



FAST GIRLS

A Novel of the
1936 WOMEN'S OLYMPIC TEAM

"A high-speed, heart-pounding
romp as ambitious as its trio of
track-star heroines. A gold medal
read from Elise Hooper!"

—KATE QUINN,
New York Times bestselling author

ELISE HOOPER

AUTHOR OF *THE OTHER ALCOTT*

P.S.

INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

FAST GIRLS

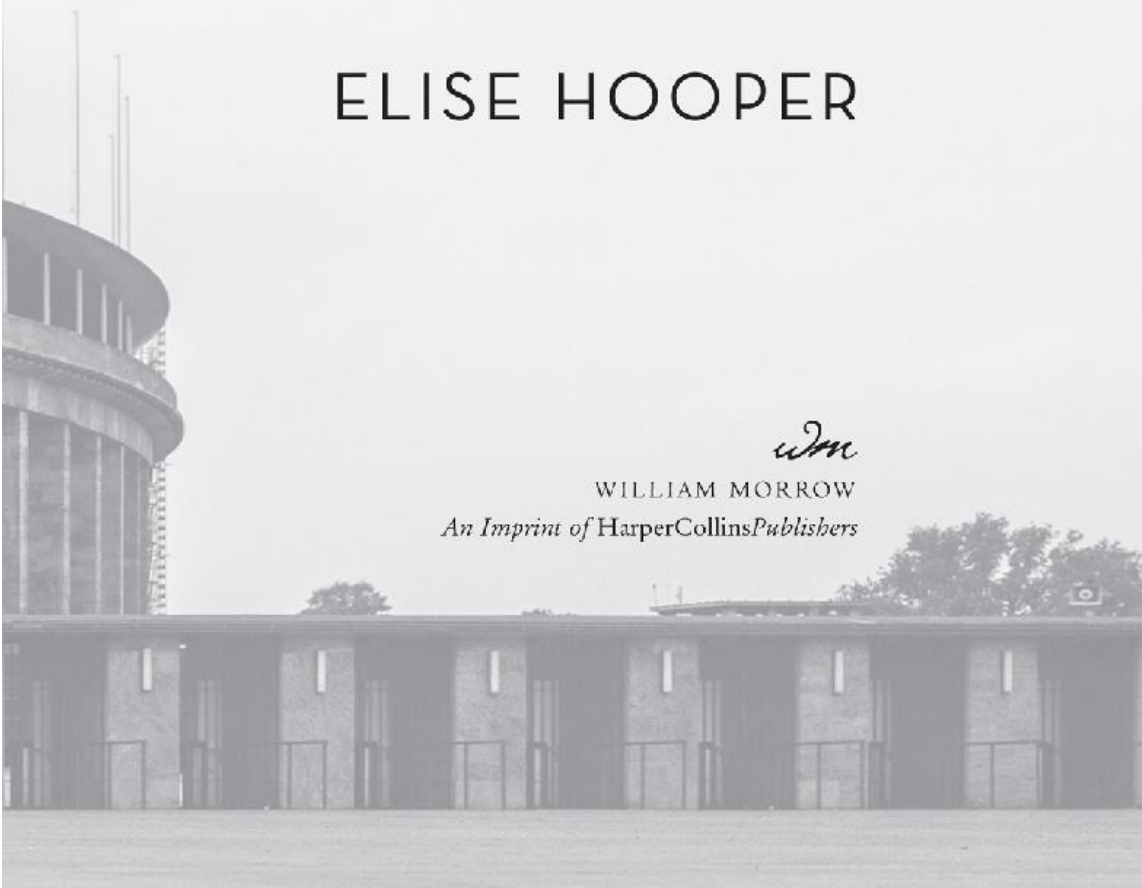
A Novel of the 1936 Women's Olympic Team

ELISE HOOPER

A stylized, handwritten-style logo of the letters 'wm' in a dark color.

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers



FAST GIRLS

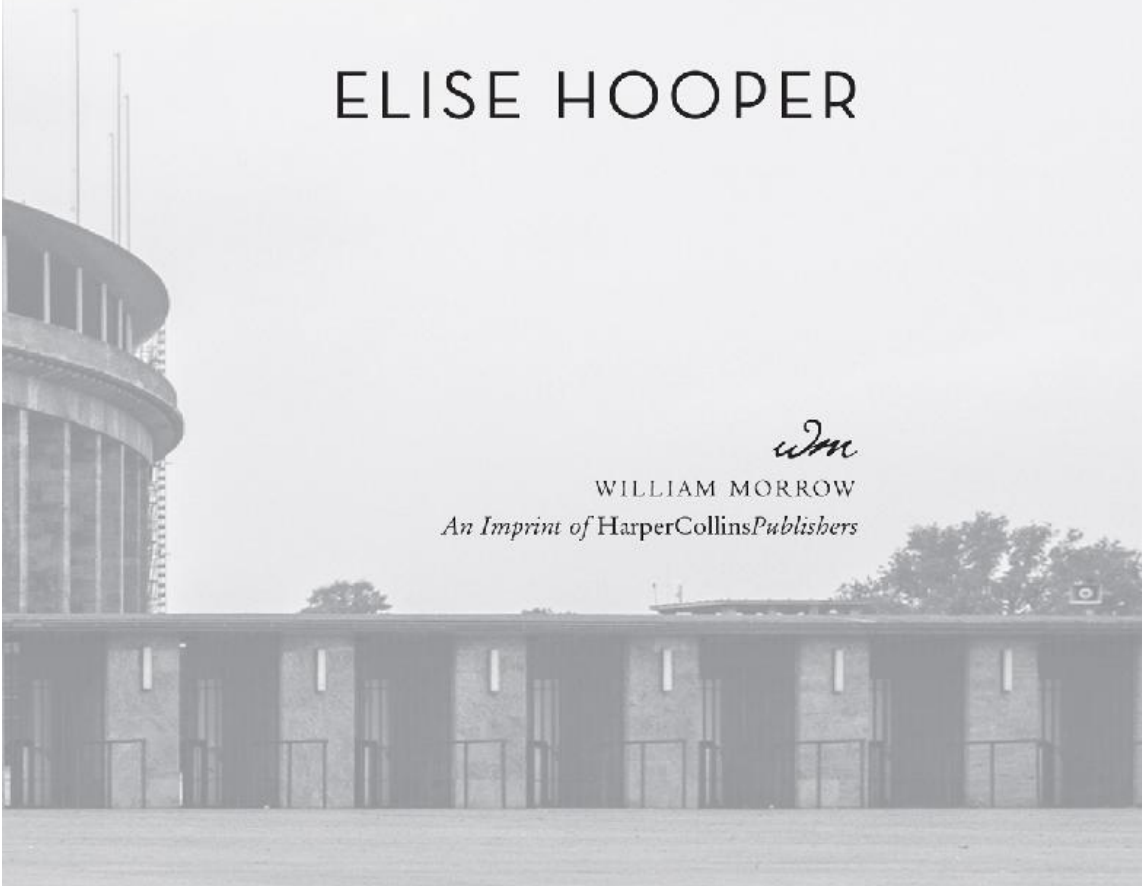
A Novel of the 1936 Women's Olympic Team

ELISE HOOPER

A stylized, handwritten-style logo for William Morrow, consisting of the letters 'wm' in a cursive script.

