

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 30 - Tips

0 17 minutes read

Nate

Friday, November 9, 3:40 p.m.

I know something's different by how the guard looks at me when he calls my name. Not as much like a piece of dirt he wants to grind under his shoe as usual. "Bring your things," he says. I don't have much, but I take my time shoving everything into a plastic bag before I follow him down the long gray corridor to the warden's office.

Eli hovers in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, giving me that intense stare of his times a hundred. "Welcome to the rest of your life, Nate." When I don't react, he adds, "You're free. You're out. This whole thing was a hoax that's been blown wide open. So get out of that jumpsuit and into civilian clothes, and let's get you the hell out of here."

At this point I'm used to doing what I'm told, so that's all I do. Nothing else registers, even when Eli shows me news stories about Jake's arrest, until he tells me Addy's in the hospital with a concussion and a fractured skull. "Good news is, it's a hairline fracture with no underlying brain injury. She'll make a full recovery."

Addy, that airhead homecoming princess turned bada.ss ninja investigator, in the hospital with a cracked skull because she tried to help me. Possibly only alive because of Janae, who got a busted jaw for her trouble, and Cooper, who's suddenly some kind of superhero the media's fawning over. I'd be happy for him if the whole thing didn't make me sick.

There's a lot of paperwork when you get out of jail for a crime you didn't commit. Law & Order never shows how many forms you have to fill out before you rejoin the world. The first thing I see when I step blinking into bright sunshine is a dozen cameras whirring to life. Of course. This whole thing's a never-ending movie, and I've gone from villain to hero in a matter of hours even though I haven't done a single thing to make a difference since I got here.

My mother's outside, which I guess is a pleasant surprise. I'm never not prepared for her to disappear. And Bronwyn, even though I specifically said I didn't want her anywhere near this place. Guess nobody thought I was serious about that. Before I can react her arms are around me and my face is buried in her green-apple hair.

Jesus. This girl. For a few seconds I breathe her in and everything's all right.

Except it's not.

“Nate, how does it feel to be free? Do you have any comment about Jake? What’s your next step?” Eli shoots sound bites at all the microphones in my face as we make our way to his car. He’s the man of the hour, but I don’t see what he did to earn it. The charges were dropped because Bronwyn kept unraveling threads and tracked down a witness. Because Cooper’s boyfriend connected dots nobody else saw. Because Addy put herself in the line of fire. And because Cooper saved the day before Jake could shut her up.

I’m the only one in the murder club who didn’t contribute a goddamn thing. All I did was be the guy who’s easy to frame.

Eli inches his car past all the media vans until we’re on the highway and the juvenile detention center fades to a speck in the distance. He’s rattling on about too many things to follow: how he’s working with Officer Lopez to get my drug charges dropped; how if I want to make a statement through the media he’d recommend Mikhail Powers; how I need a strategy for reintegrating into school. I stare out the window, my hand a dead weight in Bronwyn’s. When I finally hear Eli’s voice asking if I have any questions, I can tell he’s been repeating himself for a while.

“Did someone feed Stan?” I ask. My father sure as sh!t didn’t.

“I did,” Bronwyn says. When I don’t respond, she squeezes my hand and adds, “Nate, are you all right?”

She tries to catch my eye, but I can’t do it. She wants me to be happy and I can’t do that either. The impossibility of Bronwyn hits me like a punch to the gut: everything she wants is good and right and logical and I can’t do any of it. She’ll always be that girl in front of me in the scavenger hunt, her shining hair hypnotizing me so much I almost forget how uselessly I’m trailing behind her.

“I just want to go home and sleep.” I’m still not looking at Bronwyn, but out of the corner of my eye I can see her face fall, and for some reason that’s perversely satisfying. I’m disappointing her right on schedule. Finally, something makes sense.

Cooper

Saturday, November 17, 9:30 a.m.

It’s pretty surreal to come downstairs for breakfast Saturday morning to my grandmother reading an issue of People with me on the cover.

I didn’t pose for it. It’s a shot of Kris and me leaving the police station after giving our statements. Kris looks fantastic, and I look like I just woke up after a night of heavy drinking. It’s obvious which of us is the model.

Funny how this accidental-fame thing works. First people supported me even though I'd been accused of cheating and murder. Then they hated me because of who I turned out to be. Now they love me again because I was in the right place at the right time and managed to flatten Jake with a well-aimed punch.

And because of the halo effect of being with Kris, I guess. Eli's giving him full credit for figuring out what really happened, so he's the new breakout star of this whole mess. The fact that he's trying to avoid the media machine only makes them want him more.

Lucas sits across from Nonny, spooning Cocoa Puffs into his mouth while scrolling through his iPad. "Your Facebook fan page has a hundred thousand likes now," he reports, flicking a strand of hair out of his face like it's an annoying bug. This is good news for Lucas, who took it personally when most of my so-called fans deserted the page after the police outed me.

