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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Girls

Written by Lisa Jewell

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# the girls



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Dedicated to all my neighbours on
the C&G Gardens


VIRGINIA
Dylan and Fiona
SHOPS
Playground
Rose Garden
Clare, Grac
Rhea
VIRGINIA T


CRESCENT
The Howes
Secret Garden
The Jungle
e, Grace and Pip
Cece and Tyler
A TERRACE

**5 July, 9 p.m.**

Pip stands behind her mother in the tiny bathroom. She's not sure what to do. She's never seen her mother being sick before.

'Urgh, God, Pip. I'm so sorry. I am *so sorry*.'

'That's OK, Mum.' Pip tentatively touches her mother's head, and strokes her fine blond hair just once.

Her mother doubles over and is sick again. She judders afterwards and rocks back on to her heels, staring up into the halogens buried in the ceiling.

Pip passes her a beaker of water. 'Here,' she says, 'drink some.'

Her mother does as she is told.

'Do you think that's it? Do you think you've finished?'

Clare shudders and says, 'Yes. I think that's it.' She rests the beaker of water on the floor by the toilet with shaking hands and unfolds her legs, leaning back against the side of the bath. 'Pip,' she says, taking her hand, 'I am so so sorry.'

'Honestly, Mum, it doesn't matter.'

'It does matter!' Her mother's words are slightly slurred. Her pale skin is waxy, her mascara smudged under her eyes. 'It matters because I'm your mother and it is my job to look after you and how can I look after you in this state.' She points at herself. 'You shouldn't have to be looking after me. You shouldn't have to deal with anything you've had to deal with these past few months. You've been the best, most amazing girl. I don't know what I'd do without you. I don't.'

Her mother pulls Pip to her and holds her tight. Too tight.

'I need to go to bed now. I have to…' Clare gets uncertainly to her feet, holding on to the sink for balance. '. . . I have to sleep.'

The back door is still unlocked. All the lights are on. And Grace is still outdoors somewhere, roaming the communal garden with her friends. Pip resists the urge to say, 'But what about Grace? What about me?' She's twelve years old. She can handle this.

Her mother stumbles from the bathroom and falls face down on to her bed. Pip pulls the duvet from

under her small body and covers her properly. 'Thank you, baby. Thank you. I love you so much. So, so much.'

Pip sits on the edge of her mother's bed for a while, until she hears her breathing change to a sonorous bass. It is just past nine. She moves to the living room and sits there, perched uncertainly on the edge of the sofa. Beyond the back door, across the gardens, the party is still going on. She can hear it in snatches of laughter and high-pitched screams of over-excited children out long past their bedtimes. She doesn't know what to do. She is all alone. And soon it will be dark. She phones Grace, but, unsurprisingly, her call goes straight through to voicemail. Grace has been outdoors since two o'clock and her phone will be out of charge.

Then she hears something at the back door: footsteps. She looks up, her heart racing. She sees a tall shadow move past the window. The footsteps are closer now, and suddenly there is a man standing by the door. Pip clutches her heart and hides herself behind the sofa.

'Hello? Clare? Pip?'

She breathes a sigh of relief. It's Leo. She goes to the door, where he stands with his golden dog, Scout. 'Just checking on your mum,' he says, looking behind her. 'Is she OK?'

Pip nods. 'She was sick. And now she's gone to bed.'

'Ah.' He nods.

Pip crouches to stroke the dog, mainly because she is embarrassed to be here, alone, talking to a grown-up.

'Are you coming back out?' he asks. 'The party's still going on. Loads of kids still out there.'

'I don't think I should,' she says. 'I don't want to leave Mum. In case she's sick again.'

He nods approvingly. 'Fair enough,' he says. 'If you need anything, come to ours: we'll all be up for a good while longer.'

Then he goes, the golden dog following behind, and disappears into the shadows of the encroaching dusk.

By ten to ten it is dark and Pip wants to go to bed. She looks in on her mother who is asleep on her back, her mouth hanging open, her arms above her head, snoring.

Pip looks out into the darkness beyond her garden gate. The party has finished but the garden is still alive. Clusters of people sit on the grass or on arrangements of folding chairs, their faces lit by storm lanterns, by candles flickering in jars, by the red embers of disposable barbecues. She needs to find Grace, so that she can lock the door and go to bed. But she doesn't want to wander these gardens in the dark on her own, however lively they are.

The security light at the back of a neighbour's house goes on and she sees a stream of twenty-somethings pass through the garden and back door, each holding something: rolled-up blankets, empty wine bottles, bin bags full of the detritus of a day in the sun. The sudden brightness and the wholesome chatter of her neighbours and their friends makes Pip feel brave for a second and she grabs the key to the back door and locks it behind her.

The table on their terrace is still bedecked with balloons from Grace's birthday party earlier in the day, bobbing mournfully in the warm night breeze.

She sees children in the playground: big children. She heads towards them, hopefully. She sees faces she recognises: Leo's older daughters, Catkin and Fern, mucking about on the swings. And Tyler and Dylan, side by side on a bench. But no Grace.

