

Starting from Scratch

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Chapter 1

There's a best way to do everything.

If I get up at exactly 6:32 a.m., I won't ever be late for school. If I put my hairbrush in the same place every morning, I'll never lose it. If I write Mom's appointments on her calendar as soon as she tells me about them, I won't ever forget to remind her. Everything has its place, its time, its order.

But Mom doesn't understand that. Which is why I'm about to be late for Sunshine Club, something that's been part of the schedule for a whole year and a half.

"Mom," I say, trying not to fidget. "Please, I can't miss

Sunshine Club today. It's the last one before we go back to school! Lula will miss me." Lula is my friend who lives at Elk Ridges nursing home. We visit her every week, and we always play checkers and gossip about the other residents. I really love talking with her, even though she never lets me win our game.

"You can," Mom says, smiling at me. She's taking cookies out of the oven, so our kitchen is warm and the air hangs heavy with sugar. "And you will! Lula will understand. This is important."

"But I always go to Sunshine Club on Thursdays. At four." Every Thursday, for over a year. Every Monday too. But Mom always forgets, and I have to remind her at least once a month. And now, clearly.

"I know, Janie," Mom says, still smiling. "However, your new sister doesn't move in every Thursday!"

That's true, I guess. But Mom didn't tell me it meant missing Sunshine Club for her. It's not fair. I barely even know her! And I have a schedule. Bad things happen when we get off our schedule.

I glance at my watch. If we don't leave in five minutes, I'll be

late. Mom isn't even dressed. She's still wearing pajama pants. "Can't we just take Makayla with us?"

Mom looks up at the ceiling, and my heart stutters with hope. "Actually, Janie, that is *such* a good idea. She won't have friends here yet. I'm really proud of you."

I smile up at her. "Thanks, Mom. So we can go?"

"Sure! Next time." Mom winks at me. "Today, you're going to welcome Keisha and Makayla into our home."

I close my eyes, defeated. It's over. We'll never make it now. I sigh and slink into the living room to wait for Keisha to bring Makayla over from picking things up at her dad's house.

Getting a new sister was not part of my schedule. *Any* schedule. In May, Mom brought a new "friend" to the school's end-of-the-year party. And I thought that was fine—Mom makes a ton of new friends all the time because of her art studio. But then that "friend" hung out with us all summer. And then she started saying, "Oh, Janie, you can call me Keisha and not Ms. Jones." And then when school started again, this "friend" was at our house all the time and eating dinner with us. And

before I knew it, I was helping Mom's "friend" pick out a wedding ring.

And, I mean, it's fine. Keisha is fine. I like her okay, and she makes Mom really happy. That's what I like the most about her. But Keisha also has a daughter, and she's twelve just like me. So now I have a stepsister, one who I don't know at all because she went to a different middle school before now, and a stepmother who I know a little better but not that much.

Again, this is fine. I've already cried a little and panicked a little, and now I'm calm. I've decided that doubling our family size isn't so bad. And Dani, my best friend, reminded me that at least I don't have to move houses and schools like Makayla. It'll be fine. Maybe even fun! Maybe Makayla likes baking and dogs. Maybe it'll be easy to add two more people to the schedule. Though it is a little ominous that I'm *already* having to change my schedule and Makayla isn't even here yet . . .

I slump onto the couch and pull out my phone to text Dani a thumbs-down. Dani immediately responds with *tragedy*. I wait for more, but she just sends me a downhearted emoji and the

orange heart. She's trying to find which one she likes the best (very important for her "image," she says), so I've gotten every color this week. I start to tell her to please say hi to Lula for me and don't forget to remind everyone to make the new flyers for Sunshine Club, but my thumbs freeze when I hear the crunch of gravel outside.

I scramble to my feet. "Mom, they're here!"

"Okay," Mom calls from the kitchen, but she doesn't come into the living room. I straighten my shirt, a little nervous. I've only seen Makayla a handful of times, once at the art gallery, a few parties in the summer, and at the wedding two months ago. We didn't talk much at any of them. And now she's going to live with us. Her room is all set up and everything. I've known about this move since the wedding, but it still doesn't feel real. Even now, as footsteps approach the house.

The door opens. I see Keisha first. She's shorter than Mom, has really pretty dark skin, and she always wears her firefighter boots. Like, all the time, even when she's not at work. Dani would call this "effective branding," but I think it's a little weird.

Don't her feet get tired? Keisha usually wears a big smile, but she brightens even more when she sees me. "Hey, Janie! Were you waiting for us?"

"Yes," I say. I want to say more, but I can't think of anything that sounds right.

