

My name is Ally Kent. My best friend Lindsey and I love to do everything together. We are inseparable. One summer we had a sleepover at my house and we were stuck inside because of a horrible storm. We were playing the tradition of all sleepovers, Truth or Dare. It was Lindsey's turn and she looked at me. "Dare" I said quickly, before she could even ask. She dared me to run around the house screaming as loud as I could, even though it was 2:30 in the morning and my parents had been asleep for a while. I didn't think they would mind so I went ahead and did it. Boy, was I wrong. "Ally Elizabeth Kent!" my mother stood in the doorway of her bedroom and her face was as red as the tomato Lindsey smashed on my kitchen floor in third grade. "It's 2:30 in the morning!" "Why are you running around the house screaming?" Behind me, Lindsey snickered. "We were playing Truth or Dare," I said quietly. "Well maybe you should consider playing it a little more quietly." she said and I knew she had calmed down. "Sorry..." Lindsey answered for me, with the slightest hint of sarcasm in her voice. After my mom went back to bed we erupted in a fit of laughter, and we continued playing. It was my turn and I asked Lindsey "Do I even have to ask?" She chuckled and shook her head. "Okay, "I said handing her my phone. "Call up Jake and spill your secret" I knew that Lindsey Morgan Sparks was no chicken. Sure Enough, she grabbed my phone and dialed Jake Donovan's number. Jake Donovan was the hottest senior at our high school, and everyone was in love with him, including me. But not Lindsey. She could care less about his gorgeous blue eyes and cute brown hair. But, she also knew that Caitlyn Ramirez, Jake's super popular Barbie girlfriend, was currently on a date with Jake's best friend, Seth. So when Jake answered, she disguised her voice, one of her many talents, and told Jake where to find his girlfriend and her "date". After she hung up, we ate some popcorn, and popped in a movie. Then, we fell asleep watching *27 Dresses*.

Because the next day was Saturday, we slept until noon and ate cold pizza for breakfast. No one was home, which, wasn't unusual. My mom was a work at the phone company my dad was teaching classes at the college. So we had the house to ourselves. We got dressed and drove to Lindsey's house. We came in the door to hear her mom yelling at her two brothers to clean their rooms. "Hey girls!" her mom said to us. I smiled. Her mom was always so friendly. We went to Lindsey's room, not looking to do anything in particular, and I saw an old yearbook under her bed. It was from our eighth grade year, perhaps one of our greatest. We flipped through it, making fun of old classmates.

We lost track of time, laughing and carrying on, until her mom came in and said it was time for soccer practice. We got ready and headed out. Soccer had always been my sport, ever since second grade. It was Lindsey's as well, and that's how we met. Out on the field, I played left forward. We were scrimmaging when I felt a bit light headed. I shrugged it off; we had a big game on Tuesday! And eventually, it went away. Until about an hour later, when my knees started feeling weak. Suddenly, my heart was racing and I felt really sick, and I felt my self falling towards the ground.

I woke up in a hospital bed with my mother seated in a chair beside me. Suddenly there were nurses hovering all around me. Then they all started talking at once. Once everyone calmed down, I asked what was wrong. Everyone started looking around, as if they were afraid to speak. A nurse stepped forward, "Ally, the

doctors are finishing up some tests and as soon as they find out anything, they'll let you know." It seemed like forever until we got some answers. A tall man came in and introduced himself as Dr. Williams. "How are you feeling?" I thought for a second before I replied. "Good, I guess. Tired." He nodded his head. "That's to be expected." He came over and adjusted the IV in my arm. "We've ran some tests, and it turns out, Ally, that you have a rare heart condition. It's a condition that....." My mind was racing. Rare heart condition? He began speaking in complicated medical terms that made my brain hurt just trying to think about. Everyone was quiet. Finally Lindsey spoke, "What causes this..... condition?", she squeezed my hand. The doctor didn't hesitate. "It's not something that just pops up. It's a rare condition, one that Ally was born with." My mom, who had been quiet up until now spoke up, "Why are we just finding out about it now?" She looked as if she was about to bite the nice doctors head off. That thought made me smile, the first happy thought I'd had all day. The doctor smiled, "It's not something that's easy to diagnose. The symptoms are fatigue, easy tiring, loss of energy. These are very common symptoms. You may not have thought anything of it, until she passed out. Her condition has just progressed very far." He looked around to see if anyone had any questions. Then he continued, "This was bound to happen to her anyway. She could have been on the soccer field or at the grocery store. Because it was a condition she was born with, It's not something that could've been prevented." We all looked at each other, who knows what they were all thinking. I would've expected myself to be freaking out, but I was surprisingly calm. Finally after about two or three minutes, someone asked the question we all had in the back of our minds. "What can we do to treat it?" Another doctor, a woman this time, spoke, "There are ways to treat this. There is a type of medicine to prevent black outs and take away the symptoms. But it won't cure it completely. She will still have to have checkups to make sure everything is going okay. But, because this has progressed so much, surgery will be needed." Lindsey, good old Lindsey, spoke next. "Well, then get her the surgery! What are we waiting for?!" I smiled and the doctor's expression changed. "Mr. and Mrs. Kent, could I speak to you in the hallway for a minute?" My mom and dad looked at each other and stepped out into the hallway.

