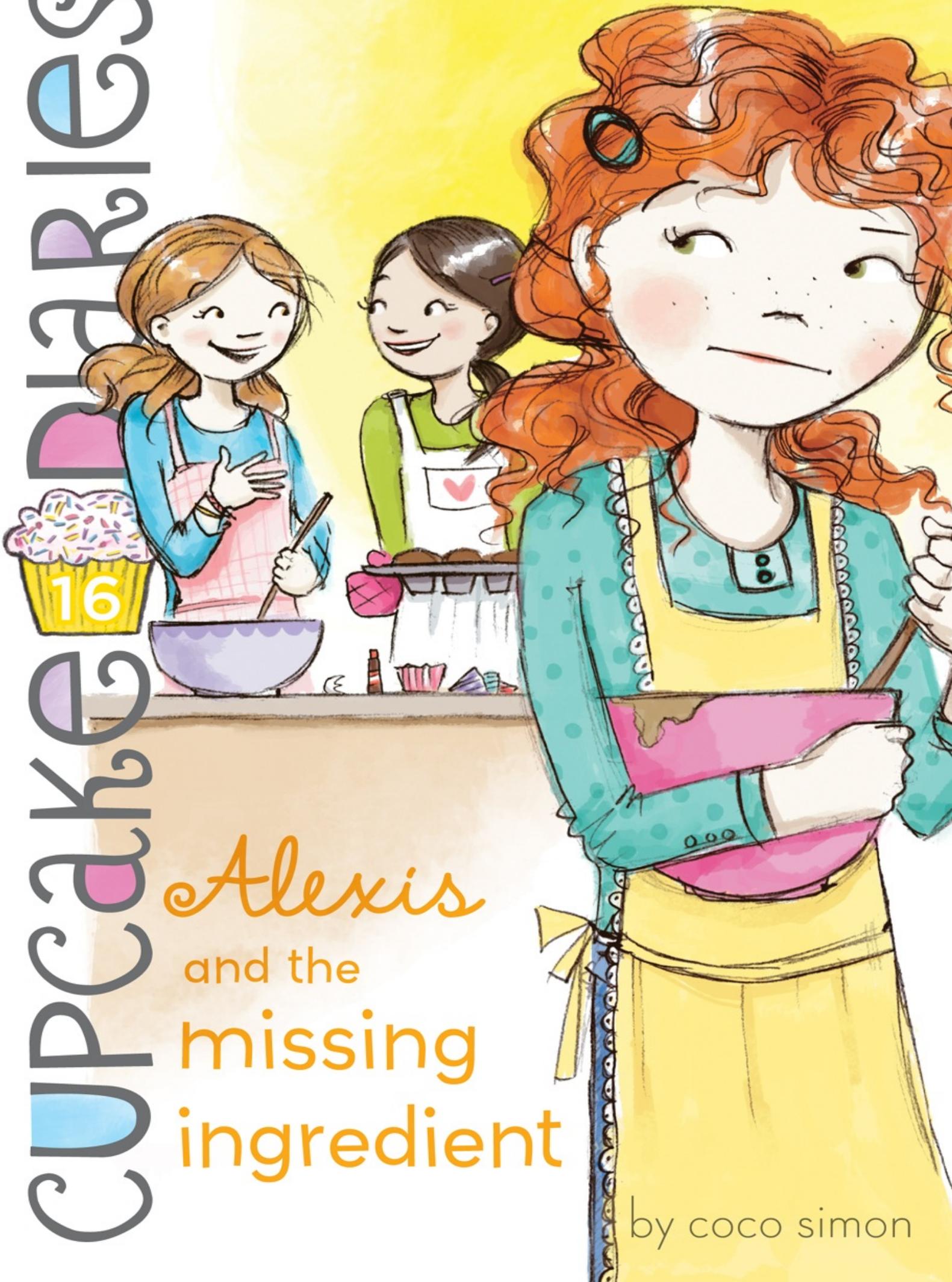


# CUPCAKE PARLIES



*Alexis*  
and the  
missing  
ingredient

by coco simon





## CHAPTER 1

### The Best-Laid Plans

Most people would be thrilled to have off a couple of random days from school in the middle of the term, but me—not so much. I hate to lose momentum. I also dislike it when my schedule is disrupted. I know it sounds nuts, but I’m the kid who listens to the radio on snow days hoping they *don’t* say my school’s name.

So all this is why I was just a little bit bummed out that it was Teacher Development Week at my school, and we’d have off Thursday and Friday. I know, I know, it’s crazy, but like I said, I’m a creature of habit and I like structure.

I also do not really like making social plans. I am happy to go to most things that other people plan, but thinking up activities and getting everyone on board isn’t my favorite thing to do. Don’t get me wrong; I love planning most everything else. I plan almost all our budgets and projects, but something like what we’re going to do on a Saturday afternoon . . . not so much. I leave that to my friends in the Cupcake Club: Emma, Mia, and Katie. In fact, I mostly just count on Emma, who has been my best friend since we were little. We like to do the same stuff, and I always include her if I want to do something, like go to the movies, and vice versa. Somehow it just always works out that there’s something to do.

