

CHAPTER 1

NO WAY THIS TEXT IS FOR REAL



I never should've stayed in Crabtree, Michigan. I'd been given the chance to leave in the fall, which would've meant going home to LA. Back to friends, my old school, my own bed, my favorite tacos, even learning to surf on the weekends.

That would've been pretty good.

But I'd solved the crime of the decade—maybe the century—in western Michigan, and I'd gotten my falsely accused grandpa out of jail. I thought I could make a difference in Crabtree. Defeat bad guys! Be a hero for the little guy!

I blew it.

One of the worst bad guys owned the biggest bank in Crabtree. He was still going. Still foreclosing on small businesses. More kids in my school moved away. Even some teachers.

And I still didn't have many friends. People blamed me for kids moving away. Tommy, the boy I thought I'd liked in the fall, was a mess. He'd moved to a new house while his dad awaited trial for a million counts of robbery and a couple counts of murder.

At least Tommy still wanted to hang out sometimes.

Mostly, though, I spent time with my little brother. Embarrassing.

I'd thought there'd be another mystery for us to solve. A chance to put my detective skills to work. I figured I could deal with the other garbage—middle school, no friends, really bad guys

winning—if I could at least work a case. But there wasn't one. Not even a whiff.

Now it was January, which meant winter. Freezing, snowy, wet, uncomfortable winter.

During study hall I sat alone at a table for four in the middle school library. My phone, facedown, buzzed with a text. Who it was wasn't a mystery, either.

When I'd moved here, my parents gave me the crappiest old iPhone, and they'd rigged it so I could only text a few people—them, my grandfather (who I lived with), and Chloe, my best friend from home. My other friends in LA—and there were some—missed the cut.

My brother and I messed with the phone, and now I could text with pretty much anyone. But all that meant was I now got texts from him on the not-really-secret phone he wasn't allowed to have but still somehow did. And also from Tommy.

Nobody else wanted my number.

I turned the phone over. Chloe.

Checked the weather.

Snowing again?

Is it beautiful?

Chloe had been born and raised in LA, like me. She thought snow was white and pretty and fell on mountains against a clear, sunny, blue sky. She saw the weather for Crabtree and imagined ski lodges.

I got up from my seat and walked to one of the library's tiny windows. Outside, the sky looked like white static against dark gray. The snow on the ground had turned brown and crusty. I'd seen better-looking mud. I snapped a photo. The camera was one of my only usable apps.

I sent it to her and returned to my seat, put the phone face-down, and waited.

I heard the usual blooping sound, and before I turned it over, I guessed at her response. Maybe “Ugh! What’s that?” Or possibly “Why do you live in a postapocalyptic hellscape?”

I turned it over. It wasn’t either of those. Or Chloe. It was a number I didn’t recognize.

It’s Gabby M. Got time after school? Need to talk about something.

Gabby M? That didn’t sound right. I checked the number again. It had Crabtree’s area code, so it could be her. But the only Gabby M I knew was Gabby Martinez. She didn’t talk to me. She ran with Ava Franklin, queen bee of the snotty trolls at Crabtree Middle. Ava, Gabby, and their crew had hated me since I got here. And how’d she even get my number? I didn’t like this.

U got the right number? This is Kat D.

She came back immediately.

I know! U got time to talk? After school?

This felt like the setup in a bad movie: Gabby draws me out with a text, but it’s so Ava and her pals can pull some cruel prank. Then either:

- a. I end up in a romance with the boyfriend of one of the mean girls (which sounds horrible; I’ve seen their boyfriends); or
- b. I come back and kill them all (better, but I didn’t really feel like doing that today).

I decided to respond but blow her off. Got basketball. Done at 5.
Around then.

She came right back again.

We still have a basketball team? LOL. JK.
Thought u took ur brother to piano today.

That was weird.

How'd u know that?

Crabtree's small.

I raised an eyebrow. This felt more and more like a prank. I
texted her once more.

U wanna talk? C u outside the gym at 5.

The bell rang, ending study hall and the school day. I stuck my
phone in my jeans and put my laptop and books in my backpack.
I had to get Alec to piano, then jet back for basketball.

No time to waste. Or to think more about why Gabby Marti-
nez wanted to talk to me.

Besides, why bother? What were the chances that it was any-
thing good?