

Part II

Coming Up

Chapter 12

WINTER IN ILLINOIS is challenging to the distance runner. The threat of snow is the least of his problems, dwarfed by the omnipresent severe cold and sharp, biting winds that threaten at times to disrobe him. A ten-mile run in such weather is often so thoroughly exhausting as to leave him spent for the rest of the day, unable to do much more than eat and sleep. A quality track session on an outdoor oval is a laughable goal from December through March.

It is only at these times, in these climates, that the praises of indoor tracks are properly sung. Though smaller than their outdoor brethren, sometimes by more than half, and thus tougher on the body—the centrifugal force normally imparted to the leg joints is magnified by tighter turns—they offer the considerable benefit of shelter from the elements.

Moreover, with no wind and little room to maneuver, race tactics differ greatly from outdoor contests. The runner must accelerate quickly to gain position on the short straightaways or risk running extra distance around the turns just to stay even. Timing—as with much of life—is everything.

Vince sat on the indoor track in the semi-gloom of the yawning Lincoln & Douglas fieldhouse interior, stretching and contemplating Ryan's timing; he was more than twenty minutes

late. It was Monday afternoon, and they had a track workout scheduled. Vince had gone ahead and warmed up with a three-mile jog, and now, as he further prepared his body for the stress it would soon undergo, he abandoned the idea that this was simple tardiness, that special province of the young, on Ryan's part; more than likely he wasn't coming.

Vince paid special attention to his hamstrings, the long, slender muscles along the backs of his legs. Above nearly all else a runner, particularly an older one, fears injury to these. Not so much because of the considerable pain, which comes as swiftly and sharply as a gunshot, but because of what it usually signifies: the end of a season. Throughout his career Vince had been extraordinarily lucky, never—with the one notable exception—having any significant interruption of his training or racing due to injury, and he knew he owed thanks to a Higher Power that in this late-date comeback attempt he had experienced nothing more serious than the normal aches and pains of an aging athlete's body being put through its paces. Still, he took nothing at all for granted; he knew he had but one shot left, long as it was, at Olympic glory, and he wasn't about to jeopardize it through foolhardiness, so he stretched with the focus of a Zen master.

While he stretched, he thought.

Yesterday had not gone well. Vince called her early in the morning, and when she answered he said: "Don't hang up."

"Why not?"

"I was an asshole, I admit it. I'm worthless. I'm scum. I'm a miserable excuse for a human being." Pause. "You can stop me any time."

"When I hear something I disagree with, I will."

"Look, I really am sorry. Things didn't turn out the way I planned them, believe me."

"Well, from where I sat, it looked like you had the power to change that, and you didn't. Guess that shows how important I am to you."

"It doesn't at all. It's just that some other important stuff is happening, too."

"Such as what? Whether you're supposed to run eight miles or ten miles tomorrow? Something as critical as that?"

Vince hesitated. Brooks had made it pretty clear that he didn't want anyone to know his condition. Did he have a responsibility to honor that wish where Corey was concerned? What about his, Vince's, responsibility to her, to tell her the truth?

He hesitated too long.

"That's about what I thought," Corey said. "Look, I think you should know: I went out last night. I met someone. He's a really nice guy, and he's not an athlete, so I figured what the hell, I haven't had much luck with athletes anyway."

Vince's heart had stopped beating. Slowly he said: "And this guy is—you're seeing him again?"

"We're going out this afternoon."

"Aw, no. Corey, tell me it's not true. Tell me this isn't happening."

"No," she said softly. "I won't tell you that."

There was silence on both ends of the line for a long time. Corey finally broke it. "So, if there's nothing else...."

"I'm sorry," Vince said. "I really am. I didn't do right by you, and I guess I can't blame you. I can't say I'm happy for you, either, but I can wish you the best."

He thought he heard something soft, something that may have been a very quiet sob, but might also have been static.

"Whatever else you think about me," he went on, "please believe that I love you. And that I'll miss you."

More silence. Then she said: "Goodbye, Vince."

After that there was no more to be said, so he hung up the phone on the dial tone in his ear.

SITTING IN THE middle of the LDU fieldhouse, Vince was momentarily surprised that he had to fight back tears. He couldn't remember having cried since he was twelve and a much older cousin had sat on him, giving him Indian rope burns until he wailed like a siren. He hadn't cried when Suzy left, nor even the day his Olympic dream died.

No, he corrected himself, not died—was deferred. That was better, because there was still hope. He'd rekindled a very hot flame over the past several months, a flame that had nearly been snuffed out almost four years ago. Whatever else happened, he promised himself, he would not let it be extinguished until it had a chance to shine.

Reluctantly he called time on Ryan; he simply couldn't wait forever. He changed into a pair of racing flats, forsaking the heavier training shoes, and hopped to his feet to do some striders. Beginning at the base of one turn, he gradually built up to racing speed and a bit beyond, held it along the straightaway, then eased up going into the opposite turn. Five more times he did this, until his heart rate was high, his blood was flowing, and his legs were buzzing with a something's-up feeling. By now the giant fluorescent lights he'd turned on when he arrived at the empty fieldhouse had warmed up, and the semi-gloom had bloomed into the kind of harsh light one might find in a morgue.

When he judged himself ready, he began the workout.

On paper it was simple: sixteen times 400 meters, a quarter-mile, fairly fast—62 seconds each—with a rapid 200-meter jog in between. On this track that meant two laps of hard running followed by one “easy” lap. Except that as the workout progressed, the easy laps would paradoxically become the harder ones as his body balked at being teased by the tiny islets of rest in a river of pain and strongly encouraged him to stop altogether. In a proper interval workout—not the kind run by sprinters—the rest period was equally as important as the fast running, because that was when the body learned to deal with fatigue. The temptation was to let it sag, but sagging developed sloppy form. Enough sagging during the rest period and the body would sag during the race. Therefore, the runner, whose job it is to maintain near-perfect form—especially toward the end of the race, when almost everything goes to hell and there is little else to rely on—strives always to keep his body running straight and true. It is easier said than done.

Vince hurtled down the backstretch on his first interval, the slap of his feet and his already heavy breathing returning to him from the cavernous fieldhouse walls. With no one else around, he was able to hone his mind completely in on the task at hand. Smoothly his legs, virtual pistons, churned him forward through the first lap. He glanced at his watch as he crossed the start-finish line the first time to see he was right on pace.

Into the backstretch the second time, the lactic acid slowly building in his legs began to speak to him in a hoarse whisper, telling him he'd be wise to stop now and avoid the terrible burning sensation that was imminent. He ignored it, knowing all too well what level of horrid pain

and suffering his body could endure, and that this was far below it. It was an almost cruel thing to know.

The last forty meters or so were the toughest, then he was across the line and slowing to a trot. Even now, however, his pace would have alarmed the casual jogger; the idea was to maintain his heart rate at the same high level without overly fatiguing his legs. The interval workout is a constant high-wire act, with the runner balancing between training and overtraining. Those who stand on podiums around the world while metallic discs are hung on ribbons around their necks are the Flying Wallendas of the track world.

All too soon he was into the second 400, which went very much like the first. Then the third, which was nearly identical to the second, and so on. The only differences between each one and the last were the slight increase of lactic acid in his legs—they now spoke to him more urgently—and the slow but steady deepening of his breathing. His concentration withstood it all, and this was why he didn't see Ryan walk in the side door when he was halfway finished.

Ryan crossed to the infield after Vince went by, not really surprised he hadn't been spotted. He dropped his small bag, which held only his racing shoes, next to Vince's gear near the start/finish line. Quickly he removed his sweats and changed his shoes, tying the laces of the second one as Vince swept past into his second hard lap. This time Ryan knew he'd been noticed.

Vince sped down the backstretch. His legs were by this time carrying on quite a conversation, and their message was clear, yet not they but he was in charge. He'd seen Ryan, and that didn't help his concentration, but what the hell.

When he finished the interval Ryan was there, falling into step with him as he eased into his jog.

“Well?” Vince asked.

“Well what?” Ryan retorted.

“You're late. I've already done eight of these. Where have you been?”

“I was busy.”

“That's it? You were busy?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I ran over here so I’m already warmed up. I’m only gonna do twelve quarters, though, then I’ll do some 200s. I need to work on my speed.”

Vince looked at Ryan for a long moment but said nothing. Then he turned his narrowed eyes back to the track.

They started the next quarter—Vince’s ninth and Ryan’s first—together. Though they were almost the same height, Vince’s legs were shorter, and so was his stride. It made for an interesting syncopation when their feet met the rubberized surface of the track.

When they were done the interval, Ryan asked Vince how the dinner with Corey had gone. There was no response; Vince simply kept jogging. Twice more Ryan asked questions, but when Vince gave no indication he’d even heard, Ryan gave up, assuming a fuck-you attitude.

They started the next one, a pair of quiet engines gliding along greased rails. Then it was finished and they jogged again. Still Vince was silent.

Eleven minutes later they finished number sixteen, and things started to go wrong.

Vince stopped his watch as they crossed the line and, without breaking stride, turned toward Ryan, grabbed his T-shirt with both hands and half-dragged, half-carried him off the track. Caught by surprise, Ryan barely got out a startled “Wha-FUCK!” before Vince slammed his back against the fieldhouse wall with a satisfying *thunk*.

“Listen to me,” Vince said in a low, calm voice as he moved his right hand up to Ryan’s throat and leaned in until their faces were inches apart. “You will not disrespect me by being late for a workout again. And when you come, you will run exactly what I tell you to run. No more, no less. And no different.”

The rough treatment had stunned Ryan momentarily, but now he was emerging from his stupor and starting to struggle. “You son of a—” he said, but that was as far as he got before Vince squeezed the hand that held his neck, pulled him off the wall and drove him back against it again, harder this time.

“Shut up!” Vince shouted, his voice making the metallic building ring. The next moment he was talking calmly once more. “Don’t interrupt, I’m not finished. The reason you’re going to do these things is that I made a promise to a man who’s probably going to die soon. This man, I don’t know why, cares enough about your snot-nosed self to worry

what’s going to happen to you when he goes. And for whatever reason, he asked me to take over as your coach. So when you disrespect me, you disrespect him. It’s that simple.

“Now, I don’t know why he thinks I’d do such a great job with you, and to tell you the truth, I’m not sure I even *want* the job. I could do without your attitude, that’s a fact. But a promise is a promise, and I am not going to let you make me break that promise. You don’t have to like me, but you *do* have to respect me. So either start doing that or I’ll break your neck. Got it?”

Ryan had been struggling weakly, still dazed from the double hammerings he’d taken, but he’d gradually stopped squirming as Vince talked, the older man’s intensity melting his resistance. Even if he’d put up a fight, it might have been in vain. Vince had never told Ryan about the summers during college he’d spent working for his uncle, a roofer, nor about the muscles he’d developed carrying sixty-pound bundles of shingles up and down ladders all day long—muscles he’d never quite lost. It made little difference that Ryan didn’t know the reason for Vince’s strength, though; he knew its effects, and that was enough.

Vince loosened his grip, ready to tighten it again should Ryan try something, but in truth his eyes held Ryan fast. He stepped back.

