

# Five to Go

by Wendy M. McDonald

*C*ushcushcushcush...

I've got an easy stride going—there's no need to push myself. I promised I'd do as many laps as I could for the fundraiser, so pacing is key, especially since my personal goal is to run a half-marathon today like my best friend Oakley.

Once I finish this lap, I'll be at six miles. Much longer than my usual two-mile weekend morning run, but Oakley and I have both been training, so it's nothing I can't handle.

*Cushcushcushcush...*

The sweat running down my back is exhilarating in the chilly, early-May air, spurring me on.

I approach the second curve, where the water station is set up just before the starting markers. The elementary school kids are supposed to be taking turns manning it, handing us little cups if we reach out as we pass by—but it's mostly the older kids like Oakley's brother Luther, on the cusp of middle school, who are actually doing the work. The younger kids lose interest pretty quickly, even though this whole fundraiser is for new playground equipment for them. My little sister Astrid has hung in at the water station longer than most of her kindergarten classmates, maybe because I humor her with a reach-out every other lap.

As I tick off this lap in my head and come up on the water station, I slow a hitch, tap my earbud to pause my running playlist, and reach out for the paper cup Astrid holds out for me, her smile almost too wide for her face. I grab. I swig. I toss. I run.

Behind me, she shouts, "Keep going, Kyurp!" She says something else, but I'm already out of range and back into my playlist.

Kyurp—Astrid’s nickname for me—rhymes with *chirp*. It’s the result of me trying to teach her how to say *Kirsten* the right way when she was eighteen months old. Mom and Dad fell into calling me that for a few years too, but now Astrid’s the only person who still gets to call me Kyurp—just like I’m the only person allowed to call her Frog Breath.

One lap later, Astrid has disappeared from the water station, but I find her again alongside the first straightaway. She’s hard to miss in her froggy rain boots, green striped play leggings, shirt with jumping frogs printed all over it, and—because of the chill in the air despite the sunny day—the frog hat Grandma crocheted for her. She and her best friend Lexie have shoved their way in front of everyone else cheering us on, and the two of them are shouting and jumping up and down like frogs escaped from Astrid’s shirt. “Go, go, go!”

I manage a wave and a smile.

They cheer me on for the next several laps, but as I start the final lap of mile seven, they’re no longer there. It’s not surprising. They’ve probably joined the other younger kids for the games some of the parents are holding on the soccer field. Either that, or they’re tucked away on the bleachers, play-acting scenes from their favorite show, *Lily’s Pad*.

As I begin mile eight, Oakley starts her own laps, holding herself back to match my pace as I pause my playlist again.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” I manage. “Did you...*pant*...see Astrid...*pant*...and Lexie?”

“Yeah, they were over with Brent, at the check-in table,” she says. Then, after a few paces, “How you doing?”

“Just starting eight.”

She makes an approving noise and we run together in silence for the rest of the lap. I grab another little cup as we pass the water station, and when we reach the lap marker, Oakley says, “I’m

gonna push it for a while. See you when it's over." She pulls ahead, her thick braids tied up and bouncing a little at the top of her head with every step.

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As I come up on the end of my eighth mile, my girlfriend Josie catches my attention, jumping onto the track to run beside me through the last curve before the lap marker. "Your mom had to go pick up more cookies for the bake sale," she says, "and Brent can't find Astrid." Brent Broderick isn't a runner unless he's being chased, but his dad, my Uncle Nick, is the elementary school principal—so Brent is manning the check-in table and doing whatever else needs done.

Shit. So much for my half-marathon.

I glance behind me and veer toward the outer lane as soon as I've completed the lap, Josie right in step with me thanks to the cross-training she does to keep in shape for lacrosse. I make my way to Oakley's mom where she's helping keep track of the laps.

"Astrid's wandered off," I say, still panting. "Can I pick back up and finish my laps after I find her?"

She gives me a quick hug. "Go look. I'll find out. Want me to send Luther to help you?"

I shake my head *No*. "I'll fill him in, though, in case she turns back up at the water station."

When I let him know to corral her if she shows back up, Luther shakes his head. "I told her and Lexie," he says, pushing his glasses up his nose with one finger. "I told them both to follow the rules and stay here with me till your mom or Lexie's dad came back."

I nod. "I know. Just send me a text if they come back, okay?"

He punches my number into his phone and turns back to filling cups with water.

Josie steers me toward where I've left my duffel bag on the grass. She pulls out my sweatpants and hoodie and makes me put them on so my muscles don't seize up, in case I'm allowed to finish my laps. I transfer my phone from my armband to my hoodie pocket.

“Brent’s already checked the bleachers and the diamond,” she says.

“Is Lexie with her?”

“We think so.”

