

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 8

0 9 minutes read

Bronwyn

Sunday, September 30, 3:07 p.m.

I'm beyond grateful my parents were with me at church when Detective Mendoza pulled me aside and asked me to come to the police station. I thought I'd just get a few follow-up questions from Officer Budapest. I wasn't prepared for what came next and wouldn't have known what to do. My parents took over and refused to let me answer his questions. They got tons of information out of the detective and didn't give up anything in return. It was pretty masterful.

But. Now they know what I've done.

Well. Not yet. They know the rumor. At the moment, driving home from the police station, they're still ranting against the injustice of it all. My mother is, anyway. My father's keeping his attention on the road, but even his turn signals are unusually aggressive.

"I mean," my mother says, in an urgent voice that indicates she's barely warming up, "it's horrible what happened to Simon. Of course his parents want answers. But to take a high school gossip post and turn it into an accusation like that is just ludicrous. I can't fathom how anyone could think Bronwyn would kill a boy because he was about to post a lie."

"It's not a lie," I say, but too quietly for her to hear me.

"The police have nothing." My father sounds like he's judging a company he's thinking of acquiring and finds it lacking. "Flimsy circumstantial evidence. Obviously no real forensics or they wouldn't be reaching this way. That was a Hail Mary." The car in front of us stops short at a yellow light, and Dad swears softly in Spanish as he brakes. "Bronwyn, I don't want you to worry about this. We'll hire an outstanding lawyer, but it's purely a formality. I may sue the police department when it's all over. Especially if any of this goes public and harms your reputation."

My throat feels like I'm getting ready to push words through sludge. "I did." I'm barely audible. I press the palm of my hand to my burning cheek and force my voice higher. "I did cheat. I'm sorry."

Mom rotates in her seat. "I can't hear you, honey. What was that?"

"I cheated." The words tumble out of me: how I'd used a computer in the lab right after Mr. Camino, and realized he hadn't logged out of his Google Drive. A file with all our chemistry test questions for the rest of the year was right there. I downloaded it onto a

flash drive almost without thinking about it. And I used it to get perfect scores for the rest of the year.

I have no idea how Simon found out. But as usual, he was right.

The next few minutes in the car are horrible. Mom turns in her seat and stares at me with betrayal in her eyes. Dad can't do the same, but he keeps glancing into the rearview mirror like he's hoping to see something different. I can read the hurt in both their expressions: You're not who we thought you were.

My parents are all about merit-based achievement. Dad was one of the youngest CFOs in California before we were even born, and Mom's dermatology practice is so successful she hasn't been able to take on any new patients in years. They've been drumming the same message into me since kindergarten: Work hard, do your best, and the rest will follow. And it always had, until chemistry.

I guess I didn't know what to do about that.

"Bronwyn." Mom's still staring at me, her voice low and tight. "My God. I never would have imagined you'd do something like that. This is terrible on so many levels, but most important, it gives you a motive."

"I didn't do anything to Simon!" I burst out.

The hard lines of her mouth soften slightly as she shakes her head at me. "I'm disappointed in you, Bronwyn, but I didn't make that leap. I'm just stating fact. If you can't unequivocally say that Simon was lying, this could get very messy." She rubs a hand over her eyes. "How did he know you cheated? Does he have proof?"

"I don't know. Simon didn't ..." I pause, thinking about all the About That updates I'd read over the years. "Simon never really proved anything. It's just ... everybody believed him because he was never wrong. Things always came out eventually."

And here I'd thought I was in the clear, since I'd taken Mr. Camino's files last March. What I just don't get is, if Simon had known, why hadn't he pounced on it right away?

I knew what I did was wrong, obviously. I even thought it might be illegal, although technically I didn't break into Mr. Camino's account since it was already open. But that part hardly seemed real. Maeve uses her mad computer skills to hack into stuff for fun all the time, and if I'd thought of it I probably could have asked her to get Mr. Camino's files for me. Or even change my grade. But it wasn't premeditated. The file was in front of me in that moment, and I took it.

Then I chose to use it for months afterward, telling myself it was okay because one hard class shouldn't ruin my whole future. Which is kind of horribly ironic, given what just happened at the police station.

I wonder if everything Simon wrote about Cooper and Addy is true too. Detective Mendoza showed us all the entries, implying that somebody else might already be confessing and cutting a deal. I always thought Cooper's talent was God-given and that Addy was too Jake-obsessed to even look at another guy, but they probably never imagined me as a cheater, either.

With Nate, I don't wonder. He's never pretended to be anything other than exactly who he is.

Dad pulls into our driveway and cuts the engine, slipping the keys from the ignition and turning to face me. "Is there anything else you haven't told us?"

I think back to the claustrophobic little room at the police station, my parents on either side of me as Detective Mendoza lobbed questions like grenades. Were you competitive with Simon? Have you ever been to his house? Did you know he was writing a post about you?

Did you have any reason, beyond this, to dislike or resent Simon?

My parents said I didn't have to respond to any of his questions, but I did answer that one. No, I said then.

"No," I say now, meeting my father's eyes.

If he knows I'm lying, he doesn't show it.

