

HARRIET'S HOTEL

By Jennifer Jane Austin

Chapter One and Two

CHAPTER ONE

Home alone

Harriet Honeyman was special. She knew it. Her parents knew it. Even her cat Humperdinck knew it. But apparently Mrs Brindle did not. No, Harriet was not special. She was, however, stubborn, rude, fussy and some other word Harriet would have to look up on Google later.

Harriet knew exactly what Mrs Brindle thought of her because she had told her so this morning, just before she quit. Up until 10.03 a.m. Mrs Brindle had been the housekeeper in the Honeyman household; by 10.06 a.m. she was unemployed, packing her bags, and about to walk out the door on the worst job she'd ever had.

This presented something of a problem. Harriet's parents were away, as usual, and Thomas, their caretaker, was on his day off. There were no relatives to call and no friends lived handy. So, in short, there was no one to look after Harriet. Not that Harriet needed looking after, in her not particularly humble opinion. So Harriet was left all alone to ponder just how stubborn and rude she might really be.

Earlier that morning, an exasperated Mrs B had asked, "Well, missy, what would you like for breakfast?"

She had already offered Harriet (lumpy) porridge, (stale) cereal and (rubbery) poached eggs and been turned down flat on each suggestion. So it was fair to say she was now extremely irritated.

"So, exactly what WOULD you like for breakfast?" Mrs B demanded.

"I think deep fried bananas with a ..." Harriet had paused for more impact, "... double scoop of vanilla ice cream and a slice of chocolate mud-cake would be nice to start with, thank you."

Mrs B just stood there gasping, mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Sensing an imminent meltdown, Harriet launched into the most annoying song she could think of. She watched Mrs B's face turn from candyfloss pink to fire-engine red as she delivered a stirring rendition of Hannah Montana's 'Ice Cream Song'. That did the trick. Mrs B stripped off her apron and tossed it on top of Harriet's plate.

"Harriet Honeyman, you are without a doubt the most rude, stubborn, fussy, spoiled,

infuriating child I have ever known. This job is the worst one I have ever had and I'm not taking it anymore. I quit, as of right now, this minute."

With that, Mrs B stomped off to her room to pack her bags, emerging less than ten minutes later to stalk off through the front door, which she slammed loudly on her way out.

Harriet wondered if she had gone too far. OK, the ice cream might have been a bit much, and the singing was downright rude. BUT Mrs B had it coming, Harriet decided.

Yesterday, Harriet helped herself to a biscuit and Mrs B complained, "You can't just take anything you want. You have to ask permission. Your parents left me in charge and I have rules." Harriet didn't react; she just stared at her. She assumed that was why Mrs B couldn't resist adding, "Though if they cared much about you, they wouldn't be away all the time now, would they?"

Harriet was stunned. What a rotten thing to say. Mrs B couldn't look her in the eye after that. Maybe she regretted it, but she hadn't said sorry, had she? Harriet tossed and turned all night. She woke repeatedly, in the middle of bad dreams in which her parents drove right by the house but didn't come in.

Now here she was on Sunday morning at 10.20 a.m., completely alone in their huge house. There was, of course, no school today, and apart from the birds outside it was pretty quiet. Too quiet. Harriet got herself some toast and sat out on the porch. She'd gone right off the idea of ice cream and mud-cake – which of course she'd only demanded to annoy Mrs Brindle. No, she wasn't unhappy Mrs B had left. In fact, that was always her plan: to be such a pain, Mrs B would leave. Then her parents would have to come home. Mission accomplished. Well, half of it.

But suddenly Harriet felt terribly lonely. Her parents were somewhere in Asia and it was never easy to reach them by phone. Now that Mrs B had quit, though, she would need to talk to them. But as often happened, she only got voicemail: "Sorry to have missed you but I can't talk right now. Please leave a message," her mum's perky 'phone voice' instructed.

Before they moved into the house, Harriet had travelled all over the world with her parents. They had their own business and were always busy-busy-busy, but had still found plenty of time for her. Since they'd moved here, though, she had hardly seen them.

