The friends each said their goodbyes, and hung up the phone, but Joe knew that Matt’s answer meant no. He had used that response a handful of other Sundays throughout the semester. One time Matt even came through with a pre-church phone call, but it was to tell Joe that he had awakened, but not soon enough to get showered and dressed.

Matt told his dad that he planned on celebrating with the team that night, and then braced himself for a big, fat “no.” He was pleasantly surprised when the old man agreed to let him go without any fuss at all. Matt’s dad wasn’t about to impede his son’s free will, but he did ask him to be smart.

“Go celebrate,” was his dad’s advice. “You earned it, but you didn’t earn the right to be stupid about it. Think you can be home by midnight?”

“I’m sure I can probably try,” Matt said as he stood next to the living room window, watching the driveway anxiously.

“You better be more than sure that you can probably try. I’d hate to have to make you be back by quarter after eight.”

“Dad, it’s quarter till right now.”

“Exactly. You better do some fast celebrating.”

Matt wasn’t amused. In fact, he was scared to be amused for fear that his dad wasn’t joking.

“Oh,” Chris said to his son as if he had just remembered an important detail. “If you need anything, call me.”

Matt’s eyes didn’t leave the driveway.
“Seriously,” his dad said as he touched Matt on the shoulder with his cell phone. “Take this.”

“Give me a break, Dad!” Matt eyes shot daggers at his father. “I’m just going to go hang out with the team. Same thing I do always, just with a different set of people.”

“I know,” Chris said, still extending his own phone. “Just thought I’d give you this in case you need to leave before anyone else wants to.”

“Thanks for the gesture, but if I need you that bad, I’ll use Hobbs’ phone,” Matt answered as Nathan pulled into the driveway. “Later.”

“Later.”

Nathan and Matt pulled into the party around 9:00 and parked his shiny red Sundance. Matt reached for the door handle, but Nathan stopped him with his voice.

“You gonna drink tonight?”

Matt pulled his hand away from the door and plopped his back against the seat. He hadn’t expected that question. He actually didn’t know that he had a choice in the matter. The closest he had ever come to tasting alcohol was at a Chicago White Sox Game almost ten years ago. He was nestled in his seat on the third base line with a tray of nachos on his lap. It was just his dad and him, watching every pitch as if it were going to be the last one of the game. Baseball was better in those days, Matt thought. He remembered a plump, bearded man squeezing his way down the row of seats, a cup in each hand. As he shuffled past Matt, his beer overflowed straight into Matt’s nacho cheese. The man grunted and continued on. Matt remembered insisting that he finish the chips and cheese – he loved nachos – but his dad wouldn’t let him. Of course, Matt nearly threw a fit before his dad finally bought him a whole new tray.
“I’m thinking about it,” the 15-year-old answered. “Are you gonna drink tonight?”

“I’m thinking about it too,” Nathan, who was two years’ Matt’s senior, said, “but I’m guessing I’m thinking about it differently than you. Do whatever you want, but if you stay sober, you’re driving home.” Nathan left the car before Matt could protest.

A few minutes later, Matt sidled into the living room, where the party was kicking off. The air smelled like a baseball field. Not a little league, or even high school park, but a Major League Baseball stadium, where the players are larger than life and a man who seems larger than life spills beer in your nachos. Matt took a step and fully expected his shoe to stick to the concrete. The music was loud and vicious. The rapid beat of the bass drum was something Matt was totally used to, but the music’s lyrics seem to stand out more that night. They spoke of sex and parties, creating an aura of the temporary ecstasy of which he was about to partake.

The party’s patrons responded to Matt’s entrance with a loud, “Hey!” almost in unison. His teammates raised their cups filled with God-knows-what and saluted the rookie runner. Matt waved, swallowed hard, and entered a new era.

Matt enjoyed the celebration for about ninety minutes without joining the wine women and song fest too much. He sat on the couch and watched his friends enjoy their freedom. He laughed often, but rarely spoke. The only word he recalled saying up to that point was, “Nah,” when Hobbs offered to grab him a beer.

To his left, Matt saw Nathan flirting with one of the girls from the team. To his right sat Huff. Huff – Brandon Huff, if you didn’t know him – was an enigma of a person. He stood five foot... well, it didn’t actually matter how tall he was. What mattered
was more his stature. He had broad shoulders and a barrel chest complemented by short, solid extremities. A flannel shirt, tan cowboy hat and tight blue jeans made up Huff’s outfit of choice. He was a “farm boy,” not a surprising moniker for this part of Indiana, but he just didn’t quite fit in with the other farm boys. A senior, Huff spoke smoothly and was, at this point, salutatorian of the senior class. He didn’t spend his time baling hay or castrating various livestock, but rather spent it working out and partying. Cross country for Huff was a warm-up for wrestling season. He was built to wrestle and was, in fact, quite good at it. The year before, he had qualified for the state wrestling meet, and in doing so, became the first athlete from Brown to qualify for state in over twenty years.

Matt tried to focus on Huff and the rest of the room instead of on Nathan putting the moves on a girl to his immediate left. He focused on Huff’s pecks filling out his flannel shirt and tried to ignore the red plastic cup that Huff held in his hands.

“How much you bench, Huff?” Matt blurted out.

“More than you do, my friend. More than you.” Huff tilted his cowboy hat back with the knuckle of his first finger and took a swig of whatever it was that he was drinking. The senior smacked his lips and nodded his head towards the cup. He then looked over at Matt. “How fast did you run today, anyway?”

“Faster than you did, my friend, fas—“

Huff had a bright grin on his face as he interrupted Matt. He stood up and raised his plastic cup high in the air, grabbing the attention of everyone attention in the room. His flailing hands painted the air as he spoke.
“Our freshman phenom here has been kinda quiet tonight. Has he not?” The room agreed half-heartedly. “I say we get this kid a beer. Break ‘im in a little.” The room seconded that motion with rabid approval.

Before he knew it, Matt was being swept from the living room into the kitchen. He looked behind him as he was being pulled away to find his ride. But Nathan had disappeared. So had the girl.

“The way I see it, Matt, you didn’t come here to sit on your can and watch these fools get drunk,” Huff bellowed as about a dozen runners filled the kitchen. Matt couldn’t tell if the cowboy was drunk himself. “Nope. You came here to get into some trouble, to see what high school is like.”

“Well,” he continued as he poured Matt a beer. “It’s like this.”

The team approved of the offer, and the newly dubbed freshman phenom reached out to take the cup.

“You don’t have to,” one of the girls’ said over the crowd. It was Hobbs. She stepped through the impromptu circle and thwacked Huff on the arm, barely hard enough for him to notice. “How much have you drank anyway?”

“I don’t see how your question pertains to the task at hand,” Huff answered innocently. “I just want the little guy to have a drink on me.”

By the time Hobbs and Huff finished their exchange, Matt was sniffing the beer, prepping himself for his swan dive into a new world. He took a deep breath, playing to the crowd, and took a drink. But not just a sip. A nice, long, sloppy gulp.

“How’d that taste, partner,” Huff said as he tossed Matt a towel.

Matt smiled. “Like mayonnaise.”
“Quite frankly, Matt, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but you’re a bright kid. I’ll let that one slide.”

As Matt continued to work on his drink, Nathan re-entered the room. He marched straight to Matt and slapped him on the shoulder, with a huge smile across his face.

“Good?” Nathan questioned.

“No, it sucks,” Matt answered as he finished off his first beer ever. “But I’ll take another one. Where’d you go?”

“Here,” Nathan said, ignoring the question. He handed Matt a bottle. “It’s better without the cup.”

The party went on for a few more hours, and Matt had a few more beers. He was looser now. More relaxed. Never mind the fact that it took a few extra seconds for his eyes to catch up when he turned his head, and his stomach tickled when he stood up. But at least the beer didn’t taste bad anymore.

“Did I ever tell you,” Matt announced to Hobbs unabashedly, “that I love running behind you at practice?”

“No, Matt, you haven’t,” the party’s host said, pleased that her first-time guest was enjoying himself. “Is it because I’m a lot slower than you are?”

“No,” Matt paused to take another drink. “It’s because I like your butt.”

Nathan swooped in and grabbed his friend’s beer at that moment. He had been watching – and listening – from nearby.

“Look at the time, Matt, it’s gettin’ close to midnight. Maybe I should take you home before your dad gets worried.”

“I don’t really think you should be taking him home,” Hobbs interrupted.
“Well, no, I probably shouldn’t, but he doesn’t live too far away. Don’t worry about it.”

“Waaaaaaait a second,” someone hollered from across the room. It was Huff, weaving his way across the room, red plastic cup still in hand. “I’ll take the phenom home. I should be outta here anyway.”

“And you definitely aren’t taking him home,” Hobbs said as she turned her attention to Huff. “You’ve had that cup since you got here.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Huff said while removing his cowboy hat and placing it over his heart. “I just have no willpower. I had to keep refilling it with the same thing all night. Here, taste it. It’s a good mixed drink.” He shoved the drink towards Hobbs.

Hobbs closed one eye and moved her head away as if Huff were offering her a snake. “I don’t think I will. What’s in it?”

“Two parts hydrogen. One part oxygen.”

“Bull shit,” Nathan said with a grin as he snatched the drink from Huff. He took a drink.

Water.

“Matt, go home with Huff,” Nathan said, shaking his head at the cowboy’s drunk act. “Huff, you’re an idiot.”

“Thankya kindly,” Huff responded. He shoved his cowboy hat back on his head and threw his arm around Matt’s shoulder before turning to Hobbs and touching the front of his hat. “Ma’am.”

Matt climbed into Huff’s truck and the two drove off.
“If you weren’t drunk,” Matt said after a few minutes of silence, “then why’d you make me drink?”

“I didn’t make you drink anything, phenom. What happened was one of two things. Either you really did want to drink, in which case I did you a favor. Or you can’t manage to get your mouth to say what your head is thinking.”

“So if it’s the second one, what does that do for me?” Matt inquired.

“Nothing,” Huff said. “It just tells me something about you.”

Matt didn’t answer. In fact, nothing was said until they pulled into his driveway a few minutes later.

“I’ll be back at 7:30 tomorrow morning,” Huff said. Matt stopped crawling out of the car and gave his teammate a blank stare. “To go for a run. I figure an easy six miles or so. You see, either you want to run, in which case I will be doing you a favor, or you can’t get your mouth to say what your head is thinking.”

Matt said nothing. He simply continued out of the car and marched into his house. Huff watched to make sure his friend got in okay before putting the car in reverse and heading home. He didn’t even say goodbye to his teammates.

Matt eased into his own house and found a tall glass of water and a note sitting on the kitchen counter. He took a long drink from the glass. God, was he thirsty. He then picked up the note and held it close to his eyes in attempt to read it in the dark.

