

**ELIZA BING
IS (NOT)
A STAR**

Carmella Van Vleet

Holiday House  New York

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For Abbey—the real-life Eliza

NEW RULE: DON'T VOLUNTEER

Master Kim once said a good martial artist focuses his or her mind on the lesson at all times. But a million cupcakes says he's never sat through Mr. Roddel's lab-safety lecture. Sorting socks would be more exciting.

Mr. R taught biology, but now that we'd been in school for a couple of weeks, both sixth-grade classes were going to do a chemistry unit and take turns using the lab. Annie was in the other biology class. We'd doubled up to get the safety talk because their class had a substitute who knew more about binomials than Bunsen burners.

Annie nudged my elbow. "Eliza," she whispered. I looked over and she pretended to fall asleep.

Annie wanted to be an actor someday, so she was always playing around like that. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. Taekwondo and making cakes were more my thing. But I faked a yawn, which made Annie yawn for real. And that made me giggle.

Zoe turned around. "Do you mind?" she snapped.

"No, I don't mind," Annie said sweetly, as if Zoe had asked if she could cut in line or something.

Annie and I started a Rules to Surviving Sixth Grade list on the second day of school. And she was breaking Rule No. 4: Don't get on Zoe Goldberg's bad side. (No. 1: Buy,

don't pack. No. 2: Write your locker combo on the bottom of your shoe. And No. 3: Don't sit in the first row of Ms. Miller's class because she spits when she talks.) I appreciated Annie sticking up for me. Tony, my ex-best-friend, never laughed at me. But he never stood up for me, either.

Zoe stared at us, confused. When she finally turned back around, Annie held up four fingers just for me and grinned. I grinned back. Then Annie nodded toward Mr. Roddel to let me know we needed to pay attention. Annie liked horsing around, but she also liked getting good grades.

"Now. Since the weather will be turning chilly soon, you may want to wear scarves," Mr. Roddel said. "You'll need to leave them in your lockers. Loose clothing is dangerous when we're working with the Bunsen burners. And if you have long hair"—here Mr. R paused and eyed a kid named Matt—"you'll need to tie it back while in class as well."

Matt had long, curly hair. He never pulled it back, so his head looked like a mop. That would never fly at taekwondo class. Master Kim had long hair, too, but he wore it in a ponytail. Mine was just long enough for a stubby ponytail. It used to be longer, but I got it cut short. Mom kept asking, "Are you sure you want to do that? You can't undo it," like I was five and didn't understand how hair worked.

I did regret doing it, though. But when Annie first saw me, she said it was "Oh-my-gosh chic!" Well, actually, it came out as "Ohmygoshchic" because Annie talks really fast. She was just being nice, though. (She reminded me of

Sweet Caroline of *Sweet Caroline Cakes*, my favorite show. Caroline always says, “Be sweet to those you meet!”)

Annie had called me out of the blue when I didn’t show up for Orientation Day. She was excited the two of us were in the same homeroom. Last year we’d been in different classes, but we went to the same orthodontist, Dr. Ohno. I’d missed orientation because I was at the ER after I’d jumped down the stairs and bruised my coccyx. If you don’t know what that is, look it up. It’s embarrassing, and I’m not going to talk about it or the inflatable donut I had to sit on for a week. That was all right before my yellow-belt test. Which, FYI, I passed.

Mr. Roddel moved everyone to the back of the room, near the safety shower. He held up the eyewash bottle and showed us how to use it. We weren’t supposed to rub. Just rinse for fifteen minutes and roll your eyeballs around inside your head to make sure nothing got missed. I tried to imagine how you went about rolling your eyeballs inside your head for that long. Should you make circles? Would shaking your head shake your eyeballs, too?

Mr. Roddel caught my attention and tapped his left ear. It was his way of telling me to focus. He came up with it in our “strategies for success” meeting. My parents and I have those every year with my teachers because of my ADHD. I was pretty sure having biology second-to-last period wasn’t a very good strategy for success. My medicine started to wear off by then.

