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HEIDELBERG

by

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Bachelor of English
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

Two long-distance runners train for the Olympic Marathon Trials in Detroit in the wake of the 2013/2014 Heidelberg Project arsons.

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CHAPTER 1

SHADOWS

Gordon’s fingers found their places under the chin of the porcelain bowl. He could have taken a trash can to the back of the locker room or even retreated outside, away from the field house, behind a tree or a bush or the soccer field. But here, at least, the shadows wouldn’t reach him. They’d wait at the sink or in the hallway, almost certainly in his periphery when he walked out to the track. But not here.

When Gordon recognized the bowel-filtered smell of whey protein, he retched and emptied: a granola bar, a bottle of water, a package of salted crackers he’d eaten just seconds before. It wasn’t enough to fuel him, even before it landed in the bowl. He retched again and put a hand to his twisting stomach, hard and small. It was almost time.

“Cooper, you good?” someone called from outside the stall.

“Fine,” Gordon called. He saw the neon and black Saucony Guide 8s from beneath the stall and knew it was Nick Van Owen, the sophomore half-miler who thought he was a miler. “Dual meet jitters.”

Van laughed and slapped the stall, startling Gordon’s thumb off the lip of the bowl.

“High stakes, buddy. Those Central Michigan milers got your picture on their walls.”

Gordon counted Van's steps until he was sure he was gone. The kid over-strided, touched down too hard on his heel—Gordon had told him, Donnelly had told him, everyone had told him. Talented runner, but not especially smart. Stubborn even before a few easy indoor wins went to his head.

When Gordon was alone, he flushed and tore a square of toilet paper to wipe his mouth. He gripped the stall to support his shaking legs. The shadows were waiting. So was Callie, who'd decided she liked seeing her boyfriend win races around the time winning got hard, when her boyfriend was less runner than puking, ghastly wreck. Donnelly was waiting, too, pacing by now, folding and refolding the brim of his cap, wondering which underclassmen he could send next to check on his star.

Gordon closed his eyes and pressed both arms against the stall. It shuddered resistance, and the more muscle he put into it, the stronger he felt. He could win this race, but it wouldn't be pretty, it wouldn't be fast, and he didn't know what would happen afterward.

Go, he commanded. When he shouldered the stall open, the shadows scattered like roaches.

Gordon always wanted to be great—at something, anything—but as a kid, he was more desperate than talented. He wailed too loud from the back row of his elementary school choir, organized failed team meetings before recess kickball games. He idolized Barry Sanders and Pelé but was too scrawny for football and too stubborn for soccer, quitting the sport when the toe-punch was no longer acceptable form. He spent the awkward, friendless years of middle school missing bounce passes and dropping fly balls. When

Gordon found running at fourteen, he looked down at his wrists—even the veins were thin—and, for the first time, didn't hate them. He wasn't scrawny, he had the distance runner's build. From then on, he channeled his misdirected energy into running, and his body transformed: bulk in his calves and thighs, definition in his chest. Lungs that expanded with deeper and deeper breaths, a new height that felt purposeful, donor to a gliding stride. His eyes opened, flashing a blue so sharp the weed dealers stopped propositioning him after school, teachers stopped scolding him for sleeping when he was actually awake.

When his peers were partying or dating, Gordon was building base mileage, fine-tuning his finishing kick, beating the sun up every morning and outlasting it at night. He mapped Grosse Pointe's ten square miles with the bottoms of his shoes. He listened for his first-place finishes on the intercom and wore a varsity jacket that jangled like an angry chime. Proof, finally, that he was an athlete. He got along with teammates, but not well enough to call them friends. They had their parties, and he had the track, the rubbery waft, the surface getting hotter and softer from April to May to June, small pebbles sticking to Gordon's fists when he knelt and pounded them on the start line. Gordon had been born a runner. It just took him fourteen years to figure it out.

Miler: Gordon wore the title with more pride than his own name, engraved on two state championship trophies and enough medals to fill a duffel bag. The scholarship offers came his junior year, and Gordon quickly cut the list to two: Stanford, his father's alma mater, and Michigan State, the school he applied to in secret and knew his parents would hate.

Stanford had a powerhouse program, but Gordon couldn't imagine running for their coaches, who met him at their athletic offices in suits and ties. They talked about molding and shaping him into an elite runner, recruited him as a lump of clay lucky to have been discovered. His father was all smiles on the plane ride home, but Gordon already knew Palo Alto wasn't for him.

Jim Donnelly, the Michigan State coach, met Gordon on campus in blue jeans and a Spartans cap. Donnelly was young for the job, an even-headed man who listened carefully, walked quickly, shook hands firmly and often. "You're a helluva runner, Cooper," was the closest he came to giving Gordon a hard pitch. He'd just finished showing him the athletic village, a tour that was mostly quiet, Donnelly pointing out buildings and answering Gordon's questions about the top runners in the conference, unfazed that a high school senior already knew them all by name. "I'd love to turn you loose on the Big Ten," he said to finish the sell.

Gordon signed the paperwork that day and was off for East Lansing that fall. By winter, he was First-Team All-Conference, two seconds off the last All-American slot in the indoor mile.

He was four times an All-American when he met Callie, who'd grown up on a farm with three football-crazed brothers in Fowler, Indiana and wasn't especially impressed by the prestige of the one-mile run. She didn't know much about the sport, except how to tell a good run from a bad one—she left Gordon alone when he came in quiet, occupied within himself, and perked up when he came in slinging happy curses, infecting her with a contagious high.

Gordon didn't tell her when the shadows started. His face gave it away.

"Are you hurt?" she asked the first time he came back jumpy and pale.

He hadn't wanted to tell her—to make it real by speaking it out loud. It was early fall, and he'd been distracted on his evening run, thinking about Nationals and agents and the student teaching he was dreading in the months ahead, when three men—three shadows, men with shapes but no bodies—appeared from the bushes like they'd been waiting for him to pass. He couldn't tell her how they followed him, dipping in and out of sight, how the reason he jumped when he opened the apartment door was because he saw Callie's shadow under the lamp and thought they were waiting for him.

"I'm fine," he told her. That was months ago, when he thought he might be.

At final call, Gordon finished his striders, stripped his sweats and joined the other runners on the far side of the track. In outdoor track they ran 1,500 meters, starting on the backstretch. Gordon kicked out his nerves at the line with the rest of the field, scanning the track. They'd be waiting for him after, or maybe just before the end.

They lined up for a waterfall start: visiting CMU milers on the inside, then Gordon, Van and Robbie Washington to the right of them. Gordon said nothing, but turned to knock fists with his teammates. The gun fired, and Van led them down the straight. Gordon's legs were still wobbly coming around the curve, so he hung back and let two CMU milers between him and Van. The third lap was usually when the strain hit, but sometimes you had to run yourself into the race, getting stronger as the others fell back.

The only runner Gordon feared in this race was Trey Franks, a CMU freshman from Petoskey who won the MAC during indoor and put the fear of god in Gordon at

indoor nats. It would take a 3:46 to beat him at his best, but he was young, still learning the ebb and flow of tactical races. If he and Van didn't push the pace, Gordon could control the race from behind. He preferred to do the opposite, but this year nothing was going as planned.

Gordon let Washington pass him as they finished the first lap. "62, 63, 64," the counter called. *Slow.* Gordon still felt empty, and the leaders still looked strong. But the mile never left a debt uncollected, and it wouldn't be long before the others had to pay. Gordon had known the depth of that hollow harder and more often than anyone on the track. He didn't fear the pain that was coming. He no longer doubted he would win.

At the start of the third lap ("2:06, 2:07") Gordon moved up behind Van and Franks and watched their backs for signs of their tying up. Franks spotted it first, and they moved around Van together, running 1-2 for the hardest lap. Gordon waited for him to push the pace, but he didn't, and when the gun cracked in their ears at the start of the final lap, adrenaline finally woke him. Strength welled up and burst beneath the hollow. *It would be nice*, he thought as he blew around Franks on the backstretch, *to get out of this with something left over.* But the freshman's footsteps didn't fall off.

Now. Gordon blasted into his sprint a few meters into the final turn, where he knew runners often hesitated, saving energy for the homestretch. Kicking was never a gamble if you knew how to do it. Gordon felt the sudden separation like a joint from a socket, and kept that pocket the final hundred meters, turning after he broke the line to wrap Van in a half-hug and shake Franks' hand.

"3:53.1," Donnelly said, finding Gordon wandering across the infield.

"Fuckin' shit. The others?"

"About two seconds behind."

Gordon spit into the short grass. He ran five seconds faster at last year's opening scrimmage—a blazing 4:01 equivalent mile that set a standard for the rest of the year. And now this—the same thing that happened six months ago when he opened indoor season with a 4:16. Gordon changed his spikes for flats and put his sweats on while Van came by for a quick word with Donnelly.

"He nipped Franks for second, yeah?" Gordon said after he left. "Good for the kid."

"Good for our kid, bad for the other. You used your seniority on them both."

Callie waved from the nearly empty stands, and Gordon waved back. She'd be full of excitement afterward, and he'd have to fake it.

"Everything good?" Donnelly asked.

For most of his college career, Gordon trained alone with his coach working the timer. Donnelly asked Gordon what workouts he thought he should be doing, and they usually agreed. He earned Gordon's trust that way—listening to his best runner, sometimes overriding him but always explaining why. Gordon listened to Donnelly because he knew his coach wouldn't speak unless he felt it essential. Lately, though, Gordon could feel his eyes on him longer and harder, trying to pry without prying. Gordon waved the question away.

"What'd you eat for lunch?" Donnelly asked.

"Granola bar."

"Here I was praising your wily racing acumen."

Experience, Gordon had—but if that was all he had, he might be in trouble. Experience wasn't going to lock up the money agents had all but promised they could broker if Gordon could finish what he'd come so close to finishing before. "Marketability," Steven Cooke had told him. "Sponsors want *winners*, and it's best to win fast." Cooke represented Lopez Lomong, a Sudanese-born Olympian and Nike-sponsored runner who capped his career at Northern Arizona proving he was the fastest runner in the country at two different distances. Gordon had talked to Cooke once over the phone, nodding and grunting, thanking the man for his time. *Don't you think I want to win?* he wanted to tell him. *Do you think it doesn't already drive me crazy enough?*

The shadows stayed away that night, but Gordon was still unsettled. He and Callie went out for dinner—"a victory meal"—but he was too far inside himself that she gave up on bringing him out and the two ate in silence. Every once in a while the mania would strike him and Gordon would suppress it with a shudder, hoping Callie didn't notice. His window was closing. His body felt unfamiliar, beyond him, a once-trusted vehicle that stuck and jolted at random, no longer responding to the most basic commands.

The Stanford Invitational was two weeks away, and the runners there would be better than Franks. There was no time to dwell over a bad preseason scrimmage—Gordon would either go step for step with the best in the country, or they'd leave him behind.

On Monday morning, he stumbled out of bed at 5:30 to find Callie already awake with coffee in hand, textbooks cracked in front of her. He drove two miles to the high school where he made four visits per semester for his teaching methods courses, stumbled through a half-lesson on World War II, then drove straight to the field house to change

for a morning run. March was cruel in East Lansing, and now there was snow to go with the cold. Gordon wore his winter gear, stretching once inside the field house and then again in the cold. He liked to take a route that snaked around the complex before turning into city, but when he started down the sidewalk to the road, the three shadows were in the middle the of the path, daring him toward them.

In the middle of the day, Gordon thought. Inside his gloves, his hands were sweating.

Even in the most painful moments, running had never been as hard as this. The summer before Gordon's junior year, he'd turned nocturnal, blazing quarter-mile repeats alone after midnight until his legs turned to rubber and he collapsed on the track. He tore through the streets of East Lansing shirtless and wild-eyed, legend and lore to drunk Spartan underclassmen nearly blindsided by the gaunt blur. His muscles knotted and warped. He thought only of his next step, his next minute, squeezing more distance out of less time. He was an addict—he didn't report to Donnelly the nights he couldn't resist a second run or a third, craving the suffering that meant progress. It was beautifully futile—he was always convinced he could have done more.

He met Callie that summer, the one night he let his teammate drag him downtown. She was there with his teammate's girlfriend, dragged away from her own cave of books. They learned each other slowly during a summer that stretched and stretched until it fit everything in.

That year, Gordon took three league championships, third place in a fast mile at indoor nationals and sixth in the outdoor 1,500-meter final despite a stomach bug that had him dry heaving at the gun. *That* was the one he should have taken, but he shrugged the

loss away. The formula wasn't as simple as get fast, win trophies—the better you got, the harder it was. He'd learned to read the fear in his opponents' eyes, winning races before they'd even begun. The next year was his.

But after his full week of indulgent rest—sleep and chocolate and beers on the patio with Callie—his head was slow to lower. He daydreamed and replayed, thinking about nationals—the hype and the pressure and everything after. He saw himself overseas, waving to a crowd erupting so loudly he couldn't even hear his name. He wanted it all—everything he'd done was because he wanted it so badly, and now it was so close. He thought of Cooke's words, how his future—the one of his visions—depended so much on that final year. That summer, he didn't vomit in garbage barrels or piss blood in the grass. He never found the extra gear that made ritual of blinding pain. Inspiration gave way to impatience, even entitlement. It was a small lapse, a grain of sand in delicate machinery, but it grew into something grating and destructive.

Twice, Gordon had his championship stolen. In the last mile of autumn's cross country championship and the final two-hundred meters of the indoor mile, he was in position to win. He should have won. Both times, he never even turned his head: he saw the passing about to happen through the shocked eyes of spectators on the home stretch. There was no choke, no collapse—Gordon held strong but was overtaken, inch by spectacular, impossible inch.

In front of the field house, Gordon stared the shadows down. He could quit—he knew it was what they wanted, and after everything he'd suffered through this year and the last, no one would think anything of it. To get out now, while there was something of him left—it would be easy to concede the trail. Maybe even smart. But he was offended

by their brazen confidence, their right to the daylight. It was worse to give them this—worse than whatever might come if he refused. The snow came down harder, flurries obscuring his vision. Gordon knew they were there, they always would be. He started his watch and ploughed right through.

The grain of sand chafed and grinded. Since his sophomore year, Gordon had been too fast for anyone at practice to really compete. Now, when he'd turned back to team training as a method to keep the shadows away, Van was regularly whipping him in intervals. Gordon turned to his breath and his stride, a mobile meditation, but that safe space was gone, ignored for too long. In its place were thoughts of trophies, ten-thousand dollar Diamond League purses in Shanghai or Doha, Oslo or Rome.

"All right there, Cooper?" Donnelly asked. When Gordon said yes, Donnelly nodded, chewed his gum, adjusted his hat. Gordon was rocked by exhaustion, but he didn't dare rest. There was an entire country of runners gunning for him now. If he rested, it was over.

The questions Callie asked him about running had always been simple—Laps to a mile? Races in a year? Spandex or lining?—but the week before the Stanford Invitational, she started acting strange. She wanted to know about his goals, whether there was such thing as a professional runner. He told her about the success stories, the Galen Rupps and the Lopez Lomongs, triple-figure shoe deals, a ceiling reached by only a handful of mid-distance runners in the country. He told her about the Prefontaine Classic and the more lucrative races overseas—bigger, faster, better pay. And then he told her about Joe Haggerty, the Spartan grad who sometimes trained with the current 5K/10K guys before

his shift at Déjà Vu, the strip club out on West Jolly. Haggerty had been a middling miler for Donnelly before moving up to distance, where his big build stood out even more. He dominated local 5Ks but lost when the prize was big. He traveled as much as could afford from his bouncer gig and a $2,000 sponsorship from a local running shop, stole the trainers' time at MSU. There was a long history of U.S. runners who lived poor for their sport—Frank Shorter, Bill Rodgers, Steve Prefontaine—but that was back when amateurism forced them into poverty.

"Besides," Gordon told Callie. "Those guys were great. Haggerty is..."

"You're past all that, though," Callie said. They were standing in her kitchen, and the sunlight through the window was giving her an odd glow. She was pale, clear-skinned to his freckles, her thick hair held up by a collaboration of clips and bands, tools that, together, could almost corral it. Gordon ran his head over his own hair—short for racing season—and Callie put her hand over his, moving it like a Ouja board to make him laugh.

Her support meant something, but not enough. There was a thin line between Bill Rodgers and Joe Haggerty, and Gordon wasn't yet certain on which side he would fall.

Three days later, a plane ticket appeared on Callie's refrigerator. Gordon was just out of the shower, a towel around his waist, in the kitchen for a glass of water when she grabbed him.

"Detroit to Eugene," he read at her urging. "June 9." He felt her head on his back, a kiss between his shoulder blades.

"I wanted to come to Stanford," she said, "but I have an exam."

Gordon didn't know what his face looked like when he turned around, but he could see from hers his mask wasn't working.

"You're mad."

"I'm...surprised."

"But not mad?"

From the corner of his eye, Gordon spotted a shadow. He'd never seen just one before, but this one stood alone, perched in front of the window, blocking the sunlight. Callie turned to look where Gordon was looking, then turned back to him, confused. Gordon wrapped her in a hug that said everything and nothing. When he opened his eyes, the shadow was gone.

Every year, most of the Spartans went to Raleigh for a small relay meet while Donnelly accompanied Gordon and a few of the team's best to Stanford. This year, though, it was only the miler and his coach, and for the first time, Gordon felt like stealing Donnelly away from the team may have been a gross misuse of resources.

