

Chapter 6

DAYS MELTED INTO days for Ryan Sandy the rest of the long, hot summer. Europe was an eye-opening experience, if not an entirely satisfying one; in race after race he was not merely challenged but humbled, placing well out of the money in every meet. In his best race, in fact, Ryan managed no better than sixth out of eleven—not even in the top half of the field. Throughout the summer, Ryan discovered the honor of being the fastest American miler is a relative one. He took it hard.

Munich was typical. Ryan's race didn't go off until almost eleven at night but the stands were still packed with raucous Germans. Three weeks of hard races with little to show for the effort had him anxious and unsure but still game. Tonight's race would include a cross-section of Kenyans, Moroccans, Britons and others of the world's elite, plus local favorite Wilhelm Snell, who, while not in that august company, figured to threaten German national records in a year or two. Ryan was the lone American in the race; in his more lucid moments earlier that day, he'd questioned whether he belonged there at all.

Unusually, tonight's race would be a full mile rather than the bastardized 1500 meter distance. Ryan despised the so-called metric mile, weary of the necessity of "converting" times—adding roughly seventeen seconds to a 1500 meter time to get its equivalent mile performance, subtracting the same from a mile to approximate the 1500 meter result. In any other country it wouldn't mean so much, for only America still

clung with rabid determination to the English system of measurement. Still, there would always be a certain poetry in breaking the four-minute mile; one simply couldn't manage the same appreciation for a 1500 runner who dipped below 3:43 for the first time. The performances were identical in terms of effort and speed, but one would excite at least a small spark of interest in even the most football-jaded American male, while the other wouldn't compete with a light beer commercial for his attention.

Such thoughts were irrelevant, however, as the starter called them to the line for the meet's final event. Ryan hunkered over in the warm July night, waiting for the pistol's crack. He'd chosen the position farthest from the pole rather than one closer in but behind the first rank of athletes; he wanted room to run, and you could get knocked around pretty good if you were trapped on the inside on the physical European circuit.

The gunshot shattered the momentary silence, and the crowd came to life as the runners cascaded like a waterfall into the first turn. Ryan took an elbow in the chest almost immediately and had to steel himself not to react in kind. Such battles had no winner, could only get a runner disqualified, and flying elbows, if unseen by the officials, were part of the race. So instead he concentrated on staying relaxed and running smoothly and efficiently until it was time for the last-lap sprint.

This was the European circuit, however, where to world-class milers the entire race is a sprint. Championship races are exceptions: too often they are slow, shuffling affairs where no one dares lead and the pace dawdles in an appalling manner until invariably the runner with the worst kick can control his nerves no longer and bolts for the front; the others, just as invariably, swallow him up like sharks gobbling minnow. Not so on the circuit, track's "regular season." Though some disapprove of the practice, pacesetters—"rabbits"—are hired to ensure a fast, honest race, the kind that determines who the best athlete is, the kind in which both records and men are broken.

The rabbit in this race, the man who'd elbowed Ryan, was filling his role in admirable fashion. One of the nameless Kenyan contingent, his job was simply to burn brightly and flame out, having towed the bigger-name athletes behind him to blazing split

times. For two and a half laps he burned brightly. Then he stepped off the track, leaving the competing athletes to do battle.

Far ahead of Ryan, the great Noah Ngugi now led the pack, really a single strand of humanity all running at the very limit of their ability. Ryan Sandy was learning that his limit was nowhere near that of Ngugi, nor of ten other athletes in the race; he was just hanging on, with more than five hundred meters of pain remaining.

Just into the last lap, another athlete passed him. It was Wilhelm Snell, the German hope, laboring much as he was. Ryan sneaked a peak over his shoulder and was appalled to find no one there—wait, there was one runner, but he had dropped so far back he wasn't even looking at the rest of them. Furious with himself for no other reason than not being as strong as he wanted to be, he revised his goal in the race to simply beating Snell.

It took him most of three hundred meters to do it, but finally he reeled in the struggling young German until only a few feet separated them. But there was no more gas left in the tank; Snell's lead grew again, and there was nothing Ryan could do to close the gap. His form fell apart, his knees refused to rise, and Snell maintained a good two meters between them. They finished that way.

Later he learned that the runner trailing him had dropped out.

DFL, he thought over and over on the cab ride back to the hotel. *Dead fucking last.*

DAYS MELTED INTO days for Vince Taggart as well. For him, though, there was the steady, relentless grind of ascent up the runner's pyramid of conditioning. As his weekly mileage climbed—to 35, then 50, then 65 and beyond—his weight dropped, until by summer's end he again resembled an athlete.

By the end of July, he was forced to do most of his running without Corey, who'd been a near-constant companion since their first date, because he'd simply gotten too fast, clicking off mile after mile at close to six-minute pace. Within weeks he was doing the bulk of his training alone in the mornings before work, occasionally cruising five or six miles with Corey in the evenings.

All in all, Vince could not have hoped for a more supportive, caring partner than Corey White. At her suggestion, Vince joined the local

YMCA and began a weightlifting regimen. Corey also helped him cut out the bad eating habits he'd developed over the past few years—really all his life, since when he'd run in high school and college he could eat pretty much whatever he wanted and suffer no ill consequences. It was all fuel for a very hot fire then; now it was potential sludge to foul aging machinery.

More than that, she was tough when he needed her strength, yielding when he needed her compassion. To her he unburdened many of the demons of his past, and she gave him comfort.

Not that they didn't have their share of spats, once the initial relationship glow had dimmed a bit.

"You have to give me a better reason than that," Corey snapped one night after dinner at Vince's. They were in the kitchen cleaning up. "And besides, it isn't true."

"Okay, so maybe *all* dogs don't howl when they hear opera," Vince conceded. "Just the ones with taste."

"Really? So who died and made *you* grand arbiter of taste? You can be such a snob sometimes." She finished washing a plate and thrust it at him to dry.

"I just know what I like and what I don't like. And anyway, who's more of a snob? Me, or the guy who throws away a couple hundred bucks on opera tickets, not to mention those funny little binoculars—"

"They're called opera glasses."

"—plus owns his own tux, plus a limo, plus—"

"For your information, a snob is someone who sticks his nose up at something different without even trying to understand it. That's you."

"I don't *want* to understand it." The dishes were done. Vince slung the dishtowel over his shoulder and folded his arms.

"Not even for me, right? You won't even go with me one time?"

"Why can't you go with one of your girlfriends? You'd have a better time anyway."

Suddenly she was serene. "You know what? You're right," she said calmly. "That's exactly what I'll do." Then she turned and walked out of the kitchen.

"That's the spirit," he called after her. "You'll see, it'll work out better." He took the towel off his shoulder and hung it over the oven handle to dry. "Hey, why don't you turn on the TV in there, see if there's anything good on?"

He heard the front door slam.

"Corey!" Vince hurried to the front door and yanked it open, making it to the porch steps in time to see her backing out of the driveway in her car.

"No fair!" he yelled. "There's no way I can catch you in a car."

She didn't stop.

Her temper had cooled enough by midnight that she answered the phone when he called.

"Hello?"

"Sorry."

"Yeah."

"No, really. I am. I was insensitive, and rude, and completely out of line."

"And?"

"And a snob."

"And?"

"And...I'll never do it again?"

"And you'll go with me to the opera Friday night."

"Uh, sure. I mean, of course I'll go. I'd be delighted to attend the opera with madame."

"You can knock *that* crap off right now."

"Sorry."

"Ugh. Isn't this where I came in?"

They hung up a minute later. Vince rolled over in bed and doused the light immediately. He had to be up in five hours to run.

IT WAS ALWAYS the same dream, or near enough that it didn't matter. Ryan was leading a road race but wasn't a runner, more like a caricature of one: sweaty rolls of fat on his bulging stomach flapped over the gutters of his hips as he pumped his stubby legs (adorned in high-top Keds and knee-high tube socks, the kind with three stripes) as hard as he could. Sometimes for a shirt he wore the one that came with the race number; this time he had on a dirty, sleeveless undershirt, a "wife-

beater," complete with spaghetti sauce stains. The course was bracketed by spectators, all screaming at him to run faster, run faster, because someone was gaining on him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Noah Ngugi a few yards back, smiling as he erased the distance between them, and there was little doubt Ngugi would catch him in the final stretch. The race announcer's voice wafted down, calling the lopsided duel, and it came to Ryan that the announcer was Brooks. "Looks like Sandy ain't gonna pull *this* one out," Brooks chuckled, his voice raspy and hollow. Ryan could feel Ngugi's breath on the back of his neck as the crowd thundered and the sanctuary of the finish line beckoned from too far away. Just then he glanced up and saw Brooks at his microphone atop a podium; the old man was in a wheelchair, withered and helpless, but his gaze was strong and disapproving as he stared Ryan down. "Hey, sweetheart," he croaked, "are you gonna sleep all day? Come on, it's time to get up."

Ryan started, blinked, opened his eyes. Disorientation seized him; this wasn't his bedroom. He lay on a four-poster with a frilly lavender spread that matched the drapes on both windows. Unmistakable girl-type items were everywhere: a jewelry armoire here, a Georgia O'Keefe print there, and oh yes, an actual girl there applying make-up at the corner vanity.

She saw him stir in the mirror and turned, smiling. "Hey, you. It's about time. I called you three times already. I was about to come in after you."

He returned the smile automatically. "Would that have been so bad?" The smile faded as he reached for her name. An "M" word, he was sure, but that covered some territory.

She went back to her make-up, saving him from panicking for the moment. He pulled himself up to one elbow and watched her. She was as darkly pretty as she'd been last night when she leaned over the bar and ordered a Coors Lights: soft brown eyes, shiny mid-length black hair, exotic features and a damned fine shape. They'd struck up a conversation about something forgettable, and that had been all it took, really. The jeans and V-neck top she'd been wearing mingled with his clothes at the foot of the bed, and what had to be a work outfit hung on the closet door as she got ready. She was wearing an old t-shirt over a pair of floral satin

panties, a cloth band around her head to keep her hair out of the way, and nothing else. Fascinated, Ryan stared as she (*Melissa, maybe*, he thought, tentatively at first, then with some conviction) drew lipstick on with the concentration of a Renaissance master. Women's morning rituals had always captivated him—probably had some psycho-sexual association with his mother or something, but there it was—although he didn't often have the opportunity to watch. Women were, more often than not, distractions he stayed away from. Weekends could be for going on dates or for improving as an athlete, and he regularly beat runners who indulged in the former while he'd done the latter. Not only that, he'd known more than one athlete who'd fallen away from the sport because the time and energy that went into being one of the elite was incompatible with the altogether different but equally demanding rigors of serious dating.

That said, he was a normal, healthy, sometimes horny male, and Melissa didn't seem to be complaining, did she?

Maybe it was Melinda, it was awfully hard to hear names in a crowded bar. *Shit*.

Melissa-or-Melinda blotted her lips and scrutinized her face in the mirror one more time. Satisfied, she stood, grabbing a hairbrush with one hand and sweeping the headband off with the other. Then she bent forward to let her hair hang down while she brushed it out. Her back was partly to Ryan, who, thanks to the oversize t-shirt, could see her full breasts dangling free beneath it. Looking at her ass in the panties wasn't half bad, either, and he felt himself stir under the covers. Surely she knew the view she was giving him.

But he was already running late; he had to visit some liquor suppliers today and meet with a shoe-company rep about a possible endorsement deal. Not much time for fun, and in any case it might send a message he didn't intend.

He got out of bed and started to pull on his clothes. The girl—oh, hell, he'd go with Melissa—straightened up and looked at him, and although she was smiling, he thought she looked a little miffed. Now came the tricky part.

"Sorry, I have to go," he told her.

"I know," she said. "I have to go to work myself." Pause. Now she would ask if he would call her later, perhaps at her office. But if he did,

he'd ask for Melissa, and what if it was actually Melinda? He should have carded her last night.

