

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 26 - Tips

0 12 minutes read

Bronwyn

Sunday, November 4, 10:00 a.m.

We're quite the crew at the Until Proven offices Sunday morning: me, Mrs. Macauley, and my mom. Who was willing to let me go, but not unsupervised.

The small, sparsely furnished space is overflowing, with each desk holding at least two people. Everyone's either talking urgently on the phone or pounding away on a computer. Sometimes both. "Busy for a Sunday," I comment as Eli leads us into a tiny room crammed with a small table and chairs.

Eli's hair seems to have grown three inches since he was on Mikhail Powers Investigates, all of it upward. He runs a hand through the mad scientist curls and sends them even higher. "Is it Sunday already?"

There aren't enough chairs, so I sit on the floor. "Sorry," Eli says. "We can make this quick. First off, Mrs. Macauley, I'm sorry about your son's arrest. I understand he's been remanded to a juvenile detention center instead of an adult facility, which is good news. As I told Bronwyn, there's not much I can do given my current workload. But if you're willing to share whatever information you have, I'll do what I can to provide suggestions and maybe a referral."

Mrs. Macauley looks exhausted, but like she's made an effort to dress up a little in navy pants and a lumpy gray cardigan. My own mother is her usual effortless chic in leggings, tall boots, a cashmere sweater-coat, and a subtly patterned infinity scarf. The two of them couldn't be more different, and Mrs. Macauley tugs at the frayed hem of her sweater as though she knows it.

"Well. Here's what I've been told," she says. "The school received a call that Nate had drugs in his locker—"

"From whom?" Eli asks, scribbling on a yellow notepad.

"They wouldn't say. I think it was anonymous. But they went ahead and removed his lock Friday after school to check. They didn't find any drugs. But they did find a bag with Simon's water bottle and EpiPen. And all the EpiPens from the nurse's office that went missing the day he died." I run my fingers along the rough fiber of the rug, thinking of all the times Addy's been questioned about those pens. Cooper, too. They've been hanging over our heads for weeks. There's no way, even if Nate were actually guilty of something, that he'd be dumb enough to leave them sitting in his locker.

"Ah." Eli's voice comes out like a sigh, but his head stays bent over his legal pad.

“So the police got involved, and they got a warrant to search the house Saturday morning,” Mrs. Macauley continues. “And they found a computer in Nate’s closet with this ... journal, I guess they’re calling it. All those Tumblr posts that have been popping up everywhere since Simon died.”

I raise my eyes and catch my mother staring at me, a kind of disturbed pity crawling across her face. I hold her gaze and shake my head. I don’t believe any of it.

“Ah,” Eli says again. This time he does look up, but his face remains calm and neutral. “Any fingerprints?”

“No,” Mrs. Macauley says, and I exhale quietly.

“What does Nate say about all this?” Eli asks.

“That he has no idea how any of these things got into his locker or the house,” Mrs. Macauley says.

“Okay,” Eli says. “And Nate’s locker hadn’t been searched before this?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Macauley admits, and Eli looks at me.

“It was,” I recall. “Nate says he was searched the first day they questioned us. His locker and his house. The police came with dogs and everything, looking for drugs. They didn’t find any,” I add hastily, with a sideways glance at my mother before I turn back to Eli. “But nobody found Simon’s things or a computer then.”

“Is your house typically locked?” Eli asks Mrs. Macauley.

“It’s never locked,” she replies. “I don’t think the door even has a lock anymore.”

“Huh,” Eli mutters, scribbling on his pad again.

“There’s something else,” Mrs. Macauley says, and her voice wavers. “The district attorney wants Nate moved to a regular prison. They’re saying he’s too dangerous to be in a juvenile center.”

A chasm cracks open in my chest as Eli sits bolt upright. It’s the first time he’s dropped his impartial lawyer mask and shown some emotion, and the horror on his face terrifies me. “Oh no. No, no, no. That would be a fvcking disaster. Excuse my language. What’s his lawyer doing to stop that?”

“We haven’t met him yet.” Mrs. Macauley sounds near tears. “Someone’s been appointed, but they haven’t been in touch.”

Eli drops his pen with a frustrated grunt. "Possession of Simon's things isn't great. Not great at all. People have been convicted on less. But the way they got this evidence ... I don't like it. Anonymous tips, things that weren't there before conveniently showing up now. In places that aren't hard to access. Combination locks are easy to pick. And if the DA's talking about sending Nate to federal prison at age seventeen ... any lawyer worth a damn should be blocking the hell out of that." He rubs a hand across his face and scowls at me. "Damn it, Bronwyn. This is your fault."

Everything Eli's been saying has been making me more and more sick, except this. Now I'm just confused. "What did I do?" I protest.

"You brought this case to my attention and now I have to take it. And I do not have time. But whatever. That's assuming you're open to a change in counsel, Mrs. Macauley?"

Oh, thank God. The relief surging through me makes me limp and almost dizzy. Mrs. Macauley nods vigorously, and Eli sighs.

