

Chapter 1 excerpt from “*She’s So Dead To Us*” by Kieran Scott
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august

Oh. My. God. You are never going to believe who I just saw driving through town in a Subaru.

Who?

Ally. Ryan.

You’re not serious.

Do I look like I’m laughing?

I heard she’s been sunning herself on the French Riviera for the past two years, living off all our college funds.

No way. Her dad lost all that money.

My mom says they’ve been living in a trailer in West Virginia somewhere, like, under a bridge or something.

Oh my God. Did she look malnourished?

Her hair was kind of frizzy. . . .

I can’t believe she’s back. Does Chloe know?

Are you kidding? She sent a 911 text to the girls and they’re already convening at Jump.

Unbelievable. Ally Ryan back in Orchard Hill.

I cannot wait for the first day of school.

ally

“So? What do you think?”

Hmm. What did I think? I had to take a moment to sort out an answer to that one. Here’s what I came up with.

I thought that my ass hurt from sitting for four straight hours on the car ride from Maryland to New Jersey. I thought that the dingy gray condo in front of which I was now standing—discernible as my new home solely by the fact that the movers had propped the storm door open with a cinder block—was butthole hideous. Although, on the bright side, it was exactly the same

butthole hideous as every other condominium on this particular block of the Orchard View condo complex, so at least it wasn't alone in its butthole hideousness. I thought that the last time I had been in Orchard Hill, about eighteen months ago, there had been a gorgeous apple orchard right where I was standing—an orchard that actually made sense of the name Orchard Hill—and that now it was gone. So not only was there no orchard anywhere near the Orchard View condominiums, but there was also no view, because we were at the bottom of the hill from which one would have viewed said orchard, back when said orchard existed.

Sigh.

I also thought—no, *knew*—that the way I answered this question would determine my mother's mood for the rest of the day. The rest of the week. Maybe the rest of the year.

So I smiled and said, "It's great, Mom."

Her tired, sad eyes brightened, and the tension disappeared from her smile. "Don't you think? And, honey, it's not forever. I'm going to put half my paycheck away every week, and Danielle says that before we know it we'll be able to afford one of those cute little houses over by the library and . . ."

Danielle was Danielle Moore, mother of my old friend Shannen Moore and the only one of my mom's friends from Orchard Hill who still talked to her. Probably because she understood that wives and daughters should not be held responsible for the actions of husbands and fathers. Mrs. Moore was also the realtor who'd found us this lovely little condo in the first place. I reminded myself not to thank her when I saw her again.

I missed the rest of my mother's rambling promises because one of the movers—a round dude with too much facial hair—was walking by with my bike on his shoulder.

"Um . . . excuse me? Could I get that, please?" I asked, swallowing my aversion to strange men with pit stains.

He grunted and dropped my bike to the ground so hard that I swear I heard the suspension whimper. But at least it was my bike. If home is where the heart is, home had just arrived.

"Thanks."

He grunted again. I straddled my bike. Closed my hands around the well-worn rubber grips. There was plenty of dirt stuck up in the thick treads, and I was ready to add some more. Instantly, I felt about nine hundred percent better. Nine hundred percent more free.

"Ally, where're you going?" The light was already gone from Mom's eyes. "Don't you want to see your room?"

“I’ll see it later. I’m going for a ride,” I said.

“Where? I hope you’re not thinking of—”

The movers slammed the truck door shut, muffling her last words, but I knew what she had said. And we both knew that I was thinking of doing what she thought I was thinking of doing. There was no reason to confirm or deny. Without a backward glance, I rode through the gates at the front of the complex, hooked a left, and headed for town. It felt good to move. To breathe. To get the hell away from my mother and all her positive thinking. I love you, Mom, but things were not going to be the same now that we were “home.” Things were never going to be the same.

But still, it was kind of good to be back. As I waited at the light at the bottom of Orchard Avenue, I couldn’t believe it had been more than a year. The place looked exactly the same. Not one storefront had changed, and they all still had the same cheesy names that had cracked me up back in kindergarten. The Tortoise and the Hair Beauty Salon. Baby, It’s Yours Kids’ Clothing. Needle Me This Knitting Supply. Jump, Java, and Wail! Coffee Company. The proprietors of Orchard Hill lived for their cutesy plays on words, which just made the Starbucks and the Gap look all the more cold and austere with their been-there-done-that signage. The movie theater anchored the downtown shopping area, its old-school neon lights doused now, since the sun was still up, its marquee advertising the three latest and greatest indie movies of the month. The brick-faced post office was bustling with activity, and a few middle school guys were using its wheelchair ramp to show off their tricks. In Veterans’ Park across the way, a group of girls were lying out in shorts and tanks, their tops folded up to expose the maximum amount of stomach. As soon as I saw them I stood up on the pedals, racing up the hill and under the train trestle toward the crest. I doubted I knew any of them—most of my former friends had huge backyards with pools if they wanted to lie out—but I wasn’t ready to do the whole reunion thing yet. Which was hilarious, considering where I was headed.