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers



[Dedication](#)

*For all who support young athletes, no matter the time of day, weather,
location, or score*

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Historical Note](#)

[Part 1: July 1928–December 1929](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

Part 2: July 1931–December 1932

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Part 3: March 1933–June 1936

Chapter 29

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Part 4: July–August 1936](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Afterword](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*P.S. Insights, Interviews & More . . . **](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*About the Book*](#)

[*Praise*](#)

[*Also by Elise Hooper*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*About the Publisher*](#)

[Historical Note](#)

During the 1920s and '30s, “athletics” referred to track and field events, but

given that this word has expanded over the years to include many different types of sporting events, the modern label of “track and field” is used throughout this novel.

All newspaper stories, letters, telegrams, and memos in this book have been created by the author and reflect the language and attitudes used to describe women athletes during their era.

[Part 1](#)

[July 1928–December 1929](#)

[1.](#)

July 1928

New York City

BEFORE THEY LEFT THE PRINCE GEORGE HOTEL, BETTY’S mother warned her to

be careful aboard the steamship and avoid the girls from California.

Apparently they were a loose set, something to do with year-round sun and mild temperatures softening one’s moral fiber. Up until that point Betty had only been half listening, but now she perked to attention. A roommate from some glamorous-sounding location like Santa Monica or Santa Barbara—wouldn’t that be a lark? With a series of decisive clicks, Betty fastened the latches closed on her suitcase and started for the door. Maybe if she was lucky, some of those objectionable girls from California would be her

cabinmates aboard the S.S. *President Roosevelt*.

Minutes later, Betty and her mother, Mrs. Robinson, sat in the back of a taxicab on their way to Pier 86. A heat wave had been pressing over New York City for a week, and Betty fanned herself while her mother fussed with their taxicab driver over the best route to take. Traffic clogged the street and newspaperboys hawked their wares, bobbing from one stopped vehicle to the next. Their driver bought one and rested it against the steering wheel, studying the headlines.

“Are you sure this is the fastest way?” Betty’s mother huffed.

“Ma’am, if there was a faster one, we’d be taking it, I promise. Now pray to the Virgin Mary that my engine doesn’t overheat.” He crossed himself.

As if on cue, the automobile shuddered and her mother inhaled sharply.

“Pray all you want, but my daughter simply cannot be late. She’s on the Olympic team set to depart for Amsterdam at noon.”

“That so?” He turned around to inspect Betty.

“Please, sir, keep your eyes on the road,” her mother said.

“But we’re not moving.”

Her mother folded her arms across her chest. “So I noticed.”

“I didn’t realize there were lady Olympians.”

“This is the first year women will be competing in running events,” her mother said, and though she still sounded annoyed with the man, the unmistakable pride in her voice made Betty sit straighter.

“Running doesn’t seem like a very ladylike business. Aren’t you worried she’ll become a bit manly if she keeps this up?” he asked, squinting at her from under the rim of his porkpie hat. “I could see encouraging rowing. Builds up the chest, you know.” He smirked.

“What an absurd notion, and anyway, she’s not running the marathon or undertaking anything too dangerous. She’s a sprinter.”

“If you say so,” said the driver, cracking his knuckles. Clearly, he was enjoying rankling her mother, and Betty hid her glee by turning to gaze at the throngs of people on the sidewalks. Heat rippled in the air above the pavement.

“Here we are,” the driver said, nosing his taxicab into a line of vehicles at the edge of the road. Band music floated over the crowd. When he opened the door, Betty paused on the running board, tenting her hand to study the S.S. *President Roosevelt* in the distance.

Red, white, and blue bunting decorated the ship’s decks, and its brass railings gleamed to a high shine, but it looked awfully small, its proportions unbalanced, especially when compared with the majestic vessels gracing

neighboring piers. It appeared Betty's journey was to begin with a steamship better suited to pleasure cruising in New York Harbor than the far more serious task of transporting America's Olympic team across the Atlantic.

Betty reached for the U.S. Olympic Team pass dangling around her neck and wrapped her fingers around it, taking comfort in the solidity of the thick card stock. *None of this was a dream.* Only several months earlier, the boys' track team coach spotted her sprinting for the train, and now here she was in New York City, a member of the inaugural women's track and field team bound for the Amsterdam Olympics. A flutter of anticipation surged through her.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day when lady runners would compete in the Olympics," the driver muttered, shaking his head as he fetched Betty's suitcase from the trunk of the taxicab. He straightened and searched their surroundings. "Now, where's a porter who can take this?" Betty reached for the luggage, but the man shook his head. "Aww, miss, you're a wee thing. Let's put a porter to work."

"I can do it."

"Impatient, are you?" He shrugged and placed it in front of her.

Betty leaned into the vehicle where her mother sat. "Well, this is it,

Mother. So long. I'll be sure to write." They embraced. When Betty pried herself free from her mother, her voile blouse stuck to her damp back.

"Make us all proud, dear."

"I will. Look for me in the newspapers," she said, winking.

Mother shook her head, but Betty detected a softening in her expression.

Mother had always been a staunch believer that a woman's name should appear in the papers only when she married and when she died, but since Betty's success had begun on the track, she seemed to have loosened her position.

Betty turned back to the crowd, lifted her suitcase, and stifled a groan. It was heavier than expected, but there was no way she would ask for help. She gritted her teeth and took a step past the driver.

"Best of luck to you, miss," he said.

She could barely stifle her delight. "I think you'll need it more than me.

You're the one staying behind with my mother."

THE TIDAL PULL of the crowd pushed Betty toward the gangway, where she

handed her suitcase to a liveried steward, and there was a moment when she glanced back to consider all that she was leaving behind. Her country, her family, everything that was familiar. But the moment was brief, because she hungered for the adventure of something new.

