

RUNNING FOR MY LIFE:
A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

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This is dedicated to the memory of Kaelyn Anne Carson
and wouldn't have been possible
without the support of my husband Kevin.

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Part I: Warning, Approach with Caution

Chapter 1:

I could be characterized as an overachiever or a goody-goody - a smart, straight “A” student. In fact, when I got my one B+ in drafting my freshmen year (I took it for a boy - stupid), I called my mom bawling. Pathetic, I know. I’m thin and athletic – a runner. I volunteer and am involved in extra-curriculars. I’m vice-president of student council, and I’m not a partier. I’ve got everything going for me and a bright future ahead. People assume all of this comes easily because I carry a smile through it all; however, they don’t know I have a dark side.

I’m often consumed by stress and self-doubt. I’m a mental basket case. In fact, I should have a warning label attached to my forehead that says, “Caution: high stress levels.” I’m lucky enough to have a genetic predisposition for a mind that cultivates stress well; I take it in, mold it until it takes over my whole thought process, and feed and water it until it blossoms into a fantastic masterpiece. Sounds nice, right? Wrong! It’s miserable for me and for anyone within a ten foot range. I should be approached with caution and if I had a sign near me, signaling my stress level, friends and family would have an easier time knowing what to expect. (Although they might also avoid me, so maybe that’s not such a good idea?) The following labels should be used:

Level 1: Stress watch - Under this state, stress is brewing.

Although, I may seem completely relaxed and happy, in the back of my mind, I’m worrying about something else.

Level 2: Stress warning - Stress is now present and unavoidable. I'm on the verge of breaking. Under this state, a person who encounters me should proceed with caution. I'm highly irritable and an explosion is imminent.

Levels 3: Explosion!! Danger!!! - I've gone over the edge. Red lights should be flashing. There's no going back or "fixing" the situation. Any reassurances or promises of "it's going to be ok" are not going to help me now, because I'm not thinking rationally.

It really is miserable to live in my skin sometimes. I don't want to get stressed. I envy people who "go with the flow" and are able to take life as it comes. However, no amount of need or want seems to make any difference for me. I am beyond help.

Exhibit A:

Last week I had a paper due in English, a ton of other homework, practice after school every day with meets on Tuesday and Friday, tutoring on Wednesday night. Then when Mom asked me to eat at my grandparents' house on Thursday, there was an explosion. Mom hadn't taken notice of the "level 2" warnings. Mentioning how much they'd been looking forward to it was the last straw. You see, it wasn't that I didn't want to go to dinner - I did actually, but I had no idea how I was going to go to dinner AND get everything else done too. As the to-do list in my head was getting longer, my heart rate increased,

palms became sweaty, and Panic showed his ugly head. Have you ever seen Panic? He's pretty scary and big with huge fighting horns and snarly jagged teeth. And, once his teeth stick in, there's no escaping. You could try all the relaxation techniques in the world, breathing, meditation, chi - it won't work on me. This ugly encounter was followed by uncontrollable sobbing on my part and patient consoling on my mom's. The headline for this incident would read: "Poor Mom: Innocent Bystander, Caught in Explosion."

This private HELL is my reality. Most people aren't ever aware of levels one or two, as I've become a pretty good actress. Explosions are usually saved for those closest to me, like family and close friends - sucks to be them. They pay a high price for loving me.

Chapter 2:

I'm a little more on edge right now because not only is a new school year beginning, but I'm also a lowly freshman. Just changing classrooms during the day was enough to throw me for a loop in eighth grade and now throw into the mix a new school, new teachers, new classes . . . new, new, new - change, change, change. And I don't do so well with either. Mom's making me go to freshman orientation tomorrow tonight.

"It'll make you feel so much better, honey," she explains. "You'll get to find out where your locker is and all of your classes and you'll meet some of your new classmates. It can only be a good experience if you make it one, and who knows, it could even be fun!"

"Yea right, Mom. *Fun* isn't exactly the word I was thinking of. How about *terrifying* or *overwhelming*? Just add one more *new* thing to the *new* list. I'm starting to get whiney now.

"But you've always loved school! What's changed?" she asks, getting that concerned Mom look.

"Everything is changing! I still love the school part, the learning part," I try to explain. "I just, I just . . . don't want to go."

I won't bore you with the rest of this conversation, except to tell you that I lost the battle. So, I find myself at orientation the following evening. As we're being herded into the bleachers and shushed to silence, there's a sharp whistle, which is followed by a buzz of activity. Everyone strains their necks searching for the source of the whistle which caused the commotion. As I search the crowd, I notice all eyes in the crowd have suddenly stopped – focused on

someone. I look up to see everyone staring at the entrance to the gym where a girl I've never seen is walking toward the bleachers. However, this isn't just a "girl." She is drop dead gorgeous. Like a swan in the midst of a swarm of ducks, she's noticeable to say the least. Her mulatto skin stands out amongst a sea of white. Tall and thin, she towers over most of the girls, and guys, for that matter, and her thick black hair falls in curls about her shoulders, swaying as she strides confidently toward a seat in the front row. As she sits down, she smiles, revealing beautiful, straight, bright (must have just been bleached) pearly whites. Her smile exudes sweetness, and I'm tempted to ask a few of the guys around me if I could get them a bib.

The principal continues to try desperately to gain the attention of our distracted audience. Another sharp whistle – this one coming from a voice of authority finally gets our attention. But before the principal can even begin his spiel, I already have her pegged: homecoming queen, shallow, girly-girl type who will establish every fashion trend which ripples through this school. Not to mention, she'll be able to have or steal the heart of any guy in this place.

I meet the mystery girl later at the clubs and organization fair at the Key Club table. She walks up as I'm listening to a student list the many volunteer opportunities available for the year . . . "cancer walk, CROP walk, bell ringing, food drive, adopt-a-family, visiting nursing homes . . ." When I notice her next to me, I resist the urge to turn and stare, instead choosing to nonchalantly flip through the club's scrapbook. As she takes a handout off the table, she turns to me and says, "Hi, I'm Kaelyn. I'm gonna join. You too?"

"Hi, I'm Sarah," I lower my voice to a whisper, "Yes, I like volunteering, but please don't tell anyone."

Leaning in and lowering her voice she whispers, “Me too.”

In the car on the way home, Mom asks, “So . . . how was it?”

“Fine,” I mumble.

I actually did find the evening ok; I found my locker and classrooms, and even met the future homecoming queen, but I don’t feel like listening to another “I told you so” speech.

Chapter 3:

D-Day was a day that “will live in infamy” as it changed the course of WWII. I’m a bit of an oddity, because I actually *enjoy* learning about history – so while other students may read the facts, noting that it took place on June 6, 1944 along a 50-mile stretch on the coast of Normandy and was the largest amphibious invasion of all time . . . yawn, I imagine the Allied soldiers jumping out of the boats while dodging enemy fire, shouting “We will not be beaten!!” These young men know it’s now or never. They may be scared to jump, but they jump anyway - perhaps willingly going to their grave for their cause: freedom, righteousness, and an end to horror and murder and genocide . . .

I have a D-Day of my own to endure before the school year begins. Ok, so it isn’t really this intense but for someone like me, it’s pretty traumatic . . . I have to (take a deep breath - pause for effect) decide between basketball and cross country. Let me tell you . . . it is NOT an easy decision.

I’ve been playing basketball since I was a little kid, beginning with my dad’s challenge to a game of H-O-R-S-E. This was followed by a succession of camps and AAU leagues, which cost my parents a lot of time and money. I ran track in middle school and was decent, but not great at the mile.

I’ve been running over the summer and have found that I actually really like distance running and the longer I run, the better I am. The problem: these two sports take place in the same season. The solution: pick one. Seems pretty easy, right? Just pick one. There’s a 50/50 shot of picking the right one. Just go eenie, meenie and if you don’t like it, you can always go

back to the other one, right? Wrong. In my mind, you pick one and that's it, otherwise it's like quitting and that is NEVER an option. I ALWAYS finish. That's it, no exceptions, EVER.

Quitting is for the weak, losers, not me.

Exhibit A:

I decided to take physics. I don't particularly enjoy science or math, but it was an advanced course, and I'm always up for a challenge. I did NOT get it. The concepts went right over my head - whoosh. After enduring many frustrating late nights of trying to "figure it out" and praying to the science gods for guidance following further frustration and fits of sobbing, my mom finally decided it was time for some outside intervention. I can only guess that the intervention was prompted by the fact that we were going through Kleenex at an alarming rate and her ears were probably bleeding from the prolonged whining of "grievances." The bottom line is, I was worried about the all important G.P.A. So . . . Mom enlisted the help of retired physics teacher, Mr. Davis. Since my mom is the secretary in the main office, he probably said "yes" as a personal favor, not because he was yearning to teach physics to a brick wall, but I didn't care. When you need help, you need help.

However, when my life line packed his bathing suit to join the rest of the saggy bodies in his retirement community in Florida, I was

left to my own devices again. This event, combined with the fact that it was nearing the end of the semester, meant that the information was passing over my head at lightening speed. That's when Mom suggested I drop the class and take an easier one second semester. "I can talk to Mr. Hawkins (school counselor) for you, honey," she offered. "I know you're doing your best, but I hate to see you struggle this much."

Poor Mom. Her timing for this suggestion sucked. First of all, I was on my second hour of homework for the class, and I didn't even know if I was doing it correctly. Second of all, she used the term "drop" and unfortunately, that subtle synonym didn't disguise the ugly truth. I do NOT *quit* anything. An explosion followed ending with my yelling, "I'M NOT A QUITTER, SO I'M NOT QUITTING (eloquent right?) You can guess how the rest played out - I cried, mom soothed, and I finished the class through much sleep deprivation, more tutoring, and perhaps an act of the science gods.

Ok, to take us back from the sidetrack, I still have a decision to make about fall sports. See how good I can be at procrastination when I want to be. Usually, I'm a "get it done" kind of girl, focused and hard working. I have a to-do list for each and every day and the faster I check things off, the happier I am. But when the task only involves me AND will have a major impact on my future, I am paralyzed. Unfortunately, no one has weighed the pros and cons or used their magic ball to look into the future, so here I am. Still. I don't know what to do, and I have to decide. Like yesterday.

I've been wrestling and stewing for at least a month already, weighing the pros and cons, asking for the advice of my parents, friends, anyone who will listen, not that any of this has helped. The list is pointless and everyone has answered, "It's up to you, whatever makes you happy." To this I want to scream, "I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL MAKE ME HAPPY, WHICH IS WHY I'M ASKING!!" The other day I really did scream. In the empty field behind our house under the guise of taking my dog Sadie for a walk, I screamed, let it out. It felt great, but didn't result in a decision. It just made me a little hoarse and freaked the dog out.

Today, however, D-Day has arrived. After putting up with my moods, short fuse, and one track mind, my mom sits me down for a talk. "Honey, stop putting yourself through this. You need to just follow your heart and make a choice. You're prolonging the agony, and it isn't fun for any of us who live under this roof."

"But I don't know what to do!" whining turns to crying. The conversation ends with a deadline and not a generous one, in my opinion. She gives me until the end of the day. Today. Until 9:00 p.m. to be exact. That gives me four hours, 28 minutes, and counting. Who knew a deadline could be so powerful? As time ticks by, I feel the enormity of it pressing in and around. I'm surrounded. Will I stick with basketball as is expected or will I take a risk, jump into the world of the unknown (so unlike me!). I could suck . . . or, I could be great. I close my eyes. What should I do? What should I do? What should I do?

I'm gonna jump! Just like those young, brave men on the beaches of Normandy, I'm going to take a risk! True, I'm not saving the world or defending righteousness, but my heart

still feels like it's beating out of my chest, and I can't help but think . . . *What am I doing? Am I really gonna become one of those crazy cross country people?!*

Chapter 4:

It's the night before the first day of school, and I'm *so* nervous! Have I mentioned that being a freshman is the worst?! It's so not fair to go from being the rulers of middle school to freshmen in the course of a few short months. Summer vacation is just not enough time to prepare for that kind of mental anguish. Yes, we've already had orientation, (which has been cited numerous times by Mom as a source of comfort), but this doesn't help the night before.

I'm nervous about a whole slew of possible worst case scenarios. I could get lost on my way to a class or say something stupid, or trip and fall *up* the stairs (always embarrassing, and yes, I know from experience), or I could have locker issues, or I could grow a huge cold sore the night before - a monstrosity so big, it takes over my entire face! (I've already popped some extra Llysine tablets just in case). Cold sores - another one of my favorite character traits - whenever I get stressed or sick, never fails. I even used to get them up my nose when I was younger - ouch! And in every one of my school pictures I either had a full blown (whoa, what is that?!) cold sore or at least a scab from a healing one.

Luckily apart from feeling extremely awkward for most of the day, none of these scenarios actually happen. However, it will top the charts as one of the most boring days in the history of my life. Each of my teachers distributes the class syllabus and then commences with his/her own version of what I have nicknamed the "Thou shalt not" speech. I gather that I am not to come in late, forget my pencil, my homework . . . and on and on and on and on. What *am* I supposed to do? Not a clue. In each of my six classes, I yearn for the teacher to just give us some work already. I want to read, do a math problem, answer a question . . . engage my mind.

Instead, I listen or at least try to listen. Even though I try to pay attention by taking notes, I zone out. I doodle some flowers on my paper and wonder and worry about practice.

At 3:20, the bell finally ends this day of boredom. Unfortunately there will probably be more to come. Rushing to my locker, I grab my change of clothes and change in a bathroom stall as quickly as possible (since I have no idea if I can use the locker room or where it is). We meet in coach's classroom, which will later become my safe place; today, however, it is a very, very scary place. The unknown invites Panic in.

“So, let's see what you've got today. We're going to do a short time trial, just to see what kind of shape you're in,” Coach Kelley announces loudly and immediately a deep gloom falls over the room and groans erupt. “You will run on the track for fifteen minutes and see how many laps you can get. Now head out; Captains lead the warm-up,” he calmly instructs. *What? What are we doing? Are you serious? A workout on the VERY first day?! I numbly follow the pack heading outside.*

I follow along dutifully, watching and mimicking whatever the people in front of me are doing as we skip and lunge ourselves into a sweat. The starting line of the track is staring me in the face before I know it. So much hangs in the balance of these fifteen minutes. *Whether I made the right choice or not will be determined here and now, and I didn't even have time to mentally prepare!* I line up in the back of the pack with all of the other newbies and lean forward in anticipation of the command, “Go!” My heart is pounding, and we haven't even started running yet.

The first 200 meters is crazy, as I'm sandwiched instantly, and there's no moving in any direction other than blindly forward. As we round the final turn of the first lap, some start to fall back, and I pass a few already gasping for air. *Seriously? How can you be tired already?* But I like the feeling of passing people. It makes me feel strong, and I gather momentum. At the starting line, coach is yelling out splits, "72, 73, 74." I have no idea what a good split would be, so I focus on keeping my breathing even and my eyes on the next pack, which is about 100 meters ahead. I catch them on the third lap and pass at the beginning of the fourth. I pump my arms and focus on the next group, catching them on the sixth lap. This time trial is going by so fast, and I feel good. My legs have established a smooth rhythm. On the seventh lap, I start to get tired - my breathing becomes ragged and my legs are starting to burn. *You can do it. Panic is nowhere to be seen. He's been replaced with confidence.* When Coach yells, "Time," I can't believe it's over already. I've made it a little over nine laps. As I walk back to the starting line, I feel so good – surprisingly good. How do I describe this feeling? . . . Exhilaration – yes, and I feel strong and excited! *I guess I made the right choice after all.* As I announce my number of laps, everyone turns to stare at me. *Why are they staring?* I think I sense surprise, but I don't know. I'm confused – new at this, so I don't know how any of this works. I just know that I ran as fast as I could, and I think I'm going to like this whole running thing.

Chapter 5:

We're required to complete our long run over the weekend, taking the other day off or cross training. I've heard from some of the upperclassmen that many of our teammates skip the weekend running and opt to sit on the couch playing video games or taking naps instead, but I find that I *love* long runs. Love them. Did I mention yet that I love running? And the longer, the better; The mileage of the long run will increase each week, so while I only have to run six miles right now, I will run ten by the end of the season, and it may sound a little crazy, but I can't wait!

I'm running alone today, because being new, I don't know many of my teammates yet and like I mentioned, many of them seem to be slackers. Since we live in a small, farming community, I take a route out in the country where there won't be much traffic. As I run, I lose myself - engulfed in quiet. The dirt roads stretch before me for miles, and I become part of the scenery; I feel myself melting away into nothing. My mind goes blank, and I become a silent observer of the wide open spaces, rolling fields, rows of corn. Because I don't have to run a certain pace, my legs establish a smooth rhythm, and I just run. For once, my mind is truly calm. Did I mention that I *love* running?

Chapter 6:

To say I'm nervous our first meet could be called the understatement of the century. After eating a light breakfast of toast and juice and grabbing my bag (that was carefully packed the night before and re-checked twice), I'm out the door, but there is just one small problem . . . I feel like I am going to hurl. This just invites Panic in, as he seems to be feeding on the fact that I've never done this before. The unknown is really working in his favor on this one. I try to relax - force thoughts of the race out of my mind - good luck, like that's gonna happen.

"You're going to do great today Sweetie; just have fun. We'll be there about 8:30 and we'll find you. Oh, I'm so excited. Courtney's mom said she'd show your dad and me around. Isn't that nice?"

As I return to the present, I wonder, *how long has she been talking?*

"Yea great. Yup," I answer in what must be a pretty unconvincing tone.

"What's wrong? she asks. Listen, I know you're nervous, and I can't tell you not to be, but just take it easy on yourself. It's your first race."

I mutter through gritted teeth, "Yes, I *know* it's my first race." *Duh. This is supposed to make me feel better? This is my first race EVER, and I have no idea what I'm doing or how I got myself into this - AHHHHHHHH!* I want to scream. (If you haven't noticed I want to scream a lot.) Mom and I make it to the school with no explosion or bloodshed. After giving her a quick kiss on the cheek and muttering, "sorry" and "I'm fine," I endure one of her "a little too long"

hugs of comfort. This makes me ready to get on the bus and get this whole first race thing over with.

‘Level 2’ on the stress scale has been reached before I can even get off the bus and begin the warm-up. Following the upperclassmen around the course results in confusion. I’m horrible with directions anyway, and now I have to figure out which way to turn in relation to trees and colored flags? *Are you serious?*

“Just follow the flags and arrows, and there will be lots of other people,” Courtney, one of the senior captains, says. I’m dangerously close to reaching ‘level 3.’ *Someone should have warned these poor people.* My expression must communicate some of the feelings within, because she stops, puts her arm around my shoulders and asks, “You’re nervous huh?” I simply nod. “I was really nervous for my first race too,” she says. “Everyone is, but it’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks,” I say, trying to let her words sink in. I know I need to just relax, but I can’t. Telling me to do a quick back flip would have been just as effective. *It’s just not gonna happen.*

Somehow I make it to the starting line in one piece, without throwing up, screaming, or peeing my pants. All of which have been serious urges. Before the starting gun goes off, I have already compiled another list of worst case scenarios, which includes tripping at the start, getting lost, and coming in last place.

