

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 17 - Tips

0 13 minutes read

Addy

Monday, October 15, 12:15 p.m.

S3xism is alive and well in true-crime coverage, because Bronwyn and I aren't nearly as popular with the general public as Cooper and Nate. Especially Nate. All the tween girls posting about us on social media love him. They couldn't care less that he's a convicted drug dealer, because he's got dreamy eyes.

Same goes for school. Bronwyn and I are pariahs—other than her friends, her sister, and Janae, hardly anyone talks to us. They just whisper behind our backs. But Cooper's as golden as ever. And Nate—well, it's not like Nate was ever popular, exactly. He's never seemed to care what people think, though, and he still doesn't.

"Seriously, Addy, stop pulling that stuff up. I don't want to see it."

Bronwyn rolls her eyes at me, but she doesn't really look mad. I guess we're almost friends now, or as friendly as you can get when you're not one hundred percent sure the other person isn't framing you for murder.

She won't play along with my obsessive need to track our news stories, though. And I don't show her everything, especially not the horrible commenters tossing racial slurs at her family. That's an extra layer of s.u.c.k she doesn't need. Instead, I show Janae one of the more positive articles I've found. "Look. The most-shared article on BuzzFeed is Cooper leaving the gym."

Janae looks awful. She's lost more weight since I first ran into her in the bathroom, and she's jumpier than ever. I'm not sure why she eats lunch with us, since most of the time she doesn't say a word. But she glances gamely at my phone. "It's a good picture of him, I guess."

Kate shoots me a severe look. "Would you put that away?" I do, but in my head I'm giving her the finger the whole time. Yumiko's all right, but Kate almost makes me miss Vanessa.

No. That's a complete and utter lie. I hate Vanessa. Hate how she's mean-girled her way into the center of my former group and how she's glommed on to Jake like they're a couple. Even though I don't see much interest on his part. Chopping my hair off was like giving up on Jake, since he wouldn't have noticed me three years ago without it. But just because I've abandoned hope doesn't mean I've stopped paying attention.

After lunch I head for earth science, settling myself on a bench next to a lab partner who barely glances in my direction. "Don't get too comfortable," Ms. Mara warns. "We're

mixing things up today. You've all been with your partners for a while, so let's rotate." She gives us complicated directions—some people move left, others right, and the rest of us stay still—and I don't pay much attention to the process until I wind up next to TJ.

His nose looks a lot better, but I doubt it'll ever be straight again. He gives me a sheepish half smile as he pulls the tray of rocks in front of us closer. "Sorry. This is probably your worst nightmare, right?"

Don't flatter yourself, TJ, I think. He's got nothing on my nightmares. All those months of angsty guilt about sleeping with him in his beach house seem like they happened in another lifetime. "It's fine."

We classify rocks in silence until TJ says, "I like your hair."

I snort. "Yeah, right." With the possible exception of Ashton, who's biased, nobody likes my hair. My mother is appalled. My former friends laughed openly when they saw me the next day. Even Keely smirked. She's moved right on to Luis, like if she can't have Cooper, she'll settle for his catcher instead. Luis dumped Olivia for her, but nobody blinked an eye about that.

"I'm serious. You can finally see your face. You look like a blond Emma Watson."

That's false. But nice of him to say, I guess. I hold a rock between my thumb and forefinger and squint at it. "What do you think? Igneous or sedimentary?"

TJ shrugs. "I can't tell the difference."

I take a guess and sort the rock into the igneous pile. "TJ, if I can manage to care about rocks, I'm pretty sure you can put in more of an effort."

He blinks at me in surprise, then grins. "There you are."

"What?"

Everyone seems absorbed in their rocks, but he lowers his voice anyway. "You were really funny when we—um, that first time we hung out. On the beach. But whenever I saw you after that you were so ... passive. Always agreeing with whatever Jake said."

I glower at the tray in front of me. "That's a rude thing to say."

