LAUREN CONRAD

Sweet Little Lies

AN L.A. CANDY NOVEL



Lauren Conrad

Sweet Little Lies: An LA Candy Novel

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In TV star Lauren Conrad's deliciously entertaining novel about young Hollywood, the lies are only as sweet as the people telling them.Jane Roberts was the average girl next door until she and her best friend Scarlett Harp landed their own reality show, L.A. Candy. Suddenly they found themselves thrown into the public eye with VIP tickets to everything.But the starlets quickly discover that fame goes hand in hand with scandal when Jane finds herself the centre of attention for all the wrong reasons. Even her relationship with Scarlett is threatened. Things go from bad to worse when Scarlett falls for a guy who is strictly off limits… In reality TV nothing stays secret for long and with all this drama L.A Candy's ratings rocket. The show is a bona fide hit - but can the girls stand another season in the spotlight?

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SWEET LITTLE LIES: An LA Candy Novel
Lauren Conrad



Copyright

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To my dear friend Sophia. Your friendship and support have meant so much to me. I love you, big sister.

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GOSSIP

YOUR #1 SOURCE FOR ALL THE HOLLYWOOD DIRT THAT'S FIT TO SLING

PopTV's newest hit series is all about good friends living the good life in L.A.—right? Last we checked, friends don't lie to each other—or stab each other in the well-dressed back. On famed reality TV producer Trevor Lord's sugarcoated confection, it's hard to tell who's really friends and who's just making nice for more airtime. But one thing's for sure: This candy isn't as sweet as it appears to be. In fact, it just might be toxic.

1 YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN THERE MIGHT BE A PHOTOGRAPHER AROUND

Jane Roberts sat up on her white chaise longue and gazed at the horizon between the vast blue ocean and the vast blue sky. She could hear the distant cries of seagulls and the roar of the surf as it curled in, approaching high tide. The breeze, dry and warm for December, stirred her long, wavy blond hair. She reached for the cactus-pear margarita on top of the small hand-painted table next to her and took a long sip.

It was a perfect day on a perfect beach in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. But not for Jane, who felt perfectly awful.

"Another margarita, sweetie?"

Jane glanced over her shoulder and saw her friend Madison Parker walking toward her. Despite her mood, Jane had to smile. Madison was wearing a bronze bikini that barely covered her size-zero figure, along with five-inch wedges and full makeup, including bright coral lipstick. But that was Madison. She never went anywhere, not even to the beach, without spending an hour and a half getting ready.

"I'm good, thanks. Where's your Gucci purse? And your gold jewelry?" Jane teased.

Madison slid onto the chaise longue next to Jane's. "Hey, a girl's gotta look her best, right? You never know when there might be a photographer around. Or a hot guy." She lowered her massive Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses to stare at a nearby lifeguard with an impressive six-pack. "Like him. Hmm, I call dibs!"

"He's all yours," Jane said. After the boy drama she'd been through lately, she really wasn't interested. She was in Mexico to get away from her disastrous love life and the media circus, not to scope out guys. "Anyway, I thought you said this was a private resort and that photographers couldn't get in."

"Yeah, I meant like other guests with cameras," Madison replied, still staring at the lifeguard. "I'll see if he has a friend for you. Back in a sec." She rose to her feet, fluffed her long platinum-blond hair, and struggled through the sand in her heels.

Jane had to laugh. *Poor guy has no idea what's coming.*

Jane and Madison had been at Madison's parents' condo for the last five days, doing not much besides swimming, tanning, drinking, and checking out guys. Well, Madison had been checking out guys. Jane couldn't stop thinking about what she had done to her boyfriend (now ex-boyfriend), Jesse, back in L.A., and how she had run away when everything had gone so wrong. A guy was the last thing she needed right now. Unless he had a PhD in psychology, he was of little use.

Jane leaned back and tried to relax. The sun felt so nice, and the sound of the waves in the background *should* have been calming. But her mind still raced with worries. Her life used to be so normal. A little boring, but wonderfully normal. When she and her best friend, Scarlett Harp, had moved to L.A. from Santa Barbara after high school, it was so Jane could pursue an internship with Fiona Chen, one of the top event planners in the business, and Scarlett could attend USC. They'd hoped to add a little excitement to their lives by meeting new people and experiencing L.A. nightlife. But they'd never planned on meeting Trevor Lord at Les Deux.

Jane still couldn't believe that out of a roomful of pretty girls Trevor had asked her and Scar to audition for *L.A. Candy*, the new reality show he was producing for PopTV. And that he'd actually cast them.

As Jane sat there on that beach so far away from everything, she wished she could go back in time to that night in August and say, *Thanks, but no, thanks.* Although it's not like she could've predicted what was about to happen to her. She and Scar had figured the show would flop but they'd

get some fun nights from it. Of course, the show ended up being a hit, and soon after the series premiere in October, Jane found herself unable to walk into a restaurant or down the street without someone recognizing her. Magazines called her "America's sweetheart." Blogs called her…well, other things. Her face was everywhere.

At first, her sudden fame was exciting and flattering. Now *she* was one of the beautiful, glamorous people. She got all the best tables at all the best clubs. Designers sent her clothes to wear, for free. She was invited to a different Hollywood party almost every night, rubbing shoulders with A-list insiders she used to only read about or see on TV.

But all the attention was also confusing. What had she done to deserve it? The *L.A. Candy* cameras merely filmed her living her life: cooking dinner, doing the laundry, going out with her friends, working as Fiona's slave-slash-assistant. Everyday stuff. How, exactly, did that make her worthy of celebrity status?

More important, why had it turned her into a tabloid target? That was the reason she was here, attempting to relax on this beach with Madison. Five days ago—was it only five days ago?—*Gossip* magazine published a story about Jane hooking up with her boyfriend Jesse's best friend and housemate, Braden. The story didn't mention that Jane and Jesse had been fighting. No one who read it knew how trashed he'd gotten at Goa or knew about the girl he'd been all over that night. They didn't know how vulnerable Jane was when Braden, who had been her friend before she met Jesse, came over, and they definitely didn't know about her long-standing, unspoken crush on him. All they knew was that there were photos of Jane and Braden in little more than their underwear, in her bedroom. A photographer had somehow gotten those shots of them through her window—why, *why* had she left the curtains open? And what kind of sick person shoots into a girl's bedroom? Talk about invasion of privacy…and that was coming from someone on a reality show. The photos ended up all over the internet for everyone in the world to see, including Jane's parents…her little sisters, Lacie and Nora…Trevor…Fiona…and, of course, Jesse.

Jane couldn't bring herself to face Jesse when the story broke. Actually, she didn't have the guts to face anyone. So she didn't. That same day, she let Madison whisk her away to the Parkers' gorgeous, exclusive condo in Cabo to escape the photographers (who were camped out at Jane's apartment building) and her phone (which was ringing nonstop). Jane made only one call before departing: to her parents, leaving them a message that she was okay and that she was going away for a few days. Luckily there was no cell reception at the Parkers' condo. Jane knew there must be hundreds of messages waiting for her: from her parents, Scar, Trevor, Fiona, random reporters, and who knew who else. She also knew there was a very real chance that she would never check her voice mail again.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but it wasn't to block out the sun. Had Braden been trying to contact her since she left L.A.? Jane wondered, not for the first time. Had Jesse? She opened her eyes and seriously considered staying in Mexico forever.

It wasn't like she had a job to go back to. Jane figured that the boss lady would likely fire her for taking off without a word and for generating headlines like *L.A. CANDY* STAR NOT SO SWEET (probably not good for the company image). And as for Trevor…would he fire her, too? She had been scheduled to film each of the last five days she had been in Cabo with Madison. The idea of leaving the show was definitely tempting, but Jane knew there would be consequences. Back in September, she had signed a contract with PopTV to do ten episodes, and they still had several episodes to go until the season finale. Would Trevor sue her for breaking the contract? Would he kick Jane and Scarlett out of their amazing apartment, which the show was paying for? Scarlett would be homeless, all because of Jane. Well, maybe not homeless, but they would have to return to their apartment with the gross walls and nonstop traffic noise. She couldn't go back there. She liked their nice, quiet apartment with the pretty white walls.

Scarlett. On top of everything else, Jane felt really guilty about leaving L.A. without talking to her best friend. She knew Scarlett must be so worried about her. They had been practically inseparable

since kindergarten, and Scarlett had always been so protective of Jane. Lately, things had been kind of strained between them. For one thing, Jane liked their *L.A. Candy* costars—Madison and another girl named Gaby Garcia—and Scar didn't. Scar often made bitchy remarks about them, on- and off-camera, which was so uncalled-for. Also, Scar didn't approve of Jane's relationship (now ex-relationship) with Jesse because of his history with girls…and drinking…and drugs…and girls. But "history" was exactly what it was. Jesse didn't do stuff like that anymore (except for that little slipup at Goa). He had changed, and he had practically been a perfect boyfriend. It was Jane who had screwed up and cheated on him with Braden.

Jane stirred her mostly melted drink and swallowed the watery remains in one gulp. She wished that she had never heard of Trevor Lord—or *L.A. Candy*. Yes, the incident with Braden was 100 percent on her. But back when she was just plain old Jane Roberts from Santa Barbara, the press wouldn't have taken pictures and splashed them all over the place, humiliating her and destroying her relationship with Jesse. It was bad enough that she'd made a mistake—now she had to share her mistakes with the whole country. No amount of free designer clothes would make that okay. She wanted to rewind time to when she and Scar were nobodies, when they had first moved to L.A., full of hopes and dreams for their fabulous new life in a fabulous new city. Instead, she was living a nightmare.

