

The
RUNNING GIRL

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A NOVEL BY
Dan Blankenship

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	7
Prologue	9
Chapter 1: His Message.....	11
Chapter 2: Special Delivery	23
Chapter 3: The Crucifixion.....	31
Chapter 4: The Proof.....	41
Chapter 5: Lunch Time.....	47
Chapter 6: Sharing the Vision	53
Chapter 7: The First Race	61
Chapter 8: Different Gifts	75
Chapter 9: Making a Difference.....	81
Chapter 10: History Lesson.....	87
Chapter 11: The Healing	101
Chapter 12: Exposing Nero's Guard	113
Chapter 13: Spiritual Battle	129
Chapter 14: The Possession.....	133
Chapter 15: After the Battle	155

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8 • The Running Girl

Mom, thanks for all you do and all you've done. Dad, I hope you have already read this, in heaven. I'll expect a book report on it when I arrive!

Pastor Winston Hunt, thank you for being an awesome man of God! I am so glad God had us cross paths. May Jesus continue to keep his hand upon you and Danny.

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Prologue

Daddy, God spoke to me in a dream last night!”
“He did, Kylee? What did He say?” Her statement caught me off guard. I had always raised our children to know God, but this was the first time any of us had claimed to actually physically hear Him. I leaned over to get a closer look into Kylee’s eyes, examining her demeanor for a hint of falsehood. I saw none. I could sense she was not playing a joke on me. Her solid blue marbles, accentuated by her summer-bleached hair, seemed to pierce through to the back of my head.

“I’m serious, Daddy!” she said.

“Okay hon,” I responded, “I just wanna know what He said, sweetheart.”

“He said ‘They will run and not get weary. They will walk and not faint.’ That’s what he said, Dad.”

CHAPTER 1

His Message

The smell of freshly cooked bacon penetrated my dream world on this mid-August morning. It's always a good morning when one wakes from a friendly dream and has a good tasting breakfast on the way. This was going to be a good morning. But little did I know it was going to be a morning that would forever change the lives of a loving family of four. Loving—that would be the best way to describe us: a close-knit family, enjoying life and feeling very blessed. We were about to become a little too blessed.

As I came out of my bedroom, dressed in my usual sleeping attire, black gym shorts and black sleeveless T-shirt, I noticed that both of my daughters' rooms were unoccupied. I was surprised that Kylee and Shelbey would both be awake so early on a Saturday morning. Their beds were even made, causing me to give a quiet “Wow” as I passed by their open doorways.

“What was that, honey?” Sharon called up the stairs.

“Umm . . . nothing,” I replied. I decided to downplay this pleasant surprise, having weighed the chances that Sharon—my lovely wife for the last thirteen years—would make too big a deal about

the girls' act of self-discipline. Children, especially ours, like to do things once in a while without an onslaught of warm-fuzzies. I imagine the other reason I didn't answer Sharon's query is because I was a little disoriented this morning; five consecutive thirteen-hour days managing the grocery store had taken its toll on me. Sleep had been welcomed, and if not for the good smell drawing me towards the kitchen, I would have ended up sleeping in a little longer than usual.

Saturday mornings are a special time for the entire Mantle family. We always plan a family activity for the day and usually everything works out fine, with the exception of the time we went horseback-riding; only to discover not a one of us could stay on a horse while riding English-style. I can't believe people actually jump things while saddled that way!

This morning, the four of us had planned a three mile jog down the Crown Point "Rails to Trails" running and bike path. The program to change all of the unused railroad lines into bike and running paths, using federal and local government funds, was a complete success in our area. It wouldn't be long before every community in northwest Indiana would be connected by these asphalt arteries. Politicians, sports enthusiasts, and environmentalists had found a common cause, and it was one of the few government projects that even I believed in. I consider most government projects a waste of taxpayers' money. And since I have paid a great deal of taxes, I felt a little resentment toward those that were so callous with my hard-earned greenbacks.

After our jog, which most people would call a "run" due to its fast pace, we planned on taking a trip to a popular local restaurant. Hawkeye's, located in downtown Crown Point, is Kylee's favorite place to eat. She had been doing so well running in local races, even landing her picture on the front page

of the sports section a few times, Sharon and I felt this would be a pleasant reward for her.

Shelbey ran road races too, but her first choice was playing basketball. She loved to play basketball day or night, rain or shine, but we drew the line at the first sign of lightning. She could beat most of the boys on our block. Our running had increased her stamina to above the neighborhood standards, which gave her an edge she capitalized on quite a bit. Some of her peers even refused to compete against her on a basketball court.

