

Daily Field Journal of Annie Johnston

Saturday, June 26

Position: Golf cart parked across the circle from the entrance of the Orchard Hill Country Club/Shannen Moore's birthday extravaganza.

Cover: If anyone asks, I lost a diamond earring while out on the links today and I'm checking all the carts before busting out the metal detector on the back nine.

Observations:

10:05 p.m.: Subject Chloe Appleby exits the front door in tears. Uniform: pink dress, high heels, party hair. The two lazing valets hop to attention. One reaches out to her for a ticket, which she doesn't have. Subject Hammond Ross drove her, of course. Subject Chloe starts back inside, thinks better of it, takes a step toward the parking lot, turns a heel, and almost goes down. One of the valets gamely grabs her arm and keeps her from hitting her butt. (Assessment: Subjects Chloe and Hammond had a fight. A big one.)

10:06 p.m.: Subject Hammond Ross comes barreling through the door in a panic. Uniform: Hugo Boss pinstripe suit, pink tie. Dutifully matching the girlfriend,

of course. He sees the valet holding on to Subject Chloe and tears her away. She shoves him and shouts, but I can't make it out from this distance. (Note: I briefly consider firing up the golf cart and gunning it across the sea of marigolds at the center of the circle to get within hearing distance, but fear that might attract a bit too much attention.)

10:07 p.m.: Subject Chloe slaps Subject Hammond across the face so hard I can see the fingerprint-shaped marks from here. (Note: Keep the camera phone on at all times, idiot!)

10:08 p.m.: Subjects Mr. and Mrs. Appleby finally appear from inside. Subject Mr. Appleby has a few stern words for Subject Hammond, who skulks back inside. The valet has the Applebys' car for them in approximately seven and a half seconds. The Applebys peel out. (Query: What the hell did Hammond do in there?)

10:09 p.m.: Ally Ryan walks out with her mother and Subject Gray Nathanson. None of them are speaking. Ally looks like she just ate a bug. She keeps swallowing over and over again like she's trying to keep it down. The valet gets Subject Dr. Nathanson's car in approximately eight and a half seconds, and they're gone as well. (Query: WTF is going on and what does Ally have to do with it?)

● 10:10 p.m.: I try Ally's cell phone. It goes straight to
● voice mail.

● 10:15 p.m.: Subject Jake Graydon jogs out and looks
● both ways, then talks to the valets and runs a hand
● over his hair. He tugs out his cell phone and dials,
● holds it to his ear for a split second, then curses. He
● tries again. Same result. (Assessment: He's trying to
● call the same person I'm trying to call.)

● 10:20 p.m.: Subject Jake gives up and hands
● the valet his ticket. The valet gets his car in
● approximately two minutes. (Note: Response time is
● clearly slower for the children of the members than
● for the members themselves.) Subject Jake's taillights
● hesitate at the end of the long drive. And hesitate.
● And hesitate. Finally he turns right, headed for the
● crest. Headed away from Ally. (Assessment: I missed
● something huge. Note: Next year, get an invite to
● Shannen Moore's birthday party.)

Ally

I had imagined my reunion with my father so many times over the past two years, I had every last detail down. I knew how many breaths of surprise I'd take upon seeing him. How long my strides would be as I raced across the distance that separated us and into his arms. I knew that he'd pick me up and twirl me around exactly three times before setting me down again, pushing my hair back from my face, and saying, "I missed you, bud."

In my mind, it had always looked like some sappy Disney movie. Him with a big, toothy grin. Me with my feet kicked up, my skirt flying. The sun was always shining and the birds were serenading us with a happy tune. It was the kind of scene that would bring tears to moviegoers' eyes everywhere.

Except I didn't actually wear a lot of skirts. And the sun had gone down hours ago. Plus, the only sound outside the car was the annoying beeping of a truck backing up. Also, it had never occurred to me that when we all saw each other again, no one would feel like smiling. In fact, the moment I spotted my dad on the front steps of the condo my mother and I shared in the Orchard View Condominium community, all I could imagine doing was shoving him as hard as I could.

