

august

*So Jake Graydon and Ally Ryan are officially together?
Bummer.*

*Oh, please. I bet he cheats on her before home-
room tomorrow.*

You think?

It's Jake Graydon! He puts the "play" in "player."

*Yeah, but he's never had a serious girlfriend
before. You have no precedent on which to
base your hypothesis.*

Since when did you start speaking Thesaurus?

She's been studying for her AP exams.

*Well, whatever. I promise you. Jally or Ake or Gryan or
whatever stupid name the sophomores come up with for
them . . . they won't last a week.*

ally

“Chloe’s *pregnant?*” Jake blurted, pushing himself up off the ground.

There was a grass stain on his cargo shorts from where he’d fallen on the edge of the lawn in front of Connor Shale’s house, and some gravel embedded in the skin of his calf. He touched the blood on his lip with his fingertips and flicked it away just as Hammond Ross grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled his monster-size fist back again. Jake’s arms flew up to protect his face, but I got between them and shoved Hammond as hard as I could with both hands. He stumbled back, surprised, and I took the two-second reprieve to whirl on my boyfriend.

My boyfriend, Jake. He was finally my boyfriend. We’d been officially together for five weeks and they’d pretty much been the most perfect five weeks of my life. So much for that.

“You had sex with *Chloe?*” I choked.

Jake’s incredible light-blue eyes said it all. He somehow looked scared and ashamed and apologetic at once. The sensation inside my chest was like nothing I’d ever felt before. It was as if first the air in my lungs, then the blood in my veins, then the life in my heart, were each getting sucked down a thirsty drain one at a time. *Slurp, slurp, slurp . . . gone.*

Jake opened his mouth to speak. “I . . .”

It was the longest syllable ever uttered by man.

“When?” I said. I was shaking from head to toe.

“It was one time. Over the summer. We weren’t together, I swear.”

I should have been relieved by this. I knew I should have. It wasn't like they were a couple. It wasn't as if they'd been humping like bunnies all summer while I was hanging out down the shore, clueless and pining for him. It wasn't like he was in love with her.

Thank God he wasn't in love with her.

But still, my stomach clenched over and over again, telling me it didn't matter. Telling me it sucked either way. Because I'd kind of thought *he* was pining for *me*. I thought we had both wanted to be together, and only circumstances and stubbornness had kept us apart. But now I find out he had sex with my popular, stunningly hot former best friend. Pining? Not so much.

"Unbelievable," Hammond said. He was standing behind me now, and I could feel his hot breath on the back of my neck, could hear how ragged it was. His adrenaline was on high alert. "That's all you're gonna say? You . . . my best friend . . . you go behind my back and you fuck the girl I was with for two years, and that's all you're gonna say?"

I hugged my own arms, even though the late-summer-evening sun was warm on my skin. I might not have agreed with the vehemence or the language, but honestly, I couldn't have said it better myself. Chloe had been with Jake in a way I never had. She'd seen things, done things, touched things . . . things I had never done or seen or touched. I felt like an iron fist was trying to push its way up from my stomach, through my throat, and into my mouth. Jake was mine. I had thought that he would one day be my first, and just thinking that was a huge, *huge* deal for me. But clearly, not so much for him. Didn't sex matter to him at all? Didn't *I* matter?

Jake clenched his jaw. “Where is she?”

I flinched. Right. This wasn’t about me. It wasn’t even about Jake, really. Or Hammond. It was about Chloe. Chloe was pregnant. Chloe Appleby, princess of perfection, queen bee of Orchard Hill High, she who had never stepped a pinkie toenail out of line in her life, was going to have an actual baby. This was what I like to call a holy-crap moment.

The sinking sun winked off the wall of windows at Connor’s house, not fifty yards away, where partiers danced in their skimpiest summer clothes, relishing our last night of freedom before school started tomorrow. I stared at them, choosing to be mesmerized by their carefree rhythm, instead of trying to breathe.

Images from *16 and Pregnant*, which our sort-of friend Shannen Moore had spent half the summer watching, flitted through my mind. The nonstop crying and fighting and cursing and heartache. This wasn’t happening. It could *not* be happening. Not to me. Not to us. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

But it was.

“She’s at her house bawling her eyes out, thanks to you,” Hammond spat.

“I have to go,” Jake said.

He started past me, and my hand shot out to grab his arm. His tan skin was warm, as if holding on to the summer sun we had basked in that day in his backyard, jumping in the pool whenever we got too hot, slurping down fresh lemonade, cuddling in one lounge chair and kissing whenever his brother went inside. It seemed like a million years ago. Then the thought of us kissing brought up an image of him and Chloe doing much more, and I let go.

“You’re just gonna leave me here?” I said, tucking my fingers under my arms.