Mia, on the other hand, is great at coming up with fun ideas, like, “Hey, let’s all go to the mall and get our nails painted neon” or “Let’s go to the department store and try on one of every kind of accessory” or “Let’s do a time capsule!” Katie, too, comes up with clever plans, like making a gingerbread mansion or building a haunted house for Emma’s little brother and his friends. I do admit I had a fun plan one year, when I convinced us all to go to the homecoming parade and game in costumes—with boys!—but that was an exception since it came from my desperate need to spend time with my crush, Matt Taylor.

So now I’m faced with four empty days in a row and no plans, and Emma has the nerve to be going away!

Sure, she gave me plenty of advance warning, but her saying she’s going camping with her family and my realizing I need to dream up some plans were not connected in my mind until the last minute. (For me, the last minute means the weekend before.)

Emma and I were lying on the floor in my room, watching cute animals on YouTube, and she was counting out the reasons on her fingers of why she was dreading camping.

“Bugs, cold, uncomfortable, no bathrooms, bad food . . .”

“No me!”

“Right! No you, only boys except my parents . . .” Emma has three brothers. That’s a lot of brothers.

“Wait! When are you gone from?” I asked.

Emma sighed. “We leave Wednesday, right after school. In fact, *from* school, I think. And then we don’t get back until Sunday morning!”

“OMG. Four nights. That is long. And meanwhile, I’ll be—Wait! What will I be doing?” I’d suddenly realized I had ignored my number-one motto (Failing to plan is planning to fail) and had not made one plan for the weekend. I sat upright in shock. “So, wait. Wednesday night, I’ll . . . do homework. Thursday *day* I can . . . do a little more, like, extra-credit homework and tie up any loose ends with Cupcake Club business. Maybe work on my speech for the Future Business Leaders of America summit.” I relaxed a little, realizing I could fill the days with getting ahead on my work. I took a deep breath. “But Thursday night, Friday? *Friday* night? Saturday and *Saturday night*? Oh no. That’s a lot of time to fill!” I twirled my hair nervously. “What should I do?”

Emma looked at me. “You are so lucky. I’d kill to be doing nothing.” She sighed.

“So stay! You can totally stay with me!” I started to relax again immediately, imagining the luxury of having a built-in best friend for four days. I grinned. “There’s so much fun stuff we could do. I’m sure you’d have lots of great ideas!”

Emma sighed again heavily. “I can’t. It’s required. My mom thinks it might be our last camping trip as a family before Sam goes away to school.”

My heart sank. “Humph!” I said.

“Maybe you and Dylan could do something?” she asked helpfully. “Go somewhere?” She shrugged.

I scowled. “Going anywhere with Dylan is not exactly a laugh a minute,” I said. Though my older sister can be nice sometimes, mostly she doesn’t want me around, and isn’t afraid to show it or let me know it. “Even if she would do anything with me,” I added.

“What about your grandparents?”

“Wow. Wait a minute! *That* is not a bad idea! Even for a night that might be fun. I’ll ask my mom to ask them.” My grandparents live about an hour away in a rambling old farmhouse that’s filled with cool stuff, and they have lots of land and a trampoline and a barn and everything. That could be good. I felt a tiny bit better just thinking of it.

Emma thought again. “Maybe Dylan would take you to the city?” she suggested, then we both laughed. If Dylan was going to the city, it certainly wouldn’t be with me. “Okay, okay. Just brainstorming.”

“Hey! Speaking of brainstorming, we’ve got to resolve that PTA meeting menu.”

“Oh boy.” Emma closed her eyes and put her head in her hands.

We’d had one of our rare Cupcake Club blowups the day before, just talking about what we should bake for the PTA meeting we were hired to cater in two weeks.

Our business, the Cupcake Club, bakes and sells custom cupcakes for all kinds of events. Along with Mia and Katie, Emma and I have built a pretty good business of baking, with regular clients and signature recipes and great reviews on our website. PTA meetings and things like that are good venues for us, because there are lots of local parents all in one place, so we get to wow them with our skills and hopefully get new

business out of some of them. It's a great way to earn some money and it's a ton of fun, too.

I am the business-minded brain of the group—the CEO. I plan our schedules, do the purchasing and manage the inventory, work out pricing—stuff like that. I realize it's funny that I am great at plans and schedules for work and for school, but terrible at it socially. It's just the way I am. My mom always says, You can't be great at everything, so be great at the most important things. That's what I try to do.

Anyway, during our meeting yesterday, all four of us had different ideas. Some of us wanted to go plain and basic, others wanted to really go wild and show what we were capable of. Two of us felt it was all about how great the cupcakes would look, while one said it was all about how they would taste, and the fourth member couldn't decide which was more important.

