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Opening extract from

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Fish for Breakfast

Edie crouched on her bedroom windowsill, training her field glasses on the three boys by the stone pond. Their names were Lyle, Jason and Tom, and she hated them. They were like foxes, thin and cunning, with eyes that flashed through mops of filthy hair.

It was nearly a month since Edie had come to live with her cousins at Folly Farm, and she had learnt to keep out of their way. If she wanted to know what they were doing, she spied. She peered down at them now, making a quick adjustment to her lens. Lyle, the eldest at thirteen, was holding a fishing net. His twin brothers watched as he thrust it into the middle of the pond, and stabbed it into the water. The stick started to bend and writhe and the others grabbed it too, three pairs of hands pulling the jerking net from the lilies.

Edie saw the fish tossed, gasping, onto the grass, and dropped her field glasses in horror.

They had caught Tilly.

'Pigs!' she choked, stumbling to her bedroom door. 'Pigs! Pigs! Pigs!'

Tilly was Edie's goldfish. She had grown huge, as long as a ruler, since Edie had brought her from her London tank and put her to live in the dirty stone pond. Edie fed her every morning, and loved to watch the metallic flash of her skin as she moved through the murky water. She was proud of the way Tilly had grown into her new country life, even if she herself had not. *At least one of us is flourishing*, she had thought grimly, when considering her own failure to settle at Folly Farm.

'Let her go!' she shouted, as she crashed down the stairs three at a time, but she was too late. When she reached the pond the boys and Tilly had gone.

The camp! she thought desperately, veering off at breakneck speed towards the woods.

The boys' camp was dank, made out of rusting corrugated-iron sheets camouflaged with peat and bracken. Edie had only discovered it last week, when she had been exploring on her own and had seen Lyle's quad bike parked outside. Lyle said if she ever came back he'd tie her up.

As she got nearer she saw feathers of smoke rising from the bracken and a nauseous smell flooded towards her. She felt faint, but staggered on.

'How could you! How could you!'

Lyle looked up, smirking, and tossed a cigarette into

the camp fire. 'You're just in time for breakfast,' he said, turning the fish in the pan.

The twins, sitting on either side of him, giggled nervously. It was Lyle who'd had the idea of cooking Tilly, but something told them they would be in trouble if their mother found out. When there was trouble the twins usually took Lyle's share of it – they were nine, and that was the deal if they wanted to play with him. Now they looked at Edie with frightened eyes.

Lyle smiled, showing pointed teeth. 'Go on, eat it!' he said, pointing to the pan. 'You like fish.'

'Beast!' Edie shouted, hurling herself on him with flaying fists.

Lyle was thin, but bigger than Edie and strong as wire. He stepped back, caught her arms and twisted them behind her back.

'Give her some!'

The twins looked at him, uncertain. Edie was struggling and kicking but Lyle had her tight.

'Let me go, you pig!'

'*Give her some!*' Lyle snarled.

Tom poked his stick in the fire. He looked as though he wanted the game to stop. But Jason stood up, and lifted the pan from the flames.

'Go on. See if she likes it.'

Jason pulled off some of the fish with his fingers. It was still rubbery, half raw. Lyle's hands were twisting Edie's wrists behind her back, burning her flesh. She kept her mouth tight shut, willing herself not to scream as the lump of pink fish was thrust under her nose.

When she was sick it went everywhere, into the pan, over Jason's hand, over Lyle's trainers.

Afterwards, she was aware of Tom's bowed head, and of a strange, fearful look in Jason's eyes. But Lyle stood gazing at her calmly, wiping his shoes on the leaves as he lit another cigarette.

As she ran away his expressionless voice swam after her: 'Go on, run away. Run back to Granny. Run back to your blind old Babka.'

Edie stumbled on, out of the woods and across the field, then collapsed, exhausted, by the pond. The damp grass soaked through her jeans but she did not move. She sat frozen, staring at the motionless grey water, thinking of Tilly writhing in the net, Tilly smoking in the pan.

