

ALLIE,  
FIRST  
AT  
LAST



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BY  
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FOR MY FAMILY



# CHAPTER 1

Blame it on Junko Tabei. Or blame my teacher, Mrs. Wendy. She's the one who puts up a new poster of a famous person each month on our classroom wall. This month it's Junko Tabei, the first woman ever to reach the top of Mount Everest. In the poster, Junko has a pickax flung over her shoulder like she's ready to hack away at our classroom.

The month before, Mrs. Wendy hung up a poster of Neil Armstrong. Before that it was Amelia Earhart. This month Junko Tabei, pickax and all, stares me down with a challenge: When will *you* be first at something?

I know it's just a poster, but a fifth grader doesn't need that kind of pressure. It's bad enough I come from a long line of ambitious "first ever." My great-gramps, Rocky Velasco, was the first soldier EVER from our town to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He got it for being a WWII hero, but he doesn't like to talk about it. My big sister, Adriana, is the "first ever" national debate champion from our town. And that's just the tip of Mount Everest. My three siblings are first at everything and have tons of trophies and medals to show for it, but here I am about to graduate from Sendak Elementary and I haven't been first at anything.

I've had five whole years at Sendak to make my mark, and each year my rise to the top collapses like an avalanche. In first grade, we had to sell cookie dough for new playground equipment. I sold cookie dough to every single house in my neighborhood and to all the firefighters at my dad's station. Still, I came in second to Ethan Atkins, who sold a hundred tubs of cookie dough outside of church. In second grade, it was the jump-rope-a-thon for the children's hospital. I was jumping for two hours straight to beat the Sendak jump record set by Adriana. Ten minutes shy of the record, I got a leg cramp. Third grade was Sendak's math tournament. I lost in the finale to a word problem! A word problem!

I don't even want to remember my big-time fail last year. It was Sendak's annual fourth grade "Trash to Treasure" Recycling Contest. All we had to do was collect trash and make something amazing. Most kids went with the obvious and built wind chimes and bird feeders, but I took a bunch of thrown-away plastic water bottles, Styrofoam, cardboard, and empty Capri Sun packages, and made an awesome boat that actually floated! Little did I know that the black-and-white kitten we had just adopted from the animal shelter hated boats. The morning of the contest, I found Secret chewing the Styrofoam and clawing the cardboard to bits like it was made of catnip.

I've had five epic years of failure at Sendak. Today everything changes. No more failure for me! I've got a massive volcano, and I plan to be the first in my family to win Sendak Elementary School's fifth-grade science fair.

A few tables down from mine, Mr. Gribble, the head of our science department, and the other teachers stand in front of Sara Lopez's display. Mr. Gribble is asking a lot of questions, and when Sara answers, he nods and jots down notes on his clipboard. The other judges, including Mrs. Wendy, follow his lead. Sara is usually super cool and collected behind her red-rimmed glasses, but I can tell she's flustered. She fumbles with the magnets on her table and frowns.

She and I used to be best friends until Christmas break, when she decided that hanging out with Hayley Ryan was more fun.

Now she sits with Hayley at lunch and barely says a word to me. The few times I've caught her alone I've been too afraid to ask her why we're not best friends anymore. I've tried to figure out what I did wrong, but I always come up empty. Since kindergarten, I've been the coolest best friend. Last year I made her a best friend bracelet. I used her favorite color rubber bands: pink and black. Then it was her idea to invent our own secret language. She called it "best friend code." I mastered our new language in a couple of hours. Sadly, it only lasted a month, because Sara got bored with it.

Did Sara get bored with me the same way she got bored with our invented language? I glance over at her again. I bet if I win this science fair she'll realize how much she misses being my best friend. There's nothing boring about a massive volcano.

Even though I know my volcano project inside and out, I flip through my note cards. I am super prepared to answer Mr. Gribble's questions about lava, the Ring of Fire, and all the different types of volcanoes. I know more about gas bubbles than is probably legal.

Last night after dinner, I rehearsed my presentation for my family. Later, while everyone slept, I practiced in front of Secret. He eyed my volcano suspiciously and took every opportunity to whip it with his fluffy black tail. I don't think cats like volcanoes, but hopefully Mr. Gribble does. He's the one I need to convince that my project is first-prize worthy. I bet Junko Tabei faced a lot of Mr. Gribbles on her way to being the first woman to scale the tallest mountain in the world. Did it stop her?

Nope!

And it won't stop me. Mr. Gribble is the only thing that stands between me and my triumphant legacy at Sendak Elementary.

"Pssst, Alyssa! They sure are taking a long time, huh?" says Victor Garcia, the new kid at Sendak. He sidles up next to me. "I wish they'd hurry—my green slime is going to dry up and I have to pee something fierce."

I glance over at his pained face and then at his table display to the right of mine. It's the green goo project. That's so fourth grade.

"I know you're still kinda new, but only the adults call me Alyssa. Call me Allie."

"Sorry about that," he says. "Anyway, I wanted to tell

you that your volcano is super cool. Everyone says you're going to win."

"Everyone? Even Sara?" I put the note cards down on the table and watch him do the gotta-pee-so-bad shuffle. Victor transferred to Sendak after the winter break. This is the most we've ever talked.

"Yeah, everyone." He shuffles some more. "You're going to make history at Sendak for having a mega volcano."

"You'll be the one making a historic puddle if you don't go and pee already," I say.

"I can't." Victor groans. "If the judges come and I'm not here, I could be disqualified. I really need to do well at this school. It's the last year before middle school, you know."

