

# Chapter 1



Twelve pairs of eyes widened in unison, awaiting Miss Ophelia Grimm's next move. She stood in the corner of the room, a scarlet flush creeping up from her neck to her cheeks. Her blonde hair sparked with static and her lips drew tightly together.

'Out!' Her shrill voice shattered the silence. 'Get out and don't come back, you horrid little monsters!'

Eleven girls reeled backwards in terror, their hands clutching pallid faces. Millie's cinnamon

freckles turned white and Jacinta's mouth gaped open. Only Alice-Miranda dared to smile.

'And that, my dears, was how I got rid of the two cheeky chimps who had taken up residence in our room!' Miss Grimm smiled and plonked herself down in the striped armchair beside the fireplace in her study. Dressed casually in jeans and a pretty orange shirt, Ophelia Grimm was a picture of happiness.

The girls exchanged quizzical looks and then disintegrated into fits of giggles. Mr Grump, who was sitting in the armchair opposite, roared with laughter.

'You should have seen those poor monkeys.' Aldous Grump grinned at his new wife. 'They didn't have a hope with Ophelia after them. Ran for their lives, they did – thought they'd be better off taking their chances with the lions out on the game reserve.'

'Very funny darling,' Miss Grimm admonished. 'I was just tired of the little brutes raiding my make-up purse, that's all. I hadn't realised chimps were fond of lipstick and blush until I caught them giving each other a makeover at the dressing table after we returned from breakfast one morning.'

‘We must have stayed at the same lodge when we were on safari last year,’ said Alice-Miranda, ‘because the very same thing happened to Mummy. The manager, Mr Van Rensburg, said that his chimps had collected enough stolen lipstick to start their own beauty parlour. Apart from that, it does sound like you had a lovely time.’

‘We most certainly did,’ Mr Grump nodded.

Millie took the last sip of her hot chocolate, up-ended the delicate blue-and-white mug and allowed a sodden marshmallow to slide into her mouth.

‘Mmm, yum!’ she exclaimed.

‘All done?’ Miss Grimm asked.

Millie nodded.

‘Well girls, I think you had better be heading off. School tomorrow and we have loads of exciting things planned for the term.’ Miss Grimm stood up and walked towards the mahogany door.

‘But can’t we stay and hear more?’ Jacinta grumbled. ‘I want to know what happened to the baby elephant you saw on safari. Did he escape from that crocodile?’

‘Next time,’ Miss Grimm promised. ‘And girls?’ She tapped her finger to her cheek as though she had just remembered something important. ‘We have a

new student starting tomorrow. She'll be rooming with you, Jacinta, so I expect you to make her feel *very* welcome.' Ophelia arched her eyebrow and gave Jacinta a meaningful look.

Jacinta nodded like a jack-in-the-box.

'A new girl? That's lovely,' Alice-Miranda replied. 'I can't wait to meet her. What's her name?'

'Sloane. Sloane Sykes,' Miss Grimm replied. 'Now, off you go, girls.'

Alice-Miranda was the first to stand. She said goodnight to Mr Grump, who was still sitting in his armchair. Without warning, the tiny child leaned forward and gave him a peck on his stubbly cheek.

'Now what was that for?' Aldous asked.

'Just because,' Alice-Miranda replied, before skipping over to Miss Grimm to give her a warm hug too. Miss Grimm smiled at her youngest student with the cascading chocolate curls and eyes as big as saucers.

'And you know something?' Alice-Miranda scanned the walls either side of the door. 'I simply love your photographs. That one of you and Mr Grump is gorgeous, and that one of the elephant is too cute – you could enter it in a competition.'

The previously bare walls now played host to

more than a dozen pictures: Miss Grimm and Mr Grump's wedding, their honeymoon and even some casual shots of Miss Grimm with girls around the school. There were faces and places and memories.

'Do you remember, Miss Grimm, when I first met you, I said that what this room needed was some photographs? And now look – it's perfect!'

'Yes, young lady, I certainly do recall that was one of your recommendations, among rather a few others,' Miss Grimm teased. Alice-Miranda grinned and leaned forward to give the headmistress another quick hug.

The group of girls behind her took turns saying goodnight to Miss Grimm and Mr Grump. It was amazing how much things had changed at Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale in the past few months. Who would ever have thought that Alice-Miranda Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones, along with eleven of her friends, would enjoy an hour in the headmistress's study, hearing all about her recent honeymoon safari to Africa?

Alice-Miranda smiled to herself. She couldn't wait to see what excitement the new term would bring.