



KEVIN RICHEY

un
pretty

an unloved ones prequel

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by Kevin Richey

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UNPRETTY

A prequel to the series *THE UNLOVED ONES*

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UNPRETTY: An Unloved Ones Prequel

by Kevin Richey

Chapter One

Sarah takes me by the hand. "Please?" she asks.

We're in the mall, and we've just passed a store for skinny people. She's seen something in the window she likes, and I'm sure she'll spend about twenty minutes trying it on while I pretend not to feel awkward.

This is the kind of store that doesn't have a single item of clothing in my size. Sarah barely fits into their largest size. What's worse, I'm not even just imagining that I'm unwelcome here. Even the CEO made a statement that fat people aren't allowed.

"Um," I say, and she bats her eyes. She has on these fake eyelashes that are too black and too thick for her complexion. Sarah is one of those blonde girls who has to fight to keep a tan. Unlike me. I lost the tan battle long ago, and am happy keeping all of my pale flesh covered from the daylight.

"It'll just be for a minute. I just want something new for the beach."

The beach. My stomach churns again. I haven't made up an excuse for the beach yet. "All right," I say. "But we should hurry. The mall closes in an hour."

Sarah squeals and takes me by the hand, pulling me into the store.

I can feel it at once: that sense that I don't belong here. I smile and don't show how much I hate this. Sarah doesn't notice, and I really don't want to bring attention to the fact that lately I've been hating my body even more than usual.

Maybe it's all this talk about the beach. Or the fact that the reason we're at the mall is to return the dress I picked out for the beach two months ago, and can no longer fit into. We're here to exchange it for a larger size.

If there is a larger size. It's getting harder and harder to find clothes that fit ever since I passed the 270 pound mark. The fact that I have to wear a dress to the beach instead of anything resembling a bathing suit is also embarrassing.

Today I'm wearing a hunter green sports sweatshirt and my only pair of jeans that I can still button. My sneakers match, I'll give myself that. But I barely did my hair. It's long and black, and I tied it up in a loose ponytail in the back. I didn't even bother with much makeup today. It's a school day, and I don't really think what I need is makeup. What I need is liposuction.

Sarah walks through the store, feeling the fabric of items on the rack between her fingers. I keep my hands folded over my stomach. This gesture makes me feel like I am hiding my weight. I don't really believe this. But covering myself, in any way whatsoever, makes me feel less anxious about people seeing me.

We live in Daytona Beach, and staying covered is growing more obvious the closer it gets to Spring Break. It's only a week away now, and I'm the only one still wearing long sleeves.

"Ooooooh!" Sarah coos. She has found a red skirt and holds it up. It dangles like a washcloth from the hanger. "I'm going to go try it on," she says. I plaster a smile on my face. I am sure I look reassuring. Not bothered at all. Even though looking at the skirt, at its small size, at something that couldn't even fit one leg through—it makes me die a little inside. I blink and say as cheerfully as I can, "Cute!"

Sarah shows the skirt to an attendant who lets her into a changing room. The attendant, a girl around twenty-five who looks about as good as the girls on the advertisements in the store, gives me

quick glance and then looks away. She knows that I'm not here to shop. How could I be? It hurts, but I pretend not to notice as she ignores me completely, and goes back to folding clothes so small that I swear they're for babies.

I lean against the wall next to Sarah's changing room. "Katherine," she mumbles after a minute. "Come in here." The door to the room opens, and I step forward. I don't actually go inside the little booth. I don't think we'd both fit in there. But my body effectively blocks the view from anyone that might pass by.

Sarah is squeezed into the little red skirt. It's very tight around her waist, and looks like Spandex around her ass. "How does it look?" she asks, turning around to let me see.

"I think it's a little tight."

"But it fits. And I bet I can lose a few pounds before the beach next week."

My stomach does that flip again. My smile is back. The fact that Sarah thinks that she needs to lose "a few pounds" is kind of cute, in an objective kind of way. But if *she* needs to lose a few pounds, what does that say about me?

I look up past her, and see myself reflected back in the mirror of the changing booth.

I look like a wall of flesh behind Sarah. I gasp. I thought these mirrors were supposed to make you look thin? I look even worse than I remembered. I've been avoiding mirrors, like I've been ignoring my growing weight. The only sign that I can't ignore is that I can't fit into my new dress that I bought for the beach two months ago.

"I think you look great," I tell Sarah, and try to back away from the door.

Sarah winks at me, and I swear her eye almost glues shut because of her fake lashes. "We are going to *rock* the beach this year. Even Chad Harlow will have to ask us out." Chad Harlow is the best-looking boy in school, and therefore also the most popular. I doubt he knows we exist, but Sarah's had a crush on him as long as I can remember.

Sarah looks at me. "You told your mom we're going, right?"

She knows my mom can be weird about this sort of thing.

"I have," I say cheerfully.

I haven't. I still plan on finding some convenient lie to excuse myself from going. I have to be careful though. Sarah won't be happy about going alone.

Sometimes I think the only reason we're friends is because Sarah hates doing anything alone.

She nods, and then puts her hand on the changing room door, letting me know she's ready to change back into her normal clothes.

I step back, and see that the skinny attendant is busy elsewhere.

After catching a glimpse of myself in Sarah's mirror, I have a sick desire to see myself. All of myself. How big have I gotten? The mirrors at home aren't big enough anymore. I tilt my head around the side of the row of booths to where three mirrors are hung for people to see themselves from every angle. I check again that the attendant isn't looking, and then race rather inelegantly to the mirrors.

I look up the same moment I let out a deep sigh.

The first thing I see is my neck.

And then I feel sick.

Even my neck is fatter. I've always had a little double-chin, but now it's gotten worse. I think I've upgraded to the triple, or somehow a quadruple. My shoulders are humped under my sweatshirt, which I want to blame for the bulky look of my body, but I know the truth is I've gotten so big that the XXXL is tight on me now. My stomach almost hangs out underneath it, I've gotten so large. And my legs—they're massive and—I don't even know how to describe it, but with the jeans being so tight, I can see all the bulges and rolls of my fat through the fabric. I swallow, dreading what I need to see but am afraid to know. I have to be quick. Sarah will be done in a moment, and I will die if she catches

me.