On her last birthday, nearly a year ago, they gave her a small gift-wrapped box. She'd torn off the ribbons, and found a glistening silver key. Fantastic news – the key opened the front door of their new home.

"We feel guilty for dragging you all over the world and living out of suitcases all these years, Possum. We think it's time we had a real family home and settled down in one place so

you can make some friends and have a cat and a rabbit and a dog and a pony,” her mum had said.

“Well, perhaps just a cat to start with,” added her dad hurriedly.

They took her to see the house the next day and she instantly fell in love. It was just glorious, like something out of an old movie; a grand old classic country estate called Beresford House. When they first turned into the driveway and saw the spectacular entrance, she half expected a member of the royal family to burst out the front door, riding a dashing white steed and yelling “Tally-ho!”

With a flourish, she’d used her new key to let them in. WOW. She was awestruck. Resplendent in the main entry stood an enormous grand staircase with monstrously wide wooden handrails that she imagined sliding down every morning. In fact, why not right now? So she and her dad had raced each other down the stairs while her mum laughed helplessly, till they all lay in a heap, panting.

The house was huge, with a zillion bedrooms and so many nooks and crannies that when they played hide-and-seek, no one could find her. Or was that because her parents needed a cup of tea and a lie down? Oh well; it was just the best house ever in the entire history of houses and that was that, Harriet decided.

The real estate agent told them the house had belonged to a long-deceased local family but it had been sold a few times since then and was now a bit run down. So they’d set to work with an army of tradesmen and restored it to its former glory. They filled it with brand-new ‘old’ furniture and they’d kept the depressing pictures that hung in large gilt frames up the stairwell. These were eight portraits of the original owners, all dressed in clothes from a bygone era and all deadly serious. By far the most striking portrait was of an elderly woman, which hung right at the top of the stairs. She was dressed in severe black and looked decidedly scary, thought Harriet. And what about those eyes? They just seemed to follow Harriet wherever she moved. Creepy!

Six months ago, they moved in. She was beyond excited. They decided to keep the name ‘Beresford House’ because all the locals knew that name. But they wanted to have their own special name for the house, too. Silly suggestions abounded, but nothing stuck. Then one day her parents were off on yet another trip and they joked the house was becoming like a hotel – ‘Harriet’s Hotel’. They thought it was a huge joke.

So it was decided, “Harriet’s Hotel – perfect.” But she soon hated the name, the funny name that suited too well. No, not so funny now. Her parents kept saying it wouldn’t be for much longer, but Harriet wondered sadly if this was just the way it would be from now on.

It was 5.30 p.m. and getting dark outside. Harriet sat on the bottom step staring out at the lengthening shadows when suddenly she had the uncomfortable feeling she was not alone.

“Aaaaaaaagh.” A loud shriek came from outside.

Harriet jumped, startled. Then she heard the front door creak open; she anxiously held her breath.

“That damned cat,” came a familiar voice. “He’ll be the death of me yet. I hope I didn’t scare you, dear.” Mrs B’s face peered round the door.

Harriet felt relief, then alarm. Had Mrs B changed her mind?

“I thought I’d better come back until your parents sort out a replacement. Can’t let you starve to death or I wouldn’t get paid, would I?” Mrs Brindle slapped her thigh and cackled raucously, finding her own joke simply hilarious.

Not seeing the funny side at all, Harriet asked coolly, “Is Humperdinck all right?”

“He’ll live,” sniffed Mrs B. “Now, missy, have you spoken to your parents yet?”

“I couldn’t get hold of them.”

“Well, then, no harm done. I’ll send a message that I want to leave and with any luck the agency will find a replacement in the next couple of weeks.” Mrs B hesitated, and then looked sheepish. “I might have been a bit hasty this morning. My back’s been playing up something awful lately, makes me grum ...” She paused to choose the right word. “... short, sometimes, and I was in no mood for your nonsense at breakfast. Besides, my Cheryl is expecting her first baby at the end of the month and I want to finish up here by then.”

So just back for a few days, and then off to play Grandma. I can cope with that, thought Harriet.

