

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 5

0 15 minutes read

Bronwyn

Friday, September 28, 6:45 p.m.

Friday evening is a relief. Maeve and I are settled into her room for a Buffy the Vampire Slayer marathon on Netflix. It's our latest obsession, and I've been looking forward to it all week, but tonight we only half pay attention. Maeve's curled up on the window seat, tapping away on her laptop, and I'm sprawled across her bed with my Kindle open to Ulysses by James Joyce. It's number one on the Modern Library's 100 Best Novels and I'm determined to finish it before the semester's over, but it's pretty slow going. And I can't concentrate.

All anybody could talk about at school today was that Tumblr post. A bunch of kids had the link emailed to them last night from some "About This" Gmail address, and by lunchtime everyone had read it. Yumiko helps out in the principal's office on Fridays, and she heard them talking about trying to track whoever did it by IP address.

I doubt they'll have any luck. Nobody with half a brain would send something like that from their own technology.

Since detention on Monday people have been careful and overly nice to me, but today was different. Conversations kept stopping when I approached. Yumiko finally said, "It's not like people think you sent it. They just think it's weird, how you guys got questioned by the police yesterday and then this pops up." Like that was supposed to make me feel better.

"Just imagine." Maeve's voice startles me back to her bedroom. She puts aside her laptop and raps her fingers lightly on the window. "This time next year, you'll be at Yale. What do you think you'll do there on a Friday night? Frat party?"

I roll my eyes at her. "Right, because you get a personality transplant along with your acceptance letter. Anyway, I still have to get in."

"You will. How could you not?"

I shift restlessly on the bed. Lots of ways. "You never know."

Maeve keeps tapping her fingers against the glass. "If you're being modest on my account, you can give it a rest. I'm quite comfortable in my role as the family slacker."

"You're not a slacker," I protest. She just grins and flutters a hand. Maeve's one of the smartest people I know, but until her freshman year she was too sick to go to school

consistently. She was diagnosed with leukemia when she was seven, and wasn't fully disease-free until two years ago, when she was fourteen.

We almost lost her a couple of times. Once when I was in fourth grade, I overheard a priest at the hospital asking my parents if they'd considered starting to make "arrangements." I knew what he meant. I bowed my head and prayed: Please don't take her. I'll do everything right if you let her stay. I'll be perfect. I promise.

After so many years in and out of the hospital, Maeve never really learned how to participate in life. I do that for both of us: join the clubs, win the awards, and get the grades so I can go to Yale like our parents did. It makes them happy, and keeps Maeve from extending herself too much.

Maeve goes back to staring out the window with her usual faraway expression. She looks like a daydream herself: pale and ethereal, with dark-brown hair like mine but startling amber eyes. I'm about to ask what she's thinking when she suddenly sits up straight and cups her hands around her eyes, pressing her face against the window. "Is that Nate Macauley?" I snort without moving, and she says, "I'm serious. Check it out."

I get up and lean in next to her. I can just about make out the faint outline of a motorcycle in our driveway. "What the hell?" Maeve and I exchange glances, and she shoots me a wicked grin. "What?" I ask. My voice comes out more snappish than I intended.

"What?" she mimics. "You think I don't remember you mooning over him in elementary school? I was sick, not dead."

"Don't joke about that. God. And that was light-years ago." Nate's motorcycle is still in our driveway, not moving. "What do you suppose he's doing here?"

"Only one way to find out." Maeve's voice is annoyingly singsongy, and she ignores the dirty look I give her as I stand up.

My heart thumps all the way downstairs. Nate and I have talked more at school this week than we have since fifth grade, which admittedly still isn't much. Every time I see him I get the impression he can't wait to be someplace else. But I keep running into him.

Opening the front door triggers a floodlight in front of our garage that makes Nate look as though he's on center stage. As I walk toward him my nerves are jangling, and I'm acutely conscious of the fact that I'm in my usual hanging-out-with-Maeve ensemble: flip-flops, a hoodie, and athletic shorts. Not that he's making an effort. I've seen that Guinness T-shirt at least twice this week.

"Hi, Nate," I say. "What's up?"

Nate takes his helmet off, and his dark-blue eyes flick past me to our front door. "Hey." He doesn't say anything else for an uncomfortably long time. I cross my arms and wait him out. Finally he meets my gaze with a wry smile that makes my stomach do a slow somersault. "I don't have a good reason for being here."

"Do you want to come in?" I blurt out.

He hesitates. "I bet your parents would love that."

He doesn't know the half of it. Dad's least favorite stereotype is that of the Colombian drug dealer, and he wouldn't appreciate even a hint of an association from me. But I find myself saying, "They're not home." Then I hastily add, "I'm hanging out with my sister," before he thinks that was some sort of come-on.

