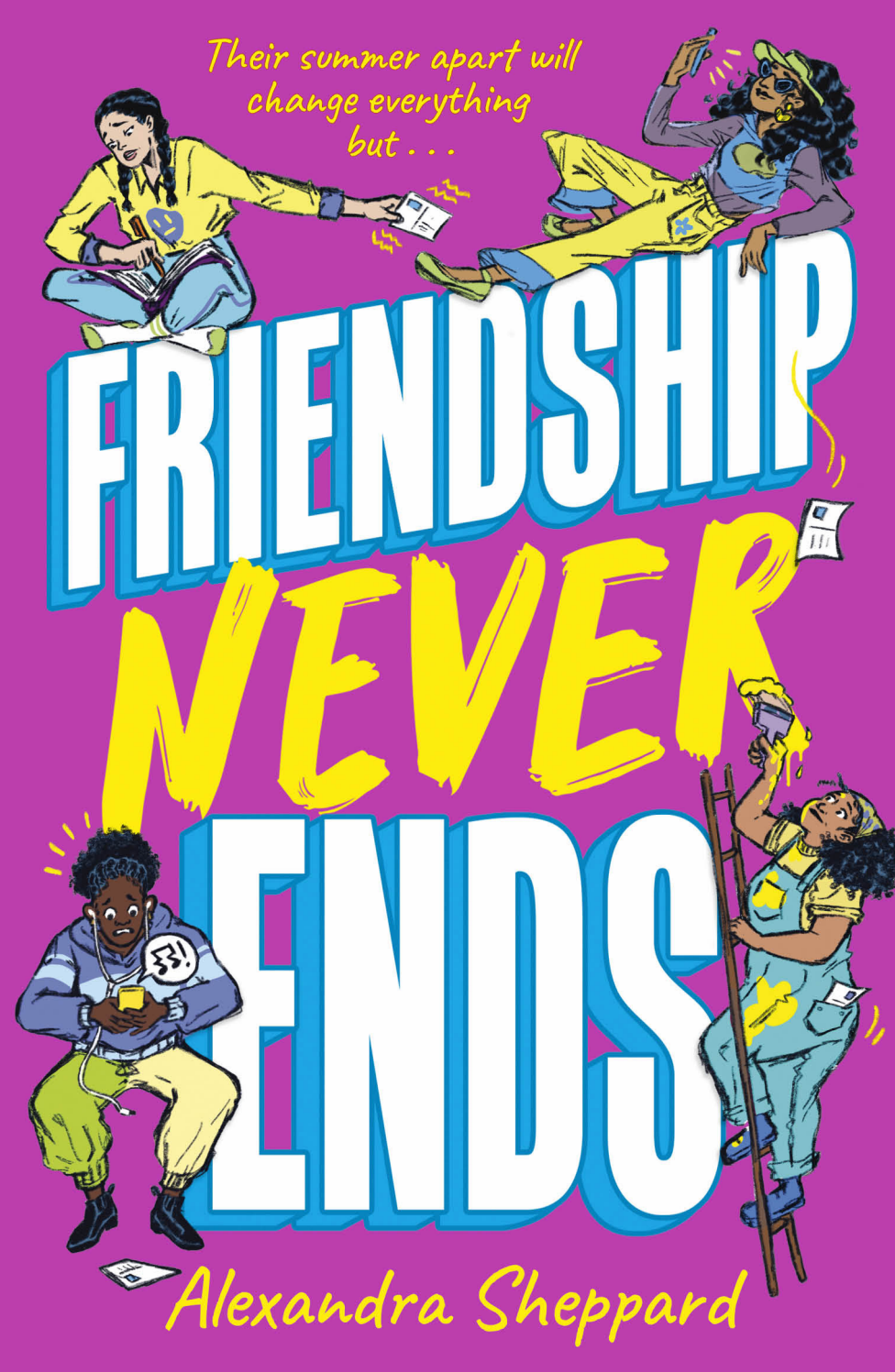

Their summer apart will change everything but . . .
FRIENDSHIP NEVER ENDS
Alexandra Sheppard


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For Michael, my bestie for life

CHAPTER ONE

SUNITA

When we found out that Holly Dalton in Year Ten was throwing an epic end-of-year house party with a '90s fancy dress theme, the girls and I knew we had to go all out. The only reason I even got an invite was because Holly has a mega-crush on my big bro Anand (gag). So, as lowly Year Nines, we had to really earn our spot at the party. And we'd do that by creating the greatest fancy dress costumes that Northstone Academy had ever seen.

We spent weeks planning our outfit. Gifty made mood boards of different themes, the group chat was flooded with ideas, and our little foursome nearly had our first ever argument when it came to deciding what we'd finally do. We didn't actually fall

out, though. Like May's mum says, we're as 'thick as thieves.' I thought she was insulting our intelligence until May explained it means we are super close.

Then, inspiration struck in the bath. Just call me Archimedes, or whichever dead white dude it was who jumped out of the tub yelling "Eureka!".

"I've got the best costume idea for Holly's party!" I yelled into a voice note in our group chat.

It. Was. Perfect. I had thought of something creative, original, and iconically '90s. Even better, there were exactly four of them in the group! No one else in our boring school would think of anything so brilliant. It was totally unique.

