

NO FILTER

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THE SMUDGE

It's ruined. Horribly, hideously ruined.

Janessa "Jinx" McCormick sits in front of her computer and glares at the image of strawberry ice cream on the monitor. She is twelve years old, with sharp green eyes and long straight blond hair parted down the middle. She wears her father's vintage black Nine Inch Nails *Pretty Hate Machine* T-shirt, which is much too big on her, and a pair of faded blue jeans that she has painstakingly shredded at the knees with a wire brush so they look like she bought them that way. She has a habit of biting her nails, and several fingers that she's

nibbled to the quick are tipped with silver Band-Aids.

Jinx's computer rests on a mostly bare, white desk beneath the loft bed in her tiny six-by-eight bedroom. It's an odd Frankenstein PC that she and her friend Blaine cobbled together from spare parts. At the moment, she is using it to edit a photo from a shoot she took yesterday. The current picture wouldn't have been perfect no matter what. Maybe it could have been, if she was a professional photographer with a studio and a food stylist. But she isn't yet, and for the time being she'll live with the less-than-ideal lighting and the lackluster texture of the red strawberry chunks nestled into the pink ice cream.

What she *cannot* live with is the black smudge that has completely ruined the image. At a glance, it appears to be a fly perched on the ice cream. Obviously, that's not a great way to sell a food product. But she knows there was no fly when she took the shot. And when she zooms in, the smudge doesn't actually look like a fly. The trouble is, she can't tell *what* it is, and that's pretty weird.

Jinx shoots with a Canon 5D Mark III DSLR. Not the most cutting-edge camera out there now, but it *was* the best camera on the market a decade ago, and still has better control over ISO, aperture size, and shutter speed than even the best phone cameras. It also allows for a nearly infinite number of lens types that she could swap in and out to achieve various effects—assuming she could afford to buy them, which she can't. Regardless, while the camera is a bit old, it still takes really good pictures. So Jinx is able to zoom in incredibly close on the image. If it *had* been a fly, she would have been able to count the hairs on its legs. But even at that intense magnification, the black smudge is still . . . just a smudge.

Could it be something on her lens? She takes it out of the case that sits by her feet, holds it up, and examines it carefully. It's clean.

Of *course* it is, because she always wipes down her lens before packing it up. Even if there was a smudge during the shot, it was gone before she put it away.

While Jinx is still puzzling out the smudge mystery, her phone lights up. She prefers a clean workspace, so it's the only thing on her desk besides her computer. When she glances over, she sees a message from Blaine.

Jinxie! We still doing that shoot at the park?

She carefully wipes her lens and places it back in the case before answering.

Yeah see you in 20 min

Jinx looks back at the ice cream image. She could edit out the smudge, but it's only one photo in a whole set, and the rest are all smudge free. Besides, she promised Mr. Alsobrooks that she'd send him proofs today. So she deletes the image with the blemish, then exports the rest from RAW format to a smaller jpeg size and uploads those to her cloud service. She emails the share link to delvin@scream4icecream.com with a brief note:

Hi Mr. Alsobrooks. Let me know which one you like best and I'll send the full res —Jinx

Then she puts her computer on standby, grabs her camera bag, and heads downstairs.

Jinx lives in a two-bedroom town house with her aunt Helen. It's pretty small, but she doesn't mind because it means there's less space to clean. The downstairs is one big room, with a couch and TV in one area, and a small dinner table with four chairs in another. Off to one side is a kitchen that Jinx only really uses for making breakfast cereal. Occasionally, Aunt Helen will cook them a meal, but Jinx's aunt is a nurse who works the graveyard shift. Right now she's upstairs sleeping, and she probably won't wake up until about 5:00 p.m. That means Jinx's dinner time is usually her aunt's breakfast time. Not that Jinx needs someone to cook for her. She pretty much has the food situation under control.

She pauses at the front door to pull on her

black-and-white checkered high-top Vans, and grab her skateboard. When she's ready to leave the house, she rests her hand on the doorknob and taps a quick sequence on it with her bandaged fingertips:

Tappity-tappity. Tap. Tap. Tappity-tappity. Tap. Tap.

She nods in satisfaction, opens the door, and heads out into the world.