

Westfallen

**ANN BRASHARES
AND BEN BRASHARES**

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Let me ask you this: What's the worst thing you've ever done? Really think about it.

Well, multiply your thing by a billion and you don't even get close to mine. Sorry to brag. It's just . . . your thing? It's the Cheeto-dust thumbprint you left on the basement sofa. It's an ant's toe you stepped on. And then you said, "Sorry!" and the ant went, "No worries, mate!" Because the ant's British, I don't know.

My name is Henry Platt and I am twelve years old. I say it's "my thing," but I shouldn't take all the credit. There were others. Six of us, to be exact. We each had a role to play, all guilty. But it started with me, a decision I made, and for that I guess I'm the guiltiest. Again, it's not a competition. But, you know, if it were . . . I'd win. Woo-hoo.

So, why am I telling you this? I mean, if it's so horrible, wouldn't I want to keep it a secret? Normally, yes. But where we are now is so very, very far from normal.

We've done everything we can to fix the mess we made. In a few hours, we'll see if it worked. These words I'm writing now, they're like our trail of breadcrumbs. Because if somehow this doesn't go right, we need you, reader, to know what really happened.

BTW, Frances just read this over my shoulder and said my breadcrumbs suck and to do better. She's always been really supportive like that.

If all goes well, you'll never know about us. Life here in twenty-first-century America will seem normal to you. Nazi Germany will stay in the history books. You'll never know about Nazi America—or *Westfallen*, as it's called. The only evidence you'll have of what we did will be these pages you're reading right now.

If not . . .

bitte vergib uns.¹

1. Please forgive us.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

Always dig deep when burying a zombie gerbil.

Henry

Like all the best stories, this one starts with a rodent. A gerbil, to be precise.

Zeus died on a Tuesday. Or, I found him on a Tuesday. I know it was Tuesday because it was the day our class went on a field trip to the Empire State Building and I stayed home sick. And by “sick” I mean I really didn’t want to go on the field trip. I don’t do well with heights. Or . . . what’s the opposite of heights? Depths? I do even worse with those.

At some point during my fake sick day, I decided Zeus needed a proper burial. It seemed like a lot of trouble to go through for a gerbil, but what was I going to do, flush him down the toilet like a goldfish? Throw him away? Put him in the freezer next to the waffles? There weren’t a lot of great options. And, of course, if he needed a burial, he needed a coffin. That’s probably where I went a little overboard.

See, Zeus didn’t belong to me alone. He had two other owners: Frances Moore and Lukas Strohman. Frances lived in the house behind mine and Lukas in the house next to hers. One day in the summer before second grade, Frances saw Lukas and me building an underground roller coaster in my backyard and squeezed through the fence to tell us we were doing it wrong. She never left. (And we never finished our roller coaster.)

We were a gang of three, always together. When our second-grade class voted to replace our boring class gerbil with a chinchilla (BTW, super-soft + terrified + nocturnal = bad choice for class pet), the three of us banded together to rescue poor, unwanted Zeus. The day we brought him home—first to Lukas’s house—we swore an oath to our new bond: In a world of fancy, super-soft chinchillas, we were gerbils. Proud. Scrappy. Somewhat unpopular.

Then something happened over the summer between sixth and seventh grade. Lukas went to a sports camp, Frances went to an arts camp, and I went back to bed. I mean, it made sense. Lukas was really good at baseball. Like, *really good*. Coaches said his “eye” and swing were even better than his older brother’s (his brother had college recruiters lining up in eighth grade). Frances was super into drawing anime, and she was really good, too. I was really good at lying in bed. There wasn’t a camp for that—I looked.

Anyway, Frances came home with new friends and her hair dyed purple on one side and black on the other. It did not look good. But I didn’t say anything, partly because she was kind of scary now with the big boots and spiked bracelet. I don’t see her much anymore. When I do see her at school, she usually says hi by jumping out at me and hissing with claw hands. I never really know what to do with that.

Her parents definitely don’t know what to do with her. That’s what my mom said. My mom loves Frances, but I can tell she doesn’t like her parents very much—and my mom likes everybody. My mom once heard her dad say Frances was their “first pancake,” as in when you make pancakes it takes a while to get

the heat right, so the first one's never good. Only thing is Frances was their *only pancake*. I always felt bad for Frances having those parents and not having siblings to help with hating them.

