10 Minutes

I hear the gun go off and I don't think for a second before I push out of my blocks with my feet kicking one foot in front of the other as fast as I can muster. As I move through the first curve, all I can think about is that I need to win. I need to push myself as hard as I have ever pushed myself. If I can't do that then I will never be good enough. I can only hear muffled cheers from the crowd through my thoughts as I go around the second curve and I am starting to feel exhausted, not only am I exhausted, but I can also feel a tightening in my chest that I just can't shake away during the race. I ignore the pain and I can only think about catching the girl that is right in front of me. She is so close that I can smell the coconut perfume radiating off her uniform.

Disgusting, I think to myself—not that the scent is disgusting, but that that scent is mine. I have worn it for years, and I fell in love with the enchanting fragrance. I wore it for every race, and I wondered if she could smell mine. But I knew I was too far behind her for that.

I throw out every thought that I am having at this moment and all I can feel is the adrenaline pulsing through my veins as I curve around to the final stretch of the 400-meter dash. I am only 40 meters away from the finish line and the pain in my chest is excruciating, it's weakening my whole body but I am so close to beating her and winning the race.

"Go, Oaklynn!" I hear my family call out as I am 10 meters away from the end.

It takes everything inside of me not to give up but I kick my feet faster and harder and I shove my chest past the line, I knew I had passed her, and I knew I had won.

As soon as I cross the finish line, I feel my legs give out and collapse onto the rough track. I can't feel anything, I can't hear or see anything either. I start to panic and I feel the whole world close in around me as I drift off.

When I wake up, I am in an unfamiliar bedroom, and I do not have a clue where I am. I glance around the bedroom that I am in and the name Milly is plastered on the baby pink wall in big white letters. I get out of bed and I observe the room more closely. On the dresser by the bedside. I see a photo of a girl and her parents. Growing more confused, I try to stay calm and I walk into the bathroom to splash some water onto my face.

When I look up in the mirror, I don't see myself. My long blonde hair had turned into a short, chocolate-brown bob that fell right at the nape of my neck, I was a stranger in my own body and I don't know why I am here. As I take another look at myself, I realize that I am the girl who was in the photo. I must be Milly.

I step out of the bathroom and I walk down the stairs with hope that my "parents" are down there. With each step, I grow more anxious about where I am and what has happened to me. When I reach the final step, I stopped and peered through the newel to see if anyone was on the other side of the stairs. As I had predicted, the two people in the photo were right infront of me talking at the dining table.

I step onto the landing and turn to the table where they sit.

"Come, come! We have something to talk to you about Milly." The man says excitedly like he has known me forever which I suppose he has if I am his daughter, but I do not know him.

I walk cautiously to a chair beside him and I ask “what?!” Pretending to be excited.

“Your best friend Kimberly is back in town for the weekend and we invited her over.” He responds joyously. “I have planned to take you girls out to dinner tomorrow night at the beach if that is alright.”

Kimberly is another stranger to me but I accept his offer and hope that I responded the same way that Milly would have.

A few moments later, Kimberly bursted through the door and jumped into my arms. I was startled, but I hugged her back and said, “Kimmy! How good it is to see you! I missed you so much!” I called her Kimmy in hopes that Milly would have done the same since she or I suppose we are friends, and friends give friends nicknames. Or so I think, I’m not so sure considering I’ve never had a best friend before let alone even a friend.

It seemed to have been the right decision when Kimberly screams out loud in excitement. She practically dragged me up to my room and as soon as she pulled me in and shuts the door behind us, she is talking non-stop about what she has been up to.

“Oh my goodness, Mills! Guess what?!” She shouts. I don’t even get a chance to respond before she goes on about the private school she attends and all the stuck up kids there.

I have a hard time following along with her words, but I am enjoying having someone to listen to. Normally, I never have people talk to me about their life. I let Kimberly talk late into the night and I can understand why Milly would want to be her friend, she is so joyful and happy.

I can’t even remember drifting off to sleep, but I wake up to the sun peering through the glass window into my eyes and the smell of pancakes. When I wake myself up a little more, still drowsy, I think of the pancakes again and I am taken aback to my life; Oaklynn’s life and I see

my mom making pancakes in the kitchen with my brother Hayden. It was only for a second, but it made me realize that I was still in this strange life and no matter how much I was enjoying it, I needed to find a way back home.

Throughout the day, I have so much fun spending time with Kimmy and my parents. Later in the evening, my dad takes us to the beach and I order the most delicious seafood I have ever eaten. After we eat, Kimmy takes me down by the pier and I think we are just admiring the beautiful yellow-orange sunset, but out of nowhere, Kimmy pushes me off the ledge and I am afraid that I will drown in the cold, rocky water. I swim back to the surface and I heave as I try to catch my breath.

