

## Chapter 29

It was 5:30 AM when morning's first light broke through the bedroom window, warming Taylor's cheek enough to cause a stir. Still in a haze, she reached over and felt for PJ. His spot on the bed wasn't even warm as she rose to survey the situation.

Moments later she quietly strolled down the hall and noticed a light on in the den. The door creaked as she gently opened it and found PJ asleep at the computer. She put her face up next to his ear and whispered "You're going to be late."

"Whaa..uhh", PJ groaned as he opened his eyes. The light from his computer monitor made opening his eyes even more irritating. Never mind the backache he had from sleeping in the desk chair.

"I'll get some breakfast ready for the two of us," Taylor said as she kissed him and headed for the kitchen.

"Great", PJ groaned as he put his head down on the desktop to catch a few more winks.

Just then, PJ noticed something and looked up at the computer monitor. He must have hit the mouse or keyboard as he laid his head on the desk because the screensaver was no longer being displayed. Instead, the local New Jersey Online webpage was being displayed. He briefly surveyed it and then decided to get up to take a shower. As he turned towards the door, he took one more look back at the screen and noticed the local "Happenings" section. This part of the website usually contained information on local music and entertainment in the area. It also listed the various speakers that were lined up to speak at the local library and literary club.

PJ clicked on the *Happenings* icon and brought up the calendar of events. As he surveyed the list, he noticed a

familiar name, Heide Aliaga, scheduled to appear at the library two days from now. She was hawking her latest book, entitled "*Voices from Beyond*". Maybe she could help him, he thought as he noted the time for the presentation.

"Get a move on, buster!" hissed Taylor as she passed by the den.

"I'm moving, I'm moving," PJ replied as he leapt to his feet and headed toward the bathroom to shower, shave, and be on his way.

As Taylor showered, PJ woofed down the French toast she had prepared. He took one final sip of his coffee and headed out the door to his car.

In no time, PJ was heading down Raritan Road towards RC. Soon he would be busy completing a few meet entry forms and preparing the workout for the day. The boys were getting stronger and would soon be entering the next mesocycle of training geared towards increasing their anaerobic thresholds. Mixing speed work with the dual meet schedule would be the challenge for the next four weeks. Today's schedule would be repeat 800's finishing each with an uphill surge. They would start out at 3:00 minute pace and work down to 2:20 by the last one.

The team gathered at 2:45 PM for the group jog over to Warinanco Park. The group arrived at the site near the lake where PJ had measured out an 800 meter loop. The boys stretched as PJ and Kathleen Glackin prepared the log sheets to record the interval times.

"You look a little tired, coach," Kathleen said as she noticed redness in PJ's eyes.

"Didn't sleep too well last night, Kathleen," he replied as he filled in the clipboard.

"Wife problems?"

PJ laughed and tapped the clipboard on Kathleen's head, "No not wife problems, young lady!"

"Drat!," Kathleen replied jokingly.

"OK guys, I am not happy that you guys decided to screw off during the tempo run around Rahway Park. I waited here for you for nearly 70 minutes and you still weren't back. I come here every day hoping to make runners out of you guys...I expect you to meet me halfway."

"coach...", David Santos started.

"Not now, David...I want to make MY point. We are here to train...YOU and ME. I expect you guys to do the workout I assign to you! Got it!

"Yes..." the group answered.

"You guys are improving, but you're not good enough to sacrifice even one workout! Got it!

"But coach..." Vlad started.