Madison returned, teetering on her heels. "Gay," she said, shrugging. She sat down and stretched out her long tanned legs. "He invited us to a party, though. Hey, you okay? What's wrong?"

"Two words. 'Jane Ho.'"

"What?" Madison said, confused.

"That's the last headline I read before we left the apartment," Jane said with a sigh. "I was just thinking that if I'd never signed on to do the show, then none of this would have happened."

Madison leaned over and placed her hand (decked out in long acrylic fingernails) on Jane's arm. "Relax. It's gonna be okay. I promise. You know someone's gonna do something way sluttier this week, so by the time we get back, your little slip will be old news."

"I hope so," Jane said, although she wasn't sure of this at all. And she was a bit stung by Madison's implying that she was slutty. Still, Madison had been such a good friend to her these last few days—bringing her to Cabo, taking care of her, ordering her frilly drinks, distracting her with funny stories about her Swiss boarding school, her parents, her crazy aunt Letitia. "You've been so sweet. Seriously. But we can't stay here forever. Christmas is the day after tomorrow, and I've gotta go home. My mom and dad'll be expecting me."

"No, *stay*!" Madison begged. "We could have a Cabo Christmas together! We'll get a little palm tree for the condo and decorate it with pretty lights!"

"You know I would love to stay here, but I can't," Jane said. "Besides, your mom and dad'll be expecting you, too." Madison didn't respond, which made Jane wonder what her family life was like. Come to think of it, Madison rarely talked about her family. Jane hoped she hadn't stuck her foot in her mouth, and decided to change the subject. "Hey, do you know if *anyone* has internet in this resort? I wanna check out flights to LAX. And I wanna send an email to Scar, to let her know I'm okay and stuff."

"Nah, this place is completely backward. No cell reception, no internet, nothing. They do that deliberately, so super-rich, super-busy people like my parents can get away from it all or whatever." Madison hesitated. "Actually, about Scarlett? I've kinda been meaning to talk to you about her."

Jane frowned. "What about?"

"The day the *Gossip* story came out? When the three of us were in your apartment together? She was acting kinda weird," Madison said.

"What do you mean, 'kinda weird'?"

"Haven't you wondered? You know, like, who tipped off the photographer about you and Braden being together in your apartment that night?" Madison said. "I'm sorry to bring that up, but… well, you know I'm just looking out for you, sweetie."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm just saying…I know she's your friend. But…" Madison's voice trailed off. "Oh, I just got it." She grinned. "Jane Ho, like Jane Doe. Funny."

Jane turned to gaze out at the water. Was Madison hinting that Scar could have been behind the photos? There was no way. There was no way *anyone* Jane knew could have been behind them. No one in her universe was *that* mean or vengeful or manipulative. Much less her very best friend.

As far as Jane was concerned, there was only one logical explanation. That photographer must have been hanging around her apartment building, waiting for a scoop. Or he must have followed Braden there because he knew Braden was a friend of Jane's. Whatever. Really, she didn't want to think about it anymore. The whole thing was too horrible.

"I mean, there was that rumor I heard about Jesse shopping those photos around to the tabs," Madison persisted. "But I've been thinking. Maybe it's someone else. So…who knew Braden was at your place that night?"

Jane shrugged. "Well, Scar. And my goldfish, Penny," she said with a straight face.

"Oh, well, then, it was obviously the fish who tipped off the photographer!" Madison said, giggling. "Maybe Penny has a thing for Jesse and wanted to break you guys up?"

"Penny would never," Jane replied, thinking how nice it felt to joke around after so many days of wallowing in misery. "Penny prefers tall, dark, and…"

But Jane didn't finish her sentence. She was distracted by a strange movement behind a palm tree about thirty feet to the right of her. She shifted in her chair, trying to see.

Click, click, click. A middle-aged guy in aviator shades stepped out from behind the tree, angling his super-long telephoto lens—*at her*.

"Oh my God!" Jane cried out, instinctively shielding her face with her hand. She grabbed her towel and beach bag and jumped to her feet. "Madison, there's a paparazzo over there."

"Really?" Madison plastered on a smile and glanced around. "Where?"

"Never mind. God, I hate this. I can't even get away from them in another country!" Jane said, her voice trembling. She began wrapping the towel around her waist, ready to head back to the condo.

Madison's smile vanished. She got her stuff and rose to her feet. "I'm sorry. You're so right," she said quickly. "Come on, let's go inside and get away from that jerk. You wanna rent some DVDs from the clubhouse? And later we could go to that party my new lifeguard friend invited us to."

Jane shook her head. "The photographer's a sign, Madison. I can't run away from it anymore. I *have* to go home," she declared, heading back inside.

"Whatever you say, Jane Ho," Madison joked.

Not funny, Jane thought.

2 JUST ANOTHER GUY

Scarlett Harp tried not to swear too much as she stuffed her clothes into a suitcase. Christmas in Aspen? Who celebrated Christmas in Aspen? *Well, probably a lot of people,* she thought, but she wasn't the Christmas-in-Aspen type. It had been her parents' idea to rent some posh condo there and spend the holiday on the slopes. Mr. and Mrs. Harp—actually, Dr. and Dr. Harp (he was a plastic surgeon; she was a shrink) didn't believe in "sentimental" traditions like decorating a tree or hanging stockings on the mantel. Every year they spent the holidays in a different vacation spot. Last year had been the Bahamas. The year before, Paris. And Hawaii before that.

It was bad enough that Scarlett had to pack for a trip she didn't want to go on. The worst part was, she wasn't alone. There were people in her bedroom watching her. *Lots* of people, in fact. A director, two cameramen, a sound guy, and a producer. And Gaby, her annoying costar, who had been sent over by Trevor to be Scarlett's stand-in friend and keep her company while she packed. Translation: Jane and Madison were MIA, and the show was desperate for footage, so Trevor and another producer, Dana, were setting up scenes that were totally bogus. So much for *L.A. Candy* being a *reality* show. Scarlett would never hang out with Gaby unless she was forced to. Which she currently was.

Gaby was sitting on the bed, trying to make conversation and commenting on Scarlett's clothes —90 percent of which were jeans and T-shirts.

"Ooooh, that top is so cute!" Gaby pointed to a purple tee that Scar was rumpling into a ball and shoving into her suitcase. "What do you call that color? Eggplant? Violet? Magenta?"

"Purple," Scarlett grumbled. "Don't you have somewhere you need to be today?"

"Nope, all yours. Hey, what time's your flight? I could use a mani-pedi, couldn't you? You wanna see if we can get in somewhere after lunch?"

Gaby glanced over at Dana, no doubt to see if her mani-pedi comment had registered. Scarlett knew that the panic on Dana's face meant she'd caught it and was thinking that if they wanted to find a salon to film in, they would have to call and set that up now.

Scarlett held up her nails, two of which were broken. "No, I'm good. You go without me."

"Well, *that's* no fun!" Gaby complained.

Scarlett's cell phone buzzed in her back pocket and she grabbed it quickly, thinking it might be Jane—finally! She had been trying to reach her best friend for the last five days, leaving dozens of frantic messages: *Call me! Where are you? I'm so worried about you! Call me!* There were other messages, too—along the lines of *Get away from that crazy bitch Madison ASAP!* Scarlett couldn't remember the exact wording.

Her face fell when she saw the name on the screen. It was yet another text message from Dana. CD U SLOW DOWN W/ THE PACKING? AND BE NICE 2 GABY PLZ.

Scarlett sighed. Dana was fond of texting Scarlett directions in the middle of a shoot, telling her to do this or say that. Not that Scarlett ever actually did what Dana asked. Scarlett didn't do *nice*. She believed in saying whatever was on her mind, and if it came out a little harsh—well, the truth hurts, people.

The thing was, with each episode of *L.A. Candy* she watched, Scarlett was growing increasingly frustrated by the disconnect between her TV self and her real self. The way Trevor edited the footage made Scarlett seem like a shy, quiet bookworm. Every time she was in a scene with Jane or the other girls, Scarlett ended up with almost no lines—just stuff like *yeah* and *no, thanks* and *bye, gotta get to class!* Sure, she *looked* good, with her long, wavy black hair, emerald green eyes, and five-foot-nine, gym-toned bod. But she *sounded* like she had nothing to say. Which was the exact opposite of who she was.

"Okay, guys, we have to break for lunch, and then we'll head over to LAX," Dana called out. *Hmm, why doesn't she just text everyone?* Scarlett thought as the crew slowly started removing their equipment from her room.

Gaby pouted. "Why is this taking so long? I'm starving."

"There're some leftovers in the fridge, I think. Help yourself," Scarlett offered. The show usually had chips and pretzels as part of their craft service, which was hardly "lunch."

