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opening extract from

Bedlam

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Mother and Dad

Mother says girls shouldn't go out at night. She has a lot of opinions about a lot of things. And when I arrive in her deadly village having not seen her for ages, I'm determined to make a Good Start. But the first thing Mother says when I walk through the door with my suitcases is, 'You've put on so much weight, Lexi.'

I pause. This is not what I, Lexi Juby, need to hear. Good Start, Good Start, Good Start.

'It looks like it's in the genes,' I reply, though Mother, as ever, is slim and immaculate. Her dog is barking wildly in the kitchen. It sounds as mad as if it'd been shut in there with a roomful of cats. Over the din I hear tyres squealing off up the road and turn to watch Dad burn off. All the times I've visited Mother over the years, Dad's never made it past the front gate.

'Hello, Lexi,' says Owen, Mother's boyfriend, watching me from the hallway. He gives me the creeps; he always has. I shouldn't have worn this outfit. I should have put on something four sizes too big. He stoops to kiss me but I pretend I have something stuck in my throat and the moment passes.

'You've grown up,' he says, sucking a sweet. 'Not a

little girl any more. You should be a model.'

'Gee, thanks, I'd love to spend my life chucking up my lunch,' I say. He prises my suitcases from my fingers. 'What a gentleman,' I mutter. Owen's a big chap and quite good-looking. I'd find him much easier to deal with if he was ugly. Mother leads us upstairs. I walk up sideways with my bag bumping against my hip to make it difficult for Owen to see up my skirt. I get a surprise, as Mother's had my room redone. Everything is white; the bedspread, the walls, even the carpet. There's a massive black and white print of Manhattan covering one wall and a full-length mirror by the bed. Mother doesn't know this, but I've always wanted to go to New York.

Owen dumps the suitcases on the carpet. 'I'll leave you girls to bond,' he says.

There's an awkward silence.

'Please try and get on with him this time,' says Mother. 'Owen hates trouble.' This is not true. Owen loves stirring things up between Mother and me, not that he needs to put much effort into it. Let's just say my relationship with the woman who apparently gave birth to me is rocky. I look at myself in the mirror. My face is puffy and my legs look heavier than usual. Either this skirt is unflattering or Mother is right, I have put on weight. This cannot be.

'Try not to mess the room up,' says Mother, eyeing my two enormous suitcases. 'I've only just had it decorated.'

'I don't mess things up,' I say coolly.

Mother clears her throat. 'I'm going to work in an hour, and Owen's got a night shift, so you'll have the place to yourself. But don't use up all the hot water and...' She goes on about not messing up the kitchen or snooping in her room, or using her shampoo, or whatever...

'Whatever,' I say.

Mother is the assistant manager at the one and only hotel in the village and Owen works in immigration security (twenty miles away at Exeter Airport. They've been together for five years and sometimes when I visit they're all over each other, but the next time they'll barely speak. They've split up a few times but so far, unfortunately, they've always got back together.

Mother looks me up and down. 'You'd better change out of that skirt. You make the place look like a red-light district.'

Ouch.

'Tyson needs a walk,' she calls as she leaves the room. 'Make yourself useful while you're here.'

Tyson, Mother's dog, is eight months old and already enormous. I think he's a Doberman crossed with something. He's got sharp teeth and a bad attitude. Personally, I think he's depressed, as he doesn't wag his tail very much. Even so, Mother likes him more than she does most people, even Owen, maybe even Devlin, my brother. Tyson has a bed in the kitchen with 'poochie' written on it. He has three fluffy blankets and,

at the last count, five coats for all weather variations – even more than me. Tyson has dog sun-screen for his ears, is given bottled water to drink in order to avoid the female hormones allegedly present in tap water, and is fed fresh meat from the butcher's. He is groomed once a fortnight at the pets' parlour and attends behavioural classes once a week. Mother takes him to the vet if he as much as sneezes. He has a large cardboard box filled with revolting chewed-up toys. Despite all this, he's a miserable animal, because for most of the day, whilst Mother's at work, he's shut up, howling, in the conservatory. It must drive the neighbours mad. I'm not keen on dogs, myself. I don't like anything which eats its own poo.