“Now,” he said. “I’m going to do my cool-down outside, because I need to cool off. You have eight more quarters to do.”

Vince gave Ryan one last, hard look before he walked away to grab his training shoes and sweats. Vince kept his back to him, but Ryan didn’t move.

As he picked up his bag and headed for the door, Vince stopped. Still with his back to Ryan, he said: “By the way. Corey and I are no longer seeing each other. Please don’t mention her name again.” Then he continued out the door, leaving Ryan alone.

Ryan stood still another minute, one hand rubbing his abused neck, thinking something like *bitch god damn son of a hate him bitch son of a mother damn fucker* as he tried to calm himself. Where the hell did Vince get off talking to him that way? How dare he grab him like that? Vince was lucky he’d caught him by surprise, or he’d have gotten more than he bargained for. *I’d have made him eat his spikes.*

He was still thinking these things when he returned to the track and resumed his workout.

WHEN HE WAS finished, Ryan went outside. The air was crisp and the sky was darkening with oncoming night, but he could very clearly make out a figure sitting on the steps that led to the parking lot.

He walked up beside Vince and stood in silence. After a moment Vince spoke.

"I'm not trying to take his place, Ry," he said without looking up. "Even if I could, I wouldn't."

"I guess I know that," Ryan replied. "It's just hard, you know?"

"Yeah," Vince said. Then: "Actually, no. I don't." This time he did look up. "Why don't you sit down and let's talk about it?"

"I still have to do my cool-down," Ryan answered. "I don't want to stiffen up. Sixteen quarters at that pace isn't easy, you know." His eyes met Vince's, and there was understanding.

"If you think that was tough, wait 'til you hear the plan for the rest of the week."

"I can hardly wait." A small smile set on Ryan's mouth. "Tomorrow? Same time, same place?"

"See you then."

Ryan zipped up his jacket and jogged off, leaving Vince alone with his thoughts.

ABOUT THE SAME time Vince was having it out with Ryan, Corey White switched off the television—some vapid sit-com nonsense about a group of twenty-somethings sharing an apartment in the Big Apple, a spacious, expensive-looking suite which none of them ever seemed to have to go to work to pay for. Now *there* was an original concept, Corey thought without humor. She hadn't actually been watching.

Dusk drew shadows across the carpet, throwing bars across one of her feet. She'd started taking off her toenail polish but lost interest halfway through; three nails lay naked while the rest accused her of apathy.

Several times over the last few days she'd found herself looking with longing at the telephone, wishing he would call. There was scant hope of

that, of course, not after what she'd told him. It didn't matter that it was a lie, or that she didn't even know why she'd said it. She *had* met a guy, that much was true, had kissed him, had even done some dirty dancing with him, but when he tried to slide a hand up her skirt she kneed him in the groin and departed with all the grace that befitted the occasion. Offhand, she'd have to say the odds of her seeing the guy again were relatively slim.

Gaunt, in fact. Anemic.

Anorexic.

Fabulous, she thought. *I'm sitting here alone playing word games with myself. And where's he? What's he doing? Is he okay? Does he miss me?*

If he missed her, he'd have called her, she told herself. And if he thought there was another guy, he'd have fought for her.

Probably that was another lie, she admitted. Although she suspected Vince was capable of mayhem if provoked, it simply wasn't his style. If she told him she preferred someone else—as she had—he'd step aside, seeing that as the right thing to do, not wanting to cause her pain. In spite of everything, of one thing she was irretrievably sure: Vince Taggart would willingly die a painful death before he intentionally hurt her.

Screw his intentions! she raged. *He did hurt me! He did!*

There were fresh tears.

Chapter 13

WINTER HAD GONE well, at least on some fronts.

Ryan traveled quite a bit to indoor meets on both coasts and points in between. He ran well, if not spectacularly, winning and losing in equal measure. With Brooks' blessing, Vince had modified his training to add longer intervals with shorter recoveries, and the short-term effect was to make him more tired, and correspondingly slower. This worried him less than he would have expected, partly because he trusted Brooks when the old coach explained to him that Vince was trying to build his strength; partly because his trust in Vince was growing as well; and partly because he could *feel* himself getting stronger almost every day.

More importantly, he was gaining in experience. No longer fettered by collegiate requirements, he was fully exposed to the professionals in his sport, most of whom were not necessarily faster than he but older, stronger and wiser.

Vince traveled with him as often as he could, sometimes as a fellow competitor, more often as his coach. He had to burn vacation and sick time at work, and his supervisors weren't happy that he was away so much, but that was the least of his concerns. He was finding it difficult to get into meets; promoters showed little loyalty, and it didn't matter to them that someone who'd won the mile at their meet five or six years ago wanted to run it again. *What kind of times have you run lately?* they wanted to know, and at first he had nothing to tell them.

Finally, in Boston, he lied, telling the promoter he had run 4:02 a week earlier at a local college meet. He even gave Brooks' name as the meet director in case the guy wanted to check, but he didn't. So Vince lined up with Ryan and the rest, beating only one runner in 4:12 while Ryan won almost ten seconds ahead.

At least now he had a time, though.

As the races went on he traded that time in for better ones. In Los Angeles he had a breakthrough, running 4:04 for third place behind Ryan and a Moroccan runner. The press started to take notice then. Not the way they would have if, say, Brett Favre came out of retirement for one last big push for a championship, but the Vince Taggart story was good enough for a sidebar in *Track & Field News* and four lines in *Sports Illustrated*.

Neither story mentioned his connection with Ryan Sandy, who was featured in both publications, which was just the way Vince wanted it. The pair had started to grow closer by degrees over the last several weeks, and the last thing Vince wanted was for articles touting him as Ryan's new coach to sour the relationship.

The only real downside to the season was Brooks' deteriorating health. The old man had balked at the suggestion that he check into a hospital or other long-term care facility, but he had finally consented to having a part-time caregiver visit twice a day when it became obvious Ryan couldn't attend him. He'd lost considerable weight and was gobbling pain medication like candy, but at least his spirits remained high. When Ryan and Vince returned from meets they were summoned for an audience, where Brooks demanded to know the smallest detail of the race. He seemed quite pleased with their performances, and on these occasions Vince thought he sensed a bit of tension and worry slip away from Ryan's former coach.

ONE EVENING SHORTLY before an early May meet at Lincoln & Douglas, a low-key open meet organized by the new outdoor track coach, who was trying to get his feet wet, Vince went to the stadium alone. A thunderstorm had ripped through the area not half an hour before, chasing away the usual collection of resolute

joggers, and in the baleful floodlit air a thick, eerie mist had settled a foot high over the track surface. Vince smiled; tonight's workout would be akin to running atop a cloud. He crossed the track to the infield, set his bag down and got ready to run.

Earlier in the day he had supervised Ryan's workout, begging off himself by pleading a sore calf. Ryan had run a combination of 400s and 200s, with a heavy emphasis on speed when tired, and Vince was quite pleased with his times. Ryan was at Mother's now, and that was just as well because this was something Vince felt he needed to do alone.

In order to represent the United States of America in a track event, a runner must be one of the first three across the finish line in the Olympic Trials. Implicit in this, however, is that the runner must first *qualify* for the Trials. In order to qualify in the 1500 meters, a man must run 3:39 or better—a few seconds faster than the equal of a sub-four-minute mile. Ryan had, of course, exceeded that standard several times during the past year, but Vince had yet to approach it. A scant second per lap separated him from the magic barrier—a barrier he knew to be more psychological than real—yet any elite miler knows the vast import of those four ticks.

In 1954, Roger Bannister became the first human being to run a mile in less than four minutes. The story of how he got there was a fascinating tale involving his competitors as well as his comrades. Few track buffs didn't know about the Englishman's battle with the Australian Landy and the American Santee to see who would be the first to grab the brass ring; almost as many knew how Bannister recruited two friends—both future Olympic champions—to pace him on the fateful day. Relatively few, however, knew how much of Bannister's confidence that he could run that fast came from one solitary workout: before he attempted to run four laps in under four minutes, he had to be certain he could run *three* laps in under *three* minutes. Having done that, he knew that with the rush of the race coursing through him he could bring it home in a minute or less.

Although Vince's task was the less grandiose one of treading ground long since trodden, by others as well as himself, he could think of no better confidence booster than the one Bannister had used nearly half a century earlier.

When he was ready, Vince toed the line, trying to recreate the incredible psyche of the race in his mind. Then he hit his watch and was off.

Smoothly he unwound his stride around the curve and down the backstretch the first time, eyes fixed somewhere between infinity and a point twenty meters ahead. On impulse he decided not to check his watch at the usual milestones to see if he was on pace; he'd let his body tell him that.

Before he knew it the first lap was a memory and he was into the second. Here was where it usually set in: the slow, stealthy torpor of the race. Here was where his adrenal glands ceased the wholesale dumping of their product into his system and left him to his own devices. Here was where the challenge was to maintain, maintain. Vince had rarely had too great a problem doing that when in top form, and he was pleased—and not a little relieved—that he was able to do so now as the second lap unfurled and he hammered down the home straight into the third lap.

The third lap, of course, was the bane of the miler's entire existence.

Today it would be his last lap, and therefore its agonies would be slightly more bearable, but there was no getting around the third lap being simply the bitch-kitty of running. Parker had said it best: the third lap is a microcosm of life's bad times. Struggling now through the molasses that was the backstretch, Vince quite agreed.

Chugging like a steam-engine, Vince forced his nearly exhausted legs to lift around the last turn. The final straightaway was a bull-rush through the building lactic acid that roiled within his body; not only his legs began to tie up but his arms as well. He tried but failed to convince his shoulders and neck to relax their death grimace, finally settling for simply keeping everything moving in more or less the same direction.

Then he was stopping his watch as he crossed the finish line and grabbing his knees as he fought for oxygen that just didn't seem to be there. When he could stand erect he checked his time. 2:58.9.

Well, it wasn't much under, but it would have to be enough.

After a ten-minute break, Vince ran six 200s in 30 and called it a day.

COREY CROSSED AND uncrossed her legs under the restaurant table, smiled and made encouraging noises, all the while wondering how she had let herself be talked into history's most boring double-date.

Her dinner companion, an insurance actuary, was saying something about the rate of long-term illness in the Midwestern states when she could take no more. She excused herself to go to the ladies' room, throwing a private glare at her friend Beth, who along with her own date she held responsible for the fiasco.

Three minutes later she was still leaning on the bathroom vanity, pretending to fuss over her makeup while in fact contemplating her chances of slipping out through a window, when Beth walked in. Beth was shorter, darker in complexion, pretty as hell, and something of a nymphomaniac. She put out as though the Rapture was upon mankind, and she had absolutely no qualms about relating her sexual escapades in exquisite detail to Corey. In each story, the guy was invariably gorgeous, well-mannered and hung like a horse. Corey didn't think of herself as prudish, but she found her friendship with Beth to be a sort of guilty pleasure; Beth was more interesting than a Jackie Collins novel, and twice as graphic.

When Beth had mentioned her current boyfriend's cousin was in town, Corey reluctantly agreed to double with them, more out of curiosity about seeing Beth in action than any real desire for fun. Which was lucky, since there was precious little hope for that this evening in light of her date's limited range of conversation.

