

CUPCAKE DIARIES



Katie
sprinkles & surprises



by coco simon



CHAPTER 1

Mia, My Personal Adviser

“Make them stop!” I cried, laughing. “They’re tickling my nose! I’m going to sneeze!”

But my best friend, Mia, can be a little harsh sometimes. “But they *like* you!” she protested, doubling over giggling.

I was sleeping over at Mia’s house, and even though she has a perfectly comfortable brand-new bed, she spread out her sleeping bag on the floor next to mine, so we could hang out and talk. But whenever anyone lies on the floor, Mia’s little fluffy dogs, Tiki and Milkshake, think that it’s playtime. So both of them were dancing around my face, sniffing me and licking my nose.

“Seriously, Mia!” I pleaded. “Call off your ferocious beasts!”

“Okay! Okay!” Mia got up and scooped up one wriggling dog in each arm. “Sorry, babies. Katie doesn’t want to play with you.”

She dropped them out the door and then shut it quickly.

“I like playing with them,” I said, sitting up. “But they were attacking me.”

“Those two? They’re afraid of ants,” Mia joked.

“They’re terrors,” I said. “But at least they’re cute. It’s too bad Mom is allergic to pets. I would love to have a dog. A big fluffy one.”

Then there was a knock on the door.

“Girls, it’s ice-cream time,” announced Mia’s stepdad, Eddie.

I smiled. “That’s my favorite time of day!”

We both jumped up and followed Eddie down the stairs to the kitchen, where the table was set up for an ice-cream sundae buffet. There were three cartons of ice cream, a bottle of chocolate sauce, a can of whipped cream, and bowls filled with cherries, sprinkles, and crumbled-up cookies.

Mia’s stepbrother, Dan, was leaning against the kitchen sink, eating out of a bowl that looked like it was mostly filled with whipped cream.

“What are you guys, twins?” he asked. (I forgot to mention that Dan is in high school. I have come to believe that most high school boys are kind of rude—that’s just how they are. Well, except for my friend Emma’s brother Sam. He is perfect.)

Anyway, I should explain why Dan made that crack about us being twins. It’s because Mia and I were wearing matching pajamas, pink ones with a cupcake pattern on them. We had bought them with the money we made from the cupcake business we’re in with our friends Emma and Alexis. It’s kind of funny. Any time I make money from the cupcakes, I end up spending it on something cupcake related. Last time, I got this cool stenciling kit you can use to make designs on your cupcakes. I guess you can say I am cupcake obsessed.

Mia is not as cupcake obsessed as I am, but she loved the pajamas as much as I did. And the sleepover was the perfect time to wear them.

“Yes, we’re twins,” Mia replied to Dan sarcastically, because apparently the best way to deal with a rude teenage boy is to be rude back. It must have worked, because Dan just shrugged and kept eating.

Eddie was anxious for us to dig in. “Come on, girls. The combination possibilities are endless!”

Mia's mom, Mrs. Valdes, entered the kitchen and gave Eddie a hug. "What a sweet thing to do, honey," she said. "Thanks!"

Mia looked at me and rolled her eyes again. I know it makes her all cringey when her mom and stepdad get lovey-dovey in front of her.

"Yes, thanks, Mr. Valdes," I said. "This looks amazing."

"What are you waiting for? Dig in before it melts!" Eddie said, motioning to us.

Mia grabbed a bowl and spoon and then stood there, thinking. I knew whatever she made would not only be the perfect balance of flavor, but also beautiful. Mia is a true artist. I'm not so picky. I took my bowl and started piling in everything.

Chocolate, mint-chip, and butter-pecan ice cream. Chocolate syrup, cookie crumbles, and cherries. Then I sprayed on the whipped cream and finally added the sprinkles.

"Katie, those sprinkles are going to fall off," Mia remarked.

"You have to put them on last," I informed her. "Because they make it pretty."

Rainbow sprinkles are my favorite because they're so colorful. Sometimes when people ask me what my favorite color is, I say "rainbow" because I just can't decide. Mom heard me say it so much that she got me rainbow socks for Christmas. They're my favorite.

I sat down at the table and was already halfway done eating my ice cream when Mia finally finished creating her bowl. As I predicted, it was a work of art. Mia had a perfect scoop of chocolate ice cream in her bowl, topped by a flower design painted with chocolate syrup. The center of the flower was a cherry.

"Mia, that's gorgeous!" I said.

Mia grinned. "And delicious!" Then she dug in with her spoon.

I mock screamed. "Ahh! You've destroyed it!"

"It's for a good cause," Mia said, eating another spoonful.

When we finished we helped to clean up the kitchen and then went back up to Mia's room and sprawled out on the floor again, this time without dogs.

"I'm so glad you could sleep over tonight!" Mia said. "What's your mom doing again?"

"She and her new boyfriend are going to see a Broadway show, and she won't be back till late," I said. "She figured it would be better if I slept over than if she came and got me at midnight."

"That's good, but we'll still be awake at midnight," Mia said. "Remember last time? We were up until three!"

I shook my head. "And then Eddie made us pancakes at, like, the crack of dawn. I was so tired!"

Then I paused. There was something I had been wanting to ask Mia.

"So, Mia, I need your advice," I began. "Of all my friends, you are the best expert on this topic."

"What topic?" Mia asked.

"Moms with boyfriends," I said. "I mean, your mom and Eddie dated for a while before they got married, right?"

Mia nodded. "Yeah."

"Was Eddie always so nice?" I asked. "For a stepdad, he seems really great."

