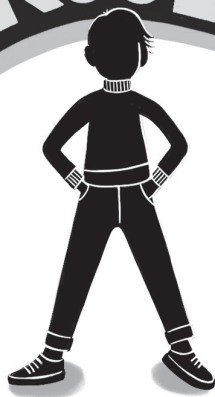


The
**PERFECT
PARENT!
PROJECT**



STEWART FOSTER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

Also by Stewart Foster

The Bubble Boy

All The Things That Could Go Wrong

Check Mates

LRI

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CHAPTER 1

ME AND ERIC

You might walk past me every day, when you're on your way to school, or going to town shopping with your mum. You've probably stood just down the road from me, talking to your friends, but I bet you've never even looked in my direction. Next time you're out, just stop for a second and look down the alley that runs along the back of the shops. The alley you never go down because it's dark and damp, with bags of rubbish strewn at the sides. The one full of silver bins and a big yellow recycling skip with a ladder leaning against it.

Can you see them?

If you creep down the alley, just a little, you'll see the skip has lots of writing on the side, such as:

CLEAN ME

DO NOT PUT HOT ASHES IN HERE

CITY RULE

ERC

I call the skip Eric and for the moment I want you to ignore all the things written on it and keep walking, just like I did the first time I came here, four months ago.

Oops, sorry, I forgot to tell you to duck under the line of Coke cans I've tied across the top of the skip. Now you've rattled them. This is my early warning system; it's how I can tell when people are coming, my alarm for when the bin collectors from the council arrive in their truck to empty the skip. Or sometimes it's just the wind blowing and the cans tinkling. But today, right now, it's not the wind, and it's not the workers from the council. It's you.

And I'm on full alert because you're past the cans and you've seen the ladder leaning against the skip. You're not sure you should climb it, but it's okay, you can. Just put two hands on the sixth rung and start to climb. That's it. Then, when you're on the tenth rung, peer over the yellow metal, into the skip. Inside, can you see the rope I use to lower myself in, and the pieces of cardboard propped up in the corner? The Samsung sixty-five-inch TV box lying across the top?

These are my walls and my roof that stop the sun baking me in summer, and the rain soaking me in winter.

Can you see me?

No?

Wait, I've just got to push myself up because the boxes have crumpled.

Ha, there I go.

'Hi! I'm Sam, little c, big C McCann. This is my home, and I'm pleased to meet you.'

CHAPTER 2

PLANES AND DREAMS

You might think it's weird that I call a skip my home, and not the house where I sleep and eat. But you see, a house and a home aren't the same thing. A house is the place you live in, made of bricks and cement with double-glazed windows and doors, with pipes and radiators inside. A home is only made by the things you put in the house, like sofas and chairs, beds and paintings, and pictures of you and your family at Santa's grotto or on your holidays. I live in a house with all those things, except the pictures are of Christmases I never had and holidays I didn't get to go on and the family isn't mine at all.

I've lived in nine houses over the last five years and they're all the same, with foster-parents who tell me I'm part of the family and that they'll treat me as if I was one of their own children. But they don't leave their own children out of a trip to the cinema, nor at a respite home in Keynsham while they all go away to Spain on holiday. It's like they think I won't notice, but it's obvious when they come back

because I'm maggot-white and the family are tanned-brown. At the moment I live with Reilly and his mum, who gets paid for looking after me. I've been here for four months and twenty-two days, which is the fourth longest I've ever stayed anywhere. They haven't been on holiday without me yet, but they will.

I stay in Eric to escape from all that. It makes me feel better when I can lie back on the cardboard and look between the grey buildings at the sky. Yesterday when I was here, I saw a plane and imagined I was on it, flying to Disneyland. I pictured a big hotel, with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck welcoming everyone in the foyer and saying, 'Have a great day!' every morning when I went out to ride on the roller coasters. I dream of going to Disneyland a lot, but today there are no planes in the sky to take me, just stacks of pigeons flying over the alley as the traffic rumbles by on the high street.