"Cor, what's going on?" Beth asked, hiking up her dress before the outer door swung shut. She headed for a stall, tugging at her pantyhose. "Not having a good time?"

"What gave you that impression? I *love* discussing when statistically I'm most likely to develop uterine cancer. Can't get *enough* of that stuff."

"You're not bored, are you?" Beth asked from inside the stall. Corey was both horrified and fascinated that Beth wanted to have a dialogue while squatting over a commode.

"Bored, hell. I passed bored before we finished the soup. Now I'm suicidal."

"Okay, so David's a little one-note. Did you check out his biceps, though? Pretty nice."

"Yeah, they're alright, I guess," Corey allowed, turning back to the mirror. "Next you're going to tell me he has good teeth and a tight ass."

"A *fantastic* ass. You should see him naked."

"Huh?" Corey started. "You've seen him naked?"

"Mmm hmm, but don't tell Brian. We all got together last time David was in town, and yours truly got a wee bit tipsy. Brian got *plastered* and passed out on the couch, and I go into the bathroom to splash some water on my face. David follows me in, right? The next thing I know I'm sitting naked on the edge of the bathtub with David's balls banging on my chin, giving him a blowjob. So he's a lot wilder than you think."

Corey didn't answer. *Couldn't* answer. Finally Beth flushed and opened the stall door, and Corey saw more than she wanted of Beth's feminine charms as she slipped out of her pantyhose.

"What are you doing?" Corey managed, and Beth looked up.

"Brian likes to feel me up when we go out to eat," Beth answered without a trace of embarrassment. "Makes him feel daring, like we might get caught. So I figured I'd give him a little extra treat tonight."

Corey shook her head. "Beth, I don't think tonight was such a good idea. It just doesn't feel right."

"Still thinking about what's-his-name, huh?" Beth said, her voice rife with pity.

"Yes. No. I don't know. I still love the guy...I think."

"Listen, take it from me, the only way to get over him is to move on. Did you ever sleep with him?"

"Well, yeah, sure," Corey said, blushing.

"Then you won't really be over him until you sleep with someone else."

"And you're suggesting David? Because you slept with him?"

"Oh, I never said I *slept* with him. I just blew him. We tried later but he couldn't get it up again. But he went down on me, and I screamed like you wouldn't be—"

“Goodnight, Beth,” Corey said firmly as she bolted from the bathroom, straight past their dates’ bemused looks and out the front door.

“WHAT’S THE PLAN again?” Ryan wanted to know.

“Plan? What plan? What makes you think I have a plan?”

It was less than five minutes before the start of the 1500. Vince and Ryan were finishing up their striders while across the track the 110 meter hurdlers were settling into their starting blocks. Vince had never understood some people’s fascination with hurdle races. Wasn’t the point of racing to see how fast you could run? If that was true, why erect ten barriers in front of you to slow you down?

But today that was neither here nor there. Today there was business to conduct.

“Actually, it’s simple,” Vince said. “Run sixty-second quarters for three laps with me clinging to your backside. Then you take off as hard as you can the last 300 and I see if I remember how to run this race. Questions?”

“One. Who’s the competition?”

“Nobody worth worrying about, if all goes well. That’s why we’re here today and not at a bigger meet: to get me a qualifying time for the Trials and work on your kick without worrying about winning or losing to anybody else.”

“Fair enough.”

The hurdles were over. The loudspeaker blared: “Final call for the mile run. All milers report to the starter.”

“Our cue,” Vince said, and zoomed off around the curve one final time, with Ryan a pace behind.

The starter wasted little time lining the athletes up. “There will be two commands, gentlemen: ‘Set’ and the gun,” he told them, invoking the age-old mantra of starters everywhere. Vince was willing to bet the starter’s commands would translate exactly the same in any modern language. “Feet off the line, please.”

Ryan held the pole position, with Vince next to him and a line of a dozen or so other athletes spread across the track from there. “See you at the finish line,” Ryan said just before the starter’s pistol cracked.

Ryan took the lead immediately, and Vince settled in behind. Before the first lap was over they had separated themselves from the rest of the pack—all except one short, familiar-looking redhead who slid up on Vince’s shoulder. A quick glance told Vince it was indeed Rich Bolton. He spared it only a brief thought, however, willing his mind to concentrate on the task at hand.

The first three laps went exactly to plan, with Ryan metronomically clicking off sixty seconds for each quarter and Vince barely half a step behind. Bolton was clinging feistily as well, and that was *not* part of the plan, but to hell with it. When the tightly bunched trio came up on one lap remaining, the tiny crowd—composed mostly of other athletes waiting for their events to begin—sent up a ragged cheer.

True to the plan, at the end of the penultimate turn Ryan shifted gears without warning, and even though Vince knew it was coming, it still brought him close to despair. Still, he managed to work up some speed of his own, negotiating with his protesting body for a little more velocity.

Just then, however, Vince felt rather than saw Bolton swing out, getting ready to pass. There would be no working together today, Vince determined, convincing his legs to take it up a notch. In so doing he held Bolton off for the length of the backstretch until the younger runner was forced to tuck in behind him for the trip around the final curve. But Vince was taking no chances, so rather than ease up he maintained his speed. He was nearly soaring as he came out of the turn, his eyes fixed not on Ryan some twelve meters ahead but on the finish line beyond. *Lift and drive, you bastard*, he commanded himself. He sensed Bolton falling away but knew he couldn’t afford to let up; not the kid but the clock was his true enemy. From this angle he couldn’t see the stadium display, but he took it on faith that it was marching swiftly forward.

Vince worried through the last twenty meters whether he would keep his feet, then it was over. More exhausted than he’d been in years, he managed to stagger to the infield before collapsing in a heap. He simply lay there sucking wind, trying to discover if he would live or die, when Ryan—barely breathing hard, the little prick—pranced over.

"You did it, man! You did it!" Ryan crowed as Vince fought to a sitting position. "Three thirty-eight point six, that's an automatic Trials qualifier. Sacramento, here we come!" He pounded Vince on the back while Vince willed him to stop, and presently he did. Grogily Vince tried to do the math in his head: *three thirty-eight, what's that worth for a mile...3:56 or so?*

Vince Taggert was once again, finally, a sub-four-minute miler. It was not the culmination of his comeback, merely a milestone along the way, but it was an enormous one. It signified his return to the ranks of the national class. He was sure he'd appreciate that some time in the near future; now, however, he was more interested in bringing his traitor body under something resembling control.

Rich Bolton made his way over then to offer congratulations. "You still got it, man," he said.

"Thanks," Vince said, struggling to get up. Bolton offered his hand, and he took it.

"Thank you," Bolton told him. "That's the second time you pulled me along. I almost got a Trials qualifier myself."

"Yeah? Great," Vince said, oddly pleased the kid had put up such a fight. "Keep at it. You'll get there, you're good enough."

"Maybe," Bolton beamed, obviously happy for the compliment. "Hey, if you ever want to do any coaching, I wouldn't mind someone who's been there and done that." He offered his hand again and Vince shook it. Then he was off to join a fair-haired young spectator—his girlfriend, judging by the way she hugged him. Vince stared after him a moment before he turned to look for Ryan.

LATER, THEY CELEBRATED. Ryan took Vince to dinner at Derringers, a local watering hole that specialized in hot ribs and cold beer. Vince had managed to miss the place when eating out with Corey. Ryan knew the bartender, and with his help secured a booth in a back corner despite a lengthy wait-list.

After they ordered and their beers came, they talked about the race.

"I'm still not sure if my legs are attached," Vince complained.

Ryan looked under the table. "Yeah, they're there. If they weren't, you'd probably be tilting to one side."

"I think the term is 'listing,'" Vince said. "You know, to be completely honest, I don't think I really thought I could do it."

"Aw, come on."

"No, really. You don't know how hard this has been, Ry. I fall asleep these days watching the news—not the *eleven* o'clock news, the *six* o'clock news. My joints creak in ways they never used to before. Most of the time I feel like some old baseball player who can't hang up the glove and ends up looking really stupid, missing fly balls and hitting into easy double-plays."

"I would have compared you to the Rolling Stones on a reunion tour myself."

"Lovely. I come to you with serious concerns and you make fun."

"Look, you don't need my vote of confidence. You went out there today and *did* it. You ran the time, man, there's no faking that. Now, maybe if you were screwing around running 4:30s and feeling like a big deal, I'd be making fun. Shit, I'd be laughing my ass off. But you're not."

"Okay, yeah, I qualified for the Trials. But what's the Olympic qualifying standard, three thirty-six? Three seconds at this level is nothing to sneeze at."

"Two point eight seconds, and why are you worrying about that now?" Ryan said. "You're aiming to peak at the Olympics, which means you're still rounding into shape. You'll get the standard, if not before the Trials, then after; you'll still have a couple of weeks before the deadline, time enough to hop in a race in Europe if need be.

"But forget about that for now, that's tomorrow's problem. Today you earned your ticket to Sacramento. You're right back where you left off."

Vince considered this. "No," he said, "not quite there. Not yet, anyway. I may never get back there again. I may have wasted the best years of my life, and whatever else happens, I'll just have to accept that.

"On the other hand," he continued, finally cracking a smile as he raised his bottle in front of him, "I may be just good enough."

"That's what the hell I'm trying to tell you," Ryan said, lifting his own bottle. "What's the toast?"

Vince thought for a moment. Then he said: “To old milers and young ones, those coming back and those coming up. May they be swift and strong—and above all, happy at the end of the day.”

They clicked their bottles together and drank.

Chapter 14

ORDINARILY PACKING WAS one of Vince’s least favorite chores. It ranked right down there with doing laundry, washing dishes, clipping toenails. (Which reminded him—his needed trimming.) He always saved it until the very last minute.

Of course, he reflected, a lot had to do with your destination. You got more excited, generally speaking, packing for Disneyland than for a visit to your in-laws. Particularly if you owed them money. And how much better than Disneyland was the Olympic Trials?

For months he’d thought about little else. After he’d run the qualifying time, Vince had played it cautious, racing only twice in college meets at the state university. Both times out he’d broken four minutes, but neither time had he had Ryan for company; he’d done it on his own, running alone at the front of the pack, setting a pace talented young runners ten or more years his junior couldn’t match. The rest of the time he’d trained, whipping his already stalwart body into even better shape. The results, he hoped, would show themselves in Sacramento over the next few days.

Vince actually caught himself whistling as he threw clothes into a bag. This time tomorrow he and Ryan would be in Sacramento, with a day to prepare for the first round of racing. They were as ready as they could be, he knew. Ryan had always

been blindingly fast, but now he had the strength to use that speed late in the race as well. And Vince finally felt that, while he probably wasn't now and never would be as good as he once was, he had clawed his way to within shouting distance of his former self. That would simply have to do.

Back to Sacramento, he thought, scene of a major—though certainly not the only—heartbreak in his life. He searched himself for feelings about his last trip out west, perhaps a sense of unfinished business or maybe some nervous apprehension, even a phantom twinge in his long-ago-injured ankle. He paused to examine that ankle now; it was strong, as solid as the rest of him. No, there was nothing there, no feelings of loss or even regret. He would simply be another runner in a very big race.

