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Opening extract from

Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls the new girl

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RulE #1

When You Are Starting Your First Day Ever at a Brand-new School, You Have to Wear Something Good, so People Will Think You're Nice

Mom didn't think I should wear a skirt with jeans on my first day at my new school.

'Allie,' she kept saying. 'You can wear a skirt *or* jeans. But not both at the same time.'

This argument was not helping the nervous butterflies that were fluttering around in my stomach, considering the fact I was less than one hour away from starting my first day at Pine Heights Elementary, my brand-new school.

I tried to explain about how my new plaid skirt flared out when I twirled around. Which was totally great, and a very important trick to be able to do, especially on your first day at a new school.

Except what was going to happen if I climbed the jungle gym and hung upside down at recess?

I'm not saying I was *going* to do this. I'm just saying it *could* happen, and if it did and all I was wearing was a skirt, the boys on the playground would totally see my underwear.

This was not something you would particularly want to happen on your first day at a brand-new school.

I don't see how Mom couldn't tell that this was a problem.

Fortunately it was a problem that was easily solved. It was solved by wearing jeans under my skirt.

'Allie,' Mom said 'why don't you wear tights under your skirt? Or leggings?'

Which was a nice idea. But, as I reminded her, all my tights and leggings were still packed – along with all my pyjamas – since we had just moved to our new house two days before. And we couldn't find the box they were packed in. We could only find the box with my jeans, shirts and skirts in it.

My tights, leggings and pyjamas were not the only things we'd packed and couldn't find. We also couldn't find the hairdryer, the cereal bowls and most of the pots and pans.

But this was OK, because our new stove hadn't come yet, so we had nothing to cook on anyway.

Personally I didn't see why wearing my plaid skirt with jeans was such a bad thing. I thought my skirt looked really, really good with jeans. So good that I decided to wear it on my first official day at Pine Heights Elementary.

Because *When you are starting your first day ever at a brand-new school, you have to wear something good, so people will think you're nice.* This is a rule.

First impressions are important. Everyone knows this.

It's true that I had already been to Pine Heights Elementary School once before and met my new teacher (Mrs Hunter) and some of my new classmates (Caroline and Sophie, and of course Erica).

But while I'd already been over to Erica's house multiple times, and she'd been over to mine, because we lived next door to each other, I hadn't really gotten to know Caroline and Sophie yet (other than playing a game they'd made up called queens with them at recess the day I'd met them).

And there were still lots of people I hadn't met at all yet, and I wanted to make sure I got off on the right foot with them.

Getting off on the right foot with people is

important. If you don't get off on the right foot with people, it could ruin your whole year.

Which was why I knew wearing a skirt with jeans would be just the right thing to do.

It was just too bad Mom didn't think so.

Fortunately Mom had bigger things to worry about. Like that my little brother Kevin wanted to wear his pirate costume to his first day of kindergarten at Pine Heights Elementary. Really, in comparison, my wearing a skirt with jeans was nothing.

'But Halloween was last month, Kevin,' Mom kept saying.

'I don't care,' Kevin said. 'It's important to make a good first impression. Allie said so. Allie said it was a rule.'

Mom was too busy chasing Kevin around, trying to get him out of his pirate costume, to notice I was still wearing my skirt with my jeans. So I sneaked into the kitchen to see what was for breakfast. What was for breakfast was popcorn.

'I can't find the cereal bowls,' Dad explained.

'We could just eat it out of the box,' my brother Mark said, stuffing popcorn into his mouth. Mark is in the second grade. Mark did not have butterflies in his stomach about his first day at a brand-new school. Mark never has butterflies about anything,

such as, for instance, jumping off the roof of his friend Sean's house, which he did once, thus breaking his arm. This is because Mark doesn't think about anything except bugs. And sports. And possibly trucks.

'Once, at Sean's house,' Mark said, 'we poured milk right into the cereal box and ate out of it with spoons.'

'That's disgusting,' I said.

'No it wasn't,' Mark said.

