

CHAPTER ONE

Abbie was out of breath. She ran all the way from the library where she had been reading her e-mail, desperate to tell Shireen the good news before the bell rang for morning school.

'Wakey, wakey!' she squealed, her blue eyes bright with excitement. 'I've had a message from Colette.'

Shireen, lazing comfortably against the trunk of their favourite tree, gave a start as Abbie sank down on the grass next to her.

'Thanks,' she said huffily. 'I was enjoying that snooze.'

'Oh, sorry! Anyway, about Colette's message.' Abbie pushed her dark brown hair away from her hot face, and unfolded the sheet of paper with Colette's message printed on it. 'You'll never guess what: she wants to come and visit me soon! She's not sure when yet, but she's hoping it'll be some time at the beginning of August if her dad says yes. That's only six weeks away! She also wants to know if she can stay with me. Here, see for yourself!'

She thrust the paper at Shireen, who just looked at it in silence.

'Well, say something!' said Abbie. 'What do you think?'

'I think you should bog off and leave me alone,' snapped Shireen. 'I've got more important things to worry about than your stupid e-mate!'

Abbie took off her glasses and rubbed them on her skirt. 'Colette *is* important, so don't you call her stupid!'

'Why aren't you more concerned about our exams instead?' asked Shireen impatiently. 'They start this afternoon.'

'I am,' said Abbie, who really wasn't looking forward to them because she hadn't done much revision, 'but it's not every day I get an e-mail from Colette.'

'Abbie, it *is* every day you get an e-mail from Colette.'

'You know what I mean. Not like the one I got today.'

'Oh, that. Yeah, I heard. Colette wants to come and visit.'

'Great, eh?' Abbie put her glasses back on before squeezing Shireen's arm. 'I'm going to meet Colette at long last!'

'Wicked.' Shireen swept her hand through her long dark hair tiredly. 'Look, can we change the subject now? I've had Colette up to here already, and it's not nine o'clock yet!'

Abbie tutted and released her grip from Shireen's arm.

'I don't know what's wrong with you today, Shireen Shah!' she grumbled, folding up the paper and putting it in her bag. 'You've got a right cob on!'

'Surprised you noticed, considering you couldn't wait to get to the library as soon as you got off the bus,' said Shireen in an aggrieved voice. 'If you must know, I don't feel very well.' And as if to illustrate the point she coughed and sniffed. 'I think I'm coming down with a cold.'

'Well, why didn't you stay at home, then?'

'We've got exams, remember.'

'Being sick is no excuse for you to be such a cow,' said Abbie grimly. 'You never have anything nice to say about Colette!'

'That's because she gets up my nose!' snapped Shireen.

‘Oh, here we go!’ Abbie gave her a push. ‘Shireen, you can’t say that, because you don’t even know her!’

‘I know more than I want to, thanks!’

‘Oh, yeah, and what’s that supposed to mean?’ Abbie matched Shireen’s glare with her own.

‘I mean she’s constantly in my face,’ said Shireen. ‘It would be nice, just for once, if we could talk about normal things, like pop music or clothes, but instead all I get is you prattling on about Colette’s big posh house, all the names of her horses and dogs, the last party she went to, what time she got home...’

‘We always tell one another things like that,’ interrupted Abbie hotly. ‘That’s what pen pals do. But you wouldn’t know that, because you’ve never had one, have you?’

‘You’re jokin’, aren’t yer? Your pen pal has taken over your life! I wouldn’t want that to happen to me! Anyway, how do you know what Colette tells you is the truth?’

‘Oh, what are you on about now, you daft div?’

‘I mean all that crap about her being rich. How do you know she’s rich? She could be making it all up.’

‘Don’t talk soft!’ cried Abbie. ‘She’s minted; her dad owns a vineyard, and you’ve seen the photos of her house.’

‘Haven’t I just!’ Shireen rolled her eyes. ‘You’re forever shoving them under my nose.’

‘Ha! Then there’s your proof!’ said Abbie triumphantly. ‘Flash house, fancy designer clothes – that makes her filthy rich to me.’

‘No, it’s not proof, actually,’ insisted Shireen. ‘How do you know they’re her pictures, that it’s her standing outside the house? You don’t.’

‘Oh, now you’re just being stupid!’

‘No, not stupid, just bored stiff.’ Shireen faced Abbie squarely, pointing to her mouth. ‘Watch my lips, Abbie Palmer. I’m sick and tired of you going on and on about that snob, Colette Saunier! I don’t want to hear what she spends her money on, I don’t want to know what she had for breakfast, dinner or tea, and I don’t want to know the name of her latest boyfriend. I don’t want to know anything about her. She thinks she’s all that, and she has nothing better to do than to tell you how wonderful and how beautiful she is. Well, you can lap up every last little detail if you want, but do me a favour and keep me out of it. OK?’