Finished, he checked his watch—perfect timing. He took one last walk through the house to see if he'd missed anything. The next time he saw this place, he thought, he would know something about himself, the answer to a question posed long ago: was he good enough?

Enough sentimental crap, he decided. Moments later he was in his car, heading toward Emmons Memorial to pick up Ryan.

RYAN WAS TRAVELING light. A knapsack and a duffel lay at his feet as he stood outside Emmons. The grin on his face on the way out nearly caused the hospital staff not to recognize him. It was a sight they'd never seen.

Part of him was of course happy and excited in anticipation of the trip, of the coming races, but in truth it was only a small part at the moment. Mostly he was happy because for the first time in years his mother had recognized him, known him, treated him like a son. They'd actually had a normal conversation, however brief. He told her about the Trials and she seemed pleased. She said she'd always known he would do great things one day, and squeezed his hand. Ryan's heart, which could pump blood through his body more than 160 times a minute for hours on end, had very nearly burst.

They talked of trivial matters for a while longer before Margaret Sandy slipped back into whatever world she inhabited for most of her life. Ryan wiped away tears as he left the room. He'd always vowed that if he ever got the chance, he'd tell her how much he loved her, and now it had

come and gone so quickly he'd forgotten. Still, he thought, she probably knew.

He watched Vince drive up and pop the trunk, and he tossed his bags in. When he opened the passenger door, his smile was so infectious Vince had to share it.

"What's got you so happy?" Vince asked.

"Little things," Ryan replied as he got in, brushing the last of the tears away. "Just little things."

Part III

Coming

Through

Chapter 15

SACRAMENTO—CAPITAL OF the largest state on the Left Coast, population a respectable 1.7 million, home to hi-tech industry giants and a frequently successful but oft-maligned basketball franchise—might as well have been Seattle, or St. Louis, or Shreveport, or nearly anywhere else for all it mattered to Vince and Ryan.

Only Vince had been to the booming northern-California city before, although that had been four years ago, an Olympic lifetime. But while there was probably a lot to see and this might be their last trip, they were not, they decided, there for sightseeing. For the next week their entire world would consist of a hotel, a 400-meter oval, and whatever space lay in between.

Distrusting the athletes' accommodations on the University of California-Davis campus where the meet would take place, they sought their own. Vince had made reservations at no fewer than four area hotels a month earlier so that when they got into town they would have their choice. The first of the four they came to from the airport happened to be hosting a Shriners' convention, so they cancelled and moved on to the next. This one, a Days Inn about two miles from the stadium, fit the bill, so once he and Ryan had checked in, Vince cancelled the others.

Next they contacted the delegation from USTAFF, the United States Track and Field Federation, and had information on the opening round assignments faxed to the hotel. As luck would have it, they were in separate heats and would not have to face each other until the final, assuming both made it that far. Vince, the slower of the two in recent times, figured to be the more disadvantaged, not being able to work together with Ryan to ensure they both placed high enough to advance to the next round. Against this drawback, however, he pitted years of experience, maturity, and a hunger that he now acknowledged had grown sharper with time.

Together they pored over the list of competitors. From all appearances, Ryan appeared to be the only sure bet; he had the fastest time among Americans all year, as well as his NCAA title. That left two spots wide open, and Vince counted his chances no better or worse than anyone else's to snare one of them.

As in all things, however, time would tell. Neither of them could afford to look past the first round; each knew that on any given day someone could rise to the occasion and run the race of a lifetime. It almost didn't matter sometimes what athletes did in the non-Olympic years; you had to keep your eye on them when the time was close. Lasse Viren had made a career of vanishing into the woodwork when Olympic glory was not on the line, earning the disdain of those who raced and beat him regularly, yet he proved invincible in the 5,000 and 10,000 meters at two Olympics—the only man in history to execute the “double double”—even setting a world record in one race.

And if it weren't other athletes, it might be themselves. A lackadaisical attitude could put one of them far back in the pack when the bell announced the final lap of the race. Poor positioning, moreover, often led to jostling among lesser runners. No one wanted to remember the specter of Mary Decker tangling legs with Zola Budd when Mary condescended to run with the pack.

Besides, they agreed, no matter what the outcome, this would be their time to shine. They had worked as hard, sacrificed as much as was possible for any two athletes striving to attain the acme of their sport. Now they would lay all the cards down on the table, and live with the result.

IT WAS HARD to tell who was the most surprised the next evening when Vince came close to winning his first-round race: the press, the competition, or Vince himself. He'd adopted a strategy of running the bastards' legs off, going out hard and grinding away until the field had to let him go—the same strategy he'd employed most of the winter and spring to more than moderate success. The plan worked nearly to perfection, and when he entered the final straightaway Vince found himself looking at a hundred meters of clear tartan. It would be a great feeling and a tremendous confidence booster to win this, he thought, but it was not to be. A sudden shout from the meager crowd signaled him someone was closing, and he tried to dig deeper, but a lithe, dark-haired athlete slipped by him forty meters from the line.

Panicked, Vince shot a glance over his shoulder at what he was sure was impending doom. Instead, there was a fair cushion of space back to third, fourth and fifth places—also qualifying spots—so Vince turned back to the task of finishing the race and did his best to ignore his pounding heart until he crossed the line in second.

He slowed to a quick jog and headed for the stadium exit, bypassing the outstretched hands of well-wishers and the probing cameras of the press. Just as he was leaving the stadium, he passed the athletes scheduled to run the next heat, who were on their way to the track. Spotting Ryan among them, Vince veered close and tipped him a wink. Ryan stretched out his hand and Vince slapped it on the way by. No words exchanged, but a world of meaning.

Five minutes later it was Ryan's turn. He demonstrated his dominance not by the speed with which he ran but by the ease with which he won. Emerging from a phalanx of struggling runners midway through the final turn, Ryan grinned as he floated toward the finish with a heart-rending lack of effort. After, he allotted a couple of minutes to shake hands and sign autographs, then talked briefly to a reporter from *Inside Track* magazine before trotting off to find Vince.

Watching the replay of Ryan's race in a locker room under the stands, Vince had to shake his head. Could anyone beat this kid? More to the point, could he?

THEY GOT BACK to the hotel at about 8:30 that night, hoping to grab some late dinner in the small restaurant downstairs, but those plans changed almost immediately when a familiar figure stood up and faced them in the lobby, stopping Vince in his tracks.

"You're looking well," Corey White told him, a wry smile on her mouth.

Vince tried to talk but nothing came out. He simply stood and gaped at her.

"It's generally not considered polite to stare," she told him, cocking her head in amusement.

Ryan looked from one to the other. "Hi, Corey," he said. "Listen, Vince, I'm kinda tired. I think I'll just go on up to the room and order room service. Why don't you two check out the restaurant? You can tell me how it is tomorrow." He turned and punched the button for the elevator, seemingly absorbed in the bright-lit numbers over the doors until the car came and took him upstairs.

Vince was still gawking.

"Hi, Corey, how are you?" she said for him. "Pretty good, Vince, pretty good, how 'bout you?' 'Oh, I can't complain. Same-old same-old.' 'Hey, I hear you just made the finals of the Olympic Trials. Good going!' 'Aw, shucks, thanks, Corey. And by the way, it's real nice to see you.'"

At last Vince got his mouth working. "It is good to see you. I'm just—wow."

Corey smiled. "Eloquent as ever. Obviously you're just going to talk my ear off all night, so why don't we sit down and get a bite to eat so I'll have the strength to listen?"

BY THE TIME they were seated and had ordered, Vince had recovered from the shock enough to ask what she was doing there.

"Well, that's a fine question," Corey said, mock-hurt in her voice. "Do I need a reason to take a little vacation? I happen to like California this time of year—"

"Corey."

"—it's nice and dry, and if things go really well you can spot a forest fire or two—"

"Corey."

"—plus it's good for my allergies, I don't know if I ever told you I have them but I do, and they've really been acting—"

"Corey."

"Okay, fine. I came to see you. I missed you, you big jerk."

Vince let that sink in. "Why now? Why here? Don't get me wrong, I'm very happy you came—but you could have seen me in Illinois any time you wanted. Why didn't you get in touch with me before?"

"Because," she sighed, "a very nice old man called me the other day and explained some very hard things to me. He talked about a good friend of his, and what the friend was doing for him. And he said his friend could use a lot of support right now because—" Her voice broke slightly and she looked down at the silverware.

Vince's heart hurt. "How is he?"

"Not good." She looked up at him. "Why didn't you tell me? I had no idea what was going on, there was no way I could have known. If Jim hadn't called me, I would have gone to my grave thinking you were the biggest, most insensitive asshole on the planet. Mind you, I'm still not sure that's not true."

"He said he didn't want anyone to know, so I kept it to myself. I did call you, though, and I was going to come clean, but that was when you told me about the other guy. The one you met, you know...that night."

"As a matter of fact, I *did* meet someone that night. An even bigger asshole than you. Our relationship lasted maybe twenty minutes, if you count preliminary eye contact."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. I was angry. I was upset. You should have called sooner." She reached out her hand.

"I know," Vince said, taking it. "And I'm so sorry I didn't. The last few months have been pretty tough without you."

"I forgive you. You forgive me for lying to you?"

"Of course. God, how could I not?" Vince came out of his seat and hugged her close. She squeezed him back, and it was only the discrete cough of the waitress bringing their food that separated them.

AFTER DINNER THEY went out to the lobby and Corey called the elevator. Vince wondered aloud if he should go check on Ryan.

“Nah, he’s a big boy,” Corey said. “I’m sure he’ll be all right on his own tonight.” The elevator came and they stepped inside.

“Tonight. As in all night?”

“That’s right, cowboy,” she said, hitting the button for a different floor. The door closed behind them.

“But I haven’t even showered yet. I’m all sweaty. Look, I’m still in my racing gear.”

“That’s okay, I *like* you all sweaty. You know, you haven’t said anything about *my* outfit.”

Vince looked her over. “Very nice. Looks kind of familiar, actually.”

“That’s because it’s the same thing I was wearing that last night over at your place.” She pressed her body full against him. “I’m wearing *everything* I wore that night, if you get my meaning.”

“I—I’m beginning to think I do,” Vince managed.

“Good. Because I’ve been just dying to show it to someone.”

“Someone?”

“Well, not just anyone....”

This time it was the elevator doors opening that separated them. Once they got into Corey’s room and turned out the lights, however, there were no more separations.

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, again running in separate heats, Vince and Ryan both advanced to the final.

It was on.

Chapter 16

COREY SPRAWLED on a double bed in Vince and Ryan’s hotel room while they, clad only in running shorts and socks, sat stretching on the floor. It was late Saturday afternoon, the day before the final, and the runners were fresh from a light-hearted thirty-minute trot along the American River Parkway that left them tingling and lively.

