

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 15 - Tips

0 14 minutes read

Nate

Monday, October 8, 2:50 p.m.

I hear the rumors before I see the news vans. Three of them parked out front of the school with reporters and camera crews waiting for last bell to ring. They're not allowed on school property, but they're as close as they can get.

Bayview High is loving this. Chad Posner finds me after last period to tell me people are practically lining up to be interviewed outside. "They're asking about you, man," he warns. "You might wanna head out the back. They're not allowed in the parking lot, so you can cut through the woods on your bike."

"Thanks." I take off and scan the hallway for Bronwyn. We don't talk much at school to avoid—as she says in her lawyer voice—the appearance of collusion. But I'll bet this will freak her out. I spot her at her locker with Maeve and one of her friends, and sure enough she looks ready to throw up. When she sees me she waves me closer, not even trying to pretend she hardly knows me.

"Did you hear?" she asks, and I nod. "I don't know what to do." A horrified realization crosses her face. "I guess we have to drive past them, don't we?"

"I'll drive," Maeve volunteers. "You can, like, hide in the back or something."

"Or we can stay here till they leave," her friend suggests. "Wait them out."

"I hate this," Bronwyn says. Maybe it's the wrong time to notice, but I like how her face floods with color whenever she feels strongly about something. It makes her look twice as alive as most people, and more distracting than she already does in a short dress and boots.

"Come with me," I say. "I'm taking my bike out back to Boden Street. I'll bring you to the mall. Maeve can pick you up later."

Bronwyn brightens as Maeve says, "That'll work. I'll come find you in half an hour at the food court."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" mutters the other girl, giving me a hard look. "If they catch you together it'll be ten times worse."

"They won't catch us," I say shortly.

I'm not positive Bronwyn's on board, but she nods and tells Maeve she'll see her soon, meeting her friend's annoyed glance with a calm smile. I feel this stupid rush of triumph, like she chose me, even though she basically chose not winding up on the five o'clock news. But she walks close to me as we head out the back door to the parking lot, not seeming to care about the stares. At least they're the kind we've gotten used to. No microphones or cameras involved.

I hand her my helmet and wait for her to settle herself on my bike and loop her arms around me. Too tight again, but I don't mind. Her death grip, along with how her legs look in that dress, is why I engineered this escape in the first place.

We're not in the woods long before the narrow trail I'm taking widens into a dirt path that runs past a row of houses behind the school. I take back roads for a couple of miles until we make it to the mall, and ease my bike into a parking spot as far from the entrance as I can get. Bronwyn takes the helmet off and hands it to me, squeezing my arm as she does. She swings her legs onto the pavement, her cheeks flushed and her hair tousled. "Thanks, Nate. That was nice of you."

I didn't do it to be nice. My hand reaches out and catches her around the waist, pulling her toward me. And then I stop, not sure what to do next. I'm off my game. If anyone had asked me ten minutes ago, I would have said I don't have game. But now it occurs to me that I probably do, and it's not giving a shit.

When I'm still sitting and she's standing we're almost the same height. She's close enough for me to notice that her hair smells like green apples. I can't stop looking at her lips while I wait for her to back away. She doesn't, and when I raise my eyes to hers it feels like the breath is yanked right out of my lungs.

Two thoughts run through my head. One, I want to kiss her more than I want air. And two, if I do I'm bound to screw everything up and she'll stop looking at me that way.

A van screeches into the spot next to us and we both jump, bracing for the Channel 7 News camera crew. But it's an ordinary soccer-mom van filled with screaming kids. When they tumble out Bronwyn blinks and moves off to the side. "Now what?" she asks.

Now wait till they're gone and get back here. But she's already walking toward the entrance. "Buy me a giant pretzel for saving your ass," I say instead. She laughs and I wonder if she's thankful for the interruption.

We walk past the potted palms that frame the front entrance, and I pull the door open for a stressed-looking mother with two screaming toddlers in a double stroller. Bronwyn flashes her a sympathetic smile but as soon as we're inside it disappears and she ducks her head. "Everyone's staring at me. You were smart not to have your class picture taken. That photo in the Bayview Blade didn't even look like you."