"I had a great time," he said awkwardly.

She noticed. "Listen," she said, "I think you're a sweet guy, and I had a good time, too. I'll make it easy on you." She grabbed a business card from the top of her dresser and pressed it into his hand, and he tucked it into his shirt pocket automatically. "Call if you want, don't call if you don't want. I think it would be nice to get together again, but I'm a big girl and I won't go all to pieces if I don't hear from you. Fair enough?"

Ryan blinked. "Uh, okay. Sure."

She laughed and put her arms around his neck, pressed her body against his, and kissed him fully and warmly before pulling away. In one fluid motion she rid herself of the t-shirt, and Ryan's semi-hard-on got more serious, but she was already going back to her dresser. "Drive safely, now," she told him, then busied herself with choosing a bra.

Twenty seconds later he was out her apartment door and walking to his car, wondering perversely whether he should feel used. That was some girl, he thought. *Very nice in bed*, and it seemed like she had a lot on the ball in the rest of her life as well. Yup, some girl.

He remembered the business card and dug it out of his pocket. He might not call her, but at least he could solve the puzzle of her name. He looked, then had to stop there on the sidewalk and laugh out loud.

Mel Peterson, the name on the card read.

Chapter 7

LATER, JIM BROOKS remembered September 4th as the day he started coaching Vince Taggert. It was also the day Vince officially met Ryan Sandy.

They gathered outside the Lincoln & Douglas fieldhouse. The day was hot and muggy, promising rain by evening. Brooks had already welcomed his collegiate charges back for cross-country season, given them a talk, and told them to go and run ten miles. He gauged how many of them had done their summer training by noting the number of audible groans and dismayed faces of those who figured that being a real athlete was a part-time endeavor. Likewise, he marked the silence of those who had come into the season prepared, had put in the miles to ready them for the inherent challenges of cross-country. These were the ones he loved to coach; it didn't matter their age, experience or talent—if they truly came to run, he would coach the best and the worst with equal dedication.

However, he admitted to himself as he stood next to Ryan and watched Vince jog across the field toward them, he was likely to be preoccupied this year with his two post-collegiate athletes, one coming back, the other coming up. Their talents, taken by themselves, were tremendous, and it would be fascinating to watch them come to fruition together. In Ryan's case, Brooks knew from watching the kid work out, seeing him maintain his composure while rubbing up against the big dogs

on the European circuit, that there was a world of untapped potential in him. As for Vince, Brooks' memory of the man's heyday and his several phone conversations with him over the past few weeks gave him a gut feeling that, with dedication and hard work and a lot of luck, Vince could again reach the ranks of the world-class.

Much of this depended, of course, on how they got along. Brooks knew Ryan was a hothead, but he knew nothing of Vince's temperament. It was quite possible they would bash each other's brains in, literally or figuratively, on the training track and never make it to race day. It would be a wait-and-see kind of prospect, he knew, and there probably wasn't much he could do about it one way or the other; he was simply too old to separate combatants.

"Afternoon," Vince said when he reached them.

"Good afternoon to you," Brooks said. "Ryan Sandy, I'd like you to meet Vince Taggert. May the two of you together become greater than the sum of both of you."

"Glad to meet you, Ryan." Vince stuck out his hand.

"Hey," Ryan replied, waiting a split-second longer than was polite, Brooks thought, before taking it. Oh, well.

"What's that line, Jim?" Vince asked. "'May the two of you—' Sounds familiar. Is it Shakespeare?"

"Nope," Brooks said, grinning. "*Star Trek*. A more universal font of wisdom, you might say."

Vince laughed. Ryan, who'd heard this before, scowled and said nothing.

"Well, gentlemen, how about some stretching?" Brooks suggested. "Then I'll let you two do your ten. Ryan knows the course, Vince."

He had them do the standard stretches. All the while, he surreptitiously took stock of Vince Taggert, and noticed Ryan doing the same. Vince had more than dropped his gut since the last time he'd seen him. Through the mesh tank Vince wore Brooks could see a fairly deep tan. That meant either he'd been lazing by a pool all summer or he'd been doing some serious outdoor work. Brooks bet the latter, and had a hunch that little of the work was of the stationary variety. He decided to take on faith Vince's claim on the phone the other night that he was getting in

eighty miles in a good week; that belief was strengthened by the man's obviously improved muscle tone.

"What's your weight these days, Vince?" Brooks asked.

"One seventy-one," Vince answered, straightening up from a stretch. "Before this summer I was pushing two hundred." He bent over again, stretching his hamstrings luxuriously.

"Nice." Brooks was impressed. "What do you think of that, Ry?"

"Two hundred's pretty heavy," Ryan allowed. He walked away a few paces to lean against the building and stretch his calves, showing his back to the other men. Vince and Brooks traded a look, and Brooks gave him an embarrassed smile.

"Talk to him," he mouthed softly, and clapped Vince on the shoulder. He couldn't help noticing the muscles there were solid—true, Vince would never make Charles Atlas jumpy, the rigors of his chosen sport having dictated a sinewy form over a bulkier one, but it was impressive nonetheless. Brooks reconfirmed his earlier assessment of the former elite miler...and had more than a slight suspicion he could be that again. The operative word, of course, was *could*.

"Gentlemen, I'll see you in—" Brooks checked his watch. "In about 63 minutes. That's 6:15 per mile pace, in case either of you need help with the math." With that, he hobbled back inside the fieldhouse, and Vince and Ryan were alone.

Ryan was still stretching against the wall, his back to Vince. "You ready?" Vince asked.

"In a minute," Ryan replied, not turning.

Okay, I guess it's gonna be a pissing contest. Vince wasn't looking forward to the next hour, but if they were going to be training together, by God, he was going to give as well as he got.

He decided to needle. "Take all the time you need. If you want, we can go real easy the first mile or two."

That got Ryan to turn around. "Don't worry about me," he said. "I'll be fine." He set his watch. "Let's go."

They set out hard, as Vince figured they would. He ran easily off the kid's right shoulder—or at least tried to appear as though he were running easily. Though he'd once clicked off 5:30 miles on runs like this, with much faster surges thrown in for grins, that had been a while ago. Vince figured they were cruising at about 5:50 pace, and there was only one way to respond if he were ever to gain Ryan's respect: he had to turn

it up a notch, and he had to do it with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. *Perfect*, he thought grimly.

They flew together along the route Brooks had chosen, a gently undulating course that bordered mostly farmland once they left the Lincoln & Douglas campus. Vince was hampered by the fact that he didn't know where they were going, so he had to be vigilant when it looked like Ryan was about to make a turn; they were running in silence, and Ryan offered no directions. Gradually, however, Vince forced the pace down to about 5:30 a mile.

When they were about halfway, Vince figured it was time to see how good an actor he was. Controlling his breathing as best he could, he asked casually, "So, Ryan, where are you from originally?"

Ryan glanced at him. "New Jersey. Outside Atlantic City."

"No kidding? Hey, I'm from Philly. We probably went to the same shore points." *Keep relaxed*, he told himself. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

"Maybe." Ryan paused a long time. Then: "My uncle had a place in Sea Isle. Ever been?"

"Hell, yes. They've got a ten-miler there that's almost all on the beach. I ran it a couple of times in high school and college."

"Ever win?" Ryan asked.

"No. Best I ever did was third, junior year of college. Never really was a distance runner." *Deep breaths, not too loud.* "I did run a few races in AC, though. They've got a half-marathon, a 5K and a road mile around St. Patrick's Day. I ran the mile four times." *Easy. Wait for it.*

A moment later, Ryan asked, "Ever win that?"

Vince looked at him, waited until he was looking back, and smiled. "Four times."

"That's cool," Ryan said. "I never—" He left off, caught short by the need to breathe, and Vince knew he had him. And the kid knew it too.

It was a little like poker: Vince had upped the ante by forcing Ryan to run even harder than he wanted. Ryan played tough, but despite his prowess at an early age, he was still learning the game. By his heavy breathing, he showed the pace was taking its toll, and by being unable to conceal the fact from Vince, he'd folded.

"I never was in town for that race," Ryan finished, trying but failing to cover his discomfort. He scowled and was silent again.

Vince allowed himself a moment's satisfaction, but he knew the battle wasn't over yet. Like a B-movie villain with just enough strength to raise his gun one last time when the hero turns his back, Ryan could still have some orneriness in him. Heartless as it sounded, Vince couldn't let up; he had to grind Ryan into the ground to truly drive the lesson home, to let him know that while he was a budding superstar, he'd still have to earn his stripes like those who went before him. So, Vince knew, he had to keep Ryan running at this pace the rest of the way, keep him on the precarious edge of oxygen debt for the next four miles or so, before he could claim victory.

Problem was, he wasn't sure he could do it. The torrid pace was exacting a price from him as well, and he struggled to maintain his form and quiet breathing. Sure, he had banked significant mileage over the last few months, and yes, he'd always been able to round into shape at an accelerated rate, but here was a kid in the prime of his life, just weeks removed from sub-four-minute mile form.

What Vince did have on his side was simple experience, knowledge that had been ground into his bones by thousands of miles run about just how hard and at what points he could push his body beyond limits most men regard as absolutes. Young and talented as he was, Ryan was still testing ground long trodden by those who would be called elite.

Not for the first time, Vince bemoaned the nature of conditioning. Many athletic skills, once learned, become so enmeshed in the synapses of body and mind they take up permanent residence: riding a bicycle, catching a baseball, swimming the backstroke. Not so with a runner's endurance, which is not a trophy to be won but a badge to be earned daily, paid for with the precious coin of toil and sweat. And, at times, with something close to agony—something close to what Vince was enduring now.

An eternity later, the Lincoln & Douglas campus appeared. Just ahead they could see the stragglers from the LDU team, the ones who had set out a short while before they'd started. Brooks, outside to greet his young harriers, didn't seem particularly surprised to see his two post-collegiate runners trot up several minutes ahead of schedule.

"I'm going to the weight room and lift for awhile," Ryan told Brooks, slowing but not stopping on the way by.

"Stick with the upper body," Brooks said as Ryan trotted through the doorway.

Once Ryan was out of sight, Vince sagged. He bent over and put his hands on his knees, wracked with the need for oxygen.

"Have a nice run?" Brooks asked in obvious amusement. Vince looked up at him and could only nod while he continued to suck air.

"Don't worry," Brooks assured him. "They won't all be this easy." Then he laughed a hearty belly roar, while beside him Vince Taggart, one-time world-class athlete, struggled to stand up straight.

ONCE INSIDE THE fieldhouse, Ryan kept running. He passed the turnoff to the weight room and headed instead for the nearest lavatory, praying it would be unoccupied. It was. He just made it into a stall before he threw up.

Chapter 8

EVERY DAY FOR the next week Vince and Ryan met to run the ten-mile course, which Brooks had for some unfathomable reason dubbed The Molehill Run. Vince ceased his morning runs for the duration, fearing the early exertion coupled with any repeat performances of his first workout with Ryan Sandy would leave him with all the pep of a watered-down margarita. He just hoped the kid learned a lesson the first time; if not, his own life could become pretty gruesome.

Hedging his bet, however, and to save face for both him and Ryan, he'd privately suggested to Brooks that the coach instruct them to run proper pace. Then he managed to look as chagrined as Ryan when Brooks told them in a stern voice that they were not to race each other in practice. The rest of the week's runs went at a much more reasonable pace.

Having succeeded in restoring sanity to their distance training, Vince had little similar success in getting Ryan to talk to him. It was clear the kid was putting up with these workouts because Brooks wanted him to; Vince's attempts at conversation were met with grunts or one- or two-word answers. All things considered, it was a difficult partnership.

So he turned to Corey White for help.