'I'm sure the milk leaked,' I said. 'Out of the box and all over the place.'

'No, it didn't,' Mark said. 'Because of the seal-tight plastic bag inside.'

'Well, I'm not doing that,' I said. 'I'm not sharing a box of cereal with you. I don't want your germs.'

'We have the same germs,' Mark said. 'Because we're related.'

'Actually, we don't,' I said. 'Because I don't pick my nose and eat it like some people I could mention.'

'The thing is,' Dad said while Mark was denying that he picks his nose and eats it, 'no one is sharing a box of cereal. Because I can't find the spoons either.'

'What's going on in here?' Mom said, running into the kitchen. She was holding Kevin's pirate hat, but she didn't have the rest of Kevin. That's because he'd

disappeared into one of the many secret passageways of our new house, which is more than a hundred years old. 'Why does it smell like popcorn?'

'That's what we're having for breakfast,' Mark said.

'No,' Mom said. 'How did this happen? Whose idea was this?'

Mark and I both pointed at Dad. He said, 'I don't see what the problem is. Popcorn is made of corn. People eat cornflakes for breakfast all the time.'

'Popcorn has no nutritional value,' Mom said.

'Yes it does,' I said. 'Popcorn is high in fibre. Fibre is good for you.' I know this because I did a report on fibre for science once. Corn, which is something they grow a lot of in my home state, is full of fibre. *You need a lot of fibre in your diet to help digest your food.* This is a rule.

'But they haven't had any dairy,' Mom protested.

'I put butter on it,' Dad said. 'And they've got orange juice.'

Mark and I raised our measuring cups of orange juice to show her. We were drinking out of measuring cups because Dad couldn't find the drinking cups.

Mom looked at the ceiling. 'Please don't tell your new teachers you had popcorn for breakfast today,' she said before racing out of the kitchen after Kevin,

who was hiding until the last possible minute so Mom would have no choice but to let him wear his pirate costume to school.

I knew the feeling.

'My new teacher, Mr Manx, would think it was cool if I told him I had popcorn for breakfast,' Mark said. 'Probably.'

'Well,' Dad said, 'Mom would appreciate it if you didn't tell him, anyway. When you come home for lunch, things will be more organized. I promise.'

That was when the doorbell rang. The doorbell on our new house isn't a normal doorbell where you push a button and it goes *ding-dong*. That's because our house is so old, the doorbell is a crank that you turn, and it rings a bell attached to the other side of the wall that goes *brrrring*, like a bicycle bell.

But if you cup your hand over the bell part while someone is turning the crank, it just goes *brrurp*. We found this out after playing around with the doorbell so many times that Mom finally said, '*No child whose last name is Finkle may touch the doorbell or they will not be allowed to watch television for two weeks.*' This is a rule. Not one of mine, one of the family rules.

'That's Erica!' I yelled because I was so excited. Erica had said she'd stop by to walk to school with me on my first day.

I raced to the front door and flung it open. Erica was standing there in her hat and coat, looking as excited as I was.

'Hi, Allie!' she yelled.

'Hi, Erica!' I yelled back.

'I can't believe it's your first day at Pine Heights!' Erica yelled.

'I can't believe it either!' I yelled back.

Then we both jumped up and down for a while until Mark came and said, 'Girls,' disgustedly, then brushed past us and ran outside to join some boys he saw riding by on their bikes.

'Wait' Mom screamed from deep inside the house.

'Why does your house smell like popcorn?' Erica wanted to know.

'Because we had it for breakfast,' I said, getting my hat and coat. 'We packed the cereal bowls and can't find them. I can't find my tights or leggings, either. That's why I'm wearing jeans with this skirt.' I twirled to show Erica my skirt.

'Wow, that skirt is so cute,' she said. 'It's like my sister's skirt for baton twirling.'

This made me really happy to hear, because Erica's older sister, Melissa, who goes to the middle school and is an expert baton twirler, is really, really cool, even though she mostly doesn't speak to us and

stomps away with her nose in the air whenever we're around.

