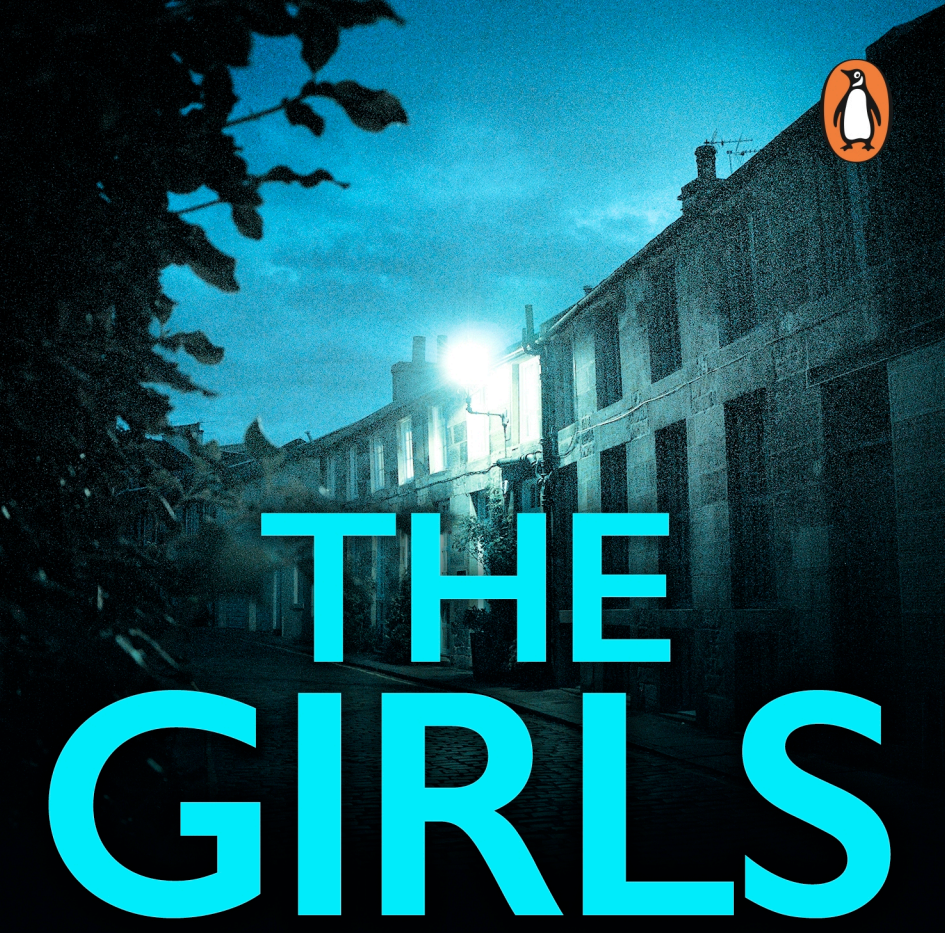


# THE GIRLS

You like your neighbours.
So why don't you feel safe?

LISA JEWELL

THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# THE GIRLS

Copyrighted Material

*Also available by Lisa Jewell*

Ralph's Party
Thirtynothing
One-Hit Wonder
Vince & Joy
A Friend of the Family
31 Dream Street
The Truth About Melody Browne
After the Party
The Making of Us
Before I Met You
The House We Grew Up In
The Third Wife
I Found You
Then She Was Gone
Watching You
The Family Upstairs
Invisible Girl
The Night She Disappeared

**Copyrighted Material**

# THE GIRLS

LISA JEWELL



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK

First published by Century 2015
Published in paperback by Arrow Books 2016
Reissued in Penguin Books 2021
001

Copyright © Lisa Jewell, 2015

Drawings on pp. 12, 14, 21, 22, 81 by Amelie and Evie Gordon
Map on p. vi-vii by Darren Bennett

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–099–59947–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC
www.fsc.org
FSC® C018179

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

Dedicated to all my neighbours on
the C&G Gardens

Copyrighted Material




Copyrighted Material




Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

**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?'


Copyrighted Material

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


Copyrighted Material

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.'


Copyrighted Material

'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.


Copyrighted Material

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


Copyrighted Material

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.


Copyrighted Material

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.


Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

# BEFORE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

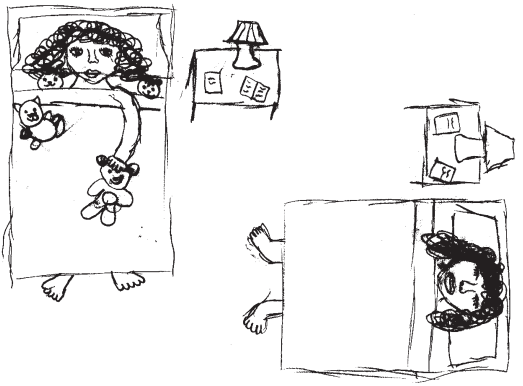
# One

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:


Copyrighted Material



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


Copyrighted Material

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.