“All I know is, we need something really great because it's an ideal marketing opportunity for us. All those parents in one place . . . Those are our customers! Think of the birthday parties they organize, never mind book clubs and baby showers!” I said now to Emma.

Emma agreed. “I know, I know. I don't know why that turned into such a big fight. Mia and Katie were pretty irate.”

“Well, they did seem better today, but that's probably because none of us brought it up.”

Emma nodded. “We'll need to figure it out soon.”

“A stitch in time saves nine,” I agreed soberly.

Later, when Emma was leaving, she said, “Hey, don't forget Mia and Katie are around next weekend . . . at least for part of it. They'll have something fun going on for sure. Call them!”

“Right,” I said. “Will do.” But, in fact, I probably wouldn't. Even though I spend a lot of time with Mia and Katie, it's kind of like our foursome is a combination of two pairs: Mia and Katie are one, and Emma and I are the other. All together, the four of us are a great group, and two by two, we are good pairs. But I have never really hung out with just Mia or just Katie, and I don't really ever hang out with them without Emma. It's just the way it works out. I would almost be kind of nervous to hang out with them without Emma. I know it sounds nuts, but that's just how I feel. Anyway, I still had weird feelings about them since the PTA fight. I figured I'd be laying low for a while.

As soon as I shut the door after Emma, I called up to my mom, “Mom! Can you call Grandma to see if I can go stay with her this week?”

Then I ran to my desk and sent out an e-mail asking the Cupcakery to meet next Sunday to brainstorm some ideas for the PTA meeting. It was chicken of me to do it via e-mail and to put it off for another week, but whatever. At least it was being addressed. Phew.



Anyway, that's how it came to be Thursday morning and how I was putting my toothbrush into my already-packed overnight bag to go to my grandma's house. My

granddad Jim was picking me up at nine, and I was really looking forward to my two nights at their house. (Jim is actually my stepgranddad, but he's the only one I've ever known.) Tonight we would have a feast and watch scary movies and eat popcorn and my grandma's caramel brownies. Tomorrow we're going to go on a long hike around the property and then to see the new kittens in the barn and lots of other fun stuff. My grandma is a great cook, and she isn't stingy with the butter or sugar the way my health-nut mom is. I knew I'd be eating well and sleeping well and getting lots of personal attention at the farmhouse, since Dylan was staying home so that she could go to the city with friends for the day. (She always has major plans, way in advance.) It was going to be great.

I heard the phone ring as I started down the stairs and kind of absentmindedly noticed it was a little early for the phone to ring. When I got to the kitchen, my mom was speaking urgently and had one hand gripping the countertop so hard, her knuckles were white.

My mom spoke anxiously into the phone. "Is she going to be okay? What did the doctor say it was?" She looked at me but didn't really register my presence. I dropped my bag to the floor. Who was she talking about?

"How long are they keeping her?"

Pause.

"Can we come out and help you?"

Dylan walked in and stood next to me, and we watched our mom talk on the phone.

*Who?* mouthed Dylan.

My mom stared blankly at us.

"Okay, well, please call me as soon as she comes back and I can drive out there later this morning. Thanks so much, Jim. Give her a huge hug from all of us."

Dylan and I looked at each other in shock. Grandma?

My mom hung up the phone and sat heavily at the kitchen table.

"Mom?" I asked quietly.

She looked up, and her eyes were teary. "It's fine. It just caught me off guard. Sorry. It's Grandma but they think she's going to be okay. She fell down the last step to the basement and bumped her head, so they took her to the hospital to make sure she was okay."

"Oh!" My hand flew to my mouth.

My mom smiled. "Well, you know Grandma can be a little clumsy. Jim said it could have been a lot worse, and she's in very good hands. They really think she's going to be fine. They're keeping her at the hospital for observation, just to be safe. She'll need to rest and take it easy for a few days."

"That's scary, Mom," said Dylan, reaching over to rub my mom's back. I wished I'd thought of that.

"Poor Grandma!" I said. "You're going to see her later?"

My mom nodded. "Jim said I didn't need to come, but I hate to think of him out there at the hospital all alone. I'll go into work for a bit this morning, then head straight out and probably spend the night at the house. And you girls can—Oh, Lexi! I just

realized! It was your special trip today. I'm so sorry, honey!" She got up to give me a hug.

"That's okay," I said into her shoulder. "Do you want me to come with you to the hospital, anyway?"

She let go and smoothed back my hair. "No, but thank you. I think I'd better go alone. Maybe Dad could take you girls out for a treat tonight, since you're missing your trip, Lexi."

I nodded. "Okay. And maybe we could watch a movie."

"Sure," she said. She picked up her cell phone to look at her day's schedule and then she called my dad to tell him the new plan.

Dylan and I looked at each other. "Well . . .," she said.

"I'm going to just do my homework today," I said.

I could see her relief. "Okay, are you sure?" Dylan asked. She stared at me for a moment, making sure I wasn't really upset.

"Totally," I said. Nobody wants to go where they're not welcome.

"Okay."

And that was that.