“Nobody’s staring,” I tell her, but it’s not true. The girl folding sweaters at Abercrombie & Fitch widens her eyes and pulls out her phone when we pass by. “Even if they were, all you’d have to do is take your glasses off. Instant disguise.”

I’m kidding, but she pulls them off and reaches into her bag for a bright-blue case she snaps them into. “Good idea, except I’m blind without them.” I’ve seen Bronwyn without glasses only once before, when they got knocked off by a volleyball in fifth-grade gym class. It was the first time I’d noticed her eyes weren’t blue like I always thought, but a clear, bright gray.

“I’ll guide you,” I tell her. “That’s a fountain. Don’t walk into it.”

Bronwyn wants to go to the Apple store, where she squints at iPod Nanos for her sister. “Maeve’s starting to run now. She keeps borrowing mine and forgetting to charge it.”

“You know that’s a rich-girl problem nobody else cares about, right?”

She grins, unoffended. “I need to make a playlist to keep her motivated. Any recommendations?”

“I doubt we like the same music.”

“Maeve and I have varied musical taste. You’d be surprised. Let me see your library.” I shrug and unlock my phone, and she scrolls through iTunes with an increasingly furrowed brow. “What is all this? Why don’t I recognize anything?” Then she glances at me. “You have ‘Variations on the Canon’?”

I take the phone from her and put it back in my pocket. I forgot I’d downloaded that. “I like your version better,” I say, and her lips curve into a smile.

We head for the food court, making small talk about stupid stuff like we’re a couple of ordinary teenagers. Bronwyn insists on actually buying me a pretzel, although I have to help her since she can’t see two feet in front of her face. We sit by the fountain to wait for Maeve, and Bronwyn leans across the table so she can meet my eyes. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.” I raise my brows, interested, until she says, “I’m worried about the fact that you don’t have a lawyer.”

I swallow a hunk of pretzel and avoid her eyes. “Why?”

“Because this whole thing’s starting to implode. My lawyer thinks the news coverage is going to go viral. She made me set all my social media accounts to private yesterday. You should do that too, by the way. If you have any. I couldn’t find you anywhere.

Not that I was stalking you. Just curious.” She gives herself a little shake, like she’s trying to get her thoughts back on track. “Anyway. The pressure’s on, and you’re already on probation, so you ... you need somebody good in your corner.”

You're the obvious outlier and scapegoat. That's what she means; she's just too polite to say it. I push my chair away from the table and tip it backward on two legs. "That's good news for you, right? If they focus on me."

"No!" She's so loud, people at the next table look over, and she lowers her voice. "No, it's awful. But I was thinking. Have you heard of Until Proven?"

"What?"

"Until Proven. It's that pro bono legal group that started at California Western. Remember, they got that homeless guy who was convicted of murder released because of mishandled DNA evidence that led them to the real killer?"

I'm not sure I'm hearing her correctly. "Are you comparing me to a homeless guy on death row?"

"That's only one example of a high-profile case. They do other stuff too. I thought it might be worth checking them out."

She and Officer Lopez would really get along. They're both positive you can fix any problem with the right support group. "Sounds pointless."

"Would you mind if I called them?"

I return my chair to the floor with a bang, my temper rising. "You can't run this like it's student council, Bronwyn."

"And you can't just wait to be railroaded!" She puts her palms flat on the table and leans forward, eyes blazing.

Jesus. She's a pain in my a.ss and I can't remember why I wanted to kiss her so badly a few minutes ago. She'd probably turn it into a project. "Mind your own business." It comes out harsher than I intended, but I mean it. I've made it through most of high school without Bronwyn Rojas running my life, and I don't need her to start now.

She crosses her arms and glares at me. "I'm trying to help you."

That's when I realize Maeve is standing there, looking back and forth between us like she's watching the world's least entertaining ping-pong game. "Um. Is this a bad time?" she says.

"It's a great time," I say.

Bronwyn stands abruptly, putting her glasses on and hiking her bag over her shoulder. "Thanks for the ride." Her voice is as cold as mine.

Whatever. I get up and head for the exit without answering, feeling a dangerous combination of pissed off and restless. I need a distraction but never know what the hell to do with myself now that I'm out of the drug business. Maybe stopping was just delaying the inevitable.