"'Kay." Gaby jumped to her feet and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Scarlett sighed again. This was such bullshit. If only Jane were here, things would be different. They'd be watching lame Christmas specials they had TiVo'd or doing last-minute shopping together at the Grove while fake snow fell around them. Scarlett could spend Christmas at the Robertses' house instead of jetting off to Aspen; Jane's family was actually *normal* (in a good way) and nicer than her own family. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts didn't sit in total, icy silence at the dinner table, CNN in the background, cutting quietly into their forty-dollar rib-eye steaks. They didn't spend more time on the phone with their patients than with each other. They didn't psychoanalyze their children with comments like, *So, Scarlett—do you think your choice to go to USC rather than Harvard or Columbia has to do with your unconscious fear of success?*

Where *was* Jane, anyway? The note Jane had left for Scarlett in the apartment five days ago said that Madison had taken her to Mexico to get away, and that she'd be back soon. The problem was, Madison was the person who had orchestrated the whole *Gossip* scandal in the first place, and Jane had no idea.

Before disappearing with Jane, Madison had whispered in Scarlett's ear that Jesse Edwards was the one who had leaked those photos to *Gossip*. So Scarlett had gone to Jesse's house to deliver a few choice words she had for him, personally. When she got there, Jesse told her that *Madison* was the guilty one, that Madison had tried to convince him to leak the photos to *Gossip*, and he'd refused (despite being beyond furious about his girlfriend hooking up with his best friend). And Scarlett had believed him. He was a drunk, ungrateful, publicity-hungry man-whore. But on this one crucial occasion, he had been telling the truth. She was sure of it.

Desperate to track Jane down, Scarlett had asked Gaby if she knew the location of Madison's parents' condo…or had any contact info for the Parkers. But Gaby had been clueless, as usual. Although it was surprising that she wasn't more informed, since she and Madison always seemed to be hanging out. Scarlett had also Googled the Parkers but had turned up nothing. Which was kinda strange, given the fact that they were supposedly zillionaire real-estate developers or whatever. Maybe they preferred to keep a lower profile than their daughter, who would happily attend the opening of an envelope if there were cameras there.

Whatever. As soon as Jane returned, the two of them were going to straighten out this whole stupid mess about Madison and the pictures. And they would work on getting their friendship back on track. So many things (and people) had come between them in the last few months: the show, Madison, Gaby, Jesse. Their lowest moment was probably when Scarlett had to find out about Jane hooking up with Braden from a damned website. She and Jane *never* used to keep secrets from each other.

Alone in the room, finally—the crew members seemed to have spread out into the hallway—Scarlett walked over to her desk, in search of her passport. She would need it if she ended up having to go to Mexico herself and drag Jane home. As she was rifling through the topmost drawer, she heard a voice behind her.

"Hey, you doing okay?"

Scarlett turned around. It was Liam, one of the cameramen. Well, not just one of the cameramen. Scarlett had had a secret crush on him for the last few weeks (speaking of secrets). It was secret because, according to the PopTV rules, the "talent" wasn't allowed to get involved with the crew (not that a crush was the same as getting involved, but the former could always lead to the

latter). It was a secret, too, because Scarlett didn't really have crushes. She had a long and perfectly happy history of hooking up with guys once, maybe twice, and then never seeing them again. It had always worked for her. It was certainly better than relationships, like Jane's disasters with Jesse and her high school boyfriend, Caleb Hunt, who had (in Scarlett's humble opinion) strung her along long-distance when he started college and then broken up with her with some very original excuse like "I love you, but you deserve better." (Scarlett's theory was that Caleb had been cheating on Jane at Yale, but that was all it was—a theory. She'd never found any proof.)

Liam, her noncrush, was standing there watching her with a friendly, concerned expression. Wow, his eyes were *so* blue. The same shade of blue as the bandanna that held back his long, light brown wavy hair, and the same color as the soft, faded tee that accentuated his slender but well-sculpted torso. Scarlett had tried to ignore him all morning during filming. But now, alone with him in her bedroom, she found it was not so easy.

"Hey," Scarlett said, turning back to her desk. "I'm great, thanks. I'll be even better when this shoot's over."

"No, I meant because…Jane. I'm sure you're worried about her."

Scarlett hesitated. Liam was the only person on the crew who had been thoughtful enough to realize this. And she hardly knew him. In fact, they had barely said more than "hi" to each other since he joined the show in September. "Um, well, yeah."

"I'm sure she's fine. And this whole stupid media circus—it'll blow over as soon as the next national emergency happens, like some It Girl gaining five pounds or Leda Phillips wearing something ugly to the *Wuthering Heights* premiere."

Scarlett cracked a smile. He was funny…and nice…and cute. *Great.* "They remade *Wuthering Heights*?" she said lightly. "Why?"

"Dunno. Leda Phillips is Catherine, and Gus O'Dell is Heathcliff. So lame compared to Merle Oberon and Laurence Olivier, right? And even lamer compared to Emily Brontë's novel."

"*Charlotte* Brontë," Scarlett corrected him.

"No, *Emily*. Wanna bet?" Liam held out his hand, grinning.

Scarlett frowned. Then she picked up her BlackBerry (courtesy of PopTV, so they could always reach her…*gag*) and looked up *Wuthering Heights* on the internet. *Hmm.* Emily Brontë. *Damn!*

So Liam was funny, nice, cute, *and* knew his Brontë sisters. It was a dangerous—and irresistible—combination, especially for a voracious reader like her. (She plowed through novels in their original Spanish or French or Italian, just for fun.) Actually, she had seen Liam reading some of her favorite books during breaks: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Marquez one time, and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot another. It was one of the reasons she'd noticed him.

"Yeah, okay, it's Emily," Scarlett admitted. "What, you a SparkNotes fan?"

Liam laughed and pretended to look hurt. "You don't think I can read a whole novel?"

"Well, maybe a short one. Like a novella."

"Oh, that's—"

Their conversation was interrupted by footsteps: Gaby wandered in and sank onto the bed, chomping down on what looked like cold pepperoni pizza. "Whatcha talking about?"

"Nothing, just grabbing the rest of the stuff in here." Liam picked up a rolled-up electrical cord.

Scarlett smiled and gave a little wave as she watched Liam walk out of her room. *He's just another guy,* Scarlett told herself. So why did she feel a warm, nervous, giddy feeling in the pit of her stomach? What the hell *was* that feeling, anyway? Maybe she ate something bad? She eyed the pizza in Gaby's hand and couldn't recall when exactly she had ordered it. She watched Gaby take another bite…and said nothing. As long as Gaby was eating, Gaby wasn't talking. And that was a good thing.

Later that day, Scarlett was sitting on the airplane just before takeoff when her cell rang. She looked at the screen but didn't recognize the number.

GOT UR NUMBER FROM CALLSHEET, HOPE ITS OK. SHH DONT TELL DANA. MY ROOMMATES AND I R HAVING A NEW YEARS EVE PARTY. IF UR BACK FROM ASPEN AND WANT 2 COME TEXT ME AND ILL GIVE U THE ADDRESS. MERRY XMAS. LIAM.

Scarlett felt her heart race and her palms get hot. Flying always did that to her—didn't it? She scrolled up and down, rereading the message. Why was Liam inviting her to his party? Was he just being polite? She reread the message again, trying to translate it, until the flight attendant announced that everyone had to turn off their portable electronic devices in preparation for takeoff. By then, it didn't matter, though. Scarlett had the message memorized.

3 IS THAT THE GIRL FROM THAT SHOW?

Jane hurried toward baggage claim, eager to get out of LAX as quickly as possible. With Christmas only two days away, the place was packed. Good—she would be able to slip in and out without anyone bothering her. Her baseball cap and oversize Chanel sunglasses would keep her anonymous. Or scream, "I'm a celebrity in hiding." Jane never thought she would actually *crave* anonymity, but she did. Now more than ever.

She felt her bikini bottoms chafing against her hips. In her rush to leave the Parkers' condo, she had slipped her jeans on over her bathing suit, practically running out the door with her hastily packed suitcase into the waiting cab. She glanced at the clock on the departures-and-arrivals board: 4:15. If she had stayed in Cabo, she and Madison would be catching the sunset on the beach…or mixing margaritas in the kitchen…or making plans for the evening. Jane had grown accustomed to the slow, lazy rhythm of their days, their carefree routine. The way Madison made Jane breakfast every morning (coffee, yogurt, and fresh fruit arranged in the shape of a smiley face), talked her down whenever she was in one of her funks, entertained her, distracted her, comforted her. Madison had been a perfect friend.

Jane passed an airport newsstand and turned her head to avoid catching a glimpse of the tabloids. She prayed her face was no longer plastered on any of them, but she didn't want to risk looking. For a brief second, she had the impulse to turn around and get on the next flight back to Cabo. But she knew she couldn't, and besides, Madison had probably taken off herself to meet her parents for the holidays in…Where exactly did Madison say she was going? Jane had asked her several times, and Madison had been vague about it. New York? Boston? London? Some island somewhere? But that was Madison: always full of fun, fabulous, half-formed plans.

As for Jane, it was time to face the music. Hopefully not all at once. Her immediate goal was to get to the apartment, unpack, repack, grab the Christmas presents she'd bought for her family, then jump into her car and drive up the coast to Santa Barbara. And at some point she might have to listen to the thirty-one messages that were waiting for her on her phone. She assumed it hadn't taken long for her voice mailbox to fill up.

If she was lucky, maybe Scar would still be in their apartment, and they could talk in person. She knew that the Harps were headed to Aspen at some point, but she wasn't sure exactly when.