I take my freshman place (back of the pack). Then, following a pep talk from Coach, which I don’t remember much of, we’re off. I’m lost in a sea of clawing arms and legs. The first mile is truly a blur. I have successfully put one foot in front of the other for many steps now, and

none of my worst fears has come true . . . yet. In fact, I've even passed competitors, so at least I know I'm not gonna be last. I shake my arms out, take a deep breath, and force the negative thoughts out of my head. *Relax.* Focusing on catching groups of runners ahead of me, I work to close the gaps. When I reach a new pack, I hang with them, draw their energy in, and then make a move to pass. *You can do this. Let's get the next one.* I feel fast. People clap and cheer loudly, and while I can't understand much of what they're saying, their encouragement gives me power. When I round the last turn and see the flags along the finish line, I lengthen my stride, pump my arms harder and give it everything I've got.

After crossing the line, I bend over and rest my hands on my knees, as I try to catch my breath. I'm so relieved to have my first race under my belt. Someone hands me a Popsicle stick with a twenty-five on it, which must be my place, and I'm encouraged to "keep walking."

Back at the tent I'm engulfed. My teammates are all talking and shouting at once, congratulating, consoling, sharing . . .

"My time was an 18:42, 10 seconds faster than my first race last year."

"I got a cramp during the first mile - don't think I drank enough water."

"Did you see the girl from Carson City? She was smokin' - ran a 19:40."

"Wow! Great job!"

"Oh, don't worry about your time. It's the first race of the season - there's plenty of time."

As I change my shoes, Coach pats me on the back. "Hey, great job today. You have some real potential. I don't think we've even scratched the surface of what you're capable of

yet.” I don’t know what to say in response to this, as I am never comfortable taking compliments. I’m sure I blush to the shade of a ripe tomato, and I stammer out a quiet “thanks,” as I busy myself with shoving my shoes and sweats in my overstuffed bag.

Chapter 7:

Key Club has been raising money the last few weeks for the Humane Society, as the group is trying to take over the animal shelter. I don't understand all the political stuff behind it, something about the county cutting the budget and not being able to apply for a millage. I just can't stop thinking about all of those unwanted cats and dogs. Where would they go? Our group is selling chocolate paws at lunch to raise money. When I show up for my first shift on Monday, Kaelyn is already selling when I arrive. Her line is longer than the others – big surprise.

“Where am I needed?” I ask?

“You can help me, if you want,” Kaelyn offers.

After some quick instructions, I'm ready to handle the cashbox, and I let Kaelyn do all of the talking and handing out of the paws. These guys are all in line to meet her, not me, and I wouldn't want to disappoint. We're so busy, it seems like five minutes pass when the bell rings at the end of the lunch hour. I grab my sandwich out of my brown bag and begin inhaling. The only problem is peanut butter and jelly does require some chewing, and I wish I had some milk!

“Wow, that was a crazy lunch hour, huh?!” she exclaims, as she unwraps her sandwich. “I have a dog named Buffy. I love animals, and I just can't believe the shelter could close. Do you have any pets?” she asks.

“Yes, I have two cats and a dog. My dog, Sadie, is an amazing dog. Her owners were actually going to take her to the shelter, but we took her instead. I just can't imagine taking her there . . .

Our conversation is cut short by the bell for fifth hour, but I can already see that Kaelyn is much more than just the homecoming queen type. I feel bad for judging her without even getting to know her first.

Chapter 8:

During the first couple weeks of school, I've heard the buzz of student council elections coming up for freshmen. The job description of being organized, responsible, maintaining school pride, and planning events all sounds right up my alley. I consider running for all of about ten minutes though, because the descriptor which makes it sound unappealing is "election." School elections are just popularity contests, and I hate the feeling of being rejected. I ran for student council once in middle school and lost. Afterwards, I acted like I hadn't really wanted the job anyway, but I did. I was crushed. To not be chosen is the worst, like you're back in elementary school waiting for someone to pick you for their team, silently praying, *Me, me; don't let me be last!* Right now the "scared of elections" part of me is winning out over the "this could be fun" part, although I'm on the fence about the whole thing.

Kaelyn yanks me off that fence without warning. At lunch she asks, "So, is anyone running for student council?" Crickets chirp. No one at our table says anything, and we all look down, holding our breath, waiting for this very awkward moment to pass.

"What about you, Sarah?" Boom; she calls me out.

"I don't know I haven't really thought about it," I answer innocently. *Liar-liar pants on fire.*

"You should totally run; you'd be great!" her voice rises excitedly. "I'm gonna run for president and you should run for V.P. Don't you guys think that'd be great?" she asks the rest of the table. They all look up and exhale collectively as relief is passed around the table, like the

butter dish. All of a sudden they're all talking at once, smiling and nodding, exclaiming, "Yea!" . . . "You both would be so great!" . . . "Totally!"

What do I say to that? Ok," I answer and that's it. Done. What else could I say? *No way, I'm scared I won't get elected.* Not so much. Looks like it's time to get ready for an election.

The buildup in my head as usual is worse than the actual event. I fill out a simple form and attach a paragraph explanation of how I "fit the description and had the qualities necessary to fulfill the duties of a student council representative," and that puts me in the running. The next evening I go over to Kaelyn's and we make signs to hang up at school. I'm not real excited about the idea at first, especially since all the ideas we come up with smack of cheesiness.

After eating a good share of junk food, including homemade cookies warm out of the oven with milk, we do get some signs made, which still smack of cheesiness, but they're cute and it's fun making them, even I have to admit. 'You're worth it' along with, 'Vote Sarah and Kaelyn for Change,' become the slogans, which take us to V-I-C-T-O-R-Y. I don't think the slogans make the difference, but the fact that Kaelyn is the most popular freshmen at school. Instead of being an object of awe as an outsider, she's now one of us. In a few short weeks, she's already made everyone feel like they know her and more importantly that she knows them. All the guys are still drooling, and the girls think she's the one of the nicest people they've ever met. Personally, I think if it hadn't been for Kaelyn, I wouldn't have made the cut.

Chapter 9:

It turns out the upperclassmen don't want any 'fresh' ideas from their freshmen reps. Student council is in midstride already when we join, and we have a meeting every week during the month of September in preparation for the all important homecoming festivities. The major event for us to orchestrate is float building. Kaelyn and I need to find a location, organize a meeting to generate ideas for the design, and then . . . we just have to build a winning float. No one tells us that as freshmen, we're destined for doom from the very beginning, so we begin this project with great enthusiasm. Our unique, never ever thought of or attempted before idea, under the umbrella of superheroes: da, da, da . . . wait for it . . . Superman!!! (*so original - I know*)

If you think about it, float building is a stupid activity that has been going on for how long? Since the beginning of time? We get together and stick decorations on a large hay wagon, which is a total waste of natural resources. Then we drive our brilliant creation very slowly past a bunch of people and throw candy to kids, so that we can encourage poor health and dental decay and then the all important chosen judges critique the creativity of the piece based on an unknown set of criteria and the seniors are *always* chosen to get first and the freshmen *always* last. We're set for failure before stapling on our very first tissue paper flower.

My optimism is further deteriorated when I find out I have a cross country meet that Saturday morning. Leaving Kaelyn to run the show solo for our very first event is NOT my ideal, but Kaelyn is unconcerned as usual. "No big deal," she says. "I can handle it; after all, you can't miss a meet."

“Thanks so much!” I say, hoping to mask my disappointment. I want to run; it’s just I want to be at float building too, and since I don’t yet have the capability of cloning myself, I decide to race and leave the float building duties to Kaelyn. This is probably best, as she’s the more creative one anyway.

Then to make matters worse, I don’t even have the greatest race. From my perspective it’s a disaster. The streak of personal records and being the first girl on our team is ruined in just a little over twenty minutes. I feel flat. When Toni passes me during the last half mile of the race, I just can’t go with her no matter how hard I try. When my dad yells, “Come on Sarah, Go! You can run faster than that!” I don’t and can’t. I finish, but the end isn’t pretty, and in my opinion, at 20 seconds slower than my PR, my time sucks. And so does my 35th place. Who knew such a seemingly short amount of time, could make such a big deal in a distance race?!

Because I don’t deal with disappointment well, I avoid going back to the tent with the rest of the team. Instead I veer to the right, looking for a quiet place by the woods. I just need to be alone. I’ve let myself down and the team. Tears push at the back of my eyes, brimming over when my mom finds me and wraps me in a hug. “It’s ok,” she comforts. “You can only do your best.”

As I cry, dad gets there and asks, “What happened? Are you ok?” Sadness quickly turns to anger, like a flash of lightening with no thunder. Poor Dad. He didn’t even see it coming.

“Yes, I’m fine, ok! And no, I couldn’t have run any faster - don’t ever say that to me again!!” I’m sure I would have continued if not for the fact that Coach K. arrives and an outsider always forces you to check yourself. A part of me realizes I’m being a spoiled brat, taking my

frustration out on my dad, who sometimes just says the wrong thing at the wrong time. Ok, more than sometimes. There are times when I feel sorry for my dad, having to live with all females (even the dog is a girl), but then again, he should also know what's coming, use careful word choice, and expect some emotional outbursts.

“Hey, it's ok kiddo; what's with the tears?” Coach K. asks.

“I ran 20 seconds slower and felt like crap - I just couldn't go - I'm sorry coach,” more tears push at the back of my eyes and my throat gets tight. *Damn it, I don't want to cry.*

“Hey, no big deal . . . you've reached a plateau; this happens to everyone. You can't run faster *every* race. Your times will go down again with some more training, especially when we start doing some speed work toward the end of the season; that's when we want you to peak. Now come on,” he says, leading me over to the tent to join the rest of the team.

Chapter 10:

By the time I get back to float building the bottom of the hay wagon is already covered in shiny blue ribbons hanging down to cover the wheels and black outdoor carpeting covers the surface. Our classmates are working in little stations at various activities, making a life size superman, cutting out yellow stars from cardboard, spray painting, and others are milling about a massive food table. The whole scene is organized chaos, and I'm genuinely impressed with Kaelyn's organization. Since she doesn't see me come in, and now I don't really feel like leading anyway, I attempt to focus less on myself and more on paper mache. I fear my self-absorbed streak has been showing, but I hope tucked it away now.

I jump in the superman building mostly because it has the fewest number of people. Plus, I'm already nasty and sweaty anyway, so maybe the smell of glue and ink will be strong enough to overcome the smell of my body odor. Before I return to my self-pity saga, someone asks, "Hey, Sarah, how'd you guys do today?"

"Great, we got third overall," I answer trying to muster some excitement in my voice. Following the voice, I look up to see . . . Jake Erikson?! My heart beats faster, because Jake's the hottest, most popular, football playing, smile melts your heart guy - and he's talking to me? Not to mention, he's also the principal's son. No pressure - right? "How'd you do?" he asks again. *Yes, he's talking to me. Jake is talking to me? Really? Uhhh, I haven't answered yet.* I don't know exactly how long it takes to answer. It may have been thirty seconds or two minutes; I have no idea, but I hope it's more like thirty seconds. I answer honestly mostly because I just

don't have the time to come up with fancy synonyms to make it sound better, "I did ok, didn't run as fast as I normally do, like twenty seconds slower," I say.

"Oh no, not twenty seconds!?" he teases.

I laugh, "Hey, twenty seconds really is a long time when it comes to distance."

"Ok, ok. I just don't get it, because I only run when chased. I don't understand how someone could enjoy running. So what *is* it exactly that makes you enjoy running?"

"I like the sense of accomplishment. When I know I've run as fast as I can - my head feels clear - and I don't know - I just like it," I answer. *Real smooth. This is the stupidest answer ever.* I wonder if I smell bad, but I think he'd notice if I did the armpit test.

"I know what you mean," he says, voice rising with excitement. "I love the exhilaration of winning a tough game, throwing a great pass, that's good for a touchdown."

Jake and I end up talking for most of the day and when he asks if he can call me later in the weekend, my mind goes blank and words escape me. I think I answer with a very cool, "Yea, sure." But I have no clue; it's all very hazy.

It isn't until after he's gone that I notice only a few hard core float builders remain. As the clean-up crew finishes up, I head to the table for a snack. I hadn't noticed how hungry I was in all the excitement. Kaelyn approaches as I peruse the "not so healthy" options. "How was your race? How'd you guys do?" she asks, as I pour some Gatorade and crunch into a cookie.

“Team fine – third - me not a PR - could’ve run faster, but that’s ok I’m over it,” I gush, talking excitedly. “But you won’t believe what happened here! Jake Erikson talked to me, and he wants to call me this weekend! Can you believe it!?”

“Yea, duh, he’s liked you since the beginning of the year. Everyone knows he’s been drooling over you,” she answers laughing, “You’re so oblivious. How could he not love you?” She puts her arm around me. Then facing me, she freezes for a moment, lost in thought. Her eyes widen. As her voice rises in excitement, she claps her hands together, exclaiming, “Oh, maybe he’ll ask you to the dance! I’m so excited!! I haven’t had a chance to tell you some news yet . . . Paul and I have been talking and he asked me to the dance last night!” I can see the wheels turning as she continues, “And he’s on the football team with Jake, and we can double date! Won’t that be fun! We’ll have to go dress shopping, and . . .”

When Jake calls that night, I’m extra nervous at the prospect of being asked to the dance, but sort of prepared, as Kaelyn has coached me on how I should answer. I’m supposed to remain calm, count to ten and then before saying, “Yes,” so I don’t sound too eager. I realize Kaelyn means the coaching to be helpful, but it actually just makes me more nervous and wonder whether I’m cut out for this dating stuff at all.

After some small talk, which seems to take at least an hour, but is really only ten minutes, he does finally ask. I think I pause before answering, “Sure,” in what I hope is a *very* calm tone. Right when I get off the phone,, my excitement is only quenched a new worst case scenario list, and it begins with him laughing and/or leaving the dance floor after finding out I can’t dance.

When I say, “Can’t,” I really mean it, because I’m as uncoordinated as they come. I really *do* have two left feet. That may be a problem.

Chapter 11:

I may have another problem in addition to the two left feet. They are both two word descriptors. “Metal mouth” and “brace face.” These are names I can, unfortunately, now be called, because I got braces today. Talk about timing - I’m pretty sure all this metal will clash with any dress for the dance and the kiss at the end of the evening, which is now definitely not going to happen. . . that’s if I even still have a date. As soon as I said, “Yes” to the dance, I begged Mom to move my appointment, using some very convincing arguments concerning my emotional stability, but unfortunately, they don’t stick.

“I made this appointment months ago, Sweetie, and to reschedule would just set us further back, and you know your Dad and I have been saving for this. I know you’re worried about the dance, but you will look wonderful. Don’t you want a beautiful smile?”

“Yes, of course,” what else can I say? “Thanks, Mom,” I try to sound convincing. Not wanting to sound like the spoiled brat I’m hearing in my head. My parents are spending all their extra money on braces, dresses, hair appointments, and here I am complaining about timing?!

My quest for the perfect smile began during sixth grade. Some jaw alignment devices were my orthodontist’s chosen devices of torture. An expander spread my jaw slowly with the turn of a key twice a day. Then my tongue’s natural pressure was used with this weird, awkward feeling metal thing on the roof of my mouth, which left permanent gouges. And they thought medieval devices of torture were bad?! My tongue would argue they were nothing in comparison. The worst part of all, was headgear. I shouldn’t have allowed any pictures to be taken during this time in my life. Wearing this awkward contraption resulted in many bad hair

days and, yes, I did wear it to school. Why you may ask? Because my orthodontist told me to, and my dad ranted about what he could do with that extra money if he didn't have to make payments each month in the quest for my perfect smile. So, what choice did I have? While most "normal" teenagers would wear it to school and wait for their Mom or Dad to get out of the parking lot to quickly take it off and stuff it in the deepest most recesses of their backpack, not me. Doing something like that would have haunted me. So, the better alternative was to just suffer through it.

Now, two weeks before the dance, I have to get braces?! Will the torture never end? This final device has the worst timing ever, and no amount of complaining seems to be getting me out of this one. They (Mom, Dad, the orthodontist) tell me that in the end, it will all be worth it, because I'll have a beautiful smile. Easy for them to say; they don't have to become "brace face."

Chapter 12:

While I'm so out of my comfort zone, Kaelyn is in all her glory when we go dress shopping. I have absolutely no 'foo-foo, girly girl' in me, at least I don't think so. Kaelyn, however, makes it her personal mission to draw that part of me out, which she seems to believe is buried deep within. And, she has my mom as her back-up. Both of them seem to think I will develop a love for sequins and high heels, but I think this part of me must be deficient.

I find myself at the mall on my Saturday afternoon, and while there is *some* excitement there, I feel mostly nervousness. I don't even know if I can walk in high heels or apply make-up properly, which both would seem to be pre-requisites for this kind of thing. Mom has reminded me that Dad gave us a limit of \$150 for this shopping spree (dress, shoes, and accessories) which means she's willing to spend up to \$200. That familiar twang of guilt surfaces for a moment, as we're always "on a budget," but mom's always breaking it to make sure my sister and I get the "essentials": things like designer jeans and fancy running shoes. You see, my mom is a secretary and my dad works in a factory and does body work on cars in the evenings and on weekends to make extra money. While they go without, Mom and Dad make sure my sister and I get everything we need. This twang of guilt while familiar, however, never seems to keep me from saying, "Yes" to purchases. Repress guilt – done.

As Kaelyn, her mom, and mine all dive into the racks "oohing and ahing" over the colors and embellishments, I try to blend in – become part of the racks, feeling so out of place. Kaelyn starts grabbing dresses off the racks, making a stack for each of us to try on. Against my will, the fashion show commences in the dressing room. While Kaelyn likes each dress, she

falls in love with the fourth one, a long, flowing, blue off-the shoulder gown. It looks amazingly elegant and makes Kaelyn look amazingly beautiful (although a paper bag would too). Contrarily, I dismiss a slew of dresses, finding something wrong with each - too short, too strapless, too white, too glittery . . . Following frustration and nearing an explosion, I finally find one that doesn't make me feel too uncomfortable, a long red gown, with spaghetti straps and sequins on the top portion. It isn't too tight across my stomach, the one area of my body that I absolutely hate, and it also isn't too low cut for the boobs I don't have. We get out of the store with minimal damage – at least close to dad's budget, only having to put the shoes on the credit card. As usual, on the way home, Mom warns me “not to tell Dad.” Obviously Dad doesn't know it takes more than 150 dollars to look beautiful.

The dress isn't the end of the mission for beauty though . . . Kaelyn and I also get our hair done. And, after putting on her own make-up, she sets to work on me. Turns out the so called 'natural' look doesn't feel so natural. But apparently, all together, the look is amazing by Kaelyn's standards.

Insanity begins when both sets of grandparents come to take a million pictures of me outside and inside, as if they're paparazzi getting the million dollar shot. My family oozes and gushes, remarking, “how grown up I look, and how it seems just yesterday that I was just a little girl and now . . .”

