

ONE OF US IS NEXT

By Karen M. McManus

93,000 words

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 last night. 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 Kelleher, 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 Kelleher 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 username? – Darkestmind

Everyone knows Simon. Well. 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

Bullshit. 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 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 brows 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 Argentinian 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 salt shaker 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 U.S. 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 tries 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 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 Argentinian 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 rest room,” 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-ever 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 3,000-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 was on ESPN so I could watch!!! Pacific Coast Sports Network does not, sadly, air in New Haven, Connecticut. Or anyplace 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 might 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 have 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."

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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 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 of 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 for trapping everyone in detention together to the secrets he leaked 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 *Simon Says* site 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 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.