Then there's Lukas. Lukas Strohman had been my best friend since first grade when we both got the role of "coral" in the school play. It was *The Little Mermaid*. Normally they make the kids with zero acting skills be trees in school plays. And we were headed right down the forest path until Lukas very correctly pointed out that there wouldn't be trees in the ocean. So we were coral. And we were great coral.

We became best friends and probably still would be if his parents hadn't moved him to a private school, where he got all jock-y and started saying things like, "Sup, brah?" Lukas's parents are the exact opposite of Frances's. His dad volunteer-coached our Little League teams for six straight years and taught us everything we "needed" to know about '90s grunge music and Japanese wood joinery. His kids were big fluffy buttery round pancakes and life was just a big sea of grade A organic maple syrup.

We'll all eventually figure out what we're good at. I hope. But Lukas had abs when the rest of us were still poking baby fat. He pretended not to be, but he was also stupid smart. He'd play Xbox all night and still get As on his tests the next morning. Add it all up and you get Lukas shipped off to private school and me wondering if I'll ever make another friend.

So, when I found Zeus on that Tuesday, I decided Frances and Lukas needed to know. Co-parents and all.

Frances didn't even remember who Zeus was when I texted her.

Me: Hey. Zeus died.

Frances (two hours later): The god of thunder?

Me: Our gerbil.

Frances: Ohhhhh.

Frances: That thing's still alive?!

Me: No, he's dead. That's why I said he died.

Frances: Oh, right.

It went even worse with Lukas.

Me: Hey. Just wanted to let you know Zeus died and I'm going to bury him later if you want to come by.

Lukas: Who dis?

Me: Henry.

Lukas: Henry T or Henry S?

Me: The one who had a gerbil named Zeus.

Lukas: Henry! Wuz good, dog!

I set the burial time for 5:00 p.m. and didn't totally expect either of them to show up. I carried the Nike size four shoebox and a shovel into our backyard, followed by my little brother, Eli.

"Can I see him?" Eli asked.

"There's not much to see, Eli. It's just a gerbil."

"It's dead," Eli said, staring at the box.

"Yeah, it's dead," I said. "*He's dead.*"

"I think, Hen, I think he died because . . . because he was old."

I handed the shoebox to Eli, if for no other reason than to calm his stims. Eli's autistic.

"Yup. He had a good, long life." I lied about the "good" part. Zeus lived his entire life alone in a small tank with a wheel. I barely remembered to feed him.

Frances and Lukas came in through the house, out the back door. Eli greeted them like nothing had changed. And, to their credit, they did the same with him. Eli loved Frances and Lukas. He didn't show it in an obvious way, but you learn to read the signs. They're all there, just different. Lukas, in particular, always read the signs right.

"Sup, baller," Lukas said, as he put his fist out for Eli to bump. "Your boy Stanton's en fuego. Hope you're keeping that rookie card safe."

"I have three of them!" Eli shouted.

Lukas looked over at me. "Sup, Hen."

"Hey," I said.

We settled on a spot back in the wooded part of the yard near the old garden shed. Lukas took the shovel and started digging. It was easier than making conversation.

"That oughta do it," Lukas said, one foot on the shovel, one hand on his hip, admiring the shallow hole he'd just dug. Like he was some kind of cowboy now?

Frances stood there staring at her phone. I wanted to punch them both. But this was a funeral. And with the dark clouds moving in fast, it was looking like we had to hurry.

"Anyone want to say something?" I asked.

"I'm going inside," Eli said.

"Okay, that's something," I said.

Lukas gave Eli a pat on the back as he left. Frances went right back to her phone.

"Let's just get this over with." I picked up the Nike shoebox and placed it gently in the hole.

"Wait . . ." Frances stepped forward and took the shovel from Lukas. She took a deep breath. "You were a good gerbil, Zeus," she said finally. "I hope you don't become a zombie gerbil and climb out of there and try to eat our brains. But if you do, we can all blame Lukas because that is one lame hole."

"What?" Lukas crowed. "That's a great hole!"

"It's fine," I said.

"*Fine. Your house, your Pet Sematary,*" Frances said.

Frances knew I didn't sleep in my own bed for a week after watching that movie. I glanced down at the hole again, the image of a white-eyed, crazed gerbil burning into my as-yet-uneaten brain.

"Fine. I'll dig it a little deeper," Lukas said, saving me the embarrassment.

"Here's an idea," Frances said. "How about we take him out of the giant box so we don't have to dig such a deep hole?" She grabbed the box.

