

All Our HIDDEN GIFTS



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CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF HOW I ENDED UP WITH THE CHOKEY CARD Tarot Consultancy can be told in four detentions, three notes sent home, two bad report cards and one Tuesday afternoon that ended with me being locked in a cupboard.

I'll give you the short version.

Miss Harris gave me in-school suspension after I threw a shoe at Mr Bernard. It was payback for him calling me stupid for not knowing my Italian verbs. To this, I responded that Italian was a ridiculous language to learn anyway, and that we should all be learning Spanish because globally, more people speak Spanish. Mr Bernard then said that if I really thought I was going to learn Spanish quicker than I am currently learning Italian, I was deluded. He turned back to the whiteboard.

And then I threw my shoe.

It didn't hit him. I'd like to stress that. It merely hit the board next to him. But no one seems to care about that, except me. Maybe if I had a best friend – or really, any close friend at all – I'd have someone to vouch for me. To tell them that it was a joke, and that I would never knowingly hurt a teacher. Someone who could explain how it is with me: that sometimes frustration and rage surge through me, sparking out in ways I can't predict or control.

But that friend doesn't exist, and I'm not sure I would deserve them if they did.

In-school suspension starts on Tuesday morning, and Miss Harris meets me at her office and then leads me to the basement.

In the four years I've been at St Bernadette's, the sewage pipes have frozen and burst twice, not to mention the annual flooding. As a result, the two tiny classrooms down here are covered in grass-green mould, and a damp, mildewy smell permeates everything. Teachers try to avoid scheduling classes down here as much as they can, so naturally it gets used a lot for detention, exams and storing extraneous junk that no one can be bothered to throw away.

The holy grail of this is the Chokey, a long, deep cupboard that makes everyone think of the Trunchbull's torture room in *Matilda*.

Miss Harris waves a dramatic arm at the cupboard. "Ta-da!"

"You want me to clean out the Chokey?" I gasp. "That's inhumane."

"More inhumane than throwing a shoe at someone, Maeve? Make sure to separate general waste from dry recyclables."

"It didn't hit him," I protest. "You can't leave me to clean this out. Not by myself. Miss, there might be a dead rat in there."

She hands me a roll of black plastic bin bags. "Well, then, that would go in 'general waste'."

And she leaves me there. Alone. In a creepy basement.

It's impossible to know where to start. I start picking

at things, grumbling to myself that St Bernadette's is like this. It's not like normal schools. It was a big Victorian town house for a very long time, until at some point during the 1960s, Sister Assumpta inherited it. Well. We say 'Sister', but she's not really one: she was a novice, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, and dropped out of the nunnery, and started a school for "well-bred girls". It probably seemed like a good idea when the number of "well-bred" girls in the city was about a dozen. But there's about 400 of us now, all bursting out of this crumbling house, classes rotating between draughty prefabs and converted old attic bedrooms. It's obscene how expensive it is to send your daughter to school here. I have to be careful about how much I complain in front of Mum and Dad. The other four didn't have to go here, after all. They were bright enough to make it through free schools unaided.

St Bernadette's costs about two thousand euro a term, and wherever the money goes, it's not on health and safety. I can't even step into the Chokey at first because of all the broken old desks and chairs that are stacked up inside, blocking the entrance. A fresh waft of rot and dust hits my nose every time a piece of furniture comes free. I try to carry each piece out and make a neat pile in the corner of the classroom, but when chair legs start coming loose in my hand, smacking against my legs and laddering my tights, it gets less orderly. I throw my school jumper off and start hurling rubbish across the room like an Olympic javelin champion. It becomes cathartic after a while.

Once all the furniture is gone, I'm amazed to see how much space there is in the Chokey. I had always thought it

was just a big cupboard, but it's clear it used to be some kind of kitchen pantry. You could fit three or four girls in here, no problem. It's good information to have. There's no such thing as too many hiding places. It needs a lightbulb or something, though. The door is so heavy that I have to prop it open with an old chair, and even then, I'm working in near darkness.

The furniture, however, is just the beginning. There are piles of papers, magazines and old schoolbooks. I find exam papers from 1991, *Bunty* annuals from the 1980s and a couple of copies of some magazine called *Jackie*. I spend a while flicking through them, reading the problem pages and the weird illustrated soap operas that play out over ten panels. They're ridiculously dated. The stories are all called something like "Millie's Big Catch!" and "A Date With Destiny!"