Shireen flopped back against the tree and closed her eyes, leaving Abbie open-mouthed and fuming. They were best friends, but Abbie was fed up with her bad-mouthing Colette all the time. It was a wonder they hadn’t permanently fallen out over it.

She sighed. Shireen’s just jealous, she thought. She doesn’t like me e-mailing and talking about Colette all the time, because Colette is so rich and sophisticated, and Shireen’s so – well, plain and ordinary. She had been stropky ever since Abbie had started writing to Colette the year before, when their class had been invited to join the new school pen friends’ club. Shireen hadn’t shown any interest, but Abbie had been very keen. She wrote to Colette using the notepaper she’d received from one of her sisters as a Christmas present, but when she found out that Colette had access to e-mail at school and at home, Abbie set up an e-mail account on the school’s network, because the Palmer family’s computer had a parental restriction on it, stopping the children from e-mailing or using chat rooms. Colette stopped being Abbie’s pen pal and became her ‘e-mate’ instead. They sent messages to one another nearly every day, but Abbie had to be careful, since it was against the rules to use the school computers for private e-mails.

‘Time to go,’ she said shortly, as the school bell rang faintly in the distance. She stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder. ‘Come on,’ she kicked Shireen’s foot, ‘shift your bum, or we’ll be late.’

Groaning, Shireen got to her feet. Abbie tugged at the hem of her skirt in an attempt to lower it over her thighs. It was the current fashion for the girls at Chelwood Vale School to wear their skirts short, but Abbie never felt comfortable in hers, because it was a bit tight on her backside.

'I wish you'd get over yourself, and stop being so jealous of Colette,' she said as they strolled towards the school building.

'I'm not jealous,' said Shireen wearily. 'Stop saying I am.'

'Oh, yes, you are. Just because she's rich and drop-dead gorgeous, and there you are with your split ends and braces.'

Shireen pouted. 'You're no oil painting yourself.'

'Maybe not, but you can't blame her if she is.' Abbie thought about the photos of her pen pal. Colette was tall and slim, with tanned, unblemished skin, and long, sleek black hair. 'God, if only I could look as lovely as her when I'm sixteen! Colette makes me feel like a right scruffbag; she's so like a model.'

'As if! You couldn't look like that in a million years,' said Shireen bluntly. 'Not even if you lose weight. You may be tall, but you're too big-boned to be a model.'

'Why don't you just come out and say it?' said Abbie. 'You mean I'm fat! Well, you're right, I am! Shame about these glasses, too. I can't wait till I'm sixteen, when I can get some contact lenses.' She looked enviously at Shireen. 'At least you're thin. You don't have spots, either, and you have long hair. It's nice when you comb it properly.' She ran her hand through her own hair. 'I can't do a thing with this mop.'

'Thanks,' said Shireen. She took out her top brace and passed it to Abbie. 'Want to try this? It'll give you extra pulling power. Works for me.'

Abbie laughed, pushing it away. 'Urgh! Gross!'

Shireen put the brace back in her mouth. Abbie put her arm through hers. 'Come on, you nutter, cheer up. Just be happy for me that Colette's coming. You never know, you might even like her!'

'Yeah, well, I doubt that,' said Shireen, forcing a smile.

'Can't you try?' Abbie put her head on her shoulder. 'To please me?'

'Have I got a choice?'

'Not really.'

'Where's she going to stay, anyway?' asked Shireen curiously. 'There's not much space in your house.'

'She'll sleep in my room with me, of course,' said Abbie. 'She can have my bed like you do when you stay over, and I can use my camp bed and sleeping bag. We'll be dead cosy.'

'Huh,' scoffed Shireen. 'I can't see your Tanya going for that! She doesn't even like sharing with you, never mind your mates. And she hates it when I sleep over.'

'Oh, stuff Carrot Head! Who gives a rat's bum what she thinks!' Abbie thought about her stepsister, who she nicknamed Carrot because of her flaming red hair, with dislike. 'Ooh, Shireen, I can't wait! We can go out every day, take Colette all around Liverpool, and show her the sights. And this is Liverpool's European Capital of Culture year, so...'

'Whoa, hold on a minute.' Shireen stopped and pulled her arm away. 'What do you mean, "we"??'

'You and me,' said Abbie. 'It'll be a laugh.'

'No!' Shireen shook her head vigorously. 'Not me! You're on your own; I'm having nothing to do with it.'

'Don't be daft.'

'No flippin' way! Over my dead body! I wouldn't be caught dead with that slapper!'

Abbie narrowed her eyes. Shireen hastily smacked her hand over her mouth, and tried to dismiss her outburst with a nervous giggle.

'Oh, Abbie, I'm sorry. It just sort of slipped out!'

Too late. Abbie pushed her into the hedge, and Shireen ended up on her back, struggling as Abbie started to grapple with her. Someone yelled, 'Fight!', and a group of kids ran over to watch.

