

CHAPTER ONE

Chocolate Lava Cupcakes

Why am I still in this kitchen?

I'll tell you why. It's because these stinking cupcakes are taking forever, and a day and a half, to finish baking! Seriously, I might still be stuck in this kitchen when I'm eighty years old; staring at the timer on the oven like a creepy cupcake stalker.

I fold my arms, squeezing them against my side so I'm not tempted to open the oven door. The baker in me knows opening the oven too soon can be the difference between puffed perfection and flat failure, but I really want to check on them.

I'm itching to check on them.

I might die if I don't check on them.

Okay, not really, but I'm under some stress right now so I think I'm allowed to be mildly dramatic.

If I don't leave the house in twenty minutes with these things I'm going to be late for Bubby's class party. It's the monthly Birthday Bash so, it's kind of a big deal.

Not only do the cupcakes need to finish cooking, but they need to cool enough that when I sprinkle the powdered sugar on top, it doesn't melt to oblivion. Also, I have to pack them up and *then* it takes seven minutes to walk to the elementary

school. Well, five if I jump the Hall's back fence though technically I'm not supposed to do that anymore. I'm not stellar at math, but even I know this is not going to add up.

Ugh!

Okay, I have to think.

Big brain time.

What are my options?

Obviously flying or teleporting are out. It's really too bad because both would come in super handy right now.

Walking is out, so, I guess I could ride my bike.

No, that's not going to work. Where would I put three dozen cupcakes?

Wait, I could get a ride.

Yes!

That is this solution for sure. I'll have help carrying the cupcakes and I'll get to the school way faster than walking or riding a bike.

Dad's at work and Mom's running errands, neither one of them will be back in time to drive me anywhere.

I wonder if *Tia* is home?

I pull my phone out of my back pocket and start to enter my password to unlock the screen when I hear the telltale creak of the back door opening behind me. My heart thumps in my chest as if it's all hopped up on pixie sticks. My phone slips out of my

fingers and would hit the floor, except that I have excellent reflexes.

Ha, like a cat.

I whip around, holding my phone up like a taser. It is turquoise and sparkly and the total opposite of intimidating but it's gotta be better than nothing, right?

The door opens all the way and instead of a big scary-hairy bad guy, I see Marissa peek her cute, blond head inside the house. Her eyes widen at my shaking phone, pointing toward her face.

Suddenly, my arms decide to turn into jello and flop down to my sides, then my legs do the same thing so I have to sink into one of the kitchen chairs or fall on my keister.

I drop my phone on the table and push my hair back with both hands. "You scared the gumdrops out of me, Marissa!"

My words come out in raspy wheezes.

Tia opens the door the rest of the way and steps inside the kitchen. A whoosh of cold air fills the room, cooling my cheeks.

"*Lo siento sobrina!* I didn't think anyone was home. Why are you still here? Your mama told me last night you are taking treats to Andy's class party today."

I nod and stretch my arms above my head. Thank goodness my heart is finally slowing down. For a second there, I thought it

was going to pound right out of my mouth. Now it's sliding back down my throat, so I can talk like a normal person again.

"I am, if the dang things ever decide to set up in the middle."

"Don't say dang, *mija*." Marissa walks to the oven and pushes the light button to peer inside. "What are you making? It smells so good in this place."

I sigh, and lean forward to moosh my cheeks into my hands, "Chocolate lava cupcakes."

"Ah si! You are becoming quite the baker!"

Normally I'd glow like a jellyfish at this kind of praise, especially when it comes to my baking, but right now I feel like a nincompoop. Bubby and the rest of his kindergarten class would be just as happy with store bought cupcakes. They love the kind with technicolored icing that stains your teeth.

I could have biked to the store, picked up a couple boxes, dropped them off and done my nails in the amount of time it's taking to bake these things. And then, I would have had pretty nails.

Instead, I'm getting gray hairs watching the oven timer because I had to be all fancy and experiment.

When I had the idea to take Aunt Jojo's chocolate molten lava cake recipe and turn it into cupcakes, it was brilliant and inspired. Now, it's completely idiotic. Why am I making

something that is impossible to check for doneness because it's *supposed to be* gooey in the middle?

Cat, Cat, Cat.

