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Opening extract from

Central Park Showdown

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Evie Brooks in Central Park Showdown

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Chapter 1

I started school today. So did the stye on my eye. I went to bed with two normal eyes and woke up this morning with an ugly reddish-yellowish lump protruding over my left eyelid. Kylie, my best friend here in New York, dropped by before breakfast. Once she had recovered from the shock of the grossness factor (that took about twenty minutes), she set about finding a solution. I rejected her *eye-patches can be cute* suggestion straight away. Ultimately, she dabbed some make-up on me to try to disguise the monstrosity. Putting her hand on my shoulder, she marched me to the mirror to inspect the results and announced, 'See! It looks like a teeny pimple now.'

I think she convinced me because I was *very, very* willing to be convinced. When we went into the kitchen for breakfast, the first thing my uncle Scott said was, 'Is your school uniform skirt supposed to be that short?'

And the second was, 'Is that a stye on your eye?'

I nodded glumly.

'You wouldn't even notice the stye,' Scott said.

Yeah, right! I didn't dignify that with an answer. I bet Scott has never had a stye. He's the kind of person who always looks perfect, even when he's a mess. I look like I can't even spell *perfect* and the horrible boil on my eye made me feel as if I'd been inducted into the *Untouchable* caste in Indian society. My major-league-important, very first day at a new school would be devoted to assuring my classmates that they won't catch anything if they breathe in the same room as me. I knew I was over-reacting, but that didn't stop me from doing it.

My school skirt *is* freakishly short, about half the size of my Irish school uniform skirt. This new skirt doesn't do a lot for my baby-giraffe-type legs. Kylie reassured Scott that soon it will be like totally automatic for me to hold down my skirt on windy days. That seemed to faze him a bit. Kylie is one of only two people who can do that to him. The other is Virpi, his

chain-smoking Finnish bookkeeper with a sick sense of humour. At least she has a sense of humour.

Scott obviously couldn't think of anything to say in response to the windy days comment so he busied himself with toasting pop-tarts, which I was too nervous to eat. I nibbled them around the edges like a picky mouse. It's not every day you start school in Manhattan. I'd been so ecstatic when I landed a place at St Sebastian's, the same school that Kylie and my second-best friend in New York, Greg, attend. Before I came to New York and met Greg, I'd never had a real friend who was a boy before, although I don't think of him as a boy. He's just who he is – Greg. I always think of his older brother, Finn, as 'Boy' with a capital 'B', but I wouldn't exactly consider Finn to be my *friend*. He's not my enemy either. He's … never mind. I had enough going on with starting a new school without having Finn occupy lots of space in my head. From the second I opened my eyes (or rather the eye I could open) this morning, I had an uncomfortable, semi-sour feeling in my gut, like facing an exam you are so unprepared for, you can't remember which subject is being tested.

Ben, Scott's dog, whimpered in protest as we left the apartment without him. I made a big fuss about scratching his floppy ears (even though they smell a little ripe right now) because he didn't take any notice at all of my stye, which is more than I can say for Scott. Animals aren't bothered about the way you look.

St Sebastian's is a sprawling, red brick building on West 87th Street. Most of the kids walk or arrive by bus. A handful are dropped off in those sleek, black Lincoln cars that are so common in New York, the ones with the private drivers. There are three nail salons and a glove store across the street from the school. Kylie and I arrived a little early so we hung out in the glove store for a while. Seriously, the only items the store sells are gloves. You can't buy a scarf or a hat or even mittens. Sitting in the display window was a solitary pair of wrist-length red lace fingerless gloves worn by alabaster-white fake hands, clasped together as if in prayer. They can be yours for two hundred and seventy-nine dollars. That's the 'sale' price. Kylie told me she could make an identical pair for a couple of dollars in about twenty minutes. I'm sure she could. She's very talented at crafts, and, at being confident.

Greg met us at the black railings near the school entrance. He looked different in his school uniform; more grown-up, but bizarrely he also seemed shorter. He didn't mention my stye, but I caught him sneaking glances at it. Twice. I felt relieved that his brother, Finn, has finished middle school so at least, I didn't have to worry about bumping into him in my

current condition. It's not that I dislike Finn. He just doesn't bring out the best in me, or even the average.

Greg and Kylie steered me through the many corridors (which Americans call hallways) to deposit me in a large room marked J101 for something called '*Orientation for New Students*.' There was a ring of bright-yellow, plastic chairs set in a circle with about fifteen other newcomers sitting on them. They watched me cross the circle to the only empty chair on the far side of the room because they had nothing better to do. First days are awful. At least I didn't trip and fall flat on my face in my short skirt.

The kid beside me, on my right, said 'hi' straight away. His name is Lorcan and, by a big coincidence, he's Irish as well. He talked A LOT, but in a good, interesting way. He is tall and lanky with light green eyes and brown longish hair, styled so that it sticks out stiffly to the left like a wave on the cusp of breaking. You need confidence to pull off that kind of hairstyle and luckily for Lorcan, he seems to have heaps of it. His nose is a little long, giving him a faint birdlike appearance, but not a bird like a hawk, more like a sparrow. I was impressed when he told me he's already thirteen. I have nearly five months to go. Lorcan said that I could probably pass for fifteen on a dark night.