Before the 1,500-meter final, the Stanford milers chanted and grunted, swaying in a circle. Their star, Derrick Dunbar, broke from the chant and screamed at nothing.

"Home-field advantage," Donnelly said with a wink. His freshman year, Gordon had whipped a University of Michigan senior in Ann Arbor and was disqualified afterward for tearing a small block-M flag out of the hand of an obnoxious fan leaning over the fence. *Worth it*, he'd argued with Donnelly after his half-victory lap with maize and blue crumpled in his fist.

When the race finally came, the pace was slow, and Gordon ran angry.

Dunbar and his teammates moved to the front of the pack and purposefully slowed the pace. Each lap the trio led, the Cardinal faithful chanted louder, a single

syllable as they passed the stands. Gordon didn't mind kicking, but he hated kicker's duels—this was a race he would have busted open last year, but instead he let the trio box him in, occasionally clipping their ankles, sending an accidental knee into their asses. A few other runners entered the fray before the start of the final lap, and Gordon could feel the Stanford trio shuffling and rearranging, preparing to slingshot Dunbar into the lead. He struck before they were ready, taking the lead from 450 meters out and grinding it home, draining the last of his energy at exactly the moment it was no longer required.

"Seniority," Donnelly said afterward, almost as a tease.

"Youth," Gordon replied, "is wasted on the dumb."

On the plane ride back, in a state of altered state of semi-conscious exhaustion, Gordon almost convinced himself to feel good about the win. If he got to Nationals, and if the race was right, he could steal one. It might not feel right, losing at his fastest and winning at his worst, but a win was a win, and at least it would be over.

The shadows didn't follow Gordon across the country, but they were waiting for him when he came home. They trailed him on his long runs, lapped him on the track. Sometimes there would be only two, and Gordon would make himself so anxious waiting for the third, the workout would be wasted. They crouched with him when he tied his shoes, trailed him across campus when he speed-walked to class. They were worst in the quiet moments Gordon used to treasure, moments when Gordon would notice the stillness of the campus or a rare day of unseasonable warmth in East Lansing, sprinting home past midnight, or when Gordon was around others at the field house and had to pretend not to see them. Around the others, Gordon's fear was one of exposure.

At the Florida Relays, Gordon couldn't watch his teammates run. He saw Sanders and Ray in the 110 hurdles prelims, imagined their feet as his and doubled over, crawling to the locker room using a fence for support, the other hand to his eye as a blinder. There, he paced with his head in his hands until Van came to get him. There was no fist pounding on the line—the ritual was broken, and Gordon ran terribly. The shadows appeared only once, a flicker at the edge of the woods beyond the track. Just so he knew they were there.

Days later, they cut across him for the first time. He was on a nighttime run around Callie's apartment, the same route as the first time he'd seen them, when they rushed him from the sides and sent him skidding into gravel. He limped back to Callie's with scrapes down his side, blood around his elbow and knee. Callie asked what happened, and Gordon told all.

He told her about high school, when the kids who didn't care posed as distance runners, jogging out with the group every day before veering off to a park around the corner to smoke cigarettes and text until they saw Gordon leading the group back around. Gordon, who led every run wire to wire and never cut corners, and who, at fourteen, was not just running but *training*. Gordon, who had the season schedule next to a Steve Prefontaine poster on his wall, his own log written in red ink over his coach's more conservative plans. It was clear halfway through his freshman year that Gordon would be next in a long line of great Norseman milers, but in those first days of practice, when he let the corner cutters go, the coaches only saw him as one body among many. They couldn't yet see what made him different from the cheaters, the ones who stole what he'd

waited so long to find. It took a long time for Donnelly to earn Gordon's trust, and no teammate ever did.

"So," Callie said. "You think this is why you're having the visions?"

Gordon winced. Callie liked to work with her back against the couch, and her coffee table was filled with books and papers, bright tabs and highlighted text, her Macbook open but asleep. She was rarely home, always in the lab, or on campus editing papers and running clubs volunteering at the zoo. Her degree would be in animal science; she was applying to join a research team studying the dietary habits of giant anteaters in Goias, Brazil. *Myrmecophaga tridactyla,* she called them lovingly. Callie had been planning a career in science since high school; on some days, Gordon's running schedule was all he knew.

Before his eyes had adjusted to the bright living room, Callie was swabbing Gordon's arm with rubbing alcohol, leading him to the couch and running back to the bathroom for more supplies. He knew he shouldn't resent her kindness, but he regretted her touch. Gordon had read about athletes whose trainers knew their bodies better than anyone but their wives, but he never welcomed that intimacy—not from his trainer, and not from Callie, either. Even now, as Gordon came to and realized how Callie was caring for him, he had to stop himself from recoiling.

And now this—her clinical response, sickeningly scientific. He flushed top to bottom and regretted trying to put it into words, his weakness on display. She looked back at him like he was the only thing in the room—a table full of work, but she didn't glance at it once. He didn't know how he'd found the confidence to talk to her that night at the bar, when he felt so helpless and strange. She wasn't supposed to happen. How

could he make her understand the corner cutters—the feeling that he was destined for something great, and the feeling of having that ripped away.

"Try," she pleaded. But Gordon had already gone too far. When he begged out of the conversation with the excuse of a shower, he knew she could through the dodge. He couldn't hide anything—his expressions were unguarded, his weaknesses bare for the world to see.

In early April, Donnelly shut him down.

"Just for a few weeks," he said. "We ran you too hard for too long. Florida was a dead-legs loss. What am I saying this for? You know your own body."

He paused to offer Gordon airtime, but Gordon denied it.

"Part of my job is making you stop when you need to stop," Donnelly continued. He was firmer now, in voice and action, than he'd ever seen him. No gum chewing, no hat adjusting. "Here's the plan. You take this weekend off entirely, and next week we cut your mileage in half. A soft reset and slow build. No hard workouts until May. I'm not worried about fitness—you're more than in shape. You're overworked and your body's fighting it. If you're feeling better, we'll do a few tune-ups the week before leagues. You can make the standard there."

Even before Donnelly finished, the little anger Gordon had was washed away, replaced instead with fear. Maybe his coach was right, and maybe he would thank him. But Donnelly didn't know how the shadows were worst when he was alone, how his races and workouts, good or bad, were the only times he still felt semblances of safety.

After a year together with no conflict, Gordon and Callie began to struggle. The telling had infected them, working different viruses on their brains. Gordon felt violated and weak; Callie was more serious in her inquiries, more persistent in her attempts to help. Gordon spent more time alone in his own apartment, a dungeon compared to the Callie's pastel walls, flicking the light on and off, unsure what was worse, seeing the shadows or knowing they were there. The two had functioned well together in small doses, but now each period of separation felt pregnant and decisive. He feared coming back to her. He feared her help in the moments after runs that were becoming more common: him staggering through the door all tremble and chatter, breathing deep until the panic shook from his bones, until he could take a full, deep breath and didn't feel like the air was constricting to press his skin to his bones. At home, he worked through the attacks in an hour, sometimes two, and the shadows let him sleep. But Callie wrapped herself around him—she didn't like the way he gripped innocuous objects like spatulas or pens that helped ground him in the moment. At night, when Callie was sleeping, the shadows stalked the yard. Moonlight flickered through the window.

The books went missing from her coffee table. When he walked into Callie's apartment, he found her staring at the door; when he walked away, she followed. Outside, the shadows swarmed; inside, they snuck. Gordon needed to be alone, but he had nowhere. Running wasn't his anymore.

Washington placed second in the 1,500 at the ACC/Big Ten Challenge. Van split 1:47.1 at Penn Relays—second fastest time in the country that year. Meanwhile, Gordon was experimenting with closing his eyes while running long, familiar stretches of road. For his own safety.

He still hadn't given up on the championship, though he knew how increasingly impossible it seemed. *Why,* he asked himself, *do I still care*? It was about more than just the future, the path he'd planned, the path he'd wanted to avoid. It was about being owed—about claiming what was his. *Why does this still matter?* he thought at his worst. *Why do I to this to myself?* The shadows stripped him raw, reduced him to questions like these. It mattered because it was everything. It was the only thing.

Gordon came back from a run one morning and the tickets were gone. The shadows were at the table, Callie was recommending a psychiatrist, Gordon was storming out the door, shadows keeping their distance behind him. Two days later, she told him she'd been accepted for the research team in Goias—in a few months, she'd be spending a year in Brazil. Maybe—she hadn't accepted yet. They were out walking, sitting at a bench down the street from the restaurant where they'd eaten breakfast minutes before. Gordon's eyes were tracing the shadows on the other side of the street, two of them getting closer when he turned away from them, stopping when he looked.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Wow," he said. "Congratulations." She got up after a moment of silence, then walked back to her apartment without saying a word.

Gordon squeaked into the 1,500-meter final at Big Tens, finishing fourth in a fast race. His time qualified him for NCAA Championship prelims, where a fast heat carried him to a Finals-qualifying time for the next weekend. It would have been a relief it Gordon could have felt relief. Donnelly was there after each of the races. *You can win it with will,* he told him. *You can steal this thing.*

Gordon was reduced to reactions. Shrinking, flinching. Each finishing kick took another part of his soul, a hollow dug too deep. When Donnelly told him to go, he went. He ran where the shadows weren't, gobbled muscle relaxers at night to ease the constant tension in his limbs, the mania that didn't let him sleep.

There were two rounds at Nationals, but Gordon knew prelims could be his last race if he ran it poorly, so he took his place at the front of the pack and burned everything he had. Only one runner caught him, and he was through to the finals.

"First place or last place," Donnelly reminded him, "this is only the start."

Gordon nodded but took nothing in. Three strides into the first turn, he knew he didn't have it. After this race, he would never talk to Donnelly again. He would go to his apartment, alone, and spend the next year preparing for a job he'd never wanted. He'd been destined for this race, built for it, but it wasn't his. And there was nothing he could do to change that.

"Haul ass, Cooper!" Donnelly shouted, but Gordon finished his career as a miler with his worst race, seven runners and three shadows crossing the line before him, leaving him dead last.

CHAPTER 2

DETROIT VS. EVERYONE

It was early Sunday morning, and Gordon watched with envy as Alvin scavenged the kitchen for food. He pinned one arm against his chest with the other as Alvin downed his cup of coffee and stuffed the last of a biscuit in his mouth.

"You get this from Red Lobster or something?"

"Truthfully," Gordon said, "I don't remember."

His stomach had stretched, offering forgiveness in his years without running, but now it was back to dry grains and water before a morning run. Alvin grinned, showing a white chunk of biscuit stuck in the gap between his teeth.

"You good?" Gordon asked.

"Great," Alvin said. "Got anymore food?"

"Nope."

"You gonna grab a shirt?"

"Nope."

"Anything else I can do to stall?"

"Nope."

Gordon shook out his arms and legs. He was trying to teaching himself to appreciate each moment—to acknowledge that routine was made of hundreds of days that

would never happen again. Everything was happened for the first and last time. He set his watch to zero.

"To Heidelberg," he said.

"Well, shit," Alvin said.

They looped around Outer Drive and Warren before finding Mack, the two-lane avenue that cut south and west from Grosse Pointe to Detroit. They were always cross and re-crossing borders, passing through on foot or by car the four cities that made up their corner of southeast Michigan. Grosse Pointe was a peninsula-shaped city on Lake St. Clair made of three boroughs, each whiter and more affluent than the next. North of Grosse Pointe was Saint Clair Shores, where Alvin worked, and west of that was Eastpointe, a city that changed its name from East Detroit to separate itself from the troubled former metropolis during the Coleman Young administration. Eastpointe shared a border with Detroit on its northeast side, along Eight Mile. The suburbs fit around Detroit the way enemies might hug in a feigned attempt at piece: loosely and reluctantly, none holding the illusion that their differences were resolved.

Gordon let out a deep breath as they crossed fully into Detroit, the landscape opening in front of them. They passed a boarded-up Top Video Superstore, a Family Dollar, an empty cement lot, overgrown with weeds and fenced all the way around. The buildings got older and taller. A man in a jean jacket and sweats tipped his coffee at them as they passed.

"The last frontier," Gordon said. Around the city, vacant plots of land were transformed into blooming urban gardens that served as town squares, public spaces where communities were born. A few years ago, a Brooklyn artist came to Detroit to

freeze a house, spending hours spraying it with water in the bitter cold. It was an installation meant to draw attention to the housing crisis, the artist said. *To show people what's possible.* Detroit for artists, Detroit for farmers—why not Detroit as a training ground? Why not the origin city of the next great American marathoners?

Gordon turned to Alvin, but Alvin's eyes were on the horizon. He hadn't been impressed by the frozen house. *That happens anyway*, he'd said. *Pipes burst. Water rushes out the windows, newspapers call it a waterfall.*

A man in a baggy white T-shirt was in the middle of the road, pushing a shopping cart full of cans across the street, near a Krazy Pizza, taking his time while traffic was dead.

"Where's that guy even going?" Gordon said.

"Looks like he's trying to return some cans."

"Right. I mean, it was a rhetorical question."

"Who knows how long he's been walking. The cops find them downtown and take them for rides," Alvin said. "Probably trying to make his way back to an overpass on the Lodge, next thing he knows, here he is."

Gordon thought about the men who tried washing his dad's car windows after Tigers games at Comerica Park, the ones who tried giving them directions in exchange for a five. They were the aggressive ones. It was hard to picture resistance from the others, slumped against buildings with coats draped over them like shrouds.

Alvin turned his head to spit. The pace was easy and the streets were quiet. They ran themselves into a trance, their legs together a churning, irregular pendulum—Gordon

tall and thin and shockingly white, Alvin shorter and more muscular, long strides that matched his partner's gait.

They turned at Ellery, running inward, past the once-beautiful two-story home split through its middle by a tree. Ellery was a street Gordon knew well, a straight shot into the heart of Detroit's east side, to the most unlikely of oases.

The street was only a street, until it wasn't. The structure spiking up from the ground at Ellery and Heidelberg seemed, from a distance, impossibly bright, impossibly shaped—it couldn't be the top half of a pink car frame sunk into the ground, flowers blooming where the windshield should be. There couldn't be polka dots—real, earnest polka dots on the asphalt, large enough to encircle two adult feet—but there were. In the time it took to process this corner, the place surrounded you: sudden intentional brightness after miles of gray neglect. A dream world, an impossible pocket of an impossible city.

They passed a grassy lot with pastel-painted doors stacked in a pile, swing sets and jungle gyms shaded purple and pink, wooden privacy fences strung with kitchenware and guitars. On their left, a green one-story house with wooden paintings of clocks stacked and nailed to its sides, some with twelve numbers and some with four, the hands loopy or straight, skinny or fat, pointing to all different times. A row of tires propped on metal poles, a dumpster spray-painted with the words KEEP THE PEACE. A tall white house with busted windows and birthday cakes painted on the siding—orange and pink and maroon. Then, finally, the street itself: polka dots crawling from the street to the sidewalk, all the way up the iconic People's House. The artist's signature totemic faces

centered the sidewalk squares, and weathered shoes covered a fence guarding a home tattooed in numbers all the way around.

When the artist started his installment in the late eighties, Heidelberg was just a street in one of the most dangerous zip codes in the country. The artist grew up in the People's House, long before the iconic polka dots. He left Detroit as a young man—first for art school, then for the Army—and when he returned, the street he'd grown up on was gone to poverty and drugs. The artist and his grandfather gathered a group of neighborhood children and began clearing abandoned lots, turning refuse to sculpture, decorating the yards and houses with "magic trash." In 26 years, the artist's oddball vision turned into a top tourist attraction in the city, a registered non-profit drawing hundreds of thousands in grants and endowments, a hub for the community and local schools. The Project drew more than 50,000 people yearly, and no serious crime had ever been reported at the installment. The artist liked to say his art was medicine, and Heidelberg healed.

There was only one blemish on the street of former blemishes. In May, the Obstruction of Justice House—a protest house, politically charged, the initials OJ streaked across the porch in red—had been hit with a suspicious fire officials wouldn't yet deem an arson. The artist stuffed the cavities with magic trash, stacking toys and furniture over the charred and jagged back end.

A long run to Heidelberg was now ritual to Gordon. Sometimes he stopped at the People's House and stretched his calves on its foundation, reaching up and putting his hand in the middle of a pink dot. This was his halfway point, the place he came when he needed something to put his hands on, somewhere to run a straight path back from.

Somewhere to set him right. On most days, the Project gave him what he needed: he found energy in the silence, being alone in such a place—*his* place. Sometimes he saw the artist walking alone, hands behind his back. Sometimes pairs of visitors explored in selfish silence, wide-eyed and reverent. And sometimes the place was alive in a different way, with noise that made Gordon uneasy. He felt like a hallucination when he ran through children *ooh*ing and *ah*ing, the artist bellowing *hello*s, paint bucket in hand, people chattering with cameras strapped around their necks. Like he was running through a place he understood, a place where his consistent trips earned him admission, and they were marveling at something else entirely. The houses were such a sight, they weren't even shocked to see him hauling through.

With Alvin, the Project was too quiet. They passed the bright blue information booth, totemic faces along the walls, where a plywood sign reminded visitors:

Please do not photograph the residents.

Please do not park in front of the residences.

