



**AFTER  
THE  
STRAWBERRY**

KATHRYN POPE

**After the Strawberry**  
a novel by Kathryn Pope

## Seedpod Publishing



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#### ***After the Strawberry***

"Kathryn Pope's *After the Strawberry* has everything I want in a novel: elegant, precise prose, unique, unsettling images, and a compelling, disquieting story. It is a work of real menace and real beauty. Not only that, but she somehow manages to combine the traditional pleasures of storytelling with the adventure of hypertext in ways that are lucid and visually startling. All this is testament to the endless range of her wild imagination and genuine talent. I can't recommend this book highly enough."

*-Alistair McCartney, author of The End of the World Book: A Novel (University of Wisconsin Press)*

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## CHAPTER ONE



Lydia still had to go to school. There was no question. She'd be in the way if she stayed. So, when Dad was finally quiet and asleep, she crept downstairs and took a thirteen minute shower, with the water turned as hot as it would go, which wasn't hot enough. She scrubbed her arms with a loofa. She went in circles, until she could see white flakes of skin coming off like eraser dust, then little pinpricks of red. The water streams looked blue against the blue shower, and she'd left the overhead lights off, so the curtain cast a blue shadow over everything.

Her skin was tomato red when she got out of the shower. The steam rose from her arms like little plumes of smoke, then disappeared. She would weigh herself only after she dried off and used the hair dryer. It was important to get completely dry first because even a little extra water could add artificial weight. She scrubbed the towel on her skin like she was scouring a pan. Then the hair dryer -- kept in the same spot on her head until it burned, until she could barely stand it any longer. Then came the most important moment of the day.

[She stepped on the scale.](#) She looked down at her feet -- at the toenails, cut so short that she could feel the new skin underneath them. She watched the needle on the scale waver over the numbers. It looked like a speedometer needle. The needle settled on its number -- not the number Lydia wanted it to be.

She stood on the edge of the bath tub so she could examine her stomach in the mirror. She poked at the softer spots so she would really disgust herself -- especially that spot right beneath her belly button, that little pillow of fat that the belly button curved into.

She wished her whole stomach could be like the inside of the belly button -- rough, star-shaped, and at least a few millimeters flatter than her real belly. She climbed down to take a good look at her face, then washed it twice to make sure her eyes didn't show any red around the edges. That was the last thing Mom and Dad needed.

Lydia dressed in three layers and sat [fully clothed under the heater](#) for a minute, listening to its hum, not moving. She pretended she was in New York with Bette -- that this was Bette's bathroom. They were getting ready to go to college -- they were both in college. They were going to stop at Starbucks on the way. Bette would order a gigantic coffee, and Lydia wouldn't have to order anything, but she'd get a cup to carry around. And they'd walk along the streets of New York and look at all those faces -- all their blank stares, like Bette described. Lydia would catch her reflection in a store window, and she'd be thin and graceful and sophisticated and perfect. Then maybe Mom and Dad would come to New York too. Dad would have no Meniere's disease, no hearing problems, no attacks of vertigo. They'd go to that huge library Bette talked about, and they'd sit next to the cement lions, holding coffee cups and being quiet -- not because they had to this time, but because it felt nice, because there was no need to say anything. Everyone felt the same.

Lydia opened the bathroom door and headed out. Mom sat in the kitchen, holding a cup of coffee in her hand. The coffee inside the cup was too milky, and by the way Mom stroked the sides of the mug, Lydia could tell the coffee was already cold. Mom stared at some spot in the air in front of her.

"Mom?"

She held out a hand and touched Lydia's sleeve. Mom's hand was like Bette's, with long fingers and freckles.

"Dad had an attack this morning," Mom said, and Lydia imagined the faces of New Yorkers, completely blank. She tried to do that with her face.

"He's sleeping now?"

Mom nodded and opened her arms for a hug. Lydia rested her head on Mom's shoulder and let the flannel pajamas close on her. She could smell the lemony remnants of whatever Mom used to clean up Dad's vomit. She tried to listen for Mom's heartbeat, but it was too soft. The lace on Mom's cuffs brushed against Lydia's ears once, then twice, then settled there until Mom let go. She held Lydia there to make long eye contact in a way that made Lydia want to get away -- go somewhere free from Mom's eyes and what Lydia was supposed to know from looking at them. It was embarrassing.

Lydia tried to think of the best thing to say, but there was no best thing, and she couldn't look at Mom anymore -- so Lydia left [as quietly as she could](#). When she closed the door, she held the doorknob carefully before letting it rotate back to closed, so it wouldn't make even a clicking sound.

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Lydia had a singing lesson with Miss Ruben first thing. Miss Ruben was beautiful. Everyone thought so. She didn't have a thick neck, like Mrs. Englewood. She didn't even have any extra fat around her middle or on the backs of her arms. She was skinny, and Lydia wished she knew how Miss Ruben did it. She probably skipped breakfast every day, but that wasn't hard. Maybe she ran a few miles every morning, or maybe she ate only salads, no dressing. Maybe Lydia should start running more. Three miles was nothing, really. She could probably do five -- maybe eight.

Lydia had her singing lessons in the practice room -- a tiny room with sky blue walls, sound cork that looked like a wasps' nest, and nothing else in it but a piano and a table where kids dropped their books. Lydia came here during study hall to practice. Jennifer B. was here to practice today too. She sat on the floor with her back against the wall, watching Lydia or Miss Ruben or maybe nothing.

Eight miles would burn at least eight hundred calories. Eight hundred calories amounted to the exact minimum a person needed each day, so if Lydia burned an extra eight hundred, she could burn a total of sixteen hundred calories a day. Sixteen hundred calories had to make a difference.

Lydia stood in the center of the room, ready to start. She watched Miss Ruben sit at the piano bench. When she scooted the bench in, the wood made a screech against the floor, like a dying seal. The edge of Miss Ruben's skirt touched the floor, and Lydia could see that the background of the flower print matched the gray of the floor exactly. Miss Ruben raised her hands to the piano keys.

Lydia had to start on a D, which wasn't a bad note for her. She adjusted her shoulders so she was standing tall, tried to be sure her feet were shoulder-length's width apart and that her chin wasn't at the wrong angle. Then the first note came, clear and outside herself, like someone else was singing it -- nobody like her. She looked toward Jennifer B., who was smiling in a vacant sort of way, twisting a long strand of hair around her thick finger. Lydia sucked in for the two-line trill. She raised her eyebrows, set her shoulders firm, and trilled until the second to last note, where the air stopped and her voice trailed into breathy nothing. She felt her cheeks run red, and pulled the D again to end the section. Jennifer B. smiled a weird kind of smile. If she were a man, she'd look lecherous.

"Beautiful," Miss Ruben said. "Such a clear voice, like an angel."

But Miss Ruben had to say nice things like that.

"I didn't get the run," Lydia said.

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Lydia went to the sewing room at lunchtime, to work on the quilt she was making for Mom, a crazy quilt, the sewing teacher called it, which really meant that it had no set pattern. Lydia sat there alone or maybe with a freshman or two, like the large girl with permed hair who listened to Garth Brooks while she ironed.

Lydia didn't talk with her. Sometimes, when the girl didn't notice, Lydia would just sit and watch her, wondering what her life was like. Sometimes the girl brought in her lunch, although no one was allowed to eat in the sewing room. She usually brought a Mountain Dew and a sandwich, usually a sandwich with some kind of meat and mustard -- and Fritos. She always brought Fritos. She'd brush the salt from her fingers after each chip, and she'd crunch them with her mouth open, like someone with a cold trying to eat and breathe through her mouth at the same time.

Fritos had one hundred, eighty calories per serving. And a little bag like that had two servings, not one. That fact made Lydia so sad.

Lydia sewed by hand, tiny stitches less than a millimeter, so sometimes she'd accidentally put the needle in the same weave of fabric she'd pulled it from. She never went to the cafeteria anymore. She was safe here, away from the calories, the process of digestion. She didn't have to pick a table in the back, hoping no one would sit next to her. Nobody in the sewing room would come up to her with a carton of chocolate milk and ask her to take it, like Amy Spegler did last week. Amy Spegler had a high thyroid. She couldn't gain weight if she tried. Her eyes bulged like a dragonfly, and she was the skinniest girl in school. When she wore short sleeves, her arms hung out like pencils. The skinniest girl in school -- offering chocolate milk, for god's sake.

At least the freshman with the Fritos wouldn't give Lydia chocolate milk. Lydia could sit here and make her millimeter-sized stitches. And it didn't hurt to be hungry. It felt good most of the time. Finally, she was getting clean. She couldn't poop or sweat or get zits. She could get rid of her body. She could become nothing -- the square root of zero. She pricked her finger with the needle, and a bead of blood formed in a sphere at the tip.

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When Lydia got home from school, the kitchen was empty. Mom's blue coffee mug sat on the table, where she'd set it to hug Lydia that morning. The coffee pot was still on,

humming like it was trying to brew air. The room was gray in the almost-dark light. The phone rang, and Lydia answered.



"Lydia? It's me."

Bette sounded like she'd been running. Maybe she exercised now. Lydia tipped Mom's mug and looked at the leftover coffee inside. It was the color of milk chocolate.

"Lydia, we're coming to visit. Jesse and I."

"Who's Jesse?"

Lydia smelled the coffee. It smelled like dirt. She tilted the cup as far as she could without spilling. She wanted to touch the coffee. It was probably greasy.

"The filmmaker. The friend who's doing the documentary on me. I told you about him, right?"

"No."

Bette didn't tell Lydia anything anymore. Not even about important things like documentaries. Lydia tilted the mug in another direction and looked at the veins in her hands, which were puffy. They bulged.

"Well, I'm coming home, and he's coming with me. He wants to film you guys. Are Mom and Dad there?"

"No. He wants to film us?"

But Bette was already talking again. Lydia pictured her in Grandpa's apartment, standing in running shoes, ready to run out the door. Maybe Bette had running shoes now. That's why this Jesse person wanted to do the documentary on her. She was an athlete.

"Oh, well you'll tell them about it, right? We're coming next Friday. We already have the flight. It was one of those last minute deals. Oh, I've gotta go. I'll talk to you soon, okay?"



When Lydia set the phone in its cradle, it made a little ringing sound, like it was trying to call her back. Mom's note was tacked right next to the phone. She'd written it on hot pink paper, with a marker that looked black against the pink. Lydia knew the ink was really blue. She'd used the marker yesterday. She stared at the letters and numbers for a while, until they formed a double image that moved from the note to the countertop.

"Lydia, call us at the hospital after 7:30. They're just running tests."