Most of the road races we ran were five-kilometer all-street races, but occasionally we ran a longer race, or one on a cross-country course. Five kilometers is equal to 3.1 miles, and this distance seemed just perfect for the whole family; long enough to get a good workout, but short enough that we could compete with others in our age groups. That is how awards are handed out at each race. If a runner is among the top three finishers in the “five year” age group divisions, an award is given. Even though we win quite a few races, the real goal is to be able to try and beat your own personal record. At every event, the biggest race seems to be against yourself. The local 5K scene consisted of runners at every age level, as well as every performance level. We had made a lot of new friends through running, and grew fonder of the sport every day.

Many of the runners we met told us Kylee was a natural at the sport. She was just two weeks shy of eight years old—two years younger than Shelbey—but she had been right behind me at each race. Sharon and I sometimes worried about her running so far at such a young age, but our family doctor assured us that having her run one of these races every few weeks would not hurt her in any way. He actually told us he had never come across such a healthy child as Kylee. He called her “the poster-child for the healthy American kid, something you don’t see too many of these days”.

Kylee was running just over seven minute miles, which is truly amazing for a child her age. There are a lot of things truly amazing about Kylee. Sharon and I had taught her how to pray at the age of four. By the age of five she informed us that she had asked Jesus to forgive her for her sins and wanted to be baptized as soon as the church's baptismal could be filled. The next day, she led Shelbey to the Lord. Since that day, the two had cast aside their constant agitating of each other. Oh, they still had their disputes, just nothing like before. Whenever they would start to aggravate each other, one of them would back down and find some common ground to cool their tempers. The first time Sharon and I witnessed this we were astounded. Eventually, we grew accustomed to it, but never mastered their technique for ourselves.

"Mmm, that looks and smells delicious!" I told Sharon, as I filled my plate with scrambled eggs and bacon. Okay, so we didn't exactly eat healthy . . . we held back on the salt as an offset.

Shelbey sat at her usual seat, munching down a bowl of Lucky Charms, a book in the hand not occupied by the fast moving spoon. All of Shelbey's friends call her the "bookworm" because when she doesn't have a basketball in her hands, she has a book in them. She is very fond of the written word, and on many occasions suggested that her teachers should give up lecturing as a form of communication. She complained that all of her teachers speak in a monotone voice, capable of putting the most hyper student to rest, and couldn't wait to read her schoolbooks, overriding the damage done from the lectern.

"Where's Kylee?" I asked as I looked around the kitchen.

"She's out back, on the swing-set," Sharon answered, opening the patio door to call her inside.

As Kylee came in the door I noticed a big smile on her face. She ran over to give me a hug. This was a big hug. The kind of hug Kylee gave out when she thought she was in big trouble. *But she*

couldn't have done anything that bad already, I thought to myself. We all just got out of bed!

“Daddy, God spoke to me in a dream last night!”

“He did, Kylee? What did He say?” Her statement caught me off guard. I had always raised our children to know God, but this was the first time any of us had claimed to actually physically hear Him. I leaned over to get a closer look into Kylee’s eyes, examining her demeanor for a hint of falsehood. I saw none. I could sense she was not playing a joke on me. Her solid blue marbles, accentuated by her summer-bleached hair, seemed to pierce through to the back of my head.

“I’m serious, Daddy!” she said.

“Okay hon,” I responded, “I just wanna know what He said, sweetheart.”

“He said ‘They will run and not get weary. They will walk and not faint.’ That’s what he said, Dad,” she proclaimed, adjusting the weight of her body to her toes, helping her emphasize the message. She was filled with confidence and joy, a beaming smile etched upon her face.

I knew I had heard this quote from the Bible before, so I hopped up from my seat and grabbed my Bible off the bookshelf in our living room, listening intently to see if Kylee continued to speak. I flipped through the pages looking for the verse my daughter had just quoted to me. The concordance guided me to the verse I was looking for, though I lost the page twice while trying to listen to Kylee’s continuing testimony.

“What did God look like?” Shelbey asked, before putting a piece of bacon in her mouth and closing her book.

“Well, He really didn’t let me see Him. In my dream, I was swinging in the backyard and the most beautiful cloud came over the cornfield,” Kylee said, stopping to take a bite of her bacon.

“And . . .” Sharon and Shelbey both demanded. Kylee had the floor; it was obvious.

