

Chapter 1



At Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale Academy for Proper Young Ladies, the dining room hummed with chatter as the girls ate their breakfast and talked about the day ahead. Mrs Smith had made a particularly delicious spread.

‘Do the Americans really eat bacon with their pancakes?’ Millie asked as she eyed the two crispy rashers sitting alongside the fluffy stack on her plate.

‘Oh, yes,’ Alice-Miranda replied. ‘I first tried it like that when Mummy and Daddy took me to

this amazing cafe down on Broadway where all the waiters sing and dance. It's called Ellen's Stardust Diner and it's very famous. Trust me, once you've had the pancakes and maple syrup together with the bacon, you'll never go back.'

Millie shrugged. 'I'm game.'

'It's good that Mrs Smith's trying new recipes,' said Jacinta, 'but I thought it must have been a special day or something. We usually get the really fancy stuff on the weekends.' She loaded her fork and took a mouthful of food. Then Jacinta looked across the table and winked at Millie, who tried to smother a grin.

'Why are you two pulling faces?' Alice-Miranda asked.

'No reason,' Millie and Jacinta said in unison. They giggled conspiratorially.

Alice-Miranda had recently returned from a month in New York City with her parents. While she was away, Miss Grimm had allowed Millie and Jacinta to share a room. The two girls had got on well most of the time but they were both glad when Alice-Miranda arrived home. Jacinta's promise not to leave her dirty underwear lying about had lasted less than a week, and although Millie had tried to bite

her tongue, she couldn't help telling Jacinta what she really thought every now and then.

Millie had packed her things and moved back into their old room before Alice-Miranda's plane had touched down on the tarmac.

Jacinta now had a new room mate of her own. Except that she wasn't exactly new.

Alice-Miranda looked up as a tall blonde girl approached the table. 'Hello Sloane, would you like to sit with us?'

'Sure,' the older girl nodded.

Millie and Jacinta both glanced up and said hello.

A lot of girls at school were still wary of Sloane. During her first stay at Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale she had behaved horridly and had helped her mother bring Fayle School for Boys to its knees. But Alice-Miranda, Millie and Jacinta had seen a different side to her. During a cruise on board the *Octavia*, Alice-Miranda had sought Sloane's assistance. Sloane had been having such an awful time at her new school that she decided to find out what it would feel like to help someone – not because there was anything in it for her, but just because they had asked. When she had arrived unexpectedly on board the *Octavia* she had been a welcome sight indeed.

Afterwards, Sloane had begged her father to send her back to Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale. A good word from Alice-Miranda and her parents had helped convince Miss Grimm that the girl deserved a second chance. She was currently ‘on trial’ for the rest of the term and so far had been a model student, much to the surprise of many – especially their housemistress, Mrs Howard. Sloane had even been visiting her step-granny Henrietta at Caledonia Manor on a regular basis. The two of them had struck up a lovely friendship and Sloane was surprised to realise that she actually quite enjoyed the old woman’s company.

‘Doesn’t Miss Grimm look lovely today?’ Alice-Miranda said as the headmistress, in a striking white suit, moved to the podium beside the teacher’s table.

‘Good morning, girls. I have some important announcements before you head off to class. I’m sure that you are aware that the Winchesterfield Show, culminating with the running of the Queen’s Cup, is coming up in a couple of weeks’ time. I know that in the past, I have been somewhat reluctant to allow girls to attend . . .’

‘Reluctant! That’s an understatement,’ Jacinta said behind her hand. ‘We’ve never been allowed to go. Ever!’

Ophelia Grimm glared at Jacinta. ‘Is there something you’d like to share with the rest of us, Miss Headlington-Bear?’

Jacinta shook her head and gulped. ‘No, Miss Grimm.’

‘Well then, I will continue if I may?’ The headmistress’s left eyebrow arched menacingly. ‘I’ve been speaking with Professor Winterbottom over at Fayle and, in honour of this being the show’s 150th continuous year, we are declaring Friday in a fortnight’s time a show-day holiday.’

A cheer went up around the room.

‘Settle down, girls,’ Miss Grimm commanded. ‘I am looking forward to seeing all of you entering as many of the events as possible. As today is Monday, you will have less than three weeks to prepare. On the Saturday evening we will all be attending the show ball, and then on Sunday we will come together to enjoy the glamour and fun of the Queen’s Cup Carnival – a fitting end to a fabulous weekend, I should think. But we also need lots of helpers. Mrs Smith is going to run the tea rooms for the Village Women’s Association and is rather keen for girls to assist. And I know Mr Charles is putting together a plant and flower market and will

need some willing workers, too. There will be some sign-up sheets here in the dining room at lunchtime today,' explained Miss Grimm, with a smile at the assembly.

'We'd better do some proper training then,' Millie whispered to Alice-Miranda. 'Do you want to enter all the pairs events?'

Alice-Miranda nodded.