Lydia carried the note with her to the window, where she looked out at the blue snow. If she looked, she could see the room reflected on this side of the window, and in the reflection, she could see the note in her hand. She took the note to the bathroom, where she turned on the heating fan, then went upstairs to get her running clothes. She grabbed the sweats that she'd left draped on the bed and went back to the bathroom. It had started to warm up inside. She set the note on the edge of the sink. The paper looked an even hotter pink next to the white porcelain. She sat on the toilet lid and untied her shoes. She pulled off her first layer of socks and left on the second. She moved the note to the top of the hamper where it wouldn't get wet. She ran the sink's water until it was hot, then stuck her hands under the stream until they were red and burning. That felt good. She put her face to the air coming from the overhead fan, closed her eyelids, and tried to pretend she didn't feel cold.

She took off her first shirt -- a striped velour sweatshirt she'd made in sewing class. Then she pulled off the long-sleeved T-shirt underneath, leaving only her long-john shirt. The air was getting warm now, and she shivered only a little. She pulled off her corduroy pants and stood, full of goose-bumps, in her long-john shirt and pants. She breathed in and peeled them off. They stuck a little to spots of her dry skin. She pulled off her panties and bra, then stood on the scale. She looked up at the ceiling heater once more, then down at the number. It hadn't changed since this morning.

Eight miles this afternoon, and she'd be eight hundred calories lighter. In just a month of this, with the right diet, she could lose 13.7 pounds. 13.7 pounds, and maybe things would be okay. Then she'd lose just a few more, just in case.

She went to the mirror and pinched the skin on her stomach, the sides of her arms. She stretched her long-johns on again. They bagged in the back and at the waist, which made her feel a little better. Then she pulled on the lavender jogging pants, two T-shirts, a sweatshirt, a puffy pair of mittens, and hat. She folded the note into thirds and put it inside her left mitten. The paper felt sharp against her hand. She sat on the toilet seat again and waited for her cheeks to warm from the heat. Then she left the bathroom, headed through the kitchen, out the door, and ran down the driveway.

The light outside was purple. Mrs. Adleman, across the street, hadn't put on the lamp in her living room yet. Lydia wondered what Mrs. Adleman did in there all night by herself. She wondered if Mrs. Adleman had any brothers or sisters -- if there was anyone who called her to say hello once in a while. She wondered what would happen if she stopped to visit sometime, if maybe Mrs. Adleman would like that, maybe even come to think of

Lydia as hers, her friend or maybe her granddaughter. Lydia made a right and ran past the mint green house with the motion light, past the house of the people who owned two Dobermans that never barked, then past the park and down toward the railroad tracks by the river. The river looked black right before dusk -- and so calm that the water was a mirror for the trees above, already naked for winter. It looked like a postcard without the glossiness. No people, no sound.

Lydia was cold again. She forced herself to run fast. She tuned her breath to different tones, listened to it running in and out, shallow, then full. She counted her breaths and lost count at twenty-six.

Eight hundred calories, minus ninety calories for the carton of skim milk. Round it up to an even hundred, just to be safe. That left seven hundred calories. Maybe she could run through dinner -- maybe Mom and Dad wouldn't notice. They might not even be back in time. If she did that, she would have a calorie difference of negative fifteen hundred today, her best so far. By the end of the month, she'd be skinny -- maybe as skinny as Miss Ruben, or if she was lucky, as skinny as Amy Spegler.

As she ran, Lydia tried out different ways of holding the folded note inside her mitten. She curled her fingers around it. Then she tried keeping her hand perfectly straight, so the note would lay flat against her palm. The paper felt warmer now, and the edges were a little softer. Lydia's muscles were getting warm too. She forced herself to go faster.

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Lydia sat in front of the living room's heat register, not turning on the lights for evening. The note was in her pocket now, bending when she bent. It was almost six o'clock. The sky outside was electric blue, and the walls inside had faded to a new and darker color. Lydia's fingers in front of the metal rungs didn't look like her own. They were whiter than usual, sheets of paper scrunched to look like hands. The register spewed out its last bit of warm air and hissed to a stop. Adam would be coming soon -- Adam, who had taken her to prom and out to movies but not as a date.

Lydia put her hand inside the pocket to check on the note. Still there.

The prom dress was too big now. Lydia remembered the way her legs stuck out below the hem in the pictures, the way the upper thigh looked, fleshy, the color of an uncooked leg of chicken.

She wondered if she should get a tape measure and measure her thighs now -- if she could track the circumference of thighs just like tracking her weight. She could measure her waist and upper arms too. She could keep a record, write the numbers in black pen. After Adam came and went, Lydia would get the tape measure from Mom's sewing things. That's what she would do.

The room was officially dark now. There was a clicking, and the register started spitting hot air again. Lydia put her hands up to the dry air, put her toes up to the rungs, watched the pale moon out there and the blue snow, the divots where Dad had stepped when refilling the bird feeder.

There was a thump at the door and a jingle as Adam let himself in, then stood in the doorway of the living room. He smelled like outside air, and his hair was messed at the top, maybe from the wind or maybe because he thought it looked cooler like that. Maybe Lydia had told him once that she liked it messy.

"It's dark in here," he said, and when he flipped the switch, the room turned buttery.

Lydia moved over to give Adam room to sit next to her. He sat crossed-legged, his corduroy knee almost touching hers.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said. "It's warm in here."

She nodded. She smiled. She told him she had to call her parents at 7:30, that he couldn't stay long. He didn't ask her why. Adam had the skinniest legs. His thigh circumference was probably smaller than Lydia's. The hot air stopped blowing from the register again, and everything was quiet. Adam's face was pink in spots, like he had windburn, maybe. Sometimes, when they were sitting like this, Lydia imagined him confessing that he had wanted to take her to the prom, that it hadn't been just as friends.

"I've been thinking," he would say, "I mean -- that I feel for you more than, you know -- more than a friend."

He never did say it, though, and he didn't now either. Maybe he could tell -- could see that she'd been waiting for him to say something like that for a while.

"Do you feel that way too? About me, I mean?" he would say.

He wouldn't say that now either, and maybe it didn't matter anymore. Not now, anyway. Lydia looked toward her legs again. She wanted to rip them in half -- maybe take a paring knife to them and pare them down until they matched his, until there was nothing there at all.

"Lydia?"

His clothes smelled like they'd been in a drawer for a long time. It was a closed-in smell. He leaned in a little, and she wanted to lean away but didn't.

"I'm sorry," she said, and she paused, because already his face had changed. She forced herself to keep going with what might be a lie. "I guess I'm a little tired for hanging out," she said.

He didn't look at her again. When he raised his head he seemed to be looking over her shoulder at the wallpaper or into the other room. "I guess I better go, then -- at least for now," he said. His face hit a funny angle from the light above, so it shined.

Lydia wanted to ask him to stay, but she didn't. He left quietly.

Then Lydia was alone at the heat register. She felt her cold skin growing hot, and the register kicked in again. This time, the humming sounded like someone crying, or like the breaths between cries, stretched out to cover all other sounds. Five thousand, three hundred and twenty calories was more than a pound, but she should do better. If she ate only a hundred calories for dinner each night, how many calories would she have burned by the end of the day? She calculated while she went into Mom's room to find the tape measure.

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Lydia set the note on the kitchen table. It had been folded and refolded many times now. The paper's creases were so soft they felt like fabric. She held the phone to her ear with both hands -- one on the base of the mouthpiece and one toward the top. There was one ring -- long and low, like a doorbell. Lydia counted one and a half seconds before the second ring came. She counted a third ring, then a fourth. She took the note from the counter and held it half open in her hand. After six rings she hung up. She looked at the number again to make sure that was really a six, not a zero. She called again. She hung up again. She tried the number with a zero.

"Jungle Video. How can I serve you today?"

She hung up again. She called the original number. She let it ring twelve times, then thirteen. She hung up again. She sat on the floor and balanced the note on her knee. She held the phone in her hand and counted to 77. Then she called again. She let it ring 7 times. Nobody answered. She hunch over herself as she sat, holding her stomach in with her folded arms so that none of her fat could come through, so she could hardly breathe.

She was still sitting there when the cowbell rigged up to the door rang, and Mom and Dad brought the cold air inside.

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"I'm sorry, honey. We were almost home already," Mom said.

Mom was already sitting, holding a cup of decaf with both hands, her bony ankles crossed over each other. Dad hunched over a piece of paper with scribbles on it. He stood to walk toward the refrigerator, then sat again. Mom asked Lydia to sit. That meant there was news. They were going to say that Dad was in serious danger. That's what they'd found out with the tests, and now this was it. Lydia stared at the terrycloth loops on the table until they went blurry.

"We have a decision to make," Mom said. "There's a surgery that could help Dad, but it would likely destroy his hearing."

Lydia breathed in.

"We don't know what we're going to do yet. We're going to give it a few months and decide."

"The surgery would make Dad deaf?"

Dad nodded. He made a few more marks on the scrap of paper, then swiveled it to show it to Lydia. The paper was a graph with a wavy line. On top of the graph, Dad's block letters said "Pain threshold with noise." Underneath was a picture of an ear. There was a scribble right in the center of the ear.

"Oh," Lydia said. She wondered what it would be like if Dad couldn't hear anything.

Lydia wanted to put her hands on Dad's ears, to warm them up with her hands. Mom moved to the left of her chair, then back to the right.

"Lydia, we're worried about you," she said.

Lydia breathed out slowly.

"You don't eat anything. You need to eat," Dad said.

It was the first time, probably, that Dad had used the word *need*. After saying it, he got up and walked to the refrigerator, then back again. He paced like that for a few seconds before Mom crossed her ankles the other way and said, "We're worried about you. We think you might be anorexic."

Lydia looked at Dad's ears. Each earlobe was a little pink. Lydia wondered if she could give Dad her ears -- if there was a transplant or something, like they did with kidneys.

"You know you're too thin, don't you?" Mom said.

Too thin. That was good. Too thin meant Lydia was getting skinny -- not as skinny as Amy Spegler, not as skinny as if Mom had said *emaciated* or something like that, but too thin was good.

"You're going to eat now, all right?" Dad said. "No more of this."

Lydia nodded at what he was saying, and that was the end of it. Dad stopped pacing and went into the bathroom to get ready for bed. Mom still sat there, holding the mug in both hands, staring off into distance.

"What's going to happen if Dad goes deaf?" Lydia said. "Is that all they can do?"

Mom's eyes were watery again. She nodded as she pulled Lydia into a hug. Lydia could feel Mom's heart beating in the hug.

"I love you, honey," Mom said. "You know that, right?"

Lydia nodded at that too. The slippery fabric of Mom's blouse swished against her ears. She liked the way it sounded. For a second, Lydia didn't think about things. She didn't think about Dad's paper on the table with the graph making a straight line, but then Mom pulled away slowly. She brushed a bit of hair from Lydia's face, and Lydia did think about things again.

On her way to bed, Lydia pulled Dad's slip of paper from the table and held it in her hand as she walked upstairs. If she lost ten more pounds, she might be emaciated, and if she lost twenty pounds, maybe she'd be like those nuns she'd read about who fasted for days and wore those really disgusting hair shirts in the middle of the summer so they'd sweat a lot and be miserable. When they died they were declared saints -- maybe not saints. Now she couldn't remember, but they were declared good people, anyway. That's all Lydia wanted. Lydia pulled the covers back and slipped into bed, trying not to move the sheets as she did. She rolled to her side and held Dad's paper up to her ear. If she listened closely enough, she thought she might hear some kind of answer to things.

