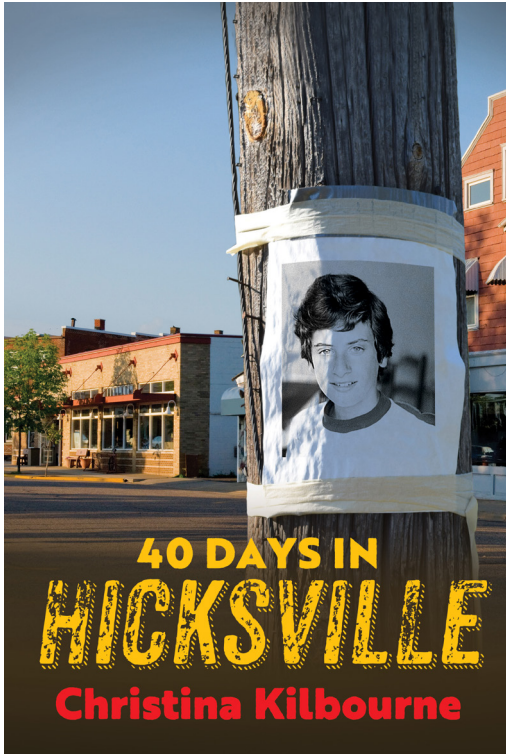


Excerpt from *40 Days in Hicksville*
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Chapter Four: Kate

In the eleven days I've been in Hicksville, I've not looked around the house. I've basically moved between the bedroom, the bathroom, and the kitchen. The only other place I've been is the barn. I snuck out on our third night to shoot a video and uploaded it to YouTube. Talk about dark. You haven't seen darkness until you've been in the countryside where there're no streetlights or car lights or lights from other buildings. It was pitch black and that part was kind of cool. But my video still got the worst batch of comments ever and only a handful of thumbs-up emojis. One person bet I wouldn't last forty days in the sticks before I'd run back to the city. I wish it was that simple. I'd pay serious stacks of cash for an escape hatch. But what that failed video made me realize is that I have to step up my urbex video game or I'm going to start losing more than just my sanity. I'm going to start losing followers.

Before I leave for school on Monday, I stand at the edge of the living room and glance inside. Maybe I'm looking for inspiration. Or maybe it's desperation. Whatever the reason, the room still makes me gag and even with Hicksville-level darkness and killer narration I couldn't turn it into a hit video for my channel.

YouTube videos aside, it wouldn't be as bad if every surface wasn't covered in crocheted doilies and the carpeting wasn't from the eighties, or worse, the seventies. But the couch and armchairs are older than my mother and everything is covered in dust and cat hair. I mean, seriously, the amount of DNA in the couch cushions alone is enough to keep a forensic team busy for decades. There are family photos hanging everywhere so I finally take the time to inspect them. I can pick out my grandparents — Gord and Bonnie — and my mother. I even recognize an aunt of my mother's who I think is Aunt Kathy, the person I'm named after. But

most of the faces are of complete strangers. I shoot a quick video and think about sending it to Austin, then decide against it. Some things aren't worth sharing.

Mom finds me as I'm leaving the living room and decides it's time to break the silence that has fallen like darkness over the house. I refused to make small talk for most of the weekend and hid out in *her* room, trying not to use too much data on my phone. Basically, it was like being in solitary confinement.

"I don't think you were very civil to Zach last week. So I hope you'll make more of an effort today," she says as I walk to the front door and pull on my Vans.

I'd hoped to leave without having to face off with her.

"To who?"

"To Zach. He lives on the next property over? The boy who came and cut the grass on Friday? Hello? The least you could have done is come out and said a few words to him. You can't be rude in a small town or you'll never make any friends."

"I don't want any friends."

She doesn't bite right away, but the set of her shoulders sharpens. I already hate the way her voice will sound when she finally opens her mouth.

"Fine. But you're going to be awfully miserable living out here without any friends for the next eleven months."

"Eleven months, two weeks, and five days." I know I'm pushing a button I shouldn't push, but I can't help myself.

"Speaking of five days, that's how many more days I'm going to put up with this bullshit of yours. Then, *my friend*, it's hardball."

She turns abruptly and stomps up the stairs. When she gets to the top, she slams the bathroom door so hard a framed picture falls off the wall, cartwheels down the stairs, and shatters at my feet. I wait a moment to see what she'll do but she doesn't open the

door and apologize. She doesn't run down the stairs to make sure I'm okay. She turns on the shower and, to make it worse, she starts singing.

"R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what that means to me!"

I want to be angry but my mom has some pretty serious pipes, so all I can really do is be impressed.