I'm almost outside when someone tugs on my jacket. When I turn, arms wrap around my neck and the clean, bright scent of green apples drifts around me as Bronwyn kisses my cheek. "You're right," she whispers, her breath warm in my ear. "I'm sorry. It's not my business. Don't be mad, okay? I can't get through this if you stop talking to me."

"I'm not mad." I try to unfreeze so I can hug her back instead of standing there like a block of wood, but she's already gone, hurrying after her sister.

Addy

Tuesday, October 9, 8:45 a.m.

Somehow Bronwyn and Nate managed to dodge the cameras. Cooper and I weren't as lucky. We were both on the five o'clock news on all the major San Diego channels: Cooper behind the wheel of his Jeep Wrangler, me climbing into Ashton's car after I'd abandoned my brand-new bike at school and sent her a panicked text begging for a ride. Channel 7 News ended up with a pretty clear shot of me, which they put side by side with an old picture of eight-year-old me at the Little Miss Southeast San Diego pageant. Where, naturally, I was second runner-up.

At least there aren't any vans when Ashton pulls up to drop me off at school the next day. "Call me if you need a ride again," she says, and I give her a quick, stranglehold hug. I thought I'd be more comfortable showing sisterly affection after last weekend's cryfest, but it's still awkward and I manage to snag my bracelet on her sweater. "Sorry," I mutter, and she gives me a pained grin.

"We'll get better at that eventually."

I've gotten used to stares, so the fact that they've intensified since yesterday doesn't faze me. When I leave class in the middle of history, it's because I feel my period coming on and not because I have to cry.

But when I arrive in the girls' room, someone else is. Muffled sounds come from the last stall before whoever's there gets control of herself. I take care of my business—false alarm—and wash my hands, staring at my tired eyes and surprisingly bouncy hair. No matter how awful the rest of my life is, my hair still manages to look good.

I'm about to leave, but hesitate and head for the other end of the restroom. I lean down and see scuffed black combat boots under the last stall door.

"Janae?"

No answer. I rap my knuckles against the door. "It's Addy. Do you need anything?"

"Jesus, Addy," Janae says in a strangled voice. "No. Go away."

"Okay," I say, but I don't. "You know, I'm usually the one in that stall bawling my eyes out. So I have a lot of Kleenex if you need some. Also Visine." Janae doesn't say anything. "I'm sorry about Simon. I don't suppose it means much given everything you've heard, but ... I was shocked by what happened. You must miss him a lot."

Janae stays silent, and I wonder if I've stuck my foot in my mouth again. I'd always thought Janae was in love with Simon and he was oblivious. Maybe she'd finally told him the truth before he died, and got rejected. That would make this whole thing even worse.

I'm about to leave when Janae heaves a deep sigh. The door opens, revealing her blotchy face and black-on-black clothing. "I'll take that Visine," she says, wiping at her raccoon eyes.

"You should take the Kleenex, too," I suggest, pressing both into her hand.

She snorts out something like a laugh. "How the mighty have fallen, Addy. You've never talked to me before."

"Did that bother you?" I ask, genuinely curious. Janae never struck me as someone who wanted to be part of our group. Unlike Simon, who was always prowling around the edges, looking for a way in.

Janae we.tts a Kleenex under the sink and dabs at her eyes, glaring at me in the mirror the whole time. "Screw you, Addy. Seriously. What kind of question is that?"

I'm not as offended as I'd normally be. "I don't know. A stupid one, I guess? I'm only just realizing I s.uck at social cues."

Janae squ!rts a stream of Visine into both eyes and her raccoon circles reappear. I hand her another Kleenex so she can repeat the wiping process. "Why?"

"Turns out Jake's the one who was popular, not me. I was riding coattails."

Janae takes a step back from the mirror. "I never thought I'd hear you say that."

" 'I am large, I contain mult!tudes,' " I tell her, and her eyes widen. "Song of Myself, right? Walt Whitman. I've been reading it since Simon's funeral. I don't understand most of it, but it's comforting in a weird way."

Janae keeps dabbing at her eyes. "That's what I thought. It was Simon's favorite poem."