"Oh my God," my mother said from the front passenger seat. Outside the window, my dad slowly rose to his feet. He was wearing pressed khakis and a crisp, white button down with varied stripes. His salt-and-pepper hair was cropped short on the sides and pushed back from his face on top. His

shoes gleamed, and he wore the silver and gold Rolex my mother's father had given him on the day of their wedding. Since leaving Orchard Hill in shame and destitution two years ago, my mom had sold most of her good jewelry to help pay the bills. Apparently that plan had never occurred to my dad. "I'm not really seeing this," my mother said. "Tell me I'm not seeing this."

Her hands shook as she reached for the clasp on her seat belt.

"Melanie, just take a breath and calm down," her boyfriend, Gray Nathanson, said. He put the car in park and covered her fingers with his large hand. "You don't want the first thing you say to him to be something you'll regret."

"Something I'll regret?" My mother's voice sounded like it was coming to us through a tin can tunnel. "I'm not going to say anything. I'm just going to kill the bastard."

Yeah. A Disney movie this was not.

Gray said my mother's name, but she was already out of the car. I found I couldn't move; my legs had gone dead. I watched through the window of Gray's luxury SUV as my father's eyes followed my mother's approach and suddenly registered fear.

"How could you?" my mother screeched, slamming his chest with both hands. Like mother like daughter. My dad staggered back a couple of steps and Gray hustled out of the car.

"Wait here," he said to me, slamming the door shut behind him.

For some reason, that directive was what finally got me moving. I undid my seat belt and scrambled out onto the pavement. A couple of lights flickered to life around me, and I saw concerned neighbors peeking through the slats of their

blinds. Great. I gave it five minutes before the Orchard Hill Police Department descended on my little family reunion. As if there hadn't already been enough humiliation tonight.

"Gray? What the hell are you doing with Gray Nathanson?" my father said as I approached.

Gray had one hand on my dad's chest, holding him back as my father talked about him like he wasn't even there.

"What the hell am I—? Are you kidding me, Christopher? Where the hell have you been for the last two years? Who the hell have you been with?" my mother shouted.

"I haven't been with anyone! I've been trying to get my life back together!" my father shouted back.

"Oh really? That's funny! Because I thought your life was with us! Have you been here all this time and I've just missed you somehow?"

Gray put his other hand on my mother's shoulder. "Why don't we all just calm down, go inside, and—"

"I have a better idea. Why don't you shut the fuck up and let me talk to my wife?" my father demanded, shoving Gray off of him.

Gray finally lost his composure. His face turned purple and his fists clenched, the tendons in his neck stuck out. My heart thumped with panic. My dad was tall and toned, but thin. Not exactly the fistfighting type. Gray worked out every day and was a lot stronger-looking than my dad. If hooks and jabs started flying, my father would be toast. I had to do something.

"Dad?" I croaked.

All three of them turned to look at me. They had clearly forgotten I was there. Gray's fists relaxed. My mother's eyes

flooded with tears. My dad blew out a breath, tilted his head, and said, “Hey, bud.”

He even managed to smile. It was almost exactly like I’d imagined it. Except—

“No!” my mother shouted, slicing a finger through the air. “No! You do not get to call her ‘bud.’ You don’t even get to look at her! Not after you haven’t so much as called her for her birthday or for Christmas or for *anything* in the past two years! Not after what happened to her tonight, thanks to you.” My mother was hysterical now, the tears streaming down her face as she blindly, haphazardly groped for my hand.

My dad’s face was blank at first, then concerned. “Wait . . . what happened to her tonight?” He repeated. “What do you mean ‘What happened to her tonight’?”

Nothing much. I was just completely blindsided and humiliated when Shannen Moore played a video at her birthday party for half the junior and senior class and most of my mom and dad’s former friends to see. A video of her, Faith Kirkpatrick, Hammond Ross, and Jake Graydon “happening upon” my father as he worked behind the counter at a deli in New York City. Up until the moment it unfolded on the huge screen over the dance floor, I’d had no clue where my father had been for the past two years, whether he was alive or dead, whether he’d . . . I don’t know . . . gotten himself a new identity and moved to Paraguay. I found out at the exact same time as everyone else in the room that he’d been slinging bologna less than fifty miles away all this time. Just making sandwiches and pouring coffee and wiping counters. Living life as if my mother and I had never existed.