"I'm desperate," he told her one evening after dinner at her place. They'd gone for a walk and had stopped at an elementary school playground, where Corey loved to swing on the swings and climb the

jungle gym. Vince detested both, but he'd learned a lesson on tolerance from this woman not too long ago. His compromise was to push her on the swings and worry about her on the jungle gym.

He was pushing her now. "The kid hates me, and I'll be damned if I can figure out why," he said.

"Maybe he's jealous?" she offered.

"Of what? He's got more talent in his little finger than I have in my whole body. And he knows it."

"I'd debate that point, but that's not what I'm thinking about. What about Brooks? Ryan's been the guy's protégé for four years, and here you come and get half Brooks' attention. Maybe he doesn't like that so much."

"I don't know if I buy that. We're doing more or less the same workouts Ryan has always done, so it's more like I'm along for the ride than anything else." He pushed her a little higher.

"He might not necessarily see it that way," Corey said. "Remember, he's young. And I read somewhere that his father died when he was just a kid. Brooks might be the only father figure he's got, and he doesn't want to share him. Jealousy's not rational."

"Okay, say you're right. What do I do about it?"

"I'm not sure you *can* do anything, other than what you have been doing, which is to try to talk to him. Maybe you can get him somewhere away from the track, one-on-one, somewhere you can socialize. Take him to dinner or something." She started putting on the brakes, dragging her feet on the ground.

"I have a better idea. How about we have them both over for dinner at my place?"

"Who's 'we,' Kemosabe?"

"You and me, Tonto. Four is a more social number than two. And it's less threatening that way, don't you think? Besides, I'm not the chef in this relationship, you are." He twined his fingers in hers as they began to make their way home. "It doesn't have to be anything fancy, just maybe four or five courses, starting with a shrimp cocktail and a braised leg of lamb with a nice béarnaise sauce, followed by steak tar—"

"All right, already," she laughed, swiping at him playfully. "I'll do it. But I make what I want."

"Deal."

THE DATE WAS set for the following week. Vince got the feeling that Ryan had agreed to come only out of respect for Brooks, which put paid to Corey's initial idea about getting the kid alone but lent credence to her notion of Brooks as a father figure.

In the meantime, training continued. Brooks' long-range plan was to keep them running distance, deferring tough intervals on the track in favor of several low-key hill sessions, and racing sparingly. In fact, he planned for them to race separately, not even going to the same meets, not wanting them to compete against one another at such an early stage. The wisdom of this course remained to be seen; Vince worried that Ryan might think he was ducking him, afraid to race the young star. In truth, he *was* a bit apprehensive about the prospect—not just of racing Ryan, but of racing in general. Not having competed in three years, the normal early-season jitters were all the more acute in his case.

The topic came up over dinner. Corey had made a tasty chicken dish, complemented by stuffing and broccoli, and she and Brooks sat back from the table while Vince and Ryan worked on second helpings.

"I think it's a lot like going for a swim in early summer," Brooks was saying. "The water has had all fall, winter and spring to get cold, so the first time you jump in, you'd like to freeze your—" He stopped, glancing at Corey. "You'd like to freeze. Eventually, though, the water starts to feel warmer and you get more comfortable."

"In your case, Vince, the water's had three years to get cold, instead of three seasons. You have to expect a bit of a shock the first time you take a dip. But you know, sometimes you can't just dip one toe in; sometimes you have to take a flying leap."

Vince nodded, downing the last of his chicken. "I know. But knowing doesn't make it any easier. Some days I get out there running—like that hill workout yesterday—and I just think to myself, 'Jesus, was it ever this hard? And was I ever really as good as him?'"

Ryan's head jumped a bit at that.

"Your boyfriend's being awfully modest," Brooks told Corey. "You know how fast he ran the mile?"

"No," she lied. "He refuses to tell me."

"It's not that important," Vince protested.

"I was in the stands at the University of Pennsylvania," Brooks continued, ignoring him, "when this guy ran 3:48.8. That's still the fastest time ever run on U.S. soil by an American. He came out of nowhere and beat the finest athletes in America that day, and some pretty good foreigners to boot."

Ryan had stopped chewing.

"Three forty-eight, huh?" Corey said. "That even *sounds* fast. I would have liked to have seen that." She glanced at Ryan, who was looking at Vince. "Mr. Brooks—"

"Call me Jim, please."

"Okay, Jim. Be honest, because I have a bet riding on this." She glanced at Vince, her eyes twinkling. "What do you think Vince's chances of returning to the big time are?"

"The big time?"

"The Olympics, I mean. World-class competition. Someone told me once it has something to do with pain."

All three of them were looking at him—and all three really wanted to know, he realized as he gazed back uneasily. They weren't just interested in hearing a line, a win-one-for-the-Gipper kind of speech. Whatever he said, Brooks couldn't ensure Vince's comeback would succeed...but a thoughtless reply could put paid to the whole effort right here. And he didn't want to lie.

He cleared his throat. "Well, it all depends on how he deals with the pain. Pain's a funny thing, you know. It's nature's way of telling you to take it easy."

"I thought death was nature's way of telling you to take it easy," Vince put in, smiling.

"Death is the ultimate end of pain disregarded, it's true. Ignore your pain long enough and something bad is bound to happen, that's for damn sure." A shadow crossed Brooks' face, was gone an instant later. "But that's not what I mean in this case. Pain from a gunshot wound or a broken ankle is one thing; pain from doing more than your body thinks it can is another. Pain when you're running a hard workout or a race is like a circuit-breaker; it tries to break your connections, make you stop hurting yourself. Your body will say anything to get you to stop. But the mind rules the body. The mind knows what the body can take; it knows the body's capacity for pain. The mind says, 'Look here,

legs, I'm in charge, and you're taking us to the finish line right now, so quit your bellyaching. You too, lungs.' The body isn't happy about it, and the mind has to ride it like a bucking bronco, but eventually they both reach the finish...unless the mind isn't strong enough. The mind might say, 'You're right, guys. Let's just coast awhile. Hell, let's stop altogether. Doesn't that feel better?' It could go either way sometimes, and it's a constant, unending struggle if you want to be any kind of athlete.

"But the thing is, no matter how much we sit around talking about it, it's meaningless until you're actually there in the moment, dealing with the pain. Think of it this way," Brooks continued, shifting in his chair. "We're sitting here, having just finished a marvelous meal, and to my mind the best way to top it off would be a nice big hot-fudge sundae."

"Mmmm, now you're talking my language," Corey purred, drawing laughter around the table.

"Close your eyes for a second and picture that sundae," Brooks went on. "See that nice round cherry on top. Imagine that steaming hot fudge sliding down the side. Think about how creamy that ice cream is, and how it makes your throat ache on the way down because it's so wonderfully damned cold. Now—can you taste it?"

They could.

"Okay, let's go a different route. Imagine the worst pain you've ever experienced. Broken bones are good, hamstring pulls, maybe even a migraine. For women I guess it's labor. Remember how intense that pain was, how it brought tears to your eyes, the hitch in your chest when you fought them back. The color of the blood if you bled. Now—can you feel it, I mean *really feel it*?"

They couldn't.

"See what I mean? *Your body doesn't remember pain*. You can't 'feel' it again, because your brain trips the circuit. I'm no expert, but I'd guess that's why women can give birth more than once: they don't really remember how bad it hurt the first time around.

"With Vince, and with any runner, it's the same thing. His mind is plenty strong or he wouldn't have gotten nearly this far. But there's simply no way to know how he'll deal with the pain of a really brutal workout, a really hard race, until it happens and he makes the choice to quit or to tough it out. He won't be finished with such choices after that, he'll have to keep making them over and over whenever it becomes difficult; that's the nature of the beast. Do I think he can do it?"

Absolutely, or I wouldn't be wasting my time with him. *Will he do it? We won't really know until it happens.*"

Brooks sat back and looked at them. It wasn't the most satisfying answer, but it was the truth. Nothing was preordained; either Vince could hack it or he couldn't. They'd all find out in a few months.

"Well," Corey said with finality, "I think he can do it, too." She stood. "Mr. Brooks—I mean Jim—would you help me in the kitchen with dessert?"

"I'd be delighted," Brooks said, getting up and grabbing dirty dishes. "After such a delicious dinner, I can hardly wait for the encore. And I sure hope there's ice cream involved." Corey laughed musically and led him into the kitchen, leaving Vince and Ryan alone.

Vince drummed his fingers on the table for a moment while Ryan stared down at his plate. Then he stood up. "Come on," he said to the young runner. "I want to show you something."

Ryan got up and followed Vince upstairs to a back bedroom. Vince opened the door and headed for a file cabinet in the corner. Ryan took two steps into the room and stopped, awed.

Each wall was virtually covered with running memorabilia. Shelves held trophies, medals, pictures and other markers of glory. There were spiked shoes hanging from nails, pin-on numbers, even a U.S. national team uniform.

"Nice room," Ryan said.

"Thanks," Vince answered over his shoulder, rummaging in the bottom drawer of the cabinet. "I don't come in here much. I don't even know why I kept half of this crap."

"Why would you want to get rid of it?"

"Because it's not what really matters. I never ran for the medals, or the money, or the fame. I ran because I liked it. It was fun. It felt so good to step out on the track with the best in the world and show them a clean pair of heels."

"So why did you stop?"

"Because it stopped being fun."

"But why—"

“Why did it stop being fun?” Vince finished for him. He found what he was looking for and stood up. “Ask me again sometime. Now, take a look at this.”

Ryan took the program Vince handed him. It was from the Penn Relays, the meet where Brooks had seen him run a sub-3:50 mile. Penn was the grandfather of all track meets, older than the modern Olympic games themselves, and bigger as well. Many high school and college competitors planned their entire seasons around Penn, and every April elite athletes from all over flocked there, wanting to be a part of the grand Penn Relays tradition. Jesse Owens had competed there when the meet was already forty years old, a short time before he achieved immortality in Berlin; Roger Bannister ran there the year before he etched his name in the history books by running the first sub-four-minute mile. In between and since, Penn was the standard by which other track carnivals were measured.

Ryan looked at the front cover of the program. The picture showed a single, grinning athlete in full flight, about to break the tape while a cadre of well-beaten runners struggled in his wake. “Hey, that’s you,” he said.

“Yeah. Seems like a hundred years ago,” Vince said ruefully. “I still remember it pretty clearly, though. Forty-seven thousand people cheering, yelling, clapping. It was a fantastic experience. The race itself was great, but that was only part of it. What really made it memorable for me was the fact that that race opened doors in my mind. I was pretty good before then, but that year I made some tough choices and worked my tail off. Starting with that race, I broke through to a whole different level that I never even dreamed was there.

“Turned out that was my only year like that, because it was also my last year. A buddy of mine sent this program to me the following April. I think he was mad at me because I stopped running. See how there’s a circle drawn around me? He drew that. The note that was attached to it just said, ‘Tsk tsk.’”

Ryan didn’t know what to say.

“How about you?” Vince asked him. “You want to look back in five years at all your past glories hanging around you? Keep going the way you’re going and you’ll have plenty.”

“You’ll get more,” Ryan said in an unexpected burst. “I’ve been watching you. It’s only been a few months, but if you went out and raced

right now you could probably beat ninety percent of the fastest guys around. And you’re only going to get better. You’ll have to add on another room to hold all the hardware.”

Vince laughed; it was by far the longest speech Ryan had ever made in his presence. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go back down. Corey and Jim must have dessert on the table by now. Besides, you’re making my head swell.”

Ryan grinned back at him. They left the room and headed for the stairs, Vince closing the door behind them.

Chapter 9

“NERVES?” BROOKS ASKED.

“Some,” Vince admitted.

They were near the starting line of the Bluebird Invitational, an annual collegiate cross-country race held by the state university. It was a fairly warm September day, though it was windy; the plastic flags lining the finish chute snapped in the steady breeze. Unattached runners occasionally competed in this meet, but Vince was the only post-collegian today. That meant he’d be running entirely against kids ten or more years his junior, and they’d all be wondering what this old asshole in the plain black shirt thought he was doing here. At this point, he was wondering much the same thing.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this,” Vince worried.

