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Opening extract from

Red Moon Rising

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Published by

Nosy Crow Ltd

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Ten years before

The child toddled down to the bottom of the garden and gazed at the grassy hill rising up on the other side of the gate. She looked through the bars and giggled. Black-winged figures flew over the top of the hill, outlined against the setting sun. They swooped and hovered as if they were dancing in the air. Spellbound, the little girl pulled at the latch and the gate creaked open.

A woman in a red dress ran down the path and scooped her up. "What are you doing out here, baby?"

The girl flapped her arms. "Fly, Mummy!"

The winged figures swooped even faster. A bright flash shot through the peaceful air and one of them crumpled before spiralling to the ground.

The woman ran inside, carrying the child with her, and locked the door. She set her daughter down gently and peered round the edge of the curtain, her face pale.

The little girl tugged at the hem of her mother's

skirt. Fine hair curled in wisps round her face. "Fly, Mummy?" she asked.

"Maybe one day, Laney." Her mother hugged her. "One day when we're far away from here."

CHAPTER 1

Laney opened her water bottle and took several big gulps. The water was warm and tasted sour like lemon juice. She lowered the bottle. For a second it looked as if the water was boiling, with big, fat bubbles rolling up to the surface. Then it was still.

Laney blinked. That was weird.

"Running round the track should be banned on the last day of term." Steph picked up her sports bag and stuffed her clothes into it. "Typical Miss Roderick, queen of PE torture."

Laney grinned and pushed back the fair hair that curled in wisps round her face. "Maybe they put that in her job description: *Must own a disgusting red tracksuit and enjoy making people suffer!*"

"They got exactly what they wanted then," said Steph.

The changing-room door banged as some of the other girls left.

Still thirsty, Laney decided to try another tiny swig of water to see how it tasted. As she tipped up the bottle, she caught a shadowy movement from the corner of her eye. The bottle was knocked out of her hand. Water splattered over her face and dripped down her clothes on to the changing-room floor.

"Oh, Laney!" said Jessie with mock sweetness. "Did I bump into you? I'm *so* sorry!"

Laney glared. "What did you do that for?" She

should have known it would be Jessie, and the gleam in the other girl's eyes showed exactly how sorry she was.

"It was just an accident." Jessie shook back her dark curls and flounced out of the changing room.

"Are you OK?" said Steph. "I don't know *what* is wrong with that girl."

"Don't worry about it. Jessie's been mean to me ever since nursery school. It's like part of her daily routine or something, and I didn't want that water anyway. It tasted really weird." Laney picked up the bottle. "I'm going to fill this up from the water fountain." She bent down to close her bag. At least her books had escaped getting wet.

As she straightened up she noticed Claudia watching her from across the changing room. As their eyes met, she gave Laney a half-smile and turned away to brush her hair.

Laney picked up her bag, staring curiously at Claudia, but the other girl didn't turn round again. Over the last few weeks she'd caught Claudia studying her a few times. She found it weird because Claudia was one of those cool types who'd never seemed to notice her before. She pushed through the changing-room door with Steph behind her. They walked down the corridor and through another set of doors to find Jessie and a bunch of her adoring fans hanging round the water fountain.

Laney was annoyed when her stomach lurched. She wasn't going to let Jessie stop her doing what she wanted.

"Better be quick. I think the bell's about to go." Steph hung back by the doors.

Laney's wet clothes stuck to her skin as she weaved her way through the group of girls and stopped in front of the fountain. She took the lid off the bottle and then dropped it. Cheeks flushing, she hurried to pick it up. Shaking the last drips out of the bottle, she pushed down the tap to turn on the fountain.

"How come you're thirsty, Laney?" said Jessie. "Is it hard work coming last round the track all the time? Don't worry, you can't help being a freak of nature."

Laney gritted her teeth as she watched the water trickle into the bottom of the bottle. She wasn't going to let Jessie have the last word. "If I'm a freak then so are you!" It wasn't a very good insult, but she couldn't think of anything better.

As she glared at Jessie, the bottle leaped in her hand and the water inside started to bubble.