"Wait . . . Don't . . ."

Frances opened the lid. There was Zeus, nestled in his wood chips. His pointy face poked out from a swaddle of toilet paper.

"Did you mummify him?" Lukas asked.

"Mummy's better than zombie," Frances said. Then, noticing what else was in the box, she whispered, "Oh my God, Hen. This is the saddest thing I've ever seen."

"Just . . ." I made a half-hearted attempt to take it back.

Lukas peered over her shoulder. “Duuuude. No.”

Propped up inside the box I had put a photo of the three of us in second grade. Next to that were old tickets from Millerton Playland, the night before it closed for good—and the last time we all three hung out together. And then there was the tricolor friendship bracelet. We made them together in third grade. Blue thread for Frances, green for Lukas, and red for me. This was a funeral for more than just Zeus.

“Aw, look at your chubby little cheeks, Lukas,” Frances said, holding up the photo.

“Shut up.” Lukas snatched it from her. He just held it, staring at it.

Frances and I inched closer to get a better look. It showed the three of us, playing with Zeus shortly after we got him. Zeus was in Frances’s hair, and Lukas and I were laughing while trying to make ugly faces for the camera. It wasn’t too hard. Lukas had a terrible bowl cut (courtesy of his dad) and I, apparently, had yet to discover the magic of toothbrushing. Or hair brushing, for that matter, judging by my tangle of curly black hair. We stood staring at the picture in silence for what felt like forever.

“Life is weird, bro,” Lukas said finally, lowering the picture to look at Zeus.

“Death is weirder,” I said, also looking at Zeus.

Frances peered into the box. “Why is there a turd in there?”

“That’s not a turd,” I said.

“That’s a turd. Bro, dead gerbils aren’t supposed to make turds,” Lukas said.

“That’s not a turd,” I said, pretty sure now it was a turd.

But I'd clearly transported it into the box with Zeus somehow. In the wood chips. It was in the wood chips.

"Bro," Frances said. "We learned that in science. I specifically remember Ms. Lin saying, 'Dead gerbils don't turd.'" She pointed at the hole. "Dig it deeper."

Whatever was left of the sun disappeared behind a fast-moving cloud. Just as the world went dark, a growling rumble rolled across the sky and the church bells down the street started chiming. We all looked up at the sky and seemed to have the same thought: It was getting totally *Pet Sematary* out here.

"Dig it deeper," Frances whispered.

"Yup," Lukas said, grabbing the shovel. He slammed it down into the dirt.

"It's gonna pour," I said, looking up at the sky again.

"Deeper!" Frances yelled. "He could still climb out of that!"

Lukas struck with the shovel again. This time a *clink* sounded off the end of it.

"Not going deeper. I hit a rock," Lukas said.

"That wasn't a rock. Rocks don't sound like that," I said.

"It's a rock," Lukas insisted.

Looking back now, oh man, do I ever wish I had just let it be a rock. I could've so easily just let it be a rock. We would've dug in a new spot. But I didn't. I mean, of course I didn't, right?

U-Boat or Whale?

Millerton Eagle 25 April 1944

p. A.5 Don Donahue

A family picnic ended in panic Monday evening in Sea Bright after onlookers claimed to glimpse a German U-boat off the coast.

Samuel Spagnelli of Rumson claimed he and two cousins spotted the enemy vessel while lighting fireworks on the beach. "It just sat there, watching us," Mr. Spagnelli said. Officer William Stutz of Rumson declared otherwise. "It was a whale," he countered.

A summons was issued to the Spagnelli family for an unlawful fireworks display on the beach.

CHAPTER TWO

Things to let lie: sleeping dogs, broken radios, and conceited jerks.

Alice

I'm not good at telling stories, but I have to tell this one.

Henry and I promised each other we would. We have to put the facts down before they change again. So at least someone—at least you reading this—will know it really did happen.

Sometimes I exaggerate and sometimes I lie, but I swear to you, everything I'm about to tell you is true, no matter how hard it may be for you to believe it.

When this started we were regular seventh graders, living in a regular town in suburban New Jersey, worrying about the regular dumb stuff: who liked whom, who hated whom, who sat with whom, who punched whom in the face. . . . (I'll get to that.)

Six kids are involved in this mess, but there's really one person to blame and it's me. Henry might say it's him, but it's not. I'm the one who saved the radio. If I'd listened to my dad and left it on the curb for the garbage truck, everything would be okay now.

