

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Lov**ereading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Running Free

Written by Kate Allatt and Alison Stokes

Published by Accent Press Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lov**ereading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

R U N N I N G
F R E E

KATE ALLATT

and

ALISON STOKES

Published by Accent Press Ltd – 2011

Reprinted May 2011

ISBN 9781908006646

Copyright © Kate Allatt and Alison Stokes 2011

Kate Allatt and Alison Stokes have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher:
Accent Press Ltd, The Old School, Upper High Street,
Bedlinog, Mid-Glamorgan CF46 6RY

Printed and bound in the UK

Cover design by Madamadari

*To my amazing husband Mark, who saved my life, and my
equally amazing, yet remarkably resilient, kids – Indi, Harvey
& The Woodster. I love you so much.
Kate and Mum x*

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it’s the courage to
continue that counts.”

Winston Churchill

Prologue

Sunday February 7 2010

I DON'T KNOW WHAT a migraine feels like. I've managed to live for thirty-nine years without ever having one. But if it makes you wish you could just take off your head and hand it over to someone else to look after until it stops yelling, then I guess the doctor at A&E must be right, that's what I've got.

Just four hours ago that same doctor sent me home with a packet of Co-codamol painkillers and told me to take it easy for a couple of days. I am trying my best to follow his advice which considering that I am mum to three active children isn't easy.

I've spent the afternoon lying in bed wishing the drugs would kick in and ease this relentless throb at the back of my head. I close my eyes and clutch the back of my neck, gently allowing my fingers to massage the base of my skull, wishing this agony would subside just long enough to let me drift off into a pain-free sleep. Please, just one hour of rest and I'll be OK.

Suddenly I hear 'MUM!' There's a brotherly war breaking out in the bathroom between Harvey, nine, and Woody, six. Woody's calling for backup. I try to block out their arguments knowing that my husband, Mark, who is down in the kitchen clearing up the remnants of Sunday lunch, will step in if it gets out of hand, as it usually does. But I can't ignore the noise. This headache is making me irritable. I get up from the bed and make my way to the bathroom.

'Harvey, if you don't leave your brother alone, you won't be going football training after school tomorrow,' I snap, causing another wave of nausea to wash over me. Mark hears my distress and comes to my rescue.

'You're stressing, sit down, I'll deal with them. Just calm down, and I'll make you a cup of Earl Grey tea,' he says, slightly irritated. Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, he guides me downstairs to the lounge, where I slump on the red leather sofa and cradle my head, which is throbbing so badly. This is the mother of all headaches. Our daughter India, eleven, has left the television on and gone upstairs to get her school bag ready for the morning. On the plasma screen there's a repeat of last week's *Dancing on Ice* where some soap star is twirling around like a pro. But I'm not really watching. I look at the clock on the TV screen. 6.09 p.m. I feel bad, really bad. Not just throbbing headache bad, but a sensation that I can't really describe. My body feels weak, like all the life is draining out of me. I start to panic.

'Mark, what's happening to me? I feel weird,' I shout to Mark who is just yards away in the kitchen. The words come out in a slur. 'Mmmeugh,' a stifled moan leaves my mouth and suddenly Mark is in front of me but his face is a blur. My entire body turns rigid and I panic as I slide off the sofa, landing on the floor in an inelegant heap. I feel Mark's arms around me as he tries to lift my dead weight and arrange my stiff limbs in to some semblance of comfort on the rug. I can only make out vague shapes and movement in the room, but I sense my husband's panic as he calls to our daughter, 'India, go and call Burt next door.'

Seconds pass, but I have no concept of time, just blind terror. I am no longer in control of my own body and it scares the shit out of me. Mark is still close, I can just about make out the whiteness of his T-shirt contrasting with the darkness of his hair.

'Please, help me. Don't leave me,' I beg inside my head.

I hear India's voice in the distance telling Mark that our neighbour is out and asking what's happening.

‘Go and get Lise, just get anyone,’ Mark responds, sending India to get help from our other neighbour, who also happens to be a nurse. The fear in his voice is rising as he holds me. Mark, my usually calm, sensible ‘everything is black or white’ kind of guy, is panicking. Right now, he can only see black.

