

Chapter One

‘Amias,’ Bella said before biting her lip to stop the laugh escaping. She shouldn’t have found it funny, but it was. The boy looked ridiculous and the giggle emerging from his friend was so heart-warming, you couldn’t fail to smile, but she pulled in her cheeks and put on her teacher voice. ‘Please could you remove the pencils from your nose and ears and give them back to Umar and Richard?’

The nine-year-old boy did as he was told, looking slightly crestfallen. Luckily, Umar and Richard didn’t seem to mind their return, given where they’d just been put.

Regaining her composure, she gave the same warning she’d given almost daily since term began. ‘Pencils should stay in hands and not be inserted into your body. It’s very dangerous, as I’ve told you before.’

What was it with boys this age and shoving things into every available orifice? She only had to turn her back for two seconds and someone had rammed something somewhere they shouldn’t. Especially Amias. The boy was addicted to mischief. Only last week there’d been a slight panic when he’d stuck a marble up his nose. Bella had dislodged it by closing off his other nostril and making him blow his nose as hard as he could. The offending object had shot out at such a speed it rolled across the classroom and ended up under the arts and crafts trays. Half the class had then scuttled out of their seats, following its path to see where it had gone. And then there was the incident with the plastic frog and his inner ear which, quite frankly, didn’t bear thinking about. Harrowing was the only way she could describe it. The number of times she’d asked the question *why* only to receive a shrug in reply was mind-boggling.

Amias was what they’d describe at parents’ evening as a ‘lively’ child. If he wasn’t sticking things in places they didn’t belong on his person, he was doing so on the school premises; shoving toilet paper into the sink or trying to steal it to throw at his friends during breaktime. Every class had a boisterous child like him, and though he could be a handful, on the whole, Bella considered herself lucky. She at least hadn’t had to deal with Miss Radcliffe’s Year 5 class and a boy they’d nicknamed Lucky Louis on account of his recent fractured wrist, busted lip, and the giant lump on his head, all from his antics on the playground.

Turning back to the board she continued to write out the sum they’d been working on.

‘Miss?’ Leonie asked, her quiet voice only just audible above the ruckus that had begun as soon as her back was turned.

‘Yes, Leonie?’ Bella turned back to her class.

‘Can I go to the toilet, please?’

‘But you’ve only just got back from break.’

‘Yes, but I’ve drunk a whole bottle of water and now I really need to go.’

‘Me too,’ said her best friend, Hannah.

Bella absent-mindedly ran her hand over her chin-length blonde hair and tucked it behind her ear. ‘Well, Leonie, you can go first and as soon as you’re back Hannah can go.’ Leonie frowned at the prospect of going all that way on her own as she stood up and pushed her chair under the table. ‘Good girl for pushing your chair in. You can move yourself up for that.’

The frown fell away and before she left, Leonie moved herself up the behaviour chart pinned to the wall. Each class had a basic traffic light system, with red and orange being the naughty colours and then moving up through green and silver until you were on top of the gold band, and onto a bright shining star. If you made it onto the star, you earned a reward. Sometimes it was an eraser or a new pencil sharpener, but at this time of year, Bella began cracking out the chocolate. It was amazing how behaviour got so much better as they edged towards Christmas, even with the extreme level of excitement that always brought.

As it was only November, Bella’s sweets were tiny chocolate balls in orange and green colours with monster faces on them left over from Halloween, but it wouldn’t be long before she could start on the wonderful gold and silver coins. She didn’t like the fake bank notes or credit card things you could get these days; they were just odd as far as she was concerned. Bella was all about tradition. It gave structure and meaning to that special time of year, much like a routine does for children, and being a primary school teacher, she knew how much that was needed, even though the children didn’t always like it. Christmas traditions were the same for her. She didn’t always realise what a comfort they were at the time. Like when she was helping her mum peel a million tonnes of carrots and potatoes on Christmas Eve after volunteering at Bluebell Park all morning. But when she looked back, she wouldn’t have been anywhere else.

Her own excitement began to build as she thought of the fun to come. There was nothing quite like Christmas at a primary school. The excitement of the end-of-term play, posting Christmas cards into the little post box made out of cardboard in the corner of the classroom, making decorations during wet play.