I read "A Date With Destiny". It turns out Destiny is a horse.

When I reach the back, things start getting really interesting. A couple of cardboard boxes are stacked against the wall, covered in a thick, chalky dust. Pulling the top one down, I open it and find three Sony Walkmans, a packet of Superkings cigarettes, a half-empty bottle of crusty peach schnapps and a pack of playing cards.

Contraband. This must have been where all the confiscated stuff ended up.

There's also a single hair slide with a little silver angel on it, looking very pure and holy next to the fags and booze. I try it on briefly and then get worried about nits, so throw it in a bin bag. Only one Walkman has a tape in it, so I stick the headphones on and press play. Amazingly, it still works. The cassette starts turning. *Holy crap!*

A playful, plodding bass line thrums in my head. Dum-dum-dee-dum-de-dum. A woman's voice whispers to me, childlike and sweet. She starts singing about a man she knows, with teeth as white as snow, which feels like a dumb line. What other colour would she expect them to be?

I listen, clipping the Walkman to my skirt. Most of the songs I don't recognize, but they all have a grungy, arty edge to them. Songs where you can hear the bad eyeshadow. I can't remember the last time I listened to something and didn't know exactly what it was. I'm not even sure I want to find out. It's sort of cool not to know. I listen to it over and over. There are about eleven songs in all, all either by very high-pitched men or very low-voiced women. I pop open the cover to see that it's a homemade mix. The only decoration is a white strip label that says, *"SPRING 1990"*.

I try to lift another heavy box, but the damp cardboard splits at the bottom and comes crashing down on me, smacking me full force in the face. Something must hit against the door because the chair I was using to prop it open suddenly topples over, and the Chokey door slams shut.

I'm plunged into stinking darkness. I grapple around for the doorknob, and realize that there isn't one. Maybe it's not a pantry after all. Maybe it's just a closet.

The music keeps playing in my ears. Now it doesn't seem fun and bouncy. It's creepy. Morrissey is singing about cemetery gates. The tape gets stuck as I pound on the door, a little hiccup at the end of the word "gates".

"HELLO?" I shout. "HELLO, HELLO! I'm STUCK in HERE. I'm STUCK IN THE CHOKEY!"

"… cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs…"

The cupboard, which had felt so roomy just minutes ago, now feels like a matchbox about to be set alight. I have never thought of myself as claustrophobic, but the closer the walls press in on me, the more I think about the air in the room, which already feels so thick and stale that it might choke me alive.

I will not cry, I will not cry, I will not cry.

I don't cry. I never cry. What does happen is actually worse. Blood rushes to my head and, even though I'm in complete darkness, I see spots of purple in my vision and I think I'm about to faint. I grapple around for something to steady me, and my hand falls on something cool, heavy and rectangular. Something that feels like paper.

The battery is starting to die on the Walkman. *"… cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAaaaaaaayyyyyyyyy…"*

And then nothing. Silence. Silence except me screaming for help and banging against the door.

The door flings open, and it's Miss Harris. I practically fall on top of her.

"Maeve," she says, her expression worried.

Despite my panic, I still feel smug at how concerned she looks. *Take that, bitch.*

"What happened? Are you OK?"

"The door closed on me," I say in a burble. "The door closed, and I was stuck and I…"

"Sit down," she orders. She fishes in her bag and brings out a bottle of water, unscrews the cap and hands it to me. "Take small sips. Don't be sick. You're panting, Maeve."

"I'm OK," I say at last. "I just panicked. Is it lunch now?"

She looks really worried now.

"Maeve, it's four o'clock."

"What?"

"You mean to say you haven't taken lunch? You've been here this whole time?"

"Yes! You told me to stay here!"

She shakes her head, as if I'm the magic porridge pot that keeps spewing porridge relentlessly until you say the magic word for it to stop.

"Do you know," she says, walking into the cupboard (I briefly consider closing the door on her), "it's amazing what you can do when you apply yourself. I had no idea there was so much space in there. You're a magician. Well done."

"Thanks," I reply weakly. "I guess I'll become a cleaner."

