

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 21 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

Bronwyn

Wednesday, October 17, 12:25 p.m.

At lunch on Wednesday, Addy and I are talking about nail polish. She's a font of information on the subject. "With short nails like yours, you want something pale, almost nude," she says, examining my hands with a professional air. "But, like, super glossy."

"I don't really wear nail polish," I tell her.

"Well, you're getting fancier, aren't you? For whatever reason." She arches a brow at my careful blow-dry, and my cheeks heat as Maeve laughs. "You might want to give it a try."

It's a mundane, innocuous conversation compared to yesterday's lunch, when we caught up on my police visit, Nate's mother, and the fact that Addy got called to the station separately to answer questions about the missing EpiPens again. Yesterday we were murder suspects with complicated personal lives, but today we're just being girls.

Until a shrill voice from a few tables over pierces the conversation. "It's like I told them," Vanessa Merriman says. "Which person's rumor is definitely true? And which person's totally fallen apart since Simon died? That's your murderer."

"What's she on about now?" Addy mutters, nibbling like a squirrel at an oversized crouton.

Janae, who doesn't talk much when she sits with us, darts a look at Addy and says, "You haven't heard? Mikhail Powers's crew is out front. A bunch of kids are giving interviews."

My stomach drops, and Addy shoves her tray away. "Oh, great. That's all I need, Vanessa on TV yakking about how guilty I am."

"Nobody really thinks it was you," Janae says. She nods toward me. "Or you. Or ..." She watches as Cooper heads for Vanessa's table with a tray balanced in one hand, then spots us and changes course, seating himself at the edge of ours. He does that sometimes; sits with Addy for a few minutes at the beginning of lunch. Long enough to signal he's not abandoning her like the rest of her friends, but not so long that Jake gets pissed. I can't decide whether it's sweet or cowardly.

"What's up, guys?" he asks, starting to peel an orange. He's dressed in a sage button-down that brightens his hazel eyes, and he's got a baseball-cap tan from the sun hitting

his cheeks more than anything else. Somehow, instead of making him look uneven, it only adds to the Cooper Clay glow.

I used to think Cooper was the handsomest guy at school. He still might be, but lately there's something almost Ken doll-like about him—a little plastic and conventional. Or maybe my tastes have changed. "Have you given your Mikhail Powers interview yet?" I joke.

Before he can answer, a voice speaks over my shoulder. "You should. Go ahead and be the murder club everybody thinks you guys are. Ridding Bayview High of its a.sshats." Leah Jackson perches on the table next to Cooper. She doesn't notice Janae, who turns brick red and stiffens in her chair.

"Hello, Leah," Cooper says patiently. As though he's heard it before. Which I guess he did, at Simon's memorial service.

Leah scans the table, her eyes landing on me. "You ever gonna admit you cheated?" Her tone's conversational and her expression is almost friendly, but I still freeze.

"Hypocritical, Leah." Maeve's voice rings out, surprising me. When I turn, her eyes are blazing. "You can't complain about Simon in one breath and repeat his rumor in the next."

Leah gives Maeve a small salute. "Touché, Rojas the younger."

But Maeve's just getting warmed up. "I'm sick of the conversation never changing. Why doesn't anybody talk about how awful About That made this school sometimes?" She looks directly at Leah, her eyes challenging. "Why don't you? They're right outside, you know. Dying for a new angle. You could give it to them."

Leah recoils. "I'm not talking to the media about that."

"Why not?" Maeve asks. I've never seen her like this; she's almost fierce as she stares Leah down. "You didn't do anything wrong. Simon did. He did it for years, and now everybody's sainting him for it. Don't you have a problem with that?"

Leah stares right back, and I can't make out the expression that crosses her face. It's almost ... triumphant? "Obviously I do."

"So do something about it," Maeve says.

Leah stands abruptly, pushing her hair over her shoulder. The movement lifts her sleeve and exposes a crescent-shaped scar on her wrist. "Maybe I will." She stalks out the door with long strides.

Cooper blinks after her. “Dang, Maeve. Remind me not to get on your bad side.” Maeve wrinkles her nose, and I remember the file with Cooper’s name on it she still hasn’t managed to decrypt.

“Leah’s not on my bad side,” she mutters, tapping furiously on her phone.

I’m almost afraid to ask. “What are you doing?”

