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Opening extract from

Mischief at Midnight

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Homesick for School

'How was your holiday?'

'Brillopad. Yours?'

'Topsical. Except we got snowed in for New Year.'

'That sounds fun.'

'Not really. We were meant to go to Paris.'

'*Tant pis* Paree! France is boring. Look at Sally's tan – she went to Jamaica.'

Sally made a face. 'It felt weird being on the beach in January. I wished we'd gone skiing.'

There was a murmur of sympathy through the dormitory. Everyone agreed that skiing beat the beach at New Year – everyone except Edie, who sat on her bed saying nothing. She hated the first afternoon of term, when the holiday conversations had to be got through.

'Where did you go, Edie?' Alice asked.

'I went to Folly Farm, to my cousins,' Edie said, hoping she wouldn't be asked to expand.

'Better than staying with Fothy, I expect?' said Sally.

Edie shrugged. Everyone knew that she sometimes spent her school holidays with Miss Fotheringay – the headmistress – and she sensed they all felt sorry for her on account of it. But they could never guess how much Edie preferred her times with the headmistress to her holidays in Devon with her relations and she would never admit it.

Anastasia was the only one she had told how much she hated going back to Folly Farm – to Aunt Sophia who never seemed to notice she was there, and her bullying cousin Lyle, who always did. Edie had spoken to Anastasia on the phone only a few days ago and told her how desperate things had been. 'I'm going to tell Papa that in future you must spend Christmas with us,' Anastasia had said firmly. Edie remembered how comforting and yet strangely out of place Anastasia's voice had sounded, speaking from far away in Moscow as Edie had stood in the cold, filthy kitchen at Folly Farm. She couldn't wait to see her. But Anastasia was always the last to arrive at the beginning of term.

'Any decent prezzies?' Sally persisted.

Edie blushed.

'At least you were in the country, instead of boring old London,' Rose said quickly. 'When I grow up I'm going to be a vet, and have—'

'Your very own farm with horses and pigs and chicken and sheep,' Sally and Alice laughed together.

'Boring snoring,' said Phoebe, who was slouched on the window seat, eating a chocolate bar. 'This must be the tenth—' She was silenced by a sudden commotion at the door.

'Hello, everybody! Are we all in this dorm together? What fun!'

It was Anastasia, trailing bags and looking like a china doll with her bright eyes and cheeks, and her dark hair tumbling over a fur tippet. There was a quick round of hugging, with Anastasia saving Edie to last, and squeezing her hand as she perched beside her on a bed strewn with unpacking.

'I see your maths hasn't improved over the holidays,' Rose said teasingly. 'How could seven of us fit into a four-bed dorm?'

'Head to toe?' Anastasia suggested.

'Belinda, Phoebe and me are across the corridor, with some mystery new girl,' said Rose. 'Come on, Bee, we'd better work out which beds we want before she shows up.'

Alice and Sally went to inspect their friends' quarters, leaving Edie and Anastasia alone.

'I picked these two for us,' said Edie, indicating her bed and the one next to it.

'And you've kept the one under the window for me,' Anastasia said, hugging her. 'Oh, thank you, Edie!'

Edie smiled. She knew how much Anastasia minded about such details.

'Are you all right, Edie? You don't look it,' Anastasia said, throwing herself voluptuously on to the narrow

bed, and raising a critical eye from the pillow.

'I'm fine. It's good to be back. It's just—'

'Everyone banging on about their "brillopad" holidays?' Anastasia asked.

'I don't even mind that. I just get embarrassed when people ask me about Folly. I don't know what to say.'

'You could always try the truth.'

'I know. But then I'd have to admit that I preferred staying with Fothy and everyone would tease me about being her pet.'

Anastasia looked thoughtful. 'Maybe you shouldn't mind that so much, Edie. I mean, you are her pet—'Then: 'Hey!' she cried, as Edie leant forward as if to pummel her. 'I didn't mean it badly. I'm lots of people's pet. Being a pet is cool.'

'Which makes you freezing,' Edie replied.

'Far from being freezing, I am actually boiling hot,' Anastasia said, sitting up and tugging off her coat. 'Which reminds me,' she went on, as she removed her fur tippet and draped it round Edie's neck. 'This is for you.'

'But – but you can't give me this!'

'Why not? I bought it for you in Moscow, silly. I only wore it because it would have got crushed in my suitcase. Do you like it? It is real, you know.'

'I – yes, yes of course,' said Edie, stroking it uncertainly.

Anastasia smiled. 'Papa thought you might be anti-fur. He says lots of English people are boring about that sort of thing. But I told him you weren't like that. Oh,

Edie, look in the mirror – it really suits you!'

Edie tried to seem pleased, but she thought the sleek tippet draped over her brown school tunic had the look of something alarmingly alive. She was relieved when she heard Matron's voice at the door, giving her an excuse to snatch it off.