"He is," Mia said. "But it was still weird when they started dating. I kind of kept hoping that Mom would get back together with my dad, you know?"

I nodded, but I really didn't know. Mia's mom and dad got divorced just a few years ago, but my dad left me and my mom when I was a little baby. I didn't grow up with him or anything. So there isn't any part of me that wants to see them get back together. But I could understand why Mia might feel that way.

“So, why are you asking?” Mia asked. “Because of this new boyfriend?”

“Jeff,” I replied. “I haven’t met him yet. All I know about him is that he’s a teacher or something which isn’t too exciting, if you ask me. And he likes to run, and he has a daughter who’s younger than I am.”

“Does your mom like him?” Mia asked.

“A lot, I think,” I told her. “She’s, like, happy all the time. She doesn’t get mad anymore when I do dumb stuff, like leave my socks on the floor.”

“Hmm,” Mia said thoughtfully. “Mom was like that right before she and Eddie got serious.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I said. “On the drive over here she said it’s time for me to meet Jeff. Like, in person!”

“How else would you meet him?” Mia asked.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “Until now, he’s been more of . . . an idea. But once I meet him, it will all be real.”

Mia looked thoughtful. “You know, Eddie was the only boyfriend Mom ever introduced me to. I think she waited until she knew she was serious about him.”

“But what about your dad?” Katie asked. “Is he serious about Lynn?”

I knew Mia’s dad had been dating a woman named Lynn, who had a little boy who was kind of pain.

“I think dads are different,” Mia answered. “He’s introduced me to other girlfriends before Lynn and they didn’t last. So Lynn might not last either.”

“So maybe Jeff won’t last?” I asked a little bit hopefully.

But Mia shook her head. “No, I’m pretty sure when moms do it, they mean it.”

I groaned. “I thought so. I hope he’s as nice as Eddie.”

“I hope so too,” Mia said. “But look on the bright side. You have the upper hand here. If you hate him, your mom is going to have a problem. If he hates you, it’s his problem.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m still nervous.”

Mia flopped over onto her back. “It’ll work out,” she said. “So, hey, did you hear about the new math teacher?”

“Oh, yeah!” I replied, quickly forgetting all about the Jeff problem. “Mr. Green, right? Everyone keeps talking about how cool he is.”

“He replaced Mr. Rodriguez,” Mia reported. “Mr. Rodriguez left town because his wife got a great new job in Chicago. So now Emma has Mr. Green. She says he’s really funny and sweet. And I heard that at his old school, he got elected Teacher of the Year, like, five times in a row.”

“Wow,” I said. “Is he going to coach boys’ track, too, like Mr. Rodriguez did?”

Mia nodded. “He just started. And you know what? I’ve heard a bunch of girls showed up to his first track practice just so they could stare at him.”

“Gross! He’s a teacher!” I said, making a face.

“And guess what else I heard?” Mia asked. “Olivia Allen has the biggest crush in the world on him. She’s in the same class as Emma, and Emma says Olivia even goes to get extra after-school help from him even though she’s pretty good at math. She’s just faking it.”

I shook my head. “That is so weird, but it’s exactly something Olivia would do!”

Mia and I gossiped some more, and even though we stayed up late, we fell asleep just before midnight. That night I dreamed Mom took me into this white room with a door, and she said, “Katie, I’d like you to meet Jeff.” And then she opened the door, and do you know what was behind it?

An ice-cream sundae with sprinkles! That’s what I get for eating ice cream late at night.



CHAPTER 2

“Nice to Meet You” Cupcakes

After talking to Mia I felt a lot better about the idea of meeting Jeff in person. I was banking on the fact that if I liked him, everything would be cool, and if I didn't like him, Mom would probably dump him.

But I still wasn't prepared the next day when Mom told me she had actually set up a time for me and Jeff to meet. She broke the news on Sunday night, when we were eating Chinese food on the couch and watching shows on the food channel together.

“So,” Mom said, during a commercial, “I've invited Jeff over for dinner Saturday night.”

“What?” I asked, letting a forkful of cold sesame noodles fall right onto my lap.

“Like we talked about,” Mom said.

“I know,” I said. “It's just I didn't think it would be so soon.”

Mom looked concerned. She has brown eyes like I do, and they're very expressive. It's easy to tell when she's worried or sad. “Do you really think it's too soon? Because I could cancel.”

Right then I had a tough decision to make. All I had to do was say so and Mom would call it off. But I kind of felt bad for Mom. I knew she really liked Jeff. And, I mean, she hadn't had a serious boyfriend for, like, ever.

I sighed. “Saturday is okay.”

Mom put her right arm across my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. “Thank you, Katie. I know you'll like him.”

I didn't say anything, and the show came back on. I finished my sesame noodles and then cracked open a fortune cookie.

“*Good things come to those who wait,*” read the fortune inside.

I looked at Mom. Was this fortune for her? I slipped the fortune into the pocket of my pajama pants.

The next day at school I decided it was time to give all my friends the Jeff details.



“So, my mom is inviting her boyfriend over for dinner Saturday night so I can meet him,” I blurted out at the lunch table. Sometimes it's just easier to tell people stuff that way.

“You mean Jeff?” Emma asked. She's a good listener; she always remembers every detail of every story you tell her.

I nodded. “Yeah, I might as well get it over with. But Mia made me feel better. I figure if I don't like him, Mom will break up with him.”

Emma frowned. “Maybe. But didn't you see that movie on the romance network? This girl's mom had a boyfriend, and the girl didn't like him, but the mom married him anyway, and it turned out he was a secret jewel thief.”

