

# Coming Back, Coming Up



A Novel

by Gerald C. Matics

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COMING BACK, COMING UP

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Visit the author at <http://geraldcmatics.webs.com>

## Prologue

*LIKE MOST ACCIDENTS, it was a stupid one. And, like most accidents, it was over almost before he knew it had happened.*

*He'd been thinking about Suzy, his wife—or not, depending on whether she'd filed the papers yet—as he ran along University Drive West outside Hornet Field, warming up for the most important race of his life.*

*A good miler, he'd paid his dues, bearing agonies of the body that would have crippled lesser mortals as he whipped himself into world-class shape. He'd also borne agonies of the soul; never having been an athlete herself, Suzy could never quite fathom his obsession with his sport. Hence, the problems between them. He was away too much, he was too selfish, too worried about tomorrow's race to enjoy time with friends tonight. There were dozens of ways she railed against the demons that drove him—demons over which he often wondered whether he had any control.*

*What it came down to was that today, a mere half-hour before the culmination of years of hard work and sacrifice—now that he'd won the right to stand at the starting line of the Olympic Trials 1500 meter final—when he should be focused on the race alone, all he could think about was his disintegrating marriage.*

*Last night's phone call had bordered on the surreal. He'd kept willing her not to say those horrible words, but out they came. His being*

away this last week had taught her something, she said: it had taught her she could live without him. She didn't say it had taught her that "for better or for worse" was a romantic lie, but surely that was what she had meant. She said that she was not getting as much out of the marriage as she was putting into it. And that it would be better—for both of them—to get out now, while they were still young enough to attract someone else, than to drift into an unhappy old age together.

As if she were doing him a favor by ripping his life to shreds.

He'd known that her refusal to come with him to Sacramento was a bad sign, but he hadn't quite been able to read it for what it was. Well, he knew now; on impulse he had asked if there was someone else, and perhaps she was shocked by his boldness into admitting it. It was his fault, she said, he'd driven her to another man, she told him.

Maybe, he thought as he glided along two blocks from the stadium, maybe it's all my fault. Probably, even. All the time I spent training, racing, traveling from meet to meet, I could have spent with her. Maybe she's right: I'm a selfish son of a bitch.

And maybe she's too small-minded, another part of his mind answered, too jealous, too self-centered to care what you care about. Marriage is about compromise. What has she compromised? What makes her think she's in the right here?

What makes me in the right? What makes anyone right when it comes to divorce?

A third part of his brain, the part that monitored such minutiae as where he was running, how fast, how far, struggled for neutrality in the internal argument, but in the midst of the struggle he overlooked the hole in the pavement. He heard the wet snap in his ankle as he fell, and that's when the pain started. Not physical pain—not yet, at least not a great deal—but shattered-dream pain. He knew it was over before he hit the ground. Years of self-denial, of sweaty exhaustion, of running just one more quarter, by God, before submitting to the slow lethargy of the end of the workout, had been invalidated in an instant. The frail house of cards that was his conditioning crashed down around him, and the incredible season he'd had, his coming-out party, the Olympic year in which he'd quite literally sacrificed everything that was important to him, was irrelevant.

For a moment he could do no more than sit in stunned silence, staring at his ballooning ankle, and then he threw back his head and howled. Not from

the pain, but from the awful, aching disappointment that he knew would only get worse as the full import of the fall hit him.

People were stopping now, asking if he was all right. He caught snippets of it: "...call an ambulance?" "...maybe we should..." "...bet he's supposed to try out in there today..." "...damned shame..." "...oh my God, look how big it's getting..."

Cruelly, above the chatter of the half-dozen or so now crowded around him (among them both the concerned and those who could never pass a car wreck without slowing, hoping to see some blood before it was hosed away), he heard the stadium announcer make the first call for the men's 1500 meter run. He wouldn't answer the first call, nor the second, which would come in another few moments. He prayed the ground would swallow him so he'd never hear the third and final call.

There was no earthquake. There was no sign from heaven. There was no miraculous healing. They simply went ahead and ran the race without him. And he shut his mouth and lay there in stony silence until the ambulance came and got him.

He didn't run another step for three years.

Part I

Coming Back

## Chapter 1

THE LATE-JUNE sun baked the Illinois heartland evenly, showing no preference Vince Taggert could see. All the lawns in his new neighborhood were the same faded brown. There was little shade, at least in this area, where the trees had had scant time to take root, and the summer's first heat wave showed no sign of relenting.

The table-top landscape was foreign to him, as much like his native Philadelphia as the surface of Jupiter, but the soupy air was plenty familiar. Earlier, before the heat had gotten a firm grip on the day, there had been a group of boys playing half-hearted baseball down the block, but since the movers left all he'd seen from the garage of his new house was a lone teenager skulking along in boxer shorts that peeked over the waistband of baggy jeans slung low, almost around his thighs, and nothing else. *The fickle politics of fashion*, he thought.

Vince wiped the sweat from his forehead before it had a chance to crawl into his eyes and stood straight to ease the pain in his back. The movers had warned him these boxes were heavy, and they all wore those weight-lifting belts and worked together when necessary. Without scoffing, exactly, Vince had refused their veiled offers to continue hauling boxes from the garage into the house. At a modest \$40 an hour per. There were better things to

spend money on, he'd reasoned, not the least of which was a case of cold beer to drink in front of the television in the living room of his new house, in his favorite chair, with his feet propped up on one of these goddamned boxes.

Now, as he kneaded his complaining back muscles, he began to admit to himself how big a fool he was. While he'd been an athlete, and a mighty good one, that was once-upon-a-time stuff these days. And despite the summers in college he'd spent roofing houses with his uncle, building a decent physique, a runner hardly qualifies as the epitome of upper body strength. Except Falcon, of course. Falcon, who, tiring of the jeering football players in the university weight room, once bet them he could lift what was then on the bar of the bench-press. Their laughter died in their throats as Falcon—all five-foot-six and 118 pounds of him—straight-armed more than 260. Vince knew that even at his own racing weight of 160 pounds stretched over six feet, trying to hoist that bar would have torn him apart. Probably all the more so now that he carried an additional 25 pounds and three years since he'd considered himself fit.

He'd been surprised at how easy the weight was to put on after he stopped running. Suzy would have enjoyed seeing him now, he reflected, the great athlete washed up. She was just that kind of spiteful. But she never got to see his roly-poly look, having vacated the house for good by the time he'd returned from Sacramento, a crutch under each arm. He winced at the memory: the crutches, his bad leg, and his bags proving too much as he manipulated the front door, him going sprawling in the small foyer, crying out for her by instinct. If the phone calls with lawyers hadn't convinced him that divorce was inevitable, her not coming to his aid right then did the trick. Gritting his teeth, he'd picked himself off the floor and gone about the business of making a new life.

For roughly the thousandth time, he wondered what form Suzy's new life was taking. He wondered what sort of man had replaced him. Was he a biker type? She'd always been attracted to those. Or perhaps a pretty-boy musician, another favorite. But irony had long ruled Vince's life, and so he was sure Suzy had taken up with a runner, but one emphatically of the recreational variety: a lumbering mid-pack dweller who occasionally lit up a smoke to relax after a grueling three miles red-lined at ten minute per mile pace....

All very fascinating, but none of this was getting him any closer to that case of beer, and the day wasn't getting any cooler. Sighing, Vince

reached for another box, squatting the way he'd seen the movers do, and heaved. Slowly he beat back gravity, and the box left the floor. What the hell was in the thing, anyway, he wondered—a jet engine?

That was when he saw her.

Running down the street at a moderate pace, cornsilk hair flowing behind, was a stunner. Had to be the most beautiful woman Vince had seen in a long time. Oh, maybe not model-beautiful, no runway stroller, especially not with perspiration glistening on her body. More like the proverbial girl next door on Easter Sunday, when she dresses up soft and pretty and glows in the springtime air as she walks out her front door after a hard winter to show herself to the world.

She glided along the pavement, looking down when she came to a broken section of sidewalk to be sure she didn't stumble (the irony of the moment was lost on Vince), taking quick, light steps. As she passed his driveway, she glanced over and their eyes met. She nodded at him, maybe even smiled just a bit, then turned away.

Vince's arms began to shake, reminding him he was still holding a really heavy box. The girl had stopped at the intersection, waiting for traffic to clear, and he watched her pretty head swivel as she gauged its flow.

What happened then was reflexive, more reaction than the product of conscious thought. He dropped the box (wincing as, too late, he wondered whether anything that heavy could be fragile) and loped out of the garage, meaning to catch her before the traffic let up. No luck; she'd taken advantage of a lull and was away before he could catch up. He kept after her, though, commanding his alarmingly stiff legs to carry him faster, scooting through the intersection a few moments behind. Damn, but this was hard; he looked down to be sure he was not in fact running through taffy.

Now twenty yards or so behind, Vince couldn't help looking her over. She wore cool blue tights over well-shaped legs, and a white tank top that revealed tanned, wiry arms and shoulders. She was nearly as tall as he was, Vince judged, and she had such an easy, practiced stride that she might have been running her first mile or her tenth; he couldn't know.

