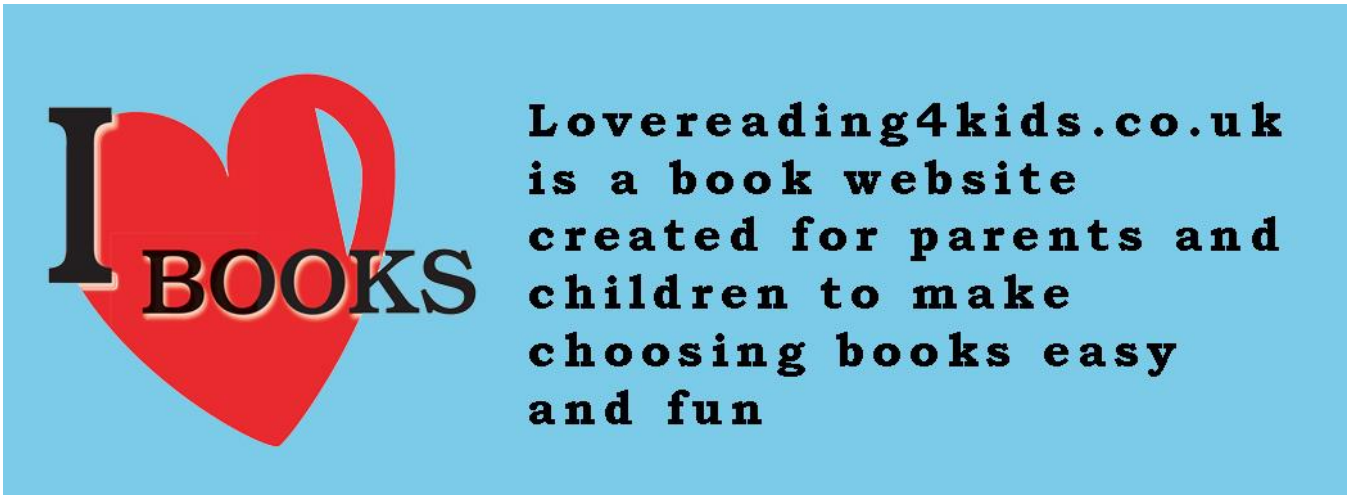


Opening extract from

Starring Meg

Written by

Natasha Mac a'Bhaird

Published by

O'Brien Press Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published 2017 by
The O'Brien Press Ltd,
12 Terenure Road East, Rathgar,
Dublin 6, D06 HD27 Ireland.
Tel: +353 1 4923333; Fax: +353 1 4922777

E-mail: books@obrien.ie.

Website: www.obrien.ie

ISBN: 978-1-84717-846-6

Text © copyright Natasha Mac a' Bháird 2017
Copyright for typesetting, layout, editing, design
© The O'Brien Press Ltd
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced
or utilised in any form or by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording or in any information storage
and retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publisher.

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 20 19 18 17

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper in this book is produced using pulp from managed forests.

Chapter One

I checked my new schoolbag for probably the tenth time. Tomorrow was my first day at my new school, and I was feeling pretty nervous. Mum and I had gone shopping for all the books on the list the school had sent, and they were waiting in my bag, looking shiny and new in their plastic covers. I had a new pencil case too, shaped like a Converse boot with a zip at the top where your foot should go in. I remembered how, when I was younger, I loved the start of the school year, with all my new colouring pencils and notebooks and workbooks waiting to be filled in, all pristine and white. It was a long time since I had been to school – and even longer since I'd been to school in Ireland – so I felt almost like I had when I started off as a five-year-old, excited and anxious and not knowing what to expect.

Upstairs, Mum was in the middle of a cleaning frenzy. She'd put on some nineties music that she said made her feel young and energetic again and was singing along at the top of her voice. The music was so loud that I didn't hear the doorbell ringing. I only realised Sadie was there when she tapped on the sitting room window. I ran to open the door.