I hesitated for a split second at the foot of Harvest Lane. What was I doing here, anyway? I hadn’t seen this hill since February of my freshman year—the night my family and I had driven down it for what I’d thought was the last time, me staring out the back window of my dad’s soon-to-be-repossessed BMW, trying to commit every detail to memory. I hadn’t even called my friends to say good-bye. Hadn’t texted. Hadn’t e-mailed. Hadn’t tweeted a less-than-140-character “See ya!” I’d been too confused, too scared, too embarrassed. And soon too much time had passed, and getting in touch felt awkward and humiliating and I just . . . never had. Now here I was, eighteen months later, wishing I could go back and smack my freshman self upside the head. Because if I had said good-bye, if I had kept in touch with any of them, it would have made moving back here so much easier. But how was I supposed to know my mother would one day get a job at Orchard Hill High? When we’d left, my parents had told me we were gone for good, and I’d believed them.

It wasn’t my fault they didn’t have a clue.

After spinning a couple of circles at the foot of the hill, I figured, what the hell? I'd come this far. If fate wanted me to bump into one of my old friends today, then let fate have her way. I turned, flipped my bike into first, and started the long climb. The late August sun beat down on my back, and sweat prickled my neck and underarms as I worked my bike uphill. There were no houses on this stretch of Harvest—the drop-off on my right was way too steep for building, the ridge on my left made of solid rock. As I came out of the trees, the view opened up and I glanced back over my shoulder to see New York City lying low and gray in the distance. In front of it, the town of Orchard Hill opened up like a pretty pop-up book at my feet. From this height I could see Orchard Avenue and all the little side streets crisscrossing it at various angles. Atop the hill on the far side of town was Orchard Hill High, where I'd be starting school in a few days, and at the foot of that hill, the Orchard View condos, where my mom was probably cursing my name right now. Beyond that were all the cute cookie-cutter houses on their gridlike streets and the strip mall with its Dunkin' Donuts and CVS and mom-and-pop pizza place and deli. At least we lived within walking distance of Munchkins and pizza. Always try to look at the bright side.

At the tip-top of Harvest I paused and put my feet down, breathing heavily and taking in the view. I'd been thinking about this moment the whole ride up from Maryland. But now that I was here, my heart fluttered with nerves. I swallowed hard and pretended I didn't feel it. Why should I be nervous? It wasn't like I was going to see anyone. It wasn't like it mattered. It was all in the past. I was a completely different person now. Smarter. Stronger. Better.

I took a deep breath and rode around the bend. Suddenly everything became crisply clear in front of me, as if I'd been looking through someone else's glasses for the whole ride up here and they'd finally fallen away. I leaned back on my bike and drank it all in. The tall, green trees forming a canopy of green, the hissing sound of the sprinklers spritzing the manicured lawns, the scent of barbecue wafting through the air from the backyard of one of the stately houses. Suddenly I was twelve years old again. Ten. Five. A little kid running from yard to yard, chasing fireflies with my friends, laughing and shouting and singing like no one could hear.

Home. I was finally, finally home.

I rode slowly, lazily, down the wide street, letting my front wheel weave in and out like I always did when I was a kid. The first house I came to was Faith's. It was all stone and brick and pointed roofs, like something out of a gothic novel, except that her little brothers' sleek, silver scooters were parked on the gravel path out front. The landscapers were out in full force, mowing and blowing and trimming and Weedwacking. There was one car in the driveway, a red Audi, which I didn't remember. But this was not surprising. Faith's mother got a new car every year, donating the old, barely driven one to charity as if she were doing it for the less fortunate and not just because she wanted her new-car-smell back. When I'd left, Faith was convinced she was destined for either Broadway or her own show on the Disney Channel. She was auditioning for

some summer program at a theater in the city. I wondered, not for the first time, if she'd gotten in. If she'd taken her first step toward superstardom.

A little bit farther and I came to Shannen's place. Wide and white-faced and sprawling. The yard was unkempt, but it was otherwise the same as always. Two cars this time, and I heard music blasting from the general direction of Shannen's bedroom. I leaned down and pedaled as hard as I could until I'd gotten past the hedgerow and out of sight. The level of fear I felt at the thought of seeing her surprised me. What the hell was I going to do on the first day of school if I couldn't even handle the thought of Shannen Moore spotting me out her bedroom window? Drop dead of nervousness, apparently. I wondered how her family was doing these days. It had been almost two years since Shannen's older brother, Charlie, had run away. When I'd left, Shannen still thought it was her fault, and her parents weren't speaking to each other. Had things gotten any better since? Had Charlie ever come home?

At the corner was Hammond's place. It looked dead. Down the shore for the weekend, of course. No one spent more time at their shore house than Hammond's family. Sometimes they spent the whole summer, but they were probably back during the week now, since Hammond would have soccer practice. Everything revolved around Hammond's sports schedules, and his older brother, Liam's, back when he was in high school. I stood up on the pedals, trying to spot the secret path that cut through the tree line separating his backyard from my side one, but the full, green trees hid it from view.

The secret path. My heart pounded at the thought of the last time Hammond had used our shortcut, and I hooked a quick right onto Vista View Lane, scooting past the yellow DEAD END sign that both my mother and Chloe's mother had actually gone to borough hall to protest because it was so "unsightly." To my left was Chloe's place, and the thought of seeing her freaked me out even more than the thought of seeing Shannen. Did Chloe know? Had Hammond told her what happened that last time he'd come over? Were they still together? And if not, was I the reason?