Discouraged, winded and feeling more than a little foolish, he almost stopped then, but she must have heard the kerslap of his tennis shoes on the pavement because she turned. Now he was committed. He threw on a smile and gave a little wave, and she turned away again.

She must have picked up her pace a bit because he had to labor even harder to keep up. Surprised, he increased his speed. Still, it was only another intersection that brought them together. Stopped short, she eyed him with suspicion.

“Hi,” Vince gasped. Now that he’d halted, his body reminded him he owed it oxygen and demanded payment in full. It was all he could do to keep from bending over and grabbing his knees. He settled for resting his hands on his hips.

“Hello,” she allowed, her voice holding a note of mistrust.

“I’m sorry, I...didn’t mean to...scare you,” he managed between swallows of air, mildly alarmed at his own distress. “Just wanted to...uh...” He tried a smile. “Well, I don’t exactly know. I just...uh...”

Her eyes might have smiled back for a fleeting moment, he thought, but her lips stayed put.

“Look, give me a break, it’s been...awhile since I did this much running.”

“No kidding,” she deadpanned, glancing at his paunch. “That’s why I stopped. I didn’t want to be responsible if you had a heart attack or something. And you didn’t scare me, just surprised me.”

“Well, I always did make a...good first impression.”

“I don’t know about *that*.”

“Joke. Sorry. Listen, I know this is kind of strange, but...”

He had to leave off then because the traffic had cleared and she was off again and he’d have been talking to himself.

With a grunt, Vince started running again. He didn’t know what else to do. Slowly, painfully, he caught up to her. In one way, it was hell: his legs and lungs were seared with the effort. In another, it was fantastic: it gave him a perfect opportunity to ogle her, the gentle V of her back, her narrow waist curving where it met her hips, the traces of her smooth, firm buttocks, trailing down to her —

He almost collided with her when she stopped dead and turned to face him.

“Are you a pervert?” she demanded.

“Par... Pardon me?” he managed, this time forced to bend over and suck air in great gulps.

“I said, ‘Are you a pervert?’ Because this is what perverts do, you know. Follow women and drool all over them.”

“I wasn’t drooling, this...is sweat.”

“Why are you following me?”

“Because you keep...running away.”

The logic of this must have been inescapable, Vince thought, because she had no reply.

“Look,” he said, “if you’d just stand still...for thirty seconds, I can—”

“I’ll save you the trouble,” she said. “I’m married.”

Vince glanced at her left hand. “No ring. Not even...a mark.”

“I was trying to let you down easy. You’re not my type.”

“Oh? What is your type?”

“Well, for starters,” she said, looking him up and down, “it’s an athlete.” With that, she turned and sped off. At that pace, and with Vince’s unpaid oxygen debt, he knew he’d never catch her. God, but she had great form, though.

He had to grin; it had been some time since he’d made quite so big a fool of himself. Vince looked around to see if anyone had witnessed the worst bombing since Pearl Harbor. The lone human being in sight, on the other side of the street, was the skulking teenager he’d seen earlier, and although he wasn’t looking in Vince’s direction, he *was* chuckling softly.

Vince turned and made his way back what turned out to be well short of a mile to his new house. Walking, this time.

THE NEXT DAY, Vince’s first on his new job, was blessedly uneventful. As a human resources manager at a small regional hi-tech consulting firm, Vince didn’t foresee having to move around much. That was fortunate, because he was having a hard time moving around at all. Everything from his abdomen to his toes was sore from his spontaneous jaunt the day before. The rest of him was sore thanks to his ill-considered impersonation of a human forklift. *Another fine mess I’ve gotten me into*, he thought, sifting through employee handbooks and training materials.

Really he was just marking time—a bad thing to do your first day with a new employer, he knew, particularly one that had relocated you halfway across the country—but he couldn't help himself. He kept thinking about the girl. He knew it was crazy; he didn't even know her name, and what's worse, she appeared to regard him as something of a cockroach.

After eight hours of stultifying training, endless form filling and awkward introductions, Vince was free for the day. He checked his watch as he hustled for the door; if she were regular, she'd be running by his house in about forty minutes.

Twenty minutes later, Vince unlocked his front door. The place was a shambles; he hadn't gotten much unpacking done yesterday afternoon, electing instead to take a hot bath to mitigate what experience told him would be an all-over body ache from his exertions. Then the couple across the street—a nice but bland young pair whose names he forgot as soon as he heard them—stopped by with a bottle of wine to welcome him to the neighborhood. The conversation was routine until the man—was it Tom, maybe, or Tim?—mentioned that he'd seen Vince plodding after the blonde earlier. They laughed about that, then Vince asked in as casual a manner as he could whether he knew who she was. Tom, or Tim, said no but she usually ran in the late afternoon on weekdays, close to five o'clock. Both men pretended not to see the look Tom/Tim's wife gave him when he revealed this nugget, but Vince knew at once the man had spent more than a few late weekday afternoons stationed at a window, looking and lusting.

The evening lasted a while longer before Vince felt it polite to yawn and say how tired he was. When at last he hit the bed, sleep came immediately, and was punctuated by dreams of blonde ponytails.

Now, in the living room, Vince kicked a few boxes out of the way, looking for the right one. There it was, the one labeled "Track Stuff." He tore into it, tossing aside various medals and trophies before unearthing a well-worn pair of running shoes and shorts. Quickly he stripped and put them on. He reached for a shirt from some long-forgotten race before he thought to be embarrassed. In all likelihood the girl would mock him for wearing it, destroying the foundation of their promising relationship. Instead he opted for a shirt touting a well-known brewery, figuring it was what a normal non-pervert would wear.

He went through a brief set of stretches. Once they had been automatic; now they entailed serious effort. Bending to touch his toes, he came within shouting distance of his knees before his eyes watered with pain. Other stretches brought similar results. Maybe it would be better to stretch afterward, he reasoned, not without a measure of relief.

Now it was time to wait. He set up a box in the living room by the picture window and crouched on it, ready to spring out the door the moment she came into view.

Minutes passed, then hours. Eventually the sun went down, and what had begun at around six o'clock as a mild complaint from his empty stomach threatened to escalate into a major insurrection. Forced from his perch, Vince went into the kitchen, bent on quelling his body's incipient riot.

He stood staring into the cavernous refrigerator, and actually had his hand on the leftovers of yesterday's hoagie (the Philadelphia terminology he'd grown up with was too much a part of him to think of the things as submarine sandwiches) and a bottle of beer before he stopped himself. Leaving the food where it was, he closed the refrigerator and headed instead for the front door. His stomach could wait a little longer, he decided. Right now he was all dressed up, and by God he was going to go somewhere.

That night Vince Taggart, former All-American and national champion, managed a full mile before staggering back into his house.

FIRST THING IN the morning he arranged with his supervisor to shift his schedule so he could come in half an hour earlier in the morning and leave half an hour earlier in the afternoon. Then he sat down at his desk to go over some files. Every so often he would twist in his seat or stand up to do something and agony would flare somewhere in his body. The principle of delayed muscle soreness says that muscle pain from exertion is at its most acute around 48 hours after vigorous exercise; any weekend warrior knows the body hurts more two days after an event than the day immediately following it. Thinking about this brought Vince the black

realization that he was then feeling the effects of his first half-mile jaunt; the good stuff from last night was yet to come.

Again when his day was done, however, he rushed home, changed and waited at the window, feeling more and more foolish as the minutes spun into hours and hunger goaded him into action. This time he forced his protesting body to do a mile and a half.

The third day Vince got serious. He wore his running shorts and shirt under his work clothes, stripping down and changing into his running shoes while driving home, causing a few stares from passing motorists, at least one near-accident, and a painful cramp in his hip when he fought his way out of his slacks at a short red light. At lunch time he'd pored over a street map of the town, trying to find a quicker route, and had chosen one that figured to save him five minutes or so. Also, he sped. He needed every break he could get.

It paid off. The girl trotted by just as Vince was pulling into his driveway. He killed the engine, got out and took off after her.

"Excuse me," he called. He could see her stiffen, but she didn't stop or even turn around. Nor did she speed up, however, a fact he took as encouraging. "Pardon me, uh, miss?"

This time she did stop. "Can I help you with something?"

"Well, you could tell me your name so I don't have to keep yelling 'Excuse me, miss,'" he said with a smile.

"Better idea: you stop following me, and you won't have to yell anything." She started running again.

At great personal cost, Vince stayed with her. "I'm betting you're a regular runner, and I'm betting you like to run this route a lot. So I'm betting you're going to be seeing a lot of me, because I'm going to keep following you until you at least tell me your name."

"You'll kill yourself first."

"I'd kill myself if I didn't try."