Keisha steps into the house, and then I see Makayla. She's wearing a light green shirt and jeans, and her hair is in thick braids. Her skin tone is a little lighter than Keisha's, almost the same as mine. She has two suitcases, even though she only goes to her dad's house every other weekend. She must have a lot of clothes, which I can respect. Makayla meets my eyes, but then quickly looks down at her purple tennis shoes.

"Hi," I offer. She doesn't say anything, so now I'm fidgeting. Should I ask about her trip? But then that sounds like I'm being nosy. And, I mean, I *am* curious about this mysterious Dad I've never seen, but I feel like I shouldn't ask that right away. I'll just wait for her to talk.

Makayla looks up as Keisha pats her back and goes to the kitchen, leaving us alone. Makayla still hasn't come inside . . .

and the door is wide open. We're letting the heat out, as Lula would say.

"Umm, hi," Makayla finally says. She pushes up her glasses and readjusts her grip on the second suitcase. "I guess I, uh, live here now."

I smile at her. She's kinda awkward, but not bad awkward. "Yeah, you do. Do you want to come in?"

Makayla looks shocked, like she's just realized she's still standing outside. "Oh, yeah, sorry." She steps into the living room, dragging her suitcases behind her, and closes the door. Should I offer to take her stuff up to her room? I don't know . . . I've never had a sister before. It's just been me and Mom for as long as I can remember.

"Umm, do you want some cookies? Mom made some."

"Oh, that's okay." Makayla shifts from foot to foot. "I ate at Dad's."

I want to ask about this Dad *so bad!* But it would be rude, I know. I pick something else to say. "That's okay, maybe later? I can actually make us some. I'm pretty good at baking."

“Oh, cool.” Makayla gives me a tentative smile. “I’m not really into cooking that much. But it’s cool you are.”

Oh, she doesn’t like baking . . . I push away the twinge of disappointment. Maybe we can find something else in common.

“That’s fine! It’s probably better if—”

I’m cut off by a small noise from Makayla’s second suitcase. It’s like . . . a baby? A doll or something?

“Oh, sorry, she’s probably cranky.” Makayla bends down and unzips the suitcase. Which I’m now realizing . . . is not a suitcase. It’s a cloth pet carrier.

I watch in horror as two orange ears poke out of the carrier. And then a small head, and a large, round body. It’s a cat. A CAT.

I hate cats!!

“This is Pumpkin,” Makayla says happily.

Pumpkin. A good name for it, considering it’s orange and very round. But why is it *here*?

“Oh, that’s, umm . . .” I back away as Pumpkin sniffs my tennis shoes. “Is it just visiting? For the weekend?”

Makayla frowns. “No, she doesn’t really like Dad, and she gets sad when I’m gone. So we brought her here.”

I clear my throat, but the lump lodged in it doesn’t go away. “But, like, not permanently, right?”

“Umm . . .” Makayla’s smile disappears. She wrings her hands anxiously. “Do you not like cats?”

I don’t answer her because Mom and Keisha finally come into the living room. Mom’s holding a tray of cookies, but before she can speak, I point to Pumpkin, who is now sniffing the bottom of the couch. “Mom, Makayla brought her cat.”

“Oh, yeah!” Mom says, smiling. “I forgot to tell you, Janie, my bad.”

My bad, she says. I can’t believe this. I can’t believe Mom would agree to this! She knows I hate cats! Ever since Grandpa’s cat scratched me, I’ve hated them. They’re so hissy and bitey and not cute like dogs are!

“You’re making a scary face, Janie,” Keisha teases.

“I thought you’d be more excited,” Mom says, frowning at me. “You’re always asking for a pet. And now we have one!”

A dog. I've been asking for a *dog* for years, not a pet. Not a cat! And this one is glaring at me, settling onto our couch like it lives here.

Well. I guess it does.

"Excuse me," I say weakly. "I need to go upstairs."

"Are you feeling okay?" Keisha asks. She's frowning now too.

"I'm fine," I say, halfway to the stairs. "Oh, uh, Makayla, see you later."

I don't wait for anyone to call me back. I run to my room, close the door, and collapse face-first onto my bed.

This is a lot to handle. Makayla doesn't like baking *or* dogs. Well, maybe she likes dogs, but if she has a cat, I'm sure she prefers them. And the cat! I can't believe I have to live with something that might scratch me at any moment. I can't believe Mom forgot I didn't like cats. Or maybe she didn't care.

I close my eyes and sigh into my pillow. This new family thing is going to be a lot harder than I thought.