She pushed toward the plank and found General MacArthur at the top greeting everyone individually. The previous evening, at a meeting in the hotel's ballroom for the athletes and their families, he had been stern, but now when she reached him, he grinned. "Ah, Miss Robinson, the fastest girl in the Midwest. Ready to serve your country?"

His transformation from fearless leader to something akin to more of a garrulous uncle made her uneasy, like the uncomfortable feeling of overfamiliarity that comes from hearing someone use the lavatory or seeing the dark cloud of a man's chest hair through his shirt.

She forced a smile.

"Good, good. You'll find your chaperone in there and she has your cabin assignment. We've got you bunking with two other midwesterners. Chicago and St. Louis, I believe. You'll feel right at home."

St. Louis? What about those Californians? She hid her disappointment by thanking him in a cheerful voice and marched into a dizzying tumult of porters shouting directions and athletes gawking at the rails and calling out to the spectators lining the wharf below. Never before had she seen such a spectacle.

"Betty, dear, is that you?" Mrs. Allen, the track team chaperone, jostled through the crowd, huffing loudly as she fanned at herself with a sheaf of

paper. “Do you have your cabin number?”

“Yes,” Betty said, raising her pass. “How in the world does General MacArthur manage to remember everyone’s room assignments?”

“Follow me,” Mrs. Allen called over her shoulder as she waddled along the narrow corridor. “Oh, that General MacArthur, bless his heart. He appears to have a soft spot for the younger athletes. Now, how old are you again?”

“Sixteen.”

“Sixteen, my goodness. Well, you’re hardly the youngest. There are a few other high-school-age track and field girls and some swimmers and divers too. I believe little Eleanor Holm is fourteen and Olive Hasenfus can’t be much more than that. Good heavens, isn’t this heat wave dreadful? The *New York Post* is reporting that six people died yesterday, poor souls. I hope it goes away when we get out onto open water.” With her silk stockings and tightly fitting lilac-colored serge suit, it was easy to see why the woman had a steady stream of sweat rolling down her temples. She stopped by a door and checked her list. “Let’s see . . . yes, here we are. This is your cabin. It will be tight. I’m afraid we were supposed to be on a different ship, but it suffered a recent fire. So now everyone’s jammed aboard this one. All three hundred and fifty of us, dear me.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Yes, well, you’re going to have to be very careful and alert. We’re packed in here like sardines. You could get knocked over by gymnasts flipping on their mats on the C Deck, stabbed by the fencers or punched by the boxers on the Sun Deck, shot by the men competing in the modern pentathlon on the rear back deck, or kicked by the horses galloping on the treadmills set on the D Deck. I make it all sound positively lethal, but keep a lookout and you’ll be fine. Just wait until tomorrow when you try the track installed on the Promenade Deck. We’ve told the athletes doing field events that they are not to throw javelins and discuses while we’re out at sea. Too risky. The cyclists are only permitted to ride their bikes during certain times, but I’m sure they’ll be whizzing around without any respect for the rest of us.” She leaned over and said in a conspiratorial tone, “They can be a bit superior, but if you ask me, they look rather absurd on their little contraptions. And just wait until the boat starts rolling while they’re speeding around. Mark my words, it will knock them down a few pegs.” She gave a breathy giggle. “Now, General MacArthur plans to have a meeting up on the Promenade Deck once we’ve pushed offshore, and he will explain the assigned practice times. Just keep a cool head, follow directions, and everything will go smoothly.”

Betty's mind reeled. Stabbed? Shot? Kicked? What exactly had she signed up for? But then she looked at the matronly figure of Mrs. Allen buttoned up in her department store ensemble, topped with her carefully constructed beauty-salon coiffure. She didn't appear to be the type who would live too dangerously.

Mrs. Allen cleared her throat. "I can tell you're a good one. Everyone's been so skeptical of the girl runners. You know all of this talk about being morally objectionable? Well, it's ridiculous. And what of those girl swimmers and divers? Now, *they're* the ones who need to be watched closely. Between the two of us, it seems that prancing around in those little bathing costumes gives them airs. Why, they're just counting the days until they land film deals. In the meantime, they think they can get away with murder. Oh goodness, their chaperone"—she clucked—"that poor woman is going to have her hands full." A blast of the ship's horn made them both jump and Mrs. Allen placed her palm on her chest. "Mercy me, I need to get back up to the gangway to find some of the other girls and make sure they know where they're going." She frowned. "You're a quiet thing, but you can introduce yourself to the girls in your cabin, right? Can you do that?"

Betty nodded. "Yes, everything will be grand."

“There you go,” Mrs. Allen said over her shoulder as she hustled herself back toward the stairs.

Betty inhaled and gave a little knock on the cabin door before entering.

Two young women lounged on a pair of bunks; one had her head hidden behind a copy of *Photoplay*. A third empty bunk hung above the other two, its height clearly designating it as the least desirable of the set.

“Sorry, kid. This isn’t the nursery. Keep moving down the hall,” one of the women said, folding an arm behind her neck and stretching her lanky legs out on the thin wool blanket beneath her.

From the narrow space between the bunks, Betty looked back and forth at her cabinmates. She had a sister in her late twenties back at home, Jean, and Betty had always been relegated to being the baby of the family. No more. She dropped her suitcase. “I’m Betty Robinson, your other roommate.”

The second woman put down her magazine as she pushed herself into a sitting position and extended a hand toward Betty. “Don’t pay any attention to Dee. She’s deluded into thinking she’s a riot, poor thing. Hey, don’t I know you from home? You’re from Chicago, isn’t that right?”

Betty studied the woman. She appeared forthright and plain, her smile genuine.

“Yes, I’ve been training with the Illinois Women’s Athletic Club.”

“I’m on the South Side of the city and getting to the IWAC is a pain in the neck for me, so my boyfriend trains me. My name’s Caroline Hale and”—she pointed to the other woman—“that’s Dee Boeckmann. You’re another sprinter, right?”

“Yes, I’m running the hundred.”

“Trying to be the fastest women in the world, huh?” Dee asked with an air of self-importance. “I heard that Elta Cartwright is a real speed devil. Didn’t she win the trials? And then there are those Canadians—what are they calling them? The Matchless Six? Sounds like you two have your work cut out for you.”

