

Chapter 1

The large, pink, glitter-heart-covered sign declaring “Welcome Home Jason!” swings toward me and I duck. Again. This time I’m not fast enough. The poster board smacks me on the side of the head and glitter sprinkles my hair and dusts my shoulders like shiny dandruff.

I scowl as I brush it off. This is so not my year.

“I am *so* sorry! Did I get you again?” the bouncy little blonde girl holding the ridiculous sign asks.

“Yes.” I sound like a jerk. I wasn’t the first three times, but this is the fourth time she’s spun to look at something and almost brained me with a corner of her poster. And now the stupid thing is completely blocking my view of the arrival board. Whoever Jason is, I feel bad for him. A girl this eager has something to prove or something to hide.

I sit up tall, almost lifting out of my seat, and can still barely see the flight status. But then the blonde shifts slightly and there it is. I groan when I read it. Their plane is now forty-five minutes late and there’s *still* no expected arrival time on the board.

I bang my head against the white wall behind me. Isn’t this why the world invented chauffeurs? But, no. Dad insisted I pick up Mom and Verity myself.

The girl holding the poster tucks the stupid thing between our seats—now *why* didn’t she do that an hour ago?—and I get a good look at her for the first time. Her large blue eyes remind me of a doll my sister had when we were kids. She glances at the board and back at me, empathy in those clear blues. “Waiting on the flight from Miami?”

“Yep.” I lean back in the hard plastic chair. “You too?”

“Yeah.” She glances down at her sign and smiles. Based on the red glitter kiss marks and hearts, I’m hoping Jason is her boyfriend. Cause otherwise it’s a little creepy.

“Boyfriend?” I might as well ask. I didn’t charge my phone before I left the house and if I spend too much more time on it, the thing isn’t going to last until Mom and Verity land.

She blushes, making the dusting of freckles on her cheeks blend into her pink skin.

“Did the sign give me away?”

“It’s kinda hard to miss.”

“I know! It looks like Valentine’s Day threw up on it. I got carried away.” She looks down at the sign and her eyebrows pull together, little frown lines circling her mouth. For some reason the expression looks really wrong on her face. Out of place. Suddenly she reaches down and pulls the sign back out, peering up at me. “You’re a guy. Is it too much?”

I look again at the girl. Her blonde hair hangs in braided pigtails and her eyes are so earnest. She’s cute. Not gorgeous or sophisticated, but cute. Nothing like Lily, for which I’m grateful. I check out the sign and try picturing walking through a crowded airport and seeing this arts and crafts atrocity with my name on it. Hiding my shudder is impossible. It’d be like the beginning of a bad horror movie. Or an even worse rom-com.

The frown on her face deepens as she peers over the top to look at her abominable creation. “That bad?”

Without waiting for my answer, she sighs and gets up, crumpling the sign and raining glitter onto the ground as she walks to a trashcan and stuffs it inside.

“Thanks for your honesty.” She sits back down, pulls a huge plastic container from under her seat, opens it, and offers me a cupcake. “Here. Red velvet with cream cheese icing. They’re Jason’s favorite.”

Since I haven’t eaten in hours, I don’t have it in me to say no. Plus, cream cheese frosting! I have *always* had a weakness for cream cheese frosting. I take it and have to stop myself from groaning after the first bite. “Whoa. That is one amazing cupcake.”

She grins, the smile coming back as naturally as the sun returning from behind some clouds. “So, *those* aren’t too much, right?”

I take another bite and eye the rest of the cupcakes in the container. “Um, yes. They’ll completely freak him out. You should leave them with me.”

She laughs and it makes me smile. “So, who are you waiting for?” She replaces the lid on the Tupperware and slides it back under the seat.

My smile dies. “My mom and my sister.” I shove the rest of the cupcake in my mouth before crumpling the paper baking cup up in my hand and tossing it into the trashcan a few feet away.

She only waits a moment before she moves on. “That’s sweet.”

Both of us hesitate. She’ll probably stay quiet if I let the silence linger, but I don’t want to. This is the first easy conversation I’ve had with someone I’m not related to in over a month. Swallowing the last of the cupcake, I clear my throat and ask, “How long have you and Jason been together?”

