

One of Us Is Lying Chapter 28 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

Cooper

Wednesday, November 7, 7:40 p.m.

These murder club meetings are becoming a regular thing. We need a new name, though.

This time we're at a coffee shop in downtown San Diego, crammed into a back table because our numbers keep expanding. Kris came with me, and Ashton with Addy. Bronwyn's got all her Post-it notes on a bunch of manila folders, including the newest one: Simon paid two kids to stage a car accident. She says Sam Barron promised to call Eli and let him know. How that'll help Nate, I have no idea.

"Why'd you pick this place, Bronwyn?" Addy asks. "Kind of out of the way."

Bronwyn clears her throat and makes a big production of rearranging her Post-it notes. "No reason. So, anyway." She shoots a businesslike look around the table. "Thanks for coming. Maeve and I keep going over this stuff and it never makes any sense. We thought a meeting of the minds might help."

Maeve and Ashton return from the counter, balancing our orders on a couple of recyclable trays. They hand drinks around, and I watch Kris methodically open five packets of sugar and dump them into his latte. "What?" he asks, catching my expression. He's in a green polo shirt that brings out his eyes, and he looks really, really good. That still seems like the kind of thing I'm not supposed to notice.

"You like sugar, huh?" It's a dumb thing to say. What I mean is, I have no idea how you take your coffee because this is the first time we've been out in public together. Kris presses his lips together, which shouldn't be attractive but is. I feel awkward and jittery and accidentally bump his knee under the table.

"Nothing wrong with that," Addy says, tipping her cup against Kris's. The liquid inside hers is so pale it barely resembles coffee.

Kris and I have been spending more time together, but it doesn't feel natural yet. Maybe I'd gotten used to the sneaking around, or maybe I haven't come to terms with the fact that I'm dating a guy. I found myself keeping my distance from Kris when we walked from my car to the coffee shop, because I didn't want people guessing what we are to each other.

I hate that part of me. But it's there.

Bronwyn has some kind of steaming tea that looks too hot to drink. She pushes it aside and props one of the manila folders against the wall. "Here's all the stuff we know about Simon: He was going to post rumors about us. He paid two kids to stage a car accident. He was depressed. He had a creepy online persona. He and Janae seemed on the outs. He had a thing for Keely. He used to be friends with Jake. Am I missing anything?"

"He deleted my original About That entry," I say.

"Not necessarily," Bronwyn corrects. "Your entry was deleted. We don't know by whom."

Fair enough, I guess.

"And here's what we know about Jake," Bronwyn continues. "He wrote at least one of the Tumblr posts, or helped somebody else write it. He wasn't in the school building when Simon died, according to Luis. He—"

"Is a complete control freak," Ashton interrupts. Addy opens her mouth in protest, but Ashton cuts her off. "He is, Addy. He ran every part of your life for three years. Then as soon as you did something he didn't like, he blew up." Bronwyn scribbles Jake is a control freak on a Post-it with an apologetic glance at Addy.

"It's a data point," Bronwyn says. "Now, what if—"

The front door bangs and she goes bright red. "What a coincidence." I follow her gaze and see a young guy with wild hair and a scruffy beard enter the coffee shop. He looks familiar, but I can't place him. He spots Bronwyn with an exasperated expression that turns alarmed when he takes in Addy and me.

He holds a hand in front of his face. "I don't see you. Any of you." Then he catches sight of Ashton and does a classic double take, almost tripping over his feet. "Oh, hi. You must be Addy's sister."

Ashton blinks, confused, looking between him and Bronwyn. "Do I know you?"

"This is Eli Kleinfelter," Bronwyn says. "He's with Until Proven. Their offices are upstairs. He's, um, Nate's lawyer."

"Who cannot talk to you," Eli says, like he just remembered. He gives Ashton a lingering look, but turns away and heads for the counter. Ashton shrugs and blows on her coffee. I'm sure she's used to having that effect on guys.

Addy's eyes are round as she watches Eli's retreating back. "God, Bronwyn. I can't believe you stalked Nate's lawyer."

Bronwyn looks almost as embarrassed as she should be, taking the envelope I'd given her out of her backpack. "I wanted to see if Sam Barron ever got in touch, and pass

along his information if he hadn't. I thought if I ran into Eli casually, he might talk to me. Guess not." She darts a hopeful look at Ashton. "I bet he'd talk to you, though."

Addy locks her hands on her hips and juts her chin in outrage. "You can't pimp out my sister!"

Ashton smiles wryly and holds out her hand for the envelope. "As long as it's for a good cause. What am I supposed to say?"

"Tell him he was right—that the car accident at Bayview the day Simon died was staged. The envelope has contact information for the boy Simon paid to do it."

Ashton heads for the counter, and we all sip our drinks in silence. When she returns a minute later, the envelope's still in her hand. "Sam called him," she confirms. "He said he's looking into it, he appreciates the information, and you should mind your fucking business. That's a direct quote."

Bronwyn looks relieved and not at all insulted. "Thank you. That's good news. So, where were we?"

"Simon and Jake," Maeve says, propping her chin in one hand as she gazes at the two manila folders. "They're connected. But how?"

"Excuse me," Kris says mildly, and everyone looks at him like they'd forgotten he was at the table. Which they probably had. He's been quiet since we got here.

Maeve tries to make up for it by giving him an encouraging smile. "Yeah?"

"I wonder," Kris says. His English is unaccented and almost perfect, with just a little formality that hints he's from someplace else. "There has always been so much focus on who was in the room. That's why the police originally targeted the four of you. Because it would be almost impossible for anyone who wasn't in the room to kill Simon. Right?"

