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Cinnamon Girl 

Starting
Over

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Chapter 1

Starting Over



‘MUUUM, have you seen my rucksack?’ I called down from my bedroom on the third floor.

‘MUM, where’s the shoe polish?’ my brother, Dylan, called from the bathroom on the second floor.

‘Both in the cupboard under the stairs and both of you, GET A MOVE ON!’ Mum shouted up from the ground floor. ‘I have better things to do with my time than chase the two of you to do something you should have done AGES AGO.’

‘It’s only last-minute stuff, I’m almost there,’ I called back.

I slid down two flights of banisters to the first floor then took the stairs to the ground, but I wasn’t feeling as carefree as I appeared. Not by a long shot. The next day was going to be the start of term at a new school and I’d be going into Year Eleven.

‘Ah, what vision of loveliness is this?’ I asked when I spotted Mum’s backside in the air as she scrabbled about on her knees with her head in the cupboard under the stairs. She located my rucksack and pulled it out from the tangle of bags and cases stuffed in the cupboard, then began to crawl out. ‘Thanks,’ I said as I took it from her.

‘Looking forward to tomorrow?’ she asked as she knelt back, loosened her auburn hair then twisted it up again into a bun.

‘About as much as a visit to the dentist’s.’

Mum stood up and dusted off the peacock-blue velvet top she was wearing over her jeans. It never ceased to amaze me how even after fishing about in a dirty old cupboard she still managed to look lovely – like a princess out of an Edward Burne-Jones Pre-Raphaelite painting. ‘You’ll be fine, India Jane,’ she said. ‘You’ve done it so many times before.’

‘Yes and *each* time has been more difficult. You don’t understand. Starting a new school is not something that gets easier. It gets harder.’

‘Well it will be new for Dylan too,’ said Mum as he appeared on the stairs in his pyjamas, his rust-brown hair slicked down wet and his face fresh and pink from his bath.

‘Yeah —’ he started.

‘Oh, he’ll be OK,’ I interrupted. ‘Everyone going into Year Seven will be new. All the dinky little kids are in the same situation, little fish in the big pond. They can be wide-eyed and anxious together. They can bond over it. But going into Year Eleven, I’ll probably be the *only* new girl in my year.’

Dylan walked over and punched my arm. ‘Less of the dinky little kid, dingbat-brain.’

‘Dingbat-brain, huh? And you? You are a bug on the windscreen of my life, O small-but-annoying one, and you know what happens to them.’ In a flash, I dropped my rucksack, flicked out my right leg, hooked it around his left, grabbed his torso and pushed him to the floor. It was an ace move. I had learned in a self-defence class at my last school. I rested my left foot on his stomach and began to sing, ‘I am the champion, I am the champion . . .’

He reached up and karate-chopped the back of my knee.

‘Owwwwww!’

‘Stop it, you two!’ said Mum. ‘For heaven’s sake, India, act your age.’

‘I am. I’m fifteen. You’re always telling me not to grow up too fast. Make up your mind.’

Dylan pushed me off, scrambled to his feet and stuck his tongue out. ‘Boys don’t like tomboys,’ he said, ‘so you’ll never get a boyfriend.’

‘Says who? And how do you know I haven’t already got one?’

‘You wish,’ said Dylan. He turned away from us, wrapped his arms around himself and started wriggling in a suggestive way so that, from our position, it looked as if someone had their arms around him. He started making slurpy kissing noises. ‘Oh Joe, Joe . . .’

I raced over and put my hands around his neck. ‘God help any girl that you try and kiss,’ I said as I began to strangle him,

then tried to wrestle him down to the ground. ‘You sound like you’re slurping noodles.’

‘Muuuuuum, she’s attacking me again. Muu-uuuum.’

Mum watched us for a few seconds then sighed. ‘India, put your brother aside,’ she said wearily. ‘He’s not a toy. And you’ll both be fine tomorrow at school although . . . sometimes I wonder if we *should* have stayed in one place instead of trawling all over the world. Maybe we should have let you have a normal family life.’

I let go of Dylan and he went to look in the cupboard under the stairs, but not before elbowing me in the stomach as he went past.

‘Yes. We should have stayed in one place, Mum,’ I said. ‘As it is, I am scarred for life and will need years of therapy when I’m older.’

‘You need it now,’ said Dylan over his shoulder. ‘But I doubt any psychotherapist could help you.’