I scan the fields, doing a few lunges at the same time. The fact is, she could be anywhere, since she’s with Lexie. The deal was, they’d stick together and stay near Luther or Brent. They’d promised Mom and Mr. Oh, putting on their best pleading faces and clasping their hands the way only kindergarteners can get away with. *Pleeeeeease? We proooooomise we’ll stay with Brent or Luther the whoooooole tiiiiime...*

Yet here I am, yanked from my laps and my fundraising goal to search for them. I mean, Mom and Mr. Oh had to know they would forget, right? I sigh. “Let’s check the edges of the woods, first. Anyplace they can play *Lily’s Pad* is fair game.”

Josie and I head toward the nearest edge of the tree line, walking closely side by side but not holding hands. When we reach the trees, I peer into the green, shadowed woods for a sign of Astrid and Lexie. They’ll have set up near a fallen tree or maybe the edge of the small, shallow vernal pond a few hundred yards off to the right.

We tromp through the soft undergrowth, the sunlight twinkling through the young-leaved oak, maple, and birch treetops and dancing across the ground here and there. “Astrid? Lexie?” I call, then wait for a response that doesn’t come. I strain my ears against the muted sounds of the woods, as if I could call up their conspiratorial giggles and whispers just by willing it.

But they’re not anywhere in the woods that I can find—not even the vernal pond. How could they not be here? It’s full of real frogs and turtles.

“Should we separate?” Josie asks.

I guess? Maybe? I don’t know if Astrid and Lexie will go with Josie if she finds them—they’ve never officially met her. Or what if...

“What if one of them’s hurt?” I glance at Josie and she nods. Forgetting myself for a moment, I let my fingers dance toward hers in search of comfort. She stiffens, and I pull my hand back.

I turn away from the vernal pond—away from Josie—and close my eyes in a long blink of silent exasperation. It’s not like hand-holding is some giant lesbian alarm—Oakley and I hold hands all the time.

“I’m sorry...” she says.

“It’s okay,” I respond, though I don’t want to. Being Astrid’s big sister has given me more practice in patience and understanding than I ever wanted.

And the fact is, I *do* understand where Josie is coming from—I haven’t always been out, either.

I turn, offering a tiny smile. “We need to keep looking.”

She smiles back, relief melting across her face. “Where next?”

I shrug. Together, we leave the hushed cool of the pond, venturing back out to commotion and bright sun on the athletic fields.

“Maybe the bathrooms?” I say. The gym shared by the middle and high schools is open so everyone can use the bathroom, and there are middle schoolers working as babysitters in the gym, reading stories and leading crafts with preschoolers whose parents are helping with the fundraiser. If they were bored enough, Astrid and Lexie may have joined one of the craft circles.

If they did that, without bothering to tell anyone—and I can’t finish my laps—I’m going to be pissed, no matter how much I love Astrid.

Josie and I cut across the soccer fields, scanning for Astrid’s frog-spangled shirt, but don’t see her. We part long enough to ask any of the parents chaperoning games if they’ve seen a little girl

disguised as a frog—or, a frog disguised as a little girl—but nobody has seen Astrid and, by association, nobody has seen Lexie, either.

The gym is connected to both the middle and high school buildings by glass-walled walkways on the second floor. Beneath the walkway from the middle school, one door is propped open and there's a table blocking the opening. Miss Kirby, the kindergarten teacher, is stationed there, checking preschoolers in and out to their parents.

“Did Astrid and Lexie come through here?” I ask. “Maybe to use the bathroom?”

She looks up at me with her bulgy blue eyes and perpetually solemn face and shakes her head. “Not that I saw, Kirsten honey. Not unless they hopped in under the radar.” She stands, making room for us to step past her. “You can go on in and check, just in case they really did get past me,” she says. We squeeze by and survey the clusters of toddlers and preschoolers. Even though I didn't expect to find Astrid and Lexie playing with kids they would describe as babyish, I'm disappointed when I don't find them.

More than that, I'm frustrated.

Even more than frustrated, I'm actually starting to worry. With all the time we spent tromping through the woods, we've probably been looking for at least thirty minutes. Should I have called Mom immediately? Should I have asked for more help? And—though I feel guilty for thinking it: how many miles does Oakley have behind her already? Will I be allowed to finish? And if I am allowed, will it still count as a half-marathon if I took a long break partway through?

As if Mom has some sort of lost-child radar, my phone buzzes with her dedicated text-alert song.

Mom: You're probably still running, but when you get this, please text me.

Mr. Oh invited Astrid to spend the night with Lexie, but I'll need you to drop them both off.

