

Chapter 20

The week leading up to the RC's first dual meet went by quickly. It wasn't so much that the team was running so well that the workouts went by quickly. It had more to do with PJ's own workouts over the last week and a half with his new running partners.

Over the last 7 days, Dan and the six other runners pushed PJ through a series of distance and hill runs. PJ loved the intensity of the workouts and the training related dialogue that they shared.

PJ's new training partners loved to hear the stories PJ told of the kids he was coaching at RC. One evening, David Santos, the runner that always wore an Adidas shirt suggested a nice interval workout for the high school kids that PJ decided to use the following day. It was a ladder workout consisting of a 1000 meter, 3000 meter, 5000 meter, 3000 meter, and 1000 meter all at tempo pace with 3 minutes recovery between each. The kids loved the workout and they seemed to be getting noticeably stronger. In fact, PJ was a little apprehensive in that he found that the last week of workouts he gave to the RC team were all based on feedback and advice from his new running partners!

It was now Tuesday evening and PJ was stretching when his seven buddies showed up to run.

"How's it going, coach," Dan Hutchens said as the group approached PJ.

PJ laughed and said "Fine...I'm a little tight, however."

"That's OK, we're going easy tonight," Pete, the most serious of the runners said as he touched his toes and stretched his calves.

“How’s the team doing?” Pete asked.

“Pretty good,” PJ answered. “Not great...but getting there.”

“They’ll need to be better than ‘pretty good’ if they are going to beat BCA”, Mark Hills interjected.

PJ looked over at Mark who was the quietest of the bunch.

“BCA?” PJ inquired.

“Yeah...they have a string of 300 something dual meet victories without a loss. They must have 50-75 kids turnout each year on the first day of summer practice. By the time November hits they are beating everyone.” Evan Brand added.

“They train on the hills over in Holmdel Park,” Pete said as he went into the hurdler stretch on the ground next to PJ’s car. “Holmdel is the premiere course in NJ...the home of all the key championship races...The States, the Meet of Champions.”

“The course consists of an opening 600 meters that is across a slightly upwardly sloping grassy field. Then you hit a roller coaster-like next 400 meters consisting of 4 short hills.” Pete continued.

“Those little hills beat the hell out of your legs!” Dan Hutchens added as the other six nodded in unison.

“After that, you have about 1 mile of flat running on mixed cinder trails and dirt road until you hit ‘the bowl’.” Pete said as the others started to groan.

“The bowl?” PJ asked as he started to laugh at the sight of seven groaning runners.

“Yeah...the bowl,” Dan Hutchens said as he took over the details since Pete had just laid down and put his legs back over his head. “The bowl is roughly a 400 meter section of the course where you run about 200 meters in a gradual downhill, followed by 200 meters flat, then a very steep uphill section of about 100 meters. The last 5

meters of this section is very steep and makes your thighs burn!”

“I’ve eaten cinder on that course many a time!” said Pete as he sprung to his feet. “The final mile and a quarter is much easier, however, most people are hurting so much by the time they exit the bowl, they just want to get the race over with.”

“My kids have done some hill work here at Warinanco Park,” PJ replied. “I have them doing hill repeats out to the 600 Meter pole.”

Just then PJ noticed how his running buddies just looked at each other for a moment.

“What?” PJ said through nervous laughter.

“Your kids are in trouble, coach,” Pete said as he motioned the group into their easy run.

“Why’s that?” PJ replied as he eased himself into the run.

“Because the hill’s here just don’t cut it...you need longer, tougher grades.”

PJ didn’t have to be told this. He had scoured the area for hills within running distance from the school but just couldn’t find anything better than the first 600 meters at Warinanco.

“But I can’t find anything better than this in the area.” PJ lamented.

“Yeah...that’s a problem,” Dan replied as he jumped to his feet and got the group started into their evening run.

The evening run was quiet and civil. Nobody pushed the pace and PJ mentally retraced all the streets and trails he had investigated in search of some better hills. As the 8 runners approached PJ’s car at the end of the run, they stopped and started to stretch lightly.

“Coach,” Pete said without looking up as he sat like an Indian with legs crossed. “A great hill to run on is Diamond Hill Road in Murray Hill. It’s about a 20 minute

drive from here. The hill is the perfect grade and about a mile long.”

“That’s too far to run to...don’t you think?” replied PJ.

“No..you wouldn’t run there,” answered Pete. “I recommend having the kids do double workouts 3 days a week for about 2 weeks. The morning workout would be hill runs on Diamond Hill Road. You could take the school’s bus or van there.”

“I don’t know if I can get use of the bus...and I doubt the kids will come in early.” PJ quipped.

“It can’t hurt to try,” Pete added.

PJ stretched quietly and thought about the suggestion. Once again, he was thankful for his new running companions. The suggestions they made always seemed so focused and correct. He knew that hill work would be the key to the team’s success. He was beginning to feel guilty for not coming up with the idea of using the school’s bus on his own. It simply never dawned on him.

“You know what Pete? I am going to try it. You guys haven’t been wrong yet!” PJ said as he closed his eyes and leaned over into the hurdler’s position to stretch.

Pete and the others looked quietly amongst themselves and nodded. It was as if the suggestion made by Pete was shared by all of them...and they all took satisfaction in the fact that PJ was going to follow through on it. These seven runners were more than just training partners for PJ. They were much more...and PJ was about to learn how much!

Chapter 21

“I’m sorry, PJ” said Brother Oakley. “The school has one bus and one van. The bus is used in the mornings by the hockey team since it is the only time they can get ice

time. The van...well...the van has a blown transmission and we can't afford the fix it right now."

PJ and Carmine sat quietly as Brother Oakley went through a brief list of the schools current debts.

"The heck with the hockey team brother!" Carmine said as he shook his head. "We always get them the best of everything! Uniforms, equipment, ...We hardly cost the school anything!"

"Now Carmine...I appreciate what your saying, but their parents are active in fund raising for the team. They pay for the ice time and uniforms themselves." Brother Oakley said while peering over his glasses at Carmine.

"I'm sorry PJ. You could have the van if it was working...no problem. But...we simply have to control costs."

"I understand brother," PJ replied. "But thanks for your time anyway." PJ added as he got up to leave.

"Kevin Glackin won't be at the race today," Brother Oakley said as PJ turned towards the door. "His sister, Kathleen was not doing well and he stayed home from school to help care for her."

PJ looked at the floor for a moment and then toward Brother Oakley. "How bad is she?" he asked.

"She has deteriorated much over the last year. PLS moves at different rates with different people. You simply can't tell." Brother Oakley said. "The Glackins are the salt of the earth and they will get through this. Kevin...God bless him...has been like a rock through it all. I make sure he gets the freedom he needs to be there for Kathleen and the family. I ask that you be just as gracious."

"I will brother. He's one of my runners...and she's the team manager...that makes them family. I see how they care for each other. And besides, Kathleen thinks I look like Ray Liotta!"

Brother Oakley shook his head and laughed as PJ and Carmine exited the principal's office.

Chapter 22

Union Catholic Academy showed up with 2 school bus loads of kids. They had slick royal blue uniforms with matching nylon sweatsuits. They went through their warm-up jog and stretches in unison. Their captain barked out instructions as to which stretch to be doing and the team responded like well trained soldiers. PJ watched and was impressed by the discipline they displayed.