Rounding the corner, Jane passed another magazine stand—and stopped in her tracks. There was her face, up and down one of the racks, on the cover of *Talk* magazine. It featured a photo of her with the cover line, *L.A. CANDY* STAR CAUGHT IN LOVE TRIANGLE.

Jane bit her lip, trying not to freak out.

Just days ago, she had been a rising star, "America's sweetheart," a normal girl with normal problems whom everyone could relate to and wanted to see on TV week after week. A few issues ago, *Talk* had dubbed her "Holly-wood's Newest It Girl." And *now* what was she? A slut who cheated on her boyfriend with his best friend? It didn't get much worse.

How had her image gone from good to terrible in such a short time?

Jane had to get out of LAX, ASAP. She saw the sign that said, BAGGAGE CLAIM, and hurried toward it. Once there, she scanned the crowded carousels, trying to figure out which one would have her bag. Within a few minutes, she spotted her baby blue rolling suitcase rounding the nearest carousel. She picked it up and turned to go. *That was easy,* she thought.

She heard them before she saw them.

"Jane!"

"Over here, Jane!"

Jane whirled around, knocking her suitcase over. There were four in all: three photographers and a fourth guy with a handheld camcorder. They must not have noticed her at first.

"Jane, have you talked to Jesse?"

"How do you feel about the photos being released?"

"Is it true that you leaked your own photos?"

"Jane, why did you cheat on Jesse?"

They were shouting at her, their voices so much louder than the background noise of flight announcements and crying toddlers. Everyone around them turned to stare at her. She heard nearby murmurs—"Who is she?" "Ohmigod, is that the girl from that show?" "Jane! Isn't she that actress?"—and saw people pulling out their cells and snapping pictures of her. Jane felt frozen in place—trapped.

Then she took a deep breath and remembered what to do. She picked up her suitcase, walked briskly past the shouting photographers and ogling crowd, and headed through the sliding glass doors in the direction of the taxi stand. With her hat over her eyes, her sunglasses in place, and her head held high…*-ish.*

"Jane, just one smile!"

"Come on, Jane…don't you like taking pictures with your clothes on?"

They followed her all the way to the taxi stand, seemingly frustrated by the way she kept turning her face away from them. At one point they began holding their cameras only a few feet from her eyes and flashing. She could barely see where she was going.

It wasn't until she got inside a cab, and they had pulled away from LAX and away from the photographers, that she allowed herself to slump down in her seat—and cry.

"Scar?"

No reply. Jane closed the door behind her and threw her keys on the hall table. The apartment was totally quiet: no TV, no music, no Scar conjugating Spanish verbs out loud. On the counter, Jane noticed an empty to-go cup from 7-Eleven. *Ah, so the crew has been here filming,* she thought. She was really, really glad she'd missed them. She didn't need the cameras spontaneously documenting her "homecoming," especially with her feeling so crappy and her face streaked with tears.

Jane thought about the ambush at the airport and felt a fresh wave of distress—and anger, too. She decided to hide out in her apartment until late, at least midnight, before hitting the road for Santa Barbara. It was the only way she could be sure not to be followed by more of them.

She walked into the kitchen and saw a big note plastered on the marble counter:

Janie, it's 2 p.m., and I'm off to catch my flight to Aspen. I have my cell, so call me!!!!!!!! Love, Scar, 12/23

Jane realized that she had just missed Scar. In fact, maybe they were at LAX at the same time?

There was another note next to the first one:

To the person from Angelo's Pet-sitting Service: Penny is in the last bedroom on the right. Plz feed her the fish food that's next to her bowl.

Scar had added her cell phone number in case of an emergency.

Aw, Jane thought. That was so sweet of Scar to remember Penny. Especially since Jane had taken off for Cabo without remembering to ask Scar to take care of her (yet another thing she felt incredibly guilty about).

The kitchen was really clean: no dirty dishes in the sink, no empty pizza boxes piling up next to the trash can. In general, Scar tended to be much neater and more organized than Jane. (Except in the grooming and fashion departments, although Scar was so naturally stunning that she always got away with not brushing her hair, putting on makeup, or wearing anything other than jeans and a wrinkled tee. Jane, while pretty, required a little more effort.) Although, speaking of the trash can… Jane noticed dozens of Post-it notes and scraps of paper spilling out of it. She fished them out.

They were all messages from Scar to her, dated between five days ago and today:

Janie, call me!

I'm off to the library to return books. Back by 9 a.m.

I have to talk to you about Madison ASAP!

Your mom called.

Call me!

Trevor called like fifty times—can u call him back?

Fiona Chen's office called.

At the gym (new personal trainer!), back noon. If you're home wait for me!!!

Call me!

Starbucks, back in an hour.

Trevor called again.

Last exam for the semester, back by dinner.

Fiona Chen's office called again.

Your dad called.

Filming at some stupid club, back by midnight.

Janie, call me!!!!!

And more of the same.

Jane's chest tightened. Scar had obviously been worried about her and trying to connect with her at every opportunity. And Jane had completely blown her off. Okay, so she didn't have cell reception or internet at Madison's parents' condo. She should have called or texted Scar from the Cabo airport or LAX or wherever.

She scanned the messages again, pausing on the one about Madison. What did Scar mean, she had to talk to her about Madison ASAP? That seemed so random. Jane knew that Scar thought Madison was a shallow, pretentious bitch who only looked out for herself. No emergency there. Like all of Scarlett's opinions, she wasn't shy about voicing it. But as far as Jane could tell, Madison had always been friendly to Scar, inviting her to parties, spa outings, and more. Scar was the one who turned her nose up at stuff like that. She prided herself on being different, apart, an outsider.

But that was Scar. She could sometimes be too intense and critical when it came to people, especially people in Jane's universe. Jane knew Scar was just looking out for her, but still. Scar had been this way with a couple of Jane's friends in high school, and with some of her boyfriends, too, including Caleb (Scar was totally against their long-distance relationship when he started college) and Jesse (whom she rarely referred to by his name, preferring "man-whore" and similarly flattering nicknames).

Scar was Jane's best friend, though. And Jane was *way* overdue in reaching out to her. Her friendship with Scar wasn't going so well these days. Like everything else in her life.

Jane pulled her cell out of her bag and quickly typed:

SCAR, IM SO SORRY IVE BEEN OUT OF TOUCH BUT IM BACK AT APT NOW AND ON MY WAY TO SANTA BARBARA. IM OKAY. LUV U, JANE

Jane hit Send and smiled to herself. That was that. She had made first contact after her self-imposed exile. That wasn't so hard, was it?

Now she just had to do the same thing with her mom and dad and Trevor and Fiona and whoever else had left messages for her. *Yeah, piece of cake,* she thought.

4 YOU'RE DOING THIS FOR A GOOD REASON

Considering that it was Christmas Eve, the Blue Dolphin was surprisingly crowded. The blinking neon Santa Claus and the Christmas lights and fishing net that decorated the walls were more depressing than festive and did nothing to disguise its cheap vinyl booths, dingy pool tables, and lame jukebox. (Jimmy Buffett? Seriously?) It was the kind of place where a mostly older crowd could drink a lot of cheap beer, play darts, and yell at whatever game happened to be on the minuscule TV set above the bar.

It was also perfect for twenty-year-old Madison Parker's purposes tonight. These people were not PopTV fans; no one would know who she was. And while she usually loved to be seen, she didn't want to be recognized this evening. As much as she would have preferred meeting her contact at her office—or better yet, over martinis at Bar Marmont—she didn't dare take the chance, not so soon after the story had broken. Maybe she was being overly paranoid, but better safe than sorry.

She sat in one of the booths in the corner, her body angled so that she had a view of the room but no one could see her face.

When her phone buzzed, Madison expected to see a text making excuses about traffic or whatever. She reached into her quilted Chanel bag and pulled out her cell.

It was from Jane:

THANK U FOR CABO! U SAVED MY LIFE! IM SO LUCKY TO HAVE YOU AS A FRIEND. MERRY XMAS! LUV U, JANE

Madison's fingers trembled slightly as she clutched the phone. Her reaction should have been annoyance. She should be scoffing at this sweet little message from sweet little Jane, whose sweetness generally made her want to puke, but for a moment she felt a pang of…what? Guilt? Regret? Jane thought of her as a friend. A *good* friend. And for those few days in Cabo, Madison had been just that. It had been fun hanging out on the beach and talking about clothes and boys. Being away from L.A. and from the twenty-four/seven pressure of being "on," Madison had almost relaxed into normalcy with Jane. Madison had never had a best friend growing up. In some ways, ironically, Jane was the closest thing to a best friend she'd ever had.

Madison shook her head sharply. *Stop it,* she told herself. *You have to focus. You're doing this for a good reason.*

After all, it wasn't like she was *hurting* Jane. Sure, Jane was upset now, but she would get over it. Any publicity was good publicity, right? If no one knew who Jane Roberts was before, they sure did now. And if Jane ended up with really minor story lines because of this—or off *L.A. Candy* altogether—then it was for the best. Hadn't she told Madison the entire time they were in Cabo that she wished she'd never signed on to do the show? Madison was just helping Jane get what she wanted.