"Yeah, okay." Nate gets off his bike and follows me like it's no big deal, so I try to act equally nonchalant. Maeve's leaning against the kitchen counter when we get inside, even though I'm sure she was staring out her bedroom window ten seconds ago. "Have you met my sister, Maeve?"

Nate shakes his head. "No. How's it going?"

"All right," Maeve answers, eyeing him with frank interest.

I have no idea what to do next as he shrugs off his jacket and tosses it over a kitchen chair. How am I supposed to ... entertain Nate Macauley? It's not even my responsibility, right? He's the one who showed up out of the blue. I should do what I normally do. Except that's sit in my sister's room and watch retro vampire shows while half reading Ulysses.

I'm completely out of my depth here.

Nate doesn't notice my discomfort, wandering past the french doors that open into our living room. Maeve elbows me as we follow him and murmurs, "Que boca tan hermosa."

"Shut up," I hiss. Dad encourages us to speak Spanish around the house, but I doubt this is what he had in mind. Besides, for all we know, Nate's fluent.

He stops at the grand piano and looks back at us. "Who plays?"

"Bronwyn," Maeve says before I can even open my mouth. I stay near the doorway, arms folded, as she settles into Dad's favorite leather armchair in front of the sliding door leading to our deck. "She's really good."

"Oh yeah?" Nate asks at the same time I say, "No, I'm not."

"You are," Maeve insists. I narrow my eyes and she widens hers in fake innocence.

Nate crosses to the large walnut bookcase covering one wall, picking up a picture of Maeve and me with identical gap-toothed smiles in front of Cinderella's castle at Disneyland. It was taken six months before Maeve was diagnosed, and for a long time it was the only vacation picture we had. He studies it, then glances my way with a small smile. Maeve was right about his mouth—it is s3xy. “You should play something.”

Well, it's easier than talking to him.

I shuffle to the bench and sit, adjusting the sheet music in front of me. It's “Variations on the Canon,” which I've been practicing for months now. I've taken lessons since I was eight and I'm pretty competent, technically. But I've never made people feel anything. “Variations on the Canon” is the first piece that made me want to try. There's something about the way it builds, starting soft and sweet but gaining in volume and intensity until it's almost angry. That's the hard part, because at a certain point the notes grow harsh, verging on discordant, and I can't muster the force to pull it off.

I haven't played it in over a week. The last time I tried I hit so many wrong notes, even Maeve winced. She seems to remember, glancing toward Nate and saying, “This is a really hard song.” As if she suddenly regrets setting me up for embarrassment. But what the hell. This whole situation is too surreal to take seriously. If I woke up tomorrow and Maeve told me I'd dreamed it all, I'd fully accept that.

So I start, and right away it feels different. Looser and less of a reach for the harder parts. For a few minutes I forget anyone's in the room, and enjoy how notes that usually trip me up flow easily. Even the crescendo—I don't attack it as hard as I need to, but I'm faster and surer than I normally am, and don't hit a single wrong note. When I finish I smile triumphantly at Maeve, and it's only when her eyes drift toward Nate that I remember I have an audience of two.

He's leaning against our bookcase, arms crossed, and for once he doesn't look bored or about to make fun of me. “That's the best thing I've ever heard,” he says.

Addy

Friday, September 28, 7:00 p.m.

God, my mother. She's actually fl!rting with Officer Budapest, of the pink freckled face and receding hairline. “Of course Adelaide will do anything to help,” she says in a husky voice, trailing one finger around the rim of her wineglass. Justin's having dinner with his parents, who hate Mom and never invite her. This is his punishment whether he knows it or not.

Officer Budapest stopped by just as we finished the vegetable pad Thai Mom always orders when my sister, Ashton, comes to visit. Now he doesn't know where to look, so he's got his eyes fixed on a dried flower arrangement on the living room wall. My mother

redecorates every six months, and her latest theme is shabby chic with a weird beachy edge. Cabbage roses and seashells as far as the eye can see.

“Just a few follow-up points, if you don’t mind, Addy,” he says.

“Okay,” I say. I’m surprised he’s here, since I thought we’d already answered all his questions. But I guess the investigation’s still going strong. Today Mr. Avery’s lab was blocked off with yellow tape, and police officers were in and out of school all day. Cooper said Bayview High’s probably going to get into trouble for having peanut oil in the water or something.

I glance at my mother. Her eyes are fixed on Officer Budapest, but with that distant expression I know well. She’s already mentally checked out, probably planning her wardrobe for the weekend. Ashton comes into the living room and settles herself in an armchair across from me. “Are you talking to all the kids who were in detention that day?” she asks.