It was now 3:45 and the race was supposed to begin at 4:00 PM. Mike Rocha, the coach of Union Catholic Academy walked over towards PJ with the race official in tow.

"Hi PJ, nice to meet you," he greeted PJ with a look of impatience on his face. "Where's your team?" he asked as he surveyed the course.

Carmine and PJ looked at each other and grinned. "We were just wondering that ourselves?" PJ answered with a laugh.

"Well I am busy this evening and we are going to have to start this scrimmage with or without your team by 4 O'clock sharp," Rocha snapped back.

"I'm sorry Mike," PJ replied, "I wasn't being a wise guy, they are just getting in a few easy miles before the race. They'll be here."

"Well...Okay then," Rocha replied as he reached out and shook PJ's hand. Rocha turned and returned to his team but the official remained and stared at PJ without speaking for a few moments.

"Coach...Do you even have a team?" he asked. "RC hasn't fielded one in years!"

PJ fought back the ‘up yours’ comment that he wanted to make. He looked over the official’s shoulder and saw the Union Catholic Academy team stripping down and approaching the starting line. They were going to start without the RC team being there.

Just then PJ saw movement from the wooded area between the starting line and the skating rink. PJ knew the Union Catholic Academy team would be tough so he decided to simply train through this race. He asked the team to do 2 miles easy followed by one mile hard before the race. He didn’t want them to have much rest between the mile and the start of the race. At the end of the race, PJ wanted his team to continue on with an additional hard mile followed by 2 miles easy.

The Union Catholic Academy team was lining up on the starting line as the RC runners came into view. All of their disciplined drill calling, stretch counting, coordinated stride outs, seemed to pale in comparison to the site of the seven ragtag RC runners rapidly approaching as they finished the end of their hard 1 mile segment. They approached as a pack, fast moving, running stride for stride.

And they were silent. PJ asked them to visualize during the hard mile and continue to visualize their race plan until the gun sounded. He wanted them to plan their attacks and rehearse how they would respond when their bodies felt tired late in the race.

Parents and spectators from both schools watched as the RC team reached the starting line. The race official chastised the RC runners for nearly missing the race. Some of the Union Catholic Academy kids snickered and found it amusing. The RC runners remained stoic and silent through it all as they toed the line waiting for the start. And then, as the official turned and walked out into the field to start the race, the pack of RC runners gently

tapped fists together and crouched slightly, awaiting the gun. As the official raised the gun in preparation for the start of the race, Andrew Cartolano, glanced over at PJ and grinned.

“Runners set!” shouted the Official.

Bang! And they were off.

“Did you see Andrew?” Carmine asked PJ as they jogged to the 800 meter mark.

“He looked ready...didn’t he!” PJ replied as he watched the wave of runners heading out towards the 600 meter pole. The RC runners were in the thick of it with them running as a tight pack among the top 20 runners. As they approached the 800 meter point, Cartolano, Dohne, Kinney, and O’leary were running together with the lead 5 runners from Union Catholic Academy. The underclassmen- Mannasee, Shipp, and Garvey were about 3 seconds back.

“2:40”, PJ shouted toward Cartolano. Andrew’s eyes met PJ’s and he nodded in acknowledgement.

Carmine and PJ sprinted towards the left field foul pole on the larger baseball field. This was the mile mark and if they hurried they could give Cartolano and the bunch their mile times.

“5:10”, shouted PJ to Cartolano as he raced stride for stride with the lead UC runner. Kinney, Dohne, and O’leary went by the mile in 5:14 surrounded by 5 UC runners. Garvey gained on the lead runners and passed the mile in 5:20.

“Nice job, Nick”, PJ shouted towards Garvey as the coach raced towards the flower garden to meet the lead runners before they headed out around the lake. As PJ ran he noticed a surge from Cartolano. This was no gradual increase in pace...but instead, Cartolano shifted gears and pushed the hill up to the 600 pole! By the time

he reached PJ, he was 50 meters in front of the 2nd place runner.

PJ stepped close to where Andrew Cartolano was running and whispered as he passed, "Listen to that voice...you won't fail it today!"

Cartolano went by in a flash. His breathing was perfect and you could see the spring in his step.

"He's on fire!" Carmine said between gasps as he finally caught up with PJ.

"Let's hope he is there at the end!" PJ said with concern.

"That a boy!" PJ yelled to Mike Kinney and Teddy Dohne as they moved into 2nd and third place.

"Ok...so we are running 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 10th and 13th. That's 29 points", PJ said as he tried to determine which team was winning the race.

"That leaves them with 4,5,6,7, and 8th. That's a total of 30 points!" Carmine added. "We are winning!"

PJ remained quiet because he could see the look on Kinney and Dohne's faces. They were entering the twilight zone. Their form was beginning to break down and their breathing was labored. O'leary was panting as he went by, and, PJ knew the remainder of the race would be difficult. And to make things worse, the UC team was running like a pack, and their first 7 runners looked comfortable.

"Go now!", a UC runner shouted to the pack that was running behind Dohne and Kinney.

PJ could only watch as the pack of UC runners put on a mid-race surge. Within about a minute they had caught Dohne and Kinney, both of whom, did their best to stay with them.

Cartolano zipped alongside the bike path that bordered the lake and passed the 2 mile mark in 10:40. He was now about 100 meters ahead of the 2nd place runner.

“Ten forty...Andrew...just hold this pace...you are running great!” PJ shouted.

Once again, Andrew nodded towards PJ.

“Put it to them Ted, Mike,” Carmine shouted as next pack of runners passed the 2 mile mark. Dohne and Kinney responded and surged to the front of the pack. Meanwhile PJ darted across the field to catch Cartolano as he turned and started heading up the first of the final two hills. PJ’s eyes widened as he watched Cartolano shorten his stride and increase his leg turnover.

“Pushhhhhh...Puuusssshhhhhhh!” PJ yelled to Cartolano.

With each step, Cartolano looked more and more like a future champion.

As Kinney and Dohne reached the sweeping turn at the end of the soccer field, they could see Andrew running up the hill that they soon would be facing, themselves.

“Damn...look at Andrew!” Dohne said through labored breathing.

“You Ready?” Kinney gasped.

Dohne looked over at Kinney and nodded. Then they shortened their stride and increased their leg turnover.

PJ had just started running towards the finish line when he noticed the move by Kinney and Dohne. He immediately turned around and raced up the hill cheering wildly. “Pusssshhhhhh...Puuusssssshhh!” his voice cracked.

Cartolano was now at the top of the last hill and making a left hand turn to run down the bike trail next to the road that encircled the park. After he left the bike path he had about 300 meters to go across grass to the finish line.

PJ and Carmine reached the finish line as Andrew rounded the final tree and streaked toward the finish line.

PJ noticed an older gentleman with a notebook and stopwatch at the finish line. The small crowd of parents and spectators that had accumulated applauded as Andrew raced through the finish line.

“Sixteen Ten...nice job Andrew!” PJ shouted towards Cartolano as he raced through the finish line and headed out onto the course for the extra hard mile.

“Looks like he simply can’t get enough of it.” Came a voice from the finish line area. PJ turned to see the older gentleman with the notebook and stopwatch smiling at him.

“I am having them run through this race as part of their training,” PJ replied in a low tone as he approached the gentlemen. He didn’t want to sound cocky (or to let anyone else know how he is preparing his team.)

