

Chapter 1

Hammy's cage was empty.

Josh bent forward and peered inside. He shivered and glanced along the hallway towards the front door. Some sort of icy gale was blowing under it. He pulled his dressing gown closer.

He knelt down, opened the cage door and edged his hand inside. You need to be a little bit careful around Hammy first thing in the morning. He was usually sleeping then, worn out after tearing around his wheel all night long, and if you dared to touch him, your fingers would soon feel the sharpness of his needle-like teeth.

Josh tiptoed his fingers across the bottom of the cage. He poked delicately, at a small pile of straw in one corner. Nothing. With increasing urgency he prodded at the rest of the cage floor. Nothing. The cage really was empty.

'Mum!'

'What?'

Josh jumped to his feet. Mum emerged from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron and frowning.

'What d'you want? Can't you see I was just doing the washing up.'

Josh hurled himself towards her, arms outstretched.

'Mum, Hammy's gone.'

Tears were beginning to well up in his eyes. He bit his lip with embarrassment.

She shook him clear.

'What?'

'Hammy, mum. My hamster. He's disappeared.'

Mum glanced absent-mindedly towards the empty cage.

'Yeah,' she yawned.

'Your father found it dead this morning.'

She paused.

'He threw it in the dustbin.'

Chapter 2

Somehow Josh got through the day. It helped being in a class of thirty-five. If you kept your head down there was a good chance the teacher would not bother you and then you could get on with that you wanted.

Josh spent most of the time remembering the good times with Hammy. He remembered the day he had first held him, a tiny furry ball, nestling in the palm of his hand, all warm and sleepy.

Then he remembered the tunnel he had constructed out of toilet roll tubes taped together at odd angles. He had taken Hammy out of his cage to run through the tubes. Hammy had gone through once and then decided that gnawing at the cardboard was more fun. Josh had tried to nudge him back through the tube but Hammy just gave him a sharp nip on the finger for his efforts.

And he remembered the previous evening. He had sat beside the cage after tea and watched Hammy run round his wheel. He had been fine then. How could he have died overnight?

By the time Josh got home he felt as if he had been emptied of all energy and life. His shoulders drooped. His feet dragged. He wondered if he would ever feel happy again.

Mum was in the kitchen, summoning up one of her mysterious creations. There was something about Mum's cooking. Maybe it was just the gravy. It did not seem to matter whether it was pork, lamb, beef, even chicken. Out would come a couple of those little brown cubes. Then with a few scoops of Bisto for thickening, a wince-making, ultra-flavour-enhanced, gloopy gravy could be guaranteed. It probably explained why Josh was severely underweight for his age.

He dragged himself down the hall towards the staircase. The empty cage was still there, probably waiting for Dad's return that evening. That sort of thing was usually his responsibility.

Josh tried not to look at it. It was all too horrible.

He went upstairs and laid on his bed. He tried to look at his ShootOut cards. His best friend, Cal, would certainly want to swap some tomorrow. But all he could think about was Hammy.

Dad got home an hour or so later.

'Josh.'

He hauled himself off his bed.

'Yes, Dad.'

'Come down here. I'm not shouting up the stairs to you.'

'Alright.' He trudged down the stairs.

Dad had a big grin on his face.

'Good news,' he said. 'Hammy's not dead.'

Chapter 3

Josh stared at him, his lower lip almost touching his chin.

'What do you mean? Mum said....'

Dad raised his hand. Josh flinched, instinctively.

'I know. I checked with some of the guys at work. Apparently hamsters hibernate if they get too cold.'

Josh's mind fought to take in what he had heard. The cold draught from the door. That must be it. Hammy was only hibernating.

His chest began to swell. He took a deep breath. Energy flooded into him. Hammy was alive!

Dad grinned again.

'Shall we go and find him?'

He led Josh through the kitchen to the back door. Josh's stomach executed a tiny somersault as he passed the cooker and he tried not to think of that gravy.

Dad took the lid off the dustbin and scratched his head. Josh peered in. It looked as if Mum had been tidying up while he had been at school. It also looked like they were going to have her version of apple pie for pudding.

Half a ton of carpet fluff mixed with apple peel, scraps of raw and previously frozen pastry, tea bags, fag ends and something pink and glutinous, which may have been the remains of last night's desert, stared back at him. His stomach did another somersault.

Dad rolled up his sleeves and delved in. Josh took a step backwards and put his hand over his mouth. Poor Hammy. What on earth would he look like after having had that lot thrown in on top of him?

Dad fished about for a minute or so, then pulled out his hand. He was holding a ball of rolled up newspaper. So that was Hammy's coffin: a load of old newspaper rolled up into a ball. Nice one, Dad.

He turned the ball over and stared at it, wide-eyed.

'What's the matter?' Josh's heart was beating fast.

Dad held it towards him. A small, hamster-sized hole had been chewed through it. 'He must have come round and escaped,' Dad said.

Josh stared at the ball.

'But, then he must still be in there,' he said, pointing at the dustbin.

Dad nodded and frowned.

'Mike!' That was Mum's voice.

She was standing at the back-door, her hands on her hips and the blackest look you have ever seen on her face. Josh took a step backwards, out of her direct line of sight.

'What on earth d'you think you're doing? Tea's nearly ready and you're out here spreading rubbish all over the place. I hope you don't expect me to clear it all up.'

Dad glared back at her.

'Since when did I ever expect you to do anything in the garden? I'll sort it.'

He turned to Josh.

'Go and wash your hands. I'll be in for tea when I've found Hammy.'

'I'm dishing it up, and if it's stone cold when you eat it, then so be it.'

Mum flicked her apron in the air and flounced back into the kitchen. A small puff of floury smoke lingered behind her.

Josh shot a pleading glance at Dad. He was not at all sure he wanted to be alone in the kitchen with Mum in that mood. But Dad just waved him in.

Josh climbed up the stairs to the back-door. His shoes weighed a ton. He sat down at the table. Mum plonked the plate down in front of him. He picked up a fork and started to push the goo around. Mum tucked in, hissing between mouthfuls.

She cleared her plate, barring a mouthful of mashed potato, and pushed it away. It clattered into the salt cellar at the centre of the table. She looked at Josh's plate.

'Are you going to eat that, or just play with it?'

Josh smiled weakly and put the tiniest amount of... he thought it was pork... into his mouth.

The back door opened and Dad came in. Josh looked up at him, his fork halfway between the plate and his mouth, and hardly daring to breath. Where was Hammy? Dad walked over to the sink and turned on the taps. He squeezed washing-up liquid onto his hands and washed them. Where was Hammy?

He sat down at the table. Josh's fork still hovered halfway to its destination. Dad looked at him and smiled. Josh put the fork into his mouth.

'He's fine,' Dad picked up his cutlery.

Josh nodded. His mouth was dry and he was finding it very difficult to digest the food in spite of all that gravy.

'I couldn't find him, but I'm sure he's fine.'

For the second time that evening Josh's mind struggled to comprehend what his father had said.

'He's probably making a nest for himself in the garden somewhere. He'll be fine as long as next-door's cat doesn't get him.'

Josh wished he had never put the food in his mouth. Then he would not have sprayed his mother with it.