Besides, Jane was not meant to be the star of *L.A. Candy.* She didn't even want it. Madison, on the other hand, *needed* this, and would never take it for granted. Paparazzi were part of the job. Madison would never have run away from a scandal. In fact, she would have made sure to get a *Maxim* or *FHM* cover out of those photos. And loved every second of it.

"Traffic was a joke, and what bar doesn't have valet?"

Madison glanced up, startled. She hadn't noticed Veronica Bliss standing there. She was holding a glass of what looked like scotch on the rocks, which she set down on the table next to Madison's untouched glass of white wine.

"Hi, how are you?" Madison said brightly.

"Fine, fine."

Madison watched Veronica as she slid into the seat across from her. The forty-something woman was tiny—five feet tall and petite—with short red hair and piercing light blue eyes behind

stylish black Chanel frames. Her simple black suit with pearls was at odds with the tacky decor in the Blue Dolphin.

Even though Veronica was physically diminutive, most people in Hollywood were terrified of her. And for good reason. As the editor in chief of *Gossip* magazine, Veronica could make or break a person's reputation and career with just one well-timed, well-placed story or photo.

A person like, say, Jane Roberts.

"Enjoy yourself in Cabo?" Veronica asked.

"The weather was to die for."

"Anything you want to share?" Veronica gazed squarely at Madison.

Madison stirred uncomfortably. Veronica had the weirdest way of staring at a person and not breaking eye contact, even for a second. It was creepy.

"You know, it was all baking on the beach and downing margaritas," Madison said, shrugging.

Veronica took a sip of her drink. "Well, I certainly appreciate your emailing me from Cabo with your location. My photographer flew in and got some great shots of Jane."

"Did he get any of me?" Madison said, remembering the guy with the aviators. At Veronica's silence, she continued, "I had to sneak into town to send you that email, 'cause our resort has no internet access, and—"

"Yes, yes, I'm grateful," Veronica cut in, not sounding appreciative at all.

Madison flinched. The woman owed her, big-time. Why wasn't she being nicer? Maybe she needed reminding.

"So. How are the newsstand sales of the big Jane/ Braden/Jesse issue?" Madison asked, taking a sip of her wine.

Veronica's blue eyes lit up. "Excellent. The numbers are incredible. You really came through with those photos."

Madison smiled smugly.

"I'm curious, though. How, exactly, did you obtain them?"

"I know a photographer. He's not afraid of heights, if you know what I mean." Veronica just stared at her, so Madison continued to explain. "There's a big tree near Jane's bedroom window, and she never closes her curtains, and…well, you can guess the rest."

"Impressive."

"So, will those pictures from Cabo be part of a follow-up story?" Madison asked.

"Yes, of course. I have reporters keeping tabs on both Jesse and this Braden guy. Apparently Braden flew out to New York City the day before yesterday. From what I gather, he and Jesse have been friends for a while, but no one knew who Braden was. One day he's an unknown wannabe actor living in the shadow of his best friend; the next day everybody's talking about him. The power of publicity, right? As for Jesse…well, it's been less than a week since the story broke, but during that short time our Jesse's been busy. He's been spotted at Crown Bar with some blonde, then Les Deux with another girl. I guess someone's trying really hard to prove that he's over Jane."

"Interesting," Madison said, although really, it wasn't interesting at all. Who cared about Braden or Jesse? She wanted to get the subject back to what really mattered: *her*. "Listen. About our deal."

"Deal?"

Madison felt heat rising to her cheeks. "Yes, deal. You told me that if I got you dirt on Jane, you would put me in your magazine."

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll have one of my reporters call you first thing tomorrow. Oh, except… it's Christmas, right? Maybe the day after." Veronica cocked her head. "Funny, isn't it?"

"What?"

"That you, Madison Parker, are spending Christmas Eve plotting against one of your best and, as I understand, *only* friends."

Madison glared. “She’s *not* one of my best friends. I have other friends. Lots of them. Besides, Christmas Eve isn’t over yet. I have plans.”

“Of course you do.” Veronica picked up her scotch and took a sip, never breaking eye contact with Madison.

Madison looked away, wanting so badly to say what she was thinking, which was that it didn’t seem like Veronica had any warm, fuzzy Christmas Eve plans, either. But Madison knew better than to bite the hand she was hoping would feed her.

“Bitch,” Madison murmured.

“What?” Derek rolled over from his side of the bed and gazed at her, confused.

Madison shook her head. “Nothing. Sorry. I was just thinking about this woman I had a drink with tonight.”

“Oh,” he said, glancing at the clock on her nightstand. “Damn. I’ve gotta go. It’s almost midnight, and…” His voice trailed off.

“Don’t worry about it. Go, go.”

Derek stood up, picked up a dove gray Zegna dress shirt from the floor, and shrugged it on. “Hey, I left your Christmas present under your tree.”

Madison grinned. “You did? Am I gonna love it?”

“You’re gonna love it. Oh, and I mailed in your *other* Christmas present this morning. January rent.”

“Awesome. Thanks, sweetie.”

“No, I’m the one who should thank *you.*” He leaned over, cradled her face in his hands, and kissed her.

Madison kissed him back, as always managing to (almost) ignore the cold touch of his platinum wedding band against her skin.

5 CHRISTMAS EVE WITH THE HARPS

"Could you pass the smoked trout, darling?" Scarlett's father said to her mother.

"Yes, of course, sweetheart. Scarlett, would you like another oyster with mignonette sauce?"

"Umm…sure."

Silence followed, filled with only the clinking of silverware against dishes. Scarlett glanced over her shoulder at Dana, who was making a frantic rolling motion with her hands, which Scarlett translated to mean, *Please keep the conversation going, already*. Any second now, she would be sending Scarlett another text: CD U TALK ABOUT CHRISTMASES FROM YR CHILDHOOD? ANY FUNNY STORIES? WHAT ABOUT THE BEST AND WORST PRESENTS U EVER GOT? WHAT ABOUT…

"So…skiing was awesome today, wasn't it?" Scarlett managed as she slurped down another oyster without grimacing. (Why did they have to have the consistency of snot?) She would normally ignore Dana's TMs, but she didn't want to come across as being even more awkward and conversationally challenged than her parents.

"Yes, excellent," her father agreed.

"A little crowded for my taste," her mother said.

More silence. Scarlett stared at the hideous all-white centerpiece (tall white candles, twinkling white lights, and a pair of fake white kissing doves nestled in a bed of white leaves and berries) and tried to think of something else to say.

Oh, yeah, the tricycle incident. "Remember when you got me that yellow tricycle for Christmas?" she said, forcing a laugh. "When I'd already taught myself how to ride a bike? That was hilarious, right?"

Her parents exchanged a confused glance. "I'm not sure I remember that," her father said. "Do you, darling?"

Her mother shook her head. "I don't."

More silence. Scarlett stirred in her chair, picking at the food on her plate. Why had she agreed to this? she wondered for what seemed like the hundredth time. Letting the show film her with her parents, of all people, on Christmas Eve, of all days?

But it had been so hard to say no—for Jane's sake.

Trevor had originally scheduled the cameras and crew to film Jane at home with *her* family on Christmas Eve. But as of yesterday, Jane was still missing. So when Dana had called Scarlett as soon as she'd landed in Aspen and asked if she wouldn't mind filling in for Jane, what could she say? "No?" Well, actually, that was exactly what she said, but after many phone calls they had worn her down, not-so-subtly reminding her that she had a contract. A contract that she was willing to honor for the few remaining episodes of the season. After that…she wasn't sure. Being on the show kind of sucked, in her opinion, and the (free) gorgeous apartment wasn't worth the invasion of her privacy and all the other little annoyances. She and Jane could happily move back to their rat hole by the 101. Well, she could, anyway. She wasn't sure how Jane was feeling about the show these days.

Soon after agreeing to the Aspen shoot, Scarlett had gotten the text from Jane saying that she was okay and that she was heading up to Santa Barbara. She had tried to call her a few times since then, but Jane hadn't picked up. Obviously, Jane wasn't ready to talk to anyone just yet. Which meant that she *definitely* wasn't going to be in the mood to have the *L.A. Candy* cameras in her face when she and her family sat down for their Christmas Eve dinner.

So Scarlett had decided *not* to inform Trevor or Dana that Jane was no longer MIA—or that they should move their shoot back to Santa Barbara, as originally planned. She had decided to give her best friend another few precious hours of space and privacy. She had even elected to try to be nice to her parents and put on a good show for the cameras. She could see the finished episode now:

"Christmas Eve with the Harps." *Gag!* The way it was going, the scene would be almost silent, with only the sounds of utensils clinking against china. She guessed that would end up being perfect for the way Trevor was editing her—the silent, pretty girl and her silent, pretty family.

See how much I love you, Janie? Scarlett thought drily.

What made it even worse was that her parents clearly had no idea how to behave in front of the cameras. Although on this count, Scarlett was sympathetic. It was definitely surreal, trying to act normal (well, as "normal" as the Harps could be) in your home (or in your rented condo in Aspen) with a crew of eight rearranging your furniture, plastering paper over your windows, and bustling around with their high-tech equipment. And then recording your every word and gesture for posterity—at least until Trevor edited the hell out of them.

The only—*only*—thing that was (almost) saving the day was the fact that Liam was here. Working, but still.

"Are we ready for the soup course?" her mother said.

"Fine with me," her father replied. "Vichyssoise?"