_If you need me, I’m upstairs. Don’t worry. I’m awake. If not, I’ll see you in the morning._

Matt tore the paper in two and crumpled the pieces together into one ball. Then he went to sleep.
Chapter 7

Joe woke up the next morning and poured a large bowl of cereal just as he always did. He showered, got dressed and prepared himself for church. There was no waiting by the phone, no anticipation of a call from Matt. Why should he call? He was probably at home, snug in his bed dreaming about all the fun he had had the night before. Part of Joe’s mind envied Matt. He could never party like that. He could never disregard his own conscience for a few extra hours of sleep. But he also pitied his friend. It must be pretty easy to chase after the wrong things, he thought.

Joe met up with Jamie at church that morning. She didn’t expect to see Matt either, but she too was disappointed that he didn’t show. The outfit that she had bought a few months ago had gone to waste after all.

They say young women – and perhaps even older ones, for that matter – buy clothes not to impress the opposite sex, but to impress other young women. That wasn’t the case for Jamie. Not with this outfit. She had kept her eye on this sun dress for months, wishing it were hers. But she found no reason to buy it. She didn’t need more dresses. This was high school. Get noticed or get lost, but Jamie didn’t think it was worth it. After Matt came to church with her the first time, however, she promptly went out and made the purchase. It was a deep purple spaghetti-strap dress with a simple butterfly pattern. It loosely hugged her form – what little there was – down to her waist and flowed down past her hips. The left side stopped at her knee, but the bottom angled downward to her right calf. She felt older when she wore that dress. She felt prettier.
But buying the dress was only the first step. She vowed not to wear it out of the house until Matt joined her again for church. She waited patiently for a few months, despite her dad’s pestering.

“Why don’t you wear that new dress I took you to get?” he’d ask each Sunday. “You look so nice in it.”

“I just don’t feel like wearing it yet,” she answered. Her dad knew enough about young girls not to follow up on the question.

But the air was getting crisper and Matt consistently showed few signs of wanting to come to church again. So this Sunday, she decided to wear the outfit for the first time, much to her father’s liking. Joe noticed too.

“New dress?” Those were the first words that exited Joe’s lips when he saw his friend at church. Jamie didn’t respond verbally. She smiled and curtsied, masking her complete disappointment. The two then entered the sanctuary. Third row on the left.

“It looks nice.”

Nobody alluded to the fact that Matt once again had decided not to attend.

It’s not that he hadn’t awakened in time that Sunday morning. Matt was up at 7:30 a.m., and he hated every second of it. Huff rolled into Matt’s driveway – as promised – at 7:29. He sat in his car in the driveway for precisely two minutes before Chris Wade opened the front door and waved the kid with the cowboy hat into the house.

“I’m Matt’s dad, Chris.”

“Good to meet you, Sir,” Huff politely responded. “Matt asked me to come run with him this morning.”
“I can see that,” Chris chuckled. In addition to his ever-present headpiece, Huff was sporting a Pioneer cross country T-shirt — the sleeves had been cut off, exposing Huff’s thick arms — and a pair of running shorts that covered no more than one-third of his thighs. Only distance runners wore those kind of shorts anymore, Chris thought. “But Matt might have forgotten. Do you want me to go get him?”

“Actually, I’d love the pleasure of waking him up if you could point me in the right direction,” Huff responded.

Chris obliged, and Huff gently opened the bedroom door, careful not to wake his slumbering friend. He then shut the door behind him, just as easily as he had opened it, and tip-toed toward the bed. Matt looked innocent as he slept. He was wearing the same clothes that he had worn the night before, and he hadn’t managed to pull back the covers. Instead, he lay on top of his comforter with one pillow between his legs and another behind his head. Huff smiled, bent down towards the sleeping beauty and slid his hands between Matt’s mattress and the box spring.

“I said 7:30,” Huff whispered just before he flipped the mattress into the air, spilling Matt onto the floor and bringing the mattress near perpendicular before it flopped back down on the box spring.

Matt leapt up and whirled around the room, searching for the culprit. When he gathered his wits, he found some kid in short shorts, a cutoff and a cowboy hat howling at his own practical joke.

“You got five minutes to be dressed and ready to run,” Huff demanded when he finally stopped laughing. “I can do a lot worse to you.”
Huff left the room and sat on the living room couch. Four minutes and fifty-nine seconds later, Matt appeared wearing baggy shorts and a long-sleeved shirt. “Let’s get this over with so you can leave,” Matt said, while rubbing the crust from his eyes.

The duo set out down the country roads of Pecksburg with a forty-minute run ahead of them. Huff wouldn’t stop gabbing. Matt just rolled his eyes for the first few minutes, but he should have listened. What came out of Huff’s mouth might have been the most precise – yet ineloquent – description of running in the history of the sport.

“You know, I love to wrestle,” Huff said about a mile into the run, “but there’s nothing quite like a runner’s high. You know?” Matt rolled his eyes.

“The sport sucks, really. There is no chance that it is not going to suck every time you lace up your shoes. You’ll always sweat. You’ll always breathe heavier than when you started. You’ll always be tired, even if for just a little bit.”

Neither of the runners spoke for a few seconds.

“Nope. There’s nothing like a runner’s high. You know what I’m talking about, phenom. Sometimes you just take off and go. You pay attention for awhile, but after you go a little bit, it doesn’t even feel like you are running anymore. Your legs are just moving. Your arms are just pumping. You’re not even controlling yourself. You start thinking about school, or some girl, or the future. You stare at the cornfield or the sun. Don’t get me wrong. You’re still running fast, breathing hard and going numb. But it feels so dang good.

“You don’t get that in wrestling. You get a rush when you win a match, but there’s never a time when you are doing your thing and all of a sudden you look up and an hour has gone by. There’s never a time in wrestling when you are worse than
everybody else but still better than you’ve ever been before. There’s no other sport where it’s just you and your shoes. Pounding the pavement. Bang bang bang. You and your shoes. Making progress no matter how slow you’re going. Bang bang bang. You and your shoes. Ending up in the exact place that you started, and when you get back nothing’s changed but yourself.”

With that, Huff stopped chattering.

“Well, it feels to me like I’ve got cement in my legs and glue in my lungs, but whatever,” Matt shot back.

“You’re just mad that I flipped your mattress.”

“You’re just too sure of yourself. What caused you to be like that anyway?”

“Let me tell you something right now, phenom,” Huff was back on his soapbox now. “Nothing caused me to be who I am. I chose it. This cause and effect stuff is baloney to begin with. I could have been like all the other hicks in this school. Pop some dip in my lip and be on my way. I could have been like all the other smart kids in this school. Be president of everything and best friends with the guidance counselor. I could have been like all the other partiers and get so drunk that I don’t remember anything that went on.

“But what I am? I’m Huff. I’m the smart kid in the cowboy hat who goes to the parties and makes everybody think I’m trashed. Nothing “caused” me to be like this. I just am.”

“Hey, why do you make people think you’ve been drinking?” Matt kind of interrupted.
“Dude, it’s funny as hell,” Huff asserted. Matt agreed. “Look, there’s going to be
guys like Nathan who take you to all the parties and want you to have a good time.
There’s going to be guys like your boy Joe who want you to be a good kid all the time.
And there’s going to be guys like me who preach at you while you are running. What
I’m saying is don’t let any of that affect you or cause you to be something. Cause and
effect is baloney.”

The teammates finished their run, and Matt was back in bed before Joe even woke
up for church.

To recount the rest of Matt, Joe, and Jamie’s freshman year would be as tedious
as it would be repetitive. Matt and Joe ingratiated themselves to the rest of Pioneer High
School by making their fellow students – and each other, for that matter – laugh. Matt
continued to run, excelling in track and field just as much as he had in cross country. He
even got Joe interested in the sport. As for Joe, he continued to spring out of bed six days
a week: for school Monday through Friday, for church on Sunday. Jamie stayed true to
her word and was a cheerleader for both football and basketball. Then she quit. She
played golf in the spring, an activity she had never tried. She consistently finished sixth
on the seven-girl team. Matt continued his flirtations with Jamie, but held true to his
tweenager dating theory. He wouldn’t let a girl get in the way of his occasional weekend
parties. In fact, if Marty Tuff were to look over the goals these three had set, he would
see students who took their goals seriously. The ambivalent Jamie Boyd. The reserved
Joe Abner. The audacious Matt Wade.

Huff finished his senior year and graduated from Pioneer High School as the
salutatorian. In his commencement speech, he encouraged everyone to ignore the
influences and create your own path. Cause and effect is baloney. He attended Purdue University, just like his parents did.
Joe Abner had a car. He had a driver’s license. He had a date.

In what he called the best week of his life, Joe had gone from a nothing to something. It was the last Tuesday of September, but the muggy, blanketing weather made it feel like early August. Joe’s fortune made it feel like Christmas. He had turned sixteen in late August, which came as a surprise to no one, but Joe was taken aback by the events of September. It was understood that turning sixteen didn’t necessarily mean he could drive whenever he wanted. First, Indiana law requires kids to wait a month after their birthday before getting a license. And besides, the Abner family had only two cars. Joe would be able to drive only when his parents weren’t using the vehicles. With these two strikes against him, Joe rode the bus home from school on Wednesday with no expectations. But when he got home, he was welcomed by his sister’s car in the parking lot. Joe started to sprint up his long driveway before the human inclination to overanalyze turned his excitement turned to worry. His sister was home from college midweek when she hadn’t made the trip back to Pecksburg since school began. He slowed to a walk as his thoughts slowly changed his mood. Soon, he wasn’t just worried that something was terribly wrong, he was certain that something was terribly wrong. Joe removed his backpack and gripped it with his left hand. Then he resumed his sprint to the door.

The worried sophomore burst through the front door and found his parents sitting calmly on the coach.

“What’s wrong?” Both he and his mother asked the question at the same time.
“Why’s Elizabeth here?” Joe blurted. “Did something happen? Where is she?”

“Elizabeth’s not here,” Joe’s dad answered, almost laughing at his son’s wildness.

“That’s not even her car.”

Joe furrowed his eyebrows at his dad and then reached back for the front door. He opened it and examined the automobile from the threshold.

“Yes, it is,” he said still looking at the car. He lifted his arm to point out its defining features. “Dented hood. Zebra steering wheel cover. Crooked antenna. That’s her car.”

“No it’s not,” his father insisted. “It’s your car.”

Joe’s right arm was still pointing at the crooked antenna when the words left his dad’s mouth. Those words caused that arm to drop limply to Joe’s side. He turned to his smiling parents and the backpack dropped from his left hand. A set of keys were in mid-flight, and Joe caught them at the last second.

“Your sister says happy birthday and she’ll see you in a few weeks,” Joe’s mom said.

“And she said you can keep the zebra cover too,” his dad added.

The car wasn’t a collector’s item, that’s for sure. It was a white Chevy something-or-other from about 1987 with a dented hood and a crooked antenna. It would undoubtedly hit 200,000 miles before Joe donned a cap and gown, and it was roughly the size of a military tank, but Joe would take it. He hadn’t expected to have a car at all. No driving to school. Nothing. But now, thanks to his sister and her recent purchase of a 1994 something-or-other, he had achieved a level of freedom that sixteen-year-olds live for. Getting a car is the first step in the autonomy period in life. The period that starts
with a car, continues when you move out of your parents’ house, and abruptly ends at marriage.