"Quiet Vlad." PJ continued as he pulled a newspaper out from the bag he used to hold the workout paperwork. "Listen guys, in two days we go up against Westfield and Cranford in a tri meet. In today's paper there was an article about the race. Let me read it to you. Here's the headline, *Westfield faces off against powerful Cranford team in Cross Country Showdown!* " PJ paused and looked briefly at his team before continuing. "*On Thursday, returning Group 4 champion, Westfield puts their unbeaten streak on the line as they face a rejuvenated Cranford squad at Warinanco Park.*" PJ looked again at his men as he continued. "*Westfield returns with 6 runners from last year's varsity squad to defend itself against a Cranford team that is predicted to be in the top 10 at the meet of champions this year. Cranford's number one runner, Mitch Derning, placed 12<sup>th</sup> in the national championships last year in San Diego and is considered a favorite to win the meet this year.*

*The rest of the Cranford squad are juniors and seniors, all with times below 17:05 on the Warinanco course. As we head into the championship portion of the season, this dual meet should be a preview of what lays in store for later in the season.”*

PJ glanced up at the team one more time. Teddy Dohne stood there with his mouth wide open. “Hey, wait a minute! That’s not a dual meet on Wednesday! Dohne blurted out.

“Exactly!” PJ said as he shook his head. “We can’t be screwing around guys. We have no reputation! People don’t even know we exist!

Rod O’leary walked up and grabbed the paper from PJ’s hands and ruffled through it for a few moments before handing it back to PJ.

“There coach...there’s our press! You should read more than the sports section.” O’leary chuckled as he turned and looked at his teammates behind him.

PJ looked down on page 2 and scanned until his eyes came across the article O’leary wanted him to see.

“RC Runner Stops Purse Snatching”, PJ read aloud as the team started to high five each other.

“Coach, we took a little detour during that run, but we still did the whole workout!” Cartolano added.

PJ looked towards Cartolano and he smiled and nodded.

“You should have seen Kevin, he looked like Houston McTear running after the guy.” Cartolano joked.

“Actually, I think he looked like Skeets Nehemiah when he hurdled the fence!” Mike Kinney said as he did an exaggerated hurdler’s stretch.

“My big brother is a hero!” Kathleen said as she reached from her wheelchair and put Kevin in a headlock as he sat stretching on the ground next to her.

PJ finished reading the article, all the while feeling a little stupid about the tongue lashing he had started to give his team.

“Well Kevin, nice job!” PJ said as he shook Kevin’s hand. “I guess I owe you guys an apology,” PJ laughed. “I tell you what, I was going to make you guys do 16 x 800 meter repeats today as punishment. But instead, I will reward you with only having to do eight.”

“Guys, today I want you to run the first 400 meters at a moderate pace, and then pick it up during the last 800 meters which will be on the slight up hill near the Alamo.” PJ said as he directed their attention to the workout at hand. “I want you to focus your attention on the hill. Don’t let it beat you! When you finish each interval. I don’t want to see anyone stopping and bending over and putting their hands on their knees. I want you to recover while jogging. We will start out at 3:00 minutes for the first one and work down to 2:20 for the last one.”

Water splashed up as the boys started their first interval. The starting point was located at the 2 mile mark of the cross country course. The half mile section PJ had chosen was known for being a swamp on wet days, because the field did not drain well. The boys ran as a pack through the first 400 meters.

“Ninety three, pick it up!,” PJ yelled as they turned for the final 400 meters up the hill to the Alamo.

Cartolano and Kinney paced the group up the hill and PJ noticed how they all seemed to match each other’s strides.

“2:59, 3:00, 3:01,” PJ called out the times as they finished their first interval.

“Ok Guys, you have 1 minute and 30 seconds to recover,” PJ said as he watched Kathleen record the times for the first 800.

The next two 800's were done in 2:55 and 2:50. PJ was enthused as he watched his runners share the lead and hit the exact times he was looking for. More importantly, they looked strong. The distance training and conditioning had paid off and they are able to train at the caliber he had hoped for.

"2:45," PJ shouted as Cartolano crossed the finished line just slightly in front of the rest of the team on the fourth repeat.

PJ turned and saw Garvey and Shipp bend over to recover with their hands on their knees.

"Damn it, guys! Use the jog to recover! Don't let them know you're tired by bending over and holding yourself up by your knees. Gather around!"

"Listen guys, we didn't even make the newspaper today! When we show up for the race on Thursday, we may not win, but we will at least let them know we were there!"

Cartolano looked up at PJ and nodded.

"Andrew, on Thursday, down goes Mitch Dering!"