"No, lobster bisque. I had the caterer make it with skim milk, of course."

"Of course."

Scarlett slurped down another oyster (okay, so maybe they were kinda good) as she felt her cell vibrate in her pocket. Great, a Dana-gram. Obviously, the yellow-tricycle story hadn't cut it.

But when she glanced at the screen, she saw that it was a text from Liam.

DID THEY HIRE THESE PEOPLE 2 PLAY YR PARENTS OR R U ADOPTED AND DIDN'T TELL ME?

Scarlett stifled a giggle. She snuck a peek at Liam, who was behind the camera next to the massive stone fireplace. She could tell that he was trying to keep from laughing, too.

Underneath the table, she quietly typed: NEVER SEEN THEM B4. IM JUST HERE 4 THE OYSTERS.

Liam typed back: HOPE THEY TASTE BETTER THAN THEY LOOK!

WHY R U HERE? DID DANA MAKE U WORK? Scarlett typed.

A moment later, Liam typed back: BEN ASKED 4 THE DAY OFF AT THE LAST MIN SO I OFFERED 2 FILL IN.

Oh, Scarlett thought.

Staring at the bowl of lobster bisque that her mother had just set down in front of her (ew, pink soup?), Scarlett weighed Liam's statement. Liam had offered to work on Christmas Eve. Did he do this because he had nothing better to do? Or because he was a really, really nice guy and he wanted to help Ben out? Or because he wanted to be in Aspen…to be near her?

Stop it, Scarlett told herself. *You're being an idiot. Yeah, like the guy seriously gave up his holiday to work, just so he could watch your lame family eat pink soup and have nothing to say to one another.*

Her cell buzzed again. SO R U COMING 2 MY PARTY? Liam had typed.

Scarlett smiled. "Maybe," she said out loud, before she realized what she was doing.

"Maybe what, Scarlett?" her father asked her.

Scarlett glanced up sharply. Everyone in the room was staring at her, including Liam, who was obviously trying hard to keep a straight face.

"Uh…yeah…that is, maybe I'll have more of that, um, delicious soup," Scarlett managed to say.

Trying to recover her composure, she quickly tucked her phone back in her pocket. Texting with a cute guy in the middle of a shoot was way too dangerous!

6 CREATIVE EDITING

Trevor Lord leaned forward and studied the magazines fanned across his desk. Again. Each cover line and photo made him clench his jaw a little harder.

L.A. CANDY STAR
MORE TART THAN SWEET
JANE'S BETRAYAL
IS L.A. CANDY STAR
PREGNANT
WITH JESSE'S BABY?
DID JESSE'S DRUG HABIT DRIVE JANE INTO HIS BEST FRIEND'S BED?
SEE JANE CHEAT!

And on and on. Each headline was insulting, attention-grabbing, and sure to sell issues. And sure to cause problems for the show.

How had everything spun *so* out of control? With his golden girl at the wheel?

He might've expected trouble from the other girls. Scarlett was stunningly beautiful, but she was way too smart, opinionated, and out-there to appeal to a general audience; Trevor had to edit out most of her real personality just to make her even remotely accessible. Madison was the perfect Hollywood cliché, with her dyed-to-the-max platinum hair and penchant for shopping, partying, and guys. But she was constantly bugging Trevor for more airtime; so far, he'd managed to keep her at bay with carefully worded compliments on the theme of "quality over quantity." Gaby had proven very entertaining, with her ditzy personality and natural talent for getting just about everything wrong. Sometimes she seemed too over-the-top even for reality television.

But Jane…Jane was his find of the decade. Sweet, natural, and vulnerable, she was a person everyone could relate to. She was pretty, but not too pretty. She liked to go out, but she didn't like to get wasted or do drugs. She worked hard. She was loyal to her friends. She came from a close-knit family.

Even her flaws were relatable. She procrastinated. She made mistakes at her job and got into trouble with her boss. She had arguments with her friends about dumb stuff. She didn't have the best judgment about guys and went on bad dates once in a while.

Right after the *L.A. Candy* series premiere in October, Trevor knew that he had a hit on his hands—and that Jane was largely responsible. Viewers loved her. After a couple of flops (fine, so everyone was sick of listening to amateurs sing Rihanna covers and watching strangers hook up on tropical islands), he was back on top as one of Hollywood's hottest reality producers.

Then things went from great to amazing when Jane and Jesse started dating, and with absolutely no intervention from Trevor. He couldn't have picked a better boyfriend than the bad-boy son of superstar actors Wyatt Edwards and Katarina Miller, who was always in some tabloid with a starlet on his arm. Jesse also liked to party hard. As in, in-and-out-of-rehab hard.

But Jesse had apparently cleaned up his act when he met Jane. It was love at first sight, and their chemistry was undeniable. Everyone seemed to want to tune in to their romance: Hollywood playboy falls for the girl next door. It was a reality producer's dream come true.

Trevor clutched his stress ball tighter. He had known that Jesse would eventually crash and burn. Once an addict, always an addict. But Trevor figured that if and when the time came, he would do some creative editing to make sure Jane and Jesse's romance continued its course, from breakup to makeup to breakup to makeup, without the unwholesome tarnish of Jesse's issues. The *L.A. Candy* cameras never showed Jesse misbehaving at clubs (drinking too much, disappearing to the men's room to do God knows what), and they never would.

But Trevor hadn't seen *this* coming: It was Jane who had screwed up. Big-time. Virtually overnight, the "reality producer's dream" had turned into a nightmare. With Jane and Madison gone, the shooting schedule was total chaos. Trevor and Dana were frantically improvising new and interesting ways to film Scarlett and Gaby: Scarlett Christmas shopping…Gaby taking a boot-camp fitness class…Scarlett checking out the spring courses in the USC catalog with a fellow student… Gaby taking her pint-size, overgroomed dog out for a walk. And filming the two girls together was beyond challenging, since most of those scenes consisted of Gaby having one-sided conversations while Scarlett mocked her and made sarcastic remarks under her breath.

How long would they be able to keep this up? Where the hell was Jane? (She'd been photographed at LAX yesterday, but she didn't seem to be at her apartment, and she still wasn't answering his calls. Her parents weren't answering his calls, either.) And what was he going to do with her when she finally resurfaced? He had a story line on his hands that everyone knew about but that didn't make sense for the show. There could be no mention of Braden, since he refused to sign a release. Which meant that there could be no mention of Jane cheating on Jesse with Braden. There could be no mention of the *Gossip* scandal, either. In the *L.A. Candy* universe, tabloids didn't exist. And neither did half-naked pictures of a nice girl like Jane.

"Trevor?"

He rubbed his eyes and glanced up. Melissa, one of the PopTV publicists, was standing in the doorway. He had ordered his entire team to put in overtime, and many were working today despite the fact that it was Christmas Eve. "Yes? What is it?" he snapped.

"Yeah, hello to you, too. Listen, you're gonna be a little nicer to me when you see this." She held up a file.

"What is it?"

"Ratings from the last episode. You know, the episode that aired after those, uh, lovely photos came out?"

Trevor stared intently at her. "And?" "Our ratings nearly doubled."

"Let me see that."

Melissa handed the file to Trevor. He opened it and scanned the figures quickly. His pulse quickened, and he sat up straighter. Four-point-six million? Did it really say 4.6 million?

Trevor's lips curled up in a slow, satisfied smile. "You just made me a very happy man."

"Yeah, yeah. Until the next crisis," Melissa joked.

"No, no. The crisis was *good*. The crisis made our numbers go up."

"Any publicity is good publicity, right?"

"Something like that. Now, go back to your office and break these down some more. I want them within the hour."

Melissa peeked at her watch. "It's almost eight and I've got a red-eye to New York to visit my family for Christmas."

"Well, you'd better get busy, then."

"Whatever you say, boss."

As Trevor watched her leave, he closed the file and thought about what this meant. As always, his brain operated simultaneously in two realities: the *real* reality and the *L.A. Candy* reality. Trevor realized that at this moment in time, these two realities were actually working in sync and in his favor. The *real* reality (Jane, Braden, Jesse, the *Gossip* scandal) boosted and would continue to boost ratings, while the *L.A. Candy* reality airbrushed—and would continue to airbrush—over any and all the ugliness, painting Jane in the same soft, golden glow that had morphed her into "America's sweetheart."

This was good—*all* good. Now all he needed was to find Jane. And figure out how to choreograph the next few episodes.

Trevor picked up the phone and got back to work.

7 IT'S KINDA COMPLICATED

Lacie hit the Pause button and pointed to the giant plasma screen. "Oh, yeah, *that* dude," she said, cracking up. "Did you ever go out with him again?"

"He seems like kind of a dork," Nora piped up. "But he's H-O-T."

Jane sighed and leaned back on the couch, where she was sandwiched between her two baby sisters. Lacie, sixteen, was to the right of her, wielding the remote. Nora, fourteen, was to the left, hugging a massive bowl of nacho-cheese-flavored popcorn. It was Christmas night, and the three girls were watching episode after episode of *L.A. Candy* in their family room. Lacie and Nora had TiVo'd all of season one so far, and were now making Jane sit through them as they grilled her about various details.

"Yeah, that's Paolo," Jane said, wishing she didn't have to relive *that* particular date. They'd had zero chemistry—and to make things worse, she had partied too much at Madison's the night before and had thrown up on the way home. "No, no second date."

