

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 10

0 12 minutes read

Part Two

HIDE-AND-SEEK

Bronwyn

Monday, October 1, 7:30 a.m.

I get ready for school on Monday the way I always do. Up at six so I can run for half an hour. Oatmeal with berries and orange juice at six-thirty, a shower ten minutes later. Dry my hair, pick out clothes, put on sunscreen. Scan the New York Times for ten minutes. Check my email, pack my books, make sure my phone's fully charged.

The only thing that's different is the seven-thirty meeting with my lawyer.

Her name is Robin Stafford, and according to my father she's a brilliant, highly successful criminal defense attorney. But not overly high-profile. Not the kind of lawyer automatically associated with guilty rich people trying to buy their way out of trouble. She's right on time and gives me a wide, warm smile when Maeve leads her into the kitchen.

I wouldn't be able to guess her age by looking at her, but the bio my father showed me last night says she's forty-one. She's wearing a cream-colored suit that's striking against her dark skin, subtle gold jewelry, and shoes that look expensive but not Jimmy Choo level.

She takes a seat at our kitchen island across from my parents and me. "Bronwyn, it's a pleasure. Let's talk about what you might expect today and how you should handle school."

Sure. Because that's my life now. School is something to be handled.

She folds her hands in front of her. "I'm not sure the police truly believed the four of you planned this together, but I do think they hoped to shock and pressure one of you into giving up useful information. That indicates their evidence is flimsy at best. If none of you point fingers and your stories line up, they don't have anywhere to take this investigation, and it's my belief it will ultimately be closed out as an accidental death."

The vise that's been gripping my chest all morning loosens a little. "Even though Simon was about to post those awful things about us? And there's that whole Tumblr thing going on?"

Robin gives an elegant little shrug. "At the end of the day, that's nothing but gossip and trolling. I know you kids take it seriously, but in the legal world it's meaningless unless hard proof emerges to back it up. The best thing you can do is not talk about the case. Certainly not with the police, but not with school administrators either."

"What if they ask?"

"Tell them you've retained counsel and can't answer questions without your lawyer present."

I try to imagine having that conversation with Principal Gupta. I don't know what the school's heard about this, but me pleading the Fifth would be a major red flag.

"Are you friendly with the other kids who were in detention that day?" Robin asks.

"Not exactly. Cooper and I have some classes together, but—"

"Bronwyn." My mother interrupts with a chill in her voice. "You're friendly enough with Nate Macauley that he showed up here last night. For the third time."

Robin sits straighter in her chair, and I flush. That was a big topic of discussion last night after my dad made Nate leave. Dad thought he'd stalked our address in a creepy way, so I had some explaining to do.

"Why has Nate been here three times, Bronwyn?" Robin asks with a polite, interested air.

"It's no big deal. He gave me a ride home after Simon died. Then he stopped by last Friday to hang out for a while. And I don't know what he was doing here last night, since nobody would let me talk to him."

"It's the 'hanging out' while your parents aren't home that disturbs me—" my mother starts, but Robin interrupts her.

"Bronwyn, what's the nature of your relationship with Nate?"

I have no idea. Maybe you could help me analyze it? Is that part of your retainer? "I hardly know him. I hadn't talked to him in years before last week. We're both in this weird situation and ... it helps to be around other people going through the same thing."

"I recommend maintaining distance from the others," Robin says, ignoring my mother's evil eye in my direction. "No need to give the police further ammunition for their theories. If your cell phone and email are examined, will they show recent communication with those three students?"

"No," I say truthfully.

"That's good news." She glances at her watch, a slim gold Rolex. "That's all we can address now if you're going to get to school on time, which you should. Business as usual." She flashes me that warm smile again. "We'll talk more in depth later."

I say good-bye to my parents, not quite able to look them in the eye, and call for Maeve as I grab the keys to the Volvo. I spend the whole drive steeling myself for something awful to happen once we get to school, but it's weirdly normal. No police lying in wait for me. Nobody's looking at me any differently than they have since the first Tumblr post came out.

Still, I'm only half paying attention to Kate and Yumiko's chatter after homeroom, my eyes roaming the hallway. There's only one person I want to talk to, even though it's exactly who I'm supposed to stay away from. "Catch you guys later, okay?" I murmur, and intercept Nate after he ducks into the back stairwell.

If he's surprised to see me, he doesn't show it. "Bronwyn. How's the family?"

I lean against the wall next to him and lower my voice. "I wanted to apologize for my dad making you leave last night. He's kind of freaked out by all this."

"Wonder why." Nate drops his voice as well. "You been searched yet?" My eyes widen, and he laughs darkly. "Didn't think so. I was. You're probably not supposed to be talking to me, right?"

I can't help but glance around the empty stairwell. I'm already paranoid and Nate's not helping. I have to keep reminding myself that we did not, in fact, conspire to commit murder. "Why did you stop by?"

His eyes search mine as though he's about to say something profound about life and death and the presumption of innocence. "I was going to apologize for stealing Jesus from you."