Mom smiles all day and constantly reminds me to “stop fussing.” She also inquires every few minutes, “Do you need another coat of lipstick?” *I keep wiping it off. I hate lipstick; it feels so weird and heavy, not like chapstick at all.*

My little sister, Meg, keeps asking when it's her turn to "dress up and look pretty." *Not for a couple years, Meg.* She's just beginning middle school and is such a copycat, which is annoying.

Dad asks only once with a raised eyebrow, "How much did all this cost?"

Mom quickly fields his question with, "We hit some great sales, Dave. Can you believe this was ALL only \$150 dollars?"

"No, I can't, which is why I'm asking," he grumbles. "And why you have to get your hair done and new shoes to go with the dress, and jewelry . . . I hope you plan on wearing this again. And Meg, you'll be wearing this same dress in a couple years!" The three of us know not to pay any attention, as it's all a show, plus he's outnumbered. When I finally leave the house, he shakes Jake's hand a little too hard and reminds him of my 12:30 curfew. As he warns Jake to, "take care of his little girl," I think I sense a quiver in his voice. *Real hard core, Dad.*

And by the end of pictures, I'm surprised I still have a date at all. On our way out to the car, I whisper just loud enough for Jake to hear, "Sorry about that. My dad's a bit overprotective. He's really is cool though."

"No big deal; you should see my dad when dates come to pick my sister up. She hasn't had many, because he makes them all come inside for a talk. Plus your dad isn't the principal, like mine. Trust me, I'm above intimidation."

I smile, "Good point, I should probably be the nervous one."

Since Paul's a junior (of course Kaelyn would be asked by an upperclassmen), he drives all of us out to eat and to the dance. This makes us the only freshmen who don't have to be chauffeured by our parents – very cool. Not so cool - I've been nervous about dancing for weeks (I think I mentioned the two left feet?). To make matters worse, I know I'll look like an even bigger uncoordinated idiot next to Kaelyn. She's taken dance classes since she was a little kid - tap, ballet, and who knows what else. I don't have a chance.

Lucky for me, it turns out Jake isn't the greatest dancer either, so once we get past the first couple very awkward songs, we're good. Thankfully, we both must look like idiots, so I don't think I stand out too much. And, at no point in the evening does anyone stop and stare at my uncoordinated dance moves, I don't biff it in my high heels, Jake doesn't leave the dance disgusted at my lack of rhythm, the earth keeps turning, and I'm home at exactly 12:25.

Paul parks the car just before the curve at the end of the driveway so Jake can walk me to the door. The butterflies in my stomach return full force at the thought of a kiss. Enter another list of worst case scenarios including worries of having bad breath. *I should have chewed a piece of gum!* Because he's much taller than I am, I look up once we reach the back door.

“Thanks; it was fun,” I say, hoping to maintain that “coolness” I was coached in.

“Yea, me too,” he answers. “Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I answer in the coolest, calmest voice possible.

Slow motion begins as his arms wrap softly around my waist, and I lean up and then . . . his lips are on mine and we're kissing! It isn't at all like it appears in those romantic movies -

definitely more awkward, just a quick peck on the lips, but wonderful. My lips tingle. After a quick, “See you Monday,” Jake bounds down the driveway.

As I float through the doorway, my parents greet me. “So . . . how was it?” They have both obviously waited up for me. After answering their million questions as vaguely as possible, I finally escape to the sanctuary of my room where I excitedly text Kaelyn. For the next hour we analyze every moment of the evening. How am I ever going to sleep? I have no idea.

Chapter 13:

Turns out my freshman year's going really well - there's no hazing, I like my classes and teachers, I'm getting straight A's, Kaelyn's my BFF and pushes me to try new things (like being more of a girly-girl!), I have a new boyfriend, and our cross team has made it to the state finals, which is the icing on the cake. At Regionals, our whole team ran phenomenally and we have made it to the state meet, which is the first time in like a million years (or at least in the past twenty).

All I've been able to think of for the past week is the state meet, and we're finally leaving today after school. I'm nervous and excited, before I even finish my breakfast of oatmeal (favorite high energy pre-race meal) and head out the door. When I get to Coach's room for lunch, members of the team have already started the latest stupid movie, something with Will Farrel in it. This room is our place. We keep our oversized bags, with our sacred smelly sneakers in the back room of his science classroom, which is supposed to hold chemicals. We eat lunch here and watch stupid movies or do the homework we forgot to do the night before, then we meet here again before practice at the end of the school day, which for many of us, is our favorite part of the day. This room is open to us anytime, and Coach K. is more than just a coach - he's whatever we need - a teacher, a role model, a friend, or just someone who really cares. I'm eating my usual pre-race lunch of a half turkey sandwich with cheese and mustard, yogurt, an apple and water. No junk. Candy, pop, sweets - all junk food is off limits during season, except on Saturday night, when Jake's parents usually order pizza for us.

"Ya good Petie?" Coach asks.

“Yea, good.” I answer. *Yea right. You are so not “good.” You are nervous as hell and can hardly even swallow this stupid, tasteless sandwich.* I take a deep breath. *Relax.*

Tomorrow is the state finals, or “The Big Dance,” as Coach calls it. Every day at practice and anytime the team is together, it sounds weird, but there’s this wave of energy. We have no idea how we’ll do though, which makes it even more nerve wracking. Coach says that’s a good thing, because we’re the underdogs. He says it’s an honor to have made it at all, which basically is a cop-out and a way to tell us, “it’s ok if you suck.”

We’ll be competing with the best teams in the whole state! *Oh no, I think I’m going to throw up. Stop thinking - just relax.* The bell rings, and I’m jerked back to reality. Next class-algebra. I’m not going to get anything from the rest of my classes today. It’s a total waste of time. *I hope we don’t go over anything really important, cause I hate missing stuff and having to catch-up.*

When the bell rings after my last class of the day, I rush to my locker. I’m excited to finally leave, but the unknown is killing me – never having run at this course, or a state meet. I keep telling myself it doesn’t matter, but it so *does!* I want to do well and don’t want to let anyone down. It’s eerily quiet in the hallway, especially for a Friday after school; usually there are people lingering, packing bags, and making plans for the weekend; then we see the swarm of people by the door, forming an aisle way. Students, staff, parents, everyone is there clapping and cheering. My face gets warm, my heart beats fast, and I smile . . . this is cool.

Chapter 14:

The state meet is at Michigan International Speedway, which of course makes my dad really excited, me not so much. I've run all of our other courses at least twice, but this one's completely unknown. I'm not worried about getting lost or being out front, because that's not even a remote possibility. However, there's a sense of comfort that comes with having run a course before. You know what to expect, where the turns are, you know the terrain. Unknown invites Panic, and I'm not very excited about that.

The set-up is overwhelming to say the least, and judging from the comments and questions of my teammates, I'm not the only one who feels completely overwhelmed by this massive place.

“Does the course go around this whole place?”

“Look at all the busses and tents and people!”

Warming up, I feel good. We walk the first mile and then start jogging at the mile mark. My stomach feels grumbly and sloshy. *I hope I didn't drink too much water.* My teammates are all jabbering away talking about the terrain, looking at other runners' uniforms and singing songs. As usual, I'm focused, but I do like listening to the rest of the team chatter; it's a good distraction. We cut off part of the second mile and jog toward the finish. The finish is so long, we jog on, and on, and on. “Don't start your kick until you can see the line, Coach warns.

After seeing the finish, we head to the tent to put on our spikes. My blue shoes, well-worn, have a new paint job courtesy of Dad. Everyone on the team is jealous of my one-of-a-

kind kicks. It had been his idea to paint them special for Regionals - 19:30 on the toe in bright blue to urge me toward my goal. I hadn't made it then, as the conditions of the course hadn't been the greatest, Mother Nature didn't cooperate. That'll change today though. The conditions are perfect for a PR, and I WILL make it today. I've pushed all worst case scenarios list out of my head.

At the starting line, I'm more nervous than I have been all season, and I have to use positive self-talk to relax. *You can do this.* The starter tells us to take off our sweats. With "Get ready!" my mind goes blank and I block out all sounds, but the starter's voice. "On your mark," BOOM!!, the gun signals the start of the race. The beginning of the race is crazy, as there is a huge building about 200 yards ahead, where the course narrows significantly. Coach has warned us not to get stuck on the inside against the building, so I veer toward the right and am caught up in the crowd. I go with the rhythm of the race - concentrating on my feet hitting the ground, I count my steps - *one, two, three, four . . . I can't believe how many people are in this race. This is insanity.* Like getting caught in the undercurrent of the ocean, I'm pulled along. My legs are moving, but I have no control. As quickly as the thought of falling enters my mind, I push it out just as quickly. *No negativity. Fight. This is the state meet.*

Beyond the building, there's a slight hill, which leads to the outside of the track and the course finally widens. It's lined with cones and there are people cheering everywhere. The crowd ripples, claps, and shouts to form an incomprehensible roar. With more room and the thinning of the crowd and competitors, I feel like I've been freed from a straight jacket. My legs stretch and eat up the open ground ahead. I dodge and weave, passing groups of competitors. *Focus. This is your race.* I enter "The Zone." What is it? The zone is a place of total

concentration, like your life depends on what you're doing at this very moment. My mind is unbendable - a fortress of positive energy. I feel no pain; my body is a machine.

There's a slight uphill leading up to the two mile mark; I dig deep, lifting my knees and pumping my arms. *Dig, dig, dig. I love hills!* The crowd's thinning, and the previous roar has become just a few solitary exclamations, much better. There are fewer competitors to pass, during the second mile, and I zero in on my breathing and turnover. *Keep the pace. Breathe. You can do it.* This is the part of the race where it's easiest to slow down and lose momentum, but I'm not going to let that happen. I throw any negative thoughts out of my mind. *My legs are tired. How much further? Slow down. Not in this fortress. You CAN do this. Focus.* I shake out my arms and take another deep breath. Mile three is go time; with only a little over a mile to go, I reflect on all of the miles I've run in training this season; what's one more? The course leads down a long downhill then flattens to sand, where we re-enter the racetrack. More sand covers the actual racetrack and my spikes dig in for traction. As I run along the grass of the infield, it seems like the finish should be close, but coach warned us it's actually further away, so I hold back a little. *Relax.* About a half mile later I see the finish. It's surreal, like a mirage of water in the middle of a desert. I want desperately to be there. Now. It feels like I'm running in place and not gaining on it at all. I want to quit, shut down, no more. The fortress goes back up. *Finish this! Be strong. Dig deep.* I lengthen my stride and pump my arms more. *Go, Go, Go!* I see a blue jersey about ten yards ahead. *Go get her.* The huge roar of the crowd gives me that extra push. I'm gasping for air, and my legs feel like weak rubber bands. *Go now.* I grit my teeth and kick in that last gear, pumping my arms and legs with every ounce of energy I have left. Just before the finish line, I pass her on the right.

Yea! As I cross the line, I let go. The fortress crumbles and my body melts into a pool of Jello. *I can't breathe. Oh, my stomach.* Sharp pains shoot through my abdomen - too much oxygen deprivation. My legs feel too weak to hold me up and I want to just lie down on the grass. But someone is yelling at me to "keep movin'" and arms are pushing me forward. *I want to lie down. I'd pay a million dollars for a pillow and blanket.* I trip on something and fall down. *What was that?* When I look down, I only see my foot. A race official picks me up, hands under my armpits, and tells me to "keep walking." *Ok, ok.* The roar continues for other runners behind me. I feel like I'm in another world – still fighting to catch my breath, trying to overcome the stingy feeling in my lungs. The deep breaths I take, begin to help, but I still feel weak. My eyes search for other red jerseys, and while there are many, I don't see any of my teammates. I wander to the right. Toni and Leslie are the first to find me.

"How'd—you—do," Susie asks in between gasps.

"I have no idea," I answer. "There were so many people!"

"I know! That was crazy," Leslie agrees.

We decide to make our way back to the tent to see if we can find the rest of the team. As we get our sweats back on, we're joined by the rest of the team and our parents. The moms begin filling card tables with food - sandwiches, chili, and every kind of junk food imaginable. *Ughhh, I can't even imagine eating right now.* As I grab a bottle of water, I see my parents running toward the tent. Mom is the first to hug me. "I'm so proud of you!" she whispers in my ear. When my dad hugs me, I lean in and let him take the weight from my legs. Kaelyn and

Jake hug me at the same time, and they're both so tall, they pick me up off the ground. "That was so great!"

"Do you know my time?" I ask - always my first question.

"Not bad, my dad answers, leaving me hanging. "I think you could've run a little harder, he teases, but a 19:31 isn't *that* bad."

"19:31!" – that brings a smile to my face. It's a season PR and just one second off my goal. I'm excited, but a little disappointed; Why couldn't I have gotten a 19:30? *Why does one second even make that much of a difference? Who cares? I do.*

Coach K. jogs up a few minutes later, and everyone has already begun pigging out. "Wow - great job!" He goes around congratulating each of us individually. When he gets to me he asks excitedly, "Do you know your time? Did you see your place?" putting an arm around my shoulders. When I shake my head "no," he grins again. "You got twelfth place, Cinderella girl! Not bad for your first year. I'm on cloud nine.

Chapter 15:

In school on Monday morning, I'm elevated from cloud nine to cloud ten with these words,

“And in sports action the cross country team had a strong showing at the state meet with an 18th place finish overall. The guys' team led by Andrew Keller with a fourth place finish in 16:22, and the girls led by Sarah Peterson who had a 12th place finish in 19:31.”

Walking down the hallway after class, I feel like a celebrity.

“Hey, great job, Sarah.”

“Wow! Congrats.”

After school I head to Coach's room automatically, and pause when I get there. *No practice today, season's over, duh.* I stand there for a minute but then decide to go in anyway. What else am I gonna do after school? As the door closes behind me, Coach looks up from his desk.

“Hey Cinderella girl, how's it going?” he asks.

“Good, can't complain,” I smile. “Don't really know what to do right now though.”

He laughs. If only the rest of the team had half your drive, we'd be state champs! “You need to take at least a week off. Then you can start running again, some *easy* mileage. Enjoy the time off. You can start training again closer to spring. Track will be here before we know it, and

I have a hunch you have a lot of potential. We haven't even seen what you are capable of yet, Petie. Now get out of here and go do something fun on your day off."

"Ok, thanks again Coach," I say. "It was a great season."

"Sure was Petie," I hear him murmur as I head out to do something "fun."

Part II: *I'm Not the Lone Freak*

Chapter 16:

I like structure, routine, forward progress. I don't like uncertainty, unplanned time, and going with the flow is difficult for me. I don't know what to do after school. Jake has already started basketball practice, plus we aren't allowed to hang out during the week anyway. That leaves weekends, usually Saturday nights after cross country meets, to go to the movies or bowling. Not being able to drive really limits our dating options. I consider staying and watching practice, but it seems a little stalkerish, so I walk home very slowly and call Kaelyn.

“Whatcha doin?” I ask.

“Nothing, just doing my homework; you can come over if you want.” When I get to her house, we head down to the basement with our arms full of ammunition against boredom - Oreos, licorice, and hot chocolate. I haven't eaten this much junk food in a long time, and it makes me feel a little bit nervous - like I'm going from one extreme to the other. All of a sudden I'm going from running every day, to not at all and eating no junk food, to far too much. It is making me feel a little on edge, off-kilter. As we do our homework, I admire Kaelyn's neat handwriting but then she erases and starts over again. When she notices I'm watching she says, “I know it's weird, but I like it to be perfect.”

“No, actually, I totally understand,” I say. “I like my homework to be done perfectly too. I always at least double check my math, and when I write papers for English, I have a hard time ending revising.”

“Yea, that’s nothing. I like to type papers, even when we aren’t asked to, because I don’t like them to be too messy,” she admits.

“I knew we had a lot in common,” I laugh. “It’s nice to know someone else is a freak like me.”

“I would describe us as hard working and efficient,” she smiles. “If that makes us freaks, then so be it.”

I pick up an Oreo, and I must have stared at it a little too long, because Kaelyn asks, “Is everything ok?”

“Yea, it’s just - I haven’t had much junk food lately. I ate healthy during the season, so now it feels weird to eat all this junk food.”

“That’s totally understandable. I don’t usually eat this stuff, either. I just thought you’d want it to celebrate your freedom. Why don’t we both eat healthy to get ready for track?” I really should eat healthy for my pageant, anyway.

“Pageant? You mean beauty pageant?”

“Yea, I don’t like to make a big deal about it, which is why I haven’t told you. My parents only let me do one a year,” she explains. “I love to dance, and pageants give me the opportunity to perform, plus you can get some really great scholarships.”

“That’s cool,” I say. What I don’t say is, “Why would you want to do that?” Even though that’s what I’m wondering. Maybe my homecoming queen perception is partly true after all?

“I actually have a pageant coming up in the spring. Want to see my dance for it?” she asks excitedly.

“Sure,” I answer, hoping to hide the shock in my voice. The CD player belts the song, “I Hope You Dance,” as she floats around the make-shift dance floor. With fluid motions she leaps, poses, spins; it’s beautiful and leaves me speechless.

“Wow, that was really amazing Kaelyn,” I clap obnoxiously.

“Oh, it was ok,” she sounds disappointed, “I didn’t point my toes enough, and I need to hold my spins longer,” she critiques.

“Yea, I didn’t notice that,” I laugh, “I love the song choice too.”

“As soon as I heard it I imagined dancing to it,” she explains “I love the message of living in the moment and not taking life for granted, you know? Here let me show you some ballet moves,” she offers.

“Yea, right. That’s not going to be an easy task,” I laugh.

“Oh, come on, stand up. It’s not like you have an audience here.” She does have a point there. “Come on,” she begs trying to pull me off the couch. Knowing she’s persistent, I give in and stand in front of her, arms folded stubbornly across my chest. *This is going to go well.*

After trying to teach me a few ballet moves and laughing hysterically at my attempts at gracefulness, we sit down to watch some T.V. “I can’t run for two weeks,” I lament; I don’t know what I’m going to do with myself. Time off with no plan and no running is unnerving.”

“It’s the same for me, and I’m between dance classes. Hey, I have an idea, we should do a workout program to stay in shape, like P90X,” her voice rises. “I’ve heard it’s tough! Between that and eating healthy, we’ll be *totally* ready for track season.”

I normally don’t like workout programs, but I can’t run and what else do I have to do? “Ok, I’m in!” I relent, with no idea of what I actually just got myself into. *Did I mention I’m totally uncoordinated? This should be fun!* But, at least I feel better that we have something constructive and athletic to do, and I’ve found that I’m not the lone freak, which is nice.

Chapter 17:

For two full weeks Kaelyn and I do P90X every day. Let me tell you, it's tough! After the first day I'm already sore. I'm relieved when I text Kaelyn asking, "R u as sore as I am?" and she answers, "Can hardly walk." The stairs are the worst. Jake thinks it's hilarious to watch me try to walk normal without limping – nice.

"So why are you doing this crazy workout thing again?" he asks.