Gordon watched Alvin's eyes linger on the sign, then on the undecorated house across the street, then on another plywood square propped in front of the fence of shoes, the words DETROIT VS. EVERYONE painted in black over a green polka dot. He watched for a response, but there wasn't one. They kept moving, looping around the block. On their way out of the Project, they passed the only two other visitors on the street, a young blonde woman and her friend taking pictures of each other in front of the Clock House. The one getting her picture taken gave an embarrassed smile, and the one taking the picture shielded her camera with her hand until they passed. Gordon looked at Alvin to see if he noticed, but Alvin was already shaking his head.

"I still don't get it," he said. Gordon stared back blankly, and Alvin rolled his eyes, like Gordon should have known what he was thinking. "Why you love this place. You're a smart guy, it doesn't make sense."

Gordon clicked his watch at the mile marker—a Mobil on Mack. He didn't know what smarts had to do with Heidelberg. He'd always thought the Project was above him—he didn't understand it as much as he appreciated it, needed its existence for reasons that didn't quite make sense, even to him.

"I told you. I can't explain it."

"Try."

The pace was slow, and talk came easy. It had been an adjustment for Gordon, learning to run with another, to talk instead of think. At the very least, it made the long runs go faster.

"I teach history," Gordon said.

"You don't give a shit about teaching."

"I give a shit about history."

"Shit, man, so you read the placards," Alvin said. "What do you know about the history of Detroit?"

Gordon couldn't argue: he didn't love studying history. He would have gone to grad school if he did. It was more accurate to say he was sporadically and eclectically obsessed. He could have told Alvin about the Munich Massacre at the 1972 Olympics in Berlin, about Joan Benoit Samuelson, the first women's Olympic champion in 1984. He could have even told him about Heidelberg, about the Soles of Most High, a tree the artist decorated with shoes in homage to his grandfather, the grandson of slaves, who

remembered looking to the sky after a lynching and seeing only soles. About how people made pilgrimages to the tree, to the very street they'd run on, to fling their own shoes into the branches. He taught the rest of it—the wars and the politics—by rote, and there was no state history component in Michigan. He and his students spent more time on McCarthyism than they did on the decline of Detroit.

"You want to know about the fur trade?" Gordon asked. "Fort Ponchartrain?"

"You're talking *ancient* history," Alvin said. "What do you know about Heidelberg the street, the line on the grid?"

"The neighborhood went to shit. Drugs, riots, all that. And now it's something else."

"Uh huh."

"Places like this give people hope," Gordon added. "Maybe *that's* why I love it."

"It gives tourists hope," Alvin said. "It pisses Detroiters off. Went to shit is one way to put it, but I don't guess you know too much about what the neighborhood was like before that, huh?"

Gordon checked his watch, then the sidewalk in front of them. Alvin waited for eye contact before he continued.

"There used to be a neighborhood in the near-east side called Black Bottom. Old name—black for the soil, not for the people, but it *was* the biggest black neighborhood in the city. We're talking forties and fifties, you lived in Black Bottom and partied in Paradise Valley with Duke Ellington. The fuckin' Duke! Well, in the sixties they tore all that down and paved it over for the Chrysler Freeway, I-75, about the same time auto plants started setting up in the suburbs. So, you know. Call it blight busting if you want."

"That's Heidelberg?"

"Couple miles south down Gratiot," Alvin said. "You can imagine, right? I'm not trying to give you a history lesson, I'm just saying a place doesn't go to shit on its own."

Gordon dodged a pothole, slipping enough on the loose gravel to jumpstart his heart—even in the middle of mile ten, despite the strain of an sixteen-miler, it could startle.

What did Alvin want him to say? If freeway construction could ripple like that, so could the splotch of color that was Heidelberg. Healing to counteract the destruction of industrialization. A cycle. Gordon thought about it until it made sense, then pushed it from his mind.

They ran northeast—away from Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, away from the freeways that looped the sprawl. Gordon realized he was matching Alvin's breaths. He held his a beat longer to separate their cycles.

"Shit, man," Alvin said, "My cousin Kris used to live way out here, off East Grand. Him and his boy Manny. Emmanuel."

"Tough guy."

"Played the saxophone in junior high," Alvin grinned. "Manny's mom had one of the last houses standing on the block, had to work two jobs to keep it. Manny and Kris got into some shit. Just tagging at first, and at first just the big ones, where you couldn't find a clean wall to paint on. Packard Plant, Michigan Central, the Birwood Wall. I'd go to watch."

Gordon eyes drifted to the tattoo on Alvin's shoulder: a smirking blue, antenna-less snail with question mark above its head. He had one other visible tattoo, two dates on

his left calf—his mother's birth and death, Gordon assumed, though he'd never asked. What would Alvin tag? He hadn't it noticed before, but the sharp, quick movements of the snail's head and shell *did* share the style of graffiti.

"There were amateurs, man. Manny designed his own tattoos—an *E* on one tricep and a *K* on the other, but they both looked like *B*s," Alvin laughed. "And Kris, he lived in Eastpointe, too. Had the intersection of Nine Mile and Gratiot inked on the back of his hand. *Born and raised.*"

"Downtown, nice," Gordon said. "Hope he got the GameStop in the background."

"It was so bad," Alvin said. "The bank was always about to take that house, but instead of getting jobs, Manny, Kris and I would sit in the basement and get lit about it. Try to solve the city's problems with a forty, a blunt and a couple big ideas. *My grandpa had to fight to get into this neighborhood fifty years ago and now my mom's fighting the city to stay on an empty fucking block?* That kind of stuff. Somehow Kris and Manny decided a good solution to the problem was to burn shit down."

Alvin waved the question away before Gordon could ask it.

"I wasn't about to get arrested," he said. "I hung with them because I was in a bad place, I guess, and because Kris was family, but Jesus, that kid sold heroin until it almost killed him. I make some bad decisions, but those two were on a whole different level."

"Yeah," Gordon said. *Heroin?* His neighbors in East Lansing smoked weed, but it had taken him two years to recognize the smell.

"There are good people in this city, just like everywhere else. Some of them are stuck. You think Manny's mom was going to put her son on the street? Turn him in to the

cops? She loved him. And me and Kris, too."

"What happened to them?"

"Kris got out, moved in with some family in North Carolina. Manny's mom died of a heart attack a few months ago. Same day they carried her out, her house was scrapped," Alvin said. "Manny, I haven't seen."

"Sorry."

"Change is hard. And it's going to take more than a few touristy polka dots to fix this city, if fixing is what you think the city needs," Alvin said. "A lot more than a house in an ice block, a garden in the city, the Tigers winning the World Series."

"I'm not a tourist," Gordon said. He pushed the pace, but Alvin didn't take the bait.

"That's fine," Alvin said a few seconds, when they'd fallen back in sync. "But there's got to be something different about us. Because that place back there? If I'm being honest, that place scares the shit out of me."

CHAPTER 3

TO BOSTON

Alvin was supposed to meet Gordon the next morning for an eight-miler around Grosse Pointe, but when he didn't show at 7:15. Gordon left without him. Afterward, he recorded the run in his training log—*48:20, alone, legs felt fine, sixty degrees at the start, fuck Michigan summers*—then showered, ate four peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, drank two cups of water and fell asleep on the couch. He woke two hours later, groggy and disoriented, pushing sweaty clumps of hair from his eyes, gauging the effects of his morning run—heavy arms and the tease of a blister on his left big toe. His Asics were good for 500 miles—Gordon bought two at a time and alternated the pairs—but that number came fast with 90-mile weeks. He thought he had another month, but he'd have to check his log.

Gordon's right quad twitched, a spasm strong enough to sometimes wake him from a dead sleep. He sat up and kneaded the muscle until it settled. Coffee was a thought, but the sunlight through the window talked him out of it. Water instead.

This morning was the first time Alvin had been a no-show. In a former life, Gordon gathered, Alvin had been less predictable, but he never would have guessed. They'd been training partners since January, when Gordon recognized him at the East Detroit High School track running laps in a hoodie and sweats. It was the setting that did it—Gordon might not have remembered his face, but he remembered that face in that

hood with that tan brick building in the background. It was Alvin's old home field, the track Gordon remembered visiting yearly for the Shamrock Relays. It seemed like Alvin was sweating some bad habits from his system back then, but Gordon had felt the same.

He found his friend in recent contacts and tried his cell as he stretched his calves against a wall. As the phone rang, he switched to his quads, pulling his left leg back and balancing on his right with a wobble and a moan. Maybe Lydiard didn't need stretching, but Gordon's body called for it—before and after runs, in the middle of a lesson, while trying and failing to cook something healthy, while he was watching ESPN 30 for 30 documentaries or obsessively scrolling through running forums. Gordon loved stretching. He did it without thinking, and his body thanked him for it.

The call went to voicemail. Gordon finished his stretches. He couldn't have gotten Alvin's work schedule wrong—they'd talked about it yesterday. He pocketed his keys from the counter and decided to drive over.

The route to Alvin's wasn't so different than the route to Cavanagh High—instead of turning from Vernier to Kelly Road, he followed the street until it turned to Eight Mile, then turned right on Gratiot, a few blocks past the Eastpointe border. When Gordon's co-workers asked where he lived, he always told them Detroit, off Eight Mile near Eastpointe, a lie on top of a lie. He would have felt guilty of it if he hadn't once heard a friend from college claim Detroit from Lake Orion, almost forty miles north. Gordon spent enough time in the city, at least. Calling it home didn't seem so wrong.

Alvin's neighbor Joe waved when Gordon got out of his car. "Heatin' up now," he shouted from the lawn chair on his cement-block porch.

"I'm ready for it."

"Sun doesn't care about your cargo shorts."

"OK," Gordon said, manufacturing a laugh. He didn't know much about the man, other than that he'd lived on this street long before Alvin and his mother moved in. Used to make money fixing bicycles in the front yard, he always said. Joe gave him carrots and tomatoes from his backyard garden when Gordon said he was trying to eat healthy; he'd finished the carrots, but the tomatoes had gone to waste.

Alvin answered the door shirtless, still in running shorts, beaded with sweat. He sneezed twice into a bloom of tissue and motioned Gordon in.

"You look like shit," Gordon said.

Alvin offered his uncontaminated hand to shake but Gordon balled his and they bumped fists instead. Gordon rubbed his hand afterward. He was always more conscious of his sharpness when Alvin was around.

"Sorry about this morning," Alvin said. He pointed to his nose. "Woke up with this shit. Didn't even get out of bed until a couple hours ago. Tried running—what a fucking mess."

"How far?"

"I tried for seven, but everything got hazy at Nine and Gratiot."

Alvin was bad with numbers, but he made his mileage count. He was the reason they never stopped once they started, snaking around cars at red lights instead of running in place. Once he ran them more than a mile off-course to get around a train when Gordon refused to jump the hitch. If Alvin's count was off, at least it was never short.

He sat down in this old brown recliner, and Gordon took the bean bag chair, the only other option. They squinted to see the TV in the corner of the room on a skinny

stand—cheap imitation wood from the nineties, plastic with a shelf cover painted in knots and swirls. Above it, an outline where a shelf once hung. Whenever Gordon came here, he expected his voice to echo.

“You’re over 80, right?” he asked.

“85, I think.”

“That’s fine. I signed us up for Crim, by the way.”

“What?”

“Crim. The tune-up race in Flint. Remember?”

For four months, from January to the end of April, Gordon and Alvin ran just to run, all base mileage. By then, they’d caught the bug: neither could accept running as a hobby, but neither wanted to go back to the track. The marathon was the unlikely answer, but once they found it, the Detroit Marathon was an obvious debut: flat, close, low-pressure. They’d build their base through the summer and amp up the intensity in the fall, speed to strength, steady training broken up with Crim in August. May to October was 22 weeks—too long, but Gordon was convinced they needed the base; he didn’t want to go into his first marathon unprepared. Though he hadn’t told Alvin, in his mind he’d already added the caveat of time: they should run under three hours and qualify for Boston. After winning Detroit, they’d take two weeks off and start a shorter cycle for the big race in April. He knew he had to keep his imagination in check, but it settled Gordon to map it out. A race and a time—he could allow himself this.

“Yeah, yeah, Crim in August,” Alvin said. “How many miles is that?”

“Ten.”

You're the running nerd, Alvin had told him before they'd started training in earnest, when Gordon was peppering him with questions about mileage and rest. *I'll leave the details to you.*

"Ten. All right. You bring your stuff? I could probably go another mile or two."

"Eight today," Gordon said. "Ten tomorrow."

"You want a beer then?"

"Shouldn't you be eating soup or something?"

Alvin shrugged, came back with two Miller Lites and passed one to Gordon. "The body wants what the body wants," he said.

On TV, a young golfer in a loud polo pursed his lips and missed his putt. Gordon set the remote in a fold of the beanbag chair. He always joked that one day he was going to walk into Alvin's house and find it suddenly extravagant—a china cabinet filled with trinkets and figurines like the one at Gordon's parents house, where Alvin walked stiff-armed for fear of collision. The closest he came to decorating was in his bedroom, where there were more awards than there was furniture to hold them. A childhood hat rack held medals instead, and his room was wallpapered with two rows of race bibs, proof he'd run in everything from preseason early birds to state and national champs. No newspaper clippings, but a few certificates were scattered sporadically under the bibs.

Alvin should have earned at least some of his high school hardware at Cavanagh, but his mom fought to keep him out of Detroit Public Schools, using his grandmother's Eastpointe address to enroll him at East Detroit instead. They did move into her house when she passed, a year before administration cut enrollment by a quarter, requiring all families to re-register to rid the system of illegally enrolled Detroiters.

Half of Alvin's medals were from his first two years, when he was one of the best sprinters and jumpers in the county. From November to February, when Gordon was already going head to head with the region's best at indoor meets, Alvin was playing varsity basketball. He might have never tried distance running if practice hadn't been so boring for sprinters. At the beginning of his junior track season, he'd sneak from the sprinters' cool-down to plea with the throws coach, straight-faced, that he'd been born to put shot. When he pulled the same joke on the distance coach, he got plugged in the half-mile. Alvin ran the thing in two minutes flat, vomiting at the finish line, collapsing on the infield and swearing at the teammates who swarmed him. His coach grinned as he helped his new star middle-distance runner up from the grass.

The rest of Alvin's trophies were proof of a smooth transition. Somewhere in the room was a state championship trophy with *Meet Record* and *State Record* engraved on the base. Six years later, those records held.

Because both Grosse Pointe North and East Detroit were in the same conference, Gordon and Alvin saw each other once a year at dual meets. Gordon remembered beating Alvin in the mile and losing to him in the half. Alvin claimed he didn't remember him at all.

Golf gave way to SportsCenter, an extended segment on the U.S. Track & Field Championships held the weekend before. Gordon used to stream races like these on his laptop in college, but he hadn't really watched them since.

"Ten bucks they don't show distance," Gordon said as Justin Gatlin—the 100-meter champion and convicted doper, a few years off his ban—sprinted onto the screen.

"They'll show your guy," Alvin said.

Seconds later, they did: Galen Rupp, the golden boy of American distance running, a six-time U.S. champion who'd earned Olympic silver in the 10,000-meter run the year before. Alberto Salazaar—three-time New York City Marathon champ—got his hands on Rupp in high school and acted as his private coach through college. Now Rupp was Salazaar's star at the Nike Oregon Project, where he enjoyed all the luxuries the 85-billion-dollar company could offer: world-class trainers, lab tests, masseuses, altitude tents, a "Space Cabin" cryo-chamber, an underwater treadmill. Even the critics who called Rupp soft admitted he'd taken steps in the past two years. The pampered prodigy was now a contender on the world stage, the first American man to medal in the 10,000 meters since Billy Mills in 1964. In 2013, he was the best the country had to offer.

Gordon didn't love Rupp, and he didn't hate him either. He envied him for his known-ness, for his recent success. One day Rupp would move up to the marathon, and when he did, Gordon wanted a shot at him.

A highlight from the Olympics showed Rupp hugging his teammate Mo Farah, the Somali-born Brit who'd outlasted Rupp for the win.

"There we are," Gordon said.

"Geeky white boy with the Breathe Right strips? That's all you."

Alvin maintained that Gordon was the only real distance runner between the two of them because he looked the part. Alvin was, he claimed, a basketball player whose career had been terribly derailed. It was a joke—or at least Gordon thought it was a joke. Alvin kept a straight face that kept Gordon guessing, and he always seemed to guess wrong. Did it matter that he wouldn't call himself a marathoner? Probably not. Gordon was still grappling with the word himself.

“Who do you think would win in a marathon?” Alvin asked. “Me or Rupp?”

Gordon studied Alvin’s face, a half-smirk hiding behind his beer can. He thought about trying to build him up, but Alvin would sniff out his bullshit. Though the marathon was new for both of them, Gordon liked his chances. If he didn’t think he had it in him, if he hadn’t decided that this was *it*, the distance he would some day own, he wouldn’t have been trying.

“I’m fucking with you,” Alvin said. “We’ll get after it at Detroit. O Captain, I’m with you. We’re gonna tear it up.”

“Detroit first,” Gordon said, picking the tab off his beer can, “then Boston.”

“What’s the time for Boston?”

“Three hours.”

Alvin nodded, swirling his beer. “Might as well,” he said.

Gordon said Boston, but he meant the Olympic Trials. It was something he’d decided weeks ago, but convinced himself he hadn’t until just now. The men’s B standard was 2:18. Fast, but Gordon could get them there. The best way to convince Alvin he could do something was to show him he could. Gordon didn’t want him to get scared by the pressure, too much too fast. He’d wait, then tell him when the time was right. He’d tell him if he asked.

