

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 12

0 10 minutes read

Bronwyn

Thursday, October 4, 12:20 p.m.

I got lulled into a false sense of complacency.

It happens, I guess, even during the worst week of your life. Horrible, earth-shattering stuff piles on top of you until you're about to suffocate and then—it stops. And nothing else happens, so you start to relax and think you're in the clear.

That's a rookie mistake that smacks me in the face Thursday during lunch when the usual low-grade cafeteria buzz suddenly grows and swells. At first I look around, interested, like anyone would be, and wondering why everyone's suddenly pulled out their phones. But before I can take mine out, I notice the heads swiveling in my direction.

"Oh." Maeve is quicker than me, and her soft exhalation as she scans her phone is loaded with so much regret that my heart sinks. She catches her bottom lip between her teeth and wrinkles her forehead. "Bronwyn. It's, um, another Tumblr. About ... well. Here."

I take her phone, heart pounding, and read the exact same words Detective Mendoza showed me on Sunday after Simon's funeral. First time this app has ever featured good-girl BR, possessor of school's most perfect academic record ...

It's all there. Simon's unpublished entries for each of us, with an added note at the bottom:

Did you think I was joking about killing Simon? Read it and weep, kids. Everyone in detention with Simon last week had an extraspecial reason for wanting him gone. Exhibit A: the posts above, which he was about to publish on About That.

Now here's your assignment: connect the dots. Is everybody in it together, or is somebody pulling strings? Who's the puppet master and who's the puppet?

I'll give you a hint to get you started: everyone's lying.

GO!

I raise my eyes and lock on Maeve's. She knows the truth, all of it, but I haven't told Yumiko or Kate. Because I thought maybe this could stay contained, quiet, while the police ran their investigation in the background and then closed it out from lack of evidence.

I'm pathetically naïve. Obviously.

"Bronwyn?" I can barely hear Yumiko over the roaring in my ears. "Is this for real?"

"Fvck this Tumblr bullsh!t." I'd be startled at Maeve's language if I hadn't vaulted over my surprise threshold two minutes ago. "I bet I could hack that stupid thing and figure out who's behind it."

"Maeve, no!" My voice is so loud. I lower it and switch to Spanish. "No lo hagas ... No queremos ..."

I force myself to stop talking as Kate and Yumiko keep staring at me. You can't. We don't want. That should be enough, for now.

But Maeve won't shut up. "I don't care," she says furiously. "You might, but I—"

Saved by the loudspeaker. Sort of. Déjà vu seizes me as a disembodied voice floats through the room: "Attention, please. Would Cooper Clay, Nate Macauley, Adelaide Prentiss, and Bronwyn Rojas please report to the main office. Cooper Clay, Nate Macauley, Adelaide Prentiss, and Bronwyn Rojas to the main office."

I don't remember getting to my feet, but I must have, because here I am, moving. Shuffling like a zombie past the stares and whispers, weaving through tables until I get to the cafeteria exit. Down the hallway, past homecoming posters that are three weeks old now. Our planning committee is slacking, which would inspire more disdain if I weren't on it.

When I get to the main office, the receptionist gestures toward the conference room with the weary wave of someone who thinks I should know the drill by now. I'm the last to arrive—at least, I think I am, unless Bayview Police or school committee members are joining us. "Close the door, Bronwyn," Principal Gupta says. I comply and sidle past her to take a seat between Nate and Addy, across from Cooper.

Principal Gupta steeples her fingers under her chin. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you why you're here. We've been keeping an eye on that repulsive Tumblr site and got today's update as soon as you did. At the same time, we've had a request from the Bayview Police Department to make the student body available for interviews starting tomorrow. My understanding, based on conversations with police, is that today's Tumblr is an accurate reflection of posts Simon wrote before he died. I realize most of you now have legal representation, which of course the school respects. But this is a safe space. If there's anything you'd like to tell me that might help the school better understand the pressures you were facing, now is the time."

