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Opening extract from

Evie Brooks is Marooned in Manhattan

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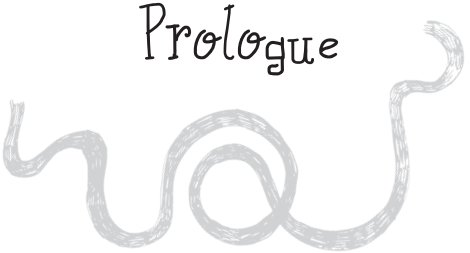
Prologue



Lashing out furiously like a cornered dog, I managed to free the collar of my cardigan from the security guard's grip and started to freefall into a void, my long hair trailing swiftly behind me. It was blacker in the rubbish chute than the darkest, loneliest part of the night. The noise echoing around me was the most horrible part; the high-pitched scream of a terrified child in a blind panic. It was only later I realised I was the child and the scream came from me.

OH MY GOD! A thick clump of my hair got stuck on something protruding from one of the narrow walls of the enclosed chute.

'HELP!' I yelled, with all that I had in me. 'HELLLLLLLLLP… PLEEAASSSSE … HELP!'

But there was no response. The security guard didn't hear me or he didn't care.

I desperately reached upwards and clawed with my hands and I wriggled and kicked out frantically with my legs to try and disentangle myself, but it was no good. I was stuck alone in the dark with excruciating pain shooting through

my head as the entire weight of my body rested on that band of thick hair. I couldn't move up and I couldn't move down. I was trapped in that narrow, suffocating space.

I'm going to die, I thought. Hanged by my hair until I am dead.

Just when it didn't seem possible to feel more frightened, I thought about what might be waiting for me below at the bottom of the chute. Maybe this narrow tunnel led directly to an incinerator and I would be burnt to a crisp, my skin blistering and melting in the flames until all that remained of me was a little pile of grey ashes and a mound of burnt hair.

Paralysed with fear, my efforts to release myself slowed and then stopped. All was still and very quiet. I would die soon. I knew it.

My fear ebbed and a huge sadness welled up inside me. I saw myself at the start of the summer, arriving at the airport in New York. I saw again the customs officer, a tall, handsome black man in a white shirt looking at me, a skinny, twelve-year-old Irish girl, carrying an enormous, soft, toy elephant. I took both of my passports out of my bag, the old Irish one and the new, shiny, blue American one and it was the new one I handed to him. He glanced at it and then back down at me.

'Welcome home,' he said, stamping my passport with a heavy thud.

'But I've never been to America before,' I said.

'Well, you're here now, sweetheart,' he replied with a smile.

And I saw myself on my first ride on the subway, when the

air-conditioning broke down and people sweated around me, black and white and Chinese and Native American and Hispanic, and a mother with a baby who looked like an Eskimo. Almost everyone jammed into that train complained bitterly about the humidity and poked one another with their bags and their elbows as they tried to fan themselves.

And I remembered the noise of their different languages mingling together and the long curly side ringlets and grey beard of a silent and patient old man wearing a black hat and a long black coat, and I remembered the sour smell of sweat. I was thinking that if an alien landed in New York, it would be impossible to convince him that we were all the same species, all human.

I felt very, very tired. I closed my eyes.

'You're going to be ok, Evie,' whispered my mum's voice in the void.

'Mum?' I said, my eyes snapping open and straining in the darkness to see, but there was nothing, which was okay, because much as I missed Mum, I'm sure I would die instantly of a heart attack if I saw her ghost.

'Think, Evie, think,' Mum's voice urged. 'What did Uncle Scott do to your hair?'

I gasped. Digging around in my left pocket, I pulled out the small nail scissors I had used that morning to trim Ben's nails and, reaching my left arm upwards, tugged the scissors frantically through my hair.

Snip. Snip. Snip. Snip.

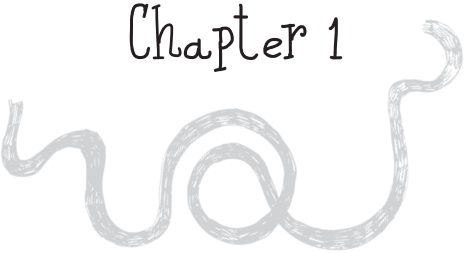
Freefalling again through space, feeling light as an Aero.

'Owwwwwwwww!' I exclaimed, as I landed with a heavy bump in a large metal rubbish skip filled with black plastic garbage bags.

I gazed upwards for a moment.

'Thank you, Mum!' I mouthed silently.

