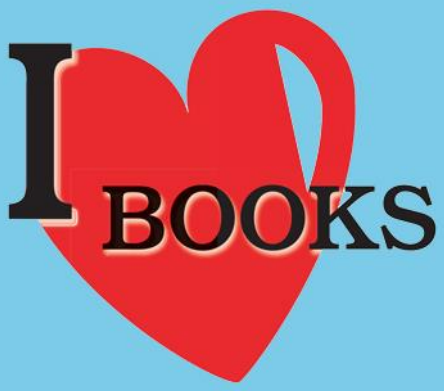


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Written by

Jacqueline Wilson

Illustrated by

Nick Sharratt

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Chapter One



This story starts with a dress. Not any old dress. Not a checked school dress or a pinafore dress or a party dress or a princess dress. This is a bridesmaid's dress. The most beautiful bridesmaid's dress in the world.

It's pink. It's not a sickly bright stick-of-rock pink. It's a very soft and subtle pink. I don't think I've ever had raspberry ice cream but it's that colour: vanilla ice cream mixed with just a few red raspberries, all swirled together to make this beautiful shade of pink. It's made of silk, so smooth you want to keep stroking it. It has puff sleeves and a collar, both edged with a tiny piece of lace,

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a tight waist, and a very flared skirt with three ruffles. It has its own petticoat too, a slightly darker pink, and the hem is trimmed with the same lace as the dress.

It's not my dress. It's my best friend Matty's bridesmaid's dress. We're both called Matilda, only no one ever calls us that, apart from Miss Hope at school, particularly when she's cross with one or other of us. It's usually Matty. She's very naughty and very cheeky but everyone likes her a lot, even Miss Hope.

I like her ever so ever so ever so much. I'm enormously happy that she's my best friend in all the world. I didn't have a best friend before Matty. I had *friends*. I mostly went round with Cathy and Amanda. They were always very nice to me. It's just that I knew Cathy liked Amanda best, and Amanda liked Cathy best too. It's a bit depressing being second-best with everyone.



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Dad says it's because I started at this school in Year Three, when everyone had already made their best friends. But Matty only came to Heathfield in Year Four and I think practically the whole class wanted to be her best friend, even Cathy and Amanda. But Matty picked me!

It was right on the very first day, straight after Register. She came up to me and said, 'Hey, you. Matilda! Guess what, I'm Matilda too.'

Well, of course I knew that, because I'd just heard Miss Hope call it out, but I pretended to be surprised, just to be polite.

'Really? Wow!' I said, though it wasn't really such a coincidence. There are two girls called Ayesha in Year Four, two girls called Eleanor in Year Five and there are actually *three* girls called Jasmine in Year Six.

I worried that I sounded silly. I felt very shy of Matty then. She had bright red curly hair, a great mop of it, and lovely green eyes, and a funny turned-up nose sprinkled with freckles. She wore an ordinary Heathfield blue-and-white checked dress, but she'd pinned different badges all over

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her front and she wore amazing emerald-green trainers, all sparkly with sequins.

'I love your badges and your shoes,' I said.

Matty grinned. 'They're cool, aren't they? Miss Hope told me we're not supposed to wear stuff like this, but she didn't get cross because I'm a new girl. So, what do you think about being called Matilda?'

I shrugged, not really knowing what to say. I liked my name. I especially liked it that there was a great story about a girl called Matilda who loved reading. I love reading too. I have six copies of the *Matilda* book at home because people think it's a great idea to give it to me for a Christmas or birthday present.

'It's a totally rubbish name, isn't it?' said Matty. 'But everyone calls me Matty. Do they call you that too?'

'They call me Tilly,' I said.

'Yeah, some of the kids at my old school tried calling me that. Silly Tilly. But I soon put a stop to it. Don't you mind being called Tilly?'

'Not really.'

'OK then. It might have got a bit muddly if we were both Matty. So shall we sit next to each other in class?'

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'Well, I'd love that, but Miss Hope usually says where we have to sit.'

'That's OK. I'll tell her I'm shy because I'm new and I need to sit next to someone nice,' said Matty.

I was thrilled that she thought I was nice – though Matty was the least shy girl I'd ever met. Somehow she got her way. Miss Hope let her sit next to me, and by the end of that first day I felt I'd known Matty all her life.

When the bell went for home time she said, 'Can you come to tea?'

'That would be great, but won't your mum mind?'

'She'll be pleased I've got a new best friend,' said Matty.

