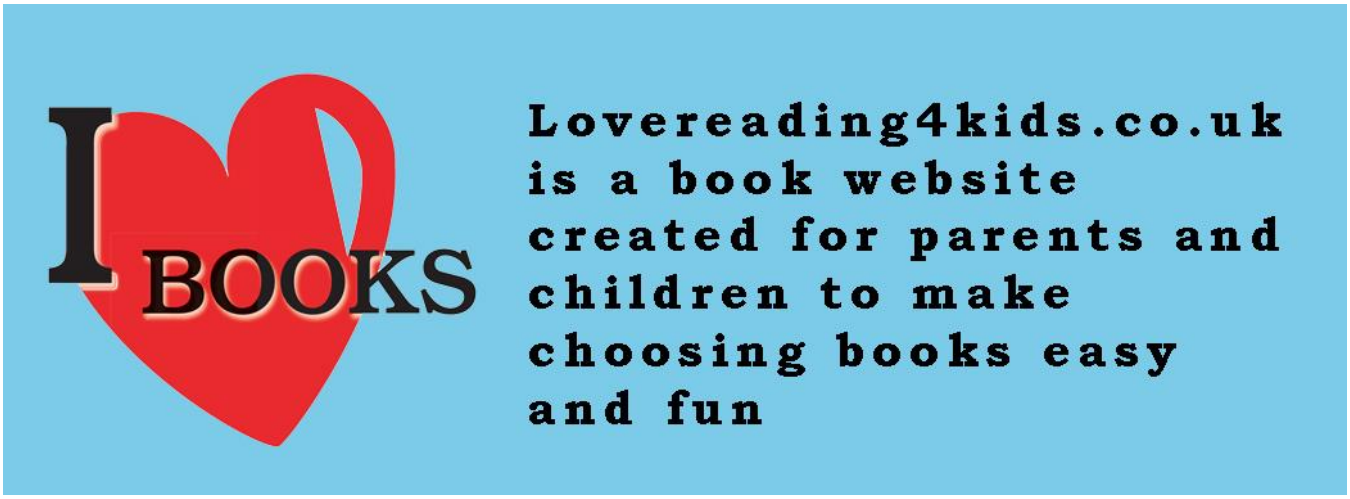


Opening extract from

The Girl in Between

Written by

Sarah Carroll

Published by

Simon & Schuster Ltd

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
A CBS COMPANY

Copyright © 2017 Sarah Carroll

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.
No reproduction without permission.
All rights reserved.

The right of Sarah Carroll to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections
77 and 78 of the Copyright, Design and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

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

PB ISBN 978-1-4711-6062-2
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-6063-9

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places
and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or
are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living
or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Goudy by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Simon & Schuster UK Ltd are committed to sourcing paper that is made
from wood grown in sustainable forests and support the Forest Stewardship
Council, the leading international forest certification organisation. Our
books displaying the FSC logo are printed on FSC certified paper.

1

Begging

I'M INVISIBLE. MA SAYS I'M SUPPOSED TO BE SO THE Authorities don't get me. She goes out into the streets almost every day but I'm not allowed. I've got to stay inside the mill so they don't see me. When she's going she says, 'Stay away from the roof, it's a bleeding deathtrap. And don't go near them windows neither. And don't even think of leaving this building or I'll lose ye and I'll never find ye again.'

Me and Ma are begging outside the mill. I'm by the door in the shadow where no one can see me. This is as far as I'm allowed to go. Ma's out on the bottom step.

'Spare change, mister?' Ma asks a man. But I can tell from the way Ma says it that she doesn't really care. She'd rather be in the backyard sunbathing.

It's a sunny day, which means good and bad news for begging. Good news cos we're not getting wet and people are

happy. Bad news cos people always give more when it's raining. They feel sorry for us cos they think we sleep out on the streets. They don't know that we don't do that any more. They don't realize that the mill is our Castle and we're safe in here.

'Any spare change?' Ma calls. There's a woman walking past her who pretends like she's heard nothing.

Ma flicks back her hair and ties it into a ponytail that reaches halfway down her back. She pulls out the front of the top she's wearing and blows on her chest to try to cool down. The pointy parts of her shoulders are all shiny from sweat and she wipes them with her hands.

Ma's real pointy. She has a pointy nose and pointy ears. Her elbows and knees are all knobbly too. She used to be much pointier, though, back when we lived on the streets.

She's real short. I'm almost as tall as her. But I'm not pointy. Ma says I've got a head like a basketball. That's why I'm so smart, she says. Cos my head's so big.

Ma says I take after me da. But I wouldn't know.

She picks up the begging cup and rattles it.

'Do we have enough, Ma?' I say.

'Nah, not if I'm getting batteries today too.' She puts it down and leans forward and looks down the street. Then she rubs the sweat off her hands on her jeans and watches the people passing again.

