



Confectionately
Yours

Sugar and Spice

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Down in Flames

"You know, this dance would be totally great," Marco says as he takes a cupcake from the platter I brought, "if it weren't so much like an execution."

"Tell me about it." The boys are lined up against one wall of the gym; the girls are lined up against the other. The refreshments table and decorations are the only clues that we're not here for a game of dodgeball. "The music here is better than at most executions, though."

"What flavor is this?" Marco asks, taking another bite of cupcake.

"Pistachio-rosewater."

"Weird, but good," he pronounces. Then he pulls a small

video camera from his pocket and trains it on the cupcake. “Pistachio-rosewater cupcakes by Hayley Hicks,” he narrates, then swings the camera to face me. “How did you come up with this flavor, Hayley?”

I’m not sure how to answer this. I mean, I came up with it in my mind. “Through the power of pistachio nuts?”

“Hayley! C’mere!” In a corner, I see Meghan pointing with one hand and waving at me with the other. She’s standing halfway underneath the bleachers.

“You’ll be sorry,” Marco says as he aims his video cam at Meghan.

“I usually am,” I tell him, but I go over to join Meghan, anyway.

“Guess what this is!” Meghan says, pointing to a black metal box-like thing.

“Does it take dental X-rays?” I ask.

“It’s a fog machine!” Meghan crows. She does a goofy little jig. She’s wearing a pink dress with white polka dots and turquoise tights, and her bangs are a matching shade of pink. She looks like a crazy tropical bird doing a peculiar mating dance.

“You brought a fog machine to the Winter Dance?”

“Of course not!” Meghan huffs. “I took it out of the drama department’s prop closet.”

“But . . . why?”

“Nobody’s dancing!”

“So?”

“So — I’m the seventh-grade class rep! I can’t let the dance go down in flames.”

“No, I mean, so what does the fog machine have to do with anything?”

“Look, everyone’s too embarrassed to be the first one out on the floor. So I figure that if we pump a little haze into the gym . . .”

“People won’t be able to see one another?”

“Right. And we’ll get the dancing started! There’s only one problem. I can’t figure out how to turn this thing on.” Meghan flips a switch. Then she flips it the other way. Nothing happens.

“Is it plugged in?”

“Yep.”

“Let me see.” I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve got a gift for mechanical things. I’m the only person in our house who can work the old-fashioned alarm clock. Gran can barely

even check voice mail. And the other day, when the industrial blender was on the fritz, I managed to get it going again. Meghan steps away from the fog machine, and I inspect it. The only switch seems to be the one she was fiddling with. I flip it, then wait. I flip it back. “Hmm . . .” I give the fog machine a kick.

Sure enough, fog starts to spew from the front nozzle.

“Brilliant!” Meghan cries.

I shrug. “That’s what got the mixer going again.”

A cloud shoots across the floor of the gym, and the crowd lining the walls lets out an “Ooo!”

The girls are the first to make a move. Leslie Fairstein has clearly been looking for an excuse to storm the dance floor. She grabs Farrah Akers’s hand and drags her out into the middle of the gym. Soon, Omar Gomez and Jamil Singh are bopping around under a basketball hoop, and then a few eighth-grade girls I know from my bus head out. Once the eighth graders are out there, the sixties feel free to stam-pede. The deejay takes the hint and turns up an Ashley Violetta song, and soon everyone is grooving.

“I’m a *genius!*” Meghan squeals as she watches the crowd.

The smoke has a strange, sickly sweet smell, and it's still pouring from the machine like Old Faithful.

"A demented genius," I agree. I see Marco over by the snack table, videotaping the dancing crowd. I wave; he grins and waves back. Another dance tune comes on, and Marco disappears in the rapidly advancing cloud of smog. "I think that's enough."

"Yeah, it's getting pretty smoky in here," Meghan agrees. She leans over and flips the switch.

Fog keeps on spewing.

Meghan flips the switch again. Off, on, off. I give the machine another kick. Twice as much fog starts coming out.

"Make it stop!" Meghan cries, then starts coughing.

"I can't!"

"What are you two doing?" demands a voice. Through the haze, I see that my ex-best friend, Artie, is glaring at us. Suddenly, I find myself hoping for more smoke, so that I can disappear entirely. "Where did you get a fog machine?"

"Meghan found it," I say, and then feel like a jerk.

"Did you get it from the drama department?" Artie demands.

Artie is a dramarama. From the look on her face, you'd think that her own house had been plundered. Like it's *her* fog machine.

"I borrowed it," Meghan says politely. "Um, do you know how to turn it off?"

At that moment, someone pulls a fire alarm.

"Oh, boy," Meghan says.