Baking Rule #1: Never experiment when there's a time crunch, or if you're baking for something important.

Apparently, I just make up those rules so that I can break them.

"What should I do, *Tia*?" I pick up the oven mitts and slap them against my leg. "I need to pull the cupcakes out or I'll be late, except that there is a really real chance they might be complete mush."

"This is a dilemma." Marissa studies me with a smile tickling the corners of her mouth. "Maybe the cupcakes were put in the oven later than they should have been, eh? I wonder why you didn't get started sooner."

The heat creeps up my neck without my permission. Now why did *Tia* have to go and ask that?

"Perhaps you were distracted?" She leans forward, her bright blue eyes sparkling.

The oven beeps the one minute warning. I praise the name of GE and resist the urge to give it a sloppy smooch.

It's not *that* weird. Jojo kisses her commercial mixer all the time.

I pull on oven mitts and quickly remove all three cupcake trays from the oven racks. Marissa reaches over to turn off the oven, since it's still beeping obnoxiously, while I wave my hands over the cupcakes. This will make them cool faster, I'm pretty sure.

"Take them outside, it's so *frio* today." Marissa grips her elbows and shivers dramatically.

Now, why didn't I think of that? I was contemplating putting them in the freezer, even though the last time I did that my mom lost her breath lecturing me about broiling hot pans in icy cold freezers.

Apparently I speed defrosted a bunch of meat for dinner that night.

Actually, she probably should have thanked me for that instead of sentencing me to dish duty for a week.

I shoot a smile at *Tia* over my shoulder, and grab two of the trays. I consider balancing the third one on top, then have visions of chocolatey goo all over the floor and my feet.

It's probably a sign from the Head Bakers in the Sky. I think I will *not* do that.

I take the first tray out, set it on the picnic table dad built last summer, and dash back inside for the other two. My feet are freezing! It's April for ganache's sake, spring. It should not be this ridiculously cold outside.

When I get the other two trays settled, I speed back in the house and take a seat next to the window. I'm not letting those cupcakes out of my sight. They are at risk from passing pedestrians on the walking path, and ambitious squirrels.

I'm just hoping, with all this hubbub, Marissa forgot what she asked me before. She loads the dishwasher with my baking mess and looks too consumed with the chore to remember embarrassing questions. I think I'm off the hook, which is super good news because blushing makes me tomato red, and that is so not my color.

"Cat?"

I bat my eyelashes. "Yes?"

"Don't you be so cute with me, *nina*. I've known you since before you were born. Your tricks won't work."

It's tragic to admit how true that is. I don't think any of my distraction techniques have ever worked on Marissa.

"Fine, yes I could have gotten the cupcakes in the oven sooner, or whatever."

"Mmm hmm?"

I purse my lips at her mocking face. "Okay, seriously, how do you know?"

Marissa waves a wooden spoon in the air like a magic wand, spraying me with a few droplets of water. "Oh, a little bird told me."

That's what I thought.

There's only one bird around these parts that sings like a canary.

"Robyn!"

Marissa holds out her palms. "Now, now. she wasn't spilling any *frijoles*, she called me because your phone was busy."

"Mmm hmm?" I mimic with a sassy flip of my head.

Marissa grabs a dish towel from the counter and swats my back with it. "Ornery *mija*! Where does your mama keep the dishwasher pods?"

"Under the sink, but we use the liquid stuff, not pods."

Marissa pours soap in the doohickey and locks the dishwasher door. It starts automatically with a click and a whoosh of water. That's the most beautiful sound in the world. Mostly because it means I don't have to wash the dishes.

Then, she sits in the chair across the table and fixes me in her soul searching gaze. Good thing I already decided not to hide anything from her, because I am totally doomed when she looks at me that way.

Bye-bye secrets.

"Tobey called to ask me to bring a volleyball to the park today, but then I had to explain that I wouldn't be there because I volunteered to take treats to Bubby's class. That took awhile, mostly because I had to jazz it up to make it sound more

exciting, then Tobey and I got in a yes/no war because he wanted to come help me but I knew if he did that I would totally make a mess of the cupcakes, which I probably did anyway, because molten lava cakes are finicky enough without me trying to turn them into cupcakes."