I suddenly felt worried. “I didn't see it, but it was based on a true story, right?”

Alexis interjected. “Katie, your mom is a lot smarter than that woman in the movie. If she thinks

he's a nice, good guy, then you'll probably like him too. Besides, it's just one dinner. You can't let too much ride on it."

"Alexis is right, Katie. That woman in the movie was nothing like your mom," Emma agreed.

"Katie's mom is so nice," Mia remarked.

"Definitely," Emma said. Then her blue eyes got big. "Oh, I know. At our cupcake meeting on Thursday we should bake cupcakes for the dinner!"

"You mean, like, 'Hey Jeff, I hope you're not a creep' cupcakes?" I asked.

"More like 'Nice to meet you' cupcakes," Emma said, laughing.

"It's a good idea," Alexis said. "We have a request for strawberry cupcakes for a party in a few weeks. We can test out the recipe."

"Wait. So now Jeff is a cupcake guinea pig?" I asked. "What happened to 'Nice to meet you'?"

"He won't know the difference," Alexis pointed out. "Besides, it's the thought that counts."

"Sounds good," I said. "Text me the recipe, so I can make sure we have the ingredients."

I heard my cell phone beep in my backpack ten seconds later. Alexis is superorganized. That night Mom and I went shopping for the ingredients, and on Thursday we were ready for our cupcake meeting.

The Cupcake Club meets every Friday during school lunch, but we have to meet at other times too because business has been pretty good since we started. Alexis handles most of the business stuff because she's best at it. She keeps track of how much money we earn and spend and keeps a record of our supplies and other expenses. She also makes sure our clients pay us, which is important.

Some meetings, all we do is business stuff, which is boring but important. At other meetings, we bake cupcakes for our clients or test out new cupcake recipes. It's important to try new flavors, because if you don't test them, then you won't know if they're good or not until it's too late, and all it takes is one bad batch of cupcakes for a client to ruin our business. That's why it was a good idea for us to make a batch of the strawberry cupcakes that day. And yeah, they have a mix for that, but we make our cupcakes from scratch. "From scratch" means we make everything fresh, from the beginning. That's why they're so good!

Alexis, Emma, and Mia all got to my house at five. My mom had started a batch of veggie chili in the Crock-Pot that morning, so we could all eat dinner after our meeting. We got started baking right away. My friends and I have gotten pretty good at baking together. Usually two of us work on the batter while the other two do the icing. Alexis knew the strawberry cake recipe by heart from studying it, so she and I did the batter together.

"It's not easy to get cake to taste like strawberry without using artificial flavor," Alexis remarked. "But I think the jam in this batter is going to be nice."

"And using homemade strawberry syrup to flavor the icing will really taste good," I added.

Mia was stirring the strawberries, water, and sugar on top of the stove while Mom supervised.

"It smells awesome," Mia reported.

The strawberry syrup cooled while we baked the cupcakes in the oven. Then Mia and Emma mixed the syrup in the blender with butter and powdered sugar to make the frosting. When the cupcakes were done, we had to wait for them to cool before we iced them, so Mom spooned us bowls of veggie chili. Mia and I put sliced jalapeños on top of ours, because we like things spicy. After the chili, we iced the cupcakes.

"They look so pretty," Emma said admiringly.

"The client wants pink flowers on top, but you can work on that, right, Mia?" Alexis asked.

Mia nodded. "No problem." She designs most of our cupcake decorations.

“These look great, but they’re kind of boring for ‘Nice to meet you’ cupcakes,” I said.

Mom smiled. ~~“Oh? Who are these for?”~~

“We thought we could use some for our dinner with Jeff,” I said, and Mom looked like she might burst with happiness.

“Oh, that’s so sweet of all of you,” she said, beaming. “Thank you! He will love them.”

“I hope he likes pink,” Alexis said.

“If he doesn’t like pink, then he’s just not a good boyfriend,” I announced, which made no sense at all if you think about it. But Mom didn’t look worried. “Anyway, I still think they look boring.”

Then I remembered the sleepover with Mia and had an idea. I ran into the kitchen closet and came out with a container of rainbow sprinkles.

“These make everything better,” I said with a grin, and I grabbed a spoon and started sprinkling the cupcakes.

Alexis shook her head. “You are rainbow crazy.”

“Sprinkles are great,” Mia said. “They cover up any mess you make with the icing.”

“And they’re pretty besides!” I added.

When we were done, we had a plate of very cheerful cupcakes. We stood back and admired our work.

“If Jeff doesn’t like these, then he has no soul!” I said.



CHAPTER 3

Olivia, the Lovesick Puppy

The next day I brought four of the “Nice to meet you” cupcakes to school for our Friday Cupcake Club meeting. It’s been a tradition since we started—every Friday is Cupcake Friday! (Although Mia has often suggested we move it to Monday, since she hates Mondays and she thinks cupcakes would make them better—which they would. But it’s hard to break a tradition once you start it.)

Sometimes it’s tempting to dig in to the cupcakes before we eat lunch, but we have learned to restrain ourselves. Besides it’s more fun to “save the best for last.” So as we ate our lunches, Alexis went over cupcake business with us.

“I have some exciting news,” she announced. “I got an e-mail last night from a brand-new client. The director of the Maple Grove Children’s Museum wants us to bake cupcakes for the opening of a space exhibit there next month.”

“Outer space?” I asked. “Cool! We could do cupcakes with alien faces.”