I turn to my side, so that in one of the tilted mirrors I can see my ass.

I nearly vomit, it makes me so sick. It is huge. It is so huge it doesn't even look like an a anymore. It's like I'm The Blob wearing a Katherine Halloween costume. I make Jabba the Hutt look sexy.

I feel the tears forming in my eyes, and know that I have to look away, just look away, when I notice how big my head has gotten.

My God. Even my head is fat. Not just my face. Not just my cheeks. But my entire skull is fat. How is that even possible?

I race back to the changing rooms, absolutely disgusted by myself. My chest is heaving from rushing, even though it was barely four steps, and Sarah emerges from her changing room with the tiny little skirt on its hanger. She walks ahead of me and puts it back on the shelf.

"You're lucky, Katherine," she says as we walk out. "At least you *know* what stores you can shop at. It sucks being in between regular and plus sizes like me. I can't find anything that fits at either store. I'm too big for a store like this, and too small for Lane Bryant. It makes shopping so much harder."

It is all I can do to keep the smile frozen on my face, and nod sympathetically like a good friend. I don't feel angry at Sarah. It must be hard to not know where you can shop, to know you are maybe fifty pounds away from fitting into tiny little skirts at the cool shops. But at the same time, I would kill to have that problem. I am so incredibly jealous of how pretty Sarah is that it makes no sense to me that she herself feels fat. I can only imagine what she thinks about me.

We walk through the mall. My breath is heavy, and I'm struggling to match Sarah's pace. She obviously pissed that she couldn't fit properly into the skirt, but if she keeps going at this pace, I think I might have a heart attack. I slow down, pretending I want to look in a shop window just to slow down. "Hold on," I wheeze.

I turn and to my horror I've stopped outside the chocolate shop. I feel my face turn red. Could I be any more pathetic?

And the worse thing is, even though I've stopped here accidentally, I find myself actually wanting to go inside. There are free samples at the counter. And the woman behind the counter, even from inside the store, she notices me. She's the only mall employee that has been friendly to me so far. She's a little plump herself. Not as big as me, but larger than Sarah. I wonder if she's gained weight since working at this store, and then I feel terrible.

Even fat people judge other fat people. Maybe we do it because we're so used to judging ourselves.

"Come on," Sarah says, taking me by the hand. "Have strength. We've got the beach to slim down for."

She says this encouragingly, not in a snide or catty way like some girls might. The main reason we get along is that I don't feel that Sarah judges me for being fat. She never brings it up, and seems oblivious to the fact that I might not want to wear a swimsuit in front of half the school at the beach during spring break, or that I might not have a date for any school dance ever, or might not ever talk about boys because I would be too embarrassed if it ever got out that I liked a boy. If the boy found out, that is. I don't want him to have that moment of disgust where he realizes someone like me likes him.

We continue through the mall, and I know where we're going now. The feeling of dread is rising in my stomach. We're going to return the dress.

My stomach gurgles. I was so nervous about returning this dress that I've been eating like crazy all day. I even asked for a bathroom pass twice today just to visit the vending machines. We're not allowed to chew gum in class, which really isn't fair because I would never leave it under a seat or

the floor. I don't want to leave any evidence behind. But the chewing helps with the nervousness. And when I can't chew gum in class, my only option is to chew food. (I even have teachers that don't let you chew gum but *will* let you eat crackers. How backwards is that?)

But all that food today was even too much for me. My stomach is unhappy, filled with junk.

We approach the store, and I feel like we walk in a little more quickly than we walked into the other store. Sarah doesn't want anyone to see us going into the fat girls' store, and I don't really blame her.

Here in this store, the mannequins are all about Sarah's size. I notice that even here they want to show off their clothes in the smallest possible size. I have never seen a mannequin my size. It makes me sick to even picture it, to have some resemblance of me that I couldn't hide. But at the same time I recognize that it's unfair. Even in the fat girls' store they try to glamorize thin.

Sarah heads to a corner of the store and starts sifting through the sale rack. This is a more boutique store than Lane Bryant or Torrid. This is for when fat girls have special occasions. I walk up to the counter, and set the shopping bag down, and then lay a crumpled receipt on top of it. I plaster on my best smile, and stop breathing all together as I wait for the sales girl to turn around.

She's thin. The sales girl is thin. It makes my stomach hurt.

"How may I help you?" she says cheerfully, looking me straight in the eye.

I find I cannot maintain eye contact, and look down at the bag. I place a hand on it, and notice my own chubby fingers as I talk, and take my hands away. "I need to return a dress."

She nods, and then starts to open up the bag. "What seems to be the problem?" she asks, and to my horror she flaps open the dress as if she's opening garbage bag. It's a hideous dress: pale purple with black zigzag patterns, made all the more ridiculous by its enormous size. Why do they only make such clothes for thin people?

She holds it up to herself, as if trying it on in front of a mirror, and then quickly realizes it's more than triple her width. Something in her face tenses as she folds the dress back up and sets it on the counter.

"Nothing's wrong with the dress," I mumble. "It just doesn't fit."

She looks at the receipt. "Did you try it on?"

My jaw tenses. "Yes. But it doesn't fit anymore."

"Do you want to exchange it?"

"No." I don't tell her that I'd *love* to exchange it, *if* they had a larger size. But they don't. I am not too fat for the fat girls' store. My only option left is to order online. "Just cash back, please."

She presses a few buttons on her register, and then looks back to the dress. She does a double take and then lifts the collar of the dress to peer inside.

"The label is missing," she says confusedly.

My blood runs cold.

I forgot.

It's such a habit that I forgot.

"I cut it off," I whisper. It doesn't even sound like my voice.

The sales girl looks up, her brow wrinkled. "But why?"

I seriously think I might shit my pants. I want to reach forward and yank the dress out of her hands, telling her to forget the whole thing as I run out of the store. But staring at her, looking at the enormous dress without a label, it's like a bad dream where you want to scream and run but you can't move. I can only watch helplessly as she fumbles with the fabric in confusion, finding the little threads that poke up like weeds from within the collar, evidence of where I disfigured the dress.