Together they watched the piece on television for which Vince and Ryan had taped an interview that morning. Having learned of the connection between them, NBC had approached Vince soon after they arrived in Sacramento with the idea of doing a sit-down in the studio with the two of them together, then one with each separately, then getting some footage of them running and maybe standing toe to toe, eyeing one another with mock hatred. Vince had demurred at the time, but now that they were both safely through the rounds he minded less. He capitulated to the joint interview but drew the line there; the separate interviews would be designed to elicit comments about each other that were negative at best and inflammatory at worst, he told Corey, and the video idea smacked of prizefighter puffery. He would not let this become a circus. Ryan agreed; the media had been good to him on the whole, he said, but he’d never considered them anything other

than opportunists, interested in him only to the degree he in turn interested their audience.

Onscreen a video montage introduction ran, with alternating file footage of Ryan and Vince running separate races, while Vince's favorite commentator read voiceover copy.

"Two runners, at opposite ends of their careers," Paul's voice droned. "A young lion and an aging one. Perhaps...the conqueror and the conquered?"

Corey looked at their backs as they watched, but of course it was impossible to tell what they were thinking. Surely they'd heard this kind of talk before; it was to be expected that the media, questing for a colorful story, would want to manufacture conflict between them—and if they couldn't come up with any actual conflict, the suggestion of one would do.

Paul went on for awhile in the same vein, in the quasi-mystical tones sportscasters reserve for such pieces, with stuff about Fate throwing them together, first as workout partners, later as athlete and coach. Corey wondered whether this last bothered Ryan, but if it did, he gave no sign.

Then the screen cut to Ryan and Vince side by side in the studio, both looking ill at ease under the hot lights as they fielded Paul's questions.

"First of all, Vince," Paul began, "welcome back to the ranks of the world class."

"Well, not quite, Paul," Vince said on the screen. "I'm not there yet."

"Plus," the real-life Vince in front of Corey added, "how can you welcome me when the only thing you've ever run is your mouth?"

Ryan snickered, and Corey *shushed* them both.

"You drop off the face of the sporting world after infamously injuring your foot at the Trials four years ago," Paul continued. "Now here you are back, having barely lost a step. I guess the questions on everyone's mind are, one, where have you been, and two, why come back now?"

"Where I've been is the easy one," Vince said. "I've just been living my life, working in corporate America just like a lot of the viewers. Why now? That's kind of complex. I guess some of it is a sense of unfinished business. I had a period there when I was among the best on the U.S. level, I'd competed internationally and had some success, but any kid

who's ever laced up a pair of track spikes has Olympic dreams. My dreams were deferred for awhile, but I guess I still had in the back of my mind that desire to see whether I've got what it takes to be an Olympian."

"Is there anything less than an Olympic gold medal that will satisfy you?"

"Honestly, Paul, I'm not even thinking in those terms anymore. Had I been able to go to Sydney four years ago, I'd like to think that, depending on how the race unfolded, I might have at least been in the mix. But at some point you have to be realistic. I'm in my thirties now. Your body is a lot different in this decade of life, and to be blunt—well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. I haven't even made the team yet, we won't know about that until..."

The interview faded into the background as in front of Corey Ryan turned to Vince. "What were you about to say?"

"What do you mean? When?" Vince asked. He knew what Ryan meant, Corey was sure. All at once the atmosphere in the room changed.

"He asked if you were going to try for a medal and you said you have to be realistic, you're in your thirties, your body is different—and then you were about to say something else."

"He asked if I was going to try for the gold. Big difference."

"That's avoiding the question," Ryan said. "You were going to say you don't think you have what it takes. You were going to say you're not sure you even belong here, like maybe you're taking up space someone else could use."

Vince didn't answer.

"That's your ex-wife talking, not you," Ryan told him. "She took all your self-confidence and flushed it down the toilet. That's why you quit before. All this time I've been wondering, and I just figured it out. Admit it: the reason you stopped running four years ago was because you were hoping she would take you back if you did." He shook his head. "Your ex-wife was a bitch, man. Fuck her."

"Ryan!" Corey was aghast. She had a mind to say more but Vince remained silent—and she realized it was because Ryan was right.

"Listen, Vince," Ryan continued with a passion Corey had never heard from him. "You've been doing the right things for the wrong reasons. You need to stop doing things for other people and start doing them for yourself. You stopped running because of Suzy, you *started* again because of Corey, you're coaching me because of Coach Brooks—where does it end? When do you start doing the things you want to do *because you want to do them?*"

Vince's head had hung lower and lower as Ryan spoke the truth to him, so low his forehead almost touched the floor. Now he straightened up and leaned back against the bed.

"I'm not saying you're right or wrong," he said at last. "Just that I won't argue with you. It seems I may have some kind of need to please people. I never thought of it as a bad thing before."

Ryan was about to say something else, but Corey spoke first.

"It's *not* bad," she said. "You care about people's feelings, you have a really good heart. But Ryan's right; there has to be some room in there for what you want, too. I want you to go out there tomorrow and run your ass off, but don't do it for me, or for Ryan, or for Jim. Do it for yourself."

Vince reached up and placed a hand on her knee, and she covered the hand with her own.

"I said one time that you're right back where you left off," Ryan said, "and you told me you might never get back there. And maybe you're right, I don't know. But I *do* know that you can have something now you never had before, something I've got plenty of."

Vince looked at him. "What's that?"

Ryan stood and reached out his hand, and Vince took it and let Ryan hoist him up. "*Mojo*," he said.

"*Mojo?*" Vince repeated.

"Attitude. Self-confidence. Whatever you want to call it, it amounts to the same thing. I don't know how it was for you, but the first time I broke four minutes, I was scared shitless. This might surprise you, but that's totally unlike me." Corey and Vince had to grin at that. "My self-confidence was completely blown before the race. Soon as Coach Brooks saw me, he knew it. He took me aside before the race and asked, 'Where's your *mojo*, kid?' Then he told me to just sit in and relax for the first three laps, because he knew the race was going to be fast. 'When you hit three minutes at three-quarters and you feel like you can't go another

step at that pace,' he said, 'I want you to think about crooks breaking into your house and stealing all your stuff, everything you worked so hard to get—all your furniture, all your CDs, all your baseball cards, everything. Then imagine those crooks are the guys running next to you. You gonna let 'em get away with that? Gonna let 'em take what's rightfully yours?' Man, that did it. I was so charged up, God's honest truth, if one of those guys had bumped into me the last two hundred meters, I'd have stopped the race and had a fistfight. And I think those other guys sensed that. I think it was like I had a sign hanging around my neck that said 'Don't fuck with me.' And you know what? They didn't. *That's* *mojo*."

Then he turned to the television, where Paul was now asking him questions. "You want self-confidence? Get a load of this."

Onscreen, Ryan had lost his unease. Now he seemed almost angry, like a caged lion when the zookeeper is late with its food.

"No, I'm not afraid of anybody in the final," that Ryan said to Paul. "Why should I be? When I'm on my game, I don't see anyone out there, present company excepted"—he looked at Vince sitting next to him on the set—"who can beat me. I know the kind of training we've done, and I defy you to find anyone else in the country who's worked as hard as we have. So if you ask me how I think the race is going to go tomorrow, I say: barring anything unforeseen happening, it's going to be Vince and me together on the final straightaway, and whoever's the best man on that day will win."

IN THE EVENING Vince and Corey went for a stroll downtown along the K Street Mall, where they marveled at all the bicyclists and the red double-decker busses so like those in London. Ryan joined them briefly but begged off when they reached Downtown Plaza, saying he wanted to investigate a few stores on his own. Corey figured it was as good an excuse as any to give them some private time, and she looked silent thanks at Ryan when he peeled off.

Vince was reserved as they meandered along, hands laced together, and Corey knew he was brooding. Ryan had surely struck a nerve earlier. Vince might now be questioning his motives for

almost everything he'd done over the past four years—for his entire life, for that matter. *Uncomfortable truths are hardest to accept when they're about you.* She knew that one pretty well herself.

She squeezed his hand. "Penny for your thoughts."

"Hmm?" Vince turned his head. "Sorry. Not being a very good date, am I?"

"Who says? I'm having a great time. I'm in sunny California, I've got my man by my side, and we've got our whole lives ahead of us."

"You're talking pretty long-term. You sure you want that with me?"

"No, with Ryan. Of *course* I want it with you."

"I didn't mean it that way, I meant—"

"I know what you meant. Vince, I know you're thinking about what Ryan said this afternoon. It doesn't change anything between us. It doesn't change the way I feel about you."

"Really? Apparently I stopped running because of Suzy. What if I'm running now because I want to impress her, to get her back?"

"Do you think that's what you're doing?"

"No." He shrugged. "But I'm hardly the best judge of my own motives, it seems."

"Well, then, listen to a woman's perspective on the subject," she said, tugging him over to a bench to sit down. "Those days you were chasing after me last summer, I guarantee you Suzy was the furthest thing from your mind. Whatever else you were thinking—about what a babe I was, maybe—" (Vince had to grin here) "—it had nothing to do with what's-her-name. And yeah, maybe I motivated you to start running and to keep at it, but so what? Everyone has goals, and everyone needs incentives to reach them. I have no problem with being your incentive."

"But guess what? I'm not your incentive anymore. I think you proved that when we split up. I'm *not* judging here, you understand—and I'm not saying I did this consciously, or that I'm proud of it—but I pretty much gave you a choice between your running and me. And you chose your running. And every day since then you've chosen it."

"Corey, I—"

"Shut up, honey." She put a finger to his lips. "I told you I'm not judging you. And I came back knowing what your priority is, at least at this point in your life. I get it now...and I guess that's what makes me different from Suzy. She didn't cost you your shot at the Olympics four years ago, but she made it a lot tougher on you than it had to be, before

and after, and that wasn't fair. I'm not going to do the same thing. I've made my own choice, you see."

"What choice is that?" Vince asked.

"To be here with you, supporting you, loving you—all that good crap," she said with a smile before turning serious again. "You have a small window left to be great at this sport. Whatever it takes, and whatever happens along the way, I'm with you until *you* decide it's time to shut that window."

Corey thought she saw a sheen in Vince's eyes as he drew her into a hug and kissed her, but it might have been only the reflection of the sun setting behind them.

IT WAS ALWAYS the same dream, or near enough that it didn't matter. Except this time it was different.

Ngugi was an inexorable force, walking him down in the final stretch. Ryan could do nothing at all to stop the inevitable defeat at the hands of the almighty Kenyan.

Why don't I just give up? he thought. *This crowd would understand. He's Noah Ngugi, after all...and me? I'm just another American doormat.* Ryan could feel Ngugi's breath on the back of his neck.

But then the scene changed. The crowd was more distant, not lining the pavement but up in a set of bleachers, from which they thundered down at the runners on the street. No, not a street any longer, but a track—the one in Athens, Ryan knew, though he'd never set foot in it, such being the way with dreams. He dared not look back, sure as he was that Ngugi was on top of him, only peeking for him from the corner of his eye.