Lindsey came and sat by my bed. "What do you think they're talking about?" I asked her. I know she could tell I was worried. She gave me a reassuring look. "Don't worry Al, whatever it is, we'll be fine." I smiled. She always knew how to make me feel better. My parents stepped back into the room. I sat up, "Where's the doctor?" My parents looked at each other, as if avoiding saying something to me. "What is it?" Lindsey asked them. "Honey," my dad started, and my mom continued. "Apparently this is a very, very, expensive surgery, one that we can't afford." Lindsey's face went white, and I think she freaked out more then I did. I sat there silently, while Lindsey was stammering all these questions and pacing the room. She stopped and looked at my parents. "But the doctor said. Without this surgery, Ally will die." My parents smiled. "We know Lindsey, and we will come up with a way to get Ally the surgery." Lindsey looked at them in disbelief. "But....But what if we can't? What if she gets to sick before we come up with the money? What if we can't come up with enough money? Isn't there something we can do?" "Lindsey calm down," I told her. I looked at my mom and dad, these two wonderful parents who had provided for me all these

years. "What about insurance?" I asked. My dad sighed, "Insurance doesn't cover this big of a surgery." His eyes dropped to the floor. "Oh," I sighed.

I stayed the next several nights at the hospital, and I don't think Lindsey ever left either. She stayed with me night and day, doing tons of research on her laptop. Trying to find a way for me to have the surgery. One day, after Lindsey had gone to the cafeteria, after I insisted she go and get some food, she came running into my room, mouth full of pizza and laptop in hand. She started talking but I made her swallow the pizza before she spoke. "Okay, so I was doing some research about this surgery and other surgeries and doctors and other hospitals around the state which is ironic because we're at one of the best hospitals in the state of Florida and we're-" I cut her off. "Linds, does this sentence end? Or have a point?" She laughed. "Of course. The point is, is that when doctors have a family that can't afford a surgery they sometimes do what they call a Pro Bono surgery." I looked at her. "Pro Bono?" she smiled. "Yes. Pro Bono. Pro Bono is when the doctors perform the surgery for free or at a reduced price." My face lit up. She grinned ear to ear and went to find my parents.

After Lindsey explained the Pro Bono thing to my parents, my parents requested a meeting with Dr. Williams. I wasn't allowed to attend the meeting, and neither was Lindsey. Which, she was not to happy about. But who can blame her? It was her idea after all. After about forty five minutes my parents came back into the room. Lindsey stood up quickly. "Well?" she asked hopefully. "What did the doctor say? Will he do it?" My parents sighed, and I could tell they didn't have good news. "Dr. Williams said that this surgery is to expensive to do Pro Bono. Between the costs of the equipment, the time spent in the operating room, and the hours of work that the doctors would have to donate, it's all just to much money." My dad looked at Lindsey. "I'm so sorry Linds." Lindsey nodded and sat down beside me. She looked up at me with those sad puppy dog eyes. "I'm so sorry Ally. But we'll find another way. I promise." I smiled at her. My best friend. She was spending all this time doing unnecessary things for me. I don't think she'd slept in over thirty six hours. If I lived long enough to repay her, I would do all I could for her.

I had several friends visit me that week, but none of them as invested as Lindsey was. They all said how sorry they were, how they would be praying for me, but I really just wanted them to go away. I didn't want them to put aside their lives for me. After all, what could they do?

