

## Prologue

Seth opened his eyes. The unbearable tremors had stopped. He sat up warily. No excruciating pain in his limbs. No dizziness. No crashing headache. The fever was completely gone.

He swung his legs carefully to the side of the thin mat he lay on, and looked around his shadowy cell. It was just as it should be – low wooden table littered with medicinal herbs and vials, fresh water in a cup. He squinted his eyes against the flickering light of a burning oil lamp. Its aura shimmered with a surprising prism of colours, unnerving him a little.

‘Matt?’ he called.

He expected his voice to come out husky and spent, but it sounded pure and full. He stood up – his legs felt strong. He walked over to the door. It was open.

Strange.

He moved out into the narrow passageway.

Empty.

The gladiatorial barracks should be throbbing with noise. Where was everyone?

He ran to Matthias’s cell.

Also empty. A tunic lay across his mattress, and a pestle and

mortar with some semi-crushed medication stood abandoned on the table by the small window.

Seth walked across to the window and looked out. Again, that strange spectrum of coloured light shimmering around the edges of the eerily empty practice arena. He glanced across it towards the gates. Where were the guards? They never left their post.

Without another thought, he fled from the building, across the deserted arena until he reached the huge wooden gates. Glancing behind him, he gave them an almighty shove. They clanked open. He slipped through quickly, before the sound could betray him, and continued to run, certain his captors wouldn't be far behind.

He knew where he was heading: their secret meeting place. He pictured her standing in the shadows of the trees. Waiting for him.

Livia. His Livia.

And then he froze, because he suddenly remembered. She wouldn't be there. Couldn't be there. She was gone forever.

He had watched her die.

# PART I

Time is too slow for those who wait,  
Too swift for those who fear,  
Too long for those who grieve,  
Too short for those who rejoice,  
But for those who love, time is eternity.

– Henry van Dyke (1852–1933)



# Delinquent

*York, England*

*AD 2012*

*‘Eva, what is your problem?’*

I shrugged. Where to begin?

‘So what were you doing when you were supposed to be at school?’

‘Er – this and that.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

*Really? Do you really want to know, Dad?*

‘Eva, what is going to happen to you?’ Mum had finally joined the party.

How the hell did I know what was going to happen to me? But thanks, Mum, for reminding me that I had no future, and that you would always side with *him*.

I stared back at them. My mother and my stepfather, Colin. All I needed now was darling Ted to show up (his son, *not* my brother), to make it three against one.

‘I’m so sick of this, Eva,’ said Colin. ‘Get out! I don’t want to look at you –’

‘The feeling’s mutual,’ I muttered as I shoved past him and stormed off to my room.

My first instinct was to pick up my guitar, turn up the amp and scream. But I didn’t trust myself. I loved my guitar too much – it was my dad’s – and all I wanted to do was smash something. I tried to get my breathing under control, but the rage was building. I needed to get out. I grabbed my jacket and slammed out of the house.

Then I ran . . . through the town, across the park, down the hill to the river. I ran along the path, ignoring the joggers, dog walkers, inevitable wolf whistles – I could shut out anything when I put my mind to it – until gradually the red suffocating heat started to subside, and I began to feel calmer.

I even managed a small humourless chuckle. Because for once Colin did have a genuine reason for being freaked.

I had been expelled *again*.

And I’d read enough to know that two expulsions meant you were pretty well washed up. And even though I hadn’t turned up at school for weeks I couldn’t help feeling this huge void opening up in front of me. My future.

My stomach churned. It was pretty scary being sixteen and washed up.

The last thing I wanted was to think about my life and how I’d got to this point. I just needed to keep running and block it all out, but my brain would not stop fizzing away uncontrollably.

My brain.

My brain was definitely at the core of the problem. The number of times I’d wished I was normal. But had I ever been normal? Happy? Like other kids?

I could only really remember when things started to unravel . . . when I realized that a gift could be a curse.

How old was I? About six, probably. My dad had been dead, I don't know – nearly a year, I guess . . . And although Mum's months of continuous crying were finally over her interest in me remained . . . intermittent. So I had plenty of time to amuse myself.

