

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 13 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Cooper

Friday, October 5, 3:30 p.m.

I pick Lucas up after school and stop by Nonny's hospital room before our parents get there. She'd been asleep most of the time we visited all week, but today she's sitting up in bed with the TV remote in hand. "This television only gets three channels," she complains as Lucas and I hover in the doorway. "We might as well be in 1985. And the food is terrible. Lucas, do you have any candy?"

"No, ma'am," Lucas says, flipping his too-long hair out of his eyes. Nonny turns a hopeful face to me, and I'm struck by how old she looks. I mean, sure, she's well into her eighties, but she's always had so much energy that I never really noticed. It hits me now that even though her doctor says she's recovering well, we'll be lucky to go a few years before something like this happens again.

And then at some point, she's not gonna be around at all.

"I got nothin'. Sorry," I say, dropping my head to hide my stinging eyes.

Nonny lets out a theatrical sigh. "Well, goddamn. You boys are pretty, but not helpful from a practical standpoint." She rummages on the side table next to her bed and finds a rumpled twenty-dollar bill. "Lucas, go downstairs to the gift shop and buy three Snickers bars. One for each of us. Keep the change and take your time."

"Yes, ma'am." Lucas's eyes gleam as he calculates his profit. He's out the door in a flash, and Nonny settles back against a stack of hospital pillows.

"Off he goes to pad his pockets, bless his mercenary little heart," she says fondly.

"Are you supposed to be eating candy right now?" I ask.

"Of course not. But I want to hear how you're doing, darlin'. Nobody tells me anything but I hear things."

I lower myself into the side chair next to her bed, eyes on the floor. I don't trust myself to look at her yet. "You should rest, Nonny."

"Cooper, this was the least dangerous heart attack in cardiac history. A blip on the monitor. Too much bacon, that's all. Catch me up on the Simon Kelleher situation. I promise you it will not cause a relapse."

I blink a few times and imagine myself getting ready to throw a slider: straightening my wrist, placing my fingers on the outer portion of the baseball, letting the ball roll off my thumb and index finger. It works; my eyes dry and my breathing evens out, and I can finally meet Nonny's eyes. "It's a goddamn mess."

She sighs and pats my hand. "Oh, darlin'. Of course it is."

I tell her everything: How Simon's rumors about us are all over school now, and how the police set up shop in the administrative offices today and interviewed everybody we know. Plus lots of people we don't know. How Coach Ruffalo hasn't pulled me aside yet to ask whether I'm on the juice but I'm sure he will soon. How we had a sub for astronomy because Mr. Avery was holed up in another room with two police officers. Whether he was being questioned like we'd been or giving some kind of evidence against us, I couldn't tell.

Nonny shakes her head when I finish. She can't set her hair here the way she does at home, and it bobs around like loose cotton. "I could not be sorrier you got pulled into this, Cooper. You of all people. It's not right."

I wait for her to ask me, but she doesn't. So I finally say—tentatively, because after spending days with lawyers it feels wrong to state anything like an actual fact—"I didn't do what they say, Nonny. I didn't use steroids and I didn't hurt Simon."

"Well, for goodness' sake, Cooper." Nonny brushes impatiently at her hospital blanket. "You don't have to tell me that."

I swallow hard. Somehow, the fact that Nonny accepts my word without question makes me feel guilty. "The lawyer's costing a fortune and she's not helping. Nothing's getting better."

"Things'll get worse before they get better," Nonny says placidly. "That's how it goes. And don't you worry about the cost. I'm payin' for it."

A fresh wave of guilt hits me. "Can you afford that?"

"Course I can. Your grandfather and I bought a lot of Apple stock in the nineties. Just because I didn't hand it all over to your father to buy a McMansion in this overpriced town doesn't mean I couldn't have. Now. Tell me something I don't know."

I'm not sure what she means. I could mention how Jake is freezing out Addy and all our friends are joining in, but that's too depressing. "Not much else to tell, Nonny."

"How's Keely handling all this?"

"Like a vine. Clingy," I say before I can stop myself. Then I feel horrible. Keely's been nothing but supportive, and it's not her fault that makes me feel suffocated.

“Cooper.” Nonny takes my hand in both of hers. They’re small and light, threaded with thick blue veins. “Keely is a beautiful, sweet girl. But if she’s not who you love, she’s just not. And that’s fine.”

My throat goes dry and I stare at the game show on the screen. Somebody’s about to win a new washer/dryer set and they’re pretty happy about it. Nonny doesn’t say anything else, just keeps holding my hand. “I dunno whatcha mean,” I say.

If Nonny notices my good ol’ boy accent coming and going, she doesn’t mention it. “I mean, Cooper Clay, I’ve been in the room when that girl calls or texts you, and you always look like you’re trying to escape. Then someone else calls and your face lights up like a Christmas tree.

I don’t know what’s holding you back, darlin’, but I wish you’d stop letting it. It’s not fair to you or to Keely.” She squeezes my hand and releases it. “We don’t have to talk about it now. In fact, could you please hunt down that brother of yours? It may not have been the best idea I ever had to let a twelve-year-old wander the hospital with money burning a hole in his pocket.”