Luckily, my friends agreed. Our outfit wouldn't come cheap and it would take some serious arts and crafts know-how to bring it to life, but it would be worth it when we saw the look on everyone's faces at the party. We spent the last month of Year Nine buying brightly coloured felt, tin foil and thread. Gifty must've spent hours on her mum's sewing machine but the time spent was worth it: when we saw ourselves in the mirror for the first time, Dawn laughed so hard that she busted a seam and Gifty had to re-stitch it.

The first inkling that we'd maybe, possibly, taken our fancy dress idea too far was when I showed Mum. I heard her come back from the office; her keys jangling as she placed them on the counter, and the kettle flicking on as she made her usual cup of peppermint tea to wind down from her day at the law firm.

"Boo!" I yelled, jumping into the kitchen doorway.

She screamed so loud that it made *me* scream. And for three full seconds we just stood there, screaming at each other.

"Sunita, are you trying to give me a heart attack?" Mum said, clutching her chest.

"It's my fancy dress outfit for tonight's party. You like? It's a '90s theme, we're going as–"

"Yes, I can see what you're dressed up as. I take it you and the girls are going as the set?" Mum asked.

"Abso-tutely! Don't forget we're having a sleepover at Gifty's tonight. It's our last night out before you drag me to France for the summer."

Mum rolled her eyes. "You know, most girls would be thrilled to be spending the summer in a genuine chateau."

Maybe if it was just us, I thought. There was no point

saying it out loud – we'd had that argument before.

This summer was a big one. It was our first time, since our friendship began, that all four of us weren't spending the summer holidays together. No pooling our money together for the bowling alley, no sneaking into 15-rated movies at the cinema, and no horror movie sleepovers.

I was going to some tiny French village for several weeks with Mum, Anand and Bryan the Bore. It's not the first time we've been on holiday with Mum's boyfriend, but it'll be the first time he's bringing his son and daughter. We've never met them before, because they're usually banished to some boarding school in the Surrey countryside.

I have no idea what we'll talk about. I don't know anything about skiing and caviar or whatever it is posh people like to spend their money on. If Holiday Anand is just like At Home Anand, then he'll spend the entire trip with his nose in some pretentious book pondering the meaning of life. And getting annoyed with me for breathing.

Dawn was going to performing arts summer school in London, Gifty was visiting her grandparents in Scotland, and May was staying right here in Kent.

That's why it was so important to have a brilliant night at Holly's party. It might be the last laugh we had for the entire summer.

We got changed at Gifty's house and walked to Holly's party. Gifty's dad offered to give us a lift, but our costumes couldn't fit into the car. Sure, we got a few funny looks as we walked down the street. One kid cried in his pram so hard that his dad had to walk on the other side of the road.

"Is it just me, or are we getting quite a few stares?" Gifty asked nervously.

"Mate, we're dressed as the most iconic foursome of the twentieth century," I said. "Of course we're getting stares!"

We turned a corner. The houses morphed from rows of neat terraces to mini mansions with sprawling driveways and sculptured hedges.

"Wow," May said. "So Holly is *rich* rich."

"I heard that she has a jacuzzi *and* a swimming pool," Dawn said.

We found Holly's house (it was the biggest one in the street, just like she'd described it in her invite) and crunched down the gravelled driveway.

"Ready, girls?" I asked.

Dawn nodded. Gifty looked like she was gonna throw up and May pursed her lips so tight they disappeared, but they both sort of look like that most of the time anyway.

We walked down the driveway arm-in-arm and I reached for the buzzer. Holly opened the front door.

"EH-OH!" We said in unison. Well, Dawn and I said it with our chests. Gifty and May stopped after the first "eh."

Silence. I swear you could hear our eyes blink. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, Holly said something.

"Jesus, who are you?" she frowned.

"I'm Tinky-Winky, this is Laa-Laa–" Dawn began.

"Yeah, I know who you're meant to be," Holly said. "But, like, who are you? Do I even know you?"

"It's me, Sunita!" Holly's face was still blank, so I added, "Anand's younger sister."

That seemed to jog her memory. She actually fluffed her hair and looked around for him. "Oh, is Anand coming tonight then?"

I flashbacked to when I'd told Anand about Holly's party a few weeks ago: he muttered something about parties being "an exercise in narcissism" and shut the

bedroom door in my face. He'd gotten so moody since starting Year Eleven.

"Erm, sure. He'll be here later," I lied.

She reluctantly opened the front door wider, and we stepped in. "Who are you meant to be dressed as?" Dawn asked.

Holly spun around on her platform heels and looked at Dawn like she'd asked why she was wearing clothes. She gestured to her black mini dress. "Isn't it obvious? I'm Posh Spice, duh!"

She led us through her mansion of a house and we followed, being extra-careful not to accidentally knock anything over with our cushion-stuffed bellies.

"You know, the fancy dress idea was more of a suggestion," Holly said, as she led us to the kitchen.

Trays of party food lined the counter in silver platters. The massive French doors led to the garden, where a DJ played 90s R&B and bartenders were mixing drinks behind a stainless-steel bar. People danced on the lawn and posed for selfies under a giant neon sign with the words 'Party Like It's 1999'.

Not one of them was wearing fancy dress. They all looked super glam, like they were dressed for a night out in London.