Reilly will be in his house, in his room, playing Ace Pilot on the Xbox he got for Christmas. I'd only been here for two weeks, so all I got was clothes, as usual. I sat on the sofa and watched Reilly open his box. I knew what it was before he even ripped off the paper. 'It's an Xbox One,' I said out loud when he stared at the box. He asked me how I knew. I just shrugged. I didn't tell him I'd watched James open one on his birthday, in the house I'd stayed in before. James had loads of friends who came for sleepovers and they'd eat pizza in his room and play Star Trooper until midnight. Reilly doesn't have many friends, and he doesn't have loads of sleepovers. I'm glad because it means I don't get left out when everyone else is shooting aliens on multiplayer.

I stare at the sky and wonder what it must be like to have just one family and live with them all your life. Well, not *all* your life, because

you'd have to leave sometime, after you finished school and had to go to university or get a job. But if I had a family of my own, I don't think I'd ever want to leave them. Why would I want to leave the people I love? I'm not sure I loved Brad and Angie, my fourth foster-parents, but I did like them so much I didn't want to leave. They lived in a bungalow in Felton. It had a massive garden with a football net at the bottom. Brad used to go in goal, and I'd whack the ball at him while Angie watched from the patio. That was my record stay: nine months – three quarters of a whole year. So long that Brad even bought me a second-hand bike from eBay and we cycled together to town whenever he wanted to go to Forbidden Planet for comics. I thought I was going to make it until Christmas. I even started thinking about what presents I would like – not computer games or DVDs, just clothes and stuff. I really liked Brad and Angie, and I think they really liked me, but I could feel the end coming. I always can. The end is when people go quiet, and start having whispered conversations about me in the kitchen. That's what Brad and Angie did – whisper, whisper, whisper – every evening after they got home from work, every night when I was in bed. It was like listening to mice under the floorboards. I noticed Angie's belly was getting bigger. She started eating whole tubes of Pringles, while she showed Brad pictures of baby clothes and prams that she had searched on her laptop. And then she'd ask Brad if it was bad luck to paint the spare room before the baby came.

Yes. It was bad luck. It was bad luck for me.

'You can still visit, Sam,' they said. 'Still play football in the garden.'

But visiting isn't the same, I thought to myself. Even if they did let me keep the bike.

CHAPTER 3

MY TOP TEN THINGS FOR PERFECT PARENTS

Brad and Angie fitted four of the things that are on my list of top ten things I'd like from my adoptive parents. My best friend Leah says I spend too much time writing lists, but I still write one every day. Sometimes the same things are on the list, sometimes they change, but the list is always to do with my perfect parents. I showed my list to my social worker, Rock Star Steve. He said it was okay to hope, that it was no different to people going to church and saying prayers. They don't give up after just one Sunday if the thing they pray for doesn't happen. That's why churches are full of people. I think they'd be empty if God answered their prayers first time. I'm not sure if Rock Star Steve even goes to church or believes in God. I've not seen many grown-up men with spikey blond hair walk into church wearing snakeskin shoes like his.

I reach over a vacuum cleaner box and pull my pen and writing pad out of my school bag. I should be getting back to Reilly's house soon, but I've still got time to add to the list I started in geography this afternoon.

Top Ten Things I'd Like From My Adoptive Parents

1. A massive garden where I could ride a petrol go-kart.
2. A garage wall with a basketball hoop.
3. Holidays to Disneyland. (Doesn't have to be Florida. Happy with Paris. ☺)
4. They should have brown hair like mine so people think I'm their real kid when I walk down the street, or at parents' evening at school.
5. They've got a daughter, slightly older and she helps me with my homework.
6. They haven't got a dog (because I don't like them).
7. They've got a nice car and the dad taps the steering wheel to music, like the man in the Citroën advert, when he drops me off at school every day.
8. The car **MUST BE A BMW M5!**
9. They will have a massive flat-screen TV in the lounge so we can all sit on the sofa and watch *Guardians of the Galaxy* together over and over.
10. They've got to have a fridge with an ice dispenser built into the door so on hot days I can run into the kitchen with my friends and we get to choose crushed ice or cubes.