Officer Budapest clears his throat. “The investigation is ongoing, but I’m here because I had a particular question for Addy. You were in the nurse’s office the day Simon died, is that right?”

I hesitate and dart a glance toward Ashton, then look back at Officer Budapest. “No.”

“You were,” Officer Budapest says. “It’s in the nurse’s log.”

I’m looking at the fireplace, but I can feel Ashton’s eyes boring into me. I wind a strand of hair around my finger and tug nervously. “I don’t remember that.”

“You don’t remember going to the nurse’s office on Monday?”

“Well, I go a lot,” I say quickly. “For headaches and stuff. It was probably for that.” I scrunch my forehead like I’m thinking hard, and finally meet Officer Budapest’s eyes. “Oh, right. I had my period and I was cramping really bad, so yeah. I needed Tylenol.”

Officer Budapest is a blusher. He turns red as I smile politely and release my hair. “And you got what you needed there? Just the Tylenol?”

“Why do you want to know?” Ashton asks. She rearranges a throw pillow behind her so the starfish pattern, made out of actual seashells, isn’t digging into her back.

“Well, one of the things we’re looking into is why there appeared to be no EpiPens in the nurse’s office during Simon’s allergy attack. The nurse swears she had several pens that morning. But they were gone that afternoon.”

Ashton stiffens and says, “You can’t possibly think Addy took them!” Mom turns to me with a faintly surprised air, but doesn’t speak.

If Officer Budapest notices that my sister has stepped into the parenting role here, he doesn't mention it. "Nobody's saying that. But did you happen to see whether the pens were in the office then, Addy? According to the nurse's log, you were there at one o'clock."

My heart's beating uncomfortably fast, but I keep my tone even. "I don't even know what an EpiPen looks like."

He makes me tell him everything I remember about detention, again, then asks a bunch of questions about the Tumblr post. Ashton's all alert and interested, leaning forward and interrupting the whole time, while Mom goes into the kitchen twice to refill her wineglass. I keep looking at the clock, because Jake and I are supposed to be going to the beach soon and I haven't even started touching up my makeup. My pimple's not going to cover itself.

When Officer Budapest finally gets ready to leave, he hands me a card. "Call if you remember anything else, Addy," he says. "You never know what might be important."

"Okay," I say, sliding the card into the back pocket of my jeans. Officer Budapest says good-bye to Mom and Ashton as I open the door for him. Ashton leans against the doorframe next to me and we watch Officer Budapest get into his squad wagon and start slowly backing out of our driveway.

I spy Justin's car waiting to pull in behind Officer Budapest, and that gets me moving again. I don't want to have to talk to him and I still haven't fixed my makeup, so I escape upstairs with Ashton following behind me. My bedroom is the biggest one in our house except the master, and used to be Ashton's until I took it over when she got married. She still makes herself at home there as if she'd never left.

"You didn't tell me about that Tumblr thing," she says, sprawling across my white eyelet bedspread and opening the latest issue of *Us Weekly*. Ashton is even blonder than me, but her hair is cut in chin-length layers that our mother hates. I think it's cute, though. If Jake didn't love my hair so much, I'd consider a cut like that.

I sit at my vanity and dab concealer on my hairline pimple. "Somebody's being a creep, that's all."

"Did you really not remember being in the nurse's office? Or did you just not want to answer?" Ashton asks. I fumble with the concealer cap, but I'm saved from answering when my phone blares its Rihanna "Only Girl" text tone from the bedside table. Ashton picks it up and reports, "Jake's almost here."

"God, Ash." I glare at her in the mirror. "You shouldn't look at my phone like that. What if it was private?"

"Sorry," she says in a completely not-sorry tone. "Everything okay with Jake?"

I twist in my chair to face her, frowning. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Ashton holds a palm up at me. "Just a question, Addy. I'm not implying anything." Her tone darkens. "No reason to think you'll turn out like me. It's not as though Charlie and I were high school sweethearts."

I blink at her in surprise. I mean, I've thought for a while that things weren't going well between Ashton and Charlie—for one thing, she's suddenly here a lot, and for another, he was hard-core flirting with a slutty bridesmaid at our cousin's wedding last month—but Ashton's never come out and admitted a problem before. "Are things ... uh, really bad?"

She shrugs, dropping the magazine and picking at her nails. "It's complicated. Marriage is way harder than anyone tells you. Be thankful you don't have to make life decisions yet." Her mouth tightens. "Don't let Mom get in your ear and twist everything. Just enjoy being seventeen."

I can't. I'm too afraid it's all going to be ruined. That it's already ruined.