I only knew one thing for sure: I was not ready to find out the answers to those questions. I laid into my pedals, putting Chloe's place behind me. And then, there it was. At the end of the cul-de-sac was my house. My home. The mansion where I'd grown up. I'd assumed the gate would be closed, but it wasn't, and as soon as I saw the opening, I accelerated. I didn't even think. I just rode. Through the gates and up the hill of the driveway. At the top was the circle with the apple tree at the center, surrounded by little pink flowers and a stone border. My dad had taught me to ride my tricycle around that circle, and later my bike. All the scraped knees and tears and shouts of joy came flooding back out of nowhere. I rode around it once and everything unexpectedly blurred.

A set of shrubs had been planted under the library window. Someone else's bike tossed on the grass. New planters in front of the door with happy little marigolds dancing in the breeze. Not my house anymore. Not my home.

My gaze drifted to the right, to the row of evergreens that shrouded the view of the basketball court in the backyard. My dad had built it for me for my twelfth birthday—a state of the art outdoor court complete with scoreboard, bleachers, and a hand-painted sign that read RYAN ARENA. It was the best birthday of my life. All my friends were there, and Dad had jerseys made up for each of us with our last names emblazoned across the back. At my mother's insistence, the number was the same on each, because she knew that if, say, Chloe had been given number one everyone would think that meant I had chosen favorites—like she was my best friend. But my mother knew I hated putting labels on the group. They were all my best friends. Chloe, Shannen, Faith, Hammond, Trevor and Todd. We'd been together since kindergarten. Had never gone a week without seeing each other for a party or a practice or a music lesson or a charity event. In my opinion, we were practically related.

Which made the fact that I'd ditched this place without saying good-bye potentially unforgivable.

I wondered what my father would say if he could see me right now. "Chin up, bud," I heard him say in my ear. "No use dwelling on the past. What you do tomorrow and the next day and the day after that is what matters." Was that what he was doing out there right now, wherever he was? Forgetting about this place, about us? Starting a new future? Two weeks after he'd moved us out of Orchard Hill and in with my grandma in Baltimore, my dad simply disappeared. One night he was there, and the next morning he was gone. He hadn't left a note. Had canceled his cell. No one—not even my mother or his mother—knew where he was. Grandma had told me that my father was ashamed. That he couldn't handle being around us every day when he had hurt us so badly. That he'd probably come back when he felt himself worthy again. That was his way, she said.

But it made zero sense to me. Because his leaving hurt way worse than the fact that he'd lost all our money and our home. Way worse.

The thing was, my dad had always been there for me. He was the one thing I had that always made my equally privileged Crestie friends jealous. All our dads had these high-powered jobs in New York. Chloe's father owned a bunch of successful restaurants and was never around at night or on weekends. Shannen's dad practically ran this huge advertising firm and was always jetting off to LA or Chicago to oversee commercial shoots. Faith's father was a concert promoter, so he spent tons of time schmoozing superstars Faith never got to meet, which drove her totally insane. Hammond's father was the boss man at a cable news channel and spent half his time buying up smaller stations around the globe. The Stein twins' father did something in real estate that I never quite understood, but it meant spending lots of time in Florida and Texas. Basically, it was rare to spot any of their dads on the crest. But my father always did his best to make it to my basketball games and plays. He actually came to the hospital when Shannen and I crashed our bikes on a dare and broke various bones, while Shannen's father hadn't even called. My dad never missed a Christmas, always took my

mom into Little Italy for Valentine's Day, helped me blow out my candles each birthday. Unlike the rest of the Crestie fathers, my dad had always been there.

Until he made some bad investments and lost everything. And not just for us. He'd lost a lot of my friends' parents' money, too. I'd never been clear on the details. All I knew was it meant we'd had to sell our house and cars and our shore house—and that we'd had to leave. I think that was part of the reason I hadn't been able to face calling any of my friends. What my dad did . . . it made me feel like an idiot. I'd thought he was so perfect—the greatest dad on the crest—and then he'd talked everyone's parents into some stupid risky investment and lost tons of their money. My dad, as it turned out, was a fake. A loser. And it made me feel like a loser too.

My mom was always telling me that my dad hadn't done it on purpose. After all, if he'd known that stock was going to tank, he wouldn't have put all our money into it as well as some of our friends'. She said he'd simply messed up. But he'd messed up so big-time that my life had been completely turned upside down.

So yeah, I was angry. But not so angry that I'd never get over it. At least, I would have. If he hadn't bailed on us.

The tears that had blurred my vision started to sting. I placed my feet on the stone and took a breath. I had not come here to cry. I was not going to cry.

I heard a noise behind me. The unmistakable sound of a window sliding open. My feet hit the pedals.

"What the hell are you doing?"