“To Detroit,” Alvin said, raising his mostly empty beer. “And then Boston.”

Grosse Pointe would be loud with kids when Gordon got home, front-yard football games finishing with last-second heaves. Gordon thought of Detroit, not of Heidelberg but of downtown, the place where, in October, something would be decided. For them, at least.

Gordon leaned over and knocked his bottle against Alvin's. He pretended to drink, stopping when Alvin stopped, nodding when Alvin nodded, grinning when Alvin grinned.

CHAPTER 4

LAKESHORE

June passed in a succession of too-cool days, a series of heat waves that threatened and threatened by never came through. Gordon and Alvin welcomed the breezy nighttime runs, the wind against their bare chests. Alvin told stories of broken air conditioners and sweaty nights on basement cots. Gordon told stories of great lakes and campfires on receding beaches. They learned the weight of hands on shoulders, hands on hands. Gordon learned some of Alvin's silence—the kind that turned sour, left alone too long, and a softer kind that enveloped them before runs, not intimidation or dread but an embarrassed anxiety, a quiet that meant Alvin didn't know what else to say, didn't know what else to do but run. They ran like they were escaping something together. The cool air wasn't for them, but they were stealing it anyway.

They started the new month with a 90-mile week, and in two weeks they were above 100. At the end of August, they'd hit their peak: 110 miles per week until September. Gordon kept a countdown in his running log, the only place he wasn't scared to share it.

At week ten, Gordon and Alvin moved from speed to strength. Their Tuesday workouts had consisted of short, fast repeats on the track with full rest in between, designed to teach the body speed and efficiency through full anaerobic effort, burst after painful burst. Strength training meant longer intervals at race pace or slower, with more

limited rest—a meld of speed, endurance and stamina meant to prepare them for the full 26.2.

"A smooth transition," Alvin nodded sagely when Gordon previewed the shift, "from pain to pain."

The first heat wave hit the Monday of week 10, a late-morning 16-miler at 5:40 pace. "Too fast," Gordon gasped the moment they stopped. "Fuck me, too fast." He staggered over to his neighbor's lawn and shook his head in the sprinkler. "Yeahyeahyeah," Alvin chanted, rolling around in the wet grass.

They met that night for an easy two miler, the next morning they jogged the mile from Alvin's house to the East Detroit track, then another to warm up for the workout: six 1,600-meter repeats at marathon race pace or faster, a quarter-mile jog in between. Their goal time was between 5:08 and 5:18, but after a 4:46 opener, all hopes for a reasonable training session were lost. They ran 4:55, 4:58, 5:03 and 5:07, finished with a two-mile cool-down, then met up later for an untimed jog to make 15 for the day.

Wednesday was a rest day that Alvin filled with an eight-hour shift at Meijer. Gordon wasn't very good at resting. In the early evening, he jogged to the Grosse Pointe North track and walked slow laps in the outside lane, taking the night air in with long, deep breaths. His mother used to take him to the same track when he was a child, offering him ice cream afterward if he'd keep to sprinting around the infield, leaving her alone with her Walkman.

Gordon jogged to the start line and worked through his stretches, holding them twice as long. Glutes, hip flexor, obliques. The track was thrumming with people, the muted noise of bodies in motion. Rest days were when Gordon felt most like a runner,

alienated and proud. When he realized it hurt more not to run than to run—that with running stripped away he was made mostly of restless tics and fevered daydreams. Still, he hated resting, how necessary it was. How it always made him feel behind. How his thoughts drifted to Rio de Janeiro, he and Alvin toeing the line years from now, as different men. *Marathoners.* He stretched until he was loose, then jogged back home.

On Thursday, they did a 13-mile progression run, starting slow and working up to marathon pace. If they were going to run the B Standard, they'd have to hit 5:18s like clockwork. Gordon led them through the run, and Alvin followed. "We get 'em?" Alvin asked. "We got 'em," Gordon answered, only briefly checking the time. He felt it in his calves, the veins pulsing so hard it felt like they'd become completely disconnected, snaked around his leg to strangle. Alvin whistled and clutched his hamstring, rubbing with both thumbs. Next Thursday, they started hills. That night, they met again for an easy five.

Friday morning, they went 13 easy around Eastpointe—an extra large triangle, according to Alvin. Another three that night, then fourteen at Metro Park on Saturday and three more on Saturday night, solo.

Most mornings, Gordon spent up to an hour convincing his body it had the strength to leave his bed. On some days his legs felt like useless lumber, cut to size for nothing. On others, it took his muscles three miles or more to start warming up, for his body to understand what was being asked of it and respond accordingly. It wasn't one day that killed them. It was the repetition of the days, the feeling of terror when Gordon realized what they'd put behind them, and how much more there was to come. There was no stopping—they were stuck in a machine of Gordon's own creation, plans he made a

lifetime ago. It was no wonder Alvin never asked questions, no wonder Gordon never found the time to tell him the true purpose of their pain, how unique it might be. The machine took them hostage, tampered with their memories. They were starting, they were done. At the horizon of every run was flickering transcendence, enough to propel them forward, but never near enough to catch.

On one evening run, Gordon looked over at his training partner and was repulsed by his composure, how easily he exuded control.

"Alv, you feel like you've got a handle on this?" he asked him.

"On what?"

"On this. Any of this," Gordon said. "Every day."

Alvin laughed until he was clutching a cramp in his side, half-limping down the sidewalk at the same snail's pace.

"Gordy, I'm dying," he said. "Every single day."

Gordon's finger hovered over his watch as he tried to remember mile markers on Lakeshore Drive: piers and gates and mansions with white marble statues on long green lawns. When he and Alvin approached a railed pier draped with fishing poles, he clicked the lap button.

"What's time?" Alvin asked.

"Seventeen. Fifty-three."

"For three?"

"Little more, little less."

"You suck."

"Buy a watch."

"You're the watch guy," Alvin said. "I'm the guy who asks about the watch."

They ran shirtless, weaving around walkers, hobby joggers, parents pushing strollers, cyclists with the money for Trek bikes but not enough sense to ride them in the street. Gordon with his long stride, arms pumping chest to waist, hands relaxed. Alvin stiffer, shorter, shoulders square, arms pushing and pulling in smaller arc. The pace wasn't hard, but out here they were flying.

"Hard to find my markers," Gordon said. "Everything looks the same."

"Nice and clean," Alvin said. Their conversation came in short bursts and long silences, exhales and inhales. "That's something."

He thought Gordon was fool for running in Detroit when he lived less than a mile from Lakeshore Drive, flat and scenic in the shadows of the wealthy, but Gordon hated weaving through the people. He liked being in Detroit. He liked the crossing over.

"Clean?" he asked, wafting the fishy breeze.

"Being Gordon Cooper," Alvin said. "What a hell of a gig."

At mile four, Gordon shook his arms out, the muscles finally starting to loosen. There was no clean shift when Alvin picked up the pace. At some point Gordon realized his legs were cycling faster, his stride stretching longer until they were flying down the path at a much faster clip.

Cowardice was always Gordon's initial reaction to the shock of a hard pace. Excuses came the moment his body grinded up against the barrier of a second or third year. *I could stop right now. I could fake an injury. I could take fifth or sixth or tenth—there's no shame in finishing tenth.* His instinct now was to stop Alvin, to make it stop.

Tell him you want to ask him something. Tell him you're cramping. Tell him the pace is too fast.

Gordon pushed through, ceding control to a body better trained to respond to challenges like these. People called running a mental sport, but the body knew better. He and Alvin silently matched pace for miles six and seven, dipping off the sidewalk and onto the grass to fly around traffic. Gordon saw and smelled and heard the rocks, the water, the fish, the high schooler in the sports bra staring at them from the bench, the sharp gasp of the woman they buzzed by on either side, the hoarse breath of the jogger who didn't even look up as they passed. He latched onto Alvin and made him his center—blank, reliable, effortless. He drifted out. His body had run faster before and would run faster again. All he had to do now was respond. Alvin surged again, turning and spitting in the grass. Gordon gritted his teeth and accelerated—made the conscious decision to accelerate—but as soon as he met the new pace, Alvin surged again, a half-step faster.

Shit, Gordon thought. *This guy is working me.*

He threw in a surge of his own—steering into the skid—but Alvin matched it quickly. Gordon hadn't checked his watch since they turned at what he thought was mile five. Suddenly they were cutting down a side street, swinging onto Gordon's block. Alvin was leading. Without so much as a look between them, they began to race.

Alvin had once told Gordon, straight-faced, that he wanted to break the runners he passed so badly that they quit the sport. That he could *feel* weakness in a runner, a shudder of fear passing to predator from prey. He could tell when they thought they had him beat, and their delusion made them stronger. *Just kicking the rust out*, is what he

called it when they ended their training runs hard. *Easier said than done,* Gordon always thought.

They traded the lead for the first two-hundred meters, Alvin on the sidewalk and Gordon in the street. Gordon was just testing the work they'd done in weeks before, probing what kind of speed he had at his disposal. When Alvin found his sprinting form and left him behind, Gordon felt broken only for a moment. His training partner had finishing speed that would rival elites. Gordon had work to do, was all. Week six. He just couldn't keep up.

Both men panted on Gordon's front lawn, hands on their knees—a miniature collapse. Gordon looked to the neighbor's house, where Mrs. Sweetwood was watching from her door. Ever since they'd used her sprinkler to cool off, she hadn't stopped watching, waiting, no doubt, to fulfill her fantasy of commanding grown men to get off her lawn.

"Sorry," Alvin said. "Last few days were shit."

Gordon shook his head and wrapped his arm around Alvin's side, briefly, his fingers glancing off a knot of muscle. Alvin went down on all fours and started coughing in fits. It was only then Gordon remembered he was still sick—that he'd just been thrashed by a sick man.

They left sweaty sockprints on the hardwood, walking through the living room to the kitchen. Alvin's shoulders tensed but his eyes wandered. He wiped his forehead and tucked his arms to his side.

When Gordon's parents retired to Florida, they took little with them. They'd furnished both their northern Michigan home and their Florida condo over the past 20

years, and when they finally embraced their lives as snowbirds, they didn't need much more than their tennis rackets. They told Gordon he was welcome to live in the Grosse Pointe house as long as he liked, though Gordon knew his father was probably impatient to sell. For now he lived alone with expensive throw pillows and black leather furniture, ceramic angels and porcelain bowls. The house was a constant reminder of his mother's taste, but also an artifact of his youth: he measured his age by the pictures on the TV stand, his childhood self looking younger every day.

In the kitchen, Gordon put coffee on, then started eggs and toast.

"You work tomorrow?" he asked.

"Ten to five."

"Early workout, then?"

Alvin nodded. There were dried sweat lines on his neck and forehead. Gordon felt so filthy, he thought his stench might ignite the heat of the frying pan, engulf him in tight-fitting flames.

"Better before than after," Alvin said. "You ever work retail? Shit wears you out. Maybe other managers sit at a desk, but I'm putting in mileage around the store all day."

"How you long you been there?" Gordon asked. He'd never told Alvin that Cavanagh High was his first job.

Alvin got up for coffee and peered over the frying pan.

"Since before my mom died," he said. "You going to put some cheese on those eggs?"

"Oh. Yeah." Gordon probed his mostly empty fridge and found a mostly empty bag of shredded cheddar, the remainder clumped in a nugget at the bottom. He was

putting the right energy out, but his intake was inconsistent: more fats than vegetables, too much processed meat. He could follow a recipe on his iPad as well as anyone else, and his mother's kitchens had the tools to double as a bakery. Gordon had every opportunity to eat well; he just forgot.

"Get your head in the game, G," Alvin said. "In college I used to go to work right from cross meets, throw on some deodorant and a clean shirt on the bus. Worked there through college, and when I graduated they bumped me up in-house. Who says business degrees don't pay?"

Alvin's state championship-winning 1:53 half-mile piqued the interest of all the power programs, but his mother was already sick by then, and he turned them down to stay local. In an alternate universe, he could have been a teammate with Gordon at State, or even a rival at U of M. But Alvin was the only child of a single mother, and he didn't have freedom to roam. Wayne State was 13 minutes down I-94, and they cobbled together enough scholarships to cover his tuition. His mother was a recently retired nurse with good health insurance and modest savings—she didn't need his money so much as his care. While Gordon was learning to live away from home for the first time, Alvin was feeding his dying mother, making Bs toward his bachelor's and running the cross country 10K because Wayne didn't have a track team.

"You hated cross," Gordon said, plating the eggs.

"I hated the 10K the first time I ran it, but I loved it after," Alvin said. "You want to see speed and power, watch a half-mile. You want to see a tough motherfucker, watch a fast 10K."

Alvin said he'd never raced anything longer than a mile before college, but he moved to the top of Wayne's roster as a freshman and dominated the GLIAC as a sophomore. His mom died the day before the Division 2 national meet in Colorado, Alvin's senior year. Instead of flying home, he fought thought a thin sheet of snow and sleet and a gaping spike wound on his calf to finish second, passing four favorites on the home stretch. He came across the line screaming and sobbing, sock drenched with blood, a school record holder that refused to call himself a distance man.

Any good runner had his share of hero stories, but Alvin seemed to do something impossible every time he raced. The time he slipped between two Division 1 All-Americans in the last five meters to win a rainy invitational as a sophomore. The time he took an elbow to the jaw in mile one, spit a tooth in his hand and held it as he ran the rest of the field into the ground with a blistering 30-minute pace, sucking blood back the entire time, finishing with a trickle of it crusted on his chin. Whenever Alvin grinned, people got a glimpse of what he was capable of.

"It's been about three years since my mom died," Alvin said. "Seems like longer. My aunt and uncle came for her stuff afterward, hollowed the place out. I wasn't there when it happened. Off doing something I shouldn't have been, I guess."

He'd gotten animated talking about the 10K, but now Alvin's face was falling back its normal blankness as he ate.

"It's funny," he said. "My mom always said we might have ended up in Grosse Pointe if my dad hadn't left. I made some asshole comment about one those waterparks on Jefferson and she told me to shut my mouth because I was too young to remember the brick that was thrown through our front window, or the time her car was stolen from our

garage. My dad's dad came over from Greece, but my mom lived in Detroit her whole life. If you've got the money, there's no shame in leaving—she said that to me, I remember."

Gordon felt a swell of something—pride or love or friendship. What would Alvin be doing if Gordon hadn't reflexively called to him at the track? Where would Gordon be if he hadn't rediscovered running? They needed each other. He looked out the window to the backyard, at the bags of grass he still needed to drag to the curb, the lawnmower and rusting clippers he'd forgotten to put away. The sun was high, filling the kitchen with uncomfortable light. When he was young, this is the time he'd just be waking on weekend mornings, padding out to the kitchen where his mother was making breakfast, a spread much bigger than his, the pancakes somehow perfectly round. He felt young, much younger than he was—always, but especially in this house.

"We're gonna get burned by some 40-year-olds," Alvin said, after they'd finished their food in silence. "You know that, right?"

After Alvin left, Gordon thought back to college. To the track, the memories he avoided. He never dreaded his training then like he dreaded it now—not until the end, at least. Was there more joy? There was more pride, more validation, so many chances for redemption. He spent so much time wondering about Alvin's commitment to the marathon, he rarely thought about his own. It had come so suddenly, with such veracity, he wondered about the impulse. Was he doing this to be great, to make his mark, to take his place among the world's best and prove he could get there on his own? Beneath all that lingered something darker. Gordon finished most of his runs feeling more punished than transcendent, more reduced than enlightened, more heavy than light.

Halfway through a shower, it occurred to him that he might have miscounted their mileage, they might not have run the full ten. He kept the water running, got out and wrapped himself in a towel, trying not to drip water on his laptop keyboard as he clicked through their route in a map. He stopped the cursor at what he thought was mile five, then stared dumbly the number: 5.48. Doubled, that made eleven. They'd run negative splits—their pace on the way back had been closer to 4:30 than 5:30. It seemed impossible they could run that fast on accident, but the numbers didn't lie.

"All right," Gordon said. He whistled softly, and a drop of water landed on the trackpad. There was fear in his shock, a frightening admiration of fitness he didn't know he had. It was terrifying to be so surprised, and they were only at the start.

CHAPTER 5

BARRIERS

To talk about Detroit is to talk about the suburbs. Canada lies south across the river, but clockwise, eight to four, are cities that define themselves by the ways they're not Detroit: Dearborn, Livonia, Southfield, Ferndale, Eastpointe, Grosse Pointe. Further: Farmington Hills, Royal Oak, Warren, St. Clair Shores. Pointes and Hills and Shores and Heights—names of exceptionality and elevation.

In its heyday, nearly two million people called the Motor City home. The 1967 riots serve as a convenient narrative turning point, but trouble had been brewing since the city's first race riot in 1943. A few years after the city razed Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, white policemen raided a blind pig in a poor black neighborhood, igniting five days of violence and destruction that still mark the city today. Nearly 700 injured, 7,000 arrested, 32 million in property damage. Those who could afford to leave wasted no time: whites hopped on I-75 to flee to the suburbs in droves, leaving poorer black residents to deal with the still-smoldering city.

Nearly a million formerly proud Detroiters of all colors shed themselves of that title between the 50s and the 80s. Detroit is the only city to have dipped back below a million residents after once having been above the mark. The numbers are almost pornographic: approximate 30 percent of the city proper is vacant land.