She hated Lyle as she had never hated anyone before. And he was always there. Wherever she went, she could feel his pale eyes following her. And next week it would be even worse. Next week, after half-term, she would be starting at his school, going with him every day on a bus into the local town. 'Don't expect me to look after you,' he'd said to her, 'though people will expect things of you, as my cousin.'

What will they expect of me? Edie wondered with a shudder. Lyle had been expelled from two schools already.

'Savages.' That's what her grandmother had said, after she and Edie had stayed at Folly Farm one Easter. After three nights they had both been glad to escape. 'A filthy, cold house and three filthy, cold children,' Babka had

muttered on the train home, pursing her lips over her sweetened coffee.

When Edie had been sent to live at Folly Farm, Babka had refused to look her in the eye as she directed her what to pack.

'You'll be going to school again. That's what you wanted,' was all she had said.

'I wanted to stay at my old school,' Edie had replied. 'I don't want to go to school with *them*.'

But Babka, defeated by blindness, had just shrugged.

Folly Farm was good enough for Edie, though not for Kitty – Babka had arranged for her fat old cat to go to an animal shelter. 'Why can't I take her with me?' Edie had pleaded.

'Your cousins would not be kind to her,' Babka replied.

'You don't care if they're not kind to me,' Edie said quietly.

Edie had lived as long as she could remember with Babka in a little flat perched at the top of a grey building near Hyde Park. There was a Chinese restaurant in the street below them, with gold lights in the window, and next to it a Polish grocer where Babka would buy jars of beetroot and red cabbage and, on good days, little cakes with bright yellow custard.

Edie had gone to a school a few streets away, but when she was nine her grandmother had started teaching her at home. Babka didn't want anyone coming to the flat; she didn't want anyone to know that she was going blind. 'If they find out,' she had warned, 'they'll

take you away.'

But Edie had hated the long, friendless afternoons, with Babka drilling her impatiently in whatever subject took her mood. She was never allowed to invite her old school friends to tea – Babka said that sometimes you needed to be secret to be safe. But the social services had found out about Babka's blindness in the end, so Babka had been sent to a home. She'd refused to go to the one they'd found for her in London – 'I want to die in a room with a view,' Babka had said – and she had dug into her meagre savings to make her wish come true. Babka had ended up in a home near Oxford, but Edie had been given no choice about where she was to live – and Folly Farm was just as bad as she had feared.

'Things will be easier when you start school and make some friends of your own,' Aunt Sophia had said, in her vague, careless way. 'You can bring girls back to play.' Somehow, though, even Aunt Sophia seemed to understand that her going to school with Lyle would not be easy.

Edie stared at the pond. She had betrayed Tilly by not keeping her feelings secret – Babka was right, you had to be secret to be safe. Lyle had killed Tilly because he had seen Edie feeding her. If he could do that to a fish friend, what would he do to a human one? Edie shook her head. She would never bring anyone back to Folly Farm, never.

She thought with sudden longing of the flat in London, and the street full of people. Here there was nothing. The village was more than a mile away, hidden

beyond the wood. Wherever Edie looked, all she could see was green – an endless mass of green, rising around her like a prison. Was this what Babka meant by a view?

She gazed out at it, the stale taste of sick on her tongue. Her body was aching, but some force rose inside her and she knew she could not stay here any longer. She took her mobile out of her pocket, and looked again at the number of Babka's nursing home.

But it was useless – there was no signal in the valley. And it was no good calling Babka. Babka would tell her she had to stay and make the best of it. If Edie turned up at the nursing home, Babka would send her back.

Her stomach felt hollow. She thought of Babka's kitchen with the rusty gold tins and the glass cake stand, and the smell of cooking that rose to meet you as the lift doors opened onto the thin concrete corridor on the sixth floor. Then she sat up with a start, thinking of the cracked stone pig beside the front door. Babka had always kept the key hidden under the pig. It would still be there, Babka wouldn't have moved it . . . She could let herself in, then in the block she was sure to find someone to help her. Maybe the Polish grocer would come to her rescue. So long as she could get back to the flat she would be all right; London was full of friendly people.

She heard Lyle's words floating back to her: '*If you hate us, go. Go on, run away . . . Run back to your blind Babka.*'

I will, she thought defiantly. *I will run away. But not where you think.*