Mike Kinney patted Andrew on the back without saying a word.

"And down goes Westfield! PJ added. "And down goes Cranford! No more hard runs before the race. On Thursday, we 'let the cat out of the bag'...the Lions will be released from their cages!"

PJ checked his watch. "OK, now I want 4 more under 2:40. Push each other. Think about passing Cranford and Westfield on this hill on Thursday."

The eight stood silent as they waited to start the 5<sup>th</sup> 800 repeat.

"Go!" PJ shouted, and the boys broke into the interval.

Cartolano trailed the pack as Nick Garvey led them through the first 400 in 78 seconds. Cartolano picked it up during the final 400 and pulled the runners with him.

The tight pack crossed the finish line in 2:34. Andrew grabbed Nick's arm as he started to bend over and Nick corrected himself and got into a jog with the team.

"I'll take the next one," O'leary said as they jogged towards the starting area. He had been quiet up until now.

"Run it like an Irishman," PJ coaxed O'leary, who was proud of his heritage.

PJ looked out towards the road and noticed a group of runners approaching the lake. They wore blue and gold and were from Cranford.

"That's Derning, with the curly brown hair," O'leary said to Cartolano as the group came close to the RC bunch. Cartolano watched as Derning led the group past the starting point of the 800 meters.

"You will start in 30 seconds," PJ got the teams attention again.

Cartolano stared at the group of runners in Blue and gold as they continued on with their run.

"Hearing voices in your head, Andrew"? PJ teased.

Cartolano said nothing, but simply circled the RC team while he jogged to stay loose.

"Ok guys, to the start," PJ ushered in the next 800 meter repeat.

"Go!" he shouted as he watched the team break into full stride.

Cartolano was noticeably pushing the pace of this sixth interval.

"Hey Andrew, I thought I had this one," O'leary said as he matched Andrew stride for stride.

"Sorry Rod, I got carried away there for a moment," Andrew replied.

"Bullshit, you want to catch Derning, don't you." O'leary said.

"Yep, but it's yours." Andrew looked over at O'leary.

“God dammit,” O’leary said. “You will owe me for this.”

PJ watched as O’leary shifted gears and brought the group through the 400 in 71 seconds. As they raced up the hill for the final 400 meters they caught the Cranford team. Darning saw the group coming and picked up the pace long enough to hold off O’leary and Cartolano. He never looked back.

“2:06,” yelled PJ. Cartolano and O’leary looked over in disbelief as they approached PJ. PJ saw Darning look back when he heard the time announced.

“Are you serious, coach?” O’leary asked. Nahh, I was just screwing around with that showoff. It was 2:21.3.”

The next two 800’s were run in 2:20 and 2:16. The pack stayed together for all of them. PJ was so happy with the results that he bought them all slurpies on their way back to school. He had heard this was a tradition amongst the high school runners from North Jersey that like to post their workouts, etc on the local running website, Runstat.com As best he could tell, someone with the username *JerryGrote* used to buy his team slurpies after running Sunday long runs on River Road in Bedminster. Before he knew it kids from neighboring schools were showing up for the runs (or the slurpies, not sure which, exactly).

## Chapter 30

The next two days workouts were easier distance runs. Tomorrow would be race day, and for the first time, PJ was not going to have his team run hard immediately

before the race. They had, so far, run three and had a record of 1 win and 2 losses.

After the high schoolers had showered and went home, PJ went to the park and ran a workout with the “spirits” as he liked to think of them. He said nothing of the visit to meet Heide Aliaga, he was going to make later that evening.

As PJ changed back into his street clothes next to his car, Dan Hutchens approached while the others stretched near the track.

“Coach, do you have a minute?” Dan asked.

“Sure, What’s up”, PJ answered as he turned and faced the apparition.

“I ...don’t know what it means...but we...uh...ghosts...can kind of sense things...you know?”

“No...you ‘re the ghost. But I’ll take your word for it. What’s up?”

“Well, when we are not running with you, we are not always together. We kind of roam around your world.”

“Yeah, and so?” PJ asked.