"Watch it!" cried Jessie. The sneering look slipped from her face and her dark eyes widened. "What are you doing? Give me that! Get away from the fountain!" Her voice held a surprising note of panic. She tried to grab the water bottle but Laney held on to it tightly.

The bottle filled to the top and hot water splashed over their hands. The liquid inside was boiling and there was a strange, bulbous cloud of steam rising above it. The water looked beautiful, spilling out and swirling round the fountain plughole. It reminded Laney of something that she couldn't quite grasp. A memory, maybe. A forgotten moment in time.

Jessie backed away, her eyes narrowing. "What have you *done*?"

"Why's the water hot?" said Laney. "It shouldn't be hot." She reached forwards, dreamlike. As her fingers touched the fountain tap she felt a sudden jolt, like electricity, run up her arm.

A deep boom echoed along the corridor and time seemed to slow down as the tap exploded and the fountain split right off the wall. Water gushed from the exposed pipes in the wall and ceiling, flooding the passage in a matter of seconds.

Laney slipped, landing in the flood. Girls screamed, trying to shield themselves from the jets of spraying water. Jessie elbowed past them to be the first to the door.

Strangely calm, Laney watched them all struggling to get away. Classroom doors were flung open and people ran. The sharp voice of a teacher cut through all the shouting.

Laney got up, the water swirling round her knees. She must look so stupid – her clothes were properly

soaked this time and she could feel her hair sticking to her forehead. She waded over to the door just as the metal water fountain was swept away down the corridor.

Blinding sunshine greeted her as she pushed her way through the exit, followed by a round of applause from all the kids gathered outside. Laney flushed again, feeling everyone staring at her.

"Right everybody, down to the field!" Miss Roderick rushed through the crowd in her red tracksuit. "Go to the place we use for fire drills."

"Why, Miss?" said Claudia. "It's not a fire, is it?"

"Just go where you're told, Claudia." Miss Roderick glared at her. "Hurry up, all of you! Away from the building." She hurried back and forth, rounding everyone up like a sheepdog.

Claudia stopped in front of Laney and fixed her with cat-like eyes. "What did you do in there?" she asked.

"What? Nothing!" Laney flushed. "The fountain broke."

Claudia stared unblinking for a few seconds. Then she turned in one smooth movement and joined the crowd heading for the field.

"The teachers won't blame you, will they?" said Steph nervously. "They might think it was an end-of-term joke."

Water suddenly broke through the doors and

gushed down the path, so the girls hurried away.

"I didn't do anything." Laney's voice shook. "How would I have got the fountain off the wall? There must've been a problem with the pipe or the water pressure or something."

"Well, you should know, as your dad does that sort of thing."

Laney thought for a moment. Her dad was a plumber, fixing pipes and mending leaks. She was sure he'd be able to explain why the pipes broke. What about the water in the bottle? It had looked just like it was boiling. And the tap on the fountain had exploded right at the moment she touched it.

But no one could boil water with their bare hands or make a tap explode just by touching it, could they?

A few hours later, with the water drained and the bottom corridor blocked off, the kids were allowed back in the building to fetch their things to go home. Laney kept her head down. If one more person thanked her for making them miss lessons, she thought she'd scream.

Miss Roderick caught up with her just outside the door. "Wait a minute, please, Laney. I've been told you were standing next to the fountain when it broke. Is there anything you can tell me about how it happened?" Her eyes searched Laney's face.

"It just came off the wall." Laney stared at the ground. She knew she should look at the teacher. She would only look guilty if she avoided her gaze. She had to remember she hadn't done anything wrong.

Well…not on purpose…

She remembered how the water fountain had felt hot under her fingers before the whole thing burst. A sick feeling grew in her stomach and rose into her chest. "Maybe the pipes behind the wall were already broken," she said, trying to steady her voice.

"I hope you're being honest about this, young lady," said Miss Roderick. "Another pupil saw you and thinks you had something to do with it. If I do find out it was you I'll be ringing your parents." She waved a hand for Laney to go.

Laney joined the tide of kids sweeping through the building. Everyone else seemed to be caught up in the end-of-term buzz, laughing and yelling as they swept down the corridor.