'Have you seen Grace?'

They all look at each other and shrug. Dylan sits up straight. 'Isn't she at home?'

Pip feels a cold chill of dread pass down her spine. 'No,' she says. 'I haven't seen her for hours.'

'She said she was going in,' says Catkin. 'About an hour ago. She must have changed her mind. Have you checked our flat? Maybe she's hanging out with our parents?'

Pip wanders across the lawn, through the remains of the party, bunting fluttering darkly from trees, bin

bags in piles ready to be removed the next morning, piles of folded chairs and dismantled gazebos stacked under trees. She can see the light from the Howeses' garden apartment glowing from here, empty now after a day-long party, the party that she and her mother had been at earlier, where her mother had drunk too much wine and had had to excuse herself, barely able to walk in a straight line.

Then she cries out and clutches her chest when a figure appears at her side. It is Max, the football-mad loner of the garden. He's only nine, three years younger than her. She can't believe he's still out here, wandering alone at this time of night. As ever he is holding his beloved football, squeezing it tight against his stomach. He looks at Pip, his eyes wide and appalled. He looks as though he's about to say something, but no words come. He turns then and runs, down the hill, towards the lights.

Pip watches him go, feeling that something is wrong.

'Grace!' she calls out. 'Grace!'

There is something on the brow of the hill, a strange shape emerging from the hedge that encircles the Rose Garden. She heads towards it.

'Grace!' she calls again. 'Grace!'

As she nears the shape she can see it is a foot. She holds her breath deep inside her body and rounds the corner timorously.

The foot is attached to a person. Pip passes the beam from her mobile phone across the figure: a girl, half-undressed. Shorts yanked down to her knees, floral camisole top lifted above small naked breasts. Her hair is spread about her. Her face is a bloodied mass.

*Grace*.

Pip drops to her knees. 'No,' she mutters, 'no. No. No. No.' She pulls Grace's camisole down, she pulls her shorts up. Then she runs down the hill, runs and runs, towards the warm safe lights of the Howeses' apartment, towards grown-ups, her heart thumping piston-hard in her chest.

# BEFORE

# One

Dear Daddy,

We moved into the new flat this weekend. It's nice. It's on a quiet street with little houses. You walk into a narrow hallway and if you turn right there are two bedrooms. I have to share with Grace but I really don't mind. You know I never liked sleeping on my own in the old house anyway. Not really. Do you remember? I don't really know how much you remember about things from before. I don't know if you've lost all your memories or if you're just the same except with all the other problems.

Anyway, our room is really cute. We put our beds in an L shape so that our feet point together and our heads are furthest apart and I can see Grace when I'm in bed. It's like this:



It's weird how I'm eleven and I should be wanting my own room and I just really don't. Remember how I used to say I wish we lived in a caravan? So we could be all snug together? Well, this is a bit like that, I suppose. Then Mum's room is next door to ours. It's quite small but she's got a little shower room attached, which is nice for her. Then on the other side of the hallway there's a kitchen which is square with white units with silver handles and white tiles and Mum says it looks like an operating theatre. It kind of does. Well, it's totally different to our old kitchen, that's for sure. Do you remember our old kitchen? Do you remember those crazy tiles around the sink with the bits of fruit on them? Grapes and stuff? I sort of miss those now.

So the kitchen has a breakfast bar, which is good, I like breakfast bars, and a window that looks over the garden. And next door is a tiny living room. It's all

painted white with that kind of shiny wood flooring that's not really wood and whoever lived here before must have worn very sharp heels because it's full of little dents, like a Ryvita. There's a door in the living room that takes you into the back garden. It's tiny weeny. Just big enough for a little table and some chairs. And maybe it's just because it's winter but it does smell a bit damp out there and there's lots of moss all over the walls.

And it has a little wooden gate and when you go through the gate there's a totally massive garden. We were not expecting it. Mum didn't even tell us about it before. I was just thinking what a cute little flat it was and then suddenly it's like Narnia, there's all these tall trees and pathways and a lawn that takes you up to all these big white houses with windows that are as tall as two men and you can see the chandeliers and the big splashy paintings on the walls. At night when you look up the hill and the houses have all their lights on it's so pretty. And in the garden itself there are all these pathways and little tucked-away places. A secret garden which is hidden inside an old wall covered with ivy, like the one in the book. A rose garden which has bowers all the way round and benches in the middle. And then there's a playground too. It's not particularly amazing, just some swings and a clonky old roundabout and one of those sad animals on a spring. But still, it's cool.

This is what the garden looks like.



Mum says I can't tell you the name of the garden, or where it is. I totally don't know why. But it is still in London. Just a different part to where we lived.

So, all in all I quite like it here. Which canNOT be said for Grace. She hates it. She hates sharing a room with me, she hates the tiny rooms and the narrow hallway and the fact there's nowhere to put anything. And she hates our new school (I can tell you it's a girls' school and there are two baby goats and a Vietnamese potbellied pig in the playground. But I can't tell you what it's called. I'm really sorry). Anyway, she hates it. I don't really know why. I really like it. And also she hates the communal garden. She says it's weird and scary, probably full of murderers. I don't think so. I think it looks interesting. Kind of mysterious.

