

Excerpt from And Alex Still Has Acne

Chapter One

The school bell rang to mark the end of the first lesson of the afternoon. Without showing a trace of sarcasm Miss Smith, the French teacher, thanked the class for being such an attentive bunch and, with a sigh of relief, gathered up her books and retreated for the staff room. A pity, she thought, that smoking was banned everywhere on school grounds – she could really do with a cigarette now. Year 10 were always hard work, especially first thing on a Friday afternoon.

Several students let out a whoop of delight as she left. In her rush to get out of the classroom, Old Smithers (she must have been at least 50) had forgotten to set them homework again. No doubt they would each get an email telling them to revise French verbs or something in time for the lesson on Monday, but they could always deny opening the email on the grounds they never switched on their computers at the weekend. As if!

Sam Rainsworth was slower than the others to collect his books and pens and stuff them into his school bag. He had hardly registered the start of the lesson, let alone the end. And Miss Smith, glad to have a quiet pupil not causing any trouble, had been happy to let him sit dreamily at the back of the class. He got up thoughtfully and left the classroom without speaking to anyone. At the corner of the corridor he found his friend, Alex, waiting for him.

“You OK? Thought you’d gone to sleep in Old Smithers’ class just then.” Alex loomed over him. A year ago both boys had been the same height, Sam just a little thicker set. But Alex had been going through a growing spurt and was now almost a head taller. He hadn’t grown out sideways though and looked chronically under-nourished despite an enormous appetite. ‘Legs like knotted string,’ his mother often said about him, much to his embarrassment. Sam looked up at his friend. “Yep, I’m fine. I was just thinking, that’s all.” Sam carried on down the corridor instead of turning left towards the labs.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“Dunno, home I s’pect.”

“It’s not home time yet, we’ve got double physics, remember?”

Sam gave a mirthless smile. “It’s an infringement of my human rights to have double physics last thing on a Friday. Besides I haven’t done the homework.”

“I have...”

“Smart-arse.”

“No, I mean you can copy mine during the lesson and hand it in at the end – Parky never takes the books in till the end.”

Sam paused for a moment, as if thinking about it. He leant down and pulled at one of his socks, then the other. Then he ran a hand through his hair, ruffling it up even more than usual. Finally he looked up at his friend and shook his head.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m not in the mood.”

He turned from his friend and set off back down the corridor. He wasn’t surprised though to hear lolloping footsteps behind him and to feel a hand on his shoulder. He knew who it was without turning round.

“So, you can resist the lure of physics too then?”

“I like physics, believe it or not,” Alex said. “But you don’t look right – I’m coming with you.”

“Suit yourself.”

Sam shrugged and continued walking in silence out of the school building, across the yard and down the short drive to the main road. Alex walked along beside him, hunched into his parka hood and whistling softly under his breath.

“I wish you’d cut that.”

“Sorry?”

“That stupid whistling.”

“Sorry, nervous tic. I was worried someone might spot us and haul us back.”

“Well, you’re safe now so you can shut up. You need more practice.”

“Someone’s going to catch up with you soon and write to your parents and then you’ll be for it.”

“As if they’ll care ...”

“So your dad’s really gone then? For good?”

“None of your business.”

“Sorry, only my dad says ...”

“None of his business either.”

“Sorry.”

The pair walked on in silence for a couple of minutes. Then Sam felt inside his parka and drew out a couple of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Want one?”

“Where’d you get those from?”

“Mum. She’s started smoking again since Dad’s gone.”

“Won’t she notice two missing?”

“Nah. I took them from different packets earlier in the week. She couldn’t tell. She’s too pissed to notice much by bedtime these days.”

“You mean she’s drinking? I never thought your mum would do anything like that. She seems so...”

“Refined? Me neither. Never saw her drink anything more than a small glass of wine with a meal before. She’s different now – sort of lost.”

The boys continued for a while again in silence. Alex couldn’t help noticing that his friend too had a lost look about him. But he had no idea what to do

about it. Perhaps just sticking with him for the rest of the afternoon would be a start. After a few long minutes he said: “Well, what are we going to do? No point going into town – I’m skint.”

“Me too, almost. Could we go over to your place?”

“Nah. Dad’s home. He’d slaughter me if I came home from school too early. He’s into school in a big way at the moment. Wants me to do well in GCSEs and so on and go to university. It’d be like his world had fallen in if he found out I’d bunked a lesson. What about your place?”

“Nah, not yet. Too empty when Mum’s not there; too gloomy when she is. Later perhaps – let’s go out on the town first. I’ve probably got enough for a burger and Coke at McDonald’s.”

“That’s settled then. I’m starving.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Alex’s appetite was legendary.

They turned their feet in the direction of the golden arch, a new sense of purpose quickening their step. McDonald’s was pretty full, plenty of people their own age, though their grammar school uniforms, badly concealed under their parkas, marked them out from the other customers. But, after chasing the last crumbs out from the burger wrappers and draining their cans, both boys felt better. Sam even smiled.

Alex belched as he finished his last drop of Coke.

“Oops, pardon – could do with another one of those,” he waved his empty Coke tin in Sam’s direction.

