

opening extract from

alex's back

written by

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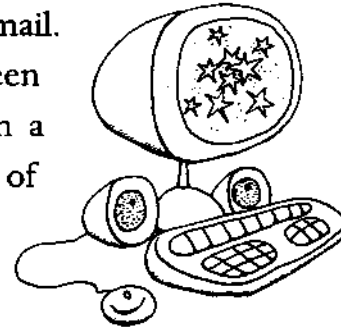
Chapter One

This New Year just gone—it's May now so we're talking five months ago—I couldn't think of one single New Year resolution to make. My mum's was to learn how to use the computer properly. My big sister Caitlin's was to revise every night for her A levels and to pass her driving test, and my dead brother Daniel's was to get a tattoo. Dad's was to stop coating his food in salt but I was stuck when it came to thinking of one for myself. I couldn't think of *anything*. In the end, I asked my dad to think of one for me, seeing as I'd thought of his. Dad put down his cup of tea,

stretched out his legs in front of the fire, and had a ponder. 'Keep life simple, Alex. If you do that, you won't go far wrong,' he said.
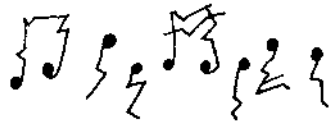
'OK, then, my New Year resolution is to keep life simple,' I announced, thinking what a doddle it was compared to Caitlin's.

I got going on it straight away. The two biggest pains in my life were deciding what to wear and worrying about friendship groups, so I decided only to wear black clothes, apart from school uniform, and only to have one best friend, Jolene Nevin. The last one was perfect because Jolene lived miles and miles away and I only heard from her by e-mail. My life couldn't have been simpler, even if I lived on a desert island in the middle of an ocean with nothing but coconuts for company. Sorted.



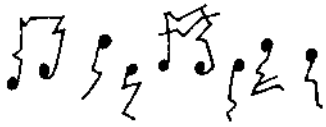
That's what I thought, anyway, until May. May was when my New Year resolution bit the dust. Unlike when Caitlin failed her driving test by

reversing into a bottle bank last month, I didn't know immediately that my resolution was doomed. It kind of crept up on me slowly, like my grandma once told me rheumatism does.



It was last lesson on a Wednesday afternoon, choir practice in the hall with Mr Sharkey, the headteacher at my school, Zetland Avenue Primary, when the creeping-up business started. Mr Sharkey was in one of his Sarky Sharkey moods. He doesn't get them often, but when he does, we all know about it.

We had just finished the last verse of 'One more Step' when he turned away from us and began bowing so dramatically in front of Mrs Pisarski at the piano his springy beard almost touched the parquet floor. 'That was fantastic, Mrs Pisarski! Fantastic! I heard every note as clear as anything. We were all lost for words at your magnificence!'



Mrs Pisarski raised her dark, velvety eyebrows, knowing, like we all did,

that Mr Sharkey wasn't paying her a compliment so much as insulting us. 'OK,' Mr Sharkey continued, loosening his tie and turning to the middle of the hall where we were standing in three rows of eight. He was ready to get down to the nitty-gritty. 'Now, if you'd all care to join in this time . . .'

'As if we didn't just then!' Sammie Wesley moaned out loud from beside me. Sammie's a year above me—a Year Six—but we hang out in choir because we go to After School club together afterwards.

Mr Sharkey immediately cupped his hand behind his ear. 'What's that? Did someone speak?' he asked gruffly.

'Yes; it was me, a little mouse from Fairyland,' Sammie whispered in a silly squeak that sounded nothing like.

Big mistake. Everyone knows headteachers have abnormal powers of hearing, especially when they're in a bad mood. Our headteacher jumped on her straight away, fixing her with his sharp, clear eyes. 'What

was that, Miss Wesley? You want to sing a solo? Absolutely. Out you come.'



'Not likely!' Sammie protested, pulling her fizzy strawberry-blonde hair in front of her face in a feeble effort to hide herself. She's quite shy, really, for a noisy person.

Instead of forcing her to step forward, which he might have done if he'd been in a really, really bad mood, Mr Sharkey let out a huge sigh and looked deflated. 'Listen, folks,' he said tiredly, his eyes roaming across the three rows so we knew he meant *everyone*, 'you all know that last effort was pathetic; a constipated pigeon could have made more noise! "With a spring" it instructs at the beginning: "a *spring*". You lot couldn't spring if I put you on a trampoline built on a mile-high stack of giant mattresses.'



Everyone slumped their shoulders and began muttering mutinously but I knew exactly what he meant because I love singing too and we *had* been pathetic. Maybe he could sense my sympathetic aura because just then he fixed his eyes straight at me.



'Alex . . .'

Oh no. I glanced at the clock; only five minutes left until the end of school. Parents were already peering through the hall windows as they waited for their kids. My heart sank and I exchanged looks with Sammie. This half-term's topic at After School club was 'Food Glorious Food' and tonight we were making the best meal in the world—pizzas. If we didn't get over there on the dot all the best toppings would go.

'Alex,' Mr Sharkey repeated.

'Do I have to?' I asked him.

'Yep.'

'But why?'

Mr Sharkey flung his arm dramatically across his forehead, pretending to be shocked, which meant he was perking up a bit. 'Why? Why, she asks? Did Jonny Wilkinson ask his PE teacher "why?" when he was picked for the rugby team? Did Leonardo da Vinci shake his head and say "why?" when someone gave him canvas and charcoal?

Did Aretha Franklin ask "why?" when she picked up a microphone? Did Marie Curie ask "why?" when she . . .'

'Just go, Alex, or we'll be here until Christmas,' Sammie urged.

So, I got up and sang the first two verses of 'One more Step'. I was a bit quiet to begin with because I was worried everyone would think I was teacher's pet but by the end of the chorus my voice took over, as it always does. The tune was so easy to follow and so jolly to sing I couldn't help but let the words bounce out of me. I even forgot about pizzas for a second.

Everyone joined in the third verse and I admit the singing was loads better after that. Afterwards, everyone clapped, including the parents outside. The bell went and Sammie grinned at me and said 'Nice one, Aretha,' as we both dashed for our bags and coats.

We didn't get very far, though. I'd just gathered up my bag when Mr Sharkey called me over to the piano. I glanced at Sammie, hoping she'd come too, but she just shook her head. Any other

topic she'd have waited but not this one. Food was her specialist subject. 'I'll save you a place,' she promised.

'And pineapple chunks,' I called after her. A pizza isn't a pizza without pineapple chunks and I knew Mum, who was one of the After School club helpers, hadn't put many in the airtight containers this morning.

'I will,' she promised, dashing off as Mr Sharkey approached.

'That was wonderful, Alex,' Mr Sharkey praised.

'Thanks, Mr Sharkey,' I murmured, my eyes gazing longingly at the swinging double doors.

He glanced round, stroking his beard thoughtfully. 'Er . . . are you in a hurry to get to the Nut in the Hut tonight?' he asked, meaning Mrs Fryston, my After School club supervisor and *his* bride-to-be. I wondered if he'd still call her that once they were married.

'Kind of,' I admitted.

'Well, I won't keep you but I've got a favour to ask. Would you mind waiting in my office?

Mrs Moore will let you in.'

'Will it take long, Mr Sharkey?' I asked him.

'Two minutes, two minutes,' Mr Sharkey promised, first thanking Mrs Pisarski for her time before striding across the hall to collar one of the teaching assistants.

Two minutes. So likely.