*(End of Chapter One. Go to Chapter Two)*

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\* **114** -- *Weighed in Science class. Heather, who was definitely skinny but much taller, weighed exactly the same. This was somehow comforting to Lydia, even though it didn't mean anything.*

*122 -- Prom. An overweight boy asked Lydia to go with him. She hated that his weight bothered her, so she went to the prom with him. When he wrote a poem about her, she didn't eat anything for three days. The surprising thing was that it didn't hurt to be hungry.*

*119 -- School musical. When being fitted for her costume, Miss Ruben commented that Lydia had measurements exactly 10 inches apart. Miss Ruben was trying to be nice.*

*115 -- The lifeguards had to clear out the basement in the middle of the summer, and there was an old scale, which everyone tried. When Lydia stepped on it, Brad said, "You're a peanut!" Lydia couldn't figure out if that was a good thing or a bad thing.*

*110 -- Summer vacation with Mom and Dad. Lydia brought a turquoise plastic bowl and had cereal for every meal. Mom and Dad didn't say anything.*

*105 -- Tore open a loaf of cinnamon bread in a moment of weakness and ate seven slices of bread in less than five minutes. Afterwards, 100 sit-ups.*

*104 -- Figured out how to stave off the temptation of cinnamon bread by drinking [3 or 4 Diet Cokes](#) with cereal at lunch.*

*101 -- Switched to dry cereal, instead of cereal with milk.*

*97 -- Used a mug instead of a bowl for cereal.*

*90 -- Switched to salad. Instead of dressing, salt and pepper.*

*86 -- Nothing, as long as she could get away with it.*

*[\(return to where you were before the link\)](#)*

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*\*\* A weird thing was how cold Lydia always was. Nobody else seemed to get so cold inside the house, and she had to do a lot to stay warm:*

### ***Clothes***

*Mom didn't like that Lydia shopped at Goodwill, because who knows who had worn the clothes before. Lydia didn't want new clothes, though. It felt better to buy them used. Sometimes, Lydia would make clothes herself. In sewing class, she made a long-sleeved T-shirt (blue and red stripes) to wear underneath other clothes. After a while, the T-shirt wasn't enough to keep warm. She switched to long underwear shirts. Then she'd wear the long underwear shirt, a T-shirt, and a sweater. She got long underwear in red and blue plaid patterns to wear underneath her corduroy pants, and she wore two socks on each foot. At home, when no one was around, she would sometimes wear her winter coat and*

*hat inside -- or she would wrap her torso in a blanket and put another blanket around her shoulders, so she felt like a burrito. It was never enough.*

### **Other Stuff**

*\* Drinking lots of hot water was good, because it warmed her inside. Sometimes, she just held the hot cup without drinking.*

*\* Sitting in the bathroom with the overhead heater on. The bathroom was small enough to get warm fast. When Lydia was inside, she never wanted to leave.*

*\* Going on a long run.*

*\* Sitting in front of the heat register in the living room. It kicked off after the house reached 70 degrees, so sometimes Lydia would turn up the thermostat -- to 72, 75. If no one would be home for a while, she'd turn it to 79.*

[\*\(return to where you were before the link\)\*](#)

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*\*\*\* It was one of Lydia's earliest memories, so she must have been maybe four years old. Bette and Lydia had their own Fisher Price record player, and the best thing was to put on the twist song, then jump around. Lydia sang with the record, because she knew every word: "Come on baby, let's do the twist! Come on baaaaaby, let's do the twist! Take me by your little ha-and. It goes like this." Lydia spun in circles, as fast as she could go. "Round and around and up and down you gooo, again." Faster and faster, until the walls and the bookshelves and the couch and the curtains and pine tree outside the window all blurred into each other. Then she'd fall to the floor and watch the room keep spinning just like the record, then finally slow to a stop.*

*When Dad first got sick, Lydia was spinning. Mom ran into the room while it was spinning, and the threads of hair falling out of the ponytail and the reflection of light from her glasses blended with the gold lamp on the end table and the wood bookshelf. Lydia fell to a stop, and the room slowed. Mom separated from the other things in the room, and Lydia saw her face.*

*"That hurts Daddy's ears," she said.*

*It was a kind way to say it, but Lydia knew what fear looked like. Lydia was putting everyone in serious danger, with all the singing and spinning. She had to learn how to use her inside voice, how to walk lightly, how to watch Daddy for signs of pain from the noise. She had to learn to be careful of other people, because any moment something she did could be hurting them. She had to keep herself contained.*

*It was because of the Meniere's Disease that Dad's ears hurt like that. Dad couldn't go on roller coasters or have long conversations or eat any salt at all. Even worse, he cried*



*sometimes during an attack. Lydia could hear it sometimes coming from the bedroom or the bathroom. It was a tight, high sound, a sound ready to snap. It was the worst sound in the world, and when she heard it, Lydia didn't want to spin anymore. That's what caused this whole mess. Everyone was afraid of it -- Mom and Bette too.*

*Lydia would be so quiet she couldn't hurt anyone.*

[\*\(return to where you were before the link\)\*](#)

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*\*\*\*\* Lydia knew, even while she was doing it, that her behavior was weird. She'd read about the men who agreed to be starved for a study done after World War II by a guy named Ansel Keys. She liked reading about how the men felt like her when they didn't eat -- how they loved reading about food, how they wanted all their food to be hot, how they put salt on everything and drank lots and lots of coffee and tea. She liked reading about how they worried too -- how they bit their fingernails and how one man even decided to hurt himself by cutting off his fingers. She wasn't the only one who had these feelings. Even men post-WWII had them.*

*But her favorite part of the study was the stuff about how the men were conscientious objectors to war. They participated in the study to make a statement about war, to help show the world just how terrible war's consequences could be. This is because so many people starved during World War II. Lydia wished that her starvation could be for a good cause like that. She wanted to believe that not eating (or at least not eating meat) could help stop war or violence or do something good for other people. She couldn't see anything good that she could do, though, so in the meantime, she'd just try to stay out of the way.*

[\*\(return to where you were before the link\)\*](#)

## **CHAPTER TWO**



**YOU NEED ENERGY RIGHT AWAY -- SOMETHING BIG AND EXCITING.**

Shit. Jesse hates this part. He's been standing here with this stuff for twenty minutes or something, scrubbing. The pen must have been permanent, because the ink's gotten down

into the grooves of his skin and the lines of his knuckles, like a disease. But the letters are faded almost to nothing now. He can read them only because he knows what they are.

He lets the bar of Lava soap slide back into the sink, green and slimy, like something from *Ghostbusters* -- the scene with that goopy thing that they blasted away in the library, with all the library cards flopping around in the green ooze and the Ghostbuster with the glasses -- Egon was his name -- Egon coming in and blasting the thing away.

*Ghostbusters* was a decent movie -- a classic. If everyone in Jesse's class were turning out stuff like that, maybe Jesse wouldn't be doing documentaries. Or maybe he would. Documentaries have weight. They get at the truth of things -- and so will this one, if he can get something decent out of Bette.

He wipes both hands on the towel by the sink, then gets a good look at them -- cracked and dry like Dad's hands used to get in winter -- big and square, with the same deep ridges in the fingernails.

He grabs a ballpoint and writes on the usual spot, in the smooth square between the knuckle and the wrist:

GET HER TO TALK ABOUT HER FAMILY. SOMETHING CANDID.

Then he slips the pen in his pocket. He's got to start carrying it around with him.

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The air is wet outside, like someone misted everything with a spray bottle. The sidewalk too. Everything's gray in the city -- even the people walking by. Jesse gets a shot of Bette -- the back of her head mostly and the hair swinging at her shoulders. She's got it in a headband today, and it makes her look English, with that buttoned coat and her little gloves. The top button of her coat is undone, and he wants to button it for her, because it's cold as hell out here. She could get sick or something.

She's walking quickly -- not because they're late or anything but because that's what people do on their way to the airport. He could do a documentary some day on people going to the airport and what they're thinking. That could be interesting. But then airports generally suck.

He gets a shot of Port Authority from the outside -- the homeless guys standing in the doorways, the trench coats going in and out. Bette leads Jesse to the right, past a cart selling bracelets, a T-shirt stand, a coffee shop that smells like eggs, and to the line for the buses to Newark. He gets a shot of the people standing in line -- a girl in a puffy turquoise coat sitting on top of a suitcase, a man with his briefcase, a couple holding hands, like they're waiting for something shitty to happen.

Jesse likes having the camera in his hands like this. It was the smallest Sony on the market last summer -- a 3-chip Sony digital and nicer than anything he's had, probably in his life. He sometimes thinks how good it would be to get a shot of the camera itself, to maybe get a few Polaroids of it from different angles, with the screen open, then closed, with and without the detachable battery. It would look good outside in the light, with the sun hitting the silver edges of the flip screen.

He gets a shot of the man with the gray mustache and the stomach hanging over his belt. He zooms in on the Port Authority patch on the guy's arm as he swings the baggage into a compartment in the belly of the bus.

The thing about this camera is the way it feels in Jesse's hands, the way he can hold a shot with one hand and leave the other hand flat against his side or even light a cigarette and have a smoke mid-shot. The thing's light as an egg, practically weightless.

The man swings Jesse's yellow duffel bag and Bette's blue suitcase into the compartment. Jesse follows Bette onto the bus, sits next to her in the front seat, and tries not to look at her knees sitting next to his. He gets a shot of Bette in profile -- her nose, her long eyelashes moving as one big eyelash when she blinks.

He likes the way life looks on pause after it's filmed -- the way movement turns into a still photo, or if you hit sepia, into something from the past -- something old and lasting or something already dead, existing on film and nowhere else, proof that the thing was alive once, and he was there.

The bus starts to move. It shifts from the underground to outside. The light outside is too bright. If Jesse could someday get a documentary where the subject dies, that would be the shit. Because, when people die, everything they've said starts to mean something. Like Dad, even though Dad never said much or even did anything decent in his life. Shit, that stuff's depressing.

Jesse gets another shot of Bette, but this time, she turns and smiles at the camera, her white teeth and her chin moving against the top of her scarf. He can maybe put this moment on pause right now -- Bette's face shaped like a heart, the white of the sky turning into the orange light of the Lincoln Tunnel. That's a great shot. Image is everything in this business.

Bette's a good image but not a great one, not compelling, not frightening. She's a fucking angel, is what she is. Shit, those eyes. Sometimes it looks like maybe they're glowing -- like they could hypnotize a person or laser beams could start coming out of them.

She's the kind of girl Jesse would take out for coffee, marry, settle down and have kids with -- gorgeous kids with bright eyes like that, the kind of kids that make strangers stare. She's got a boyfriend, though. Says she doesn't want any "funny stuff" on this trip. Says she wants to be "strictly platonic," "just friends." But Jesse will impress her. This movie will be a fucking masterpiece. She'll see.