"See, I *told* you," Lacie said triumphantly to Nora.

"Yeah, well, she's gone on second dates with dorks before," Nora shot back. "Remember that guy she went to the Homecoming dance with? And what's-his-name from the track team, Rob, Bob?" She shook with laughter, practically rolling off the couch.

Great, Jane thought. *Why do little sisters have to remember everything?*

"How come your new boyfriend isn't on the show?" Nora asked. "Braden?"

Jane managed to fudge an explanation about Braden being too busy (and to add that Braden was *not* her new boyfriend) because she didn't feel like explaining that Braden had steadfastly refused to sign a release to be filmed. And as far as Trevor was concerned, if someone couldn't be filmed, that person didn't exist. Sometimes Jane would mention Braden while filming, but they would never use any of that footage.

On the floor nearby was the carnage from this morning's present-opening frenzy: wads of brightly colored wrapping paper, ribbons and bows, empty boxes, and stray gifts. Across the room, the eight-foot-tall tree looked as beautiful and Christmassy as always, decorated with family ornaments. She especially loved seeing the angel she'd made in second grade, out of white felt and cotton balls, hanging in its coveted spot on a high-up branch.

Still…Christmas felt different this year. Lacie and Nora had been their usual giddy selves this morning, ripping open presents and screaming about their new cell phones, iPods, Sephora gift certificates, and the rest of it. Their parents had tried to put on their best happy faces—her mother oohing and aahing over the diamond earrings from her father, her father modeling the goofy apron from Nora that said, DANGER: DAD GRILLING ON BARBECUE. But Jane had caught the two of them sneaking glances at her, looking stressed and worried. And disappointed. That was the hardest part, the disappointment. Jane had let her parents down by cheating on her boyfriend and causing a national media scandal.

Lacie hit Fast-forward, then Play. Gaby appeared on the screen, answering phones at Ruby Slipper, the PR firm where she worked.

"Okay, so what about your friend Gaby?" Lacie said. "She seems nice, but is she really that dumb?"

"Like that episode where she microwaved her True Religion jeans because the dryer was broken? Did the show *tell* her to do that, to make people laugh?" Nora asked.

"Gaby's really sweet," Jane said vaguely. "Hey, you guys wanna watch a movie or something?"

"*Movie?*" Lacie burst out. "Are you crazy? We have more episodes to watch! And we have soooo many questions to ask you!"

"Alanah and Ainsley might come over later, 'cause they wanna talk to you about the show," Nora added. She picked a piece of popcorn out of her purple-tinted braces. "Oh, and they want Jesse Edwards's autograph. You can get that for them, right?"

Lacie craned her head to glare at her little sister, her hazel eyes blazing. "Nora! Are you slow or what?"

"Lacie, *be nice*!"

Jane glanced up and saw her mother standing in the doorway. Maryanne Roberts frowned sternly at Lacie, who pulled her long blond hair over her face and mumbled, "Sorry," under her breath.

Maryanne was wearing a salmon-colored silk robe, Jane's Christmas present to her, as well as a pair of fuzzy pink slippers from Lacie. She set a tray of steaming mugs on the coffee table. "Hot chocolate," she announced to her daughters. "What are you watching?"

"*L.A. Candy*, what else?" Nora replied. She pointed to the screen. "Hey! Ha! That's when Jane gets drunk at that club and flirts with that Australian guy!"

"*Austrian*," Lacie corrected her.

"I did *not* get drunk!" Jane scoffed. Did Nora seriously have to say that in front of their mom?

"Okay, girls, enough," Maryanne snapped. "Jane could probably use a break from all this stuff. Why don't we watch one of the twenty thousand DVDs Santa brought you for Christmas?"

"Santa, right." Nora rolled her golden brown eyes.

"Good idea," Jane said quickly. "I'm gonna change into my jammies first. Back in a sec."

Her mom was right—she did need a break from all this stuff. Five days in Cabo hadn't done the trick, after all. Seeing her family was a lot harder than she thought it would be. Not to mention seeing them watch the show.

She hadn't had much time to herself since driving up to Santa Barbara in the middle of the night two nights ago. Her parents had been so happy and relieved to see her, but they had a lot of questions: Was she okay? Where did she disappear to? Had any reporters followed her from L.A.? Later, after dinner (their family had a tradition of making a Swedish feast together on Christmas Eve, because her mom was half Swedish), her dad had called her aside and asked her if she was having second thoughts about being on the show. Jane hadn't had a good answer. All she'd managed was, "I don't know, Dad. Maybe?"

Which was the truth.

The second Jane got to her bedroom, she closed the door and flopped down on the bed, which she'd forgotten to make this morning. The breeze through the open window was pleasantly cool and carried with it the sounds of the surf outside. Her cell was on her nightstand, with a full mailbox. She used to love her phone; now she hated it. Over the last couple of days, she'd somehow managed to listen to all thirty-one messages that had accumulated during her time in Cabo, as well as a few more that she had received since then. They were basically variations on the same theme: her parents, Trevor, Fiona, Scar, and others asking her where she was and if she was okay and could she please call them *immediately*? There had been some messages from Diego among the bunch, saying he was so, so, so sorry that he hadn't known about the photos of Jane and Braden being leaked to the magazine until it was too late. D worked as Veronica Bliss's assistant at *Gossip*, and from the sound of it, she wasn't a very nice boss. Or, Jane could now attest, a very nice person.

Reporters had called, too, offering her the chance to tell her side of the story. Yeah, right. Likely they just wanted to trick her into saying too much about Jesse and/ or Braden, then twisting her words and printing more crazy headlines.

In addition to her daily "where/how are you" messages, Scar left a few confusing ones about Madison. Jane remembered the note Scar had left at their apartment, saying, *I have to talk to you about Madison ASAP*. What was that about, anyway? Jane figured she would find out soon enough. She planned to return to L.A. the day after tomorrow. Maybe Scar would be back from Aspen by then, and they could talk in person? They were long overdue for a heart-to-heart.

There were no messages from Jesse. Or Braden. None. Jane had checked and double-checked, and bitten back her disappointment each time. Why hadn't they tried to contact her? On the other hand, why was she so surprised?

She wasn't sure how she felt about either guy these days. She missed Jesse, missed the way things were before everything fell apart. But she couldn't deny that she was also attracted to Braden.

Not that she was in a position to choose one or the other. Jesse was likely never going to speak to her again. And Braden's silence spoke volumes. He was a low-key person who valued his privacy. Why would he want to be friends with—much less date—a publicity magnet like her, especially after what had happened?

Jane glared at her phone. She knew she was being kinda (well, definitely) irresponsible, not returning anyone's calls (although she *had* sent Scar that one text message). But she wasn't ready. She would be soon. Just not today.

As if on cue, her phone began ringing. "Go *away*!" Jane said out loud, as she looked at the screen to see which friend, producer, boss, coworker, or reporter was hounding her now.

Jane stopped when she recognized the number, which was still familiar to her after seven months of not seeing it appear on her screen.

It was Caleb. Caleb Hunt.

Caleb had been her first love and her first real boyfriend. They'd dated for a couple of years in high school. When he left to go to Yale the summer before last, they'd decided to try a long-distance relationship. She had been fine with it. He hadn't. At the end of his freshman year, he'd told her that he wanted to take a break. He'd spent the summer volunteering in New Orleans while she prepared to move to L.A. with Scar—and while she tried to get over him. Which hadn't been easy, although meeting Braden, then Jesse, had certainly helped.

Jane hadn't seen—or heard from—Caleb since their breakup back in May. Why was he calling her now?

Don't pick up, Jane told herself. *Just let it go to voice mail.* But then she remembered her mailbox was full. She grabbed the phone on the fifth ring and pressed Talk. "Hello?"

"Janie?" Caleb was the only person who ever called her that, besides Scar. "Hey. Am I catching you at a bad time?"

"Oh, hi, Caleb," Jane said casually. Although casual was the last thing she was feeling. The sound of his voice could still make her heart race, after all this time. "Nope, I'm just hanging out."

"You home for the holidays?"

"Yeah. Are you?"

"For now. I'm leaving tomorrow morning for Vail, though."

"Sounds fun."

"Hope so. Listen, Janie," Caleb said. "I'm calling because I'd heard some stuff, and I was worried about you. Are you doing okay?"

Jane realized that Caleb had seen the *Gossip* pictures. Along with everyone who had internet access or a TV set or who stood in grocery store checkout lines. "Oh, thanks, Caleb," she said, meaning it. "Yeah, I'm doing okay."

"You want me to beat anybody up?"

Jane laughed. "Yeah, maybe."

"Just say the word."

"Thanks. How's Yale?"

There was a pause. "It's…you know," Caleb said after a moment.

What does that even mean? Jane thought.

"How's Hollywood?" Caleb asked her.

"It's…you know," Jane mimicked him.

Caleb laughed. "Yeah, funny. So I guess you're with this Braden guy now?"

Why was he asking her this? “No, we’re not together.”

“Oh. So you’re still with that Jesse guy?”

“Um, not exactly. It’s kinda complicated.”

“It always is with you, Roberts.”

“You seeing anybody?” Jane asked him, wondering why they were quizzing each other on their love lives.

“Not exactly. It’s kinda complicated.” This time Caleb was mimicking her.