Joe got into the car about an hour later and drove to Matt’s. Matt answered the door in nothing but a pair of running shorts. He was munching on an apple.

“Goin’ fishin’?”

Joe was confused by Matt’s greeting. There was no “hi.” Or “Hey, is that your car?” Just a very random question. Joe was silent for a minute.

“I said,” Matt carefully enunciated, “goin’...fishin’?”

“What are you talking about?” Joe finally spat.

“Well,” Matt said as he pointed out the window to the driveway, “why else would you bring a big huge boat to my house?”

“You piece of crap,” Joe shot back as Matt started to walk away. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go get my pole. Go ahead and start backing that thing up to the pond.” Matt couldn’t keep a straight face any longer, and he walked over to his friend and they locked fingers.

“That’s yours now?”

“It’s all mine. My sister gave it to me and she got a new one.”

“Well, take me for a ride,” Matt insisted.

The two hopped into the car and left without a destination.

“This is a pretty nice ride,” Matt said with his right arm hanging out of the passenger window. “And you know...you could really pick up some hot, youn—“

“Chicks, yeah I know,” Joe interrupted.
"No, Joe, not chicks." Matt flicked Joe's ear with his middle finger. "Zebras. You can get some zebras with a wheel like that."

"Yeah, well this zebra thing is going in the garbage as soon as I get home," Joe laughed.

"Your loss."

The two friends drove a little while longer and then ended their visit. Joe wanted to get some studying done. Matt said he needed to study too, but he had no plans of actually doing it. As Joe headed home on a virtually untraveled back road, the second piece to his string of luck showed up. She was standing on the side of the road with her left hand on her hip. Her right hand sat exasperated on the top of her head. She was staring at the rear driver's side of the car. She looked deflated. So did the tire. Joe naturally pulled up behind her and got out of the vehicle.

"Flat tire?" Joe asked the girl, whom he recognized as Staci Marsh, a junior at Brown.

"Yeah," she said. She didn't look away from the tire. It seemed like she was trying to will it back to life. Joe tried too.

"Wanna help me?" Staci asked after a few moments of silence. Of course Joe wanted help. He was eager to help. He loved to help. But he couldn't help. Joe didn't have the first clue as to how to change a tire.

"Well," Joe began, "have you ever met a guy who didn't know how to change a tire?"

"No, I haven't."
Joe put his left hand on his hip and extended his hand for a shake. “Well, I’m Joe Abner, the absolute worst person to meet right now.” Before she could shake his hand, he retracted it, placed it exasperatedly on the top of his head and tried to will the tire back to life. “But hey, let me drive you home. Maybe you can find a real man there. Or I live about two miles away. I can get my dad to fix it.”

Staci laughed and put her hand on Joe’s shoulder. “I’m not going to make your dad do that,” she said.

“Okay, but I’m at least taking you to your house.”

Joe opened the door for Staci and proceeded to give her a ride. She introduced herself and Joe told her that he already recognized her. Staci looked older and could have passed for a college student. She was tall and had dark brown hair that seemed to hug the shape of her face. She continually swept her hair behind her left ear, but let the right side hang. Joe recalled that she was a good athlete – a volleyball and basketball player. The two had a pleasant conversation that included Joe’s explanation of why Staci was lucky to have gotten a flat tire on that day. If it had happened the day before, Joe asserted, he wouldn’t even be able to give her a lift.

“So this is new?”

“Clearly,” Joe answered sarcastically.

“No, well, no. I meant new to you,” Staci clarified.

“Yep. And it’s funny; my friend just told me that now I’ll be able to pick up chicks. I gotta tell ya, I didn’t think it’d work this fast.”

“Me neither,” Staci concurred. “I would have guessed you would have picked up a zebra or two first.”
"Gosh darn it!" Joe tore the zebra cover from the steering wheel and chucked it into the back seat. He tried to explain that the cover belonged to his sister, but Staci just laughed and nodded.

Joe recounted his tire-changing tale to Matt at lunch the next day. The story didn’t end, though, with Joe dropping Staci off at her house. Instead, her dad laughed at the circumstances and asked Joe if he wanted to "learn to be a real man." So all three of them drove out to the stranded vehicle, where Joe and Staci both learned to be a man.

Matt heard the story, but kind of got hung up on one small detail.

"Staci Marsh, huh?" Matt said after Joe was done talking. "She’s hot."

Joe thought for a moment and agreed. Then he looked to his right and saw Staci walking towards them. He looked at Matt again with a self-appreciating grin on his face. "Definitely," he said.

"Hey Joe!" Staci said with a tone of excitement that Joe didn’t want to think was fake. "How’s it going?"

"Good," Joe coolly responded. "This is my friend, Matt."

Staci quickly cut through the small talk to get to the reason why she came over.

"I just wanted to say thank you again for last night. You were a real sweetheart." Joe blushed. "We’ll hang out some time when I’m not stranded on the side of the road."

Sometimes words come straight from your toes. The thing you wish you could say begins playing on a loop in your mind. It plays differently each time. You emphasize a different word. You change the inflection or tone of your voice. But you would never say those words aloud, so you move them out of your brain. You try to get them as far away from your mouth as possible, so you push the words down. Like trying
to hold an inner tube under water, you move them through your chest, past your stomach and hold them in your toes. Words usually stay there. But on a rare occasion, the inner tube will slip and the words will come rushing up through your body and come gushing past your lips.

“We should go out on a date this weekend,” Joe blurted. He had let the inner tube slip to the astonishment of everyone involved. Matt’s eyes bulged. Joe tried desperately to play it cool. But most importantly, Staci smiled.

“Yeah,” she answered sweetly. “We should.” Matt’s eyes bulged farther. She wrote her phone number on Joe’s napkin and strode away. Matt’s head almost exploded.

“Why did y... How did you... What just happened?”

“It looks like I just got Staci Marsh’s phone number,” Joe said, lifting up the napkin and folding it gingerly.

“Let me see that,” Matt demanded.

“Nope.” Joe’s smile lit up his whole face. “I’m hanging on to this.”

Joe Abner called Staci Marsh that night and set a date for Saturday. Matt, who had hoped to spend Saturday evening with Joe, was left to find another form of amusement. He instinctively turned to Nathan Marx, who just happened to be having a few people over Saturday. Parties at Nathan’s place were infrequent. In fact, they were nonexistent. Nathan instead had small “get-togethers” that never consisted of more than six people other than himself. If a seventh walked through the door, one of the other guests would leave. If nobody was ready to leave, the seventh would have to wait outside or find himself another “get-together.” Nathan’s house was like a factory. Management couldn’t have too many people on the clock at once. Everyone argued with Nathan about
his policy because it just didn’t seem logical. But to Nathan, it made perfect sense. Not because of the size of his house, or the amount of alcohol he could provide, or the number of controllers he had for his video game console. It was about protecting himself.

Nathan had an older brother named Blaine. The two were almost identical in their personality, but the younger Marx was a little more cautious. In his high school days, Blaine had a habit of throwing large, raucous parties that beguiled his classmates, but irritated neighbors. The cops, not surprisingly, were regularly dispatched to the Marx house. Alcohol usually wasn’t a factor. Instead, the police advised the teenagers to keep the noise down and go home before it got too late. The complaints occurred so often, though, that the police started showing up whenever there were more than four extra cars in the driveway. During Blaine’s senior year, Nathan and his parents left Friday night to visit relatives. Naturally, Blaine threw one of his famous parties. At 10:30 p.m., eight cars were in the driveway and about twenty people filled the Marx household. Then the police came knocking on the door. It wasn’t that the kids were too loud. In fact, they were making it a point to keep quiet. But one of the town cops stopped at the house just to make sure things didn’t get out of hand. When he entered the home, however, he found more than a dozen kids drinking.

The students were cited, and parents were called to pick up their children. Nathan’s family got a call too. Blaine had hosted a party with underage drinking, and police found a bag of marijuana on his bed.

Needless to say, Blaine’s party-hosting days were put to rest. And Nathan, being a good steward of history, learned from his brother’s mistakes. But instead of avoiding
illegal activity all together, he simply laid out a set of laws for his house. First, there was the six-man rule. Then there was the four-car rule. The fewer cars, the better. Alcohol wasn’t banned, but everything else was. You could smoke cigarettes on the porch if you needed to, but all other drugs weren’t to leave the car. The cigarette and weed rules were unpopular with some, but Nathan didn’t care. He never touched the stuff anyway. Smoking kills a runner’s lungs.

Later on the same Wednesday that Matt learned about Joe’s date, he approached Nathan, well aware of the rules.

“You got room for one more Saturday?”

“Yeah,” Nathan bobbed his head in approval. He was proud of the fact that his protégé no longer waited for an invitation. He was ready to party. “I’ve got two other guys from the team and the Wilkes brothers, so you’re number five.”

“Sweet, I’ll find a ride,” Matt responded. “But I gotta go to class.”

“Hey, Matt,” Nathan said before his friend got away. “If Rabbit asks, you’ve been planning to come since Monday. He asked yesterday, and I told him we were full.”

Matt nodded and then headed for class. He wanted to feel sorry for the kid they called Rabbit, but he had been conditioned not to.

In all fairness to the team, Rabbit was an annoying character. He was a senior who in four years had never run fast enough to compete on varsity, but that wasn’t why he was rejected by his peers. He earned his nickname early in his cross country career by sprinting like a rabbit to the front of the pack on the team’s warm-up. But during the real workout, Rabbit would tuck himself just in front of the slowest person on the squad and trudge through the run. At least once a week, he would flat out stop after the warm-up,
citing asthma or some other undiagnosed nagging injury. He would then position himself in the middle of the team’s route and tell every runner how poorly he was doing.

Needless to say, he wasn’t the heart and soul of the team. His constant criticism during practice was preceded by a heavy stream of sucking up during school hours. The members of the team didn’t fall for it, and therefore always had an excuse as to why he couldn’t hang out with them after school. Nathan’s fib, then, was standard operating procedure.

Matt vented to Joe Abner about Rabbit’s antics enough that Joe – who didn’t have an enemy in the world – even started to become perturbed by the slacking senior. So whenever Rabbit approached Joe at school, Joe would give short, terse answers in hopes that his schoolmate would leave. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn’t. The day before Joe’s big date with Staci, it didn’t.

“Hey, Abner, what’s up?” Rabbit squealed as he approached Joe in the hallway. The poor kid had a habit of calling people by their last names only.

“Not much, Rabbit.”

“You got big plans for the weekend?” Rabbit responded, trying to spark a conversation.

“Not really, Rabbit.”

“You going to the football game tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. Me too. But I bet you are hanging out with Wade on Saturday night.”

“Actually—” Joe stopped himself. He almost blabbed about his date, but then realized that that would lead to more conversation than he was comfortable having. So
he diverted the attention away from himself. "Actually, I think Matt is going to Nathan's on Saturday."

"Oooh," Rabbit feigned being impressed, "one of the famous Marx get-togethers. I bet Wade's known about this for weeks."

"Actually, I think he just found out about it yesterday."

Rabbit cocked his head back in bemusement, but didn't get the chance to follow up with another question.