Wait, strike that. A few people had known *before* me.

Namely, the people in the video, who had filmed it last winter: Shannen, Faith, Hammond, and Jake.

“We are going inside now. We are.” My mother grabbed Gray’s hand as well and basically yanked us both up the stairs. She fumbled with her keys until Gray finally took them from her and opened the door. He ushered me inside ahead of him while my mother let the screen door crash behind us. She turned around and glared down at my father, who, at that moment, looked smaller than he ever had in my life. “You can stay out there and rot.”

I watched my father as the door closed on his stricken, disappointed face. My mother ran to her room and slammed that door as well, leaving me and Gray alone in our cramped entryway. He put his hands in his pockets and looked out the tiny window set high in the door.

“No one would blame you if you wanted to go out there and talk to him,” he said.

“Oh really? I think my mom would disagree,” I replied, somehow speaking past the thick, wet paper towel that had jammed itself in my throat.

“She’s just upset right now,” Gray said. “But he’s your father. She knows you two should have a relationship.”

I swallowed hard. There was a long, skinny window of cut glass next to the front door, which you could only see through if you angled your eye just right, and even then you could only catch a sliver of the outside world. I stood on my toes and tilted my head to see my father frustratedly pacing in our parking lot. He moved out of view, then back again. Covered his face with his hands, muttered something under his breath. Finally, he turned and walked away, toward the

exit of the complex, whipping out a cell phone as he went.

Just like that. He was here and then he was gone again.

“I think I’ll just go to bed,” I said weakly.

Gray gave me a sympathetic smile. He looked like he maybe wanted to reach out and squeeze my shoulder, and I was relieved when he restrained himself. I liked the guy, but I didn’t much want anyone touching me at that moment. Definitely not a father figure touching me in a fatherly way. Not now.

I walked to my room, closed the door, and sank down onto the edge of my bed, clutching the blanket at my sides. I was still wearing the black cocktail dress I’d bought specifically for Shannen’s party and I suddenly felt like tearing it off my body in shreds. What a waste of a week’s paycheck. I couldn’t believe I had been so naïve. So stupid and gullible and oblivious. Less than five hours ago I’d been standing in front of the mirror in this very room, grinning at my reflection, giddily anticipating Jake Graydon’s arrival so he could squire me off to the biggest party of the year. Five hours ago Jake was my almost-boyfriend. Five hours ago I was almost friends with Shannen and Hammond and Chloe Appleby again. Five hours ago life was on its way to being good. It was on its way to being great. One might even say perfect.

It is amazing how in five short hours, everything completely and irrevocably turned to crap.

Daily Field Journal of Annie Johnston

Sunday, June 27

Position: Window stool at the Apothecary.

Cover: Trying out tinted moisturizer at the counter.

Oddly (and to the saleslady's obvious annoyance), none seem to exactly match my skin tone. Perhaps because the cheapest three-ounce bottle is priced at \$22.50.

Observations:

1:05 p.m.: Subject Chloe Appleby arrives. Uniform: pink skirt, white T-shirt, silver thongs, ponytail, larger sunglasses than usual. (Assessment: Clearly mourning the death of her relationship with Hammond. Note: Confirmation of this was all over Twitter this morning. Ally has still not answered her phone.) Subject walks to the sunscreen aisle, stops, and stares at a Clinique bottle. (Note: Shiseido is her brand of choice. Assessment: She's not handling this breakup well.)

1:21 p.m.: Subject Chloe Appleby still staring at Clinique bottle. Subject Shannen Moore arrives. Uniform: cutoff shorts, rubber thongs, wrinkled Three Dots T. Subject freezes when she sees Subject Chloe, turns around, and walks out. Subject Chloe never sees her. Unless she hid her reaction behind those big-ass glasses and just faked it. (Assessment: Chloe totally saw her.)