"Well, you can't just stand here like a volcano about to lose it," I say. "If they get here while you're gone, I'll stall them at my table until you return, but hurry. Pee like you're trying to break the Guinness World Record."

"You rock, volcano girl!" He runs off.

Great. A new nickname. The only name I want is Allie, Science Fair Champion. Maybe then my big brother, Aiden, and my younger sister, Ava, will give me some respect. I'll finally make my family proud. And I can graduate from Sendak with my head held high like a true Velasco.

I rummage through my book bag to take a quick inventory. Detergent and baking soda mixture? Check. Red food dye, vinegar, and water? Check. Towels for cleanup? Check. Safety goggles for the judges? Check.

Mr. Gribble and the judges have left Sara's table. Her head is down, and she's picking at her nail polish. It's a bad habit she has whenever she's anxious. Science isn't one of Sara's favorite subjects—she's more of a musical, artsy type, but if anyone could beat me in this science fair, it would be her. She's super smart.

Which reminds me. Where is Victor? The judges are only three tables away now. I go over to his table and see that his prepared bowl of green goo is dried up. His poster board display asks *Is it a liquid or a solid?* in big, bold green print.

I poke the green ooze with my finger. No movement. "Definitely more solid," I answer. I grab his water bottle and stir a few drops into the bowl of green slime. It loosens it up. I have to give the new kid his props; it's actually very good-quality green goo, and his poster presentation is simple and fun. I like how he used stencils for the letters. I hate to admit it, but Victor's display is better than mine. Still, I have a massive volcano, and it's my golden ticket to that first-place trophy and Sendak history.

When Victor gets back, he's wiping his hands on his lab coat.

"I saved your green goo," I say. "It was dried up. I added some water."

"Thanks, volcano girl."

"Stop calling me that." I roll my eyes. I look toward Sara's table. She's folding up her display boards, which we're not supposed to do until the fair is over. I wonder if I should go over there and remind her. Maybe if I do, she'll thank me and we can start being friends again. "Hey, will you watch my table for a minute? I need to talk to Sara."

"Sure thing, volcan—Allie."

I sneak past the judges at Diego's "Tornado in a Bottle" table. Two tables away from mine. This has to be quick visit.

"Hey, Sara, what are you doing? We're supposed to keep our presentations up for when our parents and the other students arrive."

"What's the point?" She shrugs. "I'll be lucky if I place at all. My parents are going to be so disappointed." She drops her magnets into a box.

"Your parents are proud of everything you do," I say. Her parents are good friends of my parents. I know they'd never be disappointed in Sara as long as she tried hard.

“It was a fiasco. I wasn’t prepared for the questions,” Sara pouts. “Mr. Gribble is so unfair.” This is classic Sara Lopez. Before every big test, she’ll complain that she didn’t have enough time to study. Afterward, she’ll whine about how she “totally blew it.” Then when the tests come back, she always has a big fat A marked on the top of the page. Sara always shrugs it off as “just luck I guess.”

She’s luckier than a leprechaun.

“I’m sure you did fine. You always do awesome.” I hope my pep talk doesn’t sound lame. I don’t know why I’m so nervous all of a sudden. Sara and I were best friends for years, and now I can’t speak to her like a normal human being.

“Hardly.” She frowns.

I pull on my side ponytail and try to think of something to cheer her up.

I stick out my arm and show her the friendship bracelet she made from tiny turquoise and purple bands. “Look, you made me this bracelet, remember? Last year? It still hasn’t fallen apart.” She looks down at her magnets and doesn’t say anything. Sara isn’t wearing the bracelet I made her. In fact, I haven’t seen her wear her bracelet since this semester started. I’m such a dork. She probably tossed it. “And you’re a good songwriter. Remember that song you wrote for Secret? ‘Being Fluffy Isn’t Easy’? Everyone loved it.”

She looks up at me from her box of magnets and frowns. “Aw, I miss Secret.”

I gulp hard. She said she missed my cat and not me. I mean, I know Sara went with me and my family to pick Secret out at the animal shelter, but she could at least acknowledge that she misses me too. We’ve known each other since kindergarten!

Still, this is the most we’ve talked all semester, and I’m so happy about it that I’ve forgotten why I’m in the gymnasium in the first place. That is until I hear a series of whistles. I look over and see Victor whistling for me. Can’t he just use his words? I have a name! Mr. Gribble and the judges have left Diego’s tornado display and moved on to the table before mine.

“Hey, I’ve got to get back, but promise me you’ll stop packing. Everyone has to see your project. It’s *magnetic*.” I smile. “Everyone is going to be *attracted* to it, I’m sure.”

“Okay, Allie.” Sara rolls her eyes, but not in a mean way. “Don’t *force* me to laugh.”

I know it’s a long shot, but I go ahead and ask anyway. “Hey, after the science fair, my family is going to Cosmic Taco to celebrate. Do you want to come with us?”

Sara snaps two magnets together. “Celebrate what?”

My stomach churns. I could win first prize for making a fool of myself. “I mean, it’s not like I’m going to win, but just in case I do win today, Mom and Dad promised me tacos. Although, I probably won’t win. It’s just Cosmic Tacos. Nothing fancy.”

“Sure, I’ll ask my parents when they get here.” She smiles at me and unfolds her display board. “Good luck, Allie,” she says.

“Cool. It’ll be fun,” I say. “Okay, later!” I rush to my table, feeling like Junko Tabai at the top of Mount Everest.