'Sorry, Sadie. Have you been waiting long?' I asked, as she came into the front hall, grimacing at the blaring music coming down the stairs.

'About five minutes,' Sadie told me, pushing her sunglasses back on top of her head with one hand – in the other one she was balancing a casserole dish and a bag of groceries. 'What's all that racket?'

Not waiting for an answer, she strode into the kitchen and set the casserole dish down on the counter. Sadie is convinced Mum doesn't feed me properly. She hadn't seen the transformation in Mum this week, though.

Sadie is my grandmother, though she looks nothing like the type of granny you might imagine, with curly grey hair and sensible shoes. She's always dressed in the latest fashions and looks very glamorous, which I suppose is fitting for an actress. She has let her hair go grey, but has it cut in a short choppy style that really suits her.

She turned to me now, asking, 'Where's your mum? I'm guessing she's out if she hasn't made you switch off that dreadful noise!'

I smiled. 'That's Mum's music actually! She's gone a bit mad these last few days, if you must know.'

'Oh?' Sadie's eyebrows went up until they disappeared under her beautifully cut fringe.

'Come and see for yourself,' I told her.

I led the way upstairs, just as Mum began screeching along to 'Brimful of Asha'. Mum was kneeling on the bathroom floor wearing old jeans and bright yellow rubber gloves and scrubbing the tiles so hard it looked like she was trying to take the surface off them.

'Good heavens!' said Sadie.

Mum jumped – the music was so loud she hadn't heard us coming. Cornershop – Mum's favourite band – were blaring out that 'everybody needs a bosom for a pillow'. Sadie reached over and switched the music off.

'Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?' Sadie wanted to know. 'I didn't realise you owned a pair of rubber gloves, Cordelia.'

Mum got to her feet, using the bit of her arm not covered in rubber glove to push a strand of hair out of her face. 'Oh, hello, Sadie, I didn't hear you come in.'

'What's going on here?' Sadie asked, looking around the room almost as if she'd discovered Mum having a wild party instead of cleaning the bathroom. 'The last time I remember you being this houseproud was when you were expecting Meg and the nesting instinct kicked in!'

Mum laughed. 'Well, that's definitely not the case this time. I just want everything perfect for Meg starting school.'

'I don't think my teacher is going to ask to come over and check behind the toilet, Mum,' I told her.

'How about a nice cup of tea?' Sadie suggested. 'You look like you could do with a break.'

Mum surveyed the bathroom. Everything was gleaming and even the shampoo bottles were arranged in neat rows like soldiers.

'Good idea,' she said. 'Stick the kettle on, Meg darling. I'll be down in two shakes of a lamb's tail, just after I scrub around the taps with an old toothbrush.'

The thing about Mum is, whenever she gets a new idea into her head she just throws herself into it heart and soul. Like the time she did an evening class in pottery. She embraced the whole pottery thing with this wild enthusiasm, making one bowl after another, then (because they were easy) dozens of ashtrays, even though no one in the family smokes. She moved on to jugs next, which were a lot trickier, especially the handles, which she never quite managed to work out. This didn't faze Mum one bit – she just turned the wonky-handled jugs into vases and spent hours painting and decorating them. When she ran out of places to display them she started giving them away to anyone who came to the house.

Then just as suddenly as she'd started, Mum got tired of the whole thing, bundled the vases and ashtrays and bowls into a box and brought them all to the charity shop, and took up tennis instead. Last time I was looking for something in Sadie's garage I found Mum's old potter's wheel, which she'd splashed out on at the height of her pottery craze and then forgotten all about.

Now, it seemed, Mum had decided that Being an Ordinary Mum was her new thing. Only Mum doesn't do ordinary, so she was in fact taking it to extraordinary lengths.