My voice is emotionless. I am speaking like a sleepwalker. "I do that with all my clothes."

The girl looks at me with a sort of revulsion, as if instead of labels she's found out I've been cutting off butterfly wings and puppy dog tails. It's even worse having her look at me like that, so I a

forced to explain. I speak as quietly as I can. I would die if Sarah heard me too. I can tell a stranger because I can make it a point never to return to this store or this mall again. But I don't want Sarah find out. She'd never look at me the same again.

"Because," I whisper, "I don't want anyone to know my size."

It takes her a moment, but to the girl's credit, she gets it and her face melts into a look of pity. I am on the brink of tears. "Oh," is all she can say. She looks down at the dress. I know she's debating whether or not to break the rules. "I really can't take it back," she says. "I may lose my job. I might be unable to give you store credit, but if this doesn't fit, honestly, I'm not sure if anything else will either."

I am not even paying attention. I am helping her stuff the dress back into the bag. "I understand," I say, my voice breaking. "Thank you."

I don't know what I'm going to do. I used up half my savings on this dress. It was on sale, and I can't get it enlarged and I can't afford a new dress. What will I tell Sarah? I can't go to the beach with her now.

Maybe I can fall and break something. Or hurt myself somehow in a way that looks like an accident.

I take back the bag and shove the receipt into my pocket.

"I'm sorry!" the sales girl calls out as I rush over to Sarah. She turns and takes one look at me, and she sees right away that I'm upset. I'm so grateful that instead of asking what's wrong, she puts an arm around me and leads me out of the store. She keeps her arm around me as my shoulders quake and I fight back the tears.

"They wouldn't take it back," I tell her.

"Didn't you have the receipt?"

"It was on sale," I lie. "She can't take it back."

"Maybe if you call corporate?" she suggests.

"My mom would find out."

She's silent. She knows that would start another of my mom's enforced diets.

We walk through the mall and to the parking lot, and climb back into her car. It groans under my weight as I sit down, and I reach my breaking point. I start to cry. Sarah starts the car, and we head home.

I hate myself more than ever. There's no way left to hide the fact that I'm huge and I'm hideous. None of my old tricks are working anymore. I'm just too fat.

By the time we reach my house, I've got my tears under control. "Thank you for going to the mall with me," I say.

"Of course." She looks at me. "Are you going to be okay?"

I nod without thinking about it. I don't want her worried about me. "I just wish I still fit in that dress."

She perks up. "Hey, Kathy! You totally can. You've got a week. We can go on a diet *together*." She's all excited like it's the best idea ever.

I don't want to break her enthusiasm. She really doesn't understand how much bigger I am than her, and I don't want to say anything that might break that ignorance.

She beams. "I'll get into the red skirt, and you'll fit back into your cute beach dress. How does that sound? We've got a week."

I force a smile. "Okay."

"You'll really try this time?" she asks. "No cheating?"

"No cheating!" I say as cheerfully as a person in a commercial. I sound completely fake to my own ears, but Sarah doesn't notice.

There's no way I can do this. She doesn't even know how much weight I've gained since I bought

that dress.

To fit in it again, I'd have to lose forty-three pounds.

"Do you promise?" she asks.

I nod. "I promise." What else can I say?

She does a little dance in the driver's seat, and I sit with my smile so tight my jaw is hurting.

"Okay," she says, returning to reality. "One last thing. Close your eyes."

I look at her, and she groans.

"Kathy! Close your eyes. And no peeking!"

I close my eyes and wait patiently with my arms folded across my stomach as I hear Sarah bend back and rummage through some papers in the back seat. She finds what she is looking for, and returns to the front. Then I hear the flick of a lighter. My eyebrows go up, and Sarah chides again about "No peeking," and I wait some more.

A moment later, Sarah says, "Okay. Open your eyes."

I do, and held out before me is a homemade cupcake with neon blue frosting. A pink candle is lit in the center.

"Happy Birthday!" Sarah screams. "I know you're sixteen and not one," she says, gesturing to the flickering candle, "but it's a *cupcake*. There's only so much room."

I laugh, utterly surprised, and she starts to sing "Happy Birthday To You." I've been so stressed about returning the dress that I completely forgot about my birthday. No one else has remembered so far today either. Until now.

"Oh, Sarah!" I cry—and I mean, really cry. The tears are back, and I lean over and squeeze Sarah's body around the middle in gratitude. She stops singing. I can feel her gasping for breath, and I let go and reach out for the cupcake and stop. She sees my hesitation, and her expression softens.

"One cupcake won't make a difference," she says. "Besides, it's your birthday. The diet can start tomorrow."

I smile, so grateful to have a friend like Sarah. I blink back the tears, and reach out for the cupcake again.

She pulls it back. "Wait!" she says. "You have to make a wish first."

I raise an eyebrow, and she giggles. I don't want a wish. I want to eat the cupcake.

"It's tradition!" she insists.

I relent and drop my hands. I close my eyes to concentrate.

I don't really believe in wishes, but after all she's done for me today, I feel I owe it to Sarah to try.

"What do you want most?" she prompts, helping me to think before the candle burns out. "What would make you happy?"

What do I want? I don't even have to think about it.

I wish I were thin.

I open my eyes and blow out the candle.

Chapter Two



The smoke curls up into the low roof of the car, and Sarah hands me the cupcake. She starts the car and tells me she'll see me at school tomorrow. I thank her again for the cupcake, and lumber out of her small car. She doesn't wait until I get to the door because my mom's car is in the driveway. Sarah's car is parked in the rooms down the street, and I shuffle the shopping bag and my cupcake as I unlock the door.

We have a small house, but since it's just my mom and me, that's all we need. My dad Hank lives in New Jersey, and we have an okay relationship, even if I don't see him beyond holidays and the occasional summer trip.

The house is cluttered with junk, and when I come in, I hide my shopping bag behind a few packages by the front door. I don't want to answer any questions.

I have to pass through the living room to reach my room, so there's no avoiding my mom on the couch. I can see her the moment I walk in, her face outlined in the blue flickering glow of the TV. A bowl of popcorn is in her lap.