'Hello, let's see now, who have we here? Anastasia Stolonov, at last? Just who I'm looking for. How are you, dear? Good, good welcome back. Now, let's see, are you unpacked yet? From the looks of things I would say not. Excellent news, excellent. There's been a mix-up, dearie, you're not in this dormitory, you're in Charlbury with Rose and Belinda and Phoebe.'

Matron stood foursquare in the doorway, looking at the girls over her spectacles, then back to the sheet of instructions in her hand. Her expression was warm, but changed when both girls raged at her at once.

'What do you mean, a mix-up? We've always shared a dorm!'

'We can't be separated!'

'It's not fair! It must be a mistake! You can't force us!'

'Quiet! That's quite enough cheek from you,' Matron retorted. 'If you wish to make a complaint, make it to Miss Fotheringay, not to me. But I can assure you her instructions were quite specific. You know how much trouble she takes over her dormitory cast lists.'

Anastasia's brow darkened. 'But why would she do that to us? She's just being mean on purpose.'

'She's the boss,' said Matron. 'Ask her. Now, hurry up, please. I have better things to do on the first day of term

than argue with obstreperous second years.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Anastasia, sitting firmly on her bed. 'We're on strike, aren't we, Edie?'

'Strike about what?' asked Alice, reappearing with Sally.

'They're trying to move me into Charlbury!' said Anastasia.

'But there's no spare bed in Charlbury. And anyway, who's coming in here?'

'A new girl,' Matron replied briskly. 'Janet Stone.'

'That can't be right,' said Sally, joining in. 'Her name's on the door of Charlbury. Rose and Belinda were wondering who she was. Do you know anything about her, Matron?'

'Nothing at all,' Matron said firmly. 'Now get moving, Anastasia, or you'll find yourself spending the first night of term in the sick room.'

'I don't care if I do,' said Anastasia mulishly, but Edie could hear the choke in her voice.

When Matron had gone she tried to reassure her. 'Charlbury's only across the corridor, Ansti, and I'll sneak into your dorm every night. And at least this way we'll definitely get to be together in the summer – Fothy wouldn't dare separate us two terms running.'

'Fothy would dare do anything,' Anastasia said, letting out a sob.

Edie felt guilty. Anastasia clearly cared much more about the sleeping arrangements than she did. Her days as Anastasia's secret protector were long gone, but sometimes Edie was struck to see how much her friend still

relied on her.

'Shall we go and see Fothy?' Edie said quietly. 'We can now, before Matron comes back.'

'You go,' Anastasia said, pulling a photograph from her case and placing it firmly on the bedside table. 'You can always get your way with her.'

'Well, my dear, I wondered when I was going to be honoured with a visit,' Miss Fotheringay said, rising from her desk and gesturing Edie to come and stand beside her.

'I'm sorry,' Edie faltered. 'I was going to come, only—'

'You had your friends to say hello to first,' said Miss Fotheringay, taking Edie's hands in hers and looking at her full in the face. 'I understand.'

No, you don't, thought Edie, who had secretly been longing to see the headmistress. When the others were at tea she had prowled about the corridors, hoping Miss Fotheringay might appear. But despite all the time they had spent alone together in the holidays, in term time Edie didn't dare knock on the headmistress's door without a reason.

Miss Fotheringay let go of Edie's hands. 'You haven't just come to say hello,' she said.

Edie immediately felt wrong-footed.

'Something is bothering you, Edith. Tell me what it is.'

'It's about your dormitory cast list,' Edie said, blushing.

Miss Fotheringay inclined her head.

'Matron came and said there'd been a mistake and that

Anastasia had to go in with Rose and Belinda, and—' Edie gave up, squirming at how babyish it sounded.

Miss Fotheringay frowned. 'That's right, I think. Yes, that's what I arranged.' She looked at Edie expectantly, as if challenging her to say more.

'Anastasia's not at all happy,' Edie said, blaming her friend.

Miss Fotheringay's mouth set in a firm line. 'Then Anastasia should come and talk to me.'

'That's what I thought, but she said it would be better—' Edie stopped, sensing she was making things worse. 'What I meant was—'

'Yes, Edith?'

Edie felt the familiar crumpling of her stomach at the cool, clear tone in which Miss Fotheringay spoke her name. All the other teachers had started calling her Edie, even the Man, but with Miss Fotheringay she was still Edith. 'That was the name your mother chose for you, Edith,' Miss Fotheringay had said once. 'I see no reason to give you another one.' And Edie was glad.

'You are not Anastasia's minder, Edith,' Miss Fotheringay said now. 'You can let her stand up for herself sometimes.'

'Yes, but—'

'You are not joined at the hip, Edith. Or are you?'

'No, it's just – just that we'd both prefer to sleep in the same dormitory, that's all,' Edie said feebly.

