



Freaking Out

I'm not usually the kind of girl who gets punched in the face. I guess this was just my lucky day.

"Hayley! Hayley, are you okay?" Marco's thick, straight eyebrows are pulled together. He reaches for my hand, but Artie pushes him away.

"What is *wrong* with you?" she shouts at him.

"I'm fine," I say from my place on the ground, but nobody hears me. Everyone is shouting and pointing fingers, and Marco is looking at me, his dark brown eyes brimming. I wish I could give him a hug. His fist in my face was an accident. Marco is one of my best friends — he would never hurt me on purpose. I know he must be feeling worse than I am right now.

I rub my jaw where his knuckles knocked against me and stand up so that everyone can see I'm okay. Marco was

actually reaching for Ezra, but I got in between them. This is what I get for trying to stop a shoving match at a soccer game.

I don't even *like* soccer. Why did I have to get involved?

"Everybody step back," the coach commands. The players, referee, and miscellaneous people (me and Artie) mill around, everyone wandering slowly back to where they are supposed to be.

I look up at the blue sky. The game had started out well. I'd even been enjoying it for a while.

That alone probably should have made me suspicious.

It was a perfect day for a soccer game — sunny, with a cool breeze that kept it from getting too hot. I'd brought cupcakes that we could all share afterward. Artie and I sat in the first row of bleachers. As usual, she was patiently answering my questions about what was going on. I never understand what's happening when I watch soccer; I have some kind of sports deficiency. When I look out at the field, all I see is people in matching outfits running around like the fate of the world hangs on their ability to kick something. It's like *Attack of the Clones*, with a ball.

But it's important to Marco, and Artie plays, too, so I try to show up and cheer at their games. (Sometimes I cheer at the wrong moments, but it's the thought that counts.)

Everything had been going just fine until Marco shoved

Ezra, then Ezra shouted at him, and I rushed forward to help at the same moment that everyone on the field did the same thing.

“Hayley, I’m sorry!” Marco shouts as the coach starts to drag him toward the locker room.

“It was an accident!” I call after him, but I’m not sure he’s even heard me. I desperately want to go after him, but I think I’ve “helped” enough for one day, and don’t dare.

The zebra-striped referee has now ordered the teams back to the field. Artie and I retreat to the aluminum bleachers, where parents and other students stare at me for a moment, then return to their seats. The referee blows the whistle to restart the game.

“I can’t believe Marco got into a fight with someone from *our own* team,” Artie snaps, her eyes on the players.

“Ezra said something to him.” I open and close my jaw, testing for damage, but there doesn’t seem to be any. I don’t think I’ll even have a bruise. I only fell on the ground because I tripped over Ezra’s feet when I was trying to grab hold of Marco’s shoulder.

Ezra has white-blond hair, which makes him easy to spot among the clones. I glare at him as he races toward the opposing team’s goal. I’ve never liked Ezra much, and I like him even less now. “Someone should have dragged him off the field, too.”