Caroline flashed her palm at Dee to stop her. “Cripes, quit giving us such a hard time and loosen up. This is supposed to be fun, remember?” And with that, she raised a lipstick and traced it carefully around her mouth before plucking a battered pack of Lucky Strikes from her pocketbook lying on the edge of her bunk. “Want one?” she asked, holding it out.

Betty had never smoked before, but she was on the adventure of a lifetime, so why not? She slid one from the packet and leaned in for Caroline to light it. The smoke burned her throat as she inhaled and she coughed, but it felt sophisticated to hold a cigarette aloft. She took another

drag. Thankfully, the second try went down smoothly.

Dee frowned. “Couldn’t you two do that outside? I’m feeling a little seasick.”

“Already? We haven’t even shoved off from the dock yet. Don’t be such a killjoy.” Caroline swung her legs to the floor and balanced her cigarette between two long fingers as she stood, grinning. “But that’s not such a bad idea. What do you say, Betty, want to go out to the deck and see what kind of trouble we can get into? If we’re lucky, maybe Johnny Weissmuller will be out there in his swim trunks. Did you see the pool? It’s barely bigger than a piss pot.”

“There’s a pool?” Betty asked.

“Sure, how do you think the swimmers keep up their training?”

Caroline said.

“Say, why are you so interested in Johnny Weissmuller? Don’t you have a boyfriend?” Dee asked.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I can’t look. There’s no ring on my finger yet.” She winked at Betty, exhaled a long plume of smoke, and held the door open. “All right, well, that settles it. Put down your bag, Betty. Let’s take a tour of this place. If we’re lucky, the fellas will already be training with their shirts off. Let’s have some laughs. We’ve earned them! For God’s

sake, you know what I did to raise a little spending cash for this trip?"

"What?" Betty asked.

"I jumped out of a plane."

"On purpose?"

"Yep, I was paid twenty-five dollars to parachute out of a plane."

Dee snorted. "What on earth were you thinking?"

Caroline rolled her eyes. "I was thinking about making an easy twenty-five dollars, what do you think? I needed it. I'm the youngest of eleven kids, so it's not as if I could ask my parents for money. They're strapped."

"What did your fella think?" Betty asked.

"Oh, he thought it was nuts, but he's figured out that discouraging me is the best way to encourage me to do something, so he stayed quiet."

Betty laughed.

Caroline ran her fingers through her messy bob of dark hair. She seemed to offer fun even if she wasn't from California. Betty pinched some color into her cheeks before sashaying toward the door. "So, Dee, you're staying behind to memorize the Olympic oath?"

Caroline giggled.

"No, wait," Dee said, scrambling to her feet. "I'm coming too. The fresh air will do me some good."

There would be plenty of time to unpack later.

2.

A few months earlier

Thornton Township High School

15001 S. Broadway

Harvey, Illinois

February 27, 1928

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Robinson

3 East 138th Street

Riverdale, Illinois

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Harold Robinson,

This communication is intended to clear up a misunderstanding. Coach Price has brought it

to my attention that he believes your daughter possesses exceptional athletic abilities. After

seeing Betty run for the train last week, her speed impressed him and he invited her to train with

the boys' track team. While I applaud Coach Price's initiative and enthusiasm, I must set the

record straight on school policy: Betty cannot train with the boys' track team. In fact, the

Illinois State Athletic Association prohibits interscholastic competition for girls in track and

field events for good reason; it is well documented that women cannot be subjected to the same

mental and physical strains that men can withstand.

Upon reviewing Betty's academic record, I daresay she appears to have stellar grades and

commendations from all of her teachers, which leads me to believe that her future lies in the

direction of more wholesome and virtuous pursuits. Thornton Township High School offers

many wonderful opportunities to develop the intellect and extracurricular interests of its female

students. As John Locke once said, "Education begins the gentleman, but reading, good

company and reflection must finish him." Here at Thornton Township High School we are

certainly not narrow-minded enough to believe this sentiment extends only to gentlemen, but

also gentlewomen. Betty is off to a fine start in life. She is a conscientious student and keeps

good company, but she must have time for reflection to ready herself for her future role as wife,

mother, and citizen. It is important not to overburden this developing young feminine mind with

the distractions of sport and competition.

Sincerely,

Principal Umbaugh

From the Legal Offices of Lee, Maginnis & Finnell

MEMORANDUM

March 5, 1928

Dear Mr. Harold Robinson,

After your meeting with Principal Umbaugh yesterday in which you insisted upon

indulging your daughter's interest in training with the boys' track team, Thornton Public

School District disavows any responsibility for Elizabeth "Betty" Robinson's participation

in activities not befitting a female student. Enclosed is a waiver for you to sign that

declares Elizabeth is competing independently and entirely at her own risk.

Sincerely,

Mr. V. L. Maginnis, Esq.

THE CHICAGO EVENING STANDARD

June 3, 1928

Sporting Corner News

Soldier Field—In only her second sanctioned race, Elizabeth "Betty" Robinson of Riverdale

finished first place, beating national champion Helen Filkey at the Central American Athletic

Union meet by running the 100-meter sprint in 12 seconds flat, an unofficial new world record.

Due to high winds above acceptable levels, the new time will not stand, but it was enough to

earn the emerging track star an all-expenses-paid invitation to compete in the Olympic trials in

Newark, New Jersey, next month. For the first time in history, women will be competing in

several track and field events at the Ninth Olympiad in Amsterdam, and we wish young Betty

all the luck in the world as she competes to win a spot to represent the U.S. of A.!

The Western Union Telegraph Company

Received at Newark, NJ 1928 Jul 6 1:26 PM

CONGRATULATIONS ON QUALIFYING FOR OLYMPIC TEAM.
YOUR FRIENDS AT

THORNTON HIGH ALWAYS BELIEVED IN YOU. GOOD LUCK IN
AMSTERDAM!

PRINCIPAL UMBAUGH.

[3.](#)

July 1928

Fulton, Missouri

HELEN PLINKED OUT A FEW NOTES ON THE FAMILY'S UPRIGHT
Wurlitzer. The

woolly needlepointed piano seat scratched at the backs of her thighs. Her mind was supposed to be on Chopin, but instead she glanced out the window longingly before placing her fingers on the yellowed keys of the piano and wiggling herself into sitting straight. The sooner she was done practicing, the sooner she could get outside to play. She hit a C note and listened to it reverberate off the walls of the faded parlor. If only she could play a melody that swelled dramatically, fanned the still air, moved things around a bit—wouldn't that be grand?

She tried a chord. Nothing changed. If anything, the twang of the slightly out-of-tune piano just made everything feel flatter, hotter, more oppressive.