We'd moved to Carrickbeg, where Mum grew up and where Sadie and Grandad still live, at the start of the summer. Mum had got a new job almost straight away, and she'd been really busy. Then she'd had a sudden attack of the guilts that the summer was nearly over and she hadn't done any mother-daughter stuff with me. And the fact that Dad was working abroad and only came home for occasional visits seemed to make her feel she had to make it up to me by being twice as much fun. She persuaded her boss to give her the week off – Mum can be very persuasive. We'd gone on all sorts of day trips, to the beach, the museum, the cinema, and even on a bus tour of Dublin city. And of course there were the essential shopping trips too, where Mum bought a ton of new clothes for both of us (even though I have to wear a horrible grey uniform to my new school).

We'd had a fabulous week, but I was exhausted by the end of it and was kind of relieved when Mum said we'd stay at home for the weekend so she could get things ready for us going back to school and work. I didn't realise what she had in mind, which turned out to be a total spring clean of the entire house.

I put on the kettle, while Sadie unpacked the groceries and started putting things away in the fridge.

'I'm starting to wonder if I've come to the right house at all,' she commented, looking into the sparkling clean fridge, which was full of fruit and vegetables and natural yogurt. Mum had even made a quinoa salad with chopped peppers and cucumber and divided it into individual portions for our packed lunches. 'How long has this been going on?'

'You know Mum,' I told her. 'When she decides she's into something, nothing's going to stop her. It just so happens that this week she's into being some kind of super mum.'

'Well, if this is the result I'm in favour of it,' Sadie observed. 'It's certainly better than that eco-living phase when she stopped washing her hair.'

Mum came in, peeling off her rubber gloves, which she at once folded and put away with the cleaning things. 'Oh Sadie, did you bring groceries? You shouldn't have.'

'I thought you might need a few things for school lunches and so on,' Sadie said. 'But I can see you have it all under control.'

'Of course,' Mum said. 'Everything's going to be perfect for my little girl's big day. It's *such* an important milestone in her life.'

She kissed the top of my head. I made a face at Sadie, who tried to hide her smile.

The truth was that the more Mum went on about what a big deal school was, the more nervous I felt. I hadn't been to school in over a year. I'd had lessons, of course, with different teachers, and I'd studied on my own too, but when you're moving around all the time normal school isn't really an option. And Mum said there was no way she was sending me to boarding school because she'd miss me too much.

At first, not going to school was a kind of adventure, and I loved spending more time with my parents and not having a rigid schedule. I didn't even mind having to do lessons on my own, because I could work at my own pace, and I usually managed to wangle things so that we spent lots of time on the things I loved, like English and art, and as little time as possible on maths and geography.

But the longer I spent out of school, the more I started to miss being with kids my own age. And at the same time it became harder and harder to imagine going to a new school and having to start all over again. The thought of it built up in my head, getting scarier all the time. Now, when I knew I was facing it the very next day, it was frankly terrifying.

Sadie seemed to see how I was feeling better than Mum did. 'Oh, there's no need for such a drama, Cordelia,' she said lightly. 'It's a perfectly ordinary thing to start a new school. People do it all the time. And it's not like Meg won't know anyone. She has her lovely new friends from Star Club, don't you, darling?'

'Yes, they're all in my class,' I said, grateful to Sadie for looking on the bright side as always. I knew I was incredibly lucky to have Hannah, Ruby and Laura there for support. I'd only known them since the start of the summer, but we'd become very close, and I felt sure they'd look out for me in school. Just knowing I'd have somebody to talk to in the yard at break time made me feel better.

'There you go then! How many children have to start school not knowing anyone? Or even not knowing the language? Like little Mariola who lives near me – her parents are both Polish, and she barely had a word of English starting school! But she soon settled in – Carrickbeg National School is always so welcoming to new children. Meg will be just fine.'

'Oh, of course she will,' Mum said. 'But that doesn't mean I can't make a fuss of my precious girl on her big day, does it?'