“So, in the exceedingly rare event that your clothes catch on fire or you spill chemicals on yourself, make your

way quickly to the shower,” Mr. Roddel told us. “It’s important that you don’t panic.”

I leaned over and whispered, “Don’t panic,” to Annie. She gave me her best *Who me?* face, which made me want to giggle again. But I didn’t. I slapped my hand over my mouth to stifle a snicker so I didn’t get Mr. Roddel’s attention. Middle school was going to be different. I was going to stop blurting things out and doing things without thinking in class. I was going to have a best friend who didn’t ditch me (like Tony did) and I’d have my first sleepover.

“Once here”—Mr. Roddel fanned his hand over the shower base—“you’ll need to . . . Hold up. Let’s do and understand.”

Everyone groaned because Mr. Roddel always said that. He was in love with the Confucius quote: *I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.* He even had two posters of it on the wall.

“Who would like to volunteer?” he asked. I wanted to make up for not paying attention before, so when no one else raised their hand, I did.

“Thank you, Eliza!” Mr. Roddel said. I started to take my shoes off, but he stopped me and told us that, in an emergency, we should just get inside the shower as quickly as possible.

I stepped under the showerhead and suddenly felt silly standing there. In front of everyone. In a shower.

“Next,” Mr. Roddel announced, “you will pull down on

the chain.” I grabbed the air next to the chain and gave it a fake tug.

“And that’s it! Gravity will do the rest. Any questions?”

No one had any, so Mr. R told me I could step out. I was in a hurry to go back to the group and forgot I was standing inside a four-inch-tall shower base.

Oomph!

My right foot banged against the edge and I stumbled forward. I reached out, both arms waving wildly as I tried to grab on to something—anything!—to keep from falling.

My left hand landed on the chain. Without thinking, I pulled myself up.

HOLY GUACAMOLE

It was raining. And not just on me.

When I’d put my weight on the shower chain, it pulled the ceiling pipe down and cracked it open. Water sprayed out in all directions. People squealed. Others shrieked. Everyone scrambled.

“Calm down and move this way!” Mr. Roddel called. But no one was really listening.

“Yeeess!” a boy said.

“Aw, man. I wish I had my phone,” another boy, named Collin, said. “This would go viral!”

A girl used her folder as an umbrella. “This is a brand-new shirt!” she complained.

I backed against the wall, out of the way. It was too late, though. I was soaked. Annie was off to one side, looking damp and crossing her arms over her chest.

The commotion brought Miss Moorehouse, the history teacher from next door, running to the room. “*Should I pull the fire alarm?*” she yelled.

“No,” Mr. Roddel called over the noise.

Criminy! The last thing I needed was the whole school having to evacuate because of something dumb I did.

Miss Moorehouse managed to get everyone to the front of the chem lab while Mr. Roddel called the office.

The two classes crammed together as best they could to avoid the spray. When the water began streaming across the floor, some of the girls stood on their tiptoes or on chairs. A few boys splashed each other.

“Settle down, folks,” Miss Moorehouse scolded. “It’s water; it won’t hurt you.”

“Well, technically, it can,” a boy named Michael said. “About ten people drown each day.” He was one of those people who always had random facts handy.

Miss Moorehouse frowned at him.

A few minutes later, the maintenance guy came waltzing in with a big wrench. He went straight to the closet in the corner of the room and turned the emergency shutoff valve.

“Awwww,” some people complained. Everyone else cheered.

The place was a disaster with a capital D. Water continued to drip from the pipe and make tiny splashes in the puddles in the back of the room. The rest of the floor was covered in a shallow layer of water. There was a drain in the middle of the floor, but it was clogged by something that looked like someone's math notes. In the back, near the shower, a poster that said SAFETY RULES was a soggy mess and peeling off the wall. Some books on a nearby lab table were ruined, too.

People began shaking out their wet clothes or running their hands through damp hair. "I need a comb," someone called out. The kids with glasses grabbed tissues to dry them off.

"You better hope my shoes aren't ruined!" a girl whose name I didn't know said. "They were expensive."