And then the sprinklers go off.

A few people shriek, and girls in dresses trot toward the exits while chaperones urge everyone to stay calm. Meghan, Artie, and I stand stock-still, watching the mayhem for a few moments. Fog is still pouring from the machine, by the way.

Suddenly, the sprinklers stop, and at almost the same moment the fog stops.

"Oh, whew!" I say. "It finally shut itself off."

"Ahem."

Meghan's face has gone white. She gestures for me to turn around, and when I do, I see the frowning face of Ms. Lang, the drama teacher. She's holding the power cord to the fog machine in her hand. Clearly, she just yanked it from the wall.

"Good thinking," Meghan tells her.

Ms. Lang cocks her head. “Yes,” she says. “And do you know what is *not* good thinking? Taking drama department property without permission.” She looks at Artie with a raised eyebrow. “I’m surprised to see you mixed up in this, Artemis.”

“She wasn’t —” I start, but Ms. Lang holds up her hand in a *Silence!* gesture. I mash my lips together.

Artie squirms, but she doesn’t say anything.

“I’m giving you all a week of detention,” Ms. Lang announces. “You can repair props and costumes to make up for the fact that you took the fog machine.”

Meghan nods. “Well, I think that sounds fair —”

“I’m not really interested in your opinion, Ms. Markerson,” Ms. Lang snaps.

“Okay,” Meghan says.

The drama teacher shoots one last Look of Doom in Artie’s direction. My Ex-Best sort of cringes, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Artie,” I tell her, “I’m so —”

But she’s already stomping off.

Meghan sighs. “That didn’t go too well.”

I shrug. “Well . . . at least we got people to dance.”

Meghan looks at me for a long moment. “You know, Hayley,” she says, “I think maybe I’m a bad influence on you.”

The smog is lifting in the gym. Okay, so we kind of made a mess of things. But the dance wasn’t much fun until we did. In a way, I guess it’s better to go down in flames and smoke than it is to just putter along until you fall off a cliff.

It occurs to me that I never would’ve thought that a year ago. Puttering along used to be what I was all about.

I guess maybe Meghan *is* a bad influence on me.

It’s cold outside, and half the kids are running around like lunatics while the other half huddle up like penguins to keep one another warm. Everyone is talking and laughing, though, and I have to say that the dance seems like a pretty big success. I wish Meghan was here to see the happy crowd, but she has darted off to return the fog machine to the prop closet.

I hold on to the plate of cupcakes I grabbed on my way out the door. I wasn’t sure if the teachers were going to send everyone home, or what, and I didn’t want my treats to go to waste.

“Thanks, Hayley!” Jamil says as he grabs one of the cupcakes. He darts off. I offer a cupcake to Leslie, and soon Fatimah and Yolanda have each taken one, too. “Is the music still going?” Leslie asks. “I can hardly wait to get back out on the dance floor!” She hops from one foot to the other.

“All right, everyone!” Ms. Lang announces. She has a big drama voice, and people quiet down the minute she starts to speak. “You may return to the gym in a calm and orderly fashion! Calm and orderly — I am talking to you, Omar Gutierrez!”

Omar stops trying to smash a cupcake in Jamil’s face and instead takes a calm, orderly bite.

The other chaperones, including Ms. Sweet, the earth science teacher, and Mr. Charles, the Latin teacher everyone hates, herd the kids back into the gym.

I hang back a little.

Personally, I like the cold. And my dress is velvet, with long sleeves, so I’m not completely freezing. A lot of the other girls are wearing halter tops or one-shoulder tanks with teeny minis, and I feel sorry for them as they totter on their high heels toward the gym.

I notice someone else hovering around at the edge of the crowd. “Hey, Kyle.”

“Who is that?” He gives me a warm smile. His blond curls tumble down his forehead, almost hiding his eyes. “Fred?”

“You got it.” Kyle calls me Fred sometimes. That’s because the day I met him, I was wearing a shirt that said *Fred* on it. He couldn’t see the name, of course, because he’s legally blind. But I didn’t know he was blind, so I just thought he couldn’t read. I kept saying, “You can call me Fred,” like *dur*. Then I realized the truth and I felt like a huge loser, but Kyle was really sweet about it.

“Want a cupcake?” I offer.

Kyle’s eyes crinkle in amusement. “Do you just wander around with a plate of cupcakes all the time, Hayley?”

“I should. I’d be more popular.”

“Why would you want to be more popular?” Kyle asks.

Interesting question. I’m not sure how to answer it. “Okay, well, I have cupcakes, anyway.” I hand him one.

“Thanks,” he says as he takes a bite. “This is awesome! I love pistachios. What’s this?” He picks a flower off the top.

