

A Diamond in My Pocket

The Unaltered series: book one

By Lorena Angell

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Smashwords

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Chapter 1 - Olympic Dreams

I don't understand what's happening to me. Something strange and inexplicable is going on inside my body, and there isn't anyone I can tell about it. I wouldn't know where to start.

I just crossed the finish line in first place for the 100-meter race. No one else is even close, I'm sure. I turn around to verify this and can see the other runners are still racing towards the finish line. The crowd has grown eerily silent. I glance up at the stands to find nearly every face looking in my direction.

The other runners finally reach me and halt nearby, panting as they walk in circles to cool down while throwing suspicious glances my way. I watch the lips of a couple of the competitors and listen to their low whispers. They debate back and forth about whether I jumpstarted or not. The shorter of the two girls hammers her point home by asking why the starter's gun didn't fire twice to indicate a false start if that's what happened.

The answer: I didn't leave the starting blocks before the other runners.

Coach Simms jogs over to me with his clipboard papers flapping in the wind. His overly round waist bounces to and fro, throwing off his balance. "Calli! Wow! How did you do that?"

I respond to Coach Simm's question with the puzzled truth. "I don't know, Coach." I've never won a race before—and to win by such a long shot without feeling the least bit tired doesn't seem right. I'm beginning to wonder if winning the race was all a weird dream. "What was my time?"

Coach hands me his stopwatch and grins. The time shows 9.3 seconds. "Of course, this isn't the official time," he says. "I'll find out what it was."

My brain struggles to grasp the incredibly fast time on Coach's stopwatch. It has to be a mistake, I think.

We are ordered off the track so the next race can begin. Coach Simms and I walk towards the bleachers where my personal belongings set in a pile. As we reach the bleachers, one of the officials pulls Coach Simms aside.

I climb the stairs towards my half-frozen bottle of water, winding through the gaps between fellow athletes. Their stares of question and suspicion prickle my skin. They probably think I'm on steroids.

I'm not a track star or a spectacular athlete in any sense of the word. I tried out for the team last season in my sophomore year because of the encouragement of Coach Simms, who is also my algebra teacher. I figured it would be better for me to join an extracurricular sport than to stay home alone after school. I am the youngest junior and, until today, I was one of the slowest on the track team. I haven't performed very well. In fact, my best time for the 100-meter was 13.9 seconds, not 9.3. Looks like I'm not the slowest anymore.

I pass through a group of senior boys and one of them teases, "Hey, Courtnae, wanna share some of your 'speed' with us?" His buddies chuckle. I don't even know his name, and frankly, I'm shocked he knows mine. I sit down by my things and take a long swig from my water bottle. The boys are still staring at me—something I'm not used to—so I raise my water in a toast-like fashion, smiling half a smile, and drink some more.

I'm doing my best to appear like I'm another tired athlete, yet I can't ignore the sensations racing through my body. My muscles feel pumped and ready to run again, which is completely the opposite of how I usually feel after giving the 100-meter my all. Maybe Coach had been slow in starting his watch and I didn't actually have such an unthinkably fast time—but that would mean the other runners were incredibly slow. I rub my face with my hand, trying to transfer some of the moist coolness from the bottle to my skin. Now would be a good time to awaken from this dream.

Coach Simms climbs the bleachers and heads in my direction. I take another drink of water so my hands have something to do. Will Coach ask if I'm using drugs or steroids? He sits nearby, fatigued and sweating profusely from the climb. He looks like he could be having a heart attack.

"So, Calli, what in the world did you eat for breakfast?" He grins, as if he's come up with an original line to express his amazement.

I shrug my shoulders.

"You broke the record!"

"Oh?" I try to act surprised.

“No, I don’t think you understand. You broke *the record* for the 100-meter. Well, I mean, it’s unofficial. We’ll have to hold an officially timed run.”

“Excuse me,” a female voice breaks into our conversation. On the other side of Coach Simms stands the most beautiful, elegant woman I’ve ever seen. She has a kind of soap-opera look about her, with everything coordinated, right down to her manicured and polished nails. Not one hair on her head is out of place. I fleetingly wonder if she has a stylist who follows her around, primping her to look exquisite. “My name is Clara Winter,” she says, reaching in front of Coach Simms to shake my hand.

