

Chapter 9



After breakfast, Alice-Miranda made her way through the throng of students in the conference room, introducing herself in the usual way and trying to remember all of their names. So far she had met two boys from Paris as well as lads from Switzerland, Ireland and Scotland, three children from South Africa, two each from Singapore and New Zealand in addition to the girls from New York and Neville from Spain. Alice-Miranda continued on to a girl with cascading blonde

curls who was wearing white tights adorned with bright pink flamingos.

‘Hello, I’m Alice-Miranda Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones,’ she said with a smile. ‘It’s lovely to make your acquaintance.’

The girl’s blue eyes sparkled. ‘I’m Britt Fox and it’s such a pleasure to meet you,’ she said, diving straight in for a hug. ‘I knew from the moment I saw you this morning that you and I would become firm friends. I get these feelings from time to time and I’ve never been proven wrong.’

Alice-Miranda gasped. ‘That happens to me too.’

‘See? I told you we would be friends,’ Britt said with a wink.

Alice-Miranda took stock of the petite girl with radiant skin and shell pink nails. Her clothes were fabulous, but Alice-Miranda wondered if she’d be warm enough in just a T-shirt and denim shorts over her tights. Britt also had on a pair of cute red Mary Janes and a backpack covered entirely with silver sequins. ‘Aren’t you cold?’

Britt shook her head. ‘Norway is much chillier than Scotland,’ she replied. ‘And don’t worry, I have a coat for later. Your coat is so chic and I do adore that skirt.’

‘Thank you. Mummy chose it. I’ve always wanted to visit Norway and now I’ll have a friend for when I do. I love your tights, by the way,’ Alice-Miranda said. ‘They’re fun.’

‘They were mail order from Finkelstein’s in New York,’ Britt replied with a grin. ‘It’s my dream to open my own department store that only sells ethically sourced fashion. I’m hoping the program has some mentors we can link with so I can learn everything there is to know about pursuing such a venture.’

Alice-Miranda’s eyes lit up. ‘Have you met Lucinda? Her parents own Finkelstein’s. It’s the most glorious shop. I’d love to introduce you.’

The girl guided her new friend over to the American contingent and introduced her to Lucinda so they could talk all things retail.

Millie had been chatting to Chessie nearby and overheard what Alice-Miranda had said. ‘Did you forget to mention that your family has an even lovelier department store on Fifth Avenue?’ she chided.

Alice-Miranda raised her eyebrows. ‘It would sound like showing off if I did. Besides, I’m sure Lucinda will probably tell her.’

‘You never show off,’ Millie said. ‘Unlike

someone else.’ She glanced over at Caprice, who was flicking her copper tresses and batting her eyelids at the French boys, Vincent and Philippe. ‘I bet they know all about her star status.’

A bell tinkled and Davina Stuart stood at the front of the room waiting for the children to stop speaking. Alice-Miranda thought the woman looked to be in her mid-thirties, although it was always hard to tell with adults. She was dressed in jeans and an Aran jumper with taupe ballet flats. Her face was free of make-up and she wore dark-rimmed glasses with her hair pulled back in an Alice band.

‘Good morning, everyone. How wonderful to see so many of you in your wee tams. I trust that you all slept well. I’m afraid Miss Cranna seems to have been delayed and Mr Ferguson is on his way, so let’s get you into your groups and we can discuss this morning’s challenge,’ she said cheerily.

At that moment Morag Cranna burst through the doors, cradling a huge pile of folders to her chest. She looked as if she’d just leapt out of bed and got dressed in the dark. Her collar was askew inside a bold red jumper with a white Persian cat knitted on the front. She had a black cat dangling from one ear

and a butterfly from the other, and her dark curls had all the styling of a bird's nest.

'Are you all right, sweetheart?' Davina asked.

Morag sighed loudly. 'No, I need to get organised.' She bustled forward and tripped over a stray daypack, sending her pile of folders scattering across the floor. The woman dropped to her knees.

Alice-Miranda raced over to help. 'Hello,' she said, 'you must be Miss Cranna. My name is Alice-Miranda –' Before the child could introduce herself properly, the woman glanced up and cut her off.

'Oh, thank heavens you've arrived. You're in charge of Team Five. You need to tell me what you're going to call yourselves.' Morag stared at the girl.

'Other than Alethea, I don't even know who's in my group.' Alice-Miranda passed the folders she was holding to Miss Cranna. 'I'll go and see if I can find them,' she said and charged off.

'Well, please hurry. We haven't got all day,' the woman said as she stood up and dumped the pile onto a table at the front of the room, then straightened her skirt and brushed the dust from her elbow. She plucked her collar from the inside of her jumper and ran her fingers through her tousled curls.

Alice-Miranda spotted Alethea at the back of the room and called to her. 'Alethea, would you be able to tell me who else is in our team? Apparently, we have to choose a name. Did you come up with something last night?'

Alethea shook her head. 'No, but we're all here.'

Lucinda Finkelstein, Sep and Sloane Sykes, Alethea Goldsworthy and a girl Alice-Miranda still hadn't met were standing together.

'Oh, fantastic! What a great group,' Alice-Miranda said with a smile. She turned to the girl with the mouse-brown hair and offered her hand. 'Hello, my name is Alice-Miranda Highton-Smith-Kennington-Jones. What's your name?'

The girl looked at her blankly, then extended a limp paw. 'Madagascar Slewt. I go to Bodlington.'

'Oh, wow, our friend Chessie used to go there. She's standing over there with Millie,' Alice-Miranda said, pointing in their direction.

'Millie's my cousin,' Madagascar said plainly.

Alice-Miranda blinked. She remembered Millie telling her and Chessie once that she had a cousin who went to Bodlington, but she'd never said any more about her. This was a lovely surprise.

'Well, it's great to meet you. Any cousin of

Millie's is definitely going to be a friend of ours. Have you met everyone else?' Alice-Miranda asked.

Madagascar nodded. Last night when Miss Cranna had announced the teams, she was seething that she wasn't going to be the captain. On top of that, her cousin was in the same team as that pathetic Francesca Compton-Halls. Madagascar had been sorely disappointed when Chessie left Bodlington. She still hadn't managed to find anyone who was half as much fun to tease.

'Miss Cranna enquired after our team name. Does anyone have an idea?' Alice-Miranda asked.

'It should have a Scottish theme,' Sep piped up.

'Quick, what are some Scottish words?' Sloane said. 'Highlands, kilts, tartan, terriers, haggis . . .'

The girl frowned.

'What about Nessie's Monsters?' Alice-Miranda suggested.

There were nods all around except for Madagascar, whose lips turned south and looked as if she might cry.

'Don't you like it?' Sloane asked the girl. 'I think it's clever.'

'I just don't like being called a monster,' Madagascar replied sadly. 'We have this really mean

housemistress and she calls me a monster all the time and I have no idea why. She's always trying to get me into trouble.'

'We're not really saying that we're monsters,' Alethea said. 'It's a play on words – you know, as in the Loch Ness Monster?'

Alice-Miranda reached out and touched Madagascar gently on the arm. 'We can pick another name if you'd like.'

'I think it's a great name,' Sloane said, noticing that Miss Cranna was tapping a ruler against a glass and asking everyone to be quiet.

'It's okay,' Madagascar relented. 'So long as no one ever calls *me* a monster.'

'Great, that's settled then,' Alethea said. 'I bet ours is the best name.'

'I'm sure that naming our groups is not a competition,' Sep said.

Alethea flicked her hand. 'Whatever.'

Alice-Miranda hurried over to inform Miss Cranna of their decision. She had a feeling that her fabulous group might be a little feisty too.