"Look, Rabbit, I've got to run, but I'll talk to you later."

Joe rushed to class and didn't think about that conversation again for the next two days. In fact, it didn't re-enter his mind at all until he arrived at school Monday and found out that police had busted Nathan's get-together.
Chapter 9

It was Jamie Boyd who first told Joe what had happened. Joe was still beaming from his date with Staci when Jamie approached his locker.

“Have you talked to Matt?” she asked.

Joe almost countered with a sarcastic remark, but he saw genuine concern in Jamie’s eyes. She stood hugging a textbook and a notepad tightly against her chest. She looked up at Joe with wild eyes. He asked what was wrong.

“Matt’s not here and neither are a bunch of the other cross country guys,” Jamie explained. “I didn’t think anything of it until I was standing on the rail and heard somebody say that Nathan’s party got raided Saturday. I heard one person say everybody was still in jail, and somebody else said that one of them got hit by a car.”

Joe saw that Jamie was on the verge of tears. He tried to calm her by saying rumors are usually much worse than what really happened. He then marched over to the senior lockers to find Nathan. Joe rounded the corner and almost ran directly into one of the seniors.

“Hey, Abner,” the senior squealed. It was Rabbit. “I hope your boy Wade doesn’t get in too much trouble.”

Joe grabbed Rabbit’s arm before he could walk away.

“Do you know what happened?” Joe asked. The words the two shared Friday still hadn’t entered Joe’s mind.

“I heard that police stopped by because of a noise complaint, and found them all drunk playing poker. But all I know for sure is that the party was busted and nobody that was there is currently here.” Rabbit paused. “Serves them right, if you ask me.”
“What are you talking about? They’re your teammates!”

“They don’t care about me,” Rabbit answered. “Why should I care what happens to them when they do something stupid on the weekend?”

Joe almost chewed Rabbit out then and there, but he held back. “Do you know if somebody got hit by a car?”

“You know, I heard that too. I figured it was just a rumor, but who knows?”

Joe returned to the sophomore hallway and found Jamie sitting against his locker with her knees pulled up to her chest. Joe had never seen her so concerned. He tried to make her feel better.

“I just talked to Rabbit,” Joe explained. “He said the police showed up, but nobody got hit by a car and nobody that he knows got arrested. Let me walk you to class.”

Joe spent all of first period going through scenarios in his mind. The mind can be a cruel thing when it doesn’t have all the facts. Unfortunately, Joe didn’t have any facts. He first wondered about Matt. Had he been arrested? Probably, Joe thought, if he was drinking. And he can’t drive anyway, so he surely would have been drinking. Why isn’t he at school, though? Joe wondered if Matt’s dad had made him stay home. No, that wouldn’t make any sense. Maybe he had already met with Principal McWilliams and was suspended. Joe assumed Matt would definitely be kicked off the cross country team. Wait – Joe had a thought – how did Nathan’s get-together get busted? Nathan doesn’t allow a lot of cars in the driveway. There was surely no loud music. Cops can’t just come into your house without a reason. Another thought. Joe shuddered. What if the cops came because somebody got hit by a car? Maybe somebody was drunk and
wandered out into the street. Somebody ran into him, and called the cops. The cops went into the house to get some information. And then they found everybody drunk. So maybe Matt is in the hospital. Joe was making himself sick.

The bell rang and Joe rushed out of the classroom and straight towards the bathroom. He had one hand on the restroom door when he saw Matt digging in his locker. Joe took off on a run towards his friend and began questioning him.

“What the hell?” Joe blurted. He was furious, concerned, and relieved all at the same time.

“Dude, you just said hell,” Matt deadpanned.


“Stop,” Matt demanded with a hard stare. “I wasn’t there.”

“You didn’t go?”

“I went, but I wasn’t there when it got busted. I just heard about it myself yesterday.” He leaned closer to Joe and lowered his voice. “I left with Mich—“

Matt stopped in mid-sentence when he saw Jamie Boyd rushing toward the boys. He leaned away from Joe and put on a mask of a smile as if Joe had just cracked a joke. Jamie got to Matt and threw her arms around his neck. Matt winked at Joe and gave him a thumbs-up sign.

“You just missed it,” Matt said as he released himself from Jamie’s grip. “Joe said hell.”

“Joe!”

“Heat of the moment, Jamie,” Joe explained while glaring at Matt.
“I wasn’t at the party,” Matt said quickly, feeling bad that he had got Joe in trouble. “I went for a little bit, but left before it got out of hand.”

Jamie sighed as if she had been holding her breath for the entirety of first period. Then she and Joe spoke the same words.

“Who got hit by a car?”

Matt howled at the question. “Oh my God! Is that the rumor going around? Did you think I got hit by a car?” He paused to laugh more. “I talked to Nathan last night. He said the cops just knocked on the door. Nathan and five other guys were trashed. The only sober guy was Brandon Wilkes. So the cops sat everybody down, but told Brandon to go home. Well, he climbed into his car and threw the thing in reverse. But he was so nervous and so preoccupied that he didn’t look behind him and slammed into the cruiser.” Matt tried to keep a straight face, but failed.

“He hit the police car!” Joe didn’t even try to keep his face straight.

“You guys!” Jamie chimed in. “That’s not funny!”

“Oh yeah, it is,” Matt replied, “and it gets better. For some ridiculous reason, both the Wilkes brothers drove. But Brent’s car was at the end of the driveway. So Brandon picked up his brother’s keys so he could get out. He smashed the cruiser with his brother’s car. He nailed it good, too.”

Jamie refused to join in the laughter, and tried to stop the boys by asking what happened to Nathan and everybody else.

“The cops took them in,” Matt said as he started walking to class. “After the one cop wrote up an accident report, they took the five guys who were drunk to the station.
They made them call their parents and everything. Nathan’s parents were the last to show up. They left him there for fourteen hours.”

“Oh my gosh,” Jamie whispered.

“Yeah, so those guys are done for the year in sports,” Matt hung his head. “You know, zero tolerance.”

Joe made a poor attempt at sympathy. “That sucks,” he said. Matt didn’t respond. The three of them went their separate ways for class, and Matt and Joe didn’t speak again until lunch. They went through the lunch line, grabbing the least healthy, but best tasting items available. After they sat down at their traditional table, Matt started talking again.

“I was at the get-together,” Matt confessed.

Joe put down his mozzarella stick and leaned forward in his seat. His thoughts started racing again, and he tried to predict what Matt was going to say next.

“There were six of us there including Nathan, so we were one short of the limit. In walks Michelle Lear, her boyfriend and some other guy that Nathan knows. Well, Nathan gets up and says that there are too many people. Michelle said she was just dropping the guys off, but Nathan said that’s still too many. Well, I was pretty trashed, so I volunteered to go home if Michelle would give me a ride.”

Matt wouldn’t look Joe in the eye. Instead, he stared at his cheeseburger and picked at his French fries. Matt’s manner and countenance gave Joe that sick feeling he had felt earlier in the day.

“So everything was cool, and Michelle helped me into my house.”

“Woah, was your dad home?”
“No, he was out who knows where. So she helps me to my room and then starts getting friendly. The thing is I don’t really remember what happened, but at the very least I made out with some other guy’s girlfriend.”

Joe was no longer leaning forward in his chair. He was now in a state of exasperation. He had plopped against the back of the chair. His arms fell limply at his sides. He tried to keep his stunned mouth from staying agape. He couldn’t bring himself to talk about what Matt had just admitted.

“You’ve got to get out of this,” Joe said.

“Out of what?”

“Out of this junk that you are doing,” Joe stated. “You’re better than this. Do you know how I know that?”

“No, but I bet you’re going to tell me,” Matt said coldly.

“Because the people who like to do that stuff don’t keep it secret and pick at their food when they tell the story. They are proud of it. They go tell the whole cross country team at practice. They don’t tell just one guy in the lunchroom.”

“Oh, wait,” Matt satirized, “I don’t have a cross country team anymore. We have four guys now, and you need five for a whole team.”

“That’s not the point,” Joe answered. “The point is that soon, one of two things will happen. One, you won’t have enough luck to get bailed out of the party, so you’ll end up in jail. Or two, the boyfriend of the girl you mess around with is going to kill you. You don’t have to do this crap to make a mark at this school. You should just—“

“Just what?”

“Nothing.”
“Just say it. I should just go to church. I know how you think. You use my misfortune as motivation for me to do what you do. No offense, but you act like your life is a thousand times better than mine just because you know God. Well, that’s not the only reason your life is better. You have to do your thing. I have to do mine.”

“I wasn’t trying to be a jerk,” Joe apologized. “I just hope you don’t end up out of school or off the team.”

“Yeah, me too.” The friends sat in silence for a few minutes and began forcing down their food.

“Wait,” Joe broke the tension, “you still have a team. Only four of those guys were cross country guys. That leaves five.”

“Rabbit quit,” Matt responded with a half grin

“He did?”

“Yup.” Matt’s grin became a full-fledged smile. “This was the only chance for his slow ass to run varsity, and he bails because the team won’t be good anymore. I dig the irony.”

“Did I tell you that he was asking about Nathan’s party? I should have told him to go.”

Matt was already disheartened by the weekend’s events, but he didn’t become angry until Joe told him about Rabbit’s inquiry. Matt didn’t get mad at Joe; he got mad at Rabbit, who he assumed had ratted Nathan out. Matt’s suspicions were confirmed later in the day when he forced Rabbit into the locker him and threatened the sluggish senior until the truth came out. Rabbit, perturbed that Nathan had lied about the number of people coming to the get-together, had made an anonymous phone call to the police. He
told police that he had driven by the Marx house and had seen minors drinking alcohol. Matt decided that it'd be best to keep his new information inside. He let the coals of knowledge burn in his mind for the rest of the day. Just after the bell signaling the end of the day sounded, Marty Tuff pulled Matt into his classroom.

"Tell me what you know, so I know where to start" Marty said softly.

"Coach, I probably know more than you do. You don't need to tell me what happened."

"Well, then you know that we don't have a full team now. I wanted to see if you plan to keep running."

Matt stared down at the desk and picked at imperfections in the wood. He didn't say a word while he sat digging at the desk. Words might have been too much for him to handle at the moment. Keeping his head down somehow kept the emotions under control in his head and in his stomach. He wanted to look at the clock. He wanted to tell his coach that he too should have been caught Saturday. He wanted to blame it all on Rabbit. But he didn't. He just pinched his thumb and forefinger together and grabbed bits of the faux wood that had come lose over the years.

"I had two hunches about you when you ran that first day," Marty said, breaking the stillness, but not stopping Matt's picking. "I thought you were a leader, and I thought you were going to be nothing but trouble. You proved me wrong in regards to the latter. If you call this season quits, you'll have proven me wrong twice. I don't like to be proven wrong twice."
Matt looked up from the desk. His cheeks were cherry red – on fire with anger, or frustration, or some mix of the two. His valve, however, remained closed, and the tears stayed inside.