My fight-or-flight reflex was overruled by curiosity. I had to see who was living in my house. I looked over my shoulder. The first thing I thought was, *That's my room*. The second? *Who are you and why are you not on television?*

The guy who lived in my room was shirtless. He folded his bare, tan arms on the windowsill and gave me an arch look. His hair was wet, as if he'd just come in from a swim, and his eyes danced as he looked down at me. He had the most perfect shoulders I'd ever seen, and his biceps bulged as he settled in. An athlete. Definitely. A possibly naked male athlete of the highest hotness order. And he was living in my room.

"Are you lost?" he said.

He was amused. One of those guys who was so confident in himself and his position that even the appearance of a scraggly-looking girl trespassing on his property presented nothing more than an opportunity to tease.

I turned my bike around to face him, still straddling it, just in case I needed to make a quick getaway.

"You're in my room," I said.

He laughed, and I felt it inside my chest. My toes curled inside my beat-up Converse. "Oh, really?"

"Yep."

He looked over his shoulder. "So, that's your jockstrap on the floor."

I grimaced. "Okay, I've known you for two seconds, and already that's too much information."

His smile widened. "How is this your room?"

"I used to live here," I told him, swallowing a lump that suddenly popped up in my throat. "I moved a couple of years ago."

Now he was intrigued. He shifted position and looked me up and down. "Prove it."

"Okay. Go look inside the closet, above the door. I used to write down my box scores up there."

"What sport?"

"Basketball."

He narrowed his eyes but went. The second he was gone I noticed that my hands hurt. I released the grip on my handlebars and looked at my palms. Dozens of tiny red lines had been pressed into them from the rubber. I'd been holding on for dear life. He came back.

"You scored forty points in the state championship?"

"JV championship," I clarified modestly.

"If I had stats like that, they'd be spray painted on the walls."

"My dad," I told him. "He was always lecturing on being a team player. Didn't want me to get all me, me, me about it, so I had to hide it."

Which, considering how things had turned out, was pretty ironic.

He disappeared. Suddenly a basketball was hurtling toward my head. I reached up and plucked it out of the air with both hands before it could break my nose.

"Thanks for the warning!" I shouted, my heart in my throat.

He pulled on a maroon and gold T-shirt. Orchard Hill soccer. Of course. “I gotta see these skills,” he said. “I’m coming down.”

My palms started to sweat all over the ball. Who was this guy? If he was on soccer, he obviously knew Hammond. Was he friends with Chloe and them as well? Who was I kidding? Of course he was. He lived on the crest. Suddenly my brain was flying three steps ahead. He was definitely going to tell them I was here. Then everyone would be talking about me. What would they tell him? What would he think? He was just coming out the front door—tall . . . very tall . . . taller than me, even—when my cell phone trilled.

I considered not answering, but my mother would freak. I tucked the basketball between my hip and forearm and fumbled the phone from the pocket of my jeans.

“Hey,” I said.

“Ally, I really need you back here,” she said. “They want to know where to put your furniture, and we have to get something for dinner. Where are you?”

I looked at the hot boy who was standing in front of me expectantly with his perfect calves and ready smile and the lightest blue eyes I’d ever seen, the house that wasn’t my house looming behind him.

“I’m on my way,” I said.

His face fell.

I closed the phone and tossed him the ball. “I gotta go.”

“Wait,” he protested.

“What?”

Wow. Way to sound belligerent, Ally.

“If you used to live here, then you must know the crew,” he said, taking a few steps toward me, passing the ball back and forth from hand to hand.

The crew? Seriously? “Um, the crew?”

“Hammond, Chloe, Shannen, Faith, the Idiot Twins,” he said, rolling a hand around.

I laughed. The Idiot Twins. It was our nickname for Trevor and Todd Stein, local daredevils. Hadn’t heard that one in a while.

“Yeah, I don’t know who came up with that name, but it fits,” he said with a smile.

"I did," I told him.

His eyebrows shot up. "Yeah?"

"There was this whole thing where Trevor and Todd rigged up a homemade bungee cord and tried to bungee jump off their jungle gym," I said, narrowing my eyes. "Let's just say the results weren't pretty."

He laughed. "Is that why Trevor's nose is like that?"

"Yep."

"Nice." He nodded, dribbling the ball. "I must mock them endlessly about that later." He looked me in the eyes, and my knees went a tad weak. Just from eye contact. "So, you coined the Idiot Twins. Nice work."

"Thank you," I said, bowing my head slightly.

"There's a party the night before school starts. At Connor Shale's house."

Connor Shale. The boy who'd shoved his tongue down my throat in Shannen's tree house the summer between eighth and ninth grade while his parents played Mexican train dominoes with mine on the patio down below. I'd been too polite to shove him off me and had let the heinousness go on for at least two minutes until, thankfully, Hammond Ross had appeared at the top of the rope ladder and laughed until Connor finally stopped. Then I'd practically fallen the ten feet to the ground trying to get away. My first kiss. Not my finest moment. Even more unfortunate? I'd only kissed one other guy since.

"You should come," Bedroom Boy said.

I experienced an unpleasant twisting in my lower gut. It was amazing how casual it was for him. Like he wasn't inviting me into the very scene I had both dreaded and looked forward to with a mixture of excitement, apprehension, and abject fear for so long.

