

Falling in a Circle



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Trinity High School
Eules, Texas

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Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.

- CICERO

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Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather,
each generation for the next succeeding.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Breckenridge High School

Breckenridge, Texas

Sponsor: Jay Clack

Writers:

Sydney Caffey

Jacob Dye

Nicole Fambro

Taylor Guerrero

Katherine Parker

Justin Tubbs

JT Wood

She sat for an eternity staring darkly into the dressing table mirror. How could her life have come to this? She pursed her lips and placed the question aside for the moment. A ray of morning sunlight beamed through her window and glimmered off a collection of trophies scattered throughout the room. Staring past her reflection, she gazed at the row of awards, gaudy and insignificant reminders of a former life. Standing as a giant among the honors was the Class 4A Regional Swim Meet trophy from her final swim season. She stared at the engraving on the trophy's base and mouthed the etched words, *Kat Morrelli-2nd Place*. A low moan escaped her lips. Her name, once worth saying, now only sounded pathetic and worthless. She cursed the flashy tokens. Her face reddened and anger overwhelmed her. Suddenly, she only wanted to yank the accolade from the shelf and throw it out the window. She wanted to watch it smash into a million pieces. Little bits that could never be put back together. *Ever!*

Kat squeezed both eyes shut. When she opened them again, the trophy still sat in its place. She clenched both fists, furious at its continued presence. Her mouth twisted into a cruel smile. She would make sure it was gone soon. It was one thing that she could still do. It was one thing that would make her happy. She tossed her head back and inhaled deeply. An unnerving desperation crawled up her spine. She lowered her chin and glanced down at her limbs. Gripping her body was a cold, antiseptic, steel appliance. The device imprisoned her. Kat panicked and shook the wheelchair's arms, but to no result. Then laughter filled her head. She narrowed her brow at the sound. The laughter was hauntingly familiar. She tossed a hard gaze back at her reflection. Her mouth shook and her chest heaved. Kat shuddered at the sight. Her reflection laughed with an uncontrollable craziness.

She could hear herself, ignorant and pretentious, never thinking she could end up this way. The seemingly impossible had happened, though, and nothing was going to change that. The voices grew louder, so she thrust her hands over her ears and clinched her eyes tight. The noise turned into screams, and she began to grow faint. Just as everything started to turn black, the sound of the school bus's horn shook her out of her trance, and she pushed out of her chair, not thinking and oblivious to her condition. Her leg trembled beneath her. She collapsed forward and hit her head on the dresser as she fell in a heap. At first she felt shock. She did not even realize what had happened. Then her shock turned into despair. Kat was not thinking about the pain in her head but rather the pain in her heart as the carpet absorbed her tears. After lying on the floor for a minute, quivering like a baby between sobs, Kat realized the bus was still honking for her, so she inched back toward her chair and climbed into it. She took one more look into the mirror, wiping her eyes, shuddering as she saw her own sadness, then maneuvering through the house and out the door.

Finally, she was at the bus. The wheelchair ramp was already sitting there waiting, mocking her. The toxic smell of the bus fumes gave her a headache. The driver, rusty at the controls, helped her. "I haven't had reason to use the ramp in a while," he said.

"Glad I could help," Kat replied snidely, her head throbbing.

After a few minutes, Kat's chair was strapped down, and the bus was headed for the school. There was only one other person on the bus, a boy she immediately recognized.

His name was Aiden. They had been very good friends when they were younger. However, when the popular kids had decided that his cerebral palsy was not cool, Kat had become more wary of being around him. She never knew what to say or do. Their relationship became strained until one day it severed. *Great*, Kat thought, *this is going to be an awkward year.*

Aiden had heard about what Kat had gone through over the summer. In such a small-town, it was difficult not to. Despite the disdain she had shown him in the past, he truly felt sorry for her. However, it would be nice to have someone else on the bus with him. The bus driver was nice, but he was no conversationalist—at least not with a teenager. Aiden did not complain though. It was far better than riding on the normal bus, where his condition would be exploited. Aiden became hopeful. Maybe his friendship with Kat had a chance.

The bus ride was quiet and uncomfortable. Kat sat at the back of the bus, staring at the graffiti on the seat in front of her. She did not really care if *Sam hearts John* or if *Mrs. Hopkins stinks*, but as long as her eyes were not wandering, there was no way they would ever come across Aiden's. She didn't want him to see her so broken. People tend to think it is their job to put someone back together, and she did not want anyone's pity.

As the bus rounded a corner, the driver hit an enormous pot hole. Kat's books flew from her lap, hit the floor of the bus, and went sliding forward as the driver slammed on the brakes. The books stopped right beside Aiden's seat. She thought the universe must have hated her; there was no way something like that could have happened by accident. She sat there, her eyes fixed like magnets on the books. She focused on them as if she were going to use some kind of supernatural power to bring them back to her seat. She was immobile. She sat there, growing irritated with herself and with this new completely pathetic manner she carried. In times like this, she questioned her mother and father's decision to remove her leg. She wondered if fighting the cancer was worth being alive. She would never be the same person that she was prior to the amputation, so what was the point in existing in a world where she could not be herself?

When the driver stopped the bus, he got up to get Kat's books and help her down the wheelchair lift, saving her from having to interact with Aiden.

As Kat rolled toward the door, she could smell the industrial cleaner and the school's version of a balanced breakfast. The loud noise of hundreds of teenagers talking over each other could be heard from inside. Memories of the last three years of high school flooded her mind. It used to be fun to come into the cafeteria for breakfast and to chat with everyone. Now things would be completely different. Isolated from her friends, she wondered what they would say . . . if they would say anything at all.

Bracing herself with one last deep breath, she rolled through the door. She kept her eyes glued to the ground in an attempt to come in unnoticed. With her head down, she did not notice that she was too close to a cart loaded with stacks of dirty breakfast trays. With one hard push of her wheels, she rammed straight into the cart. What happened next was out of her control. Every tray on the cart went barreling to the floor, and in an instant, the room was silent.

Kat sat center stage for all to see.

2

Stephenville High School

Stephenville, Texas

Sponsor: Jennifer Muncey

Writers:

Ashleigh Ballard

Marion Barnes

Shana Butler

Quinn Cooper

Zach Faulkner

Chloe Gardner

Emily Hallgarth

Amanda Lee

Colby Lloyd

Stephanie Ong

Karlie Parker

Marcus Parks

Kaitlynn Price

Stephanie Salinas

Carl Spellman

Forrest Stanley-Stevens

The momentary silence lasted long enough for Kat to feel all eyes turn her way. Some students began laughing behind cupped hands. The jocks clapped and snickered.

Don't cry. That is not an option.

Kat's heart sank. She tried desperately to keep a straight face, but her lips quivered uncontrollably. She squeezed her eyes tight and suddenly remembered the last time she heard real applause. It was a year ago last February . . .

“Next up is the junior girls’ Class 4A Regional competition.”

A nasal male voice boomed through the Bose wall speakers strategically mounted every fifty feet in the Townsend Sports Complex aquatic center. The indoor complex, built in 2008, housed a turf practice field, a first-class weight room, and an Olympic size pool.

The home stands erupted with claps and shouts at the announcement.

Kat turned and stared at the excited crowd.

They're cheering for me.

She scanned the stands with a smirk. She knew her every movement was watched, admired, and envied. Her eyes darted past her assembled friends and stopped on seat C-16. The smirk disappeared. The seat, her father's seat, was, of course, empty. His familiar gray-streaked hair and handsome face were nowhere to be seen.

What's the point? Of course, he isn't here! I'm sure that diseased tramp of a step-mom has him helping her. How could he break his promise?

Plopping on the bench, Kat pushed the buds of her iPod into her ears and tried to drown out her frustration and rage. She closed her eyes and imagined the upcoming race. After a few seconds, a broad smile stretched across her face. In her mind, she held the junior girls' freestyle first place trophy.

Too bad for everyone else that I'm the best swimmer. Everyone knows that. When I shove my trophy in my father's face, he will be sorry that he didn't show up like he promised.

“The first race is the one hundred meter freestyle.”

The announcement snapped Kat from her daydream. She yanked the buds from her ear and hurried over to her assigned lane. Climbing onto the starting platform, she shivered with nervousness, and her mind drifted away.

Maybe he got here late.

She looked back at C-16 one last time.

Empty.

He will be sorry.

The shrill starting whistle blew, the timers clicked on, and the race began.

Instinctively, Kat's body extended out from the platform.

Did I jump the gun?

Was I too slow?

Her body flew through the air; then there was a moment of beautiful silence as the water swallowed the noise.

Kat's head erupted through the water's surface. She gasped her first breath of air. Her arms flew like a windmill and cut the surface perfectly. All around, bodies smacked against the water, legs pushed, and hands pulled at the surface.

Focus. Stay strong. Take even strokes.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed her biggest competitor quickly gaining ground on her.

Miss "Show Off" from the big city couldn't beat me last year, and she won't this year either.

Wasting no time, Kat kicked it up a notch and moved faster and faster.

Where is it?

Then her hands hit the wall. She flipped backwards and pushed off for the second lap still in the lead by only a few strokes.

Let's go, Kat!