1:45 p.m.: Subject Chloe has replaced Clinique bottle and moved on to nail polish. Subject Hammond Ross walks by the window. Uniform: plaid shorts, polo shirt, Nike sport sandals. Subject Hammond spots Subject Chloe. He stops. Turns. Hesitates. Walks in. Subject Hammond approaches his prey.

Hammond: "Hey, babe."

Subject Chloe slams the NARS bottle she was considering down on the shelf and storms out. Several jars hit the floor and two of them break, ruining Subject Hammond's Nikes. Pinched-face saleslady forces Subject Hammond to pay for two sixteen-dollar bottles of nail polish. He shoves the door open so hard on the way out, it smacks against the window, and the Botoxed customer next to me actually changes expression.

(Personal Note: It's a good day.)

Ally

“Don’t worry, bud. I have a plan.”

My father sat down on one of the two stools at the breakfast bar in the one-bedroom apartment he’d invited me to come check out with him in downtown Orchard Hill. The stools were the only furniture in the entire place and the one he’d chosen tipped as he sat down on it, the legs clearly uneven. The kitchen behind him had four cabinets, one stove, and no dishwasher, and the living room carpet was dotted with several nonspecific stains. Still, my dad had just signed the lease that now sat on the countertop next to him, so apparently this square apartment, those ancient stools, and even the scary stains were somehow part of his plan.

“A plan for what?” I said.

For explaining why you left? Or why you’re back? A plan for winning Mom back? For getting her to break up with Gray? For winning *me* back? The words were on the tip of my tongue, but my lips wouldn’t open. I’d always been able to talk to my dad about anything. Just not, apparently, the most important things of all.

“A plan for getting our lives back to the way they’re supposed to be,” he said, rubbing his hands together.

“Oh,” I said. “Right.”

I leaned back against the whitewashed wall of the living area, trying to figure out where to look. I couldn’t believe I felt this awkward around my dad. But then, when you don’t see someone for two years and they suddenly step back into your

life, I suppose awkward makes sense. For so long I had wished he would come home, but now I could hardly wrap my brain around the fact that he was here.

“First of all, I’ve got a new job. Two new jobs, actually,” he said. “Charles Appleby has decided to open a day-trader’s shop and he’s asked me to come on board. I’ll be starting at the bottom, of course, re-proving myself, but at least it’s a foot in the door. But before I can start making trades I have to retake my Series Seven Exam, which means taking night classes, so in the meantime I’ve landed a gig as manager at Jump, Java, and Wail!”

I stared at my father. He couldn’t be serious. He was going to be working at the coffee shop where everyone from school and their parents bought their soy lattes and triple-shot espressos every day? Where the people whose money he’d lost two years ago—most of whom, by the way, had *not* gotten over losing it—popped by for their morning cup of joe? Did he not see a problem with this plan?

“You’re kidding,” I said finally, because I had to say something.

“I know. Charlie’s been amazing these past couple of years,” my father said, missing my point entirely. “He’s really been a true friend to me, putting me up in the city . . . giving me that job at the deli. And when I came to him a couple of months ago and told him I was going to try to start over, he really listened to what I had to say. It means a lot that he’s willing to give me this second chance.”

It was so ironic I wanted to laugh. Chloe’s dad listening, giving him a second chance. Meanwhile, when I tried to explain to Chloe what had happened between me and Hammond

over two years ago—why we'd kissed and how it had meant nothing—she didn't want to hear a word.

"Um, yeah, that's amazing," I said.

I slowly crossed the room to the wall of windows—the tiny place's best feature—which overlooked Orchard Avenue. Mature trees lined the sidewalks and there were flower boxes in front of almost every window. Down below, a white Mercedes pulled into a parallel parking space, hit the curb, pulled up and back, hit the curb again, then stopped. A woman got out, her dark hair perfectly framing her tan face and gold sunglasses. She looked at her back tire, which was half on the sidewalk, muttered something under her breath, and stormed through the front door of the Apothecary, which was right beneath my feet.