I stare at her as my knees start to tremble. Is she for real? Now is most definitely not the time. Still, I feel this almost irresistible urge to answer her, to explain myself, until a hand under the table grasps mine. Nate doesn't look at me, but his fingers thread through

mine, warm and strong, resting against my shaking leg. He's in his Guinness T-shirt again, and the material stretches thin and soft across his shoulders, as though it's been through hundreds of washes. I glance at him and he gives a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"Ah got nothin' more to say than what ah told ya last week," Cooper drawls.

"Me either," Addy says quickly. Her eyes are red-rimmed and she looks exhausted, her pixie features pinched. She's so pale, I notice the light dusting of freckles across her nose for the first time. Or maybe she's just not wearing makeup. I think with a stab of sympathy that she's been the hardest hit of anyone so far.

"I hardly think—" Principal Gupta begins, when the door opens and the receptionist sticks her head in.

"Bayview Police on line one," she says, and Principal Gupta gets to her feet.

"Excuse me for a moment."

She closes the door behind her and the four of us sit in strained silence, listening to the hum of the air conditioner. It's the first time we've all been in one room together since Officer Budapest questioned us last week. I almost laugh when I remember how clueless we were then, arguing about unfair detentions and junior prom court.

Although to be fair, that was mostly me.

Nate lets go of my hand and tips his chair back, surveying the room. "Well. This is awkward."

"Are you guys all right?" My words come out in a rush, surprising me. I'm not sure what I intended to say, but that wasn't it. "This is unreal. That they—suspect us."

"It was an accident," Addy says immediately. Not like she's positive, though. More like she's testing a theory.

Cooper slides his eyes over to Nate. "Weird kind of accident. How does peanut oil get in a cup all by itself?"

"Maybe someone came into the room at some point and we didn't notice," I say, and Nate rolls his eyes at me. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but—you have to consider everything, right? It's not impossible."

"Lots of people hated Simon," Addy says. From the hard set of her jaw, she's one of them. "He ruined plenty of lives. You guys remember Aiden Wu? In our class, transferred sophomore year?" I'm the only one who nods, so Addy turns her gaze on

me. “My sister knows his sister from college. Aiden didn’t transfer for the hell of it. He had a breakdown after Simon posted about his cross-dressing.”

“Seriously?” Nate asks. Cooper runs a hand back and forth over his hair.

“You remember those spotlight posts Simon used to do when he first launched the app?” Addy asks. “More in-depth stuff, like a blog, almost?”

My throat gets tight. “I remember.”

“Well, he did that with Aiden,” Addy says. “It was straight-up evil.” Something about her tone makes me uneasy. I never thought I’d hear shallow little Addy Prentiss speak with such venom in her voice. Or have an opinion of her own.

Cooper jumps in hastily, like he’s worried she’s going to go off on a rant. “That’s what Leah Jackson said at the memorial service. I ran into her under the bleachers. She said we were all hypocrites for treating him like some kind of martyr.”

“Well, there you go,” Nate says. “You were right, Bronwyn. The entire school’s probably been walking around with bottles of peanut oil in their backpacks, waiting for their chance.”

“Not just any peanut oil,” Addy says, and we all turn to her. “It would have to be cold-pressed for a person with allergies to react to it. The gourmet type, basically.”

Nate stares at her, brow creased. “How would you know that?”

Addy shrugs. “I saw it on the Food Network once.”

“Maybe that’s the sort of thing you keep to yourself when Gupta comes back,” Nate suggests, and the ghost of a grin flits across Addy’s face.

Cooper glares at Nate. “This isn’t a joke.”

Nate yawns, unperturbed. “Feels like it sometimes.”

I swallow hard, my mind still churning through the conversation. Leah and I were friendly once—we partnered in a Model United Nations competition that brought us to the state finals at the beginning of junior year. Simon had wanted to participate too, but we told him the wrong application deadline and he missed the cutoff. It wasn’t on purpose, but he never believed that and was furious with both of us. A few weeks later he started writing about Leah’s sex life on About That. Usually Simon posted something once and let it go, but with Leah, he kept the updates coming. It was personal. I’m sure he’d have done the same to me if there had been anything to find back then.

When Leah started sliding off the rails, she asked me if I'd misled Simon on purpose. I hadn't but still felt guilty, especially once she slit her wrists. Nothing was the same for her after Simon started his campaign against her.

I don't know what going through something like that does to a person.