She mustered up every last bit of stamina with an old trick. Past pains, hurts, broken promises, her mother's death and her father's absence all rushed back at her. She channeled the anger into her legs, and her arms sped into overdrive. She kept her lead, but her competitor wasn't letting up either. The competitor's speed increased with Kat's surge. The girl matched Kat stroke for stroke.

It will be up to the camera. But, I can't lose; I never lose. Kat, dig deeper!

Ten meters.

Five meters.

Two meters.

With one last strong kick, Kat stretched for and touched the smooth concrete wall. The Cedar Lake crowd exploded. Kat shot from the water. She pushed the goggles from her eyes and shook the water from her face. Her head naturally swiveled for the scoreboard. The board's bright red numbers illuminated the far end of the pool. Her expression dropped. She stared in disbelief at the second slot and her name.

Second?

How?

I lost! It's all his fault; he should have been here so I could concentrate and not worry. He promised. My real mother should be here with my dad. I hate Carol. That helpless cry baby is probably asleep, and she doesn't even know that he's there.

Kat stared back at the water, seething.

I hate her.

I hate her.

"Kat, you did so well."

Kat glanced up momentarily and then continued to towel off her legs, ignoring the mousey girl with curly brunette hair and glasses pushing a boy in a wheelchair.

This is all I need right now, a nerd and a cripple.

"It was an exciting finish," the girl cooed.

Kat straightened, wrapped the towel around her shoulders, and stared at the pair, thinking.

That's Tracie Parker.

"Really exciting."

Tracie Parker was Kat's best friend back in junior high. But they had drifted apart when they both entered high school.

"Tracie?"

Tracie shook her head excitedly.

Kat stared back at the wheelchair and frowned.

It's that weirdo, cerebral palsy guy, Aiden Steele.

Kat gave Aiden a fake smile.

Why are they talking to me? Tracie still wears her "fat pants," and the last thing I want is for everybody to think I'm friends with Mr. Spastic Boy. This is so uncool.

Tracie stepped back. Her eyes drooped at the obvious insincerity of Kat's smile.

What? Kat thought. You are a pathetic little thing. You would think that three years in high school would change a girl from "drab" to "fab," but she is still the same old "Plain Jane" Tracie. At least she could put in a little effort in the morning. Her ponytail makes her look like a third grader. And she needs to lose that camera 'round her neck. Could she look any dorkier?

Almost in a whisper Tracie stammered, "I just wanted to say co . . . congratulations."

"Yeah, me too," offered Aiden.

Yeah, whatever.

Sneering, Kat mumbled, "Thanks." Then she turned and walked away, wondering.

I have spent three years avoiding Tracie unless I want to copy her homework, and no one has any idea that I even know Aiden! Why would they bug me now?

"Wait," Tracie shouted out.

Kat looked back over her shoulder.

Tracie fidgeted with a lonely strand of curly hair that didn't quite make the ponytail. "Well... I was wondering if I could take your picture for the yearbook. We could send one to your father, too, if you want. I remember how your mom always kept a scrapbook of your awards. I figure your father probably would like pictures to add . . ."

"He doesn't really do that anymore," Kat interrupted sarcastically and said, "He's too busy with my step-mom these days."

"Oh," Tracie said softly. "Well, maybe . . ."

"Look, I have to change. Take someone else's picture. I'm busy," Kat said sharply.

Tracie nodded. "Another time, maybe," she whispered.

Aiden glanced nervously between the two girls.

Kat flipped her head around and escaped through the dressing room door, ignoring Tracie's gaping mouth and hurt, offended eyes.

If you're lucky, but don't count on it. Kat laughed to herself. She thought about turning and giving Tracie one more fake smile but decided her snobby words would probably suffice.

3

Albany High School

Albany, Texas

Sponsor: Donnie Lucas

Writers:

Abby Ayers

Britny Eubank

Eric Lee

Melany Maurer

Kay Morrison

Maggie Shirley

The slamming door shattered the silence of the seemingly empty Morelli house. The violent vibration jarred Kat's last fond memory of her former family from the wall. The picture rocked once on its hanger and spiraled silently toward the floor. Kat, crimson-cheeked and shaking, stood in the hallway, helpless as the last remnant of her mother's place in Carol's house crashed against the tile floor.

"Katherine?" called her father. "What are you doing? Carol's trying to sleep. She's had a rough day."

"Well, we wouldn't want to wake Her Majesty," Kat mumbled sarcastically and then dropped to her knees, shaken by the broken frame. A soft moan escaped her lips, and tears welled in her eyes.

"Katherine Morelli, what a thing to say."

Kat ignored her father's soft admonishment and gingerly picked up the now tattered photo and shards of broken glass. Through her glassy eyes, she gazed upon the smiling faces of the family that she had loved dearly. They all looked so happy, and it filled Kat's heart with sorrow. She barely recognized herself as the young girl with the brilliant grin.

Donald peeked around the corner and whispered authoritatively, "What're you doing? Didn't you hear me? What happened?"

As her father entered the room, she hastily folded the memoir and tucked it away in her pocket.

Piecing together her father's words and expression, all her anger rushed back, and she shot a menacing glare at him.

"Nothing, Father," Kat said as she pushed past and stormed into her room. She threw her things onto her bed, chunked the glass into the nearby waste basket, and turned to find her father standing in the doorway.

"Kat, let's not start this right now . . . it's late," he said as he rubbed at tired, bloodshot eyes. She noticed new creases all across his face, probably from how hard he'd been working . . . , but this was no time for sympathy.

"Well, this could have been avoided if you had kept your promise this afternoon instead of staying home babying that cripple!"

A flicker of pain spread across her father's face. He sighed. "That was completely uncalled for, Katherine. How *dare* you say something like that about Carol? It's not her fault she's sick. She loves you like you're her own. She's the closest thing to a mother you have now."

Then Kat lashed out, "She'll *never* be my mother! Stop trying to compare them. Ever since Mom died, it feels like you've been trying to replace her with this gimp. I'm sick of it! Why is it always about Carol? I'm tired of always being put last. You always break your promises. Quit telling me you're going to be somewhere when you know that you'd rather be tending to Carol's constant needs."

"What are you talking about?"

"I had a swim meet this afternoon," snapped Kat.

Donald's head drooped. "Oh, Kat . . . I'm so sorry that I wasn't there, but still . . . I will not have you speaking about Carol that way in this house!"

Kat felt an uncomfortable twinge just below the knee of her left leg, but she pushed it out of her mind. She was determined not to let her father win this argument.

"There you go again. She's all you care about. Why can't we get through a conversation without you mentioning her? Life was so much better when she wasn't here."

"Kat, what would your mother think if she could see the way you're acting right now?"

Her father's words struck a nerve, and Kat was filled with remorse.

What would my mom think? She would be more sympathetic towards Carol. She would be more understanding. She would never lose her temper like this, but she never had to deal with anything like this.

"But it doesn't ma - ,"

All of a sudden, a stabbing pain shot through her leg. She winced noticeably and turned pale. Every nerve ending on the left side of her body was on fire. She clutched at her left shin and inhaled painfully.

"Kat! What's wrong?"

Kat narrowed her eyes at her father and limped toward the door.

"Nothing, I can take care of myself. I do it all the time now, anyway."

She tried to slam the door, but her father's foot caught it.

"No, Kat. We're going to talk about this right now. I'm not going to let you shut me out."

The pain intensified. Kat doubled over moaning.

"Kat?" he asked as he pushed the door open and crouched beside her.

"It's nothing," she said. "My leg always hurts after a meet, but never this bad before. I'll be fine, just leave me alone."

"How long has it been hurting like this?"

"It's been bothering me on and off since last December."

"Why haven't you told me this sooner?"

"You were too busy taking care of your precious Carol."

"We're not talking about Carol anymore. You should have told me; this could be serious. We're going to get it checked out right now."

4

Strawn High School

Strawn, Texas

Sponsor: Joyce Gray

Writers:

Leslie Crudgington

Brianna Guerrero

Nancy Juarez

Jennifer Lewallen

Heather Nowak

Dustin Wilcoxon

The waiting room of Cedar Lake Memorial Hospital was a somber place full of grim-faced patients. Kat reluctantly picked a seat in the secluded corner of the dimly lit waiting room.

As her father walked to the sign-in window, a frail, elderly man with a hacking cough made his way toward her. His sunken eyes stood out on his lifeless face. As the gaunt man gingerly lowered himself into the tacky vinyl seat next to her, he accidentally brushed his hand against Kat's. She quickly jerked her hand away from his, causing the man to fall into the seat.

"Oh! I'm sorry," he apologized hoarsely.

"Uh, seriously?" Kat snapped in response and then shifted her legs to face away from the man.

The man's face dropped in embarrassment.

Kat ignored the man and continued scanning through the four-month-old issue of *Good Housekeeping*. Moments later, a friendly woman clothed in Snoopy scrubs appeared around the corner.

"Mr. Jenkins, we will see you now. "

The old man arose from his seat, struggling, and shuffled away. Kat glared as he disappeared around the corner.

Ugh, I hate this place. All these disgusting, sick people, Kat thought as she scanned the room. *They act like everyone owes them something. I'm so glad I'm not like these freaks.*

Her eyes fell on the middle-aged woman with an oxygen tank and several tubes protruding from her listless body. She shuddered at the sight.

