

## One of Us Is Lying Chapter 6

0 12 minutes read

Cooper

Saturday, September 29, 4:15 p.m.

I squint at the batter. We're at full count and he's fouled off the last two pitches. He's making me work, which isn't good. In a showcase game like this, facing a right-handed second baseman with so-so stats, I should've mowed him down already.

Problem is, I'm distracted. It's been a hell of a week.

Pop's in the stands, and I can picture exactly what he's doing. He'll have taken his cap off, knotting it between his hands as he stares at the mound. Like burning a hole into me with his eyes is going to help.

I bring the ball into my glove and glance at Luis, who catches for me during regular season. He's on the Bayview High football team too but got permission to miss today's game so he could be here. He signals a fastball, but I shake my head. I've thrown five already and this guy's figured every one out. I keep shaking Luis off until he gives me the signal I want. Luis adjusts his crouch slightly, and we've played together long enough that I can read his thoughts in the movement. Your funeral, man.

I position my fingers on the ball, tensing myself in preparation to throw. It's not my most consistent pitch. If I miss, it'll be a big fat softball and this guy'll crush it.

I draw back and hurl as hard as I can. My pitch heads straight for the middle of the plate, and the batter takes an eager, triumphant swing. Then the ball breaks, dropping out of the strike zone and into Luis's glove. The stadium explodes in cheers, and the batter shakes his head like he has no idea what happened.

I adjust my cap and try not to look pleased. I've been working on that slider all year.

I strike the next hitter out on three straight fastballs. The last one hits ninety-three, the fastest I've ever pitched. Lights-out for a lefty. My stats through two innings are three strikeouts, two groundouts, and a long fly that would've been a double if the right fielder hadn't made a diving catch. I wish I could have that pitch back—my curveball didn't curve—but other than that I feel pretty good about the game.

I'm at Petco—the Padres' stadium—for an invitation-only showcase event, which my father insisted I go to even though Simon's memorial service is in an hour. The organizers agreed to let me pitch first and leave early, so I skip my usual postgame routine, take a shower, and head out of the locker room with Luis to find Pop.

I spot him as someone calls my name. "Cooper Clay?" The man approaching me looks successful. That's the only way I can think to describe him. Sharp clothes, sharp haircut, just the right amount of a tan, and a confident smile as he holds his hand out to me. "Josh Langley with the Padres. I've spoken to your coach a few times."

"Yes, sir. Pleased to meet you," I say. My father grins like somebody just handed him the keys to a Lamborghini. He manages to introduce himself to Josh without drooling, but barely.

"Hell of a slider you threw there," Josh says to me. "Fell right off the plate."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good velocity on your fastball too. You've really brought that up since the spring, haven't you?"

"I've been working out a lot," I say. "Building up arm strength."

"Big jump in a short time," Josh observes, and for a second the statement hangs in the air between us like a question. Then he claps a hand on my shoulder. "Well, keep it up, son. Nice to have a local boy on our radar. Makes my job easy. Less travel." He flashes a smile, nods good-bye to my dad and Luis, and takes off.

Big jump in a short time. It's true. Eighty-eight miles per hour to ninety-three in a few months is unusual.

Pop won't shut up on the way home, alternating between complaining about what I did wrong and crowing about Josh Langley. He winds up in a good mood, though, more happy about the Padres scout than upset about someone almost getting a hit off me. "Simon's family gonna be there?" he asks as he pulls up to Bayview High. "Pay our respects if they are."

"I dunno," I answer him. "It might just be a school thing."

"Hat off, boys," Pop says. Luis crams his into the pocket of his football jacket, and Pop raps the steering wheel impatiently when I hesitate. "Come on, Cooper, it might be outside but this is still a service. Leave it in the car."

I do as I'm told and get out, but as I run a hand through my hat-hair and close the passenger door, I wish I had it back. I feel exposed, and people have already been staring at me enough this week. If it were up to me I'd go home and spend a quiet evening watching baseball with my brother and Nonny, but there's no way I can miss Simon's memorial service when I was one of the last people to see him alive.

We start toward the crowd on the football field, and I text Keely to find out where our friends are. She tells me they're near the front, so we duck under the bleachers and try

to spot them from the sidelines. I have my eyes on the crowd, and don't see the girl in front of me until I almost bump into her. She's leaning against a post, watching the football field with her hands stuffed into the pockets of her oversized jacket.

