

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 24 - Tips

0 13 minutes read

Nate

Thursday, October 25, 12:20 a.m.

I ease my motorcycle into the cul-de-sac at the end of Bayview Estates and kill the motor, staying still for a minute to check for any hint that someone's nearby. It's quiet, so I climb off and give a hand to Bronwyn so she can do the same.

The neighborhood is still a half-finished construction area with no streetlights, so Bronwyn and I walk in darkness to house number 5. When we get there I try the front door, but it's locked. We circle to the back of the house and I jiggle each window until I find one that opens. It's low enough to the ground that I haul myself in easily. "Go back out front; I'll let you in," I say in a low voice.

"I think I can do it too," Bronwyn says, preparing to pull herself up. She doesn't have the arm strength, though, and I have to lean over and help her. The window's not big enough for two, and when I let go and step back to give her room, she scrambles the rest of the way and lands on the floor with a thud.

"Graceful," I say as she gets to her feet and brushes off her jeans.

"Shut up," she mutters, looking around. "Should we unlock the front for Addy and Cooper?"

We're in an empty, under-construction house after midnight for a meeting of the Bayview Four. It's like a bad spy movie, but there's no way all of us could get together anywhere else without drawing too much attention. Even my don't-give-a-crap neighbors are suddenly in my business now that Mikhail Powers's team keeps cruising down our street.

Plus, Bronwyn's still grounded.

"Yeah," I say, and we feel our way through a half-built kitchen and into a living room with a huge bay window. The moonlight streams bright across the door, and I twist its dead bolt open. "What time did you tell them?"

"Twelve-thirty," she says, pressing a button on her Apple watch.

"What time is it?"

"Twelve-twenty-five."

“Good. We have five minutes.” I slide my hand along the side of her face and back her up against the wall, pulling her hips to mine. She leans into me and wraps her arms around my neck, opening her mouth with a soft sigh. My hands travel down the curve of her waist to her hips, finding a strip of bare skin under the hem of her shirt. Bronwyn has this unbelievable stealth body under all her conservative clothes, although I’ve barely gotten to see any of it.

“Nate,” she whispers after a few minutes, in that breathless voice that drives me wild. “You were going to tell me how things went with your mom.”

Yeah. I guess I was. I saw my mother again this afternoon and it was ... all right. She showed up on time and sober. She backed off asking questions and gave me money for bills. But I spent the whole time taking bets with myself on how long it’d last. Current odds say two weeks.

Before I can answer, though, the door creaks and we’re not alone anymore. A small figure slips inside and shuts the door behind her. The moonlight’s bright enough that I can see Addy clearly, including the unexpected dark streaks in her hair. “Oh, good, I’m not the first one,” she whispers, then puts her hands on her hips as she glares at Bronwyn and me. “Are you two making out? Seriously?”

“Did you dye your hair?” Bronwyn counters, pulling away from me. “What color is that?” She reaches a hand out and examines Addy’s bangs. “Purple? I like it. Why the change?”

“I can’t keep up with the maintenance requirements of short hair,” Addy grumbles, dropping a bike helmet on the floor. “It doesn’t look as bad with color mixed in.” She cocks her head at me and adds, “I don’t need your commentary if you disagree, by the way.”

I hold up my hands. “Wasn’t going to say a word, Addy.”

“When did you even start knowing my name,” she deadpans.

I grin at her. “You’ve gotten kinda feisty since you lost all the hair. And the boyfriend.”

She rolls her eyes. “Where are we doing this? Living room?”

“Yeah, but back corner. Away from the window,” Bronwyn says, picking her way through construction supplies and sitting cross-legged in front of a stone fireplace. I sprawl next to her and wait for Addy to follow, but she’s still poised near the door.

“I think I hear something,” she says, peering through the peephole. She opens the door a crack and steps aside to let Cooper in. Addy leads him toward the fireplace but nearly goes flying when she trips on an extension cord. “Ow! Damn it, that was loud. Sorry.” She settles herself next to Bronwyn, and Cooper sits beside her.

“How are things?” Bronwyn asks Cooper.