I grasp her feathery-soft hand and shake it. “Calli Courtnae,” I respond politely.

Coach reaches up to shake her hand too. “Gerald Simms, Calli’s coach.”

She briefly shakes his hand, then focuses on me. “That was an amazing run you just completed, Calli.”

“Thanks, Ms. Winter.” I try my best to sound formal. Years of introductions to my parents’ professional associates has taught me to do so.

She takes a seat on the bench, her eyes never leaving my face. “Calli, I operate an athletic training facility in Montana called High Altitude Sports. After watching your performance, I want to invite you to come with me to train for Olympic qualifications.”

I cough on my sudden inhalation of saliva. “Excuse me?”

“Of course, we need your parents’ approval,” she continues, “but all your expenses will be covered. When would I be able to meet your parents? Are they here today?”

My insides clench. Olympics? Montana? That’s a far cry from Northern Ohio. “My parents couldn’t make it today,” I say. “I’ll have to call my mom and see when a good time is. Both my parents are doctors and have pretty jammed-up schedules.”

“I’m scheduling an official timing for Calli,” Coach Simms says, interrupting us, “so she’s going to have to wait to go anywhere.” He then goes back to accessing the internet on his smart phone.

Ms. Winter ignores his comment and tries harder to sell me on her invitation. “Calli, there’s only a small window of time to qualify. Any delays will cost you four more years until the next round of Olympic qualifications.”

“Do qualifications even work that way?” I ask. “I mean, I always thought the athletes who made it to the Olympics had also won other competitions. Besides, how do we know this race wasn’t just a fluke?”

Coach interrupts. “Here, see this, Calli.” He excitedly shows me the statistics on the screen of his phone. “You broke the *men’s world record* with your time.”

Ms. Winter asks, “Calli, are you taking any—”

“No!” I cut her off. “I’m not taking steroids or any other illegal substance. I don’t even take a multivitamin.”

“All right.” She holds her hands up as if fending me off. “I had to ask.”

“If you don’t believe me, get a cup and I’ll pee in it.” My blood pressure seems to rise with my voice. Beautiful or not, she isn’t going to accuse me of cheating. Part of me *wants* to pee in a cup to see if anything can explain why I feel a deep molecular change within my muscles and bones. What’s wrong with me?

Coach Simms says to her, “I should hear back sometime next week about setting up an official timed run.”

“She’ll be in Montana by then,” Ms. Winter says confidently, which surprises me.

Coach Simms frowns. “What about her studies?”

“Our facility is equipped with teachers and tutors to keep the athletes current on their studies.” She turns her attention to me. “Calli, call your parents and see if we can meet tonight or tomorrow morning. Time is of the essence. Qualifications are only a few weeks away. I want to get you on a plane as soon as possible.”

I retrieve my cell phone from my bag. I feel more than a little nervous as I call my mother’s office number and leave a message asking her to call me back.

Coach Simms and Ms. Winter continue debating the need for another timed race. She is against it, while Coach Simms adamantly insists on holding one in Ohio, and he isn’t backing down.

I stare off in the distance, watching the runners on the track as they strategically manage their strength and endurance while running the 1600-meter. My next scheduled race isn’t for another hour, yet my body and mind feel like I should get up and leave. A voice, not my own, sounds inside my head, saying I need to leave. I look around at the people nearby to see if someone has actually said those words. Plenty of faces are turned in my direction, but I don’t

think anyone has spoken. I'm beginning to think I might be going crazy. Well, if that's the case, I am in good hands.

My mother is a psychiatrist and my father is a brain surgeon. One could say both of them work on head cases. I like to think of their work this way: one deals with the thought processes and the other deals with the brain's functionality. So if I am in fact losing my mind, they'll take care of me. They already did so once before, when I lost my hearing in middle school.

