

## Chapter 1

### Welcome to Santana Junior High

Garrett Lowe steered his six-speed red Himalaya bicycle through narrow backroads. He hadn't slept at all the night before, worrying about the day ahead. Garrett's mind raced his body to school as he mechanically dodged a series of potholes in his path and skittered around loose gravel.

A heat wave had been baking Southern California for weeks. Curly blonde hair clung to his sweat-drenched forehead, pressed beneath his helmet. He reminded himself to slow down unless he wanted to start seventh grade with a reputation as the stinky kid. Carrotwood and pepper trees offered much needed shade while Garrett's thoughts cycled faster than his wheels.

Would he make any friends, or would things be like before? Who would be in his classes and what would his teachers be like? What if he got compared to his sisters? Would that be good or bad?

*HONNNNKKK!!*

A car horn blared. The noise vibrated through Garrett's body like a tuning fork. He veered off the road, losing his balance on the slick gravel.

Garrett crashed to the ground in a tangled heap of limbs and metal. A rusting pink and white van whipped past him, spewing dust in his face.

"Share the road! It's a law," Garrett yelled at the van disappearing around the bend.

Wincing, he pushed the bike aside and sat up to assess the damage. The green hoodie tied around his waist provided a soft landing for his butt during the fall. His knees weren't as lucky.

"Ugh, no!" Garrett groaned as he stretched out his legs. A dirty gash ran across his new jeans. The only brand-new pair his mom could buy, and he ruined them day one. He could

imagine the look of disappointment on her face that he couldn't manage the care and responsibility of a single piece of clothing.

At least the Himalaya was fine. It hadn't always been his. Garrett's father left it behind in the shed. Three years had passed since then, his dad clearly wasn't coming back for it. Even with the seat lowered, it was still a little big for Garrett. He remounted and kicked off with a skinned knee stinging in protest.

What were those drivers thinking? Everyone knew to drive slow on the twisty backroads. They could have killed him. He wondered which one of his three sisters would take his room if he died. And what would his tombstone say?

*Here lies Garrett Lowe. A loser and a loner.*

Speeding up on smoother roads, Garrett knew he was close. He rounded the bend, and his heart sped up as an imposing three-story brick structure came into view. A massive sign adorned with the scorpion mascot proudly declared that the building was Santana Junior High. His new school.

Buses and cars emptied-out with hundreds of kids eager to find their friends, gathering and massing into cliques, and telling fantastic summer stories.

Garrett recognized some of the faces, but he wouldn't really call any of them friends. He didn't know any of them like he knew Mike—his best and only friend. But Mike's family moved to Maine two days ago. Garrett always imagined he would be going through this with his best friend, but he was instead left to face seventh grade alone while Mike ate lobster and moose-watched or whatever it was kids did in Maine.

Garrett took his time approaching the bike rack. He wasn't ready to face the crowd or building behind him. He looped the cord around the Himalaya and secured it to the cold, steel grid of the bike rack. The lock fell from his hands with a heavy clank.

Excited students were funneled under a massive columned arch and through three sets of open double doors where the cartoon scorpion seemed to be posted at each entrance with its threatening stinger ready to strike. The mascot at his last school was Seamus, the friendly sea lion.

Swallowing hard, he took a deep breath and walked into the chaos.

Schedules had been mailed a few weeks prior. Seventh grade was a huge adjustment from sixth: Garrett was expected to navigate an entirely new building with different classrooms, teachers, and students for each subject with a rotating schedule every day. It seemed silly, who needs that many teachers, anyways?

Homeroom was a huge information dump, but Garrett was given his locker number and combination lock. He figured he should put his helmet away instead of carrying it around all day. Thankful for the next bell's ring, he took off in search of his locker. It was comforting to find it near the art corridor.

Garrett carried his sketchbook close to his chest like a shield. He had been working on a special housewarming gift to send to Mike. A drawing of the Lowe's rotund housecat, Houdini, but dressed as a Jedi with a lightsaber.

He struggled with the combo, juggling the helmet, sketchbook, and charcoal pencil in his hands. How many times do you spin to the right before stopping? Or was it to the left first? Ugh, why do they use these locks, it's the twenty-first century?!

Precious time ticked away; he was going to be late for his next class. Sweat pooled in his palms. He shoved his sketchbook in the crook of his arms, but it slipped to the floor.

