

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 11

0 12 minutes read

Nate

Monday, October 1, 11:50 p.m.

I made a round of calls to my suppliers this morning to tell them I'm out of commission for a while. Then I threw away that phone. I still have a couple of others. I usually pay cash for a bunch at Walmart and rotate them for a few months before replacing them.

So after I've watched as many Japanese horror movies as I can stand and it's almost midnight, I take a new phone out and call the one I gave Bronwyn. It rings six times before she picks up, and she sounds nervous as hell. "Hello?"

I'm tempted to disguise my voice and ask if I can buy a bag of heroin to mess with her, but she'd probably throw the phone out and never talk to me again. "Hey."

"It's late," she says accusingly.

"Were you sleeping?"

"No," she admits. "I can't."

"Me either." Neither of us says anything for a minute. I'm stretched out on my bed with a couple of thin pillows behind me, staring at paused screen credits in Japanese. I click off the movie and scroll through the channel guide.

"Nate, do you remember Olivia Kendrick's birthday party in fifth grade?"

I do, actually. It was the last birthday party I ever went to at St. Pius, before my dad withdrew me because we couldn't pay the tuition anymore. Olivia invited the whole class and had a scavenger hunt in her yard and the woods behind it. Bronwyn and I were on the same team, and she tore through those clues like it was her job and she was up for a promotion. We won and all five of us got twenty-dollar iTunes gift cards. "Yeah."

"I think that's the last time you and I spoke before all this."

"Maybe." I remember better than she probably realizes. In fifth grade my friends started noticing girls and at one point they all had girlfriends for, like, a week. Stupid kid stuff where they asked a girl out, the girl said yes, and then they ignored each other. While we were walking through Olivia's woods I watched Bronwyn's ponytail swing in front of me and wondered what she'd say if I asked her to be my girlfriend. I didn't do it, though.

"Where'd you go after St. Pi?" she asks.

“Granger.” St. Pius went up to eighth grade, so I wasn’t in school with Bronwyn again until high school. By then she was in full-on overachiever mode.

She pauses, as though she’s waiting for me to continue, and laughs a little. “Nate, why’d you call me if you’re only going to give one-word answers to everything?”

“Maybe you’re not asking the right questions.”

“Okay.” Another pause. “Did you do it?”

I don’t have to ask what she means. “Yes and no.”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Yes, I sold drugs while on probation for selling drugs. No, I didn’t dump peanut oil in Simon Kelleher’s cup. You?”

“Same,” she says quietly. “Yes and no.”

“So you cheated?”

“Yes.” Her voice wavers, and if she starts crying I don’t know what I’ll do. Pretend the call dropped, maybe. But she pulls herself together. “I’m really ashamed. And I’m so afraid of people finding out.”

She’s all worried-sounding, so I probably shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help it. “So you’re not perfect. So what? Welcome to the real world.”

“I’m familiar with the real world.” Bronwyn’s voice is cool. “I don’t live in a bubble. I’m sorry for what I did, that’s all.”

She probably is, but it’s not the whole truth. Reality’s messier than that. She had months to confess if it was really eating at her, and she didn’t. I don’t know why it’s so hard for people to admit that sometimes they’re just as*sh0les who screw up because they don’t expect to get caught. “You sound more worried about what people are gonna think,” I say.

“There’s nothing wrong with worrying about what people think. It keeps you off probation.”

My main phone beeps. It’s next to my bed on the scarred side table that lurches every time I touch it, because it’s missing a leg tip and I’m too lazy to fix it. I roll over to read a text from Amber: U up? I’m about to tell Bronwyn I have to go when she heaves a sigh.

“Sorry. Low blow. It’s just ... it’s more complicated than that, for me. I’ve disappointed both my parents, but it’s worse for my dad. He’s always pushing against stereotypes

because he's not from here. He built this great reputation, and I could tarnish the whole thing with one stupid move."

I'm about to tell her nobody thinks that way. Her family looks pretty untouchable from where I sit. But I guess everyone has sh!t to deal with, and I don't know hers. "Where's your dad from?" I ask instead.

"He was born in Colombia, but moved here when he was ten."

"What about your mom?"

"Oh, her family's been here forever. Fourth-generation Irish or something."

"Mine too," I say. "But let's just say my fall from grace won't surprise anyone."

She sighs. "This is all so surreal, isn't it? That anybody could think either one of us would actually k!!! Simon."

"You're taking me at my word?" I ask. "I'm on probation, remember?"

"Yeah, but I was there when you tried to help Simon. You'd have to be a pretty good actor to fake that."

"If I'm enough of a sociopath to k!!! Simon I can fake anything, right?"