The Apothecary, where all the wealthy Crestie moms went to procure their night creams and cellulite solutions and magic age-reversing vitamins.

"And then, once I pass my Series Seven, I can start trading full time, making back all the money I lost," my dad continued, strolling over to join me. "Who knows? Maybe one day we can even get our old house back."

My throat closed over and I hiccup-coughed into my hand. Jake Graydon and his family were currently living in our old house. I had a sudden vision of me reclaiming my old bedroom and tossing Jake's stuff out onto the street, while he looked on, all helpless and dejected. In my current frame of mind, the image was highly gratifying. Impossible, I knew, but gratifying.

"Shouldn't you be telling Mom all this?" I said, glancing up at my dad.

"I should be telling both of you all this," my father said,

putting his arm around my back and his hand on my shoulder. “Unfortunately, your mother won’t answer my calls.”

I shrugged away from him, and his face fell, but just for a moment. “So . . . what? You want *me* to tell her all this?” I asked, sounding belligerent.

“No. Of course not.” He took the apartment keys out of the pocket of his gray pants and fiddled with them. “Though it might be nice if you could, possibly, convince her to call me.”

My teeth clenched as a surge of anger coursed through me. I turned to the window again and held my breath for as long as I could. I *was not* this person. I had spent the last two and a half years trying as hard as I could not to be this person. Trying not to think about my dad at all. Because whenever I did think about him, I felt this awful mix of rage and confusion and longing and sadness and insecurity burning inside my stomach. So I had just . . . put it aside. I’d just not let myself go there. And I’d become so good at it—the not thinking. So good that I’d actually been able to fool the world into believing I was a perfectly normal, well-adjusted, happy human being. I’d even kind of convinced myself.

But now that he was here, it was impossible not to think about everything that had happened. And that meant feeling it. All of it. All the time. Well-adjusted? Ha. Try malfunctioning.

My life was a total and complete wreck because of him. All my old friends hated me, which wouldn’t have even mattered if I still had Jake, but that blew up in my face, thanks to my dad, too. And now, what? He was asking me to do him a favor?

The thing was, I’d also missed him. I’d missed him every single day and had daydreamed every other hour about what it would be like when he came back. And now here he was.

So how was I supposed to deal with it? Was I supposed to be angry or happy? Excited or indifferent? Because right now, I was everything.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. Tried to choose to be hopeful. Because if he'd come back now with this elaborate plan, he must be serious about staying. He must be serious about trying to get things back to the way they'd been before—back when we were all one happy family. That was what I decided to believe.

"I like the view," I said, changing the subject.

You could see the spire of the Episcopal Church down on the other side of Oak Street, which cornered the building, and the hills beyond were all green and rolling, like something out of a Thoreau poem.

"It's nice, isn't it?" he said.

On the sidewalk down below, Quinn Nathanson and her friend Lindsey walked along eating frozen yogurt, shopping bags swinging from their wrists, totally carefree. At that very moment, Quinn's dad, Gray, and my mom were out shopping for new bedding for Gray's shore house. For his bed. The bed they would share for the summer.

Puke.

Every time I thought about the two of them together—the way they held each other's hands during dinner, how they were always exchanging knowing looks, how he touched the small of her back whenever they walked through a door together—I felt an awful panic rising up in my throat. Maybe I didn't feel like doing my father any favors, but I had a bad feeling that my mother wasn't going to be picking up the phone to talk to him on her own any time soon. And with Gray in the picture, the

longer my mom and dad didn't talk, the worse off we all were.

"Okay," I said with a sigh. "I'll talk to her for you."

"Thanks, bud." He leaned in and kissed the top of my head. "So!" He clapped his hands together and took a step back. "How's everything been? How was school this year? I hope you're still playing basketball." He walked over to the counter again and picked up the lease.

"Yep. We had a good season."

"And school?"

"It was . . . good," I lied.

Except for the last few days. If I could just go back and make the last few days un-happen, I'd be fine. Then I wouldn't go to Shannen's party, she wouldn't show that awful video, I'd never know that Jake knew all along where my dad was and didn't tell me, and Jake and I would be together and happy right now, planning our two months down the shore.