But it was kind of nice that he wanted me there. And wasn't this a good sign, anyway? Clearly my friends hadn't been slandering me all over the place for the past eighteen months. If they had, he never would have invited me to a party with them. Right?

"Um, yeah. Maybe," I said. My phone trilled again. "I really gotta go."

"Oh, come on. Just one game?"

"Rain check," I told him, turning and peddling away.

"I'm holding you to that!" he shouted.

It wasn't until I was halfway down Harvest Lane that I realized I'd never even gotten his name.

jake

"Am I running some kind of geriatric summer camp here?" Coach shouted. "Let's hustle!"

I didn't hustle. I looked at Hammond and he rolled his eyes. I hate laps. If you're going to make us run distance, at least let us out on the streets. What am I, some kind of lab rat scampering in circles for your block of cheese? Upperclassmen, at least, shouldn't have to do this shit. It was so fucking hot out. And my brain was fried. And I still had three hours of practice ahead of me and back-to-school shopping with my mom tonight and all I could think about was the girl who used to live in my room.

The girl was hot. Not, like, model hot, but hot. I like a girl who dresses down. Who doesn't need all those bows and doilies and jewelry and crap—'cause she knows she's hot without it. And the ponytail? That sealed it. She even had those little curls behind her ear just, like, touching her neck. . . . Shit. So effing sexy. All night, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I mean, she used to sleep in my room. How could I not think about that?

"Dude, that's ten," Hammond said, smacking me in the chest with the back of his hand.

"Thank God."

We grabbed paper cups full of water and dropped down on the grass to watch the stragglers.

"Jonah! Pick it up!" I shouted at my brother. Just to be a dick. He was a freshman, and all freshmen and varsity virgins get hazed. He shot me an annoyed look but sprinted the last turn. Hammond laughed and crushed his cup before tossing it onto the ground.

"Look at that little fucker," he said, nodding at David Drake, who had finished ahead of us and was now running stairs on the bleachers, for no apparent reason. "He doesn't watch out, he's gonna get a kick in the head."

"Maybe he's on something," I suggested, not at all serious.

Last year David Drake had been the most pathetic player on JV. This year he'd added at least ten pounds of muscle and had shown some respectable skill on the field. It was obvious he'd been working his ass off all summer, which I respect. Not everyone cares that much. I know I don't. But Drake didn't live on the crest, and he still had the balls to play soccer, which around here was a Crestie sport. So that meant Hammond didn't like him.

Which brought up a question. Where was the new-old girl living? As far as I knew, none of the Crestie families had moved this summer. I glanced sideways at Hammond. "What do you know about the girl who used to live in my house?" I asked.

Hammond's head whipped up so fast I heard a crack. "What about her?"

"Who is she?" I asked. "Were you, like, friends with her?"

"Why? What do you know?"

I stared at him. Why was he so tense all of a sudden? "She came over yesterday," I said. "Guess she wanted to see her old place or something."

"Shut the fuck up. You saw Ally Ryan?" Hammond shifted position. He reminded me of a dog waiting for a treat. A pit bull-German shepherd mix. The kind of dog that would take the Milk-Bone out of your hand and then bite your fingers off just for fun.

"Yeah," I said. Ally Ryan. Her name was Ally Ryan. AllyRyanAllyRyanAllyRyan. "Wait. Ally Ryan. I've heard that name before."

"She comes up every once in a while," Hammond said.

Right. Now I remembered. She was the girl in the picture in Shannen's room. The one of a whole mess of Crestie girls taken at the country club pool in, like, sixth grade. I'd asked Shannen about her once, and she hadn't wanted to talk about her. Interesting.

"Dude. How did she look?" Hammond asked.

I didn't like his tone. He was practically licking his chops. "Fine. Good. Whatever. I don't know what she looked like before."

"Is she hot?" Hammond asked.

I lifted a shoulder. "She's all right."

Hammond eyed me for a long moment. I stared straight ahead at the field, where the coaches were lining up cones for drills. My face was burning. I hoped I was already red from running so Hammond wouldn't realize why.

"Dude, you don't want to go there," Hammond said.

I sucked down the rest of my water. "Who said I was going anywhere?"

"Good. Because Ally Ryan is, like, enemy number one."

"What? What does that even mean?" I asked.

“Short version? Two years ago her father screwed all our families out of a load of money and then left town,” Hammond said. “We were all friends before that. You know, Sunday dinners and all that shit.”

“She comes to Sunday dinners?” I asked. I dreaded the stupid Sunday dinner tradition. My mother had campaigned for over a year to get my family invited to them, and once we were in I still had no idea why. It was all so fake, the crest families gathering once a week for a homemade five-course meal like we were one, big, happy family. We didn’t even know these people existed two years ago, but now all of a sudden my mother’s happiness hinged on whether or not Mrs. Appleby approved of her banana crême pie or whether Mrs. Kirkpatrick broke her vegan rule for Mom’s roast. I had an okay time with my friends, but the formal setting always made everyone act like tools, like Faith flirting with the wait staff or Shannen trying to sneak alcohol between courses or the Idiot Twins, well, being themselves, only ten times louder. I was constantly counting the seconds until dessert was cleared and we could bail. But I had a feeling I could tolerate Sunday nights a lot better if Ally were there.

