

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 31: Epilogue - Tips

0 11 minutes read

THREE MONTHS LATER

Bronwyn

Friday, February 16, 6:50 p.m.

I'm sort of seeing Evan Neiman now. It snuck up on me. First we were together a lot in big groups, then smaller ones, and a few weeks ago he drove me home after a bunch of us hate-watched *The Bachelor* at Yumiko's house. When we got to my driveway, he leaned over and kissed me.

It was ... nice. He's a good kisser. I found myself analyzing the kiss in almost clinical detail while it was happening, mentally congratulating him on a stellar technique while noting the absence of any heat or magnetic pull between us. My heart didn't pound as I kissed him back, and my limbs didn't shake. It was a good kiss with a nice boy. The kind I'd always wanted.

Now things are almost exactly how I thought they'd be when I first imagined dating Evan. We make a solid couple. I have an automatic date for the spring break dance, which is nice. But I'm planning my post-Bayview life on a parallel track that has nothing to do with him. We're an until-graduation couple, at best.

I applied to Yale, but not early decision. I'll find out next month along with everyone else whether I got in or not. It doesn't seem like the be-all, end-all of my future anymore, though. I've been interning for Eli on the weekends, and I'm starting to see the appeal of staying local and keeping up with *Until Proven*.

Everything's pretty fluid, and I'm trying to be okay with that. I think a lot about Simon and about what the media called his "aggrieved entitlement"—the belief he was owed something he didn't get, and everyone should pay because of it. It's almost impossible to understand, except by that corner of my brain that pushed me to cheat for validation I hadn't earned. I don't ever want to be that person again.

The only time I see Nate is at school. He's there more often than he used to be, and I guess he's doing all right. I don't know for sure, though, because we don't talk anymore. At all. He wasn't kidding about going back to separate lives.

Sometimes I almost catch him looking at me, but it's probably wishful thinking.

He's still on my mind constantly, and it sucks. I'd hoped starting up with Evan might curb the Nate loop in my head, but it's made things worse. So I try not to think about Evan unless I'm actually with him, which means I sometimes overlook things that I shouldn't as Evan's sort-of girlfriend. Like tonight.

I have a piano solo with the San Diego Symphony. It's part of their High School Spotlight concert series, something I've applied for since I was a freshman without ever getting an invitation. Last month, I finally did. It's probably due to residual notoriety, although I like to think the audition video I submitted of "Variations on the Canon" helped. I've improved a lot since the fall.

"Are you nervous?" Maeve asks as we head downstairs. She's dressed for the concert in a burgundy velvet dress that has a Renaissance feel, her hair in a loose braid threaded with small jeweled pins. She recently got the part of Lady Guinevere in the drama club's upcoming King Arthur, and she's gone a little overboard getting in character. It suits her, though. I'm more conservative in a scoop-necked jacquard dress with a subtle gray-and-black tonal-dot pattern that nips in at the waist and flares out above my knees.

"A little," I reply, but she's only half listening. Her fingers fly across her phone, probably arranging yet another weekend rehearsal with the boy who plays Lancelot in King Arthur. Who she insists is just a friend. Right.

I have my own phone out, texting last-minute directions to Kate, Yumiko, and Addy. Cooper's bringing Kris, although they're having dinner with his parents first, so they might be late. With Kris's parents, that is. Cooper's dad is slowly coming around, but he's not at that stage yet. Yumiko texts Should we look for Evan? and at that point I remember I never invited him.

It's fine, though. It's not a big deal. It was in the newspaper, and I'm sure he would have mentioned it if he'd seen it and wanted to come.

We're at Copley Symphony Hall, in front of a capacity crowd. When it's my turn to play I walk onto a huge stage that dwarfs the piano at its center. The crowd's silent except the occasional cough, and my heels click loudly on the polished floor. I smooth my dress beneath me before taking a seat on the ebony bench. I've never performed in front of this many people, but I'm not as nervous as I thought I'd be.

I flex my fingers and wait for a signal from backstage. When I start, I can tell right away it's going to be the best I've ever played. Every note flows, but it's not only that. When I reach the crescendo and the soft notes that follow, I pour every ounce of emotion from the past few months into the keys beneath my fingers. I feel each note like a heartbeat. And I know the audience does too.

Loud applause echoes through the room when I finish. I stand and incline my head, absorbing the crowd's approval until the stage manager beckons me and I walk into the wings. Backstage I collect flowers my parents left for me, holding them close while I listen to the rest of the performers.