I stop writing. The tins are clinking on my early warning system. But why? It's Wednesday. Eric gets emptied every Thursday.

I push myself up and peer over the top.

Nothing, just people walking by the end of the alley.

Must be the wind.

The tins clink again, like a fish pulling on a hook at the end of a line.

Someone giggles as the line wobbles again.

I shake my head and smile.

'Leah,' I shout. 'I know it's you!'

Leah steps out into the alley, laughing. 'Sam, one day it'll be the bin collectors.'

'I'd hear the engine,' I say. 'And you're the only one who knows I'm here.'

'True,' she says, walking towards me. 'So, what are you up to anyway?'

I raise my list.

'Oh, should have known,' she smiles. 'What's on this one? A house in Hollywood with an Olympic-sized pool?'

'Nearly.' I laugh. 'You want to come up?'

'No thanks, it stinks in there.'

'Hey.' I tap the edge of the skip. 'That's no way to talk about Eric.'

'Only saying the truth,' says Leah, reaching up. 'So come on, let me see what you've written.'

I hand my list down to her. I don't mind Leah seeing it. She's my best friend. Leah's got long brown hair and brown eyes and some people say we look like brother and sister, which really annoys her. She was the first person to speak to me four months ago, when I got

to Dunham High. I was doing what I usually do when I start a new school – walking around the quad at break, keeping my head down, trying to be invisible, until Leah stepped in my way. She said I'd been at her primary school when she was seven. Didn't I remember her? She used to wear her hair in bunches. I shrugged. I'd been to lots of schools; I'd seen loads of girls with hair in bunches. Then she pushed me on the arm and said, 'You must remember me – I'm the one who turned up at school in a tiger suit when I thought it was Pyjama Day.' I smiled because I did remember that.

Her mum met my foster-parents at the last parents' evening, and they exchanged telephone numbers. You might think it's because they are friends, but it's because my foster-parents want to check up on where I am. But the good bit is that my foster-parents like Leah, so I get to spend lots of time with her.

'Ha.' Leah's chuckle jolts me back to the present.

'What is it?' I ask.

'Nothing,' she says. 'It's just . . . you think families are like the ones you see on TV adverts, or films on Netflix.'

'Aren't they?'

'No. Well, at least mine isn't. My mum's always arguing with her new boyfriend and going on at me to clean my room or help with the washing up.'

'But at least you're together,' I say. 'And you all go to sleep and wake up in the same house.'

Leah looks back at my list. 'Then maybe you should just say that . . . Hey, do you want to come to the shops with me? Mum gave me five pounds.'

‘Why?’

‘Don’t know.’ Leah shrugs. ‘Just did. So, are you coming?’

I’m tempted to stay in Eric but Leah gives me a look that tells me I shouldn’t.

‘It’s okay,’ she says. ‘You can come back after.’

I grab my bag and swing my legs over the top.

As we walk side by side out of the alley, I think that my list might never come true, but at least I get to share my dreams with Leah. It’s hard locking all my secrets in my head. Sometimes I can be at a school for months and leave without anyone knowing I’m a foster-kid, but I’d told Leah at the beginning of the second term at Dunham High after I found her crying outside the girls’ toilets. Her dad had left during the summer holidays, and she hadn’t told anyone. Once she’d told me her secret, I told her mine, but I think she’d guessed something was up anyway because I never invited her back to my house for tea. She told me she missed her dad and asked what mine was like, and I said I didn’t know.

I don’t even know my dad’s name. I do know my mum’s name is Vicky. I last saw her when I was eight, but that was only for ten minutes at the council offices, and even then she hardly looked at me because she was crying most of the time. I’ve got a picture of her in my memory box – the box that social workers help me put my memories in. I don’t have many memories, at least not many I want to remember. Rock Star Steve says it might help if I did, that remembering the past might help me settle down at school and with my foster-parents. I do try, but something always happens that means I get moved on.

‘Sausage roll?’