On this particular day, the TV was on as usual – Mum had shoved the remote in my hand and told me to stay put. But I'd had enough of TV. I'd read everything there was to read in the house (OK – she didn't have a lot of books) and I was bored.

I looked out of the window. Mum was in the garden, lying on a recliner, her eyes shut. I remember pressing my face to the window, willing her to look up and notice me. But of course she didn't. As I reluctantly turned away, I caught sight of her open laptop on the table. I wandered over to it and touched a key. It blinked into life. It was open on a web page: my mum had been ordering some wine. Wine wasn't very interesting to a six-year-old, but I had watched my mum typing so I had got the gist of the mechanics. I had also, it turned out, photographically memorized quite a lot of what Mum had typed – like her bank details, her PIN and password. Within a couple of hours I had done a bit of shopping myself.

I was delighted when a few days later twenty-five packs of Dolly Mixtures, a hundred bottles of lemonade, a Labrador puppy and three Siamese kittens arrived. My mother was *not* delighted. Although I happily confessed to the shopping, she didn't believe me, assuming she'd been the victim of some identity theft mess-up.

I wasn't allowed to keep any of my purchases, so I didn't do

that again, but I'd discovered an awesome new world, a world where I had total control. To a small, lonely, powerless child this was mind-blowing.

By the time I was eight I could hack my way through most data security codes and firewalls, and although nobody had the least suspicion about what I was doing, I had the sense to cover my tracks pretty well. By then I knew that this activity wasn't strictly legal. But my motives were pure: I just enjoyed cracking codes – they fascinated me. I wasn't interested in people's secrets, their data, their financial status; I just got a buzz breaking open locked doors.

Needless to say, I wasn't that good around other eight-year-olds. Barbies just didn't do it for me. I liked the idea of having friends; I longed to have friends actually. I just couldn't fake normality well enough. I didn't understand that kids wouldn't want me to mathematically predict the outcome of any playground game before they started playing. Or that the whole point of The Memory Game was that you *didn't* remember what was on the reverse of every card. Pretty soon I stopped getting asked to play.

School was mostly excruciating. I sat for hour after endless hour listening to old facts and obsolete ideas. And things weren't much better at home . . . Colin just about endured me while Ted seemed to loathe me more each day.

I had dreamed of running away loads of times, but didn't really know how, so for several years I made do with virtual escape – I could customize any computer with undetectable pirated games, and found a lot of comfort in becoming someone else, someone with power, someone who could conquer legions of mythical enemies. The games became my *real* life.

They kept me sane . . . till I discovered an even more exciting world.

I was about eleven and had finally started bunking school. Not intentionally at first. One Monday morning I just couldn't bring myself to get off the bus at the school stop and by the Thursday I'd discovered the town library: banks of computers, shelves of books, nobody hassling you. How had this oasis managed to stay such a well-kept secret from me? It became my paradise. Day after day I sat in an inconspicuous corner, devouring information: the disintegration of Stalinism; social organization in Roman Britain; Russian; Latin; Greek; quantum theory; random genetics . . . just about anything and everything turned me on. When I got home, I'd continue my reading online until someone came in. Then I'd quickly erase my history, log out, shut down and put the tv on.

I genuinely believed I'd get away with it. I thought I'd covered all bases. I'd researched drawn-out illnesses with symptoms I could fairly easily fake, and forged a letter to the school from my mother claiming I had ME and needed to be excused indefinitely.

I used the same story when the librarian eventually challenged me. I thought she'd swallowed it. I'd even begun to trust her enough to have a couple of conversations about the Canadian legal system (she was Canadian), but she turned out to be a *total traitor*.

Three months after I entered paradise I was to be cast out again. One minute I was completely absorbed in a *Lancet* article about stem-cell research, the next minute I was being tapped on the shoulder by some appalling welfare officer.

For two hours I refused to speak. I knew that once I told them my name they'd call my parents and send me back to

school. Unfortunately, when you're only eleven and you haven't received training in SAS counter-torture techniques, you don't stand up well to interrogation. I caved. I was taken home to Mum and Colin (massive row) and they sent me back to school. I received my first official warning.