“Yeah, this early in the season, it’s a challenge to keep the distance up when you have dual meets during the week and invitationals and championships on the weekends,” came the reply from the older gentleman.

“Well, obviously you are no stranger to this sport,” PJ smiled as he held out his hand. “I am PJ Irwin, the new coach at RC.”

“I know who you are, PJ. I remember when you raced McNab in the Meet of Champions in, I believe, 1978. I am Grant Edwins with The Ledger”, the old man reciprocated as they shook hands. “I’ve been covering cross country and track for various newspapers in NJ for nearly 48 years.”

“Way to go guys!” cheered the Union Catholic Academy coach as three of their runners crossed the finish line at 16:45. Immediately behind them were the 2nd and 3rd RC runners, Mike Kinney and Teddy Dohne. PJ surveyed the last section of the course and saw two Union Catholic Academy runners in a close battle with Nick Garvey and Matt Shipp. As they turned the last corner,

Garvey surged to the lead of the pack while Shipp visibly struggled to stay with the UC runners. As they crossed the line, the order was Garvey, both UCA runners, and Shipp. The UC runners surged through the finish to the wild cheering of their coach and fans.

“That’s the way to win!” the UCA coach yelled to his runners.

And while the win went to UCA, the more knowledgeable in the crowd of spectators couldn’t help but notice that as the blue uniformed runners were crossing the line and stopping, bending over, laying on the ground; the green shirted RC runners were heading out, without stopping for additional hard mileage.

“Way to go Matt,” PJ shouted to Shipp as he headed out for the final hard mile.

Despite the fatigue, Shipp smiled, shortened his stride a bit, and increased his leg turnover.

As the rest of the RC runners finished the race and headed out onto the course for an additional hard mile, PJ couldn’t help but notice how the frenzy of the victory celebration had quieted down.

“Nice race,” PJ congratulated the UCA coach and team as they huddled nearby for a post race congratulatory talk.

“Yes, congrats to your team, as well,” came the reply.

PJ noticed how a number of the kids on UCA were watching the RC runners run their additional mileage.

As PJ turned to walk away, he heard the UCA coach tell his team to get in a 2 mile warm down.

“You don’t expect us to run it as hard as those RC guys, do you?” came a question from one of the UCA runners.

“No....that’s nuts,” the coach replied.

PJ simply smiled to himself and kept walking. As he approached the grassy area where the RC runners had left their gear, he was greeted by Grant Edwins.

“Coach, do you mind answering a few more questions?” Mr. Edwins asked as he flipped open his stenographers pad.

“No, shoot,” PJ replied.

“Where did you coach before RC?” asked Edwins.

“Nowhere,” PJ said with a smile.

“So how did you land the coaching job at RC?”

“Well, I got laid off at my real job and my wife, who happens to work at the school, got pissed off when I started to redecorate the house while she was off at work,” PJ laughed as he answered.

Grant smiled as he made notes in short hand.

“How well do you expect the team to do this year?” asked Edwins as he peered over his glasses at PJ.

PJ stood silent for a while, and then answered as he peered over Edwins’ shoulder towards his team as they approached on their warm down.

“I am not sure, we haven’t had a full team in a number of years.” PJ started to answer.

“Eight to be exact,” Edwins said without looking up from his steno pad.

“But this group of kids has a lot of heart and I think they can run with anyone,” PJ said loud enough for the boys to hear as they finished their run. “My coaching style will test their limits, in fact, already today, I’ve been criticized for having them run too many miles. But if you are only running 40-50 miles per week and plan to cut back towards the end of the season... What do you do? Cut back to 25 miles per week and have them running 3-4 miles per day!?” PJ said with disbelief in his voice. “I simply can’t comprehend this!”

Grant Edwins smiled as he looked up and folded his stenographers pad signifying the end of the interview. “I agree with you 100% coach,” came the reply from Edwins. “You remind me of the fellow that coached at RC in the 70’s,” he added.

“Hey, do you want the kids’ names for your article?” PJ hurriedly inquired before Edwins could turn to leave.

“No, I already have them all,” Edwins answered as he turned toward his car. Then he stopped and turned towards PJ and motioned for him to come closer.

“Coach,” Edwins said in a hushed tone, “your guys are going to get massacred at Holmdel if you don’t start doing some serious hill work.”

“I have plans on taking them to Diamond Hill Road for hill repeats,” PJ replied.

“Good idea, I know the place,” Edwins responded. “Years ago, that used to be a popular training spot for teams such as yours.”

The moment that Edwins turned to leave, PJ started to brainstorm as to how he could get the kids to Diamondhill Road. He needed to get the van repaired. But how?

Chapter 23

As the last RC runner boarded the bus with Coach Carmine, PJ started to stretch in preparation for his evening workout. Tonight he was going to do 7 x 1 mile repeats at 10 K pace with his seven training buddies. As he sat in the butterfly stretch position, he heard footsteps on the cinders behind him. He turned in time to see Dan Hutchens jogging up behind him.

“Nice Snickers shirt,” said PJ jokingly, as if Dan hadn’t worn that same shirt for every run since they had met.

“Don’t you know it!” Dan responded gleefully! “Coach, I’ve been thinking about your broken bus problem, and I think I have a solution.”

“Please...I’m all ears...we lost a close one today and I know I have to get the kids to do quality hill work.” PJ said as he closed his eyes and got into the hurdlers stretch position.

Dan sat down beside him and started to stretch, as well. “Coach, I know this guy that has an auto repair shop in Rozelle,” Dan continued. “I think he might fix the van for you very cheaply...maybe for free. He is an old acquaintance of mine.” he added as he glanced off into the distance.

PJ studied Dan for a moment, noticing the far off look on the runner’s face. The next few moments were silent, with the only noise being a radio playing in a car parked off in the distance.

“Everything Ok Dan”, PJ asked as he resumed stretching.

“Uh...Huh,” he answered without looking at PJ. “I thought I recognized that song that I hear coming from that car over there.”

As the two sat silently listening to the faint melody coming floating across the parking lot, the moment was broken by the clammer of footsteps from behind.

“Hey Dan, Coach”, came the voice from the six runners that were approaching. “Sorry we’re late,” Bill Bahsman said as he came to a stop next to PJ.

“No problem,” PJ said with a smile. “Me and your buddy, Dan, were just listening to some music, and stretching. He had a great idea...that I should stop by...by...uh...” PJ stumbled momentarily. “Dan, what’s

the name of the guy I am supposed to contact to fix the van?”

Dan’s eyes met the eyes of his six buddies for a moment and then seemed to fix on Pete’s. “Bailey’s Garage, on Chestnut Street. He’s a great guy...I am sure he’ll help you out. Isn’t that right guys?”

“Yeah, he’s one of a kind,” came the response from David Santos as he grabbed Pete and put him into a playful headlock. It was almost as if he was trying to take his attention away from the conversation.

“Wrestling, hey I want part of that!” Dan shouted as he jumped to his feet and he tackled the two runners. In a moment, all seven of PJ’s running partners were on top of Pete, pulling his shirt over his head and giving him a pink belly.

“Jeez,” PJ thought to himself, “these guys are just like the clowns I coach...only older.”

“Okay guys, if we are going to run, I gotta get started soon,” PJ said as he leapt to his feet.

Moments later the group was striding out of the parking lot onto the road the circled the park. It was a relatively flat 1.8 mile loop, perfect for a pre-workout warm-up. As they ran, the group mixed accounts of their day’s experiences with running lore. The lore, while supposedly true, showed signs of the embellishment that is the case with most stories shared on the run.

