

CAFE CHAOS

THE WAY THE
COOKIE CRUMBLES

CATHERINE WILKINS

ILLUSTRATED BY
KATIE ABEY

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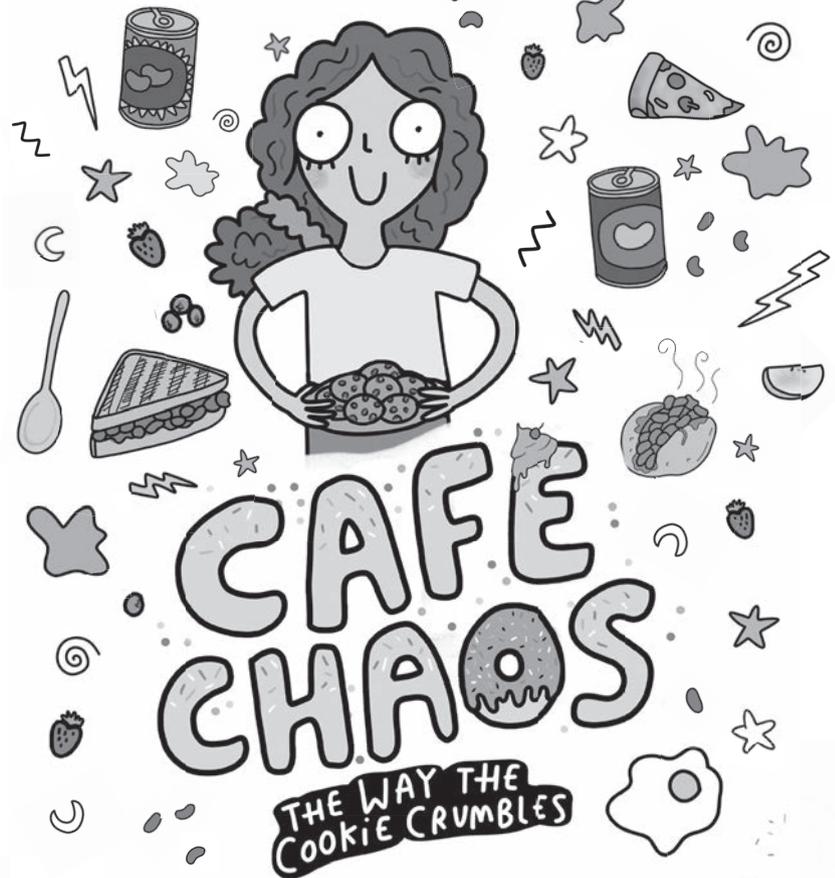
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For Christina and Jane,
thanks for everything.
C.W.

For Violet
K.A.
★



CHAPTER ONE



"Well, hello. Here we are, back again."

"Hope, can you please put your phone the right way up?"

"Oh yes. Soz."

My best friend Leila and I are trying to "get ready together" via FaceTime, but I was accidentally sideways. It could happen to anyone.

We are going out at *night!* (OK, mid-afternoon), but Leila's mum, Sara, is driving us to the cinema. So basically, it's pretty **SOPHISTICATED** and we will be **DRESSED TO IMPRESS** (each other).

"Your room looks much **BIGGER!**" The tiny Leila in my phone starts effortlessly putting a half-French-braid





into the hair around her face, as I settle at my desk and try to copy her.



"Of course it does!

My aunt's camp bed is gone!"

My Auntie Rita finally moved out, which means no more stolen clothes, scrunchies or chargers; **PLUS**, no more *diffuser* pumping lavender-scented steam into my bedroom; **AND** I no longer start my days to the sound of my auntie gargling, chanting or telling me that Mercury in retrograde is the reason the dry cleaner lost her favourite shawl with a picture of an eagle on



2



it. (Mercury is associated with communication.) Which I now know, whether I *want* to or not.

