

RULE #1

It's the Thought That Counts

The best part about the holidays is showing all the cool stuff you got to your friends.

This is a rule.

But when your friends all leave for winter vacation to go visit the beaches in Hawaii or their grandparents or their mom in Maine or whatever, it's really hard to show them that your grandma got your family the new PlayStation with Dance Party America, which you have played so many times (by yourself) that you are already up to level eleven.

It's especially hard when your parents and your brothers and your uncle are quite tired of playing Dance Party America and of hearing about it, too. They wish that your

friends would come home from winter vacation to play it with you almost as much as you do.

I did have one friend who was home from winter vacation, Sophie. But she broke her toe when we were playing Olympic figure skater on her hardwood floors in our socks. So she couldn't do Dance Party America with me. Plus, she was kind of crabby about her sore toe and not having seen her true love, Prince Peter, in so long.

So by the time winter vacation was over I was so excited for school to be starting up again and to see everyone, such as Erica and Caroline, and also my friend Rosemary, whose family had gone to Hawaii for the break, that I could barely fall asleep the night before. Even Mewsie's gentle purring on the pillow beside my head couldn't make me doze off, and usually that does the trick. I had called Erica three times before bed, knowing her plane had gotten in, even though Erica lives right next door and Mom kept telling me to leave the Harringtons alone and let them Settle In From Their Vacation.

But Erica told me she'd seen Caroline at the baggage carousel at the airport and that she had some big news, but

that Caroline's dad had dragged her away before she could tell Erica what it was.

Big news! What could it be?

I hoped it wasn't anything bad. What if Caroline was moving permanently to Maine, where her mom lived? This would be terrible! Pine Heights Elementary would be losing its champion speller!

I was really surprised when I woke up Monday morning. Surprised that I ever fell asleep at all, I mean, because I was so excited to get to school and find out Caroline's big news.

As usual when I woke up, though, Mewsie was massaging my hair. This is a morning ritual he performs daily. No one is quite sure why, and though I'd consulted all of my cat care books, there'd been nothing in them about kittens kneading their owners' hair every morning. Mewsie takes his hair kneading very seriously, and if I try to get up before he's done, he cries. But sometimes his tiny claws sink into my scalp and it really hurts. Also, his hair combing can make me late.

"Ow ow ow ow ow," I said to Mewsie.

“Mew?” he said sleepily back to me. Seriously, he is the cutest kitten in the whole wide world. But he is also the weirdest. The hair combing is the least of it. When I try to make the bed, he gets mad and jumps around with his back arched, making hissing noises.

I said he was weird. Although if you think about it, in this way he fits perfectly into my family.

I untangled my hair from Mewsie’s claws and hurried to get my face washed and my teeth brushed and undo the tangles Mewsie had made in my hair and all of that. I am not the kind of person who cares a whole lot about how she looks.

I mean, I care, in that I do not want to smell or go to school with sleep crust in my eyes like Joey Fields.

But at the same time, I am not going to wear blue eye shadow to school like Leanne Perkins does, even though she is only in the fifth grade. Because that would just be insane.

Still, I tried to Make an Effort since it was the first day of the new semester. I put on all the new hair clips that my

brother Mark had gotten me, and some of the cherry ChapStick my other brother, Kevin, gave me, and I even wore my new wraparound ballet sweater (even though I didn't have ballet lessons until Saturday and I was wearing jeans with my snow boots since it was snowing so it didn't exactly match). I also packed up my new fringe suede tote bag with some of the Boxcar Children books I got, which happens to be a very old-timey series I started reading because my teacher, Mrs. Hunter, keeps her old copies from when she was a girl in our classroom. But I can never read them in order because someone else in our class keeps taking them out and reading them. Only I don't know who it is, so I can't ask her to please return them so I can read them, too.

Now I won't have that problem, because I have my own.

Then, after a nutritious breakfast of hot oatmeal with raisins and brown sugar that Dad made for us kids, because Dad is in charge of breakfast, I rushed outside to meet Erica when she knocked on the front door.

“Let’s go find out Caroline’s big news,” I yelled as I hugged her hello.