My mom is thin. I don't know how she does it; I'm pretty sure she eats more than I do, and I've never seen her exercise. Some people are just lucky. Her jawline is sharp, but her nose is bigger than mine, and tonight she's wearing her old glasses instead of her contacts. Her hair is also lighter than mine, a medium brown with thick frizzy curls. I don't know where I got my straight black hair. My dad's hair is blonde.

I turn on a light as I walk by and steal a glance at what she's watching. It's the closing credits of *America's Most Wanted*.

"You know you're not supposed to have sweets," she says, not taking her eyes away from the screen.

"I know," I say. I don't want to have a fight. We can't seem to talk without fighting anymore. I'm only stopping to give her a chance to remember my birthday.

"Don't take that tone," she snaps. "I'm mean because I love you. It's called being a good parent. Not that you care. You're too busy being out all night doing who knows what."

"I was at the mall with Sarah."

She cringes. My mom and I used to be close when I was growing up, like sisters. But the last few years I've been hanging out more with Sarah. My mom hasn't been taking it so well.

The show is interrupted with commercials, and my mom picks up the remote to mute the TV. She turns to me, the square of the TV reflecting in her glasses and blocking her eyes.

"The mall?" she says. "That sounds *fun*. And where was I? I was here: home alone."

I feel guilty, which I'm sure was her intention. But I can't help it. I don't want to go to the mall with my mother anymore. It's just embarrassing. I'm pathetic enough as it is.

"Maybe we can see a movie this weekend," I suggest. Movies are safe. No one can really tell we're hanging out in a dark theater.

She laughs. "Don't pretend you care about me. I don't need your pity."

I sigh. There's no winning this one. Still, I want to make her feel bad for forgetting my birthday, which she can't do if she forgets.

"Aren't you going to wish me a happy birthday?" I ask.

Her mouth twists, but she doesn't look at me. "Happy birthday," she grumbles.

"You could at least look away from the TV."

~~She blinks, and for a moment she looks sorry. But then she picks up the remote, and clicks back on~~ the sound. An announcer extolls the virtues of a pepperoni pizza, and I give up and go to my room.

I lock the door. I set my cupcake on my nightstand, and then collapse on the bed. My body is exhausted, but I feel awful beyond that. I look over at my journal on my desk, but it's too far to reach and I'm too tired to get back up. I don't want to remember today anyway.

I lay staring at the dark ceiling, listening to the sounds of the canned laughter from the TV in the next room. After a moment of blank thought, my arm reaches over to the nightstand for the cupcake and I eat without tasting it. My stomach rumbles in protest at the additional junk food, but I'm still hungry.

* * *

I can't sleep.

I don't know if it's because of stress or my upset stomach, but normally the one thing I can do is fall asleep. It's been nearly two hours now and I have barely been able to keep my eyes closed.

If it were a different night, I might have gotten back up and watched some TV with my mom. But after our fight, I don't want to go back out there. Even though I want to yell at her to turn it down. She's got the volume way up tonight; every word of her show is coming through the walls. I can even hear her smacking her lips as she sips a soda.

I don't get back up. I stay in my room, pretending to be asleep, as I wait. Eventually she turns off the TV and makes her way to her bathroom. I don't know if she has the door open or what, but she's extra loud tonight. It must be on purpose. I listen to the sound of her brushing her teeth, going to the bathroom, even flicking off the light switch. Then the groan of her mattress as she settles into bed.

I expect it to be quiet after she's gone to bed, but now I hear other noises.

Dogs barking. Planes flying overhead. Even ships bellowing off in the ocean, way out in the distance.

At a certain point I just can't take it anymore. I throw off the covers, and I get out of bed.

I'm wearing a nightshirt that used to be big on me, but now is barely more than a tight shirt. I try not to think of it as I creep to the door and slowly open it. I'm quite impressed with myself as I tiptoe my way to the kitchen, managing not to make the floorboards groan like I usually do.

I don't even really think about what I'm doing. That's how habits are: you just do them. I walk to the refrigerator in the kitchen the way you automatically walk on a path to work each day.

Sarah's words echo in my head: "It's your birthday. You can start your diet tomorrow."

It's still nighttime. For me, that counts as not being tomorrow yet.

I find a Sarah Lee carrot cake in the freezer. Surprisingly, it tastes too sweet and artificial, but I'm not really eating it for taste anyway. I stand eating it by the refrigerator, not bothering with a plate or the fact that it's still frozen.

After the cake is gone, I figure I should have some "real food" so that I don't upset my stomach too much. I'm too lazy to make a sandwich, so I eat some turkey slices with some cheddar cheese on top. It's like a gourmet Lunchable, and I love Lunchables. I'm about to close the fridge after that and move onto the pantry, when just as the door is closing I spot a tube of cookie dough in the back of the bottom shelf. Someone has hidden it behind a gallon of orange juice in an attempt to hide it from me.

"Nice try, Mom."

I take out the tube and slice it down the side with the fork still covered with frosting. As I eat, I stare at the cartoon picture of Poppin' Fresh, the Pillsbury Doughboy, whose pudgy hands reach up at me. Even *he* seems to be thinner than I remember.

"The diet starts tomorrow," I tell him.

I eat the cookie dough, and then finish off the last half of a case of Oreos in the pantry. Then I eat

three packets of oatmeal raw because I'm too afraid of waking up my mother if I start the microwave. I keep eating and eating and eating, and it feels good.

But as the sun rises, and the counters are covered with empty wrappers and cartons, I feel even emptier than before. I want to cry but I don't have the energy. The morning light filters in through the kitchen window, and my entire body feels exhausted. I look at the mess I've created, and force myself to stay awake long enough to push all the wrappers into the trashcan. Then I head back to my room.

My mom hasn't woken up. I look at the clock, and it's nearly five in the morning. I have a little over an hour before my alarm goes off. I fall back on the bed, and spread out my arms like fat wings.

I never want to get back up.

* * *

The morning hits me like a slap in the face. My alarm goes off, and I reach out to tap it. I knock it clear off my nightstand, and it rings underneath my bed.