“*Came*. Past tense, dude,” Hammond said. “Look, everyone hates the Ryans. Her dad is the reason Shannen’s father is on a permanent bender. He’s the reason I have no college money and Liam had to take out freaking student loans. Trevor and Todd lost their *house* because of him.”

“That’s why they live at their grandparents’?” I asked.

“Yep.”

Huh. I’d wondered why the Idiot Twins and their parents lived in the Enclave. It was this exclusive condo neighborhood on the crest where most of the places were owned by Crestie grandparents who only visited on the holidays. The Steins lived there year round, and every once in a while their grandparents would come back and squeeze in. They seemed to like it, though. Nana and Pop were like superheroes to those dudes.

“Wait. But Shannen always says her dad’s been sloshed her whole life.”

“Maybe, but he got really bad when Charlie split, and then he went off the reservation after Ally’s dad lost all their savings,” Hammond said, his jaw clenched. “Stopped going to work, lost his job. . . . That’s why he’s ‘consulting’ now,” he said, rolling his eyes and adding air quotes. We both knew Mr. Moore hardly ever left their house. If he was an advertising consultant, he wasn’t doing very well at it.

“Whoa.” I was surprised Shannen hadn’t told me that part. She was basically my best friend and usually told me everything. But then, maybe this was why she hadn’t wanted to talk about Ally the one time I’d asked.

“No shit,” Hammond said. “Chloe’s dad’s the only one who didn’t get screwed when the Ryans skipped town. Guess he was the only one smart enough not

to invest with the guy.” He ripped up some blades of grass and threw them at his feet. “Trust me. We’re all better off if Ally Ryan stays far, *far* away.”

“Wow. Crazy,” I said.

Probably not the best idea to invite her to Shale’s party, then. I wasn’t even sure why I’d done it. Usually I didn’t invite anyone anywhere. Especially when it wasn’t my party to begin with. I just go with the flow. Don’t rock the boat. But I don’t know. I think I’d just wanted to make sure I’d see her again. Of course if I’d thought about it for two seconds, I would have realized I’d be seeing her in school. Every day. But whatever. Maybe she wouldn’t show up. I mean, if she was at all aware of how everyone felt about her, she’d be stupid not to stay home. Either way, not my problem.

Coach blew his whistle. “Let’s go! Break time’s over!”

“The girls are going to shit when they hear you talked to Ally Ryan,” Hammond said as he stood up. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” I got up and tossed my cup in the garbage can, then stooped to pick up Hammond’s and tossed that, too. I wanted to know more, but I wasn’t about to press for details. If I had learned one thing since moving to this town, it was that the people on the crest had their own way of doing things. They had their theme parties and their group vacations. They had their cheesy little traditions and their pack mentality, as my dad called it. And they also had their opinions. And hardly any of them made sense. At least, not to me.

“Hey, guys,” David Drake said as he jogged to catch up with us. He bounced back and forth from foot to foot, juggling his soccer ball. He had this self-satisfied look on his face. The kid was showing off his energy level. Maybe later I should take him aside and give him a few pointers about not coming off like a pathetic, needy loser.

“Fuck off, Drake,” Hammond said, slapping his ball away. It rolled across the field and onto the track on the far side, where the cheerleaders were throwing each other around.

David chuckled. “Yeah, right. Good one.”

This guy had no idea of the size of the hole he was digging for himself. I looked at Hammond and we laughed. David did, too. Like he was in on the joke. Dig, dig, dig.

“Line it up!” Coach called out.

We did. I made sure I was between Hammond and David so that Ham couldn’t shove the kid over in the middle of a calf stretch.

“That dude is so getting hazed this weekend,” Hammond said, almost loudly enough for David to hear.

I bent over to stretch out. Ally Ryan's face flashed in my mind, and I squashed it. I wasn't about to hook up with some chick all my friends hated. Even if them hating her made no sense. It wasn't worth the drama. I was just going to have to start fantasizing about someone else. Luckily I'd heard some marys from Blessed Heart Academy were going to show up at Shale's. Blessed Heart girls were hot. I needed distraction from Ally Ryan.

Done and done.

ally

Right. So this was a bad idea. I felt it the moment I stepped up to the imposing double doors of Connor Shale's sprawling ranch-style house at the very back edge of the crest. The homes were newer here. More modern than the classic mansions my family and friends had grown up in. And Connor's was practically all windows. Floor to ceiling, back to front. How anyone got any privacy in this place was beyond me. The house was tucked away in the thick woods that formed the barrier between the crest and the Garden State Parkway a couple of miles off, but if you got past the trees, you could see everything.

Like Chloe Appleby standing in the center of the sunken living room, surrounded by Shannen Moore, Faith Kirkpatrick, and a half dozen other Crestie girls, both younger and older. Like the backyard beyond, where the Idiot Twins had hooked up some kind of zipline over the pool, from which they were now swinging like monkeys from two opposing trees. As I watched, the two of them collided in midair. There was a groan. A splash. Then a cheer. Which meant, I supposed, that they had lived.