"I can help," I say eagerly. "We've been looking into—" I'm about to tell Eli about the red Camaro, but he holds his hand out with a forbidding expression.

"Stop right there, Bronwyn. If I'm going to represent Nate, I can't speak with other represented people in this case. It could get me disbarred and put you at risk of implication. In fact, I need you and your mother to leave so I can work out some details with Mrs. Macauley."

"But ..." I look helplessly at my mother, who's nodding and getting to her feet, securing her handbag over her shoulder with an air of finality.

"He's right, Bronwyn. You need to leave things with Mr. Kleinfelter and Mrs. Macauley now." Her expression softens as she meets Mrs. Macauley's eyes. "I wish you the best of luck with all this."

"Thank you," Mrs. Macauley says. "And thank you, Bronwyn."

I should feel good. Mission accomplished. But I don't. Eli doesn't know half of what we do, and now how am I supposed to tell him?

Addy

Monday, November 5, 6:30 p.m.

By Monday things have gotten oddly normal. Well, new-normal. Newmal? Anyway, my point is, when I sit down to dinner with my mother and Ashton, the driveway is free of news vans and my lawyer doesn't call once.

Mom deposits a couple of heated-up Trader Joe's dinners in front of Ashton and me, then sits between us with a cloudy glass of yellow-brown beverage. "I'm not eating," she announces, even though we didn't ask. "I'm cleansing."

Ashton wrinkles her nose. "Ugh, Mom. That's not that lemonade with the maple syrup and cayenne pepper, is it? That's so gross."

"You can't argue with results," Mom says, taking a long sip. She presses a napkin to her overly plumped lips, and I take in her stiff blond hair, red lacquered nails, and the skintight dress she put on for a typical Monday. Is that me in twenty-five years? The thought makes me even less hungry than I was a minute ago.

Ashton turns on the news and we watch coverage of Nate's arrest, including an interview with Eli Kleinfelter. "Handsome boy," Mom notes when Nate's mug shot appears on the screen. "Shame he turned out to be a murderer."

I push my half-eaten tray away. There's no point in suggesting that the police might be wrong. Mom's just happy the lawyer bills are almost over.

The doorbell rings, and Ashton folds her napkin next to her plate. "I'll see who it is." She calls my name a few seconds later, and my mother shoots me a surprised look. Nobody's come to the door in weeks unless they wanted to interview me, and my sister always chases those away. Mom follows me into the living room as Ashton pulls the door open to let TJ enter.

"Hey." I blink at him in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Your history book ended up in my backpack after earth science. This is yours, right?" TJ hands a thick gray textbook to me. We've been lab partners since the first rock sorting, and it's usually a bright spot in my day.

"Oh. Yeah, thanks. But you could've given it to me tomorrow."

"We have that quiz, though."

"Right." No point in telling him I've pretty much given up on academics for the semester. "How'd you know where I live?"

"School directory." Mom's staring at TJ like he's dessert, and he meets her eyes with a polite smile. "Hi, I'm TJ Forrester. I go to school with Addy." She simpers and shakes his hand, taking in his dimples and football jacket. He's almost a dark-skinned, crooked-nosed version of Jake. His name doesn't register with her, but Ashton exhales a soft breath behind me.

I've got to get TJ out of here before Mom puts two and two together. "Well, thanks again. I'd better go study. See you tomorrow."

“Do you want to study together for a while?” TJ asks.

I hesitate. I like TJ, I really do. But spending time together outside school isn't a step I'm ready to take. “I can't, because of ... other stuff.” I practically shove him out the door, and when I turn back inside, Mom's face is a mixture of pity and irritation.

“What's wrong with you?” she hisses. “Being so rude to a handsome boy like that! It's not as if they're beating down your door anymore.” Her eyes flicker over my purple-streaked hair. “Given the way you've let yourself go, you should consider yourself lucky he wanted to spend time with you at all.”

“God, Mom—” Ashton says, but I interrupt her.

“I'm not looking for another boyfriend, Mom.”

She stares at me like I've sprouted wings and started speaking Chinese. “Why on earth not? It's been ages since you and Jake broke up.”

“I spent more than three years with Jake. I could use some downtime.” I say it mostly to argue, but as soon as the words come out of my mouth I know they're true. My mother started dating when she was fourteen, like me, and hasn't stopped since. Even when it means going out with an immature man-boy who's too cowardly to bring her home to his parents.

I don't want to be that afraid to be alone.

“Don't be ridiculous. That's the last thing you need. Have a few dates with a boy like TJ, even if you're not interested, and other boys at school might see you as desirable again. You don't want to end up on a shelf, Adelaide. Some sad single girl who spends all her time with that odd group of friends you've got now. If you'd wash that nonsense out of your hair, grow it a little, and wear makeup again, you could do much better than that.”

“I don't need a guy to be happy, Mom.”

“Of course you do,” she snaps. “You've been miserable for the past month.”

