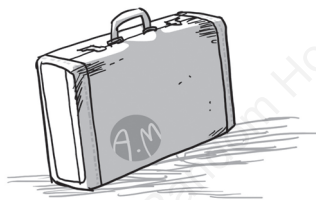


# Chapter 1



Alice-Miranda Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones waved goodbye to her parents at the gate.

‘Goodbye, Mummy. Please try to be brave.’ Her mother sobbed loudly in reply. ‘Enjoy your golf, Daddy. I’ll see you at the end of term.’ Her father sniffled into his handkerchief.

Before they had time to wave her goodbye, Alice-Miranda skipped back down the hedge-lined path into her new home.

Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale Academy for

Proper Young Ladies had a tradition dating back two and a half centuries. Alice-Miranda's mother, aunt, grandmother, great-grandmother and so on had all gone there. But none had been so young or so willing.

It had come as quite a shock to Alice-Miranda's parents to learn that she had telephoned the school to see if she could start early – she was, after all, only seven and one-quarter years old, and not due to start for another year. But after two years at her current school, Ellery Prep, she felt ready for bigger things. Besides, Alice-Miranda had always been different from other children. She loved her parents dearly and they loved her, but boarding school appealed to her sense of adventure.

'It's much better this way,' Alice-Miranda had smiled. 'You both work so hard and you have far more important things to do than run after me. This way I can do all my activities at school. Imagine, Mummy – no more waiting around while I'm at ballet or piano or riding lessons.'

'But darling, I don't mind a bit,' her mother protested.

'I know you don't,' Alice-Miranda had agreed, 'but you should think about my being away as a

holiday. And then at the end there's all the excitement of coming home, except that it's me coming home to you.' She'd hugged her mother and stroked her father's brow as she handed them a gigantic box of tissues. Although they didn't want her to go, they knew there was no point arguing. Once Alice-Miranda made up her mind there was no turning back.

Her teacher, Miss Critchley, hadn't seemed the least surprised by Alice-Miranda's plans.

'Of course, we'll all miss her terribly,' Miss Critchley had explained to her parents. 'But that daughter of yours is more than up to it. I can't imagine there's any reason to stop her.'

And so Alice-Miranda went.

Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale sat upon three thousand emerald-coloured acres. A tapestry of Georgian buildings dotted the campus, with Winchesterfield Manor the jewel in the crown. Along its labyrinth of corridors hung huge portraits of past headmistresses, with serious stares and old-fashioned clothes. The trophy cabinets glittered with treasure and the foyer was lined with priceless antiques. There was not a thing out of place. But from the moment Alice-Miranda entered the grounds she had a strange

feeling that something was missing – and she was usually right about her strange feelings.

The headmistress, Miss Grimm, had not come out of her study to meet her. The school's secretary, Miss Higgins, had met Alice-Miranda and her parents at the gate, looking rather surprised to see them.

'I'm terribly sorry, Mr and Mrs Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones,' Miss Higgins had explained. 'There must have been a mix-up with the dates – Alice-Miranda is a day early.'

Her parents had said that it was no bother and they would come back again tomorrow. But Miss Higgins was appalled to cause such inconvenience and offered to take care of Alice-Miranda until the house mistress arrived.

It was Miss Higgins who had interviewed Alice-Miranda some weeks ago, when she first contacted the school. At that meeting, Alice-Miranda had thought her quite lovely, with her kindly eyes and pretty smile. But today she couldn't help but notice that Miss Higgins seemed a little flustered and talked as though she was in a race.

Miss Higgins showed Alice-Miranda to her room and suggested she take a stroll around the school. 'I'll come and find you and take you to

see Cook about some lunch in a little while.’

Alice-Miranda unpacked her case, folded her clothes and put them neatly away into one of the tall chests of drawers. The room contained two single beds on opposite walls, matching chests and bedside tables. In a tidy alcove, two timber desks, each with a black swivel chair, stood side by side. The furniture was what her mother might have called functional. Not beautiful, but all very useful. The room’s only hint of elegance came from the fourteen-foot ceiling with ornate cornices and the polished timber floor.

Alice-Miranda was delighted to find an envelope addressed to ‘Miss Alice-Miranda Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones’ propped against her pillow.

‘How lovely – my own special letter,’ Alice-Miranda said out loud. She looked at the slightly tatty brown bear in her open suitcase. ‘Isn’t that sweet, Brummel?’

She slid her finger under the opening and pulled out a very grand-looking note on official school paper. It read:

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Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale  
Academy for Proper Young Ladies



Dear Miss Highton-Smith-Kennington-  
Jones,

Welcome to Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale  
Academy for Proper Young Ladies. It is  
expected that you will work extremely  
hard at all times and strive to achieve  
your very best. You must obey without  
question all of the school rules, of  
which there is a copy attached to this  
letter. Furthermore you must ensure that  
your behaviour is such that it always  
brings credit to you, your family and  
this establishment.

Yours sincerely,  
Miss Ophelia Grimm  
Headmistress

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Winchesterfield-Downsfordvale  
Academy for Proper Young Ladies  
School Rules

1. Hair ribbons in regulation colours and a width of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch will be tied with double overhand bows.
2. Shoes will be polished twice a day with boot polish and brushes.
3. Shoelaces will be washed each week by hand.
4. Head lice are banned.
5. All times tables to 20 must be learned by heart by the age of 9.
6. Bareback horseriding in the quadrangle is not permitted.
7. All girls will learn to play golf, croquet and bridge.
8. Liquorice will not be consumed after 5 pm.
9. Unless invited by the Headmistress, parents will not enter school buildings.
10. Homesickness will not be tolerated.

Alice-Miranda put the letter down and cuddled the little bear. ‘Oh, Brummel, I can’t wait to meet Miss Grimm – she sounds like she’s very interested in her students.’

Alice-Miranda folded the letter and placed it in the top drawer. She would memorise the school rules later. She popped her favourite photos of Mummy and Daddy on her bedside table and positioned the bear carefully on her bed.

‘You be a brave boy, Brummel.’ She ruffled his furry head. ‘I’m off to explore and when I get back I’ll tell you all about it.’