



BOOKS BY KAREN M. MCMANUS

One of Us Is Lying

Two Can Keep a Secret

One of Us Is Next

ONE OF US IS NEXT

KAREN M. McMANUS

DELACORTE
PRESS

For Mom and Dad

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About the Author

PART ONE

Friday, March 6

REPORTER (standing at the edge of a winding street with a large white stucco building behind her): Good morning. This is Liz Rosen with Channel Seven News, reporting live from Bayview High, where students are reeling from the loss of one of their classmates yesterday. It's the second tragic teenage death in the past eighteen months for this small town, and the mood outside the school is one of shocked déjà vu.

(Cut to two girls, one wiping tears, the other stone-faced.)

CRYING GIRL: It's just...it's just really sad. Like, sometimes it feels as though Bayview is cursed, you know? First Simon, and now this.

STOIC GIRL: This isn't anything like what happened with Simon.

REPORTER (angling her microphone toward the crying girl): Were you and the deceased student close?

CRYING GIRL: Not like, *close* close. Or at all close. I mean, I'm just a freshman.

REPORTER (turning toward the other girl): And how about you?

STOIC GIRL: I don't think we're supposed to be talking to you.

Ten Weeks Earlier

Reddit, Vengeance Is Mine subforum

Thread started by Bayview2020

Hey.

Is this the same group Simon Kel eher used to post with?—Bayview2020

Greetings.

One and the same.—Darkestmind

Why'd you move? And why are there hardly any posts?—Bayview2020

Too many gawkers and reporters on the old site.

And we have new security measures. Lesson learned from our friend

Simon.

Who I'm guessing you know, based on your user name?—Darkestmind

Everyone knows Simon. Wel . Knew him.

It's not like we were friends, though.—Bayview2020

Okay. So what brings you here?—Darkestmind

I don't know. Just stumbled across it.—Bayview2020

Bul shit. This is a forum dedicated to revenge, and it's not easy to find.

You're here for a reason.

What is it? Or should I say who?—Darkestmind

Who.

Somebody did something horrible.

It wrecked my life and so many others.

Meanwhile NOTHING happened to them.

And I can't do anything about it.—Bayview2020

Same, same.

We have a lot in common.

It sucks when the person who ruined your life gets to walk around like always.

As if what they did doesn't matter.

I beg to disagree with your conclusion, though.

There's always something you can do.—Darkestmind

CHAPTER ONE

Maeve

Monday, February 17

My sister thinks I'm a slacker. She's not coming right out and saying it—or texting it, technically—but it's heavily implied:

Did you check out that list of colleges I sent?

Winter of your junior year isn't too early to start looking. It's actually kind of late.

We could visit some places when I'm home for Ashton's bachelorette party if you want.

You should apply somewhere totally out of your comfort zone, too.

What about the University of Hawaii?

I look up from the texts flashing across my phone to meet Knox Myers's questioning gaze. "Bronwyn thinks I should go to college at the University of Hawaii," I report, and he almost chokes on his mouthful of empanada.

"She does realize that's on an island, right?" he asks, reaching for a glass of ice water and draining half of it in one gulp. The empanadas at Café Contigo are legendary in Bayview but they're a lot to take if you're not used to spicy food. Knox, who moved here from Kansas in middle school and still counts mushroom-soup-based casseroles among his favorite meals, most definitely is not. "Has she already forgotten that you're vehemently anti-beach?"

"I'm not anti-beach," I protest. "I'm just not a proponent of sand. Or too much sun. Or undertow. Or sea creatures." Knox's eyebrows climb higher with every sentence. "Look, you're the one who made me watch *Monsters of the Deep*," I remind him. "My ocean phobia is mostly your fault." Knox was my first-ever boyfriend last summer, both of us too inexperienced to realize we weren't actually attracted to one another. We spent most of our relationship watching the Science Channel, which should

have clued us in quicker that we were better off as friends.

“You’ve convinced me,” Knox says drily. “This is the school for you. I look forward to reading what will undoubtedly be a heartfelt application essay when it’s due.” He leans forward and raises his voice for emphasis. “Next year.”

I sigh, drumming my fingers on the brightly tiled table. Café Contigo is an Argentinean café with deep blue walls and a tin ceiling, the air a fragrant mix of sweet and savory scents. It’s less than a mile from my house and became my favorite place to do homework once Bronwyn left for Yale and my room was suddenly much too quiet. I like the friendly bustle of the café and the fact that nobody minds if I spend three hours here and only order coffee. “Bronwyn thinks I’m behind schedule,” I tell Knox.