Suburbs weren't always seen as havens. Before the influx of wealth, before they started growing faster than the cities they bordered, before they too were stripped of their charm by freeways and strip malls, before they were merely rural logging and farming towns in service to the city proper, before the transportation revolution, the suburbs were shanties and slums. *Suburban* was a racial pejorative: urban slaves, when given choice of residence, populated the edges of towns, far from their captors.

Broadly speaking, the suburban communities of Grosse Pointe are rich and white, the city of Detroit is poor and black, and the borders between them are rife with racial tension. Michiganders from as far as 40 miles away will claim Detroit as their home, but Grosse Pointers less than a mile from the border will deny it to their graves.

Detroit shares a six-mile border with four of Grosse Pointe's boroughs, most notably Grosse Pointe Park. Elsewhere, the border is unmarked and unseen—meeting, for example, in a pleasant residential neighborhood with Grosse Pointe Woods and Harper Woods to the northwest—but in the Park, boundaries become battlegrounds. Policeman bored by low crime rates cruise the Park side of the border, ticketing disproportionate numbers of black drivers. Park residents take recommended roads in and out of the city. When they leave, they plan escape routes back across the border to safety.

Grosse Pointe tried to separate itself even when both sides were white, when class was the only difference; its efforts only intensified as the complexion of Detroit changed. Potential black homeowners were prevented from buying in Grosse Pointe until the 60s, and black Detroiters near the border were regularly faced with roadblocks and fences. Today, the five Grosse Pointe boroughs own six lakefront parks open only to residents. On the Park side, a median household income of $112,000. On the Detroit side: $24,000.

The border drew national attention when Grosse Pointe officials blocked all vehicle traffic between the cities with three sheds at Kercheval and Alter, the crossroads that's been called "the most conspicuous city-suburban contrast in the country": bookstores and brewpubs on one side, thrift stores and vacant lots on the other. It wasn't the first time the intersection was blocked—the previous winter, Grosse Pointe placed concrete barricades originally rumored to be the start of an office development, then used those barricades as a backstop for plows to dump snow piles tall enough to blocked sight of Detroit altogether. The sheds, which opened to the Park side and showed their backs to Detroit, were used for the city's weekly farmer's market, and, officials claimed, were part of plans to develop a growing dining and entertainment district. When oppositions from Detroiters was echoed by Grosse Pointers who didn't want to see their city segregated, the Grosse Pointe mayor scolded his residents, telling them, "You ought to be grateful you live here."

Detroit has a history with barricades. In 1940, the Federal Housing Administration refused to back a loan unless the developer built a wall to separate the development from a growing black population around it. The Birwood Wall still stands on 8 Mile Road, an arbitrary six-feet tall divider, vibrantly painted in stretches where artists turned it into a medium for messages of equality and justice. In the 60s and 70s, Detroit's wealthy Sherwood Forest community gated itself in, and, more recently, upscale neighborhoods like Indian Village and Palmer Woods have attempted to block several roads into Detroit—"traffic calming," the process is called—with varying success. Even Hamtramck, a struggling city enclosed entirely within Detroit's border, had a City

Council candidate make news by calling for a 12-foot fence to run the perimeter of his city.

Months after the sheds' arrival, the two cities struck an agreement: Grosse Pointe would removed them, allowing free access in and out of their city, and in return, Detroit would demolish several blighted buildings near the border and build a roundabout to slow traffic into its neighbor's growing dining and entertainment district. But Grosse Pointe missed the first deadline for a tear-down, then another. Detroiters were treated to more concrete barricades set in front of the sheds after a car crashed into them, either angry or confused. When officials finally removed the sheds, they kept some of the concrete curbing, cutting two lanes of traffic to one: Kercheval now runs into Grosse Pointe Park, but not back out into Detroit.

Meanwhile, a quarter of the other streets running through both cities across Alter are barricaded—not with sheds, but with steel guard rails, brick walls or signs that simply say ROAD ENDS. As a result, the two cities often meet in the land of the surreal. Korte and Alter, for example, has been closed to vehicle traffic for 30 years. The sidewalk, though is still open. From Detroit, you cross a bridge over Fox Creek, trading blight for front-yard fountains and manicured lawns by walking through a small tunnel of bent bushes and trees, a rabbit hole more easily closed than discovered.

CHAPTER 6

CAVANAGH PIONEERS

Gordon ducked around a corner and tried the media center door. Locked. Footsteps approached, shadows stretched ahead of them. He briefly considered throwing himself in the janitorial closet. Instead, he closed his eyes and hoped they'd disappear.

"Cooper! I see you've been fasting for the academic year."

Two middle-aged men in polos assaulted Gordon with handshakes and shoulder grabs, wrinkling the already wrinkled shirt he'd pulled from the floor of his closet that morning. Ellis Stone and Anthony Reed were Gordon's two elders in the history department, both Detroit Public Schools veterans who welcomed Gordon and the other young hires with open arms—Stone seemed to think the early twenties crowd would be more appreciative of his humor.

"Esteemed professors," Gordon said. "I bet you thought summer would never end."

"Didn't for me," Reed said.

"Summer school at age 35! The man is a savior," Stone said. "I'm still drinking a Corona on a beach in the Keys. In my dreams."

Gordon liked Reed, but Stone was the worst kind of high school jock, still hanging onto the ethos past 40. At least by the end of last year he'd stopped interrupting Gordon's classes on windy mornings to make sure he hadn't blown away.

When Gordon moved back to Grosse Pointe, he sent applications scattershot to every open teaching job within 30 miles. Cavanagh was his first interview and his first offer. He'd been told so many times how hard it was to win that first teaching job in Michigan, he accepted on the spot. Weeks later, he started getting calls from schools in better districts. He decided not to back out of his contract, to instead try Cavanagh for a year before moving on. But none of those same positions were open the following spring, and Gordon had since resigned himself to staying put.

As Detroit's population plummeted under 700,000, its public school enrollment dropped accordingly. Half of Detroit Public Schools were shut down, but Cavanagh was lucky: instead of closing after losing a third of its students in three years, it was chosen for a multi-million dollar renovation, part of a $500 million bond to consolidate and save the city's remaining schools. Electrical systems were repaired, classrooms were renovated, a media center and commons area were built and the school's historic 80-year-old auditorium restored. A year later, Cavanagh was yanked out of the DPS and into a new state charter systems for failing schools. All staff were asked to reapply for their positions, and many were denied. Gordon was one of the teachers hired to help bring the school new life.

Gordon's year of student-teaching was also his first year after running—the first of many, he'd thought at the time. He spent that time cataloguing his failures—labeling them, wallowing them as he tried to store them away. Cooke, the agent, had tried to contact him for a while after nationals—other agents, too—but Gordon didn't call them back. He stopped running, and the shadows stopped, too. He stayed up too late that year, drinking all the beer he'd denied himself the past four monastic years, and arrived at

school with the students, sleepy and disheveled. With teaching, there was always an excuse. His senior year drained him, and he told himself his energy and interest would return once his college running career was done. When it was, though, he was still too tied up with the aftermath. He had every intention of making the best of his time at Cavanagh, and even started his first year there with a pep that surprised him. But the routine of teaching was not the routine he'd lost touch with, the routine he wanted. That first Grosse Pointe winter came on strong enough to make Gordon's life feel empty and gray. It was worst early in the morning and late at night. He drank coffee to fight it, drank beer to fight it, even tried chewing a pack of gum to kill the energy that stopped up in his limbs during the day. It started, as always, with visualization: he imagined himself running, not on a track but on a street—hurting in ways that were both new and familiar. The urge was still there, stronger than ever—he hadn't felt himself heal, but a healing must have happened. He relapsed, a two-mile jog around the neighborhood, and that was enough. Once running came back, teaching faded even further to the background. He had an excuse again.

Teaching was an ideal job for a marathoners in theory, but Gordon found it exhausting. Bill Rodgers had done it, running in the dark, freezing mornings before school, sneaking out for runs during lunchtime. It worked just fine for Boston Billy—for a while.

"These meetings get longer every year," Reed said. "They're going kill us with all this testing. Cooper, you're lucky they stick you with the freshmen."

"Listen, Cooper," Stone said. "We're going to lunch, and you're coming with."

"Aren't you supposed to be working in your classrooms?" Gordon asked.

"Ah, Cooper the Young. Cooper the Scholar. The Savior, the Follow of Rules."

"All right, all right," Gordon said. "Thanks but no thanks. I've got a meeting with Handey."

Stone recoiled, and Reed shook his head.

"Good luck, Cooper," he said.

"He's choosing Handey over us?" Stone asked as they walked away. "It's an insult. He's insulting us directly.

Gordon walked the opposite way toward Room 202. He didn't plan on working in his classroom, but he had a half hour to kill before his meeting, and he didn't want to get roped into lunch. He flicked the light on and closed the door behind him. The teachers around Gordon defined *work* differently than him; open doors were an invitation for an hour-long chat.

Was he as bad as Stone? The fact that he was asking himself the question was probably an indication he was on his way. He really had put a lot of energy into his first year at Cavanagh. His freshmen acted out military battles with paper balls on the stairwell, shot a Nerf basketball at a plastic hoop on the door when they answered questions correctly. Gordon went to football and basketball games, talked to his students about sports and music and TV—anything to bring Jesse's head off his desk, to give Greg incentive not to skip. Many of his kids were college-bound, active in the community, straight-A students with full families who loved them. Others had things harder. At the start of the second semester, Jesse told Gordon he was being threatened by two seniors, though he wouldn't give their names. Gordon reported the concern to the assistant principal, but there was nothing she could do. Two weeks later, Jesse was arrested for

bringing a gun to school. A week later, a police dog sniffed out weed in a locker that belonged to Jaci—one of Gordon's A students covering for Brianna, who'd already gotten arrested for shoplifting at Super K. Greg stopped showing up altogether, and one Friday when Gordon's back was turned, Sam dunked on Jasmine so hard the plastic hoop snapped and fell to the ground in pieces.

Gordon hadn't gotten into teaching to save students, but it was impossible to watch them struggle without wanting to help—and impossible not to feel guilty when he didn't. They were good kids, mostly, with a lot going against them. Some had single parents, siblings in gangs. Drug dealers preyed at the Mobil around the corner. But he couldn't help them—not like Cindy Yorke, who took a tenth grader into her own home after was kicked to the streets. The more he cared, the easier it became to surrender to the hopelessness of his position. He started to cut corners, giving students As for C work, excusing absences that shouldn't have been excused. Where these kids really going to be better off it he failed them, if he beat them down with incompletes and absences until they dropped out?

His classroom smelled like disinfectant but looked the same as he'd left it in June: maps, corkboards, empty shelves. His window looked out at the athletic fields, and he stood there for a while, watching a woman in spandex jog laps around the track. *Sucks to be her,* he thought, relieved to have his daily run already recorded. But after a few minutes he began pumping his arms, breathing with her as she made her turns. Crim was only a few days away, and his body seemed to know something fast was going. At that morning's meeting, he daydreamed elaborate race scenarios: going out fast with a pack of Kenyans from the start or getting spiked in the opening meters and slowly reeling the

leaders back in. His stomach twisted. He was nervous now, but reflex would take over during the race, and afterward he'd marvel at the version of himself capable of acting so boldly.

On his way out, Gordon noticed a tube of wet wipes on his desk, a sticky note on the lid: *Hope your summer was great. Had extras, these are all yours. First Friday coffee's on me!* Then a smiley face.

Mrs. Yorke, of course. She'd taken a liking to him, though she lived in a different universe— ten years older, married with a kid on the way. They traded off buying coffee and donuts every week last spring, and she pretended not to notice the weeks Gordon forgot.

He dropped the wipes in an empty desk drawer and made a mental note to thank her when he put the wipes to use on coffee stains and handprints, germs on the doorknob, cleaning the dirt from a semester he was already starting to dread.

During the summer, Gordon's sense of time was dictated entirely by running: a day wasn't a day until he hit his mileage. Now had had to rise before sunrise, plunging into the cold, or force himself out after sunset, the weight of the day heavy on his joints. All just to teach—to spend his day pretending to teach while students pretended to learn. Coaching was another story. Gordon had asked about it in his initial interview and looked forward to it every day—an opportunity to feel useful, even if it meant withstanding the humiliation of being John Handey's unpaid assistant.

Handey hid his thinning crew cut with an old CAVANAGH PIONEERS cap, letters stitched in fading gold, threads tearing at the sweat-stained bill. He never passed

up an opportunity to remind a runner his hat was older than them—he even said it to Gordon the first day of practice last year when he mistook him for a student. Whenever he caught glimpse of a snapback on his track, he'd snatch the flat-brimmed hat and bend the bill. Handey's hat was part accessory, part pedagogical tool—in his spiel, the hat was a gift from his high school track coach (Cavanagh, Class of '66) for sticking with the sport after wanting to quit his first year. *And damn it if I didn't go All-State*, he always finished, grinning as if no one had access to the Internet, as if Gordon hadn't already looked it up and seen it wasn't true.

A gym teacher by trade, Handey had been running the Cavanagh track & field and cross country programs into the ground repeatedly for nearly two decades. He owed his job security to nepotism and dumb luck: his sister-in-law was Cavanagh's athletic director, and once in a while he stumbled across an athlete who made him look good—usually a loaner from the basketball team, a sprinter too talented for even Handey to ruin.

Gordon kept his head uncovered, shearing his summer hair in August and keeping it short until May. Better to be Handey's opposite than Donnelly's double.

"Well, all right," Handey said when he entered the athletic director's office, letting the door slam behind him. He was 15 minutes late, putting on an air of urgency to make the roles feel reversed. Before Gordon could stand, Handey slapped him on the shoulders and slid into a swivel chair, leaning back until the spine cracked in protest.

There were three rules to surviving a Handey meeting: 1) Smile, always—Handey feeds off frustration. 2) Talk only when Handey is laughing. 3) Avoid logic at all costs.

"Heard you're training for a 5K this winter," Handey said. He cocked his head back for an answer, but Gordon resisted. "Been a while since I ran once of those.

Probably way back since I got this hat. My 15-minute days." Handey chuckled, and Gordon moved in.

"I thought we could talk about training," he said, "for when the no-contact period ends."

"That's right," Handey said. He swiveled his chair away from Gordon to the window, which looked out at a brick wall. A tall, broad man who must have been muscular once but was now misshapen, like he'd been stuffed with something soft and light that congealed over time. "Whatcha thinkin'?"

Gordon waited. It was a trap, but the old man wasn't budging.

"I was th—"

"Same as usual, was my thought," Handey said. "20 miles a week, nice and easy. Lots of striders on the track to keep those muscles loose."

Gordon smiled. Hard. Handey pulled a pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his T-shirt and began smacking the case against his hand. Striders were an improvement—Gordon's greatest coaching accomplishment so far was keeping this nut job from torturing his distance runners with suicides every day. The worst part of the job wasn't that Gordon did twice as much work as Handey, running with the team and preparing them for meets while the old man schmoozed with the other coaches. It was that Handey had no understanding of the tremendous rift in skill and knowledge that existed between them.

"Maybe build them up to 30 or so," Handey continued. "Get 'em through regionals, then call it a year."

"Good, that's good," Gordon said. He waited until Handey chuckled to himself, the prelude to a story, and jumped back in. "Maybe a little low, though."

"Got no superstars here, Cooper. In case you haven't noticed, we can barely field a team," he said. "When you've been at this as long as I have, you learn better than to scare them away."

Gordon's smile turned into a smirk as he rolled his eyes. "Jackson's got potential," he said. "Walters, too. They both broke 18 at the league meet last year. If we challenged them with more mileage, they might respond."

Shit. All three rules at once.

Handey set his cigarettes down and learned forward, trading his Magnanimous Mentor face for something colder. A Scolding Face.

"You think *you've* got a plan?"

"Maybe just 40 or 50 miles at most. Give them base mileage and let them race themselves into shape," Gordon said. It was the first time Handey had ever asked for his opinion, sarcastically or otherwise. "Some speed and strength, a taper before leagues. The trick is—"

"50 miles! Cooper, you should me a 14-year-old can handle 50 miles and I'll eat my goddamn hat!"

Gordon smiled and closed his eyes. Just down the road at his alma mater, the defending regional champs were working their way from 50 up to 70. In high school he ran twice a day, low 80s at his peak. It wasn't worth telling Handey any of this. He'd just deflect it with some half-true high school story, more hyperbole and baseless pride.

"No, 20 is plenty for these kids. You really want to work them, we'll throw in some suicides to toughen them up."

Gordon nodded, on autopilot now. Why had he been optimistic about this meeting? Why had he cared? It'd been too long since he'd been in Cavanagh, subjected to all its micro-disappointments, the cumulative effect that beat him down, hour by hour. His summer high stopped here. He controlled nothing at Cavanagh. He only had his own training—Crim on Saturday, three days away. *That* was his.

"You seem like a good, hard-working kid," Handey said. "Hard work will get you a long way."

He winked, and every muscle in Gordon's body clenched tight. He gritted his teeth, dug a nail into his arm. Clench, unclench. Smile. *Saturday*. Handey took a cigarette from his pack and smirked his lips around it. Faster that Gordon could leave, he pulled a lighter from his pocket and sparked it to life.

