

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 4

0 12 minutes read

Addy

Thursday, September 27, 7:30 p.m.

I should be doing homework before Jake stops by, but instead I'm sitting at the vanity in my bedroom, pressing fingers to the skin at my hairline. The tenderness on my left temple feels as though it's going to turn into one of those horrible oversized pimples I get every few months or so. Whenever I have one I know it's all anyone can see.

I'll have to wear my hair down for a while, which is how Jake likes it anyway. My hair is the only thing I feel one hundred percent confident about all the time. I was at Glenn's Diner last week with my girlfriends, sitting next to Keely across from the big mirror, and she reached over and ran a hand through my hair while grinning at our reflections. Can we please trade? Just for a week? she said.

I smiled at her, but wished I were sitting on the other side of the table. I hate seeing Keely and me side by side. She's so beautiful, all tawny skin and long eyelashes and Angelina Jolie lips. She's the lead character in a movie and I'm the generic best friend whose name you forget before the credits even start rolling.

The doorbell rings, but I know better than to expect Jake upstairs right away. Mom's going to capture him for at least ten minutes. She can't hear enough about the Simon situation, and she'd talk about today's meeting with Officer Budapest all night if I let her.

I separate my hair into sections and run a brush along each length. My mind keeps going back to Simon. He'd been a constant presence around our group since freshman year, but he was never one of us. He had only one real friend, a sorta-Goth girl named Janae. I used to think they were together until Simon started asking out all my friends. Of course, none of them ever said yes. Although last year, before she started dating Cooper, Keely got super drunk at a party and let Simon kiss her for five minutes in a closet. It took her ages to shake him after that.

I'm not sure what Simon was thinking, to be honest. Keely has one type: jock. He should have gone for someone like Bronwyn. She's cute enough, in a quiet kind of way, with interesting gray eyes and hair that would probably look great if she ever wore it down. Plus she and Simon must've tripped over each other in honors classes all the time.

Except I got the impression today that Bronwyn didn't like Simon much. Or at all. When Officer Budapest talked about how Simon died, Bronwyn looked ... I don't know. Not sad.

A knock sounds at the door and I watch it open in the mirror. I keep brushing my hair as Jake comes in. He pulls off his sneakers and flops on my bed with exaggerated exhaustion, arms splayed at his sides. "Your mom's wrung me dry, Ads. I've never met anyone who can ask the same question so many ways."

"Tell me about it," I say, getting up to join him. He puts an arm around me and I curl into his side, my head on his shoulder and my hand on his chest. We know exactly how to fit together, and I relax for the first time since I got called into Principal Gupta's office.

I trail my fingers along his bicep. Jake's not as defined as Cooper, who's practically a superhero with all the professional-level working out he does, but to me he's the perfect balance of muscular and lean. And he's fast, the best running back Bayview High's seen in years. There's not the same feeding frenzy around him as Cooper, but a few colleges are interested and he's got a good shot at a scholarship.

"Mrs. Kelleher called me," Jake says.

My hand halts its progress up his arm as I stare at the crisp blue cotton of his T-shirt. "Simon's mother? Why?"

"She asked if I'd be a pallbearer at the funeral. It's gonna be Sunday," Jake says, his shoulders lifting in a shrug. "I told her sure. Can't really say no, can I?"

I forget sometimes that Simon and Jake used to be friends in grade school and middle school, before Jake turned into a jock and Simon turned into ... whatever he was. Freshman year Jake made the varsity football team and started hanging out with Cooper, who was already a Bayview legend after almost pitching his middle school team to the Little League World Series. By sophomore year the two of them were basically the kings of our class, and Simon was just some weird guy Jake used to know.

I half think Simon started About That to impress Jake. Simon found out one of Jake's football rivals was behind the anonymous sexting harassment of a bunch of junior girls and posted it on this app called After School. It got tons of attention for a couple of weeks, and so did Simon. That might've been the first time anyone at Bayview noticed him.

Jake probably patted him on the back once and forgot about it, and Simon moved on to bigger and better things by building his own app. Gossip as a public service doesn't go very far, so Simon started posting things a lot pettier and more personal than the sexting scandal. Nobody thought he was a hero anymore, but by then they were getting scared of him, and I guess for Simon that was almost as good.

Jake usually defended Simon, though, when our friends got down on him for About That. It's not like he's lying, he'd point out. Stop doing sneaky shit and it won't be a problem.