TJ's voice is mild. "Sorry. But I could never figure out why you'd fade into the background that way. You were a lot of fun." He catches my glare and adds hastily, "Not like that. Or, well, yes, like that, but also ... You know what? Never mind. I'll stop talking now."

“Great idea,” I mutter, scooping up a handful of rocks and dumping them in front of him. “Sort these, would you?”

It’s not that TJ’s “fade into the background” comment stings. I know it’s true. I can’t wrap my head around the rest, though. Nobody’s ever said I’m funny before. Or fun. I always figured TJ was still talking to me because he wouldn’t mind getting me alone again. I never thought he might’ve actually enjoyed hanging out during the nonphysical part of the day.

We finish the rest of the class in silence except to agree or disagree on rock classification, and when the bell rings I grab my backpack and head for the hall without a backward look.

Until the voice behind me stops me like I’ve slammed into an invisible wall. “Addy.”

My shoulders tense as I turn. I haven’t tried talking to Jake since he blew me off at his locker, and I’m afraid of what he’s going to say to me now.

“How’ve you been?” he asks.

I almost laugh. “Oh, you know. Not good.”

I can’t read Jake’s expression. He doesn’t look mad, but he’s not smiling either. He seems different somehow. Older? Not exactly, but ... less boyish, maybe. He’s been staring right through me for almost two weeks, and I don’t understand why I’m suddenly visible again. “Things must be getting intense,” he says. “Cooper’s totally clammed up. Do you—” He hesitates, shifting his backpack from one shoulder to the other. “Do you want to talk sometime?”

My throat feels like I swallowed something sharp. Do I? Jake waits for an answer, and I mentally shake myself. Of course I do. That’s all I’ve wanted since this happened. “Yes.”

“Okay. Maybe this afternoon? I’ll text you.” He holds my gaze, still not smiling, and adds, “God, I can’t get used to your hair. You don’t even look like yourself.”

I’m about to say I know when I remember TJ’s words. You were so ... passive. Always agreeing with whatever Jake said. “Well, I am,” I say instead, and take off down the hall before he can break eye contact first.

Nate

Monday, October 15, 3:15 p.m.

Bronwyn settles herself on the rock next to me, smoothing her skirt over her knees and looking over the treetops in front of us. “I’ve never been to Marshall’s Peak before,” she says.

I'm not surprised. Marshall's Peak—which isn't really a peak, more of a rocky outcropping overlooking the woods we cut through on our way out of school—is Bayview's so-called scenic area. It's also a popular spot for drinking, drugs, and hookups, although not at three o'clock on a Monday afternoon. I'm pretty sure Bronwyn has no clue what happens here on weekends. "Hope reality lives up to the hype," I say.

She smiles. "It beats getting ambushed by Mikhail Powers's crew." We had another sneak-out-the-back routine when they showed up at the front of school today. I'm surprised they haven't wised up to staking out the woods yet. Driving to the mall again seemed like a bad idea given how high our profile's risen over the past week, so here we are.

Bronwyn's eyes are down, watching a line of ants carry a leaf across the rock next to us. She licks her lips like she's nervous, and I shift a little closer. Most of my time with her is spent on the phone, and I can't tell what she's thinking in person.

"I called Eli Kleinfelter," she says. "From Until Proven."

Oh. That's what she's thinking. I shift back. "Okay."

"It was an interesting conversation," she says. "He was nice about hearing from me, didn't seem surprised at all. He promised he wouldn't tell anybody I'd called him."

For all her brains, Bronwyn can be like a little kid sometimes. "What's that worth?" I ask. "He's not your lawyer. He can talk to Mikhail Powers about you if he wants more airtime."

"He won't," Bronwyn says calmly, like she's got it all figured out. "Anyway, I didn't tell him anything. We didn't talk about me at all. I just asked him what he thought of the investigation so far."

"And?"