"What do I have to say to get through to you? *Leave me alone.*"

"Okay, wait, just one second." Vince grabbed her arm and they stopped. She didn't pull away, but he could feel the tension in her arm and guessed he had maybe ten seconds before she started screaming or kicked him in the nuts. Or both. He dropped his hand in a hurry but went on. "I know I must come across as some crazy man. Maybe I *am* crazy. But I'm not a bad guy. I saw you running and I was attracted to you. If I'd seen you in a bar it would have been easier, I would have just

come up and talked to you. But I'm new to the area and I don't know what bar you go to and if I don't haul ass after you like this I might never see you again."

"I'll bet you say that to all the girls. Can I go now?" Her voice was still hostile, but she seemed to have relaxed a degree. Vince decided to make one last try.

"No, I don't say that to all the girls, I've never said it to anybody, but you just used a very interesting word: bet. Tell you what—I'll make you a bet. You said your type was an athlete. Well, before I joined the witness protection program, I used to pass for one. So here's the bet: tomorrow at this time, you and I will race a mile down at LDU's track. If you win, I'm not worthy of you and I'll leave you alone. No more following you around. But if I win, you tell me your name and have dinner with me. Deal?"

"Why on earth would I agree to that?" she asked.

"Because you want to put me in my place," Vince said, grinning. "You want to see me break down and cry from the pain. You're a sadomasochist, all you runner-types are."

"You're half-right. I do want to put you in your place, but there's nothing more disgusting than a bawling man. An *overweight* bawling man," she amended, studying him, and for the first time the hard-as-nails look left her eyes. "All right, Rover, it's a deal. We'll race, I'll win, you'll leave me alone."

"I hope I disappoint you on that. Why 'Rover?'"

It was her turn to smile. "Because you keep following me around. Like a dog." She spun and was gone.

Vince watched her go (pink running shorts and a white jogbra today, lovely, lovely), then turned and ran back home, grinning like an idiot. When he got there, he kept going the opposite direction; clearly there was a lot of work to be done, at least three more miles tonight.

He let out a yell of triumph, but not until he figured she was far enough away that she wouldn't hear. If she thought he was crazy before, she'd be sure of it then, because he sounded even to him like he was barking.

## Chapter 2

COACH JIM BROOKS hobbled back across the infield of the Lincoln & Douglas University track to the starting line where his star miler stood, waiting to begin the afternoon workout. His back was bothering him pretty good today. A bad case of sciatica had plagued him during his own college running days—revenge of the unforgiving pavement on which he'd run, he surmised. The weight he'd put on in the more than two-score years since hadn't helped; his knees and feet were perpetual sore spots. He was also vaguely sure he'd have to pop a couple of Tums when he got back to his office to stave off what was becoming quite a bout with the afternoon's cafeteria-style chili.

For all that, though, Brooks was smiling as he took in knots of runners running, jumpers jumping, throwers throwing, vaulters vaulting. He was proud of this group's accomplishments, as proud as he'd been of any team he'd coached in his twenty-eight year career. LDU wasn't historically among the biggest or most successful track programs in the NCAA's Division I, and it was hard-hit by the infamous Title IX balancing act that aimed to achieve equality between men's and women's sports. Brooks knew it was a crock, that such equality was inherently unachievable—he was no chauvinist, but he was realist enough to know that women's sports would match or surpass men's in the public mind only when women could outrun, outjump, outscore and outmuscle men—but he still had to live with the miserly doling out of scholarships

that came with that territory. And, bowing to the reality of a Division I coach's circumstances, he still had to field teams that were, if not dominant, competitive, or if not competitive, at least not an embarrassment.

Brooks' path to that end was less conventional than those of many of his counterparts at other schools, many of whom worked questionable deals with their universities' financial aid departments, shaded the truth on applications for academic scholarships or state grants, or glad-handed successful alumni and turned their backs when said alumni became their recruits' benefactors. Brooks' tack was simple: he coached everyone who came out for his teams the same, regardless of talent, regardless of promise, regardless of past accomplishments. And each year, without fail, one or more of his athletes would surprise him and themselves by turning in performances that were the envy of many of those same counterparts at other schools who sought to buy good athletes rather than develop them.

In the end, it was pure effort that Brooks prized. He would stand outside all afternoon in a driving November rain to time just one five-minute miler if that individual was running to the limit of his ability. And he would take that single five-minute miler who ran his heart and soul out over a team of four-minute milers who simply went through the motions. It wouldn't even be a close call.

Thankfully, in Ryan Sandy he'd found both prodigious effort *and* enormous talent—in spite of the fact that the kid could at times be a sizeable pain in the ass. He wasn't a bad seed—no discipline issues, no baby mama dramas, no rap sheets worthy of a future NBA star—just young and brash. But Lord, could he run!

Even in high school, he'd had all the tools. Brooks remembered the first time he saw Ryan race. He'd been recruiting another kid and had traveled to North Jersey to watch him run a cross-country invitational. There was a young man from the southern part of the state named Ryan Sandy who was racking up wins like a squirrel gathering acorns, and this race was to be a showdown of sorts before the state championship meet, but Brooks' money was on the North Jersey kid. South Jersey was mostly flat, he knew, and cross-country was all rolling terrain. Oh, this Sandy was fast, no doubt, but this sort of running was as much

about heart and lungs as legs. Put him up against someone who'd trained on a steady diet of hills and he'd most likely fold.

Sure enough, Ryan struggled from the opening gun; by the two-mile mark of the three-mile race the other kid had more than sixty yards on him, and they were heading up the steepest hill on the course. Brooks strolled over to wait at the finish line and congratulate his recruit, losing sight of the runners behind a throng of spectators.

Less than five minutes later, Ryan tore around the final corner as if he'd just started the race, arms and legs pumping furiously, Brooks' recruit nowhere in sight. When Ryan crossed the line he punched the air with his fist, and the old coach saw a thin rivulet of blood trickling from the kid's nose. Amazed, Brooks stared at Ryan, barely noticing his recruit stagger around the corner and wheeze over the finish line. This boy had not only come back from a seemingly insurmountable deficit—tying the meet record, Brooks would later learn—he had run so hard the last mile that *his nose bled*. That was how badly he wanted to win. As soon as Brooks got back home he typed a letter to Ryan inviting him to come to LDU.

Effort and talent? Ryan Sandy was the very definition of those terms.

But that wasn't what had Brooks smiling today. He smiled because he'd noticed the unfamiliar figure on the far side of the track ten minutes earlier and had gone to introduce himself.

"What's up, Coach?" Ryan asked when he reached the start-finish line. "We gonna start soon, or what?"

Yes, Brooks reflected, Ryan was in the tradition of some of the finest runners America had ever produced, young men who, like him, were willing to visit the very edge every time they toed the starting line. Some were blessed with awesome endurance, some with incredible speed, but all with indomitable spirit: Ryun, Prefontaine, Scott, Spivey...Taggart. Brooks' grin grew wider.

"Ryan, my boy," he said, "you see the guy I was just talking to? That just happens to be Vince Taggart. *The* Vince Taggart."

"Outstanding. Who the hell's he?"

"Who the—you've never heard of Vince Taggart?"

"Should I have? Who is he, some big-shot alumnus?"

Brooks shook his head, giving his young charge a these-kids-today look. "Vince Taggart was you a few years ago: the fastest kid on the

block. He was about that close to being one of the really great ones," Brooks said, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart, "but he lost it all. Don't you remember? Back in the late Nineties—you would have been going into high school, so you might not have been too interested yet—Taggart was just about unbeatable in the mile. I must have watched him race dozens of times on TV; once I saw him in person at the Penn Relays. They used to get a quality field there every year, and he just crushed 'em all. And he looked like he was just warming up. I used to tape his races and play them for my teams as an example of tactical running; I probably even showed them to you, you just don't remember. This guy was smooth as silk on the track, and he had a kick as good as yours. Maybe better."

"Yeah?" Ryan said, sarcasm dripping from his mouth as he eyed the distant, portly stranger. "So how come I don't remember him?"

"Because with you everything's in one ear and out the other," Brooks rejoined. He told Ryan about the accident. "He's a little older, too, took him awhile to really develop. This guy could have been a world-beater at the Olympics, he was just starting to make noise at the international level. Then the ankle went, and he gave up running entirely. Real shame."

"Just like that? He didn't even try to come back? Why?"

"Don't know. I never heard that story. I'd heard he went through a divorce at the same time, so maybe that had something to do with it."

"That's stupid," Ryan decided after a moment. "He has girl problems so he gives up running? Jesus, if he couldn't stay focused, he must not have been all that good."

"Girl problems." Brooks shook his head sadly. "Sandy, sometimes when I talk to you I think, here's a kid with a head on his shoulders; he's gonna go places. Sometimes I wonder if you're missing the whole point." He spat. "You ready?"

"Sure. What's the workout?"

"First part's the same as last week, eight quarters in 62 with a 100 jog. Run 'em with Will, Mark and Ethan; they ought to be able to stay with you most of the way. Then you'll do some quick

200s on your own. I'll tell you when to stop based on how you look. Can you handle that?"

"Are you kidding? I wish you'd stop making them so easy," Ryan told him, jogging off to meet his group.