“If you stay, you will be the best runner on a team that doesn’t exist. You will have no front runner to motivate you. You will be alone on the workouts, and you won’t see anybody wearing the same jersey as you during races. You’ll be too far ahead. You can’t gauge yourself by how far Nathan is in front of you. You’ll have to do your own running. You’ll have to do your own pacing. You’ll have to do your own motivating. I’ll be here, but I’m old. I can’t make you do anything. Your passion has to be intrinsic. You understand?”

“Doesn’t sound easy,” Matt said. He closed the valve quickly to keep the tears inside.

“Good things are never easy,” Marty answered.

Matt sniffed.

“Are you doing okay?” Marty asked.

Matt was once again looking down at the desk, his face hidden from his coach. Matt’s hands were overlapped on top of his head, and his breaths were shallow. He shook his head and a tear ran down his cheek and onto the worn-out desk. The old coach walked over and placed his hand on Matt’s shoulder, near his neck.

“Take a few days if you want,” he said. “I know those guys were your friends. You have to come to the realization that people will leave you in this life. Sometimes they will be forced out like Nathan, but not always. Sometimes they will leave for their own good. Sometimes they’ll leave to screw you over. But it happens, and how a man
copes with lost friends defines his appreciation for them in the first place. If a man feels sorry for himself when a friend is gone, he probably spent most of his time thinking of himself when the friend was around.”

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Marty didn’t have a stopwatch running at practice that day, so we will never know how fast Matt actually ran. Marty was surprised to see his new leader at practice at all, and therefore planned to send his boys out on an easy six-mile run. Matt, however, showed up and blazed a six-mile trail. Every footfall released a little bit of anger, sadness, and frustration; Matt couldn’t get rid of those emotions fast enough. He flew down Grizzly Road to start the loop. He accelerated through a straight, flat stretch that the cross country team calls “The Longest Mile.” He burned the Tuff Terrain, a group of rolling hills named after the venerable coach. He approached the school faster than he left it. Without saying a word, he got a quick drink of water, stretched, and jogged five miles back to his house.
Chapter 10

Matt ran this way for about three weeks. Quiet. Fast. Alone. He struggled to find his pace on most days. Occasionally, Coach Tuff would ride his bicycle next to his new star runner until Matt got a feel for the speed he should be going. But Marty’s old lungs and tired legs couldn’t stay next to Matt every mile of every day. Matt would finish on his own and try to leave as quickly as he could. Matt struggled at the meets he ran in Nathan’s absence. He would either go out too fast and wear himself out, or leave the blocks too slow, giving himself no chance to catch the leaders. His teammates were of no help. The other three runners had no dreams of individual success. They were mediocre runners who without a team had no objectives to reach. They spent practices after the incident goofing off and jogging in a slow, steady pack. Joe, having nothing better to do in the afternoon, would usually stay at the high school finishing homework or watching Staci play volleyball in the gym before giving Matt a ride home. Matt never heeded Marty’s idea of taking a few days off, and he never threatened to leave the team. He was always there. Joe was always there, too, wearing the clothes he wore to school and waiting for his buddy to be done for the day. After weeks of the same routine, however, Joe changed his ways.

Matt was sitting on the cool grass outside the high school stretching with the other three remaining runners. His right leg was extended, and his bent left leg formed a figure four with his body. He was reaching forward, grabbing his right toe, when he glanced up and saw someone walking towards him. The someone sported shorts and a sleeveless shirt – a boy ready to do a workout. Matt squinted to see who was about to interrupt his stretching time.
It was Joe Abner.

"Is this where the gymnastics practice starts?" Joe hollered to no one in particular. One of the other runners, who happened to be unfamiliar with Joe's wit, informed the rookie that he was in the wrong place.

"Oh," Joe feigned disappointment. "Sorry to have bothered you."

He took a step back toward the high school, but was stopped by Coach Tuff's voice.

"Fellas," he announced, "this is Joe, the newest member of our team."

The news immediately lifted the spirits of the team members. They began laughing, joking, and slapping Joe on the back. They had a team again. They had a reason to try. Matt, however, was less than thrilled, and it showed when Joe plopped down to stretch next to his friend.

"Go back to the gym," Matt said softly without looking at Joe. "I don't need any favors. You don't like to run."

Joe, in a complete lapse of personality, had no clever retort. In fact, he didn't say anything. He smiled to himself and mimicked the stretch that Matt was doing. In fact, he didn't say much of anything the entire practice. He answered questions when they were asked and even shouted a few words of encouragement, but Joe was uncharacteristically staid as he and his new teammates did speed work on the Brown High School track. There really wasn't much room for talk in the first place. The team was running 400 meter repeats. The runners would take one lap around the track, after which they were panting too much to speak. They would then jog about a half a lap to recover before dashing another 400 meters.
Matt, unsurprisingly, always finished a repeat far before the other four team members did. He was their new leader, their all-star. And he was really the only teammate that had reason to run. The others saw finishing the season as a chore, running far below their potential simply because the team was no longer a full team. The day that Joe showed up at practice, however, was far different. Matt was followed each interval by Derek Allen, a sophomore who exerted effort when he realized he now had a full team at his back. After Derek came Joe.

Joe’s form was noticeably smoother than it was on that call-out run almost eighteen months prior. His head remained steady while his arms and legs did all the work. He wasn’t breaking any land-speed records, but his vast improvement brought a smile to Coach Tuff’s face. After the workout was complete, Coach Tuff walked back to his classroom with a perplexed Matt at his side.

“He came to me, Matt,” Coach Tuff declared preemptively. He somehow sensed that Matt had a question on his tongue.

“And what did he say?” Matt asked.

“He asked if it was too late to join the team and give the other guys something to run for.”

“Isn’t it too late?”

“All you need is a physical and the completion of ten practices. After that, he’ll be able to put on a jersey and race with us. Is there some reason that you are upset about this?”

“Yes!” Matt barked. “Well…not really. I just don’t want to force Joe into doing something that he hates. I mean, you saw him last year when he came out. We jogged
three miles and he didn’t even come back for another day. Today, we had a hard workout. If he packs it up and doesn’t come back tomorrow, I’ll be pissed. He got my teammate’s hopes up for nothing.”

“I think he didn’t come back last year because his buddy embarrassed him,” Marty answered. “Remember? His buddy told him he wouldn’t have to run. Then, when they did have to run, that buddy left Joe in the dust. Who was that buddy anyway? Oh yeah, it w—“

“I get it,” Matt stopped his coach. “So if he was as fast last year as he is now, then why did he let me blow him away?”

“Maybe he wasn’t that fast last year.”

“And how did that happen?”

“Why don’t you go ask Staci,” Coach Tuff said, with a finger pointed toward the gymnasium.

Joe’s relationship with Staci had grown quickly after the flat tire incident and a perfect first date. Somehow, with all the cross country drama, Matt had set his friend’s new girlfriend aside and focused on his own issues. Whenever Matt had the time to talk to Joe, he would vent about his running frustrations, complain about how Nathan screwed him over, or fantasize about taking Jamie on a date. He left little time for Joe to discuss his new girlfriend. It was almost a shame, because Matt could have been the one who made Staci fall for Joe.

It was Friday – the day before Joe took Staci out on their first date. He picked up Matt and headed to the Brown football game with something on his mind. Matt
immediately noticed that his friend was distracted and assumed the imminent date was lingering on Joe’s mind.

“So what are you guys doing tomorrow night?”

“I was just going to take her to dinner and a movie,” Joe answered, glad that Matt was the one who brought up the date. Matt, however, wasn’t pleased with Joe’s answer. He reached over and slapped Joe on the back of the head.

“Great idea,” Matt retorted. He held his hand up to his face mimicking a telephone and changed his voice to sound like Joe’s. “Uh, hey Staci. You want to go on a date? Great! But for two hours we won’t be able to talk to or look at each other.”

“You’re an idiot,” Joe said tersely.

“No, my friend, it is you who happens to be the idiot,” Matt seemed to have this speech worked out in advance. “Let’s look at the facts. You are about to go out with a girl who is a year older than you and just a hair under a thousand times better looking. She’s probably been on a ton of dates, and seen a hundred movies with guys trying to grab hold of her hand or some other body part. Hell, she’s probably turned down more dates than you have ever dreamed of going on.”

“But I—“

“But SHHH!” Matt interrupted. “You won a free date by being a nice guy and stopping to change her tire, which, by the way, you failed at miserably. Now, in order to get a second date, you have to earn it. If you go to a movie, she won’t have a chance to talk to you. And if she doesn’t have a chance to talk to you, she has no motivation to see you again. I guarantee that if you can talk to her, she’ll at least not consider you a fool.

“Do you know where Gibson’s is?”
“Gibson’s?” Joe asked. “You mean the place where they used to take us roller skating in elementary school?”

“That’s the one. You will take Staci there tomorrow night, you will get to talk to her, and therefore, my idiotic friend, you will have earned a second date.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter that I couldn’t skate to a bucket of water if my face were on fire.”

“Actually, Joe, that could even help you.”

Despite Joe’s skepticism, Matt was right. Joe took Staci to the skating rink. And although they were among just a handful of skaters who could drive themselves home, Joe and Staci had a great date. She immediately chose her skates, laced them up, and floated around the carpeted seating area like a swan on a lake. Joe, meanwhile, took twice as long to tie his skates. He then staggered toward Staci like a drunkard. Ten-year-old boys pointed and laughed. Seven-year-old girls covered their faces and giggled — partly because they could skate better than the “old kid” and partly because they had developed a small crush. Staci laughed too, but she did so playfully. She floated to meet Joe and grabbed his hand. Her warm fingers surrounded his arm and gave him chills. While she was teaching him the basics of roller skating, he was busy suppressing his hormones.

He didn’t become good at roller skating that night, but the mastery of that skill was no requirement for a second date. Joe left the rink with a sore tailbone, a dented ego, and an aching jaw. He had laughed himself to an injury, and Staci suffered the same ailment. They talked for a few more hours and eventually agreed that they would love to go out again. In two encounters, Joe botched a chanced to change a tire and failed
miserably in an attempt to roller-skate. He and Staci agreed that they should both know how to do whatever they did on the next date.

The smart sophomore with previously undiscovered charm and the pretty junior with patience and a sense of humor hit it off. A relationship was born. For the next few weeks, Staci and Joe talked on the phone nightly and saw each other at least once on the weekends. And because Joe had the freedom to go home whenever he pleased, he stayed after school and finished his homework while Matt ran and Staci played volleyball.

Despite Joe and Staci’s newfound relationship, Matt’s interaction with the new girlfriend was limited. He spoke to her at school, and they enjoyed each other’s pleasantries, but Matt had never approached Staci without Joe there to tie it all together.

So when Marty suggested that Matt speak to Staci about Joe’s rapid improvement, Matt’s nerves took over. He slogged down the hallway and came to a stop a comfortable distance from the girl’s locker room. As the girls began filing out of the room, Matt’s stomach started turning. He practiced what he would say to Staci, even though he was just going to ask a simple question. When she sauntered out of the locker room, however, he forgot the words he was practicing. She saw him and walked towards him with a smile fixed on her thin face.

“Hey Matt,” she blurted while extending her hand for a high-five. “How was practice?”

