

((Monday before Thanksgiving.))

Chapter One. *A friend machine*

It's not like my little sister is a criminal or anything. She just likes to do science experiments which involve making things explode.

I worry she'll detonate our laptop, my room or the entire apartment. Or do something else weird *in the name of science*. You know like launch the dog off the roof in a duct tape parachute. Or turn her teeth permanently purple – not just temporarily purple like she has before.

Is it that challenging to be a regular person? I'm in fifth grade and a guy, so I try hard not to stand out, except with sports and stuff. But that's tough when everyone knows one of your little sisters is Dakota.

Dakota has an incredibly big mouth. Way bigger than any other third grader in the entire universe. When she raises her hand, you never know what will come out. And she raises her hand all the time. When the principal is talking. In the middle of a fire drill. When she runs into her teacher in the grocery store.

Plus she wears weird things like a pink lab coat and sparkly nerd glasses, when it isn't even Halloween.

Lately she's been obsessed with this man named Larry who flew nineteen miles in his lawn chair. Mom's so worried she secured the patio chairs to the patio with a bicycle lock.

My other little sister, Izzy, is not so bad. Izzy is in second grade, she smiles a lot and makes dumb jokes. But otherwise she's pretty okay.

After school we have to go to Fiorelli's Restaurant where Mom works. Mom used to let us go home, but then Dakota conducted a science experiment which caused an explosion in the

stairwell of our apartment and the landlord, Torpse the Corpse, called the police. No way Mom will let that happen again.

It's my job to keep an eye on Dakota and Izzy when we're at Fiorelli's, because Mom is busy being Assistant Manager. Assistant Manager means if the waitress calls in sick, my mom is the waitress. If the cook calls in sick, my mom is the cook. If the light in the sign isn't working, my mom is the one who climbs on to the roof to fix it.

On the #8 bus, I sit with my best friend Dodge. Dakota is in the seat behind blabbering away at us like her usual big mouth self. Izzy is in the front with her friends.

I've tuned both of them out because I have my own problems right now. I just got partnered with Yoshiko, the prettiest girl in the whole class, to do a language arts project on extraterrestrials coming to Thanksgiving dinner. We haven't figured out what we're going to do, because when I'm around her, I can't think of one thing to say. Today, Yoshiko asked me if English was my second language. Not in a mean way, either.

When we get off at the stop near Fiorelli's, I have to stop Izzy from hugging the bus driver.

"Izzy, she's driving," I tell her.

Then I notice Dakota is carrying a big box. "What you got there?" I ask.

"None of your business," Dakota says.

"Is too," Izzy says.

"Is not," Dakota says.

“Nothing that will explode, right?” I ask.

Dakota scowls. “I’m not stupid, Liam.”

“She is smart,” Izzy says, then frowns. “Very smart and very stupid.”

I smile at Izzy. Then I pretend I don’t care what’s in the box. The most effective way to get information out of Dakota is to show no interest.

Not two minutes later, Dakota bugs her eyes at us. “It’s a friend machine, if you must know.”

“A what?”

“There are science books, test tubes, magnets and a few other things inside.”

“A real friend magnet, right?” I roll my eyes.

“Exactly. Who wouldn’t be interested in science books?” she drops her voice to a whisper and leans in close. “Some of them have worksheets in the back.”

Dakota has a hard time making friends. She’s always asking weird questions like can you name ten uses for dental floss.

“Your friend machine didn’t work, did it,” I say.

“It did work. A girl came to look, but she failed my interview.”

“Nobody interviews for a friend, Dakota,” I say.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s weird.”

“It’s not weird.” She frowns at me. “How else would you know which friend to pick?”

“Everyone’s a friend. They just don’t know it yet.” Izzy says, skipping next to us.

Izzy is like Velcro for friends. She makes them without even trying. Once Dakota started a club for nerds but nobody wanted to be a member, so Izzy, invited all of her friends to join.

“Mom said the way to get friends is to be a nice person. She said I should be nice *in my own special way.*” Dakota grins.

Uh-oh. The last time Dakota tried to be nice in her own special way, she washed Mom’s favorite sweaters. Now they are all guinea pig size.

I’m waiting for Dakota to tell me more about this when I notice there are tour buses in the restaurant’s parking lot. Tour buses?

Three-thirty isn’t a busy time at Fiorelli’s. There are generally just a few customers finishing a late lunch and a couple of others drinking coffee and working on their laptops. Sometimes the old lady writers’ club Sisters-in-Crime is there. They sit at a back table arguing about the best way to poison people.

But today the restaurant is packed with people sitting at tables with no food in front of them.

A lady with a blue baseball cap that is too small for her head is waving her arm. “Excuse me, when are the drinks coming?”

“We need water!” A lady with a sparkly headband shouts.

“Is it too late for the lunch specials?” a man with a thick dark unibrow asks.

Mom’s ponytail sags and hairs poke out. She gives us each a quick hug and whispers: “I need your help, mates. Put your backpacks in the catering office. Wash your hands and get a white uniform shirt from the rack.”

Mom sometimes asks us to do little things like rolling silverware in napkins or folding side towels for the cook. She's never asked us to put on a uniform and come out front.

We hurry to the back office and each pull a clean white uniform shirt off the rack. The shirt is like a dress on Dakota and Izzy. I tuck mine in, so it doesn't look stupid.

Izzy heads straight for the salt and pepper shakers in the back. Her job is to fill them.

"Get everybody water," Mom calls when Dakota and I come out.

We run to the kitchen and start plunking ice cubes into water glasses and filling them. I grab a glass in each hand and head out.

"Use a tray," Dakota calls after me.

"Good idea." I turn back, pull out a tray, load six glasses and carry it out to the dining room.

I've just finished giving water to the first table when I hear Dakota shout: "Look, Liam! I've got twelve! Now we'll only need five trips! Five times twelve. Get it?"

"Honey!" Mom shouts.

A lady with wildly curly hair gasps.

When I look back, Dakota is carrying a tray with a three-tier pyramid of teetering-tottering glasses.

The room goes suddenly dead quiet.

Dakota stops, trying desperately to steady her wildly tottering tray. Before I can set my tray down to help . . .

*CRASH. CRACK. THUMP. THUD.*

Glasses hit the ground, crack and roll. Glass shatters. Water splashes. A lady in a red dress yelps. Her husband jumps up, knocking over his chair. The lady's red dress has water splotches everywhere.

Her husband is wet in the crotch area of his khaki pants which looks like, well never mind what it looks like.