“Hey coach, did we ever tell you about Harry Spooner?” Rob O’Mally asked. The other runners started to laugh when they heard the question.

“No, who was he?” PJ answered, while still be amused at how these guys refer to him as coach.

“Harry Spooner was this fictitious character we made up in high school.” Rob continued. “When we got in trouble we would always blame things on him. It became almost a game to us. One day, the principal actually made

an announcement over the loud speaker system asking Harry Spooner to report to his office!”

“I almost pissed myself that day,” Evan Brand remarked.

“Yeah me too,” David Santos added.

“Anyway, we had a runner on our team named Joe Mount. He was a sweet, but gullible guy, that we loved to tease. A great kid, but a target for almost every practical joke. Anyway, Joe had these very stylish glasses that he always wore. He could barely see without them. One day while we were all taking the post workout communal shower, Joe blurted out that he would love to meet this Harry Spooner kid that was always getting in trouble. The rest of us looked at each other in disbelief because we never realized that Joe didn’t know Harry was fictitious. Anyway, I noticed that Joe was standing there with his head and face completely covered with lather while his glasses were sitting on the shower ledge nearby. I grabbed his glasses and I positioned them over my “manhood”.

“It kind’of looked like Jimmy Durante with a beard,” Rob said jokingly. “Don’t you agree, guys?”

“Uh..I don’t think we were watching that closely...finish the story,” Mark Hills urged.

Rob continued, “ So there I stood with his glasses positioned over my Peter and I said, ‘Hey Joe...there he is now....that Harry Spooner kid!’ Joe, started to rinse the water off his head as he said ‘where...where....I gotta see this guy!’ And as he finished getting the water out of his eyes and started to move towards the ledge to find his glasses I said ‘ Right here, and pointed toward my work of art’. Not only did he call me every name in the book, he would not put his glasses back on when I gave them back to him. The next week, he showed up with a new set of glasses.”

PJ shook his head as the story came to the end and his attention transferred to the track that was in front of them.

“Are you guys ready for this”? PJ asked as he accelerated into the first of the seven 1 mile repeats.

“I’ve been ready for decades,” came the muffled response from Pete, who had been quiet throughout the warm-up.

Chapter 24

The next day, PJ left for school a little earlier than normal. Practice was not until 3:00 PM, however, PJ was going to stop by Bailey’s garage. PJ came to the conclusion that he could afford up to about \$400 towards the van repair. However, he hoped that Dan was right and that Mr. Bailey would fix the van for free.

PJ turned onto Chestnut Street at approximately 1:10 PM. As he drove north towards the center of Rozelle, he passed the Jack-in-the-Box and the Bank of Rozelle. He crossed over 7th Avenue and soon came upon the Bailey’s Auto Repair. It was your typical oil laden garage. Cars were strewn all over the front yard in various states of repair. Oil drums and a stack of used tires bordered the north side of the three-bay garage. The south side of the garage joined an old salt box colonial house with an eagle on the front door. There was a holly bush to the right of the front porch and an azalea on the left. The roof of the house was showing signs of wear, and the gutter was hanging off towards the rear of the home.

PJ parked his car near the stack of tires and walked towards the first of the three bay doors. As he

approached, he peered into the dark garage bay. The sun was bright, and between his eyes being dilated, and the bay being dark, PJ stood still for a few moments after entering the bay door.

“Anybody home?” PJ called into the darkness of the shop.

There was no answer.

“Mr. Bailey?” PJ tried again to find someone.

“Hold on, dammit ... I’m coming.” A mono-toned voice answered from deep in the back of the shop.

PJ surveyed the room as his eyes came into focus. There was an old Chevy Malibu on the center lift. Along the rear wall was a countertop that ran the length of the 3 bays. The countertop was cluttered with batteries, alternators, hubcaps, and numerous cans of oil.

Just then, PJ saw a large figure emerge from behind the Malibu.

“Yeah... What can I do for you,” the figure asked in a voice that was neither lively or friendly.

PJ was taken back by the appearance of Mr. Bailey. He was a huge gentleman, approximately 6 feet tall, and he must have weighed nearly 300 pounds. He was wearing black pants with a black tee shirt. The monotony of the outfit was broken only by the portion of Mr. Bailey’s stomach that emerged from beneath his shirt near his belt line. There was grease on his stomach, and a small hole above a breast pocket that contained a pack of cigarettes.

“I’m pretty busy these days,” Mr. Bailey said as he looked past PJ towards the street while pulling his cigarettes from his pocket. “You may want to try the Getty station up the street.”

“Mr. Bailey, I am PJ Irwin, the cross country coach over at RC and I...” PJ started before being suddenly interrupted.

Mr. Bailey's eyes darted back to meet PJ's and he growled, "Who the hell did you say you were?"

PJ was startled by the way Mr. Bailey responded. *Wasn't he listening?* PJ Thought. Even more startling was the intensity in Mr. Bailey's eyes. As PJ stared at him, he thought he saw a lightening bolt jump out of Bailey's left eye. Then he realized it must have been the reflection from a car passing by outside. PJ looked down and noticed that both of Mr. Baileys hands were now clenched. His forearm muscles looked like a boxer's just before the knock-out punch.

PJ took a half a step back and answered, "I am the cross country coach over at RC, my name..."

"On the way out, don't let the door hit you in the ass!" Hugh Bailey grunted through tight lips that clenched a Marlboro. He was breathing heavy as he pointed toward the street and stared at PJ. It was clear, he wanted him to leave.

As PJ started to turn to leave, Mr. Bailey did likewise and receded to the back of the garage where he had been working. PJ walked slowly towards the exit looking downward, trying to figure out what had just happened. As he approached the bay door he bumped into a man in a pin-striped suit that had just entered the building.

"So is he going to fix the van?" came a familiar voice.

Surprised, PJ looked up and saw Dan Hutchens without his Snickers bar shirt.

"What are you doing here?" PJ asked.

"I work nearby and was returning from lunch when I thought I saw you walking into the garage," Dan answered. "I thought I'd see if you were able to get anything out of the ol' bulldog."

"Well," PJ grinned, "your bulldog buddy told me to 'hit the road' and that's pretty much what I intend to do."

"Did you tell him who you were?" Dan asked.

“Yeah...I think that’s what pissed him off!” PJ shook his head as he answered. “So... if you don’t mind, I am leaving.”

“Hold on...hold on,” Dan said through a broken laugh. “Let’s try one last time.”

“I don’t think he’s going to listen,” PJ remarked.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” Dan schemed. “Did you ever hear of this guy Jumbo Elliot?”

“You mean the former track coach at Villanova University. He’s dead, isn’t he?” PJ responded.

“Yes, he’s dead, but before he died he coached Villanova and made them one of the greatest track programs of all time. He was consistently producing one great distance runner after another. People like Marty Liquori, Don Paige, and Mark Belger, to name a few.”

“Yeah, so?” PJ asked.

“Well, what most people don’t know was that he was a philanthropist, of sorts. He owned a successful construction company and personally donated quite a bit to the school and team. Without people like him, programs struggle.”

“I still don’t know where you are going with this,” PJ said impatiently.

“Tell Mr. Bailey that Jumbo Elliot would have bent over backwards for you.” Dan urged.