“Shoot,” he muttered.

He bent down to pick it up and nearly collided with a head of springy curls. A hand with sparkling rainbow nails handed him the sketchbook. Her almond skin brushed his fingers. He hoped she didn’t feel his sweat.

“Hey, cool drawing.”

“Th-thanks.” Garrett felt heat spread from his cheeks down his chest. Despite his major crush, Garrett hadn’t spoken to Cindy Peterson more than three times since she moved to town two years ago and now she was complimenting his artwork.

She stood up with a bright smile. Garrett struggled to his feet.

“It’s Garrett, right? I think you were in my homeroom. I’m Cindy.”

She was in his homeroom. With her bubbly laugh and eyes that looked like precious gems. It was distracting – no wonder he never figured out the lock. He nodded and pushed his hair off of his forehead, blushing all over again. He couldn’t possibly look less cool.

“Do you need some help with your locker? I’m pretty good with locks.”

“Yeah, thanks. I don’t really have the hang of it yet.”

“What’s your combo?”

He looked at the numbers on his palm written in smudged, sweaty ink. She opened it in a few swift movements like she had done it a thousand times.

“Thanks, Cindy.”

“No, problem. See you around.”

As she turned, a floppy-haired grease weasel slid in beside her. Ian Jackson, bully extraordinaire and Garrett's least favorite person.

"Cindy! Need help finding your next class? I know my way around pretty well."

For some sort of disciplinary reason, Garrett thought. Summer school, maybe.

"No thanks, I'm good," Cindy said and walked off.

Ian balled his fists and stepped closer to Garrett, glaring down at him, taking advantage of his tall frame. Ian snatched Garrett's sketchbook from his hands.

"Come on, Ian!"

Ian held it out of reach. Garrett noticed his back up, Marco Moreno and Colin Murphy, standing against the opposite wall.

"Let's see it, Picasso." Ian sneered at the drawing. He could use a breath mint. "Wait, Cindy likes this!? Doesn't look so special to me. I've seen elephants at the zoo do better."

The school bell reverberated, and other stragglers raced to their classes.

"Give it back, Ian! We're late," Garrett stated the obvious.

"Give it back? Like this?" Ian looked Garrett in the eye and ripped out his latest drawing.

"Stop!"

Colin laughed. "Is he gonna cry?"

"Just leave me alone," Garrett fired back lamely, grasping for his sketchbook.

Ian dropped the sketchbook on the floor. "Better get to class," he hissed while slamming Garrett's locker shut.

The three boys walked away but stared back, chuckling as though they knew a joke that Garrett had not been let in on.

The last bell rang. Somehow, Garrett had survived his first day of middle school. Just barely. His brain buzzed. He looked forward to doing hands on experiments in Science Lab, but all of his books weighed a thousand pounds, especially his Algebra textbook.

He couldn't wait to get home. He wasted some time at his locker, but finally figured out his combo lock and left victoriously with his helmet in hand. Garrett picked up his pace to get to the bike rack outside.

Garrett instantly knew he was in trouble. Deflated bicycle tires. Both of them, completely flat. He threw his helmet down. Kicking the front tire, Garrett let out an anguished shout.

A branch cracked near the trees behind him. The wild grass on the edge of school property rustled with approaching footsteps. Garrett felt a sinking in gut as he turned. Ian, Marco, and Colin approached with wide grins.

"Seriously?" Garrett asked with as much scorn as he could muster. One day into the school year and Garrett was fed up with Ian's antics. "You could at least attempt some creativity. Step it up for middle school, you know?"

"Talking back will cost you," Ian said. Garrett had a feeling this had less to do with talking back and more to do with the attention he had received from Cindy. His own family ignored him most days, so why a girl like Cindy would have any interest in him was as much a mystery to him as it was to Ian.

The gang stalked toward Garrett. He backed away slightly with each move, edging towards the woods behind them on the other side of the street.

"Poor boy. How's he gonna get home now?" Marco taunted.

"I guess he'll have to run!" Ian lunged.

## Chapter 2

### Run

Wind whipped in Garrett's ears. Fire burned in his lungs. The gang clawed at his heels, firing off insults like arrows as Garrett raced into the woods surrounding the school.

He had no idea where he was going, but he did know that it was three against one.

He couldn't fight. But he could run.