Every minute Ma made her sit in front of the piano reaffirmed the futility of harboring dreams of her musical talents. Even at ten years old, Helen understood the likelihood that she would ever become a virtuoso musician felt as far-fetched to her as owning an elephant as a pet. It simply wasn't going to happen.

Helen stopped playing and tilted her head, straining to listen for sounds of Ma working in the kitchen. Nothing. The only sound came from the parlor's window, where Doogie's nails were clicking against the wooden planks of the porch. Helen crept to the screen door without making a sound

and peeked outside. Sure enough, the dog lay in her usual spot next to the wooden rocker, paws jerking as she ran in her sleep. Helen opened the door and tiptoed across the porch. Doogie's bloodshot eyes flickered open, and without raising her head, she watched Helen from under half-opened lids. Helen's gaze swept the area, looking for action, a game, something of interest. A lone shingle lay near the stairs. She reached for it and, without thinking—it was too hot for thinking—stuck it into her mouth, clenching it between her teeth. Though she kept her tongue away from the splintery surface, the taste of dust and the powdery grit of dried-out wood filled the insides of her mouth. She shook her head back and forth and barked, trying to get a reaction from Doogie.

Nothing.

The creature only furrowed her furry brow in puzzlement. It wasn't until Helen bent over and clapped her hands and stamped her feet that Doogie's tail started to wag. The dog rose and stretched from her haunches, extending her back legs one at a time. As she watched Helen's antics, the rhythm of her wagging tail increased.

Helen turned and ran down the stairs, hoping Doogie would chase her.

With each step, the creases behind her knees felt slippery with sweat, but she wanted to run, feel the air move around her, no matter how hot it was.

She wanted escape, action, and freedom from tedium.

She aimed for the front gate. When she was running as fast as she could, she turned and found Doogie loping along beside her. At that moment, Helen's foot caught on something. Maybe it was one of Bobbie Lee's toy trucks, or a gardening trowel of Ma's, or maybe just one of her big feet got in the way—she never figured it out.

But she flew.

She sailed over the flat ground and marveled at the surrounding stillness. The dusty brown yard. The fields stretching beyond the fence. The silent barn. And then she landed with a *whoomph!*

Pain screamed through her chin, lips, and neck. Everything burned.

With the wind knocked out of her, she simply lay in the cloud of dust, lungs straining, eyes tearing from the pain, mind reeling. Doogie's snout poked her cheek, her breath snuffling hot against Helen's face. A gurgling sound came from her own throat. She tasted copper in her mouth. She wanted to cough, but something blocked her throat and a bib of blood appeared to be blooming over her pale yellow cotton work shirt. Doogie barked, quick staccato sounds that made the hair on Helen's arms stand at attention. She tried to pull the shingle from her mouth, but it hurt too much and, defeated, she dropped her hands back to the ground.

From behind her, the screen door banged open. Ma screamed. Bobbie Lee's high voice whimpered. A stampede of feet. The toes of Pa's scuffed work boots appeared and a towel was pressed into her neck. Voices rose and fell, but what were they saying? She stopped trying to understand. Her throat burned as if consumed by flames. She closed her eyes and faded from her surroundings.

From far away, Doogie continued to bark.

WHITE SHEETS, WHITE walls. An unnatural, sterile sense of blankness surrounded Helen. She couldn't move her head.

"Helen," Ma's voice said gently from somewhere beside her. "We're at the hospital. You've had an accident. Don't try to talk."

She tried to swallow but it felt like trying to jam a boulder down her throat. She gagged, unable to breathe. Her eyes watered.

"There, there," Ma murmured, but Helen couldn't see her. She wanted to move, adjust herself from the overwhelming sense of stiffness, but she couldn't. She wanted to look around, but she couldn't. Her eyes now watered from frustration, not just pain.

"Bertie, is she awake?"

"Yes," Ma answered.

"Aha, here she is." A man's voice hovered farther away, low and calm,

and then a round face with glasses and gray hair bobbed into her vision. Dr. McCubbin. “Helen, we need to stop meeting like this.” Cold hands cupped her cheeks, lifted up her eyelids, prodded her chest. “Your broken wrist mended a lot more easily than this will, but sit tight. I’ve performed a small procedure that will leave you feeling tired for a spell. In fact, you’re going to need a quiet summer. Lots of rest and no talking. You’ve punctured an important part of your throat and it’s going to need time to heal properly.” The doctor disappeared from Helen’s line of vision. The white wall returned. Her mother’s voice drifted past her, along with the doctor’s. She closed her eyes and slid into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

4.

July 1928

Malden, Massachusetts

LOUISE’S HEART HAMMERED. THE GROUND SPED PAST and gravel pinged off her

shins, but she didn’t let up.

When her basketball teammates had led her to the railroad tracks and pointed down the long straightaway, she almost hadn’t believed them. *This* was where the track club trained? She had been running along these tracks for as long as she could remember and knew this section like the palm of her hand. With a shrug, Louise set off in a pack with the others, not wanting

to shoot to the front right away, especially since she was one of the youngest girls out there. She'd be fifteen in the fall and attend the high school. At this point, it was best to fit in, get a read on the different girls. Only after they were done warming up and Coach Quain had explained the interval workout did she allow her gait to lengthen. She rocketed to the front, savoring the feeling of letting loose. When she ran, her thoughts faded and the burn of exertion took over. It hurt, but that was part of running's draw, hitting the delicate balance between pain and release. It was a relief, a reprieve from thinking too much. From remembering.

When she reached the railroad tie with a splash of red paint on its end, she slowed, turned, and dashed back to where Coach Quain waited, stopwatch in hand. The other girls trailed behind her, their faces splotchy and strained with exertion.

Louise was fast.

For as long as she could remember she had run everywhere.

When most people walked, she ran.

But then there was the accident with her sister and running changed. It became less about having fun and more about testing herself. She *needed* to be fast. She had memories, painful ones, that reminded her she would never be fast enough to save what was important.

When her basketball teammates encouraged her to go to Coach Quain, the man who sponsored the Onteora Track Club, she wasn't sure she could do it, yet a curious longing in her wouldn't let up. Could a stopwatch tell her something she didn't already know?

Suddenly, the earth seemed to quake. The five o'clock train from the city roared past. She blinked her eyes to keep from getting dizzy as it clattered along beside her, a streak of glistening metal, smoke, and moving parts. Pale faces pressed to the windows, a few grinning and waving. Not until it rounded the bend and disappeared did its import sink in.