“Or cupcakes that look like planets,” Mia suggested.

Emma looked thoughtful. “What kinds of flavors can you do for outer space?” she wondered out loud.

“How about . . . green cheese, for the moon?” I exclaimed.

“Ew!” all my friends said at once.

“But we use cream cheese in cupcakes all the time,” I pointed out.

Before we could discuss green cheese cupcakes any more, Mia suddenly pointed. “Oh my gosh! Look at Olivia. She’s trailing after Mr. Green like a lost puppy.”

Mr. Green, the new math teacher everyone was talking about, was monitoring the lunchroom that day, because all the teachers take turns. I guess it wasn’t his first time doing it because he seemed really comfortable. He was walking among the tables, making sure everyone was eating and cleaning up after themselves and not throwing food and being jerks. Some teachers walk around with a mean face on, but Mr. Green was smiling and chatting with people.

Mia was right about Olivia; she was two steps behind him, and it looked like she was trying to offer him an apple from her lunch.

“Oh my gosh, that is hilarious!” Alexis said. “She is making a fool of herself!”

That may sound mean, but I guess we have some issues with Olivia. When she was new in school Mia had become friends with her. But Olivia totally used Mia and then dumped her so she could be part of the BFC, the Best Friends Club. She also did a bunch of other stuff to Mia that wasn’t very nice. So if Alexis was going to point out that Olivia was making a fool of herself, I wasn’t going to stop her.

Emma sort of defended her. “Lots of girls have crushes on Mr. Green,” she said (and the way she said it, I wondered if she did too). “You have to admit, he’s really gorgeous.”

“I guess,” I said. Mr. Green has wavy brown hair and nice green eyes. (Mr. Green with green eyes! No wonder.) “But he’s a teacher! Ew!”

“Ew!” Mia agreed. “I mean, he seems really awesome, but I could never think of a teacher as gorgeous. That’s just weird.”

Then Alexis quickly nudged her. Mr. Green was walking up to *our* table.

~~“Hello, girls,” he said. Then his eyes landed on the see-through cupcake carrier on the table. “Hey, I’ve heard about the Cupcake Club. Your cupcakes are legendary.”~~

“Thanks,” Emma said, and I saw she was blushing a little. “Would you like one?”

Mr. Green held up his hands. “No, but thank you. I see there are just enough for the four of you. Guess I’ll have to hire you for something if I’m going to get to taste one.”

Alexis whipped out a business card faster than a cowboy drawing his gun in a shoot-out.

“We do custom orders,” she said, handing him the card. “No order is too big or too small.”

Mr. Green laughed. “Good to know. Thanks.” And then he headed to the next table.

Mia leaned in. “I bet Olivia is so jealous right now! What do you want to bet she’ll bring him a cupcake on Monday?”

“She can bring in all the cupcakes she wants, but they won’t be as good as ours,” Alexis said confidently.

“Well, anyway, I guess I can see why everyone likes him,” I said. “He seems nice. And, hey, it’s pretty cool he’s heard about the Cupcake Club already. I mean, he’s only been here, like, a week, right? We must be famous.”

“Not famous enough, if you ask me,” Alexis said. She looked through her notebook. “Well, I think that’s all the new business for now. We should all think of ideas for the space exhibit, though.”

I nodded. “No problem. I’ll probably want to live in outer space after I meet Jeff tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, Katie,” Mia said. “I have a feeling it will go just fine.”

“I hope so,” I said, but the more I thought about it, the more the meeting with Jeff felt like a big deal.



CHAPTER 4

I Wasn't Expecting That!

The day of the big “meet and greet,” I started to clean my room like crazy. I don't think in the history of my life I have ever cleaned up my room without my mom telling me to, but I guess I was nervous over something. So that's why I was hanging upside down over my bed, pulling out dirty socks covered with dust bunnies from underneath.

“Gross!” I squealed, removing a sock so covered with dust that I couldn't tell what color it was originally. I tossed it into my laundry basket, shuddering.

After I got all my dirty clothes off the floor, I glanced at the clock: 5:50. Ten more minutes until Jeff showed up. This was more suspenseful than on those reality shows, when they make you wait until after the commercial to tell you who gets voted off. I was still really nervous, so I sent a text to Mia, Emma, and Alexis:

Jeff will be here in 10! Freaking out!

Mia replied first.

Don't freak. Go to ur happy place.

My happy place is an imaginary room filled with shelves of delicious cupcakes, comfy beanbag chairs shaped like cupcakes, and cupcake recipe books to read while you're eating. I closed my eyes and tried to go there, but then my phone made a twinkly noise. I had another text.

He will be nice, Emma texted. I can feel it.

And there was a text from Alexis, too.

Be calm. Nothing big will happen 2nite.

Alexis had a point. This was just a meeting.

Tx guys! I texted back.

Full report when you're done, Alexis typed.

K, I replied.

I closed my eyes again, so I could try to go to my happy place, but then the doorbell rang downstairs. I didn't move, though. I sat very still on my bed, listening to the muffled voices coming from the front door. Then Mom yelled, “Katie!”

I took a deep breath. For a split second I considered climbing out my window, but I knew that was ridiculous. How bad could this guy be, anyway?

I slowly made my way down the stairs. The voices were coming from the kitchen now, and I could

hear Mom laughing.

~~Jeff must make her really happy, I thought, not for the first time. So the least I could do was try to like~~ him, right?