CHAPTER 7

CRIM

It didn't seem fair that after months of hard training, months of never skipping a run, two missed alarms and a stretch of bad traffic could throw them so far off. Gordon checked his watch every few steps as he and Alvin speedwalked to the conference center from the parking garage. *7:23, 7:24*. This couldn't be happening—this was too stupid to be happening. Thousands of people were already cramming the streets of Flint. Gordon had forgotten how draining pre-race nerves could be—from this and the driving, he already felt exhausted.

The line to pick up their bibs wasn't long, but a middle-aged man in black tights and a fanny pack was laughing loudly with volunteers, holding everyone up. "Motherfucker," Gordon said, checking his watch again. *7:31*. If they'd woken at 5:30 as planned, they could have made the drive to Flint in an hour, with warm-up time to spare. Instead, Gordon missed his alarm, then called Alvin to find he'd done the same, and in minutes they were speeding up I-75 at 6:30, trying to make an 8:00 start. *7:32. 7:33*. Clench, unclench. He wouldn't forgive himself if he missed this race. "Just take. The fucking bib. And go."

"We'll be all right," Alvin said. His hands were tucked under his backpack straps, and he still had one ear bud in, playing something too soft for Gordon to hear.

It was almost 7:50 by the time they finished stripping down, their numbers pinned and their flats laced. Alvin wore a thin green EAST DETROIT RUNNING CLUB singlet, and Gordon a white Nike athletic shirt he'd ventilated with scissors. It was supposed to be homage to Alberto Salazaar, who did the same at the 1984 L.A. Olympics to deal with the heat, but now Gordon felt foolish wearing the mangled shirt, his nipple poking through a slit. He nibbled the end of a Nutri-Grain bar, and Alvin ate his last handful of cereal. They both took a long pull of water. Locker closed, keys in pocket. Ten minutes to the gun.

"Guess we warm up to the start line," Gordon said. He'd already resigned himself to a bad race. It was the same way in high school—no one PRed when their bus pulled up late to Metro Park and the team had to speed through their stretches. Gordon couldn't tell if Alvin was shook, too, or if he always got this way before races, wide-eyed and nodding, almost twitchy as he scanned and rescanned the crowd.

Runners lined the width of the road more than 100 meters back by the time Gordon and Alvin joined the fray, dipping and diving and squeezing their way as far up as they could before the starter came on the megaphone. Gordon had entered them at 53 minutes—5:15 mile pace, a split they'd have to be comfortable with to break 2:18. In the parlance of training, today was a race-pace tempo run: 10 miles at their goal marathon speed. That was fast enough to be placed with the first wave of starters, but there was no way they'd be able to claim their rightful places at the line. They advanced as far as the 7:30 zone before shrugging and giving up, electing to spend their last minute before the gun stretching instead of fighting the crowd. When Gordon pulled his ankle to his ass to

stretch his quad, a woman in red spandex and felt reindeer antlers and gave him thumbs up.

“Good luck,” she said, her smile goonish and red. Lipstick? She was wearing lipstick.

“Great,” he said to Alvin. “This is great.”

What sound do thousands of runners make, crouched at the start line with pride and money and bodies on the line? A chatter, a ripple, limbs wobbling in practiced ways as bodies prepare to tense. Each runner in an orb, and each orb pressed too close. Together, just a dull hum—the lonely sound of a machine powered but idling, waiting for work.

When the gun sounded, Gordon was working his other quad, his calves. He jumped in place, slapped his knees. Next to him, Alvin took and breath, crossed his chest and raised a finger to the sky. The elites were already 100 meters gone before the pack ahead of Gordon and Alvin started to break off. When they finally had space in front of them, Gordon took a step too fast, stumbling and clipping an ankle. He pushed the man in front of him, swatted at a hand on his back, and ran in place until pavement opened up again.

“Mother. *Fucker*,” he said. Reindeer Woman waved and took off ahead of them, and Alvin laughed so hard he was running doubled over. They crossed the start line together, bound for hilarious failure.

It took Gordon a half-mile to even start thinking straight. He liked running from the front in college because he didn’t have to worry about the mess—by the time he and Alvin found some open road, unfurling their stride to pass slower runners, Gordon was

already panicked, his muscles heavy with tension. He'd imagine this race being as simple as tucking in behind the elites, but they were gone for good. It was tempting to haul as soon as they had the space to do it, but Alvin kept them smart, and Gordon matched his pace as they moved up through the masses. He didn't catch the first mile marker, but he knew it was slow. Slower than the Kenyans, the elite American half-marathoners, the college cross guys, both good and mediocre. Slower even than the hobby joggers with egos who'd entered themselves at too fast a pace.

They weaved less in the second mile—the clumps of runners were thinning. Gordon caught their split at the start of the third: *12:54.* They'd have to run negative splits to save that start, if it could even be saved. Gordon wiped the sweat from his forehead and tried to find the meditative blankness that meant he was settled into a race. All thoughts must go, except the ones that pushed him forward, past the middling collegiates in mile three and into the no-man's land of mile four. They passed the next mile marker, and Gordon caught the split.

"5:02," he said.

"Now we're talkin'," Alvin said, and they continued to move.

Like Detroit, Flint was a city made and crippled by the auto industry, but despite high crime and signs of post-industrial struggles, the presence of several colleges keep the city flirting with a bizarre "college town" label. Crim started on the red-brick Saginaw Street downtown, with the first three miles taking runners past the Farmer's Market and parts of University of Michigan-Flint before looping back through downtown and heading southwest down University Avenue to Kettering. In between landmarks, there were long stretches of city only slightly more active than Detroit—wide swaths of

land and dilapidated houses, people sitting on porches looking unimpressed at the noble race that had taken over their city. The scenery shifted rapidly from college town to business district to poverty and back to suburban highway, swaths of people lining Dougherty Road north of the river to clap and shout vague encouragement as the runners prepared to take the Bradley Hills.

“You can do it,” someone yelled, too close to Gordon’s ear as he veered toward an aid station for a cup of water. “Just go get them!” yelled a woman in a Red Wings T-shirt, holding either a Sprite or Bud Lite in one hand and pointing them forward with another.

“Helpful,” Alvin said.

“Just go get ‘em,” Gordon said. “Why didn't we think of that?”

By mile five, elevation rose to about 100 feet, and Gordon and Alvin had put most of the field behind them. A pack of five or six runners were maybe 150 meters up, and a trio of Kenyans were further ahead, barely visible as Gordon and Alvin summited their final hill. From here, the scenery improved: Miller to Hawthorne to Parkside Drive, taking them past the mansions of the city’s elite, then the Swartz Creek Valley Golf Course. They’d finish downtown on the red bricks of south Saginaw Street, having gone counterclockwise around the heart of the city.

A drop of sweat rolled into Gordon’s mouth, and he pretended it was saliva. He’d missed the last water stop like an idiot, too lazy to drift to the side of the course. The pace was tough, but he could tell he was fit—lactic acid hadn’t yet started building up in his arms and legs and the back of his mouth. The speed work has done its job, teaching his

body how to burn energy anaerobically. When the wheels fell off, he had their unfinished strength training to blame.

Good? he asked Alvin every mile. *Good*, Alvin echoed. They moved together, just another weekend run, smooth and loose. Mile six was their fastest yet—4:59. *That* was the difference.

A floppy-haired kid with a Nike sleeve and a bad mustache surged ahead suddenly and split them into a trio. Gordon was offended by the intimidation move, which he could tell by looking at the kid was only for show. To test his theory, Gordon surged—a jolt to his legs, but Alvin matched it. The kid broke form and quickly fell behind.

"Mean," Alvin said.

"Teaching moment," Gordon said. He wished the men in front of him would break so easy. The pace was harder now, and third-quarter protest was beginning to build in Gordon's gut.

Surprisingly, Alvin felt it first. Gordon thought he was falling back to tie his shoe or spit downwind, but when he turned is head, Alvin was staring at the ground with his teeth gritted.

"Good?" Gordon asked. Alvin waved him off, and Gordon turned back to the road. Alvin's breather got softer and softer, and then it was gone. Gordon ignored whatever thought it was that wanted to derail him. His instinct told him to push the pace, so he did.

At mile eight, he felt it in his calves. His body was stretched on the torture rack now, and facing it alone—the leaders far ahead and his partner behind. Gordon the

Coward snaked his way to his brain: *Why not let up? This is a tempo run, a workout—that's what you told Alvin. Isn't that all this is?*

He knew he was done when his arms broke from their grooves, suddenly pumping too high, too wild, compensating for heavy legs. He had no more surges in him. *110 miles*, he reminded himself. *This is why we taper.* It wasn't enough to stop the anger, the hate that was consuming him on the race's final stretch. They weren't doing enough. He hadn't seen the leaders, not once, not really, he'd never given himself a chance. There was no excuse for him to be this weak, so publicly weak, flushed and done and everyone could see it.

The final mile was an obscenity, a street too stocked with faces for Gordon to breathe. Nothing was natural at the end—Gordon was coaxing, grinding, fighting his own feet to make them move. *Finish, just finish.* He was dizzy now, but dizzy happened. He didn't care—not about the winners or the crowd or the numbers at all. He just wanted it to be done.

Finally, the line. Gordon clicked his watch but didn't check the time. His body stopped, but the pain hit him in waves, and he drunkenly wobbled through the chute, hands on his head. He got lost in the people, ducked out to a curb and breathed into his knees. He put a hand to his shirt and felt blood—the sweat-slicking material had chafed his nipples raw.

The pain faded as Gordon watched the runners who'd beaten him laughing together, happy with their run. Tomorrow was the last day of week 14, their peak at 110, a weekly mileage they were supposed to hold for a month before their taper. But what if they kept climbing? He'd never shown Alvin his charts, his logs, their mileage written

out from May 19 to October 20. If he told him they were pushing even harder before the taper, why wouldn't he believe him?

Alvin came into view walking like a robot, too pained to bend.

"I had an incident," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Pass out?"

"Just a little. Those hills killed me. What'd you run?"

"54:12," Gordon said, checking his watch for the first time.

"Sounds right," Alvin nodded. "I was 55 something. Oh-six or seven."

"Man, you've really got to buy a watch."

"Goddamn finish line clock's big enough to see from Detroit. You think I can't tell time?"

"You weren't that close."

"Your chicken legs were a light in the storm," Alvin said. "I followed you all the way in."

Alvin put his ear buds back in during their cool down. Gordon kept kneading at a nagging pain in his quads. By the time they looped back around to the conference center, the results were posted on the wall.

"Seventh," Gordon said. "There must have been another pack ahead of the leaders."

"Eighth," Alvin confirmed. "Kiprich, Kiprop, Koho. Team Africa wins again."

"Been like ten years since an American won Crim," Gordon said. "That Kogo dude's taken three in a row."

"So close, Gordy. So close."

Gordon felt sour, even after they'd walked back to the car, literally leaving the race behind. His memory of it was already fading, but instead of being amazed by his run, he was disgusted by it. He felt he'd given up too easy, shriveled like the bad-mustached kid who thought he could hang. And here was Alvin with a skip in his step.

"You look like you just got beat by Reindeer Lady and Santa too," Alvin said. "Just a tempo run, right? We brought it, buddy. We killed that ten-mile run."

Ten miles—an awkward distance, but what was the marathon but another awkward distance? At least Crim was even.

Alvin fell asleep before they hit the freeway. Gordon relived the race as he drove, gripping the wheel too hard, slamming his fists into the leather.

Shit, he thought, trying to wrap his head around the impossible thought. Alvin was stronger than him. There were miles and miles ahead, but for now the fact was true. It sunk him into a toxic mood. He hadn't lost him—not for a second, not even close.

After Gordon showered and scavenged the refrigerator for the last of four different deli containers, stacking the meat into a sandwich tall enough to put him to sleep, he dreamed of Callie for the first time in months.

He woke up hot, disoriented and bitter, walking laps around his living room, breathing deep, reminding himself he was home, he was awake, he was real. Normally his naps were deep and dreamless, but this one had ended with a panicked white flash, Callie's face burned onto his brain. He didn't remember what had happened, and it didn't matter—it was a waste of time parsing dreams, random collections of scenes that people wasted time on searching for symbols with meaning in a different world. What mattered

was only that he'd thought of her, he'd dreamed of her, he'd seen her face and knew she'd be unshakable, jumping in front of his every thought for weeks to come. He clicked the TV off—the AC, too, just to stop the sound.

What exactly had happened between he and Callie was something he still couldn't explain—in their last days together, each had been waiting for an apology from the other, though neither could say for what. He saw her once, weeks after Nationals, and they sat at the same bench in East Lansing for one last misunderstanding: he thought she was saying goodbye forever, she wanted to give them one more chance. It wasn't until after the walk back that Gordon understood. He was too broken then. He didn't understand anything. She went away to Brazil for that year, and then, last summer, moved back with her parents in Fowler. If they'd stayed together, she might have come to live with him instead. He still thought about these things, alone in a big house that wasn't his, and he hated himself for it.

He tried to sleep for a while, for his muscles' sake, at least, but his mind wouldn't stop replaying those middle miles of Crim, right before Alvin dropped behind him; then Heidelberg, the ice house, the snail tattooed on Alvin's arm. Now Callie. After an hour, Gordon moved to the couch, groggy but impossibly awake, propped a stack of pillows behind him and began browsing running forums with his laptop on his thighs.

Rupp's 2013 racing schedule—very odd, was the title of one thread. Others, even more vague: *Persisting ankle pains. Who else has them?* and *Help me fix my broken mechanics!* Some were too serious—*Official 2013 High School Boys Texas Cross Country Thread*—and others laughably absurd, like the *Scariest moments on a run?*

thread that was just a series of posters trying to one-up the previous with invented ghost stories: haunted maps, the ghost of Roger Bannister, a pack of zombie dogs.

Gordon's cursor paused on a thread with more than 600 posts: *Alan Webb is done—and so is American distance running.* He snorted, but clicked in spite of himself. Webb used to be his hero, the American record holder in the mile, a sub-4:00 high schooler who, after a stint at the University of Michigan, trained alone with his high school coach for most of his professional career. Webb was as great as he was inconsistent: he bombed out at Athens in 2004, set the American record at a tiny Belgian meet in 2007, then missed the Olympic team the next year. It was mental with Webb, or else it was physical—he was a miler with biceps, a rare breed, and he said the extra bulk weighed him down in his late twenties, the tail end of his prime, a window that closed too fast. "You can only reach down into that well so many times," Webb had said about his career as a miler. He'd tried moving up to the 5K, the half-marathon, and was even rumored to be considering a career in the triathlon. It was sad, Gordon thought. Webb was a man without a distance. He wasn't done, but the track & field had moved on without him.

The thread devolved into a conversation of who was better: Webb, Ryan Hall or Dathan Ritzenhein, three American distance stars who'd all graduated high school together in 2000. Hall had moved up to road races, running the fastest half-marathon and marathon in American history, and Ritzenhein had carved out a long, consistent, versatile career, running well in races from the 5K to the marathon.

The last post in the thread was on by a user named John Orange:

> *What does it matter? None of them even medalled on the world stage. There were fast but they were LOSERS and the guys replacing them will be even worse. Ritz is cooked and Rupp is on 'roids. The marathon is the worst. Your best runner is an African! Meb Keflezighi? HELP US, ALAN WEBB! Lol. Stick to baseball, gents. America sucks.*

Gordon knew that half the posters on this forum were trolls, but this one woke him up. He created a one-time username—Coop3:56—and replied to John Orange's post.

> *The future of the marathon hasn't run a marathon yet. American distance running isn't dead, it's just reloading.*

He hated it as soon as he finished typing, but it was done, and he posted it. He scrolled through the boards a little longer, waiting for another reply—someone to mock him, to accuse him of thinking he was that future—but his comment seemed to kill the thread. Sleep, now, was a ship that had long ago sailed. His pulse was thumping in his neck, his grogginess gone. *A run wouldn't be the worst idea*, he thought. His shoes sat by the door, and it would be so easy to toss the laptop aside and slip them on his feet. A late-night recovery run—not the worst idea at all.

CHAPTER 8

OCELOT

Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot.

Gordon let the word give rhythm to his stride—*oce* on the inhale, *lot* on the exhale—as he glided down Mack at six-minute mile pace. Earlier that summer there was news of a wild animal—smaller than a leopard, bigger than a housecat—roaming the streets of northeast Detroit. It had since been identified as a Savannah, a cross between an African Serval and a domesticated housecat, but Joe still swore it was his pet ocelot Kimo who'd run away from home three years ago. Neither Gordon nor Alvin believed him, but shortly after he heard the story, Gordon started using the word as mantra when he ran—half lure, half ward—and found it fit his stride. He'd been reciting it for the past ten minutes as a mode of concentration, recalibrating in the middle stretch of his 16-miler.

He'd just gone two miles the night before—more a shuffle than a run—but his body had felt better the next morning as a result. He'd felt his muscles stiffening, lying on the couch, but he woke up as loose as he could remember feeling the day after a race. The lingering soreness was the kind he liked to push through, to feel tingle and scream. Alvin had opted out of their Sunday long run, and that was fine. Gordon liked the feeling of rightness that came with recovery runs, stepping out onto the pavement dizzy and regaining control as the run went on. Running at a pace just beyond comfortable and letting the body catch up. Beyond all that, Heidelberg felt different when Alvin wasn't

around. Gordon wasn't far now, but coming up on the middle marker of an out-and-back always made him anxious. He wanted to turn, to be there, but also to be done with checkpoints, onto the final push toward home.

Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot.