Mum laughed. She knew I was joking. Kind of. Part of me was serious and wished I had experienced the usual upbringing. One junior school. One secondary. The same best friends since Year Seven. *Especially* the same-best-friends-since-Year-Seven bit. Being on my own tomorrow and going into a year where all the friendships and cliques would have been well established years ago – that was the part I was dreading the most. My family had been on the move since I was born and I’d already lived in five different countries – Rajasthan in India, St Lucia in the Caribbean, Venice in Italy, Essaouria in Morocco, Dingle Bay in

Ireland – all wonderful places: the wing of an ancient palace (the rest of it was a hotel), a lovely colonial house, an old palazzo, a villa and a derelict castle. Mum and Dad loved travelling. And we did see some extraordinary sights and have experiences I wouldn't swap for anything, but all I ever really wanted was a proper home. And a bunch of good mates. Not that I don't have friends. I do, but I feel like I have spent my whole life saying goodbye to them when my family have moved on.

At last, it looked like we might be staying in one place for a while now that we were in Holland Park in my aunt's house (apart from Dad). Mum and Dad ran out of funds (i.e. Mum's inheritance) about a year ago so had needed to rethink the plan. Due to the lack of cash, Dad had taken the first job he could – and was still travelling, but only until October when he was going to come back to join us. He was with an orchestra who were on tour in Europe, and I did miss him. Even though there were five of us living at Aunt Sarah's and a constant stream of visitors, the house felt quiet without his larger-than-life presence. Apart from that, the rethink turned out well. Aunt Sarah's house is awesome with five floors, so plenty of room for all of us. And she has the best taste – at least I like it. Airy light rooms with tall bay windows, wooden floors, (with underfloor heating which is sooo fab after some of the leaky, freezing places we've lived in), warm soft colours on the walls, lots of interesting ethnic art and nick-nacks from her travels in the Far East. Totally tasteful, but then that's Aunt Sarah. The only truly crap part about the move was leaving my

best friend, Erin, in Ireland at the beginning of summer. That was an awful wrench.

‘Have you spoken to Erin?’ Mum asked, picking up on my thoughts. ‘She always cheers you up.’

I shook my head. ‘I tried to call her before. She’s not in. Her school starts the day after ours, so no doubt she’s out making the most of it.’

‘Or out snogging that poser, Scott Malone,’ said Dylan as he crawled out of the cupboard with the shoe-polish box.

‘How do you know about him?’ I asked. ‘Have you been reading my emails?’

Dylan rolled his eyes. ‘As if. I am quite particular about the quality of fiction I read.’

‘How else would do you know about him? Mum, I *really* need my own computer.’

‘You should be glad that there’s only two of you sharing that one up in your room and glad that Sarah had no use for it when she upgraded. If it wasn’t for her, we’d all have to use the one in my workroom and we’d *all* be reading your emails.’

‘Her emails are quite good for a laugh,’ Dylan said, then continued in a girlie voice, ‘I can’t wait to see Joe again at school tomorrow. I think we really connected in Greece . . .’

‘Right! That’s it, you little perv. You’re a dead man.’ I made a dive for Dylan and decided to go for his weak spot. He’s very ticklish. I got him back on the floor and tickled him mercilessly under his arms.

He squealed like a baby. ‘Mu-uuuuuuuuuum!’

Mum sighed again then walked around us as if we weren't there. 'Supper in twenty minutes,' she said as she went through the door to the kitchen.

I released Dylan, who rolled over on to his side and got up. 'And I don't want you tagging along with me tomorrow,' he said as he followed Mum into the kitchen. 'I don't want you cramping my style.'

'*What style?*' I asked as I headed back upstairs. 'Sometimes I *so* wish I had sisters.'

'So do I,' Dylan called after me. 'Or at least a sister who knew how to behave like a GIRL!'

After supper, I went up to my bedroom, got out a sheet of paper and made a list.

Good things about starting new school:

1) *Kate: she's my cousin.*

We live in her house. Well not her house, her mum's. My Aunt Sarah's. Unlike my mum, who blew her inheritance, Aunt Sarah cannily invested hers, made tons of dosh and has this fabbie house in Holland Park. She's divorced and, as there was only her and Kate living here, she said we could stay here until Mum and Dad get sorted. (Which will be never. I know how much houses cost in London. Squillions. And then some. And I also know that when it comes to money, Mum and Dad are Peter Pan and Wendy. Not grown up yet. So I reckon we'll be staying with dear Aunt Sarah for quite some considerable time – which luckily she

seems very happy about.) Kate'll be going into Year Thirteen tomorrow, her last year. She's been at the school since Year Seven, which means she knows all there is to know about the place, plus she is über-cool and bound to be well respected there. We hung out over the summer and I am sure she will show me round and introduce me to anyone worth knowing.