And then there was Bedroom Boy, who was pressed up against the far wall, a girl in a barely there minidress slobbering all over him. Well, then. I guess he hadn't invited me here because he actually wanted to see me or anything.

I took a breath to quell the disappointment in my chest. This was not about Bedroom Boy. This was about seeing my lifelong best friends for the first time in a year and a half. I reached for the door, but my nerves took hold and atrophied my arm. I couldn't do this. Wait, yes I could. I had to. If I didn't see them now, I'd see them at school tomorrow. And then our encounter might happen in front of my mom. Which would just make it that much more intense. Besides, if I stood out here one second longer, someone was going to notice me, and then I'd have to go in but I'd already be mortified because they'd have seen me hesitating. This was a total nightmare. I held my breath, pushed open the door, and stepped inside.

"Ally?"

The voice came from behind. I whirled around to find Hammond Ross standing there all Long Beach Island tan in a colorful Billabong T-shirt and destroyed cargo shorts. He was just as blond as ever, but taller, broader, less

doofy-boy and more hot-guy. Also, he didn't look unhappy to see me. Which kind of made sense, but also kind of didn't.

"Hammond. Hey."

His eyes flicked past me toward Chloe and the rest of them. Checking to see if they'd noticed him talking to me. My nervousness mounted.

"What're you doing here?" he asked, wrapping me up in a brief hug.

So I guess they hadn't noticed us yet.

"I—"

"Wait." He pulled back, looking suddenly nervous. "You're not gonna tell anyone about—"

"Oh. My. God. She's. Here."

I would have recognized Faith's voice even if it hadn't been louder than every other one in the room. I moved from Hammond and the wide-open foyer into the even wider-open living room, where all my former friends had turned around to face me. Bedroom Boy somehow lost his hanger-on as he stepped away from the wall. He hovered a bit behind the rest of them, pushing his hands sheepishly into the pockets of his chino shorts. Even though he'd just been hooking up with some drunken frosh and obviously didn't care one iota about me, my heart was not unaffected at the sight of him standing there with his hair all coiffed, a royal blue Polo shirt hugging his muscles just so. But it was more distracted by the fact that I was here. I was home. With my friends.

"Hey, guys," I said, lifting a hand awkwardly.

Hammond closed the door behind me and went directly to Chloe's side. So I guessed they were still together. There was a prolonged moment of silence as the periphery people moved discreetly away, staying close enough of course to keep an eye on the impending drama. I tried not to ponder what it meant that my friends hadn't all rushed forward to hug me. Instead, I took them in. Chloe Appleby in her white sundress and coral sweater, her light brown hair pulled back in an eyelet band. Her posture was as perfect as ever, her discerning green eyes assessing me as if I were the new girl in town rather than the girl she'd known since nanny care. Shannen had cut bangs in her dark hair, and they practically covered her eyes. She was wearing skinny jeans and a black T-shirt with a studded belt, looking like some kind of badass supermodel. And then there was Faith. Faith had changed more than anyone. Gone were the cutesy tank tops and wild blond curls and natural skin. She was now wearing a cowl-necked tank top over microshorts and high-heeled sandals, her hair straightened and her face so perfectly painted it was practically airbrushed. Gone also was the friendly, open face. She had a scowl on like nothing I'd ever seen before.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Faith said. “What are you doing here, *Norm*? Because I know no one invited you.”

Norm. That was the nickname we Cresties had for the kids from the other, “normal” side of town. Which I guess was me now, technically. It wasn’t pretty, but there it was. My eyes automatically flicked to Bedroom Boy. He flushed and looked away. Perfect. I loved a guy with no spine.

“I just wanted to see you guys,” I told her.

My brain struggled to reconcile this bitchy socialite with the cherubic Hannah Montana fan I’d left behind less than two years ago.

“How are you?”

“Oh, please,” Faith said. “Like you care?”

“Faith,” Chloe scolded. That was Chloe. Always making sure that no situation grew too awkward or unpleasant. I had news for her. I was already feeling plenty awkward.

“No! No way!” Faith said, incredulous. “You know the only reason she’s here is because she wants us to take pity on her. She thinks she can be, like, rich by association or something.”

My skin stung as if I’d just endured a full-body slap. She couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Like we’re really going to be your friend again after your dad *stole* from our families?” Faith said, turning on me again with narrowed eyes.

“Stole?” I repeated, baffled. “He didn’t steal anything. Is that what you guys think? He—”

“Oh, please! So that’s why my parents can’t retire and Shannen’s mom had to sell their shore house and get a job and Hammond has no trust fund?” Faith said, crossing her skinny little arms across her skinny little chest. “Did you know the Zeldinas and the Fallons had to move away and the Steins had to take over their grandparents’ place? They lost their *homes* thanks to you.”

I swallowed hard. I knew my family had been hit hard by my dad’s mistake, but no one had ever told me exactly what it had meant for everyone else. Trust funds, retirements, and homes just gone? I had no idea.

Okay, Ally. Deep breath. You didn’t do this to them. Your dad did. They can’t really take it out on you.

“And don’t even get me started on what you did to Chloe,” Faith added before I could speak.