I have to go now. Mum says she doesn't know if

they'll give you any letters or even if you'd be able to read them anyway. But I always told you everything, Dad, and I don't want to stop now.

Love you. Get better!

Your Pip (squeak) xxxxxxx

'Look,' said Adele, standing in the tall window of her living room, her arms folded across her stomach. 'More new people.'

She was watching a young woman with a soft helmet of pale blond hair wearing an oversized parka with a huge fur-trimmed collar that looked as though it had eaten her. She was walking along the perimeter of the Secret Garden, followed by two biggish girls, Adele couldn't really gauge their age, but she thought roughly eleven, twelve, thirteen, that kind of area. The girls had matching heads of thick dark curls and were wearing similar-looking parkas to – she assumed – their mother. They were tall and solid, almost, Adele couldn't help herself from thinking, verging on the overweight. But hard to tell in the winter coats.

Leo joined her at the window. 'Oh,' he said, 'them. I saw them moving in a few days ago.'

'Whereabouts?'

'The terrace,' he said, 'about halfway down.'

The garden was formed in the space between a long row of small, flat-fronted Georgian cottages on Virginia

Terrace and a majestic half-moon of stucco-fronted mansions on Virginia Crescent, with a large mansion block at either end.

Adele had lived on Virginia Crescent for almost twenty years. She'd moved into Leo's flat when she was twenty-one, straight from a cramped flat-share on Stroud Green Road. She had been immediately overwhelmed by the high ceilings and the faded grandeur: the foxed mirrors and threadbare sofas, old velvet shredded by the claws of a dozen long-dead cats; the heavy floor-length curtains patterned with sun-bleached palm fronds and birds of paradise; the walls of books and the grand piano covered with a fringed chenille throw. They'd long since taken out the opulent seventies-style bathroom suite with its golden bird-shaped taps and green porcelain sanitary-ware. They'd ripped out the expensive, claret-red carpets and taken down the curtains so heavy they'd needed two people to take the weight. Leo's mother had died twelve years ago and two years later his father had moved to some land-locked African state to marry a woman half his age. She and Leo bought out his two brothers and room by room they'd made the flat their own.

Adele felt as much a part of the garden as her husband, who had grown up on these lawns. She had seen babies become adults. She had seen a hundred families come and go. She had had dozens of other people's children in and out of her home. The garden

became a mystery during these winter months: neighbours becoming shadows glimpsed through windows, their children growing taller and taller behind closed doors, people moving out, people moving in and people occasionally dying. And it wasn't until the onset of spring, until the days grew longer and the sun shone warmer, that the secrets of the winter were revealed.

She looked again at the new arrivals. Gorgeous girls, tall and big-boned, both of them, with square-jawed faces like warrior queens. And then she turned her gaze to their elfin, worried-looking mother. 'Was there a man?' she asked Leo. 'When they moved in?'

'Not that I noticed,' he said.

She nodded.

She wanted to wander out there now, accidentally cross paths, introduce herself, make sure they realised that there was more to the garden than it might appear on a dank January afternoon such as this. She wanted to impart some sense of the way the garden opened like a blossom during the summer months: back doors left open; children running barefoot in the warm dark of night; the red glow of tin-can barbecues for two in hidden corners; the playground full of young mothers and toddlers; the pop and thwack of ping-pong balls on the table wheeled out by the French family along the way; cats stretched out in puddles of sunshine; striped shadows patterning the lawn through fronds of weeping willows.

But right now that was all a long way off. Right now it was January and in an hour or so it would be getting dark, lights switched on, curtains pulled shut, everyone sealed up and internalised. The garden itself dark and shabby; lines of bare-branched trees, dead-faced backs of houses, pale gravelled paths covered in the last of autumn's leaves; an air of desolation, melancholic whistle of wind through leafless tendrils of weeping willows, cats sitting listlessly on garden walls.

'I wonder where those girls go to school,' she muttered mainly to herself. The girls' school up by the Heath, maybe? Or maybe even the hothouse place on the other side of the main road? She tried to work out whether they had money or not. You couldn't assume anything in this community. Half these houses were owned by a charitable trust and the mansion blocks at either end were affordable housing for service workers. There was even a halfway house on the terrace, home to an endless succession of recently released female offenders and their children, its back garden cemented over and sprouting weeds, with a never-used solitary plastic rocking dog.

There was no single type of person who lived here. No neat social demographic catchment. Everyone lived here. TV presenters, taxi drivers, artists, teachers, drug addicts. That was the joy of it.

'You're starting to look a bit creepy there, Del.'

She jumped slightly.

'Those girls will be going: *Mum*, have you seen that weird woman over there who keeps staring at us?'

Adele turned and smiled at Leo. 'They can't see me,' she said, 'not in this light.'

'Well, that makes it even worse! *Mum*, there's a ghostly shape in that window over there, I don't like it!'

'OK.'

Adele turned one last time, before moving away from the window.