“I’m sorry.” He didn’t look at me. His head was so far bowed it must have been straining his neck. “I’ll call you later.”

Then he turned away and took off through the woods, headed back toward Vista View Lane, where he and Chloe both lived. Slowly I leaned back against my mother’s car. Hammond eyed me warily, like he was expecting me to burst into tears or shove him again or throw some kind of hissy fit. But I just stood there and stared.

For a long time, neither one of us said a word. A car screeched up a half block away, parking behind the others that lined the street, and a pack of loud, laughing people headed into the party, oblivious to our existence. Slowly, Hammond’s breathing began to normalize, and soon he leaned back next to me.

“Bet you’re wishing you’d kissed me now, huh?”

My head snapped around so fast my neck clicked. “What?”

“That morning when you turned me down cold?” Hammond said. His tone was joking but his blue eyes were angry. A few weeks back we had passed out on the couch at my old condo while watching a movie, and when we’d woken up, he’d tried to get physical. As daydream-worthy as he was, I’d managed to resist. At the time I’d been hoping to get back together with Jake, and knew hooking up with Hammond would be a bad idea. “You wouldn’t even kiss me, and meanwhile Jake and Chloe are going at it like dogs in heat.”

“Ugh. Stop it. Just . . .” My stomach turned as fresh images of Jake and Chloe assaulted my brain. Naked skin and sweat and tongues and fingertips. Why did I have to have such a vivid imagination? “I can’t deal with this.”

I started around the car, shaking the keys out of the pocket of my jeans.

“Join the club,” Hammond blurted. It was almost like he was mad at *me*. Like I’d done something wrong.

I paused with my hand on the door handle. Why was he so pissed off, anyway? He and Chloe had broken up at the beginning of the summer and he’d spent half our time down at the shore flirting with me and trying to kiss me. But then, Jake and I hadn’t been together all summer, and I’d spent half *my* time at the shore making out with Cooper Lane, even though I was in love with Jake. I guess nothing was that black-and-white.

“Wait a minute,” I said, looking at him over the roof of the Subaru. “You called her your girlfriend. When you first got here . . . you said Jake knocked up your girlfriend.” I tasted bile as I said the words “knocked up” and had to swallow a few times to clear my throat.

Hammond blinked. “So?”

“So are you guys getting back together?” I asked.

“I thought we were, but now . . .” He shook his head and scoffed.

“So . . . what? She’s pregnant and now you don’t love her anymore?” I demanded, suddenly and oddly defensive on Chloe’s behalf.

“No! It’s not that. It’s just . . .” He pushed his hands into the roof of the car and leaned forward, hiding his face on the other side. He let out this guttural growl of frustration that I felt in my toes. “She had sex with my best friend!” he said, lifting his head. His skin was mottled as he pushed his hands into his blond hair, freshly shorn for the first day of school. “I mean . . . are you still in love with *him*?”

And that, right there, was the worst moment of my night. Even with the punching and the shoving and the horrifying revelations. Because in that moment, I didn't have an answer.

jake

I stared up at the columns around the front door of Chloe's house and couldn't make myself move. This wasn't happening. It couldn't actually be happening. Not to me. This was the kind of shit that happened on bad CW dramas, or on those Lifetime movies my mom was always watching, then denying she'd ever seen. Chloe couldn't actually be pregnant. She'd just told Hammond that to piss him off, right? Yeah. That had to be it. She was still mad at him over what happened last year and she was just trying to mess with him. I was going to go in there and we'd have a big, fat laugh about it.

I took a step toward the door, then stopped. What if it was true? What if it was true and she'd told her dad? That guy was, like, a linebacker in college or something. Yeah, he was old and stuff, but that didn't change the fact that his hands were the same size as those hugemongous hams his wife served up at every other Sunday dinner. I was pretty sure he could flatten me with one punch. I stepped back again and looked over my shoulder toward my house across the street. Maybe I should just go home. Pretend I didn't know anything. I could ignore her at school tomorrow and let her make the first move.

But no. I was not a wuss. I wasn't going to chicken out. And besides. There was no way I was ever going to chill until I knew for sure what was going on. I had to know.

I walked around the side of the house, cut through the rose garden, and climbed the trellis. Just like I did the night that we . . .

Yeah. I couldn't even think about it.

My arms shook the whole way up, like I was climbing the rope in gym class with two other guys clinging to my back, when it should have been as easy as scaling a ladder. When I got to the top, I wiped my palms on my shorts and took a breath. My head was pounding but felt weightless. Like it was trying to float away from here. Like it wanted to avoid this moment.

I knocked on the glass door. The curtain was pushed aside. Chloe looked like shit. Her light brown hair was stringy around her face, hanging half out of a ponytail. Her nose looked double its usual size. I'd never seen anyone's eyes so puffy. Not even my mom's after my grandma died.