"Right," I say.

"So." Kris removes two Post-its from one of the folders. "If the killer wasn't Cooper, or Bronwyn, or Addy, or Nate—and nobody thinks the teacher who was there could have had anything to do with it—who does that leave?" He layers one Post-it on top of the other on the wall next to the booth, then sits back and looks at us with polite attentiveness.

Simon was poisoned during detention

Simon was depressed

We're all silent for a long minute, until Bronwyn exhales a small gasp. "I'm the omniscient narrator," she says.

"What?" Addy asks.

"That's what Simon said before he died. I said there wasn't any such thing in teen movies, and he said there was in life. Then he drained his drink in one gulp." Bronwyn turns and calls "Eli!" but the door's already closing behind Nate's lawyer.

"So you're saying ..." Ashton stares around the table until her eyes land on Kris. "You think Simon committed suicide?" Kris nods. "But why? Why like that?"

"Let's go back to what we know," Bronwyn says. Her voice is almost clinical, but her face is flushed brick red. "Simon was one of those people who thought he should be at the center of everything, but wasn't. And he was obsessed with the idea of making some kind of huge, violent splash at school. He fantasized about it all the time on those 4chan threads. What if this was his version of a school shooting? Kill himself and take a bunch of students down with him, but in an unexpected way. Like framing them for murder." She turns to her sister. "What did Simon say on 4chan, Maeve? Do something original. Surprise me when you take out a bunch of lemming a.ssh0les."

Maeve nods. "Exact quote, I think."

I think about how Simon died—choking, panicked, trying to catch his breath. If he really did it to himself, I wish more than ever we'd found his damn EpiPen. "I think he regretted it at the end," I say, the weight of the words settling heavy on my heart. "He looked like he wanted help. If he could've gotten medication in time, maybe a close call like that would've jolted him into being a different kind of guy."

Kris's hand squeezes mine under the table. Bronwyn and Addy both look like they're back in the room where Simon died, horrified and stunned. They know I'm right. Silence descends and I think we might be done until Maeve looks over at the Post-it wall and sucks in her cheeks.

"But how does Jake fit in?" she asks.

Kris hesitates and clears his throat, like he's waiting for permission to speak. When nobody protests he says, "If Jake isn't Simon's killer, he must be his accomplice. Someone had to keep things going after Simon died."

He meets Bronwyn's eyes, and some kind of understanding passes between them. They're the brains of this operation. The rest of us are just trying to keep up. Kris's hand pulled away from mine while he was talking, and I take it back.

“Simon found out about Addy and TJ,” Bronwyn says. “Maybe that’s how he approached Jake in the first place to get his help. Jake would’ve wanted revenge, because he—”

A chair scrapes noisily beside me as Addy pushes herself away from the table. “Stop,” she says in a choked voice, her purple-streaked hair falling into her eyes. “Jake wouldn’t ... He couldn’t ...”

“I think we’ve had enough for one night,” Ashton says firmly, getting to her feet. “You guys keep going, but we need to get home.”

“Sorry, Addy,” Bronwyn says with a chagrined expression. “I got carried away.”

Addy waves a hand. “It’s fine,” she says unsteadily. “I just ... can’t right now.” Ashton links arms with her until they get to the door; then she pulls it open and lets Addy slip through ahead of her.

Maeve watches them, her chin in her hands. “She has a point. The whole thing sounds impossible, doesn’t it? And even if we’re right, we can’t prove anything.” She looks hopefully at Kris, as though she’s willing him to work more Post-it magic.

Kris shrugs and taps the colored square closest to him. “Perhaps there’s one person remaining who knows something useful.”

Janae seems depressed

Bronwyn and Maeve leave around nine, and Kris and I don’t stay much longer. We gather up the table debris that’s left and deposit it in the trash can next to the exit. We’re both quiet, coming off one of the weirdest dates in history.

“Well,” Kris says, pushing through the door and pausing on the sidewalk to wait for me. “That was interesting.” Before he can say anything else I grab him and press him against the coffee shop wall, my fingers digging into his hair and my tongue sliding between his teeth in a deep, wanting kiss. He makes a sound like a surprised growl and pulls me hard against his chest. When another couple exits through the door and we break apart, he looks dazed.

He straightens his shirt and runs a hand over his hair. “Thought you’d forgotten how to do that.”

“I’m sorry.” My voice thickens with the need to kiss him again. “It’s not that I didn’t want to. It’s just—”

“I know.” Kris laces his fingers in mine and holds our hands up like a question. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I say, and we start down the sidewalk together.

Nate

Wednesday, November 7, 11:30 p.m.

So here's how you deal with being locked up.

You keep your mouth shut. Don't talk about your life or why you're there. Nobody cares unless they want to use it against you.

You don't take sh!t from anyone. Ever. Juvenile detention's not Oz, but people will still fvck with you if they think you're weak.

You make friends. I use the term loosely. You identify the least sh!tty people you can find and associate with them. Moving around in a pack is useful.

You don't break rules, but you look the other way when someone else does.

You work out and watch television. A lot.

You stay under the guards' radar as much as possible. Including the overly friendly woman who keeps offering to let you make calls from her office.

You don't complain about how slowly time passes. When you've been arrested for a capital offense and you're four months away from your eighteenth birthday, days that crawl by are your friends.

You come up with new ways to answer your lawyer's endless questions. Yeah, I leave my locker open sometimes. No, Simon's never been to my house. Yeah, we saw each other outside of school sometimes. The last time? Probably when I was selling him weed. Sorry, we're not supposed to talk about that, are we?

You don't think about what's outside. Or who. Especially if she's better off forgetting you exist.