“Um,” Matt hesitated. “Well, it was interesting.”

Staci used her left ring finger to move her hair from her eyes and continued the conversation without any trace of nervousness. “Why’s that?”

Matt let out a one-syllable laugh. “Well,” he said, “your boyfriend was there.”
Staci laughed hard and Matt realized that Joe was lucky to have such a beautiful girlfriend. “So now he’s known as ‘my boyfriend?’” Staci continued laughing. “Matt, you’ve known the kid longer than I have. Call him Joe.”

Matt smiled and forgot that he was ever hesitant to talk to Staci alone. “Okay. I can do that,” Matt nodded.

“Well, how’d he do?”

“He did great,” Matt answered, “and actually I’m supposed to ask you about that. Last time he ran with me, the kid could barely finish. Today, he was the third-best on the team. Do you have any idea as to how that happened?”

“Well, doing laps around the gym concourse everyday for a month can’t hurt.”

“Wait, who’s doing laps?”

“Joe was!” Staci grabbed Matt’s arm escort-style and he proceeded to lead her back to the bleachers. “Since probably the Monday after we started going out, he did laps around the top of the gym while we had volleyball practice. He even did warm-up laps with us girls. Sometimes he came down and did sprints with us when we got in trouble. Then he did his homework, and then he gave you a ride home. Didn’t he tell you any of this?”

“No,” Matt said shaking his head and smiling. He and Staci entered the gymnasium and found Joe in the bleachers with a book across his lap. “The bastard didn’t say a word about it.”

“Who’s the girl?” Joe called when he saw his best friend and his girlfriend walking arm-in-arm across the gym floor.
“Eh,” Matt answered quickly. “I found her in the hallway. She said she needed a real man because her boyfriend was a bit too feminine.”

“Yeah,” Staci said, playing along. “Matt here said he didn’t know any real men, but he’d try to help me find one!”

Matt went home that day encouraged by his friend’s presence and reinvigorated by his success. He picked up the telephone and, for the first time in weeks, dialed Nathan Marx’s number.

Nathan had almost disappeared after his get-together was busted in the weeks leading up to the state cross country tournament. He and the other violators were removed from the team, as expected. Nathan was bound too by punishment at home. He was allowed to attend school functions, but no other social activities. When Nathan’s father answered Matt’s telephone call, he was pleased to hear the voice on the other end. He immediately recognized it as Matt’s – a kid, he thought, who was not crazy enough to be involved in the underage drinking party.

“I want to talk to Nathan,” Matt said to Nathan’s father, but Matt continued before Nathan could get to the phone. “Mr. Marx, do you think you could let him come over here?”

“Can’t you come over here?”

“Well,” Matt responded, “I would, but I can’t drive yet.”

“I’ll let him if he wants to.”

About thirty minutes later, Nathan’s red, 1990 Plymouth Sundance pulled into Matt’s driveway. Matt was waiting on a lawn chair in the garage with the overhead door wide open. It was raining outside, and the steady pounding of drops knocked the first of
fall’s foliage from the trees. As he entered the garage, Matt tossed Nathan a can of pop. Nathan caught it against his chest, opened it, and sat across from his younger friend. Nathan’s hair, drenched by the rain, was matted down to his neck and forehead. His locks had lost their luster, and Nathan had lost some of his swagger. He was still the center of attention at school, but he said less and listened more. To put it bluntly, the get-together bust had ruined his self-image. He locked fingers with Matt as only teenagers do and began drinking from his can.

For awhile, the friends shot the proverbial breeze. They complained about their teachers and their class work first. Then, they talked about their home life. Finally, the garage fell silent and the two stared at their own laps. Just as Matt was about to bring up cross country, Nathan spoke first.

“What’s Marty got you doing at practice?”

“He’s got us working hard,” Matt said, shaking his head. “Repeats, fartleks, distance. He says we aren’t even going to start tapering until a few days before sectionals. He says that if we peak at regionals we’ll be tough.”

“I thought we didn’t have a full team,” Nathan countered. He said “we” as if he were still a part of the team.

“Well, we didn’t until today. We got a new runner.”

“Who?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Matt said in response, “especially if I told you he’s running third behind me and Derek.”

Nathan’s eyebrows rose. “Man, I have no idea.”

A smile snuck across Matt’s face. “Joe.”
"Joe Abner? Slo-mo’ Joe?"

"He is slo-mo’ no mo’. We did 400 meter repeats today and he was smokin’. I guess he’s been running for about a month now."

"Unbelievable," Nathan sighed.

"You been working out?"

"I go for a run every other day or so," Nathan answered. "Mainly it’s just to burn off frustration. I’m sick of being in that house. I can’t wait to go off to school. Then I can run as much as I want and drink as much as I want without having to worry about this stupid shit."

"Nathan, I’ve been thinking," Matt said thoughtfully. He put his can of pop down and leaned forward in his lawn chair. "Maybe we should give this stuff up."

Nathan returned a blank stare.

"You know? Quit drinking and partying so much. We’re young. We can come up with something else to do. Our lives would be a lot easier, I think, if we didn’t do stuff that was so, you know, illegal."

Nathan leaned forward in his chair, too. "Is that what you wanted me to come over here for? Did you join the Joe Abner Preacher’s Club or something? I get enough of this at home."

"I’m just asking," Matt explained. "You got kicked off the team already. If it happens again, you might be out of school. Colleges don’t accept expulsion cases. Then you still won’t be able to get out of that house. I just was wondering if you thought it be easier."

"Do you think it would be easier?" Nathan asked.
“Maybe.”

“Well, try this: go to the next party and tell everybody that you aren’t going to drink. See how fun and ‘easy’ it is to watch everybody else. Better yet. Just don’t go to the parties at all. It’s not ‘easy’ to sit at the lunch table the next day and not have a clue what people are talking about. All you can do is tell them what movie you rented or something.”

“I guess I—“

“Guess nothing, Matt. I know you want to be in the middle of everything in high school. I know you want to leave a mark. If you want to do that, you have to do what everybody else is doing. You can’t just stay away from people on the weekends and expect to be in the middle Monday though Friday.”

Matt was being pulled in opposite directions. His conscience was starting to kick in with the help of Joe Abner. Matt’s conscience, however, had never been popular. Nathan had, so he took it from somebody who knew.

“You’re not going to invite me to church, are you?” Nathan asked.

“Psh. I haven’t been to church since Easter,” Matt said with a laugh.

The two friends went back to normal teenage conversation for a few more minutes. Then Nathan stood up and announced that he had to get home. They locked fingers again, and Nathan ran his fingers through his shaggy hair, preparing it for the rain.

“Hey,” Matt said as Nathan was climbing into the Sundance. “You should come watch us run at sectionals.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Nathan said, rolling his eyes. “I’ll mark it on my calendar.”
Chapter 11

The state cross country tournament is a four-level playoff that lasts almost the entire month of October. Sectionals, the first round of the tournament, are run on a Tuesday. The top five teams and the fifteen fastest individuals advance to regionals the following Saturday. The top five teams and the fifteen fastest individuals move on to semi-state one week after the regional races. The best from the four semi-states then move on to the state meet.

The last two levels of the tournament are almost a complete mystery to the runners who have passed through Brown High School. A few of Coach Tuff's teams had advanced to semi-state when boy's teams were still running four kilometers instead of five. The last twenty years or so, however, had been miserable for the Grizzlies. Nathan's class began the resurgence. As freshmen, the team was respectable. As a sophomore, Nathan advanced to regionals as an individual. Nathan's junior year (Matt's freshman year) the team advanced to regionals. This year was supposed to be the biggest for Brown, but the busted party had changed everything.

Understanding the state tournament's hierarchy is essential in understanding the Brown cross country team history – or lack thereof. Matt Wade, who suddenly felt the weight of a team on his shoulders, was not thinking about history when he stepped onto the team bus one chilly Tuesday afternoon. His body was fresh and his legs felt light, so he set in his mind a fairly ambitious goal: finish in the top ten. Judging by the previous year's sectional race, the goal was readily attainable. He had finished nineteenth then, but also had had the chance to run in regionals based on his team's final place. His
sophomore season, he had some extra experience, but his dreary performances in the weeks leading up to the tournament were no good omen.

Joe and Matt shuffled through the bus’s narrow aisle and sat in one of the back seats. Their legs were too large to fit comfortably in the space between the front of their seat and the back of the one directly in front of them, so they slumped down and propped their knees against the seatback. They sat in silence for the first few minutes of the trip; then the nerves associated with the impending meet kicked in.

“I don’t mean to make you think about it more or anything,” Joe began, “but is your stomach turning as much as mine?”

Matt chuckled. “Your worries are small. It’s your first meet – no expectations.”

“Maybe your worries are small,” Joe responded. “You have expectations, but at least you have some idea of what your body is going to go through in a couple hours.”

“You want to know what you’re going to go through?” Matt asked. “It’s like this. That feeling you have in your stomach now is nothing compared to what it’s like when you step to the line. I can’t even explain it, but for those few seconds before the gun sounds, it would be a better feeling if somebody just hauled off and kicked you in the nuts.”

“Comforting.”

“Yeah, but then the gun fires and after you take two steps the feeling just goes away. You, me, and about a hundred other guys will be sprinting to the first turn and all you will think about is not getting trapped in or tangled in someone else’s feet. Then you’ll settle in and stare at the back of some other guy’s neck for awhile. Don’t feel bad about that, though, because someone else is staring at the back of your neck too. About a
mile into it, you’ll realize that you are going pretty fast and breathing kind of hard.

You’re probably going to wonder how the hell you are going to run the other two-thirds of the race. But dammit, don’t slow down. Right before you get to the two mile, you’re probably going to want to quit. Speed up, but not too much. Start passing people. Your legs will burn like they do when we are running sprints on the track during practice. You’ll be dehydrated like you get on a long run. Sometimes, even your arms will get tired and you’ll want to drop them to your sides. Then, when you and everyone else on the course is dying, you run as fast as you can to get to the line. The faster you get there, the sooner it will be over.”

“Tell me again why we do this,” Joe asked quizzically.

“Because,” Matt said with the crown of his head back against the seat and his eyes staring lazily ahead, “ten or fifteen minutes after you are done, you feel great….Most of the time. And then, well after the race is over, you’ll think about that sick feeling in your stomach again…and you’ll want it back. Anxiety is retrospectively the best feeling in the world.”

Matt’s effort to ease Joe’s mind ended up being a form of self-therapy. Joe pondered the speech for a few minutes and then started to talk some more. Halfway through his sentence, though, he realized Matt’s eyes were no longer staring lazily ahead; Matt was fast asleep.

When Coach Tuff and the five members of the team arrived, they found their traditional shaded area, pitched their tent, and tried to focus and stay loose. Four of the runners brought a set of headphones and their choice of music to listen to. The listening was usually supplemented by another activity. One teammate read a magazine. One tried
to fall asleep. One did homework. Matt sat with his legs spread apart on the cool grass and glared at the treeline 100 meters away. Joe was the only runner who didn’t come with music to listen to, so he stood, sat, and lay around trying not to look too out of place. The team members’ focus would continue for only a few minutes at a time. In the time it takes to listen to no more than two songs, a new fan would come to the tent. It was family of the runners mostly. The parents found their children and spoke to them briefly. Joe tried to guess what each was saying. Pep talks mostly, he assumed. Later, Joe saw a man standing alone a few feet from the tent with his arms crossed and eyes narrowed. He recognized the man as Matt’s dad.