He rubs a hand over his face. “Oh, you know. Livin’ the nightmare. My father won’t talk to me, I’m getting torn apart online, and none of the teams that were scouting me will return Coach Ruffalo’s calls. Other than that I’m great.”

“I’m so sorry,” Bronwyn says, and Addy grabs his hand and folds it in both of hers.

He heaves a sigh but doesn’t pull away. “It is what it is, I guess. Let’s just get to why we’re here, huh?”

Bronwyn clears her throat. “Well. Mainly to ... compare notes? Eli kept talking about looking for patterns and connections, which makes a lot of sense. I thought maybe we could go through some of the things we know. And don’t know.” She frowns and starts ticking things off on her fingers. “Simon was about to post some pretty shocking things about all of us. Somebody got us into that room together with the fake cell phones. Simon was poisoned while we were there. Lots of people besides us had reasons to be mad at Simon. He was mixed up in all kinds of creepy 4chan stuff. Who knows what kind of people he pissed off.”

“Janae said he hated being an outsider and he was really upset nothing more ever happened with Keely,” Addy says, looking at Cooper. “Do you remember that? He started hitting on her during junior prom, and she caved at a party a couple weeks later and hooked up with him for, like, five minutes. He thought it was actually going somewhere.”

Cooper hunches his shoulders like he’s remembering something he’d rather not. “Right. Huh. I guess that’s a pattern. Or a connection, or whatever. With me and Nate, I mean.”

I don’t get it. “What?”

He meets my eyes. “When I broke up with Keely, she told me she’d hooked up with you at a party to get rid of Simon. And I asked her out a couple weeks after.”

“You and Keely?” Addy stares at me. “She never said!”

“It was just a couple times.” Honestly, I’d forgotten all about it.

“And you’re good friends with Keely. Or you were,” Bronwyn says to Addy. She doesn’t seem fazed at the idea of Keely and me getting together, and I have to appreciate how she doesn’t lose focus. “But I have nothing to do with her. So ... I don’t know. Does that mean something, or doesn’t it?”

“I don’t see how it could,” Cooper says. “Nobody except Simon cared what happened between him and Keely.”

“Keely might have,” Bronwyn points out.

Cooper stifles a laugh. “You can’t think Keely had anything to do with this!”

“We’re freewheeling here,” Bronwyn says, leaning forward and propping her chin in her hand. “She’s a common thread.”

“Yeah, but Keely has zero motive for anything. Shouldn’t we be talking about people who hated Simon? Besides you,” Cooper adds, and Bronwyn goes rigid. “I mean, for that blog post he wrote about your sister. Addy told me about it. That was low, really low. I never saw it the first time around. I’d have said something if I did.”

“Well, I didn’t k!ll him for it,” Bronwyn says tightly.

“I’m not saying—” Cooper starts, but Addy interrupts.

“Let’s stay on track. What about Leah, or even Aiden Wu? You can’t tell me they wouldn’t have liked revenge.”

Bronwyn swallows and lowers her eyes. “I wonder about Leah too. She’s been ... Well, I have a connection to her I haven’t told you guys about. She and I were partners in a Model UN competition, and by mistake we told Simon a wrong deadline that got him disqualified. He started torturing Leah on About That right after.”

Bronwyn’s told me this, actually. It’s been eating at her for a while. But it’s news to Cooper and Addy, who starts bobbing her head. “So Leah’s got a reason to hate Simon and be mad at you.” Then she frowns. “But what about the rest of us? Why drag us along?”

I shrug. “Maybe we were just the secrets Simon had on hand. Collateral damage.”

Bronwyn sighs. “I don’t know. Leah’s hotheaded, but not exactly sneaky. I’m more confused about Janae’s deal.” She turns toward Addy. “One of the strangest things about the Tumblr is how many details it got right. You’d almost have to be one of us to know that stuff—or spend a lot of time with us. Don’t you think it’s weird that Janae hangs out with us even though we’re accused of k!lling her best friend?”