I think about that all the time. That exact minute. All of history can hinge on a single minute, on one dumb decision.

It's better if I start at the beginning with the radio.

I'm saying there's a radio that changed the world, and

you're probably picturing something sleek and futuristic. Well, it isn't. My brother, Robbie, assembled it out of cast-off parts he found in the back of our dad's hardware store and from trips to the town dump. It is possibly the ugliest (sorry, Robbie) piece of electronics you've ever seen.

Robbie worked on it obsessively for a while. I think he secretly hoped to make contact with aliens. My mom claimed that world peace could just as well come about by regular folks talking to one another across oceans.

My brother didn't bring about world peace. He only managed to tune in to a longline fisherman in Nova Scotia and a restaurant hostess in Wyoming who cursed a lot. By the time Robbie graduated from high school and left for Europe last year, it was gathering dust in his closet.

So my dad left it on the curb with the garbage when he cleaned out Robbie's room. That's where I spotted it through our living room window, lying there defenseless.

"You can't throw out Robbie's radio!" I yelled to my dad, stomping into the kitchen.

My dad looked up from the pan in which he was scrambling eggs. "Alice, calm down."

I hear that a lot.

"You can't throw out Robbie's radio!"

"I already did."

"Then I'm rescuing it," I said.

"You are not bringing it back into this house," he said. "It's unlicensed and illegal. And also, it doesn't work." He held up the rubber spatula. "Eggs?"

I stomped back out, my brain shifting into a particular

gear. If I have one talent in the world it's *not* doing the thing I was told *not* to do but still getting what I want anyway.

Alice isn't that smart, Robbie used to say, *unless you get in her way*.

The only question in my mind was, how would I save the radio without bringing it into the house?

Looking back, I ask myself, why did I do it? What was I thinking? Did I want to use the broken radio?

Realistically, no. I'm not handy with electronics. I'd have no idea how to fix it. I didn't yearn to make contact with profane ladies in Wyoming.

I probably wasn't thinking at all. That's usually the problem with my decision making.

But Robbie had spent about a million hours tinkering with the radio through middle school and junior high, and I couldn't stand to watch those hours and hopes of his getting left for garbage.

That afternoon I strode out the back door and along the driveway. I was going to bang on the door to the apartment over the garage. I wanted to tell Lawrence about the radio, but I stopped myself. Lawrence was recuperating from strep throat and I promised his mom I'd let him rest all week.

Lawrence Powell is my best friend. We've played together, eaten most of our meals together, and gone to school together since we were eight. That's when our dads met at a night class in business accounting, and my dad persuaded Mr. Powell to come manage the hardware store and move his family into the apartment above our garage. My mom was still around then.

Our families were always close. My parents helped make sure Lawrence and Janie, his little sister, enrolled in the Millerton school with us, which was challenging at the time. They are one of the few Black families in the catchment. Lawrence's mom lets me eat dinner with them almost every night, because my dad works late. I call her Aunt Margery, even though we're not technically related.

I took the twisty path through the vegetable garden into the wooded part of our yard. My eyes adjusted to the shaded darkness. I passed the old wooden shed as I made my way to the back fence and felt around in the ivy for the latch of the hidden door. I hadn't used it in a while. I pushed it open, snapping a few vines, and voilà, I was in Artie's backyard.

Artie Muller was in the driveway, washing his dad's truck.

I walked past him. I spotted his old red Radio Flyer wagon parked next to his bike, grabbed the handle, and pulled it along behind me. "Can I borrow your wagon?" I asked without pausing.

Artie dropped the hose and followed me. "For what?" Nothing could stop Artie from being curious, especially on a boring Tuesday late in the afternoon.

"I thought you were never talking to me again," I said over my shoulder.

"You punched my friend in the face," he said.

"Johnny Flay is not your friend."

Artie shrugged. "He's . . . a friend of a friend." Johnny Flay was a conceited jerk. He'd failed seventh grade, which paradoxically made people look up to him.

It seems silly looking back on it now, but it created a little drama at school. Lawrence was home for the week because of

strep throat. Lawrence and I eat lunch together in the same seats at the same table in the cafeteria every single day. When Johnny noticed I was alone, he felt the need to point it out . . . every single day.

"So where's your boyfriend?" Johnny crooned at me. "Did the lovebirds have a fight?"

By Friday I was sick of it. "Shut up," I said, chewing my sandwich.