Being in love fucking wrecks everything. Hopefully her parents or maybe her sister will have something decent to film when he gets there -- something worthy of Sundance or at least Jesse's vision of the world -- because as dumb-ass as it sounds, he wants to film something good -- make some kind of real statement about life, make life look good, at least on camera -- get to the root of something.

"Are you cold?" he says, and Bette shakes her head without looking at him. She's looking out the window.

"Because you can wear my jacket, if you want."

She tells him she's fine. She doesn't want another jacket.

"They'll turn on the heat in a minute. That should help. Buses can have strong heaters. You'd be surprised," he says.

*[\(End of Chapter Two. Go to Chapter Three\)](#)*

### CHAPTER THREE



Lydia stared at the glass bottles on the counter -- the ones that held the cotton balls and gauze pads. She wrapped the gown closer around her knees, and the tissue paper on the exam table crunched when she moved. It was so cold in here. She wrapped her arms around her torso and tried to keep the sleeves of the smock covering her.

Dr. Knapp opened the door. He closed it behind himself with a little slam and moved the clipboard from one hand to the next like it was a hot potato. He was going to try to make small talk, Lydia thought, and he did. He asked her how school was going. What was her favorite subject? What did she like to do with her friends? He seemed to like it that she sang. He asked about the concert, and as she talked, he stood there, moving the clipboard from one hand to the next, looking at her like she was going to sprout a tail.

"You know you're sick, don't you?" he said, and she nodded because that's what he wanted her to do.

"Your mother says you're still losing weight, and I think she's right."

Lydia nodded again.

He put a hand to his beard and ruffled it a little. It sounded like sandpaper running over a splintery-filled block of wood. The humming of the fluorescent lights sounded loud in the silence between sentences.

"We're going to try to get you better," he said, but he sounded like he was talking to himself more than to her. He pulled a pen out of his lab coat pocket. He looked skinny underneath all that white, almost like it was a tent. She shivered again, and he clicked his pen once, then twice.

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Lydia was already cold again. She went to the bathroom and turned the water as hot as it would go, which was never hot enough. She turned the overhead heater on, let the shower hiss for a minute. It must be fifty degrees in here – maybe less. She stepped in the shower and stuck her head under the water, tried to make it so that no part of her body was untouched by the heat. She wanted to be warm. She wanted to turn the furnace up as high as it would go. She'd turn it up to eighty, maybe ninety degrees. She'd walk around inside in a tank top, without even one goose bump on her arm.

She stood with her back to the shower fixture and let the water wash down the back of her head. It wasn't hot enough. She looked down to see her belly and thighs beneath her. This was the best angle to see all her fat because she could see every roll of her skin. Her thighs were white and blubbery. She looked like a chunk of fat at the edge of a piece of meat -- that white, jiggly stuff Mom cut off before cooking it -- or like the grease at the bottom of a bacon pan that had been sitting out for a few hours. Bette was never like this. Bette was not ugly, not disorganized, not the kind of person who could be remembered and forgotten in the same breath. Maybe Bette would be able to fix things for Dad.

Lydia turned off the water and grabbed a towel. She'd been keeping track of how much towel it took to get around her, and it seemed to be less than it used to be. She had maybe a foot of overlapping fabric today. She wished she had her tape measure in here.

She dried herself with every inch of the towel, swabbing all the heavy water off. Then she stood naked on the scale. She dressed in her regular clothes again: four layers, two pair of socks. Then she sat under the heater, listening to its rattle. She got up after seven minutes and opened the door. The cold air hit her like she'd just walked barefoot into a pile of snow. She went to the thermostat and pushed the rings to eighty-one. Mom and Dad weren't home anyway. It didn't matter anyway.

Then she went quickly, sliding in her socks, to the heat register. It already blew hot air. She couldn't get close enough to the metal grating. She wanted to slip through the grates, into the vent, and climb right into the furnace.

The door jingled. "We're home," Dad's voice said.

There was a crunching of paper, and in three seconds, the gust of cold air from the door slapped against the heating vent. Three seconds later, the door jingled shut. Dad was saying something to Mom. Lydia could hear the sounds of jackets coming off.

"How'd it get so hot in here?" Dad was saying. He spoke louder than he used to -- because he couldn't hear so well, Mom said. Even though Lydia knew it wasn't, she always felt like it was shouting.

"Lydia?" he was saying, and he was in front of the thermostat, moving the dial down to nothing.

The furnace stopped mid-stream, and the air came out cold. Dad looked right at her, but she said nothing, and so did he. She wanted to convince him to sit in front of the living room heat register with her. She wanted to ask him how bad it felt. She wanted to offer to switch bodies with him, so she could have all the pain. She deserved it, and he didn't. She wanted to sit under the bathroom heater for the rest of the night. Maybe she could sleep under the heater. She'd bring a pillow and a sleeping bag, spread it out on the tile between the toilet and the tub. Dad would be knocking on the door to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, though. It would be urgent. She'd have to wake up and move the sleeping bag and the pillow.

"I brought subway sandwiches for dinner," Mom was saying in the kitchen. "I got your favorite, Lydia."



Lydia headed to the living room. She collected three blankets from the couch. She wrapped the first around her waist, like a skirt. Then she draped the other two over her shoulders and twisted them around her arms. She felt thick with them -- fatter, like a giant sausage.

"It's time for dinner," and Lydia could hear the clanking of plates in the kitchen. Lydia stood still for a moment, then walked slowly, so she wouldn't disturb the blankets.

"Are you cold?" Mom asked.

Dad was at the table already. The overhead light cast a yellow glow on the plates set out and on the six-inch sub sitting on her plate, smelling like mustard, dill pickles, and something tangy.

"You remember how you used to love the one with crab meat?" Mom said. "Well, I got you one. Your favorite."

Lydia sat down. She wrapped the blankets tight around her torso and stared at the sub -- the bread and its bits of sesame, each seed loaded with enough fat to keep [someone without money or food](#) going for a day or maybe more. Probably more.

"What do you want to drink?" Mom said.

"Water," Lydia said. She didn't plan on drinking or eating anything.

She looked at the crab meat sticking out the edges, slimy with mayo, slithering from the sandwich and toward the plate like miniature worms. Mom moved around the table, set a bag of chips in the center with a crinkle.

Six inches for that sub. Probably six hundred and thirty calories, at least, with the bread and everything -- maybe more. Lydia could gain three pounds, probably, by eating that thing. Mom sat down at her place, and Dad started eating.

"What's wrong?" Mom said, like she didn't know.

"I'm not all that hungry," Lydia said. "I had a snack earlier."

"Just have a little," Mom said.

She smiled when she said it, but it wasn't her smile. It was the smile she used when she talked with doctors, or when the plumber had to come last winter when the pipes froze.

"I'm really not hungry," Lydia said. "Maybe I'll get something else. A salad would be good. I can make a salad, and you can have some to go with your sandwiches."

She got up and started wrapping the sandwich back in its wrapper, enjoying the crackling sounds the paper made. Mom could eat it tomorrow for lunch. Seafood was Mom's favorite.

Dad dropped a heavy hand on the table. The silverware jumped. "Lydia, this has got to stop."

It sounded sort of like he'd been waiting for this to happen.

"Your mother and I have tried very hard here."

Mom didn't say anything. She wasn't eating her sandwich either. She was looking at it, or maybe at the water in her glass -- the way the surface caught the light and reflected the room.

"Look at her. She's shivering, and it's seventy degrees in here. She looks like an emaciated animal," Dad said.

*Emaciated.* He'd said it. Did that mean she was *emaciated* now? That it was working? She was getting skinny? Lydia sat up a little, adjusted the covers on her shoulders.

"Seventy degrees isn't very warm," she said.

"Lydia, you need to eat."

He was shouting now. Dad never shouted, unless he was angry at himself. Lydia thought she could see a little water gathering in his eyes. Look what Lydia had done.

"I can't take this anymore," Dad said, looking at Mom.

"I'm sorry," Lydia said, but she didn't think he heard her.

He opened the refrigerator, smelled the leftover casserole from last night.

"You're going to eat now. You don't want the sandwich? Pick something right now and eat it."

Lydia didn't move from her seat.

"Now," Dad said.

She got up slowly and took a jar of dill pickles from the refrigerator door. Zero calories per serving, the label said, but everyone knew they really had at least five calories per pickle.

"Pickles?" Dad took the jar from her and spun it around to look at the label. "This is like eating nothing."

He threw the jar into the sink. The glass broke. Green juice spurted fluorescent streams into the air, like a wet light show. Lydia's nose started to run.



"Here." He got out a carton of cottage cheese. "You used to like cottage cheese. You're going to eat this."

He grabbed a spoon from the drawer -- a big spoon, the kind used for serving -- and set the carton on the table.

"Eat it."

Lydia paused for a moment. She wanted to do everything Dad said. She wanted to eat for him and fix his ears and make it so that Mom didn't have to cry sometimes. Cottage cheese had two hundred and thirty calories per serving, though. She could read the label. How many miles of running would it take to work this off? And how many servings was he going to force into her? And why did she have to have such a big spoon?

"Eat it."

Lydia scooped a spoonful into her mouth. The chunks were slimy and thick, and they tasted salty, watered with her snot but cold sliding down. She pretended she didn't want to eat half the carton -- that it didn't taste good. She was being force-fed, and that made it okay -- at least for now.

Upstairs at night, Lydia felt like she might be able to sleep, for once. Her stomach was cramping from all that was suddenly in there. She'd never admit it to anyone, but she felt kind of good, like she was a normal person, maybe. Dad had said she was officially *emaciated*, and now she was like Amy Spegler. As she was falling asleep, she could still hear them talking down there.

"The doctor recommended the hospital."

And of course, Lydia remembered, she wasn't a regular person. There was something particularly bad inside her, because look what she'd caused. She lay awake for a while after the sounds disappeared down there. She held Dad's paper to her ear and fell asleep that way.

