

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 18 - Tips

0 15 minutes read

Bronwyn

Monday, October 15, 4:10 p.m.

Maeve pulls into the driveway seconds after Mrs. Macauley turns around. I stand rigid, my hands clenched at my sides and my heart pounding, staring at the woman I thought was dead.

“Bronwyn?” Maeve lowers her window and sticks her head out of the car. “You ready? Mom and Robin are already there. Dad’s trying to get off work, but he’s got a board meeting. I had to do some maneuvering about why you weren’t answering your phone. You’re sick to your stomach, okay?”

“That’s accurate,” I mutter. Nate’s back is to me. His mother is talking, staring at him with ravenous eyes, but I can’t hear anything she’s saying.

“Huh?” Maeve follows my gaze. “Who’s that?”

“I’ll tell you in the car,” I say, tearing my eyes away from Nate. “Let’s go.”

I climb into the passenger seat of our Volvo, where the heat is blasting because Maeve’s always cold. She backs out of the driveway in her careful, just-got-my-license way, talking the whole time. “Mom’s doing that whole Mom thing, where she’s pretending not to be freaked out but she totally is,” she says, and I’m half listening. “I guess the police aren’t giving much information. We don’t even know if anyone else is going to be there. Is Nate coming, do you know?”

I snap back to attention. “No.” For once I’m glad Maeve likes to maintain broiler-oven temperatures while driving, because it’s keeping the cold inching up my spine at bay. “He’s not coming.”

Maeve approaches a stop sign and brakes jerkily, glancing over at me. “What’s the matter?”

I close my eyes and lean against the headrest. “That was Nate’s mother.”

“What was?”

“The woman at the door just now. At Nate’s house. It was his mother.”

“But ...” Maeve trails off, and I can tell by the sound of the blinker that she’s about to make a turn and needs to concentrate. When the car straightens again she says, “But she’s dead.”

“Apparently not.”

“I don’t—but that’s—” Maeve sputters for a few seconds. I keep my eyes closed. “So ... what’s the deal? Did he not know she was alive? Or did he lie about it?”

“We didn’t exactly have time to discuss it,” I say.

But that’s the million-dollar question. I remember hearing three years ago through the grapevine that Nate’s mother had died in a car accident. We lost my mom’s brother the same way, and I felt a lot of empathy for Nate, but I’d never asked him about it back then. I did over the past few weeks, though. Nate didn’t like to talk about it. All he said was he hadn’t heard anything about his mother since she flaked on taking him to Oregon, until he got news that she’d died. He never mentioned a funeral. Or much of anything, really.

“Well.” Maeve’s voice is encouraging. “Maybe it’s some kind of miracle. Like it was all a horrible misunderstanding and everybody thought she was dead but really she ... had amnesia. Or was in a coma.”

“Right,” I snort. “And maybe Nate has an evil twin who’s behind it all. Because we’re living in a telenovela.” I think about Nate’s face before he walked away from me. He didn’t seem shocked. Or happy. He looked ... stoic. He reminded me of my father every time Maeve had a relapse. As though an illness he’d been dreading had come back, and he was just going to have to deal with it now.

“We’re here,” Maeve says, pulling to a careful stop. I open my eyes.

“You’re in the handicapped space,” I tell her.

“I’m not staying, just dropping you off. Good luck.” She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. All of it.”

I walk slowly inside and give my name to the woman behind the glass partition in the lobby, who directs me to a conference room down the hall. When I enter, my mother, Robin, and Detective Mendoza are all already seated at a small round table. My heart sinks at the absence of Addy or Cooper, and at the sight of a laptop in front of Detective Mendoza.

Mom gives me a worried look. “How’s your stomach, honey?”

“Not great,” I say truthfully, slipping into a chair beside her and dropping my backpack on the floor.

“Bronwyn isn’t well,” Robin says with a cool look toward Detective Mendoza. She’s in a sharp navy suit and a long, multistrand necklace. “This should be a discussion between you and me, Rick. I can loop Bronwyn and her parents in as needed.”

Detective Mendoza presses a key on the laptop. “We won’t keep you long. Always better to talk face to face, in my opinion. Bronwyn, are you aware Simon used to have a companion website for About That, where he’d write longer posts?”

Robin interrupts before I can speak. “Rick, I’m not letting Bronwyn answer any questions until you tell me why she’s here. If you have something to show or tell us, please get to that first.”

“I do,” Detective Mendoza says, rotating the laptop so it faces me. “One of your classmates alerted us to a post that ran eighteen months ago, Bronwyn. Does this look familiar?”