Residents were assured the animal was docile, probably a pet, but they hunted it anyway. It was more frightening to them than the packs of wild dogs already roaming some Detroit neighborhoods, the wild deer of Jefferson Ave., the coyote recently spotted near downtown. Its exotic coat made it foreign, dangerous. Gordon shook the stiffness from his arms. It was a muggy night, and his naked chest was already stuck with bugs like a human windshield. He felt hazy still, hungover but ready to sharpen. Something small had broken; it was time to reassemble the pieces. He routed nervous energy through the mantra, expelling it in exhales.

Long runs were meditation. Gordon found the pace and let rhythm take control, arms and legs clicking into their natural stride, feet slapping the pavement like a metronome. He detached from his mind, bobbing from thought to thought. In so many ways, he and Alvin were opposites. Alvin latched onto checkpoints like life preservers. He would have torn through ten-mile training runs with forty laps on the track if not for Gordon, who now found the monotony of short loops unbearable. Gordon dreamed instead of big, shifting landscapes, acres of open fields. Northern Michigan, where he'd run the long, sloping hills on so many summer vacations. Here, he had cement sidewalks, congested suburban streets instead of open rural highways. The only parks worth running were too far to justify the drive. Detroit was the closest he had to city and country, the east side burned and open, taken back in places by nature. Gordon didn't need

checkpoints or landmarks, but Heidelberg was an exception. He needed to see his feet fall on the polka-dotted street, to breathe the silence of the place before turning back, knowing his job was as simple as putting one foot in front of the other, his goal vague but final in the distance.

Ocelot, ocelot. Marathon. The word wanted to be held, to be examined and tested, stretched and distorted until it snapped back to shape. There was a weight to it around which the rest of Gordon's life was folding. He'd mocked it, rejected it, and now he had it bad. Did Webb feel this way about *5K*? About *triathlon*? Marathon was an adult word, a word on which other things depended. Owning that word, it seemed, might make him a better teacher, son, friend. Or it could be a waste—a win for the distance but a loss for him. A failure. *Marathon, marathon, marathon.* Gordon repeated the word until it meant nothing, then blew it away.

Gordon crossed McClellan Street, then Belvidere. He hit the lap button on his watch, worn with the face on the underside of his wrist for a quicker split check. *39:23*. He ran past Daysha's, a liquor store at Belvidere and Mack where the usual parking lot crowd was huddled under the awning to shield themselves from the drizzling rain. Gordon liked its rhythm, the way it slicked his sticky skin. It meant Heidelberg would be empty.

He tried not to think of how odd he must have looked on the streets of Detroit, freckled white in short shorts with skeletal chest on display—a body that could have been cropped from a larger frame, stringy muscle carved into bone. He moved with confidence past buildings long abandoned, ravaged by arsonists and gutted by scrappers, hanging by brick and shingle sinew. Some were neat despite their abandonment, orifices boarded

with plywood, but others were warped and charred and gaping. Gordon stared through the spots where windows were supposed to be, expecting something: a human, an animal, his own reflection.

He squeezed tight to the side rail of the bridge over Conner Creek Industrial, a mix of long-vacant and still-active auto part factories. The complex was split by rail spurs, the track stretching another mile south before ending at the Edison plant near the river. Like most of Detroit, Conner Creek was once booming: the Detroit Terminal Railroad was an attraction for automakers in the early twentieth century. The few students who paid attention to Gordon's lectures had no clue their city was once called "the Arsenal of Democracy" for all its car factories retooled as tank and aircraft plants during World War II. They only knew the struggling Motor City, its long fall, the embarrassment of the Big Three CEOs flying to Washington in corporate jets to beg for a bailout. The industry that sent their parents to the unemployment line. Conner Creek was no industrial graveyard, but it was a far cry from the 20s, when factory workers used to fish in the creek before it was turned into a sewer, enclosed undergrounds in stages.

Nearly 100,000 vacant structures were waiting their turn for demolition in Detroit, many on the east side, decorating the five-mile stretch from Conner Creek to Grosse Pointe. They'd sit until the city found the money to bulldoze the blight, which meant maybe they'd sit forever. Drug dealers and prostitutes used them for refuge in the meantime, making unwelcome neighbors for dwindling residents. Often, arsonists handled the mess themselves. The bridge at Conner Creek was a bridge to what once made the city great—at night the plant looked abandoned, but it hummed during the day.

This was the Detroit people forgot about when they forgot about Detroit. It wasn't University District, where young talent flocked to the hubs of Detroit-Mercy and Marygrove. It wasn't downtown, it wasn't Comerica Park or Ford Field, where the Tigers and Lions occasionally made the city rock. It wasn't the ruins of the old Packard Plant or Michigan Central Station, the so-often photographed giants of blight, stars of ruin porn, subjects of guerilla tours led by photographers with a fetish. This part of the city, the east side, was the sprawl. When people called it wild, there was truth to the words—literal truth in the neck-high grass and prowling Savannahs—but to write the city off as wilderness was to ignore those who still lived there, people with jobs and hopes and histories. People whose families told stories of Detroit's ascension, the empty lots bought and filled with houses, and people who'd witnessed the reversal, white flight and black flight and the city's so-called fall. People who loved their city and hated it, too. There was life in what was dismissed in decay, a pulse too easily forgotten. There was a city still breathing here, straining its eyes to see in the dark with half its streetlights broken. A city bleeding to death when only a third of the ambulances still ran, when a corrupt and depleted police force took an hour or more to respond to emergency calls. This was the Detroit that policemen warned visitors to enter at their own risk.

When Gordon saw a man walking toward him with grocery bags in hand, he crossed Mack—only two lanes now—in advance of his turn.

Gordon's parents had always preferred not to cross into *that* city. Good and bad, safe and unsafe—he learned the difference gripped tight to his mother's side when she took him to the fireworks downtown, or shopping at the Eastland Mall. Gordon learned racism in gestures and codes: his mother's arm, his father shaking his head at the news,

squinting at the one black couple on the block. Grumbles about the neighborhood going downhill, the *thugs* on Vernier.

The transition from Grosse Pointe wasn't drastic, as Gordon remembered it, but gradual instead. For three miles from Moran to Alter, Mack acted as border: Detroit to the north, Gordon's right, and Grosse Pointe to the south, across the street. Detroit didn't take over so much as the two cities bled together. Long driveways shortened, buildings compacted. Abandoned buildings that stuck out at one intersection looked more at home a few streets down. When there were more liquor stores and gas stations than boutique restaurants and parks, the black-and-white signs turned green and white, the letters larger and more plain. It was a gradual shock, taking this bridge to the heart of Detroit's east side. The biggest difference was in absence, something a passerby might note casually, pointing out a vacant lot, an empty courtyard. From an aerial view, the juxtaposition was more clear: if the neat lines of Grosse Pointe made the clean grin of a salesman, Detroit was a boxer's jaw, the grimace of a man who wouldn't stop getting up off the mat.

Crossing this border triggered an injection of pride. Gordon pumped blood and clicked spits through stretches of the city his parents wouldn't drive through without checking their locks. No one else ran this route—no one else was tough enough. Galen Rupp had low-gravity treadmills and a secluded track in Oregon. Gordon had Detroit, the forgotten city that would make him great. Fear was only fear, something he felt and forgot, a nagging discomfort he recognized but could push away for periods at a time. For months, Gordon had run the route to Heidelberg without incident. It had proven safer than his own neighborhood, where high school boys—many of them juniors and seniors at North—liked to cruise the city drunk and pelt him with firecrackers. Glass bottles were

rare, but, after the first time, always a threat. What he encountered most in Detroit wasn't objects but people, and Gordon was less afraid of them. People, he could outrun.

He clicked another six-minute mile at Mack and Ellery, then turned and ran past the tree-house, down the road he couldn't stop comparing to northern Michigan, where boarded shacks settled for decades in tall grass beside country roads. His breathing settled as Heidelberg came into sight. Today, the mood of the Project was rain—the houses looked muted, dirty. The remnants of the O.J. House sagged and drooped over the wounded back half.

Gordon had grown up 30 minutes from the Heidelberg Project, but he didn't know that until he graduated college, until after he'd left and come home again. In one of his many hours in front of a computer screen that first year back, he saw a picture of a girl he'd briefly known in high school standing in the middle of a polka dot, her hands thrown upward and her hip jutted out. And another of her posing in front of the Doll House, green with rainbow steps and weathered stuffed animals carpeting the outside walls. Gordon had squinted, thinking they were paintings, but they had shape and depth to them, nailed to the siding and propped in the windows. Giant dogs, cows, bears orangutans. Snowmen, mice, monsters, bees. Winnie the Pooh and Spiderman, Toucan Sam and a naked Barbie. Barney and a banana—it was childhood sung in the beautiful chaos of graffiti. *What a bunch of junk,* one classmate commented, but Gordon couldn't look away.

He didn't forget about that post, and especially not about the comment. He drove to the Heidelberg Project the next morning and spent hours walking the neighborhood, convincing himself it was real. When his parents retired and turned snowbirds, it felt like

his childhood had been swapped for a photo display. First he drove to Heidelberg, then he ran to it. He felt a comfort in its balance of safety and risk. It was like no other place in the world.

Now, though, he couldn't stop imagining the feel of the weather-battered stuffed animals, the rot between the bunny's ears. And since Alvin had told him about Manny and Mike, he couldn't stop thinking about fire—about arson. It hit him now, what it meant to be targeted, how personal it was, even when it wasn't. Maybe Heidelberg was chosen randomly, but that was, in a way, even worse. Obliviousness to what the O.J. House was, what it stood for, seemed an insult nearly as heinous as the crime. Art was a mystery to Gordon—the creation and destruction of it—and the corpse of the house made him impatient. For the Project, he wanted something bigger, something brighter. For the arsonists, he wanted justice. They were faceless, soulless criminals, but the more angry they made him, the more he pictured Alvin performing the role—Alvin tagging along, Alvin carrying the lighter fluid, Alvin getting bullied into setting the fires.

Gordon's eyes drifted when he ran—to the windows and the horizon, the cars parked on the curb. A shape in the passenger's seat of an old Ford caught his eye. Blankets, he thought. Or trash. When the shape moved, transforming into the upper half of a man, Gordon jumped and stumbled. He waved, but the man just stared until Gordon was past the car, and beyond.

Tourist, the man must have been thinking. *Kid from the suburbs. Rich boy.*

Seconds later, Gordon saw them: three men prostrate in the mud before the album-covered House of Soul. At first they were only a ripple in the rain, then dark clothes draped over the forms of men. Gordon watched them unfurl themselves and

disappear behind the structure. He kept running, hoping to see them on the other side, but they didn't cross his sight again.

On Elba, Gordon's muscles seized. They were outlines of men, or they were nothing. His breath left him a second too long, came back and seemed to leave for even longer. *Nothing*—it wasn't a mantra, but his muscles unclenched when he believed it. He was lightheaded and tired, that was enough to explain it. He pushed the three men aside and thought only of the man in the Ford. Was it the first resident he'd seen at the Heidelberg Project because they kept to themselves, or because he hadn't been looking? Gordon wasn't a tourist. He *hated* tourists, the men and women who came to half-see something once, to capture it as a souvenir and take the imitation home. Gordon came to Heidelberg because a cheap relic wasn't thought. He had to see it for himself, to make sure it was there and assure himself that he knew it, that he *knew*. He came not to marvel, but to pay respects to the environment destroyed by a city and rebuilt by a man. To learn something a placard couldn't teach.

The city reappeared around him, blank spaces filled by brick. The drizzle let up, then started again, harder. Gordon checked his wrist for the time but got nothing but his own pale skin.

As he prepared to turn onto Mack, a cat jumped in front of him and scurried across the street. Gordon broke his stride, caught himself with both hands and launched himself forward into a faster run, his heart pounding in his ears. A few weeks ago the Savannah's body had been found in a dumpster, shot dead by a Detroiter who feared the animal's unusual height, its leopard-like spots. The owners were hysterical, having raised Chum since he was four months old. They declined to speak to journalists when the story

was picked up by national news, but a local rescue group spoke on their behalf. “People can’t just go around shooting things they don’t understand,” the spokeswoman said. Gordon craned his neck to look behind him. This one was too small to be anything other than housecat, but in Detroit, you never knew.

He ran down Mack until Heidelberg was obscured, tucked into the deep gray sky. Another mile up, another mile down. *Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot*. The sense of meditation was gone, but the mantra still carried him home.

CHAPTER 9

DEMOLITION

The March 2013 O.J. House fire wasn't the first time the Heidelberg Project was attacked. The city of Detroit set the precedent for that.

By the late 80s, Heidelberg had appeared in *Newsweek* and *People.* The artist earned the Spirit of Detroit Award and an audience with Oprah Winfrey. More than anything, the Project drew attention to the city's ineptitude, its inability to stem to tide of urban decay. The artist gained disciples because of this—and enemies, too. A city councilman called him crazy, blamed his creation on psychedelic drugs. Oprah ambushed him by calling his work *a nuisance* on national TV. In 1991, Mayor Coleman Young declared the Project an *eyesore* and, citing barriers to urban planning, sent bulldozers to level "The Baby Doll House," "Fun House," "Truck Stop" and "Your World"—nearly the entire installation, including five years' worth of paintings and sculptures the demolition crew didn't grant the artist time to retrieve.

In 1995, the artist set himself to the task of rebuilding. The O.J. House became his first post-demolition installation when a family moved out, gave their keys to the artist and said, "Turn it into a work of art." His painted messages drew attention to poverty and racism, issues he felt were overshadowed by the hype of the O.J. Simpson trial. Other installments followed, signaling the return of the artist, the return of the street, but Detroit came for him again in 1998. A city councilwoman called the Heidelberg Project *glorified*

garbage, an attempted pejorative for the artist's magic trash. New mayor Dennis Archer echoes his predecessor's *eyesore* damnation, and city council soon ordered the demolition of any part of the Heidelberg Project on city property—at the time, nearly all of it. But when the demo crew arrived, they found the street blocked by the artist's supporters, many of them east side residents on whom the city claimed the artist had imposed himself. The impasse lasted hours, until the crew finally hugged the artist and drove away. He filed for a temporary restraining order, buying time to build a case against the city.

The restraining order was lifted in early 1999, and within hours, Archer's bulldozers moved in to destroy "Happy Feet" and "The Canfield House." Afterward, the crew loaded dump trucks with detritus: shoes and stools and bicycle wheels, TVs and stoves, broken domestic artifacts scattered senseless across a broken street. The artist, young son and wife in two, raced around searching for some small piece of his work whole enough to save.

That demolition would be the last—not long afterward, a well-received documentary and a lengthy public court case put the Heidelberg Project on the national map. Without city intervention, the nonprofit gained popularity across the country—and in Brazil Ecuador, Australia and Germany, too. Soon Heidelberg was drawing its 50,000 visitors per year, bringing in millions. The artist was even endorsed by Kwame Kilpatrick—Detroit's famously imprisoned "hip hop mayor"—and was commissioned to paint a garbage truck float for a 2003 parade.

The Heidelberg Project enjoyed nearly 15 years of peace before it was struck again, this time by shadow and flame.

When the artist is asked about his resilience, he responds with platitudes—love and hope and phoenix from the ashes. More telling is the image of the artist in the aftermath of the 1999 demolition, enraged that the city would destroy his life's work, again, instead of the crack hourses and thrice-burned buildings in the surrounding blocks. More telling is the artist going to his truck for a bucket of blue paint and, with the bulldozers still running and reporters behind him, furiously painting his signature polka dots on the demolition's path, reminding the city that was long as he was alive, his art couldn't truly be destroyed.

More telling was the artist looking Detroit in the eys and saying, "My next project is the whole city." When colors appeared on the doors and porches of abandoned east-side homes, an echo: "I'm going to polka-dot the whole city."

CHAPTER 10

RUNNING SAVES

August and September passed in a blur of broken routine, Gordon's failed attempts to make new ones work.

He was surprisingly optimistic for his first day back to Cavanagh. Nervous, even. In a new shirt and tie, he beat everyone but the janitors to school, using his hour before the bell to prep lessons for the week. When he asked his first freshman class who among them was interested in history, two hands shot up. One was from a student who'd just seen the *Da Vinci Code* and wanted to make a career as a symbologist. The other, a boy who wanted Gordon to sign his bathroom pass.

"You didn't," Alvin said later, grilling burgers in Joe's backyard.

"I'm well aware that releasing a student for the bathroom five minutes into the first day maybe isn't the best idea," Gordon said. "But yes, I did."

Alvin groaned and slammed the lid to the charcoal grill. Joe ran his finger across his throat.

"You're done," Alvin said. "Five minutes in and you're done."

"Before you even started," Joe said.

"Half of them were already sleeping. Dudes in the back were making fun of my tie. What was I thinking? Stone wears school-issued polos all year long, the same three colors on repeat," Gordon said. Joe put a hand over his face, ran his thumb and forefinger

over his mustache on the way down. He was watering his garden while Alvin cooked—Gordon assumed it was impossible to plant anything past June in Michigan, but Joe was a few days away from stuffing their pockets with carrots, turnips, collards and beets. What Gordon was supposed to do with a beet, he couldn't say.

"Teach to the good ones," Joe said. "That's what my daughter says. If only three of the kids pay attention, she teaches to those three."

"I know you've got some front-row note-takers," Alvin said. "Some hand-raisers, extra-credit beggers."

"Nerds," Joe said.

"They don't listen, either," Gordon said. "Everything I say does straight to the page. All they want from me is the A."