"I think you should clean up in the bathroom and go home," she says, and I realize what a state I must look. I'm covered head to toe in dust, my tights are ripped and there are bits of cobweb stuck to my school shirt. "Are you sure you're OK?"

"Yep," I say, a little snappy this time.

"I'll see you in the morning. We can figure out what to do with all this furniture then." She makes her way to the door, fixing her handbag back on her shoulder. She takes one last look at me, then tilts her head to the side. "Huh," she says at last, "I never knew you were into tarot cards."

I have no idea what she's talking about. Then I look down. There, clutched in my hands, is a deck of cards.

CHAPTER TWO

I LOOK AT THE CARDS ON THE BUS HOME. I CAN'T WORK OUT what the pattern is supposed to be. Some of the cards have titles, like the Sun and the Hermit and the Fool, but others have numbers, and suits. But not hearts, clubs, spades and diamonds. The suits here are rods, which are long brown sticks, as opposed to fishing rods; cups, which look more like wine glasses; swords, which are just swords; and pentacles, which are little stars on discs.

Most of the cards are drawings of people, the colours in brilliant reds and golds and purples, each character engaged in deep concentration with whatever task they're doing. There's a man carving a plate, but, like, he's *really* carving it. No one has ever applied himself like this dude is applying himself. He is the eight of pentacles, the card tells me. I wonder what he's supposed to mean. *You will carve a plate today?*

I've seen tarot cards before, obviously. They come up in films sometimes. A fortune teller draws the cards and says something vague, and you, the viewer, are convinced she's a con artist. Then she says something specific to make you sit up and pay attention: "And how does your husband *Steve* feel about that?" Or something.

I flick through them quickly, noticing that each card is marked by a very similar system to ordinary cards. Every

suit is marked ace, two, three, four, five, and so on until ten. There are royal families, too: pages, knights, queens, kings. My old best friend Lily would love these. One of our first made-up games was called Lady Knights and mostly consisted of us pretending to ride horses around her back garden, defeating dragons and saving princes. Maybe she's still playing Lady Knights in her head, but we don't speak any more.

As I think about Lily, another card catches my eye. One that seems different from the other cards, and makes my stomach swoop when I touch it. My eyes go bleary for a second, like I've just woken up. Is that a woman's face? I pull it out to look, but there's a noise at the back of the bus that forces me to turn around. It's a clutch of boys from St Anthony's. Why are boys so unbelievably loud on the bus? They're passing around something, then screaming with laughter. It's not a nice, joyful sound, though. It's mean. I catch a flash of something and see that they also have cards.

Now that's weird. The one day I find tarot cards is also the day the St Anthony's boys take up tarot?

Suddenly, Rory O'Callaghan gets up from his seat and saunters up the aisle, even though I know his stop – the same as mine – isn't for ages. "Hey, Maeve," he says, pausing near me. "Can I…?"

"Sure," I say. Today keeps getting stranger and stranger. Here I was, just thinking about Lily and over comes her older brother. Rory and I have known each other since we were small kids, but we've never been friends. Remote, impressive and seldom seen, he was like a comet through my childhood.

He sits down, and I see that his face is completely red, his eyes shiny. I don't ask what happened. Rory has always been a bit of a target. His big, soft features and solitary habits make him an outsider at a school like St Anthony's, where if you don't play football or hurling, you might as well be dead. It probably doesn't help that the O'Callaghans are Protestant in an almost entirely Catholic city. They're not religious; no one is, not really. But their being Protestant gives them an air of slight Britishness. A kind of polite, retiring energy that boys will prey on.

"Rory!" one of the boys shouts down. "Hey! Rory! Roriana! Roriana Grande! Come back!"

Rory blinks his big hazel eyes, which really do look a bit like Ariana Grande's, and turns to me. "So, how are you?"

"I'm OK," I say, shuffling the cards. I like the way the cool cardboard feels. It's very nice if you're the sort of person who doesn't know what to do with their hands.

Rory blanches when he sees the cards. "Oh, crap. You have them, too."

I'm puzzled, and put the cards face up, showing him the swirling illustrations. "Tarot cards?"

At that moment, one of the boys comes sprinting down the bus. "Hey, Roriana Grande, has your girlfriend seen these?"