Copyrighted Material

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


Copyrighted Material

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


Copyrighted Material

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


Copyrighted Material

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.


Copyrighted Material

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.'


Copyrighted Material

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.


Copyrighted Material

# Two

Dear Daddy,

How are you? When can we see you? I miss you so much. Well, we've been here for ten days now. Granny came for lunch on Sunday. She made lots of weird faces. I don't think she liked it very much. She said that Mum shouldn't let us out in the garden on our own, that there might be murderers and paedophiles hiding in the bushes! She said she'd heard a story about a young girl being found dead in a garden like ours a long time ago. And that everyone would be looking in our back windows all the time. She's so silly sometimes!

We went for a walk around the garden after she left and me and Grace mucked around on the swings and stuff. There was nobody out there. But then yesterday after school I could hear voices in the garden. Children's


Copyrighted Material

voices. And I looked out the window and I could see kids running about, some others on bikes.

Anyway, me and Grace went out, just to look. We stood under the tree outside our house so that nobody could see us and we spied on them. They were kind of our age, I think. Mainly girls. Some of the girls looked a bit strange, wearing really weird clothes, patterned things, one had really really long hair, literally down to her bum, another one had shaved off bits and another one had dreadlocks. There was another girl who was much smaller than the others but she acted like she was probably the boss of the gang. She was really pretty with silky blond hair that looked like it had been straightened because it was so shiny. She was wearing normal clothes, jeans and stuff. And then a boy. Mixed-race. Kind of good-looking.

This is what they look like:




Copyrighted Material

They weren't really doing much. The smaller girl was on rollerblades. The boy was on a bike. The other three girls were just kind of hanging about and then one of them got on to the back bit of the boy's bike and they were cycling around and I said to Grace, Let's go to the playground. Let's go on the swings. Because I really wanted to get closer to them all and see them properly. But she said, I'm going indoors. I hate it out here. It's cliquey and full of stuck-up kids.

But I don't think they are stuck-up really. I think they're just all different kinds of kids, that's all. And they probably think the same about us. Stuck-up girls! Hiding under trees! Staring at them!

So we went inside then because I felt too shy to stay out there on my own. It's raining today so the garden's empty. Is it raining where you are? Do you have a




Copyrighted Material

garden? Are you allowed out of bed? Are you even in a bed? I wish I knew more. I wish I could understand why you're there and what they're doing to you and how you're feeling. I wish we could come and see you. Are you lonely? Do you remember? Do you remember anything? I've drawn you a picture of me in case you can't remember my face any more.

And if you can't remember what Grace looks like, it's basically the same as me except her lips are fuller and her hair is two shades darker. And she's got a little freckle by her eye that looks like a teardrop.

I love you, Daddy. Get well soon.

xxxxx

'OK, girls.' Adele put out her hands to gather up the exercise books handed to her by her children. 'Lunchtime.'

'What are we having?' asked Fern, uncurling herself from her usual position on the blue armchair, scratching at the stubble of her shaved temples.

'Soup,' said Adele.

'What sort?' asked Willow, uncrossing her legs and getting to her feet.

'Chicken noodle.'

'Can I go to the shops and get myself a sandwich?' asked Catkin, her hands folded into the cuffs of her jumper and held to her mouth, pensively.

'No.'


Copyrighted Material

'Please. I can buy it with my own money.' Her blue eyes were wide and beseeching.

'No. I don't want you going anywhere. We won't see you again.'

'Oh, come on, where the hell am I going to go in the middle of the day?'

'I have no idea, Catkin. You are an eternal mystery to me. But I'm not letting you go to the shops. And you should be saving your money for things you actually need rather than wasting it on expensive sandwiches.'

'It's my money.'

'Yes. I know. And it's good for you to learn to budget and prioritise. And while there's a huge pan of perfectly good soup on the other side of that door, it is crazy for you to waste your money on crappy shop-bought sandwiches full of additives.'

Catkin rolled her eyes and dropped her baby-animal stance, her arms falling angrily to her sides. 'Fine,' she said. 'Bring on the fucking soup.'

Adele and her girls had their lunch in the kitchen, loosely arranged around the big farmhouse table that was one of the few things left behind from her in-laws' inhabitation.

It was the same table that Leo and his brothers had sat around as boys and it still bore scars and marks left there forty or more years ago, added to now by Leo's own children.