“Yeah, well, Bronwyn practically had her Yale application ready in preschool, didn’t she?” he says. “We have plenty of time.” Knox is like me—a seventeen-year-old junior at Bayview High, older than most of our classmates. In his case, it’s because he was small for his age in kindergarten and his parents held him back. In mine, it’s because I was in and out of hospitals with leukemia for half my childhood.

“I guess.” I reach over to grab Knox’s empty plate and stack it on top of mine but knock over the saltshaker instead, sending white crystals

scattering across the table. Almost without thinking, I take a pinch between two fingers and throw it over my shoulder. Warding off bad luck, like Ita taught me. My grandmother has dozens of superstitions: some Colombian, and some she's picked up after living in the United States for thirty years. I used to follow them all when I was little, especially when I was sick. *If I wear the beaded bracelet Ita gave me, this test won't hurt. If I avoid all the cracks in the floor, my white cell count will be normal. If I eat twelve grapes at midnight on New Year's Eve, I won't die this year.*

"Anyway, it's not the end of the world if you don't go to college right away," Knox says. He slouches in his chair, pushing a shock of brown hair off his forehead. Knox is so lean and angular that even after stuffing himself with all of his empanadas and half of mine, he still looks hungry. Every time he's at our house, one or both of my parents try to feed him. "Lots of people don't." His glance flicks around the restaurant before landing on Addy Prentiss pushing through the kitchen doors with a tray balanced in one hand.

I watch Addy wind her way through Café Contigo, dropping off plates of food with practiced ease. Over Thanksgiving, when the true crime show *Mikhail Powers Investigates* aired its special report "The Bayview Four: Where Are They Now," Addy agreed to be interviewed for the first time

ever. Probably because she could tell that the producers were gearing up to present her as the slacker of the group—my sister made it to Yale, Cooper had a splashy scholarship to Cal State Fullerton, even Nate was taking a few community college classes—and she wasn't having it. No "Bayview's Former Beauty Queen Peaks in High School" headline for Adelaide Prentiss.

"If you know what you want to do when you graduate, great," she'd said, perched on a stool in Café Contigo with the day's specials written in brightly colored chalk on the blackboard behind her. "If you don't, why pay a fortune for a degree you might never use? There's nothing wrong with not having your entire life mapped out when you're eighteen."

Or seventeen. I eye my phone warily, waiting for another barrage of Bronwyn texts. I love my sister, but her perfectionism is a hard act to follow.

The evening crowd is starting to arrive, filling the last of the tables as someone turns all the wall-mounted big-screen televisions to Cal State Fullerton's baseball season opener. Addy pauses when her tray is almost empty and scans the room, smiling when she catches my eye. She makes her way to our corner table and places a small plate of alfajores between Knox and me. The dulce de leche sandwich cookies are a Café Contigo

specialty, and they're the only thing Addy has learned to make during her nine months working here.

Knox and I both reach for them at the same time. "You guys want anything else?" Addy asks, tucking a lock of silvery pink hair behind her ear. She's tried a few different colors over the past year, but nothing that isn't pink or purple lasts for very long. "You should get your order in now if you do. Everyone's taking a break once Cooper starts pitching in"—she glances at the clock on the wall—"five minutes or so."

I shake my head as Knox stands, brushing crumbs from the front of his favorite gray sweatshirt. "I'm good, but I have to hit the restroom," he says.

"Can you save my seat, Maeve?"

"You got it," I say, sliding my bag onto his chair.

Addy half turns, then almost drops her tray. "Oh my God! There he is!"

Every screen in the restaurant fills with the same image: Cooper Clay walking to the mound to warm up for his first college baseball game. I just saw Cooper over Christmas, not even two months ago, but he looks bigger than I remember. As square-jawed and handsome as ever, but with a steely glint in his eyes that I've never seen before. Then again, until right this second, I've always watched Cooper pitch from a distance.

I can't hear the announcers over the chatter in the café, but I can guess what they're saying: Cooper's debut is the talk of college baseball right now, big enough that a local cable sports show is covering the whole game. Part of the buzz is due to lingering Bayview Four notoriety, and the fact that he's one of the few openly gay players in baseball, but it's also because he's been tearing up spring training. Sports analysts are taking bets on whether he'll jump to the majors before he's finished a single college season.