“Of course you are,” Brooks reassured him. “Didn’t that time trial the other day tell you anything?” The week before Vince had run a fast five miles solo on the road, in a time that would have placed in a half-dozen local road races.

“It told me I can run a hard, steady pace, but this is cross-country, over hill and dale, and there’s no such thing as steady out here.”

“Which is why you’re running it. When you get on the track next spring, you’re going to have to be able to switch gears the entire race. Let’s face it, you’re legs aren’t as young as they used to be—”

“Hey, thanks for reminding me. I hadn’t thought about that in at least fifteen seconds.”

“What I mean is, you can’t expect to have the same finishing kick in your thirties that you had in your twenties. So you’re going to have to rely on strength over the whole race, hard surges in the middle and quick recoveries in between. That’s one thing cross-country’s good for, to teach you how to vary your pace. Hell, I don’t expect you to win today; odds are you won’t, and you just have to accept that. But I do expect you to run hard and give it your best shot as if you were *trying* to win. Think you can do that?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Great,” Brooks said, and tipped him a wink. “Sandy would be proud.” Then he left him alone for the walk to the starting line, where many of the competitors were already lined up.

Ryan wasn’t supposed to be racing today, Vince knew, but at least he could have been here for moral support, as Vince was for him at last week’s Heart of Illinois Classic. In that race, Ryan had finished a strong third in an outstanding field, not bad for a track specialist, and Vince had been at several points along the course to cheer him on. It would have been nice to have the same sort of encouragement today. Brooks had said something about Ryan having a job interview, but he didn’t buy it; he didn’t know many employers who conducted interviews on weekends. It bothered him. He’d thought he’d made a breakthrough of sorts; at least Ryan talked to him more now while they were training, and if they weren’t friends, at least they no longer seemed to be enemies.

Vince put it out of his mind. He had a race to run. He did a few striders to accelerate his heart rate and prepare his body for the coming race. It would be five miles over some fairly rugged terrain. He’d seen worse—some of the courses in the Philadelphia area were legendary—but that was years in the past. No doubt about it, this would be a challenge.

While he was musing, the starter called them to the line. Two hundred harriers hunched over and exploded at the sound of the gun. Vince tucked in immediately and tried to find a pace that was comfortable. It was impossible. There were too many hills, too much uneven surface for that, so instead he concentrated on keeping good form and staying out of trouble.

Multicolored uniforms streamed around him as he passed the mile mark in 4:53—not super-fast, but no stroll, either. He judged himself to be in the top twenty-five and, surprisingly, moving up. *Keep coasting*, he told himself. *Stay relaxed*.

His inner monologue worked. Before he knew it he had somehow put four grueling miles behind him, and there was less than a mile remaining. His chest was heaving and his legs felt as though they were encased in iron, but in truth he'd expected to feel much worse. He came to a turn and counted the runners in front of him: four. Was there a chance he could win this after all?

With a quarter-mile to go, Vince pulled even with two of the runners, only a few yards back from the leaders, who were running virtually abreast. The crowd was starting to close in, crowding the finishing stretch. He dug deep, pulling away from the trailing pair, and abruptly he was on the heels of the two in front. Then he looked up less than fifty yards from the finish and saw he was running out of room. To make matters worse, footsteps behind him signaled another competitor was closing. Grunting with effort, he flung himself toward the finish, but before he got there the runner behind him knifed ahead, leaving him an inglorious fourth.

Vince staggered through the finish chute, weaving like a willow in the breeze as a fat official who looked as though he sweated a lot tore his number off his singlet. "Nice run, fella," the man told him. He nodded his thanks and stumbled away like a stewbum.

Brooks found him five minutes later stretched out under a tree. "What're you doing?" the old man shouted at him. "Get up! You know better than to lie around after a race."

Vince got up slowly, already feeling his muscles stiffening. "Ye gods, that hurt," he said. "I felt so slow out there."

"Well, you didn't set any world records, but you sure as hell didn't stink up the place, either," Brooks told him. He held up his digital watch in front of Vince's bleary eyes. "Look at that."

Vince looked. The time was 26:10.

"That's not too bad, I guess," Vince allowed.

"Not too bad? Hell, if you want to know the truth, I was wondering whether you'd even finish. Lots of guys in your position would have cashed in their chips early on. You not only hung in there, you were gunning for the win at the end. I think it was a *damned* good race."

"What was Ryan's time last week?"

"Now don't go comparing yourself to him right off the bat. He's got a lot more recent experience at this than you, and—"

"What was his time?"

Brooks sighed. "Right around 24:50, give or take."

Vince grunted. "That's what I thought. We've been doing the exact same training, yet he's more than a minute ahead of me." He shook his head. "Maybe I'm just fooling myself that I can do this. My day is over. This is a young man's sport, you know? It's like I have to work twice as hard to get half the results."

"So, work four times as hard and you'll be even."

"I'm serious, Jim. Low 26's are okay, but there's a world of difference between what I ran today and what he ran last week, and you know it."

"So what? This was your first race, Vince—and it was a cross-country race at that. Cross was never your event, and it's not what you're training for now. You're training to be one of the best milers in the country, and what you do in October is a far cry from what you'll be able to do come June. Is it hard? Hell yes it's hard. Nothing worthwhile is ever easy. But you have to believe you can do it, Vince. If you can believe it, you can run it. That's where it all starts."

Vince looked at him. "You really think I can do this?"

Brooks laughed. "Hey, if I didn't, would I be wasting my Saturday here with you when I could be working on my golf game?"

"I didn't know you golfed."

"Look at me. What do you think?"

"Ah. Joke?"

"Joke."

They walked over to a set of bleachers where, suitably impressed by Vince's performance, Corey waited.

AT ABOUT THE same time Vince Taggart was hitting the mile mark in his first cross-country race in more than twelve hundred days, Ryan Sandy got off a bus and walked across the street to the Homer K. Emmons Memorial State Hospital, as he had every free

Saturday since he'd had his mother moved here a year and a half ago. He paused outside and looked up at four stories of dismal concrete and glass, and wondered for about the four thousandth time whether he'd done the right thing. It hadn't been easy on anybody, but he'd been her closest living relative when the time came, a month past his eighteenth birthday, so it was his call to make.

Now, four years after he'd had his mother committed, he asked himself whether it was the *right* call, whether she would ever have straightened out on her own. No, he told himself again, it never would have happened. That she was still committed four years later and, if anything, in worse shape than when she'd arrived was testimony to that. He knew he should stop kicking himself, that it was in fact lucky for everyone that he'd come home early that night and found her methodically smashing glasses in the kitchen, and walking around on the broken fragments in threadbare slipper-socks. It was lucky that he'd had the strength to seek help for her then, and to ignore her heart-rending cries.

It might have been lucky, but it felt shitty.

Sighing, he heaved on the heavy glass door to the front lobby and went in. He stopped in the small gift shop to pick up a half-dozen daisies, her favorite, and headed for the elevator and the fourth-floor room where his mother lived. Along the way he nodded hellos to the faces of those doctors, nurses and orderlies he'd gotten used to seeing, as they had his.

Margaret Sandy was sitting on the edge of her bed when her only child walked in.

"Hey, Mom," he said, and kissed her cheek. She didn't respond.

"Look what I brought for you," he went on. "These'll really brighten this place up, huh? What do you think?"

She still didn't answer, but he saw her glance at them from the corner of her eye. It was something, anyway.

"Let me put them in some water for you. I'll have the nurse bring you a vase later." He walked into the tiny bathroom, grabbed a glass and filled it from the tap. Then he pulled out his pocket knife—they didn't allow his mother scissors—and lopped off the ends of the stems on the diagonal before he put them into the water.

"There, doesn't that look nice?" he asked. "I'll put them over here on the window sill. That way you can see them when you wake up in the morning, and it'll be just like you have your own garden. Sound good?"

"Eric used to bring me flowers," she said, surprising him. She rarely talked during their visits, and almost never about his father.

"Yeah? What kind?" Ryan prompted, though to his knowledge his father had never given her anything that didn't come in a bottle.

"Sometimes daffodils, sometimes tulips. I guess it depended on his mood, or maybe the color of the car."

Ryan had no idea what that meant. He sat down on the hard wooden chair next to her bed.

"Then Sundays we'd drive up to Cowtown to catch the rodeo," she went on. "You should have seen Eric ride a bull. Those clowns had to pull him off one time because he got so good he wouldn't come down. That was before he died." She looked at him. "Did you know Eric?"

Ryan opened his mouth a long time before anything came out. "I...heard of him," he said. "Lots of people did. He was a great guy."

"Great?" she scoffed, as though Ryan had insulted him. "The best. He was a wonderful man."

"Yeah," Ryan said, and suddenly tears were close. "That's just what I heard. A wonderful man."

They sat and talked like that for an hour or more. Then Margaret said she felt tired, did he mind? No, he didn't. He helped her into bed, made sure her pillows were fluffed just right, and then left her alone.

The staff politely didn't notice how moist his eyes were on the way out.

IT WAS PAST two in the morning when Ryan got home to Brooks' house. After he left the hospital, he caught a matinee at the Parkway; he'd hoped to see a good comedy, but unfortunately this wasn't it. The plot dragged, and in the end he found himself rooting for the bad guys. Then again, maybe it was just his mood.

From there he went to work, suffering through another long night of loud music and smoky air. He couldn't complain about the money, but it was hell on his body, and surely didn't do much for his training.

He heard snoring as soon as he opened the door; Brooks had fallen asleep in his easy chair again. Ryan crept into the living room and saw him tipped back in the overstuffed chair, glasses askew on his nose, a copy of *Track & Field News* rising and falling on his chest. The television was on, but only static showed on the screen.

Ryan hesitated; he'd lived here only a few weeks, and he wasn't sure of the proper etiquette. Should he shake Brooks awake? Speak quietly into his ear? Or should he just leave him where he was?

The decision was taken out of his hands when a floorboard creaked beneath him and Brooks started awake.

"What time is it?" he wanted to know.

"A little past two," Ryan said, "You should be in bed. This is going to ruin your back."

"My back's already ruined," Brooks grouched. "Walking around a cross-country course all morning didn't help, either."

"How'd he do?"

"Not bad. Fourth place, 26:10. He looked good the first three miles, then his form started to fall apart. You would have had your way with him."

"Yeah, well..." Ryan studied the carpet between his feet.

"How did the interview go?" Brooks asked.

"What? Oh, they said they had someone on the inside in mind already. I gather they just interviewed me to go through the motions. I don't think I have any real shot."

"Uh-huh. What was the name of the company again?"

"It's a small place, I doubt you ever heard of it. It's called, uh, Emmons Communications."

"Right. And what do they do?"

"Voice and data communications. Phone lines, modems, stuff like that."

"Uh-huh." Brooks paused. "You know, Vince was disappointed you didn't come to the race today."

"Yeah, well, I had things to do. Didn't you tell him?"

"I told him. He was still disappointed. He would have appreciated the support."

"He's a big boy. He doesn't need me to hold his hand. Besides, you were there." Ryan yawned. "Look, I'm tired. I'm going to go to bed." He turned to leave.

"Wait," Brooks said, and when Ryan turned back he smiled and held out his arm. "Give an old man a lift?"

"You're not *that* old."

"Old or not, I can't stand up. I tried about an hour ago and, well, here I sit."

"Jesus, Coach, why didn't you call me or something?" Ryan said, suddenly concerned. He knelt beside the chair. "We should get you to the hospital."

"Shit on hospitals," Brooks spat. "They'll tell me what I already know, that my sciatica is acting up again. This attack's just worse than usual, that's all."

"Even so, they can give you something for the pain."