Finally, they let me go home. Lindsey came rushing into my room as I was packing up. "Oh thank goodness you're here! My parents left and the doctors need someone to sign my discharge papers." She giggled. "Sure. But that's actually not why I'm here." I sighed. "Are you here because you knew I needed help packing my stuff?" She smiled and put a shirt and a couple magazines into my bag. She started talking but I wasn't exactly listening. I was getting really lightheaded and dizzy. It had happened to me before, but I always figured that it was because I was over working myself, with soccer and school. But now I knew the real reason why, and I'll be honest, it scared me. "Did you hear me Al?" I opened my eyes and put my hands on the bed to steady myself. I looked up at her. "What?" She sighed. "I said that I might've found a way to get you the surgery! Wait. Are you okay? Do you need me to get a nurse?" I laughed. "No I'm fine. I just need to slow down." But I realized I spoke

to soon.

I woke up in a hospital bed. Again! And I looked around for Lindsey. “Mr. Kent! She’s awake!” Lindsey and my dad were at my bed side in an instant. I laid my head back on my pillow and groaned. “Not again!” I complained. Lindsey looked at me with a look I couldn’t quite read. “Okay,” she said. “We need to get you that surgery.”

We brainstormed quite a lot of ideas those few days. They had decided to keep me at the hospital in case I lost consciousness again. “Okay.” Lindsey said. “I think our best bet is to raise a bunch of fundraisers to get the money.” I looked at her. “Fundraisers? How will that work? What will they say? “DYING GIRL NEEDS OVERLY EXPENSIVE SURGERY!” I can see the headlines now.” Lindsey got that “I have a great Idea” look except, with Lindsey, they aren’t always great ideas. “Maybe that’s just what we need!” She said. “To raise awareness. Start a donation box! Put it in the newspapers! People everywhere would hear about it and want to help out! It’s perfect!” I looked at her, then at my dad, “I don’t know...What do you think dad?” He thought about it for a moment. Lindsey interrupted. “We could do a bunch of sales. Bake Sales, Garage Sales, Car washes, we’d raise the money in no time!” She seemed super excited about this idea. I looked at my dad. “Sounds like a good idea.” He said. “What do we have to lose?” I smiled. Good old dad, always looking on the bright side. Then, they both looked at me. Lindsey with those “Pretty Pretty Please?” eyes, and my dad with those “It could be the only way.” eyes. I guess I had no other choice. “Alright.” I said. “Lindsey, you’re in charge. Go ahead and do whatever you need to.” She smiled and ran over and jumped on the bed and hugged me. “We’ll get this surgery for you Ally. I promise!”

Those next couple weeks were pretty chaotic. I’d stayed in the hospital for five days after my most recent black out. I was finally able to leave though, I’d been locked up in that place for too long. I felt like I was being suffocated. I was glad to leave, but at home I was always being watched. I knew my parents were just watching out for me, but it was getting a little crazy. I had barely seen Lindsey since I’d gotten home, she was so busy with all the fundraiser stuff. She was really serious. My best friend was putting her life on hold to organize a bunch of boring meetings and fundraisers and god knows what else. I was lucky. Very lucky.

I was sitting at home one afternoon when suddenly Lindsey burst through the door. For a minute, I thought she had gone crazy, but then I remembered that Lindsey had always been like that. She had the biggest grin on her face. “I set up four donation boxes today!” She was jumping up and down like she’d won the lottery or something. I smiled at the way she looked like a little kid. “Linds, did you go to school today?” She stopped jumping. “Mrs. Manting said I could skip this week, as long as I found some time to make up my work. Which I will. I explained the whole thing and she thinks it’s a great idea!” I raised my eyebrows. Mrs. Manting was our principal. I never really thought she found anything to be great. She was emotionless. And personally, I was a little afraid of her. “Ok. That’s great! Where are the donation boxes at?” She smiled that little girl smile again and began telling me all about her day.

Things had gotten pretty weird. Or exciting. Depends on how you look at it. I had gone to the store with my mom to get some groceries. She was a little hesitant at first, but I think she could tell I was tired of being cooped up in the house all day. We were scanning the aisles and suddenly I was being approached by some unfamiliar faces. They talked to me about how inspiring I was and how they were supporting me and wished me good luck. I couldn't believe it. I'd never even met them before and they had recognized me. It was crazy how much Lindsey was spreading this around. It was working. Our plan was actually working.

When I woke up, I could tell right away that it was going to be a bad day. I'd had my share of bad days since the hospital discharged me, but most of my days had been pretty good. But I woke feeling sick and it was hard to breathe. I stayed in bed almost all day. Lindsey was supposed to come visit after school, but she didn't show. I wasn't upset, she had her own life. I'll admit, I was looking forward to seeing her, but after all, she dropped everything to help me out and organize all of this. I couldn't blame her if she needed a break. I tried calling her before I went to bed, but there was no answer. I tried not to think too much into it.