“How are you?” Erica yelled back. “I missed you so much! Did you have a good vacation? Ooooooh, I like your new bag. We had the best time at my grandma’s house, I saw a dolphin —”

“That’s great,” I said. “Let’s go find out Caroline’s big news!”

I grabbed Erica by the front of her puffy down parka and pulled her from the porch and toward the street so we could hurry up and meet Caroline and Sophie by the stop sign where we always met to walk to school together.

“Hold on,” Erica said. “Shouldn’t we wait for your little brother?”

“Wait for me,” yelled Kevin, who is only in kindergarten and has to be walked by us to and from school every day because he’s too young to do it by himself. He was still being put into his snowsuit by Mom.

“He’ll catch up,” I said.

I couldn't understand why Erica wasn't as excited as I was to find out what Caroline's big news was. It could be anything. It could be that she had found out her family had won the lottery and that they were moving to a castle in Switzerland.

It could be that it turned out she was adopted and her real parents were famous movie stars and she was going to be starring in her own reality television show about what it was like to be adopted and then find out that your real parents are movie stars.

It could be that she'd gotten a horse for Christmas.

It could be *anything*.

"Come on!" I said.

It was kind of hard to run on the icy sidewalk all the way to the stop sign, but I managed to do it somehow, dragging Erica behind me and having to listen to Kevin yell, "Hey, wait! Allie, wait for me!" the whole way.

And of course when we got to the stop sign we had to wait because I'd forgotten about Sophie's broken toe and that Caroline and Sophie always walked to school together

and that of course meant Caroline would walk slow because Sophie could only walk slow and Caroline would be polite and wait for her to catch up.

So we had to wait for what seemed like a really long time with our toes and noses freezing. Kevin finally caught up to us and Mark had had to walk him and Mark was mad because that meant he couldn't ride his new BMX dirt bike on the first day back to school to show it off to all his friends. He'd had to walk it.

Apparently, I was supposed to feel sorry for him about this even though it was the only day in, like, a million days when Mark had had to walk Kevin to school, instead of me.

But even so, when he got to the stop sign where Erica and I were waiting, Mark went straight up to me and punched me in the arm.

It didn't hurt because I was wearing my winter coat, my ballet sweater, a turtleneck, a T-shirt, and an undershirt under that.

But of course I had to punch him back, only harder.

Because I'm older, and I had to teach him that violence is never the answer.

This made Erica yell, "You guys! Stop it! Can't we all just get along?" because she's a peacemaker and is always trying to make everyone in her own family, like her big sister, Missy, and big brother, John, stop fighting (not that this ever works).

It didn't work in my family, either. My hitting Mark back made him drop his bike in the snow and then it got wet and so he started crying, because he was so mad.

And of course right then some of his friends rode by and saw him crying, which just made him even angrier.

So then he yanked his bike out of the snow and rode away with his face all red and teary.

This made me feel a little guilty, because *As a big sister it's your job to take care of your brothers and not punch them in the arm and make them drop their new bikes in the snow and get them all wet* (this is a rule).

But seriously, I have to walk Kevin to school *every day*. You would think Mark could do it *once*.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of waiting around, with Erica telling me I shouldn't have punched Mark back and Kevin complaining he was hot in his snowsuit and couldn't we just get to school already, Caroline and Sophie showed up, Sophie hobbling on her broken toe (there is nothing you can do for a broken toe. You just have to tape it to the toe next to it. We found this out after we waited three hours in the emergency room with Sophie's dad).

I ran to hug Caroline hello (not Sophie because I'd seen her every single day during winter break) and yelled, "What's the big news?"

"News?" Caroline looked confused. "Sophie broke her toe. She said you were there when it happened."

"She was there," Sophie said. "And she said it was only dislocated, and she tried to put it back in the socket. She said she knows about these things because she wants to be a vet. But it wasn't dislocated. It was broken, and it really hurt, and now there's a giant purple-and-green bruise, and my dad says —"

"No," I interrupted. Sometimes Sophie exaggerates a little. But it's okay because she's the most beautiful girl in

our class, so it's pretty easy to forgive her. "I mean the news Caroline's dad told Erica's parents about last night at the airport."

"Oh." Caroline looked confused. "Right. That. My dad said he saw Mrs. Hunter in the grocery store over winter break, and that she said we're getting a new student in our class this semester."