*!'

Annis blinked. For a second the sense of injustice blocked her throat like a bud opening; then she swallowed and it faded. There wasn't any point trying to defend herself. She muttered, 'Sorry, Mum.'

'I should think so.' Mum looked across the valley again, but Annis could tell she wasn't really seeing it. 'As it happens, Annis, I've been meaning to talk to you. I think it's the worst possible thing for Zach, the way you worship him.'

Annis felt the air go out of her. Her lungs paused, frozen, as if she'd never need to breathe again. She thought, *I can't believe she said that* –

'You can see what he's like. If it wasn't for your influence . . . oh, I know, there've been other things going on –'

Like Dad having an affair, you mean? Like the way you hate each other? But she couldn't even move her lips.

'– but you need to see, Annis, you're not helping! Zach isn't perfect – he isn't even *close* – and it's not good for him, the way you –'

'Mum!' Annis found her tongue, quite literally, as if it had suddenly sprouted in her mouth. 'What do you mean, Zach's not even *close* to being perfect? He's your *son* – you're supposed to love him!'

'Oh, don't be so absurd! I *do* love him, Annis! That's what this is all about. I don't like seeing you with him, it's positively unhealthy, no wonder he –' Mum stopped.

'He *what*, Mum? Sold drugs to his friends? Got expelled? Or told you about Dad and Cecilia? That's his fault as well, right?'

'You see! You always stand up for him –'

'And it's not *my* fault, either –'

Mum said, 'I'm simply saying –'

'Well, don't!' Annis scrambled to her feet, not sure where she was going.

Zach said, 'Are we having lunch, or not?'

They both spun round. He was there, at the corner of the house, a book in his hand, his index finger marking his place. Annis felt a hot, prickly rush of embarrassment, because if he'd heard . . . But he looked straight through her, his eyes blank.

Mum said, 'Where have you been? I told you lunch was at –'

'Two. Yes. And it's –' He made a show of consulting his watch. 'Gosh, Mum, I'm sorry! It's almost *three minutes* past.'

Mum stared at him, chewing her lower lip. Then she said, in a tight, careful kind of way, 'All right. We'd better go in.'

Zach said, in exactly the same tone, 'Yes, we better had, hadn't we?' He started to walk back the way he'd come, round the side of the house. As he went round the corner he said, 'Oh –' and stepped backwards and sideways, because Dad was coming in the opposite direction.

Dad said, 'What's going on here? Family reunion, without me?' He sounded like he was trying to be jocular, but his voice was just off-centre.

Mum said, 'Let's go in and have lunch.'

Dad said, 'Yes, well, I've been *waiting* . . .' but he caught Mum's eye and stopped. Something flickered in his face – a kind of childish resentment, Annis thought, like he was younger than Zach. Then he smiled and turned to peer at the book Zach was

holding. He said, 'Good book, is it?'

Zach narrowed his eyes. He held the book out, silently, so Dad could see the cover.

'Ah. *The Poems of John Donne*. One of mine, isn't it?'

Annis said, trying to break the tension, 'God. Heavy. Is that for –' and then bit her tongue.

Zach shot her a glance. 'For school? Obviously not.'

Dad put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. 'I said, that's one of my books, isn't it?'

'So what?'

'I don't think you should borrow my books.'

Zach blinked, frowning, his mouth partly open, as if he was trying to make sense of what Dad had said. Then he said, 'But – I'm *allowed* – after my GCSE results, you said I could –'

'Not if you're not going to take care of them. Look!' Dad snatched the book and flipped it open, riffling through so that they could all see the dog-ears on the pages. 'It's an abuse of the privilege, Zach. Taking them outdoors, writing in them . . .'

'I *haven't* written in –'

'I just don't think you can be trusted with them. Look at this. It's in a state. You've spilt something on it, here, and the pages are starting to fall out. If you convince me you'll look after my books, in future, then you can read them. Otherwise you can ask before you borrow them, like Annis does.'

Zach was squinting at him, his whole face screwed up, as if he was trying to read something a long way away. 'You can't – I haven't *done* anything to – I can't believe – just because –'

Mum said, 'Edward . . .'

Dad said, 'No, Helen, you're right. Zach needs to take some responsibility. Well, he can learn that privileges have to be earned, and kept.' He was still looking at Zach. 'Don't you agree, Helen?'

'I *did* earn it – my GCSE results – you were proud of me, you said I'd get as much out of your books as you did . . .' Zach stopped, swallowed, and took a long, slow breath. 'Oh, Jesus . . . It's not about the book at all, is it? You don't give a toss about the book. Fuck me, Dad . . . what are you *like*? You sad, sad man. You think this is some kind of *gesture*, like suddenly you've got the moral high ground – all self-righteous, like cracking the spine of a shitty paperback classic is worse than fucking your evil bitch of a secretary –'

'That's *enough*, Zachary! Edward, Annis, it's time for lunch –'

'Well, I'm sorry, Dad, I'm sorry I screwed up your life, I'm sorry for everything, I'm *sorry*, OK, but if you want a gesture, well, here's your fucking *gesture* –'

Annis thought for a mad split second he was going to punch Dad. So did Dad, probably, from the way he flinched away from Zach's hand. But Zach was only grabbing the book back. He held it for a moment on his palms in an odd, archaic way, like it was alive. Then he opened it and ripped out the first page.

Mum said, '*Zachary!* That's your father's –'

Dad didn't say anything, but he stepped forward, reaching out.

'Sorry, Dad, am I jeopardising my *privileges*? Oh well.' Another page, and another; getting quicker, so that now he was taking whole handfuls of pages,

tearing them easily away from the binding and dropping them. Already there were yellowing pieces of paper drifting across the grass. *Rip. Rip. Ri-i-i-i-ip.*

Annis thought Mum would say something else, but she didn't. They stood in silence until Zach dropped the empty binding on the grass. It flipped over as it fell. Annis could read *Edward Randall, June 1978*, in the corner.

Zach looked at Dad; staring and staring, as if he was looking for something in particular, some specific response . . . but whatever he wanted to see, it wasn't there.

Then he turned and ran.