

Helping your children choose books they will love



Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from  
**A Trick of the Dark**

Written by  
**B. R. Collins**

Published by  
**Bloomsbury Publishing Plc**

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading .co.uk

# 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.