2) *Joe: he's the boy I met in Greece.*

Dylan is right, we do have a connection – more than that. I have an almighty great crush on him as he is the most gorgissimus boy I have ever met, as well as being funny in a cool, dry way. And he's interesting and into art like I am. A love affair is clearly meant to be, I reckon, he just has to agree to it too! His mum, Lottie, and my Aunt Sarah run a New Age centre on Skiathos. I spent the summer there and got to know him a little. He wasn't at the centre all the time because he had a holiday job down in the local village, but when he was there, there was definitely chemistry in the air and when we said goodbye at the airport after we'd flown back from Greece together, things were positively sizzling. We would have had our first snog if there hadn't been a million other people in the waiting area, including our respective relatives who were there to pick us both up. I can't wait to hook up with him now that we're back in England – in fact, I was hoping that he might have been in touch before we started term, but we've not even been back a week so I guess he had stuff to do as he will be going into his last year and doing A-levels, same as Kate.

3) *I can walk to the school from here.*

Twenty minutes tops, so that's good.

4) *I already have a contact to look out for in my year. A girl called Leela.*

Her sister Anisha works for Aunt Sarah. I met her in Greece and before I left she told me to look out for her sister. If she's anything like Anisha, she'll be well grooved up.

Bad things about starting school:

1) *Don't know anyone apart from Kate, Joe, Leela (and I don't even know her yet) and Dylan.*

2) *I have to pick up my GCSE subjects halfway through the syllabus and, because it is slightly different to my last school, there will be a lot of catching up to do to keep up with the others.*

3) *New teachers.*

4) *Having to wear school uniform. Black-and-white this time.*

OK, so you get a choice of skirt style – I chose pencil-straight, but it looks so drab and how am I supposed to wow Joe Donahue when I'm dressed like a penguin?

Tactics for starting school:

1) *Lie low.*

2) *Observe.*

3) *Don't draw attention to myself until I know what's what and who's who. And even then, don't draw attention to myself.*

4) *Arrive on time in the morning. Don't hang about in the afternoon.*

5) *Go in with Kate and be seen with her as often as possible so that people will think I am as cool as she is.*

Essentials to take:

1) *Book, so that if I am ever on my own, I can pretend to be doing something.*

2) *Natural lip-gloss, for Joe Donahue sightings.*

3) *Mobile, for texting Erin as often as possible.*

After I'd written down my tactics, I decided to have a last try-on of the uniform. As I have chestnut-red hair and amber eyes, black and white are not the most flattering colours on me and can make me look washed out. I could just get away with it as I still had a good tan from my time in Greece, but normally I look better in autumn or spice-colour shades. Dad calls me Cinnamon Girl because of my colouring (but also because one of his favourite songs by Neil Young has that title).

Just as I was experimenting to see how much make-up I might get away with, Erin called. 'Hey,' she said. 'I decided to call instead of text as, knowing you, you'll be getting yourself all worked up into a tizz and need to hear from me, the voice of sanity, wisdom and sense.'

'You? The voice of sanity and sense? Are you on drugs?'

'Check. I'll go then, shall I?'

'Noooo. Thanks for calling. You're a pal, Erin. I *do* need to talk to you. Where you been?'

‘Ah, to a movie with some of the girls.’

‘Not Scott?’

‘Not Scott. You know what he’s like. “Commitment” to him is snogging with tongues, and that he does with a number of girls. I don’t know if I want to be just one on his ticklist, no matter how cute he is.’

‘No. You deserve him all to yourself.’

‘Exactly. So, are you worried about tomorrow? On a scale of one to ten . . .’

‘Fifteen.’

‘Ah you’ll be fine, India Jane. You’re a Gemini. They’re the best sign for making new mates.’

‘Not in Year Eleven.’

‘Don’t worry. You still have me. So what you doing?’

‘Getting ready. Trying on the uniform.’

‘Black-and-white, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah. Black skirt. White shirt. So far, I’ve tried the shirt with sleeves rolled up, down. One button loose, tie loose . . .’