As soon as anything remotely festive appeared in the shops she couldn’t help but feel that fluttering in her stomach at the prospect of everything her favourite season had to offer: the smell of pine, bright-coloured baubles and twinkling fairy lights, hot chocolates and snuggling down by roaring log fires, her house a mini Santa’s grotto.

There was nothing quite like December in Meadowbank. She loved living in the small village, deep in the Kent countryside, and adored the tiny village school where she worked. City schools had large metal fences around them or protective concrete walls, but Meadowbank Primary had a low flint wall that ran all the way around with views over the village green and duck pond to the front, or acres of fields to the back. The children always played in the larger back playground, where the school looked out over farms and meadows. The only traffic they had to worry about were tractors and the occasional duck that had made its way from the duck pond and was hogging the hopscotch. With only fifteen or so children per class, it was a pleasure to teach and nurture the little minds in her care.

‘Right, let’s try and get this sum sorted out, shall we?’ Bella cheered. ‘So, don’t forget, we start here in the units column. Oliver, can you tell me what eight plus nine is, please?’

Oliver began counting on his fingers and Bella reminded him to try and do it in his head. He was such a good boy. Always playing nicely with the other children, especially Freddie in Miss Radcliffe’s class. Freddie and his father Nick were her neighbours in Bramble Cottage.

Last week, Nina told her that Freddie had been far keener to stay in and hand out the books for the next lesson than to go out and play with his friends, of which he had many. Nina had been meaning to have a chat with him about it, but as far as Bella knew she hadn’t been able to yet. It can’t have been easy for Freddie with his mum leaving six months ago, running off to Bali with another man. It was bound to have an effect.

It had been the talk of the village and, of course, the staffroom. She couldn’t understand why anyone in their right mind would leave the man Paige had left behind: Nick Cowley. He looked a bit like a stubbly Henry Cavill and who’d say no to that? Bella would obviously because she was happily in a relationship with Evan. In fact, she’d even go so far as to say blissfully happy. They never argued, never bickered, and agreed on almost everything, even down to what to have for dinner. Evan would sometimes tease her for being so optimistic about everything, but she liked it. It meant he knew her better than anyone. This would be their third Christmas in Lavender Cottage, and she was looking forward to making new memories and traditions with him over the years to come.

Bella was sure that Freddie’s mum leaving was the reason for his staying in. This time of year must be especially difficult and she hoped Nina could get to the bottom of it. Bringing her mind back to her classroom, she heard Amias snigger at Oliver’s use of his fingers and Bella shot him a warning look. He was skating on very thin ice this week.

‘Seventeen, miss.’

She quickly double-checked in her head. ‘Brilliant, Oliver, well done. Try and do it in your head though next time. And, Amias – if I see that pencil going anywhere it shouldn’t, I’ll be moving you down the chart and you’re already on orange. If you go down to red, you’ll be off to see Mrs White and I can’t imagine she’ll be happy to see you for the second time this week.’

Leonie returned from the toilet and Hannah made her escape. Another hand shot up.

Bella reverted to her normal cheerful tones. ‘Yes, Briony.’

‘Can I go to the toilet when Hannah gets back, please?’

Internally, Bella repressed a giggle. Ninety-nine per cent of her time was spent shepherding children to and from the toilet, but she was determined to finish the maths lesson that had been going on for about a million years and teach them at least one useful thing today.

‘Yes, of course, sweetheart. Now, Amias, why don’t you stop showing Richard your tongue because we’ve all seen it before, and tell me how you would work out our next sum?’

After much cajoling, including opening the window to wake them up, and downright bribery with the promise of an early story, the maths lesson was finally finished.

Just as they were about to break for a much-needed lunch, Mrs Brody, the Year 1 teacher, knocked on Bella’s classroom door. ‘Good afternoon, everyone. Good afternoon, Miss Moore.’

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Brody,’ the children chorused, and Bella felt a swell of pride at their good manners.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Brody. What can I do for you?’

‘It’s an exciting day, children. I have with me the Christmas play scripts and details of the roles you’ve been assigned.’

The children began shifting about in their chairs, stamping their feet and all talking at once. The noise level rose about eighty decibels and Bella clapped her hands together in the pattern she’d taught them. Most of them fell instantly silent as they copied her. A few delayed claps followed, and the chatter dissipated. Mrs Brody spoke again.