“Yeah, sure.” She’s letting me off the hook and we both know it. I stand up and ease out of the room into a hallway crowded with nurses in brightly colored scrubs. Every one of them stops what they’re doing and smiles at me. “You need help, hon?” the one closest to me asks.

It’s been that way my whole life. People see me and immediately think the best of me. Once they know me, they like me even more.

If it ever came out that I’d actually done something to Simon, plenty of people would hate me. But there’d also be people who’d make excuses for me, and say there must be more to my story than just getting accused of using steroids.

The thing is, they’d be right.

Nate

Friday, October 5, 11:30 p.m.

My father’s awake for a change when I get home Friday from a party at Amber’s house. It was still going strong when I left, but I’d had enough. I’ve got ramen noodles on the stove and toss some vegetables into Stan’s cage. As usual he just blinks at them like an ingrate.

“You’re home early,” my father says. He looks the same as ever—like hell. Bloated and wrinkled with a pasty, yellow tinge to his skin. His hand shakes when he lifts his glass. A couple of months ago I came home one night and he was barely breathing, so I called an ambulance. He spent a few days in the hospital, where doctors told him his liver was

so damaged he could drop dead at any time. He nodded and acted like he gave a shit, then came home and cracked another bottle of Seagram's.

I've been ignoring that ambulance bill for weeks. It's almost a thousand dollars thanks to our crap insurance, and now that I have zero income there's even less chance we can pay it.

"I have things to do." I dump the noodles into a bowl and head for my room with them.

"Seen my phone?" my father calls after me. "Kept ringing today but I couldn't find it."

"That's 'cause it's not on the couch," I mutter, and shut my door behind me. He was probably hallucinating. His phone hasn't rung in months.

I scarf down my noodles in five minutes, then settle back onto my pillows and put in my earbuds so I can call Bronwyn. It's my turn to pick a movie, thank God, but we're barely half an hour into Ringu when Bronwyn decides she's had enough.

"I can't watch this alone. It's too scary," she says.

"You're not alone. I'm watching it with you."

"Not with me. I need a person in the room for something like this. Let's watch something else instead. My turn to pick."

"I'm not watching another goddamn Divergent movie, Bronwyn." I wait a beat before adding, "You should come over and watch Ringu with me. Climb out your window and drive here." I say it like it's a joke, and it mostly is. Unless she says yes.

Bronwyn pauses, and I can tell she's thinking about it as a not-joke. "My window's a fifteen-foot drop to the ground," she says. Joke.

"So use a door. You've got, like, ten of them in that house." Joke.

"My parents would kill me if they found out." Not-joke. Which means she's considering it. I picture her sitting next to me in those little shorts she had on when I was at her house, her leg pressed against mine, and my breathing gets shallow.

"Why would they?" I ask. "You said they can sleep through anything." Not-joke. "Come on, just for an hour till we finish the movie. You can meet my lizard." It takes a few seconds of silence for me to realize how that might be interpreted. "That's not a line. I have an actual lizard. A bearded dragon named Stan."

Bronwyn laughs so hard she almost chokes. "Oh my God. That would have been completely out of character and yet ... for a second I really did think you meant something else."

I can't help laughing too. "Hey, girl. You were into that smooth talk. Admit it."

"At least it's not an anaconda," Bronwyn sputters. I laugh harder, but I'm still kind of turned on. Weird combination.

"Come over," I say. Not-joke.

I listen to her breathe for a while, until she says, "I can't."

"Okay." I'm not disappointed. I never really thought she would. "But you need to pick a different movie."

We agree on the last Bourne movie and I'm watching it with my eyes half-closed, listening to increasingly frequent texts from Amber chime in the background. She might be starting to think we're something we're not. I reach for that phone to shut it down when Bronwyn says, "Nate. Your phone."

"What?"

"Someone keeps texting you."

"So?"

"So it's really late."

"And?" I ask, annoyed. I hadn't pegged Bronwyn as the possessive type, especially when all we ever do is talk on the phone and she just turned down my joke-not-joke invitation.

"It's not ... customers, is it?"

I exhale and shut the other phone off. "No. I told you, I'm not doing that anymore. I'm not stupid."

"All right." She sounds relieved, but tired. Her voice is starting to drag. "I might go to sleep now."

"Okay. Do you want to hang up?"

"No." She laughs thickly, already half-asleep. "I'm running out of minutes, though. I just got a warning. I have half an hour left."

Those prepaid phones have hundreds of minutes on them, and she's had it less than a week. I didn't realize we'd been talking that much. "I'll give you another phone tomorrow," I tell her, before I remember tomorrow's Saturday and we don't have school. "Bronwyn, wait. You need to hang up."

I think she's already asleep until she mutters, "What?"

"Hang up, okay? So your minutes don't run out and I can call you tomorrow about getting you another phone."

"Oh. Right. Okay. Good night, Nate."

"Good night." I hang up and place the two phones side by side, pick up the remote, and shut off the TV. Might as well go to sleep.