"Just to stay in shape," I answer. "I need to be buff for Spring – duh!"

He laughs, "Oh, I see, and I was going to mention how 'buff' you look! Why don't you go ahead and catch me, since you're so in shape!" he taunts as he jogs off to his next class.

"Jerk," I mutter under my breath, but I don't even try to run after him. It would hurt too much.

After two weeks of this crazy workout program I'm so ready to return to running. Before joining cross country, if you would have told me I'd be running outside in the middle of winter, I'd say you were crazy! Then, when you become one of those crazy people, it seems totally normal.

I love running in the snow and now that cross country season is over, it's kind of nice just to get back to running easy for enjoyment - just to stay in shape - no workouts or anything. Running on the roads and on sidewalks can, however, be tricky, because of the slippery spots and inconsistent shoveling. So, I run often at City Park, which has a bunch of biking trails through wooded areas. I only have a few teammates who run after school and they're as

inconsistent as the shoveling of sidewalks, so I'm often left to run on my own. Sadie, my German Shepherd mix, becomes my running companion. I had felt bad anyway for neglecting her during the season, not taking her for as many walks and runs. I've been so busy with school, student council, cross country, and hanging out with friends and Jake, I haven't had as much time to spend with my original BFF.

Sadie is a rescue dog and an important part of our family. As a kid, she was my best friend and playmate. In the open field behind our house we ran, had picnics, and built forts. We hung out in Dad's garage, while I handed him tools or swept the floor, and we were both happiest outside. It was with her that I first found my love for running, and now that she's getting older, I want to share it with her again.

On Monday Jake doesn't meet me at my locker in the morning, like he usually does. I haven't seen him all weekend, because he had to go out of town for a family get-together and he hadn't called or texted all weekend, like I'd thought he would. I don't see him all morning, so I head to his locker right before lunch and find him putting his books away.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," he answers. "How are ya?"

"Fine," I answer. "How was your weekend? Were you really busy? Why didn't you call?"

"I didn't have time, ok! What's with the million questions?" he asks slamming his locker shut.

“Million questions? I just want to know about your weekend! I don’t think that’s too much to ask,” a knot forms in my throat. *Don’t cry.*

“I don’t need this!” he says angrily, storming off.

I have trouble paying attention in my next class, especially after he sends me an “I’m sorry” text. Is that supposed to fix everything? I can’t shake the feeling that something has changed, so I do what I do best: worry.

After school I’m left to run solo again, which is probably best, because I really don’t feel like making pointless small talk with anyone anyway. Sadie is more than willing to go for a run, and she doesn’t want to talk at all. She wags her tail, as I attach her leash; if only all relationships were this easy.

During the first mile or so she bounds up ahead, as she’s always done, jumping and pouncing through the snow. I love watching her, as it brings back so many memories. Every so often, she stops and sticks her face in the snow like she’s found something, and comes up with her face covered. After she gets tired, she settles in behind me, trotting along. It makes me sad that she gets tired so quickly now, because years ago, she never would’ve run behind me. It’s so sad to watch her get old. I have no idea how many runs we have left together, but I guess there are no guarantees in life. *Wow, I’m in a really optimistic mood!*

In the quiet woods I close my eyes and try to force all thoughts from my mind. I push the worry away and take a deep breath. Here I can find a sense of peace I don’t have in any other part of my daily life. I can let my brain turn off, and I just run, get into a smooth but easy rhythm and focus on the trail and my surroundings. It’s so beautiful out here, especially in the winter. It

seems like another world, untouched and sacred. I listen to the quiet. I let it fill me up. I know it sounds weird, but I need some time when my mind can turn off. It's especially important on days like today. I have no idea what's going on with Jake or why he's acting so weird. I feel like something's changing. *Stop thinking about it. Run.*

Chapter 18:

As spring approaches I throw in a couple workouts here and there just to shake out the cobwebs. I feel good - rested and relaxed - although I'll miss my runs in the woods. Track season makes me a little nervous, as I was never that good in middle school. Will I really be that much better just because I ran cross country? Because Coach K. is the guys' track coach, we have a new one. *Great. And from what I hear, her specialty is sprints, so she won't even know anything about distance.* When I meet her all of my worst fears are magnified times ten. I don't mean to stereotype, but she is the epitome of a ditzy blond. On the first day of practice, she greets us with, "Hi girls, I'm like so excited for track season!" This high squeaky voice comes from a *very* young, must still be in college, five foot nothin' woman, who says, "You can call me by my first name, Jodi." *Are you serious? This must be a joke?! Please tell me this is a joke.*

The warm-up is pretty standard - the usual jog two laps, skipping, high knees, lunging, stretches. Then, she gives the "workout" for distance, which is running an easy two miles on the track or roads. *Two miles?! Seriously?*

At the end of practice (if you can even call it that), I head to the locker room to grab my back pack. As I hurriedly yank the door open, Kaelyn walks in.

"Hey, how was your practice?" she asks.

"Great," I say, voice dripping with sarcasm; "We ran two miles, really productive."

"Good," Kaelyn's sincerity oozes, "Mine was good too; did some form work with high jump. Coach Jodi is so nice, though, isn't she?" *What?! She can't be serious.*

“Uh, yea, but a little inexperienced; did you hear me when I said we only ran two miles?”

“Oh, no worries, Sar,” she answers calmly. “I’m sure it will get harder. It’s the first day of practice! I’m really excited for the season, aren’t you? Hey, and do you need a ride home?”

“No, Mom’s coming,” I lie, “Thanks though.”

I try to jog on the half mile walk home, but my backpack keeps smacking against my back. The extra mileage could do me some good, and I need to stop thinking and worrying. *This season could suck. Am I the only one who feels this way?*

Another stress factor is the fact that teachers are piling on the homework, like it’s their job. I guess it is, but seriously, would it kill them to communicate with each other and space it out a little? To make matters worse, Jake had been acting weird all week, not really wanting to make plans for the weekend.

Chapter 19:

The next day Jake comes to my locker right after school and with five simple words, he delivers a crushing blow that leaves me reeling, “It’s not you, it’s me.” *What?!!! Is he really breaking up with me?!* “This is just getting too serious. I need some time.” Then he gives me a hug and is gone. *What just happened?* Tears fill my eyes, and I run to the locker room. Kaelyn looks up as I walk in. “What’s wrong?! Spill. Sit down.”

“He . . . broke . . . up . . . with me,” I sob.

“Ok, ok,” she hugs me and pats my back, as I cover her shoulder with snot. “Tell me all about what happened. Jake sucks, by the way. You don’t need him.”

“But . . . I . . . love . . . him,” my heart feels like it’s breaking.

After what feels like hours, I’ve finally stop crying long enough to blow my nose and tell Kaelyn what happened, which takes all of about ten seconds. *Not a real elaborate break-up if you ask me, but then again, I don’t have much experience in this category.*

“I’ll go tell Coach you aren’t coming to practice,” Kaelyn says, “and I’ll come over after and we can talk.”

“No, I can’t miss practice,” I whimper, “I’m fine.”

“You’re so not fine, but ok; just come and get me if you need me.”

Practice takes place in a deep fog; my body somehow follows directions, but my mind is somewhere else. Kaelyn and my mom both give me the, “There’s other fish in the sea” speech at

home later, and I finally cry myself to sleep exhausted. The lesson learned from this experience is: “Guys suck.” But I’m still hoping Jake will come to my locker tomorrow and tell me he made a horrible mistake, can’t live without me, and loves me so much.

Chapter 20:

Jake never does change his mind and with some time and Kaelyn's constant jokes and mantra of "guys suck," I begin to feel better. My life is filled with track, homework, and Kaelyn and I now hang out every weekend. We're inseparable and people joke about how you can't find one of us without the other. We've continued eating healthy, and Kaelyn recently read an article about how carbs lead to weight gain and are over consumed by most Americans. The first food to be cut from our diets: bagels, which sucks, because I really love bagels. They used to be a favorite pre-race snack. Now, I hate bagels. *Yea, right.*

We're both nervous for our first meet. No matter how much you train and prepare, or how much time you have, it just seems to sneak up on you. The weather is supposed to be rainy and cold. Let's hope the weather man is wrong, like usual. Just to be on the safe side, I've packed my entire dresser in my little track bag and have brought multiple blankets, as I absolutely hate being cold. During the races I always warm up, but it's the down time that kills you, and there's a lot of it during track season. While other events go on, it's all social time. We run around track meets in little groups, as we can't be alone for any length of time, even in the bathroom.

Today we have a triangular meet, and I have no idea what to expect, as usual. On my warm-up with my two-mile relay team, I'm hungrier than normal. The whole no carb thing has made my normal turkey sandwich a bit difficult, so I just had some turkey wrapped in cheese and some celery. My legs feel tired after the two lap warm-up and my stomach empty and knotty. *It's just nerves. Relax.* As we wait near the starting line for the start of the race, I resist the urge

to puke. Courtney starts us out and is out front by the second lap. *Nice, Courtney.* Toni follows, making her 800 look like a walk in the park. *Very smooth.* Ashley lengthens the gab between us and the other teams. *Yea. Now it's my turn.* The hand-off is good, just like we'd practiced. I run nice and relaxed during the first 200, but my legs feel flat. *Nice and easy. You're good.* By the time I reach the homestretch, I'm feeling really bad, but try to look strong for the sake of the cheering crowd. On the backstretch, I look back to see where the other teams are. They're nowhere to be seen, so I coast it in, feeling horrible. My stomach is churning, mouth dry, legs Jello. As soon as I cross the finish line, I collapse. Someone covers me in a blanket and the trainer is called over. I tell everyone, "I'm fine," but no one seems to want to listen.

"Where do you feel pain?" he asks.

"Everywhere," I whimper. "Mostly my legs"

"How much water have you had to drink?"

"Plenty - two water bottles."

"Ok," he persists, "What did you have to eat today?"

"An egg, a piece of toast, some turkey, and celery," I answer, impressed I can remember it all. Perhaps it's the lack of oxygen in my brain that prompts such honesty.

"What?! That's it? That isn't enough calories for a growing teen, and especially not an athlete. No more races for the rest of the day." He turns to Toni, "Go tell Coach she's out."

I work up the guts to go talk to Coach, I mean Jodi, a little while later. She gives me a speech on the importance of food for energy, especially carbs, including the scientific details of

how the carbs are broken down by the digestive system to create energy, which goes right over my head. Regardless, even in my delirious state, I get the message that I need to eat more. I'm allowed to stay and watch the rest of the meet and Coach puts me on the hurdle crew as punishment. As one of the sprint events begin, she dismisses me with, "It better not happen again."

Thoroughly embarrassed, I go watch Kaelyn high jump. She's battling it out with one other competitor at 5'6". As I walk over, she barely hits the bar on her way over. She hits the mat with her fist and walks toward us. "Nice job," I try to sound positive. "Second place is good, and you'll get it next time." I'm sure I don't sound very convincing though, because I know I wouldn't be happy either.

Seeing me doesn't register at first, but then I see the confusion. She asks, "Wait a second, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be warming up for the mile?"

"Yea, I'm *supposed* to be except I'm not allowed to compete anymore today," I answer sounding annoyed, "I collapsed after the relay and the trainer said I haven't eaten enough today."

"What? Really?" I can't read her tone. Is she surprised? Upset? "What did you eat?"

When I finish with the list, which seems more embarrassing each time I say it aloud, she's silent and lost deep in thought.

She slowly answers, "Ok, yea I can see why they said that. You do running events and do need to eat more."

“Hey, wait a sec. What about you? You’re following the same program I am. You’re saying that you feel fine?!” I demand.

“Yea, I do, but I don’t need as much energy as you do, because I only do sprints and field events.”

“Actually you do,” I say alarm rising, “It doesn’t matter what events you do or how long the race is; they require the same amount of energy. You need just as much energy as I do. You need to eat more too, Kaelyn. Tears form in her eyes though, so I soften my voice. “We’ll make sure we eat more TOGETHER. We started this together, now we’ll end it together. Are you in? Let’s make a pact.”

“No, this is dumb,” she says, rolling her eyes. “We don’t need a pact, but I do see what you’re saying.”

“Yes, we need a pact,” I insist, voice rising again. *Why is she making this such a big deal? Plus if I have to, she does too!* Good thing high jump is over and people have moved on to watch other events.

“Ok, ok, I’ll make the pact,” she soothes, “Just keep your voice down will you? I think the lack of blood sugar is affecting your brain,” she smiles.

And I can’t help but laugh too. I want to stay mad, but it’s not working. “Sorry,” I say.

“No worries,” she laughs. “I’ll still be your friend, even though you *do* have some anger issues that I didn’t know about. You may want to see someone about that.” Laughing, I help her gather up her gear to head back to the mayhem of the tent. I can’t wait for this meet to be over.

Chapter 21:

“FIGHT!” And everyone comes running. I don’t understand this human response to an altercation. Most people who gather around aren’t concerned for the safety of the individuals; they just want to see the action. If you ask me, which no one does on this subject, we all need a lesson in conflict management. I absolutely hate fighting with anyone, and will avoid conflict like the plague. Because of this character trait, I will sometimes not stand up for what I believe in, just because I don’t want someone to be “mad” at me. However, if I feel strongly about a something, look out. I will fight - make my feelings known, take a stand.

Exhibit A: Kaelyn breaks the pact. How do I find out? She doesn’t tell me outright, but I put the very messy puzzle pieces together. She has stopped eating lunch at our table, saying that she’s going out to lunch with Paul, but then one day I see her in the science hallway, which is on the South end of the building, in the very back, sitting all by herself with her brown bag and lunch spread before her. Because she’s engrossed in her *1984* book, she doesn’t even see me walk up.

I clear my throat, “Hey? What are you doing here? I ask.

She jumps, “Oh, ah hey,” she stuffs the remainder of her lunch in her bag quickly and stands up. “I was just finishing up and trying to catch up on my English reading.”

“I thought you were going to lunch with Paul?” I question, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice.

Awkward pause . . . “ah, I usually do, but today he had to make-up a quiz, so I just stayed here and like I said, I was behind on my reading, so I just ate here. Hey I’ll walk to your locker with you, so how was your grandpa’s birthday?”

First set of evidence: She wouldn’t be behind in her English reading - ever. Why would you eat in the science hallway? Why did she stuff her lunch in her bag? Why so jumpy? Why change the subject? Let’s face it my grandpa’s birthday probably wasn’t top three on her “concerns” list.

Another strange situation occurs during some down time during a track meet. Tina offers Kaelyn some licorice (which just happens to be one of her favorites). Kaelyn says, “No thanks.”

“You know you want one. Just a little piece,” Tina teases, holding up a string. “Eat me, eat me,” making a very convincing licorice voice.

“*I said no.* Geez Tina, leave me alone,” Kaelyn says too harshly - an angry edge to her voice.

Second set of evidence: Why wouldn't Kaelyn want a piece of licorice? It's just a piece of licorice. And *why* would she be so angry about it?

Other hints begin adding up. She's begun drinking diet soda, even in the morning. She always has a bottle sitting on the edge of her desk and her locker is beginning to look like a recycle bin. She also keeps canceling our plans to hang out. Often it's last minute, and her excuses seem lame. Most of the time she says she's hanging out with Paul, and while I haven't asked Paul about it yet, I have a feeling - he isn't attached to her hip each and every moment of the day - like she makes it sound. After all, the guy's a senior, and I'm sure he has a life. And, we have these team dinners at teammate's houses where the moms make enough spaghetti to feed a small army with the purpose of doing some serious carbo-loading. Kaelyn hasn't made it to one of them (and we've had at least five so far).

Finally, I feel I have too much evidence to ignore, so I confront her after practice on Thursday. There's never a good time for these types of conversations, and I've been nervous all day. Her mom is supposed to give me a ride home, and I purposely take longer than usual to get changed and pack up, so our other teammates will all have a chance to leave the locker room.

“Are you going to the team dinner tonight?” I ask.

“No, I can’t make it,” she answers. “I have dance class tonight.”

“I thought dance was on Wednesdays?” I continue.

“They had to move it this week, because our instructor had the flu, normally it is on Wednesdays. Oh, so that means I can’t make it to next week’s dinner either.” Darn it. In her voice I think I hear relief where I should hear disappointment.

Enough. It’s time to just get to the point. “Kaelyn, are you sticking to our pact?” I ask.

“Yes, of course. You are too, right? Are you ready? My mom’s probably waiting,” she says, heading toward the door.

This is not going how I’d planned. “Wait,” I implore urgency in my voice. “Please sit down; I want to talk to you.”

“We can talk on the way home; Mom’s waiting.” Nice move Kaelyn. She knows perfectly well I won’t continue this conversation in front of her mom. To me this is another piece of evidence in the case. Her excuses don’t add up, and her avoidance tactics, while impressive, are concerning.

Chapter 22:

The next day I go to see the school counselor after wrestling with the decision all night long. I made a pros and cons list and constructed a worst case scenario list with number one being Kaelyn gets mad at me, and I lose her friendship. As much as that would suck, I have decided that my *friend* is more valuable than my *friendship*.

“My friend Kaelyn doesn’t eat enough, and I think she has a problem,” I tell Mr. Hawkins. I try to be as specific as possible and probably tell him more than he ever wanted to know, detailing how we’d become friends in the first place, how we’d begun eating healthy, then made the pact. I present the evidence, clues which I think add up and create a strong case. After I’m finished, I sit back, not relaxed but relieved to have put this burden on someone else’s plate, an adult who has many more resources than I do, a trained professional who will know what to do. You know, one of those “don’t try this at home” people. I imagine he’ll call her in, get her to spill and talk her into changing her habits. He’ll “fix” her. Presto bammo, and I’ll have my old Kaelyn back. This, however, is not how the whole scenario plays out.

“What about you, Sarah?” he asks gently. “Are you eating enough? Do you have an eating disorder? This is a safe place. You can tell me, and I can help you if you do. Didn’t you have an incident on the track a while back?”

“No, no, it’s not me you should be worried about, it’s her!” I probably sound a little too defensive, but is this guy serious? Following some very intense questioning, making me feel like I’m on the stand, I’m finally allowed to leave his office. I go directly to the bathroom and bawl my eyes out. My tears of confusion run down my cheeks in long streams and turn into a slow

burning anger. *What was that in there? He didn't get it at all, and he's a trained professional. Really? I think my eleven year-old sister would have done a better job.*

When I get home that night I feel weird. Betrayal hovers over every thought and action. *What if she finds out what I did? I don't have as much confidence in Mr. Hawkins as I did before. Now I don't know if I want him to call her down or if I don't. I just don't know.* Worry drapes over me like a worn, oversized sweater. *Did I make a mistake?* Confusion hides in crevices all over –in my shoes, under my armpits, in my hair – *Maybe she doesn't have a problem after all. Maybe I'm reading too much into things, and she's just busy.* My stress level rises to dangerous levels and explodes later that evening, when my little sister drinks the last of the milk, and I wanted a bowl of cereal. Poor Meg.

Chapter 23:

Kaelyn gets a pass to the counseling office the next day in math class. How do I know this? Ashley's in that class and asks me after if I know what's going on? "No," I answer, probably a bit too quickly.