'Here we are,' Mom said, showing up with Kevin just as Erica and I were about to walk out the door.

Erica and I looked at Kevin. He was still wearing black pants, black boots, and a white shirt with long puffy sleeves. Mom had gotten him to give up his red sash, skull-and-crossbones hat, eyepatch and sword.

'At least she could have let me keep my eyepatch,' Kevin said, looking sad.

'You look really good,' Erica assured him.

'Why don't you just put on normal clothes?' I asked him. It's a pain having such a weird brother. Between him and Mark, I sometimes wonder how I got so cursed in the big-sister department.

'*You're* wearing jeans with a skirt,' Kevin pointed out.

'I don't want boys to see my underwear in case I hang upside down from the jungle gym,' I explained.

'Well, I want everyone to know I'm a pirate,' Kevin said.

'They will,' Erica assured him.

'OK,' Mom said in a very fake-cheerful voice as she appeared with her coat and purse. 'Are we ready to walk to school together?'

I could see now that Mark had been smart to run

ahead with those boys. *There is nothing wrong with walking to school with your mom and dad on your first day. Except everything.* Which is a rule, by the way.

Or it will be when I write it in my special notebook for writing rules in that I keep in my room.

'We can walk by ourselves,' I said quickly.

'What about Kevin?' Mom asked.

'Oh, we'll be happy to walk Kevin, Mrs Finkle,' Erica said, taking Kevin's hand.

I didn't know about that. I mean, no one asked me. I wasn't happy to walk Kevin to school.

But it was better than having my *parents* walk to school with us.

'Sure,' I said, taking Kevin's other hand. 'We'll walk Kevin.'

'OK,' Dad said. He had on his own coat. 'You girls walk Kevin. And we'll walk behind you and pretend we don't know you. How's that?'

This wasn't exactly what I had in mind. But it was better than nothing.

'OK,' I muttered.

Erica and I steered Kevin through the door. Outside, the leaves, which had already started changing colours, were beginning to fall from the trees and blanket the sidewalk. It was also cold.

'How come you don't want to walk to school with

your parents?' Erica wanted to know. 'I think they're funny.'

'They're not so funny,' I assured her, 'once you get to know them.'

'Having popcorn for breakfast is funny,' Erica said. 'My dad would never do that. And letting your brother wear a pirate costume for his first day of school is funny. Even wearing a skirt with jeans is kind of funny – although it looks really good.'

I thought about what Erica said. I didn't think it was true. The Finkles weren't funny. The truth was, Finkles were actually exceptionally talented. Especially my uncle Jay, who Erica hadn't even met yet, because he lived in his own apartment on campus who was probably the most talented Finkle of all. He could bend one of his toes so far back it touched the top of his foot. Plus, he had double-jointed thumbs.

I wished I had special skills like that. If I did, I wouldn't have any trouble at all making friends at my brand-new school, or have to wear a special skirt that twirled in order to get people to like me. *If you have special skills or talents, such as having double-jointed thumbs, other people will automatically like you right away.* That's a rule.

It's true that Erica liked me. But she hadn't asked me to be best friends or anything. Probably a skirt

that twirled wasn't going to influence her decision one way or another. But I had to do what I could.

When we were halfway to the school and had reached the stop sign at the first (completely non-busy) street we had to cross to get to Pine Heights, I noticed there were two girls walking towards us from the other direction. Erica said, 'Oh look! It's Caroline and Sophie.'

And it was.

'Oh my gosh, it's your first day,' Sophie yelled, jumping up and down when she saw me. 'This is so exciting!'

'I know,' I yelled back. Because *When someone is yelling at you with excitement, it's polite to yell back.* This is a rule. 'I'm so nervous! I have butterflies!'

'Don't be nervous,' Caroline said. She was the first one to stop jumping. I was starting to realize this because Caroline is actually quite serious. 'Just be yourself. Is this your little brother? Why is he dressed that way?'

'Because I'm a pirate,' Kevin informed her.

Caroline looked from Kevin to me.

'He's in kindergarten,' I explained with a shrug.