“Sending Simon’s 4chan threads to Mikhail Powers Investigates,” she says. “They’re journalists, right? They should look into it.”

“What?” Janae bursts out. “What are you talking about?”

“Simon was all over these discussion threads full of creepy people cheering on school shootings and stuff like that,” Maeve says. “I’ve been reading them for days. Other people started them, but he jumped right in and said all kinds of awful things. He didn’t even care when that boy killed all those people in Orange County.” She’s still tapping away when Janae’s hand shoots out and locks around her wrist, almost knocking her phone from her hand.

“How would you know that?” she hisses, and Maeve finally snaps out of the zone to realize she might’ve said too much.

“Let her go,” I say. When Janae doesn’t, I reach out and pry her fingers off Maeve’s wrist. They’re icy cold. Janae pushes her chair back with a loud scrape, and when she gets to her feet she’s shaking all over.

“None of you knew anything about him,” she says in a choked voice, and stomps away just like Leah did. Except she’s probably not about to give Mikhail Powers a sound bite. Maeve and I exchange glances as I drum my fingers on the table. I can’t figure Janae out. Most days, I’m not sure why she sits with us when we must be a constant reminder of Simon.

Unless it’s to hear conversations like the one we just had.

“I gotta go,” Cooper says abruptly, as though he’s used up his allotted non-Jake time. He lifts his tray, where the bulk of his lunch lies untouched, and smoothly makes his way to his usual table.

So our crew is back to being all girls, and stays that way for the rest of lunch. The only other guy who’d sit with us never bothers making an appearance in the cafeteria. But I pass Nate in the hallway afterward, and all the questions bubbling in my brain about Simon, Leah, and Janae disappear when he gives me a fleeting grin.

Because God, it’s beautiful when that boy smiles.

Addy

Friday, October 19, 11:12 a.m.

It's hot on the track, and I shouldn't feel like running very hard. It's only gym class, after all. But my arms and legs pump with unexpected energy as my lungs fill and expand, as if all my recent bike riding has given me reserves that need a release. Sweat beads my forehead and pastes my T-shirt to my back.

I feel a jolt of pride as I pass Luis—who, granted, is barely trying—and Olivia, who's on the track team. Jake's ahead of me and the idea of catching him seems ridiculous because obviously Jake is much faster than me, and bigger and stronger too, and there's no way I can gain on him except I am. He's not a speck anymore; he's close, and if I shift lanes and keep this pace going I can almost, probably, definitely—

My legs fly out from under me. The coppery taste of blood fills my mouth as I bite into my lip and my palms slam hard against the ground. Tiny stones shred my skin, embedding in raw flesh and exploding into dozens of tiny cuts. My knees are in agony and I know before I see thick red dots on the ground that my skin's burst open on both of them.

"Oh no!" Vanessa's voice rings with fake concern. "Poor thing! Her legs gave out."

They didn't. While my eyes were on Jake, someone's foot hooked my ankle and brought me down. I have a pretty good idea whose, but can't say anything because I'm too busy trying to suck air into my lungs.

"Addy, are you okay?" Vanessa keeps her fake voice on as she kneels next to me, until she's right next to my ear and whispers, "Serves you right, slvt."

I'd love to answer her, but I still can't breathe.

When our gym teacher arrives Vanessa backs off, and by the time I have enough air to talk she's gone. The gym teacher inspects my knees, turns my hands over, clucks at the damage. "You need the nurse's office. Get those cuts cleaned up and some antibiotics on you." She scans the crowd that's gathered around me and calls, "Miss Vargas! Help her out."

I guess I should be grateful it's not Vanessa or Jake. But I've barely seen Janae since Bronwyn's sister called Simon out a couple of days ago. As I limp toward school Janae doesn't look at me until we're almost at the entrance. "What happened?" she asks as she opens the door.

By now I have enough breath to laugh. "Vanessa's version of slvt-shaming." I turn left instead of right at the stairwell, heading for the locker room.

"You're supposed to go to the nurse's," Janae says, and I flutter my hand at her. I haven't darkened the nurse's doorstep in weeks, and anyway, my cuts are painful but superficial. All I really need is a shower. I limp to a stall and peel off my clothes, stepping under the warm spray and watching brown-and-red water swirl down the drain. I stay in the shower until the water's clear and when I step out, a towel wrapped around me, Janae's there holding a pack of Band-Aids.