"You're not a sociopath."

"How do you know?" I say it like I'm making fun, but I really want to know the answer. I'm the guy who got searched. The obvious outlier and scapegoat, as Officer Lopez said. Someone who lies whenever it's convenient and would do it in a heartbeat to save his own as*s. I'm not sure how all that adds up to trust for someone I hadn't talked to in six years.

Bronwyn doesn't answer right away, and I stop channel surfing at the Cartoon Network to watch a snippet of some new show with a kid and a snake. It doesn't look promising. "I remember how you used to look out for your mom," she finally says. "When she'd show up at school and act ... you know. Like she was sick or something."

Like she was sick or something. I guess Bronwyn could be referring to the time my mother screamed at Sister Flynn during parent-teacher conferences and ended up ripping all our artwork off the walls. Or the way she'd cry on the curb while she was waiting to pick me up from soccer practice. There's a lot to choose from.

"I really liked your mom," Bronwyn says tentatively when I don't answer. "She used to talk to me like I was a grown-up."

“She’d swear at you, you mean,” I say, and Bronwyn laughs.

“I always thought it was more like she was swearing with me.”

Something about the way she says that gets to me. Like she could see the person under all the other crap. “She liked you.” I think about Bronwyn in the stairwell today, her hair still in that shiny ponytail and her face bright. As if everything is interesting and worth her time. If she were around, she’d like you now.

“She used to tell me ...” Bronwyn pauses. “She said you only teased me so much because you had a crush on me.”

I glance at Amber’s text, still unanswered. “I might have. I don’t remember.”

Like I said. I lie whenever it’s convenient.

Bronwyn’s quiet for a minute. “I should go. At least try to sleep.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“I guess we’ll see what happens tomorrow, huh?”

“Guess so.”

“Well, bye. And, um, Nate?” She speaks quickly, in a rush. “I had a crush on you back then. For whatever that’s worth. Nothing, probably. But anyway. FYI. So, good night.”

After she hangs up I put the phone on my bedside table and pick up the other one. I read Amber’s message again, then type, Come over.

Bronwyn’s naïve if she thinks there’s more to me than that.

Addy

Wednesday, October 3, 7:50 a.m.

Ashton keeps making me go to school. My mother couldn’t care less. As far as she’s concerned I’ve ruined all our lives, so it doesn’t much matter what I do anymore. She doesn’t say those exact words, but they’re etched across her face every time she looks at me.

“Five thousand dollars just to talk to a lawyer, Adelaide,” she hisses at me over breakfast Thursday morning. “I hope you know that’s coming out of your college fund.”

I’d roll my eyes if I had the energy. We both know I don’t have a college fund. She’s been on the phone to my father in Chicago for days, hassling him for the money. He

doesn't have much to spare, thanks to his second, younger family, but he'll probably send at least half to shut her up and feel good about what an involved parent he is.

Jake still won't talk to me, and I miss him so much, it's like I've been hollowed out by a nuclear blast and there's nothing left but ashes fluttering inside brittle bones. I've sent him dozens of texts that aren't only unanswered; they're unread. He unfriended me on Facebook and unfollowed me on Instagram and Snapchat. He's pretending I don't exist and I'm starting to think he's right. If I'm not Jake's girlfriend, who am I?

He was supposed to be suspended all week for hitting TJ, but his parents raised a fuss about how Simon's death has put everyone on edge, so I guess he's back today. The thought of seeing him makes me sick enough that I decided to stay home. Ashton had to drag me out of bed. She's staying with us indefinitely, for now.

"You're not going to wither up and die from this, Addy," Ashton lectures as she shoves me toward the shower. "He doesn't get to erase you from the world. God, you made a stupid mistake. It's not like you murdered someone.

"Well," she adds with a short, sarcastic laugh, "I guess the jury's still out on that one."

Oh, the gallows humor in our household now. Who knew Prentiss girls had it in them to be even a little bit funny?

Ashton drives me to Bayview and drops me off out front. "Keep your chin up," she advises. "Don't let that sanctimonious control freak get you down."

"God, Ash. I did cheat on him, you know. He's not unprovoked."

She purses her lips in a hard line. "Still."

I get out of the car and try to steel myself for the day. School used to be so easy. I belonged to everything without even trying. Now I'm barely hanging on to the edges of who I used to be, and when I catch my reflection in a window I hardly recognize the girl staring back at me. She's in my clothes—the kind of formfitting top and tight jeans that Jake likes—but her hollow cheeks and dead eyes don't match the outfit.

My hair looks tremendous, though. At least I have that going for me.