“You must think I’m a friggin idiot,” PJ said as he walked out of the building. “There is no way that Bailey will know who Jumbo Elliot was, or appreciate the significance of what you are saying!”

“Dan grabbed PJ’s arm and twisted him so that they were face to face.

“Listen, you want your kids running hills, don’t you?” Dan asked with a sense of urgency.

“Of course, but..,”

“Well then, do it!” Dan urged again. “I am pretty sure he can’t catch you if he goes after you! Besides, I’ll be right behind you.”

PJ stared at Dan, before shrugging his shoulders and turning back towards the garage. *I can’t believe I am doing this? Bailey couldn’t care less about Jumbo or this school! I just can’t friggin believe...* PJ stopped suddenly in mid thought.

Mr. Bailey stood in the doorway with his arms folded and a stern look on his face. “I thought I told you to leave!” he barked as he stepped towards PJ.

I can’t believe I am doing this! PJ thought to himself. Just as Bailey put his hands out in front of him to give PJ a shove, PJ blurted out, “Jumbo Elliot would have bent over backwards to help me!” Then PJ shut his eyes and readied himself for the first blow.

The silence was deafening.

PJ opened one eye to find Mr. Bailey standing directly in front of him with his hands on his head. Mr. Bailey’s eyes were closed, tightly closed, as if he was battling a headache, or some type of inner pain.

As PJ watched, Mr. Bailey’s eyes slowly opened and a bead of sweat ran down from his forehead down the side of his nose. Bailey’s face grew flushed and his outstretched hand trembled as he shook his forefinger at PJ.

“Oh yeah...,” Bailey started, and through a broken voice, continued, “well Jumbo Elliot is dead now, just like my son...who died in a bus accident on the way to the Easterns Cross Country Championship 20 years ago.”

Bailey fought for his composure, while PJ tried to comprehend what he had just heard.

“His death tore us apart. I blame the school for it. My wife blamed me for it. I could have driven him that day, but, I didn’t!” Mr. Bailey said as he started walking

towards the house adjacent to the garage. "Come with me, coach."

PJ turned towards Dan, however, he was nowhere to be found. *I'll be right behind you if there's any trouble....yeah right, Dan.* PJ thought as he realized Dan was nowhere to be found.

"Come on, coach", Mr Bailey said again, without looking back at PJ.

PJ walked quietly behind Mr. Bailey, studying the imposing figure as they made their way to the house. Mr. Bailey walked with his head slightly tilted to one side. He quickly traversed the 4 steps leading up to the front porch. He briefly glanced behind him to check on PJ. "

"Watch the bricks on the second step, a few of them are loose" Bailey warned.

The front door to the Bailey house was old and worn. It was painted brown, although the paint had oxidized and it appeared grayish. Upon entering the house, PJ was greeted by a musty odor. The house was dark and somewhat gloomy. Dark wood trimmed doors and windows. The white linen curtains were turning a dark yellow. The television was a black and white Zenith, with a knob for changing channels.

"Well, what do you think of the place?" Mr. Bailey asked as he stopped in the center of the dining room.

"It's ...uh...nice....I like the wood work..." PJ started to answer before being interrupted by Bailey.

"Listen coach...Don't bullshit a bullshitter," Bailey said as he made his way into the kitchen. "This place is a disaster. My wife was the one who took care of things." He added as he reached into the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of spring water.

PJ took the water without saying a word. He looked over Baileys shoulder and saw a 'God Bless this Kitchen' plaque hanging over the stove.

“My wife and I split up a few years after my son died.” Bailey resumed the conversation as he headed past PJ into the dining room, again. “They were really close, and she simply could not deal with it. She blamed me for not driving him that day. She would not let me forget it. I was suffering too, but she simply could not get control of herself.”

PJ looked down towards the floor as Mr. Bailey glanced towards him. PJ did not know what to say.

“She tried to kill herself, twice,” Bailey uttered as he wiped his eyes. “She eventually entered an institution, got some help, and left me a few months later.” I haven’t seen her in 15 years.”

PJ watched as Bailey paused at the bottom of the stairway leading to the second floor.

“I’ve worn black every day since he died...a sign of morning,” Bailey continued as he wrestled for composure. “I don’t live my life anymore...I just exist...I want to...” Bailey stopped and shook his head as if he wasn’t in full agreement with what he was about to say.

“Come with me, coach, I have something to show you,” Bailey said as he started to climb the stairs.

PJ followed Mr. Bailey up the steps to the landing at the top. Directly in front of them was the bathroom. Off to the right was a large bedroom, apparently the master bedroom. Mr. Bailey turned towards the left and stopped momentarily in front of a closed door. He reached out and gently traced over the impression of a winged foot that had been carved into the door by Bailey’s son. He sighed before a moment.

“This was his room,” Bailey said quietly, “I haven’t been in here in 20 years,” he added as he slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open.

The two men stood outside the room and were greeted by rays of sunlight that shown in through the bedroom

window. Dust was visible floating in the air illuminated by the sunlight.

“My wife and I could not get the strength up to clean up the room after he died,” Bailey said sadly.

“Everywhere you turn in there is some reminder of him.”

PJ looked through the doorway into the room. He noticed pictures of Jim Ryun and Peter Snell on the wall to the left. There was a bookcase and desk on the right hand side of the room. The bed was a simple cot with dark green blanket folded on top of it.

As PJ scanned the bottom of the bed he noticed something that caught his eye. “Hey, I remember wearing a pair of these,” he exclaimed as he stepped into the room and then stopped abruptly.

“It’s OK coach, you go right ahead, I’ll just wait here if you don’t mind,” Mr. Bailey offered.

PJ knelt down next to the bed and picked up a pair of Nike LDV 1000 running shoes. “These were the first shoes to have the wedge heel design,” PJ said as if he had just discovered a treasure.

“Oh ...uh...really...that’s nice,” Bailey answered in an almost uninterested manner.

“Yeah, today, most shoes have this wedge design...it was revolutionary,” PJ added. “And what do we have here?” he continued as he reached under the bed. “He pulled out a fluorescent green and black pair of Adidas spikes and a single yellow and a green Nike Oregon waffle racer. “This model of spikes was known as the “spider”,” PJ said with a smile. “I had a pair of these in college.”

“Pete preferred to wear the waffles during cross country”, Bailey said. “They only recovered the one waffle from the crash scene. They were Pete’s favorite racing shoe.”

PJ stared at the loan Oregon waffle for a moment and laughed, “Funny thing, my dog just stole one of these from a runner at the park a few weeks ago. He ran off into the woods and when I got home he was sitting on the porch with the shoe in his mouth. It was like a gift he was bringing me. Funny thing...crazy dog....”

“I love dogs, they are like angels”, Bailey answered as he began to warm up to PJ.

As PJ laid the shoes on the bed he turned and noticed a picture on the wall next to the doorway. PJ studied the picture for a few moments. It was an 8x10 of a high school runner crossing the finish line with a time of 4:11.8 above it. There was something familiar about this runner, PJ thought, as he moved closer to get a better look.

PJ suddenly felt a chill on the back of his neck. He had seen this kid somewhere before, but where. He stood, frozen,... a chill taking over his body. It was as if a cool breeze had passed by him. Then suddenly, it hit him. When PJ suffered the concussion at running camp, he had that dream that he caused a bus accident. As he struggled to recall the dream, he vaguely remembered laying on the ground next to a dying boy that was bleeding from where his ear had been. The boy said he was ‘here to win the Easterns’! This was the boy...he was sure of it.