*(End of Chapter Three. Go to Chapter Four)*

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*\* Bette's friend, Audrey, went to school at Wheaton College, which was in a suburb outside Chicago, and before Bette left for New York, she took Lydia to Wheaton for a visit -- and to take part in a group that was "fighting poverty one peanut butter sandwich at a time." Lydia wondered what that meant, but she didn't ask anyone. Bette parked at Wheaton College and went into a brick building with a kitchen inside. The kitchen had a yellow glow and a long counter that was too empty to look like a real kitchen counter. There, a group of kids made 47 peanut butter sandwiches, prayed over them, and drove a van into downtown Chicago to give the sandwiches to people who were homeless.*

*The van stopped under the highway, where there were three men wrapped in blankets. The light under the overpass was orange -- but not orange like a pumpkin or monarch butterfly. It was a different kind of orange -- orange like you'd have in a factory at night. Bette, Lydia, Audrey, and the others gave each man a sandwich, then hung out for a while, talking to Paul, Anthony, and a guy who called himself Shakes. Lydia liked Shakes. He had long dreadlocks coming from under a baseball cap, and he seemed to be smiling, even when he wasn't smiling. He talked with Lydia about politics and the way people on the street wouldn't look him in the eye. Lydia wanted to say the right thing to him when he said this, something to fix the problem, but she couldn't think of any right thing, so she nodded. Shakes leaned his head to one side and looked at her.*

*"[You look like a doll](#)," he said, and Lydia didn't think that was a good thing, even though Shakes was smiling. Was he smiling?*

*As they talked, a BMW drove up and stopped. A man in a suit got out and dropped three grocery bags with fabric blooming out of the top. He set them on the sidewalk without saying a word, jumped in the car, and drove away.*

*Then it was time to find other people who wanted sandwiches. Lydia didn't want to leave Shakes, though. She liked hearing about his ideas on politics.*

*"You need to see this fair city of ours," Shakes said, and it was settled.*

*When Lydia walked up the stairs toward the train, the wind whipped at her face. The conversation was a way for Shakes to pass the time, maybe -- just a blip in his day. She knew she wouldn't see him again, but she pretended that she would.*

*([return to where you were before the link](#))*

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*\*\* Years later, Lydia would still wonder about the things people said about eating disorders. It was a disease of privilege, and maybe that was true. Even though Lydia's family didn't have cable and even though Mom and Dad shared a car, there was always plenty of food and money for all they needed.*

*Mom told stories sometimes about what it was like to grow up poor on the farm, when she'd worry about having enough food and Grandma would open all the cupboards to show her the canned tomatoes and beans that were there just in case. And when you compared that to people around the world -- people who didn't have canned tomatoes -- Mom and Lydia were both privileged. Even a decade after the strawberry, this would leave a creepy feeling in Lydia's stomach.*

*([return to where you were before the link](#))*

## CHAPTER FOUR



BE SURE TO GET A LOT OF SHOTS OF THE PARENTS. THAT'S WHERE THE DRAMA'S GOING TO BE.

So this is where Bette lives -- a huge house way the hell out in Wisconsin. Jesse expected it to be bigger than this. It's not small or anything. It's got two stories, just like Mom's, and he doesn't know what he was expecting -- some big white thing, with a few turrets, columns, and shit like flying horses and clouds made of feathers floating around. But this is nice. Not bad.

He gets a shot of the outside, the stone that makes up the side of the house. It has that New England look to it. You'd almost expect Mr. Belvedere to walk out or something. There are three or four big oak trees at the sides of the house. They've lost their leaves, and the branches look sort of dead and black against the white sky. He zooms in a little so he can get that contrast and so he can get close enough for the branches to look almost like fingers. He pans down to the brown lawn, then back to the house.

There are square windows trimmed in white, and he can see little things on the window sills -- glass birds, paperweights, and a stained glass angel, probably for Christmas. There aren't any Christmas lights on the house, but there are solo candles in the windows.

It's dusk, and the light out here is an electric kind of blue that reflects off the snow, which is piled up in huge-ass banks. He's never seen so much snow, not even in parking lots, where they usually dump most of it back home. He gets the snow and the bird feeder. A blue jay is sitting there for a second, and he holds his camera on the bird for a minute while it grabs a beak full of seeds, spilling half of them. It's a pansy shot. He better edit that out.

He pans back to Bette. She's walking up the driveway, and the wind's blowing all that hair around. A strand of it cuts across her chin, like a power line cutting across a sky. Jesse feels like brushing it away for her, but he zooms toward her lips for a second instead.

A girl's out in the driveway even before they can get to the door. She's zipping up one coat over another jacket, and Jesse pans toward her. It's Lydia, the little sister. She's walking slowly, her body wound into itself and short hair whipping around her chin. Her corduroys are too long, and the bottoms hang below her ankles and drag in the snow. She's sliding a little on the ice, and her arms are sort of flinging away from her sides. Bette said she's in high school, but she looks like a little kid. She pushes up her glasses with one hand and grabs Bette's sleeve with the other. They walk to the house together.

The lady at the door must be Mrs. Poole. Jesse zooms out so he gets her apron. She's hugging Bette and says that this must be Jesse. He steps back a little to try to get a good shot of her because he wants to know if she looks at all like Bette, but she doesn't. Her black hair is pulled behind her head, and her eyes are dark. She looks like a genius or something, with those eyebrows and the tan skin. Something about the way she looks at Jesse kind of freaks him out. Bette disappears in her mom's hug, and her face is gone underneath the arms and the sleeves.

He slides off his coat while the camera's still running and follows Bette into the kitchen. Bette's dad comes in. He's taller than Jesse, maybe six two or six three. Jesse has to pan up to get a full shot of him -- enough to get the eyes, which are oceans, even behind his glasses. He hugs Bette without saying anything. Jesse pans to Lydia, who's looking at her dad like she's waiting for something.

"So I hear you're a filmmaker?" Mrs. Poole says, but Bette's been trained well, and she tells her mom to just ignore the camera, act like it's not here, be normal.

Mrs. Poole leads everyone into the kitchen, which has shiny red tiles on the floor -- so bright that they cast an upward glow on her face and on Bette's face. Now Bette looks like an alien.

Jesse pans to the counter right away -- also red. There's an open packet of Saltines and a bag of Fritos sitting there. The table's at the back of the kitchen, large and black, with a long bench on one end and two black chairs, dwarfed in comparison. On the wall to the right, looking kind of strange, is a Disney World calendar. Mickey and Minnie are dressed as pilgrims this month.

Mrs. Poole tells Jesse again to sit down, says she'll get everyone something to drink, says she's got a whole pot of soup on the stove simmering for dinner. She swings open the refrigerator and rifles in the vegetable drawer. She brings back two sodas. Jesse sits on the bench to see if he can fit the whole room in the shot. He's never seen so much red.

Mrs. Poole wants to know how finals went for Bette, and Bette talks about her philosophy essay. Mrs. Poole bows her head a little, and Jesse can see the part in her hair, straight, like someone drew it with a pencil. Lydia's just sitting there, a fucking waste of battery-time.

He excuses himself to go to the bathroom, which turns out to be the weirdest bathroom he's seen. The narrow space that usually makes toilets private is wide like a subway track, and the wall behind the toilet is white plastic. There's a long guardrail, like in the handicapped stalls of public restrooms, only it's plastic, and the sink is lower and wider than usual. He's got to get a shot of this later.

He pulls the door closed. It's a sliding door, without lock or doorknob, and as he unzips, he feels like anyone could slide the door open and catch him there. He's been in enough hospitals to know that this is a handicapped stall, down to the plastic and the smell.

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Looks like something secretive is going on -- at least that's what Jesse hopes. Mr. Poole's getting something from the cabinet in the hallway. The room's full of shadows in this light, and Mr. Poole stands like he's talking with someone short, like he's leaning in to hear something. He's not saying anything, though, and there's no one in the hallway.

"Is that a handicapped bathroom?" Jesse says.

Mr. Poole looks up, jerks a little. Jesse can see the fluorescent glimmer of something in Mr. Poole's ear. Mr. Poole makes a grunt, like he didn't hear.

"The bathroom," Jesse says. He's talking louder than he should. He's talking like you'd talk to old people. It sounds lame, but he keeps talking like that anyway.

"The bathroom. It's handicapped or something?"

Mr. Poole nods. It looks like he's gritting his teeth or biting down on something thin.

"It was built that way," he says. "For a while, they thought I might have multiple sclerosis."

Jesse has no clue what to say about that, but he does know this would be a good shot to have -- at least on voiceover. He asks if that's what the green thing in the ear is for.

"It's just a hearing aid."

If Jesse had the camera (shit), he'd be focusing in on the hearing aid. It looks like the thing would glow in the dark. It doesn't, but it'd still make a great shot. Jesse asks if Mr. Poole lost the hearing because of the MS thing. He asks how much hearing is lost. If it's not MS, Jesse wonders what it is.

"The one with the hearing aid is my good ear. I can't even hear a train in the other one."

"But you can hear me?"

Mr. Poole nods. He reaches in his pocket and grabs a pen and an index card with writing on it. He flips the index card to the back and draws three straight lines length-wise.

"This is regular hearing," he says and pokes the pen at the top line.

Jesse wants to get a shot of this shit on the index card -- and Mr. Poole's hands. They look tough -- the kind of hands that could beat the shit out of someone, even though you can tell Mr. Poole isn't like that.

"This is no hearing at all." Mr. Poole pokes the pen at the bottom line. "And this is where I am -- enough hearing for most speech, but not a lot for background noise and other things, and I have a hard time figuring out where sounds are coming from."

Jesse nods. Shit. He has to bring the tape recorder everywhere from now on -- even to the bathroom. Mr. Poole puts the index card in his pocket, and Jesse can see that Mr. Poole is holding a stack of photos. He can't see what they are, though.

"It's not MS?" Jesse says.

Mr. Poole drops the hand with the photos to his side. If Jesse had the camera, maybe he'd focus on the photos. Maybe the photos have even more to them than the hearing aid. Probably not, but maybe.

"It's Ménière's disease," Mr. Poole says.

Jesse wonders if he can slowly move the conversation to the kitchen, if he can grab the camera casually. He doesn't want to fuck things up with Mr. Poole, though.

"Why is the hearing aid green?"

"It's a cool color," Mr. Poole says. He laughs when he says that, and the laugh seems to put him off balance, so he sways a little toward Jesse, then away again.

"What are those?" Jesse waves a hand at the photos.

"Found these recently. I wanted to show them to the girls."

He holds the pictures out for Jesse to see, flipping through a few of them. It's Mrs. Poole, a long time ago, probably. She's got a flower in her hair in one of them. In another she's wearing a winter coat and holding a fish in a plastic bag. There's snow in the background.

Jesse follows Mr. Poole back to the kitchen. Lydia's finally taken her coat off, and Jesse can see that maybe she's going to be a better subject than even Mr. Poole. Her eyes are so big they pretty much take up her face -- and fuck, she's thin. She almost doesn't have any cheeks. Her hands look like they're taped to her wrists.

He's got the camera this time, so he picks it up to get a shot. The angle of the sunset slices the room in half: half gold, half near-dark. Lydia looks like she's dipped in gold, like a gold elf ornament. She looks at the camera without adjusting her expression for it.

He zooms in on her face, getting the chapped lips and the little flaking bits of skin at the corners of her eyes, her bangs hitting the tops of her eyebrows. He pans to Bette, who's sitting with her hands on her knees, her lips pursed, talking about Biology 101 and overpopulation. She brushes a bit of hair behind her ear. She tries to cross her legs, then goes back to sitting as she was before. He zooms out, getting both her and Lydia in the picture. They've got the same expression on their faces now, looking like two angels, sort of lost -- fucking adorable. He turns the shot to Mr. Poole, who's smiling the kind of smile that's been there too long, so it sort of looks funny. The green blob in his ear catches the light and glints a little.