There's only one person who looks worse than me at school, and that's Janae. She must have lost ten pounds since Simon died, and her skin's a mess. Her mascara's running all the time, so I guess she cries in the bathroom between classes as much as I do. It's surprising we haven't run into each other yet.

I see Jake at his locker almost as soon as I enter the hallway. All the blood rushes out of my head, making me so light-headed I actually sway as I walk toward him. His expression is calm and preoccupied as he twirls his combination. For a second I hope

everything's going to be fine, that his time away from school has helped him cool off and forgive me. "Hi, Jake," I say.

His face changes in an instant from neutral to livid. He yanks his locker open with a scowl and pulls out an armful of books, stuffing them into his backpack. He slams his locker, shoulders his backpack, and turns away.

"Are you ever going to talk to me again?" I ask. My voice is tiny, breathless. Pathetic.

He turns and gives me such a hate-filled look that I step backward. "Not if I can help it."

Don't cry. Don't cry. Everyone's staring at me as Jake stalks away. I catch Vanessa smirking from a few lockers over. She's loving this. How did I ever think she was my friend? She'll probably go after Jake soon, if she hasn't already. I stumble in front of my own locker, my hand stretching toward the lock. It takes a few seconds for the word written in thick black Sharpie to sink in.

WHORE.

Muffled laughter surrounds me as my eyes trace the two Vs that make up the W. They cross each other in a distinctive, loopy scrawl. I've made dozens of pep rally posters for the Bayview Wildcats with Vanessa, and teased her for her funny-looking Ws. She didn't even try to hide it. I guess she wanted me to know.

I force myself to walk, not run, to the nearest bathroom. Two girls stand at the mirror, fixing their makeup, and I duck past them into the farthest stall. I collapse onto the toilet seat and cry silently, burying my head in my hands.

The first bell rings but I stay where I am, tears rolling down my cheeks until I'm cried out. I fold my arms onto my knees and lower my head, immobile as the second bell rings and girls come in and out of the bathroom again. Snatches of conversation float through the room and, yeah, some of it's about me. I plug my ears and try not to listen.

It's the middle of third period by the time I uncoil myself and stand. I unlock the stall door and head for the mirror, pushing my hair away from my face. My mascara's washed away, but I've been here long enough that my eyes aren't puffy. I stare at my reflection and try to collect my scattered thoughts. I can't deal with classes today. I'd go to the nurse's office and claim a headache, but I don't feel comfortable there now that I'm a suspected EpiPen thief. That leaves only one option: getting out of here and going home.

I'm in the back stairwell with my hand on the door when heavy footsteps pound the stairs. I turn to see TJ Forrester coming down; his nose is still swollen and framed by a black eye. He stops when he sees me, one hand gripping the banister. "Hey, Addy."

"Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I have a doctor's appointment." He puts a hand to his nose and grimaces. "I might have a deviated septum."

"Serves you right." The bitter words burst out before I can stop them.

TJ's mouth falls open, then closes, and his Adam's apple bobs up and down. "I didn't say anything to Jake, Addy. I swear to God. I didn't want this to come out any more than you did. It's messed things up for me too." He touches his nose again gingerly.

I wasn't actually thinking about Jake; I was thinking about Simon. But of course TJ wouldn't know anything about the unpublished posts. How did Simon know, though? "We were the only two people there," I hedge. "You must have told somebody."

TJ shakes his head, wincing as though the movement hurts. "We were kissing on a public beach before we got to my house, remember? Anyone could have seen us."

"But they wouldn't have known—" I stop, realizing Simon's site never said TJ and I slept together. He implied it, pretty heavily, but that was it. Maybe I'd overconfessed. The thought sickens me, although I'm not sure I could have managed to tell Jake only a half-truth anyway. He'd have gotten it out of me eventually.

TJ looks at me with regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry this s.ucks so bad for you. For what it's worth, I think Jake's being a j.erk. But I didn't tell anybody." He puts a hand over his heart. "Swear on my granddad's grave. I know that doesn't mean anything to you but it does to me." I finally nod, and he lets out a deep breath. "Where are you going?"

"Home. I can't stand being here. All my friends hate me." I'm not sure why I'm telling him this, other than the fact that I don't have anyone else to tell. "I doubt they'll even let me sit with them now that Jake's back." It's true. Cooper's out today, visiting his sick grandmother and probably, although he didn't say so, meeting with his lawyer. With him gone nobody will dare stand up to Jake's anger. Or want to.

"Screw them." TJ gives me a lopsided grin. "If they're still being as*sh0les tomorrow, come sit with me. They wanna talk, let's give them something to talk about."

It shouldn't make me smile, but it almost does.