“Well, to be fair, I did invite her,” Addy says. “But she’s been awfully skittish lately. And did you guys notice she and Simon weren’t together as much as usual right before he died? I keep wondering if something happened between them.” She leans back and chews on her bottom lip. “I suppose if anybody would’ve known what secrets Simon was about to spill and how to use them, it’d be Janae. I just ... I don’t know, you guys. I’m not sure Janae’s got it in her to do something like this.”

“Maybe Simon rejected her and she ... k!lled him?” Cooper looks doubtful before he finishes the sentence. “Don’t see how, though. She wasn’t there.”

Bronwyn shrugs. “We don’t know that for sure. When I talked to Eli, he kept saying somebody could’ve planned the car accident as a distraction to slip into the room. If you take that as a possibility, anyone could’ve done it.”

I made fun of Bronwyn when she first brought that up, but—I don’t know. I wish I could remember more about that day, could say for sure whether it’s even possible. The whole thing’s turned into a blur.

“One of the cars was a red Camaro,” Cooper recalls. “Looked ancient. I don’t remember ever seeing it in the parking lot before. Or since. Which is weird when you think about it.”

“Oh, come on,” Addy scoffs. “That’s so far-fetched. Sounds like a lawyer with a guilty client grasping at straws. Someone new was probably just picking up a kid that day.”

“Maybe,” Cooper says. “I dunno. Luis’s brother works in a repair place downtown. Maybe I’ll ask him if a car like that came through, or if he can check with some other shops.” He holds up a hand at Addy’s raised brows. “Hey, you’re not the police’s favorite new person of interest, okay? I’m desperate here.”

We’re not getting anywhere with this conversation. But I’m struck by a couple of things as I listen to them talk. One: I like all of them more than I thought I would. Bronwyn’s obviously been the biggest surprise, and like doesn’t cover it. But Addy’s turned into kind of a bada.ss, and Cooper’s not as one-dimensional as I thought.

And two: I don’t think any of them did it.

Bronwyn

Friday, October 26, 8:00 p.m.

Friday night my entire family settles in to watch Mikhail Powers Investigates. I’m feeling more dread than usual, between bracing myself for Simon’s blog post about Maeve and worrying that something about Nate and me will make it into the broadcast. I never should have k!ssed him at school. Although in my defense he was unbelievably hot at that particular moment.

Anyway. We’re all nervous. Maeve curls next to me as Mikhail’s theme music plays and photos of Bayview flash across the screen.

A murder investigation turns witch hunt. When police tactics include revealing personal information in the name of evidence collection, have they gone too far?

Wait. What?

The camera zooms in on Mikhail, and he is pissed. I sit up straighter as he stares into the camera and says, “Things in Bayview, California, turned ugly this week when a closeted student involved in the investigation was outed after a round of police questioning, causing a media firestorm that should concern every American who cares about privacy rights.”

And then I remember. Mikhail Powers is gay. He came out when I was in junior high and it was a big deal because it happened after some photos of him kissing a guy circulated online. It wasn't his choice. And from the way he's covering the story now, he's still bitter.

Because suddenly the Bayview Police are the bad guys. They have no evidence, they've disrupted our lives, and they've violated Cooper's constitutional rights. They're on the defensive as a police spokesperson claims they were careful in their questioning and no leaks came from the department. But the ACLU wants to get involved now. And there's Eli Kleinfelter from Until Proven again, talking about how poorly this case has been handled from the beginning, with the four of us made into scapegoats while nobody even asks who else might've wanted Simon Kelleher dead.

“Has everybody forgotten about the teacher?” he asks, leaning forward from behind an overflowing desk. “He's the only person who was in that room who's being treated as a witness instead of a suspect, even though he had more opportunity than anyone. That can't be discounted.”

Maeve leans her head next to mine and whispers, “You should be working for Until Proven, Bronwyn.”

Mikhail switches to the next segment: Will the real Simon Kelleher please stand up? Simon's class picture flashes across the screen as people reminisce about his good grades and nice family and all the clubs he belonged to. Then Leah Jackson pops up on-screen, standing on Bayview High's front lawn. I turn to Maeve, eyes wide, and she looks equally shocked.

“She did it,” she murmurs. “She actually did it.”

