

## Chapter 1 Tired of Tofu

It's almost dinnertime, the most terrifying hour of the day.

I crack open my door and peek into the family room. My little sister Blossom's watching the Disney channel. The flickering TV light makes Blossom look like she's underwater—I wish. She's six.

“Is it safe?” I cross my fingers that Nana's the one in the kitchen and not Mom.

Blossom squirms and peers over the counter into the kitchen. She grabs her throat and gags.

I shudder. Mom cooked.

We're facing another night of tofu and tabouli. I'm afraid Mom's joined a cult of vegans, and since I'm eleven, I pretty much have to eat what she puts on my plate. She's been on a healthy eating kick for so long, I'm having nightmares about killer tomatoes planning a sneak attack at the Farmers' Market.

“Buddy,” Mom calls, “time to wash your hands for dinner.”

I shut my door, find my phone, and text my best friend Emma Lane. I beg her to invite me for dinner. She gets right back with the bad news—they ate an hour ago.

“Buddy, did you hear me? Dinner's ready.” Mom's louder. She's heading this way to drag me to my doom.

I rush into my bathroom to stare into the mirror. Whew. My eye-whites are still white and not turning yellow—yet. It's just a matter time with all the fruits and vegetables Mom's forcing me to eat. Too much of even good stuff can be bad. I read this on the Internet and I believe it. I straighten my shoulders. No use fighting it.

When I reach the dining room, Blossom and her stuffed monkey, Monkey, are in their regular places. Monkey uses a pink doll highchair. Nana's filling our water glasses—even Monkey's. Nana says it's better if we go along with acting like Monkey's alive until Blossom doesn't need him to be. We're all still getting over losing my dad to a roadside bomb in Afghanistan, but Blossom's recovery's been the slowest.

When we're settled and waiting, Mom pushes through the swinging door from the kitchen with a big bowl that smells like it's filled with burnt leaves. She plops it onto the table next to a platter with tofu and tomatoes on skewers.

“What are those?” I point to the clump of singed green balls in the bowl.

Mom scoops up a mound of the icky things and drops them with a clunk onto Blossom's plate. “Roasted dollhouse cabbages with olive oil and sea salt. Yum.”

Blossom stabs at one with a fork, hits it wrong, and it flies off her plate onto the floor where it lands with a thud. “Are they plastic?”

“They're Brussels sprouts,” Nana says. “They're better than they look.”

I manage two bites. Nasty. Most times, Nana's right. Tonight, she's wrong.

For what feels like two years, I push tofu and tomato around on my plate. Finally, Mom goes into the kitchen for our desserts. I'm hoping for frozen cherries.

I turn to Nana. “I miss normal food.”

“Monkey does, too.” Blossom nods like a bobble-head doll.

“Give her time,” Nana says. “Your mom wants to take good care of you two. I don't think she knows she's gone overboard—but other than the food, she's better, don't you think?”

Mom returns with dessert. Cantaloupe. It's pretty much the Brussels sprout of

fruits. I stare at the evil orange cubes. Why are all the ickiest foods orange?

Since I promised Dad I'd try my best to always do what's right, I take a big breath, then gobble as much cantaloupe as I can without spewing chunks. If the right thing's not fighting Mom about the food she feeds me, why doesn't it feel better?

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I don't dare pull it out—breaking the no-phones-at-the-table rule means surrendering my phone for three real long days.

“May I be excused?”

Mom looks at me over her cup of chamomile tea. “Finish your dessert first.”

My bowl's fuller than before. I whip a glance to Blossom's. Empty. And she's grinning.

My phone vibrates again, then stops.

I face my fate. When my bowl's empty, my stomach feels like I swallowed a soccer ball. It looks that way too. I just might explode.

Me and Blossom clear the table, then load the dishwasher.

I dart back into my room and check my phone. I got a call from Janie McGetrick, the lady who runs the Orlando Theme Parks Kids' Advisory Board. I solved my first mystery with her. It's how I earned my spot on the advisory board. I drop onto my bed and call her back.

“Hey, Buddy,” Janie says. “I need your investigation skills on a project.”

This is awesome. “What's it about?” I ask like I might not want to do it, but I'm bouncing up and down on my bed so hard the springs creak pretty loud.

“I want you to help my friend Chef Byland at Worlds of Darkness. Several strange things have happened to him in the past few months. He thinks someone's

playing pranks on him, but I'm afraid it's more serious and will worsen. You're perfect to uncover the culprit for him."

Whoa. A detective job at my favorite theme park! I grin so big I bet I look like Monkey. "What kind of stuff's happening?"

"So far, silly things. Last week, someone loosened the tops on the salt shakers in the employee cafeteria."

"That's it?" Sounds like kid stuff. "That happens in our school cafeteria once a month."

"Normally it wouldn't be a big deal, but Chef Byland's working on a major new event, the Gourmet Ghoul Food Festival. He's had some troubles in the past that he's worked hard to overcome, so it's important the festival's a success. If you can help, I'll ask Emma, too."

A festival all about food and a case to solve? I can't believe how lucky I am. I'll get to eat stuff like giant turkey legs, fried pickles, and any kind of belly-busting burrito I want.

"Buddy?" Janie says. "Will you help?"

"You bet. I'll take the case."

"Great. Chef Byland's trying to downplay what's happening, so it's best to keep your investigation low key. Do you understand?"

"You don't want me to cause a big fuss like last time, right?"

"Absolutely. It took two days to find and return those goats to the petting zoo."

Janie laughs. "I'd like you to resolve this before Worlds of Darkness begins its media blitz for the festival next month."

“Two weeks?” I shrug. “No problem. Can you send me a list of what all’s happened?”

“I’ll send you everything I know tonight. I leave town on Monday for training, and you won’t be able to reach me. I do want to caution you that Chef Byland denies there’s a problem. If he learns I asked you to help him, he’ll lose it. Let’s keep this between us and Emma?”

“No problem. He’ll never know we’re on the case.”

“Thanks, Buddy. I don’t want to leave without giving you some backup in case things go sideways. I don’t expect you’ll need any help, but if you do, I’ve spoken to another of my friends, a detective with the Orange County Sheriff’s Department. He’s agreed to act as a resource if you need him. I’ll include his name and contact information with my list of pranks.”

What? “Why? I don’t need help. I know what I’m doing.”

“Of course you do, but I want someone you can turn to for help. Detective Roberts is a super nice guy.”

“Wait. Detective Roberts? Detective Quentin Roberts with Orange County?”

“Right. Do you know him?”

Janie sounds confused. She sounds that way a lot. I think it’s more her than me who causes it.

“No. I only know his name. He runs the sheriff’s teen academy. I’ve got two years to go before I’m old enough to apply.” That’s a lifetime to wait. “I wonder if me and Emma to a good job, if I can convince Detective Roberts to give me early admission.”

“It’s possible,” Janie says. “It won’t hurt to impress him. You and Emma take

care and call Detective Roberts if you need him. Promise?"

"Don't worry. I want to meet him."

After we say good-bye, it hits me. If Janie's worried enough to set me up with a detective, something awful strange must be happening at Worlds of Darkness.