Nonny sniffs and flings the magazine across the table. "Awful. One boy's dead, another ruined his life and almost ruined yours, and people still treat this like it's a TV show. Thank God for short attention spans. Something else'll come along soon and you can get back to normal."

Whatever that is.

It's been about a week since Jake was arrested. So far he's being charged with assault, obstruction of justice, evidence tampering, and a whole bunch of other things I can't keep track of. He's got his own lawyer now, and he's in the same detention center where Nate was being held. Which I guess is poetic justice, but it doesn't feel good. I still can't reconcile the guy I pulled off Addy with the kid who'd been my friend since ninth grade. His lawyer's talking about undue influence from Simon, and maybe that explains it. Or maybe Ashton was right and Jake's been a control freak all along.

Janae's cooperating with the police and it looks like she'll get a plea bargain in exchange for her testimony. She and Addy are thick as thieves now. I have mixed feelings about Janae and the way she let things get this far. But I'm not as innocent as I'd thought, either. While Addy was zonked out on painkillers in the hospital she told me everything, including how my stupid, panicked slight at junior prom made Simon hate me enough to frame me for murder.

I have to figure out a way to live with that, and it won't be by not forgiving other people's mistakes.

"You meetin' Kris later?" Nonny asks.

"Yup," I say. Lucas keeps eating cereal without blinking an eye. Turns out he couldn't care less that his older brother has a boyfriend. Although he does seem to miss Keely.

Who I'm also seeing today, before Kris and I get together. Partly because I owe her an apology, and partly because she's been sucked into this mess too, even though the police tried to keep her name out of Simon's confession. It wasn't part of the public record, but people at school knew enough to guess. I texted her earlier in the week to see how she was doing, and she texted back an apology for not being more supportive when the story about me and Kris broke. Which was pretty big of her, considering all the lies I told.

We went back and forth for a while after that. She was pretty broken up about the part she played in everything, even though she had no idea what was happening. I'm one of the few people in town who can understand how that feels.

Maybe we can manage to be friends after all this. I'd like that.

Pop comes into the kitchen with his laptop, jiggling it like there's a present inside. "You check your email?"

"Not this morning."

"Josh Langley's touching base. Wants to know what you're thinking about college versus the draft. And the UCLA offer came through. Still nothin' from LSU, though." Pop won't be happy until all the top-five college baseball teams make me a scholarship offer. Louisiana State is the lone holdout, which annoys him since they're ranked number one. "Anyway, Josh wants to talk next week. You up for it?"

"Sure," I say, even though I've already decided I'm not going right into the draft. The more I think about my baseball future, the more I want college ball to be the next step. I have the rest of my life to play baseball, but only a few years to go to college.

And my first choice is Cal State. Since they're the only school that didn't back away from me when I was down.

But it'll make Pop happy to talk with Josh Langley. We've gotten back on tentative father-son footing since the good baseball news started pouring in. He still doesn't talk to me about Kris, and clams up when anyone else mentions him. He doesn't bolt out of the room anymore, though. And he's looking me in the eye again.

It's a start.

Addy

Saturday, November 17, 2:15 p.m.

I can't ride my bike because of the skull fracture and my sprained ankle, so Ashton drives me to my follow-up doctor's appointment. Everything's healing the way it should, although I still get instant headaches if I move my head too fast.

The emotional stuff will take longer. Half the time I feel like Jake died, and the other half I want to kill him. I can admit, now, that Ashton and TJ weren't wrong about how things were between Jake and me. He ran everything, and I let him. But I never would have believed he could be capable of what he did in the woods. My heart feels like my skull did right after Jake attacked me—as though it's been split in two with a dull ax.

I don't know how to feel about Simon, either. Sometimes I get really sad when I think about how he planned to ruin four people because he thought we'd taken away from him things that everybody wants: to be successful, to have friends, to be loved. To be seen.

But most of the time I just wish I'd never met him.

Nate visited me in the hospital and I've seen him a few times since I've been out. I'm worried about him. He's not one to open up, but he said enough that I could tell getting arrested made him feel pretty useless. I've been trying to convince him otherwise, but I don't think it's sinking in. I wish he'd listen, because if anyone knows how badly you can screw up your life when you decide you're not good enough, it's me.

TJ's texted a few times since I was discharged a couple of days ago. He kept dropping hints about asking me out, so I finally had to tell him it's not happening. There's no way I can hook up with the person who helped me set off this whole chain reaction. It's too bad, because there might've been potential if we'd gone about things differently. But I'm starting to realize there are some things you can't undo, no matter how good your intentions are.