The boy, whose name I don't know, shoves some cards under my face and all at once, I get the joke. They're not tarot. They're the kind of gross, porn playing cards you get on holidays. Naked girls with huge boobs and thongs so tight they'd give you thrush. And stuck to every face is a photocopy of Rory's school photo. Rory pretends to look

out of the window, knowing that if he grabs for them or reacts in any way, they'll get exactly what they want.

This is, quite simply, the most awkward moment ever experienced on the Kilbeg bus.

"Wait a second," I say, my voice studious, like I'm cross-examining someone on their term project. I look at the boy. "So you photocopied, cut out and glued Rory's photo onto fifty-two playing cards?"

He laughs and gestures at his friends in an "aren't I hilarious?" expression.

"Wow, you must be totally *obsessed* with him," I say loudly, and the boy gives me a dirty look and returns to the back of the bus. Rory and I sit in silence. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that his fingernails are painted pink. Not loud, hot fuchsia. But soft pink, the colour of a ballet slipper. So close to his actual skin colour that, at first, you'd hardly notice it.

When we get off at our stop, he walks in the opposite direction, with barely a murmured "Bye."

My house is a good twenty minutes away from the bus stop, but it's a nice route, and on days like this I actually look forward to it. I have to walk alongside the riverbank, the huge blue-grey water of the Beg on the left-hand side of me, the stone walls of the old city on my right. Kilbeg used to be the city centre a hundred years ago, because the docks were here. It was a trading port, one of the most important in all of Ireland, and there are still plenty of old market squares and cattle posts left over from those days. There's even a drinking fountain, dry for decades now, where people used to tie up their horses. Back in primary school I did a project on

the riots that took place here during the Famine, when the landlords shipped the grain out of the country even though the Irish were all starving. I got a prize. My first ever, and probably my last.

Our house seems big from the outside, but not when you realize that at one time all seven of us lived here. Yes, *seven*. Mum, Dad, my oldest sister Abbie, the two boys Cillian and Patrick, Joanne and then me. People always ask me what it's like having so many siblings, unaware that there's fifteen years between me and Abbie, thirteen years between me and Cillian, ten between me and Patrick, and seven between me and Jo. It's more like having a load of parents.

"Hey," calls Jo from the kitchen. She's baking. It's something she's into at the moment. She broke up with her girlfriend a couple of months ago and is living with us while she finishes her Master's degree. I really don't want them to get back together, although Mum thinks it could be on the cards. It's so boring when it's just me and Mum and Dad.

"Hey, you're home early," I respond, dropping my bag in the hall and making my way into the kitchen. "What are you making?"

"Ugh, there was some mad Christian protest happening right outside the library window, so I came home." She sucks a little bit of batter off her finger. "Pistachio and almond blondies."

"God. What were they protesting? And why do you always have to bake things that taste like salt?"

"They're not salty," she says, crushing the nuts up with the end of a wine bottle. She's always despairing that there's no proper equipment in this house, but with five kids and

a career, Mum could never really be bothered. "They're *savoury*. And they were protesting about the Kate O'Brien exhibition, saying the taxpayer shouldn't pay for art about queer people. As if there would be any good art *left*."

She cups her palms and scoops the nuts into a mug. "How was in-school suspension?"

"It was … fine."

"Did you apologize to Mr Bernard, like I told you to?"

"No."

"Maeve!"

"It didn't *hit* him!"

"That's not the point. You should at least apologize for acting up all the time and purposefully disrupting his class."

I hate that. Acting up. Why are people always in a hurry to categorize you being funny as you being a sociopath? When a girl is quiet, they just say: "She's quiet. It's her personality." If she's a massive overachiever, they just say she's ambitious. They don't question it. Jo was so completely anal about school that she gave herself stress-induced psoriasis during her Leaving Cert, and all anyone had to say was that she was goal-orientated.

"And anyway," she says, sprinkling the mug of nuts into her blondie mixture, "I don't see why you find languages so hard. You're verbal enough. You just have to memorize the right verbs in the important tenses. Everything else is simple."

Just? You just have to memorize them?

Does she not realize how impossible that is?