I opened my mouth, the fourteen-year-old in me—the one whose dad was her best friend—wanting to pour it all out to him. To tell him what had happened with the Cresties and with Jake Graydon, the guy who'd crushed my heart and had yet to call, text, or even e-mail to apologize. But I forced my lips shut again. Because I wasn't that fourteen-year-old girl anymore. And he wasn't my best friend anymore either.

My dad shoved the papers into a brown leather messenger bag. I tugged my cell phone out of my pocket and checked the screen for messages. Not a one. Not from Jake, not from Chloe, not from anyone.

"And I hear you're going to be spending the summer down the shore?"

His voice was excited. Maybe too excited. Like he was

trying too hard to sound okay with it. I guess when you come back to town to win your family back it's kind of a bummer to hear they're moving away for two months. I wondered how he'd heard. Probably from Mrs. Appleby. The woman did love to gossip. I wondered why she hadn't told him about Gray. Probably didn't want to spoil the delicious surprise. Evil witch. I swallowed hard and tucked the phone away.

"I don't really want to go," I told him.

Understatement city. I loathed the idea of going down the shore, of spending the summer watching my mom and Gray live like a couple, of hanging out with the Cresties every day—them thinking I wanted to be there, that I still wanted, on any level, for them to accept me as one of their own again. Because I didn't. I was over it. Why I'd ever wanted any of them back in my life was beyond me.

But worst of all I'd have to see Jake all the time and deal with that spirit-shattering awkwardness. Deciding whether or not to go places based on whether or not he would be there. What to wear, how to act, what to say. Ugh.

"But Mom is going so . . . I guess I have to."

Suddenly, my father's face lit up. "Or maybe not."

"What?"

"You could stay here!" he said, his eyes sparkling. "With me!"

I stared at him, feeling a quick flutter of excitement. If he was inviting me to stay, then he couldn't be planning on bailing again, right? "Really?"

"Yeah!" He dropped his messenger bag and walked a few paces past me toward the bedroom. "You could have the bedroom for the summer and I'll sleep on the couch." He

laughed and put his hands on his hips. “When I get one.”

My throat tightened suddenly. I saw the entire summer play out before my eyes. Me and my dad in this tiny apartment, having shallow conversations and pretending everything was fine. Me wondering if he was ever going to explain. Him constantly asking me how my mother was doing. The whole thing seemed uncomfortable and sad.

“Uh . . . yeah, I guess. I mean, I’ll have to ask mom,” I hedged.

“This is going to be so great!” My father walked over and enveloped me in a hug. His signature, tight, no-holds-barred hug. He smelled different and suddenly it hit me like a speeding car to the chest. He’d been out there somewhere, all this time, working and talking to people and smiling at strangers and smelling of new cologne. All this time he’d been out there and I’d just been here. Waiting for him. When he released me, I felt relieved. “I’ll call your mom and leave her a message. Since we both know she won’t pick up,” he joshed, as if we were old pals telling an inside joke about a third buddy of ours.

“Um, okay,” I heard myself say.

“Great. We’ll spend the whole summer hanging out, catching up. We can go fishing! It’ll be just like old times.”

My dad walked into the kitchen, pulling out his phone. I turned toward the window again and leaned my forehead against the cool glass. The Mercedes woman got in her car with her pink paper Apothecary bag, slammed the door, and peeled out, almost taking out a lady with a jogging stroller in the crosswalk.

A summer down the shore with all my sworn enemies a shell’s throw away, or a summer in this apartment with the

man I wasn't entirely sure I could trust. As I heard my father start to leave a voice mail on my mother's phone, I started to wonder . . .

Was there an option C?

Jake

Before Ally Ryan moved back to Orchard Hill, I never didn't know what to do. Now it was all the time. It was like I *always* didn't know what to do.

And it was starting to piss me off.

Like, was I supposed to call her, or not call her? She'd told me she didn't want to see me anymore. Did she mean it? Or was I supposed to, like, go after her? And if that's what I was supposed to do, did I really want to be that guy? The guy who begged a girl to take him back?