Five o'clock.

She needed to get home. Emily could be left in charge only for so long. Louise summoned a final burst of effort and Coach Quain blurred as she sprinted past him and then slowed.

He whistled, looking at his stopwatch. "Now, look at that. You're the speediest girl I've ever seen."

Pride stirred in her chest.

"You don't even look winded," he marveled, appraising her up and down.

In truth, she felt exhausted but had no intention of revealing how hard she had been working. The other girls ran past, their eyes glassy with

fatigue, sweaty hair plastered to their foreheads. The exposed skin on their bare legs and arms looked pale, mottled, and vulnerable to the blazing-hot sun, but the darkness of Louise's skin hid the sizzle of blood coursing through her veins. In a town full of fair-skinned Irish, Louise was from one of the few black families, but Coach Quain didn't appear to give the color of her skin a second thought.

"I hope you'll join us. With your natural ability, think how fast you'll get with a little training and coaching. What do you say?"

"Thank you, sir, but I need to talk to my parents."

"You do that. We'll be back out here tomorrow. Same time, same place. You're young, and I wouldn't put you in any big meets until next year, although some time trials later this summer season might be useful. Could be good training for a girl with so much potential like you." He held *The Boston Globe* out in front of him and pointed to a page. "Did you know girls are running in the Olympics this year? All the way over in Europe? Who knows? Maybe one day this could be you."

Louise nodded as she jogged away, but she had no idea what he was talking about. Girls racing in Europe? She veered off the railroad tracks and loped along the sidewalk past modest brick houses lining the streets.

Figures visible in the windows went about their evening routines. Dinner

dishes clattered. Cooking smells wafted along the evening air. Fried onions.

Roasted chicken. Freshly baked bread. Her stomach rumbled in response.

When Louise reached her family's dark shingled house, she cut across the lawn, took the porch steps two at a time, pushed the front door open.

"Louise, that you?" Emily's voice called from the back of the house.

Louise glided down the hallway, past closed doors, and entered the kitchen to find her sisters—Emily, Julia, and Agnes—and brother standing around the kitchen table. Emily and Julia both held books in their hands while grass stains covered Junior's trousers.

"I'm here, I'm here. Sorry, it went later than I expected. Let me wash up and I'll be in to start dinner. Junior, go clean up. Girls, set the table, please."

"Did you make the team?" Junior asked, his wide dark eyes shining in anticipation.

"Yes." She paused in the door of the washroom. "But now don't you go saying anything about it to Mama yet. Understand?"

"When you gonna ask 'em?" Julia asked.

"Not sure." A sense of guilt eclipsed the triumph that had fueled her run home. How could she fit running on a track team into all of her responsibilities?

Moments later, she was back in the kitchen assembling plates of cold

roasted chicken from the icebox and making a potato salad. The sound of the front door wheezing open caused all of their heads to swivel toward the hallway entrance. Mama and Papa were home.

“How are you all?” Mama asked, working her way around the table, kissing the tops of everyone’s heads. Louise breathed in her mother’s smell of laundry soap. It was Tuesday, washing day over at Mrs. Grandaway’s house, where Mama worked as a domestic. She would be extra tired from wrestling with the wringer all afternoon.

After Mama and Papa retired to their room to change out of their uniforms, homework was set aside, Julia set the table for dinner, and then they all sat and clasped hands, heads bowed.

“Thank you, Lord, for this fine meal and for granting us another day to live in your good grace.” Papa looked around the table. “Anyone want to add anything?”

“Lord, thank you for making me the best pitcher in Malden.” From under his long fringe of dark eyelashes, lashes that Mama always lamented were wasted on a boy, Junior looked at everyone with an impish smile. “I struck out a bunch of the boys at the park today.”

“Please, Lord, grant Junior humility,” Mama said with a sigh, though the wrinkles around her eyes crinkled in amusement.

“I been thinking about Baby Grace today and hope God’s found her some kind angels who take care of her and play with her so she doesn’t get bored and whiny,” Agnes said, her lisp making the seriousness of what she was saying take a moment to sink in.

Mama let out a whimper that was halfway between a gasp and a sob.

“No one gets bored and whiny in heaven,” Emily corrected. “It’s perfect there.”

“Well, I hope those angels are nice and give her some of those peppermints she loved,” Agnes said, her little sharp chin jutting out in indignation.

The kitchen stilled for a moment. Thinking about Grace caused a pain to shoot straight through Louise’s heart. How could she have been so foolish as to leave her brother and sisters alone for a couple of hours? How could she risk something like what had happened to Grace happening again?

Right there, she decided she would not return to practice with the Onteora Track Club. Not the next day or any day after that. How could she have been so selfish? She had failed to look after her siblings properly once and she would never make that mistake again.

Papa cleared his throat. “I hope he’s keeping our baby close and giving her everything she wants too, sweetheart. Now let’s enjoy some of this

wonderful meal that Louise put out for us.”

The tenor in the room shifted, loosened a little, and without looking at each other, everyone raised their forks to begin eating, but Louise’s appetite had vanished. A hollowed-out sense of grief and failure weighed upon her, heavy and suffocating.

AFTER DINNER, LOUISE scrubbed the dishes as Mama settled the younger

children in bed. The house’s creaks quieted and the sound of crickets floated over her as Papa opened the kitchen door to have his evening smoke on the back stoop. Louise sat at the table, awaiting her allotment of evening mending work. When Mama joined her, she took a few items from her basket, angled herself toward the light, pulled out one of Junior’s shirts, and handed it to Louise, pointing to the spot where a button needed to be sewn on. Mama bowed her head, placed her needle at one end of a tear in Papa’s gardener’s uniform, and began stitching. Moments later, Papa came back into the house, rested a hand on Mama’s shoulder, and looked at Louise.

“When Dr. Conway arrived home this evening, he mentioned seeing you today. Said you were running along the train tracks like a bear was chasing you.”

Louise’s hand with the needle froze midair. The last time she had seen Dr. Conway was seven years ago, when she had raced over to the man’s

house, frantic to find Papa. Dr. Conway had been working in his home office, and when Louise spluttered out the story of what had gone wrong, he insisted the three of them ride back to the Stokes home in his automobile, but their speedy return was not enough to save little Grace. The tiny girl had spent four days unconscious, burns covering her small body, before she succumbed to her injuries.