I recoil a little. I have no idea what he's talking about. Is he making some kind of religious allegory? "What?"

"In the fourth-grade Nativity play at St. Pius. I stole Jesus and you had to carry a bag wrapped in a blanket. Sorry about that."

I stare at him for a second as the tension flows out of me, leaving me limp and slightly giddy. I punch him in the shoulder, startling him so much he actually laughs. "I knew it was you. Why'd you do that?"

"To get a rise out of you." He grins at me, and for a second I forget everything except the fact that Nate Macauley still has an adorable smile. "Also, I wanted to talk to you about—all this. But I guess it's too late. You must be lawyered up by now, right?" His smile disappears.

"Yes, but ... I want to talk to you too." The bell rings, and I pull out my phone. Then I remember Robin asking about communication records between the four of us and stuff it back into my bag. Nate catches the gesture and snorts another humorless laugh.

"Yeah, exchanging numbers is a sh!t idea. Unless you want to use this." He reaches into his backpack and hands me a flip phone.

I take it gingerly. "What is it?"

"An extra phone. I have a few." I run my thumb across the cover with a dawning idea of what it might be for, and he adds hastily, "It's new. Nobody's going to call it or anything. But I have the number. I'll call you. You can answer, or not. Up to you." He pauses, and adds, "Just don't, you know, leave it lying around. They get a warrant for your phone and computer, that's all they can touch. They can't go through your whole house."

I'm pretty sure my expensive lawyer would tell me not to take legal advice from Nate Macauley. And she'd probably have something to say about the fact that he has an apparently inexhaustible supply of the same cheap phones that corralled us all in detention last week. I watch him head up the stairs, knowing I should drop the phone into the nearest trash can. But I put it in my backpack instead.

Cooper

Monday, October 1, 11:00 a.m.

It's almost a relief to be at school. Better than home, where Pop spent hours ranting about how Simon's a liar and the police are incompetent and the school should be on the hook for this and lawyers will cost a fortune we don't have.

He didn't ask if any of it was true.

We're in a weird limbo now. Everything's different but it all looks the same. Except Jake and Addy, who're walking around like they want to kill and die, respectively. Bronwyn gives me the least convincing smile ever in the hallway, her lips pressed so tight they almost disappear. Nate's nowhere in sight.

We're all waiting for something to happen, I guess.

After gym something does, but it doesn't have anything to do with me. My friends and I are heading for the locker room after playing soccer, lagging behind everyone else, and Luis is going on about some new junior girl he's got his eye on. Our gym teacher opens the door to let a bunch of kids inside when Jake suddenly whirls around, grabs TJ by the shoulder, and punches him in the face.

Of course. "TF" from About That is TJ Forrester. The lack of a J confused me.

I grab Jake's arms, pulling him back before he can throw another punch, but he's so furious he almost gets away from me before Luis steps in to help. Even then, two of us can barely hold him. "You asshole," Jake spits at TJ, who staggers but doesn't fall. TJ puts a hand to his bloody, probably broken mess of a nose. He doesn't make any effort to go after Jake.

"Jake, come on, man," I say as the gym teacher races toward us. "You're gonna get suspended."

"Worth it," Jake says bitterly.

So instead of today's big story being Simon, it's about how Jake Riordan got sent home for punching TJ Forrester after gym class. And since Jake refused to speak to Addy before he left and she's practically in tears, everyone's pretty sure they know why.

"How could she?" Keely murmurs in the lunch line as Addy shuffles around like a sleepwalker.

"We don't know the whole story," I remind her.

I guess it's good Jake's not here since Addy sits with us at lunch like usual. I'm not sure she'd have the nerve otherwise. But she doesn't talk to anybody, and nobody talks to her. They're pretty obvious about it. Vanessa, who's always been the bltchiest girl in our group, physically turns away when Addy takes the chair next to her. Even Keely doesn't make any effort to include Addy in the conversation.

Bunch of hypocrites. Luis was on Simon's app for the same damn thing and Vanessa tried to give me a hand job at a pool party last month, so they shouldn't be judging anyone.

"How's it goin', Addy?" I ask, ignoring the stares of the rest of the table.

"Don't be nice, Cooper." She keeps her head down, her voice so low I can hardly hear it. "It's worse if you're nice."

"Addy." All the frustration and fear I've been feeling finds its way into my voice, and when Addy looks up a jolt of understanding passes between us. There're a million things we should be talking about, but we can't say any of them. "It'll be all right."

Keely puts her hand on my arm, asking, "What do you think?" and I realize I've missed an entire conversation.

"About what?"

She gives me a little shake. "About Halloween! What should we be for Vanessa's party?"

I'm disoriented, like I just got yanked into some shiny video-game version of the world where everything's too bright and I don't understand the rules. "God, Keely, I don't know. Whatever. That's almost a month away."