“Because I was being investigated for murder,” I remind her. “Not because I'm single.” It's not one hundred percent true, since the main source of my misery was Jake. But it was him I wanted to be with. Not just anyone.

My mother shakes her head. “You keep telling yourself that, Adelaide, but you're hardly college material. Now's the time to find a decent boy with a good future who's willing to take care of y—”

“Mom, she’s seventeen,” Ashton interrupts. “You can put this script on hold for at least ten years. Or forever. It’s not like the whole relationship thing has worked out well for either of us.”

“Speak for yourself, Ashton,” Mom says haughtily. “Justin and I are ecstatically happy.”

Ashton opens her mouth to say more, but my phone rings and I hold up my finger as Bronwyn’s name appears. “Hey. What’s up?” I say.

“Hi.” Her voice sounds thick, as if she’s been crying. “So, I was thinking about Nate’s case and I wanted your help with something. Could you stop by for a little while tonight? I’m going to ask Cooper, too.”

It beats being insulted by my mother. “Sure. Text me your address.”

I scrape my half-eaten dinner into the garbage disposal and grab my helmet, calling good-bye to Ashton as I head out the door. It’s a perfect late-fall night, and the trees lining our street sway in a light breeze as I pedal past. Bronwyn’s house is only about a mile from mine, but it’s a completely different neighborhood; there’s nothing cookie-cutter about these houses. I coast into the driveway of her huge gray Victorian, eyeing the vibrant flowers and wraparound porch with a stab of envy. It’s gorgeous, but it’s not just that. It looks like a home.

When I ring the doorbell Bronwyn answers with a muted “Hey.” Her eyes droop with exhaustion and her hair’s come half out of its ponytail. It occurs to me that we’ve all had our turn getting crushed by this experience: me when Jake dumped me and all my friends turned against me; Cooper when he was outed, mocked, and pursued by the police; and now Bronwyn when the guy she loves is in jail for murder.

Not that she’s ever said she loves Nate. It’s pretty obvious, though.

“Come on in,” Bronwyn says, pulling the door open. “Cooper’s here. We’re downstairs.”

She leads me into a spacious room with overstuffed sofas and a large flat-screen television mounted on the wall. Cooper is already sprawled in an armchair, and Maeve’s sitting cross-legged in another with her laptop on the armrest between them. Bronwyn and I sink into a sofa and I ask, “How’s Nate? Have you seen him?”

Wrong question, I guess. Bronwyn swallows once, then twice, trying to keep herself together. “He doesn’t want me to. His mom says he’s ... okay. Considering. Juvenile detention’s horrible but at least it’s not prison.” Yet. We all know Eli’s locked in a battle to keep Nate where he is. “Anyway. Thanks for coming. I guess I just ...” Her eyes fill with tears, and Cooper and I exchange a worried glance before she blinks them back. “You know, I was so glad when we all finally got together and started talking about this. I felt a lot less alone. And now I guess I’m asking for your help. I want to finish what we started. Keep putting our heads together to make sense of this.”

“I haven’t heard anything from Luis about the car,” Cooper says.

“I wasn’t actually thinking about that right now, but please keep checking, okay? I was more hoping we could all take another look at those Tumblr posts. I have to admit, I started ignoring them because they were freaking me out. But now the police say Nate wrote them, and I thought we should read through and note anything that’s surprising, or doesn’t fit with how we remember things, or just strikes us as weird.” She pulls her ponytail over her shoulder as she opens her laptop. “Do you mind?”

“Now?” Cooper asks.

Maeve angles her screen so Cooper can see it. “No time like the present.”

Bronwyn’s next to me, and we start from the bottom of the Tumblr posts. I got the idea for killing Simon while watching Dateline. Nate’s never struck me as a newsmagazine show fan, but I doubt that’s the kind of insight Bronwyn’s looking for. We sit in silence for a while, reading. Boredom creeps in and I realize I’ve been skimming, so I go back and try to read more thoroughly. Blah blah, I’m so smart, nobody knows it’s me, the police don’t have a clue. And so on.

“Hang on. This didn’t happen.” Cooper’s reading more carefully than I am. “Have you gotten to this yet? The one dated October twentieth, about Detective Wheeler and the doughnuts?”

I raise my head like a cat pricking up its ears at a distant sound. “Um,” Bronwyn says, her eyes scanning the screen. “Oh yeah. That’s a weird little aside, isn’t it? We were never all at the police station at once. Well, maybe right after the funeral, but we didn’t see or talk to each other. Usually when whoever’s writing these throws in specific details, they’re accurate.”

“What are you guys looking at?” I ask.

Bronwyn increases the page size and points. “There. Second to last line.”

This investigation is turning into such a cliché, the four of us even caught Detective Wheeler eating a pile of doughnuts in the interrogation room.

A cold wave washes over me as the words enter my brain and nest there, pushing everything else out. Cooper and Bronwyn are right: that didn’t happen.

But I told Jake it did.