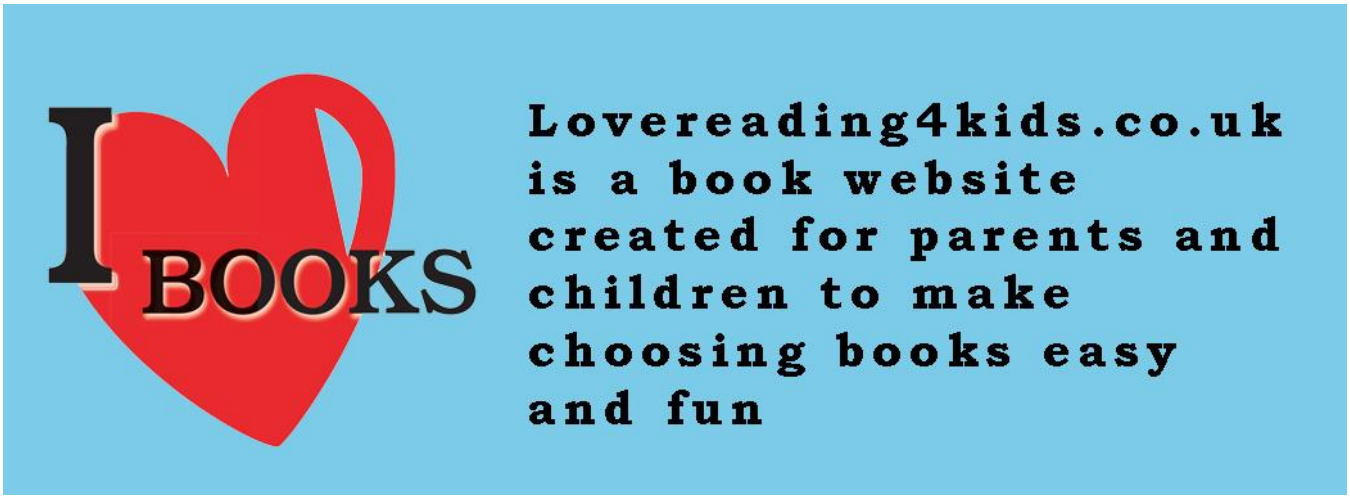


Opening extract from

Evie's Ghost

Written by

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PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Victoria Station



"Can I have a large hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows, please?" I said to the man at the counter. "And one of those doughnuts too."

I rummaged in my bag for my purse and took out one of the crumpled notes Mum had shoved at me in the back of the taxi.

"For emergencies," she'd said.

Well.

At this very moment, my mother was on her way to Heathrow Airport with her shiny new husband, who was sweeping her off for a romantic honeymoon on the Grand Canal in Venice.

I, on the other hand, had been dumped outside Victoria Station on my own, with instructions to catch a train to the middle of nowhere, to stay with an ancient godmother I hadn't seen since I was a baby.

And if that isn't an emergency that requires a large hot chocolate and a doughnut with sprinkles, then I really don't know what is.

CHAPTER TWO

The Outskirts of Nowhere



The train crawled towards Highfield at the pace of a dying slug. It was almost dark, and so far beyond the back of beyond that there was only one other person left in my carriage. He sat hunched over a bag of crisps, snatching them from the packet one by one and crunching them with quite unnecessary violence. I considered moving carriages, but then he might have thought I was scared of him. (Which I was, but I didn't want him to know that.)

At this rate Mum would probably be in Venice before I got to Highfield Station. And then it was still another five miles by car to the house. With a godmother I knew nothing about, except she was seventy-two years old.

"You'll like her," said Mum. "She's lovely."

Which meant nothing. It's what Mum says about everybody who isn't an actual criminal. Anyway, all her attention at the time was on the half-packed suitcase open on her bed.

"This one or this one?" she asked, holding up two floaty summer dresses. I shrugged. It was freezing in London. But in Venice, of course, it would be perfect

summer weather.

"Maybe both," said Mum. "They weigh practically nothing anyway."

It wasn't meant to be like this. I was supposed to be staying with my best friend Nisha while Mum was away. But then Nisha's grandfather died and they had to go to India, so Mum decided to pack me off to my godmother's instead. I'd much rather have stayed in the flat by myself, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"You're only thirteen. I can't leave you on your own for five days. Anything could happen."

"What could happen, exactly? I've lived here my whole life and nothing's ever happened yet. Anyway, I can have friends round."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," said Mum. And then, as I opened my mouth to argue, "Don't even bother, Evie. I'm not letting you stay on your own for a week and that's final."

So. Here I was. Happy holidays, Evie.

Big fat raindrops started to splat against the windows. There was nothing outside the train but fields and trees, all bleak and bare in the fading light. We hadn't passed a house for miles.