The door shuts and I am alone. I listen as the shower comes on, the other side of the wall. I stare at Manhattan. As I look, the black lines of the buildings merge with the grey and white sky and things go blurry. I swallow and breathe deeply and slowly. I'm not the crying type. It makes my eyes shrink and my nose swell, and I like to look my best. There's no need to be homesick, I tell myself. I'm only here for a couple of weeks; then I can go home. Just then the door swings open. Mother is wearing a fluffy white towel and nothing else. She has quite good muscle tone for an old person.

'Walk Tyson before dark,' she orders. 'I don't want you going out on your own at night.'

'I see,' I say, fiddling with an eyelash. At home I'm

always out at night. I love night. I'm a night person.

'There's been a few funny types passing through,' Mother says. 'Tramps and gypsies and foreigners. Weirdos. This village isn't what it was.' She looks at me like she expects me to say something.

'That sounds pretty racist,' I mutter before I can stop myself. And from the look on her face, I think I have officially blown my Good Start.

One afternoon, two weeks ago and without any warning, Dad switches off the TV.

Uh oh, I think, this is big.

TV is on 24/7 in our house.

'Lexi, love.' Dad clears his throat and rubs his cheek. The bristles crackle under his palm. He's calling me 'love'; therefore he has something bad to tell me. I wait, giving him the evil eye. Not many people like my dad. He's done some dodgy stuff in the past and been in trouble with the police a few times, but says that's all behind him now. He's got a short fuse but he's stuck by Devlin and me, which is more than I can say for some people.

Dad shifts around in his chair, clears his throat. 'Lexi ... we need to talk.' He looks worried. I'm intrigued. What's he done now?

'If it's about college, I'm going no matter what you say.' I glare at him. 'I'll earn money in the evenings.'

'It's not about college, I'm proud you're going to college. Did I ever say you shouldn't go?' Dad frowns.

'You've implied it,' I say. 'You said when you were sixteen you were earning a wage...'

'Lexi,' Dad cuts in. 'This isn't about college. It's just that...'

'What?' I'm really curious now. I don't think I've ever seen Dad look so worried. He won't stop rubbing his face. He starts saying something, then changes his mind. This has to be about a woman. Maybe he's finally found a new girlfriend and he wants her to move in...

'I've got a proposition for you,' he says.

'No,' I say. I'd have to meet her first, at least.

'Ha, ha,' says Dad.

'Forget it.'

'You don't know what it is yet,' says Dad.

'Yes I do,' I say, and am surprised at the look of horror that passes over Dad's face.

'You what?'

'What's her name?' I ask, making a grab for the remote, but he holds it up out of my reach. He breathes out in relief.

'This isn't about a woman, Lexi.' At this I start to get that familiar sinking feeling. Things, for once, are going my way. I'm starting college to do A-levels in a month (psychology, communications and English) and I'm finally, definitely over my ex, Chas Parsons. And now this. Whatever it is, I don't want to know. I get up to go.

'Sit,' orders Dad.

I was wrong. This isn't big, it's enormous. I sit down, glaring at Dad and folding my arms. When he comes

out with it, it's worse than I imagined.

'How would you like to stay with your mother for a few days?' he says, kneading his eye sockets so he doesn't have to look at me. My jaw drops. I shut it quickly. It's not my look.

'I wouldn't,' I say. 'I hate her.'

Mother walked out on us when I was two years old and Devlin was four. We don't get on. We see each other three or four times a year and this is more than enough.

'I need to go away,' says Dad, not meeting my eye.

'Fine, I can stay here,' I say.

'No can do, I'm afraid,' says Dad. 'I'll be gone for at least three weeks. You can't be here on your own for that long.'

'You said just a few days.' I pick imaginary specks from my jumper. 'And I wouldn't be on my own; I'd have Devlin.'

But Dad goes on to tell me that he's already set some work up for Devlin with Uncle Petey in Kent. He also says that Mother has already agreed to have me.

'Lexi?'

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to France,' says Dad. 'I'm doing some business with a wine merchant.'

Dad buys stuff and sells it over the internet. Even so, this is all a bit fishy. For one thing, Mother and Dad aren't into cosy chats behind my back, and for another, Devlin, a.k.a motormouth, has said nothing about this to me.

'Is this dodgy?' I ask.

'Of course not,' says Dad, frowning.