Chapter 1



I am an orphan. That should mean I have magical powers or a fabulously wealthy grandfather who owns a travelling three-ring circus or a five-star hotel in Morocco. At the very least, I should have a destined-to-be-a-star singing voice. Fat chance. In fact, my singing is so hideous that one of my teachers instructed me to whisper the words during choir practice because I was throwing the other kids off-key.

It was Mrs Scanlon's idea that I keep a journal, but I only write in it when I feel like it. She is the child psychologist I had to visit every week when Mum got sick. Mum meant well but when you are made to see a therapist, it is blindingly obvious that things are about to get so much worse. Mrs Scanlon had very long, scraggly grey hair, a face like a badger – a *kind* badger; and an interesting preference for multicoloured gypsy skirts. Practically the very first thing she asked me was, 'How do you feel about your mum being sick?'

'Bad!' I said, my mouth falling slightly open in amazement. To think that poor Mum forked out loads of cash we could not afford just so I could spend forty-five minutes every week humouring Mrs Scanlon and assembling puzzles

intended for kids half my age. Mum died seven weeks and two days after the first session so I did not have to go see Mrs Scanlon anymore. I almost miss her.

Soon after Mum went into the hospital for the last time, she told me I would be leaving Ireland to live with her brother, my Uncle Scott, in New York. That floored me and I thought, no way, but what kind of person would fight with their dying mother? Except maybe for Amy McCann, who is in my class at school. I kept my mouth firmly shut, which was not an easy thing to do.

I didn't know Scott but that was not his fault. Every time we planned to visit him in New York, something would happen, like Mum would unexpectedly get a new part in a play. That's not completely accurate. Scott sent us the money for the plane fares twice, but we could not resist spending it on other things, like a drum kit for me and highlights and burgundy cowboy boots for Mum.

Scott came to Dublin to say goodbye to Mum and he stayed for the funeral. He has the exact same colouring as Mum: dirty blonde hair minus Mum's highlights, and eyes so intensely blue that everyone stares at him for a few extra seconds when they first meet him. He is much taller than she was and has the kind of skin that suggests he just got back from a holiday in the Canaries. Mum often said that Scott was born cool, but until I met him, I figured she just said that because he's her older brother. He's not a loud American at all. He must have noticed that I avoided him as much as possible but he didn't ask me any silly questions or try to

pretend everything was normal and okay, and he said calling him just 'Scott' without the 'Uncle' was fine.

I will skip over the funeral part because I can't bear to write about it just now – maybe later, maybe never. The morning after the funeral, Scott and I wandered around the flat on North Great George's Street in Dublin, bumping into each other and saying 'sorry'. It didn't feel like home anymore with Mum gone. I tried to figure out how to tell Scott that I had no intention of heading off to America with him. I wanted to stay in Ireland where I belonged. I wanted to live with my godmother, Mum's best friend, Janet. But no clever ideas came into my head; they never do when you need them and so, finally, I just blurted out, 'I'm sorry. I don't want to sound mean or ungrateful but I'm not going with you to New York. I am staying here with Janet. That's kind of the whole point of having a godparent, that's the person who brings you up, you know, if something happens and your parents are not on the scene.'

Scott sat down beside me on our ugly brown sofa that sags in the middle, but not too close, and ran his hand through his hair quickly so that it stood up in spikes.

'Evie, I'm not a military dictator from some banana republic. I'd never force you into going anywhere you didn't want to go. But I think you would like New York if you gave it a chance. Alicia wanted you to live with me. She says so in her will. She made me your guardian. A guardian is basically the chief godparent.'

I didn't have a clue how to respond to that. First, I'm not

sure what a banana republic is. Second, it was pretty clever of Scott to drag Mum into the conversation. It didn't feel right in my stomach to be defying her wishes but I couldn't believe that Scott really wanted me even if I wanted to go, which I most definitely did not. Scott is thirty-six but he's not married and he doesn't have any kids of his own.

'I don't want to cramp your style by going to live with you,' I said.

'I don't have a style,' Scott said, 'and you won't be cramping anything. We are family.'

I pretended to watch TV even though the volume was turned down too low to hear. Scott continued, 'You don't have to come straight away. You can stay with Janet until the end of month so you can finish out the school year and be with your friends. Then you can come visit me for the summer, just for the summer; if you don't like it, you can come back to Ireland in September.'

I felt suspicious. When an adult says something that sounds fair and reasonable, there's usually a catch of some kind.

