



Chapter One

What do we do on hills? What do we do on hills?
What do we do on hills? Despite her best efforts, Mia could not block out the memory of her coach's voice. Every drill, every practice Coach James would follow the team, shouting at the top of her lungs.

They are tired, but we're not tired! Mia heard the words in her head as loudly as if Coach were running with her now. But Coach was wrong. Mia was strong, Mia was fast, but at this very moment, Mia wasn't just tired; she felt like dying.

Your arms! Your arms are never tired! Pump your arms and your legs will follow!

She would never admit it aloud, but these mantras helped her in every race, just as they were helping her now. The first cross-country meet of the preseason, and the course had an enormous hill at the 1.5 mile marker. It was practically a mountain.

And it was eleventy billion degrees outside. Who scheduled a four o'clock race for September in Phoenix? Preseason was killer.

"They are tired, but I'm not tired," she whispered to herself. Or, rather, she *would* have whispered if she had any saliva left to work her lips. Right now her mouth was so dry she could barely swallow. She felt a cramp working its way into her side.

She could imagine what Coach James would say if Mia asked advice about the cramp. "Build a time machine, go back to last night, and start hydrating."

She pictured the look on Coach's face if she slowed down even a bit and grabbed her side. Coach wouldn't shout, Coach wouldn't even scowl. Coach would just shrug and shake her head ever so slightly in disappointment. It would feel about a thousand times worse than the actual cramp.

All these visualizations were helping her through the grueling mini-mountain. If she kept her mind moving, she could forget the pain of running. That's another mantra Coach always shouted: "Running is mental! It's all mental! Just *decide* to run faster!"

Decide. My arms aren't tired. What do we do on hills?

And then- finally- she crested the peak. She was half a mile from the finish line, and it was all beautifully, gloriously downhill. She let gravity take control of her legs. She imagined the cramp loosening in her side and pouring into the dirt. It was a strange image, but it worked. *Huh. Running is mental.*

Decide. Decide. Decide. She increased the pace of the words in her brain and timed them with the pace of her legs. Now she was flying, her arms perfectly in sync with her lengthening stride.

The last two hundred meters. *I'm a gazelle, a cheetah, whatever other ridiculous animal Coach shouts at us.*

One hundred meters.

From her side vision, she could see the course was now lined with fans. Parents, younger siblings, her male teammates. They were probably cheering for her, but she was so focused on the flags ahead, it was as if they didn't exist.

Fifty meters. *Decide.*

Ten.

Mia ran through the finish line feeling in some ways more energized than when she'd begun. She handed her name tag to the timekeeper, and glanced at his stopwatch. She was only three seconds faster than she'd been last year.

Her face fell. Her heart sunk. Only three seconds faster.

She stepped out the way as her teammate Cecile came down the chute. Cecile always ran with a giant grin on her face. Her grin lit up extra bright as she high fived Mia. Through heaving breath, she panted, "I thought I'd beat you this time!"

Mia tried to return Cecile's smile. After all, she'd just won- again. She shouldn't be ungrateful. But as she left the chute and fielded compliments from total strangers, all of Coach's mental mantras were replaced with her own: *Just three seconds.*

Mia grabbed a banana off the team table and refilled her water bottle from the Gatorade jug. She meandered over to her bag and plopped on the grass. *If you're sitting, you're stretching.* In

between bites of her banana, she half-heartedly stretched to her toes.

Every few seconds she'd shift positions. Coach was right: stretching really was the best part of running. She found that after a few movements, she was able to tune out the noise around her and- more importantly- the noise inside her head. Mia's breathing became more centered, her stretching more intentional. *Lengthen with each breath in, lower with each breath out.*

As her teammates finished their race, they joined her on the grass. Mia barely noticed. It was still preseason, so the other girls were only a few minutes behind her. Soon, during regular season, when the team swelled to fifty girls and as many boys, she'd need to wait another ten, fifteen minutes for them all to finish.

She wasn't listening to *what* her friends were chattering about as they loosened their hamstrings, calves, and quads, but she paid attention when it suddenly died down. It meant Coach must be nearby.

Sure enough.

“Friends!” Coach James shouted as she jogged to where they sat. Mia had to shield her eyes to look into Coach’s beaming face. “How’d we do?” Coach asked.

Coach James never sat along the finish line with all the other coaches. Instead, she staked her claim somewhere on the course where no one else ever cheered. It was the place where kids would try to give up if they were going to give up. Coach would stand and shout her old standbys as the runners passed.

Except at Mia. Coach never shouted at Mia. Mia was always so far ahead of the pack, shouting would seem excessive. Whenever Mia ran past, Coach would just nod once and say, “Good, Mia. Good.”

And then, hundreds of meters later, Mia would finally hear Coach begin her shouting. She never cared who she shouted at. Coach James’d yell at her own team as well as their competition. “Let’s go! You worked hard for this! Strong girls! Run!”

Coach cared about *how* her team ran, not if they won. Although, more often than not, they did win.

“Mia got first,” Cecile piped up right away. Coach nodded expressionless as Cecile continued, “I got second, and the rest of us...” Cecile trailed off, unsure of how the rest of the team performed. Coach wasn’t really listening anyway, she was already turning to the rest of the team expectantly.