"Our superstar is finally going to meet his destiny," Addy says fondly as Cooper adjusts his cap on screen. "I need to do one last check on my tables, then I'll join you guys." She starts moving through the restaurant with her tray tucked under her arm and her order pad in hand, but the attention of the room has already shifted from food to baseball.

My eyes linger on the television, even though the scene has switched from Cooper to an interview with the other team's coach. *If Cooper wins, this year will turn out fine.* I try to push the thought out of my head as soon as it pops in, because I won't be able to enjoy the game if I turn it into yet another bet against fate.

A chair scrapes noisily beside me, and a familiar black leather jacket brushes against my arm. "What's up, Maeve?" Nate Macauley asks, settling into his chair. His eyes rove across the sodium-spattered tabletop. "Uh-oh.

Salt massacre. We're doomed, aren't we?"

"Ha and ha," I say, but my lips twitch. Nate's become like a brother to me since he and Bronwyn started dating almost a year ago, so I suppose teasing comes with the territory. Even now, when they're "on a break" for the third time since Bronwyn left for college. After spending last summer angsty over whether a three-thousand-mile long-distance relationship could work, my sister and her boyfriend have settled into a pattern of being inseparable, arguing, breaking up, and getting back together that, oddly, seems to work for both of them.

Nate just grins, and we lapse into a comfortable silence. It's easy hanging out with him, and Addy, and the rest of Bronwyn's friends. *Our friends*, she always says, but it's not really true. They were hers first, and they wouldn't be mine without her.

My phone buzzes as if on cue, and I look down to another text from Bronwyn. *Has the game started?*

Soon, I type. *Cooper's warming up.*

I wish it were on ESPN so I could watch!!! Pacific Coast Sports

Network does not, sadly, air in New Haven, Connecticut. Or anywhere outside a three-hour radius of San Diego. And they don't live-stream online, either.

I'm recording it for you, I remind her.

I know, but it's not the same.

Sorry :(

I swallow the last of my cookie, watching the gray dots linger on my phone screen for so long that I'm positive I know what's coming next.

Bronwyn is a lightning-fast texter. She never hesitates unless she's about to say something she thinks she shouldn't, and there's currently only one topic on her self-imposed Do Not Raise list.

Sure enough: *Is Nate there?*

My sister may not live one room away from me anymore, but that doesn't mean I can't still give her a hard time. *Who?* I text back, then glance at Nate. "Bronwyn says hi," I tell him.

His dark-blue eyes flash, but his expression remains impassive. "Hi back."

I get it, I guess. No matter how much you care about someone, things change when they used to be around all the time and then suddenly, they're not. I feel it too, in a different way. But Nate and I don't have the sort of dynamic where we talk about our feelings—neither of us has that with anyone, really, except for Bronwyn—so I just make a face at him.

"Repression is unhealthy, you know."

Before Nate can reply, there's a sudden flurry of activity around us:

Knox returns, Addy pulls a chair over to our table, and a plate of tortilla chips covered with shredded steak, melted cheese, and chimichurri—Café Contigo's version of nachos—materializes in front of me.

I look up in the direction they came from to meet a pair of deep-brown eyes. "Game snacks," Luis Santos says, transferring the towel he used to hold the plate from his hand to his shoulder. Luis is Cooper's best friend from Bayview High, the catcher to Cooper's pitcher on the baseball team until they both graduated last year. His parents own Café Contigo, and he works here part-time while taking classes at City College. Ever since I made this corner table my second home, I see more of Luis than I did when we went to school together.

Knox lunges for the nachos like he didn't just polish off two servings of empanadas and a plate of cookies five minutes ago. "Careful, it's hot," Luis warns, lowering himself into the chair across from me. I immediately think, *Yeah you are*, because I have an embarrassing weakness for good-looking jocks that brings out my inner twelve-year-old. You'd think I would have learned after my one-sided crush on a basketball player landed me a humiliating post on Simon Kelleher's About That gossip blog freshman year, but no.

I'm not really hungry, but I extract a chip from the bottom of the pile anyway. "Thanks, Luis," I say, sucking the salt from one corner.

Nate smirks. "What were you saying about repression, Maeve?"

My face heats, and I can't think of a better response than to stuff the entire chip into my mouth and chew aggressively in Nate's general direction. Sometimes I don't know what my sister sees in him.

Damn it. My sister. I glance at my phone with a stab of guilt at the string of sad-face emojis from Bronwyn. *Just kidding. Nate looks miserable*, I reassure her. He doesn't, because nobody wears the *don't give a crap* mask as effortlessly as Nate Macauley, but I'm sure he is.

