

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 16 - Tips

0 12 minutes read

Bronwyn

Friday, October 12, 7:45 p.m.

Four days after we're featured on the local news, the story goes national on Mikhail Powers Investigates.

I knew it was coming, since Mikhail's producers had tried to reach my family all week. We never responded, thanks to basic common sense and also Robin's legal advice. Nate didn't either, and Addy said she and Cooper both refused to talk as well. So the show will be airing in fifteen minutes without commentary from any of the people actually involved.

Unless one of us is lying. Which is always a possibility.

The local coverage was bad enough. Maybe it was my imagination, but I'm pretty sure Dad winced every time I was referred to as "the daughter of prominent Latino business leader Javier Rojas." And he left the room when one station reported his nationality as Chilean instead of Colombian. The whole thing made me wish, for the hundredth time since this started, that I'd just taken that D in chemistry.

Maeve and I are sprawled on my bed watching the minutes on my alarm clock tick by until my debut as a national disgrace. Or rather, I am, and she's combing through the 4chan links she found through Simon's admin site.

"Check this out," she says, angling her laptop toward me.

The long discussion thread covers a school shooting that happened last spring a few counties over. A sophomore boy concealed a handgun in his jacket and opened fire in the hallway after the first bell. Seven students and a teacher died before the boy turned the gun on himself. I have to read a few of the comments more than once before I realize the thread isn't condemning the boy, but celebrating him. It's a bunch of sickos cheering on what he did.

"Maeve." I burrow my head in my arms, not wanting to read any more. "What the hell is this?"

"Some forum Simon was all over a few months back."

I raise my head to stare at her. "Simon posted there? How do you know?"

"He used that AnarchiSK name from About That," Maeve replies.

I scan the thread, but it's too long to pick out individual names. "Are you sure it's Simon? Maybe other people use the same name."

"I've been spot-checking posts, and it's definitely Simon," she says. "He references places in Bayview, talks about clubs he was in at school, mentions his car a few times." Simon drove a 1970s Volkswagen Bug that he was freakishly proud of. Maeve leans against the cushions, chewing on her bottom lip. "There's a lot to go through, but I'm going to read the whole thing when I have time."

I can't think of anything I'd like to do less. "Why?"

"The thread's full of weird people with axes to grind," Maeve says. "Simon might've made some enemies there. Worth looking into, anyway." She takes her laptop back and adds, "I got that encrypted file of Cooper's at the library the other day, but I can't get it open. Yet."

"Girls." My mother's voice is strained as she calls upstairs. "It's time."

That's right. My entire family is watching Mikhail Powers Investigates together. Which is a circle of hell even Dante never imagined.

Maeve shuts her laptop as I heave myself to my feet. There's a slight buzzing from inside my end table, and I open the drawer to pull out my Nate phone. Enjoy the show, his text says.

Not funny, I reply.

"Put that away," Maeve says with mock severity. "Now is not the time."

We head downstairs to the living room, where Mom has already settled into an armchair with an exceptionally full glass of wine. Dad's in full Evening Executive mode, wearing his favorite casual fleece vest and surrounded by a half-dozen communication devices. A commercial for paper towels flashes across the television screen as Maeve and I sit side by side on the couch and wait for Mikhail Powers Investigates to start.

The show focuses on true crime and it's pretty sensationalistic, but more credible than similar shows because of Mikhail's hard-news background. He spent years as an anchor with one of the major networks, and brings a certain gravitas to the proceedings.

He always reads the beginning hook in his deep, authoritative voice while grainy police photos play across the screen.

A young mother disappears. A double life exposed. And one year later, a shocking arrest. Has justice finally been served?

A high-profile couple dead. A dedicated daughter suspected. Could her Facebook account hold the key to the killer's identity?

I know the formula, so it shouldn't be any surprise when it's applied to me.

A high school student's mysterious death. Four classmates with secrets to hide. When the police keep running into dead ends, what's next?

Dread starts spreading through me: my stomach aches, my lungs compress, even my mouth has a horrible taste. For almost two weeks I've been questioned and scrutinized, whispered about and judged. I've had to deflect questions about Simon's allegations with police and teachers, and watch their eyes harden as they read between the lines. I've waited for another shoe to drop; for the Tumblr to release a video of me accessing Mr. Camino's files, or for the police to file charges. But nothing's felt quite so raw and real as watching my class picture appear over Mikhail Powers's shoulder on national television.

There's footage of Mikhail and his team in Bayview, but he does most of his reporting from behind a sleek chrome desk in his Los Angeles studio. He has smooth dark skin and hair, expressive eyes, and the most perfectly fitted wardrobe I've ever seen. I have no doubt that if he'd managed to catch me alone, I'd have spilled all sorts of things I shouldn't.

"But who are the Bayview Four?" Mikhail asks, staring intently into the camera.