"Laney!" Steph had waited for her. "Are you OK? What did Roderick say?"

Laney pulled a face. "She just gave me a warning."

"But you didn't actually do anything…"

Laney could hear the doubt in Steph's voice. "I was nearest to the fountain when it broke. And it sounds like Jessie told them it was me."

The crowd was thinning now and the school

buses were starting their engines.

"You'd better go. You'll miss your bus," said Steph. "Happy birthday, anyway!"

"Thanks. I'll ring you when you're back from holiday." Laney hurried on to the bus to find that it was nearly full. She sat down on a seat as far away from Jessie as possible and took a quick look round.

The bus was divided into the usual groups. A crowd of older kids sat at the back. Laney saw Fletcher Thornbeam look at her and mutter something to his friend.

Craig Mottle, who fancied himself as the class clown, yelled, "Hey, Rivers! You've got the right name for someone who causes a flood. Rivers? Flood? Geddit?"

Laney flushed but before she could reply, Claudia interrupted. "What would be a good name for you then, Craig?" she said smoothly. "Let's ask the whole bus, shall we?"

Craig got the hint and went back to his friends. Laney smiled gratefully at Claudia, but the other girl just stared back for a moment before turning, with cat-like grace, to look out of the window.

The bus lurched away down the road, and the rows of houses and shops turned into open fields. Laney stared at the countryside without seeing it. She tried to go over everything that had happened. The taste of the water in her drinking bottle, the

fountain breaking, Miss Roderick's warning…

She sank back in her seat. This was a rubbish birthday. Her reflection glared back from the window. If Miss Roderick *did* call her dad and Kim, then they might ground her for a very long time. She couldn't get stuck in Skellmore for the whole summer. Nothing ever happened in Skellmore.

Endless fields rolled past, mostly filled with sheep. The sun poured through the smeary windows, making the bus baking hot. Laney wished she had her water bottle, but she'd lost it somewhere in the chaos of the broken pipes and running kids.

The country lane widened as they rounded the corner into Skellmore High Street with its three shops and two park benches. At four o'clock on a Friday, the village was already quite empty and the air was thick with July heat.

The bus stopped and Laney stood up to get off.

"Laney?" Claudia held out a school blazer. "Is this yours?"

Laney recognised it. "Yeah, thanks." Their eyes met for a moment. Laney thought she saw a flash of something in Claudia's face. It could have been pity or annoyance, but it was gone so fast she couldn't be sure.

"Get a move on, Claudia." Fletcher Thornbeam stood behind them, his broad frame filling the aisle. "I think the driver wants to go."

"I'll move when I'm ready." Claudia handed Laney the blazer, her eyes unblinking.

"Yeah, but you know the rules," Fletcher told her, glancing pointedly at Laney. "This isn't the time or the place for a *chat*."

Claudia sighed and muttered something about rules being made to be broken.

The driver called down the bus to them, so Laney picked up her bag and hurried to the steps. Why didn't Fletcher want Claudia to talk to her? Maybe it was because of what happened today. But why would he care? Fletcher was in the year above. He didn't hang around with them at school and she barely saw him in Skellmore.

She stepped off the bus and stopped to put her blazer in her bag. Craig climbed down behind her and bashed into her arm as he went past. Claudia glided smoothly down the bus steps and walked away up the hill. Fletcher headed in the opposite direction, towards his end of the village. Jessie got off last, still shooting dagger looks at Laney.

The bus engine roared and drove away towards the next stop in Gillforth village. The other kids hurried off, leaving Laney alone on the High Street.

The wind picked up the dust on the road and sent it dancing in little swirls. The dried-up red flowers growing in the plant tub outside the corner shop looked like they hadn't seen water for weeks. An

empty crisp packet skittered across the pavement. The place looks parched, Laney thought. She longed for rain.

Dark clouds thickened in the sky and lightning flashed, making her jump. A few seconds later, thunder boomed overhead and rain began to beat down. Laney's hair stuck to her head and water dripped down her face, but she felt happier somehow.

She swung her bag on to her shoulder and walked into the storm.