

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 23 - Tips

0 7 minutes read

Addy

Monday, October 22, 8:45 a.m.

Police cars line the front of Bayview High again. And Cooper's stumbling through the hall like he hasn't slept in days. It doesn't occur to me the two might be related until he pulls me aside before first bell. "Can we talk?"

I peer at him more closely, unease gnawing at my stomach. I've never seen Cooper's eyes look bloodshot before. "Yeah, sure." I think he means here in the hallway, but to my surprise he leads me out the back staircase into the parking lot, where we lean against the wall next to the door. Which means I'll be late for homeroom, I guess, but my attendance record is already so bad another tardy won't make a difference. "What's up?"

Cooper runs a hand through his sandy hair until it sticks straight up, which is not a thing I ever imagined Cooper's hair could do until just now. "I think the police are here because of me. To ask questions about me. I just—wanted to tell somebody why before everything goes to hell."

"Okay." I put a hand on his forearm, and tense in surprise when I feel it shaking. "Cooper, what's wrong?"

"So the thing is ..." He pauses, swallowing hard.

He looks like he's about to confess something. For a second Simon flashes through my mind: his collapse in detention and his red, gasping face as he struggled to breathe. I can't help but flinch. Then I meet Cooper's eyes—filmy with tears, but as kind as ever—and I know that can't be it. "The thing is what, Cooper? It's all right. You can tell me."

Cooper stares at me, taking in the whole picture—messy hair that's spiking oddly because I didn't take the time to blow-dry it, so-so skin from all the stress, faded T-shirt featuring some band Ashton used to like, because we're seriously behind on laundry—before he replies, "I'm gay."

"Oh." It doesn't register at first, and then it does. "Ohhh." The whole not-into-Keely thing suddenly makes sense. It seems like I should say more than that, so I add, "Cool." Inadequate response, I guess, but sincere. Because Cooper's pretty great except the way he's always been a little remote. This explains a lot.

"Simon found out I'm seeing someone. A guy. He was gonna post it on About That with everyone else's entries. It got switched out and replaced with a fake entry about me using steroids. I didn't switch it," he adds hastily. "But they think I did. So they're looking

into me hard-core now, which means the whole school will know pretty soon. I guess I wanted to ... tell somebody myself.”

“Cooper, no one will care—” I start, but he shakes his head.

“They will. You know they will,” he says. I drop my eyes, because I can’t deny it. “I’ve been hiding my head under a rock about this whole investigation,” he continues, his voice hoarse. “Hopin’ they’d chalk it up to an accident because there’s no real proof about anything. Now I keep thinking about what Maeve said about Simon the other day—how much weird stuff was going on around him. You think there’s anything to that?”

“Bronwyn does,” I say. “She wants the four of us to get together and compare notes. She says Nate will.” Cooper nods distractedly, and it occurs to me that since he’s still in Jake’s bubble most of the time, he’s not fully up to speed on everything that’s been going on. “Did you hear about Nate’s mom, by the way? How she’s, um, not dead after all?”

I didn’t think Cooper could get any paler, but he manages. “What?”

“Kind of a long story, but—yeah. Turns out she was a drug addict living in some kind of commune, but she’s back now. And sober, supposedly. Oh, and Bronwyn got called into the police station because of a creepy post Simon wrote about her sister sophomore year. Bronwyn told him to drop dead in the comments section, so ... you know. That looks kinda bad now.”

“The hell?” By the incredulous look on Cooper’s face, I’ve managed to distract him from his problems. Then the late bell rings, and his shoulders sag. “We’d better go. But, yeah. If you guys get together, I’m in.”

The Bayview Police set themselves up in a conference room with a school liaison again, and start interviewing students one by one. At first things are kind of quiet, and when we get through the day without any rumors I’m hopeful that Cooper was wrong about his secret getting out.

But by midmorning on Tuesday, the whispers start. I don’t know if it’s the kind of questions the police were asking, or who they were talking to, or just a good old-fashioned leak, but before lunch my ex-friend Olivia—who hasn’t spoken to me since Jake punched TJ—runs up to my locker and grabs my arm with a look of pure glee.

“Oh my God. Did you hear about Cooper?” Her eyes pop with excitement as she lowers her voice to a piercing whisper. “Everyone’s saying he’s gay.”