"Well, he repeated some of what he said on TV. That he was surprised there wasn't more talk about Simon. Eli thought anyone who'd run the kind of app Simon did, for as long as he did, would've made plenty of enemies who'd love to use the four of us as scapegoats. He said he'd check into some of the most damaging stories and the kids they covered. And he'd look into Simon generally. Like Maeve's doing with the 4chan stuff."

"The best defense is a good offense?" I ask.

"Right. He also said our lawyers aren't doing enough to pick apart the theory that nobody else could've poisoned Simon. Mr. Avery, for one." A note of pride creeps into her voice. "Eli said the exact same thing I did, that Mr. Avery had the best opportunity of

anyone to plant the phones and doctor the cups. But other than questioning him a few times, the police are mostly leaving him alone.”

I shrug. “What’s his motive?”

“Technophobia,” Bronwyn says, and glares at me when I laugh. “It’s a thing. Anyway, that was just one idea. Eli also mentioned the car accident as a time when everybody was distracted and someone could’ve slipped into the room.”

I frown at her. “We weren’t at the window that long. We would’ve heard the door open.”

“Would we? Maybe not. His point is, it’s possible. And he said something else interesting.” Bronwyn picks up a small rock and juggles it meditatively in her hand. “He said he’d look into the car accident. That the timing was suspect.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, it goes back to his earlier point that someone could’ve opened the door while we watched the cars. Someone who knew it was going to happen.”

“He thinks the car accident was planned?” I stare at her, and she avoids my gaze as she heaves the rock over the trees beneath us. “So you’re suggesting somebody engineered a fender bender in the parking lot so they could distract us, slip into detention, and dump peanut oil into Simon’s cup? That they couldn’t possibly have known he had if they weren’t already in the room? Then leave Simon’s cup lying around, because they’re stupid?”

“It’s not stupid if they’re trying to frame us,” Bronwyn points out. “But it would be stupid for one of us to leave it there, instead of finding a way to get rid of it. Chances were good nobody would have searched us right after.”

“It still doesn’t explain how anybody outside the room would know Simon had a cup of water in the first place.”

“Well, it’s like the Tumblr post said. Simon was always drinking water, wasn’t he? They could have been outside the door, watching through the window. That’s what Eli says, anyway.”

“Oh, well, if Eli says so.” I’m not sure why this guy’s a legal god in Bronwyn’s eyes. He can’t be more than twenty-five. “Sounds like he’s full of dipsh!t theories.”

I’m getting ready for an argument, but Bronwyn doesn’t take the bait. “Maybe,” she says, tracing her fingers over the rock between us. “But I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately and . . . I don’t think it was anyone in that room, Nate. I really don’t. I’ve gotten to know Addy a little bit this week”—she raises a palm at my skeptical look—“and I’m

not saying I'm suddenly an Addy expert or anything, but I honestly can't picture her doing anything to Simon."

"What about Cooper? That guy's definitely hiding something."

"Cooper's not a killer." Bronwyn sounds positive, and for some reason that pisses me off.

"You know this how? Because you guys are so close? Face it, Bronwyn, none of us really know each other. Hell, you could've done it. You're smart enough to plan something this messed up and get away with it."

I'm kidding, but Bronwyn goes rigid. "How can you say that?" Her cheeks get red, giving her that flushed look that always unsettles me. She'll surprise you one day with how pretty she is. My mother used to say that about Bronwyn.

My mother was wrong, though. There's nothing surprising about it.

"Eli said it himself, right?" I say. "Anything's possible. Maybe you brought me here to shove me down the hill and break my neck."

"You brought me here," Bronwyn points out. Her eyes widen, and I laugh.

"Oh, come on. You don't actually think— Bronwyn, we're barely on an incline. Pushing you off this rock isn't much of an evil plan if all you'd do is twist your ankle."

"That's not funny," Bronwyn says, but a smile twitches at her lips. The afternoon sun's making her glow, putting glints of gold in her dark hair, and for a second I almost can't breathe.

