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Opening extract from  
**The Other Life**

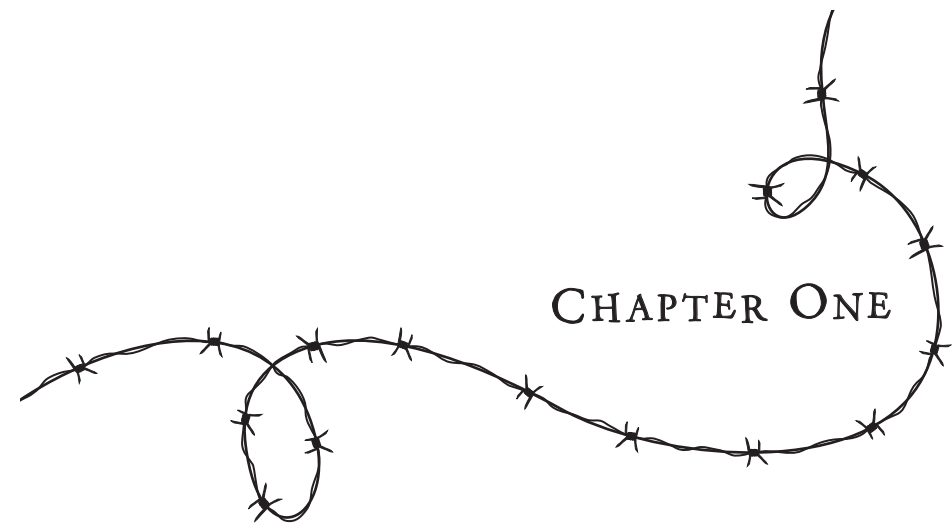
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## CHAPTER ONE

3 years, 1 month, 1 week and 6 days since I'd seen daylight. One-fifth of my life.

"We've run out of food," Dad said as he stepped into the doorway of the pantry. He avoided looking at us, especially Mom, ashamed to admit what we'd known for a while. We'd pretended it wasn't happening, but we weren't blind.

Please, not another fight.

Mom looked up from the floor of our improvised kitchen, stopped mopping and set the mop aside. I watched a little puddle of water gathering around it. Her unwashed, blonde hair hung limply down her shoulders and back, and the look of exhaustion on her face made my stomach clench. "What are you talking about? We should have food for at least another eight months."

It was impressive how easily the lies slipped from her lips – as if she hadn't noticed. She wiped her hands on her flowery apron – exactly eighty-nine flowers, I'd counted them. She stepped into the pantry. Here it came.

1,139 days since I'd heard the chatter of my friends, since I'd seen the sky.

Hands on hips, Mom glared at Dad, her brows creating a solid line of rising anger. "We stocked food for four years. You said so yourself."

Dad sighed. He slumped against one of the shelves and ran a hand through his hair. "We must have miscalculated. Maybe we ate more than we should have."

It always began like that: accusations and denial, followed by screaming and then crying. After that came hours of ignoring each other, and punishing silence. Today was the 996th day they'd spent arguing.

996 out of 1,139. Not a bad rate. Or not good, depending on how you want to look at it. Only four more days and they'd reach 1,000. Maybe some kind of celebration was due. Sometimes I wondered if they even realized how often they shouted at each other. Maybe they didn't care. Or maybe it was their way of killing time.

27,336 hours since I'd smelled freshly cut grass, or eaten a popsicle.

"You calculated the rations! You alone!" Mom pointed

an accusing finger at Dad. It shook slightly and a droplet of sweat ran down her temple, shining in the artificial light. The generator for the air conditioning system was running out of energy. It was getting hot. I pedalled a bit faster and the air became cooler.

"You said the food would last for four years. You said so," Mom said, her face strained. "Four years!" Her shrill tone made me cringe. Only a matter of seconds before she would burst into tears.

Dad threw up his hands, a look of utter frustration on his face. "Well, obviously it hasn't. The children have grown. They needed more food than we could have foreseen!" His voice rose. It filled the small space and bounced off the sterile white walls.

1,640,160 minutes since I'd run, since the wind had tousled my hair, since I'd seen any other person apart from my family.

"Your father died six months ago. His ration should have provided enough food to make up for that!" Mom shouted.

Grandma winced, but she didn't stop knitting. She seldom did. Her hands moved even faster, the knitting needles clicking together while she did one stitch after the other.

*Click. Click.*

If we'd taken as much food with us as Grandma had taken yarn, this argument wouldn't have happened. There was enough yarn for a decade in the pantry. My eyes flitted to our top-opening freezer – Grandpa's last resting place. Until three months ago, we'd stored our frozen food next to him. I shuddered and pedalled faster, ignoring the burning in my legs. Sweat trickled down my calves.

98,409,600 seconds since I'd felt sun on my skin.

98,409,602 seconds since the heavy, steel door had fallen shut and sealed us off from the world. Imprisoned us.

"This is our last can of food!" Mom held up a small silver tin of corned beef. "How long do you think it will feed six people? How long? Why didn't you say anything before? You should have warned us!"