‘I can see you’re all excited, but you’re going to have to wait until after lunch to learn your parts. Miss Moore will tell you everything you need to know later this afternoon. We agreed all the children would be told at two o’clock, Miss Moore, if you remember.’

‘Yes, I remember. Thank you.’

Mrs Brody was planning the play like a military operation and there’d been much anticipation in the staffroom. With a final glance, she adjusted her owl-like spectacles and slid out of the door. Bella just about managed to sort the children out into school dinners and packed lunches before the noise level became too deafening. Grabbing her own packed lunch box, she led them down to the hall. Her stomach bubbled with excitement, as she thought of all the fun this season had to offer: baking with her mum and sister, the village parade, and the new grotto at Bluebell Park. It was going to be a busy one, but Bella wouldn’t have it any other way. Life was too short to waste being bored. Not that Amias ever let her be bored at school.

‘Amias, carry your lunch box in both hands, please. You don’t need to balance it on your head.’

It crashed to the floor, and she helped him gather up his things. Maybe she could be bored for five minutes or so. That didn’t seem such a bad idea right now.

‘She’s going a bit over the top this year, don’t you think?’ said Johnny Feker, the Year 6 teacher. He, Bella and Miss Radcliffe, or Nina to her friends, were all stood supervising the playground and musing on Mrs Brody’s plans for the play. ‘I mean she’s even given it a subheading. It’s not just called *The Christmas Commotion*. She’s added on *A Comical Christmas Catastrophe* underneath. I thought we were just doing a knock-off pantomime. I didn’t know we were putting on a sitcom.’

‘Surely it’s more of a farce or a musical?’ asked Nina.

‘Do you want me to blow my whistle in your earhole?’

‘Oh, sir! But no thank you,’ Nina replied, teasingly.

If only Johnny would pluck up the courage to ask Nina out, Bella was sure she’d say yes and there were no rules against getting involved with a colleague. If she were Nina, she’d be sick of waiting by now. He’d been there a year or so and they’d been like this from day one. It made Bella wonder what he was waiting for.

‘Will you two cut it out? All this flirting is too much after Amias’s lunchtime shenanigans.’ Embarrassed, Nina and Johnny stared in opposite directions. Bella missed flirting though. She and Evan had been together for so long they didn’t really do it anymore. Flirt, that is. They still did...it. Just not quite as often as they once had. Though he’d sometimes look at her with a twinkle in his eye, the days of flirty banter were behind them. It was all part of growing older, she thought ruefully. The next step for them was marriage and kids. She couldn’t wait to have children of her own. Even on her worst days at school when the class had been unruly or a bit more of a handful than usual, she was still happy to be working with children and she couldn’t wait for Lavender Cottage to be full of giggles and gurgles.

Staring out over the acres of fields that rolled and crested behind the school, she marvelled at how different Meadowbank was with each passing season. The spring brought new life and pretty colours, in the summer the air was awash with the scent of flowers and dancing butterflies, and in the colder months the village became a warm and cosy haven. Where some places felt bleak with the arrival of winter winds and cold chills, the small stone cottages that predominated the village remained welcoming and homely. Chimneys smoked, inviting people in with the prospect of cosy log fires and hot toddies. It was very much a tightknit community and one that had welcomed Johnny to the neighbourhood a year before, though it felt like he’d been there longer. The three of them had immediately hit it off, even though she was thirtyfive and Nina and Johnny were both a good few years younger than her. The age difference didn’t seem to matter as they all shared the same silly sense of humour and the oddities of their job glued them together.

‘What did Amias do this time?’ asked Nina, shivering. Her long hair of tight red ringlets poked out from under her hat.

‘Somehow he managed to get cheese stuck under his fingernails and I don’t mean a little bit. I mean, like an enormous wedge you’d find on a cheeseboard. I had to scrape it out with a dinner knife because it was hurting him. And then he tried to eat it.’

Johnny spluttered.