"Don't you forget you've got nationals next week, you little punk," Brooks called after him, not unkindly. Still, he shook his head again. Ryan Sandy had talent leaking from his pores. He was a week away from what figured to be an in-the-bag NCAA 1500 meter title; he'd come close last year as a junior, and no one returning from that race had even approached his times this season. *Sports Illustrated*, *Track & Field News*, even a couple of networks wanted to interview this cocky, arrogant kid who'd been compared by some to the fabled Steve Prefontaine, also never one to put too fine a point on things. The difference in their tactics was night and day—Pre had been a gutsy front-runner who often sacrificed himself to make a race great, while Ryan preferred to lay back and unleash his potent kick in the race's late stages—but on the surface their attitudes seemed similar. Brooks knew better; Ryan might end up being Pre's equal on the track, perhaps even better once he got older and stronger, but he'd never be in the same class as a person until he did some serious growing up.

Brooks' attitude toward the boy was that of a father toward a wayward son: loving but wary. He knew Ryan about as well as anybody, but he never knew what the kid would do one minute to the next. It was infuriating.

Ryan, for his part, began the first quarter in something approaching anger without quite knowing why, except that he couldn't understand Coach Brooks' adulation for a goddamned quitter. This Taggart guy, maybe he was pretty quick in his day, but when it came right down to it he didn't have the balls to tough it out. That made him a poser in Ryan's eyes, a pretender to greatness. Even if he'd made the Olympic team—something Ryan held suspect—he doubtless would have folded against the Kenyans, the Moroccans, the Ethiopians of the world. There was no drive under heaven to match that of the Africans, Ryan knew, except maybe his own. While he wasn't ready to put himself in their class just yet—with a mile best of 3:53 and change, a full ten seconds behind Noah Ngugi's world record, he had to be a realist at some point—he reasoned that it was a simple matter of time and hard training until he would be mentioned in the same breath with the true mile greats.

Coming off the first turn, Ryan led the clustered group. The usual workout banter behind him was even now dying down in the face of the challenge of maintaining pace. A 62-second quarter mile by itself was nothing to even the slowest of them (even Mark, a freshman, was a 4:16 miler); the cumulative effects of six of them with bare snippets of rest in between, however, was quite another thing. By the time they entered the second turn, Ryan's only company was the steady drone of their breathing and the syncopation of their footfalls on the tartan track.

Taggart was stretching in lane eight in the middle of the turn. Ryan sized him up as he went by: maybe a little shorter than his own six feet, more massive in the chest and quadriceps, with what even Ryan had to admit were impressive calves. In between, however, was a slight but distinct roll around the guy's stomach—unsightly on any man but downright pathetic on a track athlete. Maybe Brooks was right about him being great once, but he gave it up and that was his tough shit. Ryan spared him not even his pity.

The pack crested the turn and floated the final straightaway. Halfway down an inattentive javelin thrower stood talking to a field event coach in the middle of the first lane. Etiquette was simple in such cases; Ryan yelled "Track!" from about twenty yards away and the pair jumped to the infield as he and the rest flashed past. They closed in on the finish line, where Brooks waited with stopwatch in hand. They turned to him as one even as they crossed the line.

"Sixty-two-three, perfect," Brooks told them. He knew it would be; his practice of forbidding them to wear their own watches during workouts had taught them to focus on their pace until they could hit lap times within a second almost every time. Brooks walked a little ways into the infield to catch them on their next quarter, which would start at the end of the first turn.

Inevitably, Brooks' attention was drawn to Taggart, who had finished stretching on the other side of the track and was now doing some light jogging. A widower, Brooks could relate a little to the pain of separation Taggart must have felt those years ago when his wife had left him. He hadn't told Ryan the gossip he'd heard, that she'd left him because of his monomaniacal dedication to his running. Nevertheless, he likewise couldn't quite understand why

the man had given up on himself as an athlete. Perhaps it was the perspective of years that allowed him not to judge Taggart too harshly. And it was no less a kick to meet him now and have him jogging on his, Brooks', track.

He looked over just in time to catch Ryan's group beginning their second quarter. He could tell he'd rankled Ryan a little when he'd marveled at Taggart's kick. Every runner ever born thinks he's a kicker, Brooks knew, but in Ryan's case it was the flat truth. (The topic had come up in a post-race interview once—one that didn't, thank God, make the air. "They say that front runners, guys like Prefontaine, make a race great," Ryan had said to the reporter, "but who really gives a shit who led the race for fourteen hundred and ninety-nine meters? It's who crosses the line first that counts.") It had been no less true in Taggart's case, but those days were almost certainly over. Brooks wondered if Ryan felt threatened, decided the answer was probably yes. *He's young*, Brooks thought. *He'll learn. I hope.*

The second quarter went much like the first, Ryan leading and the others deferring. Their breathing was marginally harder, their legs a fraction heavier, things they'd grown used to over the course of thousands of workouts between them. They knew the feeling like they knew their names. This was the point where focus kicked in, and the runner's world narrowed to the two and a half feet of track between the white lines receding before him. In the toughest interval sessions, it was the only way to keep from bursting into tears at the thought of doing even one more repeat like this.

Ryan, however, again eyed Taggart, watching until motion carried him out of view. He barely noticed when they crossed the line and Brooks called out, "Sixty-two-five, good," so intent was he on the quitter. No matter what Coach said, Ryan couldn't tolerate giving up, not in himself, not in others. In someone supposedly with such a gift, it was an affront to the sport; such a man wasn't worthy of his respect.

Midway through the third interval, Ryan saw Taggart again, doing a slow jog in the first lane. A tight smile spread on his face, and he kept his peace until they were about twenty yards apart. He could hear Taggart's heavy breathing, saw the way the man's shoulders sagged, as if he were blown out by just a few laps of running. *Shit*, he thought, disgusted.

"Track," Ryan said quietly. Will, running nearly abreast of him, gave him a quizzical look. When they were almost upon Taggart, Ryan

bellowed "Track!" Startled, Taggart was slow getting out of the way, so Ryan lowered his shoulder and butted him aside.

"Hey!" Taggart yelled behind them. Ryan lifted his hand and gave a sort of half-wave to the great Vince Taggart: half apology, half mockery. The mockery was what showed.

Then they were around to the finish again. Brooks was there. "Sixty-two-two. Goddamnit, Ryan, I want to talk to you after you're done these six!"

"He was in the way!" Ryan protested. "I yelled 'Track' twice!"

"After," Brooks said sternly.

Ryan jogged on, stewing, while Brooks limped over to Taggart. The pair stood talking in the infield while Ryan and the others jogged into their fourth quarter. Brooks shouted out their times from where he was, and he stayed there until they were done their last quarter. Before Ryan could jog over to him, Brooks called out. "Good work! Everybody except Sandy, cool down. Ryan, jog a lap and start the 200s, 25 to 27 seconds." Then he went back to his conversation.

Part of Ryan, the intellectual part, knew it was ridiculous to stew for no reason, but that part wasn't the stronger one. The stronger part was the one that already dreaded going to work tonight, standing for hours behind the bar on tired legs serving beer when he should be home in bed sleeping, preserving his strength for the coming championship meet. He was damned sure his competition didn't have to work nights to make ends meet; they had parents to pay what their scholarships didn't. He'd had a father who drank himself into a premature grave before Ryan's sixteenth birthday, and a mother who—he didn't even want to think about what his mother had become. And while none of it was Taggart's fault, Taggart had been given a gift—an opportunity Ryan would have killed for—and then had abandoned it as a dalliance. Ryan, by contrast, had had to work for everything he ever got, and could not tolerate anyone who started out with more and ended up with less, not when they'd had a choice. Taggart had deserted his talent and the sport...and he hadn't gotten that gut from eating too many garden salads. Maybe the guy was one of the

faceless bar patrons for whom he drew beer night after night. *And look at Coach, fawning over him*, he thought.

As he finished the lap jog and swept into the first 200, Ryan's anger boiled over. His legs churned piston-like around the turn and into the home stretch, and he pumped his arms hard as he drove down the straight. When he crossed the line, he looked right at Brooks and Taggart—but Taggart was halfway to the parking lot and Brooks was walking toward him.

"Cool down," Brooks called.

"What?"

"I said cool down, goddamnit. You're done for the day."

"But why? I feel great!"

"Oh, I guess that's why you just ran a 23.5 when I told you specifically 25 to 27 seconds. Wouldn't that be dandy if you pulled a hamstring a week before the national championships, being stupid? You're supposed to know better than that. You're not a freshman anymore," Brooks snapped.

"Look," Ryan said, "I'm sorry. I guess I got a little carried away."

"I'll say you did. Tell me this: what have you got against a man you've never even met?"

"I told you, he was in the way—"

"Ryan, someday you're going to have to grow up. That day might as well be today." Unexpectedly, Brooks grinned. "I've got some news for you. Come cross-country season this fall, you're going to have a new training partner. One who I sincerely hope teaches you a little humility before all's said and done." Brooks turned to look at Taggart, who was just getting into his car.

"Who, him? Get serious, Coach. I don't give a— I don't care how good he used to be, the guy hasn't run in—what, three years? He's retired, remember?"