My mother moves her chair next to me as Robin leans over my shoulder. I focus my eyes on the screen, but I already know what I’m about to read. I’ve worried for weeks that it might come up.

So maybe I should have said something. But it’s too late now.

News flash: LV’s end-of-the-year party isn’t a charity event. Just so we’re clear. You’d be excused for thinking so, though, with frosh attendance at an all-time high.

Regular readers (and if you’re not one, what the hell is wrong with you?) know I try to cut the kids some slack. Children are our future and all that. But let me do a little PSA for one new (and fleeting, I’m gonna guess) arrival to the social scene: MR, who doesn’t seem to realize SC is out of her league.

He’s not in the market for a puppy, kid. Stop with the following. It’s pathetic.

And, guys, don’t give me that poor-little-thing-had-cancer crap. Not anymore. M can put on her big-girl panties like anyone else and learn a few basic rules:

1. Varsity basketball players with cheerleader girlfriends are OFF THE MARKET. I shouldn’t have to explain this, but apparently I do.
2. Two beers are too many when you’re a lightweight, because it leads to:
3. The worst display of awkward kitchen table dancing I’ve ever seen. Seriously, M. Never again.
4. If that one beer makes you throw up, try not to do it in your hosts’ washing machine. That’s just rude.

Let’s card at the door from now on, okay, LV? At first it’s funny, but then it’s just sad.

I stay still in my chair and try to keep my face impassive. I remember that post like it was yesterday: how Maeve, who’d been giddy from her first crush and her first party, even though neither had gone exactly as planned, folded into herself after she read Simon’s post and refused to go out again. I remember all the impotent rage I’d felt, that

Simon was so casually cruel, just because he could be. Because he had a willing audience that ate it up.

And I hated him for it.

I can't look at my mother, who has no idea any of this happened, so I focus on Robin. If she's surprised or concerned, she doesn't show it. "All right. I've read it. Tell me what you think the significance of this is, Rick."

"I'd like to hear that from Bronwyn."

"No." Robin's voice cracks like a velvet whip, soft but unyielding. "Explain why we're here."

"This post appears to be written about Bronwyn's sister, Maeve."

"What makes you think that?" Robin asks.

My mother chokes out a furious, disbelieving laugh, and I finally sneak a look at her. Her face is bright red, her eyes burning. Her voice shakes when she speaks. "Is this for real? You bring us here to show us this horrible post written by a—I have to say, a boy who quite clearly had issues—and for what? What are you hoping to accomplish, exactly?"

Detective Mendoza tilts his head in her direction. "I'm sure this is difficult to read, Mrs. Rojas. But between the initials and the cancer diagnosis, it's obvious Simon was writing about your younger daughter. There's no other current or past student at Bayview High who fits that profile." He turns toward me. "This must have been humiliating for your sister, Bronwyn. And from what other kids at school have told us recently, she's never really participated in social activities since then. Did that make you resent Simon?"

My mother opens her mouth to speak, but Robin puts a hand on her arm and cuts her off. "Bronwyn has no comment."

Detective Mendoza's eyes gleam, and he looks as though he can barely restrain himself from grinning. "Oh, but she does. Or she did, anyway. Simon unpublished the blog more than a year ago, but all the posts and comments are still recorded on the back end." He pulls the laptop back and presses a few keys, then spins it toward us with a new window open. "You have to give your email address to leave a comment. This is yours, right, Bronwyn?"

"Anybody can leave another person's email address," Robin says quickly. Then she leans over my shoulder again, and reads what I wrote at the end of sophomore year.

Fuvk off and die, Simon.

Addy

Monday, October 15, 4:15 p.m.

The road from my house to Jake's is a pretty smooth ride until I turn onto Clarendon Street. It's a major intersection, and I have to get to the far left without the help of a bike lane. When I first started riding again I used to head for the sidewalk and cross with the light, but now I whiz across three lanes of traffic like a pro.

I cruise into Jake's driveway and push the kickstand down as I dismount, pulling off my helmet and looping it across my handlebars. I run a hand through my hair as I approach the house, but it's a pointless gesture. I've gotten used to the cut and sometimes I even like it, but short of growing it a foot and a half overnight, there's nothing I can do to improve it in Jake's eyes.

I ring the doorbell and step back, uncertainty humming through my veins. I don't know why I'm here or what I'm hoping for.

The door clicks and Jake pulls it open. He looks the same as ever—tousle-haired and blue-eyed, in a perfectly fitted T-shirt that shows off his football season workouts to great effect. "Hey. Come in."