“Maybe they’ll find you someone who can cook better than me, ay?” hooted Mrs B.

Humperdinck could do that, Harriet reckoned, but she decided to keep that thought to herself.

“Meantime it’s too late for anything fancy so I think I’ll defrost that tripe and onions I froze last week.”

“Tripe?”

“Don’t you remember what tripe is?”

Harriet thought she detected the glimmer of a smile. Oh, no, YUCK. She shuddered as she recalled the awful truth.

“It’s the lining of the sheep’s stomach, dear. Puts hairs on your chest, luv,” said Mrs B rather too gleefully.

Yum, yum. “I’m not all that hungry, actually, don’t worry about me, just a bit of toast will be fine, honestly ...”

“Nonsense, it’s no trouble at all,” insisted Mrs B.

Yes, definitely a smile. Payback! No point in protesting. Harriet trailed off. Mrs B was on a mission, and that mission was TRIPE.

CHAPTER TWO

The devil's daughter

Harriet ran towards the chocolate fountain, bowl outstretched to scoop up the rivers of oozing milk chocolate that gushed over the edges and pooled into a delicious lake below. The fountain was gargantuan. It was magnificent. It was taller than her dad, taller than the ceiling, taller than the whole building. It grew bigger and bigger as her bowl filled up and started to overflow ...

Brrring Brrring Brrring Brrring Brrring Brrring Brrring

What's that infernal ringing? Is it a phone? Is it a smoke alarm? Is something on fire? Have I got time for just one sip? Oh, oh, no, no, NO!

Realisation dawned, and Harriet flung out her arm and punched the OFF button on her alarm clock. What day was it? Saturday? Sunday? Harriet groaned. Oh, joy. Monday. Today was a school day. Another marvellous day at Montgomery May School awaited her.

"A charming country school renowned for its ability to nurture academically sound, well rounded children with a sense of independence and strong values who will become our future leaders," the website had said.

After a visit to tour the grounds and meet Mrs Maple, the principal, her parents were sold. "Oh, it's perfect, Harriet. And it's just around the corner," her mum gushed.

In truth, the school was indeed very pretty. It was set amidst park-like grounds surrounded by picture-perfect gardens and expansive sports fields. It was located just on the outskirts of Summerbrooke, a rural village handy to a couple of neighbouring towns and only a ten minute drive from their new home. Apparently, students came from far and wide to attend Montgomery May School. The teachers weren't too hideous, most of the students were OK and, better still, they didn't wear a uniform. There was just one problem. The devil's daughter went to school there, and she hated Harriet.

Tallulah Todd, aka Lulu, was so horrible Harriet was sure she secretly turned into a werewolf-vampire-witch and ate little children for dinner. Initially, on her first day, Lulu was super nice to Harriet. But by Day Two, Lulu despised her.

It wasn't too hard to figure out why. Till Harriet arrived, Lulu was unquestionably the 'IT

girl' at school. Her dad worked in TV and her mum used to be a model. Now how cool was that? Then in walked Harriet. Maybe Harriet had overdone the exciting tales of her world travels. Maybe her flash clothes were a tad over the top for school. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned she'd met Katy Perry 'in person'. Whatever the final straw, the most popular girl in school now loathed her. And, like a predatory lioness protecting her patch, Lulu perpetually stalked her prey, waiting for any chance to pounce.

After the 'new kid' excitement died down, everyone just followed Lulu's lead. No one wanted to get offside with her. Harriet found herself excluded from conversations and lunch tables and spent her time trying to avoid Lulu. Happy days.

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"Your breakfast is going cold so get out of that bed NOW, young lady," hollered Mrs B.

Harriet winced at the thought of clumpy porridge. She had a light-bulb moment as she heard heavy steps heading for her bedroom door. Clutching her throat, she put on her feeblest voice. "I'm not well," she whimpered.

"You must think I came down in the last shower. You've got five minutes or you're going to school in your pyjamas."

"But, really, I feel sick."