"Well, he's coming out of retirement. In fact," Brooks chuckled, still watching Taggart, "he ran the first race of his comeback earlier today..."

AT ABOUT FIVE after three that afternoon, Vince had warmed up and was doing gentle stretches on the infield of the track, wondering if he'd burned half a vacation day for nothing. The girl was nowhere in sight.

He looked around; the track was clear now, but he knew in less than an hour a horde of athletes would descend on it. Lincoln & Douglas had a few athletes qualified for next week's national meet, he knew from reading the local paper, one of whom was a real prospect: Ryan Sandy. They said the kid could fly. Well, once upon a time, so could he.

He remembered a race from another life, his first mile in college—a time trial in the early fall before the cross-country season began, where he faced only his new teammates. He'd not set the world on fire in high school, but he hadn't embarrassed himself either, and he'd worked hard over the summer, so when the gun went off he latched onto the fastest returning senior and hung on. The guy hadn't wanted to lose to a walk-on freshman, no matter how early in the season it was, but he couldn't shake this Vince Taggart. With half a lap to go and forty yards back to the third-place runner, Vince stepped into the second lane and turned on the afterburners. Foot by foot he put distance between them over the final straight and won going away. Immediately he turned and sought out his older teammate's hand. "Thanks," Vince had said, "for taking it easy on me." The older runner shook with him and walked away, not quite hiding the puzzlement in his eyes. But when the outdoor season rolled around and Vince capped a fine rookie season with his first conference mile championship, it had been this guy—even though he himself hadn't made the final—who'd been first in line to congratulate him.

He was still daydreaming when he saw her walking across the infield, wrapping her long blonde mane into a ponytail. She had on matching black spandex half-tights and shirt today, and the sleekness of the outfit combined with the tautness of her body evoked images of a jungle cat. For a moment, Vince forgot to breathe.

With no more preamble than a nod in his direction, she moved to the starting line. "All right, one mile is four laps around," she said. "You want to say go or shall I?"

"Whoa, time out," Vince protested. "Aren't you even going to warm up?"

"I just want to get this over with. The sooner it's over, the sooner I can get you to leave me alone."

"I'm touched by your vote of confidence, but I want to do this fair and square. You should at least stretch or something."

"For your information, I just finished a run. I'm as loose as I'm going to get, so spare me the concern and let's get on with it."

"All right, just one second." Vince reached into the bag he'd brought and pulled out a well-worn pair of spikes, looking a question at her. She narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips but said nothing, so he sat and changed shoes. Finished, he stood. "Okay, I'm ready to roll."

"Fabulous," she said. They walked to the line together. "Two commands: 'Runners set' and 'Go.' Clear?"

"Yeah, I think I remember hearing that somewhere before. Once. Maybe."

She scowled. "Runners set...Go!"

Immediately the girl went to the lead. Vince tucked in behind, letting his eyes wander around the side of the track, careful not to stare at her backside lest he be mesmerized. It was bad enough he could smell her perfume. *Boy, it's just not like the old days*, he thought. *You never used to have to worry about your opponent's perfume distracting you.*

*Come to think of it*, he wondered, *why is she even wearing perfume?*

As best as he could, he controlled his breathing, trying to be quiet and casual. Hers was becoming labored by the relatively quick clip; Vince figured they were somewhere close to five-minute-mile pace, and while she was in fantastic shape, she was, after all, a woman, for whom sub-five runs were rarely a lark. There was no question they would slow down; the question was who would slow down more.

She glanced back at him once, and he could almost feel her annoyance that he was still there. He made himself smile, all the while fighting the urge to vomit, and she snapped her head back around. Vince lost the smile and concentrated on not heaving as the track slipped by under their feet.

By the time they entered the final lap the pace had fallen off precipitously, and he could tell she was hurting almost as much as he was. He'd dropped all pretense of controlling his breathing, which by now had taken on the dulcet tones of a dying cow. He guessed that was okay, because he doubted she could hear him above her own tortured wheezes. As bad as he felt, Vince had to fight the urge to giggle at the sudden image of them sharing an oxygen mask on the way to the hospital; he

didn't doubt she'd swing at him if he laughed at her now. That made it all the harder to keep in, and when he thought he was going to burst he cleared his throat loudly to cover the laughter. She jumped and glared at him. *Hey, great tactic, Vince, gross her out. That'll win her over.* He bit the inside of his cheek hard, at last quelling the urge.

It was down to the final straight. She was game, Vince could see, but he'd been in this position too many times not to know how to lift and drive down the home stretch. Arms and legs flailing, he nevertheless managed to pull ahead of her for good and won by two yards.

For a solid minute, neither one could speak. They stood side by side, hands on knees, heads bent low, sucking precious, life-giving air. Without looking, Vince reached his hand out toward her; without looking, she held hers out to touch his, silent acknowledgement of their mutual effort.

When they were able, they walked with mincing steps around the turn. Vince wanted to say something to her, but by instinct he kept his mouth shut. If she told him to get lost in spite of their bet, he would, he decided. She'd already paid him a huge compliment just by showing up here today, and he was done trying to force himself on her. The best he could hope was that he'd won a small measure of respect and that she'd let him down easy.

At the end of the turn, she surprised him by sticking her hand out toward him again. "Corey White," she said.

"Vince," he replied, taking it. "Vince Taggart."

Her hand stopped in mid-shake. "No shit."

"Nope. No shit."

She looked at him in silence, then said: "Excuse me, that must have sounded really crude."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I've heard a lot worse."

"Not from me, you haven't. But I mean, holy—you're really Vince Taggart?"

"Really. It says so on my birth certificate and everything."

She let go of his hand. "Well, now it all makes sense. I kept thinking you looked familiar. Now I know why."

"Would you like to cool down a little bit?"

"I can't, sorry, I've got some things I have to do. Thanks, though."

They stood in awkward silence a moment, then Vince said: "Listen, about our bet...."

"What? Oh. How about tomorrow night?" She lifted her shirt tail wipe her forehead, giving Vince a heart-stopping glimpse of her flat stomach.

"Really? I was just going to say I'd let you off the hook if you wanted."

"No, not at all. I mean, thanks for being a gentleman and all, but I want to."

"Because I'm Vince Taggart."

"No, no," she said, starting back to where Vince had left his bag. "Because I never welsh on a bet. Besides, I pretty much came here expecting to lose. I've never been a very fast miler"

"All evidence to the contrary," he said. Then: "You thought you were going to lose, and rather than stand me up and give me a hint I couldn't miss, you came anyway."

"Does that surprise you?"

"A lot of things surprise me. It's not that difficult to do, really."

"You're a funny one, Vince Taggart."

"You're pretty funny yourself, Corey White."

She hesitated. "There's something I have to ask you."

He watched her. "Why'd I retire?"

"I guess you get that question a lot."

"Not as much as you might expect. In fact, you're the first person who recognized me in about two years."

"And you still haven't answered me."

"Well..., " he said, staring off. Then he looked at her. "How about we save that for tomorrow night? We have to have something to talk about."

"Fair enough." She reached into her tights and pulled out a slip of paper. "Here's my address and phone number. Pick me up at eight, and dress casual but neat. And if you're late, don't bother showing."

He stared at her. "You're a funny one, Corey White."

She smiled back. "You're pretty funny yourself, Vince Taggart."

With that, she turned and jogged away, leaving Vince alone on the track. No, not alone, because the track team had begun filing out of the fieldhouse, and a heavysset older man was making his slow, painful way toward him.

## Chapter 3

"YOU HAD ME convinced you hated my guts," Vince said.

"Who says I don't?" she asked stonefaced, then smiled. "Come on, don't you remember kindergarten? Didn't you always pull the pigtails of girls you liked?"

"So no one would think I liked them. Right."

They were sitting in Flannagan's, a sports bar, of all places. Vince had followed instructions, wearing jeans and a polo shirt and showing up at Corey's house at eight o'clock on the dot with a bouquet of summer flowers. He'd found her decked out in a soft yellow blouse and khakis—no nonsense about making him wait while she fretted over her outfit—and once she'd put the flowers in water, they headed out.

At Flannagan's, they navigated the usual awkward small talk—what they both did for a living (she taught ninth- and tenth-grade English), where they were from (she grew up in California but also spent time in North Carolina when she attended Wake Forrest), how they ended up in central Illinois (she'd moved to the area right after college with her then-boyfriend, an insurance agent, then decided she didn't really want him to be her good neighbor)—before they got around to talking about how they met.

"So, all along you were attracted to me?" he wondered.

"I wouldn't go that far." She smiled again. "I think you just freaked me out a little. My friends tell me I'm a cast-iron bitch when I'm not in complete control."

"I wouldn't say that about you. I'd be too afraid."

"Hmm. Guess I deserve that. But seriously, I'm not used to having guys follow me like that. Hit on me, yes. Follow me, no."

"All righty, then," Vince said, miming pulling out a pen and paper. "Note to self: No more following strange women. Makes them nervous."

"You're a fine one to be calling *me* strange."

