

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 27 - Tips

09 minutes read

Bronwyn

Tuesday, November 6, 7:30 p.m.

I'm not supposed to talk to Eli. So last night I texted Mrs. Macauley a link to the Tumblr post that Addy, Cooper, and I read together, and told her what was weird about it. Then I waited. A frustratingly long time, until I got a text back from her after school.

Thank you. I've informed Eli, but he asks that you don't involve yourself further.

That's all. I wanted to throw my phone across the room. I'll admit it; I spent most of last night fantasizing that Addy's bombshell would get Nate out of jail immediately. While I realize that was ridiculously naïve, I still think it deserves more than a brush-off.

Even though I can't wrap my brain around what it means. Because—Jake Riordan? If I had to pick the most random possible person to be involved in this, it still wouldn't have been him. And involved how, exactly? Did he write the whole Tumblr, or just that one post? Did he frame Nate? Did he kill Simon?

Cooper shot that down almost immediately. "He couldn't have," he said Monday night. "Jake was at football practice when Addy called him."

"He might have left," I insisted. So Cooper called Luis to confirm. "Luis says no," Cooper reported. "Jake was leading passing drills the whole time."

I'm not sure we can hinge an entire investigation on Luis's memory, though. That boy's killed a lot of brain cells over the years. He didn't even question why Cooper was asking.

Now I'm in my room with Maeve and Addy, putting dozens of colored Post-its on the wall that summarize everything we know. It's very Law & Order, except none of it makes sense.

Someone planted phones in our backpacks

Simon was poisoned during detention

Bronwyn, Nate, Cooper, Addy & Mr. Avery were in the room

The car accident distracted us

Jake wrote at least one Tumblr post

Jake and Simon were friends once

Leah hates Simon

Aiden Wu hates Simon

Simon had a thing for Keely

Simon had a violence-loving alter ego online

Simon was depressed

Janae seems depressed

Janae & Simon stopped being friends?

My mother's voice floats up the stairs. "Bronwyn, Cooper's here."

Mom already loves Cooper. So much that she doesn't protest all of us getting together again, even though Robin's legal advice is to still keep our distance from one another.

"Hey," Cooper says, not the least bit breathless from bounding up our stairs. "I can't stay long, but I got some good news. Luis thinks he might've found that car. His brother called a buddy at a repair place in Eastland and they had a red Camaro come through with fender damage a few days after Simon died. I got you the license plate and a phone number." He searches through his backpack and hands me a torn envelope with numbers scrawled across the back. "I guess you can pass that along to Eli, huh? Maybe there's something there."

"Thanks," I say gratefully.

Cooper runs his eyes over my wall. "This helping?"

Addy sits back on her haunches with a frustrated noise. "Not really. It's just a collection of random facts. Simon this, Janae that, Leah this, Jake that ..."

Cooper frowns and crosses his arms, leaning forward for a better look at the wall. "I don't get the Jake part, at all. I can't believe he'd actually sit around and write that damn Tumblr. I think he just ... blabbed to the wrong person or something." He taps a finger on the Post-it with all our names on it. "And I keep wondering: Why us? Why'd we get dragged into this? Are we just collateral damage, like Nate said? Or is there some specific reason we're part of this?"

I tilt my head at him, curious. "Like what?"

Cooper shrugs. "I don't know. Take you and Leah. It's a small thing, but what if something like that started a domino effect? Or me and ..." He scans the wall and settles on a Post-it. "Aiden Wu, maybe. He got outed for cross-dressing, and I was hiding the fact I'm gay."

"But that entry was changed," I remind him.

"I know. And that's weird too, isn't it? Why get rid of a perfectly good piece of gossip that's true, and replace it with one that's not? I can't shake the feeling that this is personal, y'know? The way that Tumblr kept everything going, egging people on about us. I wish I understood why."

Addy tugs on one of her earrings. Her hand trembles, and when she speaks, her voice does too. "Things were pretty personal between me and Jake, I guess. And maybe he was jealous of you, Cooper. But Bronwyn and Nate ... why would he involve them?"

Collateral damage. We've all been affected, but Nate's gotten the worst of it by far. If Jake's to blame, that doesn't make sense. But then again, none of this does.

"I should go," Cooper says. "I'm meeting Luis."

I manage a smile. "Not Kris?"

Cooper's return smile is a little strained. "We're still figuring things out. Anyway, let me know if the car stuff is helpful."

He leaves and Maeve gets up, crossing over to the spot near my bed that Cooper just vacated. She shuffles Post-its on the wall, putting four of them into a square:

Jake wrote at least one Tumblr post

Leah hates Simon

Aiden Wu hates Simon

Janae seems depressed

"These are the most connected people. They've either got reason to hate Simon, or we already know they're involved in some way. Some are pretty unlikely"—she taps on Aiden's name—"and some have big red flags against them." She points to Jake and Janae. "But nothing's clear-cut. What are we missing?"

We all stare at the Post-its in silence.

You can learn a lot about a person when you have his license plate and phone number. His address, for example. And his name, and where he goes to school. So if you

wanted to, you could hang out in the parking lot of his school before it started and wait for his red Camaro to arrive. Theoretically.

Or actually.

I meant to turn the numbers Cooper gave me over to Mrs. Macauley so she could pass them along to Eli. But I kept thinking about her terse text: I've informed Eli, but he asks that you don't involve yourself further. Would Eli even take me seriously? He's the one who first mentioned the car accident as suspicious, but he's spending all his time trying to keep Nate in the juvenile detention center. He might consider this nothing but a pesky distraction.