## CHAPTER 2

### Mall Brats

A day is kind of a long time to fill all by yourself, and, really, a person can only do so much work before they have to go watch reruns of *Celebrity Ballroom*.

Here's what I did: I made note cards for Latin; I did all my math homework for the upcoming week; I wrote the first draft of an English essay I have due next week; I studied for my history quiz; and I balanced the books for the Cupcake Club, updated our website, and sent out some e-bills to a few late-paying clients. My room was already very clean and my school stuff was organized, so I didn't need to do any of that.

After all that it was only eleven forty-five in the morning.

I watched TV for a good hour, forcing myself to relax and to enjoy the downtime. Then I had a P-B-and-J sandwich, folded the laundry, and went online, and by then it was only one thirty.

It occurred to me I could call Mia and Katie to see what they were doing. I knew they were planning to go to the city to stay with Mia's dad at some point, but I felt like a bad friend because I hadn't really made a mental note of when they'd actually be going. I'd feel like a loser if I reached out to them and they were already there and I was busted for not remembering their plans. Plus, there was a little of the PTA fight awkwardness still out there. I decided not to call them.

My mom called to check in, and I practically lunged for the phone, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice when I heard it was her, even though I didn't really expect Mia or Katie to call me. The good news was Grandma was going to be fine. My mom said my grandparents couldn't stop talking about how badly they felt that they'd let me down and how they would have to make it up to me. I smiled, looking forward to that, but obviously not feeling sorry for myself compared to the situation my grandma was in. I didn't have the nerve to tell my mom how bored I was, and I didn't want to burden her any more than she already was, anyway. I told her I was fine, and she seemed happy with that answer and told me to have fun tonight with my dad.

My dad called to say he'd be home by five, so I should pick a movie and find the showtime and then decide where I wanted to go to dinner and if I wanted to eat before or after the movie. This is the kind of planning I hate to do, but with all this time on my hands, I did it just to fill the day. (Argh! It was only one forty-five.)

I do have other friends from school, like from my classes and Future Business Leaders of America, and also some friends from summer camp who might be around, but no one I would just cold-call to hang out. I thought about it a bit. It was weird, I guess. I did everything with Emma. I wondered if this was normal.

Sitting around listening to the kitchen clock tick, I thought about how my mom always told us only boring people get bored. I don't really think that's fair to say, especially if you live in the suburbs. There just isn't much to do, especially if you're a kid on your own. I got out my bike and went for a ride around my neighborhood, and I didn't see a soul. I was a little scared to go much farther by myself, so I kind of circled the same blocks a few times, then went back home. I usually think the girls who are always dreaming up social stuff for the weekends are silly—after all, there's always work that could be done, isn't there?—but I was starting to see I'd really just been lazy all these years, letting my friends come up with plans or letting my teachers' assignments fill my days.

Humph.

For a little while after I got home, I worked on my life lists. These are the lists I keep in my planner, things like places I'd like to visit, cupcake recipe ideas, things to do in New York City, and wardrobe staples to find. My lists were pretty up-to-date, though, so I quickly grew tired of them.

By four o'clock I was dressed for my night out with my dad, sitting on the sofa, clicking through channels on the TV. And then an awful thought hit me: Today was bad, but what about tomorrow? *And the day after that?* What was I going to do to fill all this time? I really missed Emma, and not just because I was lazy.

I looked at the phone. Should I call Katie or Mia? I felt nervous thinking about it, which I knew was silly. But what were they doing right now? Weren't they already in the city? Maybe I could call, and if no one picked up, they'd never know. I wouldn't leave a message. But if they did pick up, well . . . maybe they'd want to come to the movies or do something in the morning if they weren't going to the city then.

So who to call first? Mia was a tiny bit intimidating, I had to admit. She's stylish, she grew up in the city for most of her life, she has lots of other friends there. . . .

So . . . Katie! I knew her number by heart, which is kind of weird, because I don't really call her that much. I reached out for the receiver, then shied away from it, tapping my chin with my finger instead. Should I? What would I say if she was there? *Oh, hey, my trip got canceled and I'm done with every scrap of homework, so what are you up to?*

That wouldn't be so bad, would it?

I reached for the phone again, and then I heard the front door open. "Hello! Anyone home?"

"Daddyyyyy!" I jumped up and ran to hug him.

"Whoa, tiger!" He laughed. "How did I get so lucky to deserve a greeting like this?"

"I'm just happy to see you!" I declared. He didn't know I'd have been happy to see any other living, breathing soul at that point, but I wasn't about to put it to him that way.

He changed, and we went to the mall, where we had an early dinner at Spatinis (yum!) and saw a seven o'clock showing of the newest James Bond movie, which was really good. When we got home at around ten, Dylan was already there with one of her best friends, Meredith, who was sleeping over, and they kind of let me be in the

same room as them for an hour or so before I went to bed. That was a thrilling social interaction, let me tell you. It mostly consisted of the two of them Facebooking and IM'ing on Dylan's computer while alternately shushing each other and giving me meaningful looks. *Whatever*. Like I cared or had any idea who they were talking about. I finally went to my room, and I don't think they even noticed I had left.