Ma calls the mill a poxy hole. She says she doesn't know how we got stuck here. But I call it the Castle. It's the biggest place we've ever stayed and I think it's the best, even though it has boards covering some of the broken windows and

weeds growing in between the big stones in the walls and the top three floors are so rotted that you can't run across the middle of the rooms. You have to keep close to the wall and go real slow and be ready to jump if the wood breaks, cos if you fall through, you'll break your neck.

Ma says it's a deathtrap. But that doesn't scare me cos if you fall, you just hurt yourself a bit, that's all.

'Spare change?' Ma asks a woman who's walking along smiling at nothing. She must've been daydreaming and didn't see Ma sitting on the doorstep, cos she jumps back a bit and almost trips off the kerb into the road.

'Sorry, I've got nothing,' she says, and starts walking real fast, but even I can see from back here that her purse is bulging.

'I'm bored,' Ma says. Then she says, 'Jaysus, it's hot for September.'

The sun is so high that it's right in the middle of the buildings, shining down the street. I can't even look at the offices across the road cos they're all glass, and the way the sun hits the windows is like daggers in my brain.

'Think I'll work on me tan,' I say, and I roll up my sleeves like the way Ma does and start shuffling out of the doorway. But as soon as the sun hits my face, I wish I'd stayed where I was, cos I don't want to be seen and grabbed by the Authorities again. I'm never leaving the mill, not till I'm grown and have a house like Gran's to go to.

Ma sees me. 'Get back in there, you,' she says in a real low voice.

'Ah, Ma, they can't see me, I'm invisible,' I say, but I'm already creeping backward.

Ma gives me this look, like she's sucking an egg, so I move quicker. I'm back in the shadow, hidden again. But she keeps staring at me so I look at the ground and say nothing, cos she's angry with me and I don't know why. Maybe it's cos I said I'm invisible. Maybe 'invisible' is a new Stress Word.

Some words I say, Ma tells me to shut up cos I'm stressing her out. And when Ma's stressed it means it's time to move on. I've got to go with her cos no matter what happens, I always go with Ma. Ma never leaves me behind. Except for that one time a year and eight months ago when the Authorities almost grabbed me in the alleyway. But she was real sorry after, and she promised then that we'd never sleep on the streets again and I'd never be scared again and she'd never, ever drink again. And she hasn't.

In the Castle, Ma's been good. And nothing stresses me out and I'm never scared. Not any more. The Castle is safe. The Authorites don't know I'm here. And no one else can get in.

I hope Ma's not mad now cos I don't want her stressed out. I wait another bit and then I look up. She's still staring at me, but then she sighs and says, 'You? Invisible? Sure you can be heard a mile off.' She turns back to the street and I smile cos she's not mad and she's not sad neither, so it's all okay.

When Ma was sad, it was the worst kind of stressed out. Her eyes would go all deep, as deep as the canal that runs

past the mill. She'd just sit in a doorway begging and not saying anything, and when she had enough change we'd get up and I'd have to run cos Ma would be walking real fast and her arms would be pumping like she wanted to punch someone.

We'd go to the gate, the black one with the evil smiley face. That's where Ma went to buy what she needed. And then we'd go find a doorway where no one could see us.

I'm not stupid. I knew what she was doing. I knew what she was taking. She'd say, 'It's just for the stress, love. It helps me to fly over the city,' which is dumb cos she didn't go anywhere. She just lay there like she was dead.

But her eyes haven't looked as deep as that in ages. And I try to remember not to say things that make her mad or things that make her sad. Like talking about Gran's house. Or my old school. Or her old mates. Or anything from our old life really. And I never, ever talk about that night in the alleyway.

And from now on I'd better remember not to say I'm invisible neither.

'Bored,' Ma says again and then she says something else but I don't hear her cos there's a loud bang from the construction site across the road. You can't see it from here – it's behind the glass building – but from the roof you can watch the cranes lifting massive metal bars and concrete blocks. There are loads of cranes, these days, and loads of new buildings too. Everything is new. The cranes eat the old buildings and put up new ones that all have perfect windows

and perfect corners and all look the exact same. The mill is the only one that's not shiny and packed with millions of people typing on computers.

Ma says the mill is useless but I don't think it is. The new buildings are like empty notebooks. But the mill is like a book with pictures. It has a story. And even I don't know the whole story and I've lived here for one year and eight months.

I know the mill has a story cos there's something strange going on.

I was playing a game last week where I was a princess in a forest leaving a trail of coins for an evil witch to follow. I left them all over the bottom three floors of the Castle. And they just disappeared. When I went back to get them, they were gone.

Then that night I heard this shuffling sound when me and Ma were in bed and the whole place was locked up. This part of the city is dead quiet at night, cos all the office workers have marched off home and there's hardly any traffic on the road. So the tiniest sound in the Castle booms through it till you feel it rattle and shake, like when a big truck drives over the canal bridge.