I pause to take a deep breath and accidentally glance at *Tia's* face. Now my ears feel sunburned, like my neck, but I can't stop talking.

I must finish what I start.

Dang it.

"So that lasted forever and then he had to go on and on about how Friday half day at the park is so much funner when I'm there and then I had to flirt a little bit and say something awesome like, 'no you're funner' and then my mom came in and told me she was going to the store to pick up something but she wouldn't tell me what, so I had to pester her about it until she ran out the door and *then* I started making cupcakes. That's the whole story, except the part where I was about to call you to see if you can give me a ride to the school. Do you think the cupcakes are cool enough now?"

Marissa presses her lips together, making the dimples in her cheeks deepen. "*Si*, I would be delighted to give you a ride and I think it is worth it to check."

I push my chair back, it makes a loud screech on the floor.
"You're the bestest! Hold on, I'll go check on them."

I hurry outside, hopping on one foot and then the other to keep one from getting so cold it freezes to the concrete forever and always. I've never actually heard of that happening, but I'm not about to find out if it's possible. I have seen many impossible things in the last six months. It's gotten so I pretty much believe in everything now.

The cupcakes aren't steaming anymore and the muffin tin feels cool enough to grab without an oven mitt. This time I take my chances with balancing all three because it's freezing and I still don't have any shoes or socks on.

Full disclosure, I bake barefoot.

I'm so glad we could share this moment.

Back inside, I slam the door shut with my heel and drop the trays on the kitchen island.

Marissa jumps up to help me remove the cupcakes to the cooling racks I set out on the counter ages ago.

Really, it feels like a lifetime.

Staring at clocks has this weird way of messing with my mind. Like, I can still kind of see the green glowy numbers from the oven clock behind my eyelids when I blink. And also, I can't remember what my life was like before I started obsessing about the timer.

Marissa holds one of the cupcakes up to the light and examines it from a couple different angles. "Oh, *bueno, Gata!* They look perfect."

"Yeah?"

"Oh *si,*" She tips her hand in my direction. "Look how they hold the shape when I squeeze. Not too gooey, just right!"

"Really? Do you really think they are okay?"

I squint my eyes; maybe they really are fine. Nobody says cupcakes have to be perfect to be good. And also, six year olds will eat anything, even cupcakes wrappers.

Unfortunately, I know that from experience.

"Maybe I should do a poison check?" Marissa's voice is totally innocent but when I look at her she grins like a little kid.

"I know that trick! It's just an excuse to eat one."

Marissa puts her arm around my shoulder. "This is so true, well?"

"Fine," I make a big deal out of rolling my eyes. "But only one, you'll spoil your dinner."

Marissa hops on her toes and wiggles her fingers over the tops of the cupcakes before choosing one in the middle. I try not to stare, but can't help glancing over to check her facial expressions.

Facial expressions don't lie.

Mostly.

But Marissa's face is like a wall with no pictures on it. I can't tell what she's thinking! I guess I have to wait until she tells me.

Does she really have to chew so thoroughly?

I flip a towel against my leg. I need a distraction. "Is Robyn still at the park right now?"

"Yes," Marissa swallows. "Liam is there too. She wants you to stop by when you're done with Andy."

I nod, but don't respond. If the cupcakes were nasty, Marissa wouldn't keep taking bites, right? She swallows the last bit and licks her fingers with a sigh.

But still doesn't say anything.

"Well?" My voice is so squeaky loud it echoes back and makes my ears ring for a second.

Marissa lifts her hand for a high five. "*Excellente.*"

"Yeah?" I slap her hand weakly. "They turned out okay?"

"Better than okay, *magnifica, fantastica, maravillosa!*"

I smile, for reals this time. "Thanks, Marissa!"

Marissa stands up straight. "Oh my goodness, I almost forgot! *Olvidadiza!* I came over here to borrow yeast."

"Sure," I gesture with my head. "It's in the corner cupboard."

Marissa rummages for a second, then pulls out a red container. "This?"

"Yep."

She sets it on the island, her head shaking. "A lot has changed, *si*? Before, I would never think to come to your house to borrow ingredients."

"I know," I grin over my shoulder. "I'm still geeking out about it."