Jake can be pretty black-and-white in his thinking sometimes. Easy when you never make a mistake.

“We’re still headed for the beach tomorrow night, if that’s okay,” he tells me now, winding my hair around his fingers. He says it like it’s up to me, but we both know Jake’s in charge of our social life.

“Of course,” I murmur. “Who’s going?” Don’t say TJ.

“Cooper and Keely are supposed to, although she’s not sure he’s up for it. Luis and Olivia. Vanessa, Tyler, Noah, Sarah ...”

Don’t say TJ.

“... and TJ.”

Argh. I’m not sure if it’s my imagination or if TJ, who used to be on the outskirts of our group as the new kid, has started working his way into the center right when I wish he’d disappear altogether. “Great,” I say blandly, reaching up and kissing Jake’s jawline. It’s the time of day when it’s a little scratchy, which is new this year.

“Adelaide!” My mother’s voice floats up the stairs. “We’re heading out.” She and Justin go somewhere downtown almost every night, usually restaurants but sometimes clubs. Justin’s only thirty and still into that whole scene. My mother enjoys it almost as much, especially when people mistake her for being Justin’s age.

“Okay!” I call, and the door slams. After a minute Jake leans down to kiss me, his hand sliding under my shirt.

A lot of people think Jake and I have been sleeping together since freshman year, but that’s not true. He wanted to wait until after junior prom. It was a big deal; Jake rented a fancy hotel room that he filled with candles and flowers, and bought me amazing lingerie from Victoria’s Secret. I wouldn’t have minded something a little more spontaneous, I guess, but I know I’m beyond lucky to have a boyfriend who cares enough to plan every last detail.

“Is this okay?” Jake’s eyes scan my face. “Or would you rather just hang out?” His brows rise like it’s a real question, but his hand keeps inching lower.

I never turn Jake down. It’s like my mother said when she first took me to get birth control: if you say no too much, pretty soon someone else will say yes. Anyway, I want it as much as he does. I live for these moments of closeness with Jake; I’d crawl inside him if I could.

“More than okay,” I say, and pull him on top of me.

Nate

Thursday, September 27, 8:00 p.m.

I live in that house. The one people drive past and say, I can't believe someone actually lives there. We do, although "living" might be a stretch. I'm gone as much as possible and my dad's half-dead.

Our house is on the far edge of Bayview, the kind of sh!tty ranch rich people buy to tear down. Small and ugly, with only one window in front. The chimney's been crumbling since I was ten. Seven years later everything else is joining it: the paint's peeling, shutters are hanging off, the concrete steps in front are cracked wide open. The yard's just as bad. The grass is almost knee-high and yellow after the summer drought. I used to mow it, sometimes, until it hit me that yard work is a waste of time that never ends.

My father's passed out on the couch when I get inside, an empty bottle of Seagram's in front of him. Dad considers it a stroke of luck that he fell off a ladder during a roofing job a few years ago, while he was still a functioning alcoholic. He got a workman's comp settlement and wound up disabled enough to collect social security, which is like winning the lottery for a guy like him. Now he can drink without interruption while the checks roll in.

The money's not much, though. I like having cable, keeping my bike on the road, and occasionally eating more than mac and cheese. Which is how I came to my part-time job, and why I spent four hours after school today distributing plastic bags full of painkillers around San Diego County. Obviously not something I should be doing, especially since I was picked up for dealing weed over the summer and I'm on probation. But nothing else pays as well and takes so little effort.

I head for the kitchen, open the refrigerator door, and pull out some leftover Chinese. There's a picture curling under a magnet, cracked like a broken window. My dad, my mother, and me when I was eleven, right before she took off.

She was bipolar and not great about taking her meds, so it's not as though I had some fantastic childhood while she was around. My earliest memory is her dropping a plate, then sitting on the floor in the middle of the pieces, crying her eyes out. Once I got off the bus to her throwing all our stuff out the window. Lots of times she'd curl up in a corner of her bed and not move for days.

Her manic phases were a trip, though. For my eighth birthday she took me to a department store, handed me a cart, and told me to fill it with whatever I wanted. When I was nine and into reptiles she surprised me by setting up a terrarium in the living room with a bearded dragon. We called it Stan after Stan Lee, and I still have it. Those things live forever.

My father didn't drink as much then, so between the two of them they managed to get me to school and sports. Then my mother went totally off her meds and started getting into other mind-altering substances. Yeah, I'm the asshole who deals drugs after they wrecked his mother. But to be clear: I don't sell anything except weed and painkillers. My mother would've been fine if she'd stayed away from cocaine.

