

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 7

0 11 minutes read

Addy

Sunday, September 30, 2:05 p.m.

I shade my eyes against the sun outside the church, scanning the crowd until I spot Jake. He and the other pallbearers put Simon's casket onto some kind of metal stretcher, then step aside as the funeral directors angle it toward the hearse.

I look down, not wanting to watch Simon's body get loaded into the back of a car like an oversized suitcase, and somebody taps me on the shoulder.

"Addy Prentiss?" An older woman dressed in a boxy blue suit gives me a polite, professional smile. "I'm Detective Laura Wheeler with the Bayview Police. I want to follow up on the discussion you had last week with Officer Budapest about Simon Kelleher's death. Could you come to the station with me for a few minutes?"

I stare at her and lick my lips. I want to ask why, but she's so calm and assured, like it's the most natural thing in the world to pull me aside after a funeral, that it seems rude to question her. Jake comes up beside me then, handsome in his suit, and gives Detective Wheeler a friendly, curious smile. My eyes dart between them and I stammer, "Isn't it—I mean—can't we talk here?"

Detective Wheeler winces. "So crowded, don't you think? And we're right around the corner." She gives Jake a half smile. "Detective Laura Wheeler, Bayview Police. I'm looking to borrow Addy for a little while and get clarification on a few points related to Simon Kelleher's death."

"Sure," he says, like that settles things. "Text me if you need a ride after, Ads. Luis and I will stick around downtown. We're starving and we gotta talk offensive strategy for next Saturday's game. Going to Glenn's, probably."

So that's it, I guess. I follow Detective Wheeler down the cobblestone path behind the church that leads to the sidewalk, even though I don't want to.

Maybe this is what Ashton means when she says I don't think for myself. It's three blocks to the police station, and we walk in silence past a hardware store, the post office, and an ice cream parlor where a little girl out front is having a meltdown about getting chocolate sprinkles instead of rainbow.

I keep thinking I should tell Detective Wheeler that my mother will worry if I don't come straight home, but I'm not sure I could say it without laughing.

We pass through metal detectors in the front of the police station and Detective Wheeler leads me straight to the back and into a small, overheated room. I've never been inside a police station before, and I thought it would be more ... I don't know.

Official-looking. It reminds me of the conference room in Principal Gupta's office, with worse lighting. The flickering fluorescent tube above us deepens every line on Detective Wheeler's face and turns her skin an unattractive yellow. I wonder what it does to mine.

She offers me a drink, and when I decline she leaves the room for a few minutes, returning with a messenger bag slung over one shoulder and a small, dark-haired woman trailing behind her. Both of them sit across from me at the squat metal table, and Detective Wheeler lowers her bag onto the floor.

"Addy, this is Lorna Shaloub, a family liaison for the Bayview School District. She's here as an interested adult on your behalf. Now, this is not a custodial interrogation. You don't have to answer my questions and you are free to leave at any time. Do you understand?"

Not really. She lost me at "interested adult." But I say "Sure," even though I wish more than ever I'd just gone home. Or that Jake had come with me.

"Good. I hope you'll hang in here with me. My sense is, of all the kids involved, you're the most likely to have gotten in over your head with no ill intent."

I blink at her. "No ill what?"

"No ill intent. I want to show you something." She reaches into the bag next to her and pulls out a laptop. Ms. Shaloub and I wait as she opens it and presses a few keys. I svck in my cheeks, wondering if she's going to show me the Tumblr posts.

Maybe the police think one of us wrote them as some kind of awful joke. If they ask me who, I guess I'd have to say, Bronwyn. Because the whole thing sounds like it's written by somebody who thinks they're ten times smarter than everyone else.

Detective Wheeler turns the laptop so it's facing me. I'm not sure what I'm looking at, but it seems like some kind of blog, with the About That logo front and center. I give her a questioning look, and she says, "This is the admin panel Simon used to manage content for About That. The text below last Monday's date stamp are his latest posts."

I lean forward and start to read.

First time this app has ever featured good-girl BR, possessor of school's most perfect academic record. Except she didn't get that A in chemistry through plain old hard work, unless that's how you define stealing tests from Mr. C's Google Drive. Someone call Yale

On the opposite end of the spectrum, our favorite criminal NM's back to doing what he does best: making sure the entire school is as high as it wants to be. Pretty sure that's a probation violation there, N.