“Well, most of the time, I have no control over where I end up. And lately, I keep ending up in Manhattan.”

“Not a bad place...great nightlife!” PJ joked. But Dan was not laughing he seemed confused.

“For some reason I end up in the apartment of this woman. She is your age, coach, maybe a little older. Her name is Martha. She seems very sad. I am not sure why, but I do know one thing, she is destined to change the world.”

“What do you mean?” PJ asked.

“She lives alone, and has MS. She was a very successful venture capitalist until she came down with the disease. The stress of the job made the MS worsen to the point where she had to give it up?”

“And where do I fit in?” PJ asked.

“Coach, she is heading up a group dedicated to researching the human genome looking for MS markers which could lead to a cure for disease. I just want to encourage her not to give up the fight. I met her father, who recently passed. He is so proud of her. He asked me to tell her so. He asked me to tell her that he loved her and knew that she would have an impact on the world. A tremendous one!”

“What kind of impact?” PJ asked as he studied the boy’s expression.

“She is destined to find a cure for MS,” Dan said.

PJ just stared at Dan for a moment. “Well, she is heading up the research team! Good for her.”

“Yeah, but you don’t understand, something is wrong, she’s not right...Anyway, her name is Martha Crownshield, and here’s her address.”

PJ took the paper with her address written on it and placed it in the visor of his car.

“Thanks Coach,” Dan said.

“I’ll do what I can, Dan,” PJ said, and he turned his thoughts to Heide Aliaga . It was 6:50 PM, he had 10 minutes to get to the presentation at the library.

## Chapter 31

Heide Aliaga smiled at PJ and pointed to an open seat as he entered the lecture hall at the library. She was a short, rotund woman, with her hair tightly drawn back into a bun. She spoke softly to the crowd of 30 or so that had shown up for the evening. Most had copies of her new book and were there to see a celebrity and get an autograph.

Following Heide's lecture, PJ waited towards the rear of the room while Heide talked to the remaining few fans.

Finally, PJ approached her as she reached down to pick up her purse and belongings.

"Ms. Aliaga," PJ said as the woman jumped, not realizing there was still someone in the room.

"Oh, I am sorry, I didn't know you were there," Heide replied.

*Hmm...you can see ghosts, but you couldn't see me standing in the rear of the room,* PJ thought to himself.

"So, I see you haven't purchased my book, yet?" Heide teased. "That's OK, I'll help you with your ghost issue, anyway."

PJ's eyes widened. "How did you know I had a ..."

"Why else would you be here?" Mr. Irwin.

"It's just that..." PJ started. "Hey, wait a minute! How did you know my name?"

Heide chuckled as she pointed to his shirt, On it was embroidered the words – Coach Irwin.

"Oh yeah," PJ laughed, "I forgot about that."

"So... tell me what's on your mind," Heide said as she sat down at a table in the back of the lecture room.

PJ sat down across from her and explained about the ghosts, the dream with the bus accident, Mr. Bailey, and other things that he thought might be related."

Heide listened with her eyes closed as PJ described the torment the ghosts were going through...how they wanted to cross over; but couldn't."

"You know there is unfinished business that is preventing them from crossing over," Heide opened her eyes and stared over her glasses at PJ.

"Ok, but what is it?" PJ asked.

"You'll have to figure it out," Heide replied. "Have you asked them what bother's them?"

“No, but one mentioned a woman in Manhattan,” PJ added.

Heide closed her eyes for a moment and then smiled at PJ.

“What?” he asked as the woman simply smiled at him.

“There is more than unfinished business. That woman would be Dan’s older sister”, she answered.

*How did she know it was Dan that mentioned the woman named Martha?* PJ wondered to himself.

“Dan is worried about his sister, that’s all that is coming to me...he wants you to talk to her,” Heide added with the smile being erased by concern. “You need to speak with her.”

“Yes, that’s what Dan said,” PJ replied. “I will, after the race on Thursday”.

Heide, picked up her bag and said, “Well good day...and buy my book next time.”

“I will...thank you!” PJ replied.