

CHAPTER I

Nothing calms me down like science. And since tomorrow is the first day back to school after winter vacation—back to the work-in-progress life waiting for me there—I could definitely use some calming. Luckily, my best friend, Kat, and I are headed to the Boston Youth Science Fair this morning as part of our annual birthday tradition. A jam-packed day of drooling over other kids’ projects and meeting real scientists should do the trick!

“I’m glad you and Kat still do these birthday outings, LB,” Dad says on the drive over to her house. “What is this, your fourth year?”

“Sixth,” I correct him. “We started in second grade, remember?”

Dad laughs. “Oh, right. Slime-making class for you and paint night for Kat. Some things never change.”

I laugh too, but really, *so* much has changed lately that I wasn’t even sure our birthday trips would happen this year. My parents surprised me with tickets to the science fair for Christmas, and I was so relieved when Kat agreed to come. It felt like a sign that our friendship was finally bouncing back after my ridiculous popularity experiment this past fall. Trying to be part of the “in” crowd, playing pranks on people, and lying to my friends—ugh, what was I thinking? At least that part of my life is 100 percent behind me now.

When we pull into Kat’s driveway, she hurries out to the car and hands me a hot-pink gift bag. “Happy birthday, Lily!” she cries. The big day was technically last week, but Kat was visiting her dad over the holidays and just got back last night. It’s only been ten days, but I feel like I haven’t seen her in forever.

Inside the bag, I find a lime-green headband with alien ears attached. “This is awesome!” I cry, putting it on right away.

“I thought it could be your new fashion statement,” Kat says. “Alien scientist chic.”

I snort. In the fall, I was all about the science-y wardrobe, which included wearing my safety glasses on my head all the time. I eventually realized that the whole look was a little much for me, but it *was* nice to have my unruly hair out of my face.

“I have something for you too,” I say, handing her an envelope.

Kat opens it and frowns as she reads the piece of paper inside. “A ticket to an anime exhibit in March?”

“For your birthday! I figured since you’re always talking about this stuff, it’ll be perfect for our next outing.”

Kat laughs. “I think you’re confusing anime and manga. But Hector’s always telling me I should check out more anime, so this will be great. Thanks, Lily!”

She sounds like she means it, but I could kick myself for getting it wrong. “How was your New Year’s?” I ask, changing the subject.

Kat shrugs as she brushes her neon-streaked black hair out of her eyes. “Pretty good. My dad and my

cousins and I did a game night. Then we wrote our New Year's resolutions on pieces of paper and threw them into the fireplace. It was pretty epic."

"What was your resolution? To win even *more* art contests?" I tease.

"That would have been a good one! But no, I decided I wanted this year to be totally drama free. It would be nice for things to be a little boring, you know?"

"Well, without Queen Courtenay around, life should be a lot less dramatic." That's one of the great things about both Kat and me transferring from Hemlock Academy to Lincoln Middle School this year—no more Courtenay Lyons and her minions to torture us.

An odd look passes over Kat's face. Then she nods and says, "What about you? Any resolutions?"

"Not really." I feel silly admitting that one of my big resolutions was about her. Last fall I was so busy pretending to be someone else that it almost ended our friendship. This year, I'm determined to be firmly myself, and to only hang out with people I can really trust—people like Kat.

“What about you finally asking Parker Tanaka out?” Kat whispers. “That’s a pretty good resolution.”

Ask out my totally adorable neighbor? The thought instantly makes my stomach churn. Besides, this is *not* a topic I want to talk about with my dad in the car. So I quickly shush Kat and start talking about the science fair instead.

When we arrive at the convention center, I’m overwhelmed by the hugeness of the exhibit hall. Somewhere in this mess of people are kids from my school’s science club—Priya, Owen, and Bree. Things between the science kids and me have been a little icy since I got kicked out of the club in the fall, but I’m still excited to check out their award-winning projects.

Dad tells us to meet him at the food court at noon, and then he goes off to wander on his own. He might not admit it, but I think he’s secretly a science nerd too.

“Should we try to find Exploding Emma’s booth first?” Kat asks me.

“Oh, um . . . I don’t know.”

Kat raises an eyebrow. “I thought you worshipped her.”

“I do!” Emma is only sixteen but already a super-famous YouTuber. Her channel is all about using science to make things explode. “But talking to people I don’t know isn’t exactly my thing, remember?”

“Let’s do some exploring first,” Kat says, looping her arm through mine. “That’ll give you time to prepare.”

I sigh with relief. “Good idea.”

As we wander down one of the aisles, Kat lets out an impressed whistle. “Wow, this place is huge. You really think we can see everything in two hours?”

“Two hours?” I repeat.

“I figured we’d head home after lunch.”

“No way!” I cry. “There are a bunch of panels happening this afternoon, plus the awards ceremony for the winning projects. We have to stick around for those!”

“Oh. It’s just . . . I told Hector I’d meet up with him later. But it’s no problem. I can push it back.” Kat flashes me a smile and takes out her phone to text him.

It isn’t a big deal. At least, it shouldn’t be. Just because I’m Kat’s best friend doesn’t mean I’m her *only*

friend. I'm glad she's finding her people at Lincoln. Back when we were both at snooty Hemlock, we pretty much only had each other. But that's probably why it's also strange to see Kat with new friends. And doubly strange that she'd make plans with someone else on what's supposed to be *our* day.

Kat puts her phone away and glances around. "Okay, where to next?"

I scan the aisle and spot a brightly colored project up ahead. "How about the physics of roller coasters?"

"Sounds good. Lead the way!" Kat says, and she actually sounds excited. Phew. Our day is back on track.

The morning flies by in a blur of awesomeness. Some of the projects we see are so incredible, I can't believe they were done by kids my age: filtering microplastics from drinking water, tracking aquatic ecosystems, monitoring asthma-inducing allergens. By comparison, all the time I spend cooking up slime and making things explode—not to mention conducting failed popularity experiments—seems like a waste.

After a while I can tell Kat is losing steam. She's trailing behind me, checking her phone more often than she's looking at the exhibits.

Suddenly I spot a tall girl with a headful of tiny braids waving to us from a nearby table. "Look! It's Bree!" I say, dragging Kat over.

"LB, I'm so glad you came by," Bree says to me. "No one's been stopping at my table!"

"It's their loss. This looks great," I assure her. Her presentation on an app that tracks the common cold is a little muted compared to some of the other projects in the hall, but it's obvious how much work she put into it.

Bree grins. "Thanks." She turns to Kat. "It's nice to see you here! But I thought you weren't really into science."

"I'm not," Kat says with a shrug.

At Bree's puzzled look, I explain about our yearly outings. "Our birthdays are only two months apart, so we usually do a science thing for mine and an art thing for Kat's. That way we both get to do something we like."