

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 19 - Tips

0 13 minutes read

Part Three

TRUTH OR DARE

Nate

Monday, October 15, 4:30 p.m.

My mother's upstairs, trying to have a conversation with my father. Good luck with that. I'm on our couch with my burner phone in hand, wondering what I can text to Bronwyn to keep her from hating me. Not sure Sorry I lied about my mom being dead is going to cut it.

It's not like I wanted her dead. But I thought she probably was, or would be soon. And it was easier than saying, or thinking, the truth. She's a coke addict who ran off to some commune in Oregon and hasn't talked to me since. So when people started asking where my mother was, I lied. By the time it hit me how fucked up a response that was, it was too late to take it back.

Nobody's ever really cared, anyway. Most of the people I know don't pay attention to what I say or do, as long as I keep the drugs coming. Except Officer Lopez, and now Bronwyn.

I thought about telling her, a few times late at night while we were talking. But I could never figure out how to start the conversation. I still can't.

I put my phone away.

The stairs creak as my mother comes down, brushing her hands on the front of her pants. "Your father's not in any shape to talk right now."

"Shocking," I mutter.

She looks both older and younger than she used to. Her hair's a lot grayer and shorter, but her face isn't so ragged and drawn. She's heavier, which I guess is good. Means she's eating, anyway. She crosses over to Stan's terrarium and gives me a small, nervous smile. "Nice to see Stan's still around."

"Not much has changed since we last saw you," I say, putting my feet on the coffee table in front of me. "Same bored lizard, same drunk dad, same falling-apart house. Except now I'm being investigated for murder. Maybe you heard about that?"

“Nathaniel.” My mother sits in the armchair and clasps her hands in front of her. Her nails are as bitten off as ever. “I—I don’t even know where to start. I’ve been sober for almost three months and I’ve wanted to contact you every single second. But I was so afraid I wasn’t strong enough yet and I’d let you down again. Then I saw the news. I’ve been coming by the last few days, but you’re never home.”

I gesture at the cracked walls and sagging ceiling. “Would you be?”

Her face crumples. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel. I hoped ... I hoped your father would step up.”

You hoped. Solid parenting plan. “At least he’s here.” It’s a low blow, and not a ringing endorsement since the guy barely moves, but I feel entitled to it.

My mother nods her head jerkily while cracking her knuckles. God, I forgot she did that. It’s fucking annoying. “I know. I have no right to criticize. I don’t expect you to forgive me. Or believe you’ll get anything better than what you’re used to from me. But I’m finally on meds that work and don’t make me sick with anxiety. It’s the only reason I could finish rehab this time. I have a whole team of doctors in Oregon who’ve been helping me stay sober.”

“Must be nice. To have a team.”

“It’s more than I deserve, I know.” Her downcast eyes and humble tone are pissing me off. But I’m pretty sure anything she did would piss me off right now.

I get to my feet. “This has been great, but I need to be somewhere. You can let yourself out, right? Unless you want to hang with Dad. Sometimes he wakes up around ten.”

Oh crap. Now she’s crying. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel. You deserve so much better than the two of us. My God, just look at you—I can’t believe how handsome you’ve gotten. And you’re smarter than both your parents put together. You always were. You should be living in one of those big houses in Bayview Hills, not taking care of this dump on your own.”

“Whatever, Mom. It’s all good. Nice to see you. Send me a postcard from Oregon sometime.”

“Nathaniel, please.” She stands and tugs at my arm. Her hands look twenty years older than the rest of her—soft and wrinkled, covered with brown spots and scars. “I want to do something to help you. Anything. I’m staying in the Motel Six on Bay Road. Could I take you out to dinner tomorrow? Once you’ve had some time to process all this?”

Process this. Christ. What kind of rehab-speak is she spewing? “I don’t know. Leave a number, I’ll call you. Maybe.”