On the plastic table, the cracked screen of my phone lit up with a text. I grabbed it with pathetic eagerness, hoping it was from a friend. But it was my so-called godmother.

Sorry, have to attend meeting. Get taxi from station. I should be home by the time you arrive. Anna

Well, what a lovely welcome.

I texted Mum to inform her of this new development. Maybe she'd actually feel a twinge of guilt about abandoning her only daughter to a woman who clearly cared more about some stupid village meeting than she did about looking after me.

If Mum could drag her eyes away from her perfect new husband for long enough to check her phone, that was. Which was doubtful.

I pressed Send, but there was no signal. Unbelievable. We weren't even in a tunnel. Was this what it was like in the countryside?

I suddenly had a terrible thought. What if there was no signal at Charlbury? If I had to spend five days cooped up in a random old lady's flat with no way of communicating with the outside world, I would literally die.

The rain was lashing down now, making long diagonal streaks on the windows. I thought about getting my sketchbook out to draw it, but then the train started to slow down.

Highfield. This was it.

Nobody else got out. The station was deserted. But there was one cab parked on the kerb. I walked towards it and the driver opened his window. I gave him the address, trying to sound as though I gave instructions to taxi drivers all the time. He nodded but didn't say a word, which was really creepy. I couldn't believe my godmother was actually ordering me to get into a car with a complete stranger. But I couldn't see a bus stop anywhere

and there was still no signal on my phone. So I didn't really have a choice.

Within about a minute we left the houses behind and there was nothing beyond the rain-streaked windows but darkness.

The driver stayed silent. All I could see was his thick neck and the back of his bald head.

What if he wasn't taking me to Charlbury at all, but to some deserted place where he was planning to kill me and bury my body?

After what felt like hours, he turned on to a narrow winding lane. There were no other cars on the road. I felt sick with fear. I kept my fingers curled around the door handle in case I needed to make a quick getaway. He didn't look very fit. Maybe I could outrun him. Otherwise I'd have no chance.

The car slowed down. I thought I was actually going to throw up. I said frantic prayers inside my head. I'm not religious, but there was no one else to turn to.

He turned off the lane on to a narrow, tree-lined driveway. In the light of the headlamps, I saw a huge old house at the end of the drive.

"Charlbury House," he said, slowing to a halt in front of it.

I felt weak with relief. I paid the fare – half my emergency money gone already – and got out of the cab. The wind was so strong that I could hardly open the door. I still felt shaky with fear, even though there was nothing to be scared of any more.

The rain was pelting down. A gust of wind

whipped my hair across my face. As the taxi drove away, I pushed the long dark strands out of my eyes and looked up at the house.

It was *massive*. A huge, ancient, spooky stone mansion. Enormous windows with carved stone frames, and a grand flight of steps leading to the biggest front door I'd ever seen.

How could Mum have forgotten to mention I'd be staying in a mansion?

I walked up the steps, bumping my case behind me. A light came on above the front door, illuminating slanting rods of rain. Raindrops bounced off the stone slabs. There was a big puddle right in front of the door, where the stone had worn down.

Screwed to the wall beside the door, looking completely wrong on the ancient stones, was an ugly modern row of bells and an intercom. I pressed the bell for Flat 9.

I waited for ages but there was no answer. I pressed the bell again, harder this time.

Nothing. Either the bell wasn't working, or she was still not home from her meeting.

Honestly. You'd think she might have made a tiny bit of effort, instead of leaving her goddaughter standing in the rain while she sat in a nice warm room wittering on about the village scone-baking crisis or whatever it was that was so much more important than collecting me from the station.

Unless I'd pressed the wrong bell. I pulled my phone from my pocket to check the address.

But my hands were cold and wet, and the phone

slipped through my fingers. I tried to grab it, but my fingers closed around thin air and my phone splatted right into the middle of the puddle.

"Oh, no, no, no!"

I fished it out of the water and wiped it frantically on my coat, but my coat was soaking too, and the phone was just getting wetter. I unzipped my coat and tried to rub it dry on my top.

A beam of light shone on the front door and I turned to see a sports car speeding up the drive. It veered sharply in front of the steps, throwing up gravel all around it, and braked next to the house.

Somebody got out of the car and crunched briskly across the gravel. The person bounded up the steps, and I saw it was a little old lady. But not a normal old lady. She wore orange baseball boots with black trousers and a red jacket, and a broad streak of her silver hair was dyed bright pink.

"Are you Evie?" Her voice was clipped and businesslike. "You look very like your mother. I hope you haven't been waiting long. I thought I'd be home earlier, but these councillors do love the sound of their own voices. Never use one sentence when you can use ten, that seems to be their motto."

I said nothing. I was staring at her hair.