While I was wondering exactly how dark a night he meant, a teacher, a young woman with the blackest of black hair, dressed like a chef in an uber-cool restaurant bounced into the room and I mean 'bounced.' Waves of enthusiasm radiated from her, feeding off every scrap of energy in the room, leaving us all feeling lethargic. Her perfume smelled like half-baked oatmeal raisin cookies with a faint whiff of petrol. Miss Solis told us she had moved to Queens from the Philippines when she was ten years old so she understood *exactly* what it was like to be a newbie, like all of us. We stared blankly at her and a couple of the girls giggled – in a nervous, not a mean way. Miss Solis proceeded to tell us a bit about the school and what we could expect, that kind of thing. She smiled a lot, opening her mouth very widely so we could see her multiple greyish fillings. I have racked up three fillings myself, my mum made sure the dentist put in the white ones.

Every so often, Miss Solis asked, 'Are you with me guys?' and answered herself, 'great, great.' I think she might be a trainee teacher. She had a clipboard with all of our names listed on it and called on each of us to introduce ourselves to the group and describe our families. A girl with gloriously glossy black skin called Nectar went first. (That really is her name). When it was Lorcan's turn, he said that he has two dads who own a software

development company and they all moved here a few weeks ago, from Galway, a city in the west of Ireland. Before that, they lived in Hong Kong. I couldn't help feeling a teeny bit envious of Lorcan. It must be soothing to have such a relatively straightforward *normal* family situation. I was dreading my turn so much that my palms got all sweaty. That's not completely accurate, only my left hand got sweaty, which is weird. Anyway, I didn't have a clue what was I supposed to say. I could try:

'Hi, I'm Evie. My mum, who was a brilliant actress (but not rich or famous) died five months ago. I've never had a dad because he ran away before I was born but some guy claiming to be my father turned up at my uncle's veterinary clinic last week. Oh, and this thing that looks like a pimple on my eye is just a stye – it's temporary and it's not contagious, in case you were wondering.'

Miss Solis would probably send for the school nurse who would have me popping junior Prozac before lunchtime. So, in the end, when it came to my turn, I just said,

'Hi, my name is Evie. I'm from Ireland and I live with my uncle, Scott, a vet, here in Manhattan now and the rest of my family situation is a bit complicated so I'll explain it another time.'

Everyone stared at me as if I was a weirdo. I felt flustered so I tried to fix things.

'Em, it's not *that* complicated; I'm not saying that my family are part of an international drug cartel or terrorists. Well, I suppose, technically, my father *could* be an international terrorist, but I think that must be highly, highly unlikely …'

At that point, Miss Solis swiftly intervened saying,

'Ok, Stevie, thank you for sharing, let's move on now and hear from the next student,' and consulting her clipboard for the next student's name, she said a little faintly, 'Mohammed al Sarwat.'

My day went all downhill from there – so far downhill that waking up with a stye didn't seem like a big deal.

I was hugely relieved to meet Kylie and Greg for lunch in the school cafeteria. I was less than thrilled when Kylie said,

'Guys, have you heard? Apparently there's some new kid from Iceland whose father is in Guantanamo for planning a terrorist attack on the Statue of Liberty.'

'Yeah, I heard about it, the guy's called Steve,' said Greg eating a leafy salad (I still find it bizarre to see kids *choosing* to eat salad).

'Did you meet the new kid in your orientation, Evie?' Greg asked.

I put my cranberry juice down carefully on my tray, feeling somewhat panicked.

'No,' I gulped, 'I think there's some terrible misunderstanding going on.'

Glancing around the cafeteria, it seemed like half the school was whispering about the new weird Icelandic student with terrorist connections. I spotted Camille, who is *not* one of my best friends in New York or anywhere else, pointing at me and whispering to a whole table of kids. Most of them turned and looked at me as if I had head lice. I felt like flinging my fork at Camille's snubby little nose, but I've been in trouble at a school before for throwing metal objects so I ignored her. I don't think she noticed.

Kylie said that Camille was sitting at the table where all the ultra-rich kids sat, the ones who go to the same tennis camps and the same ski schools and whose parents had houses in the right part of the Hamptons and went sailing on their yachts off the coast of Sardinia.

I asked if there were also special tables for the sporty types and the brainiacs and the Glee Club, that kind of thing but Greg shook his head and laughed at me and said that those kinds of cliques only exist in schools on TV and he'd never even *heard* of the term 'Glee Club,' until he saw the TV show.

'In real-life Manhattan, you have your two basic categories – the top one percenters and everyone else,' he explained.

Greg sounded like Dr Winters, his cynical psychiatrist father and nothing at all like Angela, his kinda out-there, theatre-director mom. Finn and Greg shuttle between their divorced parents: 'A' weeks uptown with their dad and 'B' weeks downtown with their mom. I glanced over at Camille's table. I felt a bit sorry for the one percenters; it's much more fun to be with everyone else – and lucky for me I have ready-made school friends in Greg and Kylie, not like the other newbies. The bell rang signaling the end of lunch. I sighed. Three more hours to survive.