"Sick of school, yes, heard it all before. And by the way, your parents rang while you were doing your Sleeping Beauty impression."

Suddenly wide awake, Harriet demanded, "What? Why didn't you wake me? I wanted to talk to them."

"They were in Chow Mein or Chop Suey or Egg Foo Yong or God knows where. Anyway they didn't want to wake you so I filled them in. They told me to sort out someone new through the agency and Hail Mary, Bob's your uncle, I'll be out of here in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail."

How could she? Harriet held her breath and counted to ten, then twenty, then thirty, to be sure she didn't say the rude things she desperately wanted to say. Besides, if she focused really hard on counting – thirty-three, thirty-four ... – she could distract herself from the tears that threatened to break through.

Tears didn't work on Mrs B. She didn't have a sympathetic bone in her body. She just couldn't understand that Harriet would happily give up a whole night's sleep just to hear her mother's voice. Mrs B would think it much more sensible to 'let the girl sleep'. She didn't mean to be cruel, unlike Lulu, whose current mission in life was to make Harriet cry like a baby. She hadn't succeeded, of course. Harriet wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

After a few reluctant mouthfuls of lukewarm sludge known only to Mrs B as porridge, Harriet grabbed her school bag and headed outside to Tom's truck. The sky was a gloomy cluster of dark grey clouds steadily releasing a constant drizzle. The miserable weather suited Harriet's miserable mood perfectly.

No truck. Where was the truck?

"Can't take the truck, it's getting new brake pads," came a slow, deep voice from behind her. Tom, their caretaker/gardener/handyman/chauffeur/all-round-do-anything-and-everything man, headed round the corner holding up the keys to her parents' Aston Martin. It was her dad's pride and joy, though he'd hardly ever driven it.

Oh, no, that's all I need, to bowl up to school in a flash red sports car, she thought.

"What about the Rover?" Harriet asked urgently, picturing the sedate, sensible, 'ordinary' vehicle that had come with the house.

"Lent it to the Macphersons yesterday. Their car's up on blocks."

Farting ferrets, was the whole world getting their cars fixed today?

"Then I can walk."

"It's raining."

"I've got an umbrella."

"School starts in fifteen minutes, Harriet. Come on, get in."

Tom's tone made it clear there was to be no more discussion. Harriet dragged herself into the car, slung her bag in the tiny back seat, hugged her knees and screwed up her face. She exuded 'attitude'. Tom turned on the ignition, revved the engine loudly and accelerated considerably faster than was required. Not too disappointed that you have to drive this car then, ay Tom? The car flew down the lane.

Oh, lordie, he thinks he's a secret agent, thought Harriet. They rapidly rounded a bend and sent the entire contents of a huge puddle right over their neighbour, Mr Jones. He looked furious – and filthy. Highly embarrassed, Tom mouthed apologies and swiftly slowed down.

After a few moments he muttered, "I'll try and park down the road a way." Harriet nodded, grateful that Tom had reined himself in.

As they slowed to pull into Montgomery May School Road, the skies opened up and dumped the contents of every black cloud hovering above in one almighty torrent.

"Sorry, Harriet, I can't let you get drenched," Tom said firmly as he glided forward, ending up smack bang outside the main doors. Sheltering under the eaves watching him park were about a dozen of the usual suspects. They peered out through the thick rain.

Great, I've got an audience; can't see Lulu anywhere, though, Harriet thought. Harriet's

eyes flicked about furtively searching for the face of her nemesis. She scrambled out of the car. It was so low to the ground she stumbled and almost overbalanced. Good save. She made a mad dash for the front steps. Suddenly a high-pitched squeal made her spin around, only to get knocked flying by an enormous red umbrella wielded by Lulu, who dashed past her at warp factor nine.

Picking herself, and her now decidedly damp posterior, up off the tarmac, Harriet sprinted for the front steps again. She hurled herself under cover and into the gaggle of girls.

Lulu jeered, “James Bond dropping you off, is he?” Peals of laughter.

“On a mission. Had to make do with Tom this morning,” quipped Harriet.

