

THE STARTING LINE

Mile Zero

QUINN: I still don't get why it was such a big deal. All kids like to run. Go to any schoolyard. You'll see kids playing tag, soccer, capture the flag . . . All those games involve running.

SYDNEY WATSON WALTERS: The difference is, most kids run for 10 or 15 minutes. Not for 24 hours straight like you.

(Audience laughs)

QUINN: I still don't think I did anything special. My dad used to say, if you want to run an ultra marathon, you have to be ultra tough, ultra fast and ultra determined. But I don't think I'm any of those things. Most of the time I was out there I just felt scared, slow and stupid.

SYDNEY WATSON WALTERS: Take me back to the starting line. That morning in July, before the race started. What was running through your head?

QUINN: I was thinking . . . *I must be out of my mind.*

"I can't believe you're doing this," Kneecap said. "Human beings aren't supposed to run a hundred miles. In a car, yes. On a bike, okay. But on two feet? That's just stupid. Stooooo-pid!"

Kneecap is my best friend in the world. Which isn't saying much, I guess, since she's my only friend.

"I mean, it's totally whacked!" she went on. "Running all day and all night, through a forest full of wild animals. You

heard about the bears, right? Someone spotted a big one on the trail last night.”

Mom overheard this. Her forehead crumpled like a plastic bag. She dug through her purse and handed me the phone. “Take it,” she ordered.

“No way,” I said. “It’s too heavy.”

“Not an option,” Mom said.

I stared at the phone. Mom bought it a decade ago, when phones were as big as toaster ovens. When she just kept hanging on to it, Dad nicknamed it the Albatross .

“You do know I’m running a hundred miles, right?” I said.

“A little extra weight won’t slow you down,” said Mom.

“A little?” I said. “That thing weighs more than our fridge!”

It was ten minutes before six, and the sun was starting to come up. Fifty runners were milling up and down the dirt road, holding Styrofoam cups full of coffee and shivering. One woman rotated her arms like pinwheels; another pulled her ankle to her shoulder blade as if her leg were a noodle.

“If you want to run the race, you have to take the phone.” Mom pressed the Albatross into my hand and shot me her death-ray stare.

I squeezed the phone into my fanny pack, and struggled to zip it shut.

“Where’s your brother?” Mom asked, glancing around.

I looked down the road. It was covered with shadows.

“There,” said Kneecap.

In the half light, I could see Ollie standing at the edge of a ditch.

“He’s getting his pyjamas wet,” Mom sighed. “Quinn, would you go fish him out of there?”

I sloped down the road. A line-up of runners was standing beside a pair of portable toilets. A skinny lady in a baseball hat waved to me.

I caught up with Ollie. “What’s going on?” I asked.

He was standing beside a creek, staring down at a clump of weeds. “There’s a frog in there somewhere,” he said.

I stared at the ground.

“Spring Peeper?” I asked.

“Nope. Leopard frog.”

We went on staring but couldn’t see anything moving except a light breeze blowing through the grass.

“When does the race start?” Ollie asked.

“In ten minutes,” I said, leaning over to stretch out my hamstrings. A wedge of yellow light was creeping over the foothills.

“Too bad Daddy isn’t here to see this,” Ollie said.

A huge raven, the size of a golden retriever, soared over the clearing. It screeched at us, a weird, lonely cry, and the loneliness grabbed me by the throat. My eyes started to burn, but I knew that I wouldn’t cry. Not with Ollie there beside me.

“You’ll be visiting the Shrine, right?” Ollie asked. “You promised Daddy you’d stop there, remember?”

I nodded, and poked around inside my fanny pack. The photograph was still there, stowed in one pocket. My salt tablets and energy gels were in there too, plus the Albatross, of course.

“Don’t forget your racing number,” Ollie said.

“Oh right,” I said. I knelt down so he could pin the number to my shirt.

“Isn’t thirteen bad luck?” Ollie asked.

“Not for me it isn’t,” I said.

We finally got the number pinned on straight. Ollie stepped back. “Knock knock,” he said.

“Who’s there?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Aardvark.”

“Aardvark who?”

“Aardvark a hundred miles . . . for one of your smiles!”

A stupid joke. He’d heard it from my dad, the master of stupid knock-knock jokes. Dad had run this race before, and I knew he wished he could be running it again.

The blaat of a bullhorn shattered the morning quiet: “ALL RUNNERS TO THE STARTING LINE!”

Electricity shot through my veins. “C’mon, we’ve got to go!” I said. Ollie and I jogged back toward the starting corral. All I could think was: I am about to run 100 miles.

Mom saw us coming and cleared a space in the crowd. She took Ollie’s hand and brushed his bangs out of his eyes. “I thought we agreed you’d stay dry,” she said.

Ollie kicked the road with the toe of his rubber boot. “But I was looking for frogs,” he mumbled.

Kneecap appeared out of nowhere and slung her arm around his shoulder. “You’re a frogaholic, Ollie.”

Ollie giggled and pointed at my race number. “And you’re a jogaholic!” he said.

I laughed at that. So did Mom. Kneecap punched me in the shoulder — hard.

“Ouch!” I said. “What was that for?”

“You laughed!” she said. “You actually laughed!”

“So what?” I said. “I laugh all the time.”

“As if!” said Kneecap. “You used to laugh. Lately you’ve been a total fun vampire, sucking the fun out of everything.”

I did?

The bullhorn boomed. “GOOOOD MOOOOORNING, ATHLETES!”

The crowd of runners spun around. Bruce, the race director, was standing beside the gatehouse. He was dressed in a plaid kilt and a black hoodie that said Shin-Kicker 100 across the front. His head was shaved and he had mutton-chop sideburns and a rainbow-coloured scarf was wrapped around his throat.

“YOU RUNNERS ARE LOOKING STRONG!” he belted.

The runners cheered. Bruce raised a hairy arm in the air, and then walked backward across the road, kicking a line in the dirt with the heel of his boot. “This is your new best friend,” he announced. “It’s the starting line and the finish line. Two minutes from now you’ll cross this line. And in roughly twenty-four hours, if you’re lucky, you’ll cross it again, only by then you’ll be a totally different person.”

Kneecap punched me again. “You’re really doing this!” she said. “You’re actually going to run a hundred miles!”

I didn’t answer. I was still thinking: fun vampire?

“The thermometer’s headed up to thirty-three degrees,” Bruce went on, “so be sure to drink lots of liquids out there. We’ve got emergency water drops at miles nineteen and fifty-seven, just in case. If anyone gets heat stroke and ruins my race, I swear, I’ll feed you to the bears myself.”