Phoebe Lawton, another Café Contigo waitress and a junior in our class, hands around glasses of water before taking a seat at the far edge of the table just as the first batter from the opposing team saunters up to home plate. The camera zooms in on Cooper's face as he brings up his glove and narrows his eyes. "Come on, Coop," Luis murmurs, his left hand curling instinctively like it's in a catcher's mitt. "Play ball."

—

Two hours later, the entire café is filled with an excited buzz after Cooper's near-flawless performance: eight strikeouts, one walk, one hit, and no runs through seven innings. The Cal State Fullerton Titans are winning by three,

but nobody in Bayview cares all that much now that a relief pitcher has taken over for Cooper.

“I’m so happy for him,” Addy beams. “He deserves this so much after...you know.” Her smile falters. “After everything.”

Everything. It’s too small a word to cover what happened when Simon Kelleher decided to stage his own death almost eighteen months ago, and frame my sister, Cooper, Addy, and Nate for his murder. The *Mikhail Powers Investigates* Thanksgiving special rehashed it all in excruciating detail, from Simon’s plot to trap everyone in detention together to the secrets he arranged to leak on About That to make it seem like the other four had reasons for wanting him dead.

I watched the special with Bronwyn while she was home on break. It brought me right back to the year before, when the story became a national obsession and news vans crowded our driveway every day. The entire country learned that Bronwyn stole tests to get an A in chemistry, that Nate sold drugs while on probation *for* selling drugs, and that Addy cheated on her boyfriend, Jake—who turned out to be such a controlling trash fire that he agreed to be Simon’s accomplice. And Cooper was falsely accused of using steroids, then outed before he was ready to come out to his family and friends.

All of which was a nightmare, but not nearly as bad as being suspected of murder.

The investigation unfolded almost exactly the way Simon planned—except for the part where Bronwyn, Cooper, Addy, and Nate banded together instead of turning on one another. It's hard to imagine what this night would look like if they hadn't. I doubt Cooper would've almost pitched a no-hitter in his first college game, or that Bronwyn would have made it to Yale. Nate would probably be in jail. And Addy—I don't like to think about where Addy would be. Mostly because I'm afraid she wouldn't be here at all.

I shiver, and Luis catches my eye. He raises his glass with the determined look of a guy who's not about to let his best friend's triumph turn sour. "Yeah, well, here's to karma. And to Coop, for kicking ass in his first college game."

"To Cooper," everyone echoes.

"We have to plan a road trip to see him!" Addy exclaims. She reaches across the table and taps Nate's arm as he starts gazing around the room like he's calculating how soon he can leave. "That includes you. Don't try to get out of it."

"The whole baseball team will want to go," Luis says. Nate grimaces

in a resigned sort of way, because Addy is a force of nature when she's determined to make him socialize.

Phoebe, who shifted closer to Knox and me as the game wore on and other people left, reaches out to pour herself a glass of water. "Bayview is so different without Simon, but it also... *isn't*. You know?" she murmurs, so quietly that only Knox and I can hear. "It's not like people got any nicer once the shock wore off. We just don't have About That to keep tabs on who's being horrible from one week to the next."

"Not from lack of effort," Knox mutters.

About That copycats were everywhere for a while after Simon died.

Most of them fizzled out within days, although one site, Simon Says, stayed up nearly a month last fall before the school got involved and shut it down. But nobody took it seriously, because the site's creator—one of those quiet kids hardly anyone knows—never posted a single piece of gossip that everyone hadn't already heard.

That was the thing about Simon Kelleher: he knew secrets most people couldn't even have guessed. He was patient, willing to wait until he could wring the maximum amount of drama and pain from any given situation. And he was good at hiding how much he hated everyone at Bayview High; the only place he let it out was on the revenge forum I'd found when I was

looking for clues to his death. Reading Simon's posts back then made me sick to my stomach. It still chills me, sometimes, to think how little any of us understood what it meant to go up against a mind like Simon's.

Everything could have turned out so differently.

"Hey." Knox nudges me back to the present, and I blink until his face comes into focus. It's still just the three of us locked into our side conversation; I don't think last year's seniors ever let themselves dwell on Simon for too long. "Don't look so serious. The past is past, right?"