And yet, other people do it. All the other girls I hang around with got at least eighteen or nineteen out of twenty

in the last vocab test, while I struggled to make it past ten.

Just before I started at St Bernadette's, Mum took me to a special examiner to see if I was dyslexic. I think everyone was really hoping that I was.

"I just know she has some hidden gifts," Mum told the examiner, trying to convince herself as much as him. "She was the earliest to speak of all my kids. She was talking at eleven months. Complete sentences."

They wanted an explanation for my underachievement. Especially the boys, who are both so science-y. They called up every day with new theories on why I was falling behind so much. "Have we considered that it might be her hearing?" Cillian suggested one weekend when he was home. "Maybe she can't actually hear what the teacher is saying."

Ironic, seeing as the only reason I know he said this was because I overheard him from the next room.

I'm not dyslexic, or blind, or deaf. Unfortunately for everyone, I'm just thick.

I lick my finger and start dabbing the worktop, picking up crumbs of pistachio and putting them in my mouth.

"Maeve. Gross. Stop. I don't want your spit in these blondies."

"Why? Who are they for?"

"No one. God, do I need an occasion to not want spitty blondies?"

"They're for Sarra, aren't they?" I say, needling her. "You're meeting up with Sarra."

"Shut up," she says, sweeping the nut crumbs into her hand and then folding them into her mixing bowl with a wooden spoon.

"You are!" I say, triumphant. "Well, don't expect her to appreciate them. She'll probably say she loves them and then cheat on them with some brownies."

Joanne stops mixing. Her face is going red. Oh God, I've done it now. Sometimes I forget that, even though we've all known about the cheating for so long that it feels like old news, Joanne still relives it every day. I might be over her being cheated on, but she certainly isn't.

"Hey," I say. If I can make her laugh, then we can both have a giggle about it, and Sarra's memory will be thrown over our shoulders like lucky salt. "Brownies are horrible. Probably the most overrated baked good in the world. And slutty, too."

Joanne says nothing, and just spoons the mixture into her baking tray.

"If you like brownies you're probably an asshole," I try again, watching her guide her tray into the oven.

"Jesus Christ, Maeve, will you just leave it?"

Suddenly she's shouting, so angry that she loses her concentration and burns her forearm on the side of the oven. She screams and instinctively clutches her skin, dropping the entire tray of batter on the floor. I grab the kitchen roll and start trying to clean up the sticky yellow globs.

"Stop!" she shouts, pushing me away. "Just get out. Get out, get out, get out! Go to your room."

"I'm trying to help, you cow," I say, my eyes tingling already. *God, don't cry. Don't cry.* Nothing worse than being the baby of the family and crying. "And you can't tell me to go to my room. You're not Mum, so piss off."

Now Joanne is crying. Sometimes I think that she spent

so long being the baby of the family that she's even more sensitive than I am. She had her baby status taken away from her, after all, while I'm desperately trying to leave it behind.

The kitchen door swings open and Mum's there, holding the dog's lead and looking exhausted by us already. The dog charges in and dives for the batter, stuffing as much as he can into his mouth before Mum starts shrieking about his irritable bowel syndrome.

"GRAB TUTU!" she yells. "Maeve, get Tutu AWAY! Tutu, STOP! Tutu, BAD! Joanne, is there butter in this? I am not cleaning up rancid dairy diarrhoea. Do you have any idea how that's going to smell?"

We lock Tutu outside while we clean up the mess and Joanne tearfully explains what a bitch I am.

"I can't believe you," I snap at her. "You're in your twenties and you're snitching."

Then I say a bunch of horrible stuff about her and Sarra that I instantly regret but will also never apologize for. Tutu and I go to my room, two outlaws.

There are fifty WhatsApp notifications on my phone, but all of them are from groups I'm part of. Niamh Walsh and Michelle Breen @'d me a few times, asking what Miss Harris made me do during my first day of suspension.

I cleaned out the Chokey, I write back.

Lots of emojis.

What a bitch, someone says.

I found so much crap, I type. I send a picture of the Walkman with the grungy mixtape.

They all register their surprise, but quickly move on to something else. There are at least fourteen of us in this

WhatsApp group, so it's hard for everyone to keep up. I find myself wishing, not for the first time, that I had a best friend to talk to.