‘What?’ I shake my thoughts out of my head.

Leah is waving the five-pound note in the air as we stop outside Smiths Bakery.

‘Pizza.’ I grin. ‘A whole one.’

‘So it takes longer to eat?’

‘Exactly,’ I say.

It’s good to have a friend. They make you feel like you belong, and they understand how you feel. I just wish there was someone who made me feel like that in Reilly’s house.

CHAPTER 4

THE HUG REILLY JUST HAD AND A FRONT DOOR KEY

The hallway smells of lemon and chocolate when I open the front door. Reilly's mum bakes cakes for people's weddings and birthdays. She's always baking. That's why she always seems tired when I get home.

'Sam, we're in here.'

I hang my bag at the bottom of the stairs and walk into the dining room.

Reilly's got his back to me, leaning over the table, scooping baked beans. His mum looks up from her dinner plate. She still has bits of flour in her hair. 'Where have you been?' she asks.

'Drama club,' I say. 'I told you.'

'Sam.' She frowns. 'I really don't think school would allow it three times a week.'

‘Yeah, but . . .’ I scramble for a lie. ‘We had an extra one . . . We’re doing a new play.’

‘You never said. Reilly’s been waiting for you.’

Reilly spins to face me, tomato sauce around his mouth. ‘Hey, Sam.’

‘Hey, Reilly,’ I mumble.

His mum sighs as she stands up. ‘Your tea will be ruined,’ she says. ‘Another ten minutes and I was going to call the agency.’ She walks past me into the kitchen. I glance at Reilly. He usually smiles but this time he just keeps eating, like he knows I’m in big trouble. I always am when I go to Eric after school but his mum keeps on, even when I haven’t done anything wrong. ‘Where have you been?’ ‘Who were you with?’ ‘What were you doing?’ It’s every evening when I get back. I’m her first foster-kid and I think she’s scared the agency won’t place another one with her if she doesn’t do a good job with me.

I turn back into the hallway.

‘Now where do you think you’re going?’ Reilly’s mum is back with a plate of fish fingers, chips and beans.

‘Upstairs,’ I say. ‘I thought that’s what you wanted.’

‘No, Sam,’ she says. ‘That’s not what I want at all. I just want you home on time. Now come and eat.’

I follow her back to the table and sit down.

Reilly’s mum picks up her knife and fork. Reilly picks up his glass of water. I look at my plate.

‘Come on, Sam,’ says Reilly’s mum. ‘You know I don’t like to keep on at you. I’m only doing it for your own sake. What would the agency think if I didn’t keep you safe?’

I cut a fish finger in half.

‘It’s fine for you to make plans,’ she continues, ‘but you have to tell me, and not just go missing all the time. Okay?’

I nod and start to eat. I’ve been here four months, but Reilly’s mum still seems like a new teacher at school.

Real parents smile and hug their children when they leave for school in the morning. They hug them when they come home, and they hug them before they go to bed.

Hug.

Hug.

Hug.

Sometimes it’s just for a few seconds. Sometimes it feels like minutes and they hug them so tight that the children look like they will burst. Reilly’s mum is hugging him now, on the landing after he’s showered. I’m standing at the top of the stairs in my pyjamas, waiting to get by.

‘Have you cleaned your teeth?’ Reilly’s mum asks, smoothing his hair. Reilly nods. ‘Good,’ she says. ‘I’ll tell Dad when I call him. Or did you want to?’

‘No,’ says Reilly. ‘I want to play Ace Pilot with Sam.’

Reilly’s mum smiles, then she pulls Reilly towards her, hugging him tight again.

‘I need to go, Mum,’ Reilly says, pushing away.

‘Too old for a hug, are we?’

‘No, I just want to play.’ He turns and runs into his room and I grab my chance to get away, follow him.

‘And what about you, Sam?’ says his mum.

‘What about me?’ I stop dead. For a moment I think she’s about to try to hug me too.

‘Have you packed your bags for school?’

‘Yes,’ I mumble.

‘Good,’ she says. ‘Your sandwiches are in the fridge. Don’t forget them . . . again!’