Next came the crying. No doubt.

Mom must have noticed our lack of food weeks ago. Even Mia had asked why the shelves were empty. Mom was only looking for a reason to fight with Dad – it'd been like that for months.

"It's not my fault!" Dad bellowed. "Why didn't you take a look in the pantry? If you stopped scrubbing the counters and floors every bloody minute of the day, you would have realized it on your own!"

He stormed out of the pantry, but there was nowhere

he could go. He stopped in front of the furthest wall – barely ten metres away. His shoulders shook and his right hand rose to hide his eyes. I'd have bet on Mom, she usually cried first. And she was a loud crier. She didn't even try to hide it from us.

Before life in the bunker, I'd never seen Dad cry. Now it was a common occurrence – generally about twice a week, but Mom was still in the lead when it came to hysterical breakdowns. Perhaps a few more weeks and it would be a tie. If we were still alive.

Mom stood in the doorway of the pantry, the tin of corned beef in her outstretched palms like a sacred artefact. Her lips were pressed together and tears rolled down her pale cheeks. Her skin looked like ash – no fresh air and nothing but artificial light did that to you.

The television flickered because I'd stopped pedalling, and a moment later the screen went black. Bobby turned around and scowled at me. He took out an earplug and opened his mouth. I shook my head and gave him a warning look. His eyes flitted over to Dad, then Mom, and his brows pulled down in a frown.

"Bobby?" Mia whined as she pulled at his sleeve. Disappointment filled her round face, because Ariel, the Little Mermaid, had just disappeared from the screen. Bobby wrapped his arm around her shoulders and turned

her so she wouldn't see Mom and Dad arguing. Again. Then he raised his eyebrows at me in a silent demand.

Usually, I didn't do what he told me. He was younger than me by two years and was supposed to listen to me – though he rarely did.

I returned my feet to the pedals and began cycling. Ariel reappeared on screen, happily swimming with her little fishy friends through the ocean. It had been so long since I'd eaten fish; though it was better not to mention that to Mia – she loved Ariel's undersea kingdom.

I couldn't remember how the ocean smelled or how it felt to walk barefoot on the beach, the sand between my toes. I didn't even know if any of my friends were still alive. What had they looked like? They were nothing but a fading memory. I swallowed the lump in my throat and pedalled as fast as I could.

Mom still hadn't moved from the pantry. "That's all we have," she whispered, looking down at the tin like it was our tombstone. Dad didn't turn away from the wall to look at her. His shoulders had stopped shaking, though. Mom lifted her face and stared at me. Her tears didn't stop. Then she looked at Bobby and Mia, who were immersed in the movie that they'd seen too many times before. Bobby hated *The Little Mermaid* – he only watched it for Mia's sake.

The tin fell to the carpet with a dull thud. It rolled a few centimetres before it halted on its side. Every inch of this carpet was familiar to me. Every stain, every blemish. I looked up from the ground. Mom's hands shook. "That's all we have left." Her eyes were wide as she clapped a hand over her mouth. It did nothing to stifle the sobs.

My legs slowed. The TV screen flickered and I accelerated once more. Dad turned his head slightly to look over his shoulder at Mom. When sobs turned into gasps for air, I stopped pedalling and jumped off the bike. Dad and I reached Mom a second before her legs gave way.

"Mom, look at me." I took her hand and squeezed, while Dad lowered her to the ground. Her eyes flickered between Dad and me.

"Honey, breathe in and out," Dad instructed, but Mom didn't seem to hear. Her gasps grew desperate and pained, her eyes frantic.

Eight months ago Mom's asthma medication had run out.

Tears burned in my eyes and I blinked them back. "Mom." I cupped her cheeks and forced her to look at me. "Breathe with me, Mom." I took a deep breath and let it out, my lips forming an exaggerated "O". "In and out, Mom. In and out." Her eyes finally focused. She attempted

to suck in air, her chest heaving. I nodded and showed her again. “In and out.” Her breath was rattling, but at least she was breathing. Dad held her hand, their fight forgotten, and stared at us. His eyes were red, his cheeks sunken in, his skin too pale. I couldn’t remember when I’d last seen him eat something. He was starving himself for our sake. I looked back at Mom and repeated the breathing – in and out. In and out.

Grandma hadn’t stopped knitting.

*Click. Click.*

She hadn’t even looked up.

*Click. Click.*

“There’s still room next to my Edgar.” Grandma’s harsh Bavarian accent cut through the room. Every pair of eyes in the bunker flitted to the freezer. Every pair except for Mia’s.

Thank God.

As far as she knew, Grandpa had spent the last six months happily in heaven and not rock-hard next to our frozen peas. Mom’s weak smile faltered and she swallowed visibly.

“Grandpa Edgar?” Mia turned, her eyes wide with curiosity. Grandma looked up from the half-finished scarf, but she didn’t stop knitting.

*Click. Click.*

“Yes, your grandpa, of course.” The clicking of the needles filled the room.

*Click. Click.*

“Do you want me to show you?”

