

Chapter One

Frozen Waffles

Why am I still in bed?

It's the last day of summer vacation! I can't waste one more minute, second, or millisecond sleeping. This is going to be the most epically awesome day of all time! Like, so good that awesome looks at this day and wishes it was this epic. This might sound like a lot of pressure, but I'm ready. For weeks I've been keeping track of the summer stuff I love to do most, so I could pick out all the best things. Now, I have a mental list just waiting for me to get to it:

- Go to the pool.
- Use sun lightener on my hair.
- Work on my tan.
- Try something new at the Snack Shack.
- Meet three new boys.
- Give at least one of the boys my phone number.

I am determined to squeeze the most amount of fun out of every single second of this day. Obviously, I can't get any of it done while I'm laying here like a slug! I have to get up and call Robyn.

I roll out of bed, no clue what time it is. My stinking alarm clock has been *tick-tick-ticking* away the precious minutes of my last summer day, so I have been ignoring it with all of my might. Before I stand up, I smack the clock face down on the nightstand. I

should have done that before. The irritating neon numbers, winking in my peripheral, were giving me a headache.

And headaches are not epically awesome.

I wonder, would Time stop if I use all my allowance to send it on a vacation to Hawaii? I can find a beachfront resort somewhere far away from me and Time can sit next to the ocean with a fruity little drink. I wouldn't mind if Time decided to stay there for a couple weeks even. This could totally work. Even Time must need a break sometimes.

Or maybe not, since that darn clock is still going at it, just muffled now.

I plop my pillow down on my nightstand, to shush it even more, and I tiptoe to my bedroom door. As quietly as possible, I ease it open, so it doesn't squeak. It does like to squeak sometimes, and I don't want to wake anyone up in case it's super early. For all that trying to ignore the clock's *tick-tocks*, I didn't actually look at the time.

I'll just check when I get my phone.

Because of the family 'no screens in bedrooms' rule, my phone spends the night in a basket on the coffee table. Out of habit, I look both ways before I slip out of my room and into the hall. Not a creature is stirring. Even so, I prefer to sneak along the walls and slink around corners like I'm in some big deal spy movie. It's just more fun that way. I serpentine down the stairs and army crawl across the living room. When I'm almost to the coffee table, I execute a super awesome somersault that leaves me on my back, staring up at the phone basket.

Nailed it.

I reach one arm into the basket and rummage around until I feel sequins. My phone! The most beautiful creation of turquoise and silver sparkles, I am very happy to have it in my hand.

I hold the phone above my head, over my face, while I text. My arms start to fall asleep instantly, but I ignore them, because this is super important. I type as fast as I can.

Hey, are you awake?

I tap my toes together while I wait. It's been almost five whole seconds. If Robyn doesn't respond in a couple more, I will have to text her again. I can't waste time laying on the living room floor today. My thumbs hover on the keyboard, ready to text attack. Lucky for Robyn, she responds right away.

Yeah

Now my thumbs fly over my phone like a pair of whirling dervishes. Robyn's answers come back at me as quickly as I can type and send.

Two words. Last day.

One word. Ok

One word. Pool.

One word. Loveit!

I roll my eyes. Seriously? That is not one word. Good thing Robyn is so cute.

That's two words, weirdo.

Yeah, so? I'm coming over.

I fling my phone into the air with a squeal and then roll to the side, so it doesn't hit me in the face. I'm not the best at catching things. My phone smacks the floor in the exact spot where my head was, before I moved out of the way.

I scramble to my feet, snatch my phone off the carpet and barrel upstairs to my parent's room. In my excitement, I forget to be stealthy and sound just like that herd of elephants my mom loves so much. I stampede through the door and spring onto their huge, fluffy bed.

"Oof." Comes from Dad.

"What?!" Comes from Mom.

"Can I go to the pool with Robyn?" Comes from Me.

"What time is it?" My mom groans, as she rolls over.

I can't answer that because I still haven't looked at the time. I start to turn my phone back on, but Mom is quicker. She reaches over and adjusts the clock so she can see the numbers.