"Sorry," I say, and realize who it is. "Oh, hey, Leah. You heading out to the field?" Then I wish I could swallow my words, because there's no way in hell Leah Jackson's here to mourn Simon. She actually tried to kill herself last year because of him. After he wrote about her sleeping with a bunch of freshmen, she was harassed on social media for months. She slit her wrists in her bathroom and was out of school for the rest of the year.

Leah snorts. "Yeah, right. Good riddance." She stares at the scene in front of us, kicking the toe of her boot into the dirt. "Nobody could stand him, but they're all holding candles like he's some kind of martyr instead of a gossipy douchebag."

She's not wrong, but now doesn't seem like the time to be that honest. Still, I'm not going to try defending Simon to Leah. "I guess people want to pay their respects," I hedge.

"Hypocrites," she mutters, cramming her hands deeper into her pockets. Her expression shifts, and she pulls out her phone with a sly look. "You guys see the latest?"

"Latest what?" I ask with a sinking feeling. Sometimes the best thing about baseball is the fact that you can't check your phone while you're playing.

"There's another email with a Tumblr update." Leah swipes a few times at her phone and hands it to me. I take it reluctantly and look at the screen as Luis reads over my shoulder.

Time to clarify a few things.

Simon had a severe peanut allergy—so why not stick a Planters into his sandwich and be done with it?

I'd been watching Simon Kelleher for months. Everything he ate was wrapped in an inch of cellophane. He carried that goddamn water bottle everywhere and it was all he drank.

But he couldn't go ten minutes without swigging from that bottle. I figured if it wasn't there, he'd default to plain old tap water. So yeah, I took it.

I spent a long time figuring out where I could slip peanut oil into one of Simon's drinks. Someplace contained, without a water fountain. Mr. Avery's detention seemed like the ideal spot.

I did feel bad watching Simon die. I'm not a sociopath. In that moment, as he turned that horrible color and fought for air—if I could have stopped it, I would have.

I couldn't, though. Because, you see, I'd taken his EpiPen. And every last one in the nurse's office.

My heart starts hammering and my stomach clenches. The first post was bad enough, but this one—this one's written like the person was actually in the room when Simon had his attack. Like it was one of us.

Luis snorts. "That's fvcked up."

Leah's watching me closely, and I grimace as I hand back the phone. "Hope they figure out who's writing this stuff. It's pretty sick."

She lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "I guess." She starts to back away. "Have a blast mourning, guys. I'm outta here."

"Bye, Leah." I squelch the urge to follow her, and we trudge forward until we hit the ten-yard line. I start shouldering through the crowd and finally find Keely and the rest of our friends. When I reach her, she hands me a candle she lights with her own, and loops her arm through mine.

Principal Gupta steps up to the microphone and taps against it. "What a terrible week for our school," she says. "But how inspiring to see all of you gathered here tonight."

I should be thinking about Simon, but my head's too full of other stuff. Keely, who's gripping my arm a little too tight. Leah, saying the kind of things most people only think. The new Tumblr—posted right before Simon's memorial service. And Josh Langley with his flashy smile: Big jump in a short time.

That's the thing about competitive edges. Sometimes they're too good to be true.

Nate

Sunday, September 30, 12:30 p.m.

My probation officer isn't the worst. She's in her thirties, not bad-looking, and has a sense of humor. But she's a pain in my as\*s about school.

"How did your history exam go?" We're sitting in the kitchen for our usual Sunday meeting. Stan's hanging out on the table, which she's fine with since she likes him. My dad is upstairs, something I always arrange before Officer Lopez comes over. Part of her job is to make sure I'm being adequately supervised. She knew his deal the first time she saw him, but she also knows I've got nowhere else to go and state care can be way worse than alcoholic neglect. It's easier to pretend he's a fit guardian when he's not passed out in the living room.

"It went," I say.

She waits patiently for more. When it doesn't come, she asks, "Did you study?"

"I've been kind of distracted," I remind her. She'd heard the Simon story from her cop pals, and we spent the first half hour after she got here talking about what happened.

"I understand. But keeping up with school is important, Nate. It's part of the deal."

She brings up The Deal every week. San Diego County is getting tougher on juvenile drug offenses, and she thinks I was lucky to get probation. A bad report from her could put me back in front of a pissed-off judge. Another drug bust could land me in juvie. So every Sunday morning before she shows up, I gather up all my unsold drugs and burner phones and stick them in our senile neighbor's shed. Just in case.

Officer Lopez holds out her palm to Stan, who crawls halfway toward it before he loses interest. She picks him up and lays him across her arm. "How has your week been otherwise? Tell me something positive that happened." She always says that, as if life is full of great sh!t I can store up and report every Sunday.

"I got to three thousand in Grand Theft Auto."

