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For all the fierce and furious girls,
especially Georgia Elizabeth



Like A Girl

My story starts with me running.

Heart racing.

Legs pumping.

Head empty.

Feet pounding on to the track.

Sweat trickling down my back.

Out here, the rules do not apply. I am wind, soaring above the ground as I push harder and harder. I am fire, wild and out of control as I race faster and faster.

I am girl.

My story starts with me running and I'm pretty sure that it ends that way too.



Wake Up Like A Girl

The gift is waiting on the end of my bed next to Midnight. Melissa must have put it there when she came in to plant a kiss on my head before she left for work early this morning. I lift my leg from under the covers to let my toes explore the shape and only when I have confirmed that it has the correct number of edges and corners do I open my eyes.

The flimsy curtains she's always promising to replace are failing to stop the sun from leaking into my room and I blink in the light, still sleep-fogged. But even half-asleep, I can feel the flutter of excitement in my stomach at the hope that she might have got it right; that this present might be the one thing I genuinely want.

Sitting up, I pull it towards me. The package is reassuringly heavy, but it's not a done deal yet. Last year

I asked for a sports watch and instead she gave me a set of biology books and a scientific calculator, both of which are still unopened. This wrapped box might look promising but there is always the possibility that it contains a blood pressure cuff and a poster of the inner workings of the human body.

“What do you think, Midnight?” I ask my cat. “Has Melissa actually paid attention to what I want for a change?”

Midnight gives me a disapproving look and shifts into a more comfortable position. She doesn't like it when I bad-mouth my mother – which is ironic, because I'm fairly sure that if she could speak then it would be in fluent snark.

It's not because my mother doesn't care, I know that. It's just that she still thinks that she knows what will make me happy better than I do. Her ultimate goal is to get me into medical school, and don't I know it.

Going along with it is what I do to make *her* happy.

I put the gift down on my legs and stare at it, savouring this moment before the inevitable disappointment. I'm warm here in my bed, with Midnight curled up by my feet and the sun filtering through the net, illuminating my beloved row of cacti on the window sill. I've still got

forty minutes before I need to get up and face school. I push away the usual wave of dread at the thought. This time, right now, might be the best part of my day and I'm in no rush to spoil it.

And yet – maybe, just maybe, my fourteenth birthday *could* get better than sitting here alone with an unopened present?

Quickly, before I can talk myself out of it, I rip off the paper and reveal the promising-looking box underneath. The logo is right. When I give it a shake, it has a hefty thud that makes me want to believe. And when I open the lid, it takes me a couple of blinks to see that she's done it. I do a quick check to make sure she's remembered my size, laughter bubbling up in my throat. Someone once sang that diamonds are a girl's best friend but that someone had clearly never seen the beautiful pair of trainers that now belong to me and that I have been coveting for months.

I reach down and pull them out of the box. There's a small envelope tucked into the left shoe. Melissa doesn't normally bother with a card, but when I open it, that's exactly what I find. The words *Trust That You Are Amazing, Strong & Brave* are scrawled across the front in a colourful rainbow font and inside is my mother's carefully printed, neat handwriting.

To Eden,
Happy Birthday!
Love, Mum xxx
P.S. I have the receipt if they don't fit.
P.P.S. I'll see you tonight to
celebrate with pizza.

I smile, despite myself. A day of school at Woodford High, then homework, then oven pizzas when Melissa finally gets back from her shift at the hospital are not what anyone would consider the perfect ingredients for a fun-filled birthday, but the trainers have lifted my mood.

Right now, that's all that matters.

A quick glance at my phone tells me I still have a spare thirty-five minutes before I need to get ready.

I also spot a notification that there's a new post on *Woodford Whispers*, but I have better things to do than waste my precious time looking at that. No doubt it will be another post celebrating Mikki, reigning star of the school track team, posing with yet another medal or trophy under her profile name of @silverbullet. She reinvented herself with this moniker at the start of Year Nine when she arrived back at school with newly dyed, and very striking, silver hair. It's meant to emphasize that she is incredibly small yet incredibly fast. Mikki is all about the quick

solutions, no matter what dirty shortcuts she has to take.

It takes seconds to change into my usual outfit of a tracksuit and T-shirt. I pull on a clean pair of socks and then ease first one foot and then the other into each trainer, wiggling my toes to check for comfort. The universe appears to be working in my favour today, which is a pleasant change, and the shoes fit like a dream. Standing up, I give Midnight a quick stroke and then send a *Thank you!!* text to my mother before heading for the door. At the last minute I go back for the card and shove it in my pocket, along with my phone.

For the record, I am not amazing, strong or brave. All I want is to be unseen, unremarkable and left alone.

And at Woodford High, that means keeping one step ahead of the spotlight of attention that is constantly sweeping, searching for new victims to thrust on to centre stage and humiliate in front of the entire audience.

Fortunately, keeping one step ahead is what I'm good at. Mostly, anyway.