"Right," I say, then twist in my seat as a loud groan goes up from the Café Contigo crowd. It takes a minute for me to understand what's going on, and when I do, my heart sinks: Cooper's replacement loaded the bases in the bottom of the ninth inning, got pulled, and the new pitcher just gave up a grand slam. All of a sudden, Cal State's three-run lead has turned into a walk-off, one-run loss. The other team mobs the hitter at home base, piling on top of him until they collapse in a joyful heap. Cooper, despite pitching like a dream, didn't get his win.

"Nooooo," Luis moans, burying his head in his hands. He sounds like he's in physical pain. "That is *bullshit*."

Phoebe winces. "Ooh, tough luck. Not Cooper's fault, though."

My eyes find the only person at the table I can always count on for an

unfiltered reaction: Nate. He looks from my tense face to the salt still scattered across our table and shakes his head like he knows the superstitious bet I made with myself. I can read the gesture as plainly as if he spoke: *It doesn't mean anything, Maeve. It's just a game.* I'm sure he's right. But still. I really wish Cooper had won.

CHAPTER TWO

Phoebe

Tuesday, February 18

The logical part of my brain knows my mother isn't playing with dolls. But it's early, I'm tired, and I'm not wearing my contacts yet. So instead of squinting harder, I lean against the kitchen counter and ask, "What's with the dolls?"

"They're wedding cake toppers," Mom says, yanking one away from my twelve-year-old brother, Owen, and handing it to me. I look down to see a white-clad bride with her legs wrapped around the groom's waist. Some underappreciated artist has managed to pack a lot of lust into their tiny plastic faces.

"Classy," I say. I should have guessed it was wedding-related. Last week the kitchen table was covered with stationery samples, and before that it was do-it-yourself floral centerpieces.

“That’s the only one like that,” she says with a hint of defensiveness. “I suppose you have to account for all kinds of tastes. Could you put it in the box?” She juts her chin toward a cardboard box half-full of foam peanuts on the counter.

I drop the happy couple inside and pull a glass from the cabinet next to our sink, filling it from the tap and finishing the whole thing in two long, greedy gulps. “Cake toppers, huh?” I ask. “Do people still use those?”

“They’re just samples from Golden Rings,” Mom says. Ever since she joined the local wedding planners’ organization, boxes full of stuff like this show up at our apartment every couple of weeks. Mom takes pictures, makes notes of what she likes, and then packs it back up to send along to the next wedding planner in the group. “Some of them are cute, though.” She holds up one of a bride and groom waltzing in silhouette. “What do you think?”

There’s an open box of Eggo waffles on the counter. I pull out the last two and pop them into the toaster. “I think plastic people on top of a cake isn’t really Ashton and Eli’s style. Aren’t they trying to keep things simple?”

“Sometimes you don’t know what you want until you see it,” Mom says brightly. “Part of my job is opening their eyes to what’s out there.”

Poor Ashton. Addy's older sister has been a dream neighbor ever since we moved into the apartment across from them last summer—giving takeout recommendations, showing us which washing machines never eat your quarters, and sharing concert tickets from her job as a graphic designer with the California Center for the Arts. She had no idea what she was getting into when she agreed to help Mom launch a side business in wedding planning by coordinating “a few details” of her upcoming wedding to Eli Kleinfelter.

Mom's gone a little overboard. She wants to make a good impression, especially since Eli is something of a local celebrity. He's the lawyer who defended Nate Macauley when Nate was framed for killing Simon Kelleher, and now he's always being interviewed about some big case or another. The press loves the fact that he's marrying the sister of one of the Bayview Four, so they reference his upcoming wedding a lot. That means free publicity for Mom, including a mention in the *San Diego Tribune* and an in-depth profile last December in the *Bayview Blade*. Which has turned into a total gossip rag since covering the Simon story, so of course they took the most dramatic angle possible: “After Heartbreaking Loss, Area Widow Launches a Business Based on Joy.”

We all could've done without *that* reminder.

Still, Mom has put more energy into this wedding than just about anything else over the past few years, so I should be grateful for Ashton and Eli's endless patience.

"Your waffles are burning," Owen says placidly, stuffing a forkful of syrup-soaked squares into his mouth.

"Shit!" I yank my Eggos out with a whimper of pain as my fingers graze hot metal. "Mom, can we please buy a new toaster? This one has gotten completely useless. It goes from zero to scalding in thirty seconds." Mom's eyebrows come together with the worried look she always gets when any of us talks about spending money. "I noticed that. But we should probably try cleaning it before we replace it. There must be ten years' worth of bread crumbs built up in there."

