

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 25 - Tips

0 13 minutes read

Bronwyn

Saturday, November 3, 10:17 a.m.

This time I do drop my Nano.

It slips from my hand and thuds softly onto our rug as I watch one of the police officers flanking Nate open the cruiser door and push him, not very gently, into the backseat. The scene cuts to a reporter standing outdoors, brushing windswept dark hair out of her face. "Bayview Police refused to comment, other than to say that new evidence provides probable cause to charge Nate Macauley, the only one of the Bayview Four with a criminal record, with Simon Kelleher's murder. We'll continue to provide updates as the story unfolds. I'm Liz Rosen, reporting for Channel Seven News."

Maeve stands next to me, the remote in her hand. I pluck at her sleeve. "Can you rewind to the beginning, please?"

She does, and I study Nate's face in the looping video. His expression is blank, almost bored, as though he's been talked into going to a party that doesn't interest him.

I know that look. It's the same one he got when I mentioned Until Proven at the mall. He's shutting down and putting up defenses. There's no trace of the boy I know from the phone, or our motorcycle rides, or my media room. Or the one I remember from grade school, his St. Pius tie askew and his shirt untucked, leading his sobbing mother down the hallway with a fierce look that dared any of us to laugh.

I still believe that Nate's the real one. Whatever the police think, or found, doesn't change that.

My parents aren't home. I grab my phone and call my lawyer, Robin, who doesn't answer. I leave her such a long, rambling message that her voice mail cuts me off, and I hang up feeling helpless. Robin's my only hope for getting information, but she won't consider this an emergency. It's a problem for Nate's future lawyer, not her.

That thought makes me even more panicked. What's an overworked public defender who's never met Nate going to be able to do? My eyes dart around the room and meet Maeve's troubled gaze.

"Do you think he might have—"

"No," I say forcefully. "Come on, Maeve, you've seen how screwed up this investigation is. They thought I did it for a while. They're wrong. I'm positive they're wrong."

"I wonder what they found, though," Maeve says. "You'd think they'd be pretty careful after all the bad press they got this week."

I don't answer. For once in my life I have no idea what to do. My brain's empty of everything except a churning anxiety. Channel 7 has given up pretending they know anything new, and they're replaying snippets about the investigation to date. There's footage from Mikhail Powers Investigates. Addy in her pixie haircut, giving whoever's filming her a defiant finger. A Bayview Police Department spokesperson. Eli Kleinfelter.

Of course.

I grab my phone and search for Eli's name. He gave me his cell the last time we spoke and told me to call anytime. I hope he meant it.

He answers on the first ring. "Eli Kleinfelter."

"Eli? It's Bronwyn Rojas. From—"

"Of course. Hi, Bronwyn. I take it you're watching the news. What do you make of it?"

"They're wrong." I stare at the television while Maeve stares at me. Dread's creeping through me like a fast-growing vine, squeezing my heart and lungs so it's hard to breathe. "Eli, Nate needs a better lawyer than whatever random public defender they'll assign him. He needs somebody who gives a crap and knows what they're doing. I think, um, well—basically I think he needs you. Would you consider taking his case?"

Eli doesn't answer straightaway, and when he does his voice is cautious. "Bronwyn, you know I'm interested in this case, and I sympathize with all of you. You've gotten a sh!t deal and I'm sure this arrest is more of the same. But I've got an impossible workload as it is—"

"Please," I interrupt, and words tumble out of me. I tell Eli about Nate's parents and how he's practically raised himself since he was in fifth grade. I tell him every awful, heart-wrenching story Nate's ever told me, or that I witnessed or guessed. Nate would hate it, but I've never believed anything more strongly than I believe he needs Eli to stay out of jail.

"All right, all right," Eli says finally. "I get it. I really do. Are either of these parents in any shape to talk? I'll make time for a consult and give them some ideas for resources. That's all I can do."

It's not enough, but it's something. "Yes!" I say with brazen fake confidence. Nate talked to his mother two days ago and she was holding on, but I have no idea what effect today's news might have on her. "I'll talk to Nate's mom. When can we meet?"