I noticed Artie, somewhat uncomfortably joining the edge of the group, too tall to be inconspicuous. I glanced at him. I could see his conscience pricking up red on his cheeks. "Let it go," he mumbled. I'm not sure which of us he was talking to.

"Why is that, Artie? Because I hurt her feelings? Is she gonna cry?"

Artie shook his head. He ran nervous hands through his short blond hair, so it stood straight up.

I finished my sandwich and left the cafeteria. Johnny followed me and his meathead friends, Smitty Jessup and Roland Hayes, followed him. "Go away, Johnny," I muttered.

I went outside to the blacktop and he kept following. When I stopped, he stopped.

"Not like anybody *else* is going to eat lunch with Larry," Johnny said.

I punched him.

Lawrence hates when people call him Larry. Not that that was the point.

Johnny's nose bled.

He tattled.

I got called to the office.

I confessed and served detention. Et cetera, et cetera. I'd been there before. I knew the drill.

I tried to limit my worst offenses to the rare days when Lawrence wasn't in school. I knew it upset him when I got in trouble. Not because he said so, but because he got that look of worry and clamped his molars together. He'd never rat me out to my dad or his mom, but still, I didn't want him to have to worry about me or keep my secrets.

"Why can't you just act like a regular person?" Artie asked me now, running along next to the wagon. Artie was not cut out for the silent treatment.

"Why can't you just pretend you don't know me?" I asked him.

"Oh, I try," Artie said, helping me free a wheel from a divot in the grass. "Why do you want the wagon?"

"My dad is getting rid of Robbie's radio. It's sitting on the curb waiting for the garbage truck." I looked up uneasily. The sky was darkening and I could feel the wind kicking up.

"He says I can't bring it back into the house." I stopped. This gave me an idea. "Can I bring it to yours?"

Artie thumped his palm against his chest. "My house? Are you ragging me? *My* dad?"

"Maybe we could hide it someplace he wouldn't notice." I knew it was a weak suggestion even as I said it. Artie's dad noticed everything.

We dragged the wagon over rough ground and pushed through the hidden gate in the fence. "Is Lawrence still sick?"

"He's feeling better, but his mom wants him to rest," I explained.

When we were younger, Artie used to come over to play with me and Lawrence almost every day, but then his dad started giving him a hard time about it. Artie's dad doesn't think Lawrence and I are "suitable friends." By "not suitable" I'm pretty sure he means Lawrence is Black and I'm his best friend. And it probably doesn't help that my clothes are often wrinkled if not ripped, my hair never stays neat, despite Aunt Margery's efforts, and I'm no stranger to the inside of the principal's office. At school Artie acts like he barely knows us.

"I can help you lift it onto the wagon," he offered.

I nodded. Artie was a pal, even if he had bad taste in friends of friends. Even if his dad was a jerk.

In the cool shadows of the woods, Artie pointed. "You could put it in there," he suggested.

"Where?"

"The shed there."

It took my eyes a moment to bring it into focus. "No, I don't think so." I kept walking. I hadn't set foot in the shed in three years. It was not a door I wanted to open.

"Why not?"

I ignored Artie. "Did you hear that?" I asked. We both looked to the place where the sky had turned dark and rumbly.

We reached the curb in front of my house. "See, look." The radio looked pretty terrible. Knobs and dials stood at odd angles, like a face composed by Picasso, and a mess of wires and cords sprouted out.

Artie helped me lift it into the wagon and collect its various parts. He plugged the speaker back into its side. "You don't want to lose that," he said. Like it would work.

So that was the moment. Right then and there. Nobody's fault but mine. We pulled it behind the house. "Where to?" Artie asked.

I nodded like I knew what I was doing. It was my job not to run out of ideas. "Well . . . we can keep it in the woods until my dad leaves for work and then . . . we'll bring it up to the attic and hide it under a sheet." I drew the wagon toward the cover of the trees.

Artie looked at the sky. "When does your dad leave?"

I saw what he was getting at. ". . . Tomorrow morning?"

"And so what happens when it starts pouring?"

We stopped. On cue, a raindrop landed in the middle of Artie's upturned forehead. Dang.

Artie again pointed at the shed under the ash tree, now less than three yards away from us. "Why not put it in there? At least until the rain stops."

I sputtered. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." I glanced at the latch. "Because it's locked."

Artie walked over to the door and pulled on it. The padlock fell open in his hand.