In the morning, my dad came in to say good-bye before he left for work. He told me he had asked Dylan last night if she'd keep an eye on me during the day today and that he or my mom would check in soon to see what our plans were. I rolled over and decided to go back to sleep for a few minutes. When I next woke up, it was already nine thirty, which is like sleeping half the day away!

I jumped out of bed and went into the hall just as Dylan opened her door, fully dressed and followed closely by Meredith. Dylan stopped dead in her tracks when she saw me.

"Uh-oh," she said.

"What?" asked Meredith.

"What?" I echoed, looking down at my pj's. Was it something I was wearing? I felt my hair. Did I have bed head?

Dylan frowned. "I forgot that I told my dad I'd babysit Lexi today. Ugh!"

"'Babysit'?" I said scornfully. "Seriously?"

"Well, '*include*' was the word he used, I think. Hmm. This changes things."

"I don't know what it changes for you, but I've got to use the bathroom and brush my teeth, so I will see you downstairs," I huffed. As if I was going to stand there and listen to those two discuss how I'd ruined their plans for the day.

I got dressed and made my way to the kitchen, sure that I'd find a note like, "Hey, had to dash. Will check in later!," but they were actually sitting there in their jackets. Dylan surveyed my outfit critically.

"What?" I asked, pouring myself a bowl of some sawdusty health cereal my mom buys.

"Just . . . you really can't wear that."

I looked down. Jeans, T-shirt, sneakers. "Why?" I didn't see anything wrong with it.

Dylan looked at Meredith and rolled her eyes. "Because you need to look a little more stylish if you're going to hang out with us. It can't look like we have my little sister along for the day."

"But you do!" I protested.

"But I might *not*, if you don't cooperate!" snarled Dylan.

I took a huge bite of my cereal and chomped loudly, getting out all my aggression on those little bran pods.

"Listen, we are going to the mall to meet . . . well, maybe to meet . . . this cute guy who works at Sneakerocity."

I swallowed. "A shoe salesman?"

“Very funny—not. It’s the new skateboarding store in the mall, and a guy from one of my classes works there. Mike Turnbull. And we are going to very casually be available for lunch with him on his break—if we time it right. Therefore, we cannot look like we are hauling around a kid with us.”

“Why are you leaving now?” I asked, looking at the clock. It was a quarter to ten.

Dylan and Meredith rolled their eyes at each other. “Because we don’t know what time he gets off for lunch. We need to be available at any possible time.”

“We’ve been planning this for weeks,” added Meredith.

I put down my spoon and sighed. The day loomed ahead of me, long and empty. No more homework, no more Cupcake business to attend to. Just me and the ballroom dance reruns. I sighed again.

“What do I have to wear?”



We took a taxi to the mall, and it was ten thirty by the time we were inside and scoping out Sneakerocity from a hidden perch inside Soapy Chic, which is a fancy soap and bath store, where no boy would ever tread. I was uncomfortable in an itchy funnel-neck sweater of Dylan’s and some skinny jeans that were so cropped, I looked like Pippi Longstocking. Dylan and Meredith had assured me I looked “good enough” (thanks a lot), so I was allowed to be with them rather than left on my own at Homeschooling, where I like to play with the colorful math manipulatives.

I moved around Soapy Chic, sniffing bath salts and sampling hand lotions. I felt that if we were going to use their store as a launching pad, we could at least pay some sort of rent by buying one little item or another.

A saleslady materialized at my side. “Hello, dear. Is there anything I can help you with today?”

I smiled. “I’m just looking, so far. Thanks.”

She smiled kindly. “Okay. I know one thing I can point out is our sample area, where we have trial sizes of all our bestselling products. They make great party favors and are lots of fun to bring on sleepovers—a different one for each girl, so everyone can try them!” She pointed toward the area and then moved across the store to straighten some marginally unaligned body creams.

Sleepovers. Party favors. I missed my friends.

I selected four different little hand creams, each \$1.99, and put them on the counter.

Suddenly, Dylan called to me, “Alexis! Move out! Now! He’s on the loose!”

My heart leaped in my chest, like I was on a real spy mission, but I still needed to pay. Oh, and I didn’t give a darn. There was that, too.

“I’ll . . . I’ll catch up!” I replied.

“Your loss!” Dylan rolled her eyes at me and dashed out of the store with Meredith.

“I’m sure . . .,” I muttered.

The saleslady wrapped each lotion beautifully and really took her time, which was fine with me, since I had nothing else to do. We talked about how they merchandise—which is how they display the items—and price reductions, and I learned quite a bit. That kind of info will be handy if the Cupcake Club ever opens a retail store, which is

one of my little dreams. Finally, I took my bag and left, promising to visit Nancy, the nice saleslady, soon.