Fun fact: my Auntie Rita still believes she has



and is still running Rita's Oracle from the (painted) mop cupboard of the café downstairs that my parents own and run: **CAFÉ CRUMBLE**. (We're the Crumbles; it's a thing, don't worry about it.)

But now my Auntie Rita is running her clairvoyance cupboard while living back in her *own* flat (she sublet it while she was away, **FINDING HERSELF**, after her divorce) and the truly great news is she took my sixteen-year-old cousin Connor back with her.

"Is Connor really gone too?" asks Leila.

"I can't imagine your flat without him now."

RITA





My **BUSINESS-OBSSESSED**, Fortune-500-wannabe cousin Connor lived with us for the last *six months*, on the other camp bed, in the box room, which is usually used as the office. (I think he hoped the *running-a-small-business* acumen would seep into him while he slept.)

“He is truly goooooonnnnnneeeeeee!” I emphasise.

CONNOR



“Though the box room still smells of boy and Lynx Africa. And I still see him all the time because he’s working in the café.”

“Have you met the baby yet?” asks Leila, tying up her braid and pulling at it a bit, to make it looser or even – I’m not sure which; it already looks **PRISTINE**. Mine is bumpy and wonky, but I decide to tie it up too.

“No. Connor is adamant he doesn’t want to, and my mum won’t let us interfere – apart from when *she’s* interfering. I’ve seen pictures though and she’s really **CUTE!**”



4



The main reason Connor moved in with us was because his dad got his new girlfriend pregnant and Connor wanted to take a **DRAMATIC** stand about it. I mean, OK, look, I get that that *is* a **HUGE** thing to deal with, and maybe he feels **REJECTED** or like his dad has a **NEW FAMILY** that he’s less of a part of. And maybe it hurts even more because Connor was an only child for a long time, and both his parents had always made him their first **PRIORITY**, so it must have been quite a



for him. I fully appreciate I don’t know what that’s like, and I do have empathy for Connor. I do. I really do. But also. **ALSO**. She’s a **CUTE BABY!** What’s not to like?

“What’s she called again?” asks Leila, applying lip gloss.

“Iriye. It’s a Jamaican name. Connor’s dad, Uncle Alan, and his girlfriend Audrey are honouring their heritage and her grandma. It means peace or harmony.”



5





"Oh, that's sweet," Leila smiles. "There are so many Iranian names that mean peace or harmony. Actually, that's similar to Irene. In Iranian, that means peaceful, or maybe palm tree. I think that's what my cousin Arina's name means too."

"It's a lovely name," I agree. "I mean, kind of ironic at the moment, obviously, with Connor being quite disharmonious. (However valid his feelings are.) But you can just tell she's an awesome baby from the photos. It feels like a great chance at a **NEW CHAPTER**, a **FRESH START**."

I feel very enamoured with this concept of a **FRESH START** currently. The café and my family have just been through quite a tough time, what with the whole

THREAT OF BANKRUPTCY

and all that. Luckily, we have staved off certain doom by pulling together with a bunch of schemes to **MAKE MORE MONEY** (some more hare-brained



than others), but the poetry night, ice cream, bespoke baked goods and my wannabe-actress sister Stacey's one-woman show about Jane Austen were successful enough to get us out of the red. Fun fact (or scary fact): when you are behind on your bills, they start sending them to you in red ink instead of black. Which is supposed to scare you because red means **DANGER**. But it's also the colour of love and romance, so I don't know – mixed signals from the banks there?

"You're sounding very poetic and positive," says Leila, looking slightly amused.

"I **FEEL** very positive," I agree. I really do.

I'm loving having my room back, **DELIGHTING** in my own space and absolutely **LUXURIATING** in the unscented air and lack of henna stains. Nothing can bring me down. I hear cars outside on the street below, beeping, and even **THAT** can't dampen my new

ZEST FOR LIFE

"This is the new me," I tell Leila. "I'm positive. I'm a



hopeful Hope for once. I can **FEEL** it. This is going to be *my week*."