'What pairs?' Jacinta asked. She pulled a face as she registered what the girls were talking about. 'Oh, you mean the stupid horse show. I was just looking forward to the carnival rides.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Sloane.

'You have until next Monday to get your entries to Mrs Derby. I understand there will be a list posted on the noticeboard by this afternoon,' Miss Grimm added, before stepping back from the microphone.

Alice-Miranda looked up at the large clock on the wall. 'Oh! I'd better go. I said I'd help Miss Wall get the hockey kits ready for our PE lesson.' She stood up.

'Excuse me, young lady, where do you think you're going?' Miss Grimm moved back towards the microphone and stared at the tiny child.

‘I’m sorry, Miss Grimm. I thought you’d finished the morning announcements. I told Miss Wall that I would help her before class.’

The headmistress was stern. ‘I don’t think so, Alice-Miranda. You need to sit right back down where you were.’

Alice-Miranda’s tummy fluttered. Miss Grimm had changed so much for the better over the past months but right now she seemed a little bit like her forbidding old self again.

Millie, Jacinta and Sloane tried to suppress smiles.

‘Surely you didn’t think you’d get away with it?’ Miss Grimm stared at Alice-Miranda intently.

‘I’m sorry, Miss Grimm, but I don’t understand what you mean,’ she replied.

‘Please come up here, Alice-Miranda.’

The child made her way to the front of the dining room and stood on the floor below the podium.

‘Danika, Mrs Smith, Miss Reedy, would you like to come in now?’ The headmistress turned to her left and beckoned to the head prefect, the cook and the English teacher. ‘Haaa—’ Ophelia held the note for several seconds. ‘-ppy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . .’

The whole room joined in the rousing chorus. Danika entered the room carrying the most beautiful garland of daisies and irises in white and purple, which she placed ceremoniously onto Alice-Miranda's head. Her chocolate curls cascaded beneath the flowery headpiece. Miss Reedy was carrying a beautifully wrapped pink parcel with a huge purple bow and a poster-sized card.

Mrs Smith walked behind Danika and Miss Reedy pushing a trolley loaded with the most enormous chocolate cake, on top of which flickered eight candles.

She stopped in front of Alice-Miranda, who leaned forward on her tippy-toes to blow them out.

'Hip, hip –' Miss Grimm began.

'Hooray!' the girls and teachers replied.

'Hip, hip –'

'Hooray!'

'Hip, hip –'

'Hooray!'

Alice-Miranda's smile lit up the room as she cut the cake.

'Thank you so much, everyone. This is wonderful,' she exclaimed, then rushed over to Mrs Smith and gave her a hug, then onto the podium to

Miss Grimm, who scooped her up and gave her a hug right back.

‘You didn’t really think we’d forget your birthday?’ asked Miss Grimm.

‘No. But when nobody said anything this morning, I thought it would be rude to make a fuss. Thank you, Miss Grimm. This is going to be the best birthday ever.’ Alice-Miranda hugged the headmistress tightly.

Ophelia deposited the child back to the floor.

‘Are you going to open your gift?’ Miss Reedy asked.

‘It’s so beautiful. I think I’d just like to look at it for a while,’ Alice-Miranda replied.

‘Come on, Alice-Miranda, open it,’ Millie called.

‘Open, open, open,’ the girls chanted.

Alice-Miranda carefully picked at the sticky tape.

‘Oh, please!’ Jacinta exclaimed. ‘We’ll be here until lunchtime if you unwrap it like that.’

Alice-Miranda tore open the end of the parcel and pulled out a black velvet riding cap.

‘It’s lovely,’ she said. ‘Thank you so much! I’m going to read the card later – it might take me a while.’ On the cover was a drawing. It showed

everyone at the school with Winchesterfield Manor in the background.

‘Susannah made the card,’ Miss Reedy told her. ‘She’s very clever, isn’t she?’

Alice-Miranda smiled as she noticed herself in the middle of the picture.

‘I’m afraid, girls, that while chocolate cake for breakfast does sound strangely appealing, I think we’ll save this scrumptious confection for morning tea,’ Miss Grimm announced.

A groan rang out around the room.

‘Or perhaps you’d rather that the teachers have it for themselves,’ the headmistress said with a smirk.

The room fell silent.

‘It’s time for class. I think Miss Wall might let you off the hook this morning, Alice-Miranda.’ The headmistress looked at the PE teacher, who nodded and smiled.

‘Thank you, Miss Grimm, that was the best surprise ever,’ Alice-Miranda declared.

‘You have a lovely day, sweetheart,’ Ophelia Grimm replied.

Alice-Miranda waved to Millie, Jacinta and Sloane, who were all grinning from ear to ear, thrilled that their plotting had worked so well.

‘See you later,’ she called.

‘Bye,’ the girls chorused. ‘See you at morning tea.’

And with that Alice-Miranda skipped out the door.

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