

Sweet Little Lies
AN L.A. CANDY NOVEL

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.