I instinctively turn toward the basement, but that's not where we're headed. Instead, Jake leads me into the formal living room, where I've spent less than an hour total since I started dating Jake more than three years ago. I lower myself onto his parents' leather sofa and my still-sweaty legs stick to it almost immediately. Who decided leather furniture was a good idea?

When he sits down across from me, his mouth sets in such a hard line that I can tell this won't be a reconciliation conversation. I wait for crushing disappointment to hit, but it doesn't.

"So you ride a bike now?" he asks.

Of all the conversations we could have, I'm not sure why he's starting with this one. "I don't have a car," I remind him. And you used to drive me everywhere.

He leans forward with his elbows on his knees—such a familiar gesture that I almost expect him to start chatting about football season like he would have a month ago. "How's the investigation going? Cooper never talks about it anymore. You guys still all under the gun, or what?"

I don't want to talk about the investigation. The police have questioned me a couple of times over the past week, always finding new ways to ask me about the missing EpiPens in the nurse's office. My lawyer tells me the repetitive questioning means the investigation's going nowhere, not that I'm their main suspect. It's none of Jake's

business, though, so I tell him a stupid, made-up story about how the four of us saw Detective Wheeler eating an entire plateful of doughnuts in an interrogation room.

Jake rolls his eyes when I'm done. "So basically, they're getting nowhere."

"Bronwyn's sister thinks people should be looking at Simon more," I say.

"Why Simon? He's dead, for crying out loud."

"Because it might turn up suspects the police haven't thought of yet. Other people who had a reason for wanting Simon out of the picture."

Jake blows out an annoyed sigh and flings an arm across the back of his chair. "Blame the victim, you mean? What happened to Simon wasn't his fault. If people didn't pull such sneaky, bullshit moves, About That wouldn't even have existed." He narrows his eyes at me. "You know that better than anyone."

"Still doesn't make him a great guy," I counter, with a stubbornness that surprises me. "About That hurt a lot of people. I don't understand why he kept it up for so long. Did he like people being afraid of him? I mean, you were friends with him growing up, right? Was he always that way? Is that why you stopped hanging out?"

"Are you doing Bronwyn's investigative work for her now?"

Is he sneering at me? "I'm as curious as she is. Simon's kind of a central figure in my life now."

He snorts. "I didn't invite you here to argue with me."

I stare at him, searching for something familiar in his face. "I'm not arguing. We're having a conversation." But even as I say it, I try to remember the last time I talked to Jake and didn't agree one hundred percent with whatever he said. I can't come up with a thing. I reach up and play with the back of my earring, pulling it until it almost comes off and then sliding it on again. It's a nervous habit I've developed now that I don't have hair to wind around my fingers. "So why did you invite me here?"

His lip curls as his eyes flick away from me. "Leftover concern, I guess. Plus, I deserve to know what's happening. I keep getting calls from reporters and I'm sick of it."

He sounds like he's waiting for an apology. But I've already given enough of those. "So am I." He doesn't say anything, and as silence falls I'm acutely aware of how loud the clock over his fireplace is. I count sixty-three ticks before I ask, "Will you ever be able to forgive me?"

I'm not even sure what kind of forgiveness I want anymore. It's hard to imagine going back to being Jake's girlfriend. But it would be nice if he stopped hating me.

His nostrils flare and his mouth pulls into a bitter twist. "How could I? You cheated on me and lied about it, Addy. You're not who I thought you were."

I'm starting to think that's a good thing. "I'm not going to make excuses, Jake. I screwed up, but not because I didn't care about you. I guess I never thought I was worthy of you. Then I proved it."

His cold gaze doesn't waver. "Don't play the poor-me card, Addy. You knew what you were doing."

"Okay." All of a sudden I feel like I did when Detective Wheeler first interrogated me: I don't have to talk to you. Jake might be getting satisfaction from picking at the scab of our relationship, but I'm not. I stand up, my skin making a faint peeling sound as it unsticks from the sofa. I'm sure I've left two thigh-shaped imprints behind. Gross, but who cares anymore. "I guess I'll see you around."

I let myself out and climb onto my bike, putting on my helmet. As soon as it's clipped tight I push up the kickstand and I'm pedaling hard down Jake's driveway. Once my heart finds a comfortable pounding rhythm, I remember how it almost beat out of my chest when I confessed to cheating on Jake. I'd never felt so trapped in my life. I thought I'd feel the same way in his living room today, waiting for him to tell me again I'm not good enough.

But I didn't, and I don't. For the first time in a long time, I feel free.

Cooper

Monday, October 15, 4:20 p.m.

My life isn't mine anymore. It's been taken over by a media circus. There aren't reporters in front of my house every day, but it's a common-enough occurrence that my stomach hurts whenever I get close to home.