‘I won’t,’ I say.

Reilly’s mum smiles. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do next, but luckily Reilly yells, ‘Come on, Sam! Help me get to level three.’

‘Just for half an hour,’ Reilly’s mum says, ‘and keep the sound down.’ She nods at the computer in her office. ‘I’ve got to do some invoices.’ As I walk past her she suddenly says, ‘Sam, you won’t forget to do your diary, will you? It’s always good for you to have something to bring to our chat at the weekend.’

‘No,’ I sigh. ‘I won’t forget.’ She uses the word ‘chat’ but she means ‘family meeting’. It’s when we all sit around the dining table – her, me and Reilly, and Reilly’s dad (if he’s back) – and we ‘chat’ about what we’ve done in the week and any problems we might have with each other. But mostly it’s just a chance for Reilly’s mum to complain about me being late home.

I walk into Reilly’s bedroom. It’s where I sleep, but it’s his room. It’s his old spaceman duvet on my bed. It’s his posters of Transformers on the walls and his model tanks and aeroplanes on the windowsill. And it’s his Xbox that flashes as we sit down on the bottom bunk and wait for the game to load.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Reilly looking at me.

‘Where do you go after school?’ he whispers.

‘Drama club, I told you.’

‘But she was sooo mad.’

‘I know,’ I say. I press X. ‘Are you still stuck on this bit?’

‘Yes.’ Reilly shuffles closer to me. ‘I can pick up the gold okay, but I keep crashing in the sea.’

I smile. Reilly wants to go in the air force like his dad, but he can’t get past level three on Ace Pilot.

‘Come on,’ I say. ‘Just watch and I’ll show you.’

I press the triangle and the plane soars into the sky. I press O and stall the engine and get ready to send it into a dive. Reilly is a good kid. I like that he lets me play on his Xbox even when he’s not here. And I like that he lets me share his room. I like most things about Reilly, but most of all I’d like a hug like the one he just had.

But it’s not his fault. It’s written in the *Foster-Parent Handbook*. I read it once. It’s got all the things that foster-parents are and aren’t allowed to do, including no proper hugs. It’s okay to give hugs standing side by side, with one arm. But that’s not a proper hug where people wrap their arms and squeeze you tight, like the one Reilly just got. Like the one I’ve never had. The *Foster-Parent Handbook* has loads of rules about how to behave when you are the only adult left with a foster-child alone in the same room, and how both foster-parent and foster-kid should keep a diary.

Reilly’s mum shouts out that it’s his bedtime.

‘Can we play again tomorrow, Sam?’ he asks.

‘Okay,’ I say.

He puts his controller down and I watch him climb the bunk ladder in his dinosaur pyjamas.

I reach over to the bedside table and take my diary out of the drawer. I'm supposed to write down what I've done and how I am feeling every night.

I open it to today's date and start writing.

Got up.

Went to school.

Went home.

Ate tea.

Went to bed.

Reilly's mattress pings. I wait for his head to appear like an upside-down jellyfish over the side of his bed.

'Hi, Reilly,' I say.

'Hi, Sam,' he whispers. 'Can you come back from wherever you go earlier tomorrow? So we can play longer?'

'I might,' I say, even though I know I won't, which makes me feel bad.

'Cool,' says Reilly. 'Shall I turn the light off now?'

'Yes, Reilly,' I say. 'You can turn the light off now.'

The light switch clicks and the room goes black.

I roll over on my side and face the wall. The plastic sheet rustles underneath me. It's like Reilly's mum thinks I'm four, or maybe she just left it on when Reilly moved to the top bunk.

I run my hand over the wall, picking at the lumps of Blu Tack where Reilly's posters used to be. When I arrived, his mum told me I could put up my own, but I haven't because I don't know how long I'm going

to be here. Sometimes it can be a week, sometimes months, but I still don't put my posters up. The last time I did, at Jean and Ralph's, Rock Star Steve turned up the next day and I had to pack my bags and go somewhere else.