It's all right, though. I don't agree with my mother that TJ was my last, best hope to avoid premature spinsterhood. She's not the expert she thinks she is on relationships.

I'd rather take my cues from Ashton, who's getting a kick out of Eli's sudden infatuation. He tracked her down after things settled with Nate and asked her out. She told him she's not ready to date yet, so he keeps interrupting his insane workload to take her on elaborate, carefully planned not-dates. Which, she has to admit, she's enjoying.

"I'm not sure I can take him seriously, though," she tells me as I hobble to the car on crutches after my checkup. "I mean, the hair alone."

"I like the hair. It has character. Plus, it looks soft, like a cloud."

Ashton grins and brushes a stray lock of mine off my forehead. "I like yours. Grow it a little more and we'll be twins."

That's my secret plan. I've been coveting Ashton's hair all along.

"I have something to show you," she says as she pulls away from the hospital. "Some good news."

“Really? What?” Sometimes it’s hard to remember what good news feels like.

Ashton shakes her head and smiles. “It’s a show, not a tell.”

She pulls up in front of a new apartment building in the closest thing Bayview has to a trendy neighborhood. Ashton matches my slow pace as we step into a bright atrium, and guides me to a bench in the lobby. “Wait here,” she says, propping my crutches next to the bench. She disappears around the corner, and when she returns ten minutes later she leads me to an elevator and we head for the third floor.

Ashton fits a key into a door marked 302 and pushes it open to a large apartment with soaring, loftlike ceilings. It’s all windows and exposed brick and polished wood floors, and I love it instantly. “What do you think?” she asks.

I lean my crutches against the wall and hop into the open kitchen, admiring the mosaic tile backsplash. Who knew Bayview had something like this? “It’s beautiful. Are you, um, thinking of renting it?” I try to sound enthusiastic and not terrified of Ashton leaving me alone with Mom. Ashton hasn’t been home all that long, but I’ve gotten kind of attached to having her there.

“I already did,” she says with a grin, spinning around a little on the hardwood floors. “Charlie and I got an offer on the condo while you were in the hospital. It still has to close, but once it does, we’ll make a pretty good profit. He’s agreed to take on all his student loans as part of the divorce settlement. My design work’s still slow, but I’ll have enough of a cushion that it won’t be a stretch. And Bayview’s so much more affordable than San Diego. This apartment downtown would cost three times as much.”

“That’s fantastic!” I hope I’m doing a good job of acting excited. I am excited for her, truly. I’ll just miss her. “You’d better have a spare room so I can visit.”

“I do have a spare room,” Ashton says. “I don’t want you to visit, though.”

I stare at her. I can’t have heard her correctly. I thought we’d been getting along great these past couple of months.

She laughs at my expression. “I want you to live here, silly. You need to get out of that house as much as I do. Mom said it’s okay. She’s in that decline phase with Justin where she thinks lots of private couple time will fix their problems. Plus, you’ll be eighteen in a few months and can live wherever you want then anyway.”

I grab her in a hug before she can finish, and she suffers it for a few seconds before ducking away. We still haven’t mastered the art of non-awkward sisterly affection. “Go ahead, check out your room. It’s over there.”

I limp into a sun-splashed room with a huge window overlooking a bike path behind the building. Built-in bookshelves line the wall, and exposed beams in the ceiling frame an

amazing light fixture with a dozen Edison bulbs in different shapes and sizes. I love everything about it. Ashton leans against the doorway and smiles at me.

“Fresh start for both of us, huh?”

It finally feels like that might be true.

Bronwyn

Sunday, November 18, 10:45 a.m.

The day after Nate was released, I gave my one and only interview to the media. I didn't mean to. But Mikhail Powers himself ambushed me outside my house, and as I expected when I first saw the full force of his charm turned on our case, I couldn't resist him.

“Bronwyn Rojas. The girl most likely.” He was dressed in a crisp navy suit and subtly patterned tie, gold cuff links glinting as he held out his hand with a warm smile. I almost didn't notice the camera behind him. “I've been wanting to talk to you for weeks. You never gave up on your friend, did you? I admire that. I've admired you throughout this entire case.”

“Thanks,” I said weakly. It was a transparent attempt to butter me up and it totally worked.

“I would love your take on everything. Can you spare a few minutes to tell us what this ordeal has been like for you, and how you feel now that it's over?”

I shouldn't have. Robin and my family had held our last legal meeting that morning, and her parting advice was to keep a low profile. She was right, as usual. But there was something I'd wanted to get off my chest that I hadn't been allowed to say before.

