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Opening extract from

Lilah May's Manic Days

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To Mum, with love

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CHAPTER ONE

'You should ring Bindi, love,' Mum says. 'It's the right thing to do. You two were such good friends!'

I sigh. It's nearly the half-term holiday and I don't know what's right or wrong any more.

I'm not even sure who I am.

It's been a rubbish start to autumn. Mum and Dad are a bit stressed at the moment and, although I know why, it's starting to make me angry. I have a slight problem with anger, you see. It doesn't take much for me to flare up into a rage or to start snapping at Mum or sulking with Dad.

My parents are not, and never have been, exactly 'normal'.

My mother is a clown. Yes, really. She entertains kids at children's parties and she used to be good at it until our family kind of fell to pieces. Then recently

she decided to spend more time with me and go to extra yoga classes to keep herself calm, but over the last few weeks I can see that she's getting restless and really wants to go back full-time to her job as a clown. My dad tames lions and he's quite good at 'taming' *me* when I get angry but he spends most of his waking hours obsessing about big cats. Sometimes I wish I had a furry mane and a big set of teeth and claws because then he might pay me more attention.

We got a bit hopeful because my brother – Jay – rang up after two years of us not knowing whether he was alive or dead.

I asked him if he forgave me for what I did and the line made this loud humming noise and he wasn't there any more.

We couldn't call him back but the police have been trying to trace the phone box he called from.

Jay still hasn't come home.

And Bindi?

She let me down.

Big time.

Imagine the worst thing that a best friend could do to you, and then triple it. Well, that's what Bindi did to me.

Groo.

***

'Why won't you just ring her up?' Mum says again. 'Friendship is really important, especially at your age.'

We're in the kitchen and Mum has come back from her yoga class and is ready to go to work later. She's standing at the cooker in her clown outfit – today it consists of black and white checked baggy trousers, big, black, lace-up shoes, a frilly white blouse with giant black buttons on and a frizzy red wig which sticks out in tufts on each side.

I glare up from where I've been staring at the television guide for about half an hour. I couldn't actually tell you what's on. All the time I've been staring at the black print there's been a boiling feeling of heat rising up from my feet to my head whenever I think of my so-called best mate Bindi. Even though we've been distracted because of Jay calling, all the time it's been burning away beneath the surface.

I'm fuming.

Maybe I should start keeping my Anger Diary again. I've been *too* angry to write it for the past fortnight.

'Lilah,' my mother is saying. 'Did you hear me? I

said you ought to ring Bindi and talk it through with her. She was always such a nice little friend to you.'

I grit my teeth and take a deep breath like Dad has taught me to. I'm supposed to count before speaking in an effort to stop the anger bursting out of my mouth like water from a broken tap.

'Yeah, a nice little boyfriend-stealing friend,' I mutter down at my lap.

Mum hears me and turns around with a fish slice in one hand and the other hand on her hip. It's kind of weird having a clown giving you a serious look. Mum's lipstick is painted on in the shape of a big, red, smiling mouth but her eyes behind the white panda circles look stern and concerned. 'Adam Carter wasn't your boyfriend, Lilah,' she says. 'I think you're being a bit unfair.'

I scrape my chair back and huff off upstairs to my bedroom and slam the door. Then I feel guilty because Mum was making my favourite, fish pie, for dinner and I know she's all worried about losing work during the recession so I creep back downstairs a few minutes later and shuffle sideways back onto my chair in the hope that she won't comment on it.

Benjie turns round three times under my chair, bites the end of his tail and goes to sleep. Sometimes I

think that Benjie is my only true friend. Dad got him for me to help with anger and it's true – I'd never, *ever* take out my anger on this sweet, furry puppy.

Mum spoons out the pie, covers it in peas and we sit at the kitchen table with the lamp on, steam wafting up from our plates and the radio blabbering away in the background.

'Dad's on his way home,' she says. 'Samson hurt his paw.'

Samson is one of my Dad's lions at the zoo. Dad says that lions keep him sane. That and going out every Friday for his boys' night out at the pub.

Mum goes to her yoga class every Wednesday evening and comes home all tired and bendy.

And me?

I write in my diary or look at old family photos or listen to Slipknot turned up way too loud.

When I was twelve I used to confide in Jay, until he went all strange and stopped wanting to hang out with his little sister.

After Jay disappeared I talked about my feelings to Bindi.

But that seems a long time ago now.

I know I ought to speak to her but even looking at her makes me feel sick.

There's so much uncertainty lurking about everywhere.

I worry that Jay won't come back.

I worry that I'll hate Bindi forever after what she's done.

I worry that my anger will get out of control again.

'Lilah,' says Mum. She throws our plates into the sink and pulls off her itchy, red wig to rake her fingers through her short, blonde hair. It stands up on end like a demented hedgehog. 'Give Bindi a call. Talk it through. For me?'

She has picked up the phone and is holding it out in my direction.

I take it, grit my teeth and try to calm my pounding heart.

Then I take the phone upstairs, with Mum wishing me luck and making thumbs-up signs in my direction.

I sit on my bed and look at the picture of Bindi and me at last year's school ball.

She's got her arm round my shoulders and we're grinning stupidly. I'm in a blue, strappy, silk dress and she's wearing a gorgeous red sari that her mum made for her.

I look carefully at the photo to see if I can spot anything in Bindi's eyes that might give me a clue as to what happened only a few months after that photo was taken.

I can't see anything there, though, other than friendship and laughter. She just looks the same as always, eyes sparkling and that big, wide grin and perfect white teeth.

I bury my head in the pillow and throw the phone across the room.