‘Kate, can you hear me? What’s happening? Are you all right Kate?’ Lise is here. I’ve no idea how long it’s taken for her to arrive. I am hot, I want to reach out for something to fan myself with, but I can’t move. My eyes are fixed wide open in fright like a rabbit caught in headlights. Now I can’t even control my breathing, I struggle to gulp for air. I hear myself making desperate panting sounds. Lise sends India off to get a fan and shouts at Mark to call 999 quickly.

A paramedic is first to arrive. He listens to my heart and checks my blood pressure then gets on his radio to call for back-up, an ambulance for a ‘lady in distress’. I wait. Mark and Lise are following the paramedic’s advice and putting damp flannels on my forehead to keep me cool. But I still feel like I’m in the furnaces of hell. Maybe this is retribution for my lifestyle, running a home and business, ferrying the kids to their after-school clubs and activities and my own punishing fell-running regime. ‘Is she having a fit?’ Mark asks the paramedic.

‘This is no fit,’ is the stern response.

Minutes pass and we wait, all the time I feel weaker. The paramedic gets back on his radio. He’s not taking any excuses. ‘Send me any unit you can and send it now.’ Even he seems to be panicking.

This is serious: Mark knows this is serious and I know it’s serious. The paramedic tells Mark to go and get an overnight bag ready for me as I’m going to need it. I hear Mark’s footsteps on the stairs and he returns with my running kit, silly sod. I know I love being out running on the fells, but running kit is the last thing I need at this moment.

Two men in green arrive and lift me onto a stretcher. As I’m wheeled out of my home, I think, where are the kids? I hope they don’t see me like this. Then I wonder, am I wearing matching knickers and bra?

I feel a trickle running down the inside of my left thigh as I’m wheeled into the back of the ambulance. Oh great, now I’ve peed myself. How will I ever live with the embarrassment? Mark holds my hand as the sirens scream and I slip in and out of consciousness like someone is pressing the pause button on my life.

Chapter 1

Intensive Care Unit

Wednesday February 10 2010

'OH SHIT! WHAT'S HAPPENED here?' was my first thought when I regained consciousness. I was alive. But only just. I had been in a coma for three days. I could hear the noise of machines all around me in the intensive care unit. I was trussed up like a turkey. I had never seen so many tubes. They were up my nose, in my arms and worst of all was the monster tube stuffed in my mouth. I wanted to spit it out, but I couldn't move anything except my eye-lids. What I didn't realise was that the tube was also linked to the machine that was breathing for me. It was making me dribble, which is not a good look for anyone, especially a glamorous young mum like me. I don't feel glamorous right now, I feel scared.

I couldn't move yet my mind was functioning fine and working overtime. 'This is what it must feel like to be buried alive,' I thought to myself. Only this was worse because I could see life carrying on around me and had no way of being part of it. Doctors and nurses were huddled at the foot of my bed; they were mumbling about me. 'Hey, don't you know it's rude to talk about people when they're in the room,' I said. But of course my thoughts were silent. I couldn't speak and I couldn't quite hear what they were saying about me, which was really annoying, but from the look on their faces I was someone to be pitied. As they walked away I heard laughter coming from the nurses' station. The drugs must have been making me paranoid because I thought they must be laughing at me. 'Come on, you guys, let me in on the joke. I've got a sense of humour. I could really do with something to cheer me up right now,' I was desperate for them to realise I was fun-loving Kate. I wanted to show them that underneath the tubes there was a nice, normal mother just like them, not some medical near-fatality. But they were gone in a blink. A nurse appeared with a clipboard and busied herself with one of the machines. She didn't even notice the tears of frustration running down my cheek. 'Please come and talk to me. I know I probably look like shit, but I won't bite.'

At least that headache had finally gone. The pain in the back of my head was the reason I was lying there so close to death. I later discovered that it hadn't been a migraine after all but a blood clot to the stem of my brain or, to put it bluntly, a massive stroke. I had been given a 50/50 chance of survival and for three days the doctors had been keeping me in a coma to give my brain a rest and the chance to recover. When I came round, I had been left 'locked in'. All my muscles – which controlled every movement in my body – were paralysed. Not only was I unable to sit up or move a finger, I could not even breathe or swallow for myself. I was completely helpless. Yet I was able to move my eyelids – I could open my eyes and watch everything in my field of vision. I could think for myself and understand everything that was going on around me. But did anyone know that I was alive inside my own paralysed body?