I know I heard something.

I've decided that I'm going to find out what it is later today when Ma leaves. Cos even if it's scary, we live here and we're never leaving. So if there's something going on inside, I need to know.

But I need to get rid of Ma first and she won't go out till she has enough coins.

There's a man getting out of a taxi. He grabs his suitcase and, slams the door and starts walking our way.

'Point Blank,' I say.

'Definitely,' Ma says.

Everyone ignores Ma. But if she asks for change, then there are four types of people:

Sorry Nothings – the ones that look real embarrassed and say, 'Sorry, nothing.'

Fake Smiles – the ones that root around for change and give Ma a fake smile when they're throwing it in her cup.

Runners – the ones that put coins in her cup without looking at her and then get out of here like their shoes are on fire.

Point Blanks – the ones that ignore her like she's invisible.

Most people are Point Blanks, like this man. He spots Ma from a few metres back. He pulls up his sleeve and stares at his watch.

'Spare change?' Ma asks, but what she's really saying is 'I know you can see me.'

But he must have bad eyesight, cos he lifts his arm real close to his face and stares at his watch till he's well past us.

'Stingy git,' Ma says.

'Here, Ma,' I say. "Why don't you ask them for spare change as if you were asking them what's forty-seven times sixty-two?'

Ma turns and gives me a look. She knows I hate maths but it's her favourite subject to teach me and she thinks I'm

messing with her so I say, 'Go on,' and I nod at a woman who's coming our way pushing a buggy.

When she's coming past the steps, Ma says, 'Any spare change?' in this real confused way, and it sounds so weird that the woman actually stops and thinks about it and nods like she reckons it's a fair enough question and drops some money into the cup.

I let out a whoop and then slap a hand over my mouth, cos I don't think the woman would be happy about me cheering. But she didn't notice me. Ma turns and gives me a wink.

Now there's a young guy coming, but he's got his face stuck in his phone and he's definitely a Point Blank. Behind him is another man and he's dressed in tight jeans and a shirt with loads of squares on it, and he has a beard that looks more like it was painted on than it grew there.

'Ma, ask him like you're remembering something deadly that happened years ago.'

When he gets close, Ma says, 'You wouldn't have any spare change, would you?' She says it in this voice like melted ice cream and he gives her a weird smile. Ma's pretty good-looking. Especially now that she's not dying from the drink any more. Men are always her best customers.

He actually stops walking, grabs a handful of change and puts it in the cup without even counting it. Ma laughs. And so do I, cos I think we've just found a new type.

'Fair play to ye,' she says.

'Not a bother,' he says.

She turns to me and she's smiling. Really smiling.

'You're a genius!' she says and I'm smiling too.

For the next half hour no one gives any more change, except for an old woman and I feel bad about that cos she looks like she needs it more than we do.

It's boring again and Ma reckons we have enough coins now. I can't see into the cup but I think we probably do.

Ma needs coins to buy food and batteries, but I need coins today too so I can find out what's going on in the Castle. But Ma can't know. I don't want to do anything that'd stress her out. So I'll have to nick some when she's not looking and figure it out on my own.

I notice another man coming. He's in a tight blue suit and his hair looks like the canal does today. Real sleek.

'Look at the head on him. 'Loves himself.' I say. Ma agrees. Then I say, 'Ma, why don't you ask him like you're telling him to watch out for a truck that's about to hit him?'

I don't think she's going to. I'm not even sure she's heard me. But then just as he clip-clops past us, Ma roars, 'Spare change?'

He jumps and I jump and Ma doesn't move. He curses under his breath and then runs away like Ma's pointing a gun at him. I break my heart laughing.

But then Ma turns her head and I see the look on her face. She's not laughing. Not one bit. She's watching something further down the street.

I lean forward and I don't know what she's seen at first but then my stomach flips. Before I even figure out what it is, I'm jumping up. Neon yellow jackets.

'The Authorities,' I say.

There are two men in yellow jackets. One of them is holding a roll of paper and the other takes one end and pulls it out till they're holding a huge sheet between them. They look at the paper and then up at the mill and then down at the paper again. Now one of them is drawing a line on the sheet with his finger and then pointing upward at the mill and drawing a line through the air. The other one is nodding and looking and nodding.

My heart starts going mental. I can't move. I'm stuck.

It's them.

And I remember the smell of rotting vegetables in the alleyway the night Ma left me alone. The air was so cold it stung to breathe. The Yellow Jackets came to take me away. I was on my own and I was so scared and Ma wasn't there.

But then she was.

'Ma?' I whisper.

She ignores me.

'Ma?'

She's just staring at them and I can't hardly breathe.

'Ma!' I say. I'm pushing the door open when she finally she remembers me, and she whips round and points behind me and says, 'Inside, you, now!'

But by the time she says it, I'm already inside, hidden in the darkness of the basement.