'Are those your *parents*?' Sophie whispered, noticing my parents hanging around behind us. They waved, and Sophie and Caroline waved back politely.

'Just ignore them,' I said, pulling on Kevin to get us moving along again.

'They wanted to walk Allie and Kevin to school today,' Erica explained. 'But Allie wouldn't let them, so now they're just following us.'

'Aw,' Sophie said, 'that's so cute!'

'Allie's dad made them popcorn for breakfast,' Erica said. I could tell she was enjoying herself, talking about how funny the Finkles were. This was turning out to be one of her favourite subjects. 'Because he couldn't find any cereal bowls!'

'You're not supposed to tell anyone about the popcorn,' I said to her. 'Or, at least, not any teachers.'

'That's OK,' Caroline said. 'One time we ran out of sandwich meat, so my dad just made us mustard sandwiches. They weren't very good. My parents are divorced,' she explained 'and my big sister and I live with my dad. It can be hard sometimes.'

'It must be,' I said sympathetically.

'*My* dad's a really good cook,' Sophie said. 'Last night for dinner he made us spaghetti Bolognese. My dad does all the cooking in our family, because my mom is working on her dissertation. And besides, she's a terrible cook. She burned potpourri once.'

'You can't burn potpourri,' Caroline said.

'Yes you can,' Sophie said. 'If you go to the mall

and leave it simmering on the stove, the water in it evaporates and then the potpourri smoulders, and then the smoke-detector goes off and the neighbours call the fire department. It was so embarrassing.'

I appreciated what Caroline and Sophie were trying to do – make the butterflies in my stomach go away.

And it was kind of working. Almost all the butterflies in my stomach had disappeared.

Before I knew it, even though we hadn't been walking particularly fast, our feet were tromping on the dead leaves that lined Pine Heights Elementary's playground. I could hear the shrieks of encouragement as kids (including my brother Mark) played kickball while waiting for the first bell to ring. I could see people on the swings pumping their legs to go higher and higher. I saw clusters of other kids just standing around, doing nothing but looking at other kids looking at them (which included me).

That's when the butterflies in my stomach came right back. In fact, they turned from butterflies into great big swooping bats banging around inside me. Because I couldn't help thinking, what if none of those kids on the playground liked me? What if the only people who talked to me all day were Erica, Caroline, and Sophie? Which would be OK . . . but I

didn't want them to get sick of me, not on my first day. Then I'd have a whole year of no one liking me but those three. That would be terrible! I mean, for them.

It was right then that something truly awful happened.

Kevin let go of my hand and also Erica's and ran towards the jungle gym, I guess because he saw some kids his own age playing on it.

To me Kevin just looked normal. I mean, the fact is, he wears his pirate costume all the time, such as to the grocery store, to story hour at the library, and to Dairy Queen for his favourite cone, vanilla twist butterscotch dip, which he is always careful not to spill on his red sash.

But I heard some of the kids standing in a cluster nearby – they were girls, big girls, too, maybe fifth-grade girls – start to laugh. When I looked over at them, I saw that they were laughing . . . at Kevin! That had to be what they were laughing at, because they were looking right at him.

They were laughing at my brother.

And then they looked over at me. Then they started whispering to one another. Which meant they could only be whispering about me. But why? What

was *I* doing wrong? *I* wasn't wearing pirate trousers and boots beneath my down parka.

Then I remembered: I was wearing a skirt with jeans. I'd insisted on wearing a skirt with jeans, in spite of the fact that my mom had tried to talk me out of it.

Oh, this was terrible!

And that's when it hit me. Maybe what Erica had said was really true – the Finkles *were* funny. Maybe the Finkles were *too* funny . . . too funny to fit into someplace new. Like a new school . . . a new neighbourhood . . . a new anywhere.

Oh, why had I let my parents talk me into moving? Why had I let them convince me to start at a new school, where I didn't really know anyone and where people might think Finkles were funny?

And why – why, oh why – had I worn a skirt with jeans on my very first day at my brand-new school?