“Okay.” She’s nodding like a puppet again and I’m going to lose it if I don’t get away from her soon. “Nathaniel, was that Bronwyn Rojas I saw earlier?”

“Yeah,” I say, and she smiles. “Why?”

“It’s just ... well, if that’s who you’re with, we can’t have messed you up too badly.”

“I’m not with Bronwyn. We’re murder cosuspects, remember?” I say, and let the door slam behind me. Which is self-defeating, because when it comes off its hinges, again, I’m the one who’ll have to fix it.

Once I’m outside, I don’t know where to go. I get on my bike and head for downtown San Diego, then change my mind and get on I-15 North. And just keep riding, stopping after an hour to fill up my tank. I pull out my burner phone while I’m doing it and check messages. Nothing. I should call Bronwyn, see how things went at the police station. She’s gotta be fine, though. She has that expensive lawyer, along with parents who are like guard dogs between her and people trying to mess with her. And anyway, what the hell would I say?

I put my phone away.

I ride for almost three hours until I hit wide desert roads dotted with scrubby bushes. Even though it’s getting late, it’s hotter here near the Mojave Desert, and I stop to take off my jacket as I cruise closer to Joshua Tree. The only vacation I ever went on with my parents was a camping trip here when I was nine years old. I spent the whole time waiting for something bad to happen: for our ancient car to break down, for my mother to start screaming or crying, for my dad to go still and silent like he always did when we got to be too much for him to take.

It was almost normal, though. They were as tense with each other as ever, but kept the arguing to a minimum. My mother was on good behavior, maybe because she had a thing for those short, twisted trees that were everywhere. “The first seven years of the Joshua tree’s life, it’s just a vertical stem. No b.ranches,” she told me while we were hiking. “It takes years before it blooms. And every b.ranching stem stops growing after it blossoms, so you’ve got this complex system of dead areas and new growth.”

I used to think about that, sometimes, when I wondered what parts of her might still be alive.

It’s past midnight by the time I get back to Bayview. I thought about getting on I-15 and riding through the night, as far as I could go until I dropped from exhaustion. Let my parents have whatever fvcked-up reunion they’re about to get into on their own. Let the Bayview Police come find me if they ever want to talk to me again. But that’s what my mother would do. So in the end I came back, checked my phones, and followed up on the only text I had: a party at Chad Posner’s house.

When I get there Posner's nowhere to be found. I end up in his kitchen, nursing a beer and listening to two girls go on and on about a TV show I've never seen. It's boring and doesn't take my mind off my mother's sudden reappearance, or Bronwyn's police summons.

One of the girls starts to giggle. "I know you," she says, poking me in the side. She giggles harder and flattens her palm against my stomach. "You were on Mikhail Powers Investigates, weren't you? One of the kids who maybe killed that guy?" She's half-drunk and staggers as she leans closer. She looks like a lot of the girls I meet at Posner's parties: pretty in a forgettable way.

"Oh my God, Mallory," her friend says. "That's so rude."

"Not me," I say. "I just look like him."

"Liar." Mallory tries to poke me again, but I step out of reach. "Well, I don't think you did it. Neither does Brianna. Right, Bri?" Her friend nods. "We think it was the girl with the glasses. She looks like a stuck-up b!tch."

My hand tightens around my beer bottle. "I told you, that's not me. So you can drop it."

"Shhorry," Mallory slurs, tilting her head and shaking bangs out of her eyes. "Don't be such a grouch. I bet I can cheer you up." She slides a hand into her pocket and pulls out a crumpled baggie filled with tiny squares. "Wanna go upstairs with us and trip for a while?"

I hesitate. I'd do almost anything to get out of my head right now. It's the Macauley family way. And everybody already thinks I'm that guy.

Almost everybody. "Can't," I say, pulling out my burner phone and starting to shoulder my way through the crowd. It buzzes before I get outside. When I look at the screen and see Bronwyn's number—even though she's the only one who ever calls me on this phone—I feel a massive sense of relief. Like I've been freezing and someone wrapped a blanket around me.