This meant that if I did anything else *really bad* I would get kicked out of school.

My heart lifted! All I had to do now was come up with something big enough to get expelled. I began researching and plotting.

It turns out there's an actual list of expellable offences. Truancy (Number Six) I had successfully completed. I just had to choose my second crime. I drew the line at violence, bullying or supplying drugs. But Offence Number Seven was made for me – computer hacking! The main challenge was making it blindingly obvious that I was the only suspect.

It was quite a lot of fun. I got into the head teacher's email account and composed the perfect letter of resignation, which I mailed to everyone on the board of governors and to each member of staff. Then I sent out an email alert to all the pupils, advising them that school had been cancelled for the rest of the week. I left a neat, easy-to-follow trail back to my own login account, and four days later I was summoned. After submitting to an hour's worth of rant, I skipped out of the school and never looked back.

Actually, although I never looked back, looking forward didn't turn out to be that much better. Because the head teacher's fury was like a sneeze compared to my parents' anger. I was grounded for a week and then they packed me off to Downley Comprehensive . . .

Surprisingly, Downley Comp was OK at first. It was big, anonymous, and had enough disruptive pupils to keep the focus off me. I managed to be quietly invisible for nearly three years.

But sadly, when I hit fourteen, stray interest began to be a problem.

As if my life wasn't awkward enough, I had just started to develop *Disability Number Two*.

## 2

# Escape

*York, England*

*AD 2012*

For some reason I suddenly lost my invisibility cloak. I had been working on being inconspicuous for so long that I almost believed I was invisible. I walked in the shadows, didn't make conversation, sat at the back, avoided all eye contact, but gradually I became aware of people looking at me. Boys started asking me stuff, inviting me to weekend events.

A small, buried part of me really wanted the company, wanted to go with them, but an instinct told me it wasn't safe. They would find me out. So I tried ignoring them. They just persisted. I tried acerbic rudeness. They just laughed as though I was flirting. I cut my hair really short, and started wearing baggy clothes. Nothing worked. My distance seemed to just make them more avid. Then when Jason Drummond chucked Sophie Scott, saying he fancied me more, the girls stopped ignoring me too. Instead, they started to actively hate me. En masse. And girl bullying is no fun.

It was definitely time to leave.

I'd hoped I wouldn't need to resort to expulsion again. It was, after all, legal to leave school at sixteen. But I'd made the mistake of getting a bunch of A\* GCSEs. I had radically improved Downley Comp's exam stats, and they were counting on my A-level results to do the same. So when I told the head I was leaving, he phoned my parents, and they started forcing me through the school gates every morning. I had to take evasive action. So I resorted to my little hacking gag again, and within two weeks I'd managed to get kicked out . . .

. . . *And* pick up a police record.

I stopped running and stood staring across the river.

I had just reviewed my life to date, and it was a pitiful catalogue of failure. I had managed to make a complete mess of everything. I was a criminal. I had failed at school – twice. I had failed to make a single friend. I had even failed to be loved by my own mother: quite an achievement.

Nobody really wanted me around.

I was shivering. It was getting cold. I knew I had to keep moving so I started to walk, mindlessly on and on, until I found my legs had carried me to my old sanctuary: the library.

I opened the door and wandered across to the seat in the corner. I sat down in front of the terminal. Someone had left a newspaper on the table next to the monitor. It was open at the job ads.

That's when it hit me. Like a bolt of lightning. I could get a job! I was sixteen now. And if I got a job, I could probably afford to move out – get away from my parents . . . and darling Ted!

I began to feel just a tiny flutter of optimism. What if I could get a job in a science lab? One with an electron microscope?

That would be OK. That would be more than OK. That would be cool.

With shaking fingers I started surfing. I keyed in: *research jobs – electron microscope*. Loads of technician jobs came up. My heart thumped as I trawled. Although most of them were in the States, there were a few in the UK . . .

For someone quite clever I guess I could be pretty stupid.

In what universe was I expecting anyone to invite a sixteen-year-old felon with no qualifications into their precious science lab?