In a flash, Louise could be back in that moment when she entered the kitchen to find flames licking at little Grace's pretty blue striped pinafore. That awful smell of burning fabric, hair, and skin could return to Louise all too easily and unexpectedly—when she brushed her hair in the morning; when she sat in English class contemplating an assignment; when she set the table for dinner. Each time, grief could still descend upon her with startling intensity that, even seven years later, left her reeling.

Every night before Louise fell asleep, she replayed the memory of when she had found her sister, matches strewn around her, flames lighting the kitchen floor like fallen stars. She couldn't help herself. Reliving that afternoon had become part of a sickening ritual for sleep and she couldn't stop it. If she replayed the afternoon step by step, she slept deeply and dreamlessly, but if she tried to push the memory away, it prowled around the corners of her mind, rearing up and clawing throughout the night as she

tried to sleep. Each time, she fixated on the moment when she froze, watching her sister scream. She had been slow to throw the tablecloth over Grace and beat at the flames, and even slower to run for help. Her legs had felt spongy and her feet ungainly as she made her way to Dr. Conway's house. The panic binding her chest had left her unable to breathe, and she felt sick to her stomach. Why had she been so slow? Would Grace still be alive if Louise had run faster?

Louise stared at the pale pink puckered burn scar along her left hand, the visible reminder of all that had gone wrong that horrible afternoon. In a flat voice, she said, "I was invited to try out for the Onteora Track Club. Dr. Conway must have seen me running with them earlier today."

Mama glanced up from her sewing.

Her father took a seat at the table. "Did you make the team?"

"Doesn't matter because I'm not going to do it. There's too much to do here."

"It's true, you have responsibilities, but you've always loved to run. Is this something you want to do?" Mama asked.

"No, ma'am."

Mama placed her mending on the table and shook out her hands, exchanging a look with Papa. "It strikes me that your sisters and brother are

getting old enough to handle themselves a bit . . .” Her voice trailed off. The ticking of the kitchen clock filled the room. “Listen, Louise, what happened with Grace was an accident. It’s too big a burden for a girl your age to carry.”

“It’s too big a burden for anyone to carry,” Papa said in a low tone.

Mama bowed her head a moment. When she raised it, her eyes were shiny and she reached for Louise’s hand.

“Dr. Conway said your running was a sight to behold. What you’ve got is a God-given gift, it is,” Papa said. An unmistakable glow of pride showed on his face.

Mama’s hands, dry and calloused, gripped Louise’s tightly. “As long as you keep up on your schoolwork, you have our blessing to try this, see what happens. You’ll be going to the high school this fall. Seems like a good time to let your brother and sisters take on more responsibility.”

“But they—”

“I’ll handle them. It’ll be fine.”

Louise considered how she had felt leading the pack as she raced past Coach Quain. For those few minutes, the pit of sorrow and guilt she carried had dulled. The self-consciousness she felt about her dark skin had eased. Her mind quieted and she existed only as a body in motion, powerful and

free. She wanted to feel that way again.

She nodded. "I'll try it."

THE CHICAGO EVENING STANDARD

July 30, 1928

"Dispatch from the IX Olympiad: What's the Matter with the Americans?"

Amsterdam—American athletes have always run roughshod over the rest of the world in track

and field events, but in the most stunning reversal in Olympic history, the men from the United

States are experiencing one setback after another. Before shoving off from New York, Major

Gen. MacArthur insisted his American team had nine gold medals "all sewn up," but that

prediction appears to be unraveling as three of those nine events have already been won by

other countries. At this rate, the American flag won't be waved from the winner's podium

once. Team managers and coaches are quick to point out that Amsterdam does not have its

facilities ready, and the team is stuck living aboard the S.S. *President Roosevelt* and contending

with everything from a leaky pool to tennis courts of differing sizes to a swampy track. Dutch

engineers are busy at work fixing the venues.

When Olympic officials advised the women's swim and dive teams to train in the harbor,

they headed to Paris on a shopping excursion. "If they think I'm dipping a toe into that icky

water," said perky fourteen-year-old swimming champion Miss Eleanor Holm of California,

"they have another think coming!"

The dreary weather is also being blamed as less than ideal for peak performances, but all

nations are training under the same sky, and rain clouds do not appear to be targeting only the

American athletes.

Team managers have been grumbling about the lack of recovery time for the athletes.

"With the Olympic trials a mere couple of days before departing for Europe, our fellows had to

work too hard to qualify and now they're out of steam," explains one coach. And it is not just

the men. Uncle Sam's fleetest sprinter, Miss Elta Cartwright of California, is sick, leaving the

door open for one of Canada's speedy lady runners to win gold.

But aside from unfinished facilities, bad weather, and illness, reports are surfacing that the

main problem for American athletes might be that they are spending too much time in the

buffet line aboard the S.S. *President Roosevelt*. It seems our athletes have been under the false

impression that pie eating has been added as an Olympic event! In fact, the ship's supply of ice

cream ran out midway across the Atlantic. At last check with the team's coaching staff, eating

dessert does not count as training.

When asked if he wanted to revise his initial prediction about the team's success, Major

Gen. MacArthur responded, "We have not come three thousand miles to lose gracefully, but

rather to win, and win decisively. Just wait and see."

Well, we're waiting.

5.

July 1928

Fulton, Missouri

DR. McCUBBIN HADN'T BEEN JOKING WHEN HE TOLD Helen that her summer

would be quiet. She felt like she had been stuck in bed forever. Through the languid days of July, Helen read *The Boxcar Children*. She read it so many times, she started creating her own stories about Henry, Jessie, Violet, and

Benny in her head, but one morning Ma left *The Missouri Daily Observer* next to Helen's bed, and she picked it up. The paper was a couple weeks old, but it was something different.

Helen thumbed through the sections until she noticed an article titled "Chicago's Betty Robinson to Sail for the Olympics," and read about a sixteen-year-old girl from Chicago who could run so fast that she was being sent to Amsterdam, a small city in the Netherlands, to compete against athletes from every far-flung country on earth. Argentina, Estonia, Egypt, India, Japan, New Zealand, Rhodesia, South Africa—yes, *everywhere*, it seemed.

Helen reached to her dresser and pulled her beloved globe onto her lap.

Mama often quizzed her on the locations of various countries and cities and Helen had won a school geography bee the previous year. She spun the globe so the United States faced her and then she leaned in. She found *Chicago* and traced the letters of its name crawling across the blue of Lake Michigan. Slowly, she rotated the globe, sliding her index finger across the wide expanse of the Atlantic until she reached the coast of Europe and the huge green expanse of *France*. Just north lay a tiny blob of yellow marked *Belgium* and, above that, there was a splotch of pink labeled *Netherlands*. Quite a distance separated Chicago from the Netherlands. What would it be

like to get on a ship and travel so far from home?