I pull away. If Olivia thinks I’m grateful to be included in the gossip mill, she’s wrong. “Who cares?” I say flatly.

“Well, Keely does,” Olivia giggles, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “No wonder he wouldn’t sleep with her! Are you headed to lunch now?”

“Yeah. With Bronwyn. See you.” I slam my locker shut and spin on my heel before she can say anything else.

In the cafeteria, I collect my food and head for our usual table. Bronwyn looks pretty in a sweater-dress and boots, her hair loose around her shoulders. Her cheeks are so pink I wonder if she’s wearing makeup for a change, but if she is it’s really natural. She keeps looking at the door.

“Expecting someone?” I ask.

She turns redder. “Maybe.”

I have a pretty good idea who she’s waiting for. Probably not Cooper, although the rest of the room seems to be. When he steps into the cafeteria everything goes quiet, and then a low whispering buzz runs through the room.

“Cooper Clay is Cooper GAY!” somebody calls out in a high, falsetto voice, and Cooper freezes in the door as something flies through the air and hits him across the chest. I recognize the blue packaging immediately: Trojan condoms. Jake’s brand. Along with half the school, I guess. But it did come from the direction of my old table.

“Doin’ the b.utt, hey, pretty,” somebody else sings, and laughter runs through the room. Some of it’s mean but a lot of it’s shocked and nervous. Most people look like they don’t know what to do. I’m struck silent because Cooper’s face is the worst thing I’ve ever seen and I want, so badly, for this to not be happening.

“Oh, for fvck’s sake.” It’s Nate. He’s in the entrance next to Cooper, which surprises me since I’ve never seen him in the cafeteria before. The rest of the room is equally taken aback, quieting enough that his contemptuous voice cuts across the whispers as he surveys the scene in front of him. “You losers seriously give a crap about this? Get a life.”

A girl’s voice calls out “Boyfriend!” disguised with a fake cough. Vanessa smirks as everyone around her dissolves into the kind of laughter that’s been directed my way over the past month: half-guilty, half-gleeful, and all Thank God this is happening to you and not me. The only exceptions are Keely, who’s biting her lip and staring at the floor, and Luis, who’s half standing with his forearms braced on the table. One of the lunch ladies hovers in the doorway between the kitchen and the cafeteria, seemingly torn between letting things play out and getting a teacher to intervene.

Nate zeroes in on Vanessa’s smug face without a trace of self-consciousness. “Really? You’ve got something to say? I don’t even know your name and you tried to stick your hand down my p*nts the last time we were at a party.” More laughter, but this time it’s

not at Cooper's expense. "In fact, if there's a guy at Bayview you haven't tried that with, I'd love to meet him."

Vanessa's mouth hangs open as a hand shoots up from the middle of the cafeteria. "Me," calls a boy sitting at the computer-nerd table. His friends all laugh nervously as the pulsing attention of the room—seriously, it's like a wave moving from one target to the next—focuses on them. Nate gives him a thumbs-up and looks back at Vanessa.

"There you go. Try to make that happen and shut the hell up." He crosses to our table and dumps his backpack next to Bronwyn. She stands up, winds her arms around his neck, and kisses him like they're alone while the entire cafeteria erupts into gasps and catcalls. I stare as much as everyone else. I mean, I kind of guessed, but this is pretty public. I'm not sure if Bronwyn's trying to distract everyone from Cooper or if she couldn't help herself. Maybe both.

Either way, Cooper's effectively been forgotten. He's motionless at the entrance until I grab his arm. "Come sit. The whole murder club at one table. They can stare at all of us together."

Cooper follows me, not bothering to get any food. We settle ourselves at the table and awkward silence descends until someone else approaches: Luis with his tray in hand, lowering himself into the last empty chair at our table.

"That was bullshit," he fumes, looking at the empty space in front of Cooper. "Aren't you gonna eat?"

"I'm not hungry," Cooper says shortly.

"You should eat something." Luis grabs the only untouched food item on his tray and holds it out. "Here, have a banana."

Everyone freezes for a second; then we all burst out laughing at the same time. Including Cooper, who rests his chin in his palm and massages his temple with his other hand.

"I'll pass," he says.

I've never seen Luis so red. "Why couldn't it have been apple day?" he mutters, and Cooper gives him a tired smile.

You find out who your real friends are when stuff like this happens. Turns out I didn't have any, but I'm glad Cooper does.