



## CHAPTER ONE CHRISTMAS WITH AUNT JOANNA

“Who comes to a bed and breakfast for *Christmas*?” said Ruby Pilgrim, staring out of the windows in disgust.

“People who don’t like cooking?” said Alex. He was busy hanging baubles on the enormous



Christmas tree which stood in the hall at Applecott House. Their own tree at home had tinsel and knitted snowmen and all the decorations they'd made in nursery school, but this one was very classy – all colour-co-ordinated baubles and white lights. He secretly rather disapproved – he loved their messy, family tree – but he had to admit that Aunt Joanna's did look lovely.

“Christmas is for *family!*” said Ruby. “For spending all morning in your pyjamas eating selection boxes! You're supposed to spend it watching Christmas telly and playing video games and having fights over who does the washing up! Not going on holiday!”

“I don't think everyone spends Christmas

playing video games and eating selection boxes,” said Alex cautiously. “Not grown-ups anyway.” He hung a very old-fashioned-looking reindeer on the tree, careful not to break it. *Some of these decorations are over a hundred years old*, Aunt Joanna had said to him. There had been Pilgrims living in Applecott House for over two hundred years. Had his father and his grandfather and all his great-great-grandparents hung some of those same baubles on their Christmas tree?

It was rather a nice thought.

Alex didn't need to imagine those people from another time – he'd met them; well, some of them anyway. Last summer, something mysterious and wonderful had happened to Alex and Ruby.



They'd stepped into a magical looking-glass in Aunt Joanna's hallway, and been transported back in time. They still didn't know why, but Alex believed they'd been sent there to help solve a historical problem – to find a lost Saxon treasure, and save Aunt Joanna's house in the process.

He had hoped that perhaps they were connected to the mirror now; that it would use them to right old-fashioned wrongs and solve ancient mysteries. Perhaps they would have a new adventure every time they came to stay with Aunt Joanna! But the problem was, they *didn't* come here very often. Applecott House was in Suffolk, and Alex and Ruby lived in a little town in the north east of England, two hundred miles and a long car journey away.

They came every summer, and often in the Easter holidays too, but when you've been sucked into a magical mirror and transported back to 1912 to solve a high-stakes crime, the Easter holidays is a very long time to wait to do it again.

And then, a week before Christmas, Aunt Joanna fell downstairs and broke her leg.

Christmas at Applecott House was the busiest time of year. Aunt Joanna organised a whole three-day celebration for her bed-and-breakfast guests, with a carol service in the village, a musical evening in the drawing room, and a Boxing Day quiz. There was fizzy wine with Christmas breakfast, and candlelit dinners on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, which Aunt Joanna had

to cook. Alex privately agreed with Ruby that it didn't really sound like *Christmas* at all, but lots of grown-ups seemed to like it, and she was always booked out months in advance.

And now it looked like she would have to cancel.

Aunt Joanna had called the children's father in a panic. All of the food and wine was ordered already. She'd paid a deposit for the wine glasses and the musicians. Everyone was relying on her. She couldn't ask her own children to help (Aunt Joanna had a son who lived in Australia and a daughter who had baby twins, and obviously neither could be expected to drop everything and run Christmas in Applecott House). But perhaps Alex's family might be able to...

“There won't be any beds,” said Alex's father. “All the rooms are booked, so we'll be sleeping in the living room, I'm afraid. Aunt Joanna thinks she should be able to supervise the cooking – at least I hope will, because you know what our cooking's like, and Stacey will be in as much as she can.” Stacey was a woman from the village who helped Aunt Joanna out at busy times of year. “It's mostly getting the rooms ready ... and the washing up, and the vegetable-chopping ... and the decorations – apparently that's very important. And I suppose there'll be lots of tidying up and laying tables and so on. But she's been so good to us over the years – I don't know what we'd have done if she hadn't agreed to look after you

children. And... Well. I didn't really feel I could say no. And it's supposed to be rather a luxury holiday ... I understand people pay a fortune, and of course we'd get to eat all the food and so forth. I think it might be quite fun, really..."

"But it's Christmas!" Ruby had said. "Christmas Day!"

