

# PEST CONTROL

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## CHAPTER 1

# FRESH MEAT

Alice White felt as if everyone knew what she was planning as soon as she stepped through the supermarket doors. She headed past the magazines, past the flowers, past the thick-necked security guard who glared at her from beneath a heavy brow.

She nearly lost her nerve there and then. Nearly turned around and walked back out. But then what would Dad do?

She kept her head down, carefully avoiding everyone's gaze. Down the first aisle, dodging the old woman who was pushing a trolley at a snail's

pace. Around the toddler having a tantrum on the floor.

Alice's heart was thudding in her chest, so loudly she was sure everyone could hear it. One hand was shoved in her coat pocket, the other gripping the strap of her school bag as if someone was about to rip it from her shoulder.

She hurried past the bakery and jams, and on to the fresh meat chiller. She could do this. She would have to. Do it for Dad.

What other choice did she have?

She reached the chiller cabinets and peered inside. Whole chickens. Legs of lamb. Packs of mince. Now she was here she didn't know what she should get – what he needed.

Her hand shook as she tried to slide the cabinet lid open. It wouldn't budge. Another chance to give up and make her escape. Perhaps someone was trying to tell her something.

An arm crossed in front of her. “Here, love. Let me help.”

Alice looked up. A woman in her fifties smiled back as she yanked the chiller open. “A devil to open, that one. Always has been. They should do something about it.”

“Thanks,” Alice mumbled and turned back to the food in the cabinet. The woman continued on her way, happy to have performed her good deed of the day.

Alice felt guiltier than ever.

She looked back into the chiller and spotted the steaks at the bottom. Which should she take? Braising steak? Sirloin? Rib eye? There were too many to choose from. What if she chose the wrong one? Dad would be angry and there was no telling what he would do. Not any more.

*Get a grip on yourself,* Alice thought. *Pick one and get out. What are you waiting for?*

She reached deep into the cabinet, almost having to bend double to reach the bottom.

The biggest. That's what he'd want. The juiciest.

Her fingers found a pack of bloody rump steak. Without hesitating, Alice snatched it up and slipped the meat into her open bag. She walked away without shutting the cabinet.

*Just get out, she told herself, as quickly as you can. Don't run, though. Never run. If you run they wonder what you've done. Running draws attention. Running gets you caught.*

Alice strode down the central aisle, head down. There was a long queue for the checkout at the front of the store. Good. She could use it as a shield. Nip behind it, out of sight of the checkout girl.

She scanned the queue, groaning when she noticed the woman who'd helped her with the chiller cabinet.

*Please don't talk to me, Alice willed her. Please. Please. Please.*

It was as if the woman heard her thoughts. She turned and flashed her a smile.

“Not get what you wanted, love?”

“N-no,” Alice stuttered as she rushed by.

“Doesn't matter. I can come back.”

The woman didn't take the hint. “You should ask the manager. They might have some out back.”

Alice didn't reply. She was sure that she'd blown it, that the security guard's meaty hand was going to crash down on her shoulder any second. What would happen to Dad then? Who would find him?

*What* would they find?

The exit was in her sights now. She wanted to race for the doors. Anything to get out of the

harsh glow of the store's strip lighting, away from suspicious eyes.

On the other side of the tills, the security guard turned to look at her. This was it. He knew. They all did. Alice started sprinting, almost bashing into the doors before they had a chance to open.

She didn't know if the security guard was chasing her. She didn't stop to see. She barrelled out of the shop, nearly crashing into a mother struggling with a buggy.

"Sorry," Alice spluttered, ignoring the glare from the young mum. She ran across the car park and out onto the high street, never looking back.

She just needed to get home, back to Dad. Back to the man who had made her a thief.