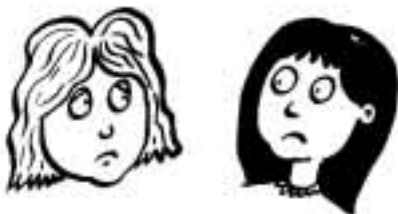


Chapter one



Sheila Sheehan says that I'm the most beautiful girl in the world. She says my eyes are the prettiest shade of blue she's ever seen. Sometimes she combs my hair for me and she says it's the silkiest hair she's ever touched in all her life.

She has to say all that stuff though. She's my mum. It's her job.

My mum has a lot to say on every subject. Sometimes I tell her to lighten up, but she only gives me her exasperated look, and continues anyway.

Mum says that my best friend Alice's mum is an evil, selfish cow.

But she only says that when she thinks I'm not listening.

It doesn't matter anyway. Alice and her mum have gone to live in Dublin. Her dad still lives next door to us, but that's not much good to me, is it? He won't want to take basketball shots with me, or to play Monopoly, or to lie on the floor of my room listening to music, and laughing at nothing.

At first, when Alice told me she was leaving, I hoped that she'd be down to see her dad at weekends. We could still be friends. That's the way it works in books anyway. Or in films – as long as they're rated PG. Real life wasn't turning out like that though. Alice's mum pulled what my mum calls her master-stroke. She enrolled Alice and her brother, Jamie, in piano classes on Saturday afternoons. That means that they can't come to Limerick at all, except at holiday time, and for long weekends. If Alice's dad wants to see her any other time, he'll have to go all the way to Dublin. It's September now, and the next long weekend isn't for weeks and weeks and weeks.

Mum says not to get my hopes up too much because Veronica, (that's Alice's mum) will probably find some reason not to send the kids to see their dad. But I have to hope. What else can I do?

And I have to face into school tomorrow. It'll be the first time ever without Alice in my class. We started together in junior infants, and have been together ever since. We were together when Alice spilt milk on her trousers and had to change into the horrible brown scratchy ones the teacher kept in the cupboard under the nature table. And everyone else thought she'd wet her knickers.

Alice never laughed at me when my mum gave me carrot sticks and broccoli for school lunch. With a bottle of water to wash it all down.

Alice was the only one who didn't tease me when I had to go to school in darned tights because Mum said it was a waste to throw them out just because of one small hole. (I said I'd skip

on the organic porridge for a week and spend the savings on new tights, but Mum didn't think that was funny.)

I never laughed at Alice when her mum forgot to pack any lunch at all for her, and the teacher had to ask all the kids to share and everyone offered the worst, soggy, squashed thing in their lunchboxes. Once she had to take an egg sandwich from Tom, who hadn't washed his hands in about five hundred years. Luckily I was able to distract him while she threw it into the bin. That's what friends are for, isn't it?

* * *

Alice and her mum left yesterday. It had been planned for weeks though. Alice's mum said she was leaving Alice's dad because they just couldn't get on. 'Irreconcilable differences', was what she said.

My mum said that if Alice's dad got the big promotion and the new silver BMW she'd been hoping for, they'd have got on just fine. She said

Alice's mum was a social climber of the highest order. She'd never be happy living in a three-bedroomed semi, and driving around in a four-year-old car.

Of course, Mum didn't think I was listening when she said all of this on the phone to my aunt Linda. She should be more careful.

Anyway, it was awful when Alice left. If it was a film, I suppose I'd have cried and hugged her and we would have promised to be friends forever. I couldn't though. Alice and I weren't huggy kind of girls. I just felt very sad.

'Bye, Al,' I said.

'Bye, Meg,' she said.

Usually there wasn't enough time to say all the things I wanted to say to Alice. Right then though, I couldn't think of anything else to say.

She looked sad too. 'Don't forget to send me lots of e-mails.'

'Oh yeah. I will. I mean I won't forget. I promise. I'll send lots of e-mails. Every day.'

Alice smiled a funny, stiff kind of smile.

‘And don’t forget to say “hi” to Melissa for me.’

I groaned. Melissa is the meanest girl in the world. Alice and I have both hated her since forever. Now I’d have to hate her all on my own. And that’s no fun.

Alice’s mum put her fancy light brown designer handbag on the front seat of the car and then she sat into the driver’s seat. She turned the driving mirror towards herself and fixed her hair. Then she put on some lipstick. Imagine, putting on lipstick for a drive to Dublin. Did she think it would show up on the speed cameras?

‘Come on, Alice. If we don’t go soon we’ll be stuck in traffic all afternoon. It’ll be teatime before we get through Castletroy.’

It was Saturday, so that was a stupid thing to say. Even I knew there were never traffic jams on Saturdays. Alice didn’t argue though. She just got into the car, and helped Jamie with his seat belt. Then her mum started the engine, and they drove off.

I waved until they were out of sight. That didn't take long. They live right at the top of the road and they were gone in about three and a half seconds.

Mum hugged me as we went inside, and offered to make me a fruit smoothie. As if that would help. Even a huge Coke wouldn't have made me feel better, and there was fat chance of getting one of those.

Later Mum took me shopping. We went to O Mahony's bookshop and she bought me two new books. Then she bought me a new T-shirt, a spotty scrunchie and a comic. When she bought the comic I knew she must be feeling really sorry for me. Last time she bought me a comic was when my goldfish died. (The fish had gone a really revolting black colour, and had big warty lumps all down its back. I was glad it was dead. But luckily Mum didn't know that. And the comic more than made up for the loss of the fish.) This was different though. A year's supply

of comics wouldn't have helped. No point in reading a comic on my own. Reading comics was only fun when Alice was around. She made everything more fun. Even stupid things that shouldn't have been fun at all.

When we got home, my little sister Rosie asked if she could read the comic. She's only three, and can't read anyway, but I let her. She tore two pages and I didn't even care.