PJ staggered backwards slowly until he touched the bed. He stammered as he pointed to the picture and spoke, “Who’s the miler in that picture?”

Mr. Bailey tucked his head into the room and looked towards the wall. “That’s him, Peter, my son.”

PJ simply stared motionless at the wall.

Mr. Bailey entered the room and uttered, “Twenty years is too long to have not looked at that picture. Are you OK coach? You don’t look so good.”

PJ looked at Bailey and then back at the picture. “Uh, yeah, I’ll be fine. Just my mind playing games with me.”

PJ glanced over towards the left footed Oregon Waffle lying next to the bed. He thought hard for a moment... “What foot was the shoe for that Nike brought home”?

Mr. Bailey walked over to the bookcase and grabbed a yearbook off the shelf. He opened it and brought it to PJ and then stopped suddenly. “Wrong year,” Bailey mumbled as he returned to the bookcase and grabbed a different yearbook. “This is the one I wanted to show you,” Mr. Bailey said as he sat down on the bed.

PJ took the book from Bailey. It was open to a picture of the entire cross country team. They were standing in front of the bleachers at RC.

“We lost all seven of them that day. They were great kids.” Mr. Bailey said through a broken voice as he stared off into the distance. “My son is right there in the middle.”

PJ studied the picture and the inscription below it. It read “The Varsity Cross Country Team - Dan Hutchens, David Santos, Rob O’Mally, Evan Brand, Mark Hills, Bill Bahsman, Pete Bailey”.

Once again, a chill surrounded PJ as his gaze was locked onto this black and white picture of a group of boys who never got their chance.

“They were a phenomenal bunch,” Bailey interjected as PJ sat motionless on the bed. “Four of them had mile times below four minutes and twenty five seconds. They set the distance medley record at the Penn Relays”.

Bailey reached out to take the book back from PJ and noticed that PJ’s grip on it had grown tight enough that his knuckles were turning white.

“Coach, do you mind...I’d like to go back downstairs...I can only take this room in small doses.”

PJ’s gaze remained fixed on the team picture. “Those names, those faces, I know them...” he thought to himself.

“What’s that on the front of that kid’s shirt?,” PJ asked as he pointed towards the kid on the leftmost side of the picture.

Bailey leaned over and squinted as he surveyed the picture. “Oh,” he started with a chuckle, “That’s Dan Hutchens, he loved Snickers candy bars, that’s the Snickers logo on his shirt.”

PJ pulled the book closer and stared intently at the faces in the picture.

“Son of a bitch,” he mumbled to himself. *I do know this bunch* he thought to himself as the hair stood up on the back of his neck.

Bailey peeled the book away from PJ and placed it back on the bookcase. He stood there with his back towards PJ for a moment. PJ noticed his head bow momentarily, as if in prayer. When Bailey turned around, PJ noticed Bailey’s eyes were watery.

“I’ll head over to the school and take a look at the van tonight, but I can’t guarantee anything”, Bailey broke the silence.

PJ looked up and replied, “Oh...uh...thanks.” He was still coming to grips with what he had just seen. PJ rose slowly from the bed. He felt nauseous and his legs felt weak. He slowly made his way down the steps followed closely by Mr. Bailey. Neither of the two spoke as they made their way onto the front porch. PJ descended the steps and walked slowly down the front walk. The warmth of the sun began to fight off the chill that had set in while in Pete Bailey’s room. He turned to say “Thank you” to Mr. Bailey. Bailey was sitting motionless on the porch with his head down. PJ could not help but feel guilty in that he had invaded this man’s privacy. He couldn’t imagine the painful memories he must have stirred up. *What do you say after having done such a thing?* he thought, *Thank you? Hardly.*

“Mr. Bailey?” PJ said from the front walk, but Bailey simply sat with his head down. Before PJ spoke again, Mr. Bailey made a sweeping motion with his hand. As if to say, “Please go, I’ve had enough”. PJ turned and walked slowly towards his car. He looked back over his shoulder a few times, but Bailey did not move. PJ got into the car and took one last look back at Bailey before turning the ignition. Bailey rose slowly and walked back into the house.

PJ looked down at the clock on the car radio and noticed it was 2:50 PM. Practice would begin in 10 minutes.

Chapter 25

As PJ pulled into the school parking lot, the team was already loosening up on the track. The warm up routine was becoming just that, routine. They would jog, then stretch, followed by some strides. As PJ crossed the bridge across the creek that ran through the school property, the boys jumped to their feet and started to do some strides.

“They’re almost ready to rock and roll”, came a voice from PJ’s right.

PJ turned and saw Kathleen Glackin sitting near the fence bordering the track. Her wheelchair was next to her, and she had her books arranged around her.

“How are you feeling, Kathleen,” PJ asked as her mere presence brought a smile to his face.

“Much better, now. Last week was rough, my medicine was not right,” she said as she shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes.

“We were worried,” PJ said.

“Ahh, I’m fine now. Besides, Kevin was with me and he kept me laughing the whole time.”

“He has that effect on people,” PJ laughed, as he looked towards the striding runners. There was Kevin, skipping, making the others laugh.

Kathleen followed PJ’s eyes towards the scene and shook her head and said, “My brother...what a goof!”

As PJ walked towards the runners, Vlad was the first to greet him. “I hear it’s going to be an easy day.”

PJ stared at the group for a moment. He was still wrestling with what had just happened at Bailey’s garage.

“Well, Vlad. It’s going to be kind of a moderate day. I am hoping to start doing some real hill work next week. I’d like to tone the workouts down a little so you go into it with fresh legs.”

The runners listened intently. They seemed focused, awaiting instruction, and ready to perform.

“Today will be an 8 mile run with the middle being at tempo pace. I want you to do the Mother Seton route”, PJ explained.

“Will we be adding on the Rahway Park Loop,” Garvey asked.

“Yes. I want you to go out at 7:30 pace until you reach Mother Seton High School. Then I want you to drop it down to about 6:00 minute pace until you exit the park. That will be about 3 miles at tempo pace.”

The runners continued to stretch while they listened.

“I expect you to be back at the track in 56 minutes. I’ll be here waiting for you,” PJ said before turning and walking towards track exit.

“Com’on guys,” he added, “Let’s get this one over with.”

A few hurdler’s stretches later and they were off. Cartolano and O’leary led the team out of the parking lot

and onto Raritan Road. The rest of the pack was tightly bunched behind them. As they reached the Rozelle Shopping Center, they went single file since the road is a little busier at that point. They crossed the intersection at Wood Avenue and continued up Raritan Road to Winfield Park. Along the way they passed Springfield Road where the legendary runner and high school coach, Jim O'leary had lived as a child. It was also, the two mile mark and Cartolano checked his watch to make sure they were on target.

"Fifteen flat", Cartolano uttered as he darted around a garbage can that was left on the sidewalk.

They continued out Raritan Road until they reached the JB Williams factory in Clark. They made a left onto Westfield Avenue and headed towards Mother Seton. As they passed under the Garden State Parkway underpass, Teddy Dohne let out a yell. He loved the way it echoed and always let out a yell when he reached this point of the run. O'leary and Cartolano added their versions, as well.

The first intersection after the underpass was Amsterdam Road. The group made a left onto Amsterdam and they knew that the pick-up was about to begin.