"Ten tomorrow, our offices."

Maeve's still watching me when I hang up. "Bronwyn, what are you doing?"

I snatch the keys to the Volvo from the kitchen island. "I need to find Mrs. Macauley."

Maeve bites her lip. "Bronwyn, you can't—"

Run this like it's student council? She's right. I need help. "Will you come? Please?"

She debates for half a minute, her amber eyes steady on mine. "All right."

My phone almost slips out of my sweaty palm as we head for the car. I must've gotten a dozen calls and texts while I was talking with Eli. My parents, my friends, and a bunch of numbers I don't recognize that probably belong to reporters. I have four messages from Addy, all some variation of Did you see? and WTF?

"Are we telling Mom and Dad about this?" Maeve asks as I back out of the driveway.

"What 'this'? Nate's arrest?"

"I'm pretty sure they're in the loop on that. This ... legal coordination you're doing."

"Do you disapprove?"

"Not disapprove, exactly. But you're flying off the handle before you even know what the police found. It could be cut-and-dried. I know you really like him, but ... isn't it possible he did this?"

"No," I say shortly. "And yes. I'll tell Mom and Dad. I'm not doing anything wrong. Just trying to help a friend." My voice sticks on the last word, and we drive in silence until we reach Motel 6.

I'm relieved when the front desk clerk tells me Mrs. Macauley's still checked in, but she doesn't answer the phone in her room. Which is a good sign—hopefully she's wherever Nate is. I leave a note with my phone number and try not to overdo the underlines and capital letters. Maeve takes over driving responsibilities on the ride home while I call Addy.

"What the hell?" she says when she picks up, and the vise gripping my chest loosens at the disbelief in her voice. "First they think it's all of us. Then it's musical chairs till they finally land on Nate, I guess."

"Anything new?" I ask. "I've been away from screens for half an hour."

But there's nothing. The police are being tight-lipped about whatever they found. Addy's lawyer doesn't have a clue what's happening. "You want to hang out tonight?" she asks.

“You must be going nuts. My mom and her boyfriend have plans, so Ashton and I are making pizza. Bring Maeve; we’ll have a sister night.”

“Maybe. If things aren’t too out of control,” I say gratefully.

Maeve turns into our street, and my heart sinks when I spy the line of white news vans in front of our house. It looks like Univision and Telemundo have joined the fray, which is seriously going to piss off my dad. He can never get them to cover anything positive about his company, but this they show up for.

We pull into the driveway behind my parents’ cars, and as soon as I open my door a half-dozen microphones are in my face. I push past them and meet Maeve in front of the car, grabbing her hand as we weave through the cameras and the flashing lights. Most of the reporters shout some variation of “Bronwyn, do you think Nate killed Simon?” but one calls out, “Bronwyn, is it true you and Nate are romantically involved?”

I really hope my parents weren’t asked the same question.

Maeve and I slam the door behind us and duck past the windows into our kitchen. Mom is sitting at the island with a coffee cup between both hands, her face tight with worry. Dad’s voice rises in heated conversation from behind his closed office door.

“Bronwyn, we need to talk,” Mom says, and Maeve floats away upstairs.

I sit across from my mother at the kitchen island and meet her tired eyes with a pang. My fault. “Obviously you saw the news,” she says. “Your father’s talking to Robin about what, if anything, this means for you. In the meantime, we got a lot of questions when we walked past that zoo out there. Some about you and Nate.” I can tell she’s trying hard to keep her voice neutral. “We might have made it difficult for you to talk about whatever ... relationships you have with the other kids. Because from our perspective the best way to keep you safe was to keep you separate. So maybe you didn’t think you could confide in us, but I need you to be straight with me now that Nate’s been arrested. Is there something I should know?”

At first all I can think is What’s the least amount of information I can provide and still make you understand I need to help Nate? But then she reaches out and squeezes my hand, and it hits me with a stab of guilt how I never used to keep things from her until I cheated in chemistry. And look how that turned out.

