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opening extract from

This Way to Paradise

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Chapter 1

Sham-pooh!



'We're here,' I said into the phone as I flopped on to my bed. I'd positioned it next to the window so that I could lie and look up at the clear July sky or sit and look down at what was happening on the street below.

'What's it like?' asked Erin at the other end of the phone.

'Heaven. Magic. Totally fab,' I said as I took in the view of the trees and roof tops of the houses opposite.

'Boys?'

'Give me a break! I've only been here half a day.'

'That's long enough. You're slacking, India Jane. What have you been doing?'

'Getting here, Miss Bossy Boots. Unpacking my stuff. What else?'

'Pff,' said Erin. 'Get your priorities straight, girl. I'd be straight out and off down Portobello Road, checking out the local talent.'

'I will, I promise. As soon as I can and I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to do a proper recce yet but, from what I've seen so far, I have to say that it's looking good. Aunt Sarah's house is only a couple of streets away from Notting Hill tube and when we drove past there, I did see a few contenders.'

'I am soooo jealous,' said Erin. 'Only you would get to live in deep trendyville. I so wish I was there with you in London instead of stuck over here in leprechaun land.'

'Me too. You could always run away. I'm sure Mum and Dad wouldn't mind. You know what they're like. Mr and Mrs Liberal. They've already adopted an orang-utan in Malaysia, a donkey in Devon and a goat in Africa. A run-away teenage girl would give them a complete set.'

'Don't be cynical,' said Erin. 'Your parents are top. I like that they give to good causes. Shows they care about stuff.'

'Well, I suppose that we can be grateful that at least the goat, donkey and orang-utan aren't here with us. Seems like everyone else is. I escaped straight up to my room for a bit of peace. It's mad downstairs. Dad's bossing everyone around in his usual manner. They're all here helping with the move, but actually getting in the way.'

'Who? Who's there?'

'Ethan, his wife Jessica, Lewis, Dylan, Aunt Sarah, of course,

and I saw my cousin Kate for a second, but she was off somewhere in a hurry as always. Ethan and Jess brought the twins too. Ethan's been training them to say, "We are the evil twins. The daughters of Satan." It's so funny because they're so cute and angelic-looking with great blue eyes and curly hair. They're not much help with the unpacking though. Ethan —'

'Ah, Ethan, swoon, swoon. Is he still gorgeous and a half?'

'He is – and way too old for you.'

'No, he's not. I'm fifteen.'

'Yeah and he's twenty-eight and married and, before you say anything, Lewis is also too old for you.'

Ethan is my step-brother from Dad's first marriage. He had come over to welcome us to the big city, as had Lewis. Dylan (who's twelve) and Lewis are my real brothers, but Lewis won't be living with us as he is a student and has digs up in Crouch End in North London.

'Nah, Lewis is a baby,' said Erin. 'He's only nineteen, isn't he?'

I laughed. Just before my family left Ireland, Erin decided that she was into older men. Like, at least twenty. I can see her point – as boys of our age do act immature most of the time, but I think that older boys can be difficult as well. Like in the trying it on department (and I don't mean trying on clothes).

'OK. Now, tell me everything,' said Erin. 'I want to be able to see it all in my head so, when we talk or email, I can imagine exactly what it looks like. Start with the front door, no, start before that. At the front gate. On the street. Give me details.'

'OK,' I said. 'Details. Holland Park. *Très chic* —'

'Who picked you up at the airport?' Erin interrupted.

'Aunt Sarah.'

'In what?'

'She's got a new black BMW. She's loaded, don't forget.'

'Then what?'

'We came straight here. Took just over an hour. The traffic is something else.'

'Weather in Londinium?'

'Lovely. A beautiful summer's day. Not a cloud in the sky. What's it like over there in Kilkerry?'

'Duh. Raining, of course.'

'Of course.' I knew all about the rain in Ireland. For the duration of our two years over there, my parents had rented a castle. They liked living in interesting locations. All my life we've stayed in unusual places, and the castle was beautiful, no doubt about that, stunning in fact and a nice enough place to live when the weather was good, which was hardly ever. It really does rain a lot in that part of Ireland and the castle leaked. We were forever running around with bowls, pots and pans to catch the relentless drips. I even woke up one morning to find a hole in the ceiling in my room and a mini waterfall gushing through. It's an aspect of living there that I'm not going to miss, which is why it's so heavenly to be at Aunt Sarah's. As well as being loaded, she is organised, stylish and together in a way that my mum can only watch in wonder. No leaks in her gaff. Oh no.

All surfaces, walls and ceilings are sealed, damp-proofed and painted in tasteful shades of designer paint. Not that Mum isn't stylish, she is in her own boho-waif way. It's the organised and together bit she's not good at. Nor is Dad, for that matter. They're like Peter Pan and Wendy. I sometimes wonder how the two have them have managed so far. Actually, I know exactly how. Grandpa's inheritance, that's how. The inheritance which has now run out, hence our moving in with Mum's sister and her daughter, Kate.