Someone had rigged a bathroom stall with a firecracker, and I'd been the unlucky one to find it. When it exploded, the small, all-tile area amplified the noise so much the sound ruptured my eardrums. I still remember the intense pain. The agonizing waves felt like someone was pounding an ice pick into my ears. In a blink, my hearing disappeared. As my parents expected, I developed severe middle-ear infections. They were on top of my situation every step of the way. But even with all their combined knowledge and expertise, only so much could be done. I endured months of pain, injections, surgeries, and speech therapy. I had to be taught how to read lips in order to communicate. For a long time no one knew whether or not my hearing would return.

I gradually healed over a year's time but never lost my lip-reading ability. In fact, I still practice all the time to keep up my skills. My mother has said on several occasions that I can read lips better than anyone she knows. I don't know how I learned so quickly, or why the ability came so easily to me. It just did.

My mother advised me against letting my classmates know I could understand their whispers for fear they might take advantage of my abilities. She worried I'd become a circus act.

"They may ask you to read lips that reveal secrets," she told me. "Not many kids can do what you can, Calli. In fact, not many adults can either. Trust me, it's better to keep this ability a secret as long as possible."

As soon as I returned to school, I picked up on conversations in the lunch room typical of the age range, and the cafeteria seemed noisier than before. *Did you hear what she said? Do you know what I heard about him?* I got so sick of all the gossip and backbiting on the lips of others, I had no choice but to bury my face in books. That's how my interest with science and the medical field came about . . . well, besides hearing about medical stuff every night over the dinner table.

Once I began reading and learning about how the human body works, I couldn't get enough. I'm pretty sure I've read every book in the public library and off my parent's bookshelf on the subject. My father often jokes I'll only have to challenge the test at medical school and they'll give me my doctorate. I know my parents are pleased their only child is interested in a career in medicine, but the interest is quite real on my part.

My extensive knowledge of how the human body works brings a pressing question to the front of my mind. How can I have run so fast when I haven't trained and built the necessary muscles to do so? This mystery will have to wait. I don't want the same experience all over again with the 200-meter. The voice in my head encouraging me to leave apparently doesn't want me to run either. I need to come up with a plausible excuse to leave. I look over my shoulder again to see if I can figure out who's talking, telling me to go. No one is near enough to be the culprit. I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and massage my temples with my fingers. What's happening to me? This isn't the first time I've wondered why I'm so different than other sixteen-year-olds, but this is the first time I've heard "voices."

My cell phone rings, revealing my mother's number on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Calli, you called?"

"Yes."

"Did you improve your personal time?" she asks excitedly. She's been actively following my personal time for the 100- and 200-meter all season.

"Yeah, Mom. I won!"

"You won? What was your time?"

"9.3 seconds."

I expect to hear some kind of exclamation—or a thud, due to fainting—instead her voice is calm.

"That is definitely an improvement."

Huh? That's it? I figure my mother must be preoccupied and my incredible running time hasn't registered.

"Yeah, it is," I reply.

"You'll call me with your time for the 200-meter, won't you?"

“Um . . . Mom, a woman has invited me to go to a training facility in Montana . . . to train for Olympic tryouts.” I scrunch my eyes shut. Saying the words aloud sounds so unbelievable.

“Excuse me? Is she with you now?”

“Yes.”

“Give her the phone so I can speak with her.”

I hand the phone over to Ms. Winter. “My mother wants to talk to you.” She takes the phone and begins talking to my mom.

I think about my mother’s inattentive and unfazed reaction to the news about my time for the 100-meter. That’s *so not* like my mother! Learning my time was 9.3 seconds should have made her shriek or something. Where are all the usual questions, especially concerning the strange woman who wants to take me to Montana? And why is this woman here in Ohio, at a high school track meet, looking for Olympic athletes?

After speaking for a few minutes, Ms. Winter hands the phone back to me.

“Your mother is coming to pick you up. We will then go to her office so we can discuss my invitation.”

That sounds more like my mother. She isn’t about to let me get in the car with an unknown adult. She would rather drop everything and come get me herself. I can’t help but smile . . . now I won’t have to invent a lie to get out of the 200-meter.