She rolls her eyes. She does that a lot at my house. "Something else. What progress have you made toward your goals?"

Jesus. My goals. She made me write a list at our first appointment. There's not anything I actually care about on there, just stuff I know she wants to hear about school and jobs. And friends, which she's figured by now I don't have. I have people I go to parties with, sell to, and screw, but I wouldn't call any of them friends.

"It's been a slow week, goal-wise."

"Did you look at that Alateen literature I left you?"

Nope. I didn't. I don't need a brochure to tell me how bad it s.ucks when your only parent's a drunk, and I definitely don't need to talk about it with a bunch of whiners in a church basement somewhere. "Yeah," I lie. "I'm thinking about it."

I'm sure she sees right through me, since she's not stupid. But she doesn't push it. "That's good to hear. Sharing experiences with other kids whose parents are struggling would be transformative for you."

Officer Lopez doesn't let up. You have to give her that. We could be surrounded by walking dead in the zombie apocalypse and she'd look for the bright side. Your brains are still in your head, right? Way to beat the odds! She'd love, just once, to hear an actual positive thing from me. Like how I spent Friday night with Ivy League-bound Bronwyn Rojas and didn't disgrace myself. But that's not a conversation I need to open up with Officer Lopez.

I don't know why I showed up there. I was restless, staring at the Vicodin I had left over after drop-off and wondering if I should take a few and see what all the fuss is about. I've never gone down that road, because I'm pretty sure it'd end with me comatose in the living room alongside my dad until someone kicked us out for not paying the mortgage.

So I went to Bronwyn's instead. I didn't expect her to come outside. Or invite me in. Listening to her play the piano had a strange effect on me. I almost felt ... peaceful.

"How is everyone coping with Simon's death? Have they held the funeral yet?"

"It's today. The school sent an email." I glance at the clock on our microwave. "In about half an hour."

Her brows shoot up. "Nate. You should go. That would be a positive thing to do. Pay your respects, gain some closure after a traumatic event."

"No thanks."

She clears her throat and gives me a shrewd look. "Let me put it another way. Go to that goddamn funeral, Nate Macauley, or I won't overlook your sp0tty school attendance the next time I file an update report. I'll come with you."

Which is how I end up at Simon Kelleher's funeral with my probation officer.

We're late and St. Anthony's Church is packed, so we barely find space in the last pew. The service hasn't started but no one's talking, and when the old guy in front of us coughs it echoes through the room. The smell of incense brings me back to grade school, when my mother used to take me to Mass every Sunday. I haven't been to church since then, but it looks almost exactly the same: red carpet, shiny dark wood, tall stained-glass windows.

The only thing that's different is the place is crawling with cops.

Not in uniform. But I can tell, and Officer Lopez can too. After a while some of them look my way, and I get paranoid she's led me into some kind of trap. But I don't have anything on me. So why do they keep staring at me?

Not only me. I follow their gazes to Bronwyn, who's near the front with her parents, and to Cooper and the blond girl, sitting in the middle with their friends. The back of my neck tingles, and not in a good way. My body tenses, ready to bolt until Officer Lopez puts a hand on my arm. She doesn't say anything, but I stay put.

A bunch of people talk—nobody I know except that Goth girl who used to follow Simon everywhere. She reads a weird, rambling poem and her voice shakes the whole time.

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them,  
emptied them,  
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.  
Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?  
Look in my face while I snuff the side of evening,  
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay  
only a minute longer.)  
Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.) ...  
Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove  
already too late? ...  
I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the  
runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.  
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the  
grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under  
your boot-soles.  
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fiber your blood.  
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

“Song of Myself,” Officer Lopez murmurs when the girl finishes. “Interesting choice.”

There’s music, more readings, and it’s finally over. The priest tells us the burial’s going to be private, family only. Fine by me. I’ve never wanted to leave anyplace so bad in my life and I’m ready to take off before the funeral procession comes down the aisle, but Officer Lopez has her hand on my arm again.

A bunch of senior guys carry Simon’s casket out the door. A couple dozen people dressed in dark colors file out after them, ending with a man and a woman holding hands. The woman has a thin, angular face like Simon. She’s staring at the floor, but as she passes our pew she looks up, catches my eye, and chokes out a furious sob.

More people crowd the aisles, and someone edges into the pew with Officer Lopez and me. It’s one of the plainclothes cops, an older guy with a buzz cut. I can tell right away he’s not bush-league like Officer Budapest. He smiles like we’ve met before.

“Nate Macauley?” he asks. “You got a few minutes, son?”