"Just an expression. Anyway, I don't think there are many guys who *could* follow you. You're quick."

"I ran the 400 hurdles in college. I was good, not great. If I wanted to keep running after college, and I did, I figured it would be easier to switch to distance running. I run a lot of the local races; usually I place, and once I won the Lake Run, which is this four-mile race they have around here."

"Cool, so you're pretty good."

"More like the competition's pretty weak, except for the university kids. It's nice to do well, but I always wonder what would have happened if I'd stayed with the hurdles. I've read that women runners get a lot stronger as they get older." She paused to sip her Chardonnay. "What's it like to be one of the best in the world in your event?"

"I wouldn't know. I never was one of the best in the world. One of the best in America, but that's a whole different story."

"What do you mean?"

"There are parts of the world where American milers are laughed at. Sometimes the only way an American can get into a race in Europe is to be the rabbit. At least," he hedged, "that's the way it used to be."

"Well, then, what's it like to be the best in America?"

He sighed. "Traveling sucks. The food's usually bad. The hotels never have air conditioning. Worst of all, it tends to destroy family life if the non-running, ah, partner isn't a hundred percent behind the one who runs."

"I'll bet. Hey, you were married, weren't you?"

Vince took his time draining his drink, a Coke. "As a matter of fact, I was," he said at last. "Will you excuse me for a second?"

He stood and went to the bar for a refill, and Corey knew she'd made a mistake. Funny that a man who could be so forward could also be

so reluctant to speak about himself. She could see she'd struck a nerve that wasn't ready to be struck, so when he came back, she changed tacks smoothly.

"You were talking about the bad things about running, but there had to be some good stuff, too."

"Sure," he said, and the tension was gone. "The running itself. The races. No matter what you went through to get there, once you're there, on the starting line of a really big race—especially in Europe, where they know a lot more about track—with the crowd going nuts, knowing that there may never be another time when you can hold the tiger by the tail like this...you savor it. You look around, you know that every son of a bitch out there—excuse me, every other competitor on the track—is just as fit as you are and has done just as much work and paid just as many dues. You know there's only one way to beat a guy like that, and that's to be willing to put yourself through just a little bit more pain than *he's* willing to put *himself* through."

He paused as he watched two couples in the corner throwing darts. "It's not like football, you know? You can't knock a guy on his behind if he gets in your way. It's not what you can do to someone else to win, it's what you have to do to yourself. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the world can't face up to that, not really, not at that level, and knowing that you're one of the few who can—that's a powerful feeling."

"And then, if you've done everything right to prepare, if you haven't skipped any of the interval workouts when it's so hot on the track your brain feels like it's frying inside your skull, haven't bagged the fifteen-mile runs in the dead of winter, haven't been injured or gotten sick or anything—and if God smiles on you that day—and you go out and *win* one of the things... There's just no words to describe it."

Corey stared, but Vince didn't seem to notice. He was looking at the TV on the wall—or maybe he was looking through it, rerunning some long-ago race in his mind. "That's what you meant about runners being sadomasochists," she said quietly. "It's all about pain."

"Yes," he agreed. He turned to look at her. "It's most definitely all about pain." Then he turned back to the TV.

After a moment, she leaned forward. “Do you want to get out of here?” she asked.

“In just one second,” he said, still looking at the TV while his hand stole across the table to find hers. She grabbed it and squeezed, and he squeezed back. His distraction gave her a chance to study him for the first time: dark brown hair and eyes, a ready smile, a roundness in the cheeks and the midsection, but handsome in a teddy-bear kind of way. She’d dated better-looking men than this—men who’d had one thing on their minds: getting into her pants. Was she looking at one of that type now, the wolf on the prowl for fresh meat? Or was she looking at that rarest of fairytale beasts: an actual gentleman?

Corey looked at the TV and saw they were running a special on ESPN: “Countdown to Athens.” Of course. Next year was an Olympic year. At least it was clear Vince had more than the one thing on his mind.

The sound was turned off and would have been drowned out in any case, but the images were plain enough. Shots of the Olympic stadium in Greece filled the screen, and images of past Olympic champions. Typical of television, ESPN tended to show the track athletes it all but ignored the three years in between Olympiads. There were great champions of the past: Frank Shorter, the rail-thin marathoner who had almost single-handedly launched the so-called running boom on the streets of Munich; Bruce Jenner, the decathlete who’d brought a new national pride to America in Montreal; Carl Lewis, winner of seven gold medals in three trips. There were also great failures: Jim Ryun, who suffered through an agonizing 1500 defeat at altitude in Mexico City, and four years later fell in the heats in Munich. The poignancy of this last was written on Vince’s face.

At last, still watching Ryun, he spoke: “How crazy are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean how do you feel about making another bet with me?”

“It depends on the bet,” she said warily.

“I bet,” he said slowly, “that a year from now I’ll be in Athens, representing my country in the Olympic 1500 meters. If I lose the bet...well, we can work out what happens if I lose another time.

“But if I *win* the bet,” he said, turning to look her in the eyes. “If I win, you’ll marry me.”

Corey nearly gasped. “Vince, don’t you think it’s a little—I mean—what?”

Vince smiled wearily. “Say yes. Even if you don’t really mean it. Even if you think you’ll get tired of me tomorrow, or next week, or next month, and want to end this, whatever ‘this’ is. Obviously, if that happens, all bets are off anyway.

“But I have to say this. I was married once, you knew that. I loved my wife, even though we were never meant for each other. She could never understand why I did what I did, why I had to be away all day at a meet, why I was up at five in the morning to run or why I had to go to sleep at nine to be ready to get up the next morning and do it again. She was so jealous she couldn’t stand it, so she found another man to help her stand it. And when that all happened, the divorce and everything, coming so soon after the injury and all, it seemed so pointless to go through it all over again.

“But this last week, chasing after you, as dumb as it was—that brought me back. *You* brought me back, without even knowing it. Running was such a massive chunk of my life, but I never realized how much I missed it until this week. As for the other parts of my life, well, for a long time I’ve felt like I’ve just been hanging onto the bottom rung, but now....”

He paused. Whether he was searching for words or gathering his courage, she couldn’t tell.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” he pleaded. “I’m not telling you I love you. Hell, I don’t even *know* you yet. But I have a strong feeling that I *could* love you, that this could work. You know how in a race there’s a moment when you have to decide whether to settle into a pace and hang on or go hard to try and win, and risk not even finishing? Well, this is one of those moments. I’ll be risking a lot, and I need some incentive, some light at the end of the tunnel. So even if you don’t mean it, even if you think it’s the looniest thing you ever heard, please—say yes.”

Whatever Corey had been expecting tonight, this was not it. It was a lunatic idea, so the man in front of her must surely be insane, and she should fear for her safety.

Or *was* he insane? Maybe just a hopeless romantic, the way she’d once been herself. There was a time, long ago, when she’d been given to flights of fancy, which often involved giving her

heart despite her better judgment. She'd been hurt more than once that way, and she'd learned to tender herself more dearly. She was no man's fool any longer. But was it foolish to embrace the chance for love? Or would she be all the more foolish to spurn it?

It might have been as long as a minute that they sat there staring at one another, or it might have been as short as a few seconds; she'd never know. What she did, however, was this: she leaned forward and brushed his lips with the gentlest of kisses.

"I *do* think it's the looniest thing I ever heard," she whispered, "so, of course, how could I say no?"

## Chapter 4

IF THE GODS of track and field had come to Ryan Sandy and offered to grant his wishes for perfect racing conditions the day of the NCAA 1500 meter final, he would have been hard-pressed to improve on nature.

The day dawned mild and fair over the University of Oregon campus; not much wind, low humidity, and nothing but sun in the forecast. Had Ryan been less Catholic, he might have been tempted to fall on his knees and worship the benevolent tartan surface, that which both gaveth and taketh away.

In truth, he knew, the track yielded up nothing of its own accord, only rewarded in equal measure the sweat and tears of those who trod it. Ryan was realist enough to know the truth: if you ran hard, you would run fast. He'd have none of the complainers who railed against rain, headwinds, a too-hard running surface, a too-soft one, or any of a thousand anemic excuses. Though he enjoyed running in beautiful weather as much as anyone, had he stepped out the door for his morning shake-out run and been greeted by fog, flood or falling snow, he'd have steeled himself and started running, rejoicing in the knowledge that the competition would likely view the same sight with despair, thereby neatly eliminating themselves before racing a single stride.

The essential truth of Ryan Sandy was this: as many things as there were in life that were beyond his control *outside* the painted white lines of the track, he'd be damned if anything that happened *inside* them ever would be.

The trial heats two days before had emphasized the point. A cold, biting shower had begun falling twenty minutes before Ryan's race, just as the first heat was getting underway. More telling to Ryan (who disdained the tent on the infield, preferring the rain) than the looks of consternation on the faces of the runners as they completed their laps was the tentative way in which they ran. Times recorded by the heat winners were beyond slow; they might have been matched by fairly good high school milers, an inappropriate showing for the supposed cream of the nation's collegiate crop. Despite Coach Brooks' orders to conserve energy for the final, Ryan elected to send a message. When his heat began, he grabbed the lead before the first turn and extended it the rest of the way, finishing almost seven seconds clear of second place. Watching from the press box, Brooks, chagrined, stifled a curse as he forced a smile at nearby reporters.