Then I realised I could also feel pain, my shoulder was really hurting after being stuck in the same position for three days. What I really wanted to do was roll over onto my side to give it a rest, but I couldn't.

The clock in front of my bed said 2.50 p.m. The kids would be finishing school soon. I panicked. Where was Mark? Was he waiting for them at the school gates? Time moves so slowly when you have no control over your body. All I could do was watch the minute hand on the clock tick forward and wish that someone would come over and tell me what was happening, spend

some quality time with me. I've never been a clock-watcher. My life is too hectic with three kids, running my own business, a great circle of girlfriends and the fell-running, there are not usually enough hours in the day. But now all I could do was watch the clock and wait for someone, anyone, to take notice of me. After a day or two I realised that I couldn't even look forward to meal times. That too had been taken out of my hands and I was being fed through the tube up my nose. I couldn't feel it at the time, but I guessed that I must have a catheter tube draining off my urine at the other end.

Suddenly I have the awful feeling that I need a poo. Shit! I realised that I didn't even have control over my own bowels and I was wearing a nappy. I felt the sensation of something happening down below, like someone had put a cowpat in my knickers. I couldn't smell anything, but imagined that something unpleasant must be wafting across to the nurse's station opposite my bed. Surely a nurse will come to see me now.

If this was going to be my new life, I wanted it to end.

Chapter 2

Running, my Escape and my Amazing Friends

WHAT CAN I SAY about the life I had before it was taken away from me in such a sudden and undignified way? To anyone on the outside looking in, it must have appeared that I had it all. We were the typical middle-class family living the perfect suburban life.

Mark and I were newlyweds when we moved into our semi-detached 1930s home in the village of Dore thirteen years ago. We fell in love with the place and its rural charm. It was a good old-fashioned friendly Yorkshire community with thriving shops, pubs and a good primary school, just what we needed to start our family. More importantly, we had the beautiful south Yorkshire peak district on our doorstep and we made the most of it, spending all our spare time walking or mountain biking. We were married in Dore Church in 1998. One year later the first of our three children, India, was born. With Harvey and Woody our family was complete.

Mark and I both worked hard and poured our money into our home and family. Mark was a sales and marketing director for a company selling medical supplies, and I was just about to launch my own online digital marketing business, after years of working for other people. The children had their own busy social diaries: Girl Guides and dance lessons for India, football and rugby for Harvey and piano lessons and swimming for Woody. In our relationship I felt I was the passionate, creative one: the driving force. I would always set my goals above what most people would expect. I always wanted to push myself harder in my work and my personal life. Mark was more practical and grounded: my navigator. When I would go off on a flight of fancy he would try and rein me in. Between the two of us we made a good team.

Apart from my family, the two most important things in my life were my friends and my fitness. My closest friends were Alison, Anita and Jaqui, three other Dore village mums. We all had children of a similar age in the school and over the years our friendships developed through other common bonds. We were all 'superwomen' juggling the pressures of full-time jobs, running homes and still finding time to keep ourselves looking good and in shape. We were the Dore equivalent of the 'Desperate Housewives' – four thirty-something mums who walked a fine line between drama and domesticity on a daily basis.

Alison is my best and most loyal friend. She is the thoughtful and caring one. Married to a headmaster, Chris, I could trust her with my deepest secrets. Jaqui is the practical, efficient 'jolly hockey sticks' type. She has a high-powered government job and is married to a company director. Anita is the one all the blokes fancy. Half Indian and petite, she is a striking brunette with a dizzy blonde attitude, who runs her own pet-grooming business. Her husband, Bill, runs his own label and packaging company. In this mix I was the bloody-minded one, the tough nut, always making plans and getting results. When one of us was stressed, the others would help to ease the pressure. When one of the group was down, the others would arrange something as a treat. We enjoyed girlie nights in watching films, weekly book club meetings, fun weekends away being pampered at spas or soaking up the sun on Mediterranean beaches. Through our friendship, our husbands also became good mates too. Mark reckoned I could turn any event into a party and with Alison, Anita and Jaqui at my side, I generally did.