"Cat Anderson!" She turns the clock so I can see the glowing numbers too.

6:15.

I clear my throat.

My mom stares at me with laser eyes that are so powerful, they may give me male pattern baldness when I'm older. Lucky for my hair, my dad distracts her. He lets out a snorting snore that is loud enough to reach Seattle. People there are probably looking up at the sky wondering what in the smorgasbord that sound was.

Mom nudges Dad so he will roll over, taking the noise with him. We watch until he starts breathing like a normal person again, then my mom snaps her eyes back to me.

I run my fingers through my hair, twirling a strand around my finger.

"It's the last day of summer." I say, in a small voice. "I hear the pool is very nice this time of year."

My mom sighs herself back into her pillows. “I know it’s the last day of summer, and I know you’re excited, Cat.” She gives me a sympathetic look that can’t be good for my plans. “But this conversation would make a whole lot more sense in a couple of hours.”

“A couple of hours!” I exclaim. “The day will almost be over in a couple of hours!”

Mom levels me with a look. “It’s 6:00.”

“6:17.” I turn her clock, so she can get another look at the numbers.

Mom sighs again, all the way from her toes this time. “Cat, my point is that nothing is open this early. The mall doesn’t even open for about three hours.”

“Oh, sure it does.” I wave a hand to get rid of her silly sentence.

My mom’s left eyebrow rises just a notch.

I nod to emphasize my words. “You know! They open it super early for all those old ladies to walk laps. The mall is open, but the stores aren’t.”

“Okay.” My mom looks at me, her eyes trying not to wrinkle in the corners. “I’m wondering how you know this. Do you often go to the mall before it opens so you can walk with the old ladies?” A smile curls the corner of her mouth upwards and her eyes lose the wrinkle battle.

She is totally teasing me.

This is so not the time for teasing! Doesn’t she know that the lasting memory of my whole summer hangs on this one day? I shake my head, making my hair fly in front of my eyes. I stop to smooth it back into place. “That’s super weird, Mom.”

“I thought so, too.”

“Anyways.” I wave my hand again, up and down and all around, to help us get back on subject. “The pool. It opens at like 7, I think, that’s 40 minutes from now. It will

take me that long to get ready. Then, it takes some time to get there, so that should work out perfect, am I right? Can I go, please? This is the last day of summer! I can't waste a single minute!"

My mom slips down her pillows, like she's a balloon that just ran out of air. One long, excruciating silence later, she pokes my dad in the back. She does it a few times before he jerks around to face her.

"What?"

"Andrew, what do you think about your oldest child going to the pool this morning?"

My dad's eyes are squinty slits. He tries to open them all the way but gives up before it happens. "Is it morning? Are you sure the sun is up?"

"Yeah!" In my enthusiasm to prove it, I spring off the bed to the window and pull up the blinds with a little too much force. The blinds slam against the top thingy and wave across the window like a banner. The room floods with light.

Hello daylight savings time.

"See! Sunshine." I stop myself from adding a trumpeted *ta-da*. My parents probably won't appreciate that much excitement this early in the morning. Sure enough, my dad rolls over and covers his head with a pillow.

My mom pulls the blanket over her head, with a loud groan. "Yes. Fine. Okay. You can go to the pool." She waves a hand to shoo me away.

I let go of the string and all that brilliant sunlight disappears. The blinds hit the bottom of the windowsill with a super loud bang. I cringe but recover right away. I'm not going to let a minor thing like that dampen my spirits.

Unfortunately, my parents are not as resilient as I am.

“I’m up.” My dad sits straight in bed. “I’m up. What?”

“Oh, nothing.” I say like this conversation is no big deal, even though the exact opposite is true. “We’re just talking about me going to the pool today.”

“By the way, how are you planning on getting there?” Mom’s muffled voice asks. She’s still under the blanket even though it’s like Dracula’s tomb in here again.

“Um, walk?” I twirl my phone around my fingers, not looking at either one of my parents.