I had one, once. But that whole thing with Lily is over. It's been almost a year and a half, now.

Then I remember the cards. The brilliant reds and purples, the serious expressions and strange symbols. I pull them out of my bag and start sifting through them, laying them out in numerical order.

1. The Fool.

   A guy with a dog and a flute. He's kind of hot in that long-haired Prince Valiant kind of way.

2. The Magician.

   A guy at a table, mixing a potion.

3. The High Priestess.

   A woman with a moon on her head. She reminds me of Miss Harris, beautiful and stern.

I peer at each one, hoping that I'll get some kind of psychic vision if I make close-enough eye contact with the people in the cards. Nothing happens. Eventually, bored of my own ignorance, I open my laptop and search: How to teach yourself tarot.

And then, the evening disappears.

CHAPTER THREE

"Hey, guys, welcome to my channel. I'm Raya Silver of Silverskin Magic, and today we're going to learn how to give a standard three-card tarot reading."

The woman in the YouTube video is sitting cross-legged in a wicker armchair, impossibly gorgeous in the New Orleans mystic shop that is also her family home. Raya has two kids, a dog, a cat and a third eye.

It has been two hours, and I am obsessed with her.

I've learned a lot. I've learned that the "face" cards – like "Death" and the "Magician" and the "High Priestess" – are like main characters of the tarot, and they're called the Major Arcana. The rest of them are suits, just like in regular playing cards, and they're the Minor Arcana. Cups represent emotions. Swords represent the mind. Rods represent passion. Pentacles represent money.

"Swords, cups, rods, pentacles," Raya's e-book says. "Head, heart, loins, feet."

"I want you to get warmed up with a nice juicy shuffle," she instructs, her cards slipping through the air and into her fingers like silk scarves. I mimic her movements, and the cards splay out of my hands, falling onto the bedspread. I'm still trying to get the hang of my shuffle technique.

"Or, if you're reading for someone else, get them to shuffle.

The cards are living, breathing things. They need to soak up all the energy from whoever you're reading for. Then, ask the client to cut the deck into three with their left hand, and put it back together. Fan the cards out so they have plenty of choice."

I do as she says.

"Now pick three. They represent past, present and future."

I pick carefully and turn all three over. The Moon, the Chariot and the Tower. The Moon is just the Moon, a big luminous, pearly illustration. The Chariot is a man on a two-horse chariot, and the horses look mad as hell. The Tower is the only one I'm anxious about. It looks horrible. A medieval tower is broken in half, orange flames licking the stone. Two people are falling out of it, plunging to their deaths. It gives me a chill. But I trust Raya. She says there are no truly bad cards, that there's a good side to everything, and I believe her.

Pausing the video, I consult my Kindle to see Raya Silver's descriptions of the cards. All of Raya's interpretations are friendly, text message-length and written in ordinary language, not in some weird obtuse magical language. It's why I like her so much. She feels like a friend.

> THE MOON: The Moon rules over our periods, so there's a lot to be mad about here. This card represents deep subconscious energy, maybe even stuff that you are suppressing. Remember, all evil has to come to the surface eventually!
>
> THE CHARIOT: Woahhhh! Slow down! Your chariot is about to veer off the track – or are you going so fast that it just looks like chaos to

everyone else? Ask yourself whether you're in control of your situation or not

THE TOWER: OK, I know this looks bad. Real bad. But sometimes old structures need to come tearing down so you can build something new.

I unpause the video, and Raya instructs me on how to put these three cards together. *"Use your intuition,"* she says breathily. *"Let the cards talk to each other."*

I gaze at them, and ask myself how I'm feeling. The moodiness of the Moon has definitely been a thing for me lately. A profound loner energy has ruled over this year at school. The last two years, if I'm honest. It seems like everyone's deeper in their cliques than ever, and I'm lagging behind, no best friend, no firm group, no academic success. Then there's the Chariot, the guy trying to keep his cool while his two horses go crazy. Yeah, that feels like me.

"Speak your truth," Raya says. Her voice is breezy, but her chocolate-brown eyes are focused and direct. *"Speak it out loud."*

"I'm not very happy at the moment," I say aloud, and to my complete surprise I feel a tiny hot tear come into the corner of my eye. I quickly blink it away. "And I'm trying to make out like I'm fine, but I'm not."