Our Saturday morning fell-running session was one of our regular get-togethers. For the past four years Jaqui and Anita and I would meet up and run. All weathers, all occasions, we would run. We'd take it in turns to plan a route, but each one was at least 12 miles. If it rained we would

follow a path through the lower forests and if it snowed, as it occasionally did, we would just run that little bit faster. It always ended at a coffee shop. It was an all-weather, no-excuses session, our chance to catch up on the gossip as we ran. Our conversations covered four general themes for the week: how crap our husbands had been; how hectic work had been; how naughty the kids had been and the general village shenanigans of who had been spotted with someone they shouldn't have. After two hours and a cup of Earl Grey tea we would be set up for another week of stressful work and family life. When it was my turn to plan the route I would often lead the girls up to Froggatt Edge. At 20 miles it was one of our longer runs, but the views looking over the purple heather moors and the valleys below made it worthwhile. This snapshot of outstanding beauty was one that would stay in my mind when I was in hospital.

Our husbands all reckoned the running was pure fabrication after Mark once spotted us sitting outside a coffee shop in the village when we should have been halfway up a mountain. But our fitness spoke for itself. Four days before my stroke I had been a guest on my local radio station, BBC Sheffield, talking about my big birthday challenge. June 3 2010 would be my fortieth birthday and I was determined to make it a year to remember. A couple of years earlier I had completed the Three Peaks Challenge. With a group of friends from work we had trekked to the top of the three highest peaks in England, Scotland and Wales in just twenty-four hours in aid of a local charity. For my birthday I wanted to push myself further and I was planning a series of challenges ending with a climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain, in September. We were going to climb the most difficult western route. I was organising the event. Mark, Jaqui and I and five friends from the local rugby club were going. We had paid our deposits and booked our places for the challenge of a lifetime. We had just seven months to get into super-fit shape.

As part of my birthday challenge I had also signed the girls up for the Eyam Half Marathon in May, which is one of the toughest courses in Yorkshire, if not the whole of the UK. Over the course of thirteen and a half miles we would have to run 1200ft up on to the Yorkshire Moors, so I had convinced Anita that it would be a good idea to try an outdoor boot camp training session. We needed to push ourselves that bit harder and I thought that a two-hour session of military fitness was the wake-up call we needed.

At 7.45 a.m. on Saturday February 6, the day before my stroke, Anita picked me up and we drove out to Chatsworth House for the start of our new fitness regime. It was one of those perfect winter mornings, cold but crisp and we were excited at the thought of doing something a bit different. I had an extra buzz because for the first time in almost two weeks I had woken up with a clear head, the annoying headache that I had been suffering from for the last fortnight had gone, and I felt on top of the world as our instructor ordered us to warm up in the clear, fresh, February morning air, while avoiding sheep poo in the grounds of the Duke of Devonshire's stately home.

'Kate, take it easy,' Anita warned me as I pushed my body to the limit with shuttle runs much faster than our instructor was expecting and twice the number of sit-ups and press-ups being asked of us. She knew that for me trotting around a field half-heartedly wasn't an option. I first introduced Anita to the Peak District's beautiful countryside when our children were still babes-in-arms. Our babies clocked up hundreds of miles in their early years as we lugged them miles and miles over the hills in all weathers in their baby rucksacks or pushed through the woods in their mud-splattered three-wheeler off-road prams. In return she introduced me to fell running. I had spent years road running and taking part in five and ten kilometre charity runs like the Race for Life and had finished in a decent one hour thirty-eight minutes in the Sheffield half marathon, but I thought fell running would be easier on my ageing joints. Anita knows that when I do something I like to commit 200 per cent, some say it's the control freak in me, but I say it's determination. She also knew that two weeks earlier I had had a session with a personal trainer and ended up walking like I had been on a horse for weeks, so she was rightly concerned. On the way home we were buzzing from all the endorphins rushing through our bodies and made a pact that we would convince Jaqui to join us the following week.

When I got home, I ran myself a hot, bubbly bath while Mark went out on his usual weekend mountain bike ride. Harvey was at his football training, Woody was swimming and India was in

her bedroom listening to her iPod, so I had some well-deserved 'Me Time' and relaxed. Later that night Alison dropped her daughter Charlotte off for a sleep-over with India and while the girls were upstairs glued to Facebook the rest of the family sat down for our usual Saturday night around the telly, cuddled together on the sofa with a chicken tikka massala, pilau rice and onion bhajis from the village takeaway, and watched *Dancing on Ice* before having an early night.