So I tell her almost everything. Not about bringing Nate to our house or meeting him at Bayview Estates, because I’m pretty sure that’ll send us down a bad path. But I explain the late-night phone calls, the escape-from-school motorcycle rides, and, yeah, the kissing.

My mother is trying so hard not to freak out. I give her a lot of credit.

“So you’re ... serious about him?” She almost chokes on the words.

She doesn’t want the real answer. Robin’s answer-a-different-question-than-the-one-you’re-trying-to-deflect strategy would work well now. “Mom, I understand this is a bizarre situation and I don’t really know Nate. But I don’t believe he’d hurt Simon. And he doesn’t have anybody looking out for him. He needs a good lawyer, so that’s what I’m trying to help with.” My phone buzzes with a number I don’t recognize, and I grimace as I realize I need to answer in case it’s Mrs. Macauley. “Hi, this is Bronwyn.”

“Bronwyn, so glad you picked up! This is Lisa Jacoby with the Los Angeles Ti—”

I hang up and face my mother again. “I’m sorry I haven’t been straight with you after everything you’ve done for me. But please let me connect Mrs. Macauley and Eli. Okay?”

My mother massages her temple. “Bronwyn, I’m not sure you understand how cavalier you’ve been. You ignored Robin’s advice and you’re lucky it didn’t blow up in your face. It still might. But ... no, I won’t stop you from talking with Nate’s mother. This case is messed up enough that everyone involved needs decent counsel.”

I throw my arms around her and, God, it feels good to just hug my mom for a minute.

She sighs when I let go. “Let me talk to your father. I don’t think a conversation between you two would be productive right now.”

I couldn’t agree more. I’m on my way upstairs when my phone rings again, and my heart leaps when I see a 503 area code. I can’t keep the hope out of my voice when I pick up. “Hi, this is Bronwyn.”

“Bronwyn, hello.” The voice is low and strained, but clear. “It’s Ellen Macauley. Nate’s mother. You left me a note.”

Oh, thank God thank God thank God. She didn’t hightail it to Oregon in a drug-induced haze. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

Cooper

Saturday, November 3, 3:15 p.m.

It’s hard to evaluate exhibition games anymore, but overall this one went pretty well. My fastball hit ninety-four, I struck out the side twice, and only a few guys heckled me from the stands. They were wearing tutus and baseball caps, though, so they stood out a little more than your average gay basher before security escorted them out.

A couple of college scouts showed up, and the guy from Cal State even bothered to talk to me afterward. Coach Ruffalo started hearing from teams again, but it strikes me as

more of a PR play than genuine interest. Only Cal State is still talking scholarship, even though I'm pitching better than ever. That's life as an outed murder suspect, I guess. Pop doesn't wait for me outside the locker room anymore. He heads straight for the car when I'm done and starts the engine so we can make a quick exit.

Reporters are another story. They're dying to talk to me. I brace myself when a camera lights up as I leave the locker room, waiting for the woman with the microphone to cycle through the usual half-dozen questions. But she catches me by surprise.

"Cooper, what do you think about Nate Macauley's arrest?"

"Huh?" I stop short, too shocked to brush past her, and Luis almost bumps into me.

"You haven't heard?" The reporter grins like I handed her a winning lottery ticket. "Nate Macauley's been arrested for Simon Kelleher's murder, and the Bayview Police are saying you're no longer a person of interest. Can you tell me how that feels?"

"Um ..." Nope. I can't. Or won't. Same difference. "Excuse me."

"The hell?" Luis mutters once we're past the camera gauntlet. He pulls out his phone and swipes wildly as I spot my father's car. "Damn, she wasn't lying. Dude." He stares at me with wide eyes. "You're off the hook."

Weird, but that hadn't even occurred to me till he said it.

We're giving Luis a ride home, which is good since it cuts down the time Pop and I need to spend alone. Luis and I drop our bags in the backseat, and I climb into the passenger seat while Luis settles himself into the back. Pop's fiddling with the radio, trying to find a news station. "They arrested that Macauley kid," he says with grim satisfaction. "I'll tell you what, they're gonna have a pack of lawsuits on their hands when this is done. Starting with me."

