

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 2

0 10 minutes read

Addy

Monday, September 24, 3:25 p.m.

Bronwyn, Nate, and Cooper are all talking to the teachers, but I can't. I need Jake. I pull my phone out of my bag to text him but my hands are shaking too bad. So I call instead.

"Baby?" He picks up on the second ring, sounding surprised. We're not big callers. None of our friends are. Sometimes when I'm with Jake and his phone rings, he holds it up and jokes, "What does 'incoming call' mean?" It's usually his mom.

"Jake" is all I can get out before I start bawling. Cooper's arm is still around my shoulders, and it's the only thing keeping me up. I'm crying too hard to talk, and Cooper takes the phone from me.

"Hey, man. 'S Cooper," he says, his accent thicker than normal. "Where you at?" He listens for a few seconds. "Can you meet us outside? There's been ... Somethin' happened. Addy's real upset. Naw, she's fine, but ... Simon Kelleher got hurt bad in detention. Ambulance took him an' we dunno if he's gon' be okay." Cooper's words melt into one another like ice cream, and I can hardly understand him.

Bronwyn turns to the closest teacher, Ms. Grayson. "Should we stay? Do you need us?"

Ms. Grayson's hands flutter around her throat. "Goodness, I don't suppose so. You told the paramedics everything? Simon ... took a drink of water and collapsed?" Bronwyn and Cooper both nod. "It's so strange. He has a peanut allergy, of course, but ... you're sure he didn't eat anything?"

Cooper gives me my phone and runs a hand through his neatly cropped sandy hair. "I don't think so. He just drank a cup of water an' fell over."

"Maybe it was something he had with lunch," Ms. Grayson says. "It's possible he had a delayed reaction." She looks around the room, her eyes settling on Simon's discarded cup on the floor. "I suppose we should put this aside," she says, brushing past Bronwyn to pick it up. "Somebody might want to look at it."

"I want to go," I burst out, swiping at the tears on my cheeks. I can't stand being in this room another second.

"Okay if I help her?" Cooper asks, and Ms. Grayson nods. "Should I come back?"

"No, that's all right, Cooper. I'm sure they'll call you if they need you. Go home and try to get back to normal. Simon's in good hands now." She leans in a little closer, her tone softening. "I am so sorry. That must have been awful."

She's mostly looking at Cooper, though. There's not a female teacher at Bayview who can resist his all-American charm.

Cooper keeps an arm around me on the way out. It's nice. I don't have brothers, but if I did, I imagine this is how they'd prop you up when you felt sick. Jake wouldn't like most of his friends being this close to me, but Cooper's fine. He's a gentleman. I lean into him as we pass posters for last week's homecoming dance that haven't been taken down yet. Cooper pushes the front door open, and there, thank God, is Jake.

I collapse into his arms, and for a second, everything's okay. I'll never forget seeing Jake for the first time, freshman year: he had a mouth full of braces and hadn't gotten tall or broad-shouldered yet, but I took one look at his dimples and summer sky-blue eyes and knew. He was the one for me. It's just a bonus he turned out beautiful.

He strokes my hair while Cooper explains in a low voice what happened. "God, Ads," Jake says. "That's awful. Let's get you home."

Cooper leaves on his own, and I'm suddenly sorry I didn't do more for him. I can tell by his voice he's as freaked out as I am, just hiding it better. But Cooper's so golden, he can handle anything. His girlfriend, Keely, is one of my best friends, and the kind of girl who does everything right. She'll know exactly how to help. Way better than me.

I settle myself into Jake's car and watch the town blur past as he drives a little too fast. I live only a mile from school, and the drive is short, but I'm bracing myself for my mother's reaction because I'm positive she'll have heard. Her communication channels are mysterious but foolproof, and sure enough she's standing on our front porch as Jake pulls into the driveway. I can read her mood even though the Botox froze her expressions long ago.

I wait until Jake opens my door to climb out of the car, fitting myself under his arm like always. My older sister, Ashton, likes to joke that I'm one of those barnacles that would die without its host. It's not actually so funny.