I think about Ashton and how she's kept me sane over the past couple of weeks. And Cooper, who's defended me at school even though there's no real friendship between us. "Do you have anybody to talk to?"

"No," Janae mutters, and her eyes fill again.

I know from experience she won't thank me for continuing the conversation. At some point we need to suck it up and get to class. "Well, if you want to talk to me—I have a lot of time. And space next to me in the cafeteria. So, open invitation or whatever. Anyway, I really am sorry about Simon. See you."

All things considered, I think that went pretty well. She stopped insulting me toward the end, anyway.

I return to history but it's almost over, and after the bell rings it's time for lunch—my least favorite part of the day. I've told Cooper to stop sitting with me, because I can't stand the hard time everyone else gives him, but I hate eating alone. I'm about to skip and go to the library when a hand plucks at my sleeve.

"Hey." It's Bronwyn, looking surprisingly fashionable in a fitted blazer and striped flats. Her hair's down, spilling over her shoulders in glossy dark layers, and I notice with a stab of envy how clear her skin is. No giant pimples for her, I'll bet. I'm not sure I've ever seen Bronwyn looking this good, and I'm so distracted that I almost miss her next words. "Do you want to eat lunch with us?"

"Ah ..." I tilt my head at her. I've spent more time with Bronwyn in the past two weeks than I have the last three years at school, but it hasn't exactly been social. "Really?"

"Yeah. Well. We have some stuff in common now, so ..." Bronwyn trails off, her eyes flicking away from mine, and I wonder if she ever thinks I might be the one behind all this. She must, because I think it about her sometimes. But in an evil-genius, cartoon-villain sort of way. Now that she's standing in front of me with cute shoes and a tentative smile, it seems impossible.

"All right," I say, and follow Bronwyn to a table with her sister, Yumiko Mori, and some tall, sullen-looking girl I don't know. It's better than skipping lunch at the library.

When I get out front after the last bell, there's nothing—no news vans, no reporters—so I text Ashton that she doesn't have to pick me up, and take the opportunity to ride my bike home. I stop at the extralong red light on Hurley Street, resting my feet on the pavement as I look at the stores in the strip mall to my right: cheap clothes, cheap jewelry, cheap cellular. And cheap haircuts. Nothing like my usual salon in downtown San Diego, which charges sixty dollars every six weeks to keep split ends at bay.

My hair feels hot and heavy under my helmet, weighing me down. Before the light changes I angle my bike off the road and over the sidewalk into the mall parking lot. I lock my bike on the rack outside Supercuts, pull off my helmet, and go inside.

“Hi!” The girl behind the register is only a few years older than me, wearing a flimsy black tank top that exposes colorful flower tattoos covering her arms and shoulders. “Are you here for a trim?”

“A cut.”

“Okay. We’re not super busy, so I can take you right now.”

She directs me to a cheap black chair that’s losing its stuffing, and we both gaze at my reflection in the mirror as she runs her hands through my hair. “This is so pretty.”

I stare at the shining locks in her hands. “It needs to come off.”

“A couple inches?”

I shake my head. “All of it.”

She laughs nervously. “To your shoulders, maybe?”

“All of it,” I repeat.

Her eyes widen in alarm. “Oh, you don’t mean that. Your hair is beautiful!” She disappears from behind me and reappears with a supervisor. They stand there conferring for a few minutes in hushed tones. Half the salon is staring at me. I wonder how many of them saw the San Diego news last night, and how many think I’m just an overly hormonal teenage girl.

“Sometimes people think they want a dramatic cut, but they don’t really,” the supervisor starts cautiously.

I don’t let her finish. I’m beyond tired of people telling me what I want. “Do you guys do haircuts here? Or should I go somewhere else?”

She tugs at a lock of her own bleached-blond hair. “I’d hate for you to regret this. If you want a different look, you could try—”

Shears lie across the counter in front of me, and I reach for them. Before anyone can stop me, I grab a thick handful of hair and chop the whole thing off above my ear. Gasps run through the salon, and I meet the tattooed girl’s shocked eyes in the mirror.

“Fix it,” I tell her. So she does.