“A sugared violet.”

Kyle nibbles a petal. “What color?”

“Blue.”

“Faithfulness,” he says, then pops the whole thing in his mouth.

“What?”

He holds up his finger and chews for a moment. Once he swallows, he says, “A long time ago, people used to send each other messages with flowers. In Victorian times. You could send a bouquet, and it would tell someone exactly how you felt about them. Violets meant faithfulness.”

“What do roses mean?” I ask, thinking about the rose-water in the cupcake.

“Depends on the color — anything from love to sleep.”

“You know a lot of weird stuff, Kyle.”

“I pride myself on odd knowledge. I can’t play sports, so . . .”

“What are you two still doing out here?” Marco asks as he comes up to us, camera in hand.

“We were just heading in,” I say.

“We were?” Kyle smiles.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, Kyle, it’s freezing out here,” I say.

“I *hadn't* really noticed,” he says, and takes another bite of the cupcake.

There's an awkward little pause. I feel as if that sentence is a message, like a flower, but I'm not exactly sure what it means.

“Well, I'm going inside,” Marco says at last. We all start toward the door. The last few kids are trickling in, and just my luck, it's Artie with her dramarama buddies, Chang and Kelley. Artie whispers something to Chang, who glares at me. Then they go through the door, and Artie deliberately lets it fall on my shoulder.

“What was *that*?” Marco asks, pulling the camera away from his face.

“Did you catch it?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“What did I miss?” Kyle asks.

“A look of disgust and assault with a door,” Marco tells him.

“Artie's mad at me,” I explain.

Kyle shrugs. “So, what else is new?”

Right. What else is new? Artie used to be my Best. Now she's my Worst.

And that's just the way it is.

* * *

There's no light coming from beneath my bedroom door when I get home, so I turn the knob carefully and give a gentle push. I don't want to wake my little sister, Chloe.

Back when we used to live in a house, Chloe and I each had our own room. But that was before our parents divorced, before Mom lost her job, before we moved in with Gran. Now we live above the Tea Room. It's been hard to get used to sharing my space . . . but it has been good, too. I like lying in the dark and chatting with Chloe until one of us falls asleep. And I know she likes it, too.

Chloe used to have an imaginary friend named Horatio. But he's disappeared. I like to think it's partly because of me. And maybe partly because of her new best friend, Rupert, who lives nearby.

On the other hand, sometimes I wish I could just burst into my room and flop on my bed. Maybe read for a while. Play music. Sometimes it's nice to be alone. You know, sometimes — like now.

I creep into the room so quietly that my heart nearly catapults out of my skin when Chloe says, "Hi, Hayley."

I look over at her bed, which is still made, and then I

realize that she's sitting on the window seat. The bay window frames her small body. She's wearing a long, pale pink sleep shirt with a cute kitten on it, and she looks very young to me, much younger than eight.

"Can't sleep?" I ask, kicking off my shoes.

Chloe turns back to the window and sighs. She has insomnia sometimes. It doesn't usually keep her up all night, but it's enough to disrupt her sleep and make her tired the next morning.

I sit down across from her. The shades are pulled up, and the lace curtains create a thin screen between our house and the night. We live on a fairly busy street, and light plays across her face as cars pass by. Chloe isn't looking at me. She's looking up, toward the sky.

Almost as if she can hear me wondering what she's thinking about, she says, "Everyone sees the same moon."

I look up at it — an uneven, lopsided moon tonight. The dark shadows scar its white face, but it's still beautiful. I imagine our dad, who's away on a business trip, looking up at the lumpy moon and missing us as much as Chloe is missing him right now. I take her hand. "It's shining on everyone," I tell Chloe.

“Unless it’s cloudy.”

“Right. But it’s still there, anyway.”

Chloe looks at me, her face serious. “Just because someone moves away, it doesn’t mean they’re gone forever.”

There’s a note of pain in her voice that stabs at my heart. We see our dad pretty regularly even though he and our mom are divorced, but I hadn’t realized that she missed him so much. “It doesn’t mean that,” I tell her. “Not at all.”

“Okay.”

“Dad’s probably missing us even more than we’re missing him,” I say. “He loves us. You know that, right? He totally loves you.”

Chloe’s eyebrows draw together. She seems to think about this for a few moments. “Okay,” she says again.

There doesn’t seem to be any reason to rush to bed. My mind is spinning, and I’m sure Chloe’s still is, too, and right now, I’m really glad we share this room, so that we can be here together. So we just stay on the window seat for a while, looking out at the busy restaurants and dark art galleries, and up at the sky.

Sometimes, insomnia’s not so bad.