'The house is a dream, Erin, I'll take some pics and e-mail them to you. It'll be better if you can see for yourself.'

'Just tell me a bit to give me a rough idea.'

'OK. It's tall, cream and *très chic*. Five storey, like most of the houses in the street are. Six bedrooms, three reception rooms and a private studio at the bottom of the back garden that Aunt Sarah uses as her office. Dylan and I are on the top floor and we have our own bathroom with the most amazing power shower that has a nozzle head thingee as big as a football. Kate's room is on the second floor and next to it a spare guest room and another bathroom. Aunt Sarah and Mum and Dad's rooms are on the first. All the rooms are huge and light with high ceilings, big windows and wooden floors. She's done it out in neutral tones and added colour with all her knick knacks, rugs and bits and pieces from places she's visited around the world – mainly Thailand and India, I think.'

'Sounds wonderful.'

'It is. The only rooms that are a bit dark are the basement, and the kitchen – which is at the back of the house. It's tall and narrow and has one of those ancient pulley drying-racks hanging from the ceiling. People used them in olden days to hang their washing on before they had machines and dryers.'

'Is that how your aunt dries her washing then?'

'No way. She uses it to hang her pans and utensils on. It's brilliant – you can haul them right up out of the way. You'll see it when you come over later in the summer. '

'I can't wait. What's your room like?'

'Pretty. Simple seaside colours. Sky blue and pale sand. Aunt Sarah said I can put what I like on the wall to make me feel at home. I carried the pic of us two over in my hand luggage. It's the first thing I put out in here.'

'And so it should be. The one we had taken in Dublin?'

'Yeah.'

The photo of Erin and me was taken at a train station in Dublin when we were on a school trip a few weeks before I left. I'd had the photo blown up so that it would fill a silver frame that Grannie Ruspoli gave me one Christmas. Erin is pushing her nose up with one of her fingers and has gone cross-eyed and I'm sitting behind her doing my zombie face. Not our most attractive picture together, but I liked it because it reminded me of what a laugh we always have. In reality, Erin is tomboyish-looking with an elfin face and short honey-blond hair. She lives in jeans and Converse All Stars (after I turned her

on to them). All the boys back in Ireland fancy her. Not that she fancies them back, apart from Scott Malone – the top cutie at our school, who everyone fancies. She is very picky and says she'd rather wait for the right one than compromise. That only makes boys chase her more, as boys like a challenge (according to my brothers).

'You going to be OK, then?' asked Erin.

'Yeah. Hope so. I still feel nervous about starting a new school in September. I'm going to *so* hate being the new girl again.'

'You'll be fine. You're a babe, plus you're a Gemini. They're one of the best star signs for making new friends. People will be falling over themselves to get in with you.'

'Yeah, right. Just like everyone was when I started at your school. Not. We didn't become mates for almost a year.'

'Ah well, I'm a Taurian. We like to take time to make up our minds about people but, when we do, we're very loyal.'

'I know. Now, I can't get rid of you. God knows I've tried! I mean, look, I've moved country and yet you're still calling me.'

Erin laughed at the other end. 'I'm going to go now. I'm not going to take those kind of insults from a low life like you. Actually I do have to go, Dad's calling. He wants me to wash the car, like, sometimes I wonder what his last slave died of. Anyway, e-mail or text and send pics of boys and the house. OK?'

'Will do.'

'Actually, wait a mo, India J. Before you go, I'm going to give you some new homework.'

'Homework?'

'Yes. You have to go out today some time and take a pic of the cutest boy you see then e-mail it to me, OK?'

'Yes sir, sergeant major, SIR!'

'Dismissed,' said Erin and hung up.

After I'd put the phone down, I was about to start unpacking when I heard Mum calling me from downstairs.

I went down to see what she wanted and found her in the hall. She looked flustered. 'You haven't seen my purse, have you?"

I shook my head.

'We need milk, sweetheart,' she continued as she searched the hallway for her bag. 'With all these extra people here, it's all gone. Would you be a love and pop out and get us some?'

'But I don't know where to get it,' I protested.

'Then find out,' said Dad, bursting into the hall from the kitchen and overhearing the last part of our conversation. Dad never enters a room. He always *bursts* in like a tornado, creating commotion and noise in his wake – partly because he's a big man, a presence, and partly because of his larger-than-life personality. 'You'll have to find your way soon enough.'

'But . . .' I was about to object then realised that there was no point. It was typical of Dad to make me go out into a strange place on my own. It wouldn't occur to him that I might feel wary of the area until I knew my way around more. It's like how he taught us to swim. He threw us in at the deep end. It was