Afterward I catch up with my friends in the foyer. Kate and Yumiko give me a smaller bouquet of flowers, which I add to the ones already in my hands. Addy is pink-cheeked

and smiling, wearing her new track team jacket over a black dress like the world's unlikeliest jock. Her hair's in a choppy bob that's almost exactly like her sister's except the color. She decided to go full-on purple instead of back to blond, and it suits her.

"That was so good!" she says gleefully, pulling me into a hug. "They should have let you play all the songs."

To my surprise, Ashton and Eli come up behind her. Ashton mentioned she'd be here, but I didn't think Eli would leave the office so early. I guess I should have known better. They're an official couple now, and Eli somehow manages to find time for whatever Ashton wants to do. He's wearing that moony grin he always has around her, and I doubt he heard a note I played. "Not bad, Bronwyn," he says.

"I got you on video," Cooper says, brandishing his phone. "I'll text it once I make a few edits."

Kris, who looks dashing in a sports jacket and dark jeans, rolls his eyes. "Cooper finally learned how to use iMovie, and now there's no stopping him. Trust me. I have tried." Cooper grins unrepentantly and puts his phone away, slipping his hand into Kris's.

Addy keeps craning her neck to look around the crowded foyer, so much that I wonder if she brought a date. "Expecting someone?" I ask.

"What? No," she says with a breezy wave. "Just checking things out. Beautiful building."

Addy has the world's worst poker face. I follow her eyes but can't catch a glimpse of any potential mystery guy. She doesn't seem disappointed, though.

People keep stopping to talk, so it takes half an hour before Maeve, my parents, and I work our way outside. My father squints at the twinkling stars above us. "I had to park pretty far away. You three don't want to walk there in heels. Wait here and I'll bring the car."

"All right," my mother says, kissing his cheek. I clutch my flowers and look at all the well-dressed people surrounding us, laughing and murmuring as they spill onto the sidewalks. A line of sleek cars pulls forward, and I watch them even though it's too soon for my father to be among them. A Lexus. A Range Rover. A Jaguar.

A motorcycle.

My heart pounds as the bike's lights dim and its rider removes his helmet. Nate climbs off, skirting past an older couple, and advances toward me with his eyes locked on mine.

I can't breathe.

Maeve tugs on my mother's arm. "We should go closer to the parking lot so Dad sees us." My eyes are on Nate, so I hear rather than see Mom's deep sigh. But she moves away with Maeve, and I'm alone on the sidewalk when Nate reaches me.

"Hey." He looks at me with those dreamy, dark-fringed eyes, and resentment surges through my veins. I don't want to see his stupid eyes, his stupid mouth, and every other part of his stupid face that's made me miserable for the past three months. I had one night, finally, where I got to lose myself in something besides my pathetic love life. Now he's ruined it.

But I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that. "Hi, Nate." I'm surprised at my calm, neutral voice. You'd never guess how desperately my heart's trying to escape my rib cage. "How've you been?"

"Okay," he says, shoving his hands into his pockets. He looks almost—awkward? It's a novel stance for him. "My dad's back in rehab. But they say that's positive. That he's giving it another shot."

"That's great. I hope it works out." I don't sound like I mean it, even though I do. The longer he stands there, the harder it is to act natural. "How's your mom?"

"Good. Working. She moved everything from Oregon, so—I guess she'll be here for a while. That's the plan, anyway." He runs a hand through his hair and shoots me another half-lidded glance. The kind he used to give right before he kissed me. "I saw your solo. I was wrong, that night at your house when I first heard you. That, tonight, was the best thing I've ever heard."

I squeeze the stems of my flowers so hard that thorns from the roses prick me. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you come? I mean—" I lift my chin toward the crowd. "It's not really your thing, is it?"

"No," Nate admits. "But this is a big deal for you, right? I wanted to see it."

"Why?" I repeat. I want to ask more, but I can't. My throat closes and I'm horrified as my eyes prickle and fill. I concentrate on breathing and press my hands against the thorns, willing the mild pain to distract me. Okay. There we go. Tears receding. Disaster averted.

In the seconds I've been pulling myself together, Nate's stepped closer. I don't know where to look because there's no part of him that doesn't undo me.

“Bronwyn.” Nate rubs the back of his neck and swallows hard, and I realize he’s as nervous as I am. “I’ve been an idiot. Being arrested messed with my head. I thought you’d be better off without me in your life so I just ... made that happen. I’m sorry.”

I drop my eyes to his sneakers, which seem like the safest spot. I don’t trust myself to speak.