"Shit on medication, too. People come to depend on that stuff too much. All I need is a little help standing and going up the stairs. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No 'buts,' Ryan. Please."

Ryan stood and hooked a hand under Brooks' arm. They counted three and Ryan hauled Brooks to his feet.

"There," Brooks said. "That's what the doctor ordered. I feel better already. Now let's try the stairs."

Ryan walked him slowly to the staircase, made sure he had hold of the banister, and followed behind him as he made his slow way up the steps.

"Now, don't you go telling anyone you had to help your coach to bed, you hear me?" Brooks admonished Ryan over his shoulder. "Last thing I need is people hovering over me, expecting me to fall on my ass any second."

"Sure, Coach. It's our secret. On one condition."

"Conditions? What's all this about conditions?"

"You have to promise that if it's not better by next week, you'll let me take you to the doctor."

"I'll promise no such thing."

"Then I'm going down to the *Daily Times* office tomorrow and taking out a full-page ad about you."

They reached the top of the stairs. Brooks turned slowly and glared at the younger man. "How did you get to be such a mean little son-of-a-bitch?" he asked.

"I learned from the best. Do you promise?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

"Then I promise."

Ryan followed Brooks down the hall to his bedroom. He stood in the doorway and turned away politely while his benefactor undressed for bed—he was smart enough not to offer help—then said goodnight and closed the door.

Once he was alone, Brooks reached into the nightstand drawer, pulled out a bottle of Percodans, and dry-swallowed two of them before turning off his light.

RYAN HAD STRIPPED to his boxers and was on his way to bed himself when he remembered he hadn't turned off the television downstairs. Silently he padded down to the living room and picked up the remote. The VCR was on as well; Brooks had apparently been watching a video. He ejected the cassette and was about to slip it back into the jacket lying atop the television when he read the label: "Penn Relays 1999 (Taggart)."

I used to tape his races and play them for my teams as an example of tactical running, Ryan remembered Brooks saying the day he first saw Vince. *This guy was smooth as silk on the track, and he had a kick as good as yours. Maybe better.*

He'd been fairly sure at the time that the old man was needling him, but with more recent developments....

He popped the tape back in and rewound until he found the mile. Then he sat on the floor cross-legged like a kid to watch the race unfold. Ryan recognized some of the competitors, a who's who of American middle-distance during that era: Neddeau, Pyrah, McMullen, Stember, more. And there was Vince, several years younger and, Ryan was forced to admit, looking awesomely fit, emerging from the pack at the end of the first lap. No, not just emerging: telescoping ahead, his spikes popping off the track half an instant after he put them down. *Too fast,* Ryan thought. *Another lap and he'll be coming back to them.*

But Vince didn't come back to them, not after the next lap, and not after the one following that. By the start of the bell lap, only Neddeau had made a move to chase him down; arms and legs pistoning, face contorted

in pain, Neddeau bought back at a steep cost some of the ground he'd lost on the first three circuits, and by the final 200 meters he was well clear of the pack and less than ten meters behind Vince, back in contact and poised to strike.

Then Vince kicked.

Ryan blinked. He'd thought Vince had been running flat out since the bell, but if Vince had separated from the pack earlier like a coiled spring, he shot forward now like a bullet from a rifle. Instantly the gap back to Neddeau seemed to double, then triple as Vince continued to pour on the pace through the long final turn.

Ryan had been watching with the volume off so as not to disturb Brooks upstairs, but now he thumbed the remote until he could hear the commentators. They were every bit as stunned as he.

"...amazing display," one was saying. "It's like Taggart said to the rest of the field, 'Just try and catch me,' and when Neddeau did he said, 'You ain't seen nothing yet.'"

"We've seen him marching toward this the last couple of seasons, Tom," the other added as Vince covered the final fifty meters with a slight grin on his face. "But this year it's as if he made a decision that nothing is going to stand between him and an Olympic medal, and truth to tell, there are only a handful of people in the entire world right now who can keep this man off the medal platform in Athens this summer."

"It will be interesting to see as we go through the next..."

Ryan killed the volume again and watched Vince cross the line. Moments after the race was over Vince was back at the finish congratulating the others, and when the last of them had crossed the line, staggering and wheezing in some cases, Vince turned around and sprang into a surprisingly quick victory lap.

Ryan glanced at the time frozen on the clock in the corner of the screen: 3:48.77. He wasn't sure—Brooks would know—but it was likely the fastest time ever run by an American in April. This was no tactical run, no shuffling sit-and-kick affair, but rather a brutal display of raw power and speed. And Vince looked as though he was ready, should the need arise, to line up and do it again.

Ryan paused the tape on the image of Vince, smiling and waving to the cheering throng, and was at last forced to concede that Vince's kick was once not simply good but world-class—faster, Ryan was almost certain, than his own.

Chapter 10

CROSS-COUNTRY WAS over for the year. Vince Taggart wasn't complaining.

It had been a tough season, his first series of competitions in a long time. Not that it hadn't been reasonably successful; he'd even won a race, albeit a low-key one, toward the end. The course was a tough one, unusually hilly for central Illinois, and the weather was an aberration for late October: mid-80s, with enough humidity to make the air all but drinkable.

Vince had emerged from a small lead pack midway through the five-mile race to chase down a lone runner who had broken away a dozen yards. That runner, a small, slight, red-headed youngster with a Roadrunner tattoo on one shoulder, was struggling to hold pace and failing, coming back to Vince at a rapid rate.

Laboring himself, a hot, heavy lump hovering in his chest and a numbing lethargy in his legs, Vince decided to try a little teamwork. He pulled even with the young runner. "Work together?" he breathed.

Red looked over. "Okay," he said.

"Tuck in behind me," Vince told him, then started to press. He kept the hammer down for a few hundred yards, then motioned Red to pass. Red obliged, and Vince slipped in behind

him, letting him cut the wind, focusing on a spot midway between the kid's shoulderblades.

They kept on like this for nearly two miles. When Vince looked back at last, he saw the gambit had been successful. No one was closer than fifty or sixty yards; working together, they had been able to pull away where either of them alone might have been swallowed by the pack. Assuming neither he nor his companion blew up, who won the race would be determined by them alone.

"We're clear," Vince told Red.

Red glanced behind. "Yeah. Thanks. Man."

Vince's expression was half a grimace, half a grin. "Don't thank me yet," he said, and took off as hard as he could.

It worked. Though Vince's burst was more bluff than speed, Red couldn't match it, and Vince quickly put about twenty yards between them. He rounded the final turn and maintained form all the way to the finish for his first win in a very long time. Red trailed him by three seconds, not visibly upset; in fact, he was beaming.

Brooks was there to congratulate Vince at the finish line as the trailing pack fought it out for third place. Vince saw him limping terribly, and his satisfaction with his win was dented by concern for the older man.

"Great run," Brooks told him. "That was some real savvy, sharing the pace with that kid."

"Thanks," Vince said. "I don't even know his name."

"Me neither. But the little mosquito isn't bad, is he?"

"No, he isn't." He looked at Brooks. "Are you all right?"

"Me? Course I am! Don't you worry about me. You've got some cooling down to do."

Vince thought about pressing but decided it wasn't the time. He changed his shoes, donned sweats and ran. Half a mile into his cool-down, he ran into Red.

"Hey!" the kid called. "Run with you?"

"I don't think so," Vince said. "I never run with people." Then he broke into a grin and held out his hand, and the kid slapped it, wearing a grin of his own. They ran on together, leaving the course behind for a quiet neighborhood of short streets and cul-de-sacs.

"I'm Rich Bolton, by the way," the young runner said. When Vince introduced himself, Bolton said: "Yeah, I know. I used to watch you run all the time."

"Oh, God," Vince groaned. "A fan."

"Don't worry," Bolton chuckled. "I'm not obsessive. And I've only stalked two other people ever."

"Consider me comforted. You're pretty good, you know."

"Man, you think so? All I've ever wanted to be is a runner. But I guess it was the same way for you."

"Me? No way, I wanted to be Dave Schultz."

"Wasn't he the guy who drew 'Peanuts'?"

"No, that's Charles Schultz. Dave Schultz played hockey for the Philadelphia Flyers. Dave the Hammer, they called him. When I was a kid, I dreamed I was the Hammer, carrying the Stanley Cup around the rink on my shoulders." They reached a busy intersection and did an about-face.

"So why didn't you play hockey?" Bolton asked.

"I like my teeth where they are. And whenever I skate, I fall down. A lot."

"Guess that's kind of a drawback for a pro hockey player, huh?"

"You could say that. Anyway, I can't imagine someone wanting to do this all the time."

"What do you mean? *You* did it."

"Yeah, but I was mental. Look, I'm not trying to discourage you or anything, but if later in life, after you graduate and get a good job and find a girl, do yourself a favor: get married, have lots of kids and be happy. Forget about running."

Bolton shook his head. "I don't get it. What could make you happier than racing all over the world?"

Vince smiled, a sad smile he was sure Rich Bolton would never understand, and said nothing.

Chapter 11

ACROSS THE STREET from Emmons Memorial Hospital was a supermarket. One cold Saturday afternoon in mid-December, with cross-country an equivocal memory and indoor track an undiscovered territory, Vince went grocery shopping.

His training was intensifying, and he found himself able to spend less and less time with Corey. She'd been sending him signals about it; while outwardly supportive and proud of how well he was running, she'd also remarked to him that she felt like a mistress, the affair he was having outside of his marriage to Jim Brooks and Ryan Sandy, someone to whom he turned only when he wasn't busy making himself really, really fast. He felt bad about that and wanted to make it up to her, so tonight he planned to cook her a delicious dinner, then take her to a play.

Still, he was troubled as he stopped in the bakery department to grab a French baguette. The whole situation was becoming uncomfortably like the one with Suzy. She'd never been supportive, had for years rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue when they were at parties and Vince answered the question: "So what do you do?" with: "I'm a runner." *He just tells people that, she would say. What he really does is stink up the house with sweaty clothes. Besides, he can't afford to quit his real job so he can prance half-naked through the streets whenever he feels like it.*

He would force himself to smile as though it were all a grand joke, even as he felt the blood rushing to his face while the guests looked elsewhere.

Six years of marriage went essentially like that. What good times there were always seemed to be on her terms: spending time with her friends, watching her movies, going to her favorite hangouts. Vince tired of the bar scene soon after leaving college—not that he'd ever visited them much while in school, with training and competition higher priorities—but not Suzy. She'd drag him to bar after bar, chastising him for glancing at his watch too often, knowing he was calculating how much sleep he'd get before his morning run if they left *right now*.

Maybe he wasn't cut out for marriage, Vince mused as he browsed the pasta aisle for capellini, but Suzy *surely* wasn't. He now had the perspective of years to tell him that. She wanted to run around like a single girl with nary a care. Had he met her for the first time today, he probably wouldn't have pursued a relationship. When they were in college, however, it was a different story; she steamrolled him, there was no other way to say it, the sheer weight of her personality bowling him over time and again. Looking back, it was a wonder he'd kept running after that day during sophomore year when he'd met her in the library and their impromptu study session turned amorous.

Sophomore. The word meant "wise fool." Vince figured that was pretty accurate as he sifted through a half-dozen brands of spaghetti sauce.

Corey was different. Her toughness when they first met had largely been a façade; beneath it she was tender, caring, passionate. He felt like her partner rather than her servant, as though he were living life *with* her rather than *for* her, at her whim.

And of course she was beautiful. She had girl-next-door features, creamy skin, and that fantastic cornsilk hair. Her body spoke the same language, one of willowy suppleness and strength. Vince chuckled aloud as he thought of how she must be carbonating the hormones of the boys in her English classes. (An elderly woman in a drab green coat gave him a funny look as he strolled past her, foraging for salad greens.)