Nate

Sunday, September 30, 5:15 p.m.

Calling my ride home with Officer Lopez after Simon's funeral "tense" would be an understatement.

It was hours later, for one thing. After Officer Buzz Cut had brought me to the station and asked me a half-dozen different ways whether I'd killed Simon. Officer Lopez had asked if she could be present during questioning, and he agreed, which was fine with me. Although things got a little awkward when he pulled up Simon's drug-dealing accusation.

Which, although true, he can't prove. Even I know that. I stayed calm when he told me the circumstances surrounding Simon's death gave the police probable cause to search my house for drugs, and that they already had a warrant. I'd cleared everything out this morning, so I knew they wouldn't find anything.

Thank God Officer Lopez and I meet on Sundays. I'd probably be in jail otherwise. I owe her big-time for that, although she doesn't know it. And for having my back during

questioning, which I didn't expect. I've lied to her face every time we've met and I'm pretty sure she knows that. But when Officer Buzz Cut started getting heated, she'd dial him back. I got the sense, eventually, that all they have is some flimsy circumstantial evidence and a theory they were hoping to pressure someone into admitting.

I answered a few of their questions. The ones I knew couldn't get me into trouble. Everything else was some variation of I don't know and I don't remember. Sometimes it was even true.

Officer Lopez didn't say a word from the time we left the police station until she pulled into my driveway. Now she gives me a look that makes it clear even she can't find a bright side to what just happened.

"Nate. I won't ask if what I saw on that site is true. That's a conversation for you and a lawyer if it ever comes to that. But you need to understand something. If, from this day forward, you deal drugs in any way, shape, or form—I can't help you. Nobody can. This is no joke. You're dealing with a potential capital offense. There are four kids involved in this investigation and every single one of them except you is backed by parents who are materially comfortable and present in their children's lives. If not outright wealthy and influential. You're the obvious outlier and scapegoat. Am I making myself clear?"

Jesus. She's not pulling any punches. "Yeah." I got it. I'd been thinking about it all the way home.

"All right. I'll see you next Sunday. Call me if you need me before then."

I climb out of the car without thanking her. It's a bullshit move, but I don't have it in me to be grateful. I step inside our low-ceilinged kitchen and the smell hits me right away: stale vomit seeps into my nose and throat, making me gag. I look around for the source, and I guess today's my lucky day because my father managed to make it to the sink. He just didn't bother rinsing it afterward. I put one hand over my face and use the other to aim a spray of water, but it's no good. The stuff's caked on by now and it won't come off unless I scrub it.

We have a sponge somewhere. Probably in the cabinet under the sink. Instead of looking, though, I kick it. Which is pretty satisfying, so I do it another five or ten times, harder and harder until the cheap wood splinters and cracks. I'm panting, breathing in lungfuls of puke-infested air, and I'm so fucking sick of it all, I could kill somebody.

Some people are too toxic to live. They just are.

A familiar scratching sound comes from the living room—Stan, clawing at the glass of his terrarium, looking for food. I squirt half a bottle of dish detergent in the sink and aim another blast of water over it. I'll deal with the rest later.

I get a container of live crickets from the refrigerator and drop them into Stan's cage, watching them hop around with no clue what's in store for them. My breathing slows and my head clears, but that's not exactly good news. If I'm not thinking about one sh!tstorm, I have to think about another.

Group murder. It's an interesting theory. I guess I should be grateful the cops didn't try to pin the whole thing on me. Ask the other three to nod and get out of jail free. I'm sure Cooper and the blond girl would have been more than happy to play along.

Maybe Bronwyn wouldn't, though.

I close my eyes and brace my hands on the top of Stan's terrarium, thinking about Bronwyn's house. How clean and bright it was, and how she and her sister talked to each other like all the interesting parts of their conversation were the things they didn't say. It must be nice, after getting accused of murder, to come home to a place like that.

When I leave the house and get on my bike, I tell myself I don't know where I'm going, and drive aimlessly for almost an hour. By the time I end up in Bronwyn's driveway, it's dinnertime for normal people, and I don't expect anyone to come outside.

I'm wrong, though. Someone does. It's a tall man in a fleece vest and a checked shirt, with short dark hair and glasses. He looks like a guy who's used to giving orders, and he approaches me with a calm, measured tread.

"Nate, right?" His hands are on his hips, a big watch glinting on one wrist. "I'm Javier Rojas, Bronwyn's father. I'm afraid you can't be here."

He doesn't sound mad, just matter-of-fact. But he also sounds like he's never meant anything more in his life.

I take my helmet off so I can meet his eyes. "Is Bronwyn home?" It's the most pointless question ever. Obviously she is, and obviously he's not going to let me see her. I don't even know why I want to, except that I can't. And because I want to ask her: What's true? What did you do? What didn't you do?

"You can't be here," Javier Rojas says again. "I'm sure you don't want police involvement any more than I do." He's doing a decent job of pretending I wouldn't be his worst nightmare even if I weren't involved in a murder investigation with his daughter.

That's it, I guess. Lines are drawn. I'm the obvious outlier and scapegoat. There isn't much else to say, so I reverse out of his driveway and head home.