In a flash of memory, I see everything that's happened in the last six months, like someone sped it all up for a montage of my baking evolution. That first day of culinary, when I didn't even know how to read a recipe, experiment baking with Robyn and then lessons from *Tia*, visiting the family bakery in Arizona, early mornings with GG, and now making up my own recipes.

It has been a wild ride, for sure. I shake my head and raise an eyebrow. "Wait, how are you out of yeast?"

Tia ducks her head. "I don't know how it happened! I thought I had another package in the pantry, but no, *nada*. It's a sad, sad thing to have everything ready to make bread sticks and there is no yeast!"

I search under the island for the sieve and then go to the pantry for powdered sugar. "What are you making bread sticks for?"

I hope they are for me; I love *Tia's* bread sticks. All crunchy on the outside, soft and buttery in the middle.

My tummy gives a little growl to remind me it's still there, in case I forgot.

Marissa laughs, "Dinner tonight did you forget?"

I shake my head, and then nod. "Yeah, actually. I've been totally focused on Bubby, I mean Andy's, party... whoops... " The powdered sugar comes out too fast and goes right up my nose. I bend away from the food to sneeze.

"Here!" Marissa hands me a tissue and finishes filling the sieve for me. She uses a measuring cup instead of dumping like I did.

Imagine that.

I blow my nose, with a loud trumpeting sound. "I totally forgot about family fun night. It doesn't even feel like Friday. Was I supposed to make something?"

"Not tonight," Marissa slides the powdered sugar back into the pantry. "I'm making bread sticks, your mama made the salad, we are all set"

I toss the tissue in the trash and look at her. "All we're having for dinner is salad and breadsticks?"

Marissa doesn't turn around. "I didn't say that."

"No?" I wash my hands and dry them off real quick so I can be the one to shake powdered sugar over the cupcakes. That's my favorite part. "What aren't you telling me?"

Marissa turns, slowly. "Nothing you do not need to know."

"Does that mean you could tell me something I should know?"

"No, that means I can't tell you what you don't know until the time comes for you to know what I can't tell you, yet."

Marissa's eyes sparkle.

I give Marissa a gremlin face and then turn my full attention to the cupcakes because they deserve it more.

Cupcakes would never tease me; cupcakes understand.

Plus, I know it's completely pointless to try and get information out of Marissa when she doesn't want to share it, so I'm not even going to try anymore.

Tia stops moving and perks her ears upward. "Is that the doorbell?"

"Huh?" I didn't hear anything.

Marissa waits a second, then she nods and she walks to the front of the house, her high heels clicking across the wood floors. I know she reaches the door when the sound is muffled by the rug in the front entryway.

"*Hola* Tobey! Come in, come in, *mijo!*"

Tobey!

My stomach drops to my toes. What is Tobey doing here? My thoughts whirl like pecans in the blender. I don't think he said anything about coming over. I would remember that. The last thing he told me was he was going to the park to meet Liam and Robyn.

Oh fudgescicles,

What is he doing here?

And what do I look like?

I peek into the reflection of the stainless steel refrigerator, which distorts all my features.

My nose isn't really that huge, is it?

There's powdered sugar streaks on both of my cheeks and something across my forehead. I fumble with the oven mitts trying to take them off and drop one on the floor. It's just going to have to stay there for a minute. I grab a clean towel and rub my face until it feels raw.

Someone needs to use more fabric softener around here.

I just have time to smooth my hair out of my eyes, snatch the other oven mitt off the floor and lean casually on the counter before Marissa comes back into the kitchen with Tobey right behind her.

"Hey Tobey!" I give a cute little wave, ignoring Marissa's eyebrows that mock me with every hair. "What's up?"

"Nothing, I was just... woa Cat! What's that smell?"

I resist the urge to take a whiff of my armpits. Even though I can tell Tobey doesn't think the smell is bad, I keep wondering if I put on deodorant today.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like..." he sniffs a couple times and smiles, "magic chocolate happy dreams."

Tobey looks so cute, I can't even!

His freckles stand out more in the bright kitchen lights. His hazel eyes crinkle at me, almost disappearing into the wrinkles of his grin.

I duck my head. "Aw, thanks. So, um, why did you come over? I thought you were going to the park."

Did that sound like I wish he was at the park instead of here? I'm sure there's a better way I could have worded that, unfortunately my brain turns into a gooey geyser when Tobey's around.