But now he was getting those signals. They were mild compared to what he'd gotten from Suzy, but they were there. Short of abandoning his dream for a second time, however, he didn't know what to do about it other than be as thoughtful as possible and pay Corey as much attention as he could when they were together.

It took some time to get through the checkout line. Vince made a mental note to avoid shopping on Saturday afternoons from now on. Though he could run relaxed in a tight pack of athletes, jostling elbows bruising his ribs, sharp racing spikes bare inches from his knees and shins, crowded stores made him nervous. There was probably some psychobabble explanation for it, but Vince didn't really care as long as he got out as quickly as possible.

He paused at the door to zip his coat; the central Illinois wind was whipping hard today. Then he pushed his cart out into the parking lot, found his car and started loading bags into the back seat.

He was putting the last bag in when he looked up and spotted Ryan across the street. The young runner was standing in front of the hospital, head tipped back, his eyes searching the forlorn brick face of the building. Vince called his name, but the wind caught the sound as soon as it left his mouth and Ryan didn't hear; at least, he didn't turn. Vince shut his car door and trotted to the edge of the parking lot. Ryan was still there in front of him, staring up. Odd, Vince thought. He thought he remembered Ryan saying he'd be working this afternoon.

Checking the traffic, Vince picked his way carefully across the street. Ryan still hadn't noticed him.

"Ryan, hey," Vince said, putting his hand on the young man's shoulder. "What—"

The reaction was startling. Ryan fell back a few steps, the look on his face that of a kid caught peeking at a centerfold. Quickly that look changed to one of anger. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

Vince was taken aback. "I'm—I just—" he stuttered.

"What were you doing, following me?"

"No, I was just over—"

"Well, you can just go back over, then, can't you?" Ryan spat.

"What's the matter with you?" Vince asked.

"Just get the hell away from me," Ryan said curtly. When Vince didn't move, he turned on him in fury. "I said go!" he shouted, and

shoved Vince hard. Caught by surprise, Vince stumbled backward and fell, glancing his hip. He stared up at Ryan in disbelief.

Ryan took half a step toward him and stopped. The murky rage that had been on his face a moment ago was gone, replaced by one of shameful mistrust. There were people walking by, eyeing Ryan but skirting the scene. For a bare second Vince thought Ryan might help him up, but then he turned and fled inside the hospital without a backward glance.

The small crowd still kept its distance. Vince ignored them, picking himself up and rubbing his bruised hip absently. What in God's name had *that* been about? He wondered. He thought about entering the hospital, finding Ryan and demanding an explanation, but quickly wrote the idea off. Worked up as the kid was, Vince knew he'd never get him to talk. He could only cause a bigger fight, and it wouldn't do to have them brawling like gangsters in the hospital lobby.

A hospital. Was the kid sick? Was that it?

Vince shook his head as he walked back across the street, leaving the gawkers to gawk. If Ryan was sick, he was the healthiest sick person Vince had ever known. *I'd love to be that sick*, Vince thought ruefully as he got into his car, favoring the abused hip. *That kid'll have pink cheeks two years after he's dead*.

Still, it was theoretically possible, he mused as he started the car and edged out of the parking space. An incipient tumor, something like that. Ryan wouldn't be the first person that happened to. And he was so closed-mouthed, at least to Vince, that he could be going through unspeakable agony and never say a word.

Vince wondered if he should talk to Brooks about it.

He paused when he came to the driveway. Left would take him by Brooks' place, only about a mile or so away. Right would take him home—and he really should go now; there was a lot to do to get ready for tonight.

He did quick mental math and decided he could afford a brief detour, so he flicked his left turn signal on and pulled out of the lot.

* * *

BROOKS HAD JUST finished a late lunch and was settling down to read the latest issue of *Running Times* when the doorbell rang. Ryan was at work, so Brooks tossed the magazine aside with a sigh and hoisted his bulk out of the chair. Practice had taught him how to do that despite the nagging pain in his back; after all, Ryan couldn't be around to rescue him all the time.

The doorbell rang again before he could get to it. "Hold your horses, I'm coming," he growled. He half-hoped it was a solicitor, a census-taker, or some other hapless soul he could unload on with both barrels. *Grouchy? So what? He thought. I've got a right.*

Finally he reached the door, opened it. "Vince!" he said, pleased to see the younger man on his doorstep. "What brings you here?"

"Hi, Jim," Vince said. "Mind if I come in for a few minutes?"

"Of course not. Please." Brooks backed away from the door to let Vince in, then closed it behind him. "What are you doing in this neck of the woods?" he asked again, motioning Vince toward the living room and following at his tepid pace.

"Well, I, uh," Vince began as he sat down on the couch, then started again. "Do you happen to know where Ryan is today?"

"Sure, at work," Brooks replied, easing himself into his seat. "You need to talk to him? I can give you the number down at Mother's if you want."

"So he wasn't supposed to go to the hospital today?"

"Hospital? What do you mean? What hospital?" Brooks was suddenly wary.

Vince told Brooks about the whole incident. "I feel kind of funny talking to you about it, almost like I'm tattling on him, but I just want to know what's wrong."

"What the hell was he doing there in the first place?" Brooks wondered, seeming not to have heard.

"I was hoping you could tell me that," Vince said. "He told me what he told you, that he was working today."

"So he lied to me. To both of us."

"That's how it looks, anyway."

"But why? He's not sick, is he?"

"Jim, I don't know. You'd know better than I would. You live with him; you're the closest person to him."

Brooks grunted. "That doesn't mean a whole lot. Ryan is a hard person to know. He'll generally talk to you if you start the conversation, but he doesn't volunteer anything. He's not rude, just...private, I guess."

They sat in silence awhile. Then Vince said, "Well, I don't think he's sick. Seventy-mile weeks with two track workouts? It doesn't figure. Maybe he was visiting someone. A friend, maybe? Family?"

Brooks shook his head. "He's got no family. He's an only child, and his parents are gone. And he hasn't got any real friends, either, at least none that I know of. I tell you, I've never seen someone whose whole existence is so completely focused on one thing. That kid plans *everything* according to how it will affect his running. If it even has a chance of getting in the way of that, whatever it is, it goes: friends, girlfriends, you name it. When he was in school he was an okay student; smart, sure, but he really only put in enough effort to maintain his eligibility to compete. Anything else was gravy. He didn't go to parties after meets like a lot of the kids on the team; either he went to work or stayed in his room reading. Guess what he read."

"I don't know. Horror novels?"

Brooks picked up the magazine he'd been reading. "This stuff. Or *Runner's World*. Or *Once a Runner*, that book about a college miler who breaks into the world-class ranks."

Vince smiled. "I've read it. So many times my copy fell apart."

"So did his. I bought him a new one for Christmas last year."

They batted around off-beat ideas for awhile, but came up with nothing.

"Maybe he's dating a nurse or something and doesn't want anyone to know about it," Vince tried.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would he try to hide that? It's not like you or I would make fun of him. No, I'm afraid there's only one logical explanation." Brooks paused. "Or maybe two. What hospital did you say this was?"

"Emmons Memorial. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I thought maybe it was St. Joseph's. That's kind of a pretty building; Ryan might have been admiring it." It

was a lousy lie, but Vince was too distracted to notice. Just as well, Brooks thought grimly.

Suddenly Vince started, looking at his watch. "I've got to get home. I'm making dinner for Corey tonight. It's kind of a special dinner." He rose.

"Yeah? What's the occasion?" Brooks asked.

"No occasion, really, other than it'll be the first Saturday night we've spent together in I don't know how long."

Brooks grinned. "Well, you kids have fun. It'll do you good. You mind showing yourself out?"

"Sure. If Ryan calls or comes home—"

"Don't you worry about if Ryan calls or comes home. I'll worry about him. You spend your time with Corey."

"Okay," Vince smiled. "You're the coach."

They said their goodbyes, and Vince left Brooks alone.

Brooks was troubled. Apparently, he hadn't been the only one keeping secrets.

COREY LUXURIATED IN the foamy water of her bath, not caring to count time. A Danielle Steel novel lay tented beside the tub, largely unread. That too she didn't care about; she didn't know why she went in for such trashy stuff, but it was as good a way as any to be mindless on a Saturday.

The bath was growing cool around her. Corey poked a toe out of the bubbles and expertly manipulated the hot water spigot, just enough to warm things up. While the toe was above sea level she studied her foot. She supposed she didn't have to worry about painting the nails; the winter day provided little incentive to wear open-toed shoes. Then again, she thought slyly, if things went well tonight, she'd be spending quite a while in her bare feet. A similar thought earlier had prompted her to shave her legs higher than usual, taking more care around her bikini area. Probably she should have waxed, but she just couldn't face doing that in the off-season. It was bad enough in summer, when she was accustomed to exposing her body.

She peered down through the soapy water at her body now; she didn't think of herself as narcissistic, but it was a pretty damned nice one, if she did say so herself: long, sensuous legs; narrow, almost boyish hips; a

flat, hard stomach; medium-sized but firm breasts; and strong, toned arms. Her face she couldn't be as objective about, but Vince seemed to like it well enough.

Vince, she thought with a sigh. She'd been pleasantly surprised by him. True, he had startled her more than she wanted to admit when they first met, but she found his persistence endearing in goofball sort of way. Not many men would have kept after her the way he had; most would be too prideful, too worried about playing the fool. A lot of men had in fact reacted just that way. Not Vince. He'd taken her aggressiveness virtually in stride, without being condescending about how cute the little filly is when she gets riled or other such nonsense. That kind of character was odd in a competitive athlete, she knew from a half-dozen bad relationships with macho types, and it was passing strange in one of Vince's caliber. Then again, he'd been away from it long enough that it was possible he'd changed.

Corey wished she'd known him before he'd met Suzy. He didn't talk about her much, and although when he did he was careful not to put her down, Corey could sense the depth of the pain she'd caused him. *How different would he be today if he hadn't gone through all that?* She wondered. *And in what ways?* She supposed it was pointless to question; they were together now, and that was that.

Any longer in the bath and her skin would start to shrivel, she knew, so reluctantly she unstopped the drain and stood, reaching for a towel and drying herself.

Tonight would be nice, a special night, she thought, even if such nights were rarer than she would have liked. Especially lately. As Vince got more and more serious about his running, he had less time to spend with her. He'd advanced far beyond the point where they could run together. When they'd tried it just a few weeks ago, he was so obviously struggling to hold himself down to her level it looked almost painful, as if he were doing his best not to trip for five miles: a long-distance stumble. He was sweet about it, but it didn't make her feel good to know she was holding him back, so that was the end of that. They didn't need any more tension between them.

She didn't like to admit to herself how possessive of him she was becoming, but there was no getting around it. It was simply the way she'd always been, and while she doubted she would ever suffocate him, she needed for them to at least spend a reasonable amount of time together. Was that really so much to ask?

Well, never mind. Tonight was tonight, and tomorrow was tomorrow, and as her grandmother used to say, what will be will be.

Dry, she padded into her bedroom, heading for the large French-doored closet. Now she could get a good look at her naked body in its mirrored face. She ran her hands along her sides, from mid-thighs over the gentle curves of her hips to just below the slight swell of her breasts and back down, then turned sideways for a semi-serious evaluation. Nothing sagging, of course; she was still a bit young and far too active for that. Simply smooth, supple skin from the soft tangle of her pubic hair out in every direction. She smiled at herself confidently. *Knock 'em dead, kid*, she told her reflection.

Time to figure out what to wear. She flung open the closet and started her search. She didn't want anything that screamed desperation, that I'll-just-burst-if-my-man-doesn't-touch-me-soon look, but something sort of provocative nonetheless. Sexy without being suggestive.

After a good five minutes of rooting, she settled on a short, flouncy black skirt and lavender button-down sweater top. She had a matching purple lace bra and panty set that would be perfect underneath it, and a pair of thigh-high stockings just the other side of pink. *Oh, aren't we just the little tramp*, she laughed to herself. Well, a little saucy, at any rate. Besides, she vowed, Vince would only get to see them if he played his cards just right. Of course, he had some pretty damned nice cards to play...