Then a funny thing happened: he sensed Ngugi starting to slip back into his wake. Startled, now Ryan did look behind him and saw the world record holder was running out of steam. Ngugi's pained face told the tale, and seeing it sent a surge of strength through Ryan. *It's going to happen*, he realized. *I'm going to win the whole motherfucking thing.*

But his elation was short-lived. When he faced front again he saw not just Ngugi but an entire pack of runners fifty meters ahead and lengthening the gap with every step. Confused, Ryan looked

back again and saw it was Vince breathing down his neck, and now Vince was smiling as he began to draw even. Ryan tried to dig deeper but it was no use, his legs were columns of rubber, and to make matters worse Vince reached out and snared Ryan's shoulder, shaking him back and forth like a dog with a rag doll in its mouth. Ryan wanted to tell him to stop but couldn't form words, and when he tried to pry the fingers loose Vince tightened his grip and shook harder. And now Vince was saying his name over and over, and in a moment the shaking would have him off his feet—

"Ryan? Hey Ryan, come on, wake up."

Ryan opened his eyes. Vince stopped shaking him and sat on the side of the bed. "Jeez, that must've been a hell of a dream," he said.

"I..." Ryan began, then stopped and pulled himself up to his elbows. "I don't remember," he said, and in truth it was fading quickly. "Something about—you were there, and Ngugi, and—I don't know, maybe Coach?" He rubbed his face. "Not sure. It's gone, whatever it was about. What are you doing here, anyway? I figured you were staying with Corey tonight."

"I was," Vince said. "Couldn't sleep. I was tossing and turning so much it was keeping *her* awake, so I decided to come down here about an hour ago. I'm still tossing and turning, but at least I'm not shaking her out of bed."

"So why are you shaking me out of bed?"

"You were talking in your sleep, something about 'the whole motherfucking thing,' and then you started groaning, and...okay, I was curious."

"Right." Ryan let himself drop back to the bed. "What time is it?"

"Almost three. I think I might go for a walk, clear my head a little."

"That's crazy, man. You need sleep."

"Nah, I'm up for good, I think. It was like this last time, too. Except last time I had different shit on my mind."

"You still thinking about what I said before, about your ex-wife? Sorry, man, I was out of line."

"No, you weren't. You were probably right on the money. I guess I never really came to terms with it all until now. It was easier to just sweep it under the rug, you know? If I didn't think about it, it wouldn't hurt."

Ryan was uncomfortable, regretting his impromptu turn as a therapist despite what Vince had said. He was the last person anyone

should come to for advice on matters of the heart, or of mental health. He'd always had, you should pardon the expression, a "just do it" mindset, about running in particular but also life in general. Like the centipede who stopped to think when asked to explain how he coordinated the placement of each individual foot, then found he couldn't walk, you could get bogged down in the details of living if you thought about them too much. Although he now acknowledged Vince as a friend, perhaps one of the best he'd ever had, for the most part he considered relationships of almost all kinds to be such a detail, fine for dallying in on occasion, but not something he ever wanted to dwell on.

Fortunately, it seemed Vince wasn't looking for advice, at least from him. Vince stood and pulled on shorts, a shirt and a pair of shoes. "See you at breakfast," he said on his way out the door. Ryan, who rarely had trouble sleeping, nevertheless lay there almost a full minute before drifting off again to more dreaming.

For the remainder of the night, it appeared, Vince would battle his demons awake, while Ryan jostled his own in his sleep.

Chapter 17

WHEN VINCE WAS eleven years old, he and his best friend, Chris, found an old *Playboy* magazine in Chris's father's sock drawer. The boys had burned the images into their eyes, pointing out to each other the differences between the voluptuous models' bodies and their own. Then Chris had the idea it would be funny to clip out one of the pictures, tape it to someone's screen door, ring the bell and run like crazy. After he talked Vince into it, the two carried out the plan. Chris rang the doorbell and they dashed across the street into a wooded area, giggling madly at the thought of some matron's astonishment at being greeted by a pair of spread female thighs. Later, when they were walking home, a car cruising by stopped them; it was the elderly couple whose house they'd chosen for the prank. The husband got out and stormed at them while his wife looked on in disapproval; then the couple loaded them in the back seat and drove to each of their parents' houses so they could explain what they'd done.

Driving back to face his mom and dad, Vince reflected years later, had probably been the scariest, most nerve-wracking time of his life.

Until today.

He and Ryan were on the practice track just outside Hornet Field, putting the finishing touches on their warm-up routine. Not wanting to risk dehydration, they'd jogged for twenty short minutes in the mid-afternoon heat. Inside the stadium the 400 meter hurdle semi-finals were

being run; if the schedule was correct, Vince figured they had about forty minutes left. Very soon, however, they would be called into the stadium to wait in a holding area for their race to go on the track, even though the women's 1500 final would be run ahead of theirs, so right now was their last opportunity to get ready.

Inside, Vince knew, Corey was in the stands. Part of him wished she hadn't come, he admitted to himself. It had kind of thrown off his game plan. Not that he wasn't overjoyed that they were back together. It was just that, having trained his mind to focus on the singular task of running fast, he didn't think it was wise to divide his attention at this point. To her credit, Corey seemed to sense this and did her best to be unobtrusive. Nevertheless, he found himself thinking some pretty crazy thoughts, like he would almost rather be sitting in the stands with her than out on the track—

"Hey, are you going to do some striders with me, or what?" Ryan's voice brought him back. They'd finished stretching, and now Ryan was in his spikes and ready to do some fast running.

"Yeah, sorry, just a sec," Vince told him. He quickly changed his shoes and hopped up, and the two of them swooped into the first strider. There were dozens of athletes out here on the practice track now, including the entire 1500 field. They all looked fast and fit, and Vince almost had trouble believing some were the same men he'd beaten two days before. Of course, during the trial heats most of them were running just fast enough to make the final; young guys with young legs usually had speed to burn at the end of the race, but in Vince's first-round heat only one of them had used that speed. That was what won Olympic races, Vince knew: the ability, not to run a hard race throughout, but to run blindingly fast at the end.

This was exactly the opposite of the way Vince had been running, he reflected as he and Ryan launched another sprint. He'd been relying on his greater strength. But if everything went perfectly and he managed to make the Olympic team by finishing in the top three today, he'd still be at a huge disadvantage running that way at the Olympics, where final laps in the neighborhood of 50 seconds were not uncommon. And he had no idea whether he was capable of running that fast for a straight-up quarter, let alone

at the end of a race. But how could he find out if not during a race itself?

It was then that Vince made a fateful decision. Should he tell Ryan? he wondered. Though they'd agreed to run their own separate races as they saw fit, Ryan would expect him to go out hard and set the pace. He'd be surprised to see Vince holding back, preparing for a burst at the end.

Vince decided not to tell him as they wrapped up their final strider. There was an official now, calling them together to get ready to enter the stadium. He and Ryan grabbed their gear and lined up with the rest, and a moment later they were walking in.

COREY WATCHED REPLAYS of earlier action on the big stadium screen with an impatient disinterest. For the hundredth time she questioned her own motives in coming here; despite what she'd told Vince, she found it difficult to separate her feelings. Was it just a promise to a dying man that put her on a plane to Sacramento, or something more?

Brooks had extracted that promise when she came to see him in the hospital after his phone call. Not much more than a husk at that point, he lay all but motionless in his semi-private room. His roommate, who introduced himself as Bob Daggett, was a fiftyish construction-worker type recovering from a triple-bypass, and though his skin was ashen, he seemed in far better shape than Brooks.

His voice barely above a throaty whisper, Brooks had lain things out to her.

"It's like I told you on the phone," he'd said. "I just don't want to go through it. And now it's way too late, anyway. Doctor says the cancer's all throughout my body, and it's a matter of weeks. Or days."

"I still don't understand *why*," she'd half-sobbed. "You have so much to live for."

"Do I? What family have I got? What friends?"

"You have Ryan. And Vince. And me, too. We're *all* your family and friends."

"Well, that may be, but I'm not about to burden all of you with a sick old man, and that's what I would have been even if I'd gotten the treatments. Here there are people who are at least paid to take care of me." He coughed in obvious pain.

"But who's going to take care of Ryan and Vince?" Corey wanted to know. "You're their coach, Jim. They need you. Especially now, with the Trials starting tomorrow and everything."

Brooks chuffed weakly. "So, you *are* following what Vince is doing."

"I didn't say that," Corey snapped. "I mean, I accept what you told me, that he was trying to honor your wishes by not telling anyone about your...situation, but that doesn't change things. He lied to me."

"He didn't lie. He left something out, but he didn't lie." Brooks coughed again, hard, and Corey feared he'd wrench something loose, but after a moment he was okay.

"You know that's just word games, Jim."

"I don't know anything of the kind. What I do know is this: Vince loves you. That's present tense: loves. He wants nothing more than for you to be happy, so when you told him about your new boyfriend, he—sorry, did you say something?"

"No," Corey said, her voice thick. "Go on."

"Well, the point is that he is a fine, fine man. He's loving, caring and all that other stuff. And I know you are, too. I'm sorry I'll never get a chance to know that about you better, but I can tell it's there."

"So what are you saying? I should just drop everything and run to him and beg him to go back to the way things were?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Minus the begging part; once you talk to him, you'll know that's not necessary." Brooks sighed heavily. "Corey, I've been around the block a few times. Since Mrs. Brooks died, I haven't seen a dozen couples I thought were truly right for one another. You two were one of them. And you can be again if you want to."

Corey sat back and thought, listening all the while to Brooks' strained breathing. There was no ping-pong of monitors; Brooks couldn't stand the noise, and in any case had left strict instructions not to be resuscitated no matter what the machines said.

"What if he doesn't want me around?" she asked quietly. "What if he thinks I'm—a distraction?"

Brooks smiled. "If you're a distraction, honey, you're the only damned distraction I can think of that would be worth it. Now promise me you'll go to him. Make an old man feel better."

"All right, I promise."

"Good. Real good. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep. They'll be televising the early rounds of the 1500 tomorrow, and I need all my strength to cheer my ass off."

Corey got up, leaned over him and planted a kiss on his cheek. Then without another word she turned and hurried out of the room.

And that was how she found herself here in Sacramento three days later, about to watch the man she loved—and it *was* love, no denying it—lay his heart and soul on the line. Now that she was here, she could admit, if only to herself, that in extracting her promise to come here Brooks hadn't talked her into doing anything she hadn't wanted to do anyway.

She realized she was almost afraid for Vince, for it was an all but impossible task he'd set himself. And though it felt disloyal, she couldn't help wondering whether the end result would validate all the struggles, joys and losses of his athletic career—or crush him completely.

There they were now, finally, being led out onto the track. From her seat near the finish, Corey could look straight across the track at the starting line. There was Ryan...and there was Vince right next to him. She saw Vince squeeze Ryan's shoulder and say something to him, saw Ryan nod in answer, pat the hand on his shoulder and say something back. Then they went to their separate places, Vince third from the inside railing and Ryan second from the outside, next to the stands. She barely listened to the introductions, but leaped to her feet and cheered when first Ryan, then Vince took a half-step forward and acknowledged the crowd's polite applause with a little wave. From this distance she couldn't read their faces; she could only guess what was going on in their heads.

At last it was time. She sat down and watched the starter give his brief set of instructions ("*Two commands, gentlemen...*"). Then the starter leaned forward slightly with his arm upraised, and the line of a dozen athletes, who were standing back a few steps, trotted as one to the starting line and crouched over to stand still as cats staking out a mousehole, awaiting that final, most important of shots.