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Jesse should be asleep by now, but he's staring at the white ceiling of the spare bedroom, trying not to look at the wheelchair in the corner. Bette said her mom bought it second-hand back when they thought Mr. Poole had MS. Jesse closes his eyes and counts to fourteen. He repeats the word *Bette* in his head for a while. He tries to think about the documentary, how good it'll be, with the right editing.

He pulls the covers back and sits up in bed. He sits with the pillow on his lap for a minute and stares into the dark. The darkness looks grainy, like a film from the sixties, like original footage of the Kennedy assassination. If Bette's dad were in the wheelchair -- if he had MS or something just as bad, that would make a good film. If there were something still seriously wrong with him, even if he wasn't in the wheelchair, that would even be kick-ass. But the guy looked okay during dinner. He could hear everything all right.

Jesse turns on the light by the bed and squints. The nightstand drawer is open a crack, and he opens it all the way. It's stuffed with bottles of pills -- fat burner plus, Dexitrim, a box of something called Slimming Tea, and (score) a pack of Marlboros and a book of matches. He wonders if these are Bette's or maybe Lydia's -- and why she wouldn't keep them in her own room.

It'd be good to start filming some of this -- start getting some more footage. It's creepy as hell in here. Two sick family members -- one with a mysterious disease and the other, mysteriously evaporating. Evaporating. He'll have to use that in the voiceover, maybe in the trailer.

He pulls out the camera and hits record. He does a slow pan of the room, starting with the gold shag carpet. Then he pans up to the open closet, stuffed with clothes and some old suit coats that look like they've been bagged up forever. He zooms in to a shirt, pans left to the bed, the covers mangled by now, the sheets smelling like the inside of a never-used

closet. He gets a shot of the nightstand, which is plastic but made to look like it's supposed to be wood, and the travel alarm clock on top.

He pulls out his mini tape recorder and presses record with his left hand. "Voiceover for spare room scene. The clock is still set to daylight savings in here, and there's all this shit, I mean all this stuff stashed in here."

He pans further to the left, where Bette's mom has a shit-load of old junk: a poster for someone's birthday or something, made by gluing candy wrappers and boxes to poster board. Then he lets the camera drift over boxes of shit that someone's just dumped in here -- an old tape recorder probably from the '80s, folders, art supplies, a glue gun, an old Darth Vader Halloween costume, and a giant, lawn-sized reindeer. He pans over to the dresser and the pills and cigarettes. He picks up one of the bottles and rattles it. It's still almost full. Shit, those cigarettes look good. He could use one.

He gets a long shot of the wheelchair, which looks newer than anything else in the room -- all shiny, with a sticker of a Christmas angel stuck to the metal where the person's hand would have been. He goes to the window and gets a shot of the snowed-over lawn. Looks purple in the dark. Fucking depressing. This is a shitty place to have to sleep.

He grabs one of the cigarettes and lights it. The smoke draws crazy curls through the shot, but who cares. The window opens more easily than he expects, and he watches the smoke and his breath float through the screen and out into the cold.

*[\(End of Chapter Four. Go to Chapter Five\)](#)*

## CHAPTER FIVE



Jesse's camera had a red light. The lens was shiny, but not shiny enough that Lydia could see herself in it. The glass was convex, so she'd probably look fat anyway. If she stepped up to the camera, her nose and eyes would look big and funny, like a cartoon.



But when she saw herself on the screen afterwards -- that would be good. Then she'd be able to see what she really looked like, and maybe what she really was. She'd be able to tell if the striped shirt made her look fat, or if the corduroys looked like the new kind -- the kind a rich kid would have to look cool, rather than the hand-me-downs that Bette wanted to give to charity, which they were. The camera was supposed to add ten pounds.

"I just want to ask you some questions," Jesse said. "Hold on. I want to get you framed in the shot just right."

He was wearing the new kind of cords. They had wide stripes to them that looked like a blue plush. His sneakers were new too -- Sketchers or Vans, maybe -- the kind skaters wore, only Jesse didn't look like a skater. He carried things around in a canvas bag. Maybe Lydia should start carrying things in a canvas bag instead of a backpack. It was less assuming, wasn't it?

"Just bear with me one second."

Lydia adjusted herself, so she was sitting cross-legged. The inner part of her thigh stretched out when she did that, and it looked less like a leg of chicken -- a fat leg of chicken, with the skin all white and blubbery.

"Okay. We're ready," Jesse said.

Jesse pushed something on the camera and stepped back from the tripod. It looked like a regular camera up there, rather than a video camera -- just a little silver box with that red light, which was lit now, and that convex lens, so small that maybe it didn't matter how fat Lydia looked in it. It was [the tiniest mirror in the world](#).

Jesse sat in the chair he'd put there for himself -- one of the kitchen chairs, which was so old that little greasy marks covered the wood in spots.

"Now, I want you to pretend that the camera isn't here, okay? We're just going to talk like normal. You're going to tell me a little about yourself, and maybe I'll ask you some stuff. I'm not going to embarrass you or make you answer anything you don't want to, okay?"

That was a nice thing to say, because Lydia's heart felt like it did when she'd been in a whirlpool too long. Tachycardia, it was called. She'd read about it. If you got it too bad, they had to put a probe inside your chest and blast away the electrical current, because it was caused by too much heart electricity.



"So, you're the youngest in the family, right?" Jesse said.

Lydia nodded. Jesse had these big eyes, and he opened them really wide -- wide enough so his face seemed like a black hole, sucking everything in and putting nothing out there to replace it. She watched the curly hair clinging to Jesse's ear, and she told him that she was a singer, that maybe she was going to be a professional singer some day, although she didn't know if she could stand all those people looking at her, so maybe she wouldn't after all.

Jesse's face lowered, like he was going to write something down, only he didn't have anything to write on. His big eyes closed for a second, and Lydia could see that his eyelashes were so long that they touched the tops of his cheeks. They were black, like his hair.

"Why do you want to eat so little?" he said. "Is it that you want to be small?"

It was and it wasn't, but Lydia wasn't going to tell him that. She looked at the red light instead. She tried to look the camera right in the eye. She wondered if she could lose three pounds this week. She wondered if anyone would notice if she cut her Cheerios portion in half. With Jesse here, no one would say anything.

"I'm sorry," Jesse said. "Maybe you weren't ready for that."

Lydia shook her head. If she didn't say anything, he'd say something. Maybe he'd say something nice. Maybe he'd tell her how little she was, tell her that he thought she was important or something. That would be nice.

But he didn't say anything. He sat with his hand in his lap. Then he moved his hands to his corduroy knees. His hands were big and tan. He had little bits of hair on his knuckles,

and in the flat part of his fingers between them. Something was written there in blue ink. She could read the word *try*, but nothing else.

"Would you sing me a song?" he said. He took his hands off his knees, put them on the armrests, and leaned his ear on one of them.

Lydia knew she would sing the song -- especially for Jesse, but she pretended she didn't want to, that it would be just too much attention, too much of something. She didn't want to be thinking how he'd fall in love with her voice, maybe -- how he'd put it on camera and maybe she would look thin on camera. Maybe she would look like a good person -- like the kind of person she wanted to be, even though she never would.

But he asked again, so she started to sing. She sang a non-traditional version of the Ave Maria. Her voice came out clear, and Lydia convinced herself that it came from someone else -- someone beautiful and good. She loved the Ave Maria. She loved going low with the low notes, then moving higher in that minor key. She loved anything in a minor key. Some day she wanted to learn to sing in Arabic, in Russian, maybe in Hebrew too.

Jesse sat still to listen. He kept his hand like that, on his left ear. He licked his lips once, and maybe that meant he liked it. His eyes opened wide again, and the long lashes blinked once quickly. Afterwards, he ran the hand with the writing through his hair, and he got up to shut off the camera.

"Shit, that was something," he said.

And Lydia wished he would say it again. She wished she could believe it in an hour, when it was time to run another eight miles. Eight miles, and she'd maybe lose one more pound this week.

"What was that song?" Jesse said. He was flipping something plastic on the tripod, lifting the camera off, and slipping it back into the bag.

"It's a version of the Ave Maria. Are you Catholic?"

"Nope. Shit, that was something," he said.

And she wished he would say it again. She wished he would ask her if she was Catholic. Maybe he'd ask her about singing in Arabic and Russian.

"Why those languages?" he might say.

Maybe he'd ask what kind of god she believed in, but he was already collapsing the tripod and moving toward another room to find Bette.

Lydia dropped back to the couch and looked at the white nothingness of the ceiling. Maybe she should become Catholic or even better, Quaker. That would be good. She'd

learn to live with less. Then there'd be more to go around. She'd live in a cardboard box with everyone, and she'd give away all the money and food she could find. As she did, everyone else would get stronger, bigger, and she'd become small -- so small that one day, she'd fit in a Fedex box. As a joke she'd ask people to ship her to South Korea. Everyone would laugh, and they'd smile as they grew fatter, as she grew thinner -- as even her bones shrunk to be thin as fish bones -- clear and crispy. She'd finally be so small that someone would pick her up and put her in a shirt pocket. The person would carry her around everywhere, like an index card. She'd be able to hear the person's heartbeat, and the person's skin would keep her warm. She'd sing to the person, maybe -- quietly, so no one could hear but the one person.

Lydia sat up again and felt the rush of almost fainting. Maybe Jesse and his camera would be like that. She'd be like Jesse's camera, always on his person, always next to him. Jesse loved his camera, she could tell -- the way he zipped it up in the case every time he was done using it and the way he held it, like an egg, or like a chick just hatched from an egg.

Maybe, if Lydia let Jesse film her, he would tell her she was skinny. Maybe he'd fall in love with her, and maybe she'd fall in love with him. Maybe, when she was small enough, he'd hold her like she was the camera. Maybe he'd zip her up in a special case and keep her there forever.

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Lydia was still warm from the run. Her skin was the clammy kind of warm that came afterwards. She had a cool sweat that clung to the little hairs all over her body. She had a lot of hairs lately, but she'd read about that. It was to be expected.

She jumped up and down again to keep the blood going. She was at the corner of the abandoned storefront, and she could see the edge of the woods at the end of the gravel road to her right and the houses to her right: the mint green house where the people lived who owned Samoyed dogs and the white house on the other corner, where Lydia's old friend, Anna, had lived before she moved to Arizona and got pregnant. Lydia didn't remember what these stores used to be, except they were probably the kind that sold guns and taxidermy stuff. The wind whisked up the snow and sent it in sheets into the air. It was a dry, sparkly snow. When she was a kid, Lydia had wanted to wear that snow on her clothes, like sequins.

She'd like to be skinny enough to disappear out here. Maybe, in the seven minutes it took to smoke a cigarette, she'd fall over like an icicle and go to sleep in the snow. She flicked the lighter a few times before getting a flame. She watched it glow for a minute, then leaned in to light the cigarette. It tasted like dirt. She hadn't imagined that. She read that you were supposed to breathe in, so she tried it, but it tasted bad. And smoke could have calories. Probably not, but it was hard to know for sure.