I checked my phone first thing when I woke up, but there were no messages. Lindsey was going to come over before school to say hi and talk about taking another step in our little project, but she was a no show. Again. I started to get a little worried. Lindsey wouldn't just not show up. I decided that she was probably just busy with catching up on all her school work. I tried not to think about it and cook something. Cooking had always been another one of my passions. It helped calm me down. I remember when I was little, before my grandmother passed away, my mom would drop me off at her house on her way to work, and she would spend the whole day teaching me new things. Techniques, recipes, I learned it all from her. I never wanted to leave. I was cooking some pasta for a recipe she'd taught me when I was about eight, when I started to feel a little bit dizzy...

Man, I was really tired of waking up in hospital beds. My mom was the first person I saw when I woke up. I sighed, "Ugh... Mom... when will I stop waking up in a room filled with beeping machines that smells like sterilizer?" She laughed. "That's my girl, always has a joke. Even when she's lying in a hospital bed." That made me smile. The doctor came in, "Hi Ally, how are you feeling?" I hadn't really thought about it. "Um... okay. A little bit of a headache." He nodded and checked my vitals. "We were worried about you." he said. I was confused. "But we know what happened. It's not like this is the first time it's happened." He nodded again, "You were unconscious for longer than normal. You seemed to have hit your head when you passed out." Suddenly I remembered. I looked at my mom, "Mom! The stove! I was cooking when I fell... Is everything okay?" She smiled. "Everything's fine Al. Just a small fire." A small fire?! I should have known better than to do something potentially dangerous, especially with my newly diagnosed condition. I could've burnt down my house. I felt so stupid. Both of my parents tried to reassure me, and tell me that everything was fine, but somehow, I still felt guilty.

At the hospital, I asked my mom if she had heard from Lindsey. She said no. I was pretty upset. It'd been almost a week. Where was she? I wasn't worried anymore. I was mad. I understand needing a break from all that was going on, but not texting or calling for a week? That was avoidance. I sat in the uncomfortable hospital bed, raging about how she hadn't spoken to me. Not twenty minutes later, Lindsey bursts through the door. She looked flustered and ran over to hug me. I was stiff. It wasn't much of a hug. "I came as soon as I heard! Are you ok?" I sat there in awe. "Who'd you here it from?" she didn't waste time getting answer. "Your mom called my mom." I nodded. Of course. Our moms were really good friends, almost like me and Lindsey. I had nothing more to say. "What's wrong Ally?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She really didn't know? Well, I'll change that. "Where have you been the past week?!" Her facial expression didn't change. "What do you mean? School, Home. You know." I really couldn't believe her. "No. I don't know. Because you haven't even tried to communicate with me all week! No text, no call, no visits. Nothing. I was worried." She sighed. "Ally...I'm sorry. I was just getting overwhelmed. All this... it's not easy." I stared at her in disbelief. "Well, if it's too much for you, I'll find someone to take over." She shook her head. "No. No. I've invested so much in this already. I'm not quitting. You need this surgery Ally." "You're right. I do. But if you're going to take off weeks at a time, then maybe I'll find someone more dedicated to getting me this surgery. I'll find someone that cares." Now she was the one staring in disbelief. "Ally... you're being unfair! I want to help you. I do care. I just needed a little break. That's all. I'm good now." I still wasn't done ranting. "You couldn't have called and told me that?" She sighed again. "My phone's broke." "You know where I live." "Ally. I'm sorry. I really am. Please..." She stepped towards me. I moved away. "Just go." I told her. She stood there for a second and then turned, and walked out the door.

I sat at home for the next three days. On Friday, I went with my mom to our schools varsity soccer game. I missed playing so much.

I was angry. Angry and the world. At pretty anyone who I came into contact with. I was angry at this stupid disease. I hated it for ruining my life. I hated it for ruining my soccer career. I had scouts from several different colleges talking to me about how much potential I had. I might never play again. I hated it for ruining my relationship with my best friend. If it wasn't for this stupid condition, I'd be going to soccer camp with Lindsey and drinking milkshakes in her room instead of barely speaking to her.

