

Chapter 1

Monday — 149 days since Mammy died

Monday is Granny's day. That's where I go after school every Monday. But first I always visit Mrs. Lemon's shop, to buy a candy bar with the rest of my lunch money, and Mrs. Lemon always says, "And what can I do for my good friend Miss Mimi today?"

"I'd like a Spiff bar, please, Mrs. Lemon."

"One Spiff bar coming up, young lady . . . and a few sweeties just for you."

And I hold out my hand, and Mrs. Lemon puts three or four sweets from the Pick 'n' Mix onto my palm and then she closes my fingers into a fist over them. Mrs. Lemon has been giving me free sweets every day since Mammy died.

So every day I make sure to drop into her shop. So does Sally, my big sister. She gets sweets too, but today Sally is late because she's hanging around with her Goth friends. Which means I get to Granny's first.

"Well! If it isn't young Mimi herself visiting her ancient grandparents," declares Grandad when he opens the door, as if it is a big surprise seeing me on the doorstep.

"It's Monday, Grandad," I tell him. "I come every Monday."

"Well, blow me down, so you do!" And he slaps his forehead with his hand as if to say how could he have forgotten. He does that every week.

And every week Granny comes bustling out of the kitchen, wiping her floury hands on her apron, and scolds him. "Well, are you going to let the poor child stand there all day? Come in, Mimi—don't mind the old fool."

Of course, Grandad is not really an old fool—well, he is old, but he's not a fool. Anyway, he doesn't mind Granny at all; he just laughs at her and winks at me.

Today Granny has made chocolate éclairs for me, and for Sally when she turns up, and for Conor (he's my big brother, but he has soccer on Mondays so he

doesn't get here till later). Every Monday Granny cooks cakes — and that's why she's so fat, says Grandad.

"I am not!" she says in her pretend-to-be-cross voice. "Now sit down there, Mimi, and I'm going to pour you a big mug of hot chocolate to go with those chocolate éclairs!" So I sit at the table pushed up against the wall, and Granny puts on the red check tablecloth and the plate with the purple flowers on it and six fresh chocolate éclairs oozing with cream. Grandad reaches for one straightaway, but Granny slaps his hand. "Ladies first!" she tells him.

"Thank you, Granny," I say as she puts one on my plate first and on her plate second, and I smile in a ha-ha way at Grandad, who puts on his poor-me look.

"Now you may have one," Granny tells him as if he was a naughty little boy.

Sally arrives just as I have finished my second éclair. "I hope you've left some for me, you greedy pig," she says, and starts stuffing one into her mouth without even putting it on a plate. The cream squashes up her nose, but Granny just laughs.

"Who's the pig?" I ask her, but then Grandad drags me away to teach me chess and we leave Sally and Granny alone to have one of their big boring chats.

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This is my second chess lesson. My first lesson was last Monday and it lasted about twenty seconds because I had to watch my favorite soap opera, *Southsiders*. I always have to watch *Southsiders* so that I can fill in Aunt M. on the episodes that she misses.

“Now we have ten minutes today before your rubbish show starts,” says Grandad, spilling out the chess pieces. “So let’s get cracking.”

“It’s not rubbish, Grandad — it’s educational.”

“Educational my bottom! Now, what’s this piece called?” He holds up this little black upside-down cone.

Luckily I know this one. “It’s a prawn, Grandad,” I tell him confidently.

He laughs — that’s how I know I’ve got it wrong. “No, not a prawn, Mimi, a PAWN.”

“Prawn, pawn, what’s the difference!” Sometimes, I find, adults fuss about nothing.

“One is a shellfish and one is a chess piece — that’s the difference.”

“I think my show is going to start, Grandad,” I say. I don’t think chess is going to be my game, somehow. I reach for the remote — but Grandad grabs it first.

“Not so quick, young lady.” He holds up another black piece. This one looks like a horse’s head. “Now, this piece is a knight.”

“Then this must be a day,” I say, holding up the white horse’s head.

“What?” says Grandad, looking really puzzled.

“If the black one is night, the white one must be day,” I explain.

Grandad just slaps his forehead with his hand and groans. “*Knight*, not *night*!” he says, which makes no sense to me. Then he sees that I’m only messing and sighs. “Oh, you! OK then, let’s watch *Southsiders*.” He ruffles my hair and we settle back on the couch to watch the TV.

Grandad wants to teach me chess because I’m Chinese and the Chinese invented chess about a million years ago, apparently. Personally I don’t know what anyone sees in the game, but I don’t tell him that.

Soon Grandad is snoring and I’m sucking my thumb and watching telly, and everything feels nice and comfy and peaceful and I wish I could stay there all evening, but at six o’clock we have to go home.