I wish I could tell Ashton that. It would be such a relief to get it out. I usually tell Jake everything, but I can't tell him this. And after him, there's literally not one other person in the world I trust. Not any of my friends, certainly not my mother, and not my sister. Because even though she probably means well, she can be awfully passive-aggressive about Jake.

The doorbell rings, and Ashton's mouth twists into a half smile. "Must be Mr. Perfect," she says. Sarcastic, right on schedule.

I ignore her and bound down the stairs, opening the door with the big smile I can't help when I'm about to see Jake. And there he is, in his football jacket with his chestnut hair tousled by the wind, giving me the exact same smile back. "Hey, baby." I'm about to kiss him when I catch sight of another figure behind him and freeze. "You don't mind if we give TJ a ride, do you?"

A nervous laugh bubbles up in my throat and I push it down. "Of course not." I go in for my kiss, but the moment's ruined.

TJ flicks his eyes toward me, then at the ground. "Sorry about this. My car broke down and I was gonna stay home, but Jake insisted"

Jake shrugs. "You were on the way. No reason to miss a night out because of car trouble." His eyes travel from my face to my canvas sneakers as he asks, "You wearing that, Ads?"

It's not a criticism, exactly, but I'm in Ashton's college sweatshirt and Jake's never liked me in shapeless clothes. "It'll be cold at the beach," I say tentatively, and he grins.

“I’ll keep you warm. Put on something a little cuter, huh?”

I give him a strained smile and go back inside, mounting the stairs with dragging steps because I know I haven’t been gone long enough for Ashton to have left my room. Sure enough she’s still flipping through Us Weekly on my bed, and she knits her brows together as I head for my closet. “Back so soon?”

I pull out a pair of leggings and unbutton my jeans. “I’m changing.”

Ashton closes the magazine and watches me in silence until I exchange her sweatshirt for a formfitting sweater. “You won’t be warm enough in that. It’s chilly tonight.” She snorts out a disbelieving laugh when I slip off my sneakers and step into a pair of strappy sandals with kitten heels. “You’re wearing those to the beach? Is this wardrobe change Jake’s idea?”

I toss my discarded clothes into the hamper, ignoring her. “Bye, Ash.”

“Addy, wait.” The snarky tone’s gone from Ashton’s voice, but I don’t care. I’m down the stairs and out the door before she can stop me, stepping into a breeze that chills me instantly. But Jake gives me an approving smile and wraps an arm around my shoulders for the short walk to the car.

I hate the entire ride. Hate sitting there acting normal when I want to throw up. Hate listening to Jake and TJ talk about tomorrow’s game. Hate when the latest Fall Out Boy song comes on and TJ says, “I love this song,” because now I can’t like it anymore. But mostly, I hate the fact that barely a month after my and Jake’s momentous first time, I got blind drunk and slept with TJ Forrester.

When we get to the beach Cooper and Luis are already building a bonfire, and Jake heaves a frustrated grunt as he shifts into park. “They do it wrong every time,” he complains, launching himself out of the car toward them. “You guys. You’re too close to the water!”

TJ and I get out of the car more slowly, not looking at each other. I’m already freezing, and wrap my arms around my body for warmth. “Do you want my jack—” TJ starts, but I don’t let him finish.

“No.” I cut him off and stalk toward the beach, almost tripping in my stupid shoes when I reach the sand.

TJ’s at my side, arm out to steady me. “Addy, hey.” His voice is low, his minty breath briefly on my cheek. “It doesn’t have to be this awkward, you know? I’m not going to say anything.”

I shouldn’t be mad at him. It’s not his fault. I’m the one who got insecure after Jake and I slept together, and started thinking he was losing interest every time he took too long to

answer a text. I'm the one who flir!ted with TJ when we ran into each other on this exact same beach over the summer while Jake was on vacation. I'm the one who dared TJ to get a bottle of rum, and drank almost half of it with a Diet Coke chaser.

At one point that day I laughed so hard I snorted soda out of my nose, which would have disgusted Jake. TJ just said in this dry way, "Wow, Addy, that was attractive. I'm very turned on by you right now."

That was when I k!ssed him. And suggested we go back to his place.

So really, none of this is his fault.

We reach the edge of the beach and watch Jake douse the fire so he can rebuild it where he wants. I sneak a glance at TJ and see dimples flash as he waves to the guys. "Just forget it ever happened," he says under his breath.

He sounds sincere, and hope sparks in my chest. Maybe we really can keep this to ourselves. Bayview's a gossipy school, but at least About That isn't hanging over everybody's heads anymore.

And if I'm being one hundred percent honest, I have to admit—that's a relief.