The only thing I knew for sure was that every night I did want to be that guy. Lying in my bed, listening to the crickets, thinking about what she was doing, I was like, *Fuck it, just call her*. Then every morning, I'd wake up and be relieved I hadn't done it. Because Jake Graydon doesn't beg for girls. What was I thinking?

Then I'd spend all day obsessing about her, and as soon as I was in bed again, the cycle started all over.

As I drove over to Hammond Ross's house the Monday after the shit hit the fan, all I could think about was the cycle. And whether or not I had the balls to break it. It had been about forty-eight hours since my best friend Shannen Moore had

shown that video of us finding Ally's dad at that deli in the city. Forty-eight hours since she'd made me look like some kind of lying, secret-keeping jerk to Ally, then told me she basically did it because *she* liked me. Yeah, that part I definitely was not ready to deal with. But I was starting to sort of feel like I could maybe talk to Ally.

Possibly.

"S'up, man?" Hammond loped across his front yard and got into the passenger seat of my Jeep. His blond hair looked longer than it had during the school year, and he was already tan. "Why are we driving to Faith's again?"

"Because we can," I said.

He smirked. Fist bump. "Nice."

Ever since I got the Jeep for my seventeenth birthday I drove wherever I could. I would've driven from my door to the mailbox to get the mail if my mother didn't pounce on it the second it came. I hit the gas and two seconds later we were pulling up in front of Faith's house. When I swung the car into the driveway, I saw that Chloe Appleby's white convertible was there too.

"Shit," Hammond said. "Did you know she was coming?"

"Faith said it was just us," I told him.

I should've known something was up when Faith had called me that afternoon. She'd never called me before unless she was trying to track down someone else. The story was, her mother had all these leftovers from a church thing she'd hosted and she wanted us to come over so they wouldn't go to waste. Had she invited Chloe, too, or had Chloe just shown up? Hammond made no move to get out of the car, so I didn't kill the engine.

"You talk to Chloe yet?" I asked.

"Once," he said. He reached forward and picked at some invisible speck on my dashboard with his thumbnail. "Long enough for her to officially dump my ass."

There was an odd twist in my chest. "Sorry, man."

"I can't believe she broke up with me because I kissed some girl two years ago," he said. He shoved himself back in the seat, his hands limp in his lap.

Again, the twist. Hammond hadn't just kissed some girl. He'd kissed Ally Ryan.

Two years ago, I said to myself. Before she even knew you existed. For some reason, it still didn't make me feel better.

"She didn't even let me explain what happened," Hammond said. "She could've at least heard me out."

That was what I was afraid of, why I really hadn't called Ally. Because I didn't want her to just hang up on me. I wanted her to let me explain. And I was scared shitless that she wouldn't let me. That we were so far gone, she wouldn't even listen. And if we were that far gone, I didn't want to know.

Which made me a wuss. Which also pissed me off.

"Come on, dude. Let's go in," I said, turning off the engine. "Get it over with."

Hammond stared at the arced, red front door of Faith's stone house. "Yeah. Yeah. All right."

We got out and walked inside without knocking. The only door we ever knocked on was Shannen's, and that was only because she never wanted anyone to come in, so she only ever came out. The lights were on down in the kitchen, and the door to the basement was open. We heard voices from the top of the stairs. Hammond looked like he wanted to be somewhere

else, so I figured I should go first. I jogged down the steps and suddenly wished I was, too. Because Chloe wasn't the only surprise guest. Shannen was there also.

"Dudes! Faith got the new Extreme Sports!" Todd Stein stood up from the wraparound couch with an Xbox controller.

"Get your asses over here so we can school you," his twin brother Trevor said.

Todd was in brown shorts and an orange T-shirt. Trevor was in orange shorts and a brown T-shirt. Their blond hair stuck out all over, like they'd just woken up, which considering summer had started, was completely possible. Trevor popped a mini quiche into his mouth, then laughed, showing us the mangled bits of food on his tongue. So at least the claim of leftovers was real.