Back out in the mall, I swung my bag and window-shopped, knowing I had Meredith and Dylan to fall back on if I got lonely but not feeling like I urgently needed to find them yet. Mom never really let me walk around the mall by myself . . . well, ever. *Huh*, I thought. Then I found myself outside my favorite store, Big Blue, and as I put my hand on the door to open the big blue double doors, I saw something at the back of the store that caught my eye. It was Mia and Katie!

Relief and happiness flooded me, but then I suddenly felt shy and also a tiny bit mad. Like, why didn't they call me to go to the mall? Of course, I was supposed to be at my grandparents', but still. Then I remembered our PTA cupcake fight, and I got even more shy. I hesitated, even contemplated turning around to flee. But then Katie turned and caught sight of me, and there was no escape.



## CHAPTER 3

### All Aboard!

Alexis?” Katie cried.

“What are you doing here?” Mia called, then added, “Great outfit!” (Mia worships Dylan’s fashion sense, so this wasn’t a surprise comment.)

I took a deep breath and smiled as I walked toward them. “Hey, guys!”

“We thought you were at your grandparents’,” said Katie, a look of confusion on her face.

“Oh. Yeah. Well, it got canceled. My grandma is in the hospital, so the visit was postponed.”

“Wait, *what?* Is she okay?” Mia asked, very concerned.

“You should have told us! That’s terrible,” said Katie. “What’s going to happen? And how’s your granddad?”

I filled them in, having forgotten that they’d met my grandparents on a few occasions. Their concern was really touching, and I was surprised they were annoyed I hadn’t told them. But then the worst part came.

“So, wait, you’ve *been here* the past two days?” asked Mia.

“Well . . . yeah. I mean, I didn’t have anywhere else to go.” I shrugged and looked away.

Katie frowned. “So what have you been doing?”

I now felt uncomfortable. I cleared my throat. “Uh . . . well. I’ve been doing homework and Cupcake Club business . . .,” I offered lamely.

Mia was looking at me carefully. “The whole time?”

“Why didn’t you call us?” asked Katie in a quiet voice.

I tried to make light of it. “I was embarrassed I couldn’t remember when you guys were going to the city. I’m such a knucklehead!” I thumped myself on the skull to illustrate my point. I wasn’t about to mention anything about the PTA cupcake war, either.

Mia and Katie exchanged a quick glance. I gulped and looked away.

“Wow,” said Mia. “I think we should be hurt.”

“Right?” agreed Katie. “We thought we were your best friends!”

“You are!” I said in a rush. “I’m sorry! I just . . . I felt like a loser, and I really couldn’t remember your exact plans, so, like I said . . .”

Katie and Mia exchanged a questioning look that I thought was like, *Should we let her off the hook?* But it turned out that wasn’t what they were silently asking each other, because they both seemed to reach the same decision and turned back to me with smiles.

“So you’ll come to the city with us, then,” said Mia definitively.

Katie nodded. “Totally!”

I could feel a blush pinken my face. “Oh . . . I . . . but . . .”

“No. It’s decided. You have absolutely no say in the matter,” said Mia, folding her arms across her chest.

I felt a swirl of emotions inside. If I had been a cupcake right then, I would have been tie-dye flavored—all mixed up. I wanted to go to the city, of course, but I didn’t want to intrude, and I felt like a third wheel. And I was honestly a touch annoyed at not being invited in the first place. On the other hand, I had absolutely no plans, and I was dreading the rest of the weekend alone. I knew it would be a relief to my parents if I had something fun to do. I took a deep breath. “Okay! I’ll come! Thanks!”

I borrowed Mia’s cell phone to call my mom for permission, and my mom was so happy for me, it seemed I’d made the right decision. After I hung up, Mia and Katie hugged me and squealed, then the three of us jumped up and down a little, and I *knew* I’d made the right decision.

“Okay, we’re getting on a one o’clock train,” Mia said.

“And we’re bringing lunch on the train, so what can we get for you?” Katie asked.

“And make sure you pack . . .”

“But, wait, don’t forget . . .”

And Mia and Katie filled me in on all their fun plans while we set out to find Dylan and Meredith to let them know I’d had a much better offer than stalking boys with them at the mall all day.

As we walked, Mia called her dad to tell him the news, and I held my breath while I listened to her side of the conversation. I was waiting to hear any inkling of my presence being a hassle, because I would have quickly canceled. But it seemed like he was perfectly happy to have me.

My mom called back on Mia’s phone to say my dad would meet me outside the mall in fifteen minutes to bring me home to pack and then to the train station. She said she’d call Dylan to let her know, so I didn’t have to keep searching the massive mall for her (a task that would have happily killed an hour for me, back before I’d had this new plan), and she reminded me, with a certain tone, that I wasn’t supposed to be walking around the mall by myself in the first place. “But—” I started, and she cut me off with, “I will definitely talk to your sister about this.” Wow, Dylan was totally going to get blamed for this. Somehow this didn’t upset me.

Mia e-mailed me a quick list of what I’d need to pack, and then we split up, so they could go meet Mia’s mom for a ride home and I could go meet my dad.