The vein in Dad’s temple began throbbing. A warning sign. “Be quiet, for God’s sake!” he said under his breath. He never talked to Grandma like that.

“I don’t think we’ve taught you to be disrespectful, son.” Grandma’s voice remained a whisper. She didn’t stop knitting.

*Click. Click.*

Mia’s curious blue eyes moved between Dad and Grandma. “You said Grandpa was in heaven. Will we visit Grandpa in heaven?”

Mom turned and walked into the pantry, closing the curtain behind her. It didn’t muffle her sobs. Dad’s hands were balled fists as he glared at Grandma. Bobby sat down on the exercise bike and began pedalling, his eyes closed. His jaw was clenched so tightly it looked painful.

I took Mia’s hand and led her towards the kitchen table, where I sank down on a chair and lifted her onto my lap. “Will we visit Grandpa in heaven?” she asked again, looking up at me with her clear blue eyes. I smiled. The muscles around my mouth felt like they might cramp from the effort. “No, Mia.”

Her smile fell and she pouted. “Why not?”

“It’s not time yet.”

I hadn’t been to a party yet, had never dyed my hair, never kissed a boy. There were so many “nevers”.

Dad glanced at me with approval and set his mouth in a determined line before he nodded, obviously pleased with my answer. I set Mia down and gave her a small clap on her backside. “Now, go watch Ariel.”

Mia’s head whirled towards the TV that had flickered back to life and she hurried over to her earlier spot on the ground. She dropped down on her bottom, already glued to Ariel with rapt attention. Every member of this family could recite the entire movie by heart. If I closed my eyes, the movie played out in my mind, only disturbed by the sound of Grandma’s knitting.

*Click. Click.*

Mom hadn’t emerged from the pantry yet, but her sobs had subsided. Or she’d finally found a way to muffle the noise. Probably the latter.

Grandma was knitting her sixtieth scarf. Bobby pedalled like a maniac. Both were busy ignoring Mom. Sometimes I felt like the only adult in the bunker. I ran a hand through my hair and winced when my fingers met knots. My hair felt dull. We’d run out of shampoo and conditioner fourteen months ago. Our soap supply had

lasted till three weeks ago. A short shower every three days was all our water supplies allowed anyway. Sometimes the smell of sweat and Bobby’s feet became unbearable, but there was nowhere we could go.

I picked up a strand between my thumb and forefinger and inspected it. My red hair had been shiny once.

1,139 days ago I’d stopped caring about such things.

I dropped the strand and picked up the tin of corned beef. All that was left. It was obvious it would never feed six people – not even three. Actually, I doubted it would be enough to fill the void in my stomach alone.

I lifted a pot from the cupboard, filled it with water and turned on the smaller burner before I set it down. The water only took a few minutes before it began to boil. After opening the tin, I dumped the corned beef in.

“What are you doing?” Dad came up next to me and peeked in.

Stirring the brew with a wooden spoon, I looked up at him. “Making soup.”

His eyes lit up with understanding. “You are a clever girl, Sherry.” He stroked my cheek and gave me a smile. Sometimes he still treated me like a little girl, as if he hadn’t noticed how I’d taken the role of an adult recently – or maybe he’d chosen to ignore it. From the corner of my eye, I saw the curtain being pulled back. Mom stepped

out of the pantry, her face cleaned of tears. She approached Dad and me with an embarrassed smile.

“I’ll set the table,” she announced. She grabbed soup bowls and spoons, and put them on the table. Dad hesitated briefly before he went to help her. I looked away when he wrapped his arms around her waist and murmured something into her ear. Privacy was almost impossible in the bunker.

I stared down at the pot of reddish-brown brew. It looked like dog food.

1,139 days ago I wouldn’t have eaten it. But that was a long time ago.

Now, I couldn’t wait.

Everyone settled around the table, even Grandma. The smell of something to eat – no matter how gross – drew her in like a moth to the light. Food was the only thing that could stop her from knitting continuously. In the last months of Grandpa’s struggle against cancer, she’d begun to knit obsessively – it was occupational therapy for her. Since his death, she’d barely stopped.

While the clicking of the needles seemed to calm Grandma, it was slowly driving the rest of my family crazy. Right now, the *click-click* felt like the countdown to something. Time was running out.

*Click. Click.*

I grabbed the pot and put it in the middle of the table. A scoop for each person. Not much.

Dad opened his mouth – in protest, I guess – when I filled his soup bowl. I ignored him, and silence settled over us as we ate what little we had.

Dad didn’t pick up his spoon at first. I glanced up and pleaded with him with my eyes: *Stop sacrificing yourself*. He dipped his head and stared at the soup. Then, finally, he began eating, guilt radiating from his face.

Dinner took us less than two minutes. Mia was the last to finish. She put down her spoon and looked at the empty plate with so much longing that I wished I’d given my soup to her.

Minutes dragged by in silence. Not the silence that surrounds you like a warm blanket, but a silence that threatens to crush you.

Longing glances were cast at empty plates, resigned glances at the empty pantry.

1,139 days since I’d seen daylight.

Only 2 minutes since we’d run out of food.