I slowly peeked into the kitchen. Mom was at the stove, stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce, and Jeff was sitting at the kitchen table, although I couldn't see him yet. I kind of had to take in the whole scene for a minute. I couldn't help wondering: If Mom married Jeff, is this what it would be like? The two of them together, laughing and talking, while I watched from the sidelines? It was a depressing thought.

Then Mom's mom-radar kicked in, and she looked up and saw me by the door.

"Oh, there you are, Katie!" she said. "Come meet Jeff."

I stepped into the kitchen and walked up to the kitchen table. Sitting there was . . . Mr. Green! The math teacher! For a second I was confused.

"Mr. Green?" I asked. Had Mom hired him to tutor me in math or something?

Mr. Green laughed. "You can call me Jeff when we're out of school, Katie," he said. "Nice to meet you officially. Your mom has told me all about you."

Then it really, actually hit me. Mr. Green and Jeff were the same person! My mom was dating Mr. Green, the math teacher at school who everyone liked! Not only that, but he said *Your mom has told me all about you*. Which means, when he came up to our table the other day, he knew who I was, but I didn't know who *he* was. That didn't seem fair at all. I felt pretty mad at my mom at that point, but I tried not to show it.

"Um, that's nice," I said.

"Katie, can you please set the table for us?" Mom asked.

"Sure," I replied. Our house is kind of small, so we don't have a dining room, like at Mia's house. We eat in the kitchen, which can be pretty cozy. Although right then it was feeling a little bit crowded.

I opened the cabinet to take out the plates, and Mr. Green-Jeff jumped right up.

"Let me help you with that, Katie," he said.

"No, it's all right," I told him. I didn't like the idea of him setting the table, like he was part of the house—part of the family. So I quickly set the table by myself, and soon we were all seated while Mom passed around the salad bowl.

"Mmm, this looks great, Sharon," Jeff said. "Lots of veggies!" And then he and my mom both said, at the same time, "Five a day!" and then laughed.

It was like they had known each other for a million years. I stayed quiet at first, mostly because I wanted to watch the two of them together, but also because Jeff didn't ask me a bunch of dumb questions about how I liked school and stuff, like most adults do when they meet you for the first time. Then Jeff started talking about this family of geese that lives at the park in town. I know about them because Mom and I see them when we go running together.

"So I was running by myself the other morning," Jeff said, "and then I heard a noise behind me, and the mother goose was chasing me! And then all her little goslings started following her!"

"Did they catch up to you?" I asked.

"I lost them on the blue trail," Jeff replied. "And it's a good thing, too, because that mom looked like she wanted to feed me to her babies!"

I laughed. "She gets very upset if you run too close," I said, and then I noticed a pleased look on Mom's face, like she was happy Jeff and I were talking. Which for some reason just made me want to get quiet again, so I did.

The rest of the dinner was pretty much okay. Mom had made her spaghetti Bolognese, which had this delicious meat sauce on it, and Jeff was funny and easy to talk to. I could understand why everyone

thought he was a great teacher, and also why Mom liked him.

~~When we were done eating, Jeff insisted on clearing off the table. "I want to make room for your~~
secret weapon, Katie," he said. "The cupcakes! I've been saving room for days."

I looked at my mom, and then at Jeff, and then it clicked. "Oh, I get it," I said. "That's why yesterday in the lunchroom you said you knew all about the Cupcake Club."

"Well, a lot of the other teachers talk about your cupcakes," Jeff informed me. "But I did get the full story from your mom."

I wanted to say, *Gee, it's nice that somebody around here got the full story*, but I kept my mouth shut. Mom really hates when I'm sarcastic, and besides, I didn't want to ruin things for her. Even though I was mad at Mom for telling him all about me and not telling me anything, it was hard not to like Jeff.

So instead I said, "I'll get the cupcakes," and then I fetched them from the pantry. Jeff looked really happy when I put the plate on the table.

"Oh, yeah, these are the ones you had yesterday," he said. "Awesome! I love sprinkles."

He took a bite of one. "Wow, these are even better than they look!" he said. "You are a cupcake wizard, Katie."

"Thanks," I replied. He might have been saying that just to be nice, but then again he did eat three whole cupcakes, all by himself. So I think he meant it.

"Katie, would it be okay if I took one home for my daughter?" he asked.

My ears perked up a little. Mom did say Jeff had a daughter.

"Sure," I said. "What's her name?"

"Emily," Jeff replied. "She's two years younger than you are. She likes to read, and she also likes to run with me."

"You have a lot in common!" Mom interjected, beaming.

I had to try really hard not to roll my eyes. Reading and running are just two things. I wouldn't call that a *lot* in common. But I kept that thought to myself.

As I packed up two cupcakes for Emily (one extra, to be nice), I thought about what it might be like to have a little sister around. I have this weird thing with kids. I'm really good at playing with them and stuff, but I have to warm up to it. I've been an only child for so long that sometimes being around kids stresses me out.

Then I thought about my friends. Emma has a younger brother, Jake, who is adorable, but Emma says he can be a pain a lot of the time. Alexis has an older sister, Dylan, who is totally rude to her most of the time, but every once in a while she helps Alexis with stuff. But Emily is not a teenager, and she's not a little kid, like Jake. So maybe having a little sister Emily's age would be all right.

I handed Jeff a little box with the cupcakes in it, thinking he was leaving. But then Mom said, "I thought we could all watch that movie about the girl who saved those dolphins. It's just out on cable."

By "all," Mom obviously meant to include Jeff. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Usually when Mom and I watch a movie together at night, we change into our pajamas, but no way was I going to do that with Jeff there. Me in my pajamas in front of Mr. Green? That would be too weird.