"I'll do it," Owen volunteers, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "And if that doesn't work, I'll take it apart. I bet I can fix it."

I smile absently at him. "No doubt, brainiac. I should've thought of that first."

"I don't want you playing around with anything electrical, Owen," Mom objects.

He looks affronted. "It wouldn't be *playing*. "

A door clicks as my older sister, Emma, leaves our bedroom and heads

for the kitchen. That's something I'll never get used to about apartment living—how being on a single floor makes you acutely aware of where everyone is, all the time. There's nowhere to hide. Nothing like our old house, where not only did we all have our own bedrooms, but we had a family room, an office that eventually turned into a game room for Owen, and Dad's basement workroom.

Plus, we had Dad.

My throat tightens as Emma runs her eyes over the piles of formally clad plastic people on our kitchen table. "Do people still use cake toppers?" "Your sister asked the exact same thing," Mom says. She's always doing that—pointing out threads of similarity between Emma and me, as though acknowledging them will somehow knit us back into the tight sisterly unit we were as kids.

Emma makes a *hmm* noise, and I stay focused on my waffle as she steps closer. "Could you move?" she asks politely. "I need the blender." I shift to one side as Owen picks up a cake topper featuring a bride with dark red hair. "This one looks like you, Emma," he says.

All of us Lawton kids are some version of redhead—Emma's hair is a deep auburn, mine is a coppery bronze, and Owen's strawberry blond—but it was our father who really stood out in a crowd, with hair so orange that

his high school nickname was Cheeto. One time when we were at the Bayview Mall food court, Dad went to the bathroom and came back to see an older couple surreptitiously checking out my dark-haired, olive-skinned mother and her three pale, redheaded kids. Dad plopped down next to Mom and put an arm around her shoulders, flashing a grin at the couple. “See, *now* we make sense,” he said.

And now, three years after he died? We don’t.

—

If I had to pinpoint Emma’s least favorite part of the day...I’d be hard-pressed, because there doesn’t seem to be a lot that Emma enjoys lately. But having to pick my friend Jules up on the way to school easily ranks in the top three.

“Oh my God,” Jules says breathlessly when she climbs into the backseat of our ten-year-old Corolla, shoving her backpack ahead of her. I turn in my seat, and she whips off her sunglasses to fasten me with a death stare. “Phoebe. I cannot *stand* you.”

“What? Why?” I ask, confused. I shift in my seat, smoothing my skirt when it rides up on my thighs. After years of trial and error I’ve finally found the wardrobe that works best for my body type: a short, flouncy skirt, preferably in a bold pattern; a brightly colored V-neck or scoop-neck top;

and some kind of stack-heeled bootie.

“Seat belt, please,” Emma says.

Jules clips her belt, still glaring at me. “You know why.”

“I seriously do not,” I protest. Emma pulls away from the curb in front of Jules’s modest split-level house, which is just one street away from where we used to live. Our old neighborhood isn’t Bayview’s wealthiest by a long shot, but the young couple Mom sold our house to was still thrilled to get a starter home here.

Jules’s green eyes, striking against her brown skin and dark hair, pop for dramatic effect. “Nate Macauley was at Café Contigo last night and you didn’t text me!”

“Oh well...” I turn up the radio so my mumbled response will get lost in Taylor Swift’s latest. Jules has always had a thing for Nate—she’s a total sucker for the dark, handsome bad-boy type—but she never considered him boyfriend material until Bronwyn Rojas did. Now she circles like a vulture every time they break up. Which has caused divided loyalties since I started working at Café Contigo and became friendly with Addy, who, obviously, is firmly on Team Bronwyn.

“And he *never* goes out,” Jules moans. “That was such a missed opportunity. Major friend failure, Phoebe Jeebies. Not cool.” She pulls out a

tube of wine-colored lip gloss and leans forward so she can see herself in the rearview mirror as she applies a fresh coat. “How did he seem? Do you think he’s over Bronwyn?”

“I mean. It’s hard to tell,” I say. “He didn’t really talk to anyone except Maeve and Addy. Mostly Addy.”

Jules smacks her lips together, an expression of mild panic crossing her face. “Oh my God. Do you think *they’re* together now?”

“No. Definitely not. They’re friends. Not everyone finds him irresistible, Jules.”

Jules drops the lip gloss back into her bag and leans her head against the window with a sigh. “Says you. He’s so hot, I could die.”

Emma pauses at a red light and rubs her eyes, then reaches for the volume button on the radio. “I need to turn this down,” she says. “My head is pounding.”