One day, I'd love to live in a house I called home. I'd love to be given my own front door key and not have to ask permission to get Coke from the fridge or a biscuit from the tin. Reilly says his mum wouldn't mind and that I should just do it, but I don't.

CHAPTER 5

REASONS WHY . . .

‘It was partly my fault too,’ Leah says as we walk to school the next morning. ‘It was my idea to go to WHSmith.’

‘I know,’ I say. ‘But I bet your mum didn’t go on at you like Reilly’s mum did. The only reason she asks if I want a lift when she drops Reilly off at school is so she can keep her eye on me longer. I always say no, but every foster-parent I’ve had does it. It’s like they’re scared they’re going to lose me or something. The only way it will stop is if I get adopted and it doesn’t seem as if that’ll happen any time soon.’

‘If it makes you feel any better, my mum said she’d adopt you if we had enough space.’

‘That’s nice,’ I say, forcing a smile.

Leah knows that I want to be adopted. She said she’d guessed I wanted to be by the way she’d seen me looking at parents playing with their children in the park. It isn’t that I look at them strangely, she says, just that I look at them for too long. But everyone looks at things they want,

imagining riding a new bike in a shop window, or eating a McDonald's triple-cheese burger on the menu. That's all I'm doing when I stare at people – imagining what it'd be like to be a part of their family.

The traffic stops. As we cross the road, I can feel Leah looking at me, like she wants to say something else. Some kids from Year Eight overtake us.

'What?' I say, checking no one is close behind. 'Why are you looking at me? Have I got a zit?'

'No.' She shakes her head.

'Toothpaste around my mouth?'

'No.' She stops walking. 'I was just thinking, maybe you should go back to Reilly's on time, at least for a while, so his mum doesn't get mad at you again.'

'Are you on her side?'

'No, of course not. But you know they always bring it up at your PET meetings.'

'It's PEP,' I say. 'And it's fine. All they do is talk and write stuff in their files.'

'Still,' says Leah. 'I think you should, and maybe don't skip any more lessons either. Mr Clunes has given you loads of chances already. You might not have many left.'

I shrug as we walk alongside the school railings. The cans on Eric aren't my only early warning system – Leah is one too. Only her alarm doesn't rattle or screech like a security alarm, it just comes out in her soft voice. She's right, I shouldn't miss lessons. It's not that I miss many, but if Mr Clunes, the head of year, catches me, it always gets brought up at our PEP meetings. That means Personal Education Plan. It's a bit

like the weekly ‘chats’ at Reilly’s house, except it’s at school, with Mr Clunes, Rock Star Steve, Mrs Sorrell (the school pastoral care person) and Reilly’s mum. Everyone talks and asks me questions: ‘Are you okay, Sam?’ ‘Are you happy?’ ‘Is there anything you’d like to talk about?’ Usually I just shrug and look at the floor. If I do speak, I listen to the scratch of their pens as they write stuff to go in my file. I have lots of notes in lots of files. That’s because I’ve had lots of PEP meetings in every school I’ve been to. The best thing about them at Dunham High is that I get to miss home economics. I don’t tell anyone in my class where I go though, otherwise they’d find out I’m a foster-kid. They think I’m having extra maths lessons with Mrs Khatri.

Me and Leah turn and walk through the school gates. Other kids join us as we walk into the main reception then head down the east corridor. Leah asks what lessons I’ve got this morning. I tell her double science, then English.

She nods.

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘I said I’ll go.’

‘Good.’

We walk towards our form class.

Leah suddenly stops.

‘Hey.’ She nods at the noticeboard. ‘Have you seen this?’

Kids brush past as I look at the notice.

SCHOOL PLAY

Cast wanted for the end-of-year school production

of *Bugsy Malone*.

Open to all years.

**Put your name on the attached list or contact Mr Powell
or Miss Dowsett before Easter break.
Auditions will start the week we return.
You don't have to be a great actor, singer or dancer.
We just want you there!**

‘Oh that,’ I say, turning around. ‘It’s been up a week.’

‘And you never said!’