"You guys have a name," Maeve whispers, but not quietly enough that Mom doesn't hear.

"Maeve, there is nothing funny about this," she says tightly as the camera cuts to video of my parents' offices.

Oh no. They're starting with me.

Honor student Bronwyn Rojas comes from a high-achieving family traumatized by their youngest child's lingering illness. Did the pressure to measure up compel her to cheat and take Yale out of her reach forever? Followed by a spokesperson from Yale confirming that I have not, in fact, applied yet.

We all get our turn. Mikhail examines Addy's beauty pageant past, speaks with baseball analysts about the prevalence of high school juicing and its potential impact on Cooper's career, and digs through the particulars of Nate's drug bust and probation sentence.

"It's not fair," Maeve breathes into my ear. "They're not saying anything about how his dad's a drunk and his mom's dead. Where's the context?"

“He wouldn’t want that, anyway,” I whisper back.

I cringe my way through the show until an interview with a lawyer from Until Proven. Since none of our lawyers agreed to talk, Mikhail’s team tapped Until Proven as subject-matter experts. The lawyer they speak with, Eli Kleinfelter, doesn’t look even ten years older than me. He has wild curly hair, a sparse goatee, and intense dark eyes.

“Here’s what I’d say, if I were their lawyer,” he says, and I lean forward despite myself. “All the attention’s on these four kids. They’re getting dragged through the mud with no evidence tying them to any crime after weeks of investigation. But there was a fifth kid in the room, wasn’t there? And he seems like the type who might’ve had more than four enemies. So you tell me. Who else had a motive? What story’s not being told? That’s where I’d be looking.”

“Exactly,” Maeve says, drawing out each syllable.

“And you can’t assume Simon was the only person with access to the About That admin panel,” Eli continues. “Anybody could’ve gotten into that before he died and either viewed or changed those posts.”

I look at Maeve, but this time she doesn’t say anything. Just stares at the screen with a half smile on her face.

I can’t stop thinking about Eli’s words for the rest of the night. Even when I’m on the phone with Nate, half watching Battle Royale, which is better than a lot of the movies Nate likes. But between Mikhail Powers Investigates and our trip to the mall on Monday—which I’ve been thinking about nonstop in those spare moments when I’m not thinking about going to jail—I can’t concentrate. Too many other thoughts compete for brain space.

Nate was about to k!ss me, wasn’t he? And I wanted him to. So why didn’t we?

Eli finally said it. Why isn’t anyone looking at other suspects?

I wonder if Nate and I are officially friend-zoned now.

Mikhail Powers does serial investigations, so this will only get worse.

Nate and I would be horrible together anyway. Probably.

DidPeople magazine seriously just email me?

“What’s going on in that big brain of yours, Bronwyn?” Nate finally asks.

Too much, and most of it I probably shouldn't share. "I want to talk to Eli Kleinfelter," I say. "Not about you," I add when Nate doesn't reply. "Just in general. I'm intrigued by how he thinks."

"You already have a lawyer. Think she'd want you getting a second opinion?"

I know she wouldn't. Robin is all about containment and defense. Don't give anybody anything they can use against you. "I don't want him to represent me or anything. I just want a conversation. Maybe I'll try to call him next week."

"You never shut off, do you?"

It doesn't sound like a compliment. "No," I admit, wondering if I've killed whatever weird attraction Nate might've once felt toward me.

Nate's silent as we watch Shogo fake Shuya's and Noriko's deaths. "This isn't bad," he finally says. "But you still owe me finishing Ringu in person."

Tiny electrical sparks zip through my bloodstream. Attraction not dead, then? Maybe on life support. "I know. That's logistically challenging, though. Especially now that we're notorious."

"There aren't any news vans here now."

I've thought about this. Maybe a few dozen times since he first asked me. And while I don't understand much about what's going on between Nate and me, I do know this: whatever happens next won't involve me driving to his house in the middle of the night. I start to tell him all my excellent practical reasons, like how the Volvo's noisy engine will wake my parents, when he says, "I could come get you."

I blow out a sigh and stare at the ceiling. I'm no good at navigating these situations, probably because they've only ever happened in my head. "I feel weird going to your house at one in the morning, Nate. Like, it's ... different from watching a movie. And I don't know you well enough to, um, not watch a movie with you." Oh God. This is why people shouldn't wait until their senior year of high school to date. My whole face burns, and as I wait for him to answer, I'm deeply thankful he can't see me.

"Bronwyn." Nate's voice isn't as mocking as I'd expected. "I'm not trying to not-watch a movie with you. I mean, sure, if you were into that, I wouldn't say no. Believe me. But the main reason I invited you over after midnight is that my house sucks during the day. For one thing, you can see it. Which I don't recommend. For another, my dad's around. I'd rather you not ... you know. Trip over him."

My heart keeps missing beats. "I don't care about that."

"I do."