"Um, okay," I said, and Mom grinned.

"Great! I'll make popcorn."

The good thing about watching the movie was we didn't have to talk to one another. The bad thing was that I sat in the blue armchair, which is my favorite, and Mom sat on the couch with Jeff, and halfway through the movie I looked over and saw they were holding hands. Ew!

So I was relieved when the movie ended and Jeff got up and stretched and said, "I should be going. It's late. Thank you both for a lovely time."

“Good night,” I said, and then I went upstairs as Mom walked Jeff to his car. I’m sure they kissed each other good night, but I did not want to be around to witness that.

While I was brushing my teeth, Mom opened the bathroom door.

“So what do you think of Jeff?” she asked. I could tell she’d been waiting all night to ask me.

I was so tired, and I didn’t really feel like talking about it. “He’s nice, Mom,” I said. “But I already knew that from school.”

I knew Mom was waiting for me to bring up the fact that Jeff was also Mr. Green, the math teacher, and she was dying to talk about it. But I didn’t give her a chance.

“I’m really tired, Mom,” I said, and then I gave her a kiss on the cheek and went into my room. Mom didn’t push it.

When I got into bed I saw that my cell phone was lighting up with texts.

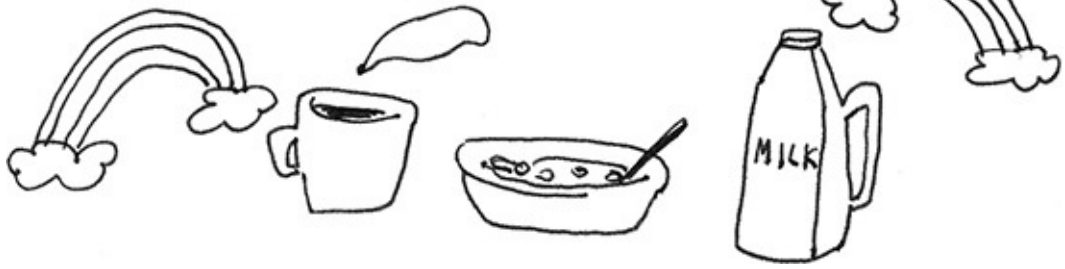
So what happened? Is he nice? Mia asked, and Emma and Alexis basically wrote the same thing.

I didn’t want to ignore my friends, but I didn’t feel like breaking the big news about Mr. Green just yet, either. So I shut off the phone and closed my eyes.

As I drifted off to sleep, crazy thoughts started popping into my head. Mom and Jeff seemed like a great couple. What if they got married? Would I have to share my room with Emily? That would be hard, because my room is pretty small.

Then I had another thought: Maybe Jeff had a bigger house, and he would want us to live with him. Mia and her mom moved in with Eddie, so it was entirely possible. I looked around my room, and even in the dark I could make out the lightning bolt-shaped crack in my ceiling and saw the soft glow of the star stickers on my unicorn poster. I loved my room. I didn’t want to leave.

Change stinks, I thought, and then I tossed and turned until I finally fell asleep.



CHAPTER 5

Mom Is Totally Clueless

When I woke up the next morning there was a text from Mia.

Dying for details.

Somehow I still couldn't break the news that Jeff and Mr. Green were the same person—not even to my best friend.

L8r. At the cc mtg, I typed back.

Aaargh! Suspense! Mia replied, but she didn't push it after that, and I was grateful.

Then I went downstairs, where Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping coffee and reading the paper. I didn't see any breakfast on the table, so I went to the pantry and got a box of cereal.

“So, Katie, I think we should talk about last night” were the first words out of Mom's mouth. Not “Good morning” or “How did you sleep?” or “Are you hungry?”

“Mm-hmm,” I mumbled, annoyed.

“I thought things went really well,” Mom went on.

“Yup,” I said, avoiding her gaze. I got the milk out of the fridge next.

Mom sighed. “Okay, Katie, use your words. What's bothering you?”

I put the milk carton on the table in front of her. “Okay. It's just . . . I can't believe you didn't tell me that Jeff is Mr. Green! That he's a teacher in my school!”

Mom nodded. “I understand. But we wanted to wait until the two of you met officially. And it's all very new. When I first started dating Jeff, he was teaching in another school. The switch to your school was pretty sudden.”

“It's not fair,” I said. “You still knew he was in my school. And it's like he knew who I was before I knew who he was. Plus, what if you guys get married and we have to move into his house? I don't want to leave my room. I like this house. And Emily sounds nice and all, but what if I don't want a little sister?”

Mom's eyes got big. “Whoa,” she said. “First of all, nobody is talking about getting married right now, so slow down.”

I sat down in my chair while Mom continued. “Secondly, nobody's talking about moving right now either.”

“Good.”

“But I'll be honest, Katie, I really like Jeff, and he likes me,” Mom said. “Our relationship is getting serious, I guess. But if we ever did decide to . . . make things permanent, I promise you we won't make any fast decisions. We'd all talk about things together, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. “But you still should have told me Jeff was Mr. Green.”

“I wanted to first make sure that you weren't in his class, because that might cause some issues,

Mom answered. "But you aren't."