‘How about wearing the shirt back to front like a mad person, wear your tie around your leg and put your knickers over your head for a *totally* individual look?’

‘So glad you called. I knew I could rely on you for sensible suggestions.’

‘Can you wear your own shoes?’

‘Nope. Black loafers are compulsory.’

‘Mmm – sexy. Not.’

‘I know. I’d have worn my Converse All Stars if I could.’

‘Ah but you’ll see the gorgeous Joe.’

‘I will.’

‘Text me immediately on spotting him. *Immediately*, you hear? You’re so lucky to be going to a mixed school, whereas I have to go back to the nunnery.’

‘Wish I was there with you, Erin.’

‘Me too. I wish I was there with you, although – hold on a mo.’

‘What?’

‘Remember what that holy chap said, the one whose meditation classes you did in Greece . . .’

‘Sensei. What did he say?’

‘You told me that he said that we shouldn’t always wish to be somewhere we’re not. We have to be here and now.’

‘Wow, you’ve got a good memory, Erin. And I thought you weren’t interested in what he had to say. I thought you were worried that he was going to scoop out my soul and eat it with a raspberry coulis.’

‘Well that just shows how little you know me, India Jane Ruspoli. I am a woman of depth and mystery, as well as wise and sensible and generally marvellous.’

‘And modest.’

‘Of course,’ said Erin. ‘But actually, I thought that your man spoke a lot of sense. It’s mad that you want to be here and I want to be there. We should try and make the most of where we are.’

I was surprised at Erin’s turnaround because in the summer, when I’d got into meditation, she had been *really* sniffy about it, like I’d joined a cult run by aliens. ‘OK. Cool. Be here now.

Groovy. Love and peace. Like, yeah baby yeah.’

‘Don’t you take the pissola now, you eejit. Clearly the purity of your soul has been corrupted by your short stay in London, but I shall pray for you. Ah but you know what I mean. What I am trying to say is let’s make the most of it and be positive.’

‘You sound like my mum, and you know what an old hippie she is.’

‘So? Nothing wrong with that. Yeah, love and peace and good vibes to everyone. And it will soon be half-term and I’ll be there.’

‘Can’t wait.’

‘Me neither. So, carry on with your trying-on sesh. Have your lip-gloss at the ready. And remember, India, you’re a fab and gorgeous girl and anyone would be honoured to be your friend. Seriously. I’ll never forget how totally brilliant you were when my ma had her breast cancer scare.’

‘Anyone would have done the same.’

‘Not necessarily. Some people run away when people are ill, especially when they hear the word “cancer”, like they can’t handle it. You were always there for me and I’ll never forget that.’

‘Well, you’re my mate. I care about you and your ma. How’s she doing?’

‘Just great. Still enjoying being back at work. She looks good.’

‘Give her my love.’

We carried on our conversation for another ten minutes and she gave me the gossip on everyone I used to know over in Ireland, then I had a shower and got ready for bed. I felt

marginally better after talking to Erin, especially when I imagined going in the school gate with my shirt on back to front and my knickers on my head. Then I remembered a technique that Dad said he used when he felt nervous about performing (he's a musician as well as other things). He said he imagined his audiences wearing something clownish. I decided to combine Dad's method with Erin's and imagined everyone – all the unknown faces I would meet tomorrow, all the teachers, all the pupils, *all* of them – with their knickers on their heads. The anxiety scale fell to five. *Now, think nice thoughts*, I told myself as I remembered Erin's advice to be positive as I snuggled down under my duvet. Images of Joe Donahue immediately came to mind and I felt an immediate warm honey sensation in my stomach as my imagination played a dozen romantic reunions through my mind: Joe and I hand in hand going into school. Crowds of pupils in awe that the new girl had got off with the cutest boy in the school. Joe and I playing the lead roles in *Romeo and Juliet* and him insisting that we rehearse the snogging scenes *a lot*. Joe and I laughing, chatting at lunch break, clearly so in love – again watched by envious admirers. Joe teaching me French. Me reading him poetry. Joe and I in the art room, having fun, having a paint fight. Joe and I running for the school team – joint winners. Joe and I. Joe and I. *So weird*, I thought, *all these feelings going through me today. Anxiety about starting over tomorrow – that's a sour feeling. Then I think of Joe Donahue and it's sweet. Sweet and sour. I am clearly in the Chinese-takeaway phase of my life.*