I cut through the food court on my way out and spied Dylan with Meredith and the Sneakerocity boy, who actually *was* really cute. I paused and watched them for a minute, and I had to hand it to Dylan. The skateboarder guy was leaning toward her, listening intently to what she was saying and then laughing appreciatively at her comments. Meredith looked happy for Dylan, and Dylan looked ecstatic and kind of charming. I couldn’t help but smile. I guess it does pay to have plans when you are interested in a boy. Social opportunities don’t always happen spontaneously, though they just did for me.

Dylan looked up and caught my eye. I hesitated, assuming she'd look away, but I was so happy, I decided to wave and smile.

Dylan smiled too! And she waved back, a hearty wave even, and the cute guy turned, and after asking Dylan a question, he also waved. Meredith made funny gestures behind Dylan's and the guy's backs, like, *Get a load of these two*, and I laughed and waved again, then left, feeling happy for everyone.

Remembering my manners, I stopped at Olde Towne Bakery on the way to the exit and got some pastries and brownies to bring to Mia's dad as a host gift. I was happy I had the Soapy Chic creams for me and the other girls. I tucked my shopping bag into the bakery bag.

My dad was waiting by the curb when I got outside. We hustled home, and I raced around grabbing the things on Mia's list. I hesitated as I tried to decide whether or not to change my un-me and uncomfortable outfit. After all, Mia had said it looked good, and we *were* going to the city. But Dylan might kill me for taking her clothes, even though she'd insisted I wear them. Hmm. I decided to split the difference and kept the cropped pants but ditched the itchy sweater, replacing it with a long button-down shirt I'd been saving for a special occasion. With little flats and a cardigan, I had to admit, the new outfit looked pretty cute too.

My dad gave me some spending money at the train station, and, of course, I had my own savings, though I didn't know how much I'd be spending. I had never spent any time with Mia's dad, so I didn't know whether or not he'd be the kind of parent who never lets you pay for anything. (Lucky for me, it turned out he was!)

Mrs. Valdes pulled up behind us in her chic Mini Cooper, and Katie and Mia hopped out, dressed in even cuter outfits than before (thank goodness I'd tried a little harder than usual), and while we girls chatted, our parents discussed details and exchanged phone numbers and all that stuff.

I couldn't believe how much Katie and Mia had planned for the trip! They had every minute mapped out. I just hoped I could keep up.

"How do *you* know the city so well?" I asked Katie.

"Oh, I've been there a bunch with my mom over the years. . . ."

"But she's never been with *me* before! I've been telling her about all these places for ages, and I can't wait for her to finally see them. Oh . . . and you, too, of course!" said Mia.

I smiled and pretended I hadn't noticed the slight. *It's okay*, I told myself. *These two have had this plan for weeks, and you've been a part of it for only an hour and a half. Relax.* But I did feel a tiny bit uneasy about my role here. Like the afterthought that I was.

The train pulled into the station, and we squealed again.

"Okay, *mis amores!*" said Mrs. Valdes. "Have a beautiful trip! I know how happy Mia is to have you girls come see her other life!" She gave us all big hugs and kisses, and then my dad grabbed me for a tight squeeze and a kiss on the head.

"Have fun, kiddo," he said with a wink. "Text me when you get there."

And we waved and hopped onboard just as the doors began to ding their warning.

The train was pretty empty, so we quickly found three seats together for the ride. Two seats were side by side, facing two others, and without thinking, I let Mia and

Katie sit next to each other and took the seat opposite, illuminating the fact that three is a tricky number.

“Okay, let’s review the agenda, girls!” said Mia, pulling out a notebook filled with scribbles and clippings. She flipped to a page and began to read from it.

I pulled out my planner and flipped right to my list of things to do in New York City! “Oh, this is great, because I totally have this list of things to do in NYC, right here in my planner! So . . .”

“Yeah, well . . .” Katie and Mia exchanged an uncomfortable look. Mia spoke again. “See, we’ve kind of had this trip planned for a while, so . . .”

“What Mia’s trying to say is we already have an agenda!” said Katie brightly. “So if your stuff fits in, then we can totally do it. Like, if it’s on the way to where we’re going, then by all means . . .”

“Yeah!” agreed Mia.

“Oh, right. Of course. Ha-ha. Duh!” Luckily, the planner is also my scheduling bible, so I just flipped to the page for today (which was mortifyingly empty), slid the pen out of its slot, and sat poised to take notes on what Katie and Mia had planned for themselves and now me. I chewed on my pen cap while I awaited further information.

“Okay!” continued Mia, looking at *her* agenda. “So today . . . we get there, leave our stuff at my dad’s, and head out for a quick whirl around the neighborhood stores while we wait for Ava to get out of school. . . .”

“Oh, we’re seeing Ava?” I asked, feeling relief. We’d all met Mia’s best friend from when she lived in the city. She was nice, though I’d never had a chance to get to know her well. However, I was happy she would change our number from an awkward three to a more comfortable four. I just wondered who would pair off with who, because that’s how foursomes work.