Principal Gupta comes back into the room, shutting the door behind her and settling into her seat. "My apologies, but that couldn't wait. Where were we?"

Silence falls for a few seconds, until Cooper clears his throat. "With all due respect, ma'am, I think we were agreeing we can't have this conversation." There's a steel in his voice that wasn't there before, and in an instant I feel the energy of the room coalesce and shift. We don't trust one another, that's pretty obvious—but we trust Principal Gupta and the Bayview Police Department even less. She sees it too and pushes her chair back.

"It's important you know this door is always open to you," she says, but we're already getting to our feet and opening the door ourselves.

I'm out of sorts and anxious for the rest of the day, going through the motions of everything I'm supposed to do at school and at home. But I can't relax, not really, until the clock inches past midnight and the phone Nate gave me rings.

He's called me every night since Monday, always around the same time. He's told me things I couldn't have imagined about his mother's illness and his father's drinking. I've told him about Maeve's cancer and the nameless pressure I've always felt to be twice as good at everything. Sometimes we don't talk at all. Last night he suggested we watch a movie, and we both logged in to Netflix and watched a god-awful horror movie he picked until two in the morning. I fell asleep with my earbuds still in, and might have snored in his ear at some point.

"Your turn to pick a movie," he says by way of greeting. I've noticed that about Nate; he doesn't do pleasantries. Just starts with whatever's on his mind.

My mind's elsewhere, though. "I'm looking," I say, and we're silent for a minute as I scroll through Netflix titles without really seeing them. It's no good; I can't go straight into movie mode. "Nate, are you in trouble because of how everything came out at school today?" After I left Principal Gupta's office, the rest of the afternoon was a blur of stares, whispers, and uncomfortable conversations with Kate and Yumiko once I finally explained what had been going on for the past few days.

He snorts a short laugh. "I was in trouble before. Nothing's changed."

"My friends are mad at me for not telling them."

"About cheating? Or being investigated by the police?"

“Both. I hadn’t said anything about either. I thought maybe it would all go away and they’d never have to know.” Robin had said not to answer any questions about the case, but I didn’t see how I could apply that to my two best friends. When the whole school’s starting to turn against you, you need somebody on your side. “I wish I could remember more about that day. What class were you in when Mr. Avery found the phone in your backpack?”

“Physical science,” Nate says. “Science for dummies, in other words. You?”

“Independent study,” I say, chewing the sides of my cheeks. Ironically enough, my stellar grades in chemistry let me construct my own science course senior year. “I suppose Simon would’ve been in AP physics. I don’t know what classes Addy and Cooper have with Mr. Avery, but in detention they acted surprised to see each other.”

“So?” Nate asks.

“Well, they’re friends, right? You’d think they’d have talked about it. Or even been in the same class when it happened.”

“Who knows. Could’ve been homeroom or study period for one of them. Avery’s a jack-of-all-trades,” Nate says. When I don’t reply, he adds, “What, you think those two masterminded the whole thing?”

“Just following a train of thought,” I say. “I feel like the police are barely paying attention to how weird that phone situation is, because they’re so sure we’re all in it together. I mean, when you think about it, Mr. Avery knows better than anyone what classes we have with him. Maybe he did it. Planted phones in all our backpacks and coated the cups with peanut oil before we got there. He’s a science teacher; he’d know how to do that.”

Even as I say it, though, the mental image of our frail, mousy teacher manically doctoring cups before detention doesn’t ring true. Neither does Cooper making off with the school’s EpiPens, or Addy hatching a murder scheme while watching the Food Network.

But I don’t really know any of them. Including Nate. Even though it feels like I do.

“Anything’s possible,” Nate says. “You pick a movie yet?”

I’m tempted to choose something cool and art house-y to impress him, except he’d probably see right through it. Plus he picked a crap horror movie, so there’s not a lot to live up to. “Have you seen *Divergent*?”

“No.” His tone is wary. “And I don’t want to.”

“Tough. I didn’t want to watch a bunch of people get killed by a mist created from an alien tear in the space-time continuum, but I did.”

“Damn it.” Nate sounds resigned. He pauses, then asks, “You have it buffered?”

“Yes. Hit Play.” And we do.