‘What’s the point?’ I shrug.

‘But you love drama club,’ says Leah.

‘I know, but only because we do a play a week so I know I can finish them.’

‘So?’

‘So *Bugsy Malone*’s at the end of next term. I won’t be here.’

‘Sam, you’ve got to stop thinking like that. Maybe that’s why you haven’t been . . .’ Leah checks over her shoulder to make sure no one is listening. Apart from the teachers, no one in school knows that I’m a foster-child. ‘Maybe that’s why you haven’t been adopted, because people can see you’re nervous about leaving.’

‘That’s because I *am* nervous.’

Leah takes a deep breath. ‘I know and I don’t want to be mean, but maybe you should stop feeling sorry for yourself. Just put your name down. Amala and Lewis have and I bet they’re nowhere near as good as you.’

‘But it’s happened before,’ I say. ‘When I was in *The Pirates of Penzance*. I went to every rehearsal for two months, then got moved a week before the first performance.’

‘Then do something about it. If you really like it somewhere you should do something to help you stay, and stop running away.’ Leah goes to say something else, but the rest of the kids are piling through the corridor, pulling us apart. I want to say something too, ask her why she suddenly came out with that, but I’m still trying to understand exactly what she meant.

‘I’m sorry if I’ve upset you Sam, but you’ve got to do something as you look a little miserable.’

‘Do I?’

‘Yeah, just a bit.’

I turn away and walk down the corridor. Leah doesn’t know what it’s like to be a foster-kid, to get moved all the time. It’s hard hiding it from my class. I don’t want to stand out or be different. I just want to be Sam. Not Sam the foster-kid. But maybe I should do something to help myself, like she said. *Stop running away. Do something. Do something . . .* Leah is half the length of the corridor behind me, but her words are still echoing through my head.

CHAPTER 6

A TALK WITH MYSELF

Mr Grosicki always smiles when he reads out my name during the register in maths. Mrs Stevens always smiles at me when I walk into English. Miss Yallop always smiles and says 'Hi, Sam!' when I walk into history. All the teachers smile at me (except for Mr Marsh in science, who is always grumpy). And I sort of smile back, then walk to my seat, wondering if they are smiling because they are pleased to see me, or because they feel sorry for me because I'm a foster-kid. Leah says it's in my head, that the teachers smile at the other kids too, it's just that I don't see. But I notice Miss Wilkins smile at me when I walk into geography, even though I'm late and she's already pointing at a picture of the sea and a white cliff on the whiteboard.

'Pebbles are formed from the sea bashing rocks against the cliff,' she says, switching to a picture of pebbles on a beach. 'Can you see that? Maybe it's shown better on this diagram.' She shows a drawing of a cliff and the sea with arrows pointing along the coastline. But

I can't concentrate on what she's saying because of Leah's words. Does she really think I'm feeling sorry for myself? Is that what everyone thinks?

'So the rocks smash against the cliff, shattering them into tiny pieces, and the currents deposit them on a beach.'

Do I look miserable? I don't think so, because Rock Star Steve says I've got a cheeky grin, and Mr Marsh is always telling me off because he thinks my grin is me laughing at him.

I pick up my pen and tap it on my book. I don't feel sorry for myself. I don't.

'And the waves crash onto the beach, making the pebbles even smaller and sometimes turning them to sand. What's this process called?'

Darek's hand shoots into the air next to me.

'Abrasion, miss.'

'Yes, well done, Darek, but what's the *whole* process called?' Miss Wilkins looks around the class.

Maybe Leah just thinks I'm feeling sorry for myself because she knows how much I want to find a family of my own. Perhaps I *should* stop thinking about it so much and do something about it. Because I love drama, and I want to be in *Bugsy Malone*, but most of all I want to stay around here because of Leah.

I open my notepad. *Yeah, Sam, I think to myself. Do something about it – don't sit around waiting to get dumped, like Leah's mum.*

'Sam, what's this whole process called?' Miss Wilkins is standing right in front of me.

'Umm . . . S-s-s-sorry.'