He slides his eyes to my left as I sit. That's Pop's new thing: he looks near me. He hasn't met my eyes once since I told him about Kris.

"Well, you had to figure it was Nate," Luis says calmly. Throws Nate right under the bus, like he hadn't been sitting with the guy at lunch all last week.

I don't know what to think. If I'd had to point a finger at someone when this all started, it would've been Nate. Even though he'd acted genuinely desperate when he was searching for Simon's EpiPen. He was the person I knew the least, and he was already a criminal, so ... it wasn't much of a stretch.

But when the entire Bayview High cafeteria was ready to take me down like a pack of hyenas, Nate was the only person who said anything. I never thanked him, but I've

thought a lot about how much worse school would've gotten if he'd brushed past me and let things snowball.

My phone's filled with text messages, but the only ones I care about are a string from Kris. Other than a quick visit to warn Kris about the police and apologize for the oncoming media onslaught, I've barely seen him in the past couple of weeks. Even though people know about us, we haven't had a chance to be normal.

I'm still not sure what that would even look like. I wish I could find out.

Omg saw the news

This is good right??

Call when you can

I text him back while half listening to Pop and Luis talk. After we drop Luis off silence settles between me and my father, dense as fog. I'm the first to break it. "So how'd I do?"

"Good. Looked good." Bare-minimum response, as usual lately.

I try again. "I talked to the scout from Cal State."

He snorts. "Cal State. Not even top ten."

"Right," I acknowledge.

We catch sight of the news vans when we're halfway down our street. "Goddamn it," Pop mutters. "Here we go again. Hope this was worth it."

"What was worth it?"

He pulls around a news van, throws the gearshift into park, and yanks the key out of the ignition. "Your choice."

Anger flares inside me—at both his words and how he spits them out without even looking at me. "None of this is a choice," I say, but the noise outside swallows my words as he opens the door.

The reporter gauntlet is thinner than usual, so I'm guessing most of them are at Bronwyn's. I follow Pop inside, where he immediately heads for the living room and turns on the TV. I'm supposed to do postgame stretching now, but my father hasn't bothered to remind me about my routine for a while.

Nonny's in the kitchen, making buttered toast with brown sugar on top. "How was the game, darlin'?"

"Fantastic," I say heavily, collapsing into a chair. I pick up a stray quarter and spin it into a silvery blur across the kitchen table. "I pitched great, but nobody cares."

"Now, now." She sits across from me with her toast and offers me a slice, but I push it back toward her. "Give it time. Do you remember what I told you in the hospital?" I shake my head. "Things'll get worse before they get better. Well, they surely did get worse, and now there's nowhere to go but up." She takes a bite and I keep spinning the quarter until she swallows. "You should bring that boy of yours by sometime for dinner, Cooper. It's about time we met him."

I try to picture my father making conversation with Kris over chicken casseroles. "Pop would hate that."

"Well, he'll have to get used to it, won't he?"

Before I can answer her, my phone buzzes with a text from a number I don't recognize. It's Bronwyn. I got your number from Addy. Can I call you?

Sure.

My phone rings within seconds. "Hi, Cooper. You've heard about Nate?"

"Yeah." I'm not sure what else to say, but Bronwyn doesn't give me a chance.

"I'm trying to set up a meeting with Nate's mom and Eli Kleinfelter from Until Proven. I'm hoping he'll take Nate's case. I was wondering, did you get a chance to ask Luis's brother about that red Camaro from the parking lot accident?"

"Luis called him last week about it. He was gonna look into it, but I haven't heard back yet."

"Would you mind checking in with him?" Bronwyn asks.

I hesitate. Even though I haven't processed everything yet, there's this little ball of relief growing inside me. Because yesterday I was the police's number one guy. And today I'm not. I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel good.

But this is Nate. Who's not a friend, exactly. Or at all, I guess. But he's not anything.

"Yeah, okay," I tell Bronwyn.