* * *

RYAN'S HEART POUNDED madly as he shook his arms and legs to keep them loose while waiting for the announcer to finish the introductions. This was as bad as it had ever been, the pins-and-needles nervousness of the paradoxically foreshortened and timeless wait for the gun, yet outwardly appeared almost calm thanks to Vince's simple last-minute advice: "Game face, brother," the older man had said to him, hand on his shoulder. To Ryan, immensely talented but still green around the edges, it was a positively brilliant thing to say. He'd nodded, patted Vince's hand in appreciation and said: "Mojo, man."

He owed Vince a lot, he realized, not just for his friendship but for steadying him and playing surrogate with Brooks' health failing, for in truth he'd had little opportunity to dwell on his old coach's final laps. Brooks had put up a brave struggle, to be sure, but he'd handicapped himself from the start by refusing treatment. Ryan had suggested, had cajoled, and finally had begged him to seek help, not just from the rank-and-file medical profession but from alternative therapists. Brooks would have none of their roots and herbs, he said—but gently, always gently, as though he realized his passing would be far more difficult on Ryan than on himself.

Brooks had asked Vince to give them a few moments the last time they'd visited him in the hospital. When they were alone, Brooks let Ryan know he was leaving his house and most of his other possessions to him. Ryan had cried, but he hadn't contradicted. Better to give the old man some peace of mind now that all the decisions had been irrevocably made.

Since then the Trials had loomed large on Ryan's screen, and he'd had to make a conscious effort not to ruminate on Brooks' sorry state—and this certainly was not the time to do so, he admonished himself as he and Vince went off to their separate positions.

He glanced at Vince. Without question they each had played no small part in ensuring both were here today, and they owed each other a great deal, but they were each there to run their respective best, no matter how the other one did. And if somehow

it came down to the two of them on the last straightaway, each knew there would be no quarter offered or expected. Whatever the result, there would be no hard feelings between them.

Now the starter was ready, and Ryan trotted forward with the rest, crouching down low.

VINCE FELT THE strength in Ryan's body when the young runner had patted his hand. He was as ready as he possibly could be. At least Vince could be sure he hadn't failed Brooks in that.

All at once Vince's nerves left him. He took in a deep, trembling breath—and when he exhaled the tension was gone from his body. It was the realization that he'd done all he could, that all the preparations that were humanly possible had been made. Now it was simply a matter of execution, and nothing, not even Vince's spur-of-the-moment—and possibly ill-advised—change in strategy, would affect that.

He tuned out the introductions, knowing it would do him little good to hear his competition's laurels, but when he heard his name over the loudspeaker he couldn't help listening to the announcer recite titles and championships that were in some cases a decade old. He was by several years the oldest competitor in the race, but this no longer bothered him, either. Whatever would be, would be.

An age later, it seemed, the starter gave his instructions and walked several paces into the infield. Only then did Vince turn and look at the runner on his inside, a short, red-haired athlete who was looking right back at him and grinning.

"Didn't want to break your concentration," Rich Bolton said. "It seems we keep running into each other."

"So we do." Vince stuck out his hand. "Luck."

They touched hands, then turned back to the track. Vince watched the starter bend forward.

"Runners, take your marks!" the man bellowed, and Vince went forth with the rest to his destiny.

Chapter 18

BANG!

The starter's pistol gave a mighty crack, and the tableau of athletes broke as they scrambled for position. Runners flowed all around Vince, and he let them, using his elbows to keep the most rambunctious at bay but otherwise settling in. There would be no early-lap heroics, in all probability, certainly not from him. No, if this race went true to form, there would be a distinct lack of enthusiasm for leading among those up front, and as a result the pace would dawdle. That would have the kickers licking their chops, sizing up the competition in preparation for the last mad dash around the track on the final lap.

Today Vince planned to be one of them.

KNOWING IT WOULD be a slugfest with so many athletes in such close quarters, Ryan elected to fall back at first, trotting even slower than the meandering pace to trail the pack until it sorted itself out. He wasn't the only one with such ideas, however, and he had company seeking last place. The fastest kick would win this race, he was sure, and he knew he was among the fastest kickers, but of course nearly everyone in the field thought the same thing about themselves.

It seemed to take an eternity to come to the first turn, and by the time he got there he was solidly locked in a pack of shuffling, stumbling men.

VINCE STARTED TAKING stock early, sizing up who looked tired and who bore watching. He would have to be attentive to put himself in good position, on the leader's shoulder going into the last lap. A few short meters ahead of him the lead changed moment by moment as everyone checked everyone else out. It was the world's oddest game of poker, and had some of the highest stakes.

WHEN IT WENT wrong for Ryan, it went wrong quickly. Ahead of him a boxed-in runner in blue and orange stuck his right arm out to tell the athlete to his outside he meant to move out. But this was no gentlemen's contest, and the man on the outside refused to move. Seeing he'd get no help there, the inside athlete tried to bull his way over, causing the other to hitch his stride as his left leg flailed behind him.

The runner's foot caught Ryan in the right knee just as that leg was starting to come forward. Thrown off balance, Ryan reached out to steady himself, but another competitor inadvertently knocked into his shoulder. It was too much; he couldn't keep his feet. Before he was aware of what was happening, Ryan was rolling on the track, and the pack was receding before him.

For several moments he could only lay there in shock. He didn't even know whether he was hurt; all he could think was that this couldn't be happening, the race could not be allowed to continue without him. Yet no one was calling it back. There were sympathetic groans from the crowd, but there was no help there. The pack continued to get further and further ahead.

His dream lay dying there on the track. All the hard work, all the sacrifice, all for naught. It was over before it had a chance to begin. What would he tell Brooks?

What would he tell his mother?

Ryan pounded a fist on the track, drawing blood he wouldn't notice until much later. In a flash he was on his feet and dashing after the knot of athletes ahead, not hearing the responsive roar of the crowd.

He may well lose, he resolved, but he would lose on his feet, not his stomach. Lowering his head, Ryan sped on.

VINCE HEARD THE shocked *Ooh!* of the crowd but didn't know the reason for it. Perhaps a pole vaulter had just missed at a lofty height. It wasn't his concern in any case, he knew, so he drew his concentration tighter to the task at hand. Nevertheless he heard the unmistakable shout of crowd approval a few moments later, and again he wondered why. Just then, however, his short red-haired friend shot by in a bid for the lead. It was early in the race, just after the quarter-mile mark, so this may not have been serious. Still, Vince elected to get one or two places closer himself. Smoothly he stepped out and accelerated around the pair in front of him, keeping a constant five meters behind the front of the pack. *Easy*, he told himself. *Keep it easy.*

If ever he needed mojo, he knew, it was now.

THIRTY METERS BEHIND the leaders, twenty or so behind the next-to-last place runner, Ryan nearly sprinted to try to gain ground. *Can't be done*, he told himself. *Too far back. Lost too much time.* And on the heels of that: *Fuck it. Got to try.*

Twenty meters just to make contact with the pack. Ryan put his head down going into the backstretch of the second lap and made himself keep it down until the start of the curve when he looked up again. Had he gained any? It was hard to tell. Again he focused on the track beneath his feet, trying to will it to pass by more quickly.

COMING TO THE end of the second lap, Vince was exactly where he'd hoped to be. The space around him was relatively clear, and he didn't have the physical or psychological burden of leading the race, yet he was within striking distance. The challenge was to stay there and maintain confidence in himself and what he could do.

All at once Vince realized that Ryan was nowhere near the lead. He started to wonder about it, then jettisoned the thought as though it were an iron weight. It was a distraction he could not afford. He was Ryan's coach before the race, would be that again after, but for the roughly three and a half minutes in between Ryan was just another athlete on the track. No one, he was sure, would have understood that better than Ryan himself.

Bolton was falling back, the strain of the lead too much for him even though the pace was still moderate. Vince passed him without a glance; this was not the day to encourage anyone else, and Bolton would just have to understand. Vince took a quick count of those ahead and discovered he was in sixth place. Only three places now separated him from the Olympic team, and logic told him to play it safe, run for third and not burn himself out trying to outkick the kickers. But this was an attitude he simply couldn't allow himself, not today. He wanted more.

And in a short time he and the rest of America would discover whether he'd get any at all.

THERE WAS STILL a lap and a quarter left in the race, and Ryan was tying up. It was difficult to make his legs respond to his commands to maintain pace, let alone cajole them into carrying him faster. Even his arms were getting the creeping numbness that signaled he was hard against that bright red line beyond which no human being, no matter how well-conditioned or well-motivated, can venture. There was simply no more he could do.

But now he looked up and discovered he could almost—not quite but almost—reach out and touch the next runner. He'd caught the pack. Looking up further, he saw the pack hadn't yet separated; those up front were waiting for the last moment to unleash their kicks. His vision was hazing over so he couldn't see where Vince was, but it hardly mattered at the moment. Vince could take care of himself; he had his own problems.

Ahead the front-runners were entering the final lap, and a bell signaled the fact. At the same time, one runner fell back behind Ryan, and the crowd was starting to realize this was something not just amazing but extraordinary. Some of them started clapping in rhythm to his footsteps, and a few beat their hands against the advertising banners lining the track. Ryan gave no sign he heard, but inwardly he tightened

an extra notch in his mental belt, passed another runner and set his sights on the next, and the next, and the next.

VINCE BIDED HIS time with the leaders going into the penultimate turn, and although his body protested strongly the treatment it was undergoing, he in fact felt better at this point in the race than he could remember ever feeling before. His legs, though tired, still had spring, and his knees continued to rise high above the track.

The clanging bell announcing the final lap sent a burst of energy through everyone, and the pack was again bunched tightly enough that such energy was dangerous. Now was when Vince wanted to be in front, so coming down the backstretch he switched to a higher gear to put himself among the top four runners.

Suddenly, though, everyone was pulling triggers. Without warning and with a bare 200 meters to go, those in front of Vince started their kicks, and it was time for him to lay his cards down as well. He took it up another level and hung with them.

JUST MORE THAN half a lap and too many runners separated Ryan from the finish line. He guessed himself to be in sixth or seventh place now, in fact very close to the front, but these guys hadn't been running the pace he had for the last three laps. It had been a hell of a run, but it looked like it just wasn't meant to be. Probably he should just resign himself to that fact and jog it in, save himself this incredible pain. There would be no dishonor in that; anyone watching could see he'd been handed a raw deal, and there would be nothing but sympathy for him, from the press, from the fans and from the athletes.

Sympathy hell, he thought. More like pity. No fuckin' way.

Through the eye slits in the death mask his face had become, Ryan focused on the two runners ahead of him. Once he'd passed them, he'd worry about third place. But even now, one of those runners was accelerating strongly and picking people off.

* * *

THE CROWD AROUND Corey had risen to its feet and, tall as she was, her view of the race was blocked. Elbowing her way to an aisle, she rushed down to the railing next to the track. There he was! *He could do it!* She yelled at the top of her lungs for him, though she knew he couldn't hear her since she could barely hear herself.