“Sorry, no can do,” he put all his money on the counter between them and counted it. “Only got 60p to my name until I see Dad.”

Suddenly his mobile rang – “Speak of the devil,” he said to no-one in particular and answered the phone. “Hello Dad.”

Alex leant back so as not to eavesdrop, and attentively brushed a mass of crumbs off his chest onto the floor. He watched as his friend grunted and nodded his head to the faint mumbling he could hear coming from the phone.

“Yeah, great,” Sam said eventually, without any visible sign of enthusiasm. “See you same time and place on Sunday.”

He switched off and turned back to his friend. Alex could see from Sam’s face that he didn’t want to discuss the call further. He straightened up in his seat as Sam concentrated on gathering up all their food wrappers and depositing them in the waste bin. He looked with mock horror at the ring of crumbs around Alex’s seat.

“God Alex, you’re a messy eater! Well what’ll we do now?”

Alex shrugged. “Dunno. It’s still too early to go home.”

“You can come back to my place for tea if you like. It’s not so bad really, and I’m still hungry.”

“Me too. What you got to eat at home?”

“Nothing, unless Mum’s stocked the fridge since breakfast this morning, which, I think not. We’ll have to get something on the way home.”

“But you haven’t got any money.”

“So?”

“So?”

“So, what?”

“Sam, you’re not going to nick stuff are you?”

“All property is theft. Weren’t you paying attention in history last week? At least that’s what I think that Marx bloke said. I need to eat to live and if Mum is too drunk to shop, I’ve got to find other ways of feeding us.”

“Does your dad know?”

“Of course not! Do you think I’m going to shop her to him? Or myself for that matter.”

“I see. But surely he could do something about it, if he knew?”

“Mind your own business, will you? This is my problem and I’ll sort it in my own time. Now, are you coming back to my place for more food or not?”

Alex sat silently for several minutes. He had never knowingly broken the law before, apart from cycling on the pavement - but then his mother preferred him to do that than run risks on the road. He didn’t like the idea at all. But Sam was his friend, and he didn’t like to abandon him either. Moreover, despite himself, he felt a tingling of excitement at what Sam was proposing. Anyway, he could never knowingly give up an opportunity for more food these days.

“Where?” Sam knew his friend was not enquiring where his house was, and felt a glow of pleasure that Alex was in on this with him. He too felt a tingle of excitement, plus a mixture of guilt and fear - but not enough of either to stop him.

“The One-Stop. It’s big enough to have blind corners and small enough to not have any security.”

“You’ve done this before.” It was a statement rather than a question. Sam nodded. “A couple of times. Tried Waitrose first ‘cos that’s where I knew from Mum shopping there – but security follows you round like you are a criminal or something, so I got out of there quick and tried the One-Stop. Easy-peasy there.”

And it was. At least for Sam it was. Alex was amazed at how smoothly Sam sauntered into the shop. Alex felt hot and sweaty as soon as they got inside and started to take his parka off, knocking into the column of trolleys as he did so. Sam and the shop assistant turned to see what the noise was. He felt his face go bright red, which he knew was not a pretty sight against his ginger hair, and shrunk his neck down into his shirt collar as he pushed the trolleys back into a straight line.

“Idiot,” hissed Sam. “Where are you going to put the stuff if you’ve taken your coat off?”

“Sorry,” Alex whispered back, pulling his coat back over his shoulders, shrinking down further into his collar, and picking up a basket as nonchalantly

as he could. He couldn't help feeling furtive as he looked around him, and he took a sharp intake of breath as his eye caught the poster by the baskets: 'NO SHOPLIFTING – WE ALWAYS PROSECUTE!'

He stopped in his tracks, the basket dangling loosely on his arm.

"Idiot," Sam hissed again, and made to take the basket off him. Then he reconsidered.

"No. Keep the basket; I've got a better idea for you. Take this money ..." – Sam handed over the 60p left from the McDonald's bill – "... and go round the shop to see if you can buy anything with it, then meet me outside."

Alex nodded. He could see he was going to be a liability if he stuck with his friend. He was also relieved that he was no longer involved, so couldn't be prosecuted. That he was now acting as a decoy to distract the sole sales assistant's attention, so in effect aiding and abetting the commission of a crime, didn't occur to him.

They met up again just round the corner from the shop. Alex held out a packet of chewing gum and 2p. Sam opened his parka and revealed a packet of bacon, a twin pack of sausage rolls, two jelly trifles and a bag of satsumas. Alex gaped.

"How the heck did you manage all that?"

"Not too bad today. I just grabbed stuff out of the chilled section whilst the assistant was watching you didn't nick anything in the sweets section, and picked the fruit up by the door on the way out. She just assumed I was with you – even gave me a smile!"

"Well ..." Alex was speechless for a minute. "I still don't think it's right."

"No? Well you try going hungry for a couple of days and see how it feels. I used to feel like you – still do most of the time – but things are a bit different now. Anyway I only nick what I need to eat; only this time I've nicked stuff for you too. So you're going to have to come home with me now."

Alex knew there was some faulty logic in this, but he was partly too impressed, partly too loyal, to say any more. He just followed his friend meekly down the road and back to his house.