



Confectionately
Yours

Something New

Lisa Papademetriou

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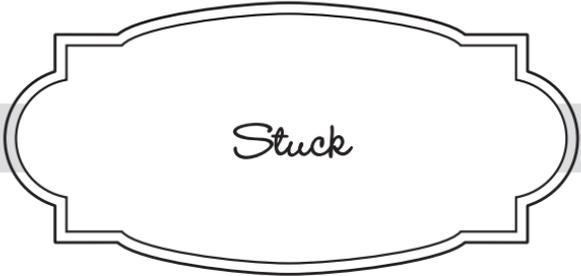
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Stuck

"Come on, Meghan! It's not that bad! Just close your eyes." I try to sound encouraging. I also try to squash the laugh that threatens to escape in a snort-spray that would make my good friend furious.

"I can't close my eyes and come down a ladder at the same time!" Meghan wails.

"It's only five steps!"

"Hayley, I will *break my neck!*"

And that's when I do let loose with a little snort. I can't help it. The way she says "break my neck" sounds just like a clucking chicken. You know, "Bok-bok-bok!" Her bangs are dyed a brilliant yellow, which contrasts with the natural peach of her red hair, which only adds to the chicken effect.

Meghan glares at me. “It isn’t funny! I’m stuck! I’ll be stuck up here forever!”

“Meg, you’re, like, four feet off the floor. It’s not like you’re at the top of the Empire State Building!”

Laser Beam Death Ray — that’s the look she gives me. Maybe I should have been more sympathetic, but she’s just stuck at the top of a bookstore ladder. Seriously. I think my toilet is farther off the ground than this ladder is, but she’s clinging to a shelf of self-help titles as if it’s the side of a cliff.

“The Empire State Building doesn’t bother me,” Meghan says. “Short heights are worse for me than tall ones.”

“Why did you go up that ladder in the first place?”

“I was looking for cookbooks for *you!*” She holds up a hot-pink book titled *Cupcake Carnival*. “You could at least be grateful!”

“I am,” I tell her, which is true. It was sweet of her to try to get me the book. My mom and grandmother run a tea shop, and I do a lot of the baking. Cupcakes are kind of my thing. “Thanks for putting your life in danger for me.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Meghan demands.

“Well, if you’re going to be stuck up there forever, I guess I could bring you sandwiches.”

Meghan holds up the book as if she might hurl it at my head, but there is laughter in her hazel eyes. That's the thing about Meghan Markerson — she has a really good sense of humor. She can definitely appreciate when she's being a lunatic. Not that it stops her. "So that's it?" she demands. "No dramatic rescue?"

I sigh and look around the store. We're in Crow's Nest, the best — and only — used bookstore in downtown Northampton. The woman behind the counter is as thin as my dental floss and has long gray hair. It is unlikely that she would be able to lift Meghan off the ladder. It's clearly up to me to make something happen. "Oh, all right," I say, starting up the ladder.

"What are you doing?" Meghan demands.

"Piggybacking you out of here," I tell her.

Meghan looks horrified.

I turn my back to her. "Just hop on," I say. "You can close your eyes."

"You'll drop me!"

"I'm incredibly strong."

"No, you aren't! You're extremely feeble! Besides, I wouldn't even let the Hulk carry me off this ladder!"

“Fine, then. Get used to living up here.” I start back down the steps.

“No, wait wait wait!” Meghan cries. “Okay, okay!”

I plant myself on the step before hers and turn my back. Meghan begins to squeal, but she wraps her arms around my shoulders. Then she transfers her weight onto me, and I start down the steps, with her draped across me like a blanket. Three more steps. Two more.

“Awesome!” someone shouts.

I look up to see Omar Gutierrez snapping a photo of us with his smartphone. “One for the school website!”

A vivid image of how absurd we must look flashes through my mind. It must have flashed through Meghan’s, too, because she screeches, “Omar!” and the moment my feet hit the floor, she drops the book, then leaps off my back. “Give me that camera!”

Omar laughs and sprints through the store, and Meghan races after him.

Omar is a prankster, and he’s tangled with Meghan before. My guess is that she’s going to make him pay for that picture. I pick up the baking book that Meghan dropped,

and flip through the pages. It has the basic cupcake recipes, like vanilla and chocolate, but it also has some interesting ones, like avocado and papaya. Really pretty pictures, too, and instructions on making frosting decorations. The price is reasonable: three dollars. I decide to get it.

I head to the cash register as Omar blasts out the shop door and onto the street. Omar is the number one base stealer on our school's baseball team. He's fast.

"I'll be back," Meghan calls to me as she races after him.

"Take your time," I tell her, but she's already gone.

"Well, that was exciting," says a warm, gravelly voice. Mr. Malik is standing in front of the cash register, holding a slim book with gold lettering on the cover. "The thrill of the chase," he adds, with a familiar twinkle in his black eyes. He hands his money to the cashier.

"I don't think it's really that thrilling," I tell him.

The creases of his face dance into a smile. "Oh, there's nothing so thrilling as young love."

That makes me giggle. Mr. Malik owns the flower shop beside our tea shop, and there is no doubt that he's a romantic. "Believe me, Mr. Malik, those two are *not* in love."

“There’s a fine line between love and hate,” puts in the wiry woman behind the register as she rings up Mr. Malik’s book. Not that anyone asked her.

“In this case, it’s less of a line and more of a barbed-wire fence,” I reply.

“Ah.” Mr. Malik’s chuckle is like a tiger’s purr. He hands over the money and smiles sheepishly at the cash register lady. “Well, I suppose I just have love on my mind, then. And speaking of love,” he says, handing me the book he just bought, “would you mind delivering this to your dear grandmother?”

“Sure,” I say, blushing a little. Mr. Malik has been my grandmother’s friend for years, and they just got engaged. I am still trying to get used to thinking of him as my almost grandfather. “*The Collected Poems of Livingston Wells?*” I say, reading the title.

“An excellent poet,” Mr. Malik says. “One of England’s treasures.”

I nod. The name is familiar. I wonder if Gran already has a copy of this book.

The door bursts open, and Meghan blasts in. Her eyes are narrowed, and she’s breathing hard.

“Did you get him?” I ask.

She holds up a finger and continues to pant. Then she puts her hands on her knees and leans over. “He’s so fast!” she gasps. She lies down on the floor.

“Please don’t block the doorway,” the cash register lady says.

Meghan rolls away from the door and continues to stare up at the ceiling. I go and sit beside her. “I got him,” she says between gasps. “He promised he wouldn’t post the picture.”

“Lucky you,” I tell her, and she shakes her head.

“He’s so *fast*,” she says again.

“So are you,” I point out. “You caught him. And you’re wearing *clogs*.”

Meghan groans. “Worst trip to the bookstore ever.”

I hold up my two titles. “Not for me.”

“Good-bye, Hayley!” Mr. Malik calls as he pushes open the door. “And farewell, dear Diana! Good luck on your hunt!” he says to Meghan.

Meghan watches him leave, then turns to me. “Doesn’t he know my name? I’ve met him about five hundred times.”

I have a feeling that Mr. Malik was referring to Shakespeare or Greek myths or something, but I decide to just say, “Probably a brain malfunction. Everyone gets them.”

“True.” Meghan hauls herself to her feet and brushes herself off.

I stand up, too. “Did you see the picture?”

Meghan shakes her head. “Omar claims he deleted it.”

“Do you trust him?” I ask.

“Well — I guess we’ll see.”

“Right,” I say.

Only time will tell.