It is not a long drive home. Granny and Sally and I squash into the backseat of the jalopy, and Conor sits up in the front. Granny always tells Conor to get in the front because of his long legs, but he tells her that it is only because she is afraid to sit in the front when Grandad is driving.

“You could be right, Conor,” Granny said, laughing. “Keep your eyes on the road, old man!” she tells Grandad.

“Are you driving the jalopy or am I?” asks Grandad as he drives through red lights.

“Those lights were red!” yells Granny. “Are you trying to kill us all?”

All my aunts say that Grandad shouldn’t be driving anymore, but none of them has been brave enough to tell him yet. I hope they don’t, because it would really upset him. Anyway, he hasn’t had a crash yet, and when he drives he goes as slow as a snail.

Before we get back, Sally has to be dropped off at her weirdo friend Tara’s house, which is good because I want to read her diary before she comes home.

Chapter 2

The house is dark when we get home, and chilly. Dad is fast asleep on the couch. He hasn't shaved again and his hair is all ruffled. I can see his toe sticking out of his sock. He looks so tired and sad and old that I don't wake him up. Anyway, Conor will soon enough when he gets started on his drums.

As usual Conor disappears into his bedroom and I turn on all the lights in the house before I slip into Sally's bedroom and lift up her mattress and pull out her diary. It is a lovely, heavy, hardback diary with little pictures of wildflowers on each page. Sally has a great collection of stationery in her room — markers of every color, folders and notebooks of all sizes, glue,

tape, staples, paper clips, sharpeners, erasers, thumb-tacks, pens, pencils in all colors, and paper in all sizes and colors. She has cards and letter-writing paper that is scented with perfume and a little booklet of stamps — all neatly arranged on her desk.

But best of all is her diary. I love sitting on her bed and opening its heavy cover — very carefully so as not to mark the pages — and then I read her most private thoughts before I put it away exactly as I found it. She would kill me if she ever found out that I have read it.

I know I should not read Sally's diary, but I can't help myself. She hardly ever talks to me now since Mammy died, and it seems as if she doesn't care about anything or anybody anymore except her horrible friends with their black clothes and black lipstick and black mascara and black earrings and black moods.

But I know she does care, because she tells her diary everything. Well, almost everything. She tells her diary about how much her tummy aches when she thinks of Mammy and how she misses her hugs and even her scolding. She tells her diary that she misses our daddy now that he is so sad and tired all the time. She tells her diary that she loves her little sister, Mimi, even if she drives her crazy half the time, and how she wishes Conor wouldn't spend every minute playing

the drums in his bedroom. She tells her diary how much she hates pizza now.

She tells her diary that she cries herself to sleep every night—just like I do. She tells her diary that sometimes she gets really cross with Mammy for getting herself killed on her bike and she hates feeling like that but she can't help it, and I know just what she means. You see I can't help it, either—so I have to read Sally's diary whenever I get the chance.

Also, my teacher, Ms. Addle, says that she wants the children in her class to read everything they can get their hands on—newspapers, comics, the backs of cereal boxes, the ads on the bus stop, signposts . . . everything we see. She didn't actually mention diaries but I bet she would have if she had thought of it.

But the most important reason I have to read Sally's diary is to find out what her dark and dreadful secret is.

Sally often mentions her "dark and dreadful secret" to her diary, but she never says what it is exactly, except that it is shameful and dangerous. But yesterday Sally told her diary that she would tell the terrible secret to it soon, so you can understand how excited I am as I sit on her bed with her diary on my lap.

I'll straighten out the bedcovers before I leave—I am very careful to cover all my tracks, like a good

burglar. I open the diary to the new page, and I read yesterday's entry:

Sunday - 148 days

Dear Diary,

I have reason to believe that there is a SPY in the house. Somebody - some STINKY LITTLE BUSYBODY - has been reading my diary. Only a ROTTEN, SMELLY, HORRIBLE LITTLE SNOOP would read someone else's most PRIVATE SECRET THOUGHTS, and I think I know who it is! If you are reading this now, YOU NOSY PARKER, then I hope that you are feeling ashamed of yourself . . . because you should be! I hope your long nosy-parker nose falls off and your eyeballs pop out of your head. I hate you for this and I will never forgive you. Sally.

P.S. Dear Diary, I cannot tell you my secret until I catch the SPY and Kill her!

I drop the diary as if it has burned my fingers! How dare Sally accuse me of reading her diary? I nearly grab

a pen and write on the page some terrible things about her before I remember that then she would know for sure that I have been looking at it.