I don't understand why Dad brought me here. This is stupid.

Moments later, Kat's father strode swiftly from the front desk to the chair that Mr. Jenkins had occupied. He turned to speak to Kat, but she interrupted him with a torrent of complaints.

"Dad, this place is gross. I mean, do you even know who was in that chair before you? I don't know why you insisted on bringing me here. Nothing is even wrong with me!"

"Kat, stop it and just calm down. The doctor simply needs to run an MRI on you."

Kat began to panic. "I'm not doing it. Take me home."

"Don't start with me. You need to have this done."

"No, I don't!" her voice rose, and people began to stare.

Kat hoped if she made a scene, he would allow her to leave. He wouldn't want to be part of a spectacle in the hospital where he worked.

She jumped to her feet. "I'm leaving. Give me the keys!" she demanded.

The woman in the Snoopy scrubs reappeared. She glanced with a look of uncertainty from Dr. Morelli to Kat.

"Kathryn Morelli, will you please come this way?"

Dr. Morelli smiled and nodded in relief at the nurse.

Kat sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine, let's just get this stupid thing over with."

Kat grew more nervous with every step toward the MRI room.

Surely I'm not sick. She tried to reassure herself. There isn't anything wrong. MRIs aren't just for sick people. They can be for anything.

The MRI room was a desolate beige color. Machinery lined every wall except one, where a cart held bedding materials, headrests, and other medical supplies. The nurse in Snoopy scrubs asked Kat to remove all of her jewelry and anything else that had metal in or on it. Kat did as she was told, unfastening her necklace and earrings, and handing them all to the nurse.

"This will take about an hour, Kat. Just relax, close your eyes, and stay as still as you can. Would you like to listen to music during the test?"

"Uh, no," Kat said, snottily. "Think of how many other people, with diseases and crap, have had those headphones in their ears!"

The nurse hid a scowl and motioned for Kat to climb onto the MRI bed. Kat exhaled reluctantly and did as instructed.

The bed was pulled into the large white tube where the MRI would take place. The giant tube engulfed Kat's petite body and made her feel claustrophobic. Her ears rang, and she struggled to breathe.

Once she was alone in the MRI tube, Kat began to take slow, deep breaths to calm herself. She opened her eyes and saw that her nose was mere inches from the top of the scanner. Her panic quickly returned.

The scan started. The knocking of the machine sounded like a stampede of horses running over her. Kat winced. Persistent and crazy thoughts rolled through her head.

*Do I really have something wrong with me?
Dad is a doctor. And he seems really worried about my leg.
What if this ruins my swimming?
Surely it's not that bad, like cancer or something.
I mean, people have MRIs for torn ACLs, and other things, too.
I'll be back to swimming in no time.
But what if it is cancer?
Will I have to go through chemotherapy or whatever and lose my hair?
What will people think?
They'll all laugh at me!
And then I'll be just as disgusting as all those people in the waiting room
A chill crawled down her spine. She shuddered and thought of Mr. Jenkins.
Take a deep breath, Kat, she warned You're the star of the swimming team. So
this is just a waste of money.*

She lay there for what seemed like hours, alone...knowing...believing...then praying that nothing bad could happen to her.

Afterward, Kat slid from the table and retrieved her jewelry. She began to put her earrings on and rearranged her hair. She stomped out of the room, still angry that her father had made her take the MRI

Back in the waiting room, she paused impatiently and searched for her father. She found him standing on the other side of the glass with one of the hospital doctors. Both men stared intently at a computer screen. Kat bit down on her bottom lip. Her father's face showed sudden concern. Kat rolled her eyes.

Dad's overreacting again.

Dr. Morelli glanced up at the doctor, mouthed a question, and then tossed a quick glance at Kat. She frowned. His face was a tangle of mixed emotions. Kat had no clue as to what the doctor said in response, but the look on her father's face told her all she needed to know. Her heart dropped into her stomach.

Something was terribly wrong.

5

Hico High School

Hico, Texas

Sponsor: Amy Mahan

Writers:

Austin Bell

Ashley Cook

Taylor Cooper

Shelby Gilson

Garrett Glocar

Jessica McDonald

Briteny Mingus

Sonny Morrow

Kimberly Perkins

Taylor Presley

Emily Redder

Brian Shepherd

Sierra Sklar

Cassi Stegall

Taylor Streenz

Michael Warren

I've got to get out of this madhouse.

Kat burst through the glass front doors of the hospital and carelessly collided with an elderly woman pulling an oxygen tank.

Waiting impatiently at her father's new car, Kat stared blankly at her reflection in the window.

What could possibly be wrong with me? There's no way I'm like Carol.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of her father unlocking the car. She slid into the front seat and slammed the door as her distressed father approached the vehicle. Her father got in the car and momentarily stared at her, his eyes expressing a combination of worry and confusion. Annoyed at the silence, Kat put in her ear buds, cranked up the volume on her iPod, and set her forehead against the cool glass of the window.

Kat noticed her father staring at the steering wheel; she yanked out her ear buds and snapped, "Why haven't you started the car?"

"Sorry, just thinking," he muttered as he turned the key.

"Less thinking, more driving!" Kat snarled. "I'd like to get home before I'm fifty."

After a painfully long, silent drive, her father punched in the code to enter their gated community. In the distance, Kat spotted the family's two-story Victorian home, nestled in between numerous oak trees at the back of the cul-de-sac. The house sat almost secluded from the rest of the outside world. It had been there for a very long time, and it didn't really match the rest of the neighborhood due to its age. The vast lawn had been freshly mowed, and the graceful rosebushes lay wonderfully in bloom.

Kat's father pulled into the driveway and cut off the engine. He hesitated and spoke softly, "Kat, we need to talk." She rolled her eyes and responded with a slam of the car door.

Kat stormed through the front door of their house and glanced in the living room to find Carol helplessly sitting in her motorized wheelchair. She stared at the television; the overly-enthusiastic voice of a reality show host blared in the background.

That's disgusting. Look at that charity case, sitting there waiting for my father to cater to her every last need. She's barely human.

"Hey, how did everything go?" asked Carol.

Kat glared back and replied, "As if you care!" She hastily fled the room but not before noting Carol's pain-stricken face. As she stomped up the stairs to her room, Kat considered Carol's hurt expression.

What a fake! How can that pasty-skinned freak pretend to care about me when I know she's only asking to please my dad. I don't even know how my dad can possibly stand her! What does he see in her? Her matted hair is the color of dead leaves, her eyes are sunken into her face, and I don't even want to think about her drooling problem!

Kat's anger ceased when she reached the door to her room. It was her personal haven from the rest of her problem-filled world. She opened the door and stepped from the hardwood floor onto her plush carpet.

Peace and quiet at last.

She closed her door and then took a few seconds to study her room.

On the caramel-colored wall to her right, she caught sight of her green memory board that framed the collage of pictures capturing those fleeting seconds of happiness throughout her life. Her eyes paused for a second on the picture in the center; it was of her and her mother, taken a few weeks before she died. She glanced at another picture, one of her holding the golden first-place trophy from a swim meet last year. She then looked to her left and noticed the laptop that rested on her desk.

Kat sat down at her desk with the intention of distracting herself on Facebook but was interrupted by the flash of her reflection in the mirror hanging above the desk.

Just look at me; there is no possible way anything can be wrong with me. I look perfectly fine. If something were truly wrong with me, wouldn't I be able to tell? I would probably look more like that vile Carol.

Kat continued to stare at herself. First, she ran her fingers through her long dark-brown hair. She had always wished that her hair had some sort of curl, but it didn't. Board-straight was all she ever got from it. From there, her eyes skated across her flawless olive skin. Kat then stared directly into her own eyes.

Why does everything always happen to me? I mean, my mom died, and then my "loving" father remarried a chick well on her way to becoming a vegetable, and, as if things couldn't get worse, I was forced to lie in a tube for testing because I might have something wrong with me. But what if there really is something wrong with me? What does that mean? Will I still be able to swim? Or will I end up like Carol?

A tear raced down her cheek and dripped on the glass top of her desk. Kat sprang out of the chair, upset with herself for having acted like a scared child. She unexpectedly fell to the floor, besieged by a piercing pain that felt as if it were trying to escape her very bones. She hugged her aching leg to her chest and wished the sharp twinge would go away as abruptly as it had come.

After a few seconds passed and the pain subsided, Kat picked herself up off the floor. She ambled to the bathroom cautiously, not wanting to give her body any excuse to punish her with the previous moment's torture again.

Kat decided that a shower would be the perfect thing to calm her down. She grabbed a towel out of the cabinet by the sink and started her water. When she stepped in, she instantly felt her taut muscles relax as the warm water glided down her skin and massaged away her troubles.

See, I'm fine. All this stress of worrying whether something is wrong with me has only caused me to imagine pain in my leg. But it's fine. Nothing's wrong with me. It's only my imagination. I need to calm down and quit freaking myself out about this.

After her shower, Kat pulled on her favorite pajamas. The white and lavender flannel set was comfy and warm, a gift from her father last Christmas.

Just as Kat exited the bathroom, someone knocked on her bedroom door. She knew it could be only her father. Carol didn't come upstairs anymore after she was put in a wheelchair. Her father had relocated their bedroom downstairs to make things more accessible for Carol.