"That. Was. Epic!" a boy said, and fist-bumped his friend.

"If my watch is toast, you're buying me a new one," another boy warned.

A girl complained as she wiped off the mascara running down her face.

"Great. Just great," Zoe muttered.

From all around the room, glaring, amused, and shocked eyes found me in the back.

And then Michael started slow clapping. "Nice job, Nimbus!" he said.

SQUISHED, SQUASHED

*N*imbus.

I got the joke right away. And since we'd talked about weather in class last week, apparently so did lots of other people.

Nimbus clouds were rain clouds.

My face and chest were hot with shame, but the rest of me shivered from the cold water. I hunched my shoulders and wished I could shrink enough to disappear down the drain. I'd been called Spaz and a weirdo before. And last year, people called me Every Day Eliza because sometimes I wore the same outfit for a few days in a row when I found a comfortable one. But nimbus clouds were gray and depressing and ruined people's day.

"There will be no name-calling," Miss Moorehouse announced over the laughter.

There were about a dozen people who were wet. Including Zoe (ugh) and her friend Ava. Mr. Roddel handed each of us a long section of paper towels as we walked out the door. "The office is expecting you," he told us. "Be quiet in the halls."

Because I'd been right under the broken pipe, I got the worst of it. My tennis shoes *squish squish squished* down the hall. I stopped and yanked them off. But then I had to move more slowly to avoid slipping. Peach pits! Even my socks were soaked.

"Want me to hang back with you?" Annie asked. She

still had her arms crossed, but now she had her notebook in front of her, too.

“That’s okay,” I said.

“I don’t mind.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I told her.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. I figured Annie would wait anyway, but she turned around and kept going down the hall. I didn’t blame her. All I wanted to do was get out of my cold, wet clothes as quickly as possible, too.

Right outside the front office was the Citizens of the Month board. One person from each grade was nominated by teachers. Annie had been picked for September, so her picture and a list of her favorite things were hanging up. Favorite food: cupcakes. Favorite color: green. Favorite subject: language arts.

After this, I bet I could go the entire three years of middle school and never be chosen as a Citizen of the Month.

When I got to the office, the rest of the kids from class were crammed around the secretary’s desk. I stood next to Annie. “So,” I said. “What are we supposed to do?”

“We’re still trying to figure that out,” she said.

“I’m sorry you got wet,” I told her.

“It’s okay. It’s not like you did it on purpose.”

Man. I hoped the principal knew it was just an accident, too. And I hoped the school had insurance for broken pipes and stuff like that. Mom said that we’d used a lot of our savings to pay for Dad’s tuition.

Even though I was the soggiest, I decided to go last. (It was my fault everyone was there, after all.) We had to leave our cell phones in our lockers during the day, so we took turns sharing the two office phones.

The dampest kids called home. The less damp kids were sent to the restrooms to see if they could dry off using the hand dryers. Others went through the Lost and Found box to see if there was something they could borrow.

I turned to Annie. "Did your homework get wet?" I asked her. "You can use the last bit of my paper towel."

Annie hugged her notebook closer to her chest. "No. I'll wipe it off later."

"Okay."

When one of the secretary's phones opened up, Annie called home. "I'm going to run to my locker before the bell rings," Annie told the secretary. "My mom's on her way."

"She'll have to sign you out," the secretary reminded her. "So come back. Don't just leave."

Annie ducked out of the office without so much as a glance my way. Was she mad at me? She'd told me she knew breaking the pipe was just an accident. I was in the middle of thinking of what to say to her when a commotion squashed my thoughts.

"I'm not wearing somebody else's old clothes." It was Zoe.

"Me neither," Ava said.

The secretary tried to tell them that it was better than being wet, but they kept complaining. The secretary ended

up opening the Pioneer Post (the fancy name of our school supplies store) just so Zoe and Ava could buy some spirit wear.

“You can pay for them tomorrow,” the secretary told Zoe.

But Zoe said, “Oh, no. I got it,” and pulled out her wallet. She counted out three twenty-dollar bills to pay for the two pairs of sweatpants and matching tie-dye T-shirts. Smoked salmon! The only things I had in *my* wallet were my student ID and a card with emergency numbers.

Zoe and Ava got permission to change into their new clothes in the nurse’s clinic.

That left just me.

DRIP DRY

The secretary pushed the phone in my direction. “Here. You can call someone about bringing you a new outfit.” I tried Mom first.

“How on earth did you get all wet?” she asked.

I gave her the mini version of what had happened. She sighed. “Eliza, I’m sorry but I just can’t leave work. We’re swamped.” Mom’s a nurse and I could hear the usual beeps and bustle of the ER in the background. “Can you ask Dad?” she said.

I tried, but Dad was no help, either. “Sorry, kiddo. I’m

literally walking into my exam. You'll figure this out. I have faith in you."

"I have faith in you" was Dad Code for "You're on your own!" Since Mom went back to work full-time and he went back to college to become a teacher, Dad loved saying this almost as much as Mr. Roddel loved saying "Let's do and understand." I wondered if Dad would put posters up in his future classroom.

"Any luck?" the secretary asked me when I handed back the phone. I shook my head and tried to ignore the fact that doing so made my hair drip.

The secretary frowned and then started going through the Lost and Found box. "What about these?" she asked, holding up an itchy-looking sweater and a pair of purple leggings.

Nope on a rope. I didn't care how wet I was, I was not wearing those. It's not that I'm stuck-up like Zoe and Ava. But I *am* very particular about my clothes. I hate tight things. And itchy things. After Master Kim first gave me my *dobok* over the summer, I made Dad wash it a billion times because it felt like paper.

"I don't suppose you have a change of clothes in your locker?" the secretary asked me. I didn't.

"Well. What are we going to do with you? It's not like you can stand there and drip dry."

WHAT WE DID WITH ME

The “good” news was I realized I did have a change of clothes. The bad news was they were my gym clothes. I had to go the locker room and put on my navy-blue tee and baggy black shorts. Thankfully they didn’t smell too bad. (I checked.)

I dried my socks under the hand dryer in the bathroom, and afterward I put my wet clothes in the plastic bag the secretary gave me.

When I got back to the office, there was no sign of Annie. I’d text her later. I just got a new cell phone. (I lost my old one.) It was the cheapest Dad could find and I wasn’t supposed to text unless it was an emergency because texting cost extra. But your best friend maybe being mad at you was an emergency.

“Well now!” the secretary declared cheerfully as she handed me a late pass for my next class. “Crisis averted!”

I wasn’t sure what her definition of “averted” was, but I bet it wasn’t the same as mine.

ANOTHER LESSON ABOUT WATER

Since Mom was still working and Sam was at marching-band practice, it was only me and Dad for dinner. This wasn't surprising but it did make me a little sad. Not the being-with-my-dad part. I liked that. It just seemed my family was rarely all in the same place at the same time anymore. And if we were, it wasn't for long.

Dad brought home a pizza. He said the principal called and said what happened was just an unfortunate accident, and she was just glad everyone was okay. That was a relief. But Annie hadn't answered the text I'd sent after school. So maybe it was too early to say *everything* was okay.

Dad and I chomped down a couple of slices of pepperoni, and we made it to the community center with a few minutes to spare.

Taekwondo was practically the only place I was on time for. Which is kind of funny because the class wasn't even my idea. At first, I really wanted to take Sweet Caroline's cake-decorating class with Tony. Tony's family owned a bakery and Tony and I planned to open up our own shop someday. But Mom and Dad said no because money was tight. So when Sam dropped out of the taekwondo class that was already paid for, I struck a deal with them. If I took the class and stuck with it for the whole summer,

they'd let me take the cake class in the fall. They thought I'd quit. But that's another story.

At exactly seven o'clock, Master Kim walked in and strode to the front of the room. If you saw him on the street, he probably wouldn't seem scary. But in class, Master Kim commanded your attention. His shoulders were wide and his hands looked like they could chop down a tree.

"Class, *jong yul!*" Master Kim called. "Line up!"

At my very first class, I was clueless. There were so many Korean words! And I had no idea where I was even supposed to stand. But I figured out that the highest-ranked belts lined up in the front row. The order went from right to left. (Which took some getting used to.) The black-belt helpers stood in the very back of the room, by themselves. My class was a beginner class, so the highest rank was an orange belt. I was a yellow belt, one step up from beginner, which meant I was in the last row. Sophia, the younger white belt next to me, looked nervous, so I gave her a quick smile.

At the start of every class, we did a meditation. We were supposed to sit with our legs crossed, close our eyes, and focus on our breathing. I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking about having to walk around in my gym clothes. (An eighth grader in my last period said, "Hey, stupid. You're supposed to change after gym!") And I kept thinking about the mess I'd made, and all the people who got wet and had to go to the office. Including Annie. And how Michael had called me Nimbus.

There was no name-calling at taekwondo. The

number one rule was to respect each other at all times. There were other rules, too. Like saying “Yes, sir” and “Yes, ma’am.” And bowing when you walked into the room. And before you walked out. Or bowing when you saw a black belt. Or bowing when you started working with your partner. Or when someone handed you a kicking paddle. (There was *lots* of bowing!)

“You may open your eyes,” Master Kim called out. “*Yursit!*” The class stood. I always thought it was cool that a word with “sit” in it actually meant “stand up.”

An orange belt bowed us in to begin training. “Class, *charyut*, attention. *Sabumnim kyoonyae.*” (This last part meant “Bow to the instructor.”)

After warm-ups, Master Kim announced we were going to practice our self-defense requirements. I was working toward my gold belt, and the test was the second week of November. At my yellow-belt test, I got a Spirit Award patch for sticking with it even though I was hurt. Master Kim didn’t give away awards often, so I didn’t expect one for the coming test. But I still wanted to do well.

We worked on our defenses against a shove. I partnered up with Sophia. I remembered what it felt like to be a new, confused white belt, so I was kinda looking out for her. She was a couple of years younger, but we were around the same height.

“Ready?” she asked, standing about six feet away.

I gave a quick *kihap*, or spirit yell, to signal that I was. (“*Huuup!*”) And then she charged at me with her hands out in front of her. I was supposed to put my own hands up in

front of my body and then pivot and turn, like I was a door being opened. But she was moving too fast, and—

Pow-za!

I only sort of managed to get out of her way. Thankfully, neither of us was hurt. Not like the time I didn't get out of the way and a boy named Mark accidentally punched me in the mouth. That was the first time Madison said something nice to me, though. Madison was in my summer class. I thought she was mean and the person who started the Every Day Eliza nickname. But it turned out she wasn't. She was actually really nice. (FYI: Your brain doesn't always tell you the truth.) Madison moved to a different class after our test.

Now Sophia looked worried she'd done something wrong. "Don't worry. It's my fault," I told her. "When someone's about to plow into me, I should move!" We both laughed.

Master Kim walked over. "Do the technique again," he said to me. "But this time move *with* her."

I stared at him. Master Kim had a habit of saying Yoda-ish things like this. I guess he could tell I wasn't getting it. He called, "*Koomahn*," which means "stop," to the rest of the class and turned my confusion into a whole class lesson. He did this a lot. But to everyone, not just me. So I didn't feel too bad.

"There is a natural balance to everything in the universe," he said. "An action and a reaction, a push and a pull. See that flag?" Master Kim pointed to the wall. On the South Korean flag, there was a circle divided in half by a line that looked kind of like an S. Half of the circle was red and the other half was blue.

“That is the symbol for yin-yang,” Master Kim explained. “It represents how opposite forces exist together. Good and bad. Heaven and earth. Fire and water. Now, when someone is attacking you, you can use your opponent’s momentum to your advantage. Watch.”

Master Kim asked an orange belt to run at him as fast as he could. At the last second, Master Kim simply turned his body out of the way and the orange belt ran past him. “Flow *with* your opponent’s energy. Be like the water, not the rock in the stream.”

Master Kim had everyone take turns being the shover and the shov-ee for a few more minutes. Sophia and I plowed into each other again a couple of times.

I should be better at being water, I thought. I had plenty of practice being all wet this afternoon.

BBF

The first thing I did when I got out of class was check my phone.

No messages from Annie.

“Hey, kiddo. Mind if we stop at the store?” Dad asked when we were a few minutes from home. “We need eggs.” What he really meant was he’d forgotten to buy them on Saturday. Dad was like me in the attention department.

I shook my head. And then peeked at my phone

again. Sixty-three percent battery, three service bars. And zero texts.

Was Annie embarrassed by what happened? Maybe she didn't want to be friends anymore because she thought I really was some nimbus cloud that would follow her around and ruin everything. I tried to shove the thought aside, but just like Sophia, it kept plowing into me. I needed a distraction.

"Can I check out the nail polish?" I asked Dad when we walked into the store. Mom usually made me stay with her because she's always in and out super fast when she goes shopping. Dad takes forever.

"Sure," he said. We agreed on a meeting place and time and headed in opposite directions.

There were rows and rows of nail polish. In all kinds of colors. I liked reading their names: Are You Grape Jelly?, Scaredy Cat Black, Espresso Yourself, Little Blue Peep, Lime Time, Roses and Toes are Red. And my favorite, Sweet Mermaid Tales (which was a pretty teal).

I opened the bottle of Sweet Mermaid Tales and tried it out on my thumb. I had money at home to buy it, but I was sure Dad would say no if I asked for a loan. I'd only recently been allowed to start using nail polish again. (Over the summer, there was a nail polish incident that involved an unfortunate spill, paper towels, and a clogged toilet.)

I checked my phone for the billionth time and headed over to meet Dad. Annie still hadn't responded to my text.

I didn't know what I'd do if Annie stopped being

my friend. I really liked hanging out with her. She was thoughtful. For example, she carried extra pens in case I needed one. And when we both had bad days, she'd let me complain first. She was funny and smart, too. Plus, we had tons of stuff in common. To begin with, we both liked peanut butter toast and hated the feeling of dry sand. And we both had dogs whose names started with B, Bingo (hers) and Bear (mine).

Everyone at school had a best friend or a group to hang out with. Everyone had their spot in the cafeteria. Annie would be fine without me. People liked her. But if she ditched me, I'd probably never find another friend. Or at least a new *best* friend. And then seventh grade and eighth grade would come, and I'd still be friendless. I'd probably have to beg my parents to let me go to a different high school to start over. Maybe I could change my name. . . .

"Eliza," Dad said, coming up alongside me and interrupting my thoughts. "You ready?" I noticed he had the eggs—along with a basketful of other stuff.

The two of us got in line. I couldn't stand looking at my blank phone anymore, so I read the magazine covers while we waited.

The ones in our lane were either gossip or news or what Mom called "DHW's." Those were magazines, Mom once explained, that always had stories about desserts, hair styles, or weight-loss fads.

I checked out one (it had a picture of chocolate cake).

On the cover was a headline: HOW GOOD A FRIEND ARE YOU? TAKE OUR QUIZ.

I thought I was a pretty good friend. After all, when Tony went off to the cake class without me, I tried to be understanding. But then he didn't invite me to his birthday party. And I always tried to make Annie laugh. We were writing a Rules to Surviving Sixth Grade list together. But I'd also gotten her wet and possibly ruined her reputation because she was friends with the girl who flooded the chem lab.

My chest hurt.

At our first middle-school assembly, the counselor had talked about how to make friends. She said, "To make a friend, you have to be a friend." It made sense.

I bet best friends worked the same way. If I wanted Annie to stay my best friend, I had to be her best friend, too.

Dad started unloading the basket onto the belt. "Shoot. Can you get that?" he asked, pointing to the box he dropped.

I leaned down to retrieve the cookies. At the same time, someone knocked into the candy rack from the other side and a pack of bubble gum fell right on my head. It wasn't Newton's apple, but I suddenly had an idea.