Ever since I found out that one of the reasons I bake so well is because I'm a Flirty Mcflirtyson, flirting with Tobey has become a total disaster.

I never cared what the boys I used to flirt with thought about me, and I *really* care what Tobey thinks. I like him so much, it's like I'm flirting for keeps now. That makes it difficult to be cutesy and adorable when I'm always second

guessing what I say. I feel like a complete ninny goat whenever I'm around Tobey now.

The other problem is, I don't *want* to flirt with anyone except Tobey anymore, but I *have* to keep flirting so I don't lose my gift.

At least, that's how I think it works.

Frosted donuts, my thoughts took me on a super ramble through the woods. I have no idea what Tobey and I were talking about. Luckily, he got distracted by the cupcakes and isn't staring at me like I'm bananas.

"So, what are you, um, doing here?" I try again, though I don't think it sounds much better this time.

sigh

Tobey pulls his eyeballs away from the yumminess on the counter. I should probably pack those things up before the temptation gets too strong. There might be enough to share, but I've seen how much Tobey eats when he gets going. It's better not to start the engine.

I pull out some tin foil trays and set them on the counter. They all smoosh together because my hands are shaky. I think my brain and my fingertips have totally disconnected.

"Let me." Marissa gently moves me out of the way.

"I'll help!" Tobey reaches for a cupcake and brushes my arm with his fingers. The zingiest zing of all time goes up my arm, making my shoulder twitch.

Yeah, I'm in the perfect state to make a mess of the cupcakes. I let Marissa take over without protesting and wipe my hands on a kitchen towel. My hands aren't really dirty, the extra time gives me a chance to breathe before I look at Tobey again.

Breathing is super important.

"I'll take care of this *mijo*." Marissa plucks a cupcake out of Tobey's hand. I'm too embarrassed about the hand brushing thing to look at him. But I'm pretty sure Marissa stepped in cause Tobey has that wild glint in his eyes from staring at sweets. "You tell Cat why you have come."

"Oh yeah," Tobey turns to me. "I'm here to save the day."

For a second, I get distracted imagining Tobey in a superhero suit.

"Aren't you going to ask me how?" He lifts one eyebrow.

His hair moves with the breeze and there's an American flag waving behind him. Oh yeah, and a cape. Superheroes totally need capes. When he smiles, the sun sparks off his pearly whites.

"Cat! Stick with me here!" Tobey snaps his fingers in front of my nose.

"What? Who? What?" I blink, it's sort of difficult to let that daydream go.

Tobey shakes his head. "Where are you exactly? Ask me how I'm saving the day, Bean-up."

Can I just say that hearing Tobey use Robyn's nickname for me is delicious? It's like he's part of the group, I mean, he is, but it makes me feel like we are friends for reals now.

A whole new level.

I grin. "How are you going to save the day?"

Tobey reaches towards me, my heart power jumps to my throat, but all he does is take the towel I'm holding. "There's a streak of flour, or something, right by your ear."

I close my eyes cause he does this dorky thing where he flaps the towel all over my face like he's trying to clean it.

"Gimme, I'll get it myself." I open my eyes and grab for the towel, but then Tobey puts his hand on my shoulder and I lose my breath for a second.

Also, what day is it?

He gently swipes the towel across my cheek and the top of my ear, looking at me intently. I get lost in the green, brown streaks of his eyes until Marissa's throat clearing brings me crashing back to earth.

I don't even want to know what she's thinking right now.

There is no safe place to put my eyes. "Thanks, Tobey."

"No prob, bob," Tobey tosses the towel on the counter. "Now come on!" He smacks my back and runs ahead of me through the living room, out the front door.

I follow a little zombie-ish and dazed. When I step outside, the cold air brings me back to life.

"Ta-da!" Tobey waves his arms all over the place like a circus ringmaster. "What do you think?"

What do I think?

Obviously he's waiting for me to say something not completely brainless.

Which means I need to stop thinking about how stinking cute he is and pay attention to what he's trying to show me.

Leaning against the basketball hoop is Tobey's bike, attached to a trailer thing that babies and little kids ride in.