Jamie and Joanne- the J-Crew as everyone called them- spoke in unison, “We got sixth and seventh.”

Jamie explained, “Two girls from Union Hills and a girl from Jackson Heights were ahead of us.”

Coach James tilted her head as she did some mental math. Finally, she nodded once in satisfaction, relatively certain of their victory. She made eye contact with Mia and asked, “How do you feel?”

It was Coach’s undivided attention that always made Mia uncomfortable. No matter how many kids were around you, when Coach spoke to you, it was like no one else was there. Mia knew her teammates loved this about Coach, but her intensity always made Mia squirm.

It was just that Coach wasn’t casually asking how Mia felt; Coach actually wanted to know. And if Mia answered anything other than the whole,

absolute truth, Coach would know. And then Coach's eyes would narrow and her brain would whirl and she'd ask a million more questions aloud and even more in her head. And Mia would shrivel under the scrutiny and the knowledge that her greatest fear might be realized: maybe someone would figure out that Mia wasn't actually perfect.

Mia didn't know how she was going to answer this question. She didn't know how she'd be able to admit that despite a year of training hard, changing her diet, buying the latest gear, she'd barely improved. And if she wasn't getting better-significantly better- with all this training, how could she ever get better? Eventually, someone was going to come along and beat her. Cecile was getting faster every practice, so it might even happen next week. And if Mia wasn't first, wasn't the best, what was she?

All these panicked thoughts swirled in her head for a few seconds of awkward silence. Mia blinked, took a swig of Gatorade, and dropped her eyes. "I'm, uh--"

Rarely, if ever, did Mia thank her mother for her overbearing presence. But at the precise moment

that Mia needed a distraction, her mom- for once- followed through.

Mrs. Bianchi appeared seemingly out of nowhere, towering over Coach James, who was not a small woman herself. Mrs. Bianchi, as usual, looked like she had just stepped out of a fitness fashion magazine. Her blond ponytail was perfectly curled, her nails expertly painted, the shade of her blue eyes precisely reflected in her blue hoodie. Where Coach James's aura invited attention, Mrs. Bianchi's demanded it. Almost comically, all her teammate's heads snapped up in response to Mia's mother's harsh cry: "Mia! There you are! We've all been expecting you at the car!"

Mia could see Coach James take a small, calming breath. It was Coach's policy that all runners stayed until the last teammate completed the race. In just a few seconds, the girls would get up and line the course to cheer on the boys, just as the boys had been told to line the course and cheer on the girls. "This is a team sport. We win as a *team*."

And every time, Mrs. Bianchi would insist on taking Mia home early. There was always some excuse which was so obviously false it was embarrassing. "Family dinner" was a standby (They hadn't had a

family dinner in years. Mrs. Bianchi didn't *eat* dinner.) along with "dentist appointment" (Honestly, how many dentist appointments could one thirteen year old have?), and once she even cited "family pictures." That was the most humiliating: the idea that Mia- sweat dripping down her tan arms, staining her jersey, matting her black hair- was heading off for a *photoshoot* was actually laughable.

Usually, at each excuse, Coach James would only slightly raise her eyebrows, gently smirk, and say something vaguely patronizing in response. "Of course she can leave early. We wouldn't want Mia to miss her *family dinner/dentist appointment/family pictures* just to support her fellow athletes."

Mia knew how seriously Coach took teamwork. She knew how Coach saw Mia's early departure as disrespectful to the very institution of Washington Junior High Cross Country. She wondered, however, how much Coach James blamed Mia. Did Coach think it was *Mia* who insisted on leaving early? Did she believe Mia thought she was too good to stay an extra twenty minutes to give back to the team that had given her so much? Mia

wished she had the courage to ask, to explain, but honestly, she was terrified of the answer.

Mrs. Bianchi, very apparently, didn't have the same reservations. "Mia," she repeated, "Mia, everyone is waiting. It's time to go." This time Mrs. Bianchi didn't even bother with an excuse.

The whole team stood up as Mia did. The difference was they were standing to run out to the course. They'd be, as instructed, finding the spot they found most challenging during the race. Their instructions were to encourage (actually, Coach James use the word "exhort" - they were to *exhort* their teammates. Coach was also her English teacher) the boys in their most desperate moments. If Mia were staying, she'd plant herself on the mini-mountain, halfway up. She'd shout, "What do we do on hills?" as loudly as she could. She'd call each boy by name as they passed her by. She'd clap her hands until they stung.

But instead, Mia was going to the car where "everyone" was waiting. She knew "everyone" meant her older brother Gio, who'd been dragged along. Her dad, she was sure, was still working. He'd never been to a single race yet.

Mia bent down and scooped up her bag. She wanted to turn and explain how badly she wanted to stay, but something kept her from it. Instead, with practiced nonchalance, Mia just shrugged and muttered, "Tell them I say 'good luck.'"

Mrs. Bianchi had already turned and strutted towards the parking lot. Mia wordlessly hurried after her, without so much as a backwards glance. And with every step, her brain relentlessly shouted, *Just three seconds!*