

Chapter One

I was sitting in front of a giant-sized bowl of green stuff – cabbage, broccoli, spinach and, worst of all, brussels sprouts. Alice’s mum, Veronica was standing beside me, shaking her long, sharp fingernails near my face.



‘Eat every single scrap,’ she said. ‘Or else I’m taking Alice back to live in Dublin, and we’re never coming back to Limerick. Ever.’

Then Veronica gave an evil laugh, and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Tears began to roll down my face, dripping into the bowl of vegetables, making them even soggier and more revolting than they had been before.

How could she do this to me?

How could anyone treat a child like this?

Surely there are laws against this kind of thing?

Suddenly Mum was beside me. She patted my arm and smiled.

‘Don’t mind Veronica,’ she said. ‘She’s just cross because she broke a fingernail. You don’t have to eat all this stuff.’

As she spoke she took the bowl and scraped every scrap of food into the bin. Then she put another bowl in front of me.

‘Here, love,’ she said. ‘Try this instead.’

I gasped. This bowl was piled high with every kind of sweet I could imagine. It was like something that had come out of Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. There were sparkling jellies, white chocolate bars, swirly lollipops, and lots, lots more.

‘Go on, Megan,’ Mum encouraged me. ‘Eat up, it’ll do you good.’

I reached into the bowl and took out a bar of white chocolate. I ripped off the wrapper and shoved the chocolate into my mouth. Mmmmm. The chocolate began to melt on my tongue, and my mouth was filled with sweetness. I was reaching for a long pink and purple jelly snake, when I felt my arm being shaken.

‘Wake up, Megan, wake up. It’s your birthday, and you don’t want to waste the whole day in bed, do you?’

I rubbed my eyes, and then opened them slowly. Mum was standing next to my bed, smiling.

‘Happy birthday, teenager,’ she said.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said sleepily.

Mum held out a parcel, all wrapped up in paper that I’d seen on at least three birthdays already. Mum believes wrapping paper should go on for ever.

‘Here, Megan,’ she said. ‘This is from Dad and Rosie and me.’

I took the parcel. It didn’t feel like a mobile phone – the one thing I wanted more than anything. Still, I wasn’t really surprised. If Mum and Dad gave me a mobile phone, I’d know for sure that I was still dreaming.

Just then my little sister Rosie appeared at my bedside.

‘Happy birthday,’ she said. ‘Can I open your present for you?’

I smiled at her.

‘How about if we do it together?’

Rosie nodded happily and before I could move, she proceeded to rip every scrap of paper off my present.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said.

I tried to smile like this was the best present I’d ever got, but that was kind of hard. Rosie was holding up what looked like about a hundred metres of knitting, in revolting, hairy, brown wool.

‘It’s a scarf,’ Mum said helpfully.

I tried again to smile. A scarf? Who would ever wear a scarf that colour? Or that length? And anyway, it was August.

‘I know it’s August,’ said Mum, as if she could read my mind. ‘But I had the scarf finished, and I couldn’t wait to give it to you.’

I closed my eyes for a second. Maybe I was still asleep. Maybe this was just part of my nightmare.

It wasn’t though. Rosie jumped on to my bed, and I could feel her hard knees pressing into my stomach as she tried to wrap the revolting scarf around my neck.

‘It’s a pretty scarf,’ she said, making me wonder if Mum had ever taken her to have her eyesight checked.

Mum sat down on the bed beside me.

‘That’s only part of your present,’ she said. ‘After breakfast, the three of us are going to town, and I’ll buy you something new to wear. How does that sound?’

That sounded just perfect.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said, meaning it this time. ‘I’ll get up now.’

Mum didn’t move though. She had that dreamy look on her face that meant she was going back in time again.

‘My little girl a teenager already. I can’t believe it. I remember this day thirteen years ago. It feels like it was only yesterday. The doctors wanted to give me drugs, but I said no. “I’m having this baby naturally,” I said. And then—’

I put up my hand.

‘Please, Mum. Stop,’ I said. ‘Don’t say any more. It’s much too much information.’

Mum smiled.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I suppose I was getting carried away. I just wish I could make you see what a special day it was for your dad and me. Anyway, get up, and I’ll make you some porridge for breakfast.’

‘But it’s my birthday,’ I wailed.

‘So it is,’ she smiled. ‘I’ll make you an extra-big bowl.’

Then she and Rosie went out of the room.

I lay in bed for another few minutes. I could see through the curtains that it was a beautiful sunny day. It was the holidays. It was my birthday and at last I was a teenager. Surely things couldn’t be any better?

Then I saw the revolting brown scarf curled up on the end of my bed, like a hairy, brown snake. I had to smile to myself. If only my mum made delicious chocolates for a hobby instead of knitting gross stuff, then my life would be totally perfect.