I cast a desperate look at Sadie, who rose to the occasion brilliantly. 'Meg, speaking of your friends, I think I saw some of them out on the green when I was coming in earlier. Why don't you go out for a while? I'm sure you need to make plans for tomorrow.'

She took the teapot from me and went to the kettle. 'I'll look after the tea. Off you go now.'

'Thanks, Sadie,' I said, glad to escape.

'Don't go too far!' Mum said. 'It's nearly bedtime and we'd better make it an early night.'

'OK, Mum,' I called back, already halfway out the door.

Chapter Two

Outside, I realised that Sadie hadn't just been making something up to let me escape. Hannah and Laura were sitting on the wall between Hannah's house and mine. Hannah's long, light-brown hair hung down loose, almost touching the wall where she was sitting, while Laura's dark curly hair was drawn back in a ponytail. As I went to join them the door opened at Ruby's house on the other side of the green and she ran over to join us. She had put on a pink wraparound cardigan over the leotard and leggings she wears to do her ballet exercises, which she's really disciplined about.

'Mum said I can have five minutes before bedtime,' Ruby said, hopping up on the wall beside Laura.

'Me too, pretty much,' I said, taking my place beside Hannah.

'Can you believe we're back to early bedtimes and all that stuff?' Hannah said with a sigh. 'I don't know where the summer holidays went – the last few weeks just seemed to disappear.'

'It's always like that,' Laura said. 'At the start of the holidays you feel like you have masses of time to do everything you want, then when it comes to the last few weeks time seems to speed up and you realise you didn't do half the things you had planned.'

'We didn't even get started on another show for Star Club,' Hannah said sadly.

After Mum and I moved in next door to the Kielys at the start of the summer, Hannah and I made friends right away, and when we realised we both loved acting it was the start of Hannah's great idea to set up Star Club. Star Club is me, Hannah, Ruby and Laura. Ruby loves ballet and is an amazing dancer, and Laura writes stories (though I haven't actually seen any of them yet – she's kind of secretive about them).

We're only twelve, but we are trying to make our theatre group as professional as we can. It had been so much fun working on something as a group and using all our different types of creativity to put a performance together. I'd found it so different from the types of acting I'd done before, where I'd have to do a scene over and over again until it was right, and where I was often the only child on set. I loved any kind of acting – but the kind where I also got to hang out with my new friends was hard to beat.

A few weeks earlier we put on our first show, which took place in Hannah's garden. It was for her little sister Maisie's birthday party, and lots of the neighbours came as well as Maisie's friends. We loved the whole experience and were planning to do another show – but with one thing and another we hadn't managed to get started yet.

'I thought we might start something when I got back from Spain, but then Laura was away,' Ruby said.

'I was going to suggest having a meeting this week, but Mum wanted to pack a whole summer's worth of outings into one week!' I said. The girls had heard all about my crazy week already.

'At least you got to do fun stuff,' Hannah said. '*My* week seemed to mainly consist of shopping for uniforms and helping Mum find everyone's lunch boxes, which they'd managed to lose over the holidays. Bobby's still had a banana in it. At least it used to be a banana.'

'Ewwww!' exclaimed Ruby.

'I know!'

'Well, let's try to meet up some day after school,' Laura said. 'Maybe once we're back in a regular routine we'll find it easier to plan our club meetings.'

Hannah's face lit up at once. She just loves organising things. 'Yes, we should start planning! What days are we going to have our meetings? We said we'd have regular days once school started.'

'I've got ballet on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturday mornings,' Ruby said. 'So they're out for me.'

'And you and I have Gaelic football on Wednesday,' Laura reminded Hannah.

I didn't say anything. I didn't have any activities lined up yet, and didn't know if I would. Getting used to a new school might be enough for now.

'Monday and Friday then?' Hannah suggested. 'That could work well – we could do our planning on Mondays and then on Fridays when we have no homework we'd have more time to rehearse.'