My mom pulls the blanket down so I can see her face. Eyes first, then nose, then mouth. Oh no. She’s chewing on her bottom lip. That is never a good thing for my mom to do. I clasp my hands together, with my phone in the middle, and hold on tight. This is going to be fine. I knew this part of the conversation might get hairy. I’ve been to the pool a zillion times in my life, but always with an adult; my mom, my aunt or one of my friend’s moms. I’m totally old enough to go alone - I’m fourteen after all - but this will be the first time.

Mom, and sort of Dad, but mostly Mom, is having a hard time watching me grow up. I heard her and Dad talking about it late one night when I was passing their door for a drink of water. They were saying something about how it’s important that I have freedom, but also consistent boundaries and stuff or whatever. I think what they mean is, I’m the guinea pig. My parents try all this teenage parenting stuff out on me, and then when my younger sibs get to where I am, my parents will be total experts.

That’s the plan anyway.

Personally, I don’t see what the big deal is about teenagers. I’m not any different now, then when I was twelve. In fact, I would say that I get better with age.

Like cheese.

Or boy bands.

Finally, my mom nods, so slowly she looks like she slept on her neck funny.

“Okay, you can go, but take your phone. Check in when you get there and let me know when you head home. Promise?”

“Yes.” I nod back, trying to show with each motion how mature I am. This is way trickier than it sounds, because my insides are riding a looping roller coaster and screaming with both hands in the air. Even I am impressed with my self-restraint.

I ease off the bed and slowly back out of my parent’s bedroom, trying not to bump anything or make any sudden noises that would cause my mom to change her mind. When I finally make it into the hall, my pent-up excitement comes out of my fingers. The tip of each one tingles as they skip across the keypad of my phone.

Parentals say okay. We can go alone!

What the what?!

Robyn answers right away, which makes me think she was staring at her phone that whole time waiting for me. I hope not, she better be ready to go already. It would be better for us to leave now, and have to wait at the pool for lifeguards, then wait around here and risk Mom changing her mind.

Right? Where are you? Hurry!

Coming, coming.

There is so much pent up energy in my legs, I want to burst into the air like a firecracker and zoom around the room. but I don’t. Instead, I dash to my room, straight to the closet, to find my cutest swimming suit. This is an important moment. One never knows who one might see at the pool on the last day of summer.

I swing the closet doors open and stop.

Oopsies.

Apparently, I haven't been taking my dirty clothes to the laundry room like Mom asked me to, at least a zillion times, in the last week. I mean, I was planning on it, and I will, I'll get to it, just not right now. I have to hurry. I wasn't joking around about my mom changing her mind. It's a real possibility up until the moment I leave the house. So, I really need to get this show on the road.

I dig through my dirty clothes basket until I find my favorite swimsuit. It is still damp and smells disgusting. Like, brussel sprouts with queso and moldy socks disgusting.

So not good.

I leave my clothes all over the floor, it's okay they're all dirty anyways, and return to my closet. My second cutest suit is dry and smells like Ocean Spring Tide. I pull it on and cover it with my favorite pair of purple Bermuda shorts, just slightly wrinkled, and a flowy flowered tunic that I tie into a knot at my waist. I look adorable.

Well, from the knees up.

The pool is close, but still a walk. As much as I want to wear my sparkly pink flip flops, I choose the worn white tennis shoes Robyn and I decorated with markers one boring day in Science last year. They don't exactly match the rest of me, but they are super comfortable. Hopefully, anyone worth seeing will be so overcome by my amazing self that they won't notice my feet. It's risky, but I don't want blisters today.

Because blisters are not epically awesome, either.

All right, I have my phone and my tote bag filled with everything else I need. Lip gloss, lotion, hair ties, candy. Check and check and check. Now, I just need to eat breakfast.

Fast.

The fastest breakfast ever.

I hurry down the stairs.

Uh-oh.

Mom is in the kitchen. I skid to a stop when I see her and walk the rest of the way to the fridge like it's just another normal morning. I totally thought she would go back to sleep after I left her room. That would have been better for me; she can't change her mind if she's unconscious. But here she is, staring at the contents of the fridge with a weird look on her face.

