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# Chapter 1

I am bombarded with inspiration: THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE. WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES, ANOTHER OPENS. And my personal favorite: IF YOU WANT THE RAINBOW, YOU HAVE TO PUT UP WITH THE RAIN. I'm so due for a rainbow. Unloading a moving van in an October downpour will not make anyone's top ten list. Same for "sleeping" on the floor for a week with your little sister gyrating next to you, ready to play hide and seek at five a.m. Minor complaints aside, I'm glad to be diving into eighth grade at a new school clear across the state. Fresh starts and all that.

The counselor clickety-clicks on his keyboard. "Annnd, print." He rolls his wheelchair around to grab the paper from the printer. "Here you go. One schedule."

Algebra. Science. Language Arts. Social Studies. Pretty much the same stuff I'd be doing back home. "What's SEL?"

"Social Emotional Learning. Talking about feelings and stuff. You'll love Ms. Daley."

Talking about feelings? With people that I don't even know? Oh my frog. I fold the schedule into neat quarters

and tuck it into my brand-new planner. Call me old-school.

He pushes away from the desk. “Shall I escort you to your homeroom?”

“Thanks, but the secretary gave me this.” Northlake is three times as big as my old school, so I keep a tight grip on the map.

“Hang on.” He rummages around in a drawer, then enthusiastically presents a window cling: KEEP CALM AND TITAN ON. “Now you’re official. Have a great year, Tess.” He waves me off while grabbing his crackling walkie-talkie. Dismissed.

A NORTHLAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL TITAN POWER! banner greets me as I leave his office. DREAMS DON’T WORK UNLESS YOU DO, warns another down the hall. This school flings motivation around like Gracie does glitter. Another poster hangs on my homeroom door: “NO ONE CAN MAKE YOU FEEL INFERIOR WITHOUT YOUR CONSENT.” —ELEANOR ROOSEVELT. I hate to disagree with someone like her, but I bet she didn’t attend middle school.

I make a wish on my dandelion ring before slipping inside: *New place. New start. New friends?* The teacher’s cleaning up a latte puddle on his desk while a tall kid waves his hands around. “Sorry, Mr. Jensen. Sorry, sorry.”

“It’s okay, Wayne. Accidents happen.” Mr. Jensen

itches a wad of soggy paper towels into the waste bin. “Show’s over, everybody. Take your seats.”

I hang back, waiting to scope out an open spot. When the scuffling settles, I count empty chairs. Four, but I’m a middle-to-back-of-the-room kind of person so the one in the front row’s not happening.

“Here’s a seat.” A really cute guy points to a desk near him.

A girl with blue streaks in her hair grabs her things and stands up. “Mr. Jensen said I could move there.”

“Sorry.” I shift out of her way, accidentally whacking another girl with my backpack. “Sorry. Sorry.” The goal is to get out of the aisle without maiming anyone else, so I plunk down next to the latte spiller. Nothing like making a grand entrance. I set my pack on the floor and realize no one’s even looking at me. Okay. I may survive after all.

The cute guy shows Blue Streak something on his phone. She laughs. He holds it toward me so I can see the photo of two kids wearing Northlake T-shirts. Which is super nice of him but I have no idea why it’s share-worthy.

“That was so hysterical.” Blue Streak braces her hand on Cute Guy’s shoulder, leaning in.

He glances my way and I guess he reads confusion on my face. “Maybe you had to be there?”

I nod. Caitlyn and I used to have tons of inside jokes,

too, before. I never realized they aren't that funny if you're not on the inside.

“Is that a cell phone I see, Mr. Jackson?”

Cute Guy's phone disappears in a flash. “Happy to provide this teachable moment, Mr. J.” When he grins, he's even cuter. And probably knows it.

Mr. Jensen nails him with that universal teacher look. “Two more minutes of chat time, sans cell phones.”

“That's French for without,” Blue Streak offers. “I learned that when we went to Paris last summer.”

I learned it from Juliette, the croissant queen at Tony's. Closest I've ever been to Paris.

The latte spiller shifts toward me. “I don't know you.” This pronouncement indicates a huge character flaw on my part.

“Today's my first day.”

He sticks out his hand. “I'm Wayne Wesley Walker. Pleased to meet you.” The words come out all choppy and rushed, like they've been memorized.

I can't leave the guy hanging out there. “Hi, Wayne Wesley Walker. Tess Agnes Medina.” We shake.

He points to the floor. “And this is Rexi. Short for T. rex.”

A black-and-tan dust mop decked out in a therapy-dog vest looks up but doesn't budge from her spot at Wayne's size thirteen Chucks.

“Hey there, Rexi.” I hold out my hand so she can sniff.

“You’re good with dogs,” Wayne says.

“Well, I had one. Stella. Black lab.” Stella was mellow, but she never would’ve been able to handle the noise and commotion of a school. “Rexi’s pretty chill.” She stretches out her muzzle and pushes at my hand. I oblige with an ear rub.

“Wait. You said, today?” Wayne pushes his glasses up on his nose. “That must be hard, starting a new school in eighth grade.”

“Not as hard as some other things,” I say. Ugh. TMI. “I mean, it’s okay.”

“I think it sounds cool. Living somewhere new.” Cute Guy leans in. “We’ve been here forever.” He draws an air line between himself and Wayne. Over his shoulder, Blue Streak zaps me with a glare.

“Mrs. Mulligan wore stoplight earrings.” Wayne nods.

“Our kindergarten teacher,” Cute Guy explains. “Wayne and I met in that class.”

I had friends from kindergarten, too. Like Caitlyn. But after, we just didn’t have that much in common. I stuff those memories way in the back of my brain.

When Mr. Jensen’s timer goes off, the buzz in the room ratchets down a few notches so he can call roll, which concludes with a “Welcome to Northlake” speech. I want to crawl under my desk when he says, “I expect you Titans to make Tess feel right at home.” Thankfully, there’s no

request to tell the class a little about myself. Then I'd have to join a witness protection program out of sheer embarrassment. The announcements sound pretty much like announcements at my old school: No student pickups or drop-offs in the bus zones. Cell phones will be confiscated if out during class. The student newspaper still has openings for reporters; see Mrs. Chatterjee if interested. Writing is definitely not my marmalade, so I don't bother making a note in my planner.

After announcements, homeroom is a study hall. Complete with no talking. Rexi snores softly while Wayne hunches over a worksheet, erasing as much as he's writing. Looks like square roots. I feel his pain. Give me fractions any day.

Since I don't have homework yet, I unzip my pack for some reading material, pushing past the letter that came the night before we moved. Not ready to deal with that yet. My library book's buried under all the essentials: pens, pencils, phone, lavender lip balm, water bottle, binder. Everything I need to survive middle school except a friend, which obviously doesn't fit in a pack.

The book makes a loud thud when I plop it on the desk. Cute Guy shoots me a look.

"Sorry." I twirl my dandelion ring nervously. "Accident."  
He stretches across the aisle and tips up the cover.