“Hold on. She can’t leave yet,” Coach Simms says. “She still has another race.”

Ms. Winter calmly replies, “You can tell that to her mother when she gets here.”

* * *

I’m still amazed at how easily my parents accepted the notion that I’m the fastest human being on the planet, heading off to train for the Olympics. Neither one of them acted normally yesterday when we met with Clara Winter.

My father was already waiting at my mother’s office when we arrived. Ms. Winter gave a brief explanation about the Montana facility and presented paperwork for them to sign that gave their permission, along with authorization for my medical care in case of an emergency. That was it. My parents didn’t so much as blink an eye or show any signs of suspicion or doubt.

I looked at the three adults who were making decisions that would affect the rest of my life and wondered if they were thinking of my own wishes at all. I don't want to be an athlete. I want to be a doctor.

When I expressed my feelings to my parents, my father said, "You'll have plenty of time to pursue your dreams, Calli. For now, follow this road and see where it takes you. You can always come home if you change your mind."

Change my mind? It wasn't my decision to go to Montana in the first place! Changing my mind would be deciding I want to *stay* in Montana.

My mother said, "This is the experience of a lifetime, Calli. You never know, you might decide you want to be a doctor to professional athletes."

After I reluctantly agreed to go, Ms. Winter instructed me to stay at home for the night and remain indoors. She told me she would be arranging plane tickets for the two of us, hopefully for the morning.

When I questioned her about not going outside, she said, "There's a darker side to being a super-star athlete that I don't think you're ready to cope with just yet. You'll be protected at my facility from the paparazzi. Please stay indoors, pack your bags, and spend time with your family."

So that's exactly what I did. Then early this morning Ms. Winter called with the itinerary and told us where and when to meet her at the airport.

* * *

"Oh, Calli, I've always known something like this would happen. This is your moment to shine," my mother says as she gives me a big hug. I pull her close, not wanting to let go. The gate attendant announces our flight is boarding, and I release my grasp from my mother and fling my arms around my father.

"I'm proud of you, Calli." The sincerity in his gentle voice almost brings tears to my eyes. "Now, go show them how Ohio girls run."

"We'll take good care of her. There's no reason to worry," Ms. Winter assures my parents.

Leaving my parents behind, Ms. Winter and I continue through security and walk to our gate.

In the company of what I think of as the world's most beautiful woman, I can't help but notice how many heads turn her way. I've always been a people watcher. What can I say? I'm fascinated by the way people behave when they don't know they're being watched. Here in the airport these people, mostly men, but a few women as well, are shameless with their double-takes. Ms. Winter is obviously used to the attention and doesn't seem bothered at all. No one is giving me a second glance, but I'm used to that, probably the same way she's used to all the attention.

It's never been my desire to be the center of attention. I didn't try out for cheerleading or drill team, and I never joined any clubs. I'm fine with being plain ol' Calli Courtnae, void of the limelight and undiscovered by the boys. I help the "lack of attention" thing along, though. I don't wear the current fashions or sport the latest hairstyles and my jewelry is kept to a minimum. In my opinion, teenage popularity contests are a waste of energy and I can do better things with my time than stress out about what others think of me. Besides, there aren't any boys in my school worthy of getting dolled up over. I suppose Brand Safferson is the most sought-after guy because he's Mr. Never-Fumbles-Always-Completes-The-Pass Quarterback, but he's not all that good looking in my opinion. I think the other girls fawn over him because they think he'll be a rich professional athlete someday, which only supports my theory that guys seem to be all about the looks and girls tend to be about the money. I'd like to think I'll be different in that respect, but I haven't actually been put to the test.

At sixteen, I've made a mental comparison of myself to other girls, to their body shapes and dimensions, in an effort to figure where I stand in contrast. I'm pretty sure other girls do the same thing . . . at least I hope they do and I'm not the only one. From a scientific standpoint, tinged with a bit of anatomy knowledge, my facial features are symmetrical and considered to be normal. I have average breasts and hips for my age, however, I think my thighs are too muscular. My conclusion is my physical appearance is a bit better than average in comparison to the girls at my school. I'm not ugly, but I don't know exactly how good looking I'm considered to be. I've never had a boyfriend to get the assurance that at least one guy, besides my father, thinks I'm beautiful.