But she does know! Suddenly I feel terrible. I put my face in my hands. I can feel my cheeks burning. How did she find out? I am always so careful to leave everything just as I find it, and she is always out of the house when I read it.

Right then I do feel ashamed and like a sneaky nosy parker. How can I ever talk to Sally again or look her straight in the eye? She'll never forgive me. I would never forgive me if I were her.

Then I think, maybe she doesn't really know that I read her diary. Maybe she is only trying to trap me. I decide not to say anything at all, just to carry on as normal. And if Sally accuses me to my face I'll cry and call her a liar. So I put everything back where it was — and just in time, too, because I have hardly finished straightening out her duvet when I hear her key turning in the front door.

Chapter 3

Sally says nothing to me all that evening. Maybe she doesn't know it was me who read her precious diary after all.

Dad makes us pizza for dinner as usual. I used to love pizza, but now I am sick of the sight of them and Dad always leaves them in too long and they get all burnt and hard. "Sorry about that, kids," he mutters as he serves us a half pizza each. He doesn't seem to mind as he chews on his own piece of pizza as if he were chewing an old shoe.

Conor doesn't seem to mind either—he just eats away and talks to Dad about the soccer tournament and doesn't seem even to notice that Dad is barely

answering him. “Liverpool are away to Man U on Wednesday, Dad,” he says, his mouth half full.

“Is that so?” mumbles Dad as if he is living on another planet.

“Should be a close match. Man U will miss Rooney — he’s pulled a hamstring.”

“Is that so?” answers Dad, but I don’t think he’s even listening. Conor might as well be talking to himself.

Sally and I don’t eat Dad’s pizza if we can help it. Sally usually just walks over to the back door, opens it, and tosses her pizza out to our dog, Sparkler. After a bit I do too. Dad doesn’t seem to care — but Sparkler is delighted. She never gets sick of pizza. When Mammy was alive, Sparkler used to charge around the house, jumping on everybody and licking them. Or she’d find her leash and pull it around in her mouth until somebody took her for a walk. Now she’s never in the house and nobody bothers with her much, and she’s gotten so fat from all the pizza that I don’t think she could actually walk very far anymore.

After dinner Dad wanders off to look at some old photos, and that just makes him sadder. Conor takes his plate up to his room and starts playing his drums. He does that every evening now. He is the worst drummer

in the world, and he is also the loudest. The noise he makes is so loud that I have to turn the TV volume up to its highest and Sally has to turn her CD player as high as it will go.

We live in a sad house but at least it is not quiet!

My friend Orla is very jealous of me because she has to be in bed by nine thirty every night and I can stay up as long as I like, but tonight I am tired and there is nothing on the TV so I go to bed at ten thirty. Orla is jealous too because I can just throw my clothes wherever I like and Aunt B. will pick them up in the morning. Aunt B. comes every day when we're in school and cleans the house spick-and-span, and every evening after school we mess it up again.

I used to find it hard to sleep with all the noise in our house. But you can get used to anything, and after a few words with Socky my eyes begin to close and my thumb slips into my mouth. "Good night, Socky," I tell my sock puppet, and he nods and says, "Good night, you." And then I slip him off my hand and tuck him under my pillow.

Before Mammy died I had gotten too old for Socky, but Mammy always used to look for him when she tucked me in. "Ah, poor Socky!" she'd say, and she'd pull him out, all dusty from under the bed, and then she'd put her hand into him and talk to him in her

silly voice: “So, Socky, has Mimi got too big and grown-up for you, is that it? And I suppose she’s too grown-up for a tickle from her old friend Socky too?” And then she’d tickle me to death with Socky on her hand. When she’d leave the room I’d throw him under the bed again. But since Mammy died I am not too old for Socky anymore.

The last thing I do before I drift off is to whisper “Good night” to the picture of Mammy on my nightstand, and I ask her to mend Daddy’s broken heart. That makes me cry a little, but next thing I’m asleep.

Chapter 4

Tuesday — 150 days since Mammy died

Tuesday is Aunt M.'s day. Aunt M.'s full name is Mari-gold. Both my mammy's sisters are named after flowers — Aunt M. and Aunt L., whose full name is Aunt Lupin ("Aunt Loopy" my dad used to call her before Mammy died) — and my mammy was named Poppy. Daddy has only one sister, Aunt B., short for Betty — "Which is not a flower, thank you very much," she says!

Before I go to Aunt M.'s I have to drop in to Mrs. Lemon's shop for a Spiff bar and some free sweets. I love Mrs. Lemon.

Sally has detention today, so I am first to arrive at Aunt M.'s apartment, which suits me fine because

Sally keeps giving me these looks where she makes her eyes all narrow, and although she hasn't said anything I think she knows that I am the one who read her diary. So just at the moment I prefer to keep out of her way.