"That's... super cute." I nod, even though I don't get it. Is he babysitting? Not his brother though, Conner is way too big for that thing.

"It is, isn't it?" Tobey rolls his eyes. "I can see you're in Catland today, so I'll explain how this works."

I nod like there's nothing in my noggin. Except this time, I'm doing it on purpose to look like a ditz. "Okay, use small words."

"I borrowed my neighbor's bike trailer to haul the cupcakes to the school so you don't have to walk. Way faster. Ta-da!" He tries again, swinging his arms into a wide arc.

That is the coolest thing in the whole world!

Except that Marissa is giving me a ride.

Moral dilemma.

What should I do?

No, actually this is easy. I'd rather be late and ruin the cupcakes riding with Tobey, then on time in Marissa's car.

"Tobey!" I turn to face him. "Seriously, this is amazing!"

"Yeah?" His smile lights up the whole neighborhood.

"You totally did save the day." If I wasn't such a chicken, I would totally throw my arms around him and then maybe he would swing me in circles while we both laugh. That would totally happen if we were in the movies, but since we're in Boise, I just hold out my fist.

Tobey bumps it and mimes an explosion.

This really is pretty rocking awesome. Not only does it prove he actually listens when I talk, but that he spends time thinking about me when we aren't talking. He totally went to work to solve this so I can deliver cupcakes and still go to the park with them before dinner.

That has to mean something.

Right?

"What's this?" Marissa steps down the front walk. I turn so Tobey can't see my face and give Marissa my best puppy eyes. One of her eyes flutters just enough that I'm going to call it a wink. I think she gets me.

"Tobey, you are a thoughtful *nino*! Let's get you loaded up so you make it in time."

Best. Aunt. Ever!

Tobey runs on ahead to get the cupcakes, instead of following, I grab Marissa's arm.

"Thank you! It was super nice that you were going to give me a ride but..."

"Say no more," She holds out a hand. "I understand perfectly."

I grin at her and jog ahead, Tobey is already on his way back out with one of the trays of cupcakes. I grab the rest and Marissa helps us pack them in the bike trailer with towels between so they don't slide around.

We are totally ready to go, with five minutes to get to the school. It's tight, but I think we're going to make it. I open the garage to wheel my bike out.

"Nice helmet," Tobey smirks.

I click it into place with a cutesy smile, and finger the cat ears on either side. "Yeah, you like it?"

"Seriously, Cat?" Tobey shakes his head, his eyes glued to mine. "You couldn't be cuter if you tried."

I follow him down the driveway, trying to keep my bike steady. For some reason my balance is all off. And also, there is sunshine, lolly pops, bluebirds singing, and people dancing in the streets with top hats and fluffy dresses.

I pedal faster to get ahead of Tobey and the cupcakes. I'm so distracted I might ram into the bike trailer and smooch everything.

Which doesn't actually seem like that big of a deal anymore.

Tobey thinks I'm adorable!

If I had the guts, I would have said it right back, because seriously, I was thinking the same thing.

But about him.

Chocolate Lava Cupcakes

Ingredients

1 C. Chocolate Chips

1 TBSP Cocoa

½ C. Butter

½ C. Sugar

½ tsp Vanilla

4 Eggs

3 TBSP Flour

¼ tsp Salt

Instructions:

If you love you some chocolate, this is a recipe of your dreams. I don't understand the chemistry that creates the lovely, fudgey middle texture, but it is pretty dang great.

Okay, enough talk - let's do this!

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

In your sauciest pan; melt the butter, chocolate chips, sugar and cocoa until combined and smooth. Remove from heat and stir in the vanilla.

Add the eggs slowly so you can stir each one all the way in before you add the next one. Whisk in the salt and flour just until combined. I sort of sprinkle it over the top so it doesn't clump up.

The batter is going to be runny - no worries - you didn't do it wrong. At least, I think you didn't. It's really hard to see your batter from

this angle. But if it's runny enough to make you crave hot chocolate, that's right on target.

Scoop into greased muffin cups and pop the whole thing in the fridge for at least 20 minutes. Bake for 10-11 minutes.

Like Cat, you might wonder if they are done because that toothpick is never going to come out clean. If you go at least 10 minutes at this temp, you'll be fine. I've gone as long as 15 minutes and they still turn out great.