“Dating for three years, but we’ve known each other since elementary school.” Her blue eyes are bright when she talks about him, but her answer makes me raise an eyebrow. Three years? She looks like she’s about fourteen. Like elementary school *was* three years ago.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Huh.”

“I know, right?” She glares, but not at me. Instead, she’s staring down at her bright blue shirt and her nearly flat chest. “I look like I’m twelve. Which is why it’s kind of amazing I have Jason.” She sighs almost wistfully.

I try not to be jealous of this girl and the fact that she’s already had a relationship that’s lasted longer and clearly felt better than all of mine combined. “Childhood sweethearts, huh?”

Her smile comes back in an instant. “I’ve been following him around since I was ten, but it took him awhile to get the hint and ask me out. We’ve been together ever since. My computer and my cell both died, so I haven’t even been able to talk to him for a while. Now, not only have we been apart for three months, but I haven’t even talked to him in three weeks!”

The only people I’ve spent that much time with are Mom and Verity. In my experience friends fade in and out and relationships don’t usually last long.

“Maybe that’s a good thing. If you’ve been together that long you probably needed some space.” I spoke without thinking. Some people flip if you say something like that. My body tenses waiting for her to yell at me. But she doesn’t. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her shrug.

“That’s what Mom said, too.” She glances up at the board again then back at me. “I mean, I *can* see where she’s coming from. This summer was fun. I missed Jason, but I still had fun.” She lifts her shoulders. “He’s my best friend, though. I love him.”

I can't help but roll my eyes. Has she really lived in L.A. this long and somehow come out so naive? Luckily, she doesn't seem the type to take offense.

She laughs. "A cynic, huh?"

"You say cynic, I say realist." I glance at the flight information again and frown. "I hate waiting. 'Specially when you don't even know how long you'll be here."

She tucks her hands under her legs. "I can't say it's my favorite thing to do but—" She purses her lips. "I think today I'm grateful for it."

I run my hand through my black hair, but my bangs just plop back down on my forehead. "Grateful?"

"Yeah. What if they're late because there was a problem with some part they needed to fix? Or maybe they were waiting out bad weather to keep everyone safe. Maybe because it's late, someone was able to make the flight and will make his best friend's wedding. I'm okay with waiting."

Is she serious? Something about her optimism makes me want to show her the world isn't all sunshine and glitter, give her glimpses of reality, easing her into it so it'll hurt less when she finally figures it out. "Or it's late because the pilot got drunk and overslept."

She gives me a cheeky grin. "Or maybe he was late because he wanted to watch his son play in his first little league game."

"Are you always like this? So..." I circle my hands in the air in front of me, trying to think of some non-condescending way to describe this girl. "So 'the glass is half full'?"

She laughs. "Guilty."

"I've heard about people like you, I just never thought I'd actually meet one." I pull a pack of gum out of my pocket and offer her a piece. "Especially not in L.A."

“Oh, no.” Her eyes twinkle with mischief. “You’re one of *them*.”

My eyes narrow. “One of who?”

“You’re chewing Robbie’s gum.”

“So?”

“No one really likes that gum.” She shakes her head. “They all chew it because it’s ‘in’ right now.”

“I like it.” I unwrap a piece and fold it into my mouth. “See?”

She studies me from head to toe as though I’ve suddenly become a science experiment. Every time her eyes pause, her grin grows wider. “Wow. Robbie’s gum *and* Krispin sneakers?”

I fold my arms and try to stifle the urge to tuck my feet away under the seat. “Your point?”

“My friend Gloria would love you.”

I stiffen. Even a casual reference of a girl claiming to love me makes me want to hurl. “Why’s that?”

“Because right now she’s really into Robbie’s gum, Krispin shoes, and Scorched shirts. And you’re three for three unless I’m guessing wrong.”

“How do you know what brands I’m wearing?” Even though the crowded waiting area is practically overheated, my blood runs cold. I know what she’s about to say and I want to hide. *Please don’t let her recognize me. Please, please, please.*

“Because half the kids in the city are wearing those brands since that girl in Miami spilled the secrets about Paul Andrews’ son. His name is Dare, which I thought was awesome when I heard it.” She bites her lip and looks at me through narrow eyes. I’m

waiting for the other shoe to drop, where she tells me she knew it was me all along and asks for a photo or an autograph or whatever. “You know what? You kinda look like him.”