I understand it's all relative—relative to what others think is beautiful. My parents will always think of me as beautiful, of course. I guess we're always beautiful to our relatives. Intellectually, I don't need to compare myself to others. Test scores tell that story. I've worked

hard for my excellent grades and fully understand that good-looks aren't important when applying for college.

Ms. Winter and I find our seats and settle in for a long flight to Denver where we will be catching a connecting flight to Bozeman, Montana. From Bozeman we will drive to our destination and arrive by evening.

Once we are in the air, I ask, "Ms. Winter, what can I expect when we get there?"

"The training facility is a large building set high in the Rocky Mountains," she answers while retrieving her bag from under her seat. She opens it and pulls out a small laptop she sets on the tray table in front of her. "As of now, there are close to two-hundred residents living and working at the compound. The tutors who will keep you current on your studies will work around your training schedule so you'll be able to excel in both your sport and your grades." She presses the power button and her laptop fires up.

"Are there any other girls close to my age?" I try to picture the athletes who compete in the Olympics. The only images coming to mind are those of older, well-developed women.

"Why don't you rest? You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow and I need to do a little work." Ms. Winter isn't asking as much as telling me to quiet down.

I lay my head back to rest, trying to ignore my jittery stomach. I try to imagine how my introduction to the other Olympic candidates might go. Something tells me they won't be too thrilled to meet me.

I think about the phone call I had with my friend Suzanne James last night. She pointed out that the other athletes might as well go home now, because I have timed faster than all of them. There's no hope for any of them, she said, to get a gold medal. I had laughed and reminded her it wasn't official yet, that it's still possible the track meet was a crazy chance-happening.

Suz hadn't actually witnessed my race. She had been too busy flirting with some of the guys from the other school. She explained that when the cheering grew quiet, she turned to see what had brought the crowd to a hush. Some of the guys around her were in awe, saying things like, "Did you see that girl run?" and, "Holy crap, she was fast!" Suz told me she's proud to have been able to say she's my friend.

I know differently, though. Most likely, she saw the admiration in the boys' eyes when they looked at me, and she wanted some of that attention for herself. That's just the way she is.

I have a lot of people who talk to me and say “Hi” in the hall, but Suz is the only friend I hang out with. She befriended me in middle school and has stayed by my side ever since the firecracker accident, supporting me through my medical troubles. She’s cute and spunky with a fun sense of humor and lots of friends. I’m not bothered by her spending more time with her other friends, but I’m amused when she comes to me after she’s had enough gossiping, back-biting, and two-facedness.

Suz tells me all the time I speak and think differently than all the other girls and I’m “über-mature” for my age. I don’t know about my maturity levels, I simply steer clear of the drama, that’s all. Maybe my brain works differently because I’ve always been surrounded by adults who constantly speak in medical jargon and use big words. Plus, once I began reading medical books, my vocabulary went up several notches.

We like to hang out at the mall on the weekend and critique other teenagers’ behavior. One thing never ceases to amaze me: jocks are jerks. It’s one thing to be an athlete who cares about his grades and tries hard to achieve in his sport, but the arrogant, cocky, strutting, can’t-get-better-than-a-C jock is a true degradation of the human species—only one step up from troglodytes.

The last thing I want to become is one of those conceited jocks Suz and I love to criticize. I’ll need to keep that in mind at the training compound. I hope I’ll fit in with the other athletes. I have to wonder what my future will hold now that I’m the fastest human on earth.

* * *

Ms. Winter and I make the connecting flight without a hitch and arrive in Bozeman at six o’clock. A valet brings her car to the baggage claim doors. Not surprisingly, it’s a top-model sedan with a posh leather interior. I wouldn’t expect anything less for a woman of her caliber.

We navigate away from the airport and turn onto the two-lane highway. The monstrous Rocky Mountains block the sun and cast a shadow across the valley. I stare out the window at the massive peaks, wondering how tall they are.

