

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 9

0 8 minutes read

Addy

Sunday, September 30, 5:30 p.m.

Ashton unlocks the door to her condo in downtown San Diego. It's a one-bedroom, because she and Charlie can't afford anything bigger. Especially with a year's worth of law school debt that'll be hard to repay now that Ashton's graphic design business hasn't taken off and Charlie's decided to make nature documentaries instead of being a lawyer.

But that's not what we're here to talk about.

Ashton brews coffee in her kitchen, which is tiny but cute: white cabinets, glossy black granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and retro light fixtures. "Where's Charlie?" I ask as she doctors mine with cream and sugar, pale and sweet the way I like it.

"Rock climbing," Ashton says, pressing her lips into a thin line as she hands me the mug. Charlie has lots of hobbies Ashton doesn't share, and they're all expensive. "I'll call him about finding you a lawyer. Maybe one of his old professors knows someone."

Ashton insisted on taking me to get something to eat after we left the police station, and I told her everything at the restaurant—well, almost everything. The truth about Simon's rumor, anyway. She tried calling Mom on the way here, but got voice mail and left a cryptic call-me-as-soon-as-you-get-this message.

Which Mom has ignored. Or not seen. Maybe I should give her the benefit of the doubt.

We take our coffee to Ashton's balcony and settle ourselves into bright-red chairs on either side of a tiny table. I close my eyes and swallow a mouthful of hot, sweet liquid, willing myself to relax. It doesn't work, but I keep sipping slowly until I'm done. Ashton pulls out her phone and leaves a terse message for Charlie, then tries our mother again. "Still voice mail," she sighs, draining the last of her coffee.

"Nobody's home except us," I say, and for some reason that makes me laugh. A little hysterically. I might be losing it.

Ashton rests her elbows on the table and clasps her hands together under her chin. "Addy, you've got to tell Jake what happened."

"Simon's update isn't live," I say weakly, but Ashton shakes her head.

"It'll get out. Maybe gossip, maybe the police talking to him to put pressure on you. But it's something you need to deal with in your relationship no matter what." She hesitates, tucking her hair behind her ears. "Addy, is there some part of you that's been wanting Jake to find out?"

Resentment surges through me. Ashton can't stop her anti-Jake crusade even in the middle of a crisis. "Why would I ever want that?"

"He calls the shots on everything, doesn't he? Maybe you got tired of that. I would."

"Right, because you're the relationship expert," I snap. "I haven't seen you and Charlie together in over a month."

Ashton purses her lips. "This isn't about me. You need to tell Jake, and soon. You don't want him to hear this from someone else."

All the fight goes out of me, because I know she's right. Waiting will only make things worse. And since Mom's not calling us back, I might as well rip off the Band-Aid. "Will you take me to his house?"

I have a bunch of texts from Jake anyway, asking how things went at the station. I should probably be focusing on the whole criminal aspect of this, but as usual, my mind's consumed with Jake. I take out my phone, open my messages, and text, Can I tell you in person?

Jake responds right away. "Only Girl" blares, which seems inappropriate for the conversation that's about to follow.

Of course.

I rinse out our mugs while Ashton collects her keys and purse. We step into the hallway and Ashton shuts the door behind us, tugging the knob to make sure it's locked. I follow her to the elevator, my nerves buzzing. I shouldn't have had that coffee. Even if it was mostly milk.

We're more than halfway to Bayview when Charlie calls. I try to tune out Ashton's tense, clipped conversation, but it's impossible in such close quarters. "I'm not asking for me," she says at one point. "Can you be the bigger person for once?"

I scrunch in my seat and take out my phone, scrolling through messages. Keely's sent half a dozen texts about Halloween costumes, and Olivia's agonizing about whether she should get back together with Luis. Again. Ashton finally hangs up and says with forced brightness, "Charlie's going to make a few calls about a lawyer."

"Great. Tell him thanks." I feel like I should say more, but I'm not sure what, and we lapse into silence. Still, I'd rather spend hours in my sister's quiet car than five minutes

in Jake's house, which looms in front of us all too quickly. "I'm not sure how long this will take," I tell Ashton as she pulls into the driveway. "And I might need a ride home." Nausea rolls through my stomach. If I hadn't done what I did with TJ, Jake would insist on being a part of whatever comes next. The whole situation would still be terrifying, but I wouldn't have to face it on my own.

"I'll be at the Starbucks on Clarendon Street," Ashton says as I climb out of the car. "Text me when you're done."

I feel sorry, then, for snapping at her and goading her about Charlie. If she hadn't picked me up from the police station, I don't know what I would have done. But she backs out of the driveway before I can say anything, and I start my slow march to Jake's front door.

His mom answers when I ring the bell, smiling so normally that I almost think everything's going to be okay. I've always liked Mrs. Riordan. She used to be a hotshot advertising executive till right before Jake started high school, when she decided to downshift and focus on her family. I think my mother secretly wishes she were Mrs. Riordan, with a glamorous career she doesn't have to do anymore and a handsome, successful husband.