“Kat, I know that today was hard on you, but I am glad you went. It was a good thing, actually,” her father said as he walked through the door and placed his hand on Kat’s shoulder.

She shrugged off his hand and replied, “Look, there’s no need to worry, Dad. I’m fine.”

“I hope you’re right, Kat, but we need to consider the possibility that you’re not.”

“No, Dad! Just stop! I don’t feel sick! Do I look sick? No! So why are you so dead-set on finding something wrong with me?” Kat irritably replied.

“Kat, something strange showed up on your MRI.”

“You’re wrong! You probably imagined seeing something on the MRI because you’re paranoid. Newsflash, Dad, there is nothing wrong with me. I’m good to go! There is no way what you saw on my MRI was correct!” Kat’s reply was frantic as she fought for denial.

Donald’s tone turned soothing and calm as he replied, “Kat, I hope you’re right and nothing is wrong, but I have been a doctor for twenty-two years, and I know when I see something irregular on an MRI. It showed a dark spot on your leg. Now, we don’t know what it is just yet, but the sooner we figure it out, the....”

Kat interrupted, “So you’re telling me that something is wrong with me, but you don’t know what? How can you even stand here, look me in the eye, and suggest something so serious when you—a doctor—can’t even be sure it’s something to be concerned about?”

“We just need to be cautious right now, Kat. Just because we don’t know something is wrong doesn’t mean nothing is. I have scheduled a biopsy with Dr. Thomas for Thursday. You know him; he’s a great doctor and will take good care of you. All he will do is take out some tissue where we found the dark spot and send it off for further testing, and I’ll be there with you the whole time. When the results come back, we’ll have a better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

All Kat could do was stare helplessly at her father and try to hold back the sob that swelled in her throat and threatened to expose her deepest fears in its escape.

6

Mineral Wells High School

Mineral Wells, Texas

Sponsor: Julie Bishop

Writers:

Katie Chambers

Kendra Geer

McKenzie Leggett

Eliza Murphy

Krysta Pruitt

Lacy Pruitt

The clear blue liquid rippled and swished placidly around bare feet. The Townsend Sports Complex was empty and consequently echoed Kat's every movement: every swish of the water, every stifled scream, and especially every miserable, convulsive, gut-wrenching sob. They ripped through her, buckling her over at the waist, her salty tears mingling with the chlorine-filled pool water.

Why me?

A singular, self-pitying thought had dominated her musings for the past hour and a half. As she looked down at her regulation swimming suit, dry now for some time, she remembered what had happened when she'd tried to swim. She had cramped up, pain ripping through her lower left leg, and found she could no longer swim. She had to dog-paddle to the wall and crawl along it to the ladder so she wouldn't drown. Even though no one had been there to see, she'd still been monumentally embarrassed. She felt like such a cripple!

It's not fair!

Yet another repeating thought that kept floating through her mind. She might not swim again for a very long time; she might not ever swim again!

No, that's just silly.

I'll swim again.

They'll treat me, I'll get over it, and I'll be back in the pool in a couple of months.

Her crying had simmered down to just a few tears when the banging of the double-doors behind her echoed around the aquatic center. Kat ignored the noise, too upset to turn around, and too angry to care. Instead, she sat focusing on her feet as they dangled in the water. She didn't even hear the rolling of wheels on the tile, only the soft voice that followed.

"Kat?"

The voice was kind but careful.

She whipped around to see who it was and groaned.

That freak.

Aiden Steele was sitting there in his chair, trying to look into her angry eyes. He was failing.

"What do *you* want?" Her voice was harsh and teasing, though it wasn't as effective as it could be. It had cracked, betraying the fact that the wetness on her face and redness of her eyes weren't from swimming. She glared at him, his wavering willpower clearly visible.

He looked down at her sadly, trying to smile and be friendly. It was clearly hard for him, especially after all the mean things she'd said to him over the years and the even meaner looks she'd given. She felt the pity as it bubbled up and swallowed it back down like an unwanted pill. Though she hated to remember it, there had been a time when they had been friends, or at least friendlier than when they got into high school. His voice was still soft, but he seemed to make it a little happier.

"Your dad said I could probably find you here."

“Why were you talking to my dad?” The question snapped at him like a whip, the pain clear on his face as he fought back the tears. He’d always been a sensitive kid, but he seemed a little over-sensitive today. She watched him contemplate, probably forming the words just right in his mind. She got impatient and snapped, “Well, spit it out!”

He took a breath and plunged in, his words all running together. “My mom heard your dad talking about your leg and asked him about it, and she told me.” He hesitated, looking away, his voice dropping a level in volume; Kat could barely hear him now. “I just wanted to extend my well-wishes.”

Kat was shocked. Why would this kid who she’d made fun of so ruthlessly want to come and tell her to “get well soon.” It almost made her regretful, but then she remembered the worries about whether she would ever swim again and the regret was gone.

“Well, you’ve said your sappy crap, so I guess I’ll say *thank you*,” she said. “Now go away and leave me alone.”

Though her face was hard and mean, she couldn’t hide the blue color of her dependency. She turned away from him with a huff and waited to hear the subtle squeak of his chair turning around. When she didn’t, she called out, the tears audible in her voice, without turning around. “Well? Go away!” Her angry command echoed bitterly off the tile walls.

Instead of the squeaky chair, she heard Aiden’s soft voice once more. “If you need someone to talk to...” He didn’t finish the sentence, out of nervousness or implication she couldn’t tell, and her answer was soft but still callous.

“Why would I *ever* want to talk to *you*?”

She imagined the pain that would flicker on his face and smirked. Not soon enough, she heard his chair finally recede from the pool side, fading away into silence until the door clicked open and closed with a clang. Once he was gone, Kat dissolved into tears once more.

“Kat Morelli?” Her head jerked up from the out-of-date magazine she’d been staring blankly at to see the plain-looking nurse in the doorway. She held a clipboard, looking around with a stupid grin on her face. Her father stood up beside her, and the nurse fixed her gaze on Kat. “Dr. Gordon will see you now.” Her too-happy smile was annoyingly bright and “in-your-face,” and it quickly got on Kat’s last nerve. Kat stood with an annoyed eye-roll and scoff, wiping the grin from the nurse’s face, and trod toward her. She held the door open for Kat and her dad as they entered the sterile hallway that would lead to Dr. Gordon’s room. They went into the third doorway on the left, and once they entered the room, Kat sat there, waiting to see what fate would befall her.

This is all so meaningless. All they are going to do is give me some pain medicine and send me home. There is going to be no cancer, and I’m going to be able to go back to swimming, and I’ll win first place with my dad finally watching from the sidelines. But what if something is wrong and I end up like Carol? What will my friends think of me? What if - ?

Just then Dr. Gordon came in with a grim look on his face. In an instant, all of Kat’s denial was shattered with the difficult truth.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news,” said Dr. Gordon slowly. “The biopsy results have come in, and the mass in your leg is a type of cancer called osteosarcoma.” Dr. Gordon paused to check Kat’s reaction, gazing carefully at her mouth which had fallen open unbidden. “There are a few treatment options...,” he trailed off, seemingly unwilling to continue. One look at Kat would tell exactly why.

Kat’s face was frozen with shock and confusion; first and foremost, she didn’t quite understand what it was.

Osteo..carma?

“What’s that?” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

“It’s a form of cancer most common in teenagers. It’s a bone cancer that....” His voice faded into the background, her tumultuous thoughts overtaking his grim, serious tone.

What?

Cancer?

But...it’s not possible!

This can’t be happening to me, not me!

He has to be lying to me...this can’t be real...I must be having a nightmare.

“What? You’re kidding, right?” She knew she’d interrupted him mid-sentence, but she didn’t care. Tears started to well up in her eyes and she fought them down. She wasn’t going to embarrass herself in front of this doctor she didn’t even know. She would not cry, not here, not now! She pushed herself off the examination table forcefully. The landing jarred her leg. She gritted her teeth and fought through the angry tears that now stained her cheeks.

“Kat, sit down please,” her father said, reaching out to touch her arm. She jerked it angrily away.

“No, I need to get out of here now.” Kat shoved her father aside, hobbling toward the door. Suddenly pain ripped through her left side, and she crumpled, screaming in agony. Dr. Gordon and Donald rushed to her side. The doctor touched her leg gently, feeling for the center of the pain based on her screams, and her father brushed the hair back from her face. She gave in to her wracking sobs, the pain throbbing through her leg.

“Kat, I need you to calm down. It’s going to be okay. Let’s see what Dr. Gordon thinks we can do about this. We will get through it,” her father tried to assure her, a pained look still etched on his now discolored face. Kat took a few deep breaths and stood.

Why does everyone keep telling me it’ll be okay?

Nothing’s ever going to be okay again!

What is everyone going to think?

What’s going to happen to me?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Dr. Gordon’s gentle voice.

“Well, Kat, there are a few treatment options available. The best option I see for right now is for you to schedule surgery as quickly as possible to see how much of the cancer we can remove. The next step would be chemotherapy.”

“If that doesn’t work, what are you going to do, cut off my leg?” she snarled.

“Yes, Kat, amputation is certainly a possibility, but it’s a last resort if we can’t stop the spread of the cancer through surgery and chemotherapy.” For a brief moment, his serious composure made Kat realize that her life was truly in danger.