Raindrops slapped the part in my hair, ticked against the metal case of the radio.

When Artie pulled the door open, the little shed seemed to exhale. I felt the warm moisture and smelled the particular smell. I closed my eyes for a minute.

"Come on!" Artie called, pulling the wagon inside as the clouds unloaded. "This radio is gonna be done for!"

I pushed my stubborn legs inside. The smell was the hardest

part. It didn't smell bad. It smelled like potting soil and damp lumber and . . . a different time.

Slowly my eyes adjusted to the deeper darkness. There were still the shelves of terra-cotta pots, garden tools hanging crookedly from hooks, baskets of seeds on the potting table. The inexplicably warm, moist air. My mom's waxy green gloves and wide-brimmed hat dangling from the hooks on the door. Her big yellow watering can next to my little yellow watering can on the low shelf. I hadn't seen any of these things in a long time.

"Do you think it still works?"

I looked up, a little startled. "What?"

"The radio!"

I held my hands together and took a deep breath. "No, dummy, of course not." I hoped my voice sounded normal.

"Why not? It didn't get that wet."

"No, not because of that. It didn't work before. It hasn't worked for years. It's broken."

"What?" Artie shook his head. "Then why did we rescue it?"

I sighed and looked at Artie, my oldest, largest, and most inquisitive friend. "Why all the questions, Artie?" I tried to sound light.

I would have been happy to leave the radio in the shed and close the door behind us for good. It's strange, I guess, how I needed the radio and the shed to exist, but didn't want anything to do with them.

Whereas Artie was continuing to be helpful. He cleared away baskets and packets of seeds and lifted the radio onto the wooden potting table. He settled its cords and wires around it.

I was distracted. I wasn't thinking.

"How's it broken?" he persisted.

I made myself look at the face of the old radio, its features comically askew. I felt the steamy air collecting around us.

I shrugged. "How are you broken?" I asked it.

We both jumped at the staticky wheeze that came out.

The light at the top started pulsing red.

We stared at each other as it emitted a long, insistent blast of static.

"I really wasn't expecting it to answer," I said.

CHAPTER THREE

One-third of nothing is still better than one-half of a turd.

Henry

Give it to me,” I said to Lukas, and he handed me the shovel. “Maybe it’s another dead pet,” Frances suggested. “It’s a rock,” Lukas said. “No, listen.” I drove the shovel down again. “Hear that?” I knelt and brushed the dirt away from a flat metal surface. “There’s a corner.”

Lukas and Frances both got down on their knees. “Here’s another corner,” Lukas said, pretending not to be excited. “Dig down. See how deep it goes.”

So a large metal box is buried in your backyard. You’re thinking treasure, right? Maybe stacks of cash? Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too.

“It’s probably one of your old, dorky time capsules,” Frances said, crouching down. She put on her best nerd voice. “Dear future me, I really hope you have a girlfriend.”

I tried not to smile as an old warmth settled over me. I’d missed this. But it required retaliation nonetheless. I dug around the metal thing and tossed a handful of dirt onto Frances’s new white Converse All Stars.

“Hey!” she yelled, kicking it off.

“Whatever’s in there,” Lukas said, now digging around the sides, “we split it three ways.”

“Okay, Lukas gets the broken toaster for the first two months, then me, then Henry gets it for the next three years and kills it. Just like with Zeus!”

I stopped digging and looked up at Frances.

“Sorry,” she said. “That was mean.”

Frances apologizing . . . That was new.

Lukas took back the shovel and pushed it under the box, prying it loose from the dirt. Frances and I cleared the packed dirt off the top and sides, revealing four rusted latches on one side.

“Let’s get it out first, then open it,” I said, reaching under it and grabbing two corners. Frances grabbed the other two.

“The latches are rusted out, totally stuck,” I said.

“Here. Move. I’ll loosen ’em up,” Lukas said.

After a few whacks, Lukas did manage to loosen them. Two opened and two broke off.

“All right. You ready?” I grabbed each end of the lid.

“I can hardly contain my excitement,” Frances said.

Inside the metal box was another metal box. This one was even uglier—dark green and dented, with faded stenciled letters: 32-167-55. We pulled it out. On the front were input holes and a display window with a needle in the center. Tucked next to it were cables and a small speaker that seemed almost like a junky toy until you felt the weight of it.

The three of us just stared at the thing.

“Why would someone bury that?” I asked finally.