Ian might have been a show-off with brand new Air Jordans every few months, but Garrett always beat him in the mile run in gym class wearing his beat-up, no-brand sneaks. Tearing deeper into the wilderness, chased down by the snarling beasts that are preteen boys, he concentrated on staying ahead.

The forest floor was uneven with roots, rotted logs, and scattered leaves. His eyes bounced from the ground, over his shoulder, and front again. There was no trail. All paths were long overgrown. The greens of the lush oak and sycamore flashed by and brushed his limbs. Birds trilled and burst from the trees, scattering to the sky, disturbed by the chaos.

"You can't run forever!" Colin shouted.

"How will you find your way home, Garrett?" Marco taunted.

"How do you exist without a brain, Marco?" Garret yelled, the best comeback he could think of.

Still running through the maze of the woods, Garrett risked a glance over his shoulder, his messy hair sweeping across his face. Colin, a lumbering pale giant, had already fallen behind. His freckled face reddened with sweat and rage.

Garrett was lucky he had speed on his side. He noticed his backpack was partially unzipped. He hoped nothing fell out as he wove his way through unfamiliar trees.

He pushed it out of his mind. No time to stop.

Another quick look. Marco dropped back too, wheezing against a tree. Apparently, taking Brazilian jiu-jitsu didn't make him any good at running. That just left Ian Jackson, the ringleader, with his flop of brown hair and smug face in close pursuit.

The heat was getting to Garrett. Blazing sun and no breeze. Sweat dripped down his back. He needed to rest. He dashed toward the nearest pine tree for cover. Both boys slowed to catch their breath.

Crunching leaves underfoot.

Ian stalked forward again with narrowed eyes; his head hung low. He gripped a piece of paper in his right hand, crushing it in his angry fist. It was the drawing he had ripped from Garrett's sketchbook.

The one that Cindy complimented.

"She's never going to like you," Ian sneered.

Garrett moved squarely behind the thick trunk, wondering if the harassment was worth his thirty second conversation with Cindy. They had never even had a class together, until now, apparently the only benefit of this new school. And it seemed like Garrett wasn't the only one with a crush.

"I don't recall asking for your opinion, Ian," Garrett said.

"You don't have to ask. You know I'll always tell you what a loser you are, free of charge because I know you can't afford it."

Garrett dug his nails into his palms. His cheeks burned.

"Quit hiding, scaredy cat!" Ian taunted.

"I'm not hiding." He was evading, it's different.



Ian wasn't strong enough to attack him like Colin or Marco could, but Ian's phone was a different story. Garrett and Mike had been the victims of multiple cyber bullying incidents, but according to administration it was always "impossible" to find the culprits. In fifth grade, Ian pelted him with rotten eggs and posted the video online. Some kids still call him "Garegg".

Garrett didn't want any more egg incidents. It was only the first day of school.

The tree still offered protection until Garrett had the stamina to run again.

"Have you found an interesting leaf? A squirrel? Your new best friend replacement? I bet you cried when he left. You're like the CEO of loneliness."

Garrett heard leaves crunching, Ian's voice growing louder, and long ripping sounds. A piece of his shredded Jedi cat drawing drifted to the ground near his feet.

"No one seems to stick around you for long," Ian taunted. He had a talent for making personal tragedies public embarrassments and Garrett was an easy punching bag. Garrett seethed as Ian continued, "Your best friend, your dad..."

His dad.

Garrett saw red. He couldn't take anymore. This was the same attack Ian had been making for three years, ever since his dad left. And it still hurt. Enraged, Garrett launched himself away from the tree and saw Ian just inches away holding his phone, ready to record. Garrett knocked the phone from his hand and sprinted. Ian swore.

With a head start, Garrett fought the urge to look back.

"Cindy won't stick around you either!" Ian yelled.

Garrett felt a sharp pain in his chest, but he couldn't stop yet. Ian sounded like he was about to give in. Garrett gave a final push. He pumped his arms, threw his head back, and ran

until he thought his heart might burst through his chest like that scene in *Alien*. After a few moments, he was gasping so hard he had to slow down to rest with his hands on his knees.

He looked back and realized he had escaped. Ian didn't even exist as a blurry figure in the distance.

"Aww yeah!" Garrett roared, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Take that—"

He spun around and the victorious sensation drained from his body, slowly being replaced by a growing dread. He had no clue where he was.