"What's up with them?" I asked, lifting my chin.

In the corner by Faith's prized dollhouse, Faith gestured at Chloe, whose eyes were on the floor, and Shannen, whose eyes were on me.

I sat down next to Todd and looked at the TV.

"Chick drama," Todd said, tossing me the third controller. On the screen, two snowboarders raced down a slalom hill.

Hammond was still at the bottom of the stairs. Now he made his move, walking slowly across the carpeted room. Todd and Trevor shouted in protest as he blocked their game for a split second, but he didn't notice or care. When he got to the girls, Faith stopped yammering and, aside from Trevor and Todd's chewing and the sound effects coming through the surround sound, the place was silent.

"Chloe, can I talk to you?"

"Does he really need to be here?" Chloe asked Faith. She didn't even look at Hammond.

Faith bit her lip, fiddling with her car keys for some reason. “Come on, Chloe. Can’t you at least just talk to him?”

“Fine.” Chloe rolled her eyes and scoffed. She grabbed her bag off the couch and started for the door. “If he’s staying, I’m leaving.”

“Chloe, wait,” Faith called.

Chloe stopped right in front of the TV and Todd’s boarder hit a tree.

“Oh, man! What the hell, Chloe?”

I paused the game.

“Look, I didn’t come here to be ambushed,” Chloe said, whirling on Faith. “You said it was going to be just the two of us. Then *she* walks in.” She gestured at Shannen with her bag. “And now Hammond? What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to keep the group from completely self-destructing! Doesn’t anybody care about that but me?” Faith said, turning her palms out. Her long blond hair hung down around her shoulders and for once in her life, she wasn’t wearing two tons of makeup. Even her outfit was different from usual. Plain brown shorts and a white tank top. No popsicle-colored minidress or too-hip jewelry or ridiculous heels. “If it makes you feel any better, I told the guys it would be just them, and Shannen, too. None of them knew.”

“Oh, good. So you’re the only liar in the room,” Chloe said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Oh, wait! Shannen and Hammond already *proved* they were liars.”

“Chloe—,” Shannen began.

“No. You don’t even talk to me,” Chloe said, lifting one finger from her bag. “You knew for two years that my boyfriend cheated on me, but you never felt the need to tell

me until it fit into one of your stupid anti-Ally plots.”

Then she turned on Hammond. “And you . . . you’ve liked her all this time, haven’t you?” Her bottom lip trembled so badly I felt embarrassed. “What was I, just some, like, pseudo-Ally? Someone to hang out with while you pined and prayed for her to come back?”

Hammond’s jaw was set as he stared at Chloe. Was that true? Did he still like Ally?

“That’s not how it is,” he said. “You know it’s not.”

He tried to take her hand, but she snatched it away.

“I don’t know anything, obviously,” she said. Then she took in a breath. “Thanks a lot, Faith. I didn’t have enough public humiliation this week. I really appreciate it.”

She stormed up the stairs and a few seconds later the front door slammed.

Faith looked like she was about to cry.

“I think I’m gonna walk home,” Hammond said.

I started to get up from the couch. “I’ll take you.”

“Guys, come on,” Faith said. Pleaded, really. “I still have the food, and I really—”

But Hammond was already gone. I stood up straight. The idea of staying here with Shannen, who I had nothing to say to, and a tearful Faith was not happening.

“I’d better go,” I said. “Sorry Faith.”

And I was out. On my way to the door, I heard Todd ask if it was okay if they kept playing.

Outside, Hammond was nowhere to be seen. Chloe’s car was gone. I got in the Jeep and reversed out of the driveway. As I drove down the hill toward town, I suddenly knew for absolute sure that I had to call Ally. Of everyone I knew, she was the only

person I actually *wanted* to hang out with. Who cared if I had to grovel to be with her? What was that old saying? Something about the ends justifying the means? At the first stoplight I came to, I grabbed my phone and let my thumb hover over the A button. But I froze.

I couldn't do it. I was too fucking scared. God, I hated myself.

The light turned green. Cursing under my breath, I dropped the phone on the passenger seat and hit the gas.