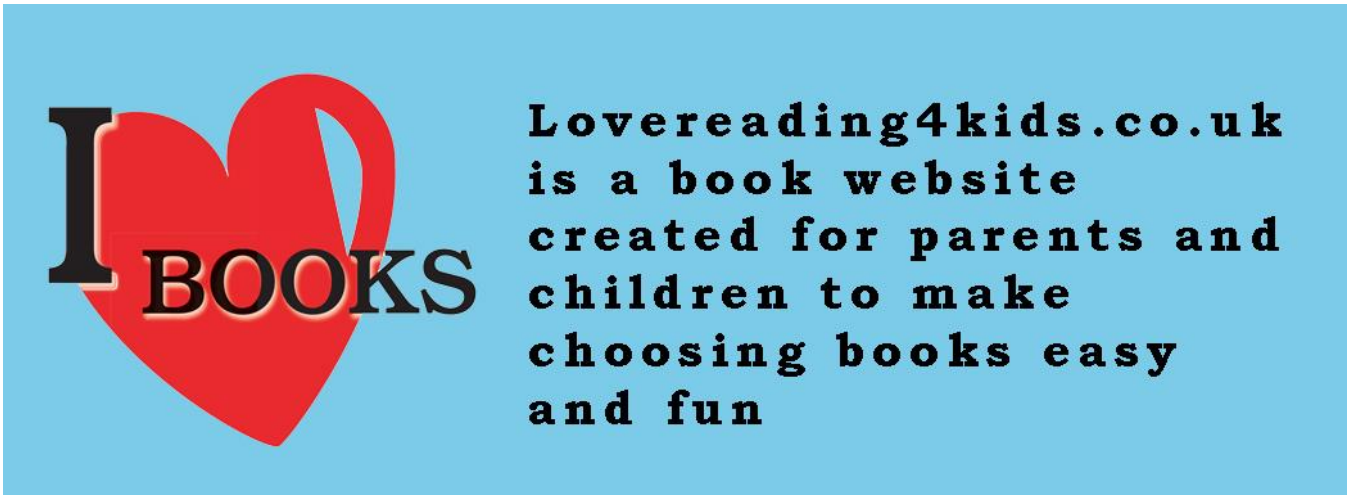


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PART ONE

SIMON SAYS

CHAPTER ONE

Bronwyn

Monday, September 24, 2:55 p.m.

A sex tape. A pregnancy scare. Two cheating scandals. And that's just this week's update. If all you knew of Bayview High was Simon Kelleher's gossip app, you'd wonder how anyone found time to go to class.

"Old news, Bronwyn," says a voice over my shoulder. "Wait till you see tomorrow's post."

Damn. I hate getting caught reading About That, especially by its creator. I lower my phone and slam my locker shut. "Whose lives are you ruining next, Simon?"

Simon falls into step beside me as I move against the flow of students heading for the exit. "It's a public service," he says with a dismissive wave. "You tutor Reggie Crawley, don't you? Wouldn't you rather know he has a camera in his bedroom?"

I don't bother answering. Me getting anywhere near the

bedroom of perpetual stoner Reggie Crawley is about as likely as Simon growing a conscience.

"Anyway, they bring it on themselves. If people didn't lie and cheat, I'd be out of business." Simon's cold blue eyes take in my lengthening strides. "Where are you rushing off to? Covering yourself in extracurricular glory?"

I wish. As if to taunt me, an alert crosses my phone: *Mathlete practice, 3 p.m., Epoch Coffee.* Followed by a text from one of my teammates: *Evan's here.*

Of course he is. The cute Mathlete—less of an oxymoron than you might think—seems to only ever show up when I can't.

"Not exactly," I say. As a general rule, and especially lately, I try to give Simon as little information as possible. We push through green metal doors to the back stairwell, a dividing line between the dinginess of the original Bayview High and its bright, airy new wing. Every year more wealthy families get priced out of San Diego and come fifteen miles east to Bayview, expecting that their tax dollars will buy them a nicer school experience than popcorn ceilings and scarred linoleum.