She stared at her father. His pale face confirmed her fears.
Oh, Dad, I need you now... more than I'll ever admit.

7

Mineral Wells High School

Mineral Wells, Texas

Sponsor: Laurie Walsworth

Writers:

Desiree Casillas

Katie Chambers

Corey Dempsey

Carissa Fleming

Brandon Haygood

Taylor Johnson

Miranda Kron

Eliza Murphy

Stephanie Smith

“Group.”

I can't believe I let my dad talk me into this.

“This is Kathryn Morelli.”

Group Therapy! Really?

“We want to make her feel welcome.”

Right now I could be out swimming, preparing for my next meet, instead; I'm sitting in this group with a bunch of whiny freaks . . . , but who am I kidding? I'm just like them. Seriously, a one-legged swimmer? I'll be SURE to win the gold!

“So, tell us about yourself, Kathryn,” chirped the all-too excited therapist.

“Actually, it's Kat.”

Not that any of you really care. I know I don't care about any of you.

“I'm here because my dad made me come, not because I need it.”

“All right, I understand. Moving on, let's start with our positives of the week.

Who would like to go first?”

At that moment, a boy with unkempt, shaggy hair entered the room, trying his best to remain inconspicuous as he made his way towards the only empty seat left in the circle.

“Well, there's our first positive of the day – Davin has joined us!” the therapist beamed.

Kat sighed loudly.

Ugh, another one? Wait, I think I know that kid from somewhere, but where?

The monotonous voices from the group droned on and on as Kat wished she could be anywhere in the world but here.

“Dad, are you on your way yet? I've been waiting for the past ten minutes. Let me guess, you're too busy tending to Carol, right? What? Okay, I'm in front. See you when you decide to show up.”

Kat slammed the phone shut and furiously flung it toward the grassy area next to the sidewalk. Immediately she realized her mistake.

Way to go, Kat! Now how are you going to get the phone? Maybe you could just hop on over there!

Tears of anger welled up, threatening to rush from her eyes.

No, I'm not going to cry.

Kat glanced up in embarrassment, the tears now spilling down her cheeks, and Davin was standing there holding her phone in his outstretched hand. It was at that moment that Kat realized why he had looked familiar to her: for years Davin had received the brunt of her sarcasm and hurtful remarks because he was “different.” His goofy, tilting walk and his incessant humming had made him the perfect target for Kat and her friends.

“Oh,” Davin mumbled awkwardly, “here's your phone.”

“Thanks, but I could have gotten it myself.”

The silence in the air seemed impenetrable, but the sound of Davin's humming soon pierced the veil.

"Why are you always humming? It's really annoying!"

"Would you rather I whistle?" Davin asked, trying to lighten the mood. After handing Kat her phone, Davin turned and began walking slowly away, then suddenly spun back around.

"So... , do you need a ride?" he asked, scratching his arm.

"From you? Sorry, but I don't go for the desperate guys," Kat shot back snobbishly.

But as Davin lowered his head and turned away, Kat was suddenly immersed with two unfamiliar feelings: guilt and shame.

That's weird. Why should I be feeling ANYTHING for him? He's a total freak show; he'll probably hum the entire way to my house . . . , but then again, who knows when my dad will show up! What if people see me with him? As if that matters, my life's already over anyway.

"Uh, okay, I guess."

Without bothering to wait for Kat, Davin began walking toward the parking lot. Kat guided her wheelchair after him hesitantly, catching up with him as they approached his truck. Davin unlocked the passenger door and attempted to help Kat, who immediately pushed him away.

"I can do it myself," Kat sneered.

After watching Kat struggle into the truck, Davin loaded up her wheelchair in the back and got behind the wheel. The silence was deafening; Davin concentrated on *not* humming.

Kat asked, "So, where did you get your truck?"

"My foster parents bought it for me."

"Foster parents? What about your real ones?"

"Well . . . , my mom . . . uh . . . sort of put me up for adoption when I was a kid.

"Why?" Kat asked, feigning interest.

"I don't like to talk about it," Davin replied.

"Why?" Kat asked again, becoming more intrigued by his unwillingness to answer her.

"Well . . . uh . . . , I have Asperger's."

"What's that?"

"It's sort of like autism, but not really."

It was obvious to Kat at that moment that the word *autism* was difficult for Davin to even say out loud.

Davin interrupted her thoughts. "Yeah, but anyways, it's why I talk weird and walk strange...and sometimes hum." He glanced at Kat with a shy smile.

"Okay, that explains a lot!"

“That’s my house, the one at the back of the circle,” Kat said as Davin turned into the cul-de-sac. Davin carefully guided the truck into the driveway just as the front door flew open, and Kat’s dad rushed down the sidewalk, keys in hand. She opened her door to get out, and when her dad turned to see who it was, Kat noticed for the first time the grief and stress that had etched itself onto his face. She had a brief feeling of remorse for her actions of the past few months.

“Hey, Dad. Since it was getting late, I went ahead and had Davin bring me home – we go to school together.”

“Okay, well, thanks for taking care of my little girl. That was very kind of you.”

Once they were inside the house, Kat’s dad said, “Listen, Kat. I need to run back to the office; something’s come up. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but it may be late. There’s some pizza on the counter for you and Carol.”

“Wait, you’re leaving again? I just got back! Don’t you want to hear about that stupid session you forced me to attend?”

“Kat, I’m really sorry. Can we talk about it later? Why don’t you talk to Carol about it? I’m sorry . . . I have to go now.”

“Sure,” Kat snapped back sarcastically as the door slammed shut behind her dad.

The whir of Carol’s wheelchair came from the kitchen, and she made her way to the dining room, struggling to balance the pizza box on her lap.

“Hey, I bet you’re hungry,” Carol said kindly.

“Not really,” Kat replied.

Great. Dad’s not here to help me, so I’m stuck! I suppose I could get up the stairs to my room if I really tried . . . , but not with her pathetic stare boring holes into me.

“So, how’d the session go?” Carol asked timidly.

“Fine.”

“You know, Kat, I know you don’t like me. You don’t deserve what’s happened to you, but I think I understand a little bit about what you must be feeling. I can’t replace your mother, I understand that, and I want you to know that I’m not trying to do that. But if you ever need anything, or want to just talk, I hope you know I’m always here for you.”

Tears filled Kat’s eyes. “Um, thanks . . . ,” Kat mumbled sincerely.

What’s wrong with me? When did I start having any feelings other than animosity for this woman?

But the longer she sat there, all she could feel was thankfulness and understanding, and what’s that . . . a touch of sympathy? The tears in her eyes spilled over, flowing silently down her cheeks. “I – I have to go upstairs. I’m pretty tired; all this rolling around really wears me out, you know?” Kat said hastily, trying to hide her face.

Carol smiled over at Kat in an understanding way and said, “Okay, if you get hungry or need anything else, I’ll be here. Not too many places for me to go, you know,” she chuckled shyly. “Your dad will be home late, so I’ll tell him not to wake you. And Kat, thanks for listening.” With that, Carol made her way to the dining table with a piece of pizza on her lap, a smile on her face, and a new light in her eye.

Great, now I’m sympathizing with her . . . way to go.

Kat hauled herself out of her wheelchair and with great effort hoisted herself up the stairs to her bedroom. Without even changing her clothes, she plopped down on her bed and began to think about all of the new emotions she had experienced that day and all

of the memories and new feelings that had surfaced with them. She drifted off to sleep, tears still staining her face.

Kat awoke to a crash and shouting.

What time is it? Is Dad home yet? What was that?

“Kat!” her father shouted up the stairs.

Kat sat up and tried to clear her groggy head.

What’s going on?

She heard her father talking to someone in urgent tones, but she couldn’t make out what he was saying. Trying to haul herself out of her bed, she heard the faint sound of a siren wailing in the distance. Kat couldn’t even think coherently.

What the heck is going on?

The siren got louder and louder, finally stopping in front of her house. The front door crashed open, and she heard her father shout, “In here!”

Kat sat on the edge of her bed, frozen in fear. Heavy footsteps thundered up the stairs, her door burst open, and her father’s figure was illuminated in the doorway by the hall’s light.

“Kat, I’ve got to go to the hospital,” her father said, the fear obvious in his voice. “Something’s happened to Carol!”

8

Trinity High School

Eules, Texas

Sponsor: Marylin Nease

Writers:

Chole Arreola
Dylan Ausmus
Trevor Baxter
Zane Berry
Gabrielle Bullock
Lucas Doss
Dylan Durham
Kyle Eichberger
Clint Ford
Miriam Gibson
Cody Hardwick
Nickole Hunt
Kaitlyn Joiner
Melanie Kirksey
Tina Norasane
Zeke Pineda
Sarah Powhatan
Rebecca Reeves
Terra Rivers
Michael Sanchez
Jonathon Scott
Orly Sotelo
Kayla Spargur
Chase Taylor
Ben Trujillo
Hayden Tweedie
Janelle Villafane
Cecilia Villegas
Lauren Wallis
Lauren Ware
Geneva Williams
Terry Williams
Andrea Willis
Erika Wilson
Kayla Wilson
Tony Wilson
Kaylyn Woodall

The bright, piercing lights of the waiting room penetrated Kat's eyes as the reek of rubbing alcohol, medicine, and sickness burned her nose, making her head throb. The chilly waiting room was an eerie place to be, especially at 3 a.m. Hesitantly, she leaned into her father's side and let herself relax against his tense arm.