Copyrighted Material

Catkin sat with her long legs stretched out along the bench, her back a C-shaped hump, causing her to turn her head forty-five degrees in order to reach her soup bowl. Fern sat straight-backed as always, rhythmically spooning the soup into her mouth, her body language giving nothing away, her ears taking in every last thing. Willow, meanwhile, kept up a running commentary, her soup getting cold in front of her, a habit she'd had since toddlerhood. In fact, until she was about nine years old Adele had spoon-fed her, slipping the spoon between her lips every time she paused for breath just to get the blessed food into her.

'What's for pudding?' she asked now.

'Pudding?' said Adele. 'You haven't started your soup yet.'

'Yes, but the thought of pudding will incentivise me to eat my soup.'

'No, stopping talking for more than thirty seconds is what you need to do. And anyway, there is no pudding.'

Willow gasped and put her hand dramatically against her heart. 'Are you serious?'

'Well, there's crumble but you won't eat crumble, so…'

'Not even any biscuits?'

'Just those oaty ones you don't like.'

'I'll eat an oaty biscuit,' she said. 'If that's all there is.'

'That's all there is.'


Copyrighted Material

'Right then.' She picked up her spoon and started shovelling soup into her mouth.

Fern looked at her in horror.

'Slow down,' said Adele, 'you're splashing it everywhere.'

'What can we do after lunch?' asked Willow, wiping soup splashes from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Adele looked at the time. Then she checked the timetable taped to the front of her folder. 'Well, it's double maths this afternoon, so it might be good for you all to burn off a bit of energy. Why don't you go out in the garden for half an hour?'

'It's wet,' said Catkin.

'No,' said Adele. 'It's damp. If you were at school it would be deemed playground weather.'

'Yes, but we're not at school, are we? Precisely because you didn't like the way mainstream schools herd children around like cattle.'

Adele sighed. 'In which case, do whatever you want. But no TV. And back here at one fifteen please. *With your brains switched on*.'

The girls left the table, grabbing oaty biscuits and apples on their way. Adele tidied up the soup bowls and wiped the crumbs from the ripped-apart bread rolls into the palm of her hand before dropping them in the bin.

Adele had been home-schooling her children since


Copyrighted Material

Catkin was five. She and Leo had decided to take her out of school halfway through her reception year when she'd come home in tears after being told off for running in the playground. For a while they'd seriously considered moving to the countryside, putting Catkin into one of those wonderful little schools with woods and fields and pigs and goats. But Leo's revolting father had refused to sell them his half of the flat: 'It's my little bit of London! I couldn't sleep at night without my little bit of London!'

They'd been to see Montessori schools, Steiner schools, some of the woollier local private schools, but they hadn't managed to make the finances work. So Adele had given up her job as an education coordinator at an arts centre – it had barely paid her anything anyway – spent a month familiarising herself with the foundation stage of the national curriculum and become her child's teacher.

Then had come Fern and then Willow and what had started off as an experiment became a way of life. Not everyone approved. Adele's sister Zoe, for one, thought it verged on child abuse. 'But they won't know how to play with other children,' she'd said. 'And they won't know what's in and what's out and everyone will think they're weirdos!'

'Do you think they're weirdos?' Adele had asked in reply.

'No. Of course not. I think they're lovely. But I'm a


Copyrighted Material

middle-aged woman. I'm not another child!'

'They've got the garden,' Adele would counter. 'They can do all the peer-to-peer stuff they need to do out there. It's just like a playground.'

'Except it's not. It's just not. It's just another weird thing that makes them different from other children. I couldn't live like that.' She'd said this more than once. 'Everyone being able to see in. Never being able to go and sit in your garden, on your own, in your bra. Always having to talk to people.'

It was an acquired taste, Adele supposed. Sometimes she did wish she could take a blanket and a book outside and sit and read undisturbed. Sometimes she did resent other people's children running through her freshly hoovered flat. But the benefits far outweighed the difficulties. And for the girls it was crucial, the lynchpin to their entire existence. Without the garden her sister would probably be right, they would be odd and out on a limb. The other children were their connection to the mainstream world. And, of course, as a world heard about only through the anecdotes of friends, school did sometimes become a romanticised concept and each of the girls had on occasion begged her to let them go to school. When she was eleven years old, Fern had even taken to walking up the hill to Dylan's school to meet him at three thirty just to feel that she was experiencing the first flush of independence like other children her age.


Copyrighted Material

Yes. Home-schooled children. Communal living. All very alternative. Verging on controversial. But to Adele, entirely and completely normal.

At 1.15 p.m. she went to the back gate and called the girls in for afternoon school. They came, her brood, her gaggle, with their unkempt hair and their unworldly clothes, their brains filled with everything she'd ever taught them, their stomachs filled with food she'd cooked from scratch. The babies that she'd never had to hand over to the world.

For half an hour they studied mindfulness. It had appeared on the national curriculum this year. Adele had been delighted. She'd been effectively teaching them mindfulness skills for years; she'd called it meditation although that hadn't been quite accurate.