He must think I'm stupid. 'Uncle' Petey is a crook; he's a mate of Dad's from way back. I didn't even know they were still in touch. I dread to think what Devlin's getting involved in.

'Why can't I come?' I ask. 'I've passed GCSE French.'

'This is work,' says Dad. 'Not a bloody school trip.' He's annoyed. Most people would back off at this stage. Dad's temper is legendary round here. However, I am not most people.

'You're up to something dodgy,' I say. 'Tell me what all this is really about.'

'Lexi,' says Dad. 'I swear I'm not doing anything illegal.' His voice breaks up and he looks away. 'Quite the opposite.'

I walk out of the room.

Gutted.

The Howling

People (Mother; Dad; Moz, my best mate, to name but a few) have all told me that I'm very up and down. I'm a teenager, I'm supposed to have mood swings, but no one seems to take that into consideration. I get happy, I get sad, end of story. Is that so unusual? But Moz says most people operate somewhere between the two. This sounds like no-man's-land to me. I like a bit of passion and excitement in life. I have to admit, though that right at this moment, I'm pretty down. I shut myself in my white room and wait for Mother and Owen to leave for work. Minutes after they've gone, there's scrabbling at my door and the dog barges in. Mother has bought him a new collar; it's silver, with studs in the shape of hearts. He's about to leap on to my bed when I step in his way.

'Beat it, stink-hound.' Tyson growls, wrinkling his snout and flashing his teeth. He's got so big so quickly. Last time I saw him, he was just a mad puppy. He bounds towards me and before I can stop him, he's reared up on his hind legs and landed his paws on my shoulders. I get a waft of his hot, stale breath before I push him off. So much for the behavioural classes. He

plonks himself down in the middle of the floor and begins to lick his intimate parts. 'This is my room now,' I say, showing him the door. 'Wash your dirty dog's bottom somewhere else.' To my surprise he slinks off, and a few minutes later I hear his claws on the tiles downstairs, so I decide to have a proper look round up here.

Mother and Owen keep their bedroom very tidy. It's painted red and cream with big flower prints. It looks like something out of a magazine, apart from Mother's eye mask and the earplugs she wears every night. Mother has always been obsessive about sleep. I open a cupboard and find it rammed with Mother's potions. She's got everything: expensive perfumes, packs of unopened make-up, hair dyes and treatments. I wish I could afford this stuff. Her clothes are all ironed and on hangers in the built-in wardrobes. I avoid touching Owen's things because I don't want to contaminate myself. The mirror is a good one, it makes me look thinner than the one in my room, but my hair needs a wash...

OUCH!

Clutching my calf, I see Tyson's hairy back shooting out the doorway. 'I'll get you put down for this,' I yell after him, collapsing on the bed to examine my leg. Blood beads from the skin and it hurts! I hope I don't get rabies or worms or some other revolting dog disease. I limp to the bathroom to find something antiseptic but end up getting distracted because in here

the shelves are loaded with yet more beauty products. After a hot shower I'm not feeling any better because Mother's expensive shampoo has made my hair really dry. I put on my pyjamas, arm myself with a rolled-up magazine and go downstairs to make a sandwich. Tyson darts out to meet me and I raise the magazine, ready to wallop him if need be, but he scampers off to the front door.

'I'm not taking you for a walk, you big creep.' Tyson wuffs at me. He kind of reminds me of someone. He's got the same bad attitude as my dad. I wonder how Dad's doing in France. He says he might even get into the wine-selling business full time after this trip. I'm not so sure. I think he's up to something, and this wine thing is just a cover. I'll find out eventually; I always do.

Tyson won't leave me alone the entire time I'm making my sandwich. Oh God. I suppose he needs a crap. I edge round him, worried he might nip me again, until I reach the front door. I hold it wide open.

'Go on, then.'

Tyson streaks out of the door and flies up the path like he's after a gold rabbit. I have no wish to watch him do his business so I go back indoors and finish making my sandwich. But it's half an hour later and I'm lying on the sofa flicking through the telly channels before I remember him. I open the front door but can't see him anywhere. It's dark. All I can hear is the buzzing of the giant electricity pylon, which stands in a paddock just behind the house.