Then I don't see Kaelyn again until lunch time, but I find a note in my locker, asking me to meet her in the science hallway. *Oh no. This is not gonna be pretty. A lump forms in my throat.* After grabbing my brown bag, I head over, palms sweaty, heart pounding, stomach lurching. *Please don't be mad, please don't be mad, please don't be mad.* Luckily the rumor mill hasn't latched onto this yet. *Who decides what's news worthy anyway? Is there a selection board, which determines what events to focus on? These people need a hobby. Find something constructive to do.* Kaelyn sits in an alcove in the middle of the hallway. No one's around, and I wonder if this is a good or bad thing. On the good side, we could talk opening, but privately. On the bad side, no one will even notice if I'm beat up, pummeled, either physically or verbally. *Yea, right. Be serious Sarah. Kaelyn wouldn't hurt a fly, and you're probably being a bit dramatic.* I try to keep my voice even as I say, "Hey," in what I hope is a cool tone.

"How could you?" she asks, voice filled with hurt.

This is what I was afraid of. "Kaelyn, I only wanted to help; please understand that," I beg.

"I know that, but I'm *fine*. I don't have a problem. But I think maybe you do? You keep bringing this up. Maybe this is a diversion tactic, to keep the attention off yourself; you keep blaming me. Do you want to talk about it?"

Are you serious? Mr. Hawkins, yea, he's real professional. "Me?" Disbelief and confusion becomes anger and hurt. All I've been holding in for days - explodes, and I start sobbing.

"I just wanted to make sure you're ok," I sob. "I could never stand to lose you and stupid Mr. Hawkins turned everything around. I . . . am . . . so . . . sorry."

Kaelyn hugs me, as I cry. "He did the same thing to me, tried to turn the tables. He's good, and I have a confession . . . he got me to talk about you. "Whoa! It's like *1984*," she smiles, lightening the mood, "I guess you sold me, and I sold you . . . what is it underneath the chestnut tree?"

"I think so, I laugh. I may have missed some details in English class today, because I was so worried about you being mad at me," I admit.

"Well, I guess we both learned a valuable lesson today," she says. I think we both should have just talked to each other, and all of this drama could have been avoided."

"I agree," I say. "But really, so you're not mad at me?"

"No, of course not, are you mad at me?" she asks.

"No," we hug and like a stupid cheesy teenage movie, we cry some more, laugh and make fun of Mr. Hawkins. We also make a second pact: to only talk to each other about our concerns, which will be much less stressful, for sure.

Chapter 24:

Kaelyn has a pretty amazing spring. She's one of the few freshmen to attend prom. Of course like any good friend, she tells me it wasn't that much fun, because I wasn't there. *Yea, right?!* I do get to go dress shopping, watch her get her hair done, and she insists that I get my nails done with her, even though I bite mine. Just another one of my bad habits. Seventy five percent of me is thankful I don't have to actually go to prom; instead, I can just watch her get all gussied up. The other twenty-five percent is just a little bit jealous, especially when Paul arrives at her house. When he sees her in her off the shoulder cream full-length gown with sequins running along the right side, hair in a spectacular, curly up-do, he visibly melts. All he can say is, "Wow," he stutters a little and keeps putting his arm around her, I think just to make sure she's real. She really is absolutely breath-taking, and what makes her even more so is the fact that she's so oblivious to the fact that she's so beautiful. Before she leaves, she gives me a kiss on the cheek and whispers, "It's overrated." I smile, appreciating the gesture of the outright lie.

Then a few weeks later, she competes in the Miss Teen Michigan pageant. Since it's on a Saturday, she has to miss a track meet, and I can't go watch. I'm bummed, especially since I've never been to a pageant. Kaelyn has dissipated some of my very inaccurate preconceived notions about them. Previously, I would have argued that they went against feminist ideals and were all about superficial beauty; however, she has helped me to see that they're much more than that. She and the other competitors are strong young women, extremely self-aware, and they use the platform of pageants to draw attention to many very good causes, like Kaelyn's which is diversity.

Her parents tape the talent portion, so I can see her ballet dance to “I Hope You Dance.” When I watch it later that evening, I’m at a loss for words. As she twirls, leaps, and bounds across the stage. I’m mesmerized and can’t take my eyes off the screen. Through her dance she tells a story of making the most of life, enjoying each moment, filling it up with moments of pure joy. “I hope you never lose that sense of wonder . . . still feel small when you stand beside the ocean . . . give faith a fighting chance . . . and when you get the choice to sit it out or dance . . . I hope you dance.” As she dances, I know she’s lost in the moment, happy, hopeful, and I am lost with her. In her white leotard and flowing tulle skirt, she displays strength, athleticism, and pure magnificence.

And . . . the judges agree and crown her the winner! As I watch the video of her smiling and crying tears of joy, waving to the audience, I’m filled with happiness for her accomplishment and this celebration of her, who she is both inside and out. There’s only one detail that bothers me and haunts me later. There is one smudge - a glaring imperfection - Kaelyn looks just a little bit too thin. *Maybe it’s just the lighting or the costume? Am I the only one who notices?*

Chapter 25:

I've been feeling run down the last few weeks of school, fighting a cold, I can't seem to shake. Before Regionals, however, I give myself a good pep talk about how my team is relying on me, and I *need* to run a PR. We've gotten first in every dual meet, and top three in every larger invitational. We have a really good chance to make it out of Regionals – that is if, we *all* run PRs.

Feeling the pressure, we're more focused on our warm-up than usual. There's less silly chatter, and we stick to the routine. Two laps, active warm-up, our silly knee lifts, and we pull our socks up tight. Long red socks, with white stripes on the top, reach each of our knees. These lucky charms are essential to our success and must be worn even if they're in the hamper, reeking of bad foot B.O. Not to mention, they look really cool.

Courtney starts us off, middle of the pack first lap, but she keeps her cool and saves herself for the second lap when competitors will realize they've gone out too fast. Not Court. She runs smart. We're in good position when Toni takes the baton -third place - and Toni moves up to second off the first turn. Always the fierce competitor, she'll pick off anyone ahead of us, and she does. With a smooth hand-off to Ashley, the other freshman, we're in first place. Ashley just has to hold on. She runs smooth, but second place is gaining on us. I'm gonna have to push the pace, can't hold back like usual. I like to save some for the mile or two mile, but not today. I stand ready and cheer Ashley in as she rounds the curve heading toward me. I reach back and watch the baton as it slaps against the palm of my hand. *Perfect. Now go.* Like being shot out of a canon, I explode, trying to get some distance between us and second place.

However, as I get to the 200, I can still hear the ragged breathing of my competitor behind me. *I'll have to push the pace.* Focusing on turnover, I kick it up a notch. Fatigue sets in as I cross the finish line for my second lap. She's still there. *How is she staying with me? I'm feeling unnerved.* As we approach the final 200, I know I'm going to have to kick in another gear. *Do I have another one left?* She passes on my right. *Perfect Move. Textbook. Wait. NO!* I nestle in just behind and try to hold on. I'll go for the win last 100. *Fight. Dig.* With 100 meters to go, I draw up along side her, lengthen my stride, pump my legs, head leans back and I give it everything I have left.

As I cross the line, my legs go limp, and I fall. I'm dragged off the track and picked up by my armpits. "You ok, Pete?" Courtney asks. "You did so great!"

"Did . . . we . . . make . . . it?" I gasp. My lungs burn, can't breathe, hurts.

"Yea, we got second - we made it!" she squeals. She crushes me in a less than gentle hug and any air I'd managed to accumulate is squeezed out again.

"Lie . . . down . . . please?" I beg. Fake turf has never looked so inviting.

"No way. Keep walking," she says, steering me toward the tent.

"No . . . puke." I try to warn her.

I do end up puking, but not on Courtney, thankfully. I'm sure she appreciates my missing her shoes. My stomach kills, and I can't breathe but who cares? We made it!

Chapter 26:

My freshmen year had been going so great, I should have known I was due for a down turn soon. The timing, however, sucked . . .

Even though I just chalked it up to staying up too late to study for exams, my mom insists I go to the doctor. My cold still won't go away, and I've been feeling worse since Regionals. After asking me quite a few questions about my sleeping habits and energy level, the doctor suggests I get a blood test to see if I have mono. When the test comes back positive, he drops the bomb;

“You probably shouldn't run for the rest of the season.”

What?! Excuse me? I turn to my mom, “Mom, you know I *have* to run, right?! My team is depending on me, and it's just one race.” I try to force myself to be calm.

“What are the risks, if she were to run,” Mom asks calmly.

“Well, she could make her symptoms worsen, and her recovery time could be lengthened. She could also do permanent damage to her organs if she overexerts herself, especially her spleen.”

“Mom, it's no big deal. Who needs a spleen anyway?” my voice wavers. I struggle to keep the tears pushed back.

“We'll discuss this at home, honey. Thank you for your time, doctor,” Mom saves the doctor from a full-blown meltdown.

When we get to the car, I lose it. This time, however, mom has seen it coming, and she has her protective gear ready. Putting the shield up, she says nothing and just waits for the storm to pass. I cry, until I have the hiccups. I rant and rave, presenting a very strong case if you ask me. After letting me get through the “why me?” portion of the rant, she finally utters three words that fix it all . . . “You can run.” *What?! Does mono affect hearing?* “But you will follow *all* of the doctor’s instructions immediately following the state meet.”

“Ok,” I say. I don’t know what else to say. I think I’m in shock and now all of my ranting and raving seems unnecessary and childish.

Always the jokester, the only comment my dad has when we get home is . . . “You know, mono is known as the kissing disease. So, who’ve you been kissing?” *Very funny, dad.*

For a lot of hype and fighting to get here, the state meet, ends up being pretty uneventful, especially compared to my cross country experience. Being in the slow heat of the relay puts us at a disadvantage right off the bat. To even have a chance of placing overall, we have to win our heat, and that doesn’t happen. We run well, with a PR of 9:53, but you wouldn’t have even known it, because we finish middle of the pack. Everyone congratulates us and tells us that it was an honor to have made it at all, but I know they’re just trying to make us feel better.

Kaelyn, as usual, is the shining star. Qualifying for the state meet as an individual and a freshman in a *very* tough field makes it even more impressive. To be on the safe side, she enters the competition at 5’0 and makes it on her first jump - gracefully stretching over the bar. Then she has to wait for a long time, as other competitors go through. Seeing so many misses would have made me nervous, but she remains calm. Plugged into her I-Pod, her head bobs in tune.

When it's her turn to rejoin the competition, only five girls remain and the bar is set at 5'2. The other four have already made it, by the time it's her turn, and she again makes it look easy, clearing the bar on her first attempt. At 5'3, she clears again, but three of her competitors don't and are eliminated. *Yea! This put her in the top two!* Our whole team cheers and she smiles up at us. Both of them clear 5'5, and the crowd goes crazy again! At 5'6 her competitor makes it on her first attempt, which leaves all of us sitting on the edge of our seats. On her first attempt, Kaelyn just grazes the bar, and it falls. On the second it seems like she's over, but she must have just tapped it with her foot on the way over. A collective groan goes up in the crowd, and she buries her face in the mat. "You can do it!" I yell. As she stands ready for her third jump, she takes a deep breath and bounds toward the bar. She jumps and just grazes the bar again on the way over. "Uhhhh," we all groan. I can't help being disappointed, since it was so close. But as, Kaelyn hugs her competitor and smiles, reality hits. She just got second place, *in the state!*

Running down to meet her at the gate, I just about tackle her with my overzealous hug. "I'm so proud of you!!"

"Thanks," she whispers, out of breath. *Does she look a little more tired than usual? Have there always been bags under her eyes?* Then she's gone - immersed in the crowd of Kaelyn supporters-teammates, her parents, everyone gathers around hugging and congratulating. Her dad puts his arm around her waist, seems to be supporting her. *Is it just me or do her sweats seem big? She has the waistband of the pants rolled, so I can't really tell on the pants, but the shirt is definitely big, and isn't a little hot to be wearing sweats?*

I hang out in the back, taking it all in, happy for her, but I also can't ignore that twinge of jealousy; I wish we could have done better too, but what goes up . . . must come down, and I now have the rest of the summer to finish my downward swing. *Great, I can't wait!*

Chapter 27:

I roll over in bed and glance at the alarm clock, and it takes a minute for my eyes to focus and read the numbers 10:42. *What!?* *I overslept!* I bolt upright and Panic grabs me by the shoulders. *Wait a minute. It's Saturday and summertime.* Annoyed, but relieved, I push Panic away. Lying back down, I snuggle into the warm blankets and close my eyes. *Ahhh, summer.* The last few weeks of school have been brutal; I'm so ready for this break. But now, what to do? A whole lot of nothin' that's what. I've promised my mom I'd follow the doctor's orders which include not running *at all* or doing any physical activity what-so-ever until I test negative for mono.

So, what follows are months of extreme boredom and agony. I'll spare you the description, as it would just induce more misery to go through the details of the nothingness that was *supposed* to be teenage bliss. I was *supposed* to be able to get some good mileage in, lift some weights, go swimming, ride my bike. Instead, I sleep or sit or sleep some more. I'm actually required to take a nap each afternoon. While that may sound like heaven to some, the fun is taken out of anything when you're forced to do it each day. Plus, something about your mom telling you to take a nap makes you feel like a toddler. My summer can be compared to a deep well of nothingness. I won't say I'm unhappy, because to say so would be such a giant understatement it, could threaten the balance of the universe.

To make matters worse, at the end of the school year, Kaelyn had announced she'd be going to a camp for the entire summer. Yes, I said entire. This was the last straw in my downward spiral leading to complete despair. Not only would I not be able to do anything fun

all summer long, but I wouldn't even have my best friend there to console me through the worst of it. As the doctor listed the many activities, I could *not* do, my only consolation had been Kaelyn.

She'd said, "I'll be there, don't worry. We'll get to catch up on our movies and T.V.; I just love soaps. I'll come watch them with you every day." This had brought me at least some comfort.

Then when she announced that she'd been chosen last minute as the recipient for this mysterious track camp, which she was strangely vague about, I dropped down the final rung on the ladder of despair. *You're really going to leave me and for the entire summer? What am I going to do?* The answer: Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

My life is horrible. The nothingness swallows me up in a tornado of self-pity. All optimism has been sucked out of me, like one of those airtight Ziplock bags. I sulk in my own misery and let me tell you nothing good has come from my behavior. Misery, despair, self-pity, negativity all seem to be side effects of mono, as is guilt.

Guilt has come about, because my mood affects more than just me; anyone within a ten foot range is at risk. I'm at a constant "level 2 or 3" on the stress scale and explosions are VERY frequent. Everyone around me suffers as a result of my mood swings. Ask my mom, dad, or sister how the summer's going, and they will lament that it's the worst summer in our family's history. My mom will tell you it's miserable to live under our roof. My little sister would like to move out, if not been for the minor issue of her only being eleven, and my dad spends a lot of time in the garage working. *Smooth move Dad.* I guess I'm lucky they're my family, because

they have to put up with me. And at the end of the summer, they still claim me, miraculously, amazingly, stupidly.

Chapter 28:

Mono finally lets go at the very end of the summer. I'm allowed to begin running the week before we go back to school. That means I'll have to begin my cross country season out of shape. Now, I will be in the company of many others on the team, but the difference between me and them, is that I'm *not* lazy. It hasn't been my *choice* not to run; in fact, it just about killed me. While they'll complain about having to get back in shape, they won't be overly affected by it. They aren't agonizing, worrying, or losing any sleep over it. Me, on the other hand . . . freakin' out! *How will I ever achieve the same level of success as last year, without my summer base mileage?* Don't answer that. I blame my parents for these thoughts (like many things lately):

Exhibit A:

"Honey, we want to talk to you since school starts tomorrow, Mom opens the conversation. "This summer has been very difficult for ALL of us, but it's over and now you need to regard this school year as a new start."

Dad interjects with "Yea, you've been a pain in the ass, and it's time you chill out."

"Thanks, Dad. You're wording is impeccable," I fight off rising anger, because I do have enough self-awareness to understand that his description is *very* accurate.

“What you’re dad means honey,” here comes Mom to smooth it over, “is that you may not run quite as fast as you did last year. We’re proud of you no matter what; we love you, and we want you to have realistic expectations. After all, you should be thankful you are able to run at all.”

I try to take their words in and adjust my attitude, but running slower, I’m just not ok with that. Mom and Dad could talk until they were blue in the face, and I still wouldn’t be “thankful” or “happy” to be running slower than I know I’m capable of. I will just have to work really hard this season, even harder than the last one. There’s some optimism.

Part III: I Didn't Know

Chapter 29:

On the first day back to school, I'm supposed to meet Kaelyn by her locker. Excitement has been building, as I haven't seen her all summer. At least I've had *something* to look forward to the last few weeks. She had sent a couple letters over the summer, but they were awkwardly vague- about the weather, the friends she'd met, books she'd read, but not many details about herself or running.

The night before school starts, she sends me a text: "Just got back. Can't wait to see u! I'll meet u at ur locker." This makes me at least a little excited to go back to school. But I'm not looking forward to my first day of cross practice at all, knowing this timed run is going to be *very* different from last year's. The list of worst case scenarios has already been constructed, including coming in last place. But looking at the bright side, at least I'll start my day with my best friend at my side again.

The shocker comes when I turn to see her approaching me the next day. Her voice is the same and her smile, beautiful and genuine. However, the rest of her looks completely different. She's too thin - legs, waist, even her arms; her once muscular frame has been replaced by this bony body. A wave of shock hits - head on like a massive earthquake. No warning, just *bam*. Breath catches, eyes stuck staring; all noise stops. I'm caught in a wave of disbelief, confusion. *What happened?* As the wave recedes, I slowly regain consciousness, and I hope I'm quick enough to readjust, plaster a smile on my face, push my chin back to proper levels, and steady my shaky voice to return a cheery, "Hi! I missed you so much." When she leans in to hug me, I

have to fight back tears, as I feel her boniness through her baggy sweatshirt. *Something here is very, very wrong.* Luckily the bell for first hour saves me from what could have been a horrible, uncomfortable, tearful discussion. But unfortunately, I know this conversation is inevitable. *There's no ignoring it. My friend is sick. Something is terribly wrong, and I thought I had problems?*

Practicing avoidance the rest of the day, I come up with every excuse I can to stay away from Kaelyn. The few times I see her in the hallway, I have ready excuses about having to run to coach's room, the bathroom, the office; I just need time to process this. *What am I going to say? "What the hell is wrong with you?" just doesn't seem like the right way to start the conversation.* All day she's on my mind; I can't shake the image of her. It haunts me. I have a million questions but where to start? *Did they not have food at this track camp? What happened? Are you sick? Do you have cancer? Do your parents know? How can I help you?* I can't shake this nagging thought, like a small child trying to get your attention, pulling at your sleeve, but you just keep ignoring them. I think I know what's wrong, and I think it started last year. *Did you break the pact?*

Practice later that day sucks. At least something goes as I thought it would. During the fifteen minute time trial, I can't breathe after lap one, and by the end, my breathing is coming in ragged gasps. My legs are Jello by lap four, and I don't know how, but I gut it out to the end. My first place spot on the team is demolished on lap six as a freshmen, Shannon, passes me easily, eating me up in two strides. *Are you serious?!* When Coach yells, "Time" I collapse on the infield. *Just leave me here to die. I hate running.* Tears stream down my face. My pity party is only interrupted when Shannon comes over to help me up. As she pulls me up, I quickly

wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt. “Just sweat,” I explain. “I got a side ache early on; I think I ate too much for lunch.”