About a week after our incident, I was sitting on the couch when I heard a knock at the door. It was Lindsey. Although I didn't want to admit it, I was glad to see her. I had missed her. I missed having someone to talk to. She came in and we sat down on my couch. At the same time we said "Look..." Lindsey said "You first." I nodded. "Lindsey, I'm sorry. I overreacted. I get that this isn't easy. I'm sorry I was so hard on you. I was just upset that I didn't have anyone to talk to." She nodded and said "I'm sorry too. You were right. I should've come here. I should've told you what was going on. I'm totally invested in this Ally. I'm not stopping until we get you this

surgery. You're my best friend. I can't lose you." I smiled. I was so glad to hear that. I pulled her into a big bear hug and whispered, "If I am going to die, I'm going to do it knowing that I have the best best friend in the whole world. I missed you Linds." She sighed a sigh of relief. "I missed you too Al."

That week, Lindsey and I organized several events. The first one was a 5K run/walk on May 16<sup>th</sup> in the New Haven Park. I wasn't sure at first, usually not many people showed up for those things. Boy was I wrong. On the morning of the run, more than forty people were there by eight, and it didn't even start until nine! The entry fee was fifteen dollars. By 8:30, we had already made almost a thousand dollars. And this was just the first of many events to come!

We ended up making a little over fifteen hundred dollars that day, including the price of snacks and drinks. I was amazed. I never thought I would get this much support.

After about a month and half, it was getting harder to breathe. I still could pretty well, but it was a little more difficult than it used to be.

By the end of July, we had raised almost 15,000 dollars. I never realized how much difference a couple of car washes and a few bake sales could make.

I had seen an article about a soccer game that was happening in the park. It was to raise money for a little kid with autism. I realized that we were alike in many ways. I wanted to show my support, so I went and played. It felt great. I loved every minute of it. And afterwards, I didn't feel too bad. I decided to see if I could rejoin the soccer team at school. I talked to my coach, and he said that if I got permission, he would be more than happy to have me back. I convinced my mom to let me play. I promised her that if I ever started feeling bad, I'd come out, ASAP.

That weekend was my first game in months. It felt so good to be able to do something productive again. It felt so much better when we won.

I received a letter in the mail from a school about an hour away, who'd heard about my condition and that I started playing again. The principal invited me to speak at their school. He called me an inspiration. In that moment, I realized I could use my newfound fame to make a difference. I agreed to speak, and I couldn't wait.

That week, I spoke at three different schools. Each one had a better reaction than the previous. I was so happy to know that I could make a difference. And as if that wasn't enough, more and more donations started rolling in. Some from states across the country. I was so happy.

One day, as I was looking over some "fan mail", Lindsey burst through my front door. She was ecstatic. "WE HAVE ENOUGH!" It took me a minute to realize what she meant, but finally I understood. I also jumped up and down. I think we

danced around my kitchen for about a half hour. It wasn't until later that the reality of this sunk in. I would finally be cured. No more waking up in hospital beds, no more black outs, no more worrying about anything.

The next day, we went to the hospital to schedule my surgery. The doctors even seemed excited. My surgery date was two days away. The same day I was speaking at a school two towns over. I would speak at the school at nine and then go back to the hospital at two.

The day of my surgery I arrived at the school to give my last speech before I got "fixed", as Lindsey called it. I got up on the stage and saw a bunch of bored kids in the auditorium. I didn't give my normal speech. I changed it up a bit. I just talked about how you shouldn't let a disease or a disability get in the way of doing what you love. I included lots of quirky metaphors, and the kids really liked it. I'm glad that my message was reaching people.

Laying in the operating room, getting ready to go under, I thought back on what this condition put me through. It definitely had it's rough moments, but I gained something to. I gained the ability to share an important message to a lot of people. I was glad to be able to do that.

I woke up in the hospital, and everything was foggy at first. The foggy effect wore off and I saw Lindsey. She asked "How do you feel?" I wasn't sure how to answer. I felt fine. I felt... better. I felt relieved. "Lindsey. I can't thank you enough. You have done so much for me. You have been with me every step of the way. You never quit on me. I wouldn't have been able to do this without you. I love you."

I'd seen Lindsey cry plenty of times, but this was different. After five months of hard work, it was over. We were free. Soon we all were crying. But they weren't tears of sadness. Not even tears of happiness. They were more like tears of gratitude. Tears of being thankful for all that we had.

After all this, I still speak at schools. And sometimes other places. Convention centers, colleges, anywhere that will let me. I want to share my story and my message to as many people as possible. I want to show people that anything is possible if you have people that love and care about you. I want to share my story of love, sadness, fear, but most importantly, friendship. Because so many people come in and out of our lives, but only certain people are lucky enough to stay. Those people, those wonderful people, are your best friends, and through everything, through the tears and sadness, through thick and thin, friends stay through it all.