“The thing is ... I never really had anybody, you know? I’m not saying that so you’ll feel bad for me. Just to try and explain. I don’t—I didn’t—get how stuff like this works. That you can’t pretend you don’t give a crap and it’s done.” Nate shifts his weight from one foot to the other, which I notice since my eyes remain fastened on the ground. “I’ve been talking to Addy about this, because”—he laughs a little—“she won’t let it go. I asked her if she thought you’d be mad if I tried to talk to you and she said it didn’t matter. That I owe you an explanation anyway. She’s right. As usual.”

Addy. That meddler. No wonder she’d been bobbleheading all over Symphony Hall.

I clear my throat to try to dislodge the lump, but it’s no good. I’ll have to talk around it. “You weren’t just my boyfriend, Nate. You were my friend. Or I thought you were. And then you stopped talking to me like we were nothing.” I have to bite hard on the inside of my cheek to keep from tearing up again.

“I know. It was— God, I can’t even explain it, Bronwyn. You were the best thing that ever happened to me, and it freaked me out. I thought I’d ruin you. Or you’d ruin me. That’s how things tend to go in the Macauley house. But you’re not like that.” He exhales sharply and his voice dips lower. “You’re not like anybody. I’ve known that since we were kids, and I just—I fvcked up. I finally had my chance with you and I fvcked it all up.”

He waits a beat for me to say something, but I can’t yet. “I’m sorry,” he says, shifting again. “I shouldn’t have come. I sprang this on you out of nowhere. I didn’t mean to ruin your big night.”

The crowd is thinning, the night air cooling. My father will be here soon. I finally look up, and it’s every bit as unnerving as I thought it would be. “You really hurt me, Nate. You can’t just ride here on your motorcycle with ... all this”—I gesture around his face—“and expect everything to be okay. It’s not.”

“I know.” Nate’s eyes search mine. “But I was hoping ... I mean, what you were saying before. How we were friends. I wanted to ask you—it’s probably stupid, after all this, but you know Porter Cinema, on Clarendon? The one that plays older stuff? They’ve got the second Divergent movie there. I was, um, wondering if you want to go sometime.”

Long pause. My thoughts are a tangled mess, but I’m sure of one thing—if I tell him no, it’ll be out of pride and self-preservation. Not because it’s what I want. “As friends?”

“As whatever you want. I mean, yeah. Friends would be great.”

“You hate those movies,” I remind him.

“I really do.” He sounds regretful, and I almost crack a smile. “I like you more, though. I miss you like crazy.” I furrow my brow at him and he quickly adds, “As a friend.” We stare at each other for a few seconds until his jaw twitches. “Okay. Since I’m being honest here, more than a friend. But I get that’s not where your head is. I’d still like to take you to a sh!tty movie and hang out with you for a couple hours. If you’ll let me.”

My cheeks burn, and the corners of my mouth keep trying to turn upward. My face is a fickle traitor. Nate sees it and brightens, but when I don’t say anything he pulls at the neck of his T-shirt and drops his head like I’ve already turned him down. “Well. Just think about it, okay?”

I take a deep breath. Being dumped by Nate was heartbreaking, and the idea of opening myself up to that kind of hurt again is scary. But I put myself on the line for him once, when I told him how I felt about him. And again, when I helped get him out of jail. He’s worth at least a third time. “If you’ll admit that *Insurgent* is a cinematic tour de force and you’re dying to see it, I’ll consider your proposal.”

Nate snaps his head up and gives me a smile like the sun coming out. “*Insurgent* is a cinematic tour de force and I’m dying to see it.”

Happiness starts bubbling through me, making it hard to keep a straight face. I manage, though, because I’m not going to make things that easy on him. Nate can sit through the entire series before we leave the friend zone. “That was fast,” I say. “I expected more resistance.”

“I already wasted too much time.”

I give a small nod. “All right, then. I’ll call you.”

Nate’s smile fades a little. “We never exchanged numbers, though, did we?”

“Still have your burner phone?” I ask. Mine’s been charging in my closet for three months. Just in case.

His face lights up again. “Yeah. I do.”

The gentle but insistent honk of a horn penetrates my brain. Dad’s BMW idles directly behind us, and Mom lowers the passenger window to peer outside. If I had to use one word to describe her expression it would be resigned. “There’s my ride,” I tell Nate.

He reaches for my hand and squeezes it quickly before letting go, and I swear to God, actual sparks shoot across my skin. “Thanks for not telling me to get lost. I’ll wait to hear from you, okay? Whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay.” I move past him toward my parents’ car and feel him turn to watch me. I finally let myself smile, and now that I’ve started, I can’t stop. That’s okay, though. I catch his reflection in the backseat window, and he can’t either.