

**ELIZA BING
IS (NOT)
A BIG, FAT
QUITTER**

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Carmella Van Vleet

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Summary: After learning she cannot take a cake decorating class with her best friend, partly because her parents consider her a quitter, eleven-year-old Eliza tries to prove herself by sticking with a taekwondo class all summer.

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For Abbey—my favorite girl in the whole world

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains numerous Korean words. There is a list of these words, their pronunciations, and their definitions at the end of the book to help you as you read.

Translating the Korean language into English is not easy. Like all languages, dialects cause pronunciations to vary from area to area. In addition, each martial arts school may use slightly different terms. I have done my best to use the spelling and pronunciation that the World Taekwondo Federation uses. I have also consulted people who speak Korean. If I've missed the mark on occasion, I apologize. Any errors are mine.

On a final note, one of the characters in this book is testing for her green belt. It should be pointed out that ranking systems vary by school. In other words, a green belt at one school may be a different color or level somewhere else. The ranking system I use here is a fairly traditional one. It is also the one we use at my taekwondo school, and therefore the one I'm most familiar with.

PB AND J

I was peanut butter, and Tony was jelly. That's what our teacher called us after we designed The Tasty Pastry for our fifth-grade social-studies project. Which, FYI, we got a big, fat A on.

"This is so coool," I said as I wrapped an apron around myself. It was day three of summer, and Dad had dropped me off at the bakery Tony's family owned so I could hang out.

Tony smiled and raised his eyebrow. When Tony first showed up at school, everyone thought that was cool and tried to copy him. I even taped my eyebrow up so it could get used to being in that position. All I managed to do was yank out a bunch of hair when I pulled the tape off.

"The bakery is busy," I noticed out loud.

"Yepperoni!" Tony said, breaking out an Italian accent.

I laughed so hard I got the attention of a nearby cake decorator. She frowned.

Tony ignored her. That was another thing I liked about Tony. Actually, there were lots of things I liked about him. But my favorite was that he never called me names like the other kids. Things like Dizzy Lizzy (which didn't even make sense because my name is *Eliza*, not Lizzy) and Lame Brain (which didn't even rhyme). And when he found out why I went down to the nurse's office each day after second recess, all he did was shrug.

Tony picked up the piping bags on the counter and handed me one. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” I said, remembering to use my inside voice that time.

We were supposed to squirt chocolate cream inside cupcakes. That’s what Tony had been working on before I came. Tony’s mom seemed surprised when I showed up. But on the last day of school, Tony said I could stop by his bakery if I wanted. Any time.

I couldn’t believe I was there. I mean, I’d visited once before when Tony and I were doing our project. But this was different. I was really working in a shop! There were pretty, sugary-smelling cakes, cookies, and pastries everywhere. And real, live bakers with flour on their clothes. It was just like the *Sweet Caroline Cakes* TV show.

“It’s easy once you get the hang of it,” Tony said, showing me how to fill the cupcakes.

We worked for an hour. Tony’s whole batch was perfect. I made about a dozen good ones. I kept squeezing the bag of cream too hard, which caused the cupcakes to explode. I had to say “Oops, sorry. Oops, sorry,” like a billion times. It was a bona fide cake-tastrophe.

“Clean up in aisle one,” Tony said after surveying the damage.

I started giggling and couldn’t stop. The grouchy cake decorator was frowning again. Tony’s dad came over and told us to take a break and get some cookies from the front case.

“Hey. I’ve been thinking about our shop’s slogan,” I said as Tony and I ate our snack at the little table in front of the bakery. He didn’t say anything so I kept talking.

“This one is really good. What about ‘Sweets for my peeps? Get it? Peeps. Like people?’”

“Oh right. Our shop,” he said.

I laughed.

Holy cheese and crackers! How could Tony forget The Tasty Pastry? It wasn’t just a school project. We were really going to do it someday. He was going to be a world-famous pastry chef. And since I had watched every episode of *Sweet Caroline Cakes* at least three times (including the one where she won the Ohio Cake-Off), Tony said I could be in charge of cakes while he made everything else.

At least that was the plan.

THE BIG FAT NO

My dad says some ideas are like Venus flytraps and that lots of times, I’m the bug. I don’t know if it’s true or not; but when the summer brochure for the community center came in the mail, I circled Cakes with Caroline with a red marker. Then I dog-eared the page and left the brochure open on the counter for Mom.

Sweet Caroline was the nicest person on TV. She always treated clients like old friends and didn’t yell at her

employees. She ended every episode by looking at the camera and saying, “Be sweet to those you meet.”

Tony was already signed up for the class, which was being held in a room filled with kitchenettes where you could work with real ovens and wear real chef hats. Even though cakes weren’t his specialty, he still thought it was important to know how to do them. And the bakers at his parents’ shop didn’t have the time to teach him.

After I got home from hanging out with Tony at the bakery, I went into the kitchen to grab a hot dog from the fridge and ask Mom if she’d registered me yet.

When she saw me, Mom stopped rinsing dishes and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Come have a seat,” she said.

Being asked to sit down is never a good sign.

I broke off an end of the cold hot dog and dangled it above Bear. She wagged her stumpy poodle tail so hard her whole backside shook, but then she remembered her manners and sat down. I gave the piece to Bear and then took my own bite.

“Eliza. Honey,” Mom said. (*Honey* isn’t a good sign, either.) “Dad and I talked it over, and we decided it wasn’t a good idea for you to take the cake-decorating class.”

I forgot the swallow-first-then-talk rule and choked a little. “Why not?” I asked between coughs.

Mom frowned. “Well,” she said, “the class is twice as expensive as all the other classes. Plus you have to buy a book and extra materials. At the moment, we just can’t afford it. Not with Dad changing career directions.”

Changing career directions was code for “losing his job and going back to college.” It meant I heard, “We can’t afford it,” as often as I heard Mom say, “I can’t today. I have to work.”

“But Mom . . .”

“Isn’t there another class you’d like to take instead?” She gave me a hopeful smile.

I crossed my arms and gave *her* my best stink eye. “No!”

NO J

I was too mad to eat so I gave Bear the rest of the hot dog. Then I grabbed the phone, locked myself in the bathroom, and called Tony.

“Oh man,” he said when I told him the bad news. “That sucks raw eggs.”

“I know! It’s so unfair.”

“Maybe you could pay for the extra stuff,” Tony suggested. “Do you have any money?”

Even though I was on the phone, I shook my head. “I only have ten dollars.”

“That’s not enough,” Tony said.

“Nope.”

I thought he might offer to share the money he got from helping at his family’s bakery, but he didn’t.

Neither of us said anything for a minute. I tugged on

my lucky rubber band, the one I wore around my ankle. It snapped in half.

“So I guess I’ll let you know how the class goes,” Tony finally said.

Whoomph! That took all the air out of my chest.

“You’re still gonna take it?” I asked. “Without me?”

“Duh,” Tony said.

When I didn’t say anything, Tony went on in a nicer voice. “If I’m gonna be a pastry chef, I gotta get started.”

“I think you’re being selfish,” I told him.

“Well, I think *you’re* being selfish. Being a pastry chef is my thing.”

“Mine too!” I said. “Well, cake decorating anyway.”

“Since when?”

I could feel the anger rolling around my insides. Why didn’t he think I was serious? I talked about Sweet Caroline’s cake show all the time. He said that’s why he picked me to be his partner on the create-your-own-business project. He told me he could tell I was going to be a great cake decorator someday.

I opened my mouth to take a deep breath, but instead of air coming in, something else popped out. “Jerk.”

Tony hung up.

PB without J.

That’s what I was.