Aunt M.'s apartment is on the third floor, so I take the elevator. Her apartment is almost new, and even though Grandad says that you couldn't swing a cat in it, I think it is just perfect. Granny isn't too impressed with it either. She wonders where the children will play, but Aunt M. just says that she has no intention of having children for years and years, if ever, and Granny says, "We'll see about that."

"I'm not even married yet and you're going on about children already!" shouts Aunt M. She and Granny are always fighting.

Aunt M. will be married next September, to Nicholas — and he'll be dropping in later, says Aunt M. when she stops hugging me, so Conor will be pleased. Aunt M. always hugs me when I come on a Tuesday. If Sally is there with me, and she is in the mood, we have a group hug.

Aunt M. is very short—I'm nearly as tall as her—and she smells of those little blue flowers that I love, so I take a big sniff and say, "You smell lovely, Aunt M."

Aunt M. is an engineer, whatever that is, and Tuesday is her only half day, which is why she takes us after school on Tuesdays. Aunt M. is not one for baking, but she still has lots of goodies for us from the shop. So before *Southsiders* starts, Aunt M. and I have a good gossip and stuff our faces with sweets and bars and wash it all down with Coke, and then at three thirty we sit down on her white leather sofa and watch *Southsiders* together. Because Aunt M. misses every episode except Tuesday's I have to fill her in on what's been happening.

"Well, you'll never guess," I tell her. "Blackson—you know Blackson, the one with the ginger hair."

"The one who's going out with Ginger, the skinny girl with the black hair?"

"Yeah, well you'll never guess," I tell her. "Blackson walked into the pub, unexpected, and there was Ginger kissing guess who?"

"OH MY GOD!" screeches Aunt M., covering her mouth with her hand. "Who?"

"William!"

"No! Is he the one with the fair hair and the mustache who I fancy?"

"No, not him." Aunt M. is always getting the people in *Southsiders* all mixed up. "No, Gregory is the one you fancy—there's William!" I tell her, pointing at the

screen, because William has just appeared . . . and he doesn't know it but Blackson is coming up behind him looking very mad indeed.

"OH, MY GOD! I CAN'T LOOK!" screams Aunt M., covering her eyes with a cushion as Blackson raises a big stick and is about to bash William on the head. . . . And then there's a commercial break.

Of course during the break Sally arrives. She stuffs a candy bar into her mouth and says, "I suppose you're watching that rubbish *Southsiders*."

Then Aunt M. wants to show her her wedding dress before Nicholas arrives.

"I suppose it's white," Sally grunts, but Aunt M. just laughs.

So I am left watching the rest of the show on my own, and it's just not the same. I could kill Sally . . . if she doesn't kill me first for being a nosy-parker spy.

At last Aunt M. remembers me, but no sooner has she sat down again than Nicholas and Conor arrive at the same time, and suddenly Aunt M.'s cozy little apartment seems crowded with noisy people. Everybody has forgotten about *Southsiders*, and William will just have to bleed to death on his own because Nicholas has decided that I have watched enough TV.

"I wonder, will this round helmet fit on Mimi's

square head?” Nicholas shouts, and pushes his motorbike helmet onto my head back to front. He says I have a square head from watching too much TV but it’s not true—I check my head regularly in the bathroom mirror and it is as round as it always was.

I can’t see a thing with the helmet backward on my head, and then he starts to tickle me. Nicholas has the longest fingers that dig right into you and tickle you to death, and I’m nearly feeling sick with giggling when at last he stops because he has to talk seriously about motorbikes with Conor.

“Give me back my helmet, Squarehead,” he says, and pulls the helmet off my head.

But before he goes he has to give his “fiancée” (that’s what he calls Aunt M.) a big sloppy kiss, and Sally groans, “Oh, give me a bucket!” and Conor just goes red and looks down at his shoes until they’re finished.

I wish every day was Tuesday. So does Conor because Nicholas takes him on a ride on the back of his motorbike. Sally loves Tuesdays too because she thinks Aunt M. is cool (I know that because I read it in her diary). So I am always sad when we have to go home to our sad house at six o’clock.

Today Dad is at least awake. He’s just staring at the telly, although it is not even switched on. “Help

yourself to pizza,” he says, but even from the hall I can smell it burning.

Anyway, I’m still stuffed from Aunt M.’s and I still have my Spiff bar left, so I toss my pizza out to Sparkler, and so does Sally. Conor takes his black pizza up to his room and the drums start, and Sally’s music starts blaring and I have to turn the TV up all the way to hear anything.