Simon's still on my heels when I reach Mr. Avery's lab on the third floor, and I half turn with my arms crossed. "Don't you have someplace to be?"

"Yeah. Detention," Simon says, and waits for me to keep walking. When I grasp the knob instead, he bursts out laughing. "You're kidding me. You too? What's your crime?"

"I'm wrongfully accused," I mutter, and yank the door open. Three other students are already seated, and I pause to take them in. Not the group I would have predicted. Except one.

Nate Macauley tips his chair back and smirks at me. "You make a wrong turn? This is detention, not student council."

He should know. Nate's been in trouble since fifth grade, which is right around the time we last spoke. The gossip mill tells me he's on probation with Bayview's finest for . . . something. It might be a DUI; it might be drug dealing. He's a notorious supplier, but my knowledge is purely theoretical.

"Save the commentary." Mr. Avery checks something off on a clipboard and closes the door behind Simon. High arched windows lining the back wall send triangles of afternoon sun splashing across the floor, and faint sounds of football practice float from the field behind the parking lot below.

I take a seat as Cooper Clay, who's palming a crumpled piece of paper like a baseball, whispers "Heads up, Addy" and tosses it toward the girl across from him. Addy Prentiss blinks, smiles uncertainly, and lets the ball drop to the floor.

The classroom clock inches toward three, and I follow its progress with a helpless feeling of injustice. I shouldn't even *be* here. I should be at Epoch Coffee, flirting awkwardly with Evan Neiman over differential equations.

Mr. Avery is a give-detention-first, ask-questions-never kind of guy, but maybe there's still time to change his mind. I clear my throat and start to raise my hand until I notice Nate's smirk broadening. "Mr. Avery, that wasn't my phone you found. I don't know how it got into my bag. *This* is mine," I say, brandishing my iPhone in its melon-striped case.

Honestly, you'd have to be clueless to bring a phone to Mr. Avery's lab. He has a strict no-phone policy and spends the first ten minutes of every class rooting through backpacks like

he's head of airline security and we're all on the watch list. My phone was in my locker, like always.

"You too?" Addy turns to me so quickly, her blond shampoo-ad hair swirls around her shoulders. She must have been surgically removed from her boyfriend in order to show up alone. "That wasn't my phone either."

"Me three," Cooper chimes in. His Southern accent makes it sound like *thray.* He and Addy exchange surprised looks, and I wonder how this is news to them when they're part of the same clique. Maybe überpopular people have better things to talk about than unfair detentions.

"Somebody punked us!" Simon leans forward with his elbows on the desk, looking spring-loaded and ready to pounce on fresh gossip. His gaze darts over all four of us, clustered in the middle of the otherwise empty classroom, before settling on Nate. "Why would anybody want to trap a bunch of students with mostly spotless records in detention? Seems like the sort of thing that, oh, I don't know, a guy who's here all the time might do for fun."

I look at Nate, but can't picture it. Rigging detention sounds like work, and everything about Nate—from his messy dark hair to his ratty leather jacket—screams *Can't be bothered.* Or yawns it, maybe. He meets my eyes but doesn't say a word, just tips his chair back even farther. Another millimeter and he'll fall right over.

Cooper sits up straighter, a frown crossing his Captain America face. "Hang on. I thought this was just a mix-up, but if the same thing happened to all of us, it's somebody's stupid idea of a prank. And I'm missing *baseball practice* because of it." He

says it like he's a heart surgeon being detained from a lifesaving operation.

Mr. Avery rolls his eyes. "Save the conspiracy theories for another teacher. I'm not buying it. You all know the rules against bringing phones to class, and you broke them." He gives Simon an especially sour glance. Teachers know About That exists, but there's not much they can do to stop it. Simon only uses initials to identify people and never talks openly about school. "Now listen up. You're here until four. I want each of you to write a five-hundred-word essay on how technology is ruining American high schools. Anyone who can't follow the rules gets another detention tomorrow."