Jesus. This girl.

I stand and hold out my hand. She gives me a skeptical look, but takes it and lets me pull her to her feet. I put my other hand in the air. "Bronwyn Rojas, I solemnly swear not to murder you today or at any point in the future. Deal?"

"You're ridiculous," she mutters, going even redder.

"It concerns me you're avoiding a promise not to murder me."

She rolls her eyes. "Do you say that to all the girls you bring here?"

Huh. Maybe she knows Marshall's Peak's reputation after all.

I move closer until there's only a couple of inches between us. "You're still not answering my question."

Bronwyn leans forward and brings her lips to my ear. She's so close I can feel her heart beating when she whispers, "I promise not to murder you."

"That's hot." I mean it as a joke, but my voice comes out like a growl and when her lips part I kiss her before she can laugh. A shock of energy shoots through me as I cup her face in my hands, my fingers grasping her cheeks and the line of her jaw. It must be the adrenaline that's making my heart pound so fast. The whole nobody-else-could-possibly-understand-this bond. Or maybe it's her soft lips and green apple-scented hair, and the way she winds her arms around my neck like she can't stand to let go. Either way I keep kissing her as long as she lets me, and when she steps away I try to pull her back because it wasn't enough.

"Nate, my phone," she says, and for the first time I notice a persistent, jangly text tone. "It's my sister."

"She can wait," I say, tangling a hand in her hair and kissing along her jawline to her neck. She shivers against me and makes a little noise in her throat. Which I like.

"It's just ..." She runs her fingertips across the back of my neck. "She wouldn't keep texting if it weren't important."

Maeve's our excuse—she and Bronwyn are supposed to be at Yumiko's house together—and I reluctantly step back so Bronwyn can reach down and dig her phone out of her backpack. She looks at the screen and draws in a quick, sharp breath. "Oh God. My mom's trying to reach me too. Robin says the police want me to come to the station. To, quote, 'follow up on a couple of things.' Unquote."

"Probably the same bullshit." I manage to sound calm even though it's not how I feel.

"Did they call you?" she asks. She looks like she hopes they did, and hates herself for it.

I didn't hear my phone, but pull it out of my pocket to check anyway. "No."

She nods and starts firing off texts. "Should I have Maeve pick me up here?"

"Have her meet us at my house. It's halfway between here and the station." As soon as I say it I kind of regret it—I still don't want Bronwyn anywhere near my house when it's light out—but it's the most convenient option. And we don't have to go inside.

Bronwyn bites her lip. "What if reporters are there?"

"They won't be. They've figured out no one's ever around." She still looks worried, so I add, "Look, we can park at my neighbor's and walk over. If anyone's there, I'll take you someplace else. But trust me, it'll be fine."

Bronwyn texts Maeve my address and we walk to the edge of the woods where I left my bike. I help her with the helmet and she climbs behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist as I start the engine.

I drive slowly down narrow, twisty side roads until we reach my street. My neighbor's rusted Chevrolet sits in her driveway, in the exact same spot it's been for the past five years. I park next to it, wait for Bronwyn to dismount, and take her hand as we make our way through the neighbor's yard to mine. As we get closer I see our house through Bronwyn's eyes, and wish I'd bothered to mow the lawn at some point in the last year.

Suddenly she stops in her tracks and lets out a gasp, but she's not looking at our knee-length grass. "Nate, there's someone at your door."

I stop too and scan the street for a news van. There isn't one, just a beat-up Kia parked in front of our house. Maybe they're getting better at camouflage. "Stay here," I tell Bronwyn, but she comes with me as I get closer to my driveway for a better look at whoever's at the door.

It's not a reporter.

My throat goes dry and my head starts to throb. The woman pressing the bell turns around, and her mouth falls open a little when she sees me. Bronwyn goes still beside me, her hand dropping from mine. I keep walking without her.

I'm surprised how normal my voice sounds when I speak. "What's up, Mom?"