“Oh, yea, I understand. I’ve heard all about you; our team followed all of your times last year!” She’s practically oozing; *This is disgusting. Pathetic. I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit.* Reporting my seven and three quarters lap total to Coach at the end, is the period in this day’s story of embarrassment, humiliation, despair, and complete suckiness. My fears have been realized. I’m out of shape. Coach K. tries to give me a pep talk after practice - something about the value of perseverance, patience, teamwork, but his words don’t get through my armor. *He doesn’t understand. No one does. I’m alone.*

You see that’s the thing about sadness. It is a total singular experience. No one else can truly share in the sadness you feel. People will say, “I understand how you feel” and they’ll tell you about times in their life when they also felt what you are feeling. But it’s not the same. It can’t save you from the hollow emptiness or the isolation, because no two experiences are exactly the same. When you are in the grips of despair, no words of comfort can buoy you up. The sadness fills you up so completely, like a balloon, with no room in it for any other feelings. You’re floating up above and away from everyone else and you want to get back down, to return to normalcy, happiness. You want to be anywhere but here.

When I finally talk to Kaelyn on the phone later that night, my worst fears are realized. Not knowing how to begin the conversation, we make small talk for a few minutes, and I ask her about her day and tell her about my horrible first practice. After all, misery loves company, right?

“Are you ok?” I finally ask.

After a long, silent pause, she says quietly, “Well, I wasn’t exactly at a track camp.”

“I figured that much; where were you then?”

After taking a deep breath, she explains that she was at an eating disorder clinic. “I’m so much better,” she assures me. “My weight is back up, and I’m eating healthy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” hurt creeping into my voice. “I’m your best friend.”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” she explains. “You had enough to deal with.”

“Not compared to you I didn’t. I could have supported you.”

“I’m so sorry,” her voice is soft and earnest, “I wanted to tell you so many times in my letters, but then it just seemed like it was too late.” She pauses. “What matters is I’m back now and getting better. I will need your support now, so much. Please forgive me.”

I want to stay mad, but considering the circumstances, it just doesn’t seem right. My best friend is sick and needs to get better. She needs support and love.

“Ok, just don’t do that again. Be honest with me. I want to know what’s going on, so I can help you,” I say, pushing the anger away.

When I finally hang up the phone about an hour later, she’s told me all about how her parents noticed a difference, her resistance to going to the clinic, her experiences there, and I’ve promised not to tell anyone at school, but I can’t help but think that this is a little unrealistic to think that people aren’t going to notice. I’m also having a hard time believing that she is on the

path to total recovery, because if you ask me, she doesn't look all that healthy. But I've been sworn to secrecy, so my lips are sealed. I don't want to lose my BFF again.

Chapter 30:

When the first meet of the season arrives, I'm so not ready, as I'm still out of shape and nervous as hell as a result. To make matters worse, the opener is taking place at Carson City on my favorite course, against my biggest rivals, and where I ran my second best time of the year last year. Now, one year later, I'm going to be so slow. At the top of the worst case scenarios list is not finishing at all. After all, I sometimes have trouble just running three miles these days, let alone trying to race them. I know one thing for certain - this isn't going to be pretty.

As dooms day arrives, the day dawns bright and clear, cool with glimmering sunshine and a slight breeze. Wouldn't you know Mother Nature would choose to taunt me with this kind of beautiful weather on the day to begin my season from hell? My mood and Mother Nature are definitely locked in silent battle. *Take that Mother Nature. I frown and is that a sharp pain in my knee? I think it might be; don't think I can run today after all. Bummer. Coach will never buy it though; no use even trying.* Mother Nature is winning as I step up to the starting line with no major mishaps, "ready" to run.

By the 800, I'm already huffing and puffing - can't breathe - oxygen deprivation occurring. By the first mile mark, I'm already being passed by competitors who should *never ever* pass me and trying to go with them is a lost cause. When two of my teammates also pass, and my legs are already burning and my lungs are also on fire, before the two-mile mark, my mental strength goes "poof." It's exhumed by the fire taking over my lungs and legs. As I reach the two-mile mark, I would give anything to quit, to just lie down right in the field and hope no one ever finds me. *There is still a mile to go? This is the longest three miles I've ever run!* The

last mile is completely ugly and my only thought is to put one foot in front of the other. My time and place mean nothing now; I'm just trying to cross that finish line.

After crossing that line, finally, I make a bee line for the woods to puke my guts out, past my parents and Coach K. I don't want to hear anything they have to say anyway. After congratulating Shannon, the freshman who took my spot, I'm silent on the bus all the way home, a self-imposed dark cloud hanging over me; take that Mother Nature.

Chapter 31:

The season continues in the same fashion as it began; aren't I lucky? I try to be as positive as I can, rejoicing in my teammates' successes, but when you suck, - it's kinda hard to be positive. The icing on the cake is that my knee starts to bother me a couple races into the season. When the doctor suggests I "take it easy" this season and have it scoped after, I know the season is shot, and now I'm worried about track season too. *Can it get any worse?*

Since I can't run much, I've been watching what I eat a little more than last season. I've already gained five pounds over the summer, and I need to stay at an ideal running weight. Getting even slower than I am now - that's not an option, can't happen, no way. I start eating a hard boiled egg and dry piece of toast for breakfast each day, cut my sandwich at lunch to a half, instead of a whole, and try to eat less of my mom's fatty dinners. Portion control is my focus, and I try to eat more veggies and fruit, and less fat and carbs. This is my last ditch effort in my quest for an acceptable end to the season.

Because of Kaelyn, I think people, like my parents, Coach, not to mention Kaelyn would overreact if I told them that I'm cutting back, so I decide not to. It's not a big deal, just a little white lie to save the people I love a whole lot of anxiety. I'd *never* let it get out of hand.

I'm surprised to find that eating less is actually much easier to disguise than I had thought it would be. I eat breakfast in my room as I get ready for school each day. I often eat lunch in Coach's room where it's so chaotic no one has the focus to monitor eating patterns. I've always eaten a healthy lunch, so what I pack isn't any different, I just eat less now, sometimes giving the extra food away to the guys on the team who are bottomless pits. Dinner is the only tricky part,

as we usually sit down to eat as a family. I put smaller portions on my plate and spread them out so that it looks like more. Again, this is just portion control, not dieting. I'm just trying to eat healthier.

Chapter 32:

Coach K. gets really fired up the week before Regionals, giving us some tough speed workouts on Tuesday and Thursday. Then at the end of practice on Thursday, he gives us the best pep talk I've ever heard saying, "We haven't had a perfect season, but perfect doesn't exist . . . we've got guts and that's what matters . . . we have a chance to make it to the state meet if we ALL run our best races of the season . . . not perfect races but great . . . we just have to believe in ourselves. . . only our minds are holding us back." Somehow these words break through my wall of negativity, self doubt, and pity. Like a little ray of light peeking through a gloomy day, I feel a little – what is that? Hope? Maybe we could make it to 'the big dance'?!

Who says perfection doesn't exist? The next day Mother Nature gives us the perfect day for racing - cool, crisp, a little sunny and absolutely no wind. And since we aren't fighting this time, I'm able to appreciate Mother Nature's gift a little more. During the warm-up I'm nervous, but focused, sharing strategy with my teammates, setting up surge points and letting them know where they can most easily pick people off. My knee feels fine during the warm-up and excitement is spreading and building like a slow fire among our team. At the starting line, our cheer is intense; we're ready.

During the first mile, I feel ok, and we've packed it up, with two other teammates and myself all running together and picking other competitors off. The nagging pain begins to rise in my knee during the second mile, but I ignore it, following my teammates and focusing on staying with them. *Turnover, turnover; we can do this!* Just past the two mile, as we get to the edge of the field, my teammates pick it up a little bit, and I try to go, but my legs just aren't cooperating.

“Go,” I gasp, not wanting them to hold back for me. Their strides lengthen, and they begin to pull away. I try to also lengthen mine and pump my arms, but it seems so hard and my knee is throbbing. As I cross the line, the clock reads 20:30, which is a PR for the season, and while it doesn’t come close to comparing to last season, it’s decent. I search around frantically for red jerseys. *How did we do? Did we make it? Please tell me we made it.* My thoughts are answered finally when Shannon runs toward grinning from ear to ear.

“We did it,” she squeals. “I’m so excited!”

Then she bounds away to go congratulate someone else. I smile. So I didn’t run as well as last year, no personal record setting year for me, but my team made it to the state meet again. I’ve stepped outside my own bubble long enough to enjoy being part of a team, and I’m proud of us.

Chapter 33:

The state meet was supposed to be the culmination of a great season - the result of a team coming together, working hard, and running our best races. However, that's not exactly the way it happened. In my mind the day is still a blur. It happened, I was there, but what exactly occurred? I have no idea. The "normal" fanfare took place - staying at a hotel, eating a fancy meal, having t-shirts made - which all made the let-down even worse.

I feel good during the warm-up, and it's pretty uneventful. Because this is my second state meet, I feel experienced. Coach asks me to lead the freshman around during warm-up and answer any questions they have. I tell them how they'll be feeling and warn them how crazy the beginning will be, to stay to the right of the crowd, that the most important strategy here is just to relax. And, before I know it, we're on the starting line, waiting for the race to begin. As I wait for the gun to go off, I feel surprisingly relaxed and confident. I'm not expected to place like last year, I just need to run my best race for right now. During the first mile of the race, I feel fine, establishing a smooth rhythm and going with the tempo of the race. The mile marker comes up quickly, and I'm on pace. During the second mile my knee starts to hurt, and my breathing is labored already, which is odd for this early in the race. It feels like I can't get enough air into my lungs, and my legs feel flat and numb. At the two-mile mark - I don't know what happens, but I pass out.

When I come to my dad is carrying me in his arms, and I feel like I'm there but not at the same time. Maybe this is what an out-of-body experience feels like? At the medical tent, they check me over and take my vitals, but they can't find anything wrong, except for the fact that I

should have my knee checked out by a doctor. Then they drive me back to the tent where I have to face my team.

“I’m so sorry,” I sob.

“It’s ok,” Shannon speaks up first. Someone else mumbles, “Yea, it’s not like we were going to place anyway.” My teammates console and soothe. But nothing can dissipate the guilt I’m feeling. I’ve let my team down and on the most important meet of the season. In my book, the entire season has been a complete failure. All because of me.

Chapter 34:

School the next day is tough; I feel upset, ashamed, embarrassed. With each explanation, I have to relive the experience. Why is it that when anything bad happens, *everyone* seems to know about it, and they want to know each agonizing detail?! I know everyone means well, but by the end of the day, I'm emotionally spent. To make matters worse, I can't run and know I won't be running for some time, as my surgery is scheduled for next Monday. Nine agonizing days lie ahead, days of not running and waiting for a surgery I don't want. I can't wait for these nine days to be over and beyond that for the next couple months of recovery as well.

There's nothing like wishing your life away. Aren't I a little young for this? I don't want to talk to anyone. I'm sure they're sick of listening to the "woe is me" speech, but how do I turn it off? I want to be happy, carefree, optimistic, take this in stride. High school is supposed to be so fun and go so fast. Not so much. It is crawling at a snails pace, no at my pace for the last season.

The surgery goes fast and isn't as frightening as I had imagined. The only scary part of the whole ordeal was the nurse asking me to draw with a permanent marker an "X" on the knee requiring surgery. Luckily, the anesthesia kicked in before I could communicate my lack of confidence in the care of a medical staff who didn't even know which knee to operate on?! One minute you're staring at the brown cabinet wondering what's in there, next minute you can't remember why you're staring at the cabinet at all, and then the next minute you're unconscious. And then you're home on my couch wondering what just happened.

I only have to hobble around on crutches for about a week. However, since my lacking coordination makes this scary, I get waited on quite a bit. If I wasn't so upset about not being able to run, I may actually enjoy this. Mom brings me something to drink or eat anytime I ask, and she makes Meg do the same, I always have a friend to carry my books, and I get to leave each class five minutes early for extra passing time. The only negative, in addition to the lack of running, is my pain medication makes me sick to my stomach. Now I can only eat small bland meals of mostly mashed potatoes and soup in an effort to avoid puking my guts out. After a couple weeks, my stomach has been retrained and these small meals became my new norm. The fact that I can't run, (have I mentioned that?) and burn off the calories I used to, has brought some extra anxiety. And strangely enough, the growling of my stomach brings me comfort. The longer I withhold food, the stronger I feel.

Chapter 35:

I thought I was fooling everyone. My change in eating habits has been easily explained at home with, “I don’t feel good” or “I already ate, but thanks.” But when someone is like you, they can’t be fooled as easily, which is what happened after lunch on Wednesday. Now that the season is over, I’m back at my normal lunch table in the caf. with all the girls. I have my normal half a sandwich, celery, and grapes. Since the surgery I’ve also begun drinking diet pop (half at lunch and half in the afternoon after school, when I’m really hungry). Lunch that day is eerily quiet, and the normal chatter of stupid gossip just isn’t flowing today. Ashley and Kelly must not be their ‘A’ game. I look up to see Kaelyn staring at me a couple times, her stare seeming to look right through me. Each time, I quickly looked away, but Panic had already settled in. My heart races, palms sweaty, and the room has become at least ten degrees warmer. No words are spoken, but I already feel like I’m being interrogated. I hurriedly finish my food, and stand to leave saying, “Hey, I’ve gotta talk to Mr. Oliver before class, so I’ll see you guys later.”

“I’ll come with you; I have to walk that way anyway,” Kaelyn answers smoothly, also standing to leave.

Shit. No avoiding her now. “Oh, great,” I say, all smiles, hoping my voice doesn’t betray the dread I’m feeling. Kaelyn follows me out of the cafeteria, as I walk slowly, feeling like my shoes are made of lead suddenly. Her eyes bore holes into the back of my head. When we get to my locker, it takes my full concentration to just put in my comb, and get it open.

“You can’t hide it from me,” she murmurs. There’s anger there but also concern. I choose to focus on the anger.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I answer, attempting a confused look.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Don’t act dumb. Since when did you start drinking diet pop and eating celery? How much weight have you lost?” Her voice is rising with each question. “How long . . .”

“Enough with the million questions,” I interrupt. “So I have a pop once in a while. This is NOT the same as you, so stop trying to make it out like it is,” my voice rises too, and a lump begins forming in the back of my throat.

Lunch is drawing to a close and the hallway’s filling up with people. I have to get out of here. “I’m done with this conversation Kaelyn; You’re the one with the problem, not me, now leave it alone,” I turn my back and walk away as fast as I could, trying to get away from her probing look, the concern, and most of all, the truth.

Chapter 36:

Regret is a powerful emotion, haunting. For the next few weeks, I feel on edge all the time. As much as I want to, I just can't relax and my mind keeps replaying that horrible conversation over and over. I've wanted to go find her and say, "I'm sorry" so many times. But that would also mean I would have to talk to her about myself and what was going on, and I'm just not ready to do that. Then, fate intervenes.

Mom comes to find me during third hour and asks me to come out to the hallway, so of course, I know something's up. She takes my hand and squeezes it reassuringly, so I brace myself for impact. "Sweetie, Kaelyn's parents are on the way," she says softly. "They're taking her to another hospital, so she can go get better." Mom attempts a reassuring smile. Tears well up and a huge knot forms instantly in both my stomach and throat. I can feel my heart beating in my head. *No. I don't want her to go. But I do. What will happen?* Mom wraps me in a tight, hug, which may have worked when I was five years old, but I'm not a little girl anymore. This is serious. You can't just fix it with a hug.

"I want to see her before she leaves, please," I whimper. Without even giving her time to answer, I leave Mom to explain to Mr. Oliver where I've gone, while I bound up the stairs toward the science wing. I round the corner just as she's leaving class. My regret becomes sorrow when I notice how thin she was again. How haven't I noticed? I'm looking at a shell of my best friend. In her eyes, I see the same person, beautiful, kind, sincere; she's still there. But when I look at the rest of her, I see this frail person I don't even recognize.

Emotions zigzag through me - sadness, pity, despair, anger, disbelief. Tears stream down my cheeks, burning, and a rock-size lump seem to be blocking my throat. There's so much I want to say, but where do you even begin? "I'm sorry," just doesn't seem sufficient, but it's all that would come out in a whisper. That rock in my throat won't allow me to say anything else other than cry. Then . . . everything fades. I know we hug and I want to think that she said, "It's ok, I forgive you," but my sobs obstruct my hearing. I feel empty, broken, and in the fog of that memory, I want so much to find peace, but I only feel regret, because of what happened before . . . and after.

Chapter 37:

I need an aversion, stress reliever, mood stabilizer. Now that Kaelyn has left, everything just seems so not good. When the doctor gives me the ok to begin running again, a little glimpse of hope appears. The only problem: it's January and the roads are extremely icy, as we've had one of the worst winters in a long time. My parents are less than thrilled about the timing and my relentless desire to jump back into running. I've taken over two months off now, so they don't see what difference a few more weeks would make. However, I can be persistent and they know I'm having a hard time now that Kaelyn's in the hospital again. And bottom line is everyone knows I'm happier and more pleasant when the endorphins of a runner's high are on my side, so they finally relent.

Taking it easy isn't as difficult as I had thought it would be, as I find myself pretty out of shape. Who would have thought being out of shape would be more of a problem than my knee?! I suck air, let my lungs and legs burn, and pound those dirt roads *very* slowly. When I'm running I can block out the memories and hold back the feelings. When sadness or regret bubble to the surface of my consciousness, I run forward faster.

After a few more weeks of running though, I can feel myself getting stronger and feeling more like myself. It's a little easier to get through the day; my legs and heart are finding a new rhythm. I begin running with some of the guys from the team, appreciating their aversion to small talk and willingness to trek along the barren country roads.

On one particularly cold day in late February, my focus is interrupted by a farmer calling, "Hey, can you crazy kids come give me a hand?" Before we can think better of it, we accept and

trudge toward the barn. He explains that one of his cows is sick and needs to be dragged into the trailer using some ropes, so before we know it, we're helping him drag the cow. While this strange experience does interrupt our run, it gives us a funny story to tell anyone who'll listen, and the more we tell the story, the stranger and funnier it sounds. *We dragged a sick cow into a trailer?!* This could only happen in a small country town.

As time passes, the distance between the feelings and memories of the past fade. I'm caught up in the everyday, and I try to lose myself in work – for school, training for the spring, volunteering. When I'm busy, I don't have as much time to think, which is a good thing. And, I don't have time to think of what's missing or *who* is missing. And then I'm so tired at night, I sleep dreamlessly, rather than being haunted by the words I didn't say, the support I didn't give, the truth I didn't speak.