"Ugghhhh," I groan, and force myself to move. My body feels so heavy. The lack of sleep and my excess weight have left me feeling like I'm struggling against restraints. I slump onto the floor and find the clock, unplugging it altogether. In the darkness, I breathe in the dust under my bed, and I feel worse than I've ever felt before. My eyes feel red, and my joints ache.

I crawl to my closet, grab a loose-fitting shirt and an enormous pair of jeans from the floor, and head to the shower. It takes all my will power not to collapse onto the base of the tub and curl up back to sleep.

After the shower, I'm drying off my hair when I see the bathroom scale staring at me. I remember the diet. There's a dry-erase marker among my combs on the counter from previous attempts to control my weight. I wipe off the condensation from the mirror, and write on the glass: DAY ONE. This will be how I'll keep track of my progress.

Then I turn back to the scale.

I take in a deep breath, and as I step onto the scale, I let it out. The digital readout glows blue, and the numbers flicker randomly. When it stops, it blinks a number that makes me tingle with disbelief. 257.

When I weighed myself two days ago, I was nearing 270. That means even with my binge last night, I've lost weight.

Or the scale is broken.

My hope vanishes. It seems more likely that I've broken the scale.

I pull on my clothes, and suck in my gut in order to squeeze the fly of my jeans together enough to button them. Normally I don't even wear jeans because they push around my weight in really unflattering ways, but I need to do laundry, and this pair was all that was clean.

I hear my Mom start to wake up in the next room, and I rush to finish getting ready. I don't want to have to explain all the missing food in the kitchen. I don't bother with makeup (nobody is checking me out anyway), and stomp back to my room to grab a sweatshirt and my messenger bag. (Backpacks don't fit anymore. Another embarrassing revelation a few months ago.) I head through the house and out the front door as I hear my mom turn on her shower. I'm early for the bus, but I don't care. I don't want to face what I did last night.

* * *

It's in third period Chemistry that I come to the realization that something is wrong.

All day things have felt off. The bus smelled worse than usual. The morning bell made my ears ring for a full fifteen minutes. And I kept hearing things outside of the classroom: people walking in the halls, toilets flushing in the bathrooms across the school, random shouts and laughter from places I couldn't pinpoint.

But in Chemistry the distractions are getting to be too much.

Victor Madding, the boy behind me, is chewing gum. He's not allowed to, which isn't what's distracting me, but the minty smell is making my nostrils burn and my eyes water. Worse though is Stephanie Rupp, who sits two chairs up and one row over. *She* is biting her nails. I can hear every fib of her brittle nails crack as her teeth snap and chew into them.

Also, and I know this is gross, but I swear everyone must have had beans for breakfast, because I keep hearing (and smelling) people fart, and nobody else even seems to notice! Even Mr. O'Brien, the math teacher, is farting. It's immensely distracting.

Lunch doesn't come soon enough. I hug my messenger bag to my stomach and walk through the crowded hallways, my eyes darting at groups of people chattering away. I know they're whispering, but it sounds like shouting, and I feel like I'm going mad.

I find Sarah by the cafeteria doors and we walk inside together. I don't say anything, and she doesn't notice my condition. But when we walk inside, the wall of sound hits me so hard that I have to step back outside again, dropping my messenger bag and putting my hands over my ears.

"Kathy!" Sarah cries, following me back outside.

"It's too loud," I say.

Sarah looks at me for a moment as if coming to a decision. "Are you sure you're feeling okay?" she asks. "You look really pale."

I remember the beach, and realize this might be the perfect opportunity. "I might be coming down with something."

Sarah puts an arm on my shoulder. "Maybe you should see the nurse. You look... messed up."

I nod again. "Will you be okay?" I ask. I don't want to leave her alone at lunch.

"I'll be fine. I'll sit with Darleen and her gang." She rolls her eyes. "Although you just know she's going to talk my ear off with the most dull stories about band practice. You owe me for this."

She gives me a hug, and then we part ways. I'm still jumpy. Everything is so loud, and it all smells so bad. I pass a drinking fountain and can smell the sewer through the drain. I pass by a classroom with closed doors, and I can hear pencils scribbling and scratching like fingernails on a chalkboard. It feels like after I've gotten over a bad cold, and my taste and hearing comes back again after being clogged. Except I wasn't sick, and now my senses are out of control. Maybe I really should see the nurse.

But instead I hit the vending machines, and eat in a bathroom on the far side of the school. I lock myself in a stall and eat sitting on a toilet with the lid down. It smells like stale cigarettes. I finish the food, and sit listening to the pipes rattling in the walls.

When the bell rings, I pick up my wrappers and stand up.

And my pants sag around my hips.

It feels so weird that I drop the wrappers on the floor, and feel the waist of the jeans with my fingers. I can pull the jeans away from my stomach so far that I can fit a hand through the gap. My heart races. These jeans were hell to get on this morning. I must have ripped them. That's the only explanation. I open the stall door and check myself in the mirror.

But there is no rip. My pants have either grown since this morning—or I've started to shrink.

* * *

The bus drops me off, and I walk home in silence. I have to keep a hand on my pants because they keep sliding down as I walk. I don't usually wear a belt; there's no point, and it's hard to find belts in my size.

No one is home when I walk through the door. I plop down my messenger bag on the couch, and rush to my bathroom. It takes all my patience to strip off my clothes. I want to be sure about this; I don't want even an ounce that isn't really me to contaminate the evidence. I have to know for sure.

I step onto the scale, and the blue screen lights up. The numbers flash randomly. When they settle

I gasp.

~~I get off the scale, wait for it to reset, and then get back on again. The same readout is given.~~

"This can't be right," I whisper. "The scale is broken."

I don't believe it, but it's even harder to believe my new weight. I walk naked through the hallway to my Mom's room, and step onto the scale in her bathroom.

It gives me the same weight.

Slowly, not feeling the joy I should at my new condition, I make my way back to my bathroom. I pick up the marker, and on the mirror, under where I wrote 257 this morning, I write my new weight with a shaky hand:

242.

Chapter Three



It's not until that evening that I remember my wish. I've spent the afternoon napping and avoiding my mother. But then when waking up at dinnertime, I see the empty cupcake wrapper on my nightstand, and I remember:

I wish I were thin.