She said it so casually, but for me it was the most amazing sentence I'd ever heard. She'd actually said I was her best friend. I must have looked a bit stunned because she gave me a nudge.

'We *are* best friends, aren't we?' she said.

'Yes! Yes, of course we are,' I said.

It wasn't hard to pick Matty's mum out from all the other mums waiting at the school gate. She had a mop of bright red curls, and so did Matty's little brother. I liked their clothes too. Matty's mum had a long green dress and a black velvet coat and

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purple wedge shoes. She looked very arty, reminding me a little bit of my own mum. Matty's little brother had six old loom band bracelets on one wrist and a brown bobble hat with a pompom at either side, like ears.

'Hey, Mum!' Matty called, and took hold of my arm. 'This is my best friend Tilly. She's coming to tea!'

'That's great,' said Matty's mum. She smiled at me. 'I'm Angie. Where's your mum, Tilly? Shall we check it's OK for you to come to tea?'

'My mum's . . . not here,' I said. 'Aunty Sue picks me up from school. She's that lady over there, the one with the beige jacket.'



Aunty Sue also had beige trousers, and a beige jumper, and beige lace-up shoes. She had beige hair too. The only bright thing about her was her lipstick. I did my best not to get too near her because I didn't want red smudges all over me. She was the exact opposite of

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Sylvie, Mum's friend from when they were at art school together. Sylvie had collected me from my old school. She always wore black and lots of big bangles and she had hair down to her waist, *blue* hair. I missed Sylvie now.

'Let's go and ask your aunty then,' said Angie.

'She's not my real aunty – she's just a lady who looks after me,' I said quickly.

'Hi, Sue,' said Angie, as if she'd known her all her life.

Aunty Sue looked surprised. She's old, the sort of lady who likes to be called Mrs Brown.

Angie chatted away without realizing this.

'You want Tilly to come to tea *now*?' said Aunty Sue. 'Well, it's not quite convenient today, not at such short notice. Perhaps another time.'

'Oh please, Aunty Sue,' I begged. Perhaps there wouldn't be another time. Perhaps Matty would choose some other girl to be her best friend and go to tea with her tomorrow.

'Well, we'd have to ask your dad, dear,' said Aunty Sue.

'Can we phone him?' I asked.

'I don't think we should bother him at work.'

'He said I can phone him any time I want,' I said.

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'Yes, but only if it's something very important,' said Aunty Sue.

'Oh, but it *is*!' said Matty. 'Please let's phone Tilly's dad. I'm sure he won't mind. Go on, Aunty Sue. Be a sport. Please, please, please.' She clasped Aunty Sue's beige arm and looked up at her pleadingly.

Aunty Sue isn't exactly strict, but I always have to do what she says. I can't ever get her to change her mind. But Matty worked wonders.

'All right then,' she said, smiling at Matty.

She has one of those ages-old phones and she always forgets to charge it. She often forgets how to *work* it. I held my breath as she fumbled away, but at last she got through to Dad and explained.

Then she handed the phone over to me.

'Hi, Dad, I've got this new best friend called Matty – she's a Matilda like me – and please can I go to tea with her now?' I gabbled.

Dad asked to speak to Matty's mum, and then he said yes.

'You go and have a lovely time, chickie,' he said.

So I did! I'll never forget that first wonderful tea time. The tea itself was fantastic. Aunty Sue gives me a glass of milk and a chocolate teacake first of all. I don't mind milk and I like chocolate

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teacakes, but it gets a bit boring having them day after day after day. Then, if Dad ever has to work overtime and won't be back in time to give me supper, Aunty Sue microwaves a pizza for me.

'I know pizza's your favourite, Tilly,' she always says.

I love going to Pizza Express with Dad for a treat. Aunty Sue's little frozen pizzas aren't the same at all.

Angie didn't give us milk or chocolate teacakes or pizza. When we got back to their house she gave us fizzy water with a slice of orange in it and a quarter of a peanut-butter sandwich and a raw carrot and a doll's-house plastic saucer of blueberries. Matty's little brother Lewis put his mouth to the saucer and gobbled down more than his fair share of the blueberries.

'Lewis! Don't get your nasty slurp all over our berries!' Matty complained.



'I'm not Lewis. I'm a big brown bear,' said Lewis, patting his bobble hat. 'You shush or I'll eat you all up, Matty!'

'I'm not Matty – I'm a bear hunter. Watch out or I'll go and fetch my gun,' said Matty.