Ad after ad was filled with lists of annoying requirements . . . stuff like ‘three years experience, blah blah . . . doctorate . . . relevant expertise . . .’

I didn’t even have A levels. I’d be lucky if I could get a job making beds in a hotel. Angrily, I started deleting my search bar, and accidentally double-clicked on *electron microscope*. A new entry popped up.

St Magdalene’s acquire an electron microscope . . . cached.

Without a lot of interest, I clicked on the page and started reading. The name St Magdalene’s rang a little bell. It had come up before on one of my researches – ancient Roman burial sites or something . . .

I started reading.

St Magdalene’s School in central London has just acquired a scanning electron microscope at a cost of £1.8 million. St Magdalene’s is unique – the only school in the world where the pupils need an IQ score in excess of 170. This is off-the-scale genius level. They are also required

to sit a four-day sequence of tests and interviews. It is consequently a small school, with very few places. Only the brilliant need apply.

Should such a school exist? Many educationalists question the elitism of such an establishment, insisting that it is in the interest of children and the system generally that schools cover a full spectrum of abilities. But the head teacher, Dr Terence Crispin, is adamant that St Magdalene's children need this rarefied environment to thrive . . .

It was the next line that made my stomach twist.

. . . Super-gifted children can have difficulties in mainstream education, and here they are understood and given scope . . .

I clicked on to the St Magdalene's School website.

It looked a bit like a medieval castle, built round a cobbled courtyard. Couldn't be more different from the purpose-built four-storey block that was Downley Comprehensive. I clicked on *Facilities* . . . and within a couple of seconds I was staring at their newly acquired microscope.

My heart missed a beat. I HAD to go there.

How did you apply? Feverishly, I searched through the contact info and application forms. Then suddenly I saw a line that made me want to be sick.

Fees: £10,000 per term.

Yeah, right.

I slammed my fist down on to the table. Someone coughed and I remembered where I was.

I hadn't cried for years. So I didn't recognize the tightness in

my throat, until the tears started plopping down on to the keypad. I shut down and stormed out of the library.

It was late by the time I turned the key in the lock. I was hoping they'd all be in bed. Mum was waiting.

'Hi.' I tried to sound nonchalant.

Nonchalance was clearly not the right note.

'Eva – where *were* you? I've been going out of my mind. I was about to call the police . . .'

My heart sank. How had I managed to turn myself into a delinquent?

I sighed, slumped down on the sofa and put my head in my hands. I should have phoned. Should have taken my mobile. I looked at my mother. She was pale. Lined. Worried and angry.

She didn't have the faintest idea how to deal with me. I wanted to be angry with her, but instead I felt an unexpected wave of sympathy. She had been landed with a rubbish daughter who couldn't do the simplest thing right.

I had to get away. Give them all a break.

'Look – I'm sorry, Mum,' I whispered, and slowly climbed the stairs to my room.

I couldn't sleep, so I sat on my bed, and took out my laptop. I logged on and found myself Googling St Magdalene's again.

How was I going to find that kind of money? Rob a bank? I probably could. I could hack my way into most places – why not a bank? First I'd need to set up an account – then I'd have to transfer enough money into it to cover two years of fees – £60,000. Whoa!

My fingers started flying, rising to the challenge. And then abruptly I stopped.

What was I doing?

I may have had a criminal record but I wasn't actually a criminal, was I? I lay back against the pillows. No. I couldn't do it.

I clicked back to the St Magdalene site. Did another virtual tour of the science labs, the art history wing, the drama studios. I masochistically clicked back on the application page.

And then I saw it. A tiny little link labelled *Scholarships & Bursaries*. How had I missed this before?

A number of means-tested bursaries are available. They are awarded on the basis of academic ability and financial need. When a full bursary is offered, it will cover the cost of all tuition, equipment and boarding fees.

Boarding fees? A boarding school? A TOTAL escape . . .

I started filling out the application form then and there. It was pretty straightforward. I knew the difficult questions came later – if they invited you in.

At 3 a.m. I pressed the send button. At 4 a.m. I was lying in the dark trying not to hope too hard.