“Okay.” I don’t fully understand Nate’s rules for managing his world, but for once I’m going to mind my own business and not give my opinion about what does and doesn’t matter. “We’ll figure something else out.”

Cooper

Saturday, October 13, 4:35 p.m.

There’s no good place to break up with someone, but at least their living room is private and they don’t have to go anywhere afterward. So that’s where I give Keely the news.

It’s not because of what Nonny said. It’s been coming for a while. Keely’s great in a dozen different ways but not for me, and I can’t drag her through all this knowing that.

Keely wants an explanation, and I don’t have a good one. “If it’s because of the investigation, I don’t care!” she says tearfully. “I’m behind you no matter what.”

“It’s not that,” I tell her. It’s not only that, anyway.

“And I don’t believe a word of that awful Tumblr.”

“I know, Keely. I appreciate that, I really do.” There was another post this morning, crowing about the media coverage:

The Mikhail Powers Investigates site has thousands of comments about the Bayview Four. (Kind of a dull name, by the way. Would’ve expected better from a top-ranked newsmagazine.) Some call for jail time. Some rail about how spoiled and entitled kids are today, and how this is another example of that.

It’s a great story: four good-looking, high-profile students all being investigated for murder. And nobody’s what they seem.

The pressure’s on now, Bayview Police. Maybe you should be looking a little closer at Simon’s old entries. You might find some interesting hints about the Bayview Four.

Just saying.

That last part made my blood run cold. Simon had never written about me before, but I don’t like the implication. Or the sick, heavy feeling that something else is coming. And soon.

“Then why are you doing this?” Keely has her head in her hands, tears running down her face. She’s a pretty crier; nothing red or splotchy about her. She peers at me with swimming dark eyes. “Did Vanessa say something?”

“Did—what? Vanessa? What would she say?”

“She’s being a b!tch about me still talking to Addy and she was going to tell you something you shouldn’t even care about, because it happened before we were dating.” She looks at me expectantly, and my blank expression seems to make her mad. “Or maybe you should care, so you’d care about something related to me. You’re so holier-than-thou about how Jake is acting, Cooper, but at least he has emotions. He’s not a robot. It’s normal to be jealous when the girl you care about is with someone else.”

“I know.”

Keely waits a beat before giving a sarcastic little laugh. “That’s it, huh? You’re not even a little bit curious. You’re not worried about me, or protective of me. You just don’t give a sh!t.”

We’re at the point where nothing I say will be right. “I’m sorry, Keely.”

“I hooked up with Nate,” she says abruptly, eyes locked on mine. And I have to admit, that surprises me. “At Luis’s party the last night of junior year. Simon was following me around all night and I was sick of it. Nate showed up and I figured, what the hell. He’s hot, right? Even if he is a total degenerate.” She smirks at me, a trace of bitterness in her face. “We just k!ssed, mostly. That night. Then you asked me out a few weeks later.” She gives me that intense look again, and I’m not sure what she’s trying to get across.

“So you were with me and Nate at the same time?”

“Would that bother you?”

She wants something from me out of this conversation. I wish I could figure it out and let her have it, because I know I haven’t been fair to her. Her dark eyes are fastened on mine, her cheeks flushed, her lips slightly parted. She really is beautiful, and if I told her I’d made a mistake, she’d take me back and I’d keep being the most envied guy at Bayview. “I guess I wouldn’t like it—” I start, but she interrupts me with a half laugh, half sob.

“Oh my God, Cooper. Your face. You seriously could not care less. Well, for the record, I stopped doing anything with Nate as soon as you asked me out.” She’s crying again, and I feel like the world’s biggest j.erk. “You know, Simon would’ve given anything if I’d chosen him. You didn’t even know it was a choice. People always pick you, don’t they? They always picked me, too. Until you came along and made me feel invisible.”

“Keely, I never meant—”

She’s not listening to me anymore. “You’ve never cared, have you? You just wanted the right accessory for scouting season.”

“That’s not fair—”

“It’s all a big lie, isn’t it, Cooper? Me, your fastball—”

“I’ve never used steroids,” I interrupt, suddenly angry.

Keely gives another strangled laugh. “Well, at least you’re passionate about something.”

“I’m gonna go.” I stand abruptly, adrenaline coursing through me as I stalk out her door before I say something I shouldn’t. I got tested after Simon’s accusations came to light, and I was clean. And I was tested once over the summer as part of an extensive physical the UCSD sports medicine center did before putting together my training regimen. But that’s it, and since plenty of steroids disappear from your system within weeks, I can’t escape the taint entirely. I’ve told Coach Ruffalo there’s no truth to the accusations, and so far he’s sitting tight on contacting any colleges. We’re part of the news cycle now, though, so things won’t stay quiet for long.

And Keely’s right—I’ve been a lot more worried about that than about our relationship. I owe her a better apology than the one I just half-as*sed. But I don’t know how to give it.