“Ha, ha.”

Someone banged on her door. “Hellllooooo?” It was Nora. “Everyone’s waiting for you! We’re gonna watch *Twilight* on Blu-ray!”

“Be there in a sec!” Jane called out. “I gotta go,” she said into the phone.

“Nora-Bora’s being a pain in the butt, huh?”

“Yeah, kinda. I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“No worries. I’ll talk to you soon, okay? Call me if you need anything. Merry Christmas, Janie.”

“Merry Christmas, Caleb.”

As Jane clicked off and put her phone back on her nightstand, she wondered about his parting words: *I’ll talk to you soon.* They hadn’t talked at all in seven whole months. Why would they be talking anytime soon? And why was she supposed to call him if she “needed anything”? Had something changed? Of course, she was on TV now, but Caleb didn’t care about that kind of stuff. He wasn’t the type to track down an old girlfriend for a chance to be closer to a so-called celebrity.

Forget “kinda complicated”; everything in Jane’s life was downright confusing.

8 YOU'RE TWO OF MY BEST FRIENDS

Scarlett sat cross-legged on her bed, clicking through channels, wondering what to do with the rest of her evening. She'd always hated Sundays. Sundays meant weekend over, back to school, back to work. These days, Sundays also meant receiving the upcoming week's shooting schedule from Dana. This week, Scarlett was scheduled to meet Gaby for lunch at La Crêperie…and at Kinara for a spa day…and at the Standard for a launch party for the Marley twins' new perfume.

It was two days after Christmas, and Jane and Madison were still not back. Which was why Trevor and Dana were (obviously) continuing to scrape the bottom of the barrel and force Scarlett and Gaby into social situations just so they had something to tape. She knew they were desperate for material, since the season finale was coming up in a month or so—and season finales were supposed to be full of drama and cliff-hangers, not scenes of faux friends eating crepes or getting mani-pedis. But that wasn't Scarlett's problem.

If only Jane would come home already. Then everything would return to normal. Well, sort of normal. How long did she plan on staying in Santa Barbara (or wherever she was these days)? How long did she plan on not picking up her phone or answering her emails?

"Scar?"

Scarlett muted her TV. *Jane?* She jumped to her feet and ran into the hallway. "Janie?" she called out.

"Yeah, it's me!" Jane's voice came from somewhere in the front of the apartment.

Scarlett ran down the hall and found Jane in the living room. She had obviously just walked through the door. Dressed in a pale yellow top and skinny jeans, her hair tied back in a messy knot, she was holding an overnight bag in one hand and a big shopping bag in the other filled to the brim with what appeared to be Christmas presents and Tupperware containers of homemade cookies. She looked kind of lost, like a little girl all alone at a train station.

"Janie! Ohmigod!" Scarlett rushed up to her and gave her a big hug. "Where the hell have you been? I've been so worried about you! Ohmigod, I am so happy to see you!" She hugged her again.

Jane hugged her back. "I'm glad to see you, too! Did you have a good Christmas?"

"What? No, it was lame. I'll tell you later. First, what about *you*? Are you all right?" Scarlett had a million questions to ask her; she didn't know where to begin.

Jane shrugged wearily. "I guess." She set her bags on the floor and walked over to the couch, sinking down.

Scarlett was right behind her. "Where did that psycho take you in Mexico? What did she say to you? Did she—"

Jane pulled back, her blue eyes wide. "Uh, Scar?" she said slowly. "I know you don't like Madison, and I respect that, even though I don't really understand it. But she's been a really good friend to me. So I'd appreciate it if—"

"*Friend?*" Scarlett cut in, practically shouting. She took a deep breath and forced herself to lower the volume. "Janie? Listen carefully to me, okay? I'm really, really sorry to have to tell you this, but Madison is the one who gave those pictures of you and Braden to *Gossip*."

There. She had said it. She sat back, waiting for Jane's reaction. Would Jane burst into tears? Start screaming? Pick up her phone and call Madison and end their friendship right then and there?

But Jane did none of those things. Instead, she gave Scarlett an icy smile. "Oh, really? You know what's funny? Madison said the same thing about you. I'm getting tired of your stupid feud. You're two of my best friends. Can't you at least *try* to get along? It's getting old, Scar."

You're two of my best friends? Scarlett heard the words but couldn't quite process them. When had Madison become one of Jane's best friends? She, Scarlett, was Jane's best friend. Madison was the enemy.

Scarlett took another deep breath. She *had* to get Jane to believe her. “I can prove to you that Madison did this.”

“You can prove it?”

“Yes! See, right before you guys took off for Mexico, she told me that Jesse gave the photos to *Gossip*. So I went over to his house to confront him, right? But when I got there, he told me that *Madison* was the one who did it. He said she showed him the pictures earlier and tried to get him to deliver them to some woman at the magazine—you know, what’s-her-name, D’s boss. Veronica.”

Jane was silent for a moment. “Why would he say that?” she said finally.

“Um, because it’s the truth? Why would he lie about something like that?”

“I don’t know. Because he wasn’t thinking straight after those pictures came out? Because he was drunk…or on something? Because he doesn’t like Madison? Or maybe because I just cheated on him with his best friend in the world and he wanted me to feel the same betrayal? There are a million reasons he would say that.” Jane let out a frustrated yell. “I just want to forget about the pictures and get on with my life. *I’m* the one who messed up here. Not Jesse. And definitely not Madison. She pretty much saved my life, do you know that? If she hadn’t gotten me out of here and taken me to her parents’ condo in Cabo, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“But—”

Jane held up her hand. “Let it go, Scarlett.”

“Seriously—”

“No more.” Jane took a deep breath and smiled the icy smile again. “Now, tell me about Christmas in Aspen.”

Scarlett opened her mouth, then closed it. She could see that Jane didn’t want to hear the truth about Madison. She would have to find another way to get through to her…to prove to her that Madison had manipulated her and lied to her from day one.

“Yeah. Right. So Trevor actually sent cameras to film our Christmas Eve dinner, can you believe it?” Scarlett said, figuring she should go along with Jane’s attempt to change the subject.

“Seriously?” Jane glanced at her nails, distracted.

“Yeah. And I’m pretty sure Dana was texting my parents during the shoot…”

Scarlett went on, describing the crazy Harp Christmas Eve dinner. But she could tell that Jane’s mind was elsewhere. She knew her best friend—loyal to a fault. Scarlett had totally alienated her by going off on Madison.

Scarlett tried to bite back the sadness welling up in her—the sadness over this distance in their friendship that she couldn’t seem to bridge. Sure, Scarlett hadn’t told Jane about her noncrush on Liam…yet. Not that there was anything to tell, because nothing had actually happened between her and Liam. Still, Scarlett wasn’t used to keeping secrets from Jane, big or small. Keeping secrets felt too much like telling lies.

How am I gonna fix this? Scarlett wondered miserably. And for once, the girl with all the answers didn’t have a clue.

9 CRAZY GIRL

Just before 9 a.m. on Monday morning, Jane pulled into her usual parking spot behind Fiona Chen's building. She turned off the engine and carefully searched the entire lot through the window. Good—no photographers. She'd had to fend off two of them outside the apartment earlier. They were so obnoxious, shouting questions at her about Braden and Jesse—"Jane, why did Braden move to New York?" "Jane, what do you think of Jesse's new girlfriend?"—and snapping picture after picture of her while she gritted her teeth and tried to ignore them. She hadn't heard anything about Braden going to New York or Jesse having a new girlfriend. But she knew better than to talk to paparazzi.

Still…the thought of Braden and Jesse moving on without her, and so quickly, made her heart feel heavy. Neither had tried to contact her since the *Gossip* story broke. She knew she had to reach out to them at some point. She owed Braden an apology—for hooking up with him when she was so mixed-up about everything, and for inadvertently getting him involved in this whole mess. And she owed Jesse an even bigger apology. She had no idea how she could possibly make things right after cheating on him, and in front of the whole world, too.

There was one guy she didn't owe anything—and he seemed to have no problem getting in touch with her: Caleb. He had texted her yesterday, from Vail—something about the awesome powder, and did she remember when they went to Tahoe during her senior year, and she wiped out on her new snowboard, like, twenty times? A few minutes later, he had texted her a photo of her lying in a pile of snow and laughing hysterically. Jane had no idea why he was sending her this stuff. It was nice that he was thinking about her. But confusing. And she didn't need "confusing" right now, on top of everything else.

Riding up to her office in the crowded elevator, Jane felt butterflies in her stomach. And not the good kind. She hadn't been to work in over a week, and she was really nervous about facing Fiona. She had sent her boss a quick email yesterday, saying that she would be back in the office on Monday. Fiona had responded right away, writing simply: *See you tomorrow at 9 sharp.*

So what was in store for Jane at 9 sharp? A furious Fiona waiting with a long lecture? A pink slip, telling her that she had two weeks to find new employment? Maybe one followed by the other. *Can't wait.*

To make things worse, the *L.A. Candy* cameras were up there already, prepared to shoot Jane's return to work. When Trevor had called Jane yesterday, Jane had felt compelled to pick up after ignoring him for so long. He asked her if it would be okay for them to shoot her at work the following day. After going MIA on him, what could she say but yes?

Much to her surprise, Trevor had been really sweet on the phone and didn't sound angry at all about the *Gossip*

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