"Go to your place of fear," Raya Silver says, as though she can hear me. "Say what you're afraid of."

"If I don't sort myself out, things are going to get really, really, really bad," I say, and before I have a chance to get upset about it, Dad calls me down for dinner.

When I get downstairs, it's just Dad at the table. Jo has gone out – probably to Sarra's house – and Mum

is correcting exam papers in Abbie's old room, so she's eating in there.

"I heard you were giving Joanne hell," Dad says disapprovingly, shoving me a plate of lasagne.

"If that's *her* side of the story…"

"You should be nice to your sister. She's going through a hard time."

"I am nice," I say. "I can be nice."

"You're better than nice, Maeve. You're good. There's so much good in you. You just need to show it."

"What's the difference?"

"Nice people," he says, stroking Tutu, who is pawing at his lap for scraps, "will smile and listen and say, 'Oh no, how terrible' when they hear a sad story. Good people do something about it."

Dad is the youngest in his family, too, so he tends to have a bit more sympathy than everyone else. But he was the one genius in a family of idiots, and I'm the one idiot in a family of geniuses. It's not exactly the same.

We talk for a while, and he asks me if school is going any better, and I lie and say it is.

"How's Lily getting on?" he asks, pushing his food around. "Do you still talk?"

"We're not friends any more, Dad," I say quickly, and take my tarot cards out of my pocket.

"What are *those*?"

"Tarot cards," I respond. "Do you want me to give you a reading?"

"I don't know. Will you tell me nasty things about my future?"

"Tarot doesn't tell the future," I say, mimicking Raya Silver's calm, guru-like voice. "They only help you analyse your present."

"Jesus. Are you in a cult now? I heard on the radio that all the young people were joining a cult, but I didn't think they'd nab *you*."

"No. I'm just interested in the cards. They're part of history, you know. They were used in Italy in the fifteenth century."

"So you're into history *and* Italian now? I think I like this cult."

"Here," I say, handing them over. "Shuffle these bad boys. Get your juice into them."

"My *what*?" Dad looks appalled.

"Your energy! Get your energy into them! Cards are made of paper, Dad. Paper is made from trees. They're conscious."

"Uh-huh," he says, clearly bemused. "And when did you get these cards?"

"Today," I answer. I get him to shuffle and split the cards into three piles. Then I fan the cards out like Raya did. "Pick three."

He picks three. Ten of Rods, Two of Cups, the Fool. I study them.

"It looks like you're working really, really hard," I say, pointing at the man with a bunch of rods on his back. "And that you might be neglecting Mum in the process. The cards are suggesting you go on a holiday or an adventure together so you can feel, y'know – in love again."

My dad's face goes dark. "Piss off," he says. "It did not say that."

"It did!"

"Has your mother put you up to this?"

"No!" I say, gleeful. "Why? Am I right?"

"Je-eeee-eee-sus!" He starts raking his hands through his thin, sandy hair. "Well, I guess we're going to Lisbon then."

"Lisbon?"

"Your mum has been on and on about us going to Lisbon. Flights are cheap at the moment. And I've been working like a madman."

"Go!" I say, truly excited to have been right. "Go to Lisbon!"

"Who's going to make sure you get to school every morning?"

"I'm sixteen! I can wake myself up for school. And Joanne will be here."

He takes our plates to the sink and rinses them off. "My God," he says, still dazed. "I guess I better check Ryanair."

I shuffle the cards again, delighted by my success. "I find it very interesting," he says, before leaving the room, "that you can learn all these cards in an evening, and still haven't quite mastered your times tables."

"Shut up! I know my times tables! I'm sixteen, Dad, not eight."

"What's sixteen times eight?"

"A million and three."

"Wrong. It's 128."

"Oh, look," I respond, drawing my cards. "It's the Death card. I'd hurry up about booking those flights."

He leaves, and I'm alone with my deck of Chokey cards. Thinking that, despite his stupid maths joke, it is a little

weird that I've managed to learn the cards so well in an evening. But it's not like learning everything else. It doesn't fall out of my brain the minute I move on to something else, like school stuff does. It sticks, like song lyrics. Like poetry. Like feelings I already had but finally have a map for.