Mr. Riordan can be intimidating, though. He's a my-way-or-nothing sort of man. Whenever I mention that, Ashton starts muttering about apples not falling far from trees.

"Hi, Addy. I'm on my way out, but Jake's waiting for you downstairs."

"Thanks," I say, stepping past her into the foyer.

I can hear her lock the door behind her and her car door slam as I take the stairs down to Jake. The Riordans have a finished basement that's basically Jake's domain. It's huge, and they have a pool table and a giant TV and lots of overstuffed chairs and couches down there, so our friends hang out here more than anywhere else. As usual, Jake is sprawled on the biggest couch with an Xbox controller in hand.

"Hey, baby." He pauses the game and sits up when he sees me. "How'd everything go?"

"Not good," I say, and start shaking all over. Jake's face is full of concern I don't deserve. He gets to his feet, trying to pull me down next to him, but I resist for once. I take a seat in the armchair beside the couch. "I think I should sit over here while I tell you this."

A frown creases Jake's forehead. He sits back down, on the edge of the couch this time, his elbows resting on his knees as he gazes at me intently. "You're scaring me, Ads."

"It's been a scary day," I say, twisting a strand of hair around my finger. My throat feels as dry as dust. "The detective wanted to talk to me because she thinks I ... She thinks all of us who were in detention with Simon that day ... killed him. They think we deliberately put peanut oil in his water so he'd die." It occurs to me as the words slip out that maybe I wasn't supposed to talk about this part. But I'm used to telling Jake everything.

Jake stares at me, blinks, and barks out a short laugh. "Jesus. That's not funny, Addy." He almost never calls me by my actual name.

"I'm not joking. She thinks we did it because he was about to publish an update of About That featuring the four of us. Reporting awful things we'd never want to get out." I'm tempted to tell him the other gossip first—See, I'm not the only horrible person!—but I don't. "There was something about me on there, something true, that I have to tell you. I should have told you when it happened but I was too scared." I stare at the floor, my eyes focusing on a loose thread in the plush blue carpet. If I pulled it I bet the whole section would unravel.

"Go on," Jake says. I can't read his tone at all.

God. How can my heart be hammering this hard and I still be alive? It should have burst out of my chest by now. "At the end of school last year, when you were in Cozumel with your parents, I ran into TJ at the beach. We got a bottle of rum and ended up getting really drunk. And I went to TJ's house and, um, I hooked up with him." Tears slide down my cheeks and drip onto my collarbone.

"Hooked up how?" Jake asks flatly. I hesitate, wondering if there's any possible way I can make this sound less awful than it is. But then Jake repeats himself—"Hooked up how?"—so forcefully that the words spring out of me.

"We slept together." I'm crying so hard I can barely get more words out. "I'm sorry, Jake. I made a stupid, horrible mistake and I'm so, so sorry."

Jake doesn't say anything for a minute, and when he speaks his voice is icy cold.

"You're sorry, huh? That's great. That's all right, then. As long as you're sorry."

"I really am," I start, but before I can continue he springs up and rams his fist into the wall behind him. I can't help the startled cry that escapes me. The plaster cracks, raining white dust across the blue rug. Jake shakes his fist and hits the wall harder.

"Fvck, Addy. You screw my friend months ago, you've been lying to me ever since, and you're sorry? What the hell is wrong with you? I treat you like a queen."

"I know," I sob, staring at the bloody smears his knuckles left on the wall.

“You let me hang out with a guy who’s laughing his as\*s off behind my back while you jump out of his bed and into mine like nothing happened. Pretending you give a sh!t about me.” Jake almost never swears in my presence, or if he does, he apologizes afterward.

“I do! Jake, I love you. I’ve always loved you, since the first time I saw you.”

“So why’d you do it? Why?”

I’ve asked myself that question for months and can’t come up with anything except weak excuses. I was drunk, I was stupid, I was insecure. I guess that last one’s closest to the truth; years of being not enough finally catching up with me. “I made a mistake. I’d do anything to fix it. If I could take it back I would.”

“But you can’t, can you?” Jake asks. He’s silent for a minute, breathing hard. I don’t dare say another word. “Look at me.” I keep my head in my hands as long as I can. “Look at me, Addy. You fvcking owe me that.”

So I do, but I wish I hadn’t. His face—that beautiful face I’ve loved since before it ever looked as good as it does now—is twisted with rage. “You ruined everything. You know that, right?”

“I know.” It comes out as a moan, like I’m a trapped animal. If I could gnaw my own limb off to escape this situation, I would.

“Get out. Get the hell out of my house. I can’t stand the sight of you.”

I’m not sure how I manage to get up the stairs, never mind out the door. Once I’m in the driveway I scramble through my bag trying to find my phone. There’s no way I can stand in Jake’s driveway sobbing while I wait for Ashton. I need to walk to Clarendon Street and find her. Then a car across the street beeps softly, and through a haze of tears I watch my sister lower her window.

Her mouth droops as I approach. “I thought it might go like this. Come on, get in. Mom’s waiting for us.”