I wasn't just going to be a *good* best friend, I was going to be the *best* best friend ever. If I did that, Annie would want to stick around.

Sweet Mermaid Tales, I had a plan.

Operation BBF was on!

THE NEXT DAY

Annie had Student Council meetings on Thursday mornings, so she wasn't in homeroom.

I didn't see her in the halls all morning, either. By the time lunch came around, my stomach felt like it did that one time when I accidentally made frosting with old shortening.

The two of us usually met up after we'd gotten our trays. I got to our table first and wondered if I'd be sitting there alone. I didn't think I could deal with the meat loaf. So instead, I started tearing up my napkin.

"Sorry about not texting you back," Annie said, suddenly plunking her tray down across from me. I was so relieved to see her that I almost tossed the napkin pieces like confetti.

"Mo-mo took away my phone for the night because I forgot to take out the trash. I didn't get your text till this morning." Mo-mo was one of Annie's moms.

"It's okay," I told her.

Annie started eating and I found my appetite, too.

"I was worried when you didn't text me back," I admitted. "You seemed a little mad yesterday."

Annie frowned. "Well, I kinda was. But mostly I was just worried"—she leaned in closer—"that everyone could see through my shirt."

"Oh!" I said. "That makes sense." And it did. I always made sure to wear white underwear on days I had taekwondo because you could sorta see through my *dobok* pants.

“If it makes you feel better,” I told Annie, “I don’t think you could.” I didn’t know if that was actually true, but I wanted to help.

She smiled. “Thanks. Sorry I didn’t stick around. All I wanted to do was go home and change as fast as possible.”

Whoa. I’d embarrassed her, and here she was apologizing to me.

“What did you end up doing?” she asked. I told her about the gym clothes and she winced.

Annie pulled out the Rules to Surviving Sixth Grade notebook and opened it on the table. “We should add ‘Keep a change of clothes at school’ to the list,” she said.

I laughed and nodded. She carefully wrote it down. Annie was in charge of writing the rules because, first of all, the list was her idea. And second, her handwriting was neater than mine.

“So, switching channels,” Annie said after she’d closed the notebook. “Play auditions start next Tuesday.” (She got that “switching channels” thing from me.)

I looked at her. She’d been trying to talk me into going with her for the last two weeks. “Come on. Pleeese? It’ll be fun,” she said. “I promise.”

When I didn’t say anything, Annie frowned.

Picnic ants! This was the perfect chance to set Operation BBF into motion and I was already messing it up. Like salt instead of sugar in a recipe. But I’d never been onstage. What if I did something embarrassing in front of an entire audience? A classroom had been bad enough.

Annie and I noticed at the exact same time that people were standing beside our table. It was Collin, the boy who wanted make a viral video yesterday, and a few of his friends.

“Yo. What’s the weather forecast, Nimbus? Chance of rain today?” Collin said. He and his friends cracked up and high-fived. I remembered Master Kim’s lesson about being like water and not the rock, and decided to go with the flow. But Annie grabbed her pencil and opened our notebook to the very back page.

“So. What are your names again?” she asked with the pencil poised over the blank sheet of paper.

“Why?” one of the boys wanted to know.

Annie smiled sweetly. “No reason.”

The boys looked at each other and then decided to just keep moving.

Annie turned her attention back to me. “Don’t listen to them. You are not a rain cloud. In fact, you’re the opposite of a rain cloud,” she said, her voice rising dramatically and her hands gesturing wildly. “You’re one of those giant, fluffy clouds on sunny days. The ones that look like bunnies or ice cream cones.”

“Thanks!” I laughed.

“How can you be so calm about those jerks?” she asked.

I shrugged. Annie didn’t take taekwondo, so it was hard to explain.

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

It did. A lot. Names were like assigned seats—something you wouldn’t have picked but were usually stuck with anyway.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It bothers me. But it’s better to just ignore them.”

“Well, you’d never know you were upset. You’ve got a great poker face!” Annie said. “I’m serious. You have to come to the auditions with me. Being able to keep your composure is, like, the number one skill for actors.”