Anyway, I'm just scoping things out. That's what I tell myself as I enter Eastland High's parking lot. They start classes forty minutes before we do, so I can still get back to Bayview in plenty of time for the first bell. It's stuffy in the car, and I lower both front-seat windows as I pull into an empty spot and turn the car off.

Thing is, I need to be doing stuff. If I don't, I think about Nate too much. About where he is, what he's going through, and the fact that he won't talk to me. I mean, I understand he has limited communication options. Obviously. But they're not nonexistent. I asked Mrs. Macauley if I could visit, and she told me Nate didn't want me there.

Which stings. She thinks he wants to protect me, but I'm not so sure. He's pretty used to people giving up on him, and maybe he's decided to do it to me first.

A flash of red catches my eye, and an ancient Camaro with a shiny fender parks a few spaces away from me. A short dark-haired boy gets out and hauls a backpack from the passenger seat, looping one strap over his shoulder.

I don't intend to say anything. But he glances my way as he walks by my window and before I can stop myself I blurt out, "Hey."

He pauses, curious brown eyes meeting mine. "Hey. I know you. You're the girl from the Bayview investigation. Bronte, right?"

"Bronwyn." Since I've already blown my cover, might as well go all in.

"What are you doing here?" He's dressed like he's waiting for a '90s grunge comeback, in a flannel shirt over a Pearl Jam T-shirt.

"Um ..." My eyes skitter to his car. I should just ask, right? That's what I came for. But now that I'm actually talking to this boy the whole thing seems ridiculous. What am I supposed to say? Hey, what's the deal with your oddly timed car accident at a school you don't go to? "Waiting for somebody."

He wrinkles his brow at me. "You know people here?"

“Yeah.” Sort of. I know about your recent car repair, anyway.

“Everybody’s been talking about you guys. Weird case, huh? The kid who died—he was kind of weird, right? I mean, who even has an app like that? And all that stuff they said on Mikhail Powers. Random.”

He seems ... nervous. My brain chants ask ask ask but my mouth won’t obey.

“Well. See ya.” He starts to move past my car.

“Wait!” My voice unsticks and he pauses. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“We just were talking.”

“Right, but ... I have an actual question for you. The thing is, when I said I was waiting for somebody? I meant you.”

He’s definitely nervous. “Why would you be waiting for me? You don’t even know me.”

“Because of your car,” I say. “I saw you get into an accident in our parking lot that day. The day Simon died.”

He pales and blinks at me. “How do you—why do you think that was me?”

“I saw your license plate,” I lie. No need to sell out Luis’s brother. “The thing is ... the timing was weird, you know? And now someone’s been arrested for something I’m sure he didn’t do and I wondered ... did you happen to see anything or anyone strange that day? It would help—” My voice catches and tears prick my eyes. I blink them back and try to focus. “Anything you could tell me would help.”

He hesitates and steps back, looking toward the stream of kids funneling into the school. I wait for him to back away and join them, but instead he crosses to the other side of my car, opens the passenger door, and climbs inside. I press a button to raise the windows and turn to face him.

“So.” He runs a hand through his hair. “This is weird. I’m Sam, by the way. Sam Barron.”

“Bronwyn Rojas. But I guess you know that already.”

“Yeah. I’ve been watching the news and wondering if I should say something. But I didn’t know if it meant anything. I still don’t.” He gives me a quick sideways glance, as though checking for signs of alarm. “We didn’t do anything wrong. Like, illegal. As far as I know.”

My spine tingles as I sit up straighter. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me and my buddy. We had the accident on purpose. A guy paid us a thousand bucks each to do it. Said it was a prank. I mean, wouldn’t you? The fender barely cost five hundred to fix. The rest was pure profit.”

“Someone ...” It’s warm in the car with the windows up, and my hands gripping the steering wheel are slick with sweat. I should turn the air conditioning on, but I can’t move. “Who? Do you know his name?”

“I didn’t, but—”

“Did he have brown hair and blue eyes?” I blurt out.

“Yeah.”

Jake. He must’ve gotten away from Luis at some point after all. “Was he— Wait, I have a picture in here somewhere,” I say, fumbling through my backpack for my phone. I’m sure I took a picture of the homecoming court in September.

“I don’t need a picture,” Sam says. “I know who he is.”

“Really? Like, you know his name?” My heart’s beating so fast I can see my chest moving. “Are you sure he gave you a real name?”

“He didn’t give me any name. I figured it out later when I saw the news.”

I remember those first few stories, with Jake’s class picture next to Addy’s. A lot of people thought it wasn’t fair to show him, but I’m glad they did. I have the homecoming picture pulled up now, and I hand it to Sam. “Him, right? Jake Riordan?”

He blinks at my phone, shakes his head, and hands it back. “No. That’s not him. It was someone a lot more ... closely involved with the whole thing.”

My heart’s about to explode. If it wasn’t Jake, there’s only one other boy with dark hair and blue eyes involved in the investigation. Closely involved, no less. And that’s Nate.

No. No. Please, God, no.

“Who?” My voice isn’t even a whisper.

Sam blows out a sigh and leans against the headrest. He’s quiet for the longest seconds of my life until he says, “It was Simon Kelleher.”