I drag myself out of bed and make my way to the dinner table. I avoid eye contact, and dish out a portion of food for myself. We're having fast food: fried chicken and mashed potatoes with gravy. I poke at the potatoes with a plastic fork.

"Something wrong with the food?" my mom asks, startling me.

My eyes dart up to see her staring at me. She's wearing her glasses again instead of her contact lenses. Her eyes must be bothering her.

"I'm not feeling so well," I say. I force myself to take a small bite of the mashed potatoes, but I nearly gag.

They taste so... unnatural. It's like I can taste each individual freeze-dried flake, stale and soaked with unfiltered tap water. I cringe.

I try a chicken wing, but the crispy fried coating tastes waxy and hollow. The flesh of the chicken itself is better than the potatoes, but—and I don't know how I know this—I can taste that it's been killed some time ago, and that its flesh has been frozen. It just doesn't taste *alive* enough. I set the chicken down and wipe my mouth clean with a paper napkin.

"I think they did something wrong with this," I say. "It doesn't taste right."

"Tastes fine to me," my mother says, chewing the food and smacking it between her teeth.

"Maybe I'm getting sick," I say.

My mom pushes back her chair and walks over to me. She places a hand on my forehead. "You're icky! Maybe you had better stay home from school tomorrow, just to be safe?"

I nod. "May I be excused?"

I get up from the table and go back to my room. I feel frustrated in a way that I've never known before. I'm still craving food, but nothing tastes good to me. I fall onto my bed and mash my face into the pillow.

I feel so drowsy that I don't even bother getting into my pajamas. With my last bit of energy, I reach for my phone and send Sarah a text.

"Feeling sick. Won't be at school tomorrow."

I set the phone on the nightstand, and don't even bother looking over when I hear it vibrate a few seconds later. I'm already too far gone into sleep.

* * *

My mom is waking me up. The sun is up, and streaming through my window.

"Honey?" she asks. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say, my voice scratchy. I struggle to sit up, and then press my hands into my face, trying to wipe away the grogginess.

"How are you feeling?" my mom asks.

"Better. I guess I needed that nap. But I still don't think I should go to school tomorrow."

My mom is quiet. I look at her, and her face is wrinkled with concern. She's not wearing her

glasses. “Honey,” she says very quietly, “you already stayed home from school.”

“What?” I say, waking up a little.

“You’ve been in here since last night. I assumed you had gotten up when I left for work.”

I sit up all the way, turning so that my legs are hanging off the bed. I am running my fingers through my hair, and my mom puts a comforting hand on my shoulder. She tends to like it when I’m sick. It means I am forced to spend time with her.

Then she is quiet again. I feel her squeezing, feeling my shoulder.

“Have you lost weight?” she asks. There is surprise in her voice.

I gasp, getting up and walking past her straight to my bathroom. I don’t bother to strip naked this time. I place my bare feet on the scale, and wait while the numbers flicker under blue light.

It stops. I look with dread at my new weight.

215.

My hands start to move down, to feel my body, but before I have any time to react, I hear my mother scream back in my bedroom. I rush back, and she is leaning over the bed, looking at something.

I walk up to the bed slowly, and look over her shoulder.

In the bed is a huge indent from where I usually sleep. In this shallow basin, there is at least a half-inch of fine grey dust. I know instinctively that the dust is from me. The weight had to go somewhere.

Still, I have never heard of a weight loss plan that involved producing more dust.

My mom turns around to look at me, and sits down on the edge of my bed. She looks up at me with horror in her eyes.

“Oh honey,” she cries, “it’ll be okay. I’ll make an appointment right away with Dr. Morris. We’ll get this fixed.”

I nod, glad that she’s going to help me take care of this. Her tears even seem genuine. Maybe this will bring us closer.

But I notice, no matter how comforting her words, that she keeps her distance. She is active, trying not to touch me now.

In case I might be contagious.

Chapter Four



The doctor's office is overcrowded. It's Friday night, and my mom is sitting next to me in an uncomfortable metal chair while people cough, wheeze, and sniffle around us. It smells dank and sour, and I am trying to breathe through my mouth but it's not helping much. My clothes are loose. My shirt, which was too tight a few days ago, is now flowing like a graduation gown. My jeans are so baggy that I had to borrow one of my mom's belts to hold them up.

I can hear my mother's heartbeat. I don't actually think her heart is that loud, but I can hear it clearly because she's right next to me. Her stomach also seems to be upset, or maybe it's just making normal stomach gurgles. I don't know. I couldn't hear stomachs so clearly a few days ago.

"Blythe," the receptionist calls out. That's our last name.

My mom stands up. I stand up too, more easily than I used to. Before all this, getting up meant a sort of rocking motion to build up inertia, and then an awkward balancing act as I tried to center my weight on my legs. I can stand up the normal way now, by pushing up against the arms of the chair. I should be happy about that, but it's hard to be happy when you're not sure what's wrong with you.

A male nurse leads us to a small waiting room, and my mom takes a seat against the wall while I sit on a padded table.

The nurse looks at her clipboard. "All right, Katherine. I'm just going to take a few quick measurements before the doctor sees you."

I nod, and she gets to work. She takes my blood pressure and reads it off to me, but I don't really understand what the numbers mean. She takes my temperature, and then asks me a series of routine questions before finally having me stand on a scale.

It's one of those old-fashioned scales, with the counterweights that slide across the bars until they're balanced at your bodyweight. I used to hate this part of seeing the doctor; now it just makes me afraid.

She smiles, and reads off the weight.

"One ninety-five."

I look over at my mother to share my horror, but she is looking away. Her gaze is transfixed at a spot on the wall, and she stares at it unblinkingly.

"The doctor will be with you shortly," the nurse tells me, and then exits the room. I sit back down on the padded table. I find my own spot to stare at, and my mom and I sit in silence for however long it takes the doctor to arrive.

There's a knock at the door that makes us both jump.