"Adelaide!" My mother's concern is theatrical. She stretches out a hand as we make our way up the steps and strokes my free arm. "Tell me what happened."

I don't want to. Especially not with Mom's boyfriend lurking in the doorway behind her, pretending his curiosity is actual concern. Justin is twelve years younger than my mother, which makes him five years younger than her second husband, and fifteen years younger than my dad. At the rate she's going, she'll date Jake next.

"It's fine," I mutter, ducking past them. "I'm fine."

"Hey, Mrs. Calloway," Jake says. Mom uses her second husband's last name, not my dad's. "I'm going to take Addy to her room. The whole thing was awful. I can tell you about it after I get her settled." It always amazes me how Jake talks to my mother, like they're peers.

And she lets him get away with it. Likes it. "Of course," she simpers.

My mother thinks Jake's too good for me. She's been telling me that since sophomore year when he got super hot and I stayed the same. Mom used to enter Ashton and me into beauty pageants when we were little, always with the same results for both of us: second runner-up. Homecoming princess, not queen. Not bad, but not good enough to attract and keep the kind of man who can take care of you for life.

I'm not sure if that's ever been stated as a goal or anything, but it's what we're supposed to do. My mother failed. Ashton's failing in her two-year marriage with a husband who's dropped out of law school and barely spends any time with her. Something about the Prentiss girls doesn't stick.

"Sorry," I murmur to Jake as we head upstairs. "I didn't handle this well. You should've seen Bronwyn and Cooper. They were great. And Nate—my God. I never thought I'd see Nate Macauley take charge that way. I was the only one who was useless."

"Shhh, don't talk like that," Jake says into my hair. "It's not true."

He says it with a note of finality, because he refuses to see anything but the best in me. If that ever changed, I honestly don't know what I'd do.

Nate

Monday, September 24, 4:00 p.m.

When Bronwyn and I get to the parking lot it's nearly empty, and we hesitate once we're outside the door. I've known Bronwyn since kindergarten, give or take a few middle-school years, but we don't exactly hang out. Still, it's not weird having her next to me. Almost comfortable after that disaster upstairs.

She looks around like she just woke up. "I didn't drive," she mutters. "I was supposed to get a ride. To Epoch Coffee." Something about the way she says it sounds significant, as if there's more to the story she's not sharing.

I have business to transact, but now probably isn't the time. "You want a ride?"

Bronwyn follows my gaze to my motorcycle. "Seriously? I wouldn't get on that deathtrap if you paid me. Do you know the fatality rates? They're no joke." She looks ready to pull out a spread sheet and show me.

"Suit yourself." I should leave her and go home, but I'm not ready to face that yet. I lean against the building and pull a flask of Jim Beam out of my jacket pocket, unscrewing the top and holding it toward Bronwyn. "Drink?"

She folds her arms tightly across her chest. "Are you kidding? That's your brilliant idea before climbing onto your machine of destruction? And on school property?"

"You're a lot of fun, you know that?" I don't actually drink much; I'd grabbed the flask from my father this morning and forgotten about it. But there's something satisfying about annoying Bronwyn.

I'm about to put it back in my pocket when Bronwyn furrows her brow and holds out her hand. "What the hell." She slumps against the redbrick wall beside me, inching down until she's sitting on the ground. For some reason I flash back to elementary school, when Bronwyn and I went to the same Catholic school. Before life went completely to hell. All the girls wore plaid uniform skirts, and she's got a similar skirt on now that hikes up her thighs as she crosses her ankles. The view's not bad.

She drinks for a surprisingly long time. "What. Just. Happened?"

I sit next to her and take the flask, putting it on the ground between us. "I have no idea."

"He looked like he was going to die." Bronwyn's hand shakes so hard when she picks up the flask again that it clatters against the ground. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah," I say as Bronwyn takes another swig and makes a face.

"Poor Cooper," she says. "He sounded like he left Ole Miss yesterday. He always gets that way when he's nervous."