Someone giggles behind me. Miss Wilkins darts a look that says, 'Stop it,' then turns back at me and smiles. Please don't smile.

'The whole process, Sam,' she says. 'What's it called?'

'L-l-longshore drift, miss.'

'Yes,' she says. 'I'm amazed, Sam. You looked like you were miles away.'

I *was* miles away, but I'm not any more. Because I didn't just know the answer to the question, I've also figured out what I need to do. I turn my notebook towards the window and make a barrier with my arm so Darek can't see it. I start to write:

Wanted

Two adults (or one) prepared to look after and love an
11-year-old boy. And he promises to do the same for them.

No dogs.

Or cats.

Or hamsters.

Interviews by the bandstand, The Downs,

Saturday 4th April, from 10 a.m.

If there are loads of people, please wait.

Email: Don't have one yet

'It's brilliant.' Leah beams as I show her my notebook in the canteen. 'What made you think of it?'

'What you said.'

'About being in the school play?'

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘and because ... because ... I don’t know. Lots of things.’

‘Well, it’s great.’ Leah smiles, reading it again. ‘No hamsters. Ha. What’s wrong with hamsters?’

‘They wriggle too much,’ I say, ‘and they’ve got cold feet.’

‘No, they’re cute.’ Leah puts her hand over her mouth to stop herself laughing.

Kids are walking by with plates full of food while I stare at my notebook, feeling as happy with my poster as Leah seems to be.

‘I thought we could make loads of copies,’ I say. ‘And post them through people’s doors.’

‘Yeah.’ Leah’s eyes open wide. ‘And maybe we could stick them to lamp posts and telegraph poles.’

‘I’m not a missing cat!’ I laugh.

‘Okay, maybe not then, but you can’t send it like this, with your scruffy writing. We need to do it on a computer.’

‘I know,’ I say. ‘But Reilly’s mum goes nuts if anyone uses up all the paper.’

‘It’s all right,’ says Leah. ‘We can do it at mine after school.’

‘I’ve got drama club.’

‘Then come to mine after that. We’ll use my mum’s ex’s printer – he hasn’t taken it back yet. What are you going to call it?’

‘Call it?’

Leah checks behind to make sure no one is listening. ‘Yes,’ she whispers. ‘We have to give it a name, like a campaign. Like when my mum’s friend’s friend set up a fund to save donkeys in Spain.’

‘What was that called?’

‘Save Donkeys in Spain.’ Leah laughs. ‘But you could have Get Sam Adopted, or GSA. Everyone shortens the name.’

I bite into my sandwich, but I don’t have time to swallow before the lunch bell rings. I’ve been so excited about my poster that I’ve had no time to eat.

Leah snaps the lid on her lunchbox and stands up.

‘How about Adopt Sam – little c, big C – McCann?’

‘That’s quite hard to say.’

‘Yeah.’ Leah shakes her head as we walk out of the canteen. Suddenly my strides feel longer and I feel taller. I have a plan and for once it’s to stick around, not run away.

‘Sam’s Sticking Around Plan?’ I say out loud.

‘No,’ says Leah. ‘That makes you sound like a Post-it Note or a fridge magnet.’

We laugh as we head down the corridor.

My plan is all I can think about during English.

As I look around the class, everyone has their heads down, either writing or reading the next question. Me wanting perfect parents is probably the same as them desperately wanting new football boots or a bike for Christmas and feeling mega-disappointed when they don’t get them. Actually, wanting real parents and being rejected is a million times worse than that. You don’t just feel disappointed, you feel an ache in your stomach that spreads to your heart and all the other parts of your body and it hurts so much that you have to pretend it’s not there.

I spot Mrs Stevens looking right at me. She smiles then mouths, ‘Sam, write!’ and points at my book.

I put my head down and try to write, but all I can think about is that I'm going to find my perfect parents, something I have wanted for as long as I can remember. They will never be my real parents, my mum will always be my mum, but I'm going to find someone who will love and care for me, and I'll do the same for them, for the rest of my life.

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