She cocks her head to the side, studying me. My palms started to sweat. I hate this feeling. It’s like I’m prey waiting to see if the hunter is going to take the shot.

“He’s not as cute as you, though.” Her cheeks tinge pink again and her next words come out rushed. “I mean that in an entirely platonic, complimentary kind of way. I’m waiting for my boyfriend. Maybe I should just go hide in a corner now.”

I laugh, but it’s been so long since I had anything to laugh about, the sound is gruff and rusty. The constricted, hunted feeling in my chest loosens, though. She doesn’t recognize me. And for some reason that makes me feel a little impulsive.

I grin at her and lean closer. “You think I look like that Dare guy?”

“A little?” She bites the corner of her lip and her nose crinkles. “I don’t know. Maybe not. I don’t follow tabloids. I only know about him because Gloria kept talking about the article.” She pats my arm and shakes her head. “Be glad you aren’t Dare.”

My grin fades a little. I knew this girl was too nice to be real. She must be judging me by some of the crap Lily leaked to the press. I’m not sure I want to know, but some perverse side of me asks, “What do you mean?”

“Are you kidding?” She stares at me like I just asked if she knew the Easter Bunny and I relax a little. “Who’d want to be Dare? The poor guy’s girlfriend sold him out to the tabloids. That’s gotta suck.” She tugs one of her braids. “It isn’t nice to say, but I hope he dumped her. She deserved it.”

It’s weird listening to a complete stranger defend me. The longer I do, the more impulse gives way to outright recklessness.

“You feel bad for him? The guy’s famous and, if he looks like me, incredibly handsome.” She giggles and it only encourages me. “And his girlfriend was probably hot. Plus, if his dad’s a director, he’s got connections most people’d kill for. And you feel *bad* for him? You’re probably the only person in the country who does.”

She shrugs, like she doesn’t care in the least what I think. “My friends tell me I’m crazy for thinking that. But honestly? All the stuff you said—money, connections, wealth, looks—it’s all so temporary. It doesn’t really mean anything and it can be taken away fast.” She takes a deep breath and a shadow passes over her bright blue eyes. For a moment, I almost get the feeling this sunshine-and-light girl knows what it’s like to hurt. And that she’s also a master at hiding it. “But love, family, friendship. *Real* friendship—not the kind willing to sell you out for money and fame friendship. *That’s* what matters. That’s what lasts even after it’s gone.”

I stare at her for a moment unable to speak. She seems to understand me more from hearing about my life fifth or sixth hand than Lily and my ex-friends in Florida ever did. Uncomfortable with the sudden depth of the conversation I fall back on sarcasm.

“So... you *don’t* want any gum then?”

She laughs again and shakes her head. “No, but thanks.”

The group around us suddenly stands and I check the board. *Finally*. The flight from Miami is now at the gate according to the latest update. The girl—whose name I still don’t know—has noticed the same thing and is now bouncing in her seat. I’m about to officially introduce myself, kinda just to see what she does, when she grins and jumps up onto the chair, waving her hands.

I stand up, curious to see the kind of guy a girl like Little Miss Sunshine would be so mushy over, but if the guy I’m seeing is the same one she’s seeing, I don’t understand

what all the fuss is about. He's tall, but lanky. He moves through the crowd smoothly, though, so I'm guessing he plays something. Eyes on the cell phone in his hand, he still doesn't see Sunshine.

"Ugh. I hate being this small," I hear her mutter above me before she waves her arms even faster and shouts, "Jason!"

Sunshine's voice stops Jason cold. He shakes his head like he thinks he's hallucinating and I get a shiver in my stomach. I got this feeling around Lily the week before my face was suddenly plastered across the internet and supermarket magazine racks. Sunshine doesn't notice anything off. She shouts again. This time, Jason looks up and when his eyes lock with his supposed girlfriend's, happy is not how I'd describe the expression on his face.

It takes him a minute to wind his way through the crowd and I use the time to step in front of her chair and help her down. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

As I hoped, her smile fades a little as she tries to figure out what the hell I'm apologizing for. She's still looking slightly confused when Jason reaches us, staying a good three feet away.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. Definitely not happy to see her. Crap. Sometimes it sucks to be right.