She caught herself daydreaming a full three minutes later, still standing naked in front of the mirror clutching her outfit. She swore silently, then started getting dressed; Vince would be here to pick her up in less than an hour, and greeting him at the door in the nude might come off a bit anxious.

VINCE WAS FRANTIC. The visit with Brooks had cost him more time than he'd planned, and he'd had to scramble to shower, shave, clean the place up, set the table and start preparing the food. Timing was

everything. Corey lived only a few blocks away; if he figured everything right he could stick the bread in the oven, start the water boiling for the pasta, heat the sauce and have the wine breathing before he left to get her. Probably with all he had to do he should have let her drive herself over, but he wanted the night to be as romantic as possible, and surely in some romance manual somewhere it said in black and white that when a man plans a special evening for his lady, he should drive to her house and pick her up—

With a dozen roses in his hand.

Shit, he raged at himself. He'd completely forgotten to buy them while he was out. And now there wasn't time to get anything. Unless...*hmmm*.

Vince dashed through the kitchen and out the back door to the tiny garden outside the basement window, a legacy of sorts left by the previous owner that he'd tended only half-heartedly since moving in. Maybe there was something here, some hangers-on he could fashion into a bouquet. By now it was dark, however, and he had trouble seeing. He cursed himself anew for not bringing a flashlight. That wasn't getting the flowers picked, though, so he gritted his teeth and bent down low over the garden, peering at the late-blooming buds as best he could, shivering in his shirtsleeves in the cold, breezy night air.

At last he snared handful and went back inside where he could get a better look at them—then cursed again at the barren stalks in his hand. Not only were they unlikely to win a prize at any horticultural festival, they might just send Corey packing for good. He tossed them into the garbage.

His biggest mistake, he was discovering, had been showering first. With all this running around to get ready, he was sweaty again. Well, it couldn't be helped, he thought as he carefully wrapped the flowers in some colored Saran Wrap and aluminum foil. Besides, he remembered reading somewhere that sweat was an aphrodisiac, so maybe it would work in his favor. Something had to.

He didn't have time to do any heavy cleaning, so he settled for running through the house with a duster and a damp rag. He did take more time in the bedroom, setting out several candles at

strategic points around the room. That done, he hurried back down the stairs to the dining room. At least the table looked nice, he thought, though that was more thanks to Corey's taste than to his since she'd bought the place settings herself a couple of months ago.

He was placing the pot of water on the stove when the doorbell rang. Cursing, he cranked the burner to high and grabbed a sponge to blot the water that had spilled out of the still-sloshing pot before hurrying to the door. He checked his watch on the way. No, that shouldn't be Corey; he wasn't running *that* late.

Vince opened the door to find Ryan Sandy on the doorstep. For the second time today, he was taken aback. He started to brace himself for another tirade, but one look at the kid told him he wasn't here to fight.

"Ryan? What are you doing here?"

"I didn't know—I mean, I was just—aw, hell, can I just come in? Please?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess. For a few minutes." Vince glanced at his watch again. "I sort of have plans—"

"I know it's probably a bad time, but I didn't know who else to talk to." Ryan brushed past Vince and walked into the living room. Nonplussed, Vince closed the door and followed him.

"Talk to about what? About this afternoon?"

"What about this afternoon?" For a moment, Ryan looked genuinely puzzled. Then it clicked. "Oh, yeah, I'm sorry about that. You just kind of surprised me, I guess."

"I could tell. But what were you—"

"I was there to visit my mother."

"Your mother? What do you mean? I thought your mom was d—that she had, you know, passed away."

"No, I just tell people that. Nobody knows about her but me. And now you. And now Coach Brooks, too."

"What's to know? What's going on, Ry?"

Ryan heaved a sigh and ran fingers through his dirty-blond hair. "After my dad died, Mom fell apart. He wasn't the greatest dad in the world, and he didn't treat her real well, either, but she loved him, you know? She just cracked up. It got worse and worse, until I finally had to have her committed. It should have been done years earlier, but I wasn't legally an adult when Dad died. And I was the only one who could do it. She didn't have any other family."

"So you were visiting her in the hospital, and you didn't want anyone to know about it, and along I came—"

"Yeah," Ryan said. "I'm really sorry about that. I'm sorry about a lot of things. Those days when you were racing and I was somewhere else, that's where I was, at the hospital. I lied to you, and I lied to Coach."

"Look, don't worry about it. We've all done things we're not proud of. But you didn't have to come all the way over here just to say you're sorry."

"I didn't. There's something else."

Vince could have sworn he saw tears welling in the young man's eyes. Instinctively he got up from his seat and sat down next to Ryan. "What is it, kid? What's the matter?"

"It's Coach Brooks," Ryan said. "I was just at home talking to him. He told me you came over today. He kept after me until I told him the truth. Then he laid into me for awhile. And then he told me it was high time we quit having secrets from each other. He told me—" This time Ryan actually did let out a little sob before starting again. "He told me he has a tumor in his back. It's cancer. And it's spreading. And there's nothing they can do about it."

Vince sat stunned, momentarily speechless. Then he said: "Oh my God."

"He said he didn't want to bother anybody. He didn't want to be a burden on anybody." The tears were falling freely now, but Ryan was heedless of them. "I took him to see a doctor a couple of months ago. He didn't want to go. In fact, he fought me tooth and nail about it. When he came out I asked him what the story was, and he told me the doctor said it was muscle spasms just like he'd been saying to me all along, and I should quit being a mother hen and mind my own business. I think he knew then, though. I mean, I think suspected before but he found out for sure then. About the cancer."

"And for two months he didn't do anything about it?"

"No. I asked him the same thing. He said the thing was wrapped around his spine, and they couldn't be sure of removing all of it without crippling him completely."

"What about radiation? Chemotherapy?"

“He said he watched his brother go through that—cancer runs in the family, I guess—and it was hell. His brother suffered pretty bad from the chemo and died anyway. So he told them thanks but no thanks; he says he’d rather die on his own terms.”

Vince sat back on the couch, numb, while Ryan hitched his chest, trying to stop the tears. He almost couldn’t accept it. He hadn’t known Brooks very long, but the old man had grown on him. Brooks was the type of man most often called crusty, but with a heart of gold underneath. To think of him as mortally ill, and unwilling to accept any help, was devastating. How much more so it must be for Ryan, for whom Brooks was the only family he had. Vince thought suddenly of his own father, still living in Philadelphia, who was about Brooks’ age. If Joe Taggart were diagnosed with cancer, how would he, Vince, handle it?

Vince put his arm around Ryan’s shoulders and tried to think of something to say. Nothing came.

WHEN THE PHONE rang twenty minutes later, it startled both of them. Vince knew instantly who it was.

“Oh, shit,” he said.

“What’s the matter?” Ryan asked.

“I was supposed to pick Corey up ten minutes ago,” Vince said, reaching for the phone. “Hello?”

“Did we get our signals crossed?” Corey asked on the other end.

“No, not exactly. I’m sorry. Something came up here.” Vince saw Ryan stand and walk to the door. “Honey, hold on one second. Ry?” he said, pulling the phone away from his ear.

Ryan turned. “I’m fine. You go ahead. I shouldn’t have bothered you with this now, anyway.” He turned back, grabbed the doorknob and let himself out into the frigid night.

Vince sat silently, clutching the receiver at arm’s length. Corey called his name at least twice before he remembered it was in his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “Again, I’m sorry. Ryan was just here.”

“He was, huh? Look, maybe you want to cancel tonight —”

“No, not at all. Give me five minutes and I’ll be right over. Okay?” There was no answer for a moment. “Okay?” he said again.

“Okay,” Corey said. “Five minutes. No more.” *Click.*

Vince hung up the phone. It was then that he smelled it: burning bread. Cursing, he ran into the kitchen and yanked open the oven door. Smoke billowed out, making him cough. He reached in with his bare hands and snatched the smoldering roll, pitching it into the pot of water on the stove, which had boiled almost half away. Vince offered a particularly vile epithet as he heaved the kitchen window open and hurled the pot’s contents out into the yard. Despite the draft, he decided to leave the window open to try and air the place out. Then he refilled the pot with water and set it on the stove to boil again.

The whole time his mind was on Brooks. The pain the man must be going through. Suddenly Vince remembered a day on the indoor track at the university. He and Ryan had been running 400 meter intervals, ten of them in 63 seconds with a 90-second rest in between—a challenging workout for the time of year, but nothing compared to what they’d be doing in a few months’ time. Brooks had been particularly irritable that day, berating them if they were more than a few tenths of a second off the pace, dogging them if he thought they were jogging too slowly between repeats. Several times when Vince looked over he saw Brooks popping things into his mouth with a grimace. At the time he thought they were breath mints, but now he knew what they really were.

Pain pills.

God, why? he asked silently.

He’d have to think about it later. Right now he had to go get Corey, and he had the distinct feeling if he were late, her door would not open. Grabbing his keys, he headed for the door.

Two minutes later he pulled up in front of her house. Vince got out and hurried up the front steps to ring the doorbell. Again he’d forgotten to put on a jacket, so he shivered and watched his breath condense in front of him as he waited to see if Corey would come out tonight. Finally the door did open, and Corey stepped out onto the porch. Even in the dim half-light, she was stunning. Her eyes sparkled—whether with love or annoyance he couldn’t tell; from her tone on the phone, he was willing to bet the latter—and her hair fairly glowed. Throwing on a brave face, he offered his arm to her in mock chivalry.

“Ma’am? Your chariot awaits.”

She didn't move for a moment. Just when he was about to drop the arm, she took it. "I wouldn't call a four-year-old Dodge Avenger with squeaky brakes a chariot."

"I know, it's kind of pretentious," he said, inwardly a little relieved as he walked her to the car. If he were perfectly charming, this might still be a nice night. "But people just don't say, 'Ma'am, your oxcart awaits,' or, 'Ma'am, your wheelbarrow awaits.'"

"Okay, okay, I get the point," Corey said, trying to be stern. She ruined it a moment later by giggling. "You do know you're an asshole, right?"

"I've heard that," he said happily as he opened her door and saw her into the car. For just a split-second as she swung her legs onto the seat, he caught a heart-stopping glimpse of the inside of her thigh beneath her skirt, a fleeting impression of gently swirling lace at the top of her stocking. He shut the door and had to remind himself to breathe as he went around to the driver's side. She was unbelievably sexy; while that wasn't exactly breaking news to him, it was pleasant the way it caught him by surprise every now and then. They could be in the middle of an argument, virtually nose to nose, and she'd flip her hair back from her face or something and he could do nothing but grab her and hold her and cover her mouth with a kiss.

At the moment that feeling was multiplied by ten. Corey always looked good, but she'd obviously taken special care tonight. Even her perfume, light and perfect, made his head swim as he started the car and dropped it into gear.

They made successful small talk on the way back to Vince's house: the weather, her day, his day. Vince studiously avoided the afternoon's goings-on, however, glossing over that part with something about running around like a headless chicken to get ready. That part, at least, was true.

When they got to the house, Vince escorted Corey from the car and inside. The smell of burning bread had retreated, thank God, and coming in from the cold Corey didn't register the slight chill emanating from the kitchen. Vince popped in there immediately to shut the open window, then went back out to the living room with a bottle of wine and a brace of glasses.

The wine seemed to relax Corey. She sank back into the couch and crossed her legs. Vince couldn't keep from staring at her. Catching his eye, Corey smiled. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry. I'm gawking like a high-school kid," he said.

"What do you have to be sorry for? This is the most attention you've paid me in weeks."

"I'll admit I've been a little preoccupied," Vince allowed. "It's just that I'm running really well right now, training's going great, and I'm feeling pretty good."