‘The weird thing is, he didn’t even have cheese sandwiches for lunch and neither did anyone sat with him. I’ve no idea where he got it from.’ The chill wind whipped around the open space, sending ice down Bella’s spine. She pulled up her scarf and tucked her gloved hands inside her pockets. A whistle dangled from her neck though she hadn’t yet had to use it. The children were all running around like it was the middle of summer, some of them trying to surreptitiously remove their coats even though it was only five degrees outside. ‘But you’re right, Johnny. Mrs Brody’s certainly stepping up her game this year. Apparently, she wants to buy some weird lighting rig for the school hall, but Mrs White’s told her it’s not in the budget and she’ll have to make do with turning the lights up and down or putting a piece of coloured plastic over them as we’ve done every other year. I don’t think she was that impressed. How was your morning, Johnny?’

It was a well-known fact that Johnny hated teaching Year 6. He much preferred the littler ones but it was customary for them all to swap around each academic year so they had variety and kept up to date with the different Key Stage curriculums. The Year 6s were always more of a handful because they were the big fish in the little pond and thought they ruled the world. Yet, there were still moments when they’d cry or show their innocence and need some reassurance. But that wasn’t what bothered Mr Feker.

‘Eleven times today they tried to call me Mr Fucker. I wish I could change my name. I’ve thought about it before, you know. I only haven’t because it would break my dad’s heart.’

‘That’s why they all think my first name’s Nina,’ Nina said sagely. ‘If I admitted it was Titania they’d all call me Titty and then I’d have to move to another school. That was my nickname when I was at primary school and I absolutely hated it.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Johnny said. ‘I like the name Titania.’

‘It’s from Shakespeare.’

‘Oh, look out, Mrs Brody’s coming over.’

‘Are you three ready to tell your class the parts they’ve got this afternoon?’

‘We are, Mrs Brody,’ Bella answered. ‘I can’t wait. They’re going to be so excited.’

Meadowbank Village Primary was such a small school that there were only two Christmas plays a year. One for the tiniest Reception class up to Year 3, and one for Years 4, 5 and 6.

‘Now I want us to be practising every day,’ Mrs Brody said as if she were talking to her tiny five-year-olds.

‘Every day?’ Nina asked before immediately shying backwards under Mrs Brody’s glower.

‘Yes, every day. I want this to be the best one I’ve – I mean we’ve – ever done. I’ve worked hard on that script. I even did an online scriptwriting class in the summer, so I’d know exactly what I’m doing. I’ve learned all about pacing and the three-act structure and the

hero's journey.' Bella bit her lip for the second time that day. It all seemed a bit excessive for a fake pantomime where half the children would be off with colds and the rest would either forget their lines or be too busy fiddling with their costumes to remember when to recite them. Last year, one of the teachers had actually had to step up on stage when one of the angels kept knocking the donkey's ears off. 'This year, I don't want you two and your lackadaisical attitude ruining it.' She pointed between Johnny and Nina.

'They won't, Mrs Brody,' Bella said, protecting them. 'I'll make sure of it.' Johnny and Nina's attitudes weren't at all lackadaisical. They were just a bit more laidback than highly strung Mrs Brody. Bella thought them two of the best teachers she'd ever known.

'Good,' Mrs Brody said. 'It's going to be fun, fun, fun for everyone.' She clapped her hands together, beaming.

After pointing once more between Johnny and Nina, Mrs Brody walked off. For a moment, no one spoke in the intimidating silence left in her wake until Johnny blew the air out through his mouth, puffing his cheeks.

'She is actually the most terrifying woman I've ever met. But here's a question. If you were in a pantomime, which end of the pantomime horse would you be?'

'The front of course,' Nina replied.

'Bella?'

'Yeah, me too. For obvious reasons. And because being the other end would put my back out.'

Before they fell into discussing the ins and outs (or fronts and backs) of the pantomime horse, Freddie came up to them and Bella felt her eyebrows pull together.

'Miss Radcliffe?'

'Yes, Freddie.'

'Can I go and set the books out, please?'

'Too cold?' asked Johnny. 'You just need to run around a bit. Want to play some football with me?'

'No, thank you. I don't feel well.'

Bella stepped forwards and put a hand on Freddie's shoulder. His face was so full of sadness her heart almost lurched out of her chest. 'Who were you playing with just now, Freddie? Don't you want to carry on? There isn't long till playtime's over.'

He shook his head. 'I was playing with Amias and Richard, miss.'

'And was everything okay?' asked Nina.