"What do we write with?" Addy asks. "There aren't any computers here." Most classrooms have Chromebooks, but Mr. Avery, who looks like he should have retired a decade ago, is a holdout.

Mr. Avery crosses to Addy's desk and taps the corner of a lined yellow notepad. We all have one. "Explore the magic of longhand writing. It's a lost art."

Addy's pretty, heart-shaped face is a mask of confusion. "But how do we know when we've reached five hundred words?"

"Count," Mr. Avery replies. His eyes drop to the phone I'm still holding. "And hand that over, Miss Rojas."

"Doesn't the fact that you're confiscating my phone *twice* give you pause? Who has two phones?" I ask. Nate grins, so quick I almost miss it. "Seriously, Mr. Avery, somebody was playing a joke on us."

Mr. Avery's snowy mustache twitches in annoyance, and he extends his hand with a beckoning motion. "*Phone,* Miss Rojas.

Unless you want a return visit." I give it over with a sigh as he looks disapprovingly at the others. "The phones I took from the rest of you earlier are in my desk. You'll get them back after detention." Addy and Cooper exchange amused glances, probably because their actual phones are safe in their backpacks.

Mr. Avery tosses my phone into a drawer and sits behind the teacher's desk, opening a book as he prepares to ignore us for the next hour. I pull out a pen, tap it against my yellow notepad, and contemplate the assignment. Does Mr. Avery really believe technology is ruining schools? That's a pretty sweeping statement to make over a few contraband phones. Maybe it's a trap and he's looking for us to contradict him instead of agree.

I glance at Nate, who's bent over his notepad writing *computers suck* over and over in block letters.

It's possible I'm overthinking this.

Cooper

Monday, September 24, 3:05 p.m.

My hand hurts within minutes. It's pathetic, I guess, but I can't remember the last time I wrote anything longhand. Plus I'm using my right hand, which never feels natural no matter how many years I've done it. My father insisted I learn to write right-handed in second grade after he first saw me pitch. *Your left arm's gold,* he told me. *Don't waste it on crap that don't matter.* Which is anything but pitching as far as he's concerned.

That was when he started calling me Cooperstown, like the

baseball hall of fame. Nothing like putting a little pressure on an eight-year-old.

Simon reaches for his backpack and roots around, unzipping every section. He hoists it onto his lap and peers inside. "Where the hell's my water bottle?"

"No talking, Mr. Kelleher," Mr. Avery says without looking up.

"I know, but—my water bottle's missing. And I'm thirsty."

Mr. Avery points toward the sink at the back of the room, its counter crowded with beakers and petri dishes. "Get yourself a drink. *Quietly.*"

Simon gets up and grabs a cup from a stack on the counter, filling it with water from the tap. He heads back to his seat and puts the cup on his desk, but seems distracted by Nate's methodical writing. "Dude," he says, kicking his sneaker against the leg of Nate's desk. "Seriously. Did you put those phones in our backpacks to mess with us?"

Now Mr. Avery looks up, frowning. "I said *quietly,* Mr. Kelleher."

Nate leans back and crosses his arms. "Why would I do that?"

Simon shrugs. "Why do you do anything? So you'll have company for whatever your screw-up of the day was?"

"One more word out of either of you and it's detention tomorrow," Mr. Avery warns.

Simon opens his mouth anyway, but before he can speak there's the sound of tires squealing and then the crash of two cars hitting each other. Addy gasps and I brace myself against my desk like somebody just rear-ended me. Nate, who looks glad for the interruption, is the first on his feet toward the

window. "Who gets into a fender bender in the school parking lot?" he asks.

Bronwyn looks at Mr. Avery like she's asking for permission, and when he gets up from his desk she heads for the window as well. Addy follows her, and I finally unfold myself from my seat. Might as well see what's going on. I lean against the ledge to look outside, and Simon comes up beside me with a disparaging laugh as he surveys the scene below.

