



CHAPTER 1

An early summer breeze wafts through my window, and I hear the growling motor of the Shady Pines Retirement Home van crawling slowly up our tree-lined street. As it makes a careful turn into our short driveway, I happily shove as much stuff as I can into my lumpy duffel bag.

Super exciting things are about to happen!

For one, in just a few short hours (forty-two to be exact), I'm almost ninety-five percent sure that I'll be going to the David Lynch Film Camp in Los Angeles.

Even though I'm only in seventh grade, this is a big deal for me because I want to be a filmmaker. Not the kind who just tells stories. But the kind who *observes* stories. I want to create my life opus, a very big story, in a style called *cinéma vérité*, a

term I learned in Mr. Burns's after-school film club. Mr. Burns says *cinéma vérité* reveals not only the truth in other people, but the truth in oneself.

This sounds like a good thing for me because people confuse me sometimes. As for revealing the truth in myself, I'm not exactly sure what that means. I'm guessing it's that thing where you say or do something and then afterwards you're like, "That was stupid. Why did I say that? And why are people looking at me like I smell bad or something?"

So by observing others, maybe I can cut down on those types of experiences because, if I'm being honest, that kind of happens to me a lot.

Plus, for Hanukkah, Aunt Bea got me this awesome headpiece camera, which is very cool because I can film people even from far away. The only problem is that I almost got punched once by a kid who thought I was spying on him, which was not my intention. But Mr. Burns says good art should be dangerous, so maybe I'm on the right track.

As for the David Lynch Film Camp, I say I'm only ninety-five percent sure I'm going because, at first, my parents weren't hot on the idea. They were like, "Sorry. Not happening. It's too far away and too expensive."

But I can be really persistent when I want something. So I started talking it up, like, all the time, at every meal, during every car ride, during TV shows. But then I noticed Mom and Dad were kind of avoiding me, so I thought: go subtle. I started leaving brochures around the house in places I knew they'd look, like inside the refrigerator crisper bin, plastered across the car windshield, and taped to the lid of the toilet seat.

Although that might have been a little overkill because at one point Dad was like, "Mention that camp one more time . . ." Then he didn't finish his sentence, which meant he was really mad.

Eventually, he said he and Mom would think it over, which gave me hope. That is until my sister, Lily, reminded me that sometimes that means they've already made up their minds and they're never gonna do it.

But last night, they told me to pack my bags. For a second, I thought they were kicking me out. Lily said I wasn't reading the room right, which, as I said, is kind of my problem. They promised there was a good surprise coming. So now I'm really stoked. Lily's also stoked because she thinks that means she can do what she wants to do this summer too.

The second exciting thing that's going to happen has to do with my Pops. Today is his birthday party. We think he's turning ninety-something, though Pops refuses to say. Yesterday he sent me a mysterious email, saying he has a secret that will change my life forever. I can't imagine what that is, but I bet it's cool!

So, right now, I'm going to find out his big secret. I'm going to make sure I get a hard "yes" from Mom and Dad about film camp. And I'm going to record everything on my camera, which I'm securing firmly around my head as I make my way down to our living room for the party Mom is throwing for Pops.

Pops's friends from Shady Pines are already milling around, filling their paper plates with salad and lasagna. Festive party decorations dot the room, and silver tinsel bristles hang across the fireplace mantel. Mom's large picture board of the history of Pops's life, family, and friends is propped up on the table. Stretched across the archway to the living room is a purple papier-mâché banner that reads: *Happy Whatever Birthday, Pops!*

Lily pops in front of me, looking annoyed. "Noah! Where were you? We need more cups." She leans in close. "Rabbi Blum's had like twelve cups of coffee already, and he keeps leaving them everywhere."