

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 20 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Cooper

Tuesday, October 16, 5:45 p.m.

“Pa.ss the milk, would you, Cooperstown?” Pop j.erks his chin at me during dinner, his eyes drifting toward the muted television in our living room, where college football scores scroll along the bottom of the screen. “So what’d you do with your night off?” He thinks it’s hilarious that Luis posed as me after the gym yesterday.

I hand over the carton and picture myself answering his question honestly. Hung out with Kris, the guy I’m in love with. Yeah, Pop, I said guy. No, Pop, I’m not kidding. He’s a premed freshman at UCSD who does modeling on the side. Total catch. You’d like him.

And then Pop’s head explodes. That’s how it always ends in my imagination.

“Just drove around for a while,” I say instead.

I’m not ashamed of Kris. I’m not. But it’s complicated.

Thing is, I didn’t realize I could feel that way about a guy till I met him. I mean, yeah, I suspected. Since I was eleven or so. But I buried those thoughts as far down as I could because I’m a Southern jock shooting for an MLB career and that’s not how we’re supposed to be wired.

I really did believe that for most of my life. I’ve always had a girlfriend. But it was never hard to hold off till marriage like I was raised. I only recently understood that was more of an excuse than a deeply held moral belief.

I’ve been lying to Keely for months, but I did tell her the truth about Kris. I met him through baseball, although he doesn’t play. He’s friends with another guy I made the exhibition rounds with, who invited us both to his birthday party. And he is German.

I just left out the part about being in love with him.

I can’t admit that to anybody yet. That it’s not a phase, or experimentation, or distraction from pressure. Nonny was right. My stomach does fl!ps when Kris calls or texts me. Every single time. And when I’m with him I feel like a real person, not the robot Keely called me: programmed to perform as expected.

But Cooper-and-Kris only exists in the bubble of his apartment. Moving it anyplace else scares the hell out of me. For one thing, it’s hard enough making it in baseball when

you're a regular guy. The number of openly gay players who are part of a major league team stands at exactly one. And he's still in the minors.

For another thing: Pop. My whole brain seizes when I imagine his reaction. He's the kind of good old boy who calls gay people "fags" and thinks we spend all our time hitting on straight guys. The one time we saw a news story about the gay baseball player, he snorted in disgust and said, Normal guys shouldn't have to deal with that crap in the locker room.

If I tell him about Kris and me, seventeen years of being the perfect son would be gone in an instant. He'd never look at me the same. The way he's looking at me now, even though I'm a murder suspect who's been accused of using steroids. That he can handle.

"Testing tomorrow," he reminds me. I have to get tested for steroids every damn week now. In the meantime I keep pitching, and no, my fastball hasn't gotten any slower. Because I haven't been lying. I didn't cheat. I strategically improved.

It was Pop's idea. He wanted me to hold back a little junior year, not give my all, so there'd be more excitement around me during showcase season. And there was. People like Josh Langley noticed me. But now, of course, it looks suspicious. Thanks, Pop.

At least he feels guilty about it.

I was sure, when the police got ready to show me the unpublished About That posts last month, that I was going to read something about Kris and me. I'd barely known Simon, only talked with him one-on-one a few times. But anytime I got near him I'd worry about him learning my secret. Last spring at junior prom he'd been drunk off his a.ss, and when I ran into him in the bathroom he flung an arm around me and pulled me so close I practically had a panic attack. I was sure that Simon—who'd never had a girlfriend as far as I knew—realized I was gay and was putting the moves on me.

I freaked out so bad, I had Vanessa disinvite him to her after-prom party. And Vanessa, who never passes up a chance to exclude somebody, was happy to do it. I let it stand even after I saw Simon hitting on Keely later with the kind of intensity you can't fake.

I hadn't let myself think about that since Simon died; how the last time I'd talked to him, I acted like a j.erk because I couldn't deal with who I was.

And the worst part is, even after all this—I still can't.

Nate

Tuesday, October 16, 6:00 p.m.

When I get to Glenn's Diner half an hour after I'm supposed to meet my mother, her Kia is parked right out front. Score one for the new and improved version, I guess. I wouldn't have been at all surprised if she didn't show.

I thought about doing the same. A lot. But pretending she doesn't exist hasn't worked out all that well.

I park my bike a few spaces away from her car, feeling the first drops of rain hit my shoulders before I enter the restaurant. The hostess looks up with a polite, quizzical expression. "I'm meeting somebody. Macauley," I say.

She nods and points to a corner booth. "Right over there."