'Scott,' I said, 'I know I'm not going to like living in New York. I'm Irish. My teacher told us that Irish children are not brought up like cows to be exported to a foreign country. I *definitely* would want to come home at the end of the summer. How do I know you will let me?'

Scott thought about this for a minute or two and then he called Janet who was pretending to be busy making toast in the kitchen, but was obviously shamelessly eavesdropping. As soon as she bustled into the living room, her silver brace-

lets jangling, Scott turned to me, 'Evie, I promise you, with Janet as the witness, if you want to come back to Ireland in September, you can and nobody will stop you. In fact, I will make sure that happens.'

'You will *always* be welcome to live with me,' added Janet. 'I would love to have you and I'm only prepared to let you go because that's what your mum wanted.'

'Thank you,' I said and my eyes felt itchy. I rubbed them vigorously, automatically waiting for Mum to tell me to stop rubbing my eyes, but of course she couldn't. Scott got up and walked to the fireplace, where, with his hands in his pockets and his back to me, he began to look through the many photographs of Mum and me scattered across the mantelpiece. He gave a little nod to Janet who meekly returned to the kitchen.

I didn't want to trust Scott, but I wasn't feeling overwhelmed with options. Janet wouldn't be able to keep me without Scott's consent. My savings amounted to fifty-seven Euro and some change. I didn't have a credit card or any living relatives that I knew of other than Scott. I wouldn't even be thirteen for another nine months (my birthday is 7 February). The police don't allow twelve-year-olds to live by themselves and, even if they did, I would be way too scared to live alone.

'Ok,' I said in a little voice and Scott whipped around to face me.

'Just until September,' I added, a little louder, and held out my hand to Scott to shake on it, but he awkwardly

high-fived it instead.

Janet appeared immediately in the doorway and giggled a bit for no reason, a dead giveaway that she fancies Scott. Janet is not very good with men. Nor was Mum. That was a big bond between them. I have a feeling I will not be good with them either.

Take John Donaghy from school, for example, super cute, with light brown hair and shiny brown eyes. He talks very quickly with his hands when he is excited and he can sketch anyone in the world in a few minutes with a pencil stub.

I spent all last summer learning to climb the big tree in the park behind the junior infants' school. Every evening between five and half past six, John used to cycle by and there I'd be, sitting on the bottom branch, coolly reading a book. If no other boys were with him, he'd wave to me, but that was it. Once, I even manoeuvred myself so that, as he passed by, I hung upside down with my legs curled over the branch, but he just waved as usual and I very nearly fell when I waved back. After all of that hard work to impress him, when we went back to school in September, he started going with Hannah Cunningham, who would never in a trillion years be able to climb that tree.

Hannah is very pretty, like a Spanish exchange student. I am in the middle of my class when it comes to height, but I am mainly made up of legs, which not even Mum could say is cute. They are far too skinny and bony; at our class outing to Glendalough last year, Amy McCann called me Daddy Longlegs in front of the whole bus and then she had

the cheek to repeat it on Facebook, but it didn't catch on, thank God.

Hannah Cunningham's hair is caramel coloured and curly and short. Mine reaches half way down my back; it is boot polish black and when it's not riddled with pesky knots that appear overnight, it is straight without even a hint of a curl. To top it off, I have freckles. Hannah doesn't have one freckle, not even on her arms or anything. I suppose it would be fair to say that I have interesting eyes. They are large and grey and they can look lighter or darker, depending on my mood.

Last year, Mum played the part of the youngest sister in a play by Chekhov (that's an old, dead Russian guy), called *Three Sisters*. One night backstage, I overheard the middle one of the *Three Sisters* say, 'Alicia's daughter, Evie, has a real promise of beauty.'

But the older Sister, who was a pathetic actress and only got the part because she was the girlfriend of the director's brother, replied, 'She could go either way, ugly or beautiful.'

I didn't find that comforting.

I noticed Scott examining a photograph of Mum and me dressed up for Halloween last year. I was *Alice in Wonderland* and Mum wore ripped fishnet tights and a little miniskirt as the Queen of Tarts instead of the Queen of Hearts. Not everyone got her costume, but I thought it was brilliant.

Scott looked sad. It is always so much scarier when adults are sad.

'Do you have a girlfriend, Scott?' I asked to try and get him to think about someone other than Mum.

'Sort of,' he said. 'We've been dating a few months, so yeah, I guess Leela is my girlfriend. You'll meet her.'

'You'll like her,' he added a few seconds later, a little unconvincingly.

I didn't find that very comforting either.