‘OW! Gerroff!’ cried Shireen. ‘Abbie, you’ve got your knee on my arm!’ She started to cough. ‘Oh, now you’ve done it! OW!’

‘Take back what you said, Shireen Shah!’ Abbie dug her knee further into her arm and grabbed a clump of soil. ‘Take back what you said, or see this, I’ll shove it down your gob!’

Shireen managed to wriggle her hand free, and tickled Abbie on the side in an attempt to get her off. Abbie fell on the grass, laughing uncontrollably, her glasses slipping and falling on her chin. Shireen sat up, giggling and coughing at the same time. She rubbed her aching arm.

‘You’ve broken it, you fat cow!’ she said, between gasps of air. ‘Why don’t you go on a diet?’

Abbie wiped her eyes with the back of her hand before putting on her glasses. ‘That’s what you get for being so horrible about Colette!’

‘Look out!’ someone hissed. ‘It’s Farnham!’

Everyone went quiet. Mrs Farnham, the head of the languages department and Year Nine’s French teacher, stood before them with her arms folded, and a face like thunder. She’d always had naff taste in clothes, but she’d outdone herself today. Even though it was nearly the end of June, and hot, she was wearing a heavy black skirt and jacket, and her greying hair was tied back tightly in a bun. She considered Abbie and Shireen with fierce green eyes glaring ominously over the rim of her glasses.

‘What on earth do you two think you’re doing?’ she said sharply. ‘Get up at once!’

Abbie and Shireen rose quickly to their feet, smoothing down their skirts. They were both covered with smudges and had scratches on their arms, and there were leaves in Shireen’s hair.

‘The bell rang five minutes ago. Why aren’t you in class?’

‘We were just going, miss,’ said Abbie defiantly.

‘Oh?’ Mrs Farnham’s voice was like ice. ‘So what were you doing in the hedge?’

‘I fell in it, miss,’ Shireen lied. ‘Abbie was trying to help me up.’

There was a snort, then instant silence as Farnham’s cold gaze fell on the culprit.

‘Well, you both look a disgrace. Go and clean yourselves up. You can both take a detention for fighting, damaging a perfectly good hedge, and being late for registration, which you undoubtedly will be by the time you get to your class. And if you lot don’t hurry up and shift yourselves,’ she added to the onlookers, ‘I’ll put you on detention as well. Go!’

They ran off. Abbie and Shireen followed, cursing Mrs Farnham under their breath.

‘And I’ll be having a word with your form tutor about those skirts,’ she called after them.

When they reached the toilets they slammed the door behind them, and flung down their bags.

‘Great start to the day this is!’ said Shireen furiously. She sneezed and groaned. ‘Oh, I feel like death warmed up! I wish I’d stayed in bed, after all.’

‘That Farnham can be a right cow sometimes.’ Abbie peered at her reflection in the mirror and shrieked. ‘God, Shireen! Look what you’ve done to my face! There’s a piggin’ scratch on it now.’

‘Good. It might improve your looks.’ Shireen snatched a paper towel from the dispenser.

Abbie turned on the taps, dipped a paper towel in the water, and started to clean her face. They washed in silence until Abbie stopped, and turned to Shireen with a look of panic on her face.

‘Shireen, I’ve just thought of something.’

‘What?’

‘Colette can’t come. She certainly can’t stay at our house! If she does, she’ll find out.’

Shireen sank her paper towel into the water impatiently. ‘What are you talking about? Find out what?’

Abbie hesitated, looking a bit embarrassed.

‘Well, I sort of told her I was an only child,’ she said at last. ‘She doesn’t know about Tanya, for a start.’

Shireen stopped washing and grinned. 'Oh, right. So Tanya, your sisters, and your little brother will come as a bit of a surprise, then.'

'Yeah, but that's not all.' Abbie ran her wet hands through her hair, making it stand up on end.

'Don't tell me! You said your dad was a famous film star!'

'No,' Abbie sighed, 'but I did tell her I live in a big house with a swimming pool, and that I got a pony for my fourteenth birthday. Oh, and that Dad's got lots of sports cars, as well as a Rolls Royce, and we've got a chauffeur. And Mum's got a collection of priceless jewellery and Chinese porcelain, and a wardrobe full of fashionable clothes.'

Shireen nodded solemnly. 'Oh, I see.'

'But I did say I only have one computer.'

They gazed at one another for a moment. Abbie's face was flaming red, and Shireen's mouth had started to twitch. Then they burst into fits of laughter.

'What am I going to do?' said Abbie. 'It was only white lies! She wasn't supposed to find out the truth!'

'Oh, Abbie!' shrieked Shireen through her cough. 'I can't wait to see her face when she finds out! Promise I can be there when you tell her!'

But at last Abbie pulled herself together, and shook her head.

'No. She's not going to find out, because she's not coming,' she said firmly. 'I'm going to have to think of an excuse to put her off!'