Ryan, for his part, had felt fantastic. It would be worth the chewing out he knew would be coming from Coach Brooks. He could see it in the eyes of the others, those on whom Fortune had frowned by putting them through their paces alongside Ryan Sandy. He'd put fear into them, serious fear. Not more than two or three had harbored real hopes of beating him in the final in any case—though most had likely dreamed about it often enough—but now when he sought them out, they couldn't even meet his eyes. Now he owned them, he knew. Now the fixed order of things, the one in which Ryan Sandy would leave college as the finest middle-distance runner of his day, was ever more firmly established.

Milling about now on the track with the other finalists before the championship race, Ryan felt strong and confident, light as a whisper. At once he savored the moment and wanted the formality of the race to be over, mostly so he could know how fast he had run.

At last the starter called them to the line, gave them their instructions, then set them at the ready. Normally a statue at the start, Ryan shook his hands impatiently for the seeming eternity between the starter's cry of "Set!" and the crack of the gun.

Once they were off, even Ryan was surprised at the ease with which he assumed the lead. The field had doubtless conceded him the race,

leaving him the somewhat reluctant point of a flying wedge of athletes. *Fine*, he thought, *if they're gonna make it this easy....*

Quickly Ryan put ten meters between himself and the pack. By the end of the first lap, they were an abstraction; he heard only himself above the subdued noise of the crowd. He had time to think.

Running had begun for Ryan at a tender age. He was a third-grader when his father took him to his first CYO track meet. He didn't win the race, a half-mile, that day, but he'd shown promise enough that the old man took him home and ran him around the block a dozen times before dinner. Little Ryan got his first side-stitch on the fourth go-round, but dared not hold his stomach when he passed his father, who even then had had a flask furtively at his lips when he judged the neighbors weren't looking. Instead, when he passed his dad, he unscrunched his pained face and forced his tired legs to lift higher. Daddy was happy, he could tell, and if Daddy was happy, maybe he wouldn't yell at Mommy so much. If all it cost was a little pain in Ryan's side and maybe sore feet and legs, well, he could stand that, couldn't he?

Maybe Eric Sandy stopped yelling at Ryan's mother so much; maybe he didn't. Ryan started to be out of the house enough not to know. Extra workouts in the evenings and sleepovers at the homes of his running friends absorbed his time and attention. Probably he knew things were sliding further and further downhill between his parents, but by keeping himself busy he prevented himself from thinking about it too much. All he knew was that when he brought home trophies and medals his father seemed happy, even proud, so he determined to bring home a lot of them.

Ryan remembered with awful clarity the day his father died. He'd been away at a high-school meet, an invitational with some of the best young runners in southeastern Pennsylvania and the surrounding tri-state area, and he won the two-mile, a race that was a little long for him. He couldn't wait to show the old man his trophy, and when a teammate's parents dropped him off at home he dashed inside, only to find his mother sitting in the gloom of the unlit living room, aiming the remote at the dark television.

"Mom?" he said, walking toward her. "Hey, Mom, where's Dad?"

"The TV don't work," she said softly, staring at the silent set. "It worked just fine before, but it don't now."

Ryan was puzzled, and not a little afraid. "What do you mean? Before what? Where's Dad?"

"Before those people got here. Maybe they kicked the plug out or something. I should check." Margaret Sandy didn't move from her place on the easy chair.

Ryan didn't have to ask again, knowing by instinct who "those people" were. He tottered on shaky legs to the couch and sat down. "When did it happen?"

"About one. He came home at lunchtime not feeling good. Went right upstairs, took off his clothes and passed out. When I came up to bring him some chicken soup, he was...he was..." Her voice faltered. "He wet the bed. I didn't want the ambulance people to see him like that, so I stripped the bed and got some shorts on him." She paused. "Reminds me I got to do the laundry."

Ryan cried, not really sure why. Had he loved his father, really? He'd lived to make the old man proud, but was that the same? He wasn't sure. Maybe he was crying for his mother. Maybe he was crying for himself, for things he'd never known and never would. He couldn't tell. It was just that right now, crying seemed the thing to do.

Still his mother made no move. Through his tears, Ryan wondered if she'd gone insane. He'd no way of knowing, but he had the feeling he should find out. His first considered act of adulthood, then, was to dry his eyes, go to the phone book and look up a psychiatrist, someone who could give her the help that the males in the Sandy family could not.

"...OF EASTERN MICHIGAN making a move on Sandy, with Orbach of Kansas in third, McMillan of..."

Abruptly Ryan snapped back into the present. He'd been daydreaming. The crowd had gotten considerably louder as he entered the final lap—and had the stadium announcer just said the gap had closed? Startled, he sneaked a look over his shoulder; the pack had caught up, sure as hell, and a green-and-yellow-clad runner was no more than two or three meters back. Horace Wyler, Eastern Michigan's stud, one of those few with pretensions to greatness. He must have worked

hard to reel Sandy in while he, Ryan, had been on cruise control the last couple of laps.

Angry with himself for the lapse in focus, Ryan lowered his head, intent on restoring the gap. His silky strides took on a different appearance, one that spoke of wellsprings of power bubbling to the surface, and Wyler fell away like dead skin.

From the stands sixty meters away, Brooks could see the change in demeanor. While he had been mildly annoyed with Ryan over his antics in qualifying, he couldn't help but wonder anew at the talent the young man possessed. Why, it was as if he'd just begun the race—a quarter-mile instead of the metric one. Brooks shook his head and laughed, drawing a look from the Arkansas coach with whom he'd been standing.

"Looked a little scary there for awhile, eh?" the coach remarked.

"Never a doubt in *my* mind," Brooks replied, taking his leave to make his painful way to the track.

For Ryan, it was now just a matter of finishing it off. Not that this was a lark; he was pressing as hard as he could, still accelerating when he hit the final straightaway. The crowd, which he'd shut out only moments before, now buoyed him down the homestretch. Ten meters from the finish he treated himself to a look back and punched his fist into the air; one second later he was the national champion.

Ryan kept jogging, dodging officials, looking for Brooks. He got most of the way around the turn before he spotted him, and though Brooks was smiling, it seemed a smile not so much of happiness as of relief.

"Congratulations, son," Brooks said, first grabbing Ryan's hand, then pulling him into a brief, semi-embarrassed man-hug. It was long enough, however, to note that while Ryan was drenched in sweat, his breathing was nearly back to normal. "You pulled it off."

"Thanks," Ryan said. "Got a little careless there, going into the last lap."

"Well, when you run the last lap in 52 seconds flat, there ain't many mistakes you can't overcome. At least," Brooks hedged, "against this bunch there ain't. Europe, now, there's a different

story altogether. You plan on pulling that daydreaming crap over there, you might as well set up your own private jock-carrying service as soon as you get off the plane.”

“Aw, come on, Coach, don’t bring me down now,” Ryan protested.

Brooks sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. Go on, finish your lap. You earned it.”

Ryan flashed him a huge, infectious grin as he sped off, staying close to the stands to slap the outstretched hands of those who wanted a piece of him. Halfway down the backstretch he stopped to sign a few autographs. Then he completed the lap, found his bag, traded his spikes for his training shoes and soggy singlet for a t-shirt, and headed down a short, dim tunnel to pee in a cup. Later he hoped to get in some mileage for the day.

EIGHT HUNDRED MILES away, Vince Taggart sat stretching on the rug in his living room in front of the television while Corey rummaged through the refrigerator in the kitchen. CBS was replaying the final lap of the 1500. Vince was glad he and Corey had finished their run—an easy six miles—before he watched this race, because it was enough to bring him close to tears. Fifty-two seconds. Damn.

It was difficult enough to do what he was doing, to embark on a comeback, without torturing himself with this, he thought. Surprisingly, Corey had been the one who’d insisted they watch the race. She had taken an interest in the Sandy kid since Vince had told her about their encounter. Had Vince been a different sort of man, he might have felt real jealousy over that interest, age difference notwithstanding. He’d decided, however, that he’d lay no serious claims on Corey, at least not yet. Already he could feel himself falling for her, a feeling he resisted by choice rather than by instinct; he regretted somewhat his rash wager with her—was it only a week ago?—because while he was more than a little smitten, he was wary of dragging either of them into another ill-advised relationship.

Corey came into the living room, guessed partly right about what he’d been thinking, and sat down next to him. “He’s kinda fast, huh?” she said, handing him a glass of iced tea.

“Sure,” he said, taking a sip. “Like the Arctic Circle’s kinda cold.”

They watched in silence as Ryan circled the track and the commentators bantered.

“Look at him, Paul,” one said. “It’s like he just finished a training run, not the equivalent of a 3:56 mile.”