I can't believe I feel this way . . . , but I really hope Carol doesn't—

Kat couldn't complete the sentence and shuddered at the thought. Her father shrugged out of his coat and placed it around Kat's shoulders. She stole a look at his eyes—worn, tired, and tear-stained. Feeling a pang of remorse, Kat took her father's hand on impulse and gave it a squeeze. She hadn't felt this close to him since she was his little princess.

"Dad . . . , we can do this . . . together."

"I know we can, Kat," he said as he squeezed her hand.

With a moment of silence between them, Kat turned her attention again to the pain in her head.

My head's pounding like someone's slamming it with a sledge hammer. But why? Could it be my conscience?

Why is everything so mixed up and confusing?

Do I really care about Carol?

A doctor entered the waiting room and looked around until he spotted Carol's family.

"Dr. Morelli, may I speak with you in private?"

"No, you can say it in front of both of us," replied her father, glancing into Kat's eyes.

"Yes, of course. Carol's fine, but she needs to stay with us for a few days to insure that she has no further complications. She's had a seizure related to her MS. You can go back and visit her if you like. Family seems to be the best medicine after this kind of event."

"You go ahead, Dad. I'll wait here," replied Kat in a monotone voice.

With slanted lips of disappointment, her father glanced at her and asked, "Are you sure?"

Kat nodded, then watched the doctor and her father exit the waiting room through the double white doors. Alone, she pondered her relationship with Carol.

Has she really been all that bad to me? I mean, she's treated me normally since my diagnosis.

No, she's been—that freak has always been out to get me. She sits around all day and takes all my dad's time and money.

But aren't I doing the same thing now?

No, no, she's different.

*Or is she?
Why is this happening to me?*

The next morning at breakfast, Kat's father said something she hadn't expected to come out of his mouth: "Would you like to go visit your mother today?"

Kat looked at him, one eyebrow slightly higher than the other. "You know, I *would* like to do that."

At a florist's shop, they bought a bouquet of flowers; then, at the cemetery they slowly made their way to her mother's headstone.

"I know you didn't want this to happen, Kat, but there are some things in life we just can't control."

Kat saw a tear slide down her strong father's soft cheek.

"I know, Dad, and I'm sorry for the way I've been acting lately. I just, I just miss Mom, and I don't see Carol as my real mom, and sometimes I don't know how to handle myself."

"I've noticed that, and I'm sorry I wasn't always at your swim meets. I haven't always been the best dad, but no matter what, I'll always be your dad, and your mother will always be your mother. I realize it's hard for you and Carol to understand each other, but maybe you can try treating her like a friend, not a mom. No matter what happens, though, you'll always be my sweet, precious daughter."

There was a long pause until Kat broke the silence. "You're right. If Caro—*when Carol* makes it out of this, I promise I'll treat her better. I promise I'll be a better daughter."

Suddenly, her dad's pocket vibrated, and he pulled out his cell phone.

"Hello? Okay, we're on our way."

"Let's go, Kat. That was the doctor. Carol's stable. She's asking for us."

Kat looked at her mom's headstone one last time; then, she turned her wheels and headed to the car.

Back at the hospital, Kat and her father stood beside Carol, who was barely awake. Kat's father took Carol's hand in his and sighed. Nobody said anything. The heart monitor was the only thing they needed to hear.

The following day when Kat and her father arrived at the hospital, Carol's doctor greeted them in the waiting room, saying, "Carol's awake now and seems to be improving, but we want to keep her another night for observation."

"So, can we see her now?" Kat's father asked.

"Yes, but she wants to see your daughter first," the doctor said, making eye contact with Kat. Blinking uneasily at the doctor's piercing gaze, Kat slowly rolled after him as he led her to Carol's room.

Why does she want to see me?

What will I say?

Looking lifeless, Carol lay on her bed, her skin as pasty as the white walls. Stunned, Kat stopped in the doorway. Flushed with a memory of the last moment she had seen her mother, Kat felt her throat tighten, and she swallowed the pain. The air tensed around her as the beeping of the machines grew deafening.

"Carol?" Kat whispered.

"Hello, Kat."

Carol weakly smiled as Kat rolled to her bedside. Shakily reaching out her hand, Kat placed it on Carol's. Carol opened her mouth to speak, but Kat cut her off.

"So, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'll be okay. Seizures could happen from time to time now. I just have to live with them."

Why is she so calm about all this?

I'd be freaking out. I am freaking out!

"Look, I know it seems that I don't like you, but I want you to know that I'm here for you just like you're here for me," Kat said hesitantly. "I know you said you would listen, so I just want to say I'm sorry."

Carol's eyes brightened.

A knock at the door interrupted the moment. Her father peeked in, pausing for recognition.

"Carol?" he called softly as he walked toward her bed.

"Um, you guys can talk," Kat mumbled awkwardly, making her way to the waiting room.

Back home in her room again, Kat felt tears rolling down her cheeks.

I'm really trying to work things out with Dad and Carol, but how can I be nice to them after everything they've put me through?

Wait . . . , what reason do I have to blame them?

She lifted her hand to her bedside table, grabbed her phone, and dialed a number written on a scrap of paper. Her hand shook as if she had Davin's problem.

“Take me to your leader!” an alien voice cried when Kat’s father opened the door. He stared at the boy on the other side.

“I’m from Kat’s therapy class,” Davin explained, chuckling a little. “She called and commanded me to be her friend. I’m Davin, by the way.” He raised his hand in a mock salute, his hand wobbling only a little.

Her father laughed. “That makes sense. Her Majesty does indeed need a friend. She’s upstairs, first door on your left.”

Davin stumbled in, then paused. “Kat has only one leg,” he told her father, as if he hadn’t noticed.

Dr. Morelli shrugged. “Yes, and she also has a hard head.”

Davin laughed and climbed the stairs, humming softly. When he found the right door, he knocked, calling, “Oh, mighty one, I am not worthy, but might I ask an audience?”

“Cut that out. This isn’t funny.”

When Davin opened the door, Kat sat up. Her hair stood on end from tossing and turning, and her nose was runny, her eyes puffy and red.

“It looks pretty funny from here, Gimpy,” he winked before ambling over to sit where her leg should have been, ignoring her glare. “What’s up?”

Kat’s story flooded out—everything from all the past unhappy months. She cried on his shoulder as he listened, humming and patting her back.

When she was done, she looked up at him, expecting to be made fun of and laughed at.

The silence was deafening, and she suddenly missed his obnoxious humming.

“So what’s the problem?” Davin asked when he realized she expected him to console her.

Kat groaned, “Is *this* what friends are for?”

“I try,” Davin interrupted. “I heard you the first time, Kat. I just don’t think you have a problem. Well, not a big problem anyway.”

She frowned at him.

He sighed. “Look, your father loves you. That’s very apparent because he tries so hard for you *and* Carol. You shouldn’t be mad at him just because he’s not perfect. The only outcomes from that are a headache and a broken family.

“As for Carol, she’s not trying to take your mother’s place. She just wants a place in your life. Why don’t you give it to her?”

“And the whole make-fun-of-handicapped-people routine is immature. We’re just like you, and we’ll forgive you because you’re one of us, and we understand what you’re going through. So forget it, and be happy!”

It wasn't the most touching speech in history, and he had stuttered a lot, but she knew what he meant.

"I can't," Kat mumbled, looking down at her hands.

"Why not?" Davin cooed gently. When she didn't answer, he grinned. "I know why. You're stubborn, and you can't stand to be the one to put yourself out there, but no one is trying to shoot you down, Kat. Just go for it!"

She opened her mouth, forming a reply in her mind, but her father's voice cut her short.

"Kat!" he shouted from downstairs. "I'm going to visit Carol. She's awake!"

A smile burst onto her face as she looked at Davin, who was making shoo-ing motions with his hands.

"Dad! Wait! I want to go, too!" she yelled, scooting off the bed and hopping around her room, quickly grabbing her hairbrush and shoe.

There was silence downstairs before her father, in a disbelieving voice, called back, "Really?"

In his truck, Davin and Kat followed her father to the hospital to see Carol. After a silence, Davin asked shyly, "Maybe afterwards, do you want to go get some ice cream or something?"

I used to make fun of this guy, and here he is asking me to go get ice cream . . . , and I want to say yes?!

"So, what do you think, Kat? Maybe while we have ice cream, we can talk about school? Are you ready for Monday?"

Kat didn't answer, but her face revealed her anxiety.

Oh, school! I forgot!

What will people think when they see me?

9

L.D. Bell High School

Hurst, Texas

Sponsor: Donna Faunce

Writers:

Raymond Adams

Josette Allen

Sierra Baker

Gerado Barron

Logan Boyd

Latipah Davis

Heidi Duarte

Taylor Ellzey

Cameron Grogan

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Emily Overby

Amber Sauer

Tanya Spence

Paige Tucker

Kersten Zahurones

The applause that echoed in Kat's head brought a momentary smile to her face before a sudden wave of laughter jolted her back to reality.