I can tell my mother's already been there for a while. Her soda's almost empty and she's torn her straw wrapper to shreds. When I slide into the seat across from her, I pick up a menu and scan it carefully to avoid her eyes. "You order?"

"Oh, no. I was waiting for you." I can practically feel her willing me to look up. I wish I weren't here. "Do you want a hamburger, Nathaniel? You used to love Glenn's hamburgers."

I did, and I do, but now I want to order anything else. "It's Nate, okay?" I snap my menu shut and stare at the gray drizzle pelting the window. "Nobody calls me that anymore."

"Nate," she says, but my name sounds strange coming from her. One of those words you say over and over until it loses meaning. A waitress comes by and I order a Coke and a club sandwich I don't want. My burner phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out to a text from Bronwyn. Hope it's going ok. I feel a jolt of warmth, but put the phone back without answering. I don't have the words to tell Bronwyn what it's like to have lunch with a ghost.

"Nate." My mother clears her throat around my name. It still sounds wrong. "How is ... How are you doing in school? Do you still like science?"

Christ. Do you still like science? I've been in remedial classes since ninth grade, but how would she know? Progress reports come home, I fake my father's signature, and they go back. Nobody ever questions them. "Can you pay for this?" I ask, gesturing around the table. Like the belligerent asshole I've turned into in the past five minutes. "Because I can't. So if you're expecting that you should tell me before the food comes."

Her face sags, and I feel a pointless stab of triumph. "Nath—Nate. I would never ... well. Why should you believe me?" She pulls out a wallet and puts a couple of twenties on the table, and I feel like sh!t until I think about the bills I keep tossing into the trash instead of paying. Now that I'm not earning anything, my father's disability check barely covers the mortgage, utilities, and his alcohol.

“How do you have money when you’ve been in rehab for months?”

The waitress returns with a glass of Coke for me, and my mother waits until she leaves to answer. “One of the doctors at Pine Valley—that’s the facility I’ve been in—connected me with a medical transcription company. I can work anywhere, and it’s very steady.” She brushes her hand against mine and I jerk away. “I can help you and your father out, Nate. I will. I wanted to ask you—if you have a lawyer, for the investigation? We could look into that.”

Somehow, I manage not to laugh. Whatever she’s making, it’s not enough to pay a lawyer. “I’m good.”

She keeps trying, asking about school, Simon, probation, my dad. It almost gets to me, because she’s different than I remember. Calmer and more even-tempered. But then she asks, “How’s Bronwyn handling all this?”

Nope. Every time I think about Bronwyn my body reacts like I’m back on the couch in her media room—heart pounding, blood rushing, skin tingling. I’m not about to turn the one good thing that’s come out of this mess into yet another awkward conversation with my mother. Which means we’ve pretty much run out of things to say. Thank God the food’s arrived so we can stop trying to pretend the last three years never happened. Even though my sandwich tastes like nothing, like dust, it’s better than that.

My mother doesn’t take the hint. She keeps bringing up Oregon and her doctors and Mikhail Powers Investigates until I feel as if I’m about to choke. I pull at the neck of my T-shirt like that’ll help me breathe, but it doesn’t. I can’t sit here listening to her promises and hoping it’ll all work out. That she’ll stay sober, stay employed, stay sane. Just stay.

“I have to go,” I say abruptly, dropping my half-eaten sandwich onto my plate. I get up, banging my knee against the edge of the table so hard I wince, and walk out without looking at her. I know she won’t come after me. That’s not how she operates.

When I get outside I’m confused at first because I can’t see my bike. It’s wedged between a couple of huge Range Rovers that weren’t there before. I make my way toward it, then suddenly a guy who’s way overdressed for Glenn’s Diner steps in front of me with a blinding smile. I recognize him right away but look through him as if I don’t.

“Nate Macauley? Mikhail Powers. You’re a hard man to find, you know that? Thrilled to make your acquaintance. We’re working on our follow-up broadcast to the Simon Kelleher investigation and I’d love your take. How about I buy you a coffee inside and we talk for a few minutes?”

I climb onto my bike and strap on my helmet like I didn’t hear him. I get ready to back up, but a couple of producer types block my way. “How about you tell your people to move?”

His smile's as wide as ever. "I'm not your enemy, Nate. The court of public opinion matters in a case like this. What do you say we get them on your side?"

My mother appears in the parking lot, her mouth falling open when she sees who's next to me. I slowly reverse my bike until the people in my way move and I've got a clear path. If she wants to help me, she can talk to him.