"I got these for you. Your knees need them."

"Thanks." I lower myself onto a bench and press flesh-colored strips across my knees, which sure enough are getting slick with blood again. My palms sting and they're scraped pink and raw, but there's nowhere I can put a Band-Aid that will make a difference.

Janae sits as far away as possible from me on the bench. I put three Band-Aids on my left knee and two on my right. "Vanessa's a bitch," she says quietly.

"Yeah," I agree, standing and taking a cautious step. My legs hold up, so I head for my locker and pull out my clothes. "But I'm getting what I deserve, right? That's what everybody thinks. I guess it's what Simon would've wanted. Everything out in the open for people to judge. No secrets."

"Simon ..." Janae's got that strangled sound to her voice again. "He's not ... He wasn't like they said. I mean, yes, he went overboard with About That, and he wrote some awful things. But the past couple years have been rough. He tried so hard to be part of things and he never could. I don't think ..." She stumbles over her words. "When Simon was himself, he wouldn't have wanted this for you."

She sounds really sad about it. But I can't bring myself to care about Simon now. I finish dressing and look at the clock. There's still twenty minutes left in gym class, and I don't want to be here when Vanessa and her minions descend. "Thanks for the Band-Aids. Tell them I'm still at the nurse's, okay? I'm going to the library till next period."

"Okay," Janae says. She's slumped on the bench, looking hollowed out and exhausted, and as I head for the door she abruptly calls out, "Do you want to hang out this afternoon?"

I turn to her in surprise. I hadn't thought we were at that point in our ... acquaintance, I guess. Friendship still seems like a strong word. "Um, yeah. Sure."

"My mom's having her book club, so ... maybe I could come to your house?"

"All right," I say, picturing my own mother's reaction to Janae after being used to a house full of pretty-perky Keelys and Olivias. The thought brightens me up, and we make plans for Janae to stop by after school. On a whim I text an invitation to Bronwyn,

but I forgot she's grounded. Plus, she has piano lessons. Spontaneous downtime isn't really her thing.

I've barely stowed my bike under the porch after school when Janae arrives dragging her oversized backpack like she came to study. We make excruciating small talk with my mother, whose eyes keep roving from Janae's multiple piercings to her scuffed combat boots, until I bring her upstairs to watch TV.

"Do you like that new Netflix show?" I ask, aiming the remote at my television and sprawling across my bed so Janae can take the armchair. "The superhero one?"

She sits gingerly, like she's afraid the pink plaid will swallow her whole. "Yeah, okay," she says, lowering her backpack next to her and looking at all the framed photographs on my wall. "You're really into flowers, huh?"

"Not exactly. My sister has a new camera I was playing around with, and ... I took a lot of old pictures down recently." They're shoved beneath my shoe boxes now: a dozen memories of me and Jake from the past three years, and almost as many with my friends. I hesitated over one—me, Keely, Olivia, and Vanessa at the beach last summer, wearing giant sun hats and goofy grins with a brilliant blue sky behind us. It had been a rare, fun girls' day out, but after today I'm more glad than ever that I banished Vanessa's stupid smirk to the closet.

Janae fiddles with the strap to her backpack. "You must miss how things were before," she says in a low voice.

I keep my eyes trained on the screen while I consider her comment. "Yes and no," I say finally. "I miss how easy school used to be. But I guess nobody I hung out with ever really cared about me, right? Or things would have been different." I shift restlessly on the bed and add, "I'm not gonna pretend it's anything like what you're dealing with. Losing Simon that way."

Janae flushes and doesn't answer, and I wish I hadn't brought it up. I can't figure out how to interact with her. Are we friends, or just a couple of people without better options? We stare silently at the television until Janae clears her throat and says, "Could I have something to drink?"

"Sure." It's almost a relief to escape the silence that's settled between us, until I run into my mother in the kitchen and have a terse, ten-minute-long conversation about the kind of friends you have now. When I finally get back upstairs, two glasses of lemonade in hand, Janae's got her backpack on and she's halfway out the door.

"I don't feel well suddenly," she mumbles.

Great. Even my unsuitable friends don't want to hang out with me.

I text Bronwyn in frustration, not expecting an answer since she's probably in the middle of Chopin or something. I'm surprised when she messages me back right away, and even more surprised at what she writes.

Be careful. I don't trust her.