The girls arranged themselves into their usual layout, long legs outstretched in wash-faded leggings and hand-me-down jeans, scrubbed faces in mindful repose, wearing holey old jumpers and unbranded sweatshirts from the charity shops along the Finchley Road – nothing from Primark, nothing from New Look, nothing ethically unsound. The girls understood. They'd watched the documentaries about the sweatshops, seen the news reports about the factory fire in Mumbai that had killed all those people. They knew fashion wasn't as important as people. They weren't vain. They weren't shallow. No smartphones. No Facebook. No Instagram. All too likely to turn


Copyrighted Material

them into narcissists. They understood. They sneered at the posturing and posing of their contemporaries, the twelve-year-old girls in mascara puckering into camera lenses, the misguided fools on talent shows. They got it, her girls. They absolutely got it.

They weren't weird, Adele thought now, looking at them in turn. They were magnificent.


Copyrighted Material

# Three

Pip stared up at the girl standing in front of her, squinting against the low sun. It was the blonde girl, the one who looked like the leader of the garden clique. She'd been watching them from a distance and then suddenly got on her bike and cycled towards them with some urgency. 'Hi.'

'Hi,' said Pip.

'Have you just moved in?' the girl asked in a flat monotone.

'No,' said Grace. 'We moved in last month.'

'Oh. Right. Haven't seen you before. Who are you?'

'I'm Pip.'

'Pip?'

She nodded.

'Is that your real name?'


Copyrighted Material

Pip blinked.

'Seriously? You're called Pip?'

She felt her cheeks fill with warm blood.

'It's her nickname,' said Grace. 'Short for Pipsqueak. What we called her when she was a baby.'

'So, what's your real name?' The blonde girl stared at her impatiently as if this conversation had been going on for long enough even though she'd been the one who'd started it.

'Lola,' she said.

'God, that's a much nicer name. Why don't you ask to be called that instead?'

Grace spoke for her again. 'The woman next door where we used to live had a really yappy dog called Lola. It put us all off.'

'But still,' she said, 'you don't live there any more. You could change it back now.'

Pip shrugged. She still thought of the yappy dog when she thought of Lola. She still thought of the woman next door and the thing that had happened and, besides, she'd always been Pip. She *was* Pip.

The girl stood astride her bike, a big black thing with gears. Her fine blonde hair was tucked behind one double-pierced ear; her thin hands gripped the handlebars possessively. She wore denim shorts with pocket bags hanging out and a grey sweatshirt that was as wide as it was long; she had narrow feet in bright white Converse and blunt-cut fingernails.


Copyrighted Material

'What's your name, then?' Pip asked her.

'Tyler.'

'Tyler like the boy's name?'

'Yeah.'

Pip nodded. She looked like a Tyler.

'Where do you live?' asked Tyler.

'That flat there,' said Grace.

Tyler nodded again. 'Where do you go to school?'

'Mount Elizabeth.'

'Are you twins?' She narrowed her eyes at them.

'No.'

'You look like twins. Are you sure you're not twins?'

'Positive,' said Grace.

'I know someone at Mount Elizabeth. She says you're allowed to smoke. Is that true?'

'No!'

'Or maybe she said swear. Are you allowed to swear?'

'I don't think so.'

Pip tried to think of something to say. But Tyler had lost interest, and was scouring the gardens from left to right. She stopped when she saw a boy in the distance; then she pressed her feet to the pedals and propelled the huge bike across the garden towards him, her hair blowing out behind her.

Pip watched for a while. It was the good-looking boy, the tall one with bobbly golden-tipped Afro hair and green eyes. The boy's gaze fixed on to Tyler. Pip


Copyrighted Material

watched him pull off his school tie and absentmindedly roll it into a ball which he tucked into the pocket of his posh school blazer. Tyler said something to him and dismounted from the bike. Then they walked slowly in the opposite direction, towards the square of benches at the furthest end of the garden, Tyler wheeling the bike, the boy strolling with his hands in his pockets, the pair of them deep in conversation.

Pip and Grace looked at one another. Grace shrugged. 'What was that all about?'

'Maybe she was just being friendly?'

Grace shook her head. 'Weird.'

'She's pretty.'

'Skinny,' said Grace dismissively.

'I guess.'

Pip stared into the anemone-shaped head of a clover flower growing by her feet. She pinched it between her thumb and index finger and then brought the honey smell to her nose. A sharp breeze circled the half-moon of the garden, feathering the tendrils of weeping willows, biting through the wool of Pip's jumper. The last slice of setting sun fell behind a chimney stack and the temperature dropped.

'I'm going in,' said Grace.

'Me too.'

Pip turned briefly to look at Tyler and the boy again. They were sitting side by side on a bench. The bike lay flat on the grass, its back wheel still turning


Copyrighted Material