

ELEMENTS OF GENIUS

NIKKI TESLA AND THE
FERRET-PROOF DEATH RAY

JESS KEATING
ILLUSTRATED BY LISSY MARLIN



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amuses herself by inventing things, like her mysterious missing father; trouble is
most of her inventions have serious, lethal potential (like the death ray, which just
blew a hole in her floor); so she and her ferret are hustled off to the special Genius
Academy with classmates who are equally exceptional, although she still worries
about fitting in—but when her death ray disappears she has something bigger to
worry about: who took it and what are they planning to do?

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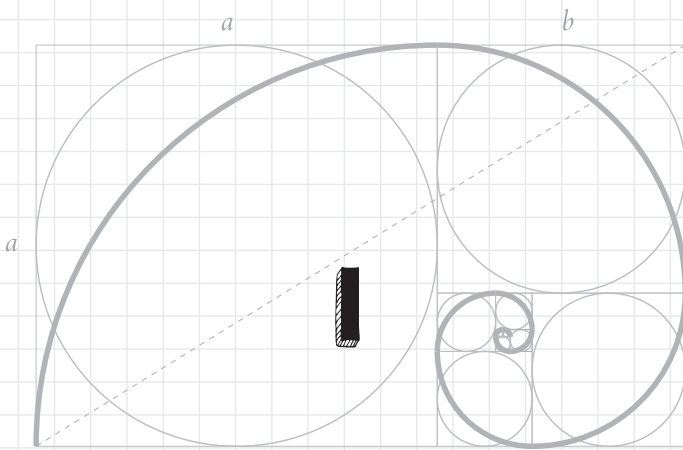
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Okay, I can't really explain a lot right now because as you can see, there's a death ray pointed at my eye.

Yeah, a *death ray*. As in, utter destruction and annihilation—*poof*, you're dust!—all at the handy pull of a trigger on a weapon no bigger than a water gun. But this thing doesn't shoot water. Do me a favor and don't sneeze or anything, all right? I do not need to be vaporized right now.

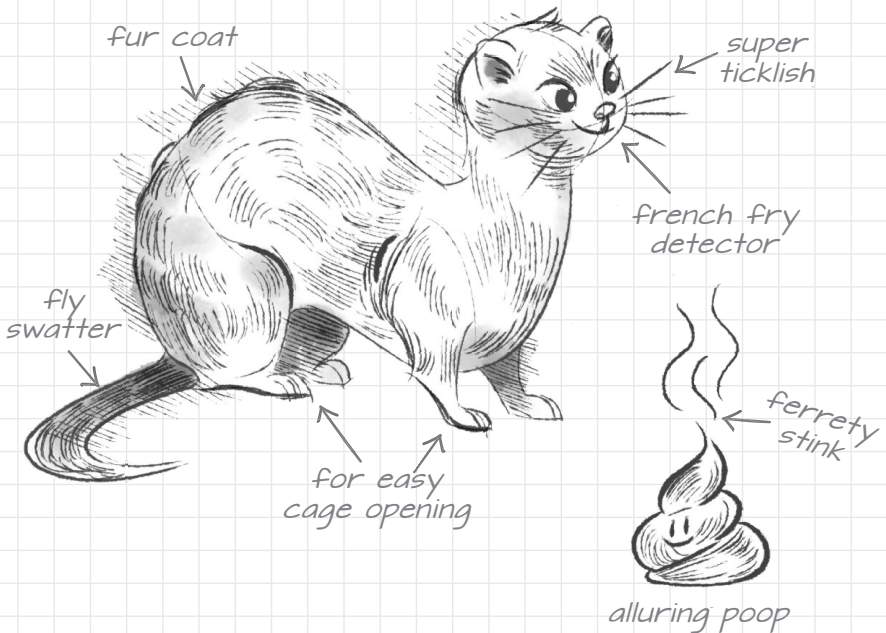
In case you're wondering, the most important step when building a death ray is to keep your pet ferret away from it.



I learned this the hard way.

Pickles is my best friend. You might think it's weird that my best friend is a ferret, but I promise you she's very friendly and only bites when you startle her. Can you say that about *your* best friend?

She's escaped her cage twenty-seven times, so I'm pretty sure she's a genius. But she also eats her own poop sometimes, so maybe I'm completely wrong. Anyway, before I started working today I checked that Pickles was in her cage, and even filled it with French fries to make sure she would stay in there. But apparently the lure of



accidentally vaporizing me was too great for her. She jimmed the lock on the door and shimmied out of that cage with a mouthful of fries before I could say “Eureka!” Then that little so-and-so hopped onto my desk and started batting my death ray with her furry little paws.

The death ray slipped, and the next thing I knew, I was flat on my back with Pickles staring down at me, her brown paw resting on the trigger of the death ray like it was no big deal.

That brings us up to right now.

“Uh . . . Pickles?” I squirmed against the floor, angling myself as best I could away from her aim. I was afraid to move too fast and spook her.

She cocked her head. Her tiny pink nose was snuffling. Maybe I should have given her gravy on those French fries.

“Would you mind moving away *slowly* from that gun, sunshine?” I asked her. I don’t know why I bothered asking, really. She never listens.

“Come on,” I coaxed. I glanced over to her cage. I was sure the pile of French fries was still inside, waiting for her. “Can’t you smell how yummy those fries are? All greasy and salty. Triglyceride city. How about you go eat and let me clean up this mess? I’ll even get you some gravy for them . . .”

Pickles huffed. The trigger of the death ray clicked backward slightly as she adjusted her paw.

“Okay! Okay!” I winced. “Cheese, too! I’ll get you some cheese, I promise!”

Pickles narrowed her beady eyes at me, and I started to wonder if holding me hostage for her cheddar fix had been her plan in the first place. She’s had it out for me ever since I threw out the stinky toilet paper roll she used as a hat. Her ears perked at the sound of someone walking up the stairs.

Oh no.

“Nikki!” my mom yelled from the hallway.

“Don’t come in, Mom!” I yelled back, my voice crackling traitorously. Pickles and my mom didn’t get along very well. The last thing I needed was for Pickles to get panicky. Not with the barrel of the death ray still aimed at my eyeball. Plus I’d *sort of* promised my mom that I wouldn’t mess around with any new inventions anymore ever. Especially dangerous ones.

I was pretty sure a *death ray* wouldn’t be seen as a safe gadget to her, no matter what cool stuff it could do.

My doorknob twisted. One surefire way to guarantee your mom comes into your room is to tell her to stay out.

“Don’t come in?!” Mom burst in, already in full rant

mode. “Young lady, as long as you’re living under this roof—”

Her mouth dropped open when she saw me on the floor. Above me, Pickles gnawed on the trigger of the ray gun. This was some bad luck right here. I really should have put a safety on the thing.

“Mom!” I hissed. “Don’t *move!*”

But it was too late.