'Sounds good to me,' I said, and Laura and Ruby nodded too.

'Hannah!' It was Hannah's dad at the door. 'Time to come in.'

Hannah sighed. 'I guess someone had to be first.' She scrambled down from the wall. 'See you tomorrow, OK?'

A wave of panic swept over me all of a sudden at the thought of the next morning and going in to my new school for the first time. 'You *will* still call for me on the way to school, won't you?' I said.

'Of course I will,' Hannah said reassuringly. 'I'll call at 8.15 and we can walk down together.'

My new school, the one the other three girls had been going to for seven years now, was about a ten-minute walk away. Mum had said she would drive me there and bring me in, but I'd absolutely refused to let her. Hannah said everyone from Woodland Green walked to school, with their parents if they were in the younger classes, but definitely with their friends once they reached sixth class. I didn't want to be the odd one out. Plus the thought of Mum getting all weepy and emotional at leaving me was enough to fill anyone with horror. After the way she'd been acting lately I could just imagine her behaving like the mum of a five-year-old starting school for the first time. It seemed to me that scenes like that were best played out in the privacy of our own home. The last thing I wanted was to start school with people already thinking I came from some sort of crazy family.

‘Should we call for you too, Ruby?’ I asked as Hannah headed inside.

Ruby shook her head. ‘I wish I could walk down with you guys, but Mum got the dates mixed up and thought we weren’t back to school until Wednesday. She made a dentist appointment for me first thing tomorrow morning, so I’m going to be late getting to school. I’ll be there by break time though so we can catch up then.’

‘I notice no one’s offering to call for me,’ Laura said with a grin.

‘Sorry, Laura,’ I said. Laura’s the only one of us who doesn’t live in Woodland Green. I felt bad for her that she’d be walking to school on her own. I was so glad I’d have Hannah with me.

‘That’s OK,’ Laura said. ‘I get more time for daydreaming when I’m on my own!’

Ruby’s mum was the next one to appear at the door and call her in.

‘I’d better go too, I suppose,’ Laura said. She grabbed her bike, which was propped up against the wall, and got ready to go.

‘Oh well, if you’re all abandoning me,’ I said with a laugh. I was often the last one to be called in, I’d noticed. I wondered if it was because I was an only child that Mum treated me as a bit more grown up, or maybe just that we’d had such a different lifestyle, free from set routines.

We all called our goodbyes as we headed off in separate directions.

When I got inside Mum was ironing my new school uniform while Sadie finished her cup of tea.

I eyed the uniform in disgust. ‘Ugh, I can’t believe I have to wear that thing.’ Last time I’d been to school, it was an elementary school in New York, when Mum was in a play in Broadway that ran for over a year. Only the posh private schools in New York had uniforms, and my school was definitely not one of those. I much preferred being able to wear my own clothes – T-shirts and shorts in summer, warm skirts, jeans and jumpers in winter and fur-lined boots for walking to school along snowy city footpaths.

‘I know, darling, it’s simply awful, isn’t it?’ Mum said, holding the green pleated skirt up. The grey shirt and jumper were already hanging up, with the grey and green striped tie draped over the jumper’s hanger. ‘At least you get to wear your own jacket. When I was in school we had a dreadful blazer to match as well. Too bulky and absolutely no use at keeping you dry!’

Mum went to Carrickbeg National School too, so at least she can sympathise.

‘I remember,’ Sadie said with a shudder. ‘You hated that blazer. In fact I seem to remember it going missing on a few occasions.’

‘I can’t think what you mean, Sadie,’ Mum said innocently, winking at me.

I rubbed the material of the skirt between my fingers. ‘Why do they have to make it so scratchy?’

‘At least you’ll blend in, darling,’ Mum said.

It’s kind of hard to get used to Mum wanting me to blend in, when for the first twelve years of my life she and Dad were always trying to get me to stand out.