Poor Sunshine still doesn't get it. She just looks even more confused. "I told you I would pick you up."

Jason stares at her like she just told him the moon really *is* made out of Swiss cheese. "Uh, yeah, but, I mean, that was before you got my email." The frown lines around Sunshine's lips deepen and Jason pales even more. "Didn't you get my email?"

It's like watching a slow-motion train wreck. I can't look away and I can't stop what's coming.... Can I? If there *is* something, I better think of it fast. She's about ten seconds away from revealing she's got no clue she doesn't have a boyfriend anymore.

Jason grips the strap of his backpack so tight his whole hand is white. When he talks again, his voice carries a desperate edge. "The one where I broke up with you?"

Bam. There's the crash. Before she can blink, react, or say something to completely humiliate herself in front of this jackass, I slide in next to her and drop my arm around her shoulder and a kiss on her cheek. She looks up at me the way my youngest cousin did the day she found out there's no Santa, her eyes begging me to tell her it's not true.

I lean forward and kiss her forehead, whispering, "Play along."

"You know Sunshine better than that, man," I say, turning to the idiot and shrugging. He's wide-eyed as he glances between Sunshine and me. "She's not the type to leave you stranded, even if you did make the biggest mistake of your life. Worked in my favor though, so I should probably say thanks."

The muscles in his jaw clench and loosen spasmodically, but he doesn't say anything. Man, I hope the guy isn't a big enough wuss to actually take the girl he broke up with by *email* up on the offer of a ride. If he does, this charade of mine isn't going to last much longer.

Sunshine's hand is gripping the back of my shirt so hard the collar is starting to get tight around my neck, but otherwise only the fact that her bright eyes have gone dark gives her away. This girl *definitely* knows what it's like to hurt. You don't get this kind of self-control from being happy all the time. She even smiles as she says, "We're still friends, right, Jason? I didn't want to leave you stuck."

“That’s...I mean, thanks, but I don’t—I shouldn’t. My mom got off work early today. She’s picking me up.” The guy looks at her like he wants to fall on his knees and start sobbing, but the glare he sends my way is something else completely. Maybe he’s done with Sunshine, but that doesn’t mean he wants her to be done with him. With one more glance at his apparently-ex-girlfriend, the dude turns on his heel and practically bolts for the door.

As soon as he’s out of her sight, Sunshine starts trembling, but I wait until I watch him walk out the sliding glass doors before I turn to her and look down into her wide, tear-filled eyes. “Can I give you a lift somewhere?”

I don’t know how I’ll fit her in my car along with Mom, Verity, and their various luggage, but no way am I not offering. Not while she’s shaking like this.

She pulls herself free and shakes her head, stepping away from me and wrapping her arms around herself. “No. No, um, thank you. I’ll be fine until I get home. I can fall apart later.” She lets out a laugh that’s one of the saddest sounds I’ve ever heard. “I’m so glad I didn’t have the sign, though. Thanks for making me toss it.”

“Yeah, Sunshine. No problem.”

She looks around like she isn’t sure what to do and her eyes land on the Tupperware under the chair. The first of her tears leaks out as she bends down, grabs the container, and forces it into my hands. “Please take them. I never liked red velvet that much anyway.”

The gesture makes my chest ache. I wanted them before, but now I don’t know if I can eat them. To her, though, I just say, “Okay.”

She goes up on her tiptoes to press a kiss against my cheek and I inhale her scent, apples and sugar and chocolate. “I don’t know how you knew, but thank you for stepping

in.” She steps back and smiles at me. It’s a very wobbly smile. “It means a lot that you’d help a total stranger like that.”

And then even Sunshine’s self-control cracks. Pulling a small key-ring out of her pocket, she strides for the door and I’m left holding eleven cupcakes and the memory of a girl whose name I don’t know.

Looking down, something bright catches my eye. Stuffed in the back corner against the wall under her seat is a brown leather purse with a huge cartoon-looking sun stitched in. Grabbing it, I stand and search for her, but she’s already gone. And by now Verity and Mom are probably wondering where the hell I am. Sighing, I sling the purse over my shoulder, grab the cupcakes, and head down to baggage claim.

