

## AUGUST 12, 2011

The shrill ring of the phone startles me from a deep sleep. I look at the clock: it's 12:43 a.m. Who could possibly be calling? Something must be wrong. I push my dog Charlie's head off my arm and grab the phone off the nightstand.

"Hello?" I whisper into the phone, my heart racing.

"Brez, this is Shelly." I'm immediately angry: Line and Shelly have woken me up again.

Caroline Found and Shelly Stumpff are senior starters on the volleyball team I coach at Iowa City West High School. Both big jokesters, they love having fun at my expense. I didn't mind when they called in the middle of the night a couple of times over the summer; it was kind of funny. But I'm exhausted from wrapping up our first week of pre-season volleyball. My blood pressure is rising and I decide to hang up on the two of them before they can say anything.

"Wait, don't hang up," Shelly says. "Kelley's with me. There's been an accident." She pauses. I hear her voice breaking up, "Caroline was riding a moped and crashed into a tree. She died."

I know this is another typical Caroline joke, albeit a sick one. "Come on, you guys, this isn't funny. You two will pay for this in the morning. I'm going back to sleep now."

"Seriously, don't hang up, it really happened!" Shelly yells. Then all I can hear is Kelley's heart-wrenching

screams in the background. I can't take in what Shelly just said. Caroline's dead? My mind refuses to wrap itself around the words. There must be some mistake.

"Shelly, let me talk to your mom," I say.

I hear Shelly tell her mother that I want to talk to her.

"Hi Brez, this is Kathy. It's true. Caroline apparently borrowed a moped from a friend and was coming home from a Young Life meeting. She lost control and hit a tree. Nobody knows exactly what happened, but it's true – she died. The girls and their parents are starting to gather here."

I reach over Charlie and try to find the switch for the lamp. Charlie gently thumps his tail on the bed. I fumble around for the lamp and somehow knock it on the floor. One part of my brain registers that the bulb shattered, but I don't even look down at it as I crawl over Charlie and get out of bed. I flip on the overhead light – my eyes reflexively close in protest. None of this can be true. Surely there must be a mistake and the girls meant to say that Ellyn has died. Ellyn, Caroline's mother, was diagnosed with stage-four pancreatic cancer four months ago and her health has been rapidly deteriorating.

"Kathy, please let me talk to the girls again," I say into the phone.

The sobs in the background subside. "Hello?" Kelley Fliehler says quietly. I can hear her breathing, trying to catch her breath.

"Kelley, where are you right now? Should we call everyone and get together as a team?"

"No, let's wait until the morning. We're all here at my house. Our parents are with us."

"Okay, I understand. Please call if you want me to come over, otherwise I'll see all of you tomorrow at 7:30."

The phone feels contaminated. I throw it down on the bed. I grab some warmer clothes and put them on. I have no idea what I should do. Call my assistant coach,

Scott Sanders, who's worked with our program the past two years? Go over to the Fliehler's house? Get ahold of one of my friends? It's impossible to wrap my mind around this news. Then I feel incredible anger, I can't breathe. The room is closing in on me.

I carefully sidestep the broken shards of light bulb on the floor. "Come on, Charlie," I say, and he and I walk outside to the gazebo. The cool night air helps to clear my head. I decide to call Scott and tell him this unfathomable news.

I can barely punch in his phone number, my hands are shaking so badly. The phone rings for a long time and then he answers, his voice thick with sleep.

"Scott, brace yourself. I have the most horrible news possible. Caroline was in an accident tonight and died."

His reaction is identical to mine: disbelief. We talk for a while and his voice changes as the news sinks in and he's hit with his own wave of overwhelming grief. I can tell he's on the verge of crying, but know he won't cry until he hangs up. He asks me if he should text the other team members with the news, in case some of them haven't heard yet; we agree we don't want anyone who still hadn't heard showing up for practice tomorrow. We were especially concerned about some of the younger players who may not be part of the seniors' circle of communication. I tell him I'll text everyone. We agree to meet at six a.m. in my office at West High School. I hang up the phone and bury my head in Charlie's soft red coat. Then I set about the impossible task of figuring out how to tell these young women that we've lost the heart and soul of our team, the girl who always makes us laugh and brightens all our days.

Finally, I finish writing the text and push send. I lean back against the rattan bench, rest my head against Charlie's side, and begin to cry.