Chapter 38:

Kaelyn doesn't send any letters this time, and it's driving me crazy. Her parents give me vague updates from time to time, but I want to hear from her, I need to hear from her, and it doesn't help that track season's approaching. Track season just wouldn't be the same without her.

There's been a rumor going around school that she may be returning, but I haven't heard anything, and no one answered at her house when I tried to call today. *What if she doesn't want me to know she's coming home? What if she isn't better? All of these possibilities seem equally disturbing.*

So I do what I do best - worry and overreact. I obsess over questions I'll never get answers to. Questions like . . . Will she be ready for track? Will things be the same between us? Has she forgiven me? If not, will she? And on and on and on . . . the questions fill my head swirling around in torment. The anxiety is overwhelming and settles into every crevice of my being. It courses through my veins and makes me feel short of breath. My heart feels heavy and sick. I want to cry, to release this pressure; however, the tears just won't come. So, I suffer silently and wonder and wait.

I like to think that she isn't allowed to contact me, but wanted to, but of course the worst case scenarios continue to hold the most power. She's still angry with me, hurt, sad; I've ruined our friendship forever.

I try to hold on to the memory of our hug in the hallway before she left, but that memory is becoming fuzzy and less comforting.

Chapter 39:

I didn't know you could die of anorexia. I'd never even heard much about the 'say it in a whisper' disease. To even call it a disease seems strange. So when my mom takes a very short, quiet phone call one evening in early May, I'm completely shocked by what happens next. Mom comes in my room and says quietly, "Honey, will you sit down for a sec?" I know something's wrong, and I feel paralyzed by fear. My mind goes blank and heart starts racing.

"What is it?" I whisper, sitting gingerly on the edge of my bed.

"I don't know how to tell you this; Kaelyn died this morning."

"Died?" The blood rushes to my head. "No, no, please no." It feels like the air has been squeezed out of my lungs. Mom hugs me, while I sob hysterically. After what feels like hours later, I pull away, and ask, "How?" I can't bring myself to add the word 'died.'

After a long pause, as if searching for words, Mom answers, "She had a heart attack in her sleep, honey. They found her this morning. Her body had been under too much stress. It couldn't take it anymore," she pauses as if searching for words. "I'm so sorry."

These words sink in slowly. My mind hears the words and comprehends the meaning, but my heart refuses to accept or understand. I suppose I'm in shock. For the next part of my life, I check out, only catching painful bits and pieces. I feel stuck underwater in a fish tank. All sorts of commotion and activity is going on, and I'm there, but I can't really hear or understand or get out. I guess I've went off the deep end, after all, I'm describing myself as living in a fish

tank, and I'm actually wondering how that could all work and what color the stone is on the bottom of the tank. But my best friend just died.

My parents decide I should go to counseling. Probably since I don't think I've uttered one coherent thought in the past few days. I tell them I just need some time. Personally I think counseling is a dumb idea. I just need some time and for everyone to just leave me alone. My friend has died, and I feel sad. Why can't anyone understand that? Unfortunately, they don't. So . . . here I am.

Part IV: The Girl in the Mirror

Chapter 40:

As I'm sitting in the waiting room at the counseling office, I'm thinking, *This is the worst day of my life*. But then I decide that's debatable. It's probably the funeral or maybe the day I found out she died, or maybe every day since then? I don't know. At this point I ponder walking out of the office. Just leaving. But where would I go? I decide I don't have the energy, so I just continue to sit there. I stare at a spot on the wall.

"Sarah?" A short dark haired lady smiles, as she opens the door leading to a hallway. "Right this way, dear," she says, motioning for me to follow.

I'm filled with dread. Now I really want to turn and run the other way. They really should have guards at these sorts of places. Here it goes for my first 'How does that make you feel?', bullshit session.'

After making small talk for close to a half an hour (nice burning up of Mom and Dad's money), she finally brings up Kaelyn, but at this point I'm already annoyed and don't feel like talking. I never did in the first place really. So after lots of "I don't know" answers and now that I've memorized the pattern of the rug on the floor, she suggests I begin a journal to express my emotions. Then I can share them with her, which will give us material to discuss. This will allow me to begin to 'process' my grief. I think the idea is bullshit. Did I mention that?

However, the next problem I face is myself. I don't have a rebellious bone in my body. I always do as I'm told, so what am I doing right now? I'm sitting at my desk, ready to write in this stupid journal. *Stupid. . . stupid. . . stupid. . .*

Entry #1:

I don't remember full memories, just snippets of detail. I remember that Mom told me, but after that . . . my mind is blank. Her death was so sudden, shocking, horrible. My counselor says I've blocked it out, because it's so painful. She did the whole stereotypical, 'How does that make you feel?' crap. For a minute I wanted to laugh out loud - they really do say that?! Then I come back to reality and remember why I'm here - nothing funny about this situation. My best friend has died from the ugly, horrible, misunderstood, the 'is that really a disease? Say it in a whisper' . . . ANOREXIA.

When I get home from my counseling appointment, I decide to go for a run. I need to NOT think. It's almost dark, but I NEED to run. I need to run hard, so my brain can turn off, if I have any hope of sleeping at all tonight. And my legs and lungs need to hurt - to take the pressure off my heart. Maybe for one moment, I can forget this awful reality that Kaelyn is dead . . . and is never coming back.

But as I run memories of the funeral keep creeping up into my mind. It seemed like it happened in the midst of a deep fog, with muffled sound. I felt half there, half alive, confused. The car ride there was silent. I felt dazed and stared out the window. When we got to the church, Dad put his arm around me, "We're here; you ok? Do you need a minute?" bringing me back to reality.

I followed the crowd into the church to the line leading to her coffin. By the time we got to the edge, where you could see the flowers, my heart was racing, palms sweaty, and the tears were just below the surface. I took a few slow deep breaths, in an attempt to fend off the rising panic. Someone squeezed my hand. Then, I saw her, *but that can't be her*. She lay peacefully, but looked so frail. Her cheek bones were too prominent and she looked so thin - emaciated. My breath caught and my knees felt weak-, the person holding my hand led me away and toward a pew in the church.

Once seated, I began reading the missal, which had a butterfly on the front and said, "Life is changed . . . not taken away." Tears rolled down my cheeks. On the inside it had the "Footprints in the Sand" poem on the left side, her favorite, and on the right side, I had to stop reading at the first line, "In Loving Memory of Kaelyn Kaelyn Carson." Turning it over to the back the words to "I Hope You Dance" were printed. This made me cry even harder. There was no stopping the tears. Someone put their arm around me. I stared straight ahead. Throughout the service, I was there, but wasn't. I couldn't focus. More tears rolled down my cheeks, and I felt numb. Someone squeezed my hand, and then held it. It brought me no comfort, and I continued to stare straight ahead. Instead of listening to the words of the sermon, I stared at her sister Jordan's hair - couldn't imagine the pain she was feeling. *Kaelyn was just here. I didn't say good-bye. Does she know how sorry I am? How much I loved her?*

I push this memory away and run harder. So much for not thinking – that worked well. I feel the tears building again, and the lump in my throat is making it difficult to breathe. Run, run, run. I count my steps - *one, two, three, four . . .* Words "I hope you dance," begin creeping in my mind. 'I hope you never lost that sense of wonder' . . . *Stop thinking - just run.* I push the

thoughts, memories, and feelings away again and instead, focus on the sound of my feet on the road; *one, two, three, four, five . . . She's gone. Gone, gone, gone*, I've picked up the pace; my breathing comes in ragged gasps, and it hurts, which is much better than the numb feeling. I'm sad and angry, and I want my body to hurt as much as my heart.

After reading this entry to my counselor at my next appointment, there's no more speaking, at least not on my end. I'm sobbing uncontrollably. She hands me a Kleenex. "You're so brave to share your feelings with me," she says. "We're going to work through it."

Entry #2

I hate school. I keep expecting to see Kaelyn sitting at her desk, and I can't stop staring at it. It's like watching something bloody or gory on T.V. I don't want to see and know it will creep me out, but I can't help myself, I watch it anyway and then get mad because I'm grossed out. Same thing here. I don't want to even look over there at the empty desk; I try everything to avert my attention, but I can't help it, my gaze drifts over and 'damn it,' I'm staring at the desk again. To make matters worse, no one sits there, and the teachers just leave the desk. I'm sure it would feel wrong to just remove the desk completely and that might bother me even more, not to mention, not making any sense. After all, there's nothing wrong with the desk. *AHHHHH, See how it is? I hate being in my head!*

After reading this entry to my counselor, she asks, "So how are things going at school?"

"Not good," I answer. "People all look at me with pity. A few people will ask about how I'm 'holding up.' But for the most part everyone avoids me, like grief is contagious. People don't know what to say. They avoid me."

“How do you feel about that?” she asks.

“Ok. I don’t want to make small talk anyway,” I answer.

“Really?” she’s not buying it. In a short time, she’s already figuring me out. Am I that transparent?

“Ok, fine. It makes me feel sad. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Only if it’s the truth,” she answers.

And then, it’s as if a switch flips. It isn’t what she said that made an impact, it’s how she said it. The sincerity in her voice and persistence in her eyes – looking not through me, but *at* me. Her look wasn’t one of pity or dismissal, but concern. No other person has tried as hard to get to know me and what I have been feeling, and so with that comment, I feel a crack form in my wall of defense.

Suddenly, I no longer see her as the enemy. Maybe this counseling thing could help? It’s worth a try. After all, there’s no way I can be even more miserable than I already am.

Chapter 41:

The truth is my life really is sucks right now. School is the hardest part, as it's filled with memories of Kaelyn, and I hate facing people. Trying to ignore their looks of pity, trying to go on with the every day, just getting through the day is exhausting.

Exhibit A: In science class the other day . . .

We're doing a lab in partners - dissecting frogs. I hate this kind of thing; I always feel bad for the animals. I don't really care about learning this stuff anyway, so why does a frog have to die in futility? My lab partner, Steve on the other hand, is all about it. He loves dissection days, so I'm fine with just letting him cut away. As he makes the incision across the belly, his forehead wrinkles and he sticks his tongue out of the corner of his mouth with concentration. If I were in a better mood, I would find this funny actually.

"Good thing he's good and dead," Steve mumbles. "Can't feel a thing."

Tears quickly form. I can't help it. I hate that I am so emotional these days. As Steve looks up; he immediately goes red. "Oh gosh, I'm sorry Petie, I wasn't thinkin'."

Taking a deep breath, I quickly wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. "No big deal," I say as evenly as possible. "I'm fine, really."

For the rest of the class period, Steve focuses on the frog, cutting and labeling on his worksheet, and I follow along, copying the appropriate letters. Normally I would be interested, for the sake of the 'A,' wanting to be sure Steve's doing the lab correctly. Today, however, I don't care. I feel so sad and class activities, especially dissecting a frog, seem like a stupid waste of my time.

When I get to my locker after class, I'm feeling emotional; an explosion is imminent, but Kevin the poor guy who has a locker next to me, doesn't know and hasn't been around for the warning signs. Poor guy.

"Hey, how was class?" he asks.

I can't even answer. I run down the hall crying, like a lunatic. *Damn it! I didn't want to cry in front of the entire school again!* Once I am in the safety of the bathroom stall, I let the tears go, and then I can't stop them. *Why does it have to be so hard?* The bell rings, but I just can't bring myself to even think about going to class, not with red, bleary eyes again.

I can't bear to walk into another class late, with everyone looking up to stare at me. One look at my red, swollen eyes and they'll look at me again with pity. I'll sit down, and the teacher or someone near me will ask if I'm ok, and I'll have to shake my head 'yes' when I'm so not. I've done this already so many times; I just can't do it again, so I head to the office. I need to go home.

Chapter 42:

I'm stuck in neutral - can't move forward but can't go back to fix anything either. There isn't a day that goes by where I don't wonder what I could have done to prevent Kaelyn from dying. Could I have talked sense into her? But it's too late and she is already gone, and I'm left here, not knowing how to go on. How do you have a 'normal' life again when the unthinkable has happened? Everyone tells me to 'Give it some time. Time heals all wounds.' When I hear this I want to scream. *When? When do you think I'll be 'healed?'* Instead I try to nod my agreement and move my mouth into a convincing smile. *Does it actually look like one? I have no idea.*

Sadness hangs on each moment of the day. Moments, which used to be so carefree or at the worse mundane, are now often filled with dread and grief. Her empty desk, her locker, the road leading to her house - are all painful reminders. Searching through my desk the other day, I came upon a card she'd given me. It read:

"Life is a journey that sometimes leads us through rough places. But the walk is so much easier when we travel beside each other. That way we can reach out and find help when we need someone to lean on . . . It doesn't matter whose turn it might be. . . All that does matter is that we're there for each other and that we'll keep walking side by side wherever the road may lead us." This message was surrounded by footprints through sand on a beach and a starfish up in the right hand corner. On the inside of the card it read " . . . and I'm at your side right now."

Then Kaelyn had written underneath "Sarah, There are times in your life that you will feel overwhelmed and just want to give up. I know you better than that though.

Even though I'm not sure what is bothering you, I can tell something is wrong. Don't forget that I love you and I am here for you whenever you need to talk. I'm here
let me listen." Love, Kaelyn

The familiar lump forms in my throat. Tears run down my cheeks, as I hold the card delicately. Who would've thought that a card she spent \$2.50 on would come to mean so much to me? I read it a few more times, searching for comfort in her words, finding none, I put it under my pillow and lay down to cry myself to sleep.

I feel heavy and sad, always, and wonder if this will ever go away. When will it stop hurting so damn much? When will I stop expecting to see her or hear her voice? I don't want to forget, but I do want to move on. I'm miserable and tired and want to stop hurting.

Chapter 43:

I decide to run track; maybe it will be a good diversion and a “step” in the right direction. Get it?! On the second day of practice we have our first workout. I’ve only been back to running for a short time since my surgery and since Kaelyn’s death, I’ve only run off and on, so coach tells me on the way out to the track to ‘take it easy.’ To increase our endurance, we’re doing repeat 800s. I usually rock at workouts like this, getting within one to three seconds of my target every time. Today, however, each time someone passes me, I try to pick it up and hang with them, but my legs feel like stone and my breathing is ragged. After my third repeat, my time is twenty seconds slower than the first two.

“Ok, that’s enough for today,” Coach says, patting me on the back. “Go inside and get some water, maybe ride a bike SLOWLY for a few minutes.”

“No . . . I . . . can finish,” I pant.

“Absolutely not. It’s not worth it. You’re going to be injured again.” Coach’s voice is stern now, on the verge of anger. I know there’s no use arguing. So I walk away, tears in my eyes, feeling defeated and weak. This isn’t helping.

After a week more of easy running, I’m not getting any better either. My breathing is still bad and I continue to feel tired during runs. Coach takes me aside after practice one day.

“Pete, you’re hearts just not in this. I can see it. Now I hate to lose you; you know that, but I think maybe you should take this season off and just focus on you. Get healthy and give yourself some time to deal with Kaelyn’s death.”

“But coach . . .” I wind up, ready to launch my defense.

“Nope. I don’t want to hear it. Give it some time.” And with those words, track season is over, before it even began.

Chapter 44:

Just because coach told me I couldn't run track, doesn't mean I can't run at all. He doesn't own the roads. I can run whenever I wanted to. I guess my teenage rebellious spirit takes over. I'm going for a run, damn it! I'm tired of feeling sad and hopeless, of being "poor Sarah." When people pass me in the hallway now, they look away, like I have some contagious disease. I want to yell, scream, "Grief isn't contagious people! Look at me!" I feel invisible and like my life is headed nowhere fast. I need to feel alive, and what's the best way to feel alive? A good dose of legs aching, lungs burning, can't breathe - a good workout.

I run the first five minutes easy and feel good, energized. The crisp, spring air feels clear and clean and I imagine it not only filling my lungs but traveling through the rest of my body to replace the old, stuffy air of dark depression with clean, clear optimism. I decide on a good fartlek (Swedish for speed play) for my 'comeback' run. The first two pick-ups feel great. My legs feel strong and fast. During the third one, my legs feel more tired and a little tingly at end. I think nothing of it, figuring it's just the change in temperature. After all, it had been about ten degrees cooler last week. When it starts raining, I consider it a sign from God, welcoming me back to life. During the fourth pick-up, my breathing becomes labored, so I decide to cut it short and head back toward the school. Because I'm trying to avoid the track (don't want coach to see me - so much for open teen rebellion). That means I have to go right through the center of town, where I usually cut through some parking lots, which makes it not so discreet when I pass out in the parking lot behind the bank. When I come to, there's a huddle of peering faces bent over me and someone has put something soft under my head. Someone else is holding my hand and in the next instant, my mom's there.

“Honey, honey, are you ok? Sarah, talk to me. Are you ok?” Oh, maybe we need an ambulance. Why isn’t she talking? Oh . . .”

“Mom, slow down, let me answer. I’m fine. I think I must have fallen, maybe I bumped my head. I’m fine. I feel fine, see? I try to stand up, before anyone could stop me, but oh, no, I feel a little woozy.

“Ok, that’s it; we’re going to the hospital,” Mom then orchestrates a frenzy of activity with me being carried me to the car in two seconds flat.

“Mom, really I’m fine. This is ridiculous. Mom!” I beg and plead but unfortunately, I get my stubborn streak from my mom, so I don’t have a hope of winning this one.

When we get to the hospital, they ask a million and ten questions and run a battery of tests and come to the conclusion that I’m fine. Wow, I’m a medical miracle! The prognosis: dehydration, overexertion, and I should increase my calorie intake. After giving me some fluids and covering me in some really nice, warm blankets for a couple hours, I’m finally allowed to go home.

The rumor mill at school takes this and has a field day. Great, like I didn’t have enough issues in the social department. I might as well have the plague now. By the next day, rumor has it I tried to run ten miles, passed out, wasn’t breathing, and the ambulance came to take me to the hospital. Oh, and on the way to the hospital, I almost died. Great. It’s going to be easy to get over that one. I might as well consider my first kiss, my last, as I’m going to be known as the girl with issues.

Chapter 45:

I'm extra nervous for my counseling appointment the next week, because I know I'll be asked to discuss the passing out incident and my parents have been acting weird this week. I'm sure my mom called, because she's been a helicopter ever since 'the incident.' It was annoying after the first day. Now that the week is almost over, thank God, I would describe it as absolutely intolerable. She's been making me eat so much. Every time I turn around she's asking, "Honey, would you like a snack? Can I make you anything?" When "no" doesn't work, she starts bringing me food anyway-ice cream, grilled cheese sandwiches, stuff I haven't eaten in a long time and don't want to eat. My stress levels are off the charts. I'm so desperate for relief; I actually fake being sick mid-week.