THIS WAS IT! Only a straightaway in front of him, and Vince was pulling even with the leaders. With every step he increased his speed until he reached his highest gear, but the guy next to him sure wasn't folding in half. He matched Vince stride for stride, even managing to pull ahead slightly with only fifty meters or so remaining. Vince simply maintained his pace; he was flat out now, no chance of digging deeper for that extra something, and he knew it. Long, hard experience had taught him that top speed is top speed, and any attempt to go beyond it could well result in no speed whatsoever. All he could do was continue to lift his knees, drive his arms and hope for the best.

The runner to his left was game but young; he hadn't had the same experience. He strained too much, and his form began to fall apart. Stride by stride he faded—and the way to the finish was clear.

There was just enough time for Vince to appreciate the fact that he'd won the race before it actually happened, and he crossed the line with arms raised in triumph.

POUNDING DOWN THE final straightaway, Ryan leached every last bit of strength from his body. Distantly he felt himself locking up, and he knew it was only a matter of a few strides before he collapsed. It was simply a question of whether that would happen a stride before or a stride beyond the finish line.

A lone runner slid backward past him, and he found himself in sixth with precious little race left to run. Farther ahead two runners dueled for the win, but there was a pack of three just a foot or two away, and all were coming back to him.

This was bad. This was agonizing. But when all was said and done, when all the chips had been counted, this was the only thing he'd ever truly wanted.

For the only time in his racing career, Ryan Sandy closed his eyes as he knifed his body forward and prayed the finish line was there.

Chapter 19

THE FIRST THING Vince did when he crossed the line was search the crowd for Corey. He couldn't see her at first, but then he spotted her much closer to the track than he'd expected. A camera crew raced toward him but he ignored them, actually shouldering away a reporter on his way to the stands.

When he reached the spot below where Corey stood, he found he lacked the strength to climb the railing. Just then a burly security guard appeared, bent down and put his shoulder under Vince's buttocks, lifting him as he straightened up. Willing hands of spectators reached for him, and he let them pull him the rest of the way. In a moment he was over the railing, and he wrapped himself in Corey's arms.

Despite the crowd of fans screaming around them, Vince had no trouble talking to her. "Babe," he said, "I did it."

"I know," she answered through sudden tears. "I saw."

"I love you, you know."

"I love you too, you big jerk."

"How did Ryan do?" he asked next.

Her face fell. "Oh, Vince. It was awful. He was tripped early on, but he got back in the race. He ran like hell—but he ended up fourth."

"God, no!"

There on the big stadium screen was the replay, however, and Vince watched as Ryan tumbled in slow motion. Shots tracked him as he picked

himself up and sped after the pack, each showing him gaining ground. Close-ups captured the frightening set of his eyes as he ran at what Vince was sure had to be American-record pace—perhaps even faster. It came to him then that Ryan was not only a fast runner but a beautiful one, with near-perfect form. It was a joy simply to watch him run.

Then the view cut to the home stretch; behind his own image Vince saw the strain on Ryan's face and watched him lunge for the finish, missing third place by inches as, utterly spent, he crumpled in a heap.

Only then did Vince turn back to the track. An official was just now helping Ryan to his feet as the young runner rose from the track for the second time that afternoon. Vince saw him walk around slowly, trying to contain the pain of his failure. Then Ryan spotted a folding chair near the finish line and sat down, letting his head fall into his hands.

For a long moment Vince looked at him, and made up his mind.

Turning toward Corey, he said: "I have to go to him."

"I know," she said. "I understand."

Vince gazed at her almost sadly and cradled her face in his hands. He kissed her. "No," he said. "Actually, I'm pretty sure you don't, since I'm not sure *I* do yet. But I hope we both will, eventually."

He turned away and walked a few steps, then turned back. "I'm closing the window," he said.

Then he turned again, found the stairs and descended to the track, crossing over to where Ryan sat in disconsolation.

Puzzled, Corey watched him go, wondering, neither for the first time nor the last, what it was about him.

VINCE DIDN'T REACH Ryan right away. He managed to evade the camera crew a second time, but there was Bolton in front of him, bent forward at the waist, still sucking air.

Vince patted him on the back. "Hey, Red, how'd it go?" he asked.

Bolton looked up, his face beaming. "Fifth place. I'm stoked!"

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Hey, good luck in Athens. Blow some doors in.”

“Uh, thanks,” Vince said, looking past him at Ryan, who’d been cornered by another TV crew.

“MAN OH MAN, that was some race,” Bob Daggett observed to his roommate as he watched the fourth replay of the finish. “Damn shame about the kid, but the other guy did great. You must be real proud.”

Brooks didn’t answer.

Daggett looked over, saw the man lying back in bed, eyes closed, a gentle smile on his lips. Daggett eyed him carefully for some time before he rang for the nurse.

RYAN FAVORED THE cameraman a few feet away with a look of such antipathy that the cameraman wisely sensed he should not intrude further. He held an arm in front of the commentator who’d been poised for the interview. “Give him a minute, Pat,” he said, and Pat shrugged, turned away and looked for another story. The cameraman himself, having gotten the shot that was far more poignant than an interview anyway, was gone a moment later.

It’s over, Ryan thought, and tried to decide whether he was bitter about it. He’d given it his best shot, but his best was, by maddening inches, not good enough. It didn’t matter that he was one of the favorites in this race, nor even that he would have been a potential medal contender in Athens. The American system of choosing the Olympic team, while harsh, was nevertheless fair: either you were first, second or third across the line and on your way to the Games—provided you had met the Olympic time standard—or you were an also-ran and on your way home, thanks for coming, here’s your plane ticket, don’t let the door hit you on the way out.

He briefly considered his options: he could lodge a protest; he could hope that one of those who finished ahead of him would be disqualified and he could advance to third; he could pray that one of them didn’t have the standard and would fail to achieve it in the next couple of weeks before the deadline; or he could simply go home and wait four years for another chance. None of these was all that appealing.

Probably there was nothing for it but to learn to live with the hollow feeling inside. And he would return home to Brooks’ vacant house, a house without comfort, a house of loss and despair, and ponder over what to do now. For the first time he could empathize with Vince’s ordeal four years earlier.

He was still looking down when Vince came to him. When he saw familiar spikes in his line of vision, he looked up. Something in Vince’s face told him how he’d done, so Ryan offered his hand.

“Congratulations, man,” he said, meaning it. “You deserve it.”

“Thanks,” Vince said, shaking with him. “You too. You ran a hell of a race.”

Ryan grunted. “Not enough. Fourth place is worse than last in a race like this.”

“Wrong. Today only, it’s as good as first.”

Ryan looked at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Vince squatted beside him. “Hear me out before you say anything, okay? A year ago, as you so helpfully pointed out, I started running again because of Corey—but I *kept* running because of you. You were the young whippersnapper and I was the old coot who was going to show you a thing or two, that it was better back in my day.

“All right, maybe it’s not that simple. I had some unfinished business to take care of. I wanted to prove to myself that I had what it takes to get to the Big Show. Well, it took a lot longer than I ever thought it would, but I did it. I proved what I set out to prove, so that’s it.”

Vince saw Ryan’s blank look and sighed. “Look,” he went on, “maybe I’m not doing such a good job of this, but here’s the deal: the first three guys across the line make the team, unless one of the three doesn’t have the Olympic qualifier. Right?”

“Yeah, but you’re going to get your qualifier, next race or maybe the one after that. You’re in too good shape not to—”

“I’m not going to try. As of right now, I’m done.”

“*What?*” Incredulous, Ryan stood and faced Vince. “What are you talking about? This is what you wanted, and you’ve got it. Believe me, I’m happy for you. Why the hell would you not want to go?”

“Ryan,” Vince said, “it’s simple. The Olympics belong to young guys. Guys like you. In a million years I couldn’t win *that* race. Today I gave it everything, and it just barely worked, but the Olympics are a whole different level. Probably I’d get the qualifier—ten days on the circuit in Europe, yeah, there’s no way I wouldn’t—but so what? At best, I’d be just another guy on the track. I know my limits; if I tried to outkick Noah Ngugi, I believe he would laugh in my face.

“But you could do it, Ryan. The way you ran after you got back up was incredible! If you hadn’t fallen, you would have won by ten seconds. At my best, I can’t beat you at your best, and you at your best is what it’s going to take. I know it, and you know it.

“So I ask myself, what makes sense? Since I’ve come here and proven to myself what I needed to prove, I don’t need to take it any further.” He tapped Ryan’s chest. “That’s your job.”

Ryan shook his head. “Listen, I appreciate the gesture and all, but I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. You won the race fair and square.”

“Damn straight I won, and don’t ever forget it.” Vince grinned. “It’s not pity, believe me. If I give up my spot and you go over there and trip over your own feet again, I’m going to kick your ass! But it’s time for me to walk away now. It’s *my* choice this time.”

Ryan stared at him. “I—I don’t know what to say.”

“Say thank you. And that you’ll do your best in Athens.”

“Thank you. And I will. You know I will.”

“Then that’s all there is to it.” Vince smiled again and looked away. Over by the finish line the second- and third-place finishers were waiting for him to begin a victory lap. “Come on. Let’s take a lap together.”

Ryan grinned at him, and they set out. After a moment, Ryan asked: “So if you’re not going to the Olympics, what are you going to do now?”

Vince turned his head toward the infield, where Rich Bolton was pulling on his sweats.

“Well,” he said, “I thought I might try my hand at coaching.”

Epilogue

“HOW MANY TIMES do I have to tell you this? I never said I didn’t make the bet. I just said I didn’t remember making it.”

“Well, tough cookies. It’s over and done with, anyway.”

“So why are you complaining?”

“I’m not.” Pause. “Are you sure Ryan’s not upset that you’re not there?”

“I’m sure. He wanted to go to Athens alone. I don’t know if you noticed, but to me he seems different somehow after Jim’s funeral, more independent. More grown up, I guess.”

“Hmm, you may be right. I think the first round is on soon. You may want to turn on the TV.”

“Right.” Another pause. “Say, you wouldn’t want to make a bet on whether Ryan takes the gold, would you?”

“Depends. What would the stakes be this time?”

“Good question. I can’t think of anything else.”

“So what’s the point of betting?”

“I’ve got it. How about the winner gets to name the baby, and the loser gets to have the baby?”

“You’re a funny one, Vince Taggert.”

“You’re pretty funny yourself, Corey Taggert.”

About the Author

Gerald C. Matics was born in Philadelphia and has lived most of his life in the area, save for a brief stint in Illinois. Gerald received his B.A. in English with a certificate in secondary education from Widener University.

As a writer, Gerald most often dramatizes what he knows best: the trials and triumphs of serious athletes. A long-time competitive middle-distance runner (now semi-retired) with personal bests of 1:54.4 for 800 meters (indoors) and 4:12.6 for the mile, Gerald held multiple school records and competed in the NCAA Division III National Indoor Track Championships in 1991.

Gerald also writes in other genres, including horror, sci-fi, and literary fiction. He is currently shopping a novel manuscript and is working on its sequel. Other projects include a stage play, a movie screenplay, a TV pilot, and of course many literary sports-themed short stories.