She decided just to puff her lips against it, to avoid the bulk of the calories. This is why people smoked anyway, to give their lips something to do when they weren't eating. That's why everyone who smoked was skinny, like Jesse was skinny. Jesse was as skinny as Adam, maybe skinnier.

"You're supposed to breathe it in," someone said.

It was Jesse, not even wearing a coat, standing out here in a stretched-out sweater. He had a cigarette of his own in his left hand. The end of it glowed orange and peeling, like burning birch bark.

"It's a nasty habit anyway," he said, and Lydia tried to take a real puff -- one where she'd breathe it all in. She could run around the block a few times, maybe -- or she could do sit-ups, maybe jump rope for an extra half hour.

"Why do you smoke, then?" Lydia said.

"I don't know. I just started."

He never stopped moving. Lydia could see a red light on in his hand, but it wasn't from the camera. It looked like a tape recorder.

"Why'd you start?" she said.

"Just did. My dad caught me smoking once when I was a kid. That guy was scary when he got mad."

"Oh."

She watched her cigarette. The paper was peeling back slowly, shrinking. The glowing point was getting closer to her hand.

"You're not going to tell anyone, are you?" she said.

"About what?"

"The cigarette. It's only my first time."

"I know," he said. "Just give me the rest of your pack, and we'll call it even."

He breathed in his last mouthful of smoke and dumped the butt into a snow bank. It shuttled deep into the snow, leaving a dot-sized hollow on the surface. Lydia did the same with hers, and she followed him back to the house. If she was lucky, everyone would have already eaten dinner.

Lydia sat with her butt right on the edge of the bed, so her legs were sitting on air. Bette had scrunched down low into the covers, with one arm stretched above the pillow, like she always did. Lydia could see the tiny stubble under Bette's arm, like black bits of pepper. She didn't have hair in her armpit when they were kids. Back then, Bette's armpit was like a pink saucer in the dark.

The first time the attacks happened with Dad, after Lydia saw him downstairs with the yellow stuck in his beard, she came upstairs and Bette was sleeping like this. Lydia didn't wake her, although now she wished she would have.

Lydia lay down on her own bed again, taking inventory: the scratch of the pillow; nuns in Spain with their Ave Maria; the Ave Maria sung in choir with a piano in the background; Amy Spegler, who was really bad at choir but said she was going to convert to Judaism and become a rabbi someday; Amy Spegler in Rabbi robes, which were probably like the robes of priests; Amy Spegler as she'd look in the hospital, like when she had that asthma attack in fifth grade -- her skinny body wrapped in a thin sheet; Amy Spegler almost dead that day; death as non-being, like a big rest; death as nothing to fear; other words that start with "D": Dog, Depth, Dead End, Derogatory, Destination, Deplorable; the edge of Bette's pajama sleeve; the sound of a voice in the hall; Jesse's red camera light today; Jesse's cigarette smushed in the snow; Bette's puffy eyelids in the morning; Bette's wrist, the circumference of her arm; perfect Bette; other words that start with B: Beautiful, Butter, Buttermilk pancakes, Brain, Bitmap, Bites, Bach, Beethoven, Brilliant, Bicycle, Bi-lateral, Billion, Bitter, Better, Best.

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Lydia sat on the table and dangled her feet over the edge. Her feet were heavy in these shoes, and she felt like they were pulling her toward the floor -- maybe pulled all the way to the center of the earth, and at least it would be warm there. Every time she swung her legs, the paper crackled against her corduroys. She let her book -- Emily Dickinson -- sit heavy in her lap to balance her from the shoes.

Dr. Knapp slipped through the door like his visit was a secret. The gray stripes on the sides of his head were a little messy today. He was holding a bottle of pills. He balanced the clipboard on top of the bottle, like it was a gigantic lid.

"How's the book coming?" he said.

"The same," she said.

He stood far away, set the pills on the counter, then moved in closer, like someone peering into an oven to check on a cake. Dr. Knapp probably had cake all the time. He asked about Lydia's dad, and Lydia only nodded that yes, he was okay. The less she said, the better. Once, when she answered one of these questions, she'd seen him write the

word *blasé* in her chart. He chewed on his pen. Lydia watched his Adam's apple move as he swallowed. His breath smelled like coffee and ceramics.

"Lydia, you know what I've recommended to your parents, don't you? I think you need to go somewhere to rest and get better."

Then he talked about the hospital again. He called it a facility, as if she were going into rehab for a drug addiction or maybe an old folk's home. Lydia wouldn't mind that. Maybe she could sing to the old people. Maybe someone there would tell her that she reminded them of someone now dead, someone they really loved.

Dr. Knapp was staring right into Lydia's eyes now. Dr. Knapp's eyes were tired, and he had folds of skin that made little pillows underneath them. When Lydia didn't say anything, he stopped and wrote something -- probably the word *blasé*. The silver clipboard hit the sun from the window, and the glint made a white spot of light that hit Lydia's thigh, then jumped to the wall, right below the clock. Dr. Knapp sighed with his belly and pulled in close with the stethoscope.

"Well, let's take your vitals," he said.

The stethoscope was cold against her back, then against her breasts. Dr. Knapp's wrist hit the edge of her bra, and she breathed in quickly. He grunted and wrote down the numbers, then opened the blood pressure cuff with a crackle of Velcro and squeezed it around her arm. The pumping sounded like a heartbeat, then she could feel her own heart inside the cuff. Dr. Knapp grunted again as he wrote that number too. He pulled her wrist forward and pushed his two flat fingers against the veins.

"We're going to have to take you in soon," he said as he was leaving, and Lydia followed him out to the scale in the hallway, where Miss Eichner -- the nurse-turned-nutritionist -- waited.

Lydia stepped on the scale with her heavy shoes. Miss Eichner took the book from Lydia and started fiddling with the weights. Less than one hundred, so the big weight was shifted to fifty. The little weight was too much at ninety-nine, too much at ninety-seven, ninety-five. She stopped it on ninety and wrote the number down.

"You've lost another two pounds," she said.

The home scale said eighty-eight point five. It was the shoes, Lydia knew, unless she had somehow gained it back. She had used a different mug for her Cheerios this afternoon, because Bette had used the usual one for coffee. Maybe this mug was bigger. Or maybe it was the smoking. Maybe there was a significant number of calories in smoke. Or the scale at home could be off. Who knows when the last time it had been calibrated. Maybe this scale was off too, and she was actually getting fatter. Maybe Dad and the doctors had rigged the scales that way to trick her. When she got home, she'd weigh just the shoes.

Then she'd know for sure, and maybe she'd go on an extra run. Just two miles, nothing big.

Miss Eichner's office was a converted exam room. There was carpeting inside, flat and orange. The desk had plastic stands with brochures on how to lose weight, determine your risk for diabetes, or start an exercise program. Then, in the middle of the desk, because Miss Eichner didn't have a family of her own, was a picture of her sister's family.

Miss Eichner said that the purpose of food journaling was to be more aware of what you're eating to know why the weight keeps coming off. She described how fast metabolism works, how people with fast metabolism need to eat lots of peanut butter to keep their weight up.

This is the part where Lydia had to show Miss Eichner her food journal for the week. She kept it in a tiny notebook, small enough to fit in a pocket, because Miss Eichner said it was a good idea to bring it everywhere, to remember what you ate as you ate it. Lydia's notebook had a blue cover, and one of the corners was bent where she'd shoved it into her locker. The food journal was the worst thing Lydia had done in her life, because she lied in it. She included the Cheerios, but she also added other stuff, like apples and salads and even a hard-boiled egg.

Miss Eichner opened the food journal slowly, swinging the cardboard cover over like she was opening a sacred document -- the Talmud, maybe. She read the lists slowly, as if each word was a paragraph, and her forehead wrinkled a little when she did it.

"An apple," Miss Eichner said. "An apple doesn't have very many calories, now. It's a fruit, which means that the energy from it burns off within the first hour. If you eat something like a piece of bread, maybe, or a bagel, that will stay with you longer. Now, what if you tried to replace the snack of an apple with a complex carbohydrate like bread? What about a handful of crackers or a muffin?"

Lydia nodded because Miss Eichner was looking at her. Miss Eichner had the smallest hands, and she held Lydia's journal page in both of them like she was about to hug it. Lydia wished Miss Eichner would hug her instead.

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Mom had made steak and baked potatoes for dinner. Everyone knew that Lydia wouldn't eat the steak, but Mom plopped a large potato on her plate. Jesse sat next to her with the red light going on his camera. Lydia wished she could see the eyes behind the camera.

"Ninety pounds? Is that what the doctor said?" Dad said.

Mom nodded. Lydia kept looking at the potato. She couldn't get away without eating it -- not with Jesse here and Dad quoting her weight. She grabbed the salt shaker and shook on as much as she could. She could see the clear crystals coating the potato.

"It's just too much," Dad said, and he was quiet when he said it. Lydia wished she could stab herself like Mom stabbed the potato. She was making things worse for everyone.

"We've decided that you need to go to the hospital, honey." Mom said.

Mom had cut her steak into tiny pieces. The gray squares of meat were arranged like a checker board on her plate. She touched Lydia's hand. Lydia could see Jesse from the corner of her eyes. He adjusted his chair and pushed a button on the camera.

"She can't help it," Bette said. "I've seen friends at school, and they can't help it."

Lydia stabbed the potato. She pretended it was her own chest she was stabbing. A chunk of potato came out of the skin, clumped together like an icy chunk of snow. The steam rose from it in curly-cues. It smelled like dirt. Lydia put the chunk in her mouth.

Mom's eyes were watery. She was going to cry. She probably felt like a failure -- like she was a bad mother or a bad person altogether, and it was Lydia's fault. Lydia chewed the potato slowly. The salt made her tongue get watery, and her teeth chomped on the potato clump fast. She pushed the chunk under her tongue and held it there while she swallowed just spit.

"The closest program is in the Twin Cities?" Bette said, and Lydia hated her for a second.

Mom nodded. Lydia looked toward Jesse's camera, and it was steady on her, staring at her.

"The people there are really nice, honey," Mom said.

Lydia wished Mom wouldn't call her "honey." She didn't deserve honey. She put her napkin to her mouth and spit out the wet chunk of potato. It felt like a slimy square in there, and she folded the napkin over itself to hide it. She watched the camera, which was probably zooming in on the napkin, using its X-ray vision to see the potato glob inside it.

"They'll get me better," Lydia said, because she wanted to make Mom and Dad feel like they were doing the right thing. She tried to use the same tone of voice that Bette would use.

She hacked off another chunk of potato with her fork. They were all watching her now. It was like having five cameras on her at once -- all zooming in on her and the potato.

Dad's teeth were gritted like they were right before an attack. He was holding his head at an angle, and Lydia thought maybe this was the start of one right now. In an hour she'd be sitting at the top of the stairs looking down at him getting vertigo.