"I don't imagine you children will have to help too much on Christmas Day itself," their mother said hurriedly. (Alex got the impression she wasn't keen on spending Christmas laying tables and loading dishwashers either.) "I expect you'll be able to hide somewhere with your presents if you'd rather."

"I don't see where," Ruby muttered. "We won't

even have a *bedroom*."

But Alex didn't really mind. Just being back at Applecott House – his favourite place in all the world – was enough to make him happy. They'd arrived yesterday, just after lunch, and even an afternoon spent making beds and vacuuming bedrooms had been fun. He'd enjoyed hanging up all the decorations, and helping Aunt Joanna ice Christmas biscuits. He was looking forward to eating all this fancy food – and after all, he thought, their father was right. Aunt Joanna was *family*.

"We're hardly going to see Mum and Dad all Christmas!" said Ruby furiously. "They're going to spend all day washing dishes and chopping

carrots, just you wait. It's going to be awful! I wish we were *anywhere* else. I wish we could just *leave* and go and have a *proper* Christmas. Anywhere!"

She swung away from the window to glare at Alex. And stiffened.

"Alex!"

"I know," said Alex, who'd seen it too. "I think you might be about to get your wish."

He hurried over to the wall, Ruby close on his heels. The mirror – the magic mirror, the time-travelling mirror, *their* mirror – now showed a middle-aged woman in a very old-fashioned dress – Victorian, probably, Alex thought – with a woollen shawl and big old-fashioned skirts. She was frowning at her reflection in the mirror, a hatpin

poised above her hat. Then suddenly something changed. A look of astonishment passed over her face, as though she couldn't believe what she was seeing. She took a step backwards, staring at the mirror as though it was a ghost.

"She can see us!" cried Ruby. She grabbed his hand. "I didn't know that could happen."

The woman blinked, and rubbed her eyes. She took a deep breath. And then slowly, cautiously,



arm outstretched, she began to move towards the mirror.

“No!” Ruby cried. “If she touches it, she’s going to come *here*. No way, old Victorian lady. This is *our* time-travelling adventure, not yours!”

She pulled Alex forwards, into the mirror ...

... and they landed on their hands and knees on the floor of the Victorian hallway.

The first thing that hit Alex was the cold. He’d known, in a vague sort of way, that the Victorians didn’t have central heating, but he hadn’t realised how *cold* that would make their houses. Victorians had fires, hadn’t they? The Pilgrims weren’t lords and ladies or anything like that, but they weren’t exactly poor. The Edwardian Pilgrims had

servants and things. But the hallway at Applecott House had no fireplace, and it was icy cold. Nearly as cold as being outside would be, Alex thought in dull horror. Was this really what Victorian houses were like?

Beside him, Ruby moaned,

“Oh no! Seriously? It’s freezing! Summer! Can’t we have summer?”

“You did ask for Christmas,” Alex pointed out.

“I take it back! I want a heatwave! A heatwave!”

The woman was staring at them in understandable amazement. Alex wasn’t great at grown-up ages, but she looked older than his mother and younger than Aunt Joanna. She was wearing a dark-blue dress, with a sticky-out bit

at the back, which Alex vaguely remembered was called a bustle (their parents liked costume dramas and telling their children useless bits of information). She had a green shawl around her shoulders, and greyish-brown hair done up in a bun with curly bits hanging out at the front. She had that look about her which Alex was beginning to recognise as *Pilgrim*, something inexplicable which marked her out as a friend and relation among the strangers of the past. Alex wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it was something energetic, something cheerful, something that looked on the world as a game to be played or a treasure chest to be opened and explored. Even his funny, awkward, serious father had it, even *Ruby* did, though she

sometimes pretended she didn't. Alex had never heard the phrase *intellectual curiosity*, but he would have understood it immediately; a sort of interest and enthusiasm for the world and all its doings. Alex knew without being told that he was related to this woman, that she would be pleased and excited to see him, and that once she'd recovered from her astonishment, they would be safe with her.

He wasn't prepared for what she actually said, which was: "Alex and Ruby! It is you, isn't it?"