I catch a glimpse of Kimberly and she is laughing at me, thinking that this is some sort of joke. I take a second to think that maybe it was only a joke, I'm sure that Kimberly and Milly love playing silly, playful jokes with each other. I decide to climb back onto the pier and push Kimmy off while I laugh the same way she did. We stayed at the pier for what feels like only minutes but the moon had already risen to the peak in the sky so I know it has been way longer than it feels. I hear my dad call for us and I race Kimberly to his voice and for another moment while we are running, I am back to my life as Oaklynn, in another track meet, but I don't get to reach the finish line before I am pulled back to Milly's life when I reach my dad. We take Kimmy back to her parents and when I get into my bed, I am so exhausted that I immediately fall asleep.

I wake up before even the sun is in a cold sweat. I open my window and I try to fall back asleep but to no avail. I toss and turn until I can't take it anymore. I decide to just give up and go for a jog outside.

I look in the drawer by my bedside and find some headphones to put on during my jog. I sneak downstairs as quietly as I can and open the door to the warm summer night air. I find a trail just behind the house and decide that it is the perfect place for a jog. Only a few minutes go by when I can feel my legs aching and my breathing getting heavier. I realize how different Milly and I are, because If I was running as Oaklynn, I would still have so much energy to carry on. I decide not to fight the exhaustion and I begin to walk. I think back to today and how much fun I had. Milly was the complete opposite of me. I had a blast exploring this world and what it is like to not have immense pressure on you the whole time to be the best. I only ever thought of being better than everyone else that I never had the chance to do anything else that I enjoyed. I don't even know what I enjoy.

I stop walking at this thought and I pick up to a hasty jog that picks up faster and faster. I am in Milly's body, but I am still Oaklynn and if I can't find a way back home, I need to make Milly the best.

My pace quickens and I feel my chest tighten the same way it did in the race right before I collapsed. I ignore it as best I can but it is impossible and again I feel my body give out and I hit the ground.

Everything around me disappears into a deep void but then I can't comprehend what appears in its place. It's my track, Oaklynn's track. I am already set up in a block and it is second nature when the gun goes off again and I bolt out running as fast as I can. Or as fast as Milly can. I keep running around each curve and I am so tired, I want to give up but I know that I can't. I run around the final curve of the track when I start to feel the track beneath me turn to water. I trip in the current and I am so confused at what is happening. I still see my competitors running

on a track and regardless of the situation, I must win. I try to listen to the crowd for encouragement, but there is none.

"What?" I say to myself. "What is happening?"

I hear the crowd yelling at me but not cheering for me. "You're not good enough!" "You will never win!" "Loser!" "You can't do it!"

I stop for a second still with water up to my ankles, and I look around me. The yelling continues and the stands are filled with hatred. Filled with Oaklynns? *Wait what?* I think to myself. I take another look and everyone in the crowd is Oaklynn. Hundreds of that same face. I look at my competitors and they are Oaklynn as well. Except for one, one competitor is a dark shadowy figure that is not far ahead of me. I try to keep going and I start running again, but the water beneath me has now turned to sand and my shoes are soaked in water and are now being covered with sand that just sticks. I understand that to get back to my life as Oaklynn, I need to win this race and beat myself. But I am so tired. *Is it worth fighting for?* I ask myself. I only spent a day in a life as Milly, but I had loved it so much it was exhilarating to enjoy her life. Right away the sand turns to quicksand and I am stuck. I try with everything left to get out, but it is impossible. I close my eyes and I give up. As I am falling back into the sand, accepting the fate that I will be stuck as Milly, the dark shadowy figure comes up to me and everything else disappears.

A blank space encloses us and the shadowy figure only says a few words to me, "Give yourself grace, embrace who you are, you do not need to live up to everyone else's expectations. Only your figure fades, and the track returns, clear and empty. My competitors are frozen behind the finish line, faces blank. They all have words written across their foreheads: "Loser," "Hopeless," "Useless."

I walk toward them, one by one. I wrap my arms around Oaklynn, whispering, “It’s okay to not be perfect.” I say it over and over until I reach the last one, the one with tears rolling down her face. She sobs, whispering “useless” as I hold her.

“I forgive you,” I say.

She doesn’t respond, but she steps aside, and I cross the finish line.

When I wake up, I’m back on the track. Hayden is pulling me into a hug, telling me how worried everyone was when I collapsed after the race.

But I can’t stop thinking about Milly. I think of how she embraced life, how she found joy in the small moments. And I think of what I learned and what I still need to learn.

In those 10 minutes, I figured out how to forgive myself. I don’t need to be perfect. I just need to be me.