‘I’d better let you get to bed,’ Sadie said, putting her empty mug down beside the sink. ‘Have a great day tomorrow, Meg – I’m looking forward to hearing all about it.’

Sadie blew a kiss to Mum. I went to the door to wave her off, and she leaned in to give me a hug, pressing something into my hand. It was a gold locket in the shape of a heart.

‘This is my lucky locket,’ she told me. ‘Take it with you tomorrow. You can keep it in your pocket or tuck it inside your school shirt. It’s always brought me luck when I’ve been worried about a performance. Now don’t worry about a thing, you’ll be absolutely fine.’

She kissed me and dashed off. I opened the locket. Inside, instead of a photo, there was a pressed flower petal. I smiled, remembering now that Sadie had shown me this locket years earlier. The petal came from the bunch of roses Grandad had given Sadie after her very first play, when he was trying to convince her to go on a date with him. The petal was dry and paper thin, but still a beautiful soft pink. I shut the locket carefully and closed my fingers around it, feeling the comforting weight in my hand.

Back in the kitchen Mum was folding up the ironing board.

‘I think I’ll get some toast and hot milk,’ I said. ‘Maybe it will help me sleep.’

‘I’ll get it,’ Mum said. ‘You bring that ghastly uniform upstairs and get into your pyjamas, and I’ll have a nice supper waiting for you when you come back down.’

When I came down a few minutes later Mum had made me a big mug of hot chocolate and a plate of toast with strawberry jam. The hot chocolate was made with foamed milk and looked delicious. Mum’s not the most domesticated person and normally can’t even make hot milk without it boiling over, so I appreciated the gesture. She’d even found some marshmallows, which she’d arranged in a semicircle on the saucer.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said. ‘This is great.’

Mum looked pleased with herself. ‘I know you’re feeling nervous about your big day, so I wanted to be extra nice to you, darling!’

‘I am a bit nervous,’ I admitted. ‘It’s pretty nerve-wracking starting at a new school in sixth class. Everyone else is going to have known each other since they were four or five.’

‘Oh, that reminds me!’ Mum exclaimed. ‘The woman next door called in earlier. She said they’d been away visiting relatives for August so she hadn’t called in before. Funny sort of woman. She kept staring at my hair as if there was something extraordinary about it.’

I tried not to smile. Mum generally looks quite glamorous (for a mother) but today she’d tied a headscarf round her head to protect it from all the dust in her cleaning frenzy. She probably thought she looked sophisticated in a fifties movie star sort of

way, but since the headscarf was actually a sarong I'd had on holidays, with ice cream cones and lovehearts printed all over it, she did look a tiny bit odd.

'She has a daughter in your class – Tracey, I think she said,' Mum went on. 'She's been away staying with her aunt since they came home from their holidays, otherwise I'm sure you would have bumped into her. But she's home now and her mum said she could walk to school with you tomorrow and show you the way. I told her that would be wonderful, since you've absolutely refused to let your old mum go with you!'

'Oh, but I've said I'll walk with Hannah,' I said.

Mum dismissed this with a wave of her hand. 'You can all go together, can't you? Nice for you to make more friends. There are other things in life besides Star Club, you know!'

I tried to picture the girl next door as I sipped my hot chocolate. I thought I remembered seeing her just after we'd moved in, but I didn't remember Hannah saying anything about her. Though maybe if she'd been away most of the holidays that was why.

'Goodness, look at the time!' Mum exclaimed. 'You'd better get off to bed, Meg. Early start tomorrow.'

'Don't remind me,' I said. 'I think the whole getting up early thing might actually be worse than the uniform.'

'Now don't exaggerate, honey,' Mum said. 'Nothing could be worse than that thing!' She shuddered again. 'I think we should go shopping at the weekend and buy you some nice hair things so at least you have something to brighten it up a bit! Now off you go.'

I kissed Mum goodnight and headed upstairs, still feeling a bit nervous about what the new day would bring.