“Are you getting sick?” I ask.

“Just tired. My tutoring session with Sean Murdock went too long last night.”

“No surprise there,” I mutter. If you’re searching for signs of intelligent life in the Bayview High junior class, Sean Murdock isn’t where you’ll find it. But his parents have money, and they’ll happily throw it at

Emma for the chance that either her work ethic or her grades might rub off on Sean.

“I should hire you, Emma,” Jules says. “Chemistry is going to be a nightmare this semester unless I get some help. Or pull a Bronwyn Rojas and steal the tests.”

“Bronwyn made up that class,” I remind her, and Jules kicks my seat.

“Don’t defend her,” she says sulkily. “She’s ruining my love life.”

“If you’re serious about tutoring, I have a slot free this weekend,” Emma says.

“Chemistry on the *weekend*?” Jules sounds scandalized. “No thank you.”

“Okay, then.” My sister exhales a light sigh, like she shouldn’t have expected anything different. “Not serious.”

Emma’s only a year older than Jules and me, but most of the time she seems more Ashton Prentiss’s age than ours. Emma doesn’t act seventeen; she acts like she’s in her midtwenties and stressing her way through graduate school instead of senior AP classes. Even now, when her college applications are all in and she’s just waiting to hear back, she can’t relax. We drive the rest of the way in silence, until my phone chimes when Emma pulls into the parking lot. I look down to a text. *Bleachers?*

I shouldn't. But even as my brain reminds me that I've already gotten two late warnings this month, my fingers type *OK*. I put my phone in my pocket and have the passenger door halfway open before Emma's even shifted into Park. She raises her eyebrows as I climb out.

"I have to go to the football field real quick," I say, hiking my backpack over my shoulder and resting my hand on the car door.

"What for? You don't want to be late again," Emma says, narrowing her light brown eyes at me. They're exactly like Dad's, and—along with the reddish hair—the only trait she and I share. Emma is tall and thin, I'm short and curvy. Her hair is stick-straight and doesn't quite reach her shoulders, mine is long and curly. She freckles in the sun, and I tan. We're both February-pale now, though, and I can feel my cheeks redden as I look down at the ground.

"It's, um, for homework," I mumble.

Jules grins as she climbs out of the car. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

I turn on my heel and beat a hasty retreat, but I can still feel the weight of Emma's disapproval settling over my shoulders like a cloak. Emma has always been the serious one, but when we were younger it didn't matter. We were so close that we used to have entire conversations without talking.

Mom would joke that we must be telepaths, but it wasn't that. We just knew one another so well that we could read every expression as clearly as a word.

We were close with Owen too, despite the age difference. Dad used to call us the Three Amigos, and every childhood photo shows us posed exactly the same way: Emma and me on either side of Owen, our arms around one another, grinning widely. We look inseparable, and I thought we were. It never occurred to me that Dad was the glue keeping us together. The pulling apart was so subtle that I didn't notice it right away. Emma withdrew first, burying herself in schoolwork. "It's her way of grieving," Mom said, so I let her be, even though *my* way of grieving would have been to do it together. I compensated by throwing myself into every social activity I could find—especially once boys started getting interested in me—while Owen retreated into the comforting fantasy world of video games. Before I'd realized it, those had become our lanes, and we stayed in them. Our card last Christmas featured the three of us standing beside the tree, arranged by height, hands clasped in front of us with stiff smiles. Dad would've been so disappointed by that picture.

And by me shortly after we took it, for what happened at Jules's Christmas party. It's one thing to treat your older sister like a polite stranger,

and quite another thing to...do what I did. I used to feel a wistful kind of loneliness when I thought about Emma, but now I just feel guilt. And relief that she can't read my feelings on my face anymore.

"Hey!" I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I would've walked right into a pole under the bleachers if a hand hadn't reached out and stopped me. Then it pulls me forward so quickly that my phone slides out of my pocket and makes a faint bouncing noise on the grass.

"Shit," I say, but Brandon Weber's lips are pressed against mine before I can get anything else out. I shimmy my shoulders until my backpack joins my phone on the ground. Brandon tugs at the hem of my shirt, and since this is one hundred percent what I came for, I help him along by untucking it.

Brandon's hands move up and across my bare skin, pushing aside the lace of my bra, and he groans against my mouth. "God, you're so sexy."