A few girls snorted. They shut up after a withering look from Lulu. Harriet smiled to herself and tore off before Lulu could say anything more.

Her day continued uneventfully until the afternoon. The rain stopped just as it was time to pick teams for an interclass netball tournament. The team captains called out names one by one until they were down to the last two girls: Harriet Honeyman and Sophie Green. Harriet stood there calmly, unsurprised to be the last to be chosen. Sophie, however, was squirming uncomfortably and turning redder by the second. Harriet felt sorry for her.

Caro Simpson, Lulu’s best friend, was captain of one team. She had to select her last player and was hesitating. Harriet guessed she felt conflicted by her no-win situation. Lulu despised Harriet and everyone felt uncomfortable with Sophie. Oh dear, poor Caro.

“Come on, Caro, stop mucking around,” Lulu called out impatiently.

Caro scrunched up her face in a mask of indecision. Miss Banks, the PE teacher, decided enough was enough. She stepped in and divvied up the last two girls while Lulu smirked. Sophie went to Caro’s team.

After the first games, Harriet’s team was doing well, in no small part due to Harriet’s strong goal shooting. Plenty of practice on her own had clearly paid off. Harriet glanced at Caro’s team, who were struggling on the next court. That will teach you, Caro!

After a fierce round robin tournament, two teams remained for a final show down. At forty-two points each, it was down to the wire. Harriet lined up the last shot of the game. THWACK. A ball flew out of nowhere and slammed hard into the side of her head. YEOW.

“Sorry, Miss Banks,” called Lulu from the side line, “It was an accident.”

Sure it was, thought Harriet.

“Don’t let it happen again, Tallulah, you could hurt someone if you’re not careful,” said an annoyed Miss Banks.

COULD hurt someone? Harriet rubbed her smarting temple and winced. I’ll show you.

She took aim, lined up her shot and – PLOP – the ball sailed right through the hoop. The whistle blew and her team shrieked with delight, leaping in the air. In the thrill of victory, they completely forgot they were supposed to hate Harriet. They swarmed round her whooping and patting her on the back.

Disgusted, Lulu yelled, “Come on, girls, it’s not the Olympics.”

Jolted back to reality, most backed away from Harriet. But a couple stayed to give her a last congratulatory pat. Wow, almost a breakthrough. Maybe if Lulu finds someone else to hate, I might make some friends here after all, thought Harriet.

3.20 p.m. – time to go home. This had been her second best day at school so far. Maybe things were changing. As Harriet waited for Tom to pick her up, the rain reappeared with a vengeance. Please, not the sports car. With relief, she saw him pull up in the truck.

As she slid into the front seat, the rain turned into a deluge and she spotted Sophie huddling under a tree. She wasn’t wearing a coat and looked bedraggled as usual. Poor Sophie always wore the same clothes. She only seemed to have two outfits, plus one sweater that had seen better days. Everyone knew her story: her mum had left Sophie with her grandparents a year ago and it didn’t look like she was coming back. She never said a word, which was just as well because no one talked to her anyway. She must be pretty lonely, thought Harriet.

She knew Sophie lived just off the main street in the village, which they were about to drive through on their way home. “Tom, I wonder if we could ...”

“Yes, Harriet?”

Harriet hesitated as Lulu appeared on the front steps with a bunch of friends. She’d enjoyed a brief moment of acceptance today. She’d even imagined making friends here. Would she blow it if she picked up Sophie? “Nothing, let’s go home,” she murmured. The rain showed no sign of easing as she watched Sophie step out from the tree’s shelter and scurry down the street.

Tom followed Harriet’s gaze. “Are you sure?”

Harriet hesitated. “Um, I ... yes, I’m sure.”

Tom studied Harriet thoughtfully. He seemed about to say something else, then changed his mind. Bumper to bumper in a demolition derby of cars, engulfed in a cats-and-dogs downpour, it was time to get out of here. Tom manoeuvred carefully past the throngs and headed towards home. As they passed a now woefully drenched Sophie, Harriet hastily glanced out the other window. She couldn’t bear to look at her.