



Chapter One



“It’s over,” I moaned as I collapsed into the booth across from my best friend, Leila. Even the sugary aroma wafting from the milkshakes behind the Sip & Shake counter—one of the best scents in the entire world—couldn’t cheer me today. My spirits sank even further when I realized that Leila, her thumbs flying over her smartphone screen, hadn’t even glanced up. Not that I could blame her. If I had *my* phone with me, I’d be doing the exact same thing right now.

I was still reeling from the fact that Mom and Dad had taken away my phone privileges for the *entire* summer.

I tried again, louder this time. “I said . . . It’s. Over.”

“Huh?” Leila’s eyes flicked to my face, then back to her screen. “Oh. You mean your life?” She shrugged. “Yeah . . . it’s over for sure.”

Her nonchalant tone made my stomach clench. I wanted her to be as upset as I was. We were about to be separated for the whole summer. But she didn’t look very upset. She looked as smilingly pretty and put together as always. Her enviable golden-bronze skin—so glowing compared to my own pale complexion—shimmered with the blush her parents let her use, and her sunflower-yellow maxi dress (which I’d picked out) made her look older and more sophisticated than any other soon-to-be seventh grader I knew.

“But, hey,” she continued, “I ordered your fave, the Purple Pixie Dust. On me as a parting gift.”

The Purple Pixie wasn’t actually my favorite. All the towering milkshakes at Sip & Shake were amazing, but my favorite was the Heavenly Heath Cheesequake: a dulce de leche milkshake with bits of crumbled Heath bar and caramel cheesecake topping. I didn’t correct her, though. Nobody ever corrected Leila Flores.

“Thanks. I have to drink quickly, though. I can only stay for a little while.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. I forgot. The whole forbidden friendship thing.”

“Not forbidden.” I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “More like . . . discouraged.” My parents didn’t know I was meeting Leila here after school. They hadn’t exactly *told* me I wasn’t allowed to hang out with her. They’d said they were “worried about her influence” on me, and that I was “spending all my time with her.” Then they’d told me the summer would be a “good break” from her. Leila, though, had been completely nonplussed when I’d confessed their critique to her.

“Parents are so pedestrian,” she’d said. “They’ll forget everything by next week. Mine always do.”

I had my doubts about that. My dad is a seismologist and my mom is a professor of archaeology. Studying earthquakes and the demise of thousand-year-old civilizations seems to have fine-tuned their parental alert systems. They never forget *anything*.

“So where did you tell the ’rents you were going this afternoon?” Leila asked, her thumb swiping through her Instagram feed. I tried to see what she was “liking,” but the pics were scrolling by too fast.

“To the library to return some books.” I shrugged. “And I *am*. As soon as we’re finished with our shakes.”

She laughed. “Well, they can’t punish you more than they already have. They took away your phone and they’ve exiled you for the whole summer. I mean, it’s not like you cracked your screen on purpose.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I set it down on the locker room floor for two seconds and . . .” I cringed, remembering the ominous *Crunch!* when Sheena Jackson had stepped backward, right onto my phone.

“And two months away from Chicago?” Leila added. “It’s like they’re stranding you on Mars.”

A car honked its horn, and I glanced out the window at the bustling street. Only a few blocks from my family’s apartment and our middle school, Sip & Shake was the perfect hangout. I didn’t just love the shakes; I loved that I could watch what felt like the entire world pass by outside the windows. Living in the main downtown

area of the city, the Loop, felt like being at the center of a glittering galaxy of skyscrapers. Everywhere, there was something to see and do: light and people and beautiful noise. And I was about to lose it all.

I dropped my head into my hands. I wasn't leaving Chicago as punishment for breaking my phone, but that hardly mattered. It felt like the worst kind of punishment all the same. "Two months on a *farm*."

Leila's nose wrinkled, as if the very word summoned the smell of cows and chickens. "I still don't understand why your parents couldn't have just taken you to California with them. I mean . . . California or Iowa?" She raised her hands palms up and moved them up and down, as if she were a scale weighing the two options. "It's a no-brainer."

"I know." I sighed. "I begged them, but they're both going to be so busy with work." Dad was doing a hands-on field study of the San Andreas Fault, and Mom had agreed to teach at a summer program at Stanford University. They'd been waiting until I was old enough to make this trip, and this year they'd decided I

was. “They thought it would be fun for me to visit the farm instead.” I couldn’t admit the real reason Mom and Dad were sending me to my aunt and uncle’s farm—especially not to Leila.

“Fun?” Leila smirked now. “Fun the way purgatory is fun.”

“What am I going to do in small-town Iowa?” I hadn’t visited my aunt, uncle, and cousins in years, but I remembered the musty smell of the farmhouse, the sour-milk scent of the creamery, and the flat fields of soybeans and corn that stretched for miles. The nearest town was at least a twenty-minute drive away.

“I don’t know,” Leila said. “My parents told me we might be passing through Omaha on a family road trip to Colorado this summer, and that was cringe-worthy enough. Iowa’s way worse. At least your cousins are out there. What do they do for fun?”

I shrugged. “Last time I visited, I was seven. We played together. You know, swung on the tire swing. Swam in the creek—”

“Omigod. There’s a tire swing? Is there an outdoor spigot, too, with one of those pump handles? Or better yet, an outhouse?” She giggled.