MLB plus CC equals a whole lot of green next June, right? Seems inevitable Bayview's southpaw will make a splash in the major leagues ... but don't they have some pretty strict antijuicing rules? Because CC's performance was most definitely enhanced during showcase season.

AP and JR are the perfect couple. Homecoming princess and star running back, in love for three years straight. Except for that intimate detour A took over the summer with TF at his beach house. Even more awkward now that the guys are friends. Think they compare notes?

I can't breathe. It's out there for everyone to see. How? Simon's dead; he can't have published this. Has someone else taken over for him? The Tumblr poster? But it doesn't even matter: the how, the why, the when—all that matters is that it is. Jake will see it, if he hasn't already. All the things I read before I got to my initials, that shocked me as I realized who they were about and what they meant, fall out of my brain. Nothing exists except my stupid, horrible mistake in black and white on the screen for the whole world to read.

Jake will know. And he'll never forgive me.

I'm almost folded in half with my head on the table, and can't make out Detective Wheeler's words at first. Then some start breaking through. "... can understand how you felt trapped ... keep this from being published ... If you tell us what happened we can help you, Addy"

Only one phrase sinks in. "Is this not published?"

"It was queued up the day Simon died, but he never got the chance to post it," Detective Wheeler says calmly.

Salvation. Jake hasn't seen this. Nobody has. Except ... this police officer, and maybe other police officers. What I'm focused on and what she's focused on are two different things.

Detective Wheeler leans forward, her lips stretched in a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "You may already have recognized the initials, but those other stories were about Bronwyn Rojas, Nate Macauley, and Cooper Clay. The four of you who were in the room with Simon when he died."

"That's ... a weird coincidence," I manage.

“Isn’t it?” Detective Wheeler agrees. “Addy, you already know how Simon died. We’ve analyzed Mr. Avery’s room and can’t see any way that peanut oil could have gotten into Simon’s cup unless someone put it there after he filled it from the tap. There were only six people in the room, one of whom is dead. Your teacher left for a long period of time.

The four of you who remained with Simon all had reasons for wanting to keep him quiet.” Her voice doesn’t get any louder, but it fills my ears like buzzing from a hive.

“Do you see where I’m heading with this? This might have been carried out as a group, but it doesn’t mean you share equal responsibility. There’s a big difference between coming up with an idea and going along with it.”

I look at Ms. Shaloub. She does look interested, I have to say, but not like she’s on my side. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“You lied about being in the nurse’s office, Addy. Did someone put you up to that? To removing the EpiPens so Simon couldn’t be helped later?”

My heart pounds as I pull a strand of hair off my shoulders and twist it around my fingers. “I didn’t lie. I forgot.” God, what if she makes me take a lie detector test? I’ll never pass.

“Kids your age are under a lot of pressure today,” Detective Wheeler says. Her tone is almost friendly, but her eyes are as flat as ever. “The social media alone—it’s like you can’t make a mistake anymore, can you? It follows you everywhere.

The court is very forgiving toward impressionable young people who act hastily when they have a lot to lose, especially when they help us uncover the truth. Simon’s family deserves the truth, don’t you think?”

I hunch my shoulders and tug at my hair. I don’t know what to do. Jake would know—but Jake’s not here. I look at Ms. Shaloub tucking her short hair behind her ears, and suddenly Ashton’s voice pops into my head. You don’t have to answer any questions.

Right. Detective Wheeler said that at the beginning, and the words push everything else out of my brain with startling relief and clarity.

“I’m going to leave now.”

I say it with confidence, but I’m still not one hundred percent sure I can do that. I stand and wait for her to stop me, but she doesn’t. She just narrows her eyes and says, “Of course. As I told you, this isn’t a custodial interrogation. But please understand, the help I can give you now won’t be the same once you leave this room.”

“I don’t need your help,” I tell her, and walk out the door, then out of the police station. Nobody stops me. Once I’m outside, though, I don’t know where to go or what to do.

I sit on a bench and pull out my phone, my hands shaking. I can't call Jake, not for this. But who does that leave? My mind's as blank as if Detective Wheeler took an eraser and wiped it clean. I've built my entire world around Jake and now that it's shattered I realize, way too late, that I should have cultivated some other people who'd care that a police officer with mom hair and a sensible suit just accused me of murder. And when I say "care," I don't mean in an oh-my-God-did-you-hear-what-happened-to-Addy kind of way.