Helen placed the globe on the bedspread next to her and clutched the newspaper closer, scanning the article to find where it described how athletes from countries all over the world would convene to participate in a series of competitions. All thoughts of *The Boxcar Children* paled next to the cast of characters described in the newspaper article. Boxers. Cyclists. Gymnasts. Equestrians. Soccer and field hockey players. Most of the athletes would be men, but a small group of women would also be competing, including Betty. This would be the first time women could compete in track and field events.

A grainy photograph of the girl from Chicago caught Helen's eye. A man stood next to her. Even in the black-and-white image, anyone could plainly see how tightly his arm wrapped around the girl's shoulders, how wide his smile stretched. According to the article, the man was the girl's father and it quoted him saying, "Without any sons, I never imagined I'd have a girl competing in athletics. I couldn't be prouder of her."

Helen read his quote over and over. She couldn't imagine her stern-eyed father ever saying something similar. Frank Stephens didn't believe in spending time on doling out compliments. His life was one of singular focus: farming. He believed in operating his 140-acre farm the old-

fashioned way: with guts and muscle. No newfangled John Deere machines for him, thank you very much. Even at ten years old, Helen understood that part of Pa's disdain for tractors and threshers stemmed from his inability to pay for the equipment. He farmed his land with a horse and plow and dismissed what he called "the easy way to a dollar."

In the photo of Betty, her short blond hair curled to frame her face. Her grin glimmered off the page as if she hadn't a care in the world. Helen smiled back at the image. She tried to forget the birthmark staining her forehead, her unruly hair, enormous feet, and clumsy limbs, but her smile slackened thinking of how her classmates taunted her with *Helen the Huge* and *Smelly Hellie*.

She sighed, folding the article so the picture of Betty disappeared from view. Helen could run fast—none of the boys at school would dispute *that*—but being someone like Betty Robinson felt about as achievable as becoming Queen of England. Still, she opened the newspaper again to view the article once more.

Could Betty really win?

Helen pulled the page with Betty's story from the newspaper and tucked it under her bed, vowing to keep her eyes out for more updates. She needed to see what would happen next to this girl.

6.

August 1928

Amsterdam

ABOARD THE FERRY ON HER WAY TO CENTRAL STATION, Betty drummed her

fingers along the window's railing. Clouds scudded low overhead, the morning's downpour having done little to rid the air of humidity. It was the day of the 100-meter finals and she was the only American woman left competing. She wrapped her arms around her belly to stop the flip-flopping sensation inside her. Deep inhalations would help, but who wanted to breathe in the putrid stench of the canal's brackish water?

When Betty and her teammates arrived at the stadium, they exited the bus and stood on the sidewalk, shifting their weight from foot to foot, awed by the throngs of spectators bustling past and the honking from snarled traffic.

Caroline reached out and squeezed Betty's hand. "Good luck. Knock 'em dead."

Betty thanked her as the rest of the girls crowded round, rubbing her shoulders and slapping her back. Mrs. Allen brushed Betty's hair off her forehead. "Go get changed and I'll meet you in the locker room after settling the girls in some seats."

Betty said goodbye to her friends. They strolled away giggling about something and Betty watched them, twisting the edge of her Peter Pan collar between her fingers. She squared her shoulders and entered the long corridor to the locker room. The thud of her heels striking the ground echoed with each step she took. A metallic-smelling mixture of rainwater and newly poured cement wafted over her.

She entered the locker room and found three Canadians gathered between a row of lockers, talking and laughing. In the next row, two Germans sat on the bench between the lockers, their expressions serious as they cleaned dirt from their running spikes. Betty passed them, found an empty row, dropped her bag on a bench, and slumped down next to it, gnawing on the cuticle of her index finger.

Never had she felt so alone.

If only Caroline or Elta was there with her. Even Dee would have been better than being alone. Her heel jiggled up and down, but she pressed on it to stop. *I cannot be nervous anymore. I've got a job to do.* She repeated these two sentences over and over. Each time she recited them, her mind cleared a little from the anxiety swirling inside it. She stood, shook out her legs, and hopped up and down a few times. Her shoulders dropped, the jitters in her belly settled. She closed her eyes, raised her hands above her

head, and pictured herself leaning into the finish tape. *Yes!* Opening her eyes, she smiled, bent over her bag, and pulled out her white shorts and top, along with her navy-blue sweat suit.

Once she'd changed, she sat down to put on her track shoes. First, she slid her foot into her left shoe and laced it, listening to the guttural sound of the German athletes talking.

She started to slide her right foot into her other shoe, but her toe jammed inside.

Perplexed, she lifted the shoe for closer inspection. Her breath caught.

It was a second left shoe.

Two left shoes! How had this happened? Panic rose inside her. She spun toward her bag, rummaging through it to find a shoe for her right foot.

Nothing. She blinked. Could she run barefoot? Even if officials allowed it, which she doubted, the sharp surface of the track would ruin her feet.

Clutching the shoe to her chest, she ran, limping unevenly on one shoe, toward the door of the stadium. With each step, the roar of the crowd became louder and louder. As she lunged for the doorknob, it opened toward her. Mrs. Allen stepped into the locker room, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting.

“Heavens, Betty, you nearly gave me a fright.” She raised a hand to her

chest. “Are you ready, dear?”

“I have two left shoes. I . . .” Betty stammered. “I own two pairs of track shoes and somehow I grabbed only the left ones this morning.” Saying the words out loud made her predicament real and she blinked back tears.

“What am I going to do?”

“All right, all right, don’t panic. You stay here. I’ll hurry down and speak with Coach Sheppard to see what he thinks. You go back and sit down.”

“But what about my race? Doesn’t it start soon?”

Mrs. Allen inspected her wristwatch. “Yes, dear, it does. Sit tight. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Betty’s hands dropped to her sides and she returned to her bench and sat, her head falling into her hands. The Canadians passed by on their way to the doorway, looking curiously at her. Betty’s face burned. Somewhere nearby, a leaky faucet dripped, each drop echoing through the otherwise silent room. Her throat tightened and tears burned at the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away. This was not the time to fall apart.

From a distant corner of the locker room, a door slammed. Footsteps slapped along the floor, getting louder and louder. “Betty? Betty? Where are you?” Caroline rounded the corner and stopped, panting. “Whew, that was