Shit. Do I respond now? Or wait till I've found Astrid? I hover my finger over the message bar, then decide it's better to wait. There's no sense in worrying Mom if Astrid is off with Lexie someplace, just messing around. I slide my phone back into my hoodie pocket.

"Damn," says Josie. "You're leaving your mom on READ?"

I shrug. "What else am I supposed to do? Tell her I lost my little sister?" My parents are both pretty cool, but...they're still my parents. Sometimes I don't want to deal with them.

Anyway, I didn't really lose Astrid. She wandered off. And it's also not like my parents didn't know I was busy on the track. Really, one of them should have been here, watching her. Mom should have sent someone else to get more bake sale goodies.

Josie shakes her head, her eyebrows raised, as we head toward the decrepit locker rooms that eighth-graders always try to convince the sixth-graders are haunted. They haven't been used in ages, so it's not hard to think of them as haunted—even when we switch the lights on, the girls' locker room is dark and damp, the locker doors broken completely off in places and dangling like useless limbs in others. Our sneakered feet squeak across the dull tile floor, echoing like the *Psycho* knife-music.

"Astrid? Lexie?" My voice comes out hushed, as if I really am that idiot in a slasher movie, venturing into the basement without a flashlight. I shake my head, pushing the absurdity from my thoughts, and try again, louder.

"Astrid? Lexie? Are you two in here?"

We pause and Josie reaches for my hand here, where we're safe from examination. I let her take it, the warmth reassuring me.

"Seriously, Astrid. Are you in here? Answer me if you're in here." I use my big-sister voice, the one that calls to mind Mom's mom-voice and means consequences are forthcoming—but there's still no response.

The boys' locker room is similarly creepy, and similarly empty. I glance at Josie, and take a deep breath. The locker rooms were my last hope.

Astrid and Lexie are really, truly, unquestionably lost.

#

Outside again, Josie and I separate to do a cursory search of the parking lot, trying to find someplace that would appeal to two kindergarteners intent on pretending to be frogs and turtles, but there's nothing. I'm actually starting to panic, now, my breath coming in shallow gasps, as if I've been pushing myself too hard on the track. What if I can't find them? I can't imagine this world without Astrid. I don't think I could ever forgive myself if something happened to her on my watch.

As I jog up and down the rows, peering between the cars, I can hear music from a party going on down at Callahan's Ice Creamery, across from the base of the campus driveway. At first the music is just a fact in the background. Then it hits me: Callahan's backs up to the Merrimack River, and there's a willow tree on the property, near the riverbank. The trunk leans out over the river, tickling the water with its deceptively delicate branches.

I shout for Josie but don't wait for her to follow before I sprint across the rest of the asphalt, down the campus driveway, and across the residential street, my sneakers skidding a little as I hit the gravel parking lot of the micro-dairy set up in a tiny, old Cape.

It would be just like Astrid to drag Lexie all the way here to play *Lily's Pad* underneath a real weeping willow tree. She's so damn impatient, she can't wait for the one I special-ordered to plant for her in our yard. But they'll be here—if not, then it really will be time to call in adult reinforcements.

"Astrid! Lexie!" I shout their names as I skirt the building, dodging customers leaving the pickup windows with their raspberry-lime rickeys, banana splits, and brownie sundaes.

“Astrid! Lexie!” I dart past the picnic tables and gazebo, down the dirt path toward the river. Scrambling down the stairs leading to the rivers-edge deck full of umbrellaed cafe tables, half-tripping over my own feet, I call their names again with still no answer.

I’m seriously scared.

They should be here—right here, on the deck or in the mud just beyond it, sitting butts-on-heels and getting filthy playing in the shade of the weeping willow like the characters on that damn show.

The willow reaches out over the water, its branches swaying in the light breeze. The ground beneath the willow is soft, but I can’t pick apart anything resembling little-kid footprints in the churned-up mud from here.

Josie comes up behind me, panting as much as I am. “Are they...” She swallows the rest of the question as I turn and shake my head.

We lock eyes. “They have to be here. It’s the last place. The only place. Right?” She leans around me to see for herself.

The scent of hot dogs, fries, and Callahan’s homemade fudge sauce wrap around me, but it’s a taunt instead of a comfort. Still, it kicks me back into action, sends me climbing over the deck railing and dropping onto the riverbank below.

I crouch, duck-walking beneath the deck, but the only things down here are fallen straws and plastic spoons, muddy bits of paper cups and napkins, and bird poop. Above, Josie engages with a collage of voices, explaining the situation. Snatches of the conversation reach me.

Josie: ...two girls, about five or six...one dressed in all green...

Some guy: ...called the police yet?...

A woman’s voice: ...you want help looking?...

Different woman: ...is one of them Asian?...