For a while she came back every few months or so. Then once a year. The last time I saw her was when I was fourteen and my dad started falling apart. She kept talking about this farm commune she'd moved to in Oregon and how great it was, that she'd take me and I could go to school there with all the hippie kids and grow organic berries or whatever the hell they did.

She bought me a giant ice cream sundae at Glenn's Diner, like I was eight years old, and told me all about it. You'll love it, Nathaniel. Everyone is so accepting. Nobody labels you the way they do here.

It sounded like bullshit even then, but better than Bayview. So I packed a bag, put Stan in his carrier, and waited for her on our front steps. I must have sat there half the night, like a complete fucking loser, before it finally dawned on me she wasn't going to show.

Turned out that trip to Glenn's Diner was the last time I ever saw her.

While the Chinese heats up I check on Stan, who's still got a pile of wilted vegetables and a few live crickets from this morning. I lift the cover from his terrarium and he blinks up at me from his rock. Stan is pretty chill and low maintenance, which is the only reason he's managed to stay alive in this house for eight years.

"What's up, Stan?" I put him on my shoulder, grab my food, and flop into an armchair across from my comatose father. He has the World Series on, which I turn off because (a) I hate baseball and (b) it reminds me of Cooper Clay, which reminds me of Simon Kelleher and that whole sick scene in detention. I'd never liked the kid, but that was horrible. And Cooper was almost as useless as the blond girl when you come right down to it. Bronwyn was the only one who did anything except babble like an idiot.

My mother used to like Bronwyn. She'd always notice her at school things. Like the Nativity play in fourth grade when I was a shepherd and Bronwyn was the Virgin Mary. Someone stole baby Jesus before we were supposed to go on, probably to mess with Bronwyn because she took everything way too seriously even then. Bronwyn went into the audience, borrowed a bag, wrapped a blanket around it, and carried it around as if nothing had happened. That girl doesn't take crap from anyone, my mother had said approvingly.

Okay. In the interest of full disclosure, I stole baby Jesus, and it was definitely to mess with Bronwyn. It would've been funnier if she'd freaked out.

My jacket beeps, and I dig in my pockets for the right phone. I almost laughed in detention on Monday when Bronwyn said nobody has two cell phones. I have three: one for people I know, one for suppliers, and one for customers. Plus extras so I can switch them out. But I wouldn't be stupid enough to take any of them into Avery's class.

My work phones are always set to vibrate, so I know it's a personal message. I pull out my ancient iPhone and see a text from Amber, a girl I met at a party last month. U up?

I hesitate. Amber's hot and never tries to hang out too long, but she was just here a few nights ago. Things get messy when I let casual hookups happen more than once a week. But I'm restless and could use a distraction.

Come over, I write back.

I'm about to put my phone away when another text comes through. It's from Chad Posner, a guy at Bayview I hang out with sometimes. You see this? I click on the link in the message and it opens a Tumblr page with the headline "About This."

I got the idea for klling Simon while watching Dateline.

I'd been thinking about it for a while, obviously. That's not the kind of thing you pluck out of thin air. But the how of getting away with it always stopped me. I don't kid myself that I'm a criminal mastermind. And I'm much too good-looking for prison.

On the show, a guy kllled his wife. Standard Dateline stuff, right? It's always the husband. But turns out lots of people were happy to see her gone. She'd gotten a coworker fired, screwed over people on city council, and had an affair with a friend's husband. She was a nightmare, basically.

The guy on Dateline wasn't too bright. Hired someone to murder his wife and the cell phone records were easy to trace. But before those came out he had a decent smoke screen because of all the other suspects. That's the kind of person you can get away with klling: someone everybody else wants dead.

Let's face it: everyone at Bayview High hated Simon. I was just the only one with enough guts to do something about it.

You're welcome.

The phone almost slips out of my hand. Another text from Chad Posner came through while I was reading. People r fvcked up.

I text back, Where'd you get this?

Posner writes Some rando emailed a link, with the laughing-so-hard-I'm-crying emoji. He thinks it's somebody's idea of a sick joke. Which is what most people would think, if

they hadn't spent an hour with a police officer asking ten different ways how peanut oil got into Simon Kelleher's cup. Along with three other people who looked guilty as hell.

None of them have as much experience as I do keeping a straight face when sh!t's falling apart around them. At least, none of them are as good at it as me.