“Hey, Chris!” Joe said with great enthusiasm.

“How are you doing, Joe?”

“I’m a little nervous, but I’ll live,” Joe replied. “Matt’s sitting right over here, do you want me to get him for you?”

Joe started back toward the tent, but Chris’s adult arm stopped the now-thin sophomore.

“He doesn’t like me to bother him before races,” Matt’s dad explained. “He knows I’m here, so I’ll just sit back and watch the meet.”

“Alright,” Joe nodded. “Well, I guess I better get back over with the team.”

He again headed toward the tent but was stopped this time by a high-pitched female voice.

“Joooooooooooooeee-yyyyyyy.”
He spun to see Jamie walking toward his with one hand still cupped around her mouth and the other high in the air, waving. Two feet to Jamie’s left was Staci. He jogged toward the girls and escorted them the rest of the way to the tent.

“We found each other in the parking lot,” Jamie bubbled when Joe asked why she was with Staci. “We’re the cheerleading squad.”

“Good,” Joe replied. “Our guys could use some.”

He pointed out the start and finish lines and let the girls go off on their own. First, they went past Matt to wish him luck. He thanked the self-proclaimed cheerleaders politely, but rolled his eyes after they and their perkiness passed. The rest of the meet is history – both in the literal and figurative sense.

Matt stood at the starting line minutes before the race began and tried to fend off the queasiness that comes at the beginning of all cross country meets. The five members of the Brown High School cross country team huddled in the tiny box painted on the grass indicating from what position they should start.

“Hey, Matt,” Joe said from the rear of the huddle, “could you please haul off and kick me in the nuts.”

Moments later the starter fired the gun and the race began. Joe consciously turned Matt’s speech over and over in his mind. Matt did the same thing subconsciously – no, instinctively. He tried to keep from falling when he sprinted off of the line. After a few hundred meters he settled in and stared at the back of some other guy’s neck. Less than five minutes into the race, he felt like he was going too fast and breathing too hard. He didn’t slow down. Right before the two mile, he hurt so bad that he wanted to quit. He sped up. Then he started passing people. He was perplexed when he realized there was
only one person to pass. Matt spent a chunk of the last mile trying to figure out where everybody else was. He had never led a race before. Ever.

His legs burned as the lactic acid enveloped his muscles. His mouth was parched. His arms were tired. But he sped up. Everyone else on the course was hurting worse than he was. He finished the five kilometer course in just under sixteen minutes – first.

It has been previously noted that Brown’s cross country team did not have a very notable history. The little it did have, however, was changed on that Tuesday evening. With Jamie and Staci squealing and his father silently pumping his fist, Matt Wade ran faster than any other Brown Grizzly had ever run.

Jamie was the first to greet Matt. She wrapped her arms around his weary neck and kissed his wind-burnt cheek. He would have kissed her back, on the lips, if he had had any saliva left in his body. Staci gave Matt a high-five as other runners began trickling in. Matt’s dad smiled and said, “Well done, son.” Matt thanked his father and then walked to the scrawny, floppy-haired kid standing a few feet back. It was Nathan Marx. He wore a Brown Cross Country T-shirt and a thousand-watt smile. He clapped as his friend walked toward him.

“I’m glad I came,” Nathan said.

“I wish you were running,” Matt responded. “That way, you would have been able to see me win from the back.”

“Bite me,” Nathan laughed. “Let’s go cheer on the other guys.”

Nathan and Matt left the mob and found a spot near the finish line, where they shouted encouragement to their four ailing teammates. Joe had finished the race three minutes behind his best friend, but far ahead of his expectations. He could also be
credited for his teammate’s strong showings. If Joe hadn’t come along, they still might have been running slowly in a pack, breathing lightly and cracking jokes. Instead, they all ran personal best times.

Despite the solid race, the team had missed a chance in regionals. The atmosphere on the bus ride home, however, was triumphant. Until two weeks ago, there was no team at all and the best runner was present only in body. The team – Coach Tuff included – felt intoxicated. When the bus pulled into the high school parking lot, he thanked his runners, announced that practices would continue as long as Matt kept advancing in the state tournament, and asked his star runner to join him in his classroom.

The differences between youth and old age were obvious in Marty Tuff’s classroom. Matt, who had just covered five kilometers faster than anyone from Brown High School ever had, was bouncing with energy. Coach Tuff was exhausted. You could see it in his silver eyebrows, which seemed unable to support themselves. They slumped down towards the blue eyes. Marty’s entire face was haggard and worn. His mouth hung open a finger’s width like someone trying to catch his breath without breathing too heavily. He sat down in his chair and folded his arms on the desk in front of him. He looked at the shimmering hair on his forearms and seemed despondant.

“You ran a helluva race today,” he said wearily.

“I had a helluva coach.”

Coach Tuff’s eyes and mouth received a quick burst of energy. He grinned and shook his head like a loveable grandpa. “You could have done that without me.”
“Seriously, Coach,” Matt argued, “I doubt it.” He couldn’t bear to sit still like Marty. Instead, he paced every foot of that classroom. His hands flew when he talked. It seemed as though he was trying to burn the extra energy.

“What about next year?” Marty asked.

“What about next year?” Matt queried back. “I can only get better. And besides, you’ll have a full team to coach next year.”

“You never know,” Marty responded.

“C’mon, you know we’ll have a full team next year.” Matt reached the far end of the room and whirled back toward his coach. He was using his fingers to count. “All but one of the guys who ran today will be back; two guys who got kicked off will be back. That’s six, and there’s what, five eighth-graders running who’ll be freshmen next year? And what the hell am I talking about next year for, because I still have at least one race left.”

“Matt, you’ll have a team next year,” Marty explained, “but you won’t have me. I’m retiring.”

Matt quit pacing. He plopped into the chair he happened to be standing next to. The lassitude that had characterized Marty minutes ago seemed to spread to the young, energetic Matt. He could only utter three words.

“Thanks a lot.”

This was not a sincere expression of gratitude. It was a sarcastic comment from a punk kid who had just lost a coach – not two months after he had lost his favorite teammate.
“Remember what I said to you after Nathan was removed from the team?” Marty was hoping for a discussion, but ended up with a monologue. A brief monologue. He walked toward Matt to give consolation. “I told you that people come and go and that feeling sorry for yourself is no way to cope. That wasn’t just a pep talk or some bull that I just made up. I was trying to get you ready for this.”

“You should have told me then.”

“There’s no way I could have. It would’ve been too much.”

In the middle of that last sentence, Matt stood up and left the room. Marty clutched his chest as his favorite runner walked out on him. He sat down where Matt had been sitting and resumed staring at his forearms.
Chapter 12

Matt’s relationship with his dad had never been cordial, but as the son started evolving from an innocent child to a rebellious adolescent, their interactions became brief and sparse. Chris Wade knew that his son went to parties and came home drunk. If he didn’t have evidence, he at least had intuition. Parents always know. The distinctive thing was that Chris never punished Matt for drinking and doing who-knows-what else underage. Some might call it bad parenting. Chris called it patience. He trusted Matt enough to believe the teen wouldn’t put himself in a position to get hurt, and if Matt confessed his demons, Chris would certainly deal with it. It could be called free-will parenting; Matt didn’t care for it.

Matt had the suspicion that his father knew about his failings. He left too many clues for his dad not to be able to figure it out. He came home late and smelly, he sometimes woke up Saturday or Sunday mornings hung over, and he spoke bluntly about parties on the telephone while his dad was still within earshot. What bothered Matt was that his dad never said a word about it. What Chris saw as tolerance, Matt saw as apathy. When you add that tension to the usual seditiousness of a father/son relationship, you’ve got a very turbulent home life.

Chris, to his credit, would do things to try to get involved in the nobler pursuits in Matt’s life, like attending cross country meets. Matt felt resentment. Chris would try to strike up conversations when the two were alone in the house at night. Matt’s stubbornness, however, made for many still nights in the Wade household. Matt usually ended up listening to music or playing video games or watching television. His father, too, tried to keep himself entertained, but he would have dropped any of his leisure
activities in an instant if his son wanted help with his homework, a person to talk to, or a slow partner to run with.

Matt came home a few hours after his father had beamed with pride at the sectional finish line. Matt had forgotten that particular moment and was wrapped up in the apparent carelessness of his coach’s resignation announcement. Chris had no idea that Matt’s conversation with Marty had just taken place. He greeted Matt with praise and a hot meal.

“You were amazing,” Matt’s father said.

Matt didn’t eat. He entered the kitchen and began taking his anger out on his dad.

“Marty’s a pretty good guy, don’t you think?” Matt asked his dad with contained fury.

“He seems to be, yeah,” Chris said, “and a darn good coach.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, but the jerk just told me that he’s quitting after the year is over.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he’s giving up on me.” Matt’s voice was rising. “He’s going to sit at home while some other guy that no one is going to want to work hard for is going to come in and try to coach us.”

“When did he tell you?”

“Right after we got off the bus, he pulled me into his class and told me,” Matt explained. He tried to control his volume and his face turned as red as blood, trying to contain the frustration. “I respected that guy. He’s the only reason I kept running.”

“It’s okay,” Chris said softly. “Just calm down.”
“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Matt lashed at his dad. “I just had the best day of my life and he ruined it! The guy’s crazy, announcing that he is retiring when the real season is just getting started.”

“What did you want him to do?”

“He should have told us before the season or after. Not four days before the most important meet of my life. First, Nathan does something stupid and gets booted, and now this. Everyone freakin’ leaves me! Always!”

“I’m always here,” his father said.

“Yeah, you’re always there, but you never do anything,” Matt countered. “That makes me feel real good. You don’t even yell at me when I screw up. That really makes me want to believe that you care.”

“Whether you believe or not, I’ll still be here. All I know is that—“

“All I know is that you can’t make this bullshit stop. It was the same thing with mom. She left and you didn’t do a damn thing to stop it.”

Matt stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“You shouldn’t blame me for everything that goes wrong,” Chris said softly. Matt didn’t hear. He was already in his bedroom.

His father was left stunned – the unsuspecting recipient of his 15-year-old son’s wrath. It was a role he played often, but never got used to. Matt somehow managed to bring up his mother almost every time. Chris marveled at the irony that his ex-wife had made a decision that he might never live down.

The phone at the Wade household rang later that evening. It was Jamie Boyd, calling to again congratulate her speedy friend. Matt remained calm and explained the
situation. He recounted how Marty had broken the news and said exactly what he thought of his coach now. As he spoke, all kinds of different thoughts ran through his mind. It was times like these – when he was filled with anger or frustration – that he wanted to tell Jamie that he wanted to be with her. He was still a ‘tweenager, though, and he was scared to say anything.