"Good evening," Dr. Morris says in a voice that's much too jovial for the circumstances. He's an older man, tall and boney, wearing glasses with round frames. I've been seeing him off-and-on since I was a little girl, which is why it surprises me that I've never noticed before how much his thin, smiling face makes him look like the Grim Reaper.

He flips through the clipboard left behind by the nurse and adjusts his glasses. "I see Katherine has lost a little bit of weight."

"A little?" my mother shrieks. "She's like a balloon deflating!"

He looks up at my mother, as if seeing her for the first time. She is a mess: dark circles under her eyes, her frizzy hair wild and crazy. There are food stains on her blouse.

His face doesn't react to the way she looks, and I can hear that his heartbeat doesn't accelerate. ~~There's something deeply unsettling about a man who can look upon human misery with boredom.~~

He turns to me. "Well, Katherine, let's take a look at you."

He listens to my heartbeat with his stethoscope. He looks into my eyes, ears, and throat. I can hear the receptionist call out the next patient in the waiting room, and I don't know if I'm the only one hearing it. I don't know if it screws up my heartbeat when he listens.

"How much weight have you lost, Katherine?"

I consider his question as he taps my knees to check my reflexes. "About seventy-five pounds since last Tuesday." It is Friday.

He pauses and looks at me. His heart quickens, and it makes me nervous too. He stands up and clears his throat, and then writes down something on his clipboard. Then he takes a seat at a desk in the corner of the room, and turns the chair to face me.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, Katherine, and I need you to be honest with me."

I nod.

"Are you unhappy, Katherine?"

This question seems to come out of nowhere, and I'm unable to answer. What would that have to do with anything?

"Are you depressed?" he prods.

He won't let me avoid the question. "I—I don't think so."

"She is," my mother chimes in. "She doesn't like herself."

"Mom!" I give her a look to keep out, but she's on a roll.

"It's true," she says. "I've read her diary."

"Journal!" I snap. "A diary is for thirteen-year-old girls who want to gush about cute boys. I have a *journal*." The doctor is staring at us like we are insane. I regain my composure, smoothing my oversized t-shirt over my remaining stomach. "Okay," I say, realizing there's no point in lying. "I don't like myself sometimes. So what?"

"Have you hurt yourself?"

My brow wrinkles in distaste. "No."

"Have you ever forced yourself to vomit?"

"No." The truth is that I have, once, but it was to get out of a test. I don't think that's what he's getting at.

"Have you been sexually promiscuous?"

My mom sits forward on her chair, and I blush. "No," I whisper.

"Are you sexually active?"

I don't really know how that is different from his previous question, so it takes me a second to answer. "No," I say, but he looks at me as if he doesn't believe me, and in her chair, my mom begins to shake her head like I've been sentenced to life in prison.

"Have you had trouble sleeping at night, or experienced irregular sleeping patterns?"

My chest tightens. "Yes."

He scratches my answer on the clipboard, and I'm actively not looking toward my mother now.

"Do you feel tired or run-down?"

I nod.

"Do you experience any delusions or hallucinations?"

I think of my stupid superstition that it was a birthday wish that caused all this. I answer "No," but it sounds like I'm lying.

"Do you put on a happy face to hide feelings of sadness?"

My face feels heavy. "Doesn't everyone?"

He reaches what I assume is the end of his depression checklist, and flips the page on his clipboard and makes a few more notes. Then he starts on a new checklist, one that begins with a question that makes me want to jump out a window:

“Describe your relationship with food.”

After the surveys, he orders a bunch of tests—blood tests, urine tests, X-rays—and then asks to speak to my mother alone. He takes her out into the hallway and closes the door.

I can still hear every word.

“What’s the matter with my baby?” my mother cries, and I can picture her wringing her hands and flailing melodramatically.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Dr. Morris answers.

“Is it cancer?” my mom asks in a whisper. “Because I don’t think I could handle that.”

“It’s too early to tell.” He clears his throat. “Is there any history of cancer on either side of your family?”

“Not on mine,” my mother answers with pride. “But I don’t know about her father’s.”

I sit forward. How could she not know about Dad? As far as I know, his family is all still alive and healthy.

“Can you contact him to find out?” the doctor asks.

“No,” my mother answers, and I nearly jump up to accuse her of being a liar. She could call him right now; his number is in her phone. But then she continues. “To be honest, Doctor, I don’t know *who* her father is.”

I sit back, the wind knocked out of me. What is she saying?

“It was not your husband?” the doctor asks.

“My *ex*-husband,” my mother corrects. “And no, it wasn’t him. It was a man I had never seen before, and don’t expect to see again.”

The doctor is silent. There’s not much you can say to that.

Chapter Five



The doctor leads my mother back into the examination room, and I try to get her to make eye contact with me, but she's avoiding my glare. What did she mean, my dad wasn't my real father? She had sex with a stranger? My father is a stranger?

I'm too shaken by this news to listen to anything more the doctor tells me. I am in a daze. Another nurse draws blood. We are told the majority of the results should be back by the end of the weekend. Dr. Morris is going to rush the tests. My mother thanks him, and we get back into her car.

Out of habit, I stretch out the seat belt as far as it will go when I sit down. And then I realize I don't have to anymore, and let it whiz back to a normal size. I strap it across my chest, and my body feels flat against it.

"Mom," I say. My voice sounds like someone else's. I must have lost weight in my mouth, too.

She ignores me and starts the car. We back out of the parking space, and the bright sunlight shines through the windshield, making me sleepy.

When we're at a stoplight, I try again. "Mom, I want to ask you a question, and I don't want you to get mad."

She grips the wheel a little tighter.

I continue. "I heard what you said in the hall. About Dad. About him not being my real father."

The light turns green. It takes her a second to notice. Her shoulders are tense as she grips the steering wheel with both hands. Without signaling, she turns off onto a side street and parks in front of a house with a For Sale sign. She shifts the car into Park, and then returns her grasp to the wheel.

"You were eavesdropping," she says. She doesn't look at me.

"That's not the point," I protest, but she speaks over me.

"Can't expect to like everything you hear, can you?" she asks. "Maybe that'll teach you to mind your own business."

I hate it when she's childish.

"But who was he?" I insist. When she doesn't respond, I try a different tactic. "It might help me understand what's happening to me. It might explain something."