“Calli, would you tell me what your body felt like as you ran the hundred meters?” Ms. Winter asks without taking her eyes off the road.

Definitely a strange question. “Well, I don’t quite know how to explain it, but I wasn’t exhausted when I finished.”

“Could you have run faster?” she asks, and I wonder if she’s testing me.

“Faster? Well, I guess, um, yes, I think I could have.” I’m not sure why I feel ashamed to be admitting this. Ms. Winter seems relieved, as if a heavy load has been removed from her shoulders. I wonder why, but before I can figure out how to frame the question, she slows the car and turns into a restaurant parking lot.

“Let’s go in and eat. Dinner will have already been served at the compound, and I can’t have you going to bed hungry.”

Any questions I have vanish. My stomach has been growling, and the thought of warm food sounds wonderful.

As we enter the diner, the hum of conversation ceases. Ms. Winter doesn’t seem disturbed by the blatant stares of the locals who are attired in tattered overalls and plaid shirts. She acts as if nothing is out of the ordinary.

We seat ourselves, and a bubbly young waitress appears instantly.

“Ladies, how are we today?” Barb, as the label-maker nametag announces, cracks her chewing gum annoyingly while she prepares to scribble on her pad.

Ms. Winter smiles and answers politely, “Wonderful, Barb.”

Barb hands us menus and leaves to “grab us waters.” I glance over the photocopied sheet of paper.

I want a burger and fries, and the Big Sky burger plate sounds like the one for me. I don’t know what is acceptable to order, so I ask Ms. Winter, “What are you going to have?”

“Calli, you can order whatever you want,” she reassures me, almost as if she’s reading my mind.

When Barb returns to take our orders, Ms. Winter requests a detailed special combination of foods consisting of mostly fresh vegetables. The waitress seems to be a bit put out with the particulars and looks to me to see what out-of-the-ordinary order I will place.

“Big Sky burger plate and a Coke,” I say.

Barb smiles, jots some notes on her pad, then excuses herself.

Ms. Winter takes a sip of her ice water before she asks, “Are you nervous, Calli?”

“Yes, a little,” I admit, feeling shy about saying so.

“I don’t doubt it. Calli, there’s so much to explain to you, but we’ll do that tomorrow after breakfast. Tonight, you’ll be shown to your room. You absolutely must not venture outside the building. Do you understand?”

“No going outside?”

“Correct.”

“Okay. Who’s my roommate?”

“I’m not sure. We’ll find out when we arrive. The female hall and living arrangements are handled by Stella Wood. She oversees the assignments and makes sure everyone is getting along. Talk to her if anyone is giving you a hard time. My door is always open, but I prefer you take your rooming issues to Stella first.”

“Why would anyone give me trouble?” I ask, knowing the answer as soon as the question passes my lips: I’m faster than everyone else. Of course they will view me as a threat.

“I’m not saying they will, only if they do. Also, any and all phone calls will be made through my office, and I will be monitoring them until I’m convinced you’ve grasped the workings of the compound. Oh, and there are no cell phones at the compound. We have a scrambler.”

My head reels. Monitored phone calls? Workings of the compound? Am I headed to prison?

Ms. Winter continues. “You’re going to be a bit overwhelmed at first, but I’m sure you will adjust to everything easily with time. Remember this important rule: no leaving the building after dark.”

“Is it because the paparazzi are waiting to attack?”

“I’ll show you why tomorrow night. This evening I have too many things to catch up on.”

Show me? What does she mean?

We talk for a little while longer and then our food arrives. My burger and fries look heavenly and taste even better. Ms. Winter’s plate, on the other hand, contains primarily raw vegetables without dip. Yuck.

Ms. Winter uses a carrot stick to point at my plate. “I hope your burger is good. Just so you know, burgers are not served at the training facility.”

I figured as much. Coach Simms tells us repeatedly that what we eat and drink affects our performance. Things like carbonated sodas, he says, slow our running times, but that has never

stopped me from indulging once in a while. Look at me now: I drink sodas, eat burgers, and still run faster than any human on earth. Go figure.