Suddenly someone yelled out, "Way to go, cripple!"

Kat looked down to hide her face flushed with embarrassment.

"My God, is that Kat?" a familiar voice echoed across the hall.

How did this happen to me?

Breakfast trays were scattered everywhere. Kat looked down to see bits of soggy pancake lying in her lap and her hair doused with chocolate milk. She wiped her face of food and tears. From the corner of her tear-glistened eye, she saw Aiden wheeling over with a handful of napkins.

"Looks like you missed your mouth," Aiden said. His crooked smile brought back memories of their past friendship.

Kat took the napkins and chuckled, smiling for the first time that day. Sceptically, Kat questioned, "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Well, doesn't it suck?" Aiden asked.

"Thanks for the napkins," Kat answered as she wiped the gooey mess from her shirt.

Minutes later, Traci appeared at her side and gently motioned toward the door, "Come on; let's go get you cleaned up."

"I think the nurse will have some extra clothes," Aiden said sympathetically.

Reaching the nurse's office, Kat felt relief that the stares from the student body had ceased.

Aiden asked, "You all right from here?"

"Yeah, go ahead," Kat nervously replied.

Aiden and Traci left Kat at the nurse's doorway.

Entering the nurse's office, Kat found a familiar face lingering inside.

Davin grinned at the sight of her and her new look. "Whoa, you sure look pretty today," he said. His tease didn't help the situation for Kat one bit.

"Now is definitely not the time, Davin," Kat sneered. "Nurse Betty, I need your help!"

Nurse Betty's eyes widened to the size of apples as she saw Kat smothered in the aftermath from the cafeteria fiasco. "Oh my, let's get you cleaned up right away," she said, and then opened the infirmary's storage closet. She removed sweat pants and a shirt for Kat to change into.

Kat's first reaction was to push the clothes away and insist she'd rather have her eyes poked out with needles than be caught dead in an outfit like that. But, with a sigh, she took the clothes and went to the bathroom to clean up. When she rolled out with her new outfit, Davin was saying good-bye to the nurse. He saw her and smiled while holding the door open.

Davin rushed to catch up with Kat in the hallway. “Hey, I heard about what happened in the cafeteria. Are you okay?” he said while trying to catch his breath.

Kat looked up into Davin’s eyes with a glare. “I’m just great,” she said and wheeled down the hallway with Davin at her side. From the hurt look on Davin’s face, Kat knew her attitude toward him had stung a bit, but she was just so embarrassed she couldn’t help it.

Suddenly, Davin looked at her with an idea coming in his head, “Hey, let me see your schedule; maybe we have some classes together,” he said.

Kat made a face and handed over her schedule.

“Awesome! We have first period together.”

They entered the class as the teacher rushed in seconds before the tardy bell rang. She immediately began going over rules and regulations that Kat had already heard multiple times in years past and was sure to hear a few more times that day.

Kat made her way out of fourth period, thankful that so far she had survived the day. She looked down at her schedule to see what her last class was when she saw the letters pop out at her-
S-W-I-M-M-I-N-G.

I don’t think I can do this.

Anxious, she made her way to the place she missed the most ... the natatorium. She entered and rolled herself to the edge of the water. Her reflection stared up at her. The face was not her own though, at least not the one she used to recognize. Kat thought back to all her swimming victories and her former life.

Everything was perfect then.

The rush of her classmates through the doors snapped her from her thoughts.

“Okay, everyone gather over here please,” Coach Rayner’s voice boomed. “Today we’re going to get in the water for the first part of the class. Make sure you stay with your buddy while you complete your warm-up laps. All right, girls, go get changed and meet me poolside in 10.”

Kat rolled off to the side to get out of the way.

“Kat, wait up!” Coach Rayner called.

“Yeah?”

“It’s great to see you back at school. I understand how hard this must be for you to even look at a pool, much less this one,” he said.

Panic flashed across Kat’s face. “I can’t do this, Coach. Can I, please, change my schedule?”

Coach Rayner remained silent and gave Kat a quick nod.

Kat lowered her head and whispered, “Thanks.”

Coach Rayner watched Kat turn her wheelchair and roll away. After she disappeared through the natatorium doors, he exhaled, wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, and muttered, "It's good to see you back, Kat. I am proud of your courage."

Empty halls surrounded Kat as she arrived at the counselor's office. She inhaled deeply and opened the plain white door to the office.

The secretary watched her enter and immediately gestured Kat toward an open door.

The counselor rose as Kat entered. "Well, hello there," the counselor said.

Kat took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I wanted to see if I could ...,"

The counselor interrupted Kat with a quick nod and then extended a new schedule toward her.

Kat lifted her chin and forced a smile.

Coach must have called down.

"Good luck," the counselor said.

Kat backed out of the office and headed for the front door as the bell rang. Students immediately rushed the halls.

Kat wheeled herself out to the school foyer and was about to call her dad when Davin rolled up in his car. He put down the window and winked at her, "Hey Kitty Kat, need a ride?"

She laughed, a little too loudly it seemed, and situated herself onto the passenger seat. He grabbed her wheelchair and threw it in the back seat, then hopped into the car and sped off.

As Kat sat in Davin's car, feeling the breeze brush her face, she contemplated telling him that she had quit swimming. For some reason she was nervous about telling him.

"Hey, Davin?" she said quietly, her voice quivering.

"Yeah, Kat?" Davin said. He let out a shy half grin and glanced over at her.

"I changed my schedule today."

"Uh-huh."

"I quit swimming," she told him and then turned towards the open window on her side of the car.

"Oh, really? Hmm, I kinda thought you would at least give it another shot, Kat."

"Are you disappointed or something?" she asked, anxious. Her brow scrunched.

"Naw, it's your choice. I understand it could be kinda hard swimming again after what happened to you."

Kat smiled and stared out at the road ahead. The trees seemed to push themselves back towards the car as the wind shifted to a strong gust. The slight silence was broken by the sound of Davin clearing his throat.

"Um, Kat?" he slightly mumbled

"Yeah, what is it?" Kat stared at him. His face seemed to flush.

With hesitation in his voice, "Remember that ice cream we never got? Are you busy this weekend?"

Kat stared into Davin's eyes. His face flushed a deep shade of maroon.

Davin gulped and stared straight ahead.
“You know, Davin,” Kat said, “I think that would be really awesome.”
“Wow! Really? You’ll go?”
“Of course, I’ll go. It will be something to look forward to if the rest of the week ends up anything like today.”

“Thanks for the ride,” said Kat.
Davin helped her out of the car and walked with her toward the door. “I guess I’ll talk...,” he said and then stopped mid-sentence as Kat’s dad opened the door.
Dr. Morelli stood in the doorway and tossed a questioning look at Davin. “I thought you were riding the bus home?” he said to Kat.
Kat quickly responded, “Dad, don’t you remember Davin from therapy? Turns out he goes to school with me, and he offered me a ride home.”
Dr. Morelli nodded but narrowed his eyes in a skeptical look.
Davin smiled and then turned to walk back to his car. Midway down the sidewalk, he turned back and said, “Nice to see you again, Dr. Morelli. See you tomorrow, Kat.”
Dr. Morelli watched Davin drive away and then looked down at Kat. “I guess I could have been more civilized,” he said.
A raindrop splattered on top of Kat’s head. “Come on, Dad,” she said. “Let’s go inside before we get soaked.”
Inside, Dr. Morelli grabbed two towels and handed one to Kat.
As they dried off, Kat glanced at her father, “Dad...,I’m sorry.”
“For what, Kat?”
“I’m sorry for how I’ve acted since Mom died. I’m sorry for not giving Carol a chance. But I’m gonna be better. I’m gonna make things right, I promise.”

10

San Angelo Lakeview High School

San Angelo, Texas

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Friday night seemed to come too slowly after the emotional week Kat had endured, but from the moment she and Davin parted after school, each second began to pass more quickly than the one before. Kat's nerves were on edge as the date, her first since her surgery, grew closer.

Kat had spent the past few hours struggling with indecision.

Curly or straight hair?

Green or brown eyeshadow?

Jeans or capris?

Kat pulled her cashmere sweater over her head, admiring the way it hugged her waist. She knew that the green of the sweater would bring out her eyes and would certainly turn Davin's head. For a brief moment, she felt like a normal girl, until a quick glance in the mirror reminded her of what she had lost.

Confidence broken, Kat shrugged back into her wheelchair. She stared listlessly at the phone on her night stand, tempted to call Davin with an excuse for canceling. Her doubt-filled trance was interrupted by a soft knock on her bedroom door.

"Kat, Davin just got here," Carol said. Her voice was muffled by the door. "He's waiting in the living room with your dad, so you might want to hurry before he pulls out your baby pictures."

A timid smile broke through Kat's tears at the thought of Davin being forced to listen to her dad's memories as he paraded through the family album. But even that thought couldn't give her the strength to answer Carol.

"Kat?" Carol called. The door cracked open, and she peeked her head in the room. Her forehead creased with worry when she saw Kat, tears in her eyes, mindlessly fidgeting with her empty pant leg. "Are you okay?"

The sincerity in Carol's voice brought her out of her reverie. Kat slightly raised her head. "Carol, I can't do this," she confessed in a whisper of a voice. "Everyone looks at me like I'm a freak."