I found the verse that I was looking for while Kylee continued her story. It was Isaiah chapter 40, verse 31. The words were very close to the exact ones Kylee had spoken.

Kylee continued, “I looked up at the cloud and saw a giant light coming from the bottom of it. Then I felt like I was so safe. Like nothing could ever hurt me there. I could tell I was dreaming, but it was so real. Then I heard the most beautiful voice. I knew it was God right away. I don’t know how, but when He spoke . . . Mom . . . Dad . . . it sounded like a voice I always knew or something. He said ‘So many children stand upright, while so many elders fall helplessly to evil.’”

I had to cut in at this point. This was starting to become an X-Files episode. “What do you think He meant by that, Kylee?” I asked, emphasizing her name a little too much. I think Kylee noticed it, as her expression became a little less excited.

Before she could answer, I noticed Sharon and Shelby had both stopped eating. The two of them actually looked as though they had mouths full of food, which they had no intention of swallowing any time soon—at least not until Kylee’s testimony was completed. I have to admit, even I was hanging on Kylee’s every word. This was a far cry from our usual morning conversations. Basketball, websites, church programs, and running usually dominated our topics list, not conversations with God.

“Daddy, I think He meant what He said. Us kids know how to behave better than adults do sometimes.”

I felt a jolt of reality hit me for the first time during this unique conversation. What if my seven-year-old daughter had talked to God? Would we tell anyone? If we told anyone, would we be mocked? Would our lives ever be normal again? I had to end this quickly. I had to find a way to move on, make Kylee finish this story, and then laugh about it. I believed in God, Jesus, Heaven and Hell, sin and forgiveness, but I’d never seen us as the “chosen family” to which a message from God would be handed. Surely

Kylee saw a movie or something that caused her to dream all of these things. There had to be a rational explanation to why Kylee got up early in the morning, made her bed, her sister's bed, and then read the entire book of Matthew from our New International Version Bible. A reason that did not involve actual conversations between Kylee and Almighty God.

"Kylee, did you watch another one of those Christian fiction movies at church last Sunday?" I blurted out with a slight chuckle. Inside I was not laughing, but felt like a giant pot of boiling water about to explode. I glanced at Sharon, who was shaking her head "No."

Sharon helped teach the Sunday school classroom at the nondenominational church we attended: "The Lord is Our Rock". She would know if Kylee had seen anything at all like this.

Sharon started to speak, but then we all sat back and listened to Kylee as she continued, "God told me to pack an extra breakfast in a lunch bag and bring it with us on the way to our run this morning. He said we'll see a homeless man on the corner, by the Crown Point Century Newspaper Shop. He said I should give him the extra breakfast, and that you and Mom would then let me follow His plan. That's when He said the stuff about running and not getting weary. Then when I came into the kitchen today, that article was laying there on the dining table." It was obvious by the look on Kylee's face, whatever God's message for her was, the article played a major role in its completion.

I picked up the article that she pointed to and began to read it. It was a list of the "Top-Ten" five-kilometer road races in America, printed in the sport's section of our local newspaper. I couldn't remember leaving it open and laying on the table where it was now located. The first race on the list was a "down the lake-front" 5K scheduled for the next day in Gary, Indiana. The rest were spread

out all over the country. A vision of God telling my daughter to put us into bankruptcy suddenly popped into my head. Talk about being scared back to reality. Fear of poverty can be a roadblock to spirituality that's hard to sidestep.

Sharon spoke up. "Kylee, you believe God told you to run at all these races?" Kylee nodded her head, and Sharon continued, "I really don't think we can afford to travel to all of these races, honey. Did God mention how we would pay for this traveling all over the country?"

Kylee got out of her chair, and without saying a word, began making the extra breakfast for the supposed beggar we would see in a short time. I began to get a really bad stomach-ache over this whole thing.

Shelbey began looking at Kylee in a strange way and said, "Mom, Dad . . . do you believe her?"

"I think she had a dream," I replied, rather sternly. A little too sternly, as Sharon's sideways glance informed me.

Sharon stood up, walked over to Kylee, and put her hand on her shoulder. "Kylee, what if there isn't someone there this morning?" she asked, staring down into those darling eyes.

"Mom, God is always right. I trust Him."

"Well, at least pack a fork with that breakfast," Sharon responded, handing Kylee a plastic fork from the pantry shelf.