We finish our food, and Ms. Winter puts down a sizable tip before we leave the diner to start the final leg of our journey. The road takes us higher in altitude to where pine and fir trees grow. No more sagebrush, only lush and thick forest with twisting roads. Due to the pressure change, I have to pop my ears several times on the ascent. We round a corner, and the entire windshield fills with the view of the compound.

The huge building looks like an Alpine Chalet, designed similarly, with intricately cut eaves and trim. Many of the windows lining the exterior are illuminated from the interior lighting. Standing outside the tall windowed front doors, four adults wait to greet us.

We climb out of the car. A woman immediately pulls Ms. Winter to the side and gives her a hushed message. I don't mean to eavesdrop, but I read the woman's lips and am able to take in half of the conversation.

"Clara, they never made it. Chris is still gone, investigating their last known location with a Hunter. He's trying to determine who's responsible for this." The woman pauses as she listens to something Ms. Winter says, and then adds, "As soon as you left, the Seers reported a fog that remains fixed in place. The last time that happened, well, I don't need to remind you—"

My attention is pulled away by the remaining three adults as they welcome me to the compound. One of the women introduces herself as Stella Wood. I smile and nod, not really hearing what they're saying. I keep looking back at Ms. Winter. *What's going on?* Ms. Wood holds her hand out in invitation and says, "Let's get inside."

We enter the building and stand facing a giant staircase.

Ms. Winter ends her mysterious conversation and joins us, leading the way up to the second floor. She makes a swooping motion with her arm, "Calli, this is the girls' hall."

Ms. Wood walks ahead of us and knocks on each door.

Girls step from their rooms out into the hallway. Obviously they've been told a new athlete would be arriving. I make eye contact with the nearest girl and smile. She gives me a sour look. The girl across the hall has the same look. I'm confused because these two are younger than I am. Further down the hall, I note that not all of the girls are this young. One thing stands out though: every girl, whether twelve or twenty, is beautiful, not just pretty, but gorgeous, even with the crabby expressions on their faces.

“Come.” Ms. Winter pulls me forward. “Everyone, this is Calli Courtnae from Ohio.”

I greet everyone in my most cordial voice. “Hello.”

No one says anything in return.

We continue down the hall and Ms. Winter tells me the name of each girl as we pass. I smile and greet each one. No one responds. I notice that every girl, has a perfectly proportioned body, with long legs and small breasts, accentuated by lean, toned muscles. Their bodies seem to be genetically perfect for cross-country running, regardless of their skin color or height. I realize I look *nothing* like them. The expressions on their faces and the whispers behind my back tell me they’re thinking the same thing.

As we arrive at the end of the hallway, my eyes connect with a girl with heavy black eyeliner and unnaturally black hair. At least she stands apart from the other girls. She scrutinizes my appearance, looking me up and down, and then says to Ms. Winter and Ms. Wood, “No! No, I’m not rooming with that . . . that human!”

“Calli, this is Beth Hammond. She’s your roommate,” Ms. Wood informs me.

Beth focuses on my face and says adamantly, “No, I’m not.” Then she turns to Ms. Winter and orders, “Find another room.” Beth flips around and struts into her room.

Ms. Winter rolls her eyes ever so slightly and follows Beth.

Stella Wood places her hand on my forearm. “Give us a moment, Calli. Wait here.”

Stella follows Ms. Winter into Beth’s room, leaving me alone with the world’s most stuck-up girls. I turn around, wondering how many girls are still staring. Everyone who’s remained in the hallway gathers around me with expressions of derision plastered across their faces. The kids at my high school ignored me on a regular basis, and I was perfectly fine with that. But they never looked down their noses at me the way these girls do. These girls don’t even know me. How could they hate me?

One older girl asks, “How fast can you run, Calli?”

I figure a vague answer might be the best bet at the moment, so I answer with, “Fast enough to be invited to come here.”

She persists with a mega-snobbish attitude. “What’s your time?”

“I’m sorry, what was your name?” I ask, trying to be polite.

Another girl steps beside her and takes over the drilling session. “She asked how fast you are.”

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