

It may not seem possible to you right now, but there will come a time when JEANS are no longer the thing that everyone wears. I have a confession to make: I don't like jeans much. For years, I resisted: I didn't wear jeans, ever. Eventually I had to give in, because they were all you could get in the shops. But any time I'm in a place where there are a lot of people, like a shopping centre or an airport, I look out upon that vast ocean of washed-out, bleached-out, saggy-bottomed, fraying-bottomed, boot-cut, classic-cut, skinny-fit, relaxed-fit denim and I find it depressing. Oh look, it's the Blue Rinse Brigade again.

I don't know what year this story takes place in, but I can tell you one thing: the whole jeans thing will have passed. Instead, people will be wearing SLANTS. Slants will have all the benefits of jeans; comfortable, better-looking as they get older. even, for some, the ability to make a flabby bottom look more compact. Originally 'slouch pants' (the name soon gets abbreviated), they will be a dark purple-red and made from a kind of fabric originally devised for Mars miners. So when you read about someone in this story wearing 'slants' you'll know what I'm talking about.

## **Chapter One**

### **Poker Bute Hall**

Arthur Clarkson was not having a good day; you could tell this because he had turned a very murky dark green all over. Given that he'd had to spend the last few hours in Rorie's pocket, this was hardly surprising.

Elsie leaned over and stroked the pet chameleon's head. 'Oh Arthur, not too long now, OK?'

Arthur Clarkson just turned murkier. His throat quivered and his eyes - those crazy eyes like two rotating volcanoes! - swivelled independently, anxiously trying to make sense of it all.

Rorie gazed at him pitifully. 'Shush, Elsie,' she whispered to her little sister. 'He's not in the mood, look.' He was not a sociable lizard at the best of times, and these were anything but the best of times. Of course, it *was* rather dark in Rorie's pocket, and like all chameleons, Arthur Clarkson - who got his name from a rather odd-looking reclusive

genius known to the family - tended to blend in with his surroundings. But Rorie had only seen him this black once before, and that was when he'd got lost and was being taunted by the neighbour's cat. Poor thing took weeks to get over that. Eventually they knew he was fine when his markings began once again to proclaim his well-being in rainbow hues. Rorie had always thought it must be rather wonderful to be able to change colour like that according to your mood.

'Quick, hide him,' hissed Elsie, 'they're coming back'.

Rorie swiftly pocketed the chameleon again, as the door opened and in walked Uncle Harris and Aunt Irmine. Just seeing them churned Rorie's stomach; if she were a chameleon she would have been khaki-coloured too.

Uncle Harris was a tall, imposing man, with an angry fist of a face that seemed to be composed entirely of tightly wrought sinew. On the front of it sat a nose-and-moustache arrangement two sizes too big. On the sides, two perfectly round, shiny purple ears perched exactly at ninety degrees, like handles. 'Time to go,' he announced brusquely.

'Girls,' added Aunt Irmine, the slight fluttering of her tiny hand indicating that one must stand to attention. She really was the oddest shape, thought Rorie, starting out bulky at the top, and tapering down to improbably small hands and feet. Her hulking shoulders seemed intended for a rugby player, and her heavy unibosom lolloped from side to side under her shapeless sweater as she walked. She had no neck to speak of, and her formidable bulldog jaw thrust itself forward defiantly.

The girls stood up; Uncle Harris grimaced, clearly disenchanted with their appearance. 'Now then; as you know, your father and I have never really seen eye-to-eye on matters.'

Rorie and Elsie glanced at each other at this reference to their father.  
*Oh Dad! Come back, Dad.*

Uncle Harris wagged a long, sinuous finger. 'Now don't you forget! Irmine and I' - he pronounced the name "Er- mine " - 'are taking you in out of the goodness of our hearts . '

'Out of the goodness of our hearts,' added Aunt Irmine.

'So there's to be no trouble; understand?'

'Yes, Uncle Harris.'

'Of course, you'll have to attend our school.'

Rorie's jaw fell open. 'We'll have to - what?'

'It's the only way,' insisted Aunt Irmine, shaking her bulldog head in a falsely-apologetic-but-really-bossy way.

'OWWWW!!' cried Elsie, bursting into tears.

Rorie put her arm around her, while trying hard to stop herself from doing the same. Having both your parents disappear suddenly was quite bad enough, without having to move to some boarding school full of strangers as well. Even when your uncle's the Head Master and your aunt's the deputy - no, *especially* then. Oh, why did he have to be the *only* family member available to take care of them? If only Granny were still alive, and Great-Grandma not simply too old. If only Mum had some family, apart from a sister in Australia with four young kids. If only, if only.

If only Mum and Dad would come back.

'I said, there's to be *no trouble*, ' repeated Uncle Harris. 'Now, it will be different from *your* school, no question about that. At Poker Bute Hall, we instil a real sense of discipline, right from the start. And just because we're related, you needn't expect any sort of preferential treatment.'

Aunt Irmine nodded. 'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.'

Elsie broke off from her sobbing. 'What's a gander?'

Aunt Irmine and Uncle Harris exchanged pitiful glances. 'It's a female goose,' explained Aunt Irmine.

'But I don't eat goose!' exclaimed Elsie, bursting into tears again. 'And I only like *tomato* sauce!'

'Sshh!' said Rorie, comforting her. 'You won't have to eat goose, Elsie.' She felt Arthur Clarkson squirm in her pocket, which seemed to draw Uncle Harris' attention.

She froze, then realised her uncle was actually looking at some papers on the table.

He picked them up. 'Right then; come along. I take it you returned that lizard of yours to the pet shop, as you were instructed?'

'He's a chameleon,' corrected Elsie.

Uncle Harris turned his beady-eyed frown on her. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Arthur Clarkson,' said Elsie. 'He's a *chameleon*. Not just any old lizard.'

Rorie blushed. Elsie was incredibly forthright for a seven-year-old.

Uncle Harris stepped forward and thrust his angry-fist face at the girls, casting them into heavy shadow. 'But this *chameleon*, ' he uttered in a low, menacing voice, almost a whisper, '.is gone now, am I correct?'

'Yes', chorused the two sisters, nodding furiously.