"Do you like it?" she asked, pulling out the pink strand with her thumb and forefinger. "I was tempted to dye the whole lot, but it takes a lot of work to maintain it, apparently. I might still do it at some point though. It's very cheering when one looks in

the mirror, I find. Distracts from the wrinkles. Now, where's my key?"

As she rummaged in her shoulder bag, I looked at her jewellery. Enormous earrings, a huge necklace and a vast number of heavy-looking rings on her slim fingers. Her nails were painted silver.

From the depths of her bag, she pulled out a key ring in the shape of a skull.

"Are you Anna?" I asked, trying to adjust the image I had formed in my head to this pink-streaked, orange-booted, silver-nailed reality.

"I am. I suppose I should have said. What's wrong with your hand? Have you hurt it?"

"It's not my hand," I said, withdrawing it from inside my coat. "My phone fell in that puddle. I was trying to dry it."

She frowned at the screen. "The water will have got in through the cracks. It's probably dead. No great loss. The reception here's terrible anyway."

"It'll be fine if I put it on a radiator," I said, seething. How dare she tell me it wasn't a loss?

She unlocked the front door and I followed her in. The inside of the house was much less fancy than the outside. Standing in this hall, you wouldn't have known you were in a mansion at all. It looked just like the communal hall of our block of flats in London, only bigger. Same chipped magnolia paint, same pile of junk mail, same dog-eared notices on the wall.

Anna led the way up a staircase with an ugly brown carpet, threadbare in the middle. We climbed

two flights of stairs to the second-floor landing.

"Here we are," she said, stopping outside a white-painted door with a lopsided brass number nine screwed to it. It opened on to a corridor with several doors leading off it. Anna opened the nearest door.

"This is the living room," she said. "Also the kitchen and dining room."

Seriously? I thought. She expects me to live in *this*?

"It's not very tidy, I'm afraid," she said, not sounding the least bit bothered, "but I've never been interested in housework. Such a waste of time, don't you think?"

OK, I admit I've said similar things to Mum many times, when she's having one of her regular rants about me leaving stuff all over the flat and never clearing up after myself and blah blah blah.

But this place…

Well.

The sofa, the chairs, the table, most of the floor and all the kitchen surfaces were buried beneath piles and piles of papers and pens and folders and magazines and books. Empty mugs and crumb-strewn plates teetered on top of every pile.

I was suddenly struck by the thought that this was probably what our flat would look like if Mum didn't clear up after me.

"I don't cook much," said Anna breezily, following my eyes to the hob heaped with books. "Things on toast mainly, and I tend to eat in bed. One of the perks of living alone. You won't mind getting your

own meals, will you? I don't know what sort of food you like, but you can go to the shop tomorrow and choose for yourself. I expect you cook a lot, with your mother out at work."

I never cook. Mum always cooks when she gets home. But I didn't say this. I couldn't decide whether to be offended that Anna was clearly not planning on making the slightest bit of effort to look after me, or excited at the idea of living on crisps and chocolate for a week.

I laid my poor phone on the radiator. And then I noticed something truly disgusting.

"That's not … real, is it?"

"My skull?" said Anna, smiling at the hideous toothy monstrosity grinning at me from the middle of the dining table. "Yes, he's perfectly real. I call him Yorick. A useful reminder, don't you think, of our mortality. None of us will be here very long, and when we're gone that will be all that's left. I should have taken him to that council meeting tonight. It might have encouraged them to hurry things along a bit."

"What was the meeting about?" I asked, trying to take my mind off the skull and thinking how interesting it was that Mum had conveniently forgotten to mention the fact that my godmother was completely barking mad.

"Well, the part I went along for," said Anna, her whole face lighting up, "was actually very exciting. There are new houses being built on this lane, and when they were digging the foundations, the

builders discovered an old paupers' burial ground – a graveyard for people who couldn't afford a private funeral or who weren't buried in the churchyard for other reasons. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of skeletons. The oldest remains may go back to the twelfth century. I can't wait to get started on the dig."

I stared at her. "You're going to dig up graves?"

"Well, not personally. The archaeologists do that. I just examine the skeletons."

"You examine dead bodies? For fun?"

She laughed. "Not just for fun, though it *is* fun. I'm a forensic anthropologist."

"A what?"

"Essentially, I examine human skeletons to find out things about the person: their age, sex, how they died and so on. It's a fantastic source of information on how people lived and died hundreds of years ago."

"But aren't you… I mean… I thought you'd be … retired?"

"Why would I retire, when I love my work and I'm good at it? I'll take you to see the dig, if you like. Actually, you'll be able to see it from your bedroom window."

Oh, good. That was something to look forward to. I gave her a look that I hoped expressed my feelings, but she didn't seem to notice.

"I need to go and do some work in my room," she said, "but make yourself some supper if you're hungry." She gestured vaguely at the kitchen