



Confectionately
Yours

Taking the Cake!

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Slammed

I'm standing at the front of the cafeteria, covered in lasagna. A noodle clings to my shirt for a moment, then drops onto my shoes with a tomato-sauce splat.

Why did I have to get lasagna? I wonder. *Why didn't I get the burger?* But it wouldn't have mattered. I'm also covered in chocolate milk.

"Oops," Artie says. Then she giggles. "Sorry."

"OMG!" Chang lets out a laugh and the two of them walk away.

She didn't do it on purpose, I tell myself as I watch my ex-best friend cross the cafeteria to sit with her new crowd. I really do believe that Artie didn't mean to cover me in lasagna. She'd been chatting with Chang, and neither one of them had been watching where they were going. I'd just gotten my drink. I turned around with my tray, and Artie

slammed into me. The tray knocked up against my body, splattering my lunch against my shirt.

I guess I should be grateful that it wasn't soup.

So, no, Artie didn't do it on purpose — but did she really have to laugh?

Artie leans over and says something to Kelley, who is sitting beneath a giant paper jack-o'-lantern. It's Halloween, but nobody's dressed up. Kelley tucks her blond hair behind her ear and casually looks over at me, and then all three girls crack up again. I feel like I've been sliced open. I wonder if the whole cafeteria can see inside my rib cage, where my heart is beating.

I tighten my grip on the orange plastic tray and watch Chang, but she doesn't even glance my way. She has her hand up to the side of her face and she's looking at Artie and laughing.

Artie picks up her lemonade and takes a sip. She looks out into the crowded cafeteria as if she's forgotten me already.

The clink and hum of other students talking and eating surrounds me as everyone else in the cafeteria carries on with their normal lives.

Last year, we learned that scientists found this woolly mammoth frozen solid in a block of ice. They think the Ice

Age may have come on really fast. That's like what's happened to me. Artie used to be my friend. My best friend. And then everything changed.

I turn and walk away. As I head toward the door, I dimly register my other ex-best friend, Marco, sitting with his soccer buddies. There's another mystery: He used to be almost a brother to me. Now he thinks we shouldn't hang out as much.

I don't break my stride as I drop my heavy tray on a nearby table, abandoning my ruined lunch, and push through the double doors. I'm not hungry anymore.

I just want to be alone.

Technically, we aren't supposed to leave the cafeteria during lunch period, but lots of kids do. I walk over to the playing field nearby and sit down in the stands.

Overhead, the sky is a heart-shredding shade of gray. I think about how Artie looked right through me in the cafeteria, and the tears start to flow. I'm crying and crying and my face is wet, and the tears are trickling down my neck and I can't stop crying. I'm trying to be quiet, but I hear someone sit down next to me and I can tell without looking up that it's Marco. I wipe my face, even though he's just staring straight ahead.

"How can she act like that?" I whisper finally.

“I don’t know.” His eyes flick to mine, then away. He looks like maybe he wants to run, but he stays put beside me.

I shake my head, thinking that I should try to stop crying, or at least stop talking, but I feel my face twisting, and I can’t stop the words. “It’s like I’m nothing, like I’m worse than something she scraped off her shoe. We were *friends*.” I can hardly hear my own words now, because the tears are choking me.

He turns to look at me, and he looks so sad, and so sorry that I feel like another little piece of my heart has been ripped open. “Do you want me to talk to her?” Marco asks.

I laugh a little — a messy laugh, half snort, half snot. “What would you say?”

“I’d say, ‘Stop messing with Hayley.’”

“That’s not really talking, Marco.”

He looks away. “Yeah. I can’t think of anything better.”

“Me, neither.”

He leans toward me then, just a little, until our shoulders are touching. We sit together, just breathing. My arm is warm where it meets his, and I start crying again. Quieter this time. Not as messy. Just tears. I take a deep breath, and my chest feels clean.

The world shifts just a fraction, and even though everything's the same as it was five seconds ago, I feel a little better.

"I thought you didn't want to hang out together as much," I say. *Why did you say that?* I wonder. *Things are half-way normal right now — be quiet!*

But Marco just sighs.

"Ohmigosh, what *happened?*"

Meghan Markerson walks up to us with her eyes and mouth round. She's wearing a purple tunic and yellow leggings, and with her newly dyed green bangs and naturally orange hair, she looks kind of like a cartoon character. I don't think it's a costume, though. This is just a normal Meghan outfit.

"Artie accidentally spilled lasagna on me," I say.

"Where is she?" Meghan asks, looking around.

"Inside," Marco explains.

"*What?*" Meghan screeches. "Is she getting you some towels, or something?" She plants a hand on her hip, like, *She'd better be getting Hayley some towels.*

Marco looks at me, and I bite my lip.

"She's having lunch," Marco says.

Meghan looks at him for a long moment. Then her eyes narrow, and her nostrils flare.

For some reason, this makes me happy. I've been busy dissolving into tears, but Meghan looks like she wants to go inside and rip Artie's face off. I don't even know Meghan that well, but she's clearly outraged on my behalf. I feel better already.

"Calming breath," Meghan says to herself, inhaling deeply. She closes her eyes, then waves her hands down the length of her body and shakes them out.

"What are you doing?" Marco asks.

"Cleansing my chakras." She hums a little.

Marco and I look at each other. He shrugs. I have no clue, either. Meghan's kind of . . . unique.

Her eyes snap open and she looks at me. "Okay, come on." Meghan holds out a hand.

"Where are we going?" I ask as she drags me up.

"To the gym."

"To work out?" Marco asks. "Lunch is almost over."

"To work out? Are you nuts?" Meghan asks. "No — I've got some spare clothes in my locker."

"You do?" I ask. "Why?"

Meghan looks at me, a little half smile on her face. "Because you never know when you'll get attacked by a lasagna, Hayley."

Marco stands, and his warm, dark eyes meet mine. He punches me on the arm gently, and then turns and heads back into the cafeteria.

“Come on,” Meghan says. She’s already walking toward the gym, so I follow her.

But I can’t help wishing it was Artie leading the way.