"I wouldn't know. But what's-her-name was useless."

"Addy." Bronwyn's shoulder briefly nudges mine. "You should know her name."

"Why?" I can't think of a good reason. That girl and I have barely crossed paths before today and probably won't again. I'm pretty sure that's fine with both of us. I know her type. Not a thought in her head except her boyfriend and whatever petty power play's happening with her friends this week. Hot enough, I guess, but other than that she's got nothing to offer.

"Because we've all been through a huge trauma together," Bronwyn says, like that settles things.

"You have a lot of rules, don't you?"

I forgot how tiring Bronwyn is. Even in grade school, the amount of crap she cared about on a daily basis would wear down a normal person. She was always trying to join things, or start things for other people to join. Then be in charge of all the things she joined or started.

She's not boring, though. I'll give her that.

We sit in silence, watching the last of the cars leave the parking lot, while Bronwyn sips occasionally from the flask. When I finally take it from her, I'm surprised at how light it is. I doubt Bronwyn's used to hard liquor. She seems more a wine cooler girl. If that.

I put the flask back in my pocket as she plucks lightly at my sleeve. "You know, I meant to tell you, back when it happened—I was really sorry to hear about your mom," she says haltingly. "My uncle died in a car accident too, right around the same time. I wanted to say something to you, but ... you and I, you know, we didn't really ..." She trails off, her hand still resting on my arm.

"Talk," I say. "It's fine. Sorry about your uncle."

"You must miss her a lot."

I don't want to talk about my mother. "Ambulance came pretty fast today, huh?"

Bronwyn gets a little red and pulls her hand back, but rolls with the quick-change conversation. "How did you know what to do? For Simon?"

I shrug. "Everybody knows he has a peanut allergy. That's what you do."

"I didn't know about the pen." She snorts out a laugh. "Cooper gave you an actual pen! Like you were going to write him a note or something. Oh my God." She bangs her head so hard against the wall she might've cracked something. "I should go home. This is unproductive at best."

"Offer of a ride stands."

I don't expect her to take it, but she says "Sure, why not" and holds out her hand. She stumbles a little as I help her up. I didn't think alcohol could kick in after fifteen minutes, but I might've underestimated the Bronwyn Rojas lightweight factor. Probably should have taken the flask away sooner.

"Where do you live?" I ask, straddling the seat and fitting the key in the ignition.

"Thorndike Street. A couple miles from here. Past the center of town, turn left onto Stone Valley Terrace after Starbucks." The rich part of town. Of course.

I don't usually take anybody on my bike and don't have a second helmet, so I give her mine. She takes it and I have to will myself to pull my eyes away from the bare skin of her thigh as she hops on behind me, tucking her skirt between her legs. She clamps her arms around my waist too tightly, but I don't say anything.

"Go slow, okay?" she asks nervously as I start the engine. I'd like to irritate her more, but I leave the parking lot at half my normal speed. And though I didn't think it was possible, she squeezes me even tighter. We ride like that, her helmeted head pressed up against my back, and I'd bet a thousand dollars, if I had it, that her eyes are shut tight until we reach her driveway.

Her house is about what you'd expect—a huge Victorian with a big lawn and lots of complicated trees and flowers. There's a Volvo SUV in the driveway, and my bike—which you could call a classic if you were feeling generous—looks as ridiculous next to it as Bronwyn must look behind me. Talk about things that don't go together.

Bronwyn climbs off and fumbles at the helmet. I unhook it and help her pull it off, loosening a strand of hair that catches on the strap. She takes a deep breath and straightens her skirt.

"That was terrifying," she says, then jumps as a phone rings. "Where's my backpack?"

"Your back."

She shrugs it off and yanks her phone from the front pocket. "Hello? Yes, I can Yes, this is Bronwyn. Did you— Oh God. Are you sure?" Her backpack slips out of her hand and falls at her feet. "Thank you for calling." She lowers the phone and stares at me, her eyes wide and glassy.

"Nate, he's gone," she says. "Simon's dead."