

Chapter 1

Al

I'm hungry. Really hungry. I want to fill the biggest bowl with cornflakes and then pile on sugar and milk and mix it all together. It doesn't have to be normal milk. Chocolate milk would be even better. I'd finish all the cornflakes and scrape the bowl until it squeaked. Then I'd munch down three slices of toast with peanut butter and chocolate spread, with a squished banana on top. After that, some crackers and cheese.

But all that food is in my head. I don't want to get off my bed and go into the kitchen because we haven't got no cornflakes, nor chocolate spread, nor cheese nor peanut butter. We've got milk, because Gran dropped it round. But I don't think we've got nothing I can pour milk over. We do

have sugar, so maybe I can mix it into the milk and drink that instead.

There's another reason why I don't want to go into the kitchen. I'd have to pass Mum. She's on the sofa, in a mood. She's been trying not to have big moods since I started living with her again. We're supposed to be starting over. Mum's promised that she'll never go near the people that make her want to take drugs. She's promised that she'll never steal anything again. She's promised that it was the last time she'll go to prison. She's promised she'll make herself get better and strong. Mum didn't just promise me. She promised Gran and my social worker too. But I think she's finding it hard to keep her promises.

Her sad mood today is an extra big one. Mum didn't say nothing to me when I got home from school. She didn't even look at me when I made her a cup of tea. Her hand was all floppy over the arm of the sofa, so I put her mug on the table and pulled it towards her. I called her name – her real name, Ramona, not just Mum. She gave me a sort of smile and then went back to staring at the ceiling. I shouted her name, but Mum didn't say nothing more.

I started feeling cross, so I made myself do what Blessing, my social worker, says I should do when I want to kick off. *Breathe slowly, Al, Blessing says, and take yourself away from the thing that's making you upset.* So I came back into my bedroom and let out Venom and Vulture.

Venom and Vulture are my pet rats. They're not supposed to come out of their cage, because not everyone likes rats. But I do.

These are the reasons why people don't like rats:

1. They wee a lot.
2. They can get a bit smelly.
3. They carry diseases. (But these aren't any old rats. Venom and Vulture are posh rats from a pet shop. They got checked for fleas and plague.)
4. They eat anything.

Mum says I'm not supposed to have my rats here at all, but as long as I behave myself, she'll let me

keep them. I got Venom and Vulture from Maya, who was staying in the same foster home as me.

There have been lots of times when Mum hasn't been able to look after me. When I was small, I'd move in with my dad or my gran. But last time Gran told the social workers she couldn't have me because she'd be in New Zealand visiting her sister, and my dad wouldn't take me in neither.

I haven't been to my dad's for three years now. He moved out of London with his third family. (I'm from his second family.) Dad's new girlfriend is called Lara and they have twins called Bianca and Marsha. Dad says that Lara's hands are too full with the twins for me to stay there now.

So I ended up with Macey and Lee, foster parents who look after teenagers in an emergency. That means kids like me and Maya who haven't got nowhere else to go. Macey didn't mind rats, but Lee hated them. Once, Venom stuck her claw out from her cage and hooked the scarf Macey had been knitting for Lee's mother. Venom pulled the scarf into her cage and we only noticed when half the scarf had been unravelled and turned back into wool.

Lee told the social workers that the rats had to go. I was moving back with Mum by then and I promised I'd care for them.

I let Venom climb up my leg. She used to hang from my sleeve with her teeth. She's getting fat and heavy now, so I won't let her do it so much in case she falls and hurts herself. Vulture is sniffing around my room like she thinks there's food hidden behind the walls. Watching her just makes me feel more hungry, so I put them both back in their cage.

I slump back onto my bed and open up the Argos catalogue Gran left here. I find the pages with all the games consoles. Dad says he's gonna buy me one for my birthday, but he said the same thing last Christmas. Mum says I'm gonna be an old man before I get that gift.

I rip the pages out. Then I tear them into tiny pieces. I feel better for a few minutes and then my stomach groans so loud it almost makes the catalogue shake.

I need food!

I need food right now.

I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna get the milk.

I open my bedroom door slowly, go out into the hall and look into the sitting room. Mum isn't in there no more. I hear the fridge open in the

kitchen. Good. I want her to know we haven't got no food, because she's promised the social workers that she'll make sure I'm all right. I know she doesn't want to break her promises.

These are the promises Mum made when social services said we were allowed to live together again:

1. Mum would give up her bad friends.
2. She would make sure we always had food and it was going to be healthy.
3. She would stop smoking. She doesn't smoke inside, but it's bad for her and expensive.
4. She would use the money she saves from not smoking to buy fruit and vegetables.

I know Mum's trying to keep the promises, even if she hasn't given up smoking. And she hasn't bought masses of vegetables, but I don't mind that.

"Mum!" I shout.

She comes out of the kitchen and she's wearing her big coat. I look out of the window. It wasn't

raining when I came back from school. I'd been too hot and took off my blazer on the bus. I almost left it there because I hate wearing a blazer, but Gran bought it and she'd go mad if I lost it. There's only so much mad that I want to make Gran.

Mum doesn't need an enormous coat like that in this weather. So why's she wearing it? I think about the coat's deep pockets. There's even a pocket hidden inside the lining. Pockets where you can hide things.

Mum says, "I'm going out, Al. You need to stay here."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I'm just going to ... going to see a friend."

Mum hasn't got no friends who live nearby. That's why we moved all the way over here. The social worker says it makes Mum's life easier to be far away from all the bad friends that made her go to prison.

Mum goes over to the shoe rack and slips on her trainers. I run over and put mine on too.

"Who are you going to see?" I ask.

Mum won't meet my eyes.

Please don't break your promises, Mum, I think. I don't know what's worse. Mum really going to see the friends she's not supposed to see or Mum

not going to see friends at all in her coat with the secret pocket.

“Mum!” I shout. “Tell me!”

She looks me in the eye and says, “OK, Al. I’m not going to see my friends. I’m going to get us some food.”

Just the word “food” makes my hunger go twisty again.

“Then I can come with you,” I say.

“No, Al. Stay here.”

“I can help you carry—”

“I’m not getting that much,” Mum tells me. “I don’t need help.”

Her eyes have dropped away from mine again.

“You’re not really going shopping, are you?” I say. “That’s why you don’t want me to come with you. You promised you wouldn’t do rubbish stuff no more! You’re not allowed to keep letting me down!”

Mum’s eyes snap back up to me. “You’re hungry, Al,” she says. “The fridge is empty. I’m going to get some food, right?”

I thought she was gonna shout. But her words are all flat like they’ve been stomped on.

Mum opens the front door and slams it shut behind her.