“Just one thing.” I looked into the camera while Mikhail smiled encouragingly. “I did cheat in my chemistry class, and I'm sorry. Not only because it got me into this mess, but because it was an awful thing to do. My parents raised me to be honest and work hard, like they do, and I let them down. It wasn't fair to them, or my teachers, or the colleges I wanted to apply to. And it wasn't fair to Simon.” My voice started shaking then, and I couldn't blink back the tears any longer. “If I'd known ... If I'd thought ... I won't ever stop being sorry for what I did. I'll never do anything like that again. That's all I want to say.”

I doubt that's what Mikhail was hoping for, but he used it anyway for his final Bayview report. Rumor has it he's submitting the series for Emmy consideration.

My parents keep telling me I can't blame myself for what Simon did. Just like I keep telling Cooper and Addy the same thing. And I'd tell Nate, if he'd let me, but I've barely

heard from him since he got out of juvenile detention. He talks to Addy more than me now. I mean, he should talk to Addy, who is obviously a rock star. But still.

He finally agreed to let me stop by and catch up, but I don't feel my usual excited anticipation as I ring his doorbell. Something's changed since he was arrested. I almost don't expect him to be home, but he opens the creaking door and steps aside.

Nate's house looks better than it did when I was feeding Stan. His mother's staying here and she's added all sorts of new touches like curtains, throw pillows, and framed pictures. The only time Nate spoke to me at any length after he got home, he said his mother had convinced his father to try a stint at rehab. Nate didn't hold out much hope for it, but I'm sure having his father out of the house temporarily is a relief.

Nate flops into an armchair in the living room as I make my way over to Stan and peer into his cage, glad for the distraction. He lifts one of his front legs in my direction, and I laugh in surprise. "Did Stan just wave at me?"

"Yeah. He does that, like, once a year. It's his only move." Nate meets my eyes with a grin, and for a second things are normal between us. Then his smile fades and he looks down. "So. I don't actually have a lot of time. Officer Lopez wants to hook me up with a weekend job at some construction company in Eastland. I have to be there in twenty minutes."

"That's great." I swallow hard. Why is it so hard to talk to him now? It was the easiest thing in the world a few weeks ago. "I just—I guess I wanted to say, um, I know you went through something awful and I understand if you don't want to talk about it, but I'm here if you do. And I still ... care about you. As much as ever. So. That's all, I guess."

It's an awkward start, made worse by the fact that he won't look at me during my sad little speech. When he finally does, his eyes are flat.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that. First, thanks for everything you did. Seriously, I owe you one. I probably won't ever be able to repay you. But it's time to get back to normal, right? And we're not each other's normal." He averts his eyes again, and it's killing me. If he'd look at me for more than ten seconds I'm positive he wouldn't say this.

"No, we're not." I'm surprised at how steady my voice is. "But that's never mattered to me, and I didn't think it mattered to you. My feelings haven't changed, Nate. I still want to be with you."

I've never said anything that matters so much in such a straightforward way, and at first I'm glad I didn't wimp out. But Nate looks like he couldn't care less. And while I'm not fazed by external obstacles thrown my way—Disapproving parents? No problem! Jail time? I'll get you out!—his indifference makes me wilt.

"I don't see the point. We've got separate lives, and nothing in common now that the investigation's wrapped up. You need to get ready for the Ivy League, and I—" He lets out a humorless snort. "I'll be doing whatever the opposite of that is."

I want to throw my arms around him and kiss him until he stops talking like this. But his face is closed off, as though his mind's already a thousand miles away, waiting for his body to catch up. Like he only let me come here out of a sense of obligation. And I can't stand it.

"If that's how you feel."

He nods so fast that whatever tiny flicker of hope I might've been nursing disappears. "Yup. Good luck with everything, Bronwyn. Thanks again."

He stands up like he's going to walk me to the door, but I can't take fake politeness right now. "Don't bother," I say, stalking past him with my eyes on the floor. I let myself out and walk stiffly to my car, willing myself not to run, and fumble through my bag with shaking hands until I find my keys.

I drive home with dry, unblinking eyes and make it all the way to my room before I lose it. Maeve knocks softly and enters without waiting for an invitation, curling up next to me and stroking my hair while I sob into a pillow like my heart just broke. Which I guess it did.

"I'm sorry," she says. She knew where I was headed, and I don't need to tell her how it went. "He's being a jerk."

She doesn't say anything else until I wear myself out and sit up, rubbing my eyes. I'd forgotten how tired full-body crying can make you. "Sorry I can't make this better," Maeve says, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her phone. "But I have something to show you that might cheer you up. Lots of reaction on Twitter to your statement on Mikhail Powers Investigates. All positive, by the way."

"Maeve, I don't care about Twitter," I say wearily. I haven't been on there since this whole mess started. Even with my profile set to private, I couldn't deal with the onslaught of opinions.

"I know. But you should see this." She hands me her phone and points to a post on my timeline from Yale University: