

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 29 - Tips

0 17 minutes read

Addy

Thursday, November 8, 7:00 p.m.

I keep reading through the About This Tumblr as if it's going to change. But it never does. Ashton's words loop through my head: Jake's a complete control freak. She's not wrong. But does that mean the rest of it has to be right? Maybe Jake told somebody else what I said, and they wrote it. Or maybe it's all just a coincidence.

Except. A memory surfaces from the morning of Simon's death, so seemingly insignificant that it hadn't crossed my mind till now: Jake pulling my backpack off my shoulder with an easy grin as we walked down the hallway together. That's too heavy for you, baby. I've got it. He'd never done that before, but I didn't question him. Why would I?

And a phone that wasn't mine got pulled from my backpack a few hours later.

I'm not sure what's worse—that Jake might be part of something so awful, that I drove him to it, or that he's been putting on an act for weeks.

"His choice, Addy," Ashton reminds me. "Plenty of people get cheated on and don't lose their minds. Take me, for example. I threw a vase at Charlie's head and moved on. That's a normal reaction. Whatever's going on here isn't your fault."

That might be true. But it doesn't feel true.

So I'm supposed to talk to Janae, who hasn't been in school all week. I tried texting her a few times after school and again after dinner, but she never responded. Finally, I decided to borrow TJ's trick—find her address in the school directory and just show up. When I told Bronwyn she offered to come along, but I thought it'd go better with only me. Janae never warmed up to Bronwyn all that much.

Cooper insists on driving me even though I tell him he'll need to wait in the car. There's no way Janae'll open up about anything if he's around. "That's fine," he says as he pulls across the street from Janae's faux-Tudor house. "Text me if things turn weird."

"Will do," I say, giving him a salute as I close the door and cross the street. There aren't any cars in Janae's driveway, but lights are burning throughout the house. I ring the doorbell four times with no answer, glancing back at Cooper with a shrug after the last one. I'm about to give up when the door cracks and one of Janae's black-rimmed eyes stares out at me. "What are you doing here?" she asks.

“Checking on you. You haven’t been around and you’re not answering my texts. Are you all right?”

“Fine.” Janae tries to close the door, but I stick my foot in it to stop her.

“Can I come in?” I ask.

She hesitates but releases the door and steps back, allowing me to push it forward and enter. When I get a good look at her, I almost gasp. She’s thinner than ever, and angry red hives cover her face and neck. She scratches at them self-consciously. “What? I’m not feeling well. Obviously.”

I peer down the hallway. “Anyone else home?”

“No. My parents are out to dinner. Look, um, no offense, but do you have some reason for being here?”

Bronwyn coached me on what to say. I’m supposed to start with small, subtle questions about where Janae’s been all week and how she’s feeling. To follow up on the thread of Simon’s depression and encourage her to tell me more. As a last resort, I can maybe talk about what Nate’s facing as the DA’s office tries to send him to an honest-to-God prison.

I don’t do any of that. Instead I step forward and hug her, cradling her scrawny body as though she’s a little kid who needs comforting. She feels like one, all weightless bones and fragile limbs. She stiffens, then slumps against me and starts to cry.

“Oh my God,” she says in a thick, raspy voice. “It’s all fvcked up. Everything’s so massively fvcked up.”

“Come on.” I lead her to the living room sofa, where we sit and she cries some more. Her head digs awkwardly into my shoulder while I pat her hair. It’s stiff with product, her mouse-brown roots blending into shiny blue-black dye.

“Simon did this to himself, didn’t he?” I ask carefully. She pulls away and buries her head in her hands, rocking back and forth.

“How did you know?” she chokes out.

God. It’s true. I didn’t fully believe it till now.

I’m not supposed to tell her everything. I’m actually not supposed to tell her anything, but I do. I can’t think how else to have this conversation. When I finish she rises and goes upstairs without a word. I wait for a couple of minutes, curling one hand on my lap and using the other to tug at my earring. Is she calling somebody? Getting a gun to blow my head off? Slitting her wrists to join Simon?

Just when I think I might have to go after her, Janae thuds down the stairs holding a thin sheaf of papers she thrusts toward me. "Simon's manifesto," she says with a sour twist of her mouth. "It's supposed to be sent to the police a year from now, after all your lives are completely screwed. So everyone would know he pulled it off."

The papers tremble in my hand as I read:

Here's the first thing you need to know: I hate my life and everything in it.

So I decided to get the hell out. But not go quietly.

I thought a lot about how to do this. I could buy a gun, like pretty much any asshole in America. Bar the doors one morning and take out as many Bayview lemmings as I have bullets for before turning the last one on myself.

And I'd have a lot of bullets.

But that's been done to death. It doesn't have the same impact anymore.

I want to be more creative. More unique. I want my suicide to be talked about for years. I want imposters to try to imitate me. And fail, because the planning this takes is beyond your average depressed loser with a death wish.

You've been watching it unfold for a year now. If it's gone the way I hope, you have no clue what actually happened.

I look up from the papers. "Why?" I ask, bile rising in my throat. "How did Simon get to this point?"

"He'd been depressed for a while," Janae says, kneading the fabric of her black skirt between her hands. The stacks of studded bracelets she wears on both arms rattle with the movement. "Simon always felt like he should get a lot more respect and attention than he did, you know? But he got really bitter about it this year. He started spending all his time online with a bunch of creepers, fantasizing about getting revenge on everyone who made him miserable. It got to the point where I don't think he even knew what was real anymore. Whenever something bad happened, he blew it way out of proportion."

Words are tumbling out of her now. "He started talking about killing himself and taking people with him, but, like, creatively. He got obsessed with the idea of using the app to frame everyone he hated. He knew Bronwyn cheated and it pissed him off. She practically had valedictorian sewn up anyway, but she made it impossible for him to catch up. He thought she'd screwed him out of going to the Model UN finals too. And he couldn't stand Nate because of what happened with Keely. Simon had thought he had a shot with her, and then Nate stole her away without even trying or actually giving a fvck."

My heart contracts. God, poor Nate. What a stupid, pointless reason to end up in jail. “What about Cooper? Did Simon involve him because of Keely too?”

Janae snorts out a bitter laugh. “Mr. Nice Guy? Cooper got Simon blacklisted from Vanessa’s after-prom party. Even though Simon was on the court and everything. He was so humiliated that he was not only not invited, but actually not even allowed to go. Everyone was going to be there, he said.”

“Cooper did?” I blink. That’s news to me. Cooper hadn’t mentioned it, and I never even noticed Simon wasn’t there.

Which I guess was part of the problem.

Janae bobs her head. “Yeah. I don’t know why, but he did. So those three were Simon’s targets, and he had his gossip all lined up. I still thought it was just talk, though. A way to blow off steam. Maybe it would’ve been, if I could have convinced him to get offline and stop obsessing. But then Jake found out something Simon didn’t want anyone to know and it just—that was the final straw.”

Oh no. Every second that went by without a mention of Jake’s name made me hope he wasn’t involved, after all. “What do you mean?” I pull at my earring so hard, I’m in danger of tearing a lobe.

Janae picks at her chipped nail polish, sending gray flakes across her skirt. “Simon rigged the votes so he’d be on the junior prom court.” My hand freezes at my ear and my eyes go wide. Janae huffs out a humorless little laugh. “I know. Stupid, right? Simon was weird like that. He’d make fun of people for being lemmings, but he still wanted the same things they did. And he wanted them to look up to him. So he did it, and he was gloating about it at the pool last summer, saying how easy it was and how he’d mess with homecoming too. And Jake overheard us.”

I can immediately picture Jake’s reaction, so Janae’s next words don’t surprise me. “He laughed his head off. Simon freaked. He couldn’t stand the thought of Jake telling people, and everyone at school knowing he’d done something so pathetic. Like, he’d spent years spilling everybody’s secrets, and now he was gonna get humiliated with one of his own.” She cringes. “Can you imagine? The creator of About That getting exposed as such a wannabe? It sent him over the edge.”

“The edge?” I echo.

“Yeah. Simon decided to stop talking about his crazy plan and actually do it. He already knew about you and TJ, but he’d been sitting on that till school started again. So he used it to shut Jake up and bring him in. Because Simon needed somebody to keep things going after he died, and I wouldn’t do it.”

I don’t know whether to believe her or not. “You wouldn’t?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Janae doesn’t meet my eyes. “Not for your sake. I didn’t care about any of you. For Simon’s sake. But he wouldn’t listen to me, and then all of a sudden he didn’t need me. He knew what Jake was like, that he’d lose it when he found out about you and TJ. Simon told Jake he could plant everything on you so you’d take the fall and wind up in jail. And Jake was totally on board. He even came up with the idea of sending you to the nurse’s office that day for Tylenol so you’d look more guilty.”

White noise buzzes through my brain. “The perfect revenge for cheating on a perfect boyfriend.” I’m not sure I’ve said it out loud until Janae nods.

“Right, and no one would ever guess since Simon and Jake weren’t even friends. For Simon, there was the added bonus that he didn’t care if Jake screwed up and got caught. He was almost hoping he would. He’d hated Jake for years.”

Janae’s voice rises like she’s warming up for the kind of bltch session she and Simon probably used to have all the time. “The way Jake just dropped Simon freshman year. Started hanging out with Cooper like they’d always been best friends, as if Simon didn’t exist anymore. Like he didn’t matter.”

Saliva swims at the back of my throat. I’m going to throw up. No, pass out. Maybe both. Either would be better than sitting here listening to this. All that time after Simon died, when Jake comforted me, made me drive to a party with TJ like nothing happened, slept with me—he knew. He knew I’d cheated and he was just biding his time. Waiting to punish me.

That might be the worst part. How normal he acted the whole time.

Somehow, I find my voice. “But he ... But Nate was framed. Did Jake change his mind?”

It hurts how much I want that to be true.

Janae doesn’t answer right away. The room’s silent except for her ragged breathing. “No,” she says finally. “The thing is ... it all unfolded almost exactly the way Simon planned. He and Jake snuck those phones into your backpacks that morning, and Mr. Avery found them and gave you detention, just like Simon said he would. He made it easy for the police to investigate by keeping the About That admin site wide open. He wrote an outline of the Tumblr journal, and told Jake to post updates from public computers with details about what was really happening. It was like watching some out-of-control reality TV show where you keep thinking producers are gonna step in and say, Enough. But nobody did. It made me sick. I kept telling Jake he needed to stop before it went too far.”

My gut twists. “And Jake wouldn’t?”

Janae sniffs. “No. He got really into the whole thing once Simon died. Total power trip watching you guys get hauled into the station, seeing the school scrambling and

everybody freaking out about the Tumblr. He liked having that control.” She stops for a second and glances at me. “I guess you’d know about that.”

Yeah, I guess I would. But I could do without the reminder right now. “You could’ve stopped it, Janae,” I say, my voice rising as anger starts to overtake my shock. “You should’ve told somebody what was going on.”

“I couldn’t,” Janae says, hunching her shoulders. “One time when we were meeting with Simon, Jake recorded us on his phone. I was trying to talk sense into Simon, but the way Jake edited things made it sound like it was practically my idea. He said he’d give the recording to the police and pin everything on me if I didn’t help.”

She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I was supposed to plant all the evidence on you. You remember that day I came to your house? I had the computer with me then. But I couldn’t do it. After that, Jake kept harassing me and I panicked. I just dumped everything on Nate.” She chokes out a sob. “It was easy. Nate doesn’t lock anything. And I called in the tip about him instead of you.”

“Why?” My voice is tiny, and my hands are shaking so badly that Simon’s manifesto makes a rattling sound. “Why didn’t you stick to the plan?”

Janae starts rocking back and forth again. “You were nice to me. Hundreds of people in that stupid school and nobody, except you, ever asked if I missed Simon. I did. I do. I totally get how fucked up he was, but—he was my only friend.” She starts crying hard again, her thin shoulders shaking. “Until you. I know we’re not really friends and you probably hate me now, but ... I couldn’t do that to you.”

I don’t know how to respond. And if I keep thinking about Jake, I’m going to lose it. My mind latches on to one small piece of this messed-up puzzle that doesn’t make sense. “What about Cooper’s entry? Why would Simon write the truth and then replace it with a lie?”

“That was Jake,” Janae says, swiping at her eyes. “He made Simon change it. He said he was doing Cooper a favor, but ... I don’t know. I think it was more he didn’t want anyone to know his best friend was gay. And he seemed pretty jealous of all the attention Cooper was getting for baseball.”

My head’s spinning. I should be asking more questions, but I can think of only one. “Now what? Are you ... I mean, you can’t let Nate get convicted, Janae. You’re going to tell someone, right? You have to tell someone.”

Janae passes a hand over her face. “I know. I’ve been sick about it all week. But the thing is, I don’t have anything except this printout. Jake has the video version on Simon’s hard drive, along with all the backup files that show he’d planned the whole thing for months.”



I brandish Simon's manifesto like a shield. "This is good enough. This, and your word, is plenty."

"What would even happen to me?" Janae mutters under her breath. "I'm, like, aiding and abetting, right? Or obstructing justice? I could wind up in jail. And Jake has that recording hanging over my head. He's already pissed at me. I've been too afraid of him to go to school. He keeps stopping by and—" The doorbell chimes, and she freezes as my phone rings out with a text. "Oh God, Addy, that's probably him. He only ever comes by when my parents' car isn't in the driveway."

My phone blares with a message from Cooper. Jake's here. What's going on? I grab hold of Janae's arm. "Listen. Let's do to him exactly what he did to you. Talk to him about all this, and we'll record it. Do you have your phone on you?"

Janae pulls it out of her pocket as the doorbell rings again. "It won't do any good. He always makes me give it to him before we talk."

"Okay. We'll use mine." I look into the darkened dining room across from us. "I'll hide in there while you talk to him."

"I don't think I can," Janae whispers, and I give her arm a hard shake.

"You have to. You need to make this right, Janae. It's gone way too far." My hands are trembling, but I manage to send a quick text to Cooper—It's fine, just wait—and get to my feet, pulling Janae with me and shoving her toward the door. "Answer it." I stumble into the dining room and sink to my knees, opening my phone's Voice Recorder app and pressing Play. I put it as close as I dare to the entryway between the dining room and the living room, and scoot against the wall next to a china cabinet.