"You must be. You seem to be enjoying running more than me most days."

"Hey, come on. Is that fair?"

Corey looked as if she were about to say something, then bit down on it. Instead she sipped her wine.

"Mmmm," she said. "Chablis?"

"Yes, ma'am," Vince answered, then raised his glass for a toast. "What shall we drink to?"

"Oh, the possibilities. How about to time spent together?"

"Sounds good to me." They clinked glasses and drank.

Then the phone rang.

Vince paused in the middle of setting his glass down, then completed the move and sat back. The phone rang a second time.

"Aren't you going to get that?" she asked.

"No. Let it go on the machine." Vince picked up his wine.

Another ring, and Vince took a large gulp.

"For crying out loud," she said and reached for the phone herself. "Hello? Oh, hi, Jim." She glanced coolly at Vince, who looked uncomfortably back. "Yes, he's right here. Hold on."

Still looking at Corey, Vince took the phone from her. "Hello?" he said.

MAYBE HE SHOULD have told her the truth, Vince reflected half an hour later, his head in his hands and the wine growing warm in front of him. Corey was gone—perhaps for good, for all he could tell. She certainly didn't seem pleased when she left.

Vince had taken the cordless phone into the next room to talk to Brooks, keeping his voice low. Ryan hadn't been home,

Brooks said; well, he'd been home, then he'd left again. By any chance, did he come there?

Vince told him he and Ryan had talked and straightened out their differences but skirted the other details of the conversation. Brooks wanted to know more. It made Vince uneasy; it seemed as though Brooks were pumping him for information, trying to find out whether Ryan had told him of his, Brooks', condition. Vince wanted to hear it from Brooks himself.

In between snippets of conversation, Vince peeked into the other room. Corey was growing restless, heaving a couple of deep sighs of the boy-am-I-pissed variety, and Vince began to look for a tactful way to cut the conversation short.

When he finally said goodbye to Brooks and went back into the living room, Corey was at the door.

"Hey, where are you going?" he asked.

"Far be it from me to intrude on your evening," she said harshly.

"What do you mean? This is *our* evening."

"Yeah? Who makes up 'our,' Vince? You and your coach?"

"Look, I'm sorry. This is not a good time right now—"

"Well, I'll tell you what. When it is a good time, give me a call." She pulled the door open and stepped through, then turned back. "Actually, I have a better idea: when it's a good time for *me*, I'll call *you*." Then she shut the door behind her and Vince was alone.

Now, as Vince surveyed the empty room, he indulged in hindsight, that perfect magic looking-glass through which all mistakes are eventually viewed. He should have gone after her. He should have told her about Brooks.

He should call her now and tell her.

No, he mused, *you missed that boat, at least for tonight*. Odds were she wouldn't answer anyway. Besides, as much as he felt for Corey—and he felt a lot, more than he'd felt for anyone in a long time—she wasn't the one he needed to talk to right now.

He started to pick up the phone again, then put it back down. Some things had to be said in person. He stood, went into the kitchen and turned off all the appliances. He wasn't really hungry anyway. Then he got ready to go see Brooks for the second time today.

And although a thousand things were racing through his mind at once, at least he remembered to bring his coat this time.

* * *

COREY WHITE LAY on her back, staring at the bedroom ceiling, tears trickling into her hair, wondering what it was about him. He could make her feel wonderful; he could also make her miserable. There was simply no question what his priorities were in life, and while she had no doubt she was high on the list, she wasn't number one. It bothered her.

And it bothered her that it bothered her.

She rolled over onto her stomach and looked at the digital clock. Could it really be only nine o'clock? Corey sighed. She still wore the outfit she'd worn to Vince's. Should she go out on the town? It might make her feel better. She didn't move.

She simply wasn't used to feeling this way about a man, as though she dictated none of the priorities. It was an unsettling change of pace for someone so used to being in control. Normally she played hearts like fiddles, and when she lost interest, she moved on. Granted, she usually had keen insight into where the relationship was going. But looking back, she couldn't count the number of times she'd had that insight concerning guys who were, when you got right down to it, pretty damned good to her. (Corey flopped onto her left side, then her right, finally coming to rest on her back once more, certain realizations about oneself having the tendency to make one uncomfortable.)

And now here was a man who was nearly everything she wanted; he was sweet, funny, smart, and oh so sexy. But it maddened her that he had higher priorities, even if she wasn't ready to admit (at least to him) how high a priority *he* was becoming to *her*.

Why hasn't he called? she wondered. Not that she'd talk to him at this point anyway, but still he should have checked to see if she was all right, if she got home safely. But he was too busy with his precious coach to think twice about her, she supposed.

It wasn't fair, she decided. And regardless of her feelings, she'd be damned if she'd sit here and wallow in her misery a minute longer. She was still dressed, the night was still young, and she could still make men's heads turn.

Corey got up from the bed, slipped on her shoes, grabbed her purse and keys, and headed for the door.

VINCE FLEW THROUGH the night.

He covered territory at an astounding rate, the dark night making his quick pace seem even faster as he ran. He glided along under harsh streetlights, chasing his own shadow between them. Passing motorists saw not much more than a fleeting wraith; some may have questioned whether they had actually seen anything at all.

Though he'd already done ten miles at a moderate pace in the morning, thinking that would be the day's lone workout, he simply had to move. He thought best while running, anyway, so while he ran, he thought.

Vince didn't know what he'd expected when he'd gone to confront Brooks, but what had happened wasn't it. He fully intended to tell Brooks what Ryan had told him earlier, but as he sat on Brooks' couch with his mouth open, no words came out.

Brooks studied his face and made the correct assumption. "I have cancer," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Apparently you know."

Vince nodded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I have?" Brooks countered. "Is it any of your business? Are you a blood relative? Am I obligated to tell you a damned thing about my personal life? What makes you think you have a right to demand answers from me?"

"I'm not demanding—"

"Yes, you are. Next you'll want to know why I haven't done anything about it."

"Well, since you bring it up—"

"And my answer's the same: why should I tell you anything? I don't answer to anyone but myself and the Man Upstairs, and I guess I'll get around to Him soon enough." This last Brooks said almost bitterly.

"But Jim, I—"

"Do *not* interrupt me again or I'll show you the door. You know, if there's one thing I can't stand, it's pity. And that's why you came over here tonight, to pity me. Don't shake your head at me, it's true. If you and Ryan had your way, you'd have me lying in some damned hospital bed with a hundred tubes sticking out of me. Well, get this through your

head: *I don't want that.* I made up my mind about it years ago when my brother Paul went through the same thing. That man was healthier than an ox when he went into the hospital, at least to look at him. If he was never treated he would have been gone in a week or two. Instead, they prolonged his agony. It took almost a year for him to die, a year full of misery. He was miserable, and we were miserable watching him. I'm not about to put myself or anyone around me through that, and that's the end of it."

Brooks leveled a finger at him. "I'm going to tell you this once, Vince, and that's it. If you can handle it, fine, and if not, we're through. What I need right now is not a doctor or a nurse, not a father or a son. It's a friend. True friends are always in short supply, and I can use all I can get. So, what's it going to be, Vince? Friends?"

Vince looked into Brooks' tired eyes for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Of course. We're friends."

"Good." Brooks sighed, as if a tremendous weight had been lifted from him. "I'm glad to hear it, friend, because I have a confession to make: I am scared shitless."

And finally the real talking could begin. For more than an hour, Brooks opened up to him. The old man told Vince about his own competitive days as a steeplechaser at Villanova in the late Fifties, when he rubbed elbows with the likes of Ron Delany and Noel Carroll, the great Irish Olympians, and sometimes came close to beating them. ("That was on the rare occasions when they'd gone out and bent their elbows the night before, and I ran like my heels were on fire and my ass was catching," Brooks laughed.)

And surprisingly, for the first time, Vince talked to another man about his ex-wife, and the pain she'd caused him—the pain they'd caused each other, he now (thinking of Corey) had to admit. Brooks didn't judge; he merely listened and nodded, and offered what sympathy he could.

So engrossed were they in their conversation that neither heard Ryan slip in. Vince was startled when he walked into the living room.

"Ryan!" he exclaimed. Brooks turned in that direction and winced, a small grunt escaping his lips. Ryan merely looked from one to the other.

"Sit down, son," Brooks said to him. "We've got some talking to do."

So Ryan sat, and Brooks laid things out to him. Though the message was the same one he'd given Vince, the words and tone were gentler. Vince kept silent through it all, watching the emotions play over Ryan's face. He'd seen the shock, denial and anger already, figured he'd missed the depression, but was now, finally, seeing the acceptance. It was, after all, Brooks' life, and no one had the right to tell him what to do. Ryan may not have liked it, but he was going to have to deal with it.

"Actually," Brooks went on after a pause, "I'm glad I have you both together, because there's some unfinished business to discuss. I don't expect to be around too much longer, and unfortunately that leaves the two of you without a coach, and the Olympic Trials only a few months away. I'm not worried about you so much, Vince. You've been around the block enough to know how to train yourself. And I believe you're on the right track, so to speak.

"But you, Ryan, you're fresh out of college. You're still not used to running at this level. These guys who'll be at the Trials, they've had nothing to do for four years, most of them, but prepare themselves to take their shot. Even the ones you've run well against before will be downright dangerous. Remember Viren? He was a doormat most of the Seventies, except at the Olympics the son of a bitch won the two longest track races—twice. Didn't matter that he lost everything in between; he was the best on those given days, and that's what's important.

"Most of the guys you'll be up against are older than you, stronger than you, and some of them are even more focused than you. Especially as you look for a job, you've got enough on your mind without having to worry about what to do for workouts every day.

"So, naturally, I've come up with a brilliant solution: Vince, from now on, you'll be Ryan's coach."

Both younger men were silent for a moment; after that they had a lot to say. Brooks shut his eyes against the protests ("But I've never coached anyone before!" from Vince; "No way, *you're* my coach!" from Ryan), then held up his hands for quiet.

"Look," he said, "nothing else makes sense. Ryan, either way, I'm not going to be able to even watch you work out much longer. Hell, I can barely stand now as it is. Vince will be there with you every step because he'll be doing it himself. You'll know you can do the workouts he gives you because he'll be doing them, too.

"And you," he said, turning to Vince, "don't sell yourself short. You could be a damned fine coach if you put your mind to it. And if you have somebody give you a nudge to get you started. Well, here's your nudge. Use your head and follow your gut, and you'll be right more often than not."

Vince and Ryan weren't done arguing about it, not by a long shot, but soon it was clear Brooks was getting very tired. His strength was deserting him in stages, day by day. So they closed the subject by agreeing to think about it, and Vince left soon after.

Now here he was, flitting along in the dark, trying to absorb the day. There was a lot to take in: Ryan, Brooks...and Corey. On the way to Brooks' house, he'd driven by her place and seen her bedroom light on, so he figured she'd gotten home all right. But when he'd come back, the light was out and her car was gone from the driveway. A few more minutes of driving made it clear she hadn't gone to his place, so where could she be?

It nagged at him like a loose tooth. Obviously he'd handled the whole situation poorly. He only hoped he could make it up to her somehow. Maybe tomorrow he could stop by with some more flowers or something. He tried to leave it alone for now but couldn't, instead turning it over and over in his mind.

By sheer chance he glanced down just as he was about to land in a pothole. He managed to leap over it instead, stumbling but keeping his feet. It scared him a little. Here he was thinking about Corey and he'd nearly hurt himself, possibly quite seriously. Not unlike the last time he'd been injured, when his mind was on Suzy.

The thought sobered him. Maybe someone was trying to tell him something; what that something was, he couldn't figure. From now on, however, he would be damned sure to watch where he was going.

Quite unaware, Vince flew along now at close to 5:30-mile pace. This would be a very quick ten miles indeed, giving him a cool twenty total for the day. As he turned a corner and headed for home, a light snow began to fall.