"Hey, Mommy, Mom, Mom, Mom." I squeeze by to get to the freezer so I can pull out a box of waffles. I am a pro at baking these things. Seriously, I can make them crispy on the outside and chewy soft on the inside. This is super hard to do, especially in a standard two slice toaster my mom got on clearance at the grocery store.

I have a gift.

"Hey, Kitty Cat." Mom smooths my hair a couple of times.

She has forgiven me for waking her up at the crackiest crack of dawn, or she wouldn't be petting my head. I pull a plate from the cupboard above the toaster and dance on my toes while I wait for the toaster to work its magic. "What are you doing?" I ask my mom. "Why are you staring at the fridge?"

"Oh." She shrugs with just one shoulder. The cheek I can see from this side of her face looks blotchy red, like mine do when I run laps in P.E. But that doesn't make sense, my mom is shivering in front of the refrigerator, not running her lungs out on the sweltering ball field.

“Sometimes I just like to look at the ingredients in the fridge and cupboards.” My mom says without looking at me.

I purse my lips. “That’s weird, Mom.”

She laughs, but it sounds more like choking. “I know. It is weird. I just...” She looks at a milk jug longingly. “I just, sometimes I just really want to *bake* something.” She whispers the word ‘bake’ like it’s a naughty swear.

I stare at her. “For reals?” I am completely kerflummoxed. “Why would you want to bake something when you can buy it? You hate baking.”

“Don’t say hate, Cat.” Mom closes the fridge door slowly, one palm lingers on the stainless steel like she isn’t ready to let it go.

I shake my head. This is starting to get super weird. Weirder than weird. “Okay. Don’t you detestiloe the baking?”

My mom turns to me with a half-smile. “That is not a word.”

“It is now.” I stretch my face into a grin, but my heart doesn’t join the fun. I feel all squeamish, suddenly. I check the cupboard for juice or ginger ale, I can’t get sick today!

Sick is super not epically awesome.

“Do we have any apple juice?” I ask over my shoulder. When Mom doesn’t answer right away, I decide she needs my full attention.

She stares at the clock on the microwave.

Oh no.

She’s biting her lower lip.

May day! May day!

Now there's that crinkle in her forehead! Her thoughts are so obvious it's as if she already said them out loud. She's having doubts about letting me go to the pool without an adult. I totally should have skipped breakfast and left while I had the chance. Why did I loiter? Loitering is practically illegal, or is that littering? Oh! It doesn't matter! What am I going to do?!

"The pool isn't open yet." She says slowly. "It's still so early..."

"It's 6:45." I say in a rush. All my brain powers are focused on figuring out how to get out of here as fast as possible. I contemplate flipping a box of cereal up in the air to create a diversion so I can ninja vanish out the dining room window. That just might work.

Before I can put my brilliant plan into action, my waffles pop up. Both Mom and I jump a mile and one of us squeaks. I really hope it wasn't me, but I can't say for sure. I grab the steaming waffles with the tips of my fingers and thumb, transferring them to a plate so fast my skin doesn't feel the burn.

It's time to implement one of my tried and true distraction techniques. Technique number four to be exact.

Talk.

Talk a lot. Talk until the other person forgets what they were thinking about. No! Until they forget there ever was a time before I opened my mouth.

I reach for a knife to butter my waffles and let the words flow unrestrained.

"Hey Mom, guess what? I had the weirdest dream last night. Do you ever have dreams where it's super real and even after you wake up it takes you a few minutes to come back to earth? That's how this one was, except, this dream was super kooky dukes. Hey! Do you ever wonder if your brain notices the dream is weird? I mean, why doesn't

it go, ‘whoa this is straight up bananas’ and put a stop to the whole nutso thing? Then it could straighten it out, into stuff that makes sense. That seems like something the brain would do. Anyway, so in this dream, I was walking down a cobblestone street that looked like the cartoon Beauty and the Beast, you know that first scene where Belle is singing and walking through the village? Like that. Except I wasn’t singing. I was sniffing. Like, every few feet I would stop and sniff. I think I was looking for something, but I’m not sure cause I don’t know what I would have been looking for. But then, the village or whatever turned into the mall and there were a bunch of old ladies there wearing bright orange, sequined leggings, and retro sweat suits. I tried to figure out a nice way to tell them that their clothes don’t match, but then a janitor distracted me by throwing sprinkles on my head.”