He is, too. Brandon quarterbackes the football team, and the *Bayview Blade* likes to call him "the next Cooper Clay" because he's good enough that colleges are already starting to scout him. I don't think that's an accurate comparison, though. For one thing, Cooper has next-level talent, and for another, he's a sweetheart. Brandon, on the other hand, is basically an asshole.

The boy can kiss, though. All the tension flows out of me as he pushes me against the pole behind us, replaced with a heady spark of anticipation. I wrap one arm around his neck, trying to pull him down to my height, while my other hand teases at the waistband of his jeans. Then my foot sends something skidding across the ground, and the sound of my text tone distracts me.

“My phone,” I say, pulling away. “We’re going to smash it if I don’t pick it up.”

“I’ll buy you a new one,” Brandon says, his tongue in my ear. Which I don’t like— *why* do guys think that’s hot?—so I shove at him until he lets go. His front pocket dings loudly, and I smirk at the bulge there as I retrieve my phone.

“Is that a text, or are you just happy to see me?” I say, brushing off my screen. Then I glance down and catch my breath. “Ugh, are you kidding me? This again?”

“What?” Brandon asks, pulling out his own phone.

“Unknown number, and guess what it says?” I put on an affected voice.

“Still missing About That? I know I am. Let’s play a new game.” I can’t believe somebody would pull this crap after Principal Gupta’s warning.”

Brandon’s eyes flick over his screen. “I got the same thing. You see the

link?”

“Yeah. Don’t click it! It’s probably a virus or—”

“Too late,” Brandon laughs. He squints at his phone while I take him in: over six feet tall with dirty-blond hair, blue-green eyes, and the kind of full lips a girl would kill for. He’s so pretty, he looks like he could fly off with a harp any second. And nobody knows it more than he does. “Jesus, this is a freaking book,” he complains.

“Let me see.” I grab his phone, because no way am I following that link with mine. I angle the screen away from the sun until I can see it clearly. I’m looking at a website with a bad replica of the About That logo, and a big block of text beneath it. *“Pay attention, Bayview High. I’m only going to explain the rules once,”* I read. *“Here’s how we play Truth or Dare. I’ll send a prompt to one person only—and you can’t tell ANYONE if it’s you. Don’t spoil the element of surprise. It makes me cranky, and I’m not nearly as nice when I’m cranky. You get 24 hours to text your choice back. Pick Truth, and I’ll reveal one of your secrets. Pick Dare, and I’ll give you a challenge. Either way, we’ll have a little fun and relieve the monotony of our tedious existence.”*

Brandon runs a hand through his thick, tawny hair. “Speak for yourself, loser.”

“Come on, Bayview, you know you’ve missed this.” I scowl when I finish. “Do you think this went to everyone at school? People better not say anything if they want to keep their phones.” Last fall, after Principal Gupta shut down the latest Simon copycat, she told us she was instituting a zero-tolerance policy: if she saw even a hint of another About That, she’d ban phones at school permanently. And expel anyone caught trying to bring one in.

We’ve all been model citizens since then, at least when it comes to online gossip. Nobody can imagine getting through a school day—never mind *years*—without their phones.

“No one cares. It’s old news,” Brandon says dismissively. He pockets his phone and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me close. “So where were we?”

I’m still holding my own phone, pressed against his chest now, and it chimes in my hand before I can answer. When I pull my head back to look at the screen, there’s another message from an unknown contact. But this time, there’s no simultaneous text tone from Brandon’s pocket.

Phoebe Lawton, you’re up first! Text back your choice: Should I reveal a Truth, or will you take a Dare?

CHAPTER THREE

Knox

Wednesday, February 19

I scan the half-off clothing rack next to me with a feeling of existential dread. I hate department stores. They're too bright, too loud, and too crammed full of junk that nobody needs. Whenever I'm forced to spend time in one I start thinking about how consumer culture is just one long, expensive, planet-killing distraction from the fact that we're all going to die eventually.

Then I suck down the last of my six-dollar iced coffee, because I'm nothing if not a willing participant in the charade.

"That'll be forty-two sixty, hon," the woman behind the counter says when it's my turn. I'm picking up a new wallet for my mother, and I hope I got it right. Even with her detailed written instructions, it still looks like twelve other black wallets. I spent too long debating between them, and now I'm running late for work.

It probably doesn't matter, since Eli Kleinfelter doesn't pay me or, most days, even notice I'm there. Still, I pick up my pace after leaving the Bayview Mall, following a sidewalk behind the building until it narrows to nothing but asphalt. Then, after a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure no one's watching, I approach the flimsy chain-link fence surrounding