~~I looked at Mom. She is a very smart woman—she's a dentist! But right now she sounded pretty clueless.~~

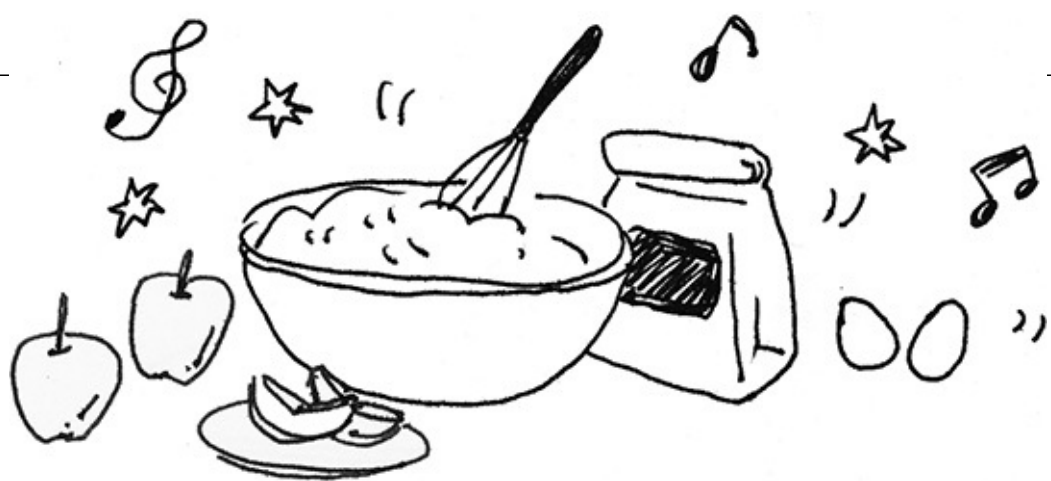
"Don't you see?" I said. "If you're dating one of the teachers in my school, it's going to be weird, period. It doesn't matter if I'm in his class or not."

Mom looked thoughtful. "I see your point. But if it does become an issue, we'll deal with it together, okay? I always want you to feel like you can come talk to me, Katie. Especially about stuff like this."

"Sure," I said with a sigh. Mom just didn't get it. She was dating Mr. Green. I didn't have to wait for it to become an issue—it already was an issue!

Mom went back to reading her paper, and I got to thinking as I ate my cereal. Mom had been dating Jeff for a while, and so far nobody knew he was Mr. Green but me. The best thing I could do was to keep it a secret—even from my friends—and then maybe, maybe, I could get through the rest of the school year.

I hated not telling them, but it was my only hope for a normal life. At least that's what I thought anyway.



CHAPTER 6

More Developments in Awkwardness

The Cupcake Club had a meeting on Sunday afternoon, after Mia got back from visiting her dad. Remember I told you her parents are divorced too? Well, Mia spends every other weekend with her dad in Manhattan, in the apartment she grew up in. I always miss her when she's gone.

Mom dropped me off at Emma's house at two o'clock.

"I'll pick you up at five," she said. "Jeff and I are going for a run, but I have my cell phone if you need me."

"Say hi to *Mr. Green* for me," I said. I wasn't ready to let Mom forget she was dating a teacher in my school. I smirked at her.

Mom had on her patient face. "I will."

When I got out of the car, Emma was chasing her little brother, Jake, across the lawn.

"Hey, Katie!" she said. She grabbed Jake and hugged him. "Tag! You're it! Except I need to start my meeting now."

"But I'm it!" Jake protested. "So you'd better run!"

Emma shook her head, but she ran inside, and I followed them into Emma's kitchen. Jake was hanging off her arm.

"You're it now! Chase me! Chase me!"

Emma sighed. "Stop it, Jake."

"But you're it!" her little brother wailed.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Mom! Tell Jake to quit bugging me, please! Katie is here!" she yelled.

Mrs. Taylor came into the kitchen. "Emma, please don't yell," she scolded. Then she smiled at me. "Hi, Katie."

"Hi, Mrs. Taylor," I said. Emma's mom is the only one in their whole family without blond hair. Hers is brown, like mine.

"Mia and Alexis will be here any minute," Emma said. "Jakey, we need to work now, okay?"

Mrs. Taylor grabbed Jake's hand. "Come on, Jakey. Let's go play ball in the yard."

"I get to lick the bowl!" Jake cried over his shoulder as Mrs. Taylor pulled him outside.

Then Emma and I were alone in the kitchen. I knew she was going to ask about Jeff, so I quickly brought up another topic.

"So, how was your modeling job yesterday?" I asked. Emma has a lot of stuff going on. Besides being in the Cupcake Club, she plays the flute, has a dog-walking business, and even does modeling on the weekends sometimes.

"Kind of fun," Emma replied. "I had to model clothes for a winter catalog for this store, and it was superhot in the studio, but I had to wear a fuzzy parka! I was sweating like crazy."

I laughed. "I never thought about that before. I think I have a new respect for models."

Then Alexis and Mia came into the kitchen.

"Your dad let us in," Alexis reported.

"Emma was just telling me about her modeling job," I said quickly, before Alexis and Mia could sta

firing Jeff questions. That worked for, like, a minute, but then Mia was in the chair next to me, her eyes shining with curiosity.

“So, what’s Jeff like?” Mia asked.

I took a deep breath. I could tell the truth without telling the whole story.

“He’s nice,” I said. “And funny, and my mom really likes him.”

“What does he look like?” Alexis asked.

I had to be careful about this one. “Regular, I guess. Brown hair. He has a daughter, and she’s, like, two years younger than I am. So if Mom and Jeff get married, I’ll have a younger sister.”

“That’s definitely better than getting stuck with an older sister,” Alexis said, making a face.

