

**MUST
LOVE
PETS**

Kitten Chaos

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CHAPTER 1

“What’s your favorite animal in the whole universe?”

Olivia asks me dreamily.

“A dog, obviously,” I reply, my eyes closed. “Like that’s even a question.”

She’s asked me this before, lots of times. It’s our favorite topic of conversation. We’re in our neighborhood park, lying flat on a picnic table with our legs dangling down the sides. I’m in the middle. My best friend, London, is on my left side. Our new friend, Olivia—who moved to California a week ago—is on my right. All I can see is the blue sky

above me, with puffy white clouds and a tiny airplane.

What a perfect way to spend summer break.

Our plan: to have the Most Awesome Summer Ever, full of food and fun and animals. Lots and lots of animals.

I can't believe that fifth grade is over, and so many exciting things have already happened. It's all thanks to our new pet-sitting business, Must Love Pets. Last week, we took care of our first client, Sir Teddy, an adorable golden retriever belonging to our neighbor Mrs. Jarrett. Sir Teddy is my dream pet, but he's also a devious escape artist. He made my little brother, Amir, sneeze and my grandfather Dada Jee super annoyed, and finally he got lost. Since we're amazing pet sitters, we organized a neighborhood search party and found him.

And then the three of us had our first ever sleepover, so I guess everything turned out pretty perfect. Right?

Right.

“Your mom still won’t get you a dog, Imaan.” This is from London, who’s known me (and my mom) since we were in preschool. She could be right. Mama has told me forty-four times that we will absolutely not be getting a pet. Ever.

That’s not going to stop me from trying, though. “That’s why we started Must Love Pets, remember?” I say cheerfully. “To show my mom how responsible I am.”

“You’re so responsible,” Olivia says in a soothing voice. “Who would doubt you?”

I giggle. “Mama. And Dada Jee.” Then my smile fades a little. “And maybe even me sometimes.”

London turns to look at me. “We don’t doubt you,” she says seriously. “We know you can do it. By the time summer ends, we’ll have taken care of so many pets your mom will call you Miss Responsible.”

I give her a grateful look. London is always on my side, no matter what. “Thanks,” I say, trying to get my cheerfulness back. Sometimes I feel sad for no reason, like when I remember my dad, who died of brain cancer when I was little, or when I think of that perfect dog just waiting for me to bring him home. But the sadness never lasts too long. My friends are always there to push me back into happiness.

Olivia nudges me from the other side. “Imaan the Responsible. Like a knight in medieval times.”

I pretend to groan. “Seriously? That’s the worst name ever for a knight in shining armor.”

“What? Being responsible is super important.”

She’s right. I try to be the best big sister, the best granddaughter, and the best daughter a mother could have, even though Mama can be annoyingly strict sometimes. I clean up every day, and distract Amir

when he's in one of his hyper moods. I even help Dada Jee with his lemon trees.

"Imaan the Responsible," I repeat to myself. It's not too bad. I could get used to it.

I go back to smiling. Lying on this picnic table between my two friends, planning out the summer, feels so good.

"I can't wait to take care of another dog," I say dreamily. "Maybe we'll get a Chihuahua this time. They're so cute!"

"Or one of those mini dogs you can take around in your giant designer purse!" London says with a snort.

Olivia shakes her head. "We already had a dog. I hope we get a different animal this time."

"Like what?" I ask. "A rooster? A piglet?"

"Ooooh, maybe a snake!"

I shiver in pretend disgust. No way am I pet sitting a snake. Then Olivia says, "Pigeons!" and London

shudders like there's one right next to her. She's not a big fan of birds. We come up with more weird pets, laughing at one another's guesses.

Finally, London sits up with a little frown. "How will all these pet owners even know about us?" she demands. "We need to go put up those flyers we brought."

She's right, of course. We found our first client, Sir Teddy, because he lives right next door to us. Mrs. Jarrett had to go to the hospital for an emergency and left us in charge of Sir Teddy. I like to think of it as fate. Kismet. Meant to happen.

I also know we can't rely on things like that happening all the time. If we want to have more pet-sitting clients in the future, we need to let people know we exist.

Olivia sits up too. "Good idea. My back is stiff."

We climb down from the picnic table. Olivia picks up her camera and starts taking pictures of the

trees in the park. She's always doing that, aiming at something very ordinary and taking dozens of pictures with a *click-click-click*. The pictures always turn out ah-mazing!

I lean into her to look at the camera's display window. "Oh, that came out really nice," I tell her. It's a picture of a squirrel on a low branch, eating an acorn. The squirrel's eyes are huge and gleaming, and it looks close enough to touch.

"Thanks." Olivia shrugs and quickly puts away her camera. She's not convinced of her talent yet.

I roll my eyes at her and grab my backpack. It's filled with flyers we, and Amir, made several days ago. We walk over to the big community bulletin board at the park entrance, and I find an empty space to tack on a couple of flyers. *Must Love Pets. Best Pet Sitters in the Neighborhood! We'll Care for Your Pets Like Our Own. Call Us Today.*

The number on the bottom is my home phone number.

“I hope I get lots of calls,” I say. Our home phone hardly ever rings unless it’s a telemarketer selling Florida vacations or a new credit card. But now that we’re giving out my number for the business, I’m hoping it rings nonstop, making Dada Jee scowl at it.

“I hope we get one call at a time,” Olivia replies. “Pets are a handful, you know.” She’s our pet expert, since she’s always pet sitting her aunt’s dog.

London stands nearby, handing out flyers to adults who’re walking around the park with their kids. “We’re very affordable,” she tells a lady with a baby stroller. “And we have great references from Mrs. Jarrett, who lives down the street.”

The lady smiles and takes a flyer. “What a wonderful idea for a summer project, girls!” she says. “I don’t have a pet, but I’ll pass this on to my friends.”

“It’s a real business, not a summer project!” London calls after her, but she hurries away with a wave.

As we leave the park, I remember what London had said a few minutes ago. “Affordable.” I repeat the word a few times, liking the way it sits on my tongue.

London turns to me. “Yeah, so?”

“I guess we still need to work out some things for Must Love Pets,” I reply. “Like how much we’ll charge our customers. And how we’ll divide the money we make.”

Olivia snaps her fingers. “Oh, we also need to get a written testimonial from Mrs. Jarrett. Something about how great we were with Sir Teddy.”

I know what that means. I head toward my house, also known as Must Love Pets headquarters. “We need another team meeting, pronto!”