“It’s pretty amazing, Todd,” Paul agreed. “We knew at the beginning of this season—really since last year—that this could be a real breakthrough year for Ryan Sandy, and this is the fulfillment of that promise.”

“I think the most incredible thing is the *way* he did it today,” Todd went on. “It was just like he was toying with the field, letting them get a little close, then blowing them away. And you’re talking about some quality runners here; Horace Wyler in second had run 3:57 twice coming into this meet, and he was looking to take a big scalp in Ryan Sandy.”

“And again we’ll probably hear the comparisons start up between Sandy and Vince Taggart. Taggart, you’ll remember, had an outstanding pre-Olympic year three years ago before breaking his foot right before the trial race.”

“It was my ankle, you jackass,” Taggart muttered at the television. Paul had interviewed him a few times in another life, and had never been anything less than irrelevant.

“Steady, big fella,” Corey soothed.

“Boy, there’s a blast from the past,” Todd said as Ryan was finishing his lap of glory. “You just don’t hear the name Vince Taggart much these days. Wonder what ever happened to him?”

The camera cut to the pair of announcers, perfectly coiffed and wearing interchangeable blue blazers. “I don’t know, Todd,” Paul answered, “but if he’s watching this today, you just have to wonder what’s going through his mind.

“We’ll be back in a moment.”

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Corey asked as the screen showed a cat begging its owner for Tender Vittles.

“Me? Nothing,” Vince said, thinking plenty.

“Don’t give me that. This all bothers you, don’t deny it. It bothers you the way they talk about him.”

“Of course not,” he said. She looked at him. “Okay, maybe it bothers me a little.” She looked some more. “Okay, okay, it bothers me more than a little.”

“Why?”

“It’s like I told you, he’s cocky. I can’t stand arrogance like that in a runner. We’re not football or basketball players, you know; we don’t have to puff up our own egos and shout to the world how great we are. Running speaks for itself. Either you win or you don’t; it’s that simple. No arguments over who was better. Sportswriters might argue for the rest of time over who would have won if Wilt Chamberlain in his prime went one-one-one against Shaquille O’Neal in *his* prime. Sure, Wilt scored a hundred points in a single game, but Shaq was unstoppable in the paint, et cetera, et cetera. But we know Noah Ngugi would’ve kicked the *crap* out of Roger Bannister because we know exactly how fast each one ran. When you’re a great runner, you don’t have to rub people’s noses in it, because everybody with eyes already knows.”

“And?”

“And he’s nothing like me! I never pulled that kind of crap, the way he was showboating today. If he was that frisky at the end of the race, why didn’t he run harder sooner? Because he wanted to embarrass the rest of them. People want to pretend he’s the second coming of Prefontaine, fine. I know better. Leave me out of it.”

“Do you think maybe you’re still upset over the whole bumping incident?”

“Of course not. I mean, that was annoying, but this is something else. It’s like now I *have* to come back to... I don’t know, clear my name or something.”

Corey got up and slid down in front of the TV, straddling Vince’s outstretched legs. “You know, Vince, it’s not like you have anything to prove. You’ve been where he’s heading as a runner. You’ve been to the mountaintop. Maybe someday he’ll get there, and maybe he won’t. But for you, it would be getting *back* there, which is probably twice as hard. Even if you don’t make it, you’ll have accomplished a lot just by trying.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But now that I’ve started out, knowing doesn’t make it any easier.”

“When’s Mr. Brooks going to start coaching you?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“Oh, I don’t expect that to be for awhile. He’ll probably go to Europe with Sandy. If the kid keeps his head, he could really do some great things over there. On the other hand, he could get his ass handed

to him. Anyway, it’ll probably be August at least before Brooks is ready to give me any of his time.”

“How good do you think he is as a coach?”

“Well, you see what he’s done with Sandy. The guy must know something. He’ll probably have him in the Olympics. Jesus, that kid’s fast!” Vince shook his head and smiled without humor. “Did you see how easy it was for him? I may not like him, but I’ve got to admire him.”

Corey reached behind her without looking and switched the TV off. Then she plucked the glass from his hand and set it aside. “How,” she said slyly, “would you like to admire something else for awhile?”

Then she crawled into his arms, and Vince thought no more about Ryan Sandy, Jim Brooks or the Olympics for the rest of the day.

## Chapter 5

RYAN WON THE NCAA title on Saturday; Sunday he was back at work.

It had taken some persuading to get his boss to let him take off in July for an abbreviated European tour—the guy was no track fan and couldn't have cared less about Ryan's star status—and Ryan had only persuaded him by promising to work almost every night in June. True to his promise, he was behind the bar at Mother O'Leary's Grill when it opened at three o'clock, just more than twenty-four hours since he'd held the country's elite college milers in the palm of his hand. Probably many of them were touring Eugene—the fabled Track Town, USA—before going home and contemplating a summer at the beach. The better ones he'd see on the European circuit in a month's time.

Bar traffic was light, normal for this early on a Sunday at Mother's. It would pick up a little later. For now, Ryan was able to sit and prop up his feet. He was glad of the chance, for despite the ease of his win the day before, he'd run three world-class races in four days to accomplish it; coupled with last night's late flight, it made for a drain on his energy.

The flight had afforded him the chance for a quiet conversation with Brooks.

"So, you've got your degree, you've got your national championship, and you're about to have a summer in Europe under your belt," Brooks had said. "What will you do now?"

"Don't know," Ryan admitted. "I never really thought too much about life after graduation. I just figured I'd keep running, I guess."

"You know I've stayed out of the business side of it on purpose. Have you gotten any sponsorship offers? The shoe companies must be lining up to throw money at you."

"I'm looking at a couple, but they all come with different strings attached, and I have to figure out which strings I can cut and which I can't. I've still got the bartending job in the meantime, so I'm not needy yet. I guess I do have to look for a place to live now, though. They've got my stuff in storage back at the dorm, but I can't stay there."

"No, you can't," Brooks agreed. He studied his young protégé. "I have quite a bit of room in the house since Marjorie passed away; you're more than welcome to stay with me as long as you'd like. But there's something else we need to talk about first."

"Which is?"

"Whether you want me to continue coaching you or not."

"Aw, Coach, of course I do. You know that."

"Now, before you commit to it, just hear me out. I'd be proud to continue coaching you indefinitely, as long as you'll let me. I'm anxious to see how far you'll go. But be honest with me: am I one of those 'strings' you mentioned cutting?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb, it doesn't suit a college graduate. I've coached some athletes who have done pretty well, but no one at your level, so as far as many people who follow the sport are concerned, you're a fluke, if you get me. Who knows, they might be right. Just in case, at least one of those shoe companies wants you to make a coaching change. Maybe the guys with the pretty 'swoosh' want you to stay out there in Eugene permanently, for instance?"

Ryan said nothing, which was answer enough.

"You might want to take the deal, son," Brooks said. "Because I'll be honest with you: I don't want my shortcomings as a coach to hold you back."

"What are you talking about? You don't have any shortcomings."

Brooks shook his head sadly. “Hell, Ryan, you know I’m not as young as I used to be. Even if I were, this damned back has me in pain just about all the time now. It’s getting so I can barely stand around to time you sometimes during workouts; what you really need is someone who can run with you, challenge you. A mentor of sorts, someone closer to your own age.”

“Why do I get the feeling you have someone in mind?”

“He’s not a bad person, you know. I know you have trouble respecting him because he got away from running, but I wish you wouldn’t judge him so quickly. You haven’t even met the man.”

“And I don’t much care to, either. He’s a quitter, Coach. I’ve known people like him my whole life. They always talk a good game, but when the shit really hits the fan, where are they? Nowhere. If he quit once, he’ll quit again. I’d rather not have anything to do with him, and personally, I wish you wouldn’t waste your time on him, either.”

They rode in silence for awhile. Then Brooks, looking straight ahead, said quietly: “How I choose to spend my time is my business. And if I continue to coach you, how you spend your time is *also* my business. Until you develop some maturity of your own, you’ll just have to depend on mine. Come September, you and Taggert will be working out together, and that’s that. And you will *not* give him any crap about it. Do I make myself clear?”

Ryan was staring at him.

“I said, ‘Do I make myself clear?’”

“Yeah,” Ryan said. “It’s clear.”

They didn’t speak for the rest of the flight.

Ryan took his feet off the bar and got up when the afternoon’s first customer, a pudgy, fortyish man in an expensive-looking sweatsuit, walked in. Ryan got the newcomer a Guinness and sat back down.

He still couldn’t understand what was up with Coach Brooks. The old man had his cranky moments, to be sure, but he had never spoken to him like that before. Never. And all over this loser Taggert. Ryan sniffed loudly.

“Sorry, were you talking to me?” his lone customer asked.

“No,” Ryan said. Then: “Actually, yeah. Got a question for you. Ever heard of a guy named Vince Taggert?”

“Vince Taggert, Vince Taggert. Not that I can remember, no.”

“How about Ryan Sandy?”

“Yeah, I think—Hey, that’s you, isn’t it? I saw your picture in the paper this morning. Way to go at that national meet, kid.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said, his thoughts a hundred miles away.