

# Chapter 1



Alice-Miranda Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones said goodbye to her friends on the steps of Winchesterfield Manor.

‘Please try to be brave, Mrs Smith.’ She wrapped her arms around the cook’s waist.

‘Dear girl.’ Mrs Smith sniffled into her tissue, then fished around in her apron pocket to retrieve a small parcel wrapped in greaseproof paper. ‘Some brownies for the drive.’

‘Oh Mrs Smith, my favourites! You really are the

best brownie cook in the whole world. I'll share them with Mummy and Jacinta. You know, I was thinking you should make them for Kennington's. I'm sure we'd sell kazillions. Imagine: "Mrs Smith's Scrumptious Melt-in-Your-Mouth Chocolate Brownies". Alice-Miranda underlined the invisible words in the air. 'Wouldn't that be amazing – you'd be famous!'

Mrs Smith turned the colour of beetroot. 'Off you go,' she smiled. 'And please tell Mrs Oliver I'm looking forward to seeing her later in the week.'

Alice-Miranda stepped back and moved along the line.

'Now, you look after those flowers while I'm gone, Mr Charles,' she said, smiling up at her weathered friend. His eyes, the colour of cornflowers, sparkled in the morning sunlight and he brushed a work-worn hand across the corner of his face.

'Ah lass, I'll have those blooms perfect by the time you get back,' he nodded.

Alice-Miranda stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his middle.

'Off with you now,' he said and patted her shoulder.

Mr Plumpton and Miss Reedy stood side by side. His nose glowed red, while she maintained her usual dignified stance.

‘Thank you, Miss Reedy.’ Alice-Miranda offered her tiny hand, which the English teacher shook most vigorously. ‘I’ve had a wonderful term.’

‘You have a lovely break, Alice-Miranda. It’s hard to believe you’ve been here only three months.’ Livinia Reedy looked down at her youngest student. The girl was a constant source of amazement.

‘And Mr Plumpton, your science lessons have been truly fantastic. I will never in my life forget that volcano experiment. All that frothing and fizzing and then – boom!’ Alice-Miranda laughed.

Mr Plumpton’s forehead wrinkled. ‘That wasn’t my best work, Alice-Miranda. Not quite the outcome I was expecting.’

‘But Mr Plumpton, it was magnificent – even if it did make a lasting impression on the ceiling and spew that icky liquid all over the lab.’

‘Yes, well, I can only imagine how the volcano’s vent ended up with a cork wedged in it.’ He tried not to, but couldn’t help showing an embarrassed smirk.

Next in line stood Mrs Derby. Alice-Miranda

was only just getting used to Miss Higgins's new name.

'You have a lovely holiday, sweetheart,' the young woman beamed.

'Thank you, Miss Higgins, I mean, Mrs Derby,' Alice-Miranda corrected herself.

Mrs Derby knelt down and brushed a stray curl behind Alice-Miranda's ear. The child leaned forward and threw her arms around Mrs Derby's neck.

'Now what was that for?' she asked, as surprised as she had been the first time Alice-Miranda offered such affection.

'Just because,' the tiny girl whispered.

At the end of the line loomed the headmistress, Miss Ophelia Grimm, in a striking magenta suit. Her hair, now swept up loosely, no longer pinned her face into a scowl. Today she was elegant and quite beautiful.

'Alice-Miranda,' she barked sternly, and then as if remembering she was no longer *that* person, she cleared her throat and began again.

'Alice-Miranda.' This time her tone was soft. 'Thank you for your hard work this term. It has been a pleasure.' Her dark eyes smiled and her mouth curved upwards.

‘No, thank *you*, Miss Grimm. Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale Academy for Proper Young Ladies really is the most beautiful school in the whole wide world and you are the best headmistress in the world too. Even when you were, well, upset and angry, pretty much all of the time, I knew that wasn’t really you. You were far too stylish and lovely to be as mean as all that.’ Alice-Miranda stopped suddenly.

Miss Grimm’s eyes narrowed.

‘What I meant to say, Miss Grimm, is that I knew it wasn’t the real you; the one who spied on us and never came out to see the girls and the staff and wouldn’t let Mrs Smith take holidays or Mr Charles plant flowers, or Jacinta go to the gymnastics championships –’

‘Stop!’ Miss Grimm held up her hand.

‘But Miss Grimm, what I really meant to say –’

‘Enough,’ Miss Grimm cut her off again, her steely eyes threatening. ‘No more. Do not say another word, Alice-Miranda.’

Suddenly Ophelia’s face crumpled and she found herself smiling at this infernal child with her cascading chocolate curls. She bent down to meet Alice-Miranda’s brown-eyed gaze.

‘Now, Miss Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones, as your headmistress I am commanding that during this term break you will under no circumstances spend time studying for ridiculous academic tests, nor will you set off on any wilderness walks on your own and you most *definitely* will not train for onerous physical challenges. After what I put you through at the beginning of the term, I expect nothing less than two weeks of purely childish pursuits befitting that of a girl aged seven and one-quarter.’

‘Oh dear, I am sorry, Miss Grimm, but I can’t guarantee any of those things,’ Alice-Miranda whispered.

‘And why ever not, young lady?’ Miss Grimm snapped.

‘Because, Miss Grimm, I’m actually now seven and a half,’ Alice-Miranda beamed.

Before she knew what she was doing, Ophelia Grimm leaned forward and hugged Alice-Miranda tightly.

‘Thank you, Miss Grimm.’ Alice-Miranda hugged her right back. ‘And you and Mr Grump enjoy your honeymoon, too. Goodness knows you’ve waited long enough for it.’

Now it was Ophelia’s turn to blush.

Alice-Miranda ran towards her mother's shiny car parked at the bottom of the steps.

'Come on, darling, time to go home,' Cecelia Highton-Smith called, dabbing a tissue to her eyes.

'Hurry up, Alice-Miranda,' griped Jacinta from the back seat. Then she leant forward and waved furiously out the window. 'Bye everyone!'

The staff could hardly believe just how much things had changed in the eleven and a half weeks Alice-Miranda had been at Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale. And who would have thought that Jacinta Headlington-Bear – the school's former second best tantrum thrower – would ever be invited home for term break?