At first, the blood rushing in my ears blocks out every other sound, but when it starts to recede I hear Jake's voice: "... haven't you been at school?"

"I don't feel well," Janae says.

"Really." Jake's voice drips with contempt. "Me either, but I still show up. Which you need to do too. Business as usual, you know?"

I have to strain to hear Janae. "Don't you think this has gone on long enough, Jake? I mean, Nate's in jail. I realize that's the plan and all, but now that it's happening it's pretty messed up." I'm not sure the phone's going to be able to pick her up, but there's not much I can do about it. I can't exactly stage-direct her from the dining room.

"I knew you were freaking out." Jake's voice carries easily. "No, we fvcking can't, Janae. That'd put us both at risk. Anyway, sending Nate to jail was your choice, wasn't it? That should've been Addy, which is why I'm here, by the way. You fvcked that up and need to turn it around. I have some ideas."

Janae's voice gets a little stronger. "Simon was sick, Jake. Killing yourself and framing other people for murder is crazy. I want out. I won't tell anybody you're involved, but I want us to—I don't know—put out an anonymous note that says it was a hoax or something. We have to make it stop."

Jake snorts. "Not your call, Janae. Don't forget what I have on hand. I can put everything on your doorstep and walk away. There's nothing to tie me to any of this."

Wrong, a.ssh0le, I think. Then time seems to stop as a text message from Cooper crosses my phone with a loud blare of Rihanna's "Only Girl." You ok?

I forgot the all-important step of silencing my phone before using it as a spy device.

"What the hell? Addy?" Jake roars. I don't even think, just take off out of the dining room and through Janae's kitchen, thanking God that she has a back door I can burst through. Heavy footsteps pound behind me, so instead of going for Cooper's car I run straight into the dense woods behind Janae's house. I fly through the underbrush in a panic, dodging bushes and overgrown roots until my foot hooks under something and I tumble to the ground. It's like the gym track all over again—knees torn, breath gone, palms raw—except this time my ankle's twisted also.

I hear branches crashing behind me, farther away than I would have thought but heading straight to me. I get to my feet, wincing, and weigh my options. One thing's sure after everything I heard in the living room—Jake's not leaving these woods till he finds me. I don't know if I can hide, and I sure as hell can't run. I take a deep breath, scream "Help!" at the top of my lungs, and take off again, trying to zigzag away from where I think Jake is while still getting closer to Janae's house.

But, oh God, my ankle hurts so badly. I'm barely dragging myself forward, and the noises behind me get louder until a hand catches my arm and yanks me back. I manage to scream once more before Jake clamps his other hand over my mouth.

"You little bltch," he says hoarsely. "You brought this on yourself, you know that?" I sink my teeth into Jake's palm and he lets out an animal sound of pain, dropping his hand and lifting it just as quickly to strike me across the face.

I stagger, my face aching, but manage to stay upright and twist in an attempt to connect my knee to his groin and my nails to his eye. Jake grunts again when I make contact, stumbling enough that I break free and spin away. My ankle buckles and his hand locks around my arm, tight as a vise. He pulls me toward him and grips me hard by the shoulders. For one bizarre second I think he's going to k!ss me.

Instead he shoves me to the ground, kneels down, and slams my head on a rock. My skull explodes with pain and my vision goes red around the edges, then black. Something presses across my neck and I'm choking. I can't see anything, but I can



hear. "You should be in jail instead of Nate, Addy," Jake snarls as I claw at his hands. "But this works too."

A girl's panicked voice pierces the pain in my head. "Jake, stop! Leave her alone!"

The awful pressure releases and I gasp for air. I hear Jake's voice, low and angry, then a shriek and a thud. I should get up, right now. I reach my hands out, feeling grass and dirt beneath my fingers as I scramble to find an anchor. I just need to pull myself off the ground. And get these starbursts out of my eyes. One thing at a time.

Hands are at my throat again, squeezing. I lash out with my legs, willing them to work the way they do on my bike, but they feel like spaghetti. I blink, blink, blink some more, until I can finally see. Except now I wish I couldn't. Jake's eyes flash silver in the moonlight, filled with a cold fury. How did I not see this coming?

I can't budge his hands no matter how hard I try.

Then I can breathe again as Jake flies backward, and I wonder dimly how and why he did that. Sounds fill the air as I roll onto my side, gasping to fill my empty lungs. Seconds or minutes pass, it's hard to tell, until a hand presses my shoulder and I blink into a different pair of eyes. Kind, concerned. And scared as sh!tless as I am.

"Cooper," I rasp. He pulls me into a sitting position and I let my head fall against his chest, feeling his heart hammering against my cheek as the distant wail of sirens draws closer.