There are ten minutes before the bus, so I grab the broom. I pick the frame carefully from the shards of glass and clean up the mess. There are two pictures pressed together, like someone was too cheap to buy a second frame. I glance quickly at the front picture, which shows a young version of my mother. She's in a graduation robe, holding a diploma. It's one of those studio shots. I'm surprised to see how much of my own face is in hers. Her hair isn't as curly as mine, but there's something about her jawline, about the way her hair sweeps off her forehead, about how her eyes squint into the camera. The alarm on my phone buzzes and words flash across the screen: *Move UR Ass. Bus in 2 Minutes*. I jam the photo, frame and all, into my backpack. Then I run out the front door as the bus pulls up to our driveway.

There are only three other kids on the bus and they are all in the very back, so I have plenty of choice about where to sit. I pick a spot two seats behind the driver without making eye contact with anyone, slouch down, and brace my legs against the seat in front of me.

"Whatcha doing?"

Tractor Boy hangs over the back of my seat, gawking over my shoulder. His hair is long, scraggly, and tucked into a backward baseball cap. He has that casual but calculated look I hate in guys. He's too obvious, like he needs constant attention, especially from girls. I glance at him quickly when he looks over his shoulder to the back of the bus. Actually, he looks like the kind of guy a lot of

girls would go for, but he's nothing like Austin and definitely not my type.

"Sitting on a bus," I say deadpan. Then I wait, just in case he missed the fact that I have more important things to do than answer his stupid questions.

"Why?"

I don't answer right away because I'm trying to figure out what kind of stupid question "Why?" is. I mean, I'm obviously sitting on the bus so I can go to school. I glance over my shoulder and he hasn't moved, is still leaning forward, staring ahead. I second-guess myself, wonder if he's being philosophical, if it's some kind of test. Is he expecting me to say something profound like: *because I exist?*

"Because I want to," I say finally. But even to my ears, I sound like a bitch. So I clear my throat. "Unless you know a better way to get to school."

He nods knowingly. "I could lend you our riding lawn mower. Gets up to ten miles an hour going downhill."

I can't help myself and laugh, just a little, more like a snort.

"Ah, so you *do* have a sense of humor," he says. Then he sits back with such a self-satisfied look I have to clench my fist to keep from hitting him.

"I probably have a better sense of humor than you. I just don't go around showing it off."

"On the contrary. I'm not showing it off. I'm so funny I just can't contain it sometimes."

"Is there something I can help you with, Zach? If so, just cut to the chase already."

This time it's Zach's turn to pause for effect and he drags it out. I swear to God, he even feigns looking at his fingernails. "And you even know my name?"

“Yeah, so big deal. My mom told me this morning.”

“I guess I made a pretty big impact on your mother. She seemed to like me.”

“Oh my God! Are you always this annoying?”

“It’s part of my charm,” Zach says casually.

“Someone told you this was charming?”

Zach ignores the bait and changes the subject. “I was thinking of coming over after school to do the weed whacking. Your mother seems to need the help. Maybe I’ll see you then. Or maybe I’ll enjoy talking about you with your mother again.”

“Wait! You guys were talking about me?” I ask.

I feel my temper spike and I clamp my teeth together to stop myself from saying anything else, from letting him know how bothered I am by his intentionally offhand comment. I can’t help but wonder exactly what she said about me. In fact, I want to know more than I want to admit.

But Zach doesn’t answer. Instead, he jumps off the bus and slips into the crowd of kids streaming into the school. I stand up and wait. The girl in front of me drops her phone and stops to pick it up while I fume. Zach is easily the most annoying guy I’ve ever met in my life.

The next time Zach shows up at our house he comes by foot, carrying the weed whacker over his shoulder. He walks slowly, with his face down and that terrible hair hanging in front of his eyes. I video him from my bedroom window as he walks up the hill toward our house, then turns into our driveway. That’s when I sneak down the stairs and go outside to meet him.

“Hey!” I call out when we’re about twenty feet apart.

He squints into the sun and says: “Hey back.”

“Where’s that sweet ride you had last week? I thought you were going to let me drive it to school?”

He blushes and I feel sort of bad for teasing him. But Zach doesn’t miss a beat, which is something I could probably learn to appreciate about him.

“It’s at the body shop getting tricked out. I thought flames would be a nice touch. What do you think?”

I can’t help but laugh. “That would be totally badass.”

I turn and walk with him toward the house. He puts the weed whacker on the ground and looks around.

“You don’t really have to do that, you know.”

“But I live for weed whacking. It’s an honor. In fact, I feel like I owe you for letting me do it.”