Cartolano readied the troops, "We pick it up at the red house."

No response from the pack...it was time to focus.

The change in pace, for most runners, starts with a change in stride length. Usually, a brief shortening of the stride, followed by a gradual pick up in leg turnover rate, then finally a gradual increase in stride length. PJ had taught them this technique and urged them to think about it whenever they were changing pace. From PJ's point of view, it was a good way to take their mind off the fact that they were challenging themselves to run faster.

The group crested the hill on Amsterdam and were heading towards the entrance of the park when Kevin Glackin noticed two people having what appeared to be an argument with each other.

“Hey...what the hell is going...,” Kevin said as he motioned towards the scene.

Cartolano looked over and saw a woman clutching a baby carriage with one hand while her other arm was outstretched clutching her purse. Also, clutching the purse was some guy in torn jeans and an old sweatshirt. He was frantically pulling at the purse and beating on the woman’s head to get it way from her.

“Motherfucker....leave her alone...,” Kevin yelled as he took off directly towards the couple. The woman released the purse and fell to the ground and the guy took off running with the purse. Kevin chased the guy into the park and the rest of the team chased Kevin. They were heading towards a large fence and they figured they had this guy trapped.

Suddenly, like a Gazelle, the loser jumped up and started to scale the fence. Just as he hoisted himself over the top, Kevin let out a yell and virtually leaped over the fence in a single bound. He landed on the other side; directly on top of the purse snatcher.

“Give me the damn purse!” Kevin growled as he wrestled briefly with the guy. The guy handed it over and then ran away. Kevin cut his lip during the scuffle, but otherwise, walked away unscathed.

The rest of the team congratulated Kevin as he scaled back over the fence.

“You OK,” Nick Garvey asked?

“Yeah...is the woman okay?” Kevin replied.

They turned and noticed a cop car approaching. The team walked over to the car as it came to a screeching

halt. The woman was in the back seat and the cop was helping her out as the boys walked up.

Kevin handed the purse over to the woman and asked her if she was OK.

Through broken English she replied, "Thank you very much."

The boys watched nervously as Kevin gave the police his information. Moments later a second police car rolled up with the purse snatcher in it. Kevin and the woman both indentified him and he was arrested.

Finally, the lead cop said they were done and that the boys could leave. In no time they were up to full stride and circling the outside of Rahway Park. Cartolano checked his watch and they were down to six minute pace.

"We're only an hour late," Cartolano chuckled as they headed into the homestretch of the run.

Meanwhile, PJ paced back and forth across the parking lot because they were not back yet. PJ wanted to leave and get over to the park to talk to that strange group of runners that looked exactly like the kids in the pictures at Bailey's house. He was irritated...he wanted answers...and he didn't want to wait for these kids.

He decided to leave.

"Screw them." he thought, "they're probably doing something irresponsible again...I'll straighten them out tomorrow."

PJ hopped in his car and headed over to Warinanco Park. He had a meeting with ... well...he just wasn't sure with whom.

PJ could see the seven of them standing near the track as he pulled into the parking lot. They were standing close together, not stretching, just talking.

PJ stepped slowly from his car. His legs felt a little rubbery...like they did the time he ran his first and only triathlon. He didn't like this feeling and, as a result, he vowed never to do another.

As he locked his car door, he noticed the reflection of his face in the window. Briefly, if only for a moment, he thought of getting back in the car and leaving. As he stared, he noticed his hair gently blowing in the wind. He paused and shut his eyes and enjoyed the cool moment as the breeze passed. He felt the wind go through his hair and he knew what he had to do.

Chapter 27

It was 97 steps from the car to the warm-up area they used. PJ felt every one of them today. His legs felt weak, they trembled more the closer he got to the group.

There were no words that were appropriate for their greeting tonight. Simply a stare, a collection of them. PJ stood facing the group and stared into the seven sets of eyes, the fourteen pupils. And they stared back....without blinking....without movement....they just stared.

"Are you Peter Bailey?" PJ asked as he motioned towards the runner.

"Yes sir, I am," came the reply.

"And you? Are you Dan Hutchens?" PJ pointed to the runner.

“Hey, you’re good,” snickered Hutchens, as the rest of the group chuckled lightly.

“Well what the hell do you want me to do?” PJ snapped back. “You guys aren’t real!” “You’re dead! You’re friggin’ dead!”

“Hey Santos....That mean’s “mucho muerto” for you!” Rob O’Malley teased.

“Gotcha! Yo soy mucho dead!” David Santos answered. “Por Que?” he added.

“Yeah...Like you don’t know why,” quipped O’Malley. “You’re the numbskull that threw the spike wrench at Bahsman!” he added.

“Hey, Bahsman should have caught it,” Santos shouted back.

“Hey, wait a damn minute, I didn’t even know it was coming,” Bill Bahsman jumped to his feet and lunged towards Santos.

Hutchens and Bailey grabbed Bahsman as PJ simply stared with a confused look on his face.

“You’ve been blaming me for the accident for years!” Bahsman added.

“Relax Bill,” Dan Hutchens said calmly. “Santos is only kidding.”

“Yeah, Sorry about that Bill,” Santos added as he walked up and put his arm around Bill’s shoulder.

Bill looked down towards the ground and started to weep. The group of runners quietly gathered around him to comfort him. Dan looked over his shoulder towards PJ and then whispered something into Pete Bailey’s ear.

Bailey nodded and broke away from the group and walked over towards PJ.

“It’s rough for us,” Bailey started. “We’ve been dead for nearly 20 years; yet, it’s different than we imagined. It’s lonely, frustrating,” he added as he looked back towards his tight knit bunch of friends.

“At first, we didn’t know what was going on. We thought we survived the crash. However, when the rescue squad showed up, they simply walked around us, they didn’t hear our voices, they seemed to be ignoring us as we told them we were “OK”. We told them they didn’t have to climb down the side of the hill bordering the Hudson River. After all, we had all managed to climb up the embankment to the side of the road where the bus went through the guardrail.”

PJ listened, intently.

“We shouted to the rescuers that the bus was empty, we were all accounted for, and the body of the driver was only a few feet from the side of the road. But they went down anyway.”

“So what happened?” PJ asked as the rest of the boys came closer.

“They started pulling out the bodies,” Dan Hutchens said as he fought back tears. “We were dead.”

“So why are you here?” PJ asked.

“Good question, we don’t know,” Pete Bailey answered. “For the last 20 years we’ve been wandering around Union County, visiting our families, observing our friends and families, trying to communicate...” Bailey added before being interrupted by Bahsman.

“The key word is trying!” Bahsman lamented.

“Twenty damn years trying...wandering...wondering...”

“and running!” Pete added with an upbeat tone. “it is what we do to find peace.”

“Coach,” Pete spoke slowly so as to allow PJ to hear every word. “You are the only person in the last 20 years to have been able to see or communicate with us.”

PJ stood silent gazing into the eyes of the seven as they stood before him. For the first time, PJ noticed a sadness, loneliness in their eyes.

“Why do you think I can see you?” PJ asked.

“We are wondering the same thing,” Pete answered.

“I...I...don’t know what to say,” PJ added.

“Neither do we,” Dan Hutchens interjected. “But there must be a reason. This has to end.” Hutchens added through a strained voice.

“Yesterday I ate dinner with my mom and dad,” but they never knew I was there,” David Santos chimed in. “I watched my mom cry as she looked at the picture of me on the china closet in our dining room. I hugged her, but it didn’t help, she did not know I was there.”