My mother would care, but I can't face that much scorn and judgment right now.

I scroll to the As in my contact list and press a name. It's my only option, and I say a silent prayer of thanks when she picks up.

"Ash?" Somehow I manage not to cry at my sister's voice. "I need help."

Cooper

Sunday, September 30, 2:30 p.m.

When Detective Chang shows me Simon's unpublished About That page, I read everyone else's entry first. Bronwyn's shocks me, Nate's doesn't, I have no idea who the hell this "TF" Addy supposedly hooked up with is—and I'm almost positive I know what's coming for me. My heart pounds as I spy my initials: Because CC's performance was most definitely enhanced during showcase season.

Huh. My pulse slows as I lean back in my chair. That's not what I expected.

Although I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I improved too much, too quickly—even the Padres scout said something.

Detective Chang dances around the subject for a while, dropping hints until I understand he thinks the four of us who were in the room planned the whole thing to keep Simon from posting his update. I try to picture it—me, Nate, and the two girls plotting murder by peanut oil in Mr. Avery's detention. It's so stupid it wouldn't even make a good movie.

I know I'm quiet for too long. "Nate and I never even spoke before last week," I finally say. "And I sure as heck never talked to the girls about this."

Detective Chang leans almost halfway across the table. "You're a good kid, Cooper. Your record's sp0tless till now, and you've got a bright future. You made one mistake and you got caught. That's scary. I get that. But it's not too late to do the right thing."

I'm not sure which mistake he's referring to: my alleged juicing, my alleged murdering, or something we haven't talked about yet. But as far as I know, I haven't been caught at

anything. Just accused. Bronwyn and Addy are probably getting the exact same speech somewhere. I guess Nate would get a different one.

“I didn’t cheat,” I tell Detective Chang. “And I didn’t hurt Simon.” Ah didn’t. I can hear my accent coming back.

He tries a different tack. “Whose idea was it to use the planted cell phones to get all of you into detention together?”

I lean forward, palms pressed on the black wool of my good pants. I hardly ever wear them, and they’re making me hot and itchy. My heart’s banging against my chest again. “Listen. I don’t know who did that, but ... isn’t it something you should look into? Like, were there fingerprints on the phones? Because it feels to me like maybe we were framed.” The other guy in the room, some representative from the Bayview School District who hasn’t said a word, nods like I’ve said something profound. But Detective Chang’s expression doesn’t change.

“Cooper, we examined those phones as soon as we started to suspect foul play. There’s no forensic evidence to suggest anyone else was involved. Our focus is on the four of you, and that’s where I expect it to remain.”

Which finally gets me to say, “I want to call my parents.”

The “want” part isn’t true, but I’m in over my head. Detective Chang heaves a sigh like I’ve disappointed him but says, “All right. You have your cell phone with you?” When I nod, he says, “You can make the call here.” He stays in the room while I call Pop, who catches on a lot faster than I did.

“Give me that detective you’re talking to,” he spits. “Right now. And Cooperstown—wait, Cooper! Hold up. Don’t you say another goddamn word to anyone.”

I hand Detective Chang my phone and he puts it to his ear. I can’t hear everything Pop’s saying, but he’s loud enough that I get the basic idea. Detective Chang tries to insert a few words—along the lines of how it’s perfectly legal to question minors in California without their parents present—but mostly he lets Pop rant. At one point he says, “No. He’s free to go,” and my ears prick up. It hadn’t occurred to me that I could leave.

Detective Chang gives my phone back, and Pop’s voice crackles in my ear. “Cooper, you there? Get your ass home. They’re not charging you with anything, and you’re not gonna answer any more questions without me and a lawyer.”

A lawyer. Do I actually need one of those? I hang up and face Detective Chang. “My father told me to leave.”

“You have that right,” Detective Chang says, and I wish I’d known that from the beginning. Maybe he told me. I honestly don’t remember. “But, Cooper, these

conversations are happening all over the station with your friends. One of them is going to agree to work with us, and that person will be treated very differently from the rest of you. I think it should be you. I'd like you to have that chance."

I want to tell him he's got it all wrong, but Pop told me to stop talking. I can't bring myself to leave without saying anything, though. So I end up shaking Detective Chang's hand and saying, "Thank you for your time, sir."

I sound like the as*s-k!sser of the century. It's years of conditioning kicking in.