Gravity reversed itself. I looked at Chloe. She couldn't know, could she? Faith didn't mean—

"All right. That's enough," Shannen interrupted, speaking up finally.

Faith was dumbfounded. "Shannen, you're not gonna let her—"

"Faith, please," Chloe implored. "I don't want to make a scene."

"Too late," someone in the crowd muttered, earning a round of uncomfortable laughter.

"It's okay," Shannen said. "Everyone, just chill."

Shannen stepped in front of me. The girl who used to challenge me to swim races and paint my toenails in rainbow colors and name stars with me at sleepovers in the backyard. The girl I'd comforted on the worst night of her life. The one whose deepest secrets I kept locked away in the bottom of my heart.

"You need to go," she said. "Now."

My heart couldn't take this. "Shannen, I—"

"Faith's right. Take a look around. You don't belong here."

Her dark eyes flicked over my Old Navy shorts and well-worn shoes in distaste. I felt sick. My friends were really going to reject me because of what my dad did? Because I wasn't wearing the latest label? I looked around, desperate for someone to tell me this was a joke—to take my side. Chloe looked sad, almost sorry, before she trained her eyes on the floor. Bedroom Boy, meanwhile, stared right back at me, his jaw clenched with something unspoken, his blue eyes almost pleading. For what? For me to go? Or for me to never have come?

Right then, the back door slid open, letting in shouts and squeals and splashes from the backyard. In tromped the Stein twins in their almost matching Hawaiian-print bathing suits, dripping pool water all over the pristine wood floors. They had identical red welts forming on their foreheads. Not that either of them seemed to care.

"Yo! Where's the chips and dips?" Trevor shouted.

Todd stopped in his tracks. "Dude. Who died?" Then he saw me and his eyes lit up. "Ally Ryan!" He loped over and gave me a huge, wet bear hug, his soaked brown hair dripping all over my shoulders. "You're lookin' smokin' as ever! Where you been, girl?"

Trevor came over and hugged me too, turning me into the filling inside an Idiot Twin sandwich. The force of their hugs brought tears to my eyes. I'd missed

them. All of them. Even the Idiot Twins. But clearly, only these two doofs had missed me.

"I have to go," I mumbled, extricating myself from their clammy grasp and ducking away so that no one could see my eyes.

"Wait, what?" Trevor said.

"You just got here! We're gonna have chips and dips!" Todd added.

I would have laughed if I hadn't been so miserable. On my way out the door I almost barreled over some punk-looking chick with blond hair who had just walked in—right in time to see my ignominious exit. I sputtered an apology, then almost tripped again when I realized she was Annie Johnston, Faith's best friend. Another one with a completely new look. In any other scenario I would have stopped to say hi, but she probably hated me as much as Faith did. I slipped by her and ran for the edge of the jam-packed driveway, where I'd stashed my bike under the thick border of evergreen trees.

My legs pumped the pedals with all their might as I raced away from Connor's house, my breath coming short and shallow, until I reached Harvest Lane. There I placed my feet on the ground and glanced back over my shoulder in the direction of Vista View. Somewhere back there behind the trees was my old house. My old life. The life that I, apparently, could never go back to.

I was never going to lie out under the sun with Chloe again or ride bikes with Shannen or put on fake concerts with Faith or climb trees with Hammond and the twins. I was never going to kiss Bedroom Boy under the bleachers after a soccer game. Never going to see him waiting for me after class or searching for me in the caf or standing in a tux under the domed ceiling of the country club ballroom.

Not that I had been daydreaming about those things for the last two days. Not at all. Clearly it was time for me to officially grow up. I turned my back on Vista View and rode on.

My mother was going to die when she heard what had happened tonight. All she wanted was to move home and reclaim her old friends, her old life. That was all she wanted for the both of us. Well, it appeared that, for one of us at least, that was not going to happen.

God, I hated my father. How could he do this to us? To them? How could he lose all their money, move us out of a town we loved, and then just drop us? Just disappear without a word, without an explanation? Where the hell was he? Was he ever going to come back? Was he ever going to try to rectify what he'd done?

I tipped my front wheel down the hill at the top of Harvest and took my feet off the pedals, just letting myself fly. Letting the wind clear my head and tug a few tears from the corners of my eyes. At the bottom I almost forgot to stop.

Almost flew directly into the two-way traffic on Orchard Avenue. But as soon as I saw the cars whizzing by, my brain snapped back into focus. I hit the brakes hard and yanked my wheel to the left, stopping two inches away from the brick wall of the bagel shop at the corner. My chest heaved. My heart raced. My pores oozed hot sweat into my clothes. And only one word came into my mind.

No.

Just like that, I knew. I knew my mother would never find out about tonight. She didn't need to know I'd pathetically reached out to them and been brutally rejected. Clearly, my new life in Orchard Hill was going to be just that—a new life. I didn't need the Cresties. I felt, suddenly, foolish for ever thinking I did. Somehow I'd survived the last year and a half without them. I could survive the next two. And so what if Bedroom Boy hadn't defended my honor back there? I could handle myself. Sort of. At least, I would. From now on.

I turned my bike down Orchard Avenue and headed for my new home. Faith was right. I was a Norm now. It was time to start living like one.

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