



Save the Cupcake!

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Save the Cupcake!



Freaking Out

I'm not usually the kind of girl who gets punched in the face. I guess this was just my lucky day.

"Hayley! Hayley, are you okay?" Marco's thick, straight eyebrows are pulled together. He reaches for my hand, but Artie pushes him away.

"What is *wrong* with you?" she shouts at him.

"I'm fine," I say from my place on the ground, but nobody hears me. Everyone is shouting and pointing fingers, and Marco is looking at me, his dark brown eyes brimming. I wish I could give him a hug. His fist in my face was an accident. Marco is one of my best friends — he would never hurt me on purpose. I know he must be feeling worse than I am right now.

I rub my jaw where his knuckles knocked against me and stand up so that everyone can see I'm okay. Marco was

actually reaching for Ezra, but I got in between them. This is what I get for trying to stop a shoving match at a soccer game.

I don't even *like* soccer. Why did I have to get involved?

"Everybody step back," the coach commands. The players, referee, and miscellaneous people (me and Artie) mill around, everyone wandering slowly back to where they are supposed to be.

I look up at the blue sky. The game had started out well. I'd even been enjoying it for a while.

That alone probably should have made me suspicious.

It was a perfect day for a soccer game — sunny, with a cool breeze that kept it from getting too hot. I'd brought cupcakes that we could all share afterward. Artie and I sat in the first row of bleachers. As usual, she was patiently answering my questions about what was going on. I never understand what's happening when I watch soccer; I have some kind of sports deficiency. When I look out at the field, all I see is people in matching outfits running around like the fate of the world hangs on their ability to kick something. It's like *Attack of the Clones*, with a ball.

But it's important to Marco, and Artie plays, too, so I try to show up and cheer at their games. (Sometimes I cheer at the wrong moments, but it's the thought that counts.)

Everything had been going just fine until Marco shoved

Ezra, then Ezra shouted at him, and I rushed forward to help at the same moment that everyone on the field did the same thing.

“Hayley, I’m sorry!” Marco shouts as the coach starts to drag him toward the locker room.

“It was an accident!” I call after him, but I’m not sure he’s even heard me. I desperately want to go after him, but I think I’ve “helped” enough for one day, and don’t dare.

The zebra-striped referee has now ordered the teams back to the field. Artie and I retreat to the aluminum bleachers, where parents and other students stare at me for a moment, then return to their seats. The referee blows the whistle to restart the game.

“I can’t believe Marco got into a fight with someone from *our own* team,” Artie snaps, her eyes on the players.

“Ezra said something to him.” I open and close my jaw, testing for damage, but there doesn’t seem to be any. I don’t think I’ll even have a bruise. I only fell on the ground because I tripped over Ezra’s feet when I was trying to grab hold of Marco’s shoulder.

Ezra has white-blond hair, which makes him easy to spot among the clones. I glare at him as he races toward the opposing team’s goal. I’ve never liked Ezra much, and I like him even less now. “Someone should have dragged him off the field, too.”

“They don’t drag you away for saying things; they drag you away for shoving,” Artie shoots back. “Marco has to control his temper. He can’t keep losing it!”

“The last time was two years ago.”

“And it was just like this — he went ballistic and shoved Guy for no reason!”

“Maybe there was a reason.”

Artie’s hazel eyes lock on mine. “What good reason could there possibly be?”

I shrug, biting my lip.

My best friend heaves a sigh. She looks over at the gymnasium, where Marco is — no doubt — being lectured to within an inch of his life. “He’s so sweet,” she says slowly. “But he just gets so . . . mad sometimes.”

“I know.”

We stare out at the field for a while. I reach for the Tupperware box of cupcakes at my feet. We each take one, and nibble in silence as we watch the purple-suited players race around, trying to score.

Neither one of us feels like cheering anymore, I guess.



Confession:
I Know Why Marco Freaked
Out in Fifth Grade . . .

. . . And Artie doesn't. Nobody knows but me. That's because Marco made me promise not to tell.

After Marco screamed at Guy Poole and shoved him so hard that he knocked over a desk, Marco was suspended for two days. His father, red-faced and frowning, had to come to school and pick him up.

I didn't see him when I got home from school, and I didn't see him the next day, either. Artie was unusually talkative on our walks, almost as if she was trying to drown Marco's absence in words.

During one of her brief silences, I said, "I wonder what Marco is doing right now."

She heard me, all right, but she just squinted up at the clouds, and then started describing Jennifer Winston's awful new shoes.

That night, I couldn't fall asleep, wondering about Marco. He had another day of suspension, then I guessed he would just walk to school with Artie and me again. Artie's house was behind mine. Marco lived next door.

Looking out the window, I saw a flash — like a bolt of tiny lightning — from the tree house next door. I must have been tired, because it took me a full minute to register that the light must be from a flashlight.

It could be Sarah, I thought. But Marco's sister hardly ever used the tree house. It was Marco's place.

I don't know what made me do it, but I got out of bed and slipped my feet into a pair of sneakers. My room was on the ground floor, at the back of the house, and in the corner it had a door to the outside, plus a set of concrete stairs. I moved a pile of stuffed animals away from the door and walked out, careful to leave the door unlocked behind me.

I crossed the lawn and walked over to the tree. It was strange and thrilling to be out under the thumbnail moon. I climbed up three rungs of the ladder and whispered, "Marco."

Quiet.

