

Chapter 1



'It's not fair! I don't know why you have to go,' Jacinta groused. 'We've only been back at school for a month.' The fair-haired girl and school's former second best tantrum thrower sat cross-legged on the end of Alice-Miranda's bed, watching as Alice-Miranda packed.

The tiny child smiled. 'Please don't be cross, Jacinta. It's a wonderful opportunity. Miss Grimm said I should make the most of it and I know Mummy and Daddy are terribly excited. Besides,

I told you ages ago. It's just come forward a couple of weeks, that's all.'

'You said you were only going for *two* weeks and now it's *much* longer,' Jacinta griped.

Alice-Miranda folded a pair of jeans and placed them neatly at the bottom of her suitcase.

Millie rolled over on her bed beside them and propped her elbows under her chin. 'Who's going to ride over and visit Miss Hephzibah with me now?'

'Don't look at me,' said Jacinta, curling her lip. 'You know I hate horses and I certainly won't be going near that pony of yours, Alice-Miranda. He's a nasty little beast.'

Alice-Miranda grinned. 'Bonaparte just has a mind of his own, that's all. And it's only for a month or so. Not even the whole term.'

'But that's *forever*,' Jacinta sighed.

'I'm sure Susannah will go riding with you, Millie,' Alice-Miranda assured her friend. 'And really Jacinta, I'll be back before you've had time to miss me.'

'I wish we could come. I'm sure there'll be loads of movie stars and celebrities at the opening party.' Jacinta sprang from the bed and sauntered across the floor, as if she was walking a red carpet.

Millie looked at her and laughed, then jumped up and pretended that she was taking Jacinta's photograph.

'Jacinta, over here, this way, look at me,' Millie ordered like a mini paparazza. 'Gorgeous, amazing, you're a star!'

Jacinta smiled and struck a pose with her hand on her hip.

'I wish you could both come too,' Alice-Miranda said.

'Hey.' Jacinta's smile turned to a frown as a thought suddenly struck her. 'My mother had better not be invited. It's just the sort of thing she loves – a fancy department store being re-launched.'

'Oh, ugly, ugly, Jacinta, what's with the face?' Millie grimaced. 'Those pictures are not going anywhere near the cover of *Gloss and Goss*.'

Alice-Miranda giggled.

'As if I'd ever want to be on the cover of that rubbish.' Jacinta rolled her eyes. 'That would mean I was turning into my mother.' She launched herself off the make-believe red carpet and onto Millie's bed.

'I thought you and your mother were getting on much better,' Alice-Miranda commented. 'Hasn't she rented a cottage in the village so she can spend some time with you on the weekends?'

‘Yes, but I’ve only seen her once,’ Jacinta said. ‘And I haven’t been near the cottage because she’s having it repainted. I don’t know why she’s bothering. It’s not as though she’s going to come and live here permanently.’

‘At least it’s a start,’ Alice-Miranda smiled.

There was a sharp knock at the door. ‘Hello girls.’ Mrs Howard’s voice drifted ahead of her into the room. ‘Whatever are you doing there, young lady?’ she said with a glance at Alice-Miranda’s open suitcase.

‘I thought I’d get a head start,’ the girl answered.

‘But you’re not off until the weekend are you?’ Mrs Howard enquired. ‘I’ve set aside a couple of hours to do all that for you.’

‘I don’t expect you to pack my bags, Mrs Howard. That wouldn’t be fair at all,’ Alice-Miranda frowned.

‘Goodness, you don’t know where I can get some more just like this one, do you girls?’ Mrs Howard’s eyes wrinkled as her lips turned upwards.

‘Oh, you wouldn’t want that, Howie,’ Jacinta replied. ‘If we were *all* like Alice-Miranda you’d be completely bored and have nothing to complain about.’

‘Jacinta!’ Millie rebuked. ‘Howie doesn’t complain about us, do you?’ Millie looked up at the housemistress, who rolled her eyes and changed the subject.

‘I know someone who’s going to miss this little one very much.’ The sturdy woman strode over and pulled a pink cardigan from the tall chest of drawers, folded it with military precision and placed it into the suitcase.

‘Oh, Mrs Howard, of course I’m going to miss you too.’ Alice-Miranda wrapped her arms around the old woman and rested her head against her tummy.

‘And what’s all that for?’ Howie enveloped the child in return.

‘Just because,’ Alice-Miranda replied. A plump tear formed in the corner of the housemistress’s eye. She tried to blink it away but it fell heavily onto the top of Alice-Miranda’s head. ‘Mrs Howard, you’re not crying are you?’ Alice-Miranda stepped back and looked up.

The older woman snatched a handkerchief from her apron pocket, wiped her eyes and blew her nose noisily.

‘Oh, goodness no. Hayfever, my dear. I think

I need to give this house a good going over. Must be a layer of dust in here.’ Mrs Howard glanced around; the room was spotless, its surfaces gleaming.

‘But you cleaned our room yesterday,’ Millie said.

‘I must have missed a spot.’ Mrs Howard blew her nose again.

‘We don’t want Alice-Miranda to go either,’ said Jacinta with a pout. ‘It’s going to be so dull without her.’

‘And no one to talk to at bedtime,’ Millie frowned.

‘Well, I have a surprise for both of you.’ Alice-Miranda’s voice fizzed.

‘A surprise?’ Jacinta bounced up and down on the bed. ‘You’re not really going and this is all just a big joke?’

‘No, even better, we *are* coming with you!’ Millie exclaimed.

‘Well, neither, I’m afraid.’ Alice-Miranda bit her lip. ‘But I asked Miss Grimm if you could share a room while I’m gone and she said yes.’

‘Oh.’ Jacinta stopped her bouncing. ‘Is that all?’

‘Jacinta Headlington-Bear – where are your manners?’ Howie gave her a frosty stare. ‘You know

Miss Grimm is not one for moving girls willy-nilly so I think you might be a little more grateful.'

'I didn't mean it like that,' Jacinta protested.

'Thanks, Alice-Miranda. You know Jacinta and I have been getting on just fine since you arrived.' Millie turned her attention to the older girl. 'But you'd better be tidy, Headlington-Bear. I like living with "Miss Nothing Out of Place" here,' she said, nodding towards Alice-Miranda, 'and I don't fancy having to dodge your dirty undies all over the floor.'

'I don't leave my underwear on the floor,' Jacinta snapped.

Mrs Howard gave Jacinta a meaningful look. 'Oh, really, young lady? Is that so?'

'Well, I don't do it on purpose. And I didn't mean to sound ungrateful, Alice-Miranda. Thanks. You really do think of everything.' Jacinta leapt up and hugged her friend.

'Just promise me that you'll be kind to each other,' Alice-Miranda grinned.

Mrs Howard folded her arms. 'Oh dear, that will be the day.'

'No it won't, Howie. You wait and see. We'll be perfect friends,' Jacinta insisted.

‘I’m looking forward to seeing that.’ Howie pulled a dusting cloth from her apron and ran it quickly along the top of one of the chests of drawers opposite Alice-Miranda’s bed and then marched out the door.

‘Come on then, Jacinta. I want to look at how much junk you’re planning to move in here,’ said Millie as she walked towards the door.

‘I don’t have any junk, thank you very much,’ the blonde-haired girl retorted. ‘And why do I have to move in here? Why can’t you come to my room?’

Alice-Miranda chuckled at her friends.

Jacinta followed Millie out the door, the pair of them trading questions all the way.