Two cars, an old red one and a nondescript gray one, are smashed into each other at a right angle. We all stare at them in silence until Mr. Avery lets out an exasperated sigh. "I'd better make sure no one was hurt." He runs his eyes over all of us and zeroes in on Bronwyn as the most responsible of the bunch. "Miss Rojas, keep this room contained until I get back."

"Okay," Bronwyn says, casting a nervous glance toward Nate. We stay at the window, watching the scene below, but before Mr. Avery or another teacher appears outside, both cars start their engines and drive out of the parking lot.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Simon says. He heads back to his desk and picks up his cup, but instead of sitting he wanders to the front of the room and scans the periodic table of elements poster. He leans out into the hallway like he's about to leave, but then he turns and raises his cup like he's toasting us. "Anyone else want some water?"

"I do," Addy says, slipping into her chair.

"Get it yourself, princess." Simon smirks. Addy rolls her eyes and stays put while Simon leans against Mr. Avery's desk. "Literally, huh? What'll you do with yourself now that homecoming's over? Big gap between now and senior prom."

Addy looks at me without answering. I don't blame her. Simon's train of thought almost never goes anywhere good when it comes to our friends. He acts like he's above caring whether he's popular, but he was pretty smug when he wound up on the junior prom court last spring. I'm still not sure how he pulled that off, unless he traded keeping secrets for votes.

Simon was nowhere to be found on homecoming court last week, though. I was voted king, so maybe I'm next on his list to harass, or whatever the hell he's doing.

"What's your point, Simon?" I ask, taking a seat next to Addy. Addy and I aren't close, exactly, but I kind of feel protective of her. She's been dating my best friend since freshman year, and she's a sweet girl. Also not the kind of person who knows how to stand up to a guy like Simon who just won't quit.

"She's a princess and you're a jock," he says. He thrusts his chin toward Bronwyn, then at Nate. "And you're a brain. And you're a criminal. You're all walking teen-movie stereotypes."

"What about you?" Bronwyn asks. She's been hovering near the window, but now goes to her desk and perches on top of it. She crosses her legs and pulls her dark ponytail over one shoulder. Something about her is cuter this year. New glasses, maybe? Longer hair? All of a sudden, she's kind of working this sexy-nerd thing.

"I'm the omniscient narrator," Simon says.

Bronwyn's brows rise above her black frames. "There's no such thing in teen movies."

"Ah, but Bronwyn." Simon winks and chugs his water in one long gulp. "There *is* such a thing in life."

He says it like a threat, and I wonder if he's got something

on Bronwyn for that stupid app of his. I hate that thing. Almost all my friends have been on it at one point or another, and sometimes it causes real problems. My buddy Luis and his girlfriend broke up because of something Simon wrote. Though it *was* a true story about Luis hooking up with his girlfriend's cousin. But still. That stuff doesn't have to be published. Hallway gossip is bad enough.

And if I'm being honest, I'm pretty freaked at what Simon could write about me if he put his mind to it.

Simon holds his cup up, grimacing. "This tastes like crap." He drops the cup, and I roll my eyes at his attempt at drama. Even when he falls to the floor, I still think he's messing around. But then the wheezing starts.

Bronwyn's on her feet first, then kneeling beside him. "Simon," she says, shaking his shoulder. "Are you okay? What happened? Can you talk?" Her voice goes from concerned to panicky, and that's enough to get me moving. But Nate's faster, shoving past me and crouching next to Bronwyn.

"A pen," he says, his eyes scanning Simon's brick-red face. "You have a pen?" Simon nods wildly, his hand clawing at his throat. I grab the pen off my desk and try to hand it to Nate, thinking he's about to do an emergency tracheotomy or something. Nate just stares at me like I have two heads. "An *epinephrine* pen," he says, searching for Simon's backpack. "He's having an allergic reaction."

Addy stands and wraps her arms around her body, not saying a word. Bronwyn turns to me, face flushed. "I'm going to find a teacher and call nine-one-one. Stay with him, okay?" She

grabs her phone out of Mr. Avery's drawer and runs into the hallway.