“Or a little brother,” Emma added. “Or even an older brother. I’ve always wanted a sister.”

“And she’s only two years younger,” Mia pointed out. “She’s not some gross little kid.”

“You mean like Ethan?” I asked.

Mia nodded. “Yesterday he insisted on making his own lunch, and he made the drippiest peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich ever. Every time he took a bite, jelly squirted onto his shirt. And his hands were sticky and gross all day long.”

“Eww!” I squealed, along with Alexis and Emma.

“Can we please stop talking about this and make some cupcakes?” Alexis asked. “We’ve got to get this birthday order done.”

“Let’s do it,” I said quickly. Everyone seemed to have forgotten about Jeff, which was good.

We had a birthday order for two dozen cupcakes that was due by six o’clock that night. We were cutting it kind of close, but Mia was with her dad yesterday and Emma had her modeling thing.

I started chopping up apples for the batter, Emma started mixing the dry ingredients, Alexis whipped up a cream cheese frosting, and Mia started working on the decorations. Not only would the cupcakes be apple flavored, but they would look like apples too, with red icing, green leaves cut from fruit rolls, and a skinny pretzel stick for a stem.

“Is this red enough?” Alexis asked, holding up the bowl of icing she’d been working on.

“Add a little more gel,” I suggested. Getting icing to look really red is hard to do with regular food coloring, but we found a gel that works pretty well. Alexis nodded and went back to work.

Before long the cupcakes were out of the oven, and the whole house smelled like apples and cinnamon. That’s when Emma’s brother Matt came into the kitchen. He’s a year older than we are, and he’s got blond hair and blue eyes, like Emma. He could probably be a model too, but he’d rather play sports—all of them.

“I’m ready to help,” he said.

Emma snorted. “Yeah, you mean you’re here to eat a cupcake.”

“Hey, it’s an important job,” Matt said. “You need me to test the cupcakes for you.”

Alexis handed him a freshly iced cupcake. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” Matt said, and then he took a bite. “Shish ish really good,” he said with his mouth full.

“Thanks,” Emma said, rolling her eyes.

Then I had a sort of reverse thought. Emma and Alexis were always complaining about their older siblings. What if Emily met me and she didn’t like *me*? I mean, I couldn’t imagine being annoying to anybody, but it was possible.

“You need to get out of here,” Emma told Matt. “We have more cupcake business to discuss.”

“Matt can stay,” Alexis said. (She has a little bit of a crush on him.)

Matt smiled at Alexis, then looked at Emma. “I’ll leave, but it’ll cost you,” he said, holding out his hand.

Emma put another cupcake onto his palm. "Now, go!"

~~Alexis looked a little disappointed, but she got over it quickly, because now she could discuss cupcake business, which she loves doing.~~

"So we should talk about the job for the children's museum," Alexis said as she continued icing the apple cupcakes. "Mia, did you ask your dad about that weekend?"

Mia sighed. "I asked him, but he says it's his time with me, and he has something planned. So I can design the cupcakes and the display, but I can't be around to make them or deliver them. Sorry."

"That's too bad," Emma said worriedly. "You're usually around when we do the fancy cupcakes. You're the best at it."

"Aww, thanks, Emma," Mia said. "I love decorating our cupcakes! I am really sorry."

"As long as we prepare correctly, everything will go smoothly," Alexis said. "Mia, you can write up detailed instructions for us and even do a demo before the event."

Mia nodded. "Of course! Anything! I know this is a big job."

"Also, I spoke with the director of the children's museum," Alexis reported. "She wants to meet us on Saturday morning to go over what they want. We can walk around and get some ideas for how to do the display."

"Perfect! I can be there!" Mia promised.

Emma frowned. "That's the day we deliver the mini cupcakes to The Special Day. But you guys can go, and I'll make the delivery. Mona wants me to model some bridesmaid dresses that day, anyway." (I forgot to mention—that's another thing Emma does. She helps us with our gig making mini cupcakes for a bridal shop.)

"No problem," Alexis said. "When we're busy like this, it makes sense to split up. I'll text you guys with the details, and we can figure out who'll drive us for the meeting."

At that moment my phone made a noise, and there was a text from my mom saying she was outside.

"I've got to go," I said. "Thanks for handling the birthday delivery, Alexis."

"No problem," Alexis said.

I went outside and got into the car.

"How was your run?" I asked.

"Nice," Mom said. Then she casually added, "So, I was talking to Jeff about the Wilsons' party."

"You were?" I asked, confused, and I should probably explain why. Since I was a little kid, my mom and I have been friends with the Wilsons. I used to be best friends with Callie Wilson, until she dumped me at the beginning of middle school. That was painful, but now we are okay with each other, I guess. It's still a little awkward any time we're together. Anyway, Callie's mom was having a birthday party next week, and Mom and I were invited.

Mom nodded. "So, I thought it would be nice if Jeff came with us."

I let that statement hang in the air for a minute. Mom wanted to bring Jeff to Callie's house. Callie would know Jeff was Mr. Green. Talk about awkward! And so much for keeping Mr. Green a secret.

"But I was trying to . . .," I began, but I didn't finish. Callie's mom was still Mom's best friend. Callie was going to find out sooner or later.

"What, Katie?" Mom asked. "Don't you think it will be fun to have Jeff with us?"

"It's not that," I said. "It's just really awkward, you know?"

"It'll be fine, Katie," Mom said. "The Wilsons are like family."

It'll be fine. That was Mom's answer for everything these days. I just wished I could believe her.

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