He paused for a moment. ‘Yes, miss.’

‘What’s wrong, Freddie?’ Nina leaned down to speak to him.

‘My tummy feels funny, and I’ve got a headache.’

‘All right. Don’t forget to drink your water bottle through the afternoon, okay? I won’t even tell you off if you need the toilet a hundred times.’

Freddie giggled and headed inside. A few minutes later, after checking her watch, Bella blew the whistle for the children to line up. She hoped Freddie wasn’t coming down with something. An uneasy feeling nestled in the back of her mind. Should she ask Nina to speak to him? Maybe she could knock next door and speak to Nick. Perhaps she’d mention it all to Evan tonight. He was a brilliant sounding board and always helped her talk things through when she couldn’t get her head around them. He’d help her decide on the best course of action.

The end of the day arrived rapidly, the afternoon flying by with talk of the Christmas play and everyone discussing their roles. Soon she’d be at home in her lovely warm cottage with the log fire burning. It was Evan’s turn to cook tonight, and she couldn’t wait to walk into the homely golden glow from the inglenook and smell the divine aromas emanating from the kitchen.

She let the children go for the final time that week, grateful for the weekend before her.

‘Miss Moore? Miss Moore?’ Bella checked where the voice was coming from to see Leonie’s mum walking towards her. ‘I was hoping to have a word with you.’

Concern balled in Bella’s stomach. Mrs Barnes glanced towards the playground and Bella followed her gaze to see Leonie had gone off to play on the climbing frame. ‘Of course. What’s the problem?’

‘It’s about the play.’ Mrs Barnes tucked her windswept hair behind her ear and sighed. ‘We just can’t afford a costume. Kurt lost his job last month and he’s been looking every day but hasn’t found anything yet. I don’t even know how we’re going to afford Christmas. I normally save all year round, but we had to get the car fixed so he could go to a job interview and that took everything we had. He didn’t even get the job and now we’re broke. Is there anything the school can do? Can they change her part so she’s a narrator and can wear her own clothes? That would be a bit better.’

‘She’s a tiger, isn’t she?’

Mrs Barnes nodded. ‘What’s all that about by the way? I didn’t think there were many of those in the nativity.’

‘Mrs Brody’s written us a pantomime. She wants it to be fun and inclusive so some of the parts are a little unusual.’

‘That’s very nice of her, but I just looked online, and a tiger costume is still a tenner. I know that doesn’t sound like much.’ She dropped her hands, but Bella could see the pink tinge to her cheeks. She was embarrassed, and Bella felt for her.

‘I completely understand. How does Leonie feel about changing parts?’

‘She won’t want to. She’s so excited about being a tiger. I feel terrible doing this to her, but if I don’t, she could end up looking like a laughingstock and then her friends would be mean to her.’

‘I wouldn’t stand for anything like that,’ Bella reassured her. ‘But I understand what you’re saying. Does she have an orange T-shirt and black leggings? We could then do some face paint at school? I’ll happily buy a palette to do the kids’ faces.’

‘She had an orange T-shirt in the summer, but I think she’ll have grown out of it by now and her leggings are too small already. I don’t know how I’m going to find the money for new clothes on top of everything else.’

Seeing her distress, Bella couldn’t help but reach out and take her hand. ‘Let me see what we’ve got in the dressing-up box and if not, I might have something somewhere. If she doesn’t want to change parts let’s see if we can make it work before I talk to Mrs Brody. Is that okay with you?’ Mrs Barnes nodded agreement. ‘I’ll have a look later before I go home and let you know on Monday.’

‘Thank you so much, Miss Moore. It’s so stressful at the moment what with December fast approaching.’

‘We’ll sort something out. Try not to worry.’

Mrs Barnes went off, calling Leonie as she did so. Bella hadn’t realised Mrs Barnes was having such troubles. There hadn’t been any changes in Leonie’s behaviour at school, but it must be so hard for her parents to keep everything normal at home with such worries hanging over them. If only there was something she could do. Evan had told her before she needed a thicker skin but she’d never quite managed to grow one.

Never before had she been so grateful to still live in Meadowbank near to her family and to have Evan by her side. She’d definitely see what she could do to help, just as her family would do for her if ever she were to need it. Fortunately, she never had.

How did she get so lucky?