I kneel next to Simon. His eyes are bugging out of his head, his lips are blue, and he's making horrible choking noises. Nate dumps the entire contents of Simon's backpack on the floor and scrabbles through the mess of books, papers, and clothes. "Simon, where do you keep it?" he asks, tearing open the small front compartment and yanking out two regular pens and a set of keys.

Simon's way past talking, though. I put one sweaty palm on his shoulder, like that'll do any good. "You're okay, you're gonna be okay. We're gettin' help." I can hear my voice slowing, thickening like molasses. My accent always comes out hard when I'm stressed. I turn to Nate and ask, "You sure he's not chokin' on somethin'?" Maybe he needs the Heimlich maneuver, not a freaking medical pen.

Nate ignores me, tossing Simon's empty backpack aside. "Fuck!" he yells, slamming a fist on the floor. "Do you keep it on you, Simon? Simon!" Simon's eyes roll back in his head as Nate digs around in Simon's pockets. But he doesn't find anything except a wrinkled Kleenex.

Sirens blare in the distance as Mr. Avery and two other teachers race in with Bronwyn trailing behind them on her phone. "We can't find his EpiPen," Nate says tersely, gesturing to the pile of Simon's things.

Mr. Avery stares at Simon in slack-jawed horror for a second, then turns to me. "Cooper, the nurse's office has EpiPens. They should be labeled in plain sight. *Hurry!*"

I run into the hallway, hearing footsteps behind me that fade as I quickly reach the back stairwell and yank the door open. I take the stairs three at a time until I'm on the first floor, and weave through a few straggling students until I get to the nurse's office. The door's ajar, but nobody's there.

It's a cramped little space with the exam table up against the windows and a big gray storage cabinet looming to my left. I scan the room, my eyes landing on two wall-mounted white boxes with red block lettering. One reads EMERGENCY DEFIBRILLATOR, the other EMERGENCY EPINEPHRINE. I fumble at the latch on the second one and pull it open.

There's nothing inside.

I open the other box, which has a plastic device with a picture of a heart. I'm pretty sure that's not it, so I start rummaging through the gray storage cabinet, pulling out boxes of bandages and aspirin. I don't see anything that looks like a pen.

"Cooper, did you find them?" Ms. Grayson, one of the teachers who'd entered the lab with Mr. Avery and Bronwyn, barrels into the room. She's panting hard and clutching her side.

I gesture toward the empty wall-mounted box. "They should be there, right? But they're not."

"Check the supply cabinet," Ms. Grayson says, ignoring the Band-Aid boxes scattered across the floor that prove I've already tried. Another teacher joins us, and we tear the office apart as the sound of sirens gets closer. When we've opened the last cabinet, Ms. Grayson wipes a trickle of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "Cooper, let Mr. Avery know we haven't found anything yet. Mr. Contos and I will keep looking."

I get to Mr. Avery's lab the same time the paramedics do.

There are three of them in navy uniforms, two pushing a long white stretcher, one racing ahead to clear the small crowd that's gathered around the door. I wait until they're all inside and slip in behind them. Mr. Avery's slumped next to the chalkboard, his yellow dress shirt untucked. "We couldn't find the pens," I tell him.

He runs a shaking hand through his thin white hair as one of the paramedics stabs Simon with a syringe and the other two lift him onto the stretcher. "God help that boy," he whispers. More to himself than to me, I think.

Addy's standing off to the side by herself, tears rolling down her cheeks. I cross over to her and put an arm around her shoulders as the paramedics maneuver Simon's stretcher into the hallway. "Can you come along?" one asks Mr. Avery. He nods and follows, leaving the room empty except for a few shell-shocked teachers and the four of us who started detention with Simon.

Barely fifteen minutes ago, by my guess, but it feels like hours.

"Is he okay now?" Addy asks in a strangled voice. Bronwyn clasps her phone between her palms like she's using it to pray. Nate stands with his hands on his hips, staring at the door as more teachers and students start trickling inside.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and say no," he says.