"What're you doing here?" she said as she opened the door a crack.

The word "pregnant" was lodged at the back of my mouth. *Pregnant, pregnant, pregnant.* I cleared my throat. "I saw Hammond."

"Oh."

She walked away, letting the door swing open. I followed her inside and closed it as quietly as possible. Chloe went to her queen-size bed—which was covered in crumpled tissues—and sat on the edge. She was wearing gray sweatpants and a white tank top. She didn't look pregnant. In fact she looked skinnier than ever. Tiny even. I felt a surge of hope.

Maybe she *had* lied to Hammond for some reason. But then, why did she look like her dog had just died?

Chloe picked at her fingernails. I pushed my hands into my

pockets. An hour could have passed like that; I had no idea. It definitely felt like one.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she asked finally.

“Is it true?” I demanded.

Chloe nodded, looking down at the wood floor. “It’s true.”

My heart shriveled up and died. She sounded like she was drowning. Like there was water clogging her throat.

“How do you know it’s mine?” I asked.

Her head popped up. Her mouth was open in this sort of ugly, silent cry of pain. Part of me wanted to take it back, but it was a valid question, right? I mean, right?

“How could you ask me that?” she blurted, standing.

“Chloe, come on. I know you and Will Halloran were, like, a thing this summer. And—”

“Oh, so now I’m a slut or something?” she cried.

My mind reeled. This was not going well.

“No! It’s just . . . I don’t know what you did with him. And we used a condom! How could it possibly be mine?” I said, turning out my palms.

“Well, I guess it didn’t work,” Chloe replied, crossing her arms over her flat stomach and pacing away from me. “And Will and I, we never had sex.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“Oh my God! What’s the matter with you?” she demanded, bending at the waist. “Did you just come over here to make me feel like shit?”

I was pretty sure I’d never heard Chloe curse before. And she was looking at me like she wanted to spit in my face. I took a step back and tried to think. Tried to figure out how to make sense of this without being even more of a jerk. But I had to

know the truth. This was too important to just crawl away with my tail between my legs. She'd gone out with Will for at least a month. *At least.* And I knew he'd been over here in the middle of the night a couple of times. I'd seen him through my window, sneaking off. Was I really supposed to believe she didn't give him any all that time, but all I had to do to get in her pants was show up on her doorstep once?

"You are unbelievable, Jake," she said, pushing one hand into her hair as she walked back and forth from her flat-screen TV to the end of her four-poster bed. "I haven't seen you or heard from you or gotten even a text from you since that night and now you come over here and accuse me of being a lying whore?"

My jaw hung so low I swear it scratched against the wool on her pink throw rug. "I didn't . . . I just—"

"You'd better not tell anyone I was going out with Will," she continued, her voice gaining strength. "Because if you do, I'm gonna look like a slut and you're gonna look like an immature jerk who couldn't take responsibility."

I pressed my lips together. There were a million questions in my head. Desperate, awful questions. But I couldn't ask a single one of them or I knew she'd take my head off again. But I couldn't just stand there and say nothing, could I?

"So what are you . . . I mean . . . what are we . . . supposed to do?"

Chloe's scrawny arms fell limp at her sides. She looked away. "I don't know."

And then she burst into tears.

"My parents are going to kill me," she wailed. "Hammond hates me. You hate me. I can't deal with this. I just can't."

I hated watching girls cry. My arms twitched to hug her, but I hesitated a second. Was hugging her a bad idea? Would she think I wanted to be her boyfriend or something?

Suddenly Ally popped into my brain and I wanted to run. Get the hell out of here and never look back. But that wasn't an option, was it? I lived right across the street. We went to the same school. We had the same friends. It was either man up now, or commit to being the biggest asshole in Orchard Hill.

I took a step toward Chloe, and she basically fell against me. My arms wrapped around her small shoulders. She was so little I probably could have wrapped them around twice.

"It's gonna be okay," I said, my voice flat. "I don't hate you."

She sobbed into my shirt. "What are we going to do?"

My whole chest tightened. We. She'd said we. We were a we now, no matter what. And there was going to be a baby. She was going to be Mom and I was going to be . . . I was going to be . . .

Run, man. Run now.

I gritted my teeth and didn't move. "I don't know. But we'll . . . we'll figure it out."

Chloe held on to my shirt and cried and cried and cried. I stood there and stared over her head at the double doors to the hall. The doors to freedom. I wished I'd never stepped foot in this room in my life.

ally

As soon as I shoved open the door of the Dunkin' Donuts, the air-conditioning blasted the hot humidity of the outside right off my skin. Annie Johnston looked up from her ever-present