I stop to take a breath. Judging by the expression on my mom’s face, my chatter has done a good job. She looks all perplexed, like she might be worried for my cognition, coming up with a dream like that.

This is good!

But the waffles haven’t fared as well. I wasn’t paying any attention to them while I buttered and now, they are a sopping, soggy mess. I don’t even know how much butter I used. I eye the dwindling cube. How full was it when I started?

I pick up one of the waffles and bend it in half like a taco, watching the stream of melted butter that drips back onto my plate. There’s no question about eating the waffles, of course I’m still going to eat them, I just have to wait a few minutes for the leaking to stop, so I can take a bite without making a mess of my clothes.

Just as I start my first luscious mouthful, there is a tap on the back door.

“Who could that be?” My mom moves towards the door. “It’s so early.”

I have a pretty good idea.

“*Buenos Dias!*” Robyn bursts into the kitchen. She is wearing enormous sunglasses, bigger than her head, that are fluorescent pink to match her capris. Anyone else who dressed like that would look like a loony hobo, but Robyn looks like a teen magazine cover model, even with her old “Save the Unicorns” t-shirt thrown on over her swimming suit. I can’t help but grin when I see her; she is my very bestest, best friend.

Oh yeah, and my cousin.

Also, she lives in the house right behind us.

Cause I’m a lucky ducky.

“*Como estas Tia?*” Robyn leans in to give my mom a peck on the cheek.

“Yeah, of course. I’m great.” Mom squeezes Robyn tight, kissing her head. “Wow, you smell good!”

Robyn laughs. “You know my mama. She was up at four this morning with that baking itch and made about a million blueberry scones. Too many for our family to eat.” Robyn grins at me. “So, later today she wants us to deliver them.”

My *Tia* Marissa has a total baking addiction and no sense of portion. She always makes way too much of everything, so Robyn and I deliver the extras to the neighbors. It’s super fun. *Tia* Marissa does all the hard work, while Robyn and I get all the ‘ooh’s’ and ‘awwwww’s’, and ‘you’re wonderful’s’.

It’s the best.

“Your mom was baking this morning, huh?” The tone of Mom’s voice is strange. Kind of froggy or something. I wonder if she is coming down with a cold.

Robyn laughs. “Does she ever stop? She is always baking! You know!”

“Yeah,” Mom’s face turns stormy. “I know.”

That look again! Rats, I thought I distracted it! What should I do? Maybe the ninja vanish thing? Or should I start talking again? I turn to Robyn for help, giving her my most pleading, despairing look, but she watches my mom like she's trying to work out a complicated math problem.

“*Tia*...?” Robyn reaches out a hand and rests it on my mom’s shoulder.

Mom twitches and rubs her arms as though she’s freezing cold. She is covered in goosebumps. Must be an after effect of standing in front of the fridge for so long.

“I’m fine. Fine. You girls have fun.” She fixes me in her sights. “Don’t forget the rules.”

I nod, give her a quick kiss on the cheek and pull Robyn out the door as fast as I can. I practically drag Robyn, because she is still staring at my mom with her version of that LOOK. It’s the one that usually means we’re going to end up serving food at the soup kitchen, rescuing a litter of kittens or volunteering at the nursing home. I have to get Robyn out of here before she sits my mom down with a cup of cocoa and tries to solve all the problems of the universe.

As soon as the sunshine hits my face, I feel a wave of excitement that is almost as powerful as my relief. I let go of Robyn and pump both fists into the air.

“This is going to be the most epically awesome day, ever!”

“Yeah...” Robyn looks over her shoulder, back at the house. “*Tia* Bridget... is she...?”

“She’s fine. She said she’s fine. She’s just in a weird mood.” I roll my eyes and laugh. “She was staring at the open fridge for like an hour, thinking about baking or something.”