"Oh, Sweetie, I can't pretend to know exactly how you feel, but there have been so many times that I've felt like the whole world was staring at me. But you figure out sooner or later that the world won't accept you until you accept yourself." Carol said. She laid her hand over Kat's. "You're beautiful, Kat, and right now there is a handsome young man waiting for you who thinks you're beautiful too."

Kat sat in thoughtful silence. She was unable to look in Carol's eyes, and an awkward moment lingered. Finally, Kat curled her fingers around Carol's hand and whispered, "I've never made life very easy for you, have I?"

"No, it hasn't been easy for us. I'll admit there have been days that were worse than others, and there have even been times that the words you said broke my heart. But each day hope survived, the hope that I could continue to accept myself and that, one day, you would too."

Unsure of how to respond, Kat squeezed Carol's hand tightly. "My mascara must be running by now. Will you help me touch it up?" she asked.

Smiling, Carol reached for the Kleenex on the nightstand and dabbed at the black smudges streaking Kat's cheeks. "Okay, Sweetie, you look gorgeous!" she said with a wide smile. "Are you ready to go rescue your date from your dad? By now, he's probably run out of baby stories and is bragging about each of your swimming trophies."

"Then we better hurry! Because once Dad starts on that, he won't stop for hours, and by then, the ice cream shop will be closed," Kat said. She and Carol shared a laugh at her dad's expense. Kat took one last look in the mirror, ran her fingers through her hair, then headed towards the living room.

As she entered the room, Kat chuckled as she heard Davin say, "Oh, wow, Dr. Morelli...I never knew Kat had so many first place trophies."

It was definitely time to set Davin free from her dad's awkward rambling.

"All right, Dad, I think Davin's heard enough," Kat said and then rolled her eyes.

Dr. Morelli stopped mid sentence.

Davin turned his gaze on Kat. Redness rose from his neck to his cheeks.

"Hey...um...hello...um, I mean you, um, look great, Kat," he stuttered. Davin's usual confidence shrank in the shadow of Kat's beauty.

Kat offered a reassuring smile, charmed by Davin's boyishness. "Thanks, Davin. So do you."

Dr. Morelli nudged Davin's shoulder. "Y'all have fun."

Blushing, Davin inched towards Kat's wheelchair. He fumbled with the chair's handles, but eventually managed to roll the wheelchair out the door under the cautious gaze of Kat's dad.

"Davin, you be careful with my little girl."

"Dad!" Kat strung out the word into three syllables.

Dr. Morelli chuckled at Kat's embarrassment. He watched Davin gently help Kat into the truck and then softly close the door.

Davin folded up the wheelchair and tossed it into the bed of the truck. He then took a deep breath, composed himself, and climbed into the driver's seat.

The streets of Cedar Lake were empty except for the cars filling the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. As they pulled into the crowded lot, Kat recognized many of the cars, some that belonged to her friends and others to her old teammates. Looking into the brightly lit windows, she saw that the restaurant was filled with lively teenagers, laughing and joking so comfortably with one another. Uneasiness crept up her spine. She used to be one of them, but now....

Closing her eyes, Kat massaged her temples, and a deep sigh escaped her lips. Carol's words echoed in her mind: "The world won't accept you until you accept yourself." But that advice seemed so much easier to follow in the shelter of her own home, away from the judging eyes of her peers.

"Would you like to go somewhere else?" Davin asked.

Kat opened her eyes to see concern written across Davin's face. He always seemed to understand her fears before she could put them into words.

“Well, maybe,” her voice trailed. Kat lifted her head to look once more at the groups of familiar faces elbowing each other in the line, huddled around the soda fountain, and crowded into the booths. Kat’s hand settled on the door handle; her heart screamed at her to melt back into her seat, but her mind urged her to move forward.

Movement out of the corner of her eye forced Kat’s attention to a corner booth. Tracie, with camera in tow, was eagerly waving at Davin and Kat.

Davin placed a reassuring hand on Kat’s shoulder, “Hey, there’s Tracie! It looks like she saved us a seat. Kat, are you sure you want to leave?”

Kat squared her shoulders, flashed a smile, and flung open the truck door. “Hurry it up, Davin!” she said. “What are we waiting for...Christmas?”

Davin erupted in laughter. “Now there’s the Kat I know!” He barely had time to unload the wheelchair before Kat had slid down from the truck seat.

Kat flinched at the sound of the bell jingling over the door as she and Davin entered the fast food establishment. She immediately reacted by dropping her chin to her chest, hoping to avoid the inevitable stares of her classmates.

Davin gave Kat’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, “Looks like you’re popular tonight!”

Confused, Kat lifted her gaze from her lap, and, instead of the expected glares, she saw the welcoming smiles of her former teammates. Still wearing their sweats and team shirts, the girls seemed to have come straight from practice. Between bites of their burgers and sips of their sodas, the girls called, “Hey, Kat! We’ve missed you at practice this week!”

Kat’s breath caught, and her eyes widened at the unexpected concern. She glanced at Davin, unsure of what to say, and then turned back to the swim team. “Um...well, I had to quit the team. I didn’t want to hold you guys back this season.”

Mouths gaped around the booth. One girl almost spewed her soda as she said, “Kat! Don’t you get it? Without you, we don’t even feel like a complete team!”

Another teammate nodded in agreement and added, “No kidding, Kat! We need you. We love Coach, but you’re the one who’s always known how to motivate us and push us past our limits. Please, come back.”

There was a resounding, “Yeah, Kat!” when the new captain suggested, “Even if you’re not ready to give swimming a try, at least be there for us as our manager.”

The unexpected invitation flattered Kat, and a genuine smile spread across her face. “I don’t know, guys. But tell Coach I’ll think about it over the weekend.”

Kat looked back at Davin.

Davin leaned over and whispered in her ear, “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

A sarcastic response was on the tip of Kat’s tongue when she heard someone repeating her name. Before she could shield her face from the ever-present yearbook camera, a sudden bright flash went off in her face. Her sight blurred, and Tracie’s face swam behind the million tiny dots that exploded and danced across Kat’s field of vision.

“Geez, Tracie!” Kat snapped, “Do you ever stop with that camera?”

Tracie’s smile wavered, and her enthusiasm faded until Kat added with a laugh, “That picture better be on the front page of the yearbook!”

“Well,” Davin suggested, “I bet you could put that picture in with the photos of this year’s swim team.”

Tracie's eyes gleamed as she shrieked, "What? You're back on the team?" she asked. Tracie frantically searched the room looking for Aiden. She spotted him back in their corner booth, watching them curiously.

"Come on, guys. We can't keep this to ourselves. Let's go tell Aiden!" Tracie said. She spun on her heels and hurried toward Aiden, shouting, "Guess what!"

Kat rolled her eyes and sighed at Davin, "Thanks a lot, Davin! You wanna order for me too?"

Davin shrugged innocently.

Kat reached up and gave him a playful slap on the shoulder. "Remind me to never tell you anything!" she teased. But inside, she was thrilled.

With Davin at her side, Kat headed towards their waiting table. She locked eyes with Aiden, remembering their childhood friendship and regretting the torment she had put him through over the past years. It surprised her, now, that after all the time that had passed, it was Aiden she first wanted to share her decision with.

Looking around the loud, crowded restaurant at her old friends and her new ones, Kat felt a wave of contentment.

She whispered to herself, "If you accept yourself, the world will too."

Davin leaned down, "What was that, Kat?"

"Oh, nothing," Kat replied with a knowing smile. "Nothing at all."

Afterword

Coordinator's Note: Marcus Parks is one of our 2010 collaborative novel writers. Marcus also suffers from several disabilities. At our planning session in September 2009, Marcus spoke to the attending schools and offered his insight on life as a disabled person. I asked Marcus to write this year's afterword. I think you will find it revealing and inspiring.

Mike Kearby

My disability is called Arthrogryposis, which means that I have weak or nonexistent muscles in the arms and legs. I also have Mobius Syndrome, severe nerve damage which has completely paralyzed the left side of my face, affecting my smile and my speech. These disabilities have been a challenge when it comes to writing, eating, and reaching things.

People think that because my arms look different, and my speech is slightly different, that I am mentally disabled. Sometimes even adults talk down to me as if I don't understand what they are saying. I've also been given the nickname "chicken boy" in my high school because of my physical appearance. It makes me sad and angry at the same time. On the one hand, it makes me feel like doing the best I can is not good enough for anyone. And on the other hand, it makes me wish that people would just learn to grow up, live and let live.

The only thing I ever have wanted is to be treated like an equal. Having a physical handicap does not deprive me of intelligence or social skills. I can read, write, and talk just like any other person, and being treated as if I cannot is very damaging to my self-esteem. I see myself as a normal person. A very challenged person, but normal. I don't want to be viewed as someone who can't do things. I want to be viewed as someone who is challenged to do things differently.

Just like Kat in the novella, handicapped teenagers struggle in their lives every day. Going an entire day without being picked on is a good day. Or not having to ask someone for help with the smallest task is an accomplishment. It's all a struggle that most people can only imagine, but for handicapped people like myself, it's an everyday thing.

It's important for people to understand our struggle because nothing can be done by just one person; it takes many people to build a bridge.

- Marcus Parks