"Hey," Bronwyn says when I pick up. Her voice is far away, quiet. "Can we talk?"

Bronwyn

Tuesday, October 16, 12:30 a.m.

I'm nervous about sneaking Nate into the house. My parents are already furious with me for not telling them about Simon's blog post—both now and back when it actually happened. We got out of the police station without much trouble, though. Robin gave this haughty speech that was all, Stop wasting our time with meaningless speculation that you can't prove, and that wouldn't be actionable even if you did.

I guess she was right, because here I am. Although I'm grounded until, as my mother says, I stop "undermining my future by not being transparent."

"You couldn't have hacked into Simon's old blog while you were at it?" I muttered to Maeve before she went to bed.

She looked genuinely chagrined. "He took it down so long ago! I didn't think it even existed anymore. And I never knew you wrote that comment. It wasn't posted." She shook her head at me with a sort of exasperated fondness. "You were always more upset about that than I was, Bronwyn."

Maybe she's right. It occurred to me, as I lay in my dark room debating whether I should call Nate, that I've spent years thinking Maeve was a lot more fragile than she actually is.

Now I'm downstairs in our media room, and when I get a text from Nate that he's at the house, I open the basement door and stick my head outside. "Over here," I call softly, and a shadowy figure comes around the corner next to our bulkhead. I retreat back into the basement, leaving the door open for Nate to follow me.

He comes in wearing a leather jacket over a torn, rumpled T-shirt, his hair falling sweaty across his forehead from the helmet. I don't say anything until I've led him into the media room and closed the door behind us. My parents are three floors away and asleep, but the added bonus of a soundproof room can't be overstated at a time like this.

"So." I sit in one corner of the couch, knees bent and arms crossed over my legs like a barrier. Nate takes off his jacket and tosses it on the floor, lowering himself on the opposite end. When he meets my eyes, his are clouded with so much misery that I almost forget to be upset.

"How'd it go at the police station?" he asks.

"Fine. But that's not what I want to talk about."

He drops his eyes. "I know." Silence stretches between us and I want to fill it with a dozen questions, but I don't. "You must think I'm an asshole," he says finally, still staring at the floor. "And a liar."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Nate exhales a slow breath and shakes his head. "I wanted to. I thought about it. I didn't know how to start. Thing is—it was this lie I told because it was easier than the truth. And because I half believed it, anyway. I didn't think she'd ever come back. Then once you say something like that, how do you unsay it? You look like a fucking psycho at that point." He raises his eyes again, locking on mine with sudden intensity. "I'm not, though."

I haven't lied to you about anything else. I'm not dealing drugs anymore, and I didn't do anything to Simon. I don't blame you if you don't believe me, but I swear to God it's true."

Another long silence descends while I try to gather my thoughts. I should be angrier, probably. I should demand proof of his trustworthiness, even though I have no idea what that would look like. I should ask lots of pointed questions designed to ferret out whatever other lies he's told me.

But the thing is, I do believe him. I won't pretend I know Nate inside and out after a few weeks, but I know what it's like to tell yourself a lie so often that it becomes the truth. I did it, and I haven't had to muddle through life almost completely on my own.

And I've never thought he had it in him to kill Simon.

"Tell me about your mom. For real, okay?" I ask. And he does. We talk for over an hour, but after the first fifteen minutes or so, we're mainly covering old ground. I start feeling stiff from sitting so long, and lift my arms over my head in a stretch.

"Tired?" Nate asks, moving closer.

I wonder if he's noticed that I've been staring at his mouth for the past ten minutes. "Not really."

He reaches out and pulls my legs over his lap, tracing a circle on my left knee with his thumb. My legs tremble, and I press them together to make it stop. His eyes flick toward mine, then down. "My mother thought you were my girlfriend."

Maybe if I do something with my hands I can manage to hold still. I reach up and tangle my fingers into the hair on the nape of his neck, smoothing the soft waves against his warm skin. "Well. I mean. Is that out of the question?"