He kneels down and fiddles with the gas cap in a way that makes me wonder if he actually knows how to use it.

“You’re so weird,” I say. “But I could actually use your help if you’re into chivalry.”

He stands up and wipes the hair out of his face, considers the weeds growing tall around the perimeter of the house. The more I look at him, the more he reminds me of someone, but I can’t quite figure out who. I scan through my friends from back home but my synapses don’t make the connection.

“I’m not going to tell you what your mother said about you so don’t even ask.”

Now it’s my turn to blush, and I fumble to speak. “Don’t worry. I won’t. I forgot all about it actually.”

“Likely story. So what do you want me to do? Nothing illegal, I hope.”

What I am about to propose is cringeworthy, and if I wasn’t desperate, I’d find another way. But I can’t take another day of si-

lence in the house, another sullen meal, another rendition of “Respect” by my mother. I mean, I am not over the move, I’ll never be over the move, and I haven’t given up on *Operation Get the Hell Out of Hicksville*, but I need a couple of days off. It’s been a long weekend. And digging in my heels is just making her dig in more.

Zach eyes me suspiciously, then looks down the hill toward his own place, as if I am taking too long and if I don’t hurry up and spill it, he’s going to walk home.

“It’s just ... I was hoping ... Can you maybe come inside and say hi to my mom? It’ll make her happy to see I’ve made a friend.”

Zach stops fiddling with his ear and turns to face me. He raises his eyebrows in high arcs. “So, I’m a friend now?”

“Sure, I guess. I mean, we just met. But if she sees me making an effort ...”

I don’t finish the thought because my brain catches up to my mouth and I hear how *mean girl* I sound. What’s worse is I can see how my *mean girl* comment lands. Zach scowls in response, glances down at the weed whacker and over at the house again as if he’s decided the weeds look more promising than doing me a favor. I mean, I don’t want him to think I’m only using him, because I’ve been on the wrong end of that equation too many times with Serena before and it doesn’t feel good. But I also don’t want to commit to anything. After all, I’m pretty sure we have nothing in common and he’s the first person I’ve met. Plus, he seems a little desperate, so who knows, maybe he’s the town weirdo and I’m stepping into a trap.

Finally, he says: “What’s in it for me?”

It makes me a little bit happy to realize he’s not a complete pushover, that he has enough backbone to expect something in return. It’s more interesting, you know, when you don’t have all the power.

"I'll think of some way to repay the favor," I say. "Just don't answer her questions with too much detail or we'll be there forever."

"Message received."

We step up onto the wooden porch and through the screen door. As soon as it bangs shut, Mom calls out from the kitchen.

"Kate?"

"Yep. Hi. Zach came over for a bit. Hope that's okay."

Mom rushes from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

"Zach! Good to see you. I hope you didn't bring the lawn tractor this time!"

Zach blushes for a second time in ten minutes.

"Actually, he brought the weed whacker," I say. "But I suggested he show me around the property instead."

Zach looks surprised but plays along. "That's right. Since we share a property line, I know yours just about as well as mine. I thought I could show Kate the, uh, highlights."

Mom is so happy she practically lights the room up with her smile. It almost makes me feel bad that she's falling so hard for my con. She turns to Zach, who's looking around the kitchen. There's a blender full of raspberries, a colander in the sink draining pasta, canisters of flour and sugar open on the table, jars of spices strewn about. There are three different cutting boards heaped with veggies, measuring cups of freshly chopped herbs, two saucepans and a frying pan all on the go.

"Wait?" Zach says like a question. "Is this dinner?" He has a haunted, hungry look about him, like he might drool into one of the mixing bowls.

Mom laughs. "No. No. I'm experimenting with some new recipes. Are you hungry? I made lemon poppy seed cupcakes this afternoon. With cream cheese icing?"

"We're fine," I say as I try to edge us out of the kitchen. Zach

resists but eventually follows my lead and scuffles backward.

“Quinoa walnut salad?”

“That’s okay.” I shake my head.

Zach mouths *keen-wa*?

Mom looks disappointed. She loves to feed people and I’m never enough people to keep her satisfied. But she tries again. “Potato pockets with double-smoked bacon and provolone?”

“No thanks.” I smile and press Zach to move faster.

“Roast beef sandwiches on rye with horseradish mayo?”

Zach stops moving and looks from Mom to me and back again. “Actually, I wouldn’t mind a roast beef sandwich. I haven’t eaten since I got home from school.”