“Yes, she’ll sleep over with us at least tonight, too,” said Mia.

I looked at Katie, who was smiling a little too brightly. I was confused. “Are you really good friends with Ava too?” I asked.

Katie was taken aback. “Me? What? Oh, no. I’ve only just met her when you have. I don’t really know her that well,” she said.

“I mostly spend time with Ava one-on-one,” said Mia with a shrug. “I’ve just always kind of kept things separate, I guess.”

“Oh, so like when she comes out to visit . . . ?”

“Mostly I go in to visit her,” said Mia. “But when she comes out, we just lay low, you know?”

I glanced at Katie, who looked a little hurt. “Oh,” I said, suddenly understanding that it would be hard to be best friends with someone who already had a best friend from somewhere else. Poor Katie. “Right,” I said. Emma might be away for the weekend, but at least she wasn’t off with some other, potentially cooler, best friend she’d known for way longer. That would be hard. I chewed my pen cap again. “Okay, back to the plans . . . ,” I prompted.

Katie laughed. “Oh, Alexis, you do love plans!”

“I like business plans when I make them and social plans when other people make them,” I said. *And I’ve been sitting home alone for the past thirty-six hours*, I wanted to add,

but I knew that would be a touchy subject.

Mia continued, “Okay, so we’ll go surprise Ava around the corner from her school, which is my old school. Then we’re going to go get this killer hot chocolate at City Bakery. It’s so thick, it’s like melted candy bars, and they have huge homemade marshmallows they put on top, and churros if we want them, for dipping.”

“Yum!” I said, scribbling “Pick up Ava. Get HC. Churros!” in my book. “Do they have cupcakes?”

“Of course!” said Mia.

“You’re always thinking about the competition!” teased Katie.

“Business first, that’s my motto!” I said, and we giggled.

“Next, we’ll walk home and pass by the baking store Katie wants to check out”—they exchanged a smile—“then we’ll look into just one or two boutiques I like along the way, then go home to change and wait for my dad.”

I scribbled furiously. “Will Ava already have her bag with her?” I asked.

“What? Oh. Well, maybe not, because it’s a surprise that we’re going to school,” Mia said, a little distressed.

“Okay, just planning ahead,” I said. “Emma always hates it when I forget to tell her to pack a bag in case she sleeps over. Then we’re always scrambling at the last minute . . . you know.”

“Right. Then we’re going to dinner at Omen, that awesome sushi place in SoHo I’ve told you all about!” Mia’s eyes lit up in excitement.

“I can’t wait!” said Katie, grinning.

“Oh, is it cool?” I asked.

“Wait, you haven’t heard Mia going on and on about Omen?” Katie laughed incredulously.

I shrugged. “I guess not,” I admitted.

Mia giggled. “Well, after tonight we’ll *all* be going on about it!”

I am personally not a fan of raw fish, but I felt like it really wasn’t my place to throw a wrench into the plans. I made a mental note to eat an extra churro at the bakery.

“After Omen, my dad is going to take us to get our palms read by this really cool lady he knows.”

“Wait, whoa! Palm reading?” That kind of stuff made me a little nervous. But Katie and Mia looked at me blankly, like, *What’s not to like about palm reading?* “I mean, uh . . . wow!” I corrected, and they smiled.

“Yeah, she only gives out good news, though, so don’t worry!” reassured Katie. “At least that’s what Mia always says.”

Mia nodded. “Right. Then after that we’ll walk a couple of blocks to the treat that Katie and I have lined up to surprise you and Ava. . . .”

“What is it?” I asked excitedly.

They laughed. “We can’t tell you! It’s a surprise!”

“Oh.” I felt a little left out. I guess I’d feel better after we hooked up with Ava. Then she and I could be left out together. I decided to change the subject. “Okay, and will we set up the beds before or after we go out?” I asked.

Mia laughed again. “You and your details, Alexis! I don’t know! Before? After? Who cares?”

“Oh, I just thought ’cause maybe we’ll be so tired when we get back . . .”

“No way. We will be rowdy!” said Katie, giggling.

“Okay . . . ,” I said, and wrote in my planner: “Omen, palm reader, shop, get rowdy.”

Katie leaned across the seats to see my planner. “Did you actually just write ‘get rowdy’ in there?”

I nodded. “Yes. Failing to plan is planning to fail!”

“How can you fail at being rowdy?” asked Katie.

“You can use up all your energy too early and then want to go to sleep when it’s rowdy time, that’s how,” I said huffily. Didn’t everyone know that?

“Alexis Becker, you are too much!” said Katie with a laugh as we entered a dark tunnel.

“The Beckers try harder.” Mia giggled as she quoted our family motto.

It hurt my feelings a little, but I took a deep breath and decided not to turn their teasing into a fight. After all, it would be two against one. Not my favorite odds.

“And what’s wrong with that, my friends?” I asked. “What’s wrong with that?”