My head snaps up. “What? Yes! That might be Lexie!” I shout, at the same time that Josie’s already calling down to me. I speed-waddle out from beneath the deck, clambering up the steep, slippery bank. “Where did you see them?” I blurt.

Several customers are leaving the deck, starting to search the riverbank and the parking lot. A chorus of *Astrid! Lexie!* resounds in a half-dozen voices. A woman who I recognize as one of the Callahan’s owners is pointing toward the side yard, where the picnic tables are scattered across the nearby part of the yard. “I remember them because they both got kiddie cups of turtle tracks, and the one in green asked if we also had a frog tracks flavor.”

I leave Josie and the Callahan’s woman on the deck and bolt for the side yard, scanning the picnic tables. My eyes fall on the gazebo. It looks empty from here, but I start towards it anyway. As I reach the octagonal structure, I can hear Astrid’s Lily Frog voice. “We can make a fort at my house, Shelley.”

My eyes flare with heat as tears rise. “Astrid! Lexie! Where are you?”

Astrid’s voice comes again, in her usual tones. “Kyurp? Are you all done running?”

“Oh, god. Where are you?” From inside the gazebo, I peer over the edge on the far side, but they’re not in the grass. “I can hear you. Where are you?”

There’s some rustling, the sound of wood scraping across wood, and Astrid squeezes out from behind a loose piece of the lattice skirting. Lexie follows right behind her.

“We found a hideout,” Astrid says.

“We were playing *Lily’s Pad*,” adds Lexie. “The running got boring.”

Astrid nods in support of Lexie’s statement, but I’ve already jumped over the side rail to kneel in the grass. I pull them both into one-armed hugs, my tears soaking into their hair.

“Ohmigod. I was so scared.” My voice shakes, even though they’re safe now and it’s over. It could have so easily gone another way.

“Here! I have them—they’re here! They’re safe!” I shout over my shoulder, to where Josie is talking with the Callahan’s woman and the customers.

They both squirm in my embrace. Astrid says, “Lexie’s dad gave her money for the bake sale. We didn’t want bake sale cookies.”

Josie is beside me, but I’m not sure when she got here. “We’ve been looking for over an hour,” she tells them, relief evident in her voice.

I nod, pulling away from Astrid and Lexie and meeting their gazes. I hope I’m telegraphing the right amount of intensity through my own. “You can’t just wander off. You didn’t tell anyone where you were going and oh my god, you left the Mid-High campus and crossed a busy street and...” I pause, catching myself before I ramp up into the hysteria I’d been on the verge of succumbing to before we found them, and take a deep breath. I let the breath out. “That was really, really dangerous, what you did. Nobody knew where you were.”

Heads hanging, they both get smaller. I swear it.

I shake my head. “Never mind. You’re safe. We found you.” I stand, glancing at Josie. “Let’s get back to the fundraiser. I have to see if I can finish my laps. Hold hands.”

“You didn’t finish?” Astrid asks.

I shake my head. “I had to stop to look for you, Frog Breath.”

Her head hangs a little more. “I didn’t know that would happen.”

I shake my head. “Actions have consequences, Frog Breath. I’m just glad we found you both and you’re okay.”

Astrid and Lexie link hands, Josie and I bookending them. We lead them back across the gravel parking lot, across the street, up the Mid-High campus driveway, through the parking lot, past the gym, where we pause to let Miss Kirby know they’re safe, before finally reaching the track.

Josie points with her chin toward the spot where Oakley's mom is clocking runners. "Go. I've got these two."

I nod, swiping away a few final tears of relief.

"I see you found them!" says Oakley's mom as I approach.

"They were at Callahan's," I say. "There was supposed to be a surprise sleepover tonight, but I suspect it won't be happening, once Mom and Mr. Oh find out what they did..."

She nods her understanding. "I checked the fundraiser rules," she says. "There's nothing saying you can't pick back up and finish your laps."

Peeling off my sweats, I slide my phone back into my armband, and do a few lunges and stretches while I watch the track, waiting for Oakley to come back around. "What lap is Oakley on?" I ask.

"Just finishing up eight, I think. Someone else is timing her."

Oakley runs into view, grabs a paper cup, swigs, tosses, and approaches the start line. She sees me and slows enough for me to fall into pace beside her.

*Cushcushcushcush...*

If you liked reading about Kirsten Madsen, she is the main character in my upcoming debut novel, *The Willow*. For details, subscribe to my email list at [www.wendymmcdonald.com](http://www.wendymmcdonald.com) and on the Table for 7 Press website at [www.tablefor7press.com](http://www.tablefor7press.com). Follow me on Instagram [@wmmcdonald](https://www.instagram.com/wmmcdonald) or on Twitter [@wendymmcdonald](https://twitter.com/wendymmcdonald).