Miss Fotheringay smiled. 'And there's nothing wrong with that. But I am afraid, Edith, I am not going to let you pit your childish preference against a greater good.'

'What greater good?' Edie asked, baffled.

'At last!' Miss Fotheringay said, clapping her hands. 'I was afraid you would never ask!'She poured herself a drink, and sank on to the sofa.'Sit!' she commanded, patting the seat beside her. 'A new girl is joining the school,' she went on, looking at Edie squarely. 'I have agreed to take her at short notice, and I felt I could depend on you to look after her.'

'Me and Anastasia could look after her together,' Edie said earnestly. 'I—'

'Anastasia and I,' Miss Fotheringay corrected her. 'And you must let me be the judge of how helpful Anastasia would be in this instance. She is not used to looking after people.'

'She looks after me!'

Miss Fotheringay arched an eyebrow.'The new girl, Janet, is going to find it difficult arriving in the middle of the school year,' she continued. 'And her home circumstances are not easy. I wasn't at all sure whether I should take her. Then I thought about you, Edith, and I did not think I could, in all conscience, refuse haven to a child who might be in as great a need as you were, when you first came to me.'

Edie remembered her first visit to Miss Fotheringay's office more than a year ago, when she had sat frozen on the sofa, hypnotised by Miss Fotheringay's searchlight gaze. Edie shook herself. That girl no longer existed. She was stronger now.

'Now tell me, Edith, how was Folly?'

Edie shrugged, but she could feel her throat tightening.

'My poor child.'

'It wasn't that bad,' Edie said quickly. 'I just felt – homesick . . . for school.'

She hadn't meant to say it. She had thought during the holidays how strange it would sound to say it out loud – 'homesick for school' – and had imagined discussing it with Anastasia, no one else. But Miss Fotheringay always had a way of making Edie say more than she intended.

'I'm sorry I couldn't take you with me to my parents,' Miss Fotheringay said. 'They both missed you. 'As she spoke she got up and walked to the window, then pulled back the curtain and stood staring pensively into the night.

'How – how is your father?' Edie asked cautiously. She knew Mr Fotheringay had not been well.

The headmistress did not look round. 'You have heard about the Prefects' Tower?' she said, changing the subject.

'No,' Edie replied.

The Prefects' Tower stood in the woods just outside the boundary of the park. It was a proper hideaway, with bunk beds and a kitchen, and a turret window from which you could spy out over the treetops – but as its name suggested, only prefects were allowed to use it.

The tower was where Edie and Anastasia had taken refuge when they were trying to escape Anastasia's kidnappers. But no one referred to that now.

'It won't be the Prefects' Tower much longer,' Miss Fotheringay said, gazing out in its direction. 'It's been

sold, and is to be converted into a house. There's been quite a fuss about it in the village – they're going to cut down nearly an acre of trees to build a proper road up to it and make a garden and they'll have to build a new bridge over the river too.'

Edie looked at her in astonishment. She knew the tower did not belong to the school. It belonged to the Greyling family, whose daughter had been head girl at Knight's Haddon last year. The Greylings owned most of the neighbouring land, but they had always let the school have use of the tower, even before their daughter arrived there. All the Knight's Haddon girls looked on it as their own. 'But – but it can't be sold,' she said, shocked.

'Don't be so silly, Edith. The tower is private property. Helen's family had a right to sell it, and now they have done so. We should just consider ourselves lucky to have had the use of it for so long.'

'But – but they can't just cut down the trees!' Edie said.

'On the contrary, the council has given permission for it,' Miss Fotheringay said. 'Some people aren't happy – there's been some petition going around, I gather, but at this stage any protest will be an exercise in futility.'

'Who's bought it?' Edie asked, curious.

Miss Fotheringay closed the curtains with an air of impatience. 'That will emerge.' She turned, and looked at Edie searchingly. 'I sometimes wondered how you would have felt about using the tower when – if – you become a prefect. It might have felt strange for you after

what you went through there.'

Edie blushed. The kidnap was so seldom talked about, that even with Miss Fotheringay she felt awkward when it was.'Your father?' she said again, to change the subject. 'Is he very ill?'

'He was, then he rallied enough to ask after you, and to request that I make you a present of this,' the headmistress replied, handing Edie a brown paper package that had been lying on the desk.

Edie unwrapped it to find a copy of *Macbeth, a Play by William Shakespeare*. It looked very old, with gold lettering, and a leather cover crumbling at the seams. When Edie opened it she found a bookplate with a school crest, and an inscription to Michael Fotheringay, 'For First Prize in History, 1945'. Edie gave a smile of surprised pleasure.

'He knew you would be reading it later this term, and wanted you to have his copy,' Miss Fotheringay said brusquely. 'Now run along, and see if they've left any supper for you.'