I look at the clock on the stove. It’s only five but I don’t say anything when I see Mom’s expression turn into a smile again, squinty eyes and everything. She gives me that *I told you so* look and rummages through the fridge. Zach shrugs an apology at me and I roll my eyes. Now we’re going to have to wait ten minutes for Mom to make him a sandwich. And who knows how many questions she could squeeze into that amount of time.

“Lettuce, Zach?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“Pickle?”

“Please!”

“I’ll make it to go,” Mom says as she cuts it into two pieces with a flourish. She wraps it in parchment paper and hands it to Zach with a can of San Pellegrino.

“Now off you go to do whatever it is you’re in such a hurry to do. When you come back you can try one of the cupcakes.”

Zach has a dopey smile on his face and I tug the tail of his shirt to get his attention. He thanks Mom about fifteen times and finally follows me outside.

"I'm so jealous right now," he says as he unwraps the sandwich. He takes a bite while we walk toward the barn. "Omgod, this is amazing!"

"Okay, I admit it. She has a way with food."

He takes another bite and moans with delight.

"Get over it. It's just a sandwich," I mutter.

"I'd weigh two hundred pounds if I lived with her."

I look him up and down. With his frame, there's no way he'll ever be two hundred pounds. He'll be lucky to hit one-fifty by his eighteenth birthday.

"What do you want to see first?" He asks through a cheek full of sandwich.

I scowl and shrug. "I don't know. What's there to see?"

"Fields, trees, fences."

"Sounds thrilling," I mutter.

Zach swallows and tilts his head. "What's in the barn?"

I look at the barn mutely. There's no point trying to explain that I was only in the barn for twenty minutes to shoot a video. And there's definitely no point in trying to explain why.

"I dunno. I haven't actually looked around that much. I've mostly been hanging out in my bedroom."

"Part of your protest?"

"Something like that."

We follow an overgrown trail beyond the barn, through the fenced fields and to the top of a hill, which is the highest point for a long way around. The fields are empty. There are no cows or crops, but in the far distance, there's a stand of pine trees so perfectly ordered they had to have been planted.

"So this is where my mom grew up. Do you think it's the same as when she lived here?" I ask as I sweep my hand across the view before us.

“Probably more or less. Those trees are probably taller now. And I know your grandfather used to keep cows and grow hay.”

Despite the weather forecast, the temperature still hasn't broken, so for the ninth straight day I'm choking on the thick hot air, so different from the cool breezes we got out west. Zach cracks open his San Pellegrino and offers me the first drink, but I shake my head.

Instead, I pull out my phone and turn in a circle, videoing in all directions. Behind us is our house, the infamous Cooper farm, and to the left, across an expanse of field, is Zach's house and barn. Some parts of the landscape are obscured by trees and other parts by hills. But as I continue turning, I see another farm far in the distance, fronting onto a different road.

“Who lives over there?”

Zach looks uneasy. “Some cranky old guy. A bit of a lunatic. He pretty much keeps to himself. But I think your mom might have known his son. Someone named Goheen?”

My breath catches in my throat and sticks like a ball of dough.

“I think that's my grandfather's place.”

Zach looks confused.

“Not Gord Cooper. My *other* grandfather. Mitch Goheen is my father. That must be where his dad lives. I've never actually met him. I mean, I barely see my dad. But I know he used to live near Mom when she was in high school. That's how they met.”

Zach glances away and rubs the back of his neck. It's clear there's something he doesn't want to talk about.

“What?”

“It's nothing.”

“Just tell me.”

“Well, uh, it's just, there're a few unsavory rumors about him. The kind of stories kids tell at sleepovers to scare each other. You

know?”

“Actually, I don’t know. But I would if you just told me already.”

“Okay. But it’s probably not true.”

“Spill it!” I shout.

“Don’t get mad. But, well, I heard he killed someone once.” He pauses briefly then rushes through the next sentence. “But like I said, I don’t know for sure if it’s true.”

I turn back to the property in the distance and wonder if the rumor could be true and how I might find out. I wonder if my mother knows the story.

My *other* grandfather’s house is tucked back off the road. It’s a large two-story structure with a curved veranda. There’s a long driveway leading up to it, a barn and a couple of smaller buildings further in the distance. From where we stand, it looks like a pretty nice place, or like it might have been. It’s hard to connect that place to my father, or what I know about him, which isn’t all that much: a few summer holidays and Christmases, birthday cards, texts, the odd telephone conversation.

Zach gazes across the expanse of land at the house for a few minutes. He looks hopeful, nervous, then determined. Finally, he says: “It’s probably not true. It sort of sounds made up. You know? Maybe he’s just a lonely old man and people started saying shit about him that stuck. Do you wanna maybe ... I mean ... well ... maybe we should go introduce you?”