Olivia clucks her tongue disapprovingly. "Typical guy. You have no idea how hard it is to find a costume that's s3xy but not slvty."

Luis waggles his brows at her. "Just be slvty, then," he suggests, and Olivia smacks his arm. The cafeteria's too warm, almost hot, and I wipe my damp brow as Addy and I exchange another look.

Keely pokes me. "Give me your phone."

"What?"

"I want to look at that picture we took last week, at Seaport Village? That woman in the flapper dress. She looked amazing. Maybe I could do something like that." I shrug and pull out my phone, unlocking it and handing it over. She squeezes my arm as she opens my photos. "You'd look totally hot in one of those gangster suits."

She hands the phone to Vanessa, who gives an exaggerated, breathless "Ohhh!" Addy pushes food around on her plate without ever lifting her fork to her mouth, and I'm about to ask her if she wants me to get her something else when my phone rings.

Vanessa keeps hold of it and snorts, "Who calls during lunch? Everybody you know is already here!" She looks at the screen, then at me. "Ooh, Cooper. Who's Kris? Should Keely be jealous?"

I don't answer for a few seconds too long, then too fast. "Just, um, a guy I know. From baseball." My whole face feels hot and prickly as I take the phone from Vanessa and send it to voice mail. I wish like hell I could take that call, but now's not the time.

Vanessa raises an eyebrow. "A boy who spells Chris with a K?"

"Yeah. He's ... German." God. Stop talking. I put my phone in my pocket and turn to Keely, whose lips are slightly parted like she's about to ask a question. "I'll call him back later. So. A flapper, huh?"

I'm about to head home after the last bell when Coach Ruffalo stops me in the hall. "You didn't forget about our meeting, did you?"

I exhale in frustration because yeah, I did. Pop's leaving work early so we can meet with a lawyer, but Coach Ruffalo wants to talk college recruiting. I'm torn, because I'm pretty sure Pop would want me to do both at the same time. Since that's not possible, I follow Coach Ruffalo and figure I'll make it quick. His office is next to the gym and smells like twenty years' worth of student athletes passing through. In other words, not good.

"My phone's ringing off the hook for you, Cooper," he says as I sit across from him in a lopsided metal chair that creaks under my weight. "UCLA, Louisville, and Illinois are putting together full-scholarship offers. They're all pushing for a November commitment even though I told them there's no way you'll make a decision before spring." He catches my expression and adds, "It's good to keep your options open. Obviously the draft's a real possibility but the more interest there is on the college level, the better you'll look to the majors."

"Yes, sir." It's not draft strategy I'm worried about. It's how these colleges will react if the stuff on Simon's app gets out. Or if this whole thing spirals and I keep getting investigated by the police. Are all these offers gonna dry up, or am I innocent until proven guilty? I'm not sure if I should be telling any of this to Coach Ruffalo. "It's just ... hard to keep 'em all straight."

He picks up a thin sheaf of stapled-together papers, waving them at me. "I've done it for you. Here's a list of every college I've been in touch with and their current offer. I've highlighted the ones I think are the best fit or will be most impressive to the majors. I wouldn't necessarily put Cal State or UC Santa Barbara on the short list, but they're both local and offering facility tours. You want to schedule those some weekend, let me know."

"Okay. I ... I have some family stuff coming up, so I might be kinda busy for a while."

"Sure, sure. No rush, no pressure. It's entirely up to you, Cooper."

People always say that but it doesn't feel true. About anything.

I thank Coach Ruffalo and head into the almost-empty hallway. I have my phone in one hand and Coach's list in the other, and I'm so lost in thought as I look between them that I almost mow someone over in my path.

"Sorry," I say, taking in a slight figure with his arms wrapped around a box. "Uh ... hey, Mr. Avery. You need help carrying that?"

"No thank you, Cooper." I'm a lot taller than he is, and when I look down I don't see anything but folders in the box. I guess he can manage those. Mr. Avery's watery eyes narrow when he sees my phone. "I wouldn't want to interrupt your texting."

"I was just ..." I trail off, since explaining the lawyer appointment I'm almost late for won't win me any points.

Mr. Avery sniffs and adjusts his grip on the box. "I don't understand you kids. So obsessed with your screens and your gossip." He grimaces like the word tastes bad, and I'm not sure what to say. Is he making a reference to Simon? I wonder if the police bothered questioning Mr. Avery this weekend, or if he's been disqualified by virtue of not having a motive. That they know of, anyway.

He shakes himself, like he doesn't know what he's talking about either. "Anyway. If you'll excuse me, Cooper."

All he'd have to do to get past me is step aside, but I guess that's my job. "Right," I say, moving out of his way. I watch him shuffle down the hall and decide to leave my stuff in my locker and head for the car. I'm late enough as it is.

I'm stopped at the last red light before my house when my phone beeps. I look down expecting a text from Keely, because somehow I ended up promising we'd get together tonight to plan Halloween costumes. But it's from my mom.

Meet us at the hospital. Nonny had a heart attack.