

CHAPTER I

There are eleven days until seventh grade starts, and I am *not* letting myself freak out. Instead, I invite my best friend over for an emergency slime-making session. Nothing calms me down like, as Kat calls it, “doing science.”

“Lincoln will definitely be better than Hemlock,” I say for the fifth time that afternoon. “I’m *totally* making the right decision.”

Kat looks up from her spot at my kitchen counter, where she’s been sketching out ideas for her newest batch of food-inspired superheroes. “Yes, Lily,” she says with a groan.

“It’s bigger, it has a ton more clubs and sports teams, and it’s coed,” I go on, pretty much reciting the

presentation I gave my parents last spring when I was trying to convince them to let me change schools.

“And most importantly,” Kat chimes in, “it does *not* have Queen Courtenay.”

I nod. She’s right. But after years of being singled out by Courtenay Lyons and her minions at Hemlock Academy, a fresh start at Lincoln Middle School sounds too good to be true. A place where no one cares that I do science experiments for fun and that my family isn’t rich and that I’m nothing like my sister. A place where maybe I could even work up the courage to try out for soccer again.

“What do you think?” Kat asks, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Should Tater Tot shoot ketchup out of his eyes or out of his fingers?”

“Why not his ears?” I joke. “It would be like he has tomato-y earwax.”

Kat chuckles. “Perfect!” She hunches over her sketchbook again and starts drawing furiously, her rainbow-streaked black hair falling in her eyes.

“You can always count on me for good ideas,” I say.

I adjust the lime-green safety glasses that Kat got

me for my twelfth birthday and grab a box of baking soda. Then I sprinkle a half teaspoon into the shaving cream, Elmer's glue, and food coloring that I already combined in a bowl. That done, I squeeze in three tablespoons of my mom's contact lens solution—I'll have to remember to add it to the shopping list so I don't get in trouble for using so much again—and mix everything together. The pale blue concoction slowly stops sticking to the bowl and starts sticking to itself. I lift the spatula and the slime squelches in a way that's vaguely gastrointestinal.

Kat scrunches her nose as she glances over at the bowl. "That sounds so gross."

"It sounds like *chemistry*." There is nothing more satisfying than combining ingredients and creating a whole new substance.

"Just more proof that art is better than science," Kat says with a grin.

I snort. "Keep dreaming!"

This little argument has been going on between us for pretty much as long as we've been friends. Of course, at Hemlock Academy, neither art nor science is

a winner. All that matters is being rich and pretty and—judging by Queen Courtenay—100 percent pure evil.

I give the slime another stir. The new formula I'm testing out seems frothier and less adhesive than ones I've tried before. I pull my trusty notebook and combination pen/screwdriver/ruler/level out of my pocket and flip through my notes on past experiments. When I come to a clean page, I jot down the results.

Light footsteps echo on the stairs. A moment later, my older sister, Maisie, practically bounces into the kitchen. She's wearing an outfit you'd expect to see on a toddler—a sparkly purple T-shirt and denim overalls—and there's glitter sprinkled in her hair. On any other almost-high-school-freshman it would look ridiculous, but it perfectly fits her upbeat personality.

"Hey, guys!" she chirps. Then she spots my bowl. "Uh-oh. *Someone's* stressed out!"

My sister knows me too well. "Not stressed, exactly," I insist. "I'm just—"

"Totally freaking out about changing schools," Kat cuts in.

“Hey!” I cry. Although maybe it’s a tiny bit true.

“Aww, you’ll be fine,” Maisie assures me. “I know it’s weird for both of us to be leaving Hemlock, but we can start over together, okay?”

Right, except that our situations are totally different. I’m slinking off to public school with my tail tucked between my legs while Maisie’s practically riding off to St. Mary’s, her new private high school, on a parade float. Courtenay might be the feared queen of my grade, but Maisie has been the adored mayor of Hemlock Academy since we were little. I don’t think her “starting over” is going to be quite the same as mine.

“Besides,” Maisie goes on, “no one at Lincoln knows you. This is your chance to show them who you really are.”

“In that case, can I be Exploding Emma?” I ask.

Kat shakes her head. “I don’t get why you’re so obsessed with her. All she does is make stuff explode.”

“Who are you guys talking about?” Maisie asks, her forehead crinkling.

“She’s a YouTuber who does these cool chemistry

videos,” I explain. “She’s only sixteen and already a total science celebrity. I would kill to be her.”

Maisie smiles. “Except you’re you,” she says, clearly not getting it. Then she peers into the bowl of slime. “That looks great, but you know what it could use?”

Kat and I look at each other. “Glitter?” we say in unison.

“Totally!” Maisie glances at her phone. “Oops, gotta go. I’m late meeting Ty for ice cream.”

“Which one is Ty again?” I ask. My sister has so many friends that I’ve been thinking of putting them into a spreadsheet to keep track.

“I met him at one of Mom’s fundraisers last year, remember? He gave me his number, so we’ve kept in touch.” Only my sister would go to a charity event and come home with a guy’s number.

“Is it like a date?” I ask.

Maisie laughs. “I don’t know! I mean, he’s cute, but he’s just fun to hang out with, you know?” She slings her glittery bag over her shoulder. “Want me to bring a scoop of chocolate Oreo home for you, Lil?”

She really does know me too well. “Absolutely!”

“You got it! Tell Mom and Dad I’ll be back for dinner, okay?” Then she rushes out of the house in a cloud of perfume and sparkles.

“One day I’m going to convince Maisie to donate her brain to science,” I tell Kat. “There has to be some mysterious chemical that makes her so amazingly cheerful and nice all the time.”

“Maybe it’s all the glitter,” Kat says.

I snort with laughter as I scribble a reminder in my notebook: *Research brain chemistry and “happy hormones.”*

As I tuck my notebook away, I spot movement outside my kitchen window. Could it be? I squint toward the blue house three doors down, trying to get a better look. I can see the basketball hoop at the end of the driveway, but no one’s using it.

“Lily?”

I almost drop my pen. “What?” I ask, pulling my eyes away from Parker Tanaka’s house.

“Are you *still* stalking him?” Kat asks.

“No! Who?”

Kat rolls her eyes. “Why don’t you just go *talk* to Parker?”