I try not to go online more than I have to. I used to dream about my name being a trending search on Google, but for pitching a no-hitter in the World Series. Not for possibly killing a guy with peanut oil.

Everyone says, Just keep your head down. I've been trying, but once you're under a microscope nothing slips by people. Last Friday at school I got out of my car the same time Addy got out of her sister's, the breeze ruffling her short hair. We were both wearing sunglasses, a pointless attempt at blending in, and gave each other our usual tight-clipped, still-can't-believe-this-is-happening smile. We hadn't gone more than a few steps before we saw Nate stride over to Bronwyn's car and open the door, being all exaggeratedly polite about it. He smirked as she got out, and she gave him a look that made Addy and me exchange glances behind our shades. The four of us ended up almost in a line, walking toward the back entrance.

The whole thing barely took a minute—just enough time for one of our classmates to record a phone video that wound up on TMZ that night. They ran it in slo-mo with the song “Kids” by MGMT playing in the background, like we’re some kind of hip high school murder club without a care in the world. The thing went viral within a day.

That might be the weirdest thing about all this. Plenty of people hate us and want us in jail, but there are just as many—if not more—who love us. All of a sudden I have a Facebook fan page with over fifty thousand likes. Mostly girls, according to my brother.

The attention slows sometimes, but it never really stops. I thought I’d avoided it tonight when I left my house to meet Luis at the gym, but as soon as I arrive a pretty, dark-haired woman with a face full of makeup hurries toward me. My heart sinks because I’m familiar with her type. I’ve been followed again.

“Cooper, do you have a few minutes? Liz Rosen with Channel Seven News. I’d love your perspective on all this. A lot of people are rooting for you!”

I don’t answer, brushing past her through the gym’s entrance. She clicks after me in her high heels, a cameraman trailing in her wake, but the guy at the front desk stops them both. I’ve been going there for years and they’ve been pretty cool through all this. I disappear down the hall while he argues with her that no, she can’t buy a membership on the spot.

Luis and I bench-press for a while, but I’m preoccupied with what’s waiting outside for me when we’re done. We don’t talk about it, but in the locker room afterward he says, “Give me your shirt and keys.”

“What?”

“I’ll be you, head out of here in your cap and sunglasses. They won’t know the difference. Take my car and get the hell out of here. Go home, go out, whatever. We can swap cars again at school tomorrow.”

I’m about to tell him that’ll never work. His hair’s a lot darker than mine, and he’s at least a shade tanner. Then again, with a long-sleeved shirt and a cap on, it might not matter. Worth a shot, anyway.

So I hover in the hallway as Luis strides out the front door in my clothes to the bright lights of cameras. My baseball cap sits low on his forehead and his hand shields his face as he climbs into my Jeep. He peels out of the parking lot and a couple of vans follow.

I put on Luis’s hat and sunglasses, then get into his Honda and fling my gym bag across the seat. It takes a few tries to start the engine, but once it roars I pull out of the parking lot and take back roads until I’m on the highway toward San Diego. When I’m downtown I circle for half an hour, still paranoid someone’s following me. Eventually I make my

way to the North Park neighborhood, pulling in front of an old factory that was renovated into condos last year.

The neighborhood's trendy, with lots of well-dressed kids a little older than me filling the sidewalk. A pretty girl in a flowered dress almost doubles over laughing at something the guy next to her says. She clutches his arm as they pass Luis's car without looking my way, and I feel a bone-deep sense of loss. I was like them a few weeks ago, and now I'm ... not.

I shouldn't be here. What if someone recognizes me?

I pull a key out of my gym bag and wait for a break in the sidewalk crowds. I'm out of Luis's car and in the front door so fast, I don't think anyone could've seen me. I duck into the elevator and take it to the top floor, letting out a sigh of relief when it doesn't stop once. The hallway echoes with empty silence; all the h!psters who live here must be out for the afternoon.

Except one, I hope.

When I knock, I only half expect an answer. I never called or texted to say I was coming. But the door cracks open, and a pair of startled green eyes meet mine.

"Hey." Kris steps aside to let me in. "What are you doing here?"

"Had to get out of my house." I close the door behind me and take off my hat and sunglasses, tossing them on an entry table. I feel silly, like a kid who's been caught playing spy. Except people are following me. Just not right this second. "Plus, I guess we should talk about the whole Simon thing, huh?"

"Later." Kris hesitates a fraction of a second, then leans forward and pulls me roughly toward him, pressing his lips against mine. I close my eyes and the world around me fades, like it always does, when I slide my hands into his hair and k!ss him back.