"Good for you, babe," grins Leila.

"I'm going to be normal. No

CRAZY FAMILY SHENANIGANS.

Normal."

"Well, don't be too normal," says Leila.

"It's going to be *my week*," I repeat. "And I decree it will be normal."

"What is that? Can you hear it?" asks Leila.

"The cars beeping?"

"Yeah. What's going on?"

"Umm." Now that Leila mentions it, those cars *are* beeping a lot more than usual. Honking, and there's also kind of shouting.

"Ah, it's probably nothing," I say. "Did you know, the longest traffic jam in history was in China in 2010? It was sixty-two miles long and lasted twelve days."

"That can't be true."

"It is true. Google it. Thousands of people were trapped."

"That sounds awful."

"Exactly," I say brightly. "So this is probably nothing compared to that."

"I don't know," says Leila. "It must be **PRETTY EXTREME** if even *I* can hear it."

I go over to my window. "There's a **MASSIVE** lorry dropping off boxes," I report to Leila. "Much bigger than the small vans that usually bring *us* stuff. This is quite a narrow street, so now traffic is blocked both ways and getting really gridlocked. It's— Oh."

"What?"

"Well, it looks like this actually *is* a delivery for our café. But it can't be. Hang on."

I race down the narrow staircase that (theoretically) separates work and home. I narrowly avoid the trip-hazard-hoover (which we now keep at the bottom of the stairs, because the mop-storage cupboard is

RITA'S ORACLE.





And then I burst through the digital-code-locked door, into the bright lights and delicious food smell of **CAFÉ CRUMBLE**.

I have never witnessed such a **CHAOTIC** scene in this café, and *that's* saying something – we once had a queue of customers demanding ice cream that we (at the time) didn't even have on the menu. And don't even get me started on the time the dishwasher randomly pumped foam everywhere, or the time my sister Stacey thought dry ice would be "**ATMOSPHERIC**" last Halloween, but actually made it very hard to see, and an old lady **ACCIDENTALLY** ate her husband's scone and blamed it on the visibility issues, so we had to give him another one for free.

Anyway. The beeping and shouting from the street is much louder in here. A man I don't recognise is bringing heavy-looking boxes into the café. There clearly isn't any space to put them, so he's just piling them up in any gaps he can find around the busy tables full of bemused-looking customers.

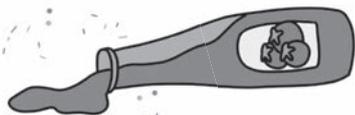
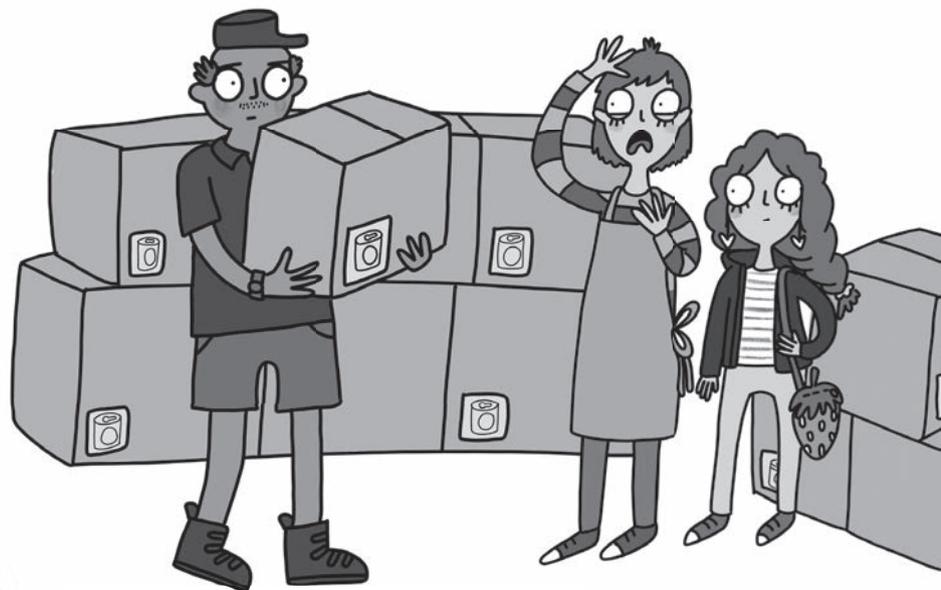
"**NOOOOOOOOO!**" my mum howls at a piece of paper