She shakes her head. "It wouldn't explain nothing."

"Please," I say softly, going for all the weakness I can exploit. "I don't like there being secrets between us. We used to be best friends."

Her shoulders relax, and she turns to me, her eyes getting teary. "We still are, Kathy. I just don't like talking about it. It makes me feel..." Her eyes look around as she searches for the word. "It makes me feel *trashy*."

I force my face not to react. I simply stare and wait for her to continue.

"Anyway," she says after a moment, "I suppose you're old enough now to hear it." She takes her hands from the wheel and fiddles with the keys hanging from the ignition. "The whole night is... *hazy*. I've thought about it many times, and I honestly think I was drugged. I had some to drink, but I've never been *that* drunk. And not just from one drink."

She looks over at me, obviously ashamed, and I keep my face free from judgment.

"He bought me a drink. I was staying at the Regency by the airport in Miami for a conference. That was back when I did sales."

She sells cosmetics to department stores.

“Anyway, I had gone down to the front desk to check to see if I had a message from your father—mean, you know what I mean—and I ran into this man. He was...” She squints her eyes, trying to remember. “I *think* he was tall. I don’t really remember what his face looked like; all I remember is that he had the whitest teeth I had ever seen. He asked me to join him for a drink at the bar, and... I don’t really remember what I talked about. I know I took him back to my room.” She turns to me and takes my hand. “You have to believe me, Kathy. I swear I was drugged. I’d never cheat on Hank. Never.”

Hank is the man I *thought* was my father until today.

“How do you know I’m his?” I whisper, “I mean, are you sure it was *him*? Couldn’t I still be Hank’s?”

She shakes her head sadly. “No, honey. Hank was impotent. Honestly, I think he might be gay.”

I let go of her hand. This is too much information.

My mother lets out a loud, nervous laugh. “Wow!” she says. “It feels *good* to finally be able to talk about this with you. It’s been such a weight on my mind.” She reaches to turn the keys, satisfied with the end of the conversation. She pulls away from the curb and makes a U-turn before turning back onto the main road. It makes me dizzy.

“So you have no idea who he is?” I ask as she’s driving. “Or where he is?”

“Nope,” she says. “I don’t even know his name.” She’s smiling. She must really feel relieved. “And you know what? I don’t care. I got what I wanted out of it.” She takes one hand off the wheel and takes mine. “I got my new best friend.”

I have never felt more hatred for her than at this very moment.

I am still mad when we get home, and the scale reads 192.

* * *

I spend the weekend in bed. I sleep through the days, waking up with dust on my sheets at sunset. On Saturday night my mom supervises my visit to the scale. I can hear her gasp when it displays 173.

“You need to eat,” she says, as if figuring out the solution to an equation.

“I’m not hungry.”

She forces me to drink a full glass of milk. I manage to drink it down without gagging. As soon as the glass is empty, she takes me by the hand and leads me back to the bathroom.

“On the scale,” she says.

“I already did this,” I object.

“Just let me try something.” She must not believe that I’m keeping my food down. I oblige and get on the scale.

It reads 171. She starts crying.

“Now do you believe me?” I ask. I step off the scale and go back to my room.

* * *

The next afternoon Dr. Morris calls. I can hear both sides of the conversation from my room, even without speakerphone.

“The tests came back negative,” he tells my mother.

“I don’t understand. What’s wrong with her?”

“My guess is her hormones are still straightening out. The teenage body is in a constant state of flux.”

“But she’s lost so much weight!”

“True, but she is still above a healthy level for her age and height. All her tests came back healthy—healthier than she has ever been before, I might add. If anything, all this weight loss has been

beneficial to her health, not detrimental.”

“But what about her mood swings? Her lack of concentration? Her depression?”

“Mrs. Blythe, there’s nothing wrong with your daughter physically. If you want my advice, what you should do next is seek out a psychologist.”

My mother thanks him, and that evening when she collects me for my weigh in, I am down to 140. I am wearing her clothes now.

“We’ll find a different doctor,” she says. “That Morris doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“I’m not sure a doctor can help,” I say, stepping down from the scale.

She starts to cry again.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I say, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She shakes me off. “I’ll bet you are. You don’t even care how *I* feel about all this.” She sneers at me and stomps out of the bathroom.

I guess we’re not best friends anymore.

* * *

Monday is the start of Spring Break. I begin to worry I might disappear altogether before it’s time for back-to-school. After all, if you keep subtracting from a number, eventually it will get to zero. What will happen to me then? Will my mother come into my room one morning, and in my bed she’ll find nothing but dust? I am afraid to sleep, but when the sun rises, I can’t help it. Exhaustion covers me like a warm blanket.

When I wake up on Tuesday, my weight is down to 115. None of my clothes fit. None of my mom’s clothes fit. There doesn’t seem to be any fat left to lose, and I am starting to understand the fact that I am going to die. I send Sarah a text message:

“I won’t be at the beach. I am sick. The doctors can’t figure out what’s wrong.”

She texts back: “OMG!!! Are you OK?”

Apparently, Sarah’s education was light on reading comprehension.

“No. I am sick.”

She doesn’t text back.

Then, on Wednesday, something odd happens. Or rather, something odd doesn’t happen. I climb out of bed and force myself to confront the scale. When it reads 115, I am too set on defeat to believe it. I trudge into my mom’s bathroom, and step onto her scale.

115.

“Mom!” I yell, and she comes in from the next room. Her eyes are red from crying. I can tell she’s holding her breath, expecting more bad news. I laugh. “Mom, I’m one fifteen! I’m *still* one fifteen!”

She squeals and runs forward to clutch me into a tight hug. We laugh like witches and cry into each other’s shoulders. My mother steps back, looking at me and holding my face in her hands.

“Oh honey,” she says. “If it’s still like this tomorrow, let’s go out and celebrate.”

I smile. “I’m still not that hungry.”

“We’ll go shopping,” she says. “You need some new clothes.”

Hope swirls in my chest like smoke.

My weight has stabilized. I am not going to waste away to nothing. I am not going to die.

And then I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I look like a stranger.

I look thin.

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