Frances stood up and slapped her dirt-covered hands against her legs. “Because . . . maybe it died?”

Lukas and I gave her a look.

"What? You bury a gerbil. Why not a beloved toaster?"

"I don't think that's a toaster," Lukas offered.

"Or . . . maybe someone was trying to hide it?" I said.

Just as I said it, the heavens opened up and sheets of rain came down. It was like God said, "Not yet . . . not yet . . . okay . . . NOW!"

Lukas ran shrieking to the garden shed in the back corner of my yard, where we kept our lawnmower. Nobody spent time in there besides the lawnmower and Ellen, the garden lady, who showed up about twice a year. Why Lukas ran there and not back to the house I'll never know.

I grabbed the cords and stuffed them into the case before pulling the lid on and flipping a few latches. I glanced over at Frances, who was now standing with her arms out to her sides catching rain in her mouth.

"What about Zeus?" I shouted to her through the heavy rain.

"He's dead, Hen!" she shouted back as dramatically as she could. "They're all DEAD!" She spit out a mouthful of rain, smiling. "SAVE YOURSELLE!"

I scrambled over to get Zeus's box. Yeah, he was dead, but he deserved better. I brought him over to the hole, lowered it in, and pushed a small mound of dirt-mud over him.

I really can't tell you why I did what I did next. I mean, there was thunder cracking over me and rain coming down so hard it actually hurt, and I stopped to grab the metal box. It was junk. It was metal (lightning!). It was too heavy to carry, but I grabbed two corners and began dragging it across the mud.

Frances's hands appeared on the other side. She didn't even ask why we were trying to save this piece of junk from the rain. I looked down at her no-longer-white All Stars. She caught my glance and shrugged.

"Over here!" Lukas called from the shed.

We waddled the thing across the yard, smiling the whole way. Hard rain had a way of changing a mood.

Lukas pushed the door open from the inside.

"Move the lawnmower!" Frances yelled.

"Where?" he yelled back.

"I don't know!" Frances yelled.

Lukas shoved the mower out into the rain and we dropped the thing onto the high wooden table against the back wall.

"Out with the new, in with the old!" Frances shouted.

I put my hand up for a high five and instantly regretted it. Frances just rolled her eyes, smiled, and gave it a hard smack.

We stood around half admiring the pure ugliness of it—puke-green color, dented metal, a cracked glass display splotched with brown paint. There were two knobs and one little switch at the top right.

"Doesn't look that complicated," I said, picking the dots of paint with my thumbnail.

"That might actually be blood," Lukas said, examining the flakes as they came off.

"Creeeeepy," Frances said.

I wiped them off quickly, doing my best to ignore that idea.

I flipped the power switch. Not surprisingly, the thing was deader than . . . an old toaster left in the ground for ten years. I smacked it. Because that *always* works.

We stood there in awkward silence.

"Well . . .," Frances said, peering out the door. "Looks like the rain's mostly stopped."

Lukas glanced at his phone. "Yeah, I should probably head home."

I looked back at the box. "So . . . that's it, then. See you guys . . . later?" I swallowed hard. We all knew there'd be no "later."

"What about Zeus?" Frances asked.

"I'll finish burying him," I said. "You guys can go."

Lukas walked to the door and put a hand out to check for rain. He looked back at us. "Okay, maybe see you guys at Jake's . . . or, were you invited to . . .? Do you know Jake? Jake Doring? No . . . Jake?"

We just stared at him.

"Right." He put a hand up to say bye.

Frances quickly slapped it and brushed past him. "Later, dudes. Been real," she said over her shoulder.

"Let me know if you ever get it to work," Lukas said.

"What?"

"That"—he looked past me and pointed—"thing."

The very second he said it, a blip of static sounded and a little amber glow appeared in the cracked display of the radio. The needle in the center waved back and forth.

"No way," Lukas whispered.

"What?"

"Frances!" we both called.

Frances appeared in the doorway seconds later.

"It's ALIVE!!!" she yelled.

There was more static. And then a voice came over it. A kid's voice, it sounded like.

"Hello?" said the voice, a boy's voice. Then a *thud*. *"It's not gonna work,"* the voice said.

We stood there dumbstruck. We turned to look at each other.

"Do something?" Lukas said. "Say something back!"

Frances grabbed the speaker and lifted it to her mouth. "Hello?" she said. "Anyone there?" She looked at me and shrugged. "This is Frances. From planet Mars. Who is this?"