She was being so nice. And she’d been so forgiving about the whole getting-her-wet-and-embarrassing-her thing. My plan to be the best best friend ever was off to a disastrous start all because I was too chicken to be onstage.

Annie tried again. “It’ll be an adventure,” she said.

I wasn’t convinced. But then I thought about how Tony had started to do other things without me. Would Annie stop being my friend if we didn’t like the same things? On the other hand, the thought of auditioning . . .

“I’m too busy,” I told her.

“No, you’re not.”

She had me there. I’d been hoping I could take Sweet Caroline’s fall cake-decorating class, but I didn’t have a way to get there and back. Mom had to work extra shifts. And Dad had added more classes this semester. Luckily Sam had a girlfriend with a driver’s license and a car to give him rides home after band practice. Plus, the cake class cost money and, as Mom and Dad liked to remind us, “Money still doesn’t grow on trees.”

Annie didn’t give up. “But we’ll make so many new friends. For real,” she said. “Plus, you’re a natural, Eliza.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not!” Annie insisted. She lowered her eyes and got quiet. “And, truth is, I also don’t want to go by myself.”

Something jabbed at my heart.

What would a best friend do?

STEP 1 OF OPERATION BBF

Okay. I’m in!”

DUUUUH

It was past dinnertime. Mom and Dad were arguing in the kitchen.

“I’m sorry. I forgot,” Dad said. “I was running late this morning. Why didn’t *you* take out something last night?”

“Why is dinner always my responsibility?” Mom responded.

I turned around and headed to the living room. I didn’t like it when Mom and Dad raised their voices like that. Especially about something as dumb as dinner. I’d totally eat cereal three times a day if they’d let me. The kind that tasted like cookies was my favorite. It’s too bad there

isn't a tiny cupcake-shaped one. I'd eat that three times a day, too.

Since dinner was obviously going to take a while, I decided to watch TV. Sam was stretched out on the couch. "What up, E?"

I scowled in my brother's direction. Since he turned sixteen, he'd started calling everyone by their first initial all the time. He even called Mom and Dad "M" and "D." It was super annoying, but Mom said it was a phase.

"Is dinner ready?" Sam asked.

I shoved his feet off the end of the couch and plopped down. "No," I told him. "Wanna watch *Family Feud*?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

I clapped, pretending to be all excited, and said, "Good answer, good answer!" He grinned and grabbed the remote.

"We surveyed one hundred people," the host read from his card. "The top eight answers are on the board. Name something a dog might do that embarrasses its owner."

"*Sniff things!*" Sam yelled at the TV.

"*Pee on the floor!*" I said at the same time.

"*Sniff things*" was the number one answer.

"Ha!" Sam said to me. "In your face." I didn't mind. He wasn't really being mean. Sam was actually pretty cool most of the time. He was the one who helped me after I fell down the stairs and bruised my tailbone. And while I was at the ER, he cleaned up the mess I'd left.

One of the contestants on the show answered, "Coughs up a fur ball."

The rest of her family clapped and said, “Good answer! Good answer!”

Bear put her tiny poodle paws on the screen and barked. Even she knew that answer was silly.

Sam and I raised our arms into X’s. “*Dumb answer! Dumb answer!*” we yelled at the television. Sure enough, a giant red X appeared on the screen and the buzzer sounded. I always thought it sounded like it was saying *Duuuuuh!*

Sam was ahead three correct answers to my two when his phone pinged.

The goofy grin on his face told me it was Megan, his girlfriend. We hadn’t officially met her yet, but Mom knew her because Megan was in the marching band, too. Mom was the band nurse on game nights and field trips.

Sam’s thumbs texted a quick reply. He stared at the phone, waiting for a response. A few seconds later, he grinned some more. I nudged Sam’s leg and pointed at the TV, but he ignored me.

It was happening again.

Last year, in fifth grade, we learned about these things called whirlpools. They were kind of like tornados, only in water, and they sucked things in if you got too close. Megan was Sam’s whirlpool.