Jamie responded to Matt’s complaints with firm sympathy. She acknowledged that he was upset, but covertly and gently chided him for thinking only of himself. She spoke to Matt the same way his father would have had Matt given him the opportunity.

The next day, Joe stopped in Marty’s classroom before seventh period and let Marty in on the team secret.

“Matt told us what happened,” Joe said from the doorway. “He asked us to go to his house to run instead of practicing here...with you.” Joe looked down at his shoes, but Marty remained silent. “I was wondering if you could give us a workout. You know, so we don’t wear Matt out before regionals.”

“I was going to have you do about four miles,” Coach Tuff said, “but make Matt stay with you guys. He shouldn’t run at full speed like he does when he’s angry.”

Joe nodded and left the doorway. Marty ran his hands through his thinning hair and gave his desk a concerned stare. Joe popped back into the doorway.

“Why did you tell him last night?”

“Greed.”

The five members of the cross country team and Nathan Marx embarked on their four-mile run from Matt’s driveway a few hours later. The boys cracked jokes as always,
but the overall mood was as bitter as the October air. No one mentioned Marty before or
during the run. Afterwards, however, was a different story. With about a half mile left in
the workout, Matt couldn’t stand being with the pack any longer. He began pushing the
pace, and his teammates couldn’t keep up. Nathan, his long hair flopping with every
stride, was the only one to leave the pack with Matt.

“Better slow down, man,” Nathan said. “Save some energy.”

Matt looked the other way as Nathan spoke and simply sped up. He put some
distance between himself and Nathan as the two approached Matt’s driveway.

“There’s nobody out here to impress,” Nathan shouted as Matt pulled away.

When he got back to his house, Matt saw that there was someone else there. The
visitor wasn’t present to be impressed, however. In fact, he had been impressed the day
before. On that Wednesday, Coach Tuff was there just because he had something to say.
The Indiana sun was descending in the Western sky, and the clear atmosphere scattered
the light, giving objects a red glow. Marty was leaning against the bed of his truck,
directly in a ray of red light. When Matt turned the corner into his driveway, it looked as
if a spotlight were directing him to the object of his ire.

“Nice sprint to the finish,” Marty said seriously. “I’m impressed.”

Matt quickly ignored the spotlight. He wiped spit from his chin and walked
directly past his coach.

“Look, son, I owe you an apology.”

Matt continued doing things to look disinterested: stretching, re-tying shoes,
pretending not to listen, and pretending not to care.
"I'm sorry I ruined your night," Marty said. "I should have waited to tell you, and I'd like for you to come back to practice tomorrow. We'll work on extending your season another week."

"I don't know if I can do that, Marty," Matt said without looking at his coach. "I just have to ask what in the hell you were thinking. I always respected you and never questioned what you said, but that was the dumbest thing."

"Does it matter why I chose to tell you yesterday?"

"No," Matt answered matter-of-factly, "but I deserve to hear the reason if there was a reason at all."

"Well," Marty said, "it was supposed to be motivational."

"Well, on a scale of one to 'win one for the Gipper,' that has to be about the worst pep talk ever given."

"Tell me, for whom did you run that sectional race," Marty asked.


"Okay, good," Marty responded. "So there was your motivation. Yourself. But really, you've never run a race by yourself. You've always had a team behind you."

"I didn't have a team for two weeks after Nathan got kicked off," Matt interrupted.

"Yeah, and honestly, you sucked during those two weeks." Matt stood up and stared coldly at his coach. "You didn't have a team behind you, and you lost it. Then, when Joe came and you had a whole team again, you came alive. Your team motivates you. But on Saturday, you won't have a team. So I wanted to be the Gipper."

Matt's stare eased. "What?"
"I wanted you to win one for me: the old man who is about to leave the sport. I decided that this would be my last year long before you ever joined my team. And if I had waited to tell you until after the year was done, I didn’t want you to say, ‘If I had known, I would have run harder for you.’ Bottom line: I don’t want Saturday’s race to be the last one I ever see as a coach."

The sun peaked out from the clouds it was hiding behind. Matt squinted and stared across the road into a seemingly endless cornfield.

“Saturday’s not going to be the last race you see.”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t know I could run that fast,” Matt said. “Now that I know, there’s no turning back.”

“It’s not going to be easy.”

“Well, Coach,” Matt said, extending his right hand for a shake, “a wise man once told me that nothing good is ever easy.”
Chapter 13

What happened over the course of the next two Saturdays did not nearly hold the importance of the events leading up to the regional race. In those days, Matt evolved into a potentially great runner. He made quiet amends with his troubled friend, Nathan. He lost a coach, but learned to deal with it. He grew up a little bit.

Three days after Matt accepted his coach’s apology, he ran alone for the first time in his life. But by keeping his exiting mentor in the back of his mind, he made good on his guarantee to extend Marty’s career by another week. He finished thirteenth and once again beat his personal best time. At semi-state, he was not so fortunate. A fast field made it nearly impossible for Matt to advance. He performed admirably, but his season—and Marty’s coaching career—ended that day.

The runners and the runners’ parents threw a celebration to honor the beloved old coach. The athletes who had been forced to leave the team earlier in the year showed up, as well as some Brown cross country alumni who still lived in the area. It was like a birthday party and a wake combined into one. There was a cake, balloons, and plenty of laughing, but the party’s guests reminisced about the past, an early remembrance of a man who was still alive in the room. When one of Marty’s old runners began talking about the teacher’s traditional goal statements on the first day of a student’s freshman year, Joe and Matt flashed back together.

“Oh yeah,” Joe said to Matt with a sigh. “I forgot about those completely.”

“I didn’t,” Matt responded.

“Yeah, didn’t you say you wanted to be the school’s most popular kid or something?”
“Something like that.”

“Well, you’re on your way.” Joe tried to keep the envy out of his voice.

“What’s funny,” Matt said, looking out at the crowded room, “is that I wrote absolutely nothing about running on that goal sheet. Now, that’s what I’m thinking about eighty percent of the time.”

“And the other twenty percent, you think about Jamie,” Joe cracked.

“That’s a good one,” Matt said, feigning appreciation for the joke. “But it’s probably like eighty percent running, ten percent Jamie, seven percent parties, and three percent world record.”

“Are you friggin’ kidding me? You’re still on that record thing.”

“Hey man, I wrote it on my sheet. When Marty sends me a letter in fifteen years, I better have that done. I’m afraid he’ll hunt me down and shoot me if I don’t.”

“Well,” Matt said, now fully supportive of his friend, “let’s start planning.”

“I’m always planning, my friend. Always planning.”

How the world record attempt actually came to be had little to do with planning and a lot to do with luck. It really began back in Matt’s freshman year, when Jamie first said she, too, wanted to be immortalized in Guinness’ famous book. Since then, one of the two brought up the topic every month or so by asking if the other had discovered any new ideas. The other would answer, usually with a “no.” On the rare occasion that there was a positive response, the two would discuss the newborn idea until they concluded that it probably couldn’t happen. They had decided, through studying current world records, that individual achievements were out of reach. It takes a special person, they thought, to grow fingernails more than three feet long. Jamie once considered the idea of
chewing the same piece of gum for a month straight. Matt and Jamie decided they
needed to do some training if they were to accomplish the task. One day, in the spring of
their freshman year, the friends both popped in a piece of long-lasting spearmint chewing
gum first thing in the morning. They followed the current record-holder’s protocol by
placing the used gum in a cup of water when eating. Well, Jamie did, anyway. Matt spat
his gum out two-thirds of the way through second period. He couldn’t handle the hard,
tasteless gum and saliva-deprived mouth any longer. Jamie persevered, though, finished
the school day with the gum still in her mouth. It wasn’t until that night, when she was
talking to Matt on the telephone, that she briefly forgot about her rigorous training and
swallowed the almost day-old stick.

That was the closest either of the two had come to achieving their goal. Almost a
year later, Matt came up with a new idea – one completely unrelated to a world record
attempt. It was February of Matt’s sophomore year, and he was completing a semi-
regular stop in Marty Tuff’s classroom. A few times each week, Matt would stop in and
see what was going on with his old coach. They would usually talk sports, school, and
training, but on this particular day, they talked schedule.

“The athletic department is trying to plan for next year’s schedule,” Marty said
just before Matt was about to leave the room. “Are there any meets that you guys want to
dump?”

“Yeah,” Matt quickly answered. “All the big Saturday meets. We’re always in
the bus at least an hour to get to those things.”

“I’m afraid that’s something we aren’t really able to control,” Marty responded.
“Until a nearby school starts a big invitational, we’ll keep riding the bus.”
It was a brief, innocent conversation, but it led to something larger. When Matt, was sharing his complaint with Joe later in the day, Joe mentioned an overlooked, yet obvious solution.

“What stops us from hosting a big invite?”

Matt agreed with Joe, and the two friends took their case to Sandy Miles, the school’s athletic director. She appreciated the boys’ problem-solving and pitched the idea to principal McWilliams. He loved the idea, and the wheels were officially in motion. Just before sending invitations to more than fifty schools (spots were filled on a first-come, first-serve basis), she pulled the boys into her office and gave them a word of caution.

“I know you two are thinking big,” she said, “but please keep in mind that this is the first year and a lot of schools don’t like to change their schedules from year to year. So, don’t be surprised if we only have five to ten teams respond.”

Matt and Joe looked over the invitation as Mrs. Miles spoke. “We understand,” Matt said without looking up from the paper. Joe nudged Matt with his elbow, and Matt continued speaking. “We were wondering…”

“What is it?”

“The Brown Invitational is fine and all,” Matt elaborated, “but we were thinking we should make it more meaningful. Do you think we could change it to the Martin Tuff Invitational?”

Mrs. Miles smiled at the boys’ maturity and said she had no problem making the adjustment. A few months later, twenty-five teams had responded and Mrs. Miles made the decision to continue accepting schools, split the meet into two races to accommodate
everyone that was interested: one race for large schools and one for small schools. When Matt told Jamie about the overwhelming response to the new meet, Jamie had only one thought.

“How about the world’s largest cross country meet?”

“No even close,” Matt shot down her world record idea. “But there will be a lot of people there.” Matt quickly did the math in his head. About thirty teams. About fifteen runners per team. That’s about 450 runners. “That’s at least 600 people if you also count spectators and coaches and stuff.”

“At least!” Jamie shouted gleefully. “So what else do you do at cross country meets that could be a world record.”

The momentary excitement quickly left Matt’s countenance. He got caught up in the moment but didn’t think things through. “Nothing,” he answered. “We stretch, wait, and run. Beforehand, nobody does anything so they can save energy. Afterwards, everybody is tired and ready to go home.”

Matt went from being excited about the size of the meet to disappointed that there was no reasonable activity that could be done before, during, or after the run to get his name into the record books. This could have been the point where another dream died. Just like the gum-chewing, it was too large of a task, too idealistic to actually work. But then Matt met Tyson McGrath.

It was a strange encounter at a pretty normal party. Joe had gone out with Staci one Friday towards the end of their sophomore year, and Jamie was spending the weekend with family out of town. So Matt did what he usually did and went to whatever