Robyn slows her pace until I'm next to her. Her spidery long legs make walking with her a challenge sometimes. I either jog or she has to snail it up.

"Your mom was talking about baking?" Robyn's forehead crinkles.

Which is totally unacceptable.

"Yeah." I wave my hand dismissively. Robyn needs to focus; she needs to stop worrying about weird things and get as excited as I am about the day before us.

We pass a parked car on the side of the road and I catch a glimpse of my reflection. What was I going to say? I am totally distracted now. My hair looks awesome! I'm glad I got it cut last week. The shoulder length, wavy look is a good one for me. I fluff the ends with one hand.

"But your mom never bakes." Robyn tugs at my elbow.

Oh yeah, that's what we were talking about.

I shrug. "So, lots of people don't bake. That's why we have stores and fast food chains."

"No!" Robyn says, like I haven't lived with my mom not cooking for fourteen years. "Really, she NEVER even cooks. Like, not even in the microwave. Like, hardly even the toaster. Like, she has to give herself a pep talk to order take-out sometimes. Your mom really doesn't like anything to do with food. Don't you think it's strange that she's thinking about baking with it?"

I laugh, because most of Robyn's words are a total exaggeration, even though everything else she said is kind of true.

"Seriously, Cat! Your mama hates baking so much, she won't even let my mama bring treats to your family, you know, *Tia* gets weird about it every time. And she won't eat at our house, I've wondered about that one for a while." Robyn taps her front teeth

with one fingernail. “Does she have a germ phobia, do you think? I can’t figure it out. Why would she be thinking about baking suddenly? She’s never wanted to before. I mean, my mama cooks a ton. *Tia Jojo* owns that bakery with Great Grammy Ginny. Your mom is the only one who doesn’t ever bake.”

“Not so.” I can’t help but contradict, even though I think this conversation is ridiculous and needs to stop. Who cares if my mom cooks or not? We have plenty of frozen food and a whole list on the fridge of restaurants that deliver right to our door. I don’t get it, what’s the big deal with homemade food anyway? “Remember Granny Penny? She doesn’t cook.”

“Well,” She stretches the word out to give herself more time to think. “Actually, we don’t know that for sure. She never cooks when she visits us, but that could be because she’s on vacation. Most people don’t want to cook on vacation. My point is, it’s very mysterious, don’t you think?”

I stifle a sigh by pretending to yawn. Ugh! Robyn is in full detective mode. How did that happen so fast? Usually I can ward it off before she gets so far in. But now it’s too late, she will not quit until she figures out a solution that she feels good about. So, I guess it’s up to me to rescue her from herself. If I don’t do something quick, we are going to spend our whole day trying to puzzle out my mom’s food issues.

That is also not my idea of epically awesome.

It is time to drastically change the subject.

“Yeah, I know, weird... so... Robyn, what was going on with you and Liam at the mall last week?”

“What?” She gasps, “Nothing!” Her face flips away from me, but the tippy tops of her ears turn pink.

“Really...? Because I was totally there, and it looked like something to me.” I turn my voice singsong because it drives Robyn nuts when I do that.

“He’s just... it’s just... it was...”

I hide my victory smile. It’s going to take Robyn the whole walk to the pool to figure out a good way to explain to me what happened with Liam, without admitting that she has a thing for him. Which she does. I know she does, she totally has had a thing for him since the fifth grade.

Mission accomplished.

Frozen Waffles

1 package of whatever brand frozen waffles you like

1 toaster

Butter

Syrup

Instructions:

Remove two waffles from the box and plastic packaging. Place one in each side of the toaster, if using a 4-slot toaster, put two in each side. Adjust the dial to between 3 and 4 for warm waffles, between 4 and 5 for crisp waffles. Push the toaster lever down until it catches. Arrange plate, utensils, butter, and syrup while you wait.

If you stare at the toaster it will take so much longer.

When the waffles pop up, remove, but take care, the sides of the toaster will burn your fingers. Place on a plate and spread generously with butter, be sure it melts into each waffle slot.

Pour on syrup to taste.