“I had the same thing happen to me last week,” Evan Brand added. “My sister, Jana, cries at least once a day.”

“And my father...he wishes he was dead,” Pete Bailey turned and looked again at PJ exposing the tears that had formed in his eyes. “My father wanders through life wishing he was dead! I can’t bear to see him this way, yet, I can’t escape it! He wanders through life wishing he was dead...I wander through death wishing I was ...either alive or dead...just not wandering!”

PJ stood before them, confused.

“Somehow coach, you’ve got to help us,” Pete said.

PJ nodded, but didn’t know why. He had no idea what to do. As he watched the boys console each other, he repeated everything he had just heard over again in his mind. He felt weak. What could he do?

“I feel weak,” PJ said as he moved towards his car. “My legs feel a little wobbly.”

“Like you saw a ghost?” David Santos wisecracked.

“Seven of them,” PJ chuckled.

“There’s only one thing to do when the legs feel wobbly,” Dan Hutchens shouted as he smacked his hands together.

“A two mile warm-up followed by a 5 mile tempo run?” O’Malley said in a matter-O-fact way.

“Exactly! You in, coach?” Dan said as all eyes were on PJ.

“Uh...Yeah, I suppose so.” PJ said as he turned and walked numbly back.

Moments later the group gently broke into an easy pace for the next two miles around the park’s perimeter. The group remained silent during the warm up with the only words occurring when they increased the pace at the start of the tempo portion of the run. PJ ran at the back of the back and observed the seven runners in front of them. They looked like thoroughbreds as they gracefully ran around the park. PJ noticed how perfect their form was. They glided as they ran, as opposed to bouncing. All of their motion was in the forward direction, no up and down. Their arm-carry as well, no wasted motion, no side to side. They were perfect. Well coached no doubt.

PJ’s legs recovered enough to allow him to run the next five miles at 5:45 pace. Actually, PJ would normally run a tempo run such as this when he felt a little tired or wobbly. Either one of two things would happen during the 2 mile warm up section. He would recover and have a productive workout, or he would fold before the tempo section got started. Today he was happy that he made it through the tempo.

The final mile was more of a warm down for the group.

“You know coach...,” Pete Bailey started as they glided gently through the last mile. “...in life, there was only one constant for me. It was running. It never mattered what type of crap happened during the day, I could always count on my appointment with the road”.

PJ smiled and added, “ I know exactly what you mean, Pete. I can remember planning out my work day and then going to work and accomplishing nothing that I had planned. It would be one surprise after another. But

when the day was over, I regained control and did my run. I did MY run, on MY course, at MY pace, for as long as I wanted to.”

The two looked at each other and smiled.

PJ giggled and said, “You know, when it got real bad at work I would run at lunch time. Afterwards, I used to love sitting there in afternoon meetings with sweat still running down my face with some fat SOB on our management team staring at me like I was from another planet or moving away from me because I wrecked. Yet, half of them smelled like cigarettes, had yellow teeth, and couldn’t take the steps to the 4th floor without taking a break.”

PJ paused for a moment and then continued, “I always scheduled my meetings for the 4th floor conference room and then pasted the out of order signs on the elevator. Did it for 2 years without anybody catching on.”

The boys laughed at PJ’s story as they came to the end of their run.

“Gentlemen,” PJ said hesitantly, “I really don’t know how I can help you. But I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thanks coach,” they replied as PJ took a deep breath and simply watched as the boys jogged off towards the track.

But what can I do? PJ wondered to himself.

Chapter 28

As PJ drove home he still couldn’t believe what had happened. He thought he would wake up at any moment and realize it was just a dream.

As he turned off Park Avenue onto Linden Road he noticed raindrops starting to land on his windshield. A few moments later a steady rain was falling and wet streets

were soon reflecting the headlights of the rat race heading home from work.

PJ stopped, briefly, for a coffee at a Quik Check and got back into his car. He sipped the elixir and took in the “earned sensation” that was a combination of endorphins and caffeine. PJ sat and listened to cars passing by on the rain slicked road. He noticed how their tires “sighed” in the rain as if these vehicles would rather be somewhere else. PJ sighed and thought of how these boys would like to be somewhere else, as well.

For a moment he felt embarrassed because the word ghosts came to mind when he thought of them. But “ghosts” does not seem like the right word to use. They seem so full of life, so beyond death. *You become a ghost after you finish your life here on earth* PJ thought. *Ghosts are part of the “afterlife”.*

PJ continued home and pulled to a stop in his driveway. Taylor opened the front door of the house and watched as he walked up the front path.

“You look dead,” she joked.

PJ didn’t laugh. “No, I am just a little tired.”

“Well how was your day?” She asked.

“Same ‘ol stuff,” he mumbled as he walked into his den and turned on his computer.

“I saved dinner for you.”

“I’m not that hungry ,” PJ answered as he turned and looked into Taylor’s eyes.

“Are you Ok?”

“Yeah, just a little tired. I need to do a little research on,..uh,,, race strategies, tonight. Boring stuff, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Taylor answered as she headed off towards the living room. “I have a show to watch tonight, anyway.”

PJ turned back to the computer in time to see the last of the desktop icons loading on the screen. PJ clicked on internet explorer and in no time was busy surfing the web for answers.

He did a search under “Rozelle Catholic” and “Accident” and “Cross Country Team” but found nothing.

He also tried each of the runners’ names but came up empty handed, as well.

He entered “Ghosts”, “Spirits”, “Séance”, and got thousands of hits. He searched for hours, but did not come away with any ideas.

He looked down at his watch and noticed it was 11:30 PM. Taylor must have already been in bed. He went to shut down his computer by pressing the “start” and then “shutdown” icons on the screen. The computer prompted him, “Are you sure you want to Shut Down?” and he answered, Yes.

As the computer started the shutdown process, PJ left the den and walked into the bedroom.

“Are you asleep?” PJ whispered in Taylor’s direction.

“No” was the response from her side of the bed. “I just shut off the TV, the show I was watching had a 2 hour special tonight and it just finished.”

“Oh, I see.” PJ said as he slid into bed next to her. “What show was that?” he asked as he leaned over to kiss her.

“Crossing Over,” Taylor said as she pressed her lips against his and started to reach her hand behind his head and let out a sexy little moan.

PJ pushed back abruptly.

“I’m sorry hon, I forgot something,” and he jumped out of bed and hurried back to the den.

The computer was still with the “Are you sure you want to shut down the computer” prompt on the screen. PJ shook his head and thought *I thought I told this thing*

to shut down. But he was glad it didn't because he wanted to do one more search. He frantically logged back on and got to the internet search page. This time he typed in the following "Spirits" "Afterlife" "Crossing Over".

A single article came up. It was by a Peruvian paranormal expert named, Heide Aliaga. The article indicated that she was used in some unsolved murder cases. She also has been involved in what were termed "ghost whisperer" situations where she was apparently hired by homeowners to rid their places of ghosts and apparitions. As PJ read on he learned that in most cases she claimed the ghosts had some sort of "unfinished business" here on earth at the time they passed. She attributes her successes to being able to complete the business for the apparition, whatever it was.

The desk chair squeaked as PJ leaned back and stretched his arms out over his head. But what unfinished business could a group of high school students have? And why do all seven of them have unfinished business. Surely one of them would have crossed over?