Oh God. I actually said it. What if it is?

Nate's hand moves down my leg, almost absently. Like he has no idea he's turning my entire body into jelly. "You want a drug-dealing murder suspect who lied about his not-dead mother as your boyfriend?"

"Former drug dealer," I correct. "And I'm not in a position to judge."

He looks up with a half smile, but his eyes are wary. "I don't know how to be with somebody like you, Bronwyn." He must see my face fall, because he quickly adds, "I'm not saying I don't want to. I'm saying I think I'd screw it up. I've only ever been ... you know. Casual about this kind of thing."

I don't know. I pull my hands back and twist them in my lap, watching my pulse jump under the thin skin of my wrist. "Are you casual now? With somebody else?"

"No," Nate says. "I was. When you and I first started talking. But not since then."

"Well." I'm quiet for a few seconds, weighing whether I'm about to make a giant mistake. Probably, but I plow ahead anyway. "I'd like to try. If you want to. Not because we're thrown together in this weird situation and I think you're hot, although I do. But because you're smart, and funny, and you do the right thing more often than you give yourself credit for."

I like your horrible taste in movies and the way you never sugarcoat anything and the fact that you have an actual lizard. I'd be proud to be your girlfriend, even in a nonofficial capacity while we're, you know, being investigated for murder. Plus, I can't go more than a few minutes without wanting to k!ss you, so—there's that."

Nate doesn't reply at first, and I worry I've blown it. Maybe that was too much information. But he's still running his hand down my leg, and finally he says, "You're doing better than me. I never stop thinking about k!ssing you."

He takes off my glasses and folds them, putting them on the side table next to the couch. His hand on my face is featherlight as he leans in close and pulls my mouth toward his. I hold my breath as our lips connect, and the soft pressure sends a warm ache humming through my veins. It's sweet and tender, different from the hot, needy k!ss at Marshall's Peak. But it still makes me dizzy. I'm shaking all over and press my hands against his chest to try to get that under control, feeling a hard plane of muscle through his thin shirt. Not helping.

My lips part in a sigh that turns into a small moan when Nate slides his tongue to meet mine. Our kisses grow deeper and more intense, our bodies so tangled I can't tell where mine stops and his starts. I feel like I'm falling, floating, flying. All at once. We k!ss until my lips are sore and my skin sparks like I've been lit by a fuse.

Nate's hands are surprisingly PG. He touches my hair and face a lot, and eventually he slides a hand under my shirt and runs it over my back and oh God, I might have whimpered. His fingers dip into the waistband of my shorts and a shiver goes through me, but he stops there. The insecure side of me wonders if he's not as attracted to me as I am to him, or as he is to other girls. Except ... I've been pressed against him for half an hour and I know that's not it.

He pulls back and looks at me, his thick dark lashes sweeping low. God, his eyes. They're ridiculous. "I keep picturing your father walking in," he murmurs. "He kinda scares me." I sigh because, truth be told, that's been in the back of my mind too. Even though there's barely a five percent chance, it's still too much.

Nate runs a finger over my lips. "Your mouth is so red. We should take a break before I do permanent damage. Plus, I need to, um, calm down a little." He kisses my cheek and reaches for his jacket on the floor.

My heart drops. "Are you leaving?"

"No." He takes his phone out of his pocket and pulls up Netflix, then hands me my glasses. "We can finally finish watching Ringu."

"Damn it. I thought you'd forgotten about that." My disappointment's fake this time, though.

"Come on, this is perfect." Nate stretches on the couch and I curl next to him with my head on his shoulder as he props his iPhone in the crook of his arm. "We'll use my phone instead of that sixty-inch monster on your wall. You can't be scared of anything on such a tiny screen."

Honestly, I don't care what we do. I just want to stay wrapped around him for as long as possible, fighting sleep and forgetting about the rest of the world.