I thought that was bad, the weekend turns out to be even worse. I can't escape to school. Who would have thought high school, rumor mill and all, would be a sanctuary of relief? By the way, I'm no longer a contagious, disease carrying, avoid-your-eyes-when-you-pass girl. Instead, now I am an object of interest. People stare at me, but not in an 'oh that's a great shirt' kind of way, instead they stare in the 'oh there's the freak' way. I really don't know which is worse.

As I sit in the waiting room of the counseling office, my stress level continues to rise, as I imagine the very uncomfortable conversation which will follow soon. Today there's no small talk. Right after, "How are you today?" She asks, "Sarah, do you suffer from an eating disorder?"

"No," I remark emphatically. "Kaelyn did." *Stay calm, deep breaths.* My stomach hurts.

“I know Kaelyn did, but I’m not asking about her. I’m asking about you, and your recovery depends on how honest you can be with me now.

“But I don’t. This is ridiculous,” I exclaim, voice rising in anger. *What the hell is she thinking? Kaelyn had the problem, not me.*

“I’m going to ask you some questions now, and I want you to *really* think about your answers before you respond, ok?”

“Ok, fine,” my defenses are up. I am ready for battle. *This is so stupid! I bet mom put her up to this. I don’t have an eating disorder. Not me.*

“I notice you’re wearing a baggy sweatshirt now. Do you often wear this type of clothing?”

You’ve got to be kidding me. Is she really asking about my sweatshirt? “Yea, but just cause it’s comfortable. I hate dressing up. Is that really a big deal?” I am already beyond annoyed. *Maybe we need a second opinion. I will need to talk to Mom about this. This lady’s a whack. This is a waste of my time and their money.*

“Have you lost any weight, and do you monitor what you eat? *Here we go again. I’m still annoyed; on the ‘how’s your counseling session rating system’ she’d get a two, tops.* I want you to answer honestly,” she pauses. “Listen, I know this is difficult for you, Sarah, but it’s nothing to be ashamed of. I can help.”

Why does she have to be so nice? It makes it harder to be angry and hate her. Of course I pay attention to what I eat, but I can’t say that. I can’t. Then she’ll tell my parents and other

people will find out . . . So many thoughts and emotions are ripping through me. But I can't tell her. I'm so confused. "I don't really weigh myself very often," I say, "So I don't know if I've lost weight." *Liar. You're down a measly seven pounds. Three short of the goal.* "I try to eat healthy, but I don't really pay close attention to what I eat," I continue. *Lies, lies, and more lies.*

She continues, relentless. "Do you eat meals alone often and have you ever eaten a lot and then purged? Have you ever felt guilty for the food you've eaten? I know I'm asking a lot of questions, but this will help me a great deal. Just hang in there." She pats my leg and smiles. "You're doing great." *Oh, she's good, real good, but I'm not buying it. You've moved down to a zero on the rating scale. I now have the desire to scream, 'Stop.' Just stop, please. Leave me alone.*

"I've had a lot of homework lately, so I've had to eat dinner early or later, than the rest of my family, "I explain, trying to keep my voice calm. *Are my hands shaking?* I don't mention that I often make my own meal, so I don't have to eat my mom's fattening ones. I don't even go near the purging question. *That's disgusting and embarrassing. Plus I only did it once, and it was just because I ate birthday cake at that party, and then this week, just because Mom made me eat all that junk. It's not like I do it all the time. I am not bulimic.* I can feel an explosion coming, but I can't get out. I'm trapped. My palms are sweaty and my heart begins beating faster. *Shit. No escape.* I stare at the rug. *If only there was a secret porthole. Ok, I'm losing it.*

The inquisitor brings me back to the present with the stereotypical, "Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Do you eat with your friends at school?" She exudes patience, and I hate that, so cool, calm, and collected. Not a hair out of place. *This is not good.*

I take a deep breath. *Relax.* “I used to eat with my friends, but Kaelyn ate with us. Since she died, it’s been weird, plus I’ve really had a lot of homework lately and projects to get done last minute,” I say.

“The fact that it’s ‘weird’ now that Kaelyn has died is understandable. The dynamics are going to change and you have to find a new ‘normal.’ However, you haven’t mentioned that your school work is slipping, and you’ve mentioned that a couple times. You also said you had to skip meals at home due to school work. I’m confused, though because, my notes here indicate that you are a very strong student, and I thought your mom told me that you have close to a 4.0 grade point average. Are you having trouble keeping up since Kaelyn’s death? It’s understandable that you may need some extra time and accommodations. I could talk to your parents about getting some tutoring set up.”

AHHHHHHH! Warning, you may want to take cover inquisitor. I don’t need a freekin’ tutor! You’re twisting what I’m saying. I take another deep breath. I may need an oxygen tank soon. “No, you don’t understand. It’s not that I’m not doing well in school. My grades are fine, it’s just I don’t want to get behind, you know.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Oh, I see.”

What do you mean, “You see?” “What’s with the million questions and why does she act like she doesn’t believe me? I don’t need to convince her. Panic comes in without even knocking at this point. She’s not listening. That’s not what I meant. I do NOT have an eating disorder. “No, it’s not what you think,” my voice wavers. “I’m not like her; I am FINE.”
Emphasis on the ‘fine.’ I want so much to convince her and myself and Panic who is now staring

me down too. *This is stupid. I can't do this, and I am actually having conversations with imaginary people.*

“Ok, I only have a few more questions, are you cold or tired often? Do read the nutritional information on the food you eat or count your calories?” And with those last few questions, that's it. There's an explosion. Only it's not the normal explosion of anger and frustration. There is also pain and sadness at the root of this one. Because, I had to answer, ‘Yes,’ and not just to these last few questions, but to all of them.

I sob uncontrollably. “Yes, and that means that I am doing exactly what Kaelyn did. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry.”

The inquisitor hands me what feels like the millionth Kleenex I've used today. It's ok. I'm so proud of you. You needed to tell me, and I'll help you get through this. You're not alone, and you don't need to be sorry. This is nothing to be ashamed of.”

This pep talk doesn't help me feel any better. I have been forced to see myself as I really am. Looking in the mirror, I see a scared anorexic girl looking back. The description fits. The title fits. The wall of anger and denial falls, and I have no choice now but to talk about it. But first I have to finish crying, which could take some time. Panic, inquisitor, go ahead and have a seat.

Chapter 46:

I have so many questions but so few answers. Why did this happen? How did it happen? It seems so innocent - to just watch what you eat, cut back a little bit, eliminate the empty calories. The problem is this is a slippery slope. It doesn't take long to go from "little" to "none." It'd been easy to think I really didn't have a problem, because it was much easier to focus on Kaelyn. But am I really anorexic? I want to say, 'no.' However, the mirror is still there, unfortunately. Now I can see the similarities between what Kaelyn did and what I am doing. The cutting back, diet pop, being defensive, distancing myself from friends and family. I've been trying to hide, and it was easy to deny it, especially since Kaelyn seemed so much worse in my mind. We were both so 'type A' but I just kept telling myself that she was worse. But I still don't understand how this happened. Why Kaelyn? Why me? But the major question I wrestle with is: Why did Kaelyn die, but I lived?

For weeks I've been having to keep a food journal in addition to my regular one, and I've been going to see a nutritionist on top of my regular counseling sessions. My nutritionist has had me gradually re-introduce new foods back into my diet. I've found that I wasn't merely limiting calories, but I'm obsessed with the fat section of the nutritional information. If that number under total fat is over four to five grams, 'Houston we have a problem!' After listening to the whole spiel about healthy fats though, I'm open to trying. I have to. I don't want to die, so my homework: eat peanut butter. How sad, that I even need this homework. *How did I get here – to this horrible place?*

Thankfully, however, I've had a change of heart, epiphany, aha moment, whatever you want to call it before it was too late. After I stopped sobbing uncontrollably at the counseling office, which took a lot of Kleenex by the way (I really got my monies worth that session), the inquisitor called in the heavy artillery. She brought my parents in for a "special" session to tell them what was going on. That was tough. I feel so bad for putting them through this, wasting their money on the hospital bill, counseling, all because of me, and something I can control. I did this. It's not like it was a conscious decision. I didn't wake up one day and decide I'd become anorexic, but I did make my choices leading up to this. I feel so ashamed and guilty. It took one more \$25 session to be able to say that. Sorry again, Mom and Dad.

Entry #23

For this session I was asked to make a list of situations/reasons which make me feel guilt. Where to begin?

1. I'm costing my parents a whole lot of time and money, and we don't have much of that in the first place.
2. I'm making other people worry about me.
3. I'm letting down my teammates from my track team.
4. I have been and continue to push other people away.
5. I'm setting a bad example for my little sister.
6. Kaelyn died, but I'm still here and now I'm wronging her memory by following in her footsteps.

I could go on and on with a million other reasons. I'm completely consumed by guilt. How do you begin getting over that? My counselor says that I need to give myself a break, not be so hard on myself. This is easier said than done. I wish I could just stop, wake up tomorrow and be better. I could eat normal, feel normal. Or better yet, I could wake up and none of this ever happened? Kaelyn is still here, and we are both healthy and happy, BFFs, worrying about stupid high school events, like dances and boyfriends and student council elections. High school is supposed to be carefree, the "best four years of your life," right? Not so much in my case.

Healing is a difficult process, especially when your body *and* mind are sick. Progress is slow, sometimes painfully so. Sometimes the steps forward are so small, they're hardly noticeable. This is the way counseling is for me. I'm moving forward, I just don't notice until I get there. It's like walking across a log balanced over a river. You're concentrating so much on each little step and staying balanced, you can't look back to see how far you've come or too far ahead to see how far you have left. Looking ahead is the most dangerous, because if you notice how far you have left, you may just sit down on the middle of the log and cry. Instead, you have to keep looking straight down or just slightly ahead, and you can't celebrate until you've safely made it to the other side.

Chapter 47:

You know how I said that my first kiss would probably be my last? Well, thankfully, I was wrong. I'm at my locker between classes one day, exchanging my math books for science ones, but the exchange isn't going very smoothly. My science binder's wedged in sideways and I'm trying to dislodge it with my one free arm, when I hear laughing. I look over to see the guy who has a locker next to me, Kevin, chuckling.

"Funny, huh? Do you always laugh at other people's misfortune?" I ask.

"Well, I wouldn't really call this misfortune, but here let me help you, before you hurt yourself." After handing me my binder with a smirk, he asks, "Who's that?" pointing to a picture hanging in my locker.

"That's my dog, Sadie; she's the greatest dog in the world."

"The greatest?" he raises his eyebrows. "Yea, well, my dog Abbey is the worst. She's a beagle, who doesn't come when she's called and has a stubborn streak."

"Oh, yea? She sounds *great*," I answer. "A little bit like me actually."

"Really? You don't come when you're called?"

"No, I don't, and neither do the Alpacas," he says grinning.

I'm intrigued by the beagle, Alpacas, *and* Kevin. When I get to my locker the next morning there's a mysterious envelope taped to my locker, and it's unlabeled. My name isn't even written on it. But when I open it, I know it was most definitely meant for me as there is a

picture of Alpacas inside. When I turn the picture over, it reads, “We’d love to meet you sometime.”

I head out to the farm on that Saturday, but *only* for the purpose of learning about Alpacas. This is purely an educational outing. But I do wonder how many other girls have fallen for the “come see the Alpacas line.” I must say, it’s the most unique I’ve heard. I learn that Alpacas are shorter than llamas and don’t have the banana shaped ears. They’re sheared twice a year for their fleece, which is then made into yarn.

“Can you pet them?” I ask.

“Kind of. We spend a lot of time with ours so they’re used to being handled, but only a few will tolerate being petted. I’m amused when it takes him two tries to catch a little brown baby, cornering and grabbing her as she runs by.

“That was smooth,” I tease.

Then I meet Abbey, and let me tell you, it’s love at first bark. This little brown and white beagle jumps up on me to be petted and snuggles her head into my neck. I wonder how long it took him to teach her that. Another nice move. It’s also cute and funny when she later takes my sandal, which I had slipped off under the swing. When Kevin calls her back, she starts running in circles, playing keep away. As he jumps off the swing to chase her, he trips and then tries unsuccessfully to grab her collar each time she runs by. The longer this game lasts and the more frustrated Kevin gets, the funnier it seems. I laugh until my abs hurt and tears run down my cheeks, and I feel a layer of grief fall away.

Chapter 48:

At my counseling appointment today when she asks, “So how was your week?” I can honestly answer, “It was good.” It’s taken me almost a year of coming here weekly to get to this point, and it feels like a weight has finally been lifted. You don’t know how heavy that weight is until it’s gone. I chatter away for the hour, telling her about eating lunch with my friends, going for ice cream with Meg, and about my trip to the Alpaca farm. This visit is so much different than my first few sessions. I feel relaxed, open to feedback, and non-judgmental. I also feel thankful. With every part of my being, I know this experience has saved my life.

“It’s so good to hear joy in your voice finally,” she says. But, I do want you to be ready. This is going to be a long process. You’ll have setbacks, times when you continue to experience grief or fall into old habits. But I hope recognize your own strength.”

“I’m nervous about telling Kevin about my eating disorder,” I admit. “I feel . . . ashamed. And, I’m nervous; what is he going to think?”

“Well first of all, this is nothing to be ashamed of, but it is a difficult and personal struggle, so I understand your feelings of discomfort. I don’t know how he’ll react, but you won’t know until you ask him, will you? And if he isn’t supportive, then he can’t be a part of your life. Do you understand that?” she pauses, waiting for my response. I nod. “The road ahead is going to be difficult,” she continues. “You need to surround yourself with people in your life who are going to support you, AND you need to allow people to be there for you.”

“I know, I know, I’ve heard this a few times before,” I say, smiling.

“It takes a strong person to ask for help,” she stops and studies my face. I know she’s worried and wants to know if I’m really listening.

“I hear you,” I answer. “I’m just letting your words sink in.”

At the end of my appointment she suggests that I only come back monthly now, and I don’t need to continue seeing the nutritionist. “Call me if you need me. I mean it. We can always go back to meeting more often if you need it. Keep writing in your journal and don’t be too hard on yourself,” she reminds me.

“Thank you,” I don’t know what else you say to someone who has saved your life. Words don’t seem sufficient ironically. Instead I hug her and hope she feels the depth of my appreciation.

Chapter 49:

When I get home from school today, I feel good and decide this would be the best time to go for a run. I was given the “ok” from the doctor, counselor, and nutritionist over three weeks ago, but I just hadn’t felt like running yet. Out of the driveway my feet take me on a route I used to run with Kaelyn. The familiar twinge of sadness pinches, but I give it time to pass. My legs fall right back into an easy rhythm.

Images and memories of Kaelyn keep coming to mind - I hear her laughter, like it’s floating through the summer breeze. I remember the first time we met, and images of her high jumping, bounding across the stage, and dancing play through my mind like a slide show. Then I remember the day we fought, the last time I saw her in the science hallway, and her body in the coffin. I push these memories away, as a lump forms in my throat. When I get to the corner where I would normally turn right and head back through town and the subdivision, I notice an orange butterfly out of the corner of my eye, and I watch it land on a flower near the street sign. It’s a sign, so I go straight instead.

This is the first time I’ve been at the cemetery since the funeral. I thought about coming many times, but I needed to focus on myself first. I also needed to work up the courage, to recognize my own strength. As I near her grave, I see her mom standing there. She lights a candle and then sits on a bench. Part of me wants to run the other way, after all she hasn’t seen me yet. But the other part of me, the stronger part, wants to see her, give her a hug; of all people she would most understand how I’m feeling. When Brenda sees me, she smiles and tears fill her eyes. She wraps me in a tight hug and I cry. “I miss her so much,” I whisper into her shoulder.

“I know. Me too,” she says.

“This is the first time I’ve been here,” I admit. She takes my hand, and I look down at Kaelyn’s gravestone. In the middle of her dark grey stone, lies her picture; her name and the dates are etched in stone. *It doesn’t seem possible – that she’s gone.* ‘I hope you dance,’ is etched beneath next to a butterfly.

“I saw a butterfly a few minutes ago; this will sound strange, but I think it brought me here,” I say softly.

“It doesn’t sound strange at all,” Brenda says. I’ve seen many butterflies lately. I think she sends them to comfort us.”

We sit at Kaelyn’s grave for a long time, talking about everything . . . how amazing she was, how much we loved her, how much we miss her. Then, we just sit quietly for awhile; it feels peaceful. But I know there’s one more revelation, which hangs like a heavy stone.

“Brenda, I have to tell you something,” I pause to gather strength. “I have an eating disorder, too, and I feel so . . . guilty. I pushed Kaelyn away toward the end, and I want so much to know if she forgave me,” I am wracked with sobs again.

“Oh, honey,” she whispers into my hair as she hugs me again. “I already knew, and I also know you *are* going to beat this. Kaelyn wants you to. She’s here. And so am I. I also know for a fact that she forgave you. She talked about you all the time – but she was in a pretty intensive program, so she couldn’t write or call – she was just focusing on herself and trying to get better. You were both suffering and pushed each other away - because you were so much

alike and in the same horrible place. She loved you, and trust me, she knows how much you loved her.”

With these words, another layer of grief falls away. It’s not gone yet. But it’s different – less poignant and a little hazy. Brenda offers to drive me home, but I want to run. I want to finish; I need to finish. On the way home, I feel lighter, more at peace than I have in a long time.

Chapter 50:

When I tell Kevin about my eating disorder, he says, “Ok,” putting his arm around me, he asks, “How can I help?”

“You just did,” I answer.

He hugs me and says, “I’m here; I’m not going anywhere.” He’s really good for me – the exact opposite - calm, laid back; maybe he’ll balance me out a little bit. We’ll see if this relationship goes anywhere. Right now he’s just a good friend, and you can never have too many of those. And if it doesn’t work out, I’ll survive. I’ve been through much worse than a break up. Hearts mend, it just takes a little time.

I’ve been spending some time at Kaelyn’s house, with her family. I think it helps both Brenda and me to keep Kaelyn’s memory alive by talking about her. We’re helping each other through our grief. Her dad, Mike, enjoys making me meals, and it helps me to eat them. Her sister asked me to stand in her wedding in the fall. We’re all moving forward, one step at a time, and one day at a time. We have each other and Kaelyn’s angel is with us all. She keeps sending butterflies to remind us.

I’m running again, for my life. I know I have to eat well to be able to run, and I’m continually chasing emotional peace. It is what I pray for and strive toward. I’m strong and working on not being so hard on myself. Am I recovered, healed, perfect? No way and not possible. I’m a work in progress.

Today I'm out in the woods running with Sadie, and I feel happy. I maneuver the trail with ease, letting my legs traverse the twisting and weaving. The roots are there to trip me up, but my feet know how to avoid them. I'm expecting slight uphill and downhill on this run and in my life. I know I'll always struggle to maintain healthy eating. Not only do I have Panic to deal with, but I also have the eating disorder monster to fight off (I've named him Ed). They'll both always be a part of my life, unfortunately, but I can fight them off, using strength, optimism, and some counseling on occasion. It also helps that I have the support of many friends and family - Mom and Dad, Meg, Kevin, Kaelyn's family - they're all there to defend me, and they're as lucky to have me, as I am to have them.