She wanted to be the one with the problem. She wanted to go deaf instead of Dad. Dad could sit at the top of the steps to Lydia's bedroom instead of her. Dad could see the yellow of the light down in the hallway, the silver of the linen closet's knobs hitting the light down there. Dad could slip his toe in on the edge of the carpet to feel the rubber backing. Dad could see Lydia down there instead of him. She'd be on hands and knees, dizzy and throwing up, and things like potatoes wouldn't matter anymore.

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Mom had started to pack for the trip to the hospital, even though she and Dad were only going to stay over one night. She'd pulled her hard-topped suitcase from the top shelf of her closet and slung it on the bed. Her clothes and Dad's clothes were stacked on the bed in square piles, like a patchwork quilt.

Lydia started packing her things too. She had square piles of her own, and Jesse stood next to the bed filming them, moving the camera slowly over each stack, then the plastic bag with Lydia's shampoo and razor and hand lotion.

"You're bringing a lot of lotion," he said.

Lydia didn't say anything. She wanted him to go away because she needed to do some exercise. She needed to lose two more pounds before she got to the hospital. If she didn't, she'd be laughed out of there. They'd send her home.

Jesse turned the camera on her. He was holding it up to his face, and she could see something new written on his hand, in purple ink this time, the kind of ink Mom used for everything. Mom loved purple.

"Are you afraid of going?" Jesse said.

"No."

Lydia unzipped the suitcase and lined the bottom with books and sheet music. She laid the pile of pants in first, then a pile of shirts that fit underneath other shirts, and finally, the shirts that fit over other shirts. She had a lot of clothes. A lot of people could fit all their possessions in a suitcase like this. A lot of people didn't even have enough to fit in a suitcase.

"You know, it's not going to be any fun, filming here without you," Jesse said.

He said it like he knew her well enough to care if she was here or not. And for a second, Lydia believed him. For a second she thought maybe her singing had made him fall in love with her. Maybe he wanted to film her all the time. Maybe she came off on camera as a good person -- the kind of person who could make the world a better place, who was perfect like Bette and who was above all greed. She unzipped the side pocket of the suitcase and slid in her underwear, trying to hide it from the camera. She rolled her pajama bottoms into a flannel burrito, and stuffed them along the side of the suitcase. Jesse's camera followed her hands. She looked at the clock. Not a lot of time left for exercising.

"I hope we get to come and visit you," Jesse said. "Me and Bette, I mean. Because you're a good kid, you know?"

She put the plastic pouch with her shampoo and stuff on top of everything else in the suitcase. The pouch was still new, and the plastic shined.

"I hope you don't mind me filming you like this?" he said, and Lydia shook her head.

A curl was falling right in the middle of Jesse's forehead. Lydia wondered if he'd watched the footage of her interview already -- and if maybe he'd let her watch it too sometime. Jesse sat on the bed. His face was hovering away from the camera a little, and Lydia could see the corners of his mouth twitching. Maybe he wouldn't mind if she exercised right here. Maybe he wouldn't tell anyone.

She stood in front of him for a minute. Two pounds thinner meant that she had to burn an extra seven thousand calories. Even if she didn't eat anything between now and tomorrow, she'd have to exercise for at least four hours. She'd have to jump rope or run stairs. She pulled her jump rope out of its drawer and wound the ends around her palms. Maybe if she started slow, he'd just think she was playing, just trying to pass the time. She did one jump. The rope hit the ceiling and just missed the edge of the bed on its way down. She sped her pace and did two, three, seven jumps. Jesse put his face back to his camera again. He licked his lips.

"How much do you weigh now?" he said.

She sped her pace. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Jesse twisted his position a little. He switched hands with the camera.

"I know you weigh yourself outside of the doctor's office. I'm not going to tell anyone if you tell me," he said.

Lydia kept jumping. She started to feel a thin film of sweat at her neck, and the breath coming in felt sharp.

"Eighty-four," she said.

"Shit," Jesse said, and that was good. Eighty-four was good. But eighty-two would be perfect. Or maybe eighty. Eighty would be safer. Lydia kept jumping. Then the red light stopped, and Jesse lowered the camera and asked if she wanted to go outside with him while he got a smoke. Lydia shook her head. She kept jumping as he headed downstairs toward smells of macaroni and cheese, which is what Mom always made the night before a trip.

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Lydia had been standing for ten minutes now watching Bette sleep, which was pretty boring. Bette's lungs blew up like a little balloon, then collapsed again. Her hair was flung on the pillow in all sorts of angles, and her knees were drawn up to her chest like they always were, like a baby.

Lydia wondered what Bette dreamed. Maybe she had nightmares, like Lydia did -- nightmares about Dad not hearing or about Dad serving a huge plate of lasagna or about Jesse walking off a grassy golf course somewhere and falling twenty thousand feet into a black hole while holding a plate of lasagna. Maybe Bette had dreams like that, but probably not. Probably Bette dreamed about good things -- about finding a cure for cancer, about saving children from a burning building, walking down an infinite hallway and accepting blown kisses from everyone in the world.

Sometimes, when they were little, Lydia used to creep up to Bette while she was sleeping and peel back her eyelids to see what her eyes were doing. Lydia thought maybe she could find out what Bette was thinking that way. Maybe she'd catch Bette's eyes moving back and forth like they were supposed to do when people dreamed. Maybe her eyes would move in Morse code or something and relay some kind of important message about how not to feel alone all the time. But all Lydia ever saw was an eyeball, staring straight ahead into nothing. Then the eye would move, and Bette would wake up.

The room looked speckled in the dark, and the further Lydia looked across the room, the more blurry things got. Not far away, Bette's flat stomach was rising and falling under the covers. Behind her were the bookshelves, the spines organized by size, showing a whole

pallet of gray tones. The one glow-in-the-dark star stuck to the door had finally lost its glow, and all Lydia could see of it now was a white star shape, only because she knew it was there. She could hear the tocks of the clock downstairs. She could hear the darkness, almost -- at least it seemed like she could. It pressed up against things, shuffled and shifted.

Lydia opened the door and slipped out. She closed the door behind her, turning the doorknob back to its regular position only after the door was shut, so the latch wouldn't make that clicking sound, although it wouldn't wake Bette anyway. Lydia turned and saw her reflection in the full-length mirror at the head of the stairs. Her pajamas looked white in the darkness -- like a ghost, like the story that a big kid had told her when she was six, how, if someone looked at her reflection in the dark, she'd see terrifying things about herself -- she'd see how awful she really was. And maybe, if she looked long enough, she'd die right there. She'd collapse, and her head would hang over the top stair. No one would notice until morning, when Bette would have to step over her to go down and get Mom and Dad. But Lydia's reflection wasn't all that bad, in the dark. Her face was white and puffy. Her pajama pants billowed around her legs like a giant pillowcase.

She went down the stairs slowly, trying to time her descent with the tocks of the clock. At the bottom, she turned to the dresser that was still in the hallway, pressed against the wall like maybe no one would notice it there. It was Grandpa's old dresser. Dad hadn't known what to do with it since the funeral, and Mom wouldn't give it away because it had sentimental value, and besides it was an antique. It looked antique too, with the dark wood that had been stained and polished so many times and the old-looking handles, carved into creepy shapes. It had so many little drawers, none really big enough to store clothes. It was the kind of dresser for hiding things, for putting letters and secrets.

Lydia opened a drawer -- slowly, so it wouldn't make any noise. It was still filled with things: old receipts, papers, and hundreds of pictures of Grandma -- Grandma when she was young with her dishwater blonde hair done up in weird shapes, Grandma painting the house, Grandma pulling things in the garden, Grandma with baby Mom in her arms. Lydia hadn't even remembered what Grandma looked like until now.

Lydia opened one of the deepest drawers next, and there was a silver Kodak camera, a black camera, and a disposable camera. The drawer to the right had an ancient camera -- the fancy kind with all sorts of lenses and stuff. Lydia took the silver Kodak and closed the drawers. She looked in the little window at the camera's top, but she couldn't tell if there were pictures left on this roll. She wanted to take a picture of something -- maybe of her own reflection in the mirror or Bette sleeping or Jesse down the hall. She hated Jesse, but she wanted a whole roll of him -- Jesse from every angle, enough to fill up two drawers in an old dresser.

She walked slowly to the other end of the hallway. The hallway smelled like clean sheets and a little like Dad's shaving cream. She passed the bathroom, where the nightlight made a white streak on the floor. When she got to the guest room, she put a hand on the door, like teachers always said to do if there was ever a fire, to feel if the door was hot. She

held it there for a second, then turned the doorknob one hundred eighty degrees before pushing the door open.

Lydia's footsteps sounded like loud brushes scraping against the carpet. She tried to tiptoe, let her eyes adjust to the room without a nightlight. Jesse was asleep. He was breathing out of his mouth. He was lying on his side, stretched out, with his arms over his head. His eyelashes fanned out on his cheekbones like a girl's, and his mouth was relaxed. It seemed wider than it did when he was awake. A wavy bit of dark hair hung over his eyebrows. It made him look like one of those paintings of boy angels -- the kind that was maybe painted on the Sistine Chapel. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and his chest was bubbly with muscle under what looked like baby skin. She wondered if Adam's chest looked like that without a shirt.

She looked down at the camera, fiddled with the controls. She wondered if the flash would wake him. It might. She might have to take the picture and run before he opened his eyes and saw her. Because he'd be mad, if he knew she was doing this.

She sat on the floor to watch him for a second -- or maybe just because she didn't want to go back into her room again. Jesse's duffel bag was in the corner. It was unzipped, and his T-shirt was tossed on top. Lydia scooted over to it to take a look. She pulled the shirt off the mouth of the bag. Inside was Jesse's camera bag, open slightly. She wondered what would happen if she looked at it for a moment to see what things looked like on film. The metal was cold against her warm hands. It was light but solid. She remembered seeing Jesse do this, so she flipped out the screen on the side, pushed the power button, and a touch-screen display came up white against a blue background. She touched the arrow for rewind, then play.

The screen glowed yellow from Bette's shirt. It was Bette on screen, next to Dad. The camera shook for a second, then zoomed into Bette's eyes, into the water gathering at the centers. Then the camera slowly moved out. It showed Bette's lips, her eyes batting, the little wrinkle on her forehead when she saw Dad. The camera moved to Lydia in her winter coat, barely resting on her before jumping back to Bette's eyelashes, Bette's eyebrows, the contour of Bette's face.

Lydia held the camera and crawled toward Jesse again. She wondered what it would be like if he held her, if she could sleep next to him. What if Lydia crept up beside him, if she rested her back against his back? She wondered if his skin would be warm from sleeping. He'd probably wake up if she tried. He'd probably call her a fat bitch or maybe a stupid kid. Lydia didn't know which would be worse.

She raised the camera and looked at his face through the viewfinder. His eyelids looked like wet eggshells. She hit record and listened to the camera hum as it recorded his ribcage, his eyelids, the low whistle of his breath while he slept.

*[\(End of Chapter Five. Go to Chapter Six\)](#)*