Life had seemed so easy just thirty minutes before this. Everything had seemed in order the last few months. I had felt like the world was so stable. My job managing the grocery store was going quite well. Sharon's new website designing venture had been gaining steam. The girls had maintained "honor roll" status every year and their focus on church activities had reached a new level of extreme interest. Now, in the matter of time it takes for a family to get together for breakfast, my world seemed to be thrown into a giant unknown cavern, which I wasn't sure I wanted any part of. I even started to sweat, and the house was fairly cool for a sunny

August morning. Our family had always prayed to know God more intimately. Sometimes we get an answer to prayer we really don't want. We, as a family, believed we are on this planet to serve God. We just never expected Him to place an order so directly.

The girls went up to their room to put on their running clothes. I turned to Sharon, but before I could say anything, she motioned that it was her time to talk. "Reese, what if we get to the Century Newspaper building and there is a man there? What if we get there—even though for the thirteen years we've driven through Crown Point and have never seen a homeless person—and there is a homeless man there waiting for someone to help him? Waiting for a seven-year-old girl to bring breakfast to him?"

I paused for a moment. I thought of how many times I had walked into church and sang to God; cried my eyes out to God; even gotten down on my knees before God. I had followed the Christian faith most of my life, Sharon too. But now, here at the Mantle Homestead on our Saturday family-get-together, God had decided to lay a roadblock and a detour I was uncomfortable with. I knew that God existed, but I never anticipated a house call like this one.

I began pacing the kitchen. "I guess if we get to the Century Building, and there is someone standing there at nine A.M., then we'd better figure out how God is using Kylee. And how in the world He's gonna supply us with enough money and time to travel all over the country for these races. I don't think we have enough in savings to travel to Los Angeles or New York for these 5Ks." There was a despair in my voice I was unaccustomed to, and I noticed a bit of sympathy in Sharon's eyes.

Sharon hugged me and placed her forehead upon mine. "If God is talking through Kylee, are we still in charge of her, or is she gonna take over as head of this household?" It would have sounded humorous, if it was not so legitimate a question. Her nose touched mine as she pulled back to wait for my answer. Her hug was a

welcome gesture, a sign that she would be with me in whatever the Lord was asking of us. I welcomed the assurance.

Sharon wasn't joking about Kylee running the show. There was a definite fear in her voice. If God spoke through Kylee, even through a vision or a dream, then how could we question anything she said? God had made some extreme requests of people He called on in the past. I felt like my brain was about to meltdown from all the "what ifs?" that kept flying through my mind. Just as I was about to answer Sharon, the girls came down, ready to go on our family jog and homeless-person-patrol. Sharon sat on the kitchen stool rubbing her hands in her stunning auburn hair, a look of bewilderment etched upon her face. She still looked as beautiful today as when I met her sixteen years ago. God had blessed me so much by bringing her into my life. Maybe He is asking for a little back, I thought. Maybe it is time I learn to use the faith He gave me. *Trust in Him*, I reminded myself as I squeezed Sharon's hand.

Sharon and I had met our freshmen year at Indiana University. We were both members of an on campus Christian Fellowship Club and became good friends before we fell in love. In fact, we were friends for almost two years before we realized that neither of us had a significant other in our lives. As we began to enjoy each other's company more and more, we noticed our grades were slipping. It was hard to concentrate on studies when I was enthralled with a woman who not only turned the heads of most members of the opposite sex, but also a woman who had a personality and spirit that equaled her outward appearance. A rare-find, some would successfully argue. This fact led to one of the toughest decisions of our lives.

Sharon knew that our ability to wait until our wedding day to become intimate would waiver if we did not back away for a while. Ridiculed by our classmates for doing so, we made the decision to avoid direct contact with each other our final year of school. We

corresponded through letters and phone messages, even though we lived on the same campus.

Our social life took a back seat to our schoolwork for one year, and it paid off. I finished in the top ten percent of my class, Sharon in the top five. Two of our instructors gave letters of recommendation to two regional employers, and in a matter of days after graduation we landed gainful employment.

We had to ask for an early vacation from the new bosses though; I had proposed to Sharon immediately following graduation ceremonies. Two years after that, Shelby was born. A little over two years after that, Kylee was born. Sharon and I had a few years where we felt the stress of juggling careers and family, but in time we ironed out the problems and had settled into a routine. Eventually we saved enough money for Sharon to start her own web-based business, and I began to feel right at home working for NWI Groceries. We stayed active in our church, in our personal walk with the Lord, and in the lives of our children. Hard times came our way, rough roads we had been down; but we had an unshakable faith in something bigger than those obstacles, and we had somehow managed to successfully pass that faith on to our children. *Trust in Him*, I thought once again.