'TYSON.' After a minute I nip back inside for a coat, swearing under my breath, but the only one on the hook belongs to Owen and it stinks of aftershave and sweat, so I go outside in just my pyjamas and bare feet. I walk down the garden path and look up and down the deserted street, the tarmac cold beneath my toes. Everyones doors are shut and curtains are pulled tight, but I imagine people spying on me from behind every curtain. Bewlea is that sort of place. Mother's house is in the old council estate at the bottom of the village. It's the last one on the street, number fifty-eight.

'Tyson,' I call lamely, wrapping my arms around myself because it's chilly out here. He could have gone anywhere. I'm annoyed now. This is my first night and I've already messed up. But how was I to know the dog would run off? There's a big forest just beyond the village. It stretches for miles and miles. I hope Tyson hasn't gone there; I'll never find him. I sigh. Mother is going to go mad if he doesn't come back. She might even think I've lost him on purpose. I stare at the big full moon. Dad says people go a bit crazy on a full moon. He says women have babies and the police put more men out on the streets to deal with the loonies. He says people get charged up and do crazy things.

I hear light footsteps and spin round to see a dark figure dart out from a garden up the road and sprint down the road. There's a large dog bounding at his side.

'TYSON,' I bellow, rushing out into the road. As he

passes under a street light, I see a bloke with long hair belting along with what I think is my mother's dog bounding behind.

'HEY,' I shout. 'You've got my dog.' The man glances back at me but keeps going. I hobble after them, the asphalt cutting into my feet. The dog is haring along with such obvious enjoyment it makes me think it isn't Tyson after all.

'Hey!'

The figure seems to pour over the high wall at the end of the road and the dog springs up after him. Then they've gone and I'm left looking at the empty street. I'd never catch them, even if I was wearing my trainers. That bloke ought to be in the Olympics. I stare at the spot I last saw him. He jumped over that wall no problem. So things really do happen in this deadly place after all. Thieves don't really worry me. My brother, Devlin, has a thieving habit. He's been at it since he was about seven. My feet are going numb with cold. I'd better go back. Should I, God forbid, call the police? But I'm not one hundred per cent sure that was Tyson. He was too far away to tell for sure. And there was something definitely un-Tyson-ish about the way he was leaping around with such dog-joy.

I wait up until Mother gets home, going out to check the front garden every ten minutes in case Tyson comes back, but Mother's not back before midnight and by then I'm absolutely knackered. Owen is due back even later. Mother looks surprised to find me stretched out

on the sofa.

'Tyson bit me,' I say before she's even taken her jacket off.

'What?'

'And I'm afraid he ran off. I've been out calling but he's been gone since seven. I'm a bit worried he's been stolen.' Good. I've said it. Now the only way is up. Mother stares at me for a moment, then she does up all her jacket buttons again. She goes outside and calls for him. She's out there for twenty minutes before she returns, alone.

'You NEVER let him out without a lead,' she says, her eyes wide with worry.

'I'm sorry, I didn't know. I didn't want to go near him after he BIT me,' I say. 'Look.' I show her my bite mark but she barely glances at it.

'Oh, Lexi,' she says, her face crumpling up, and I feel really, really bad.

'I really think he was stolen,' I say. 'By a scruffy man with long hair. I saw them running down the street.'

'Are you sure it was Tyson?'

'It was dark,' I say. 'But I think so.'

'I think you're lying,' says Mother, her face hardening. 'I think you deliberately let him run off and all this about a thief is just to let you off the hook...'

'No.' I try to defend myself but it's no good. She's going for me in a big way. I watch her lips moving and let her words bounce off my skin. Her lipstick is miraculously still intact after a five-hour shift. I wonder

what sealer she uses? Eventually Mother stops bitching at me and goes to bed. It's late, after all, and she cannot function without her nine hours of shut-eye. I drag myself up to bed after her but I can't sleep. After a while I get out of bed and go to the window. I open it and breathe in the night air and look up at the moon. I didn't mean to upset Mother. I never do, but always seem to manage it.

I hear something over the buzz and crackle of the electricity pylon. It's coming from far away, from the forest up beyond the village. It's like moaning, or wailing. The noise rises and falls with the wind and as I listen, a prickle of cold runs up my back.

It's dogs howling, a long way away. It sounds spooky and kind of sad. They must be howling at the moon. I don't blame them, really; right now I feel like howling myself.