"Marco," I whispered. "It's Hayley."

A pale face peeked out through the window. He didn't speak, just placed a finger to his lips and motioned for me to

come up, so I scaled the ladder and hauled myself in through the crude door frame.

Marco stood up when he saw me. He had been sitting in a corner, reading comics. The flashlight was lying on top of one of the pages, illuminating one of the X-Men in fine detail, then fading into the darkness.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi.”

“What are you doing out here?”

Marco shrugged. “I just had to get out of my room. I’ve been stuck in there for a day and a half.”

“What?”

Marco turned away from me, fumbled with the flashlight, and turned it off. “I’m grounded. Like, in solitary confinement. Mom brings my meals, and I’m allowed out to do one hour of yard work a day.” He laughed bitterly. “Dad says physical exercise is important.”

I didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” In the darkness, his words were flinty, as if they could strike sparks.

“You’re not?”

“Guy Poole is a —” He paused, trying to think of something that was bad enough.

“What did he do?”

Marco hesitated a moment. Finally, he spat it out. “He put some tacks on Kyle Kempner’s seat.”

“Seriously?” Kyle Kempner was in our class, and I’d always thought he was a sweet guy because he was totally nice to me even though I made an idiot out of myself the first time I met him in fourth grade. It was the first day of school, and I was wearing a denim skirt and a vintage bowling shirt with the name *Fred* stitched over the pocket. So I saw this curly-haired, smiley guy talking to my friend Annie, and I walked up and said hello. Annie introduced us, and I said, “My name is Hayley, but you can call me Fred.”

“Fred?” Kyle smiled, as if he suspected that there was a joke that he was missing.

“Yeah, Fred.” I gestured to my shirt.

He shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

This is when Annie dove in. “Her shirt has the name Fred on it,” she said, and I was totally confused. I was standing there for like five minutes wondering why this kid couldn’t read, until Kyle’s aide came over. He walked away, and Annie whispered, “He’s blind,” and I felt like the biggest loser on earth.

But Kyle never acted embarrassed, or like I was a jerk, or anything. In fact, whenever I said hi, he would say, “Hey, Fred!” and give me a huge smile. It turned out that he could

see a little — large shapes, some colors — just not well. But he could recognize voices in an instant.

Anyway, I couldn't imagine why anyone would put tacks on his seat, unless they were . . . well, some kind of word from a cable show.

“Why would anyone do that to Kyle?” I repeated.

Marco didn't answer; he just went on with his story. “So I was the first one back from lunch, and I saw the tacks and grabbed them off the seat before Kyle could sit on them, and Guy tried to make me put them back. He said it would be hilarious — Kyle wouldn't even see it coming.” His voice lowered a bit. “But I wouldn't do it.”

“Why didn't you tell anyone?”

“Because I didn't want Kyle to know.” The words were soft as a flutter from a moth wing.

“Oh, Marco.” I put my hands to my face. “This is all wrong. And now you're suspended and locked in your room.”

He shushed me, and we stood stock-still, listening in the darkness.

“Look, I've got to go,” Marco said after a moment. “I just wanted to get out for a while. Promise me you won't tell anyone, okay? It's not that bad, really — I just read most of the time — and it's almost over. My sentence is done tomorrow at three.”

“I promise.” I reached for his hand, and his fingers touched mine. I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know what. He squeezed my fingers and then disappeared by inches as he went down the ladder.

I sat in the tree house for a long time by myself, listening to the quiet of the neighborhood, broken only by the occasional car rolling by. After a while, I climbed down and walked back to my room. I closed the door softly and put my stuffed animals back in their places. As I climbed into my bed, I noticed that the hems of my pajama bottoms were wet with dew. I stared out at the moon, thinking about Kyle and Marco and Guy, and what it means to have a temper.

It’s not always a bad thing.

Spicy Mexican Chocolate "Hotheads"

(makes approximately 12–15 cupcakes)

These cupcakes come with a little “surprise” in the center. A good surprise. Not like a peach pit, or something.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1/2 cup cocoa powder, unsweetened
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/3 cup canola oil
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon almond extract

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a muffin pan with cupcake liners.
2. In a large bowl, sift together the flour, cornstarch, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, and cayenne pepper, and mix.
3. In a separate large bowl, mix together the milk, sugar, oil, vanilla extract, and almond extract, and whisk. Slowly add the dry ingredients to the wet, and beat with a whisk or handheld mixer until smooth.
4. Fill cupcake liners halfway full, then gently place a spicy ganache ball in the center of each cupcake, pressing it down a little, and top with a few tablespoons of batter so that the ganache ball ends up "inside" the cupcake. (See ganache recipe on the next page.) Bake for 22–25 minutes, then serve immediately, so the goodness inside is properly gooey.

Chocolate Ganache (for molten centers)

(makes approximately 2 cups)

INGREDIENTS:

- 10 ounces semisweet chocolate chips
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon agave syrup or corn syrup
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Place the chocolate chips, cream, and agave or corn syrup into a microwave-safe bowl and heat for 45 seconds. Remove from microwave and stir. If the chips are not melted, heat again in 10-second increments, stirring each time, until fully melted.
2. Whisk in vanilla extract and cayenne pepper. Place in the refrigerator for 1–2 hours and allow to firm.
3. When firm, remove from the refrigerator and scoop balls of ganache, rolling them into the size of a walnut. Place balls on wax paper, and keep in the refrigerator until ready to use.