Leah's interview is followed by segments with other kids hurt by Simon's gossip, including Aiden Wu and a girl whose parents kicked her out when news spread about her being pregnant. Maeve's hand finds mine as Mikhail drops his last bombshell—a screen capture of the 4chan discussion threads, with Simon's worst posts about the Orange County school shooting highlighted:

Look, I support the notion of violently disrupting schools in theory, but this kid showed a depressing lack of imagination. I mean, it was fine, I guess. It got the job done. But it was so prosaic. Haven't we seen this a hundred times now? Kid shoots up school, shoots up self, film at eleven. Raise the stakes, for God's sake. Do something original.

A grenade, maybe. Samurai swords? Surprise me when you take out a bunch of a.ssh0le lemmings. That's all I'm asking.

I think back to Maeve texting away that day Janae got so upset with her at lunch. "So you really did send that to the show?" I whisper.

"I really did," she whispers back. "I didn't know they'd use them, though. Nobody ever got back to me."

By the time the broadcast finishes, the Bayview Police are the real villains, followed closely by Simon. Addy, Nate, and I are innocent bystanders caught in a cross fire we don't deserve, and Cooper's a saint. The whole thing's a stunning reversal.

I'm not sure you could call it journalism, but Mikhail Powers Investigates definitely has an impact over the next few days. Somebody starts a Change.org petition to drop the investigation that collects almost twenty thousand signatures. The MLB and local colleges get heat about whether they discriminate against gay players. The tone of the media coverage shifts, with more questions being raised about the police's handling of the case than about us. And when I return to school on Monday, people actually talk to me again. Even Evan Neiman, who's been acting like we've never met, sidles up to me at the last bell and asks if I'm going to Mathlete practice.

Maybe my life won't ever be fully normal again, but by the end of the week I start to hope it'll be less criminal.

Friday night I'm on the phone with Nate as usual, reading him the latest Tumblr post. Even that seems like it's about to give up:

Being accused of murder is turning into a monumental drag. I mean, sure, the TV coverage is interesting. And it makes me feel good that the smoke screen I put in place is working—people still have no clue who's responsible for klling Simon.

Nate cuts me off after the first paragraph. "Sorry, but we have more important things to discuss. Answer this honestly: If I'm no longer a murder suspect, will you still find me attractive?"

"You'll still be on probation for drug dealing," I point out. "That's pretty hot."

"Ah, but that's up in December," Nate replies. "By the new year I could be a model citizen. Your parents might even let me take you out on an actual date. If you wanted to go."

If I wanted to go. "Nate, I've been waiting to go on a date with you since fifth grade," I tell him. I like that he wonders what we'll be like outside this weird bubble. Maybe if we're both thinking about it, there's a possibility we'll figure it out.

He tells me about his latest visit with his mother, who really seems to be trying. We watch a movie together—his choice, unfortunately—and I fall asleep to his voice criticizing the shoddy camerawork. When I wake up Saturday morning, I notice my phone has only a few minutes left. I'll have to ask him for another one. Which will be phone number four, I think.

Maybe we can use our actual phones one of these days.

I stay in bed a little later than usual, right up till the time I need to get moving if Maeve and I are going to do our usual running-slash-library routine. I've just finished lacing up my sneakers and am rooting around in my dresser for my Nano when a tentative knock sounds on my bedroom door.

"Come in," I say, unearthing a small blue device from a pile of headbands. "Is that you, Maeve? Are you the reason this is only ten percent charged?" I turn around to see my sister so white-faced and trembling that I almost drop my Nano. Anytime Maeve looks sick, I'm seized with the horrible fear she's had a relapse. "Do you feel all right?" I ask anxiously.

"I'm fine." The words come out as a gasp. "But you need to see something. Come downstairs, okay?"

"What's going on?"

"Just ... come." Maeve's voice is so brittle that my heart thumps painfully. She clutches the banister all the way downstairs. I'm about to ask if something's wrong with Mom or Dad when she leads me into the living room and points mutely at the television.

Where I see Nate in handcuffs, being led away from his house, with the words Arrest in the Simon Kelleher Murder Case scrolling on the bottom of the screen.