that another man is showing her. "No, no, no, no, no, no, I **DIDN'T!** Oh nooooooooooooooooooooo." Mum puts her head in her hands.

I skirt around some precariously stacked boxes and go over to her. "What's up, Mum?" I ask.

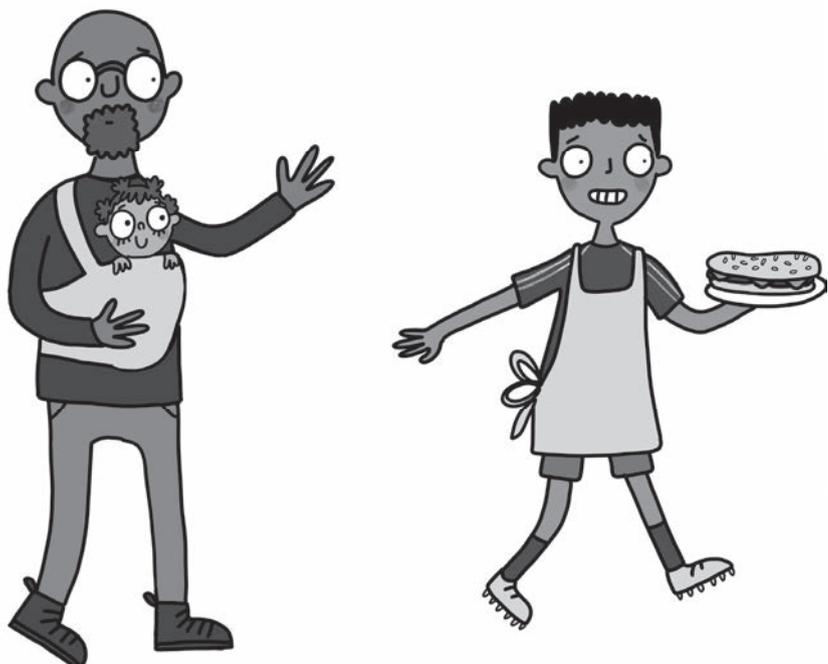
"I've over-ordered the beans!" Mum wails. "This **NEVER** happens to me. I don't *make* **MISTAKES**. I can't believe I've done this."





It is at this exact moment that Uncle Alan enters the café with newborn baby Iriye strapped to his chest. Clearly sick of waiting for Connor to come round, Alan has taken matters into his own hands and decided to **SURPRISE** Connor while he's on shift.

Connor takes one look at Alan with Iriye and immediately **BOLTS** from the premises, past Alan and Iriye, out into the beeping, angry street, still clutching an undelivered mozzarella panini.



There is a brief moment of

SHOCK,

and then a customer in plumber's overalls stands up and says, "Was that my panini?"

OK, maybe *now* it's the most **CHAOTIC** scene I've ever witnessed in this café.

I become aware of Leila's tiny voice, still in my phone. "Hope? Hope?"

I lift my phone back up to my face. "Are you seeing this?" I wave it around so Leila can see the boxes, the concerned plumber, Uncle Alan with a tiny, sleeping baby strapped to him, and my mum still staring aghast at some paper.

I hold her back up to my face again. "I guess, maybe it might not be your *exact week* to be normal," says Leila.

"I couldn't even last *one day*," I agree.

I can feel all my **NEW-FOUND POSITIVITY** start to slowly seep out of me, like I'm a rubber ring with a slow puncture.