Garrett took a moment to study his surroundings, but every direction looked the same.

As a failed Scout who didn't last in a troop for more than a week, he didn't know what direction of the tree moss should grow, or if there were other ways to navigate the woods. With zero skills he might be stuck there until high school graduation. Trees and more trees everywhere with nothing but indistinct bird calls overhead.

His tormentors had chased him there on purpose, in any other direction there would have been witnesses. Still, Garrett couldn't help but be angry at himself for not figuring out a way to turn around and get back to the school, a road, anywhere sooner!

His dad, back when he cared, had always made him promise never to play near these woods. "Not a safe area," he would say, with a vague mention of drugs and dangerous people. David, his new stepdad and a cop, constantly making safety the priority, had echoed the sentiment.

Garrett checked his hand-me-down smartphone. Dead battery. No surprise since it was at 43% by third period. He realized how isolated he was in the middle of nowhere. Alone.

*No one seems to stick around you for long.*

Garrett fought back tears. He couldn't help but think maybe Ian was right.

He wiped the moisture from his eyes and blinked. He rubbed his eyes again, not sure about what he saw in the distance. A shape: something dense that looked like more than trees. Garrett edged closer, and with each step, the object became clearer. A tinge of panic rose in his chest as he saw an old run-down, wooden house.

His mind spiraled in every direction. It was an adventure with possible hidden treasure! Maybe it was like a TARDIS, bigger on the inside with complex machinery capable of time-travel. Or maybe this was a bad idea? The start of a slasher film—a creepy cabin in the woods. A drug den with dangerous people. Everything his dad and David warned him to stay away from.

Most likely, it was just a boring abandoned shack, and it would be completely empty, a total letdown.

Garrett had been so distracted by his fantasizing he hadn't realized he was almost within touching distance. The one-story building was pretty large up close. Moss and vines attempted to reclaim the wooden structure; entire sections of the house were so green they looked like they were being swallowed up by the earth. Nearly all the windows had been broken and boarded up and the shingled roof had partially caved in. A narrow trail led away from the entrance, overgrown with weeds.

An odor grew stronger with every step he took closer. Beyond the stale funk of the house, there was something fresher—rotting, sickly.

Garrett studied the building for a few more seconds before gathering the courage to peek inside. He found a window at the back low enough to reach. He gripped the ledge, scrambled against warped wood for a foothold and pulled himself up by grabbing one of the rough boards nailed across the window. Finally high enough, he peered between the planks.

Nothing too exciting inside. A real mess of dusty crates and boxes. Except maybe something furry poking out from one of the crates. He moved his face closer for a better look.

Dust stirred in the window opening.

A tickle stirred in Garrett's nose. He braced himself to sneeze, his fingertips turned white as he held a firm grip. *ACHOO*.

*SNAP*.

First of all, these are strong opening chapters! You do a good job of including just the right amount of action, so that we get these really engaging, edge-of-our seat moments, but also moments of interiority/reasons we're caring about Garrett.

I think the story starts in the right place with the first day of school. I think if the story had only begun on Garrett's way home from school, we'd be missing some details. On the other hand, if the story had started with the details leading up to his first day (e.g. getting ready), it would've dragged things out a bit and delayed the inciting incident.

It does hook me, and I do want to read on. Not only do I want to see what is peeking out of one of the crates (though I have a suspicion based on your query letter!), but I also want to see more of Garrett's home life with his mom, stepdad, and 3 sisters. (Not saying I want them to appear in the first chapter – just the fact that they're mentioned was enough and intriguing to me). The pacing didn't drag at any points, as it's quite action-packed, which works nicely for keeping an 8-12 y/o's interest. I really don't think much needs to be cut/tightened, but if you did want to get down to 10 pages perhaps you could trim the chase scene a bit, while still capturing his emotions and intensity of the scene. Out of the gang/bullies, Ian definitely seems like the lead member, the mastermind, despite lacking the strength of Marco and Colin.

Overall, I have a sense of Garrett's world, including where the story is set. You open with a setting that is very relatable to most middle grade readers (first day of middle school). There's enough mystery to keep me invested (e.g. why did his dad leave) without confusing me. We have an interesting main character – I enjoyed his sense of humor, too! I think a lot of his struggles/situations (loneliness, bullies, family issues, crushes) will be relatable to a variety of readers in this age group.