"Are you kidding me, Gordy? You don't even like the good ones?"

Gordon scooped an ice cube from his glass of water and pressed it to his Achilles. Worse than the teaching was the standing—he'd underestimated the toll of being on his feet all day. He thought of his best student, Alicia, rolling her eyes at him as he stretched his calf on his desk, waiting for on the boys in the back to finish a quiz that would never see his grade book. Or Sasha, who doodled in the corner of his notebook, waiting for him to finish his joke so she could resume taking notes. A few days ago, they'd come to him to talk about future classes and careers, college already on their minds, but Gordon referred them to the counselor. He cared too much to be Stone, but not enough to be a mentor. He didn't have the energy—not now, with the beating his body was taking.

"No," he said finally. "Their enthusiasm makes me sick."

Whenever old teammates asked Gordon about teaching in Detroit, they were disappointed to hear his description didn't fit the hellscape they'd imagined for him. Cavanagh looked good with its renovations, and academics had been on the rise since the city declared bankruptcy and the school was adopted by the Statewide charter. Like any school, it was only a handful starting the fights, making the bomb threats, defacing the outside walls with graffiti. Students Stone would say were *gone to the streets.*

The smart ones didn't need him, and the ones making trouble were already in too deep. But Gordon was drawn to students like Tayvon, a talented athlete doing his second tour of the ninth grade. Tayvon was six-four, 220, and could already jump out of the gym and carry tacklers on his back. Handey was itching to see what he could do in the quarter-mile, but Tayvon couldn't keep his grades up long enough to make it through a season. By mid-September, he was already failing three classes, including Gordon's. It shouldn't matter that he was an athlete, but it did—here was a student Gordon could relate to, a student he could help in ways other teachers couldn't.

"It's simple," Gordon said. "You stay away in my class, you get to play football. You get good grades, tear it up on the field, you get a full ride to college. Do the same thing there and the next things you know you're catching bombs from Matt Stafford, dancing in the endzone at Ford Field."

"All I gotta do is stay awake, huh?"

"It's a start," Gordon said. Tayvon looked at him, bleary eyed, arms still crossed into a pillow. Never angry but always tired. On his more lucid mornings, they talked sports: Lions and Pistons and LeBron James. Tayvon liked the King, but wished he'd stayed loyal to Cleveland. Gordon enjoyed talking to him, and that only made it more

frustrating to see him give up mid-lecture, put his pencil down halfway through a test. "Staying awake is the pre-req. Listening comes next."

"To you?"

"Man, I'll sing. I'll dance if I have to. Don't put it past me. I'll teach the Cold War in hoops metaphors, it'll be ballin'."

"*Man,*" Tayvon said, "don't say *ballin'*."

His head stayed up for the first five minutes, and when it dropped for the first time, Gordon brought him back into it with a Youtube video, a fast-talking clip spliced with footage of Joseph McCarthy slinging enthusiastic accusations that made a few students chuckle. The second time, he came by and tapped Tayvon on his shoulder before launching back into the lesson like the disruption had never happened. The third time, Gordon let him sleep. He stopped waving, stopped pacing and lowered his voice. He assigned pages from the textbook and slumped into his chair, regretting the energy he'd wasted—energy he'd need that night for a hard 14.

Kid might have problems at home, Alvin texted back during lunch. *Stuff you don't know about.*

In all their talks, Gordon had never pried about Tayvon's home life. He lived with his grandmother, he knew from Mrs. Yorke, but that was all he knew.

Can't punish him for that, Gordon said. *Can't help him either. What am I supposed to do?*

A pause. Gordon set his phone on his desk and opened his lunch bag: three PB&Js, an apple, a blueberry Gogurt, a plastic bag of rolled turkey meat. Somewhere in

California, Ryan Hall was eating a grilled chicken and spinach wrap, or salmon and rice, or a salad Gordon could have made from Joe's garden. Actual blueberries.

You definitely shouldn't have said 'ballin', Alvin replied.

His colleagues vented frustrations in the teacher's lounge or drank it off at home, but cross country practice was where Gordon found relief. Finally, students who liked him and listened to him—students he felt he could help. On top of that, practice was a chance to put in some light mileage, a warm-up that loosened his muscles for his evening run.

The boys had seven runners, exactly enough to make a varsity team, while the girls fielded eight. Handey was officially head coach of both, but Gordon handled most of his duties while the old man invented paperwork or flirted with the secretary in the athletics office. Josh Jackson and Mark Walters broke twenty minutes in an preseason scrimmage, and Gordon knew he had to work with them, either with Handey's permission or without it. The rest of the team was only doing it for fitness, but these two had talent and drive. It seemed criminal to let the old man's apathy ruin them.

He liked the spend his first mile in the back of the pack, running with the boys. When his calves began aching from the slow pace, he made his way to the front gradually enough to give the others a chance to latch on. He never hit them with the nasty surges now regular on runs with Alvin, but once he started accelerating, he didn't stop. Jackson always chased. He was a tall, wispy junior, all heart but no mechanics. When he got a full head of steam he looked like a robot with loose screws, sprinting himself to pieces. Walters, a sophomore, followed half the time. He was quiet, moody, and didn't seem to look up to Gordon the way Jackson did. Gordon had seen Walters tear his older teammate

to pieces during workouts, but knew if he increased the pace too quickly on neighborhood runs, he risked leaving the kid behind.

It was Jackson who came to him to talk training. Gordon made a mental note of it—proof that he wasn't forcing the mileage on the kid. He—they—wanted it on their own. He'd appeared in the doorway of Room 202 the first week of school with a bathroom pass, nervous, telling Gordon he wanted to run 50, and asking him how. Gordon didn't give him much, just instructions for extra mileage in the evenings, workouts once a week. Jackson must have passed the information on to Walters, because the two began looking stronger through September.

Once a week, now, Jackson would come to Gordon's room during his prep hour to learn more about the sport.

"What's a fartlek?" he'd asked most recently.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Online. Should I being doing those?"

The kid lit up when they talked training—it was obvious he wanted Gordon to say yes, to give him something new. Gordon remembered his early days of progression in the sport, how large the increments of progress. It was exciting to be a part of it again. The longer you trained, the faster you ran, the harder it was to find that feeling. Only in the beginning was such excitement possible—or maybe Gordon just hadn't hit his next transcendent run.

"It's Swedish for *speed play.* Less structured than a tempo run. Run fast the that light pole, recover for a minute, pick it up again to the end of the block—that sort of

thing. Fartleks are great. Push yourself, but keep your watch at home. Four or five miles at the most."

Jackson grinned like Gordon had given him keys to the family car.

That day, just before Jackson was about to lead his team in cool-down stretches, Handey burst from the school and barked, "Infield sprints!" The kids looked at Gordon, who shrugged and motioned them up off the track. He watched from the pole vault pad, curious how his runners would respond. Jacksons eyes were slits, but Walter slugged him on the arm, and the two kid runners shared a guilty smile. *No running is bad running*, their smiles said. Gordon didn't disagree.

After Crim, Gordon let their mileage climb, from 110 per week to 112. From 115 to 118. By the end of September, they hit 120, their final peak.

They were both caught in the unstoppable machine. The only question Alvin asked was how it would stop.

"Probably never," Gordon told him.

"That true, Gordy?"

"I think so, Alv. I think so."

Less than a month before the marathon, Alvin agreed to try a 22-miler as long it wasn't to Heidelberg. Gordon agreed—he hadn't been to the Project since he'd seen the man in the car. They took Lakeshore Drive north into St. Clair Shores instead. Gordon geared up in a knit cap and long sleeves, but Alvin showed up in a short-sleeved EAST DETROIT BASKETBALL shirt. Gordon conceded the toughness points. The late-

September chill was already deadly, and a cold might kill him. They took the wind for the first 11 miles, then turned and let it carry them home.

"I tell you I raced. The other day?" Alvin asked around mile 13. They weren't timing the long run, but they were keeping the pace honest. Conversation gave Alvin energy, rather than taking it away—he turned to it when he needed a boost.

"What?"

"Was hanging. With my boy James. And some of his boys," he said. Gordon's surprise must have been showing on his face, because Alvin laughed and nudged Gordon's chest with the back of his hand. "Don't worry, Gordy, you're my one and only. James is from old times. Wants something, usually, but I tell him I'll hang. This time he brought this hairy crossfit motherfucker. Drank too much, started talking he could beat me in a mile. Went over to the ED track to duel it out."

"Idiot," Gordon said.

"He wasn't the brightest."

"I meant you."

"Ha!" Alvin stuck his tongue out and Jordan-shrugged. His proud face. "Don't worry, we didn't finish. I was a half-lap ahead, two laps in. Guy cut across the infield, fists up."

"The fuck?"

"I just hit the start line and ran to the parking lot. Across the street. Back home."

"There's a lesson in that," Gordon said.

"Running saves."

"Amen."

The run was only three miles longer than they'd gone before, but every step after nineteen was a chore. They finished together, hurting in this new way, swimming through a fresh kind of exhaustion. Since Crim, it had been like this: Gordon expected the mileage to split them apart, pit them against each other. For Alvin to accuse him of lying, and be right. But instead, they were coming together like they hadn't before—like they'd cracked the casing that separated them and mixed the wires. Their shoulders bumped and brushed on finishing kicks. This time, Gordon didn't have to wonder how hard Alvin was working, whether the run had tested him. He was doubled over, breathing helpless and hard, just like him.

On October 5, the O.J. House burned. This time the flames took everything but half a chimney stabbing upward from the center of the foundation. Gordon saw the story online—a spokesman for the Heidelberg Project said they believed there was only one culprit, the same man they suspected was responsible for the fire in May. Just one—it was a relief to hear. What Gordon hadn't seen, he hadn't seen.

By late morning, volunteers were already clearing the remains. New found art appeared on the scene of the fire. A nude doll on a yellow-and-white jet ski. Nearby, a toy fire engine the artist himself pulled from the first fire in May. A turquoise shoe, hanging on rebar. The artist stopped by to supervise the cleanup, but gave no statement.

Gordon thought about helping, but didn't. He wasn't one of them. He didn't want to be. If he went there in street clothes, they'd know he couldn't dig the shovel into the ash. He'd pause at each fragment and wonder what gave him the right to pronounce it dead. Or else they would stare at him, deny him the shovel. Deny him the work gloves.

They wouldn't want *him.* He was already known as the one who always ran past, the foolish tourist from the suburbs who always pretended not to see them, convinced he was alone.

CHAPTER 11

HUNTER EYES

The machine churned them into mid-October, into their taper—85 miles, then 70, then 45. Time lunged forward and stopped, the seconds cracking open in front of them. Gordon's muscles gasped for air and got it. His body rebuilt in hyper-speed, and he shed his soreness like a skin.

Gordon crunched the ice in his mouth as Alvin watched the television in the corner. They were eating hot ham-and-cheese sandwiches at Lou's Deli, on the other side of Belle Isle, where'd they'd come from the Detroit Public League Championships. Gordon hadn't told him about the fire. They'd talked about that morning's race, and then Detroit's bankruptcy trial came on the TV, and Alvin became ineligible for conversation. Gordon beeped his car locked for a second time and scanned Alvin's face to see if he'd noticed. Nothing. The lunch crowd had died out, and it was just the two of them along with two Marygrove students who, after sliding credit cards under the bulletproof glass, sat down too close in the empty restaurant, passing a blaring iPod back and forth.

The strategy he'd given his runners for the league meet was simple: find the top two runners—a 16:30 guy from Mumford and a senior from Southeastern who Walters had nicknamed *Captain Caveman*—and stay on their shoulders until the final mile. Jackson and Walters followed his instructions, dipping under five minutes for the first time in mile one. By mile two, Walters had fallen back and Jackson had broken from the

plan, leading the race with Mumford and Southeastern ten meters behind. “Boy’s got hunter eyes,” Alvin had said, and it was true: Jackson came down the home stretch wide-eyed with shock, the other runners far behind. “Your kid really just ran 16:15 on 20 miles a week?” Alvin had asked. Gordon grinned and went to retrieve his runner. Handey was ecstatic, snapping his clipboard in half on his knee and nearly choking on his gum when he found Gordon to gloat. “How many miles, Cooper? *How many miles?”*

“Fucking shithead,” Alvin spat at the image of Michigan’s mayor, Rick Snyder, testifying at the trial.

“What’s he doing wrong?” Gordon asked. He only knew the basics—that Snyder had named an Emergency Manager, and the Emergency Manager had filed for bankruptcy. “The city’s had bad mayors forever. Seems like someone’s finally serious about fixing it.”

“It’s not your pension they’re cutting,” Alvin said.

“Not yours either, right?”

Alvin raised his eyebrow. One of the Marygrove kids had a loud, hiccupping laugh, the kind of laugh owned by people who wanted others to hear them. The one without the iPad had a Mac on the table, and they both had their phones out in front of them. A pair of women walked in, saw the kids and immediately lost their smiles.

“We can appeal to Mr. Mayor tomorrow,” Gordon said. Alvin rolled his eyes, folding white creases into his straw. “You ready?”

One of the Marygrove kids slammed his fists on the table, and his iPad fell to the ground. The other laughed even harder as he examined it for cracks.

"I lost three toenails this month. Last week I pissed blood, and I think I've had shin splints in my knees since Crim. Shin splints? Knee splints? I'm sorry, what was the question?"

"Same," Gordon said. He rubbed his own knee on reflex. The machine had dropped them into what felt like the first quiet moment in months. Things were changing quickly, and every big run was a divider—the Before and the After. Before Crim and After. Before Detroit and After. Before Boston, Before the Trials. And after.

On their way out, Alvin rapped his knuckles loud enough on the Marygrove table loud enough to cause both kids to jump, to look up at him in fear, one spilling his drink and then recovering, trying to play it off like a joke.

That night, Gordon didn't sleep well. He went to bed early, just past 7:30, to give himself several chances, but just as he came close to falling into a sleep cycle, a rotation of images would wake him. The tattoo on Alvin's shoulder, the O.J. House burned, the Marygrove kids who looked like two of Gordon's college friends who dragged him to Haggerty's strip club, ordered only pop and refused to tip the waitresses. He saw Snyder, the artist, the three men disappearing behind the House of Soul. The women at Lou's. Jackson letting out a throaty roar, a redemptive thing, as he realized what he'd done. Jackson taking the first race of his career with a look that might at first appear to be disbelief, but that Gordon knew was the opposite, was actually the intense satisfaction of belief fulfilled.

CHAPTER 12

RIVER

The Detroit River serves as a border between Detroit and Windsor, the only place where a Canadian city lies south of an American one. The Detroit Marathon isn't the only one that spans two countries or more, but it is the only to boast an underwater international mile.

The Iroquois and the Dutch first traded furs on the river, but it was the French who named it Détroit, meaning *strait*. They adopted the same title for their settlement, and the city was founded on what we might now call a misnomer: the Detroit River is two-and-a-half miles at its widest, not nearly broad enough to be considered a strait by modern standards.

The river made for easy access to resource-rich northern Michigan, and factories popped up along the water as industrialization began. Before the Motor City was the Motor City, it was the shipbuilding capital of the world, a hub for wooden railroad cars, the country's top manufacturer of stoves and steam engines, varnish and lead-based paint. For decades, the *Rivière du Détroit* was one of the busiest commercial waterways in the world.

Even before the auto industry declined, the river was starting to suffer from the chemicals American factories had been dumping for decades. Oil slicks were common as early as the 1940s, when the river swallowed six million gallons of petroleum products

per year. By 1960, the Detroit Riverway was one of the most polluted waterways in the country. Five years later, Lake Erie was declared dead, too poisoned by river-swept phosphorous to support aquatic life.

Conservation efforts improved water conditions in the 70s as bald eagles, falcons, sturgeon and beavers all made their return. The Detroit River once again became the "Walleye Capital of the World," a title promising fish no longer came out of the water tasting distinctly of oil.

Attempts to revitalize Detroit often focus on landscape—ways to fill the empty spaces, consolidate or repurpose the patternless blight. Urban gardening, land banks, public transit—and waterways, too. Landscape architects pose the idea of daylighting, uncovering streams turned to sewers and buried long ago. Restoring floodplains may boost property values, improve the environment. For some, these hidden waterways have become symbols of hope, clean and pure, with power to transform. A community coming together around new wildlife in the city's east side. Small children learning the names of plants and fish, people of all colors frolicking in the green.

It will be years before all the waste is drudged from a river that accounted for three quarters of the booze smuggled into the country during prohibition. Years before the particles of industrial waste are no longer cut with auto parts from the rum runners' failed trips across the river, fragments of aluminum and steel, small but not innocent reminders wedged in the riverbank.

What of the water many can't afford—the water no longer flowing from faucets? What business of ours is the underground, residents ask, when so many streetlights hang dead over streets flooded with crime, when so many are already sucked so dry?

CHAPTER 13

DETROIT MARATHON

With his eyes still closed, Alvin asked Gordon how many stairs he thought he'd cleared in college. Gordon perked up—he'd been staring blankly at the road in front of him, hypnotized by cruise control and the traffic-less drive. Alvin had been finishing coffee when he first got in the car, but for the past ten minutes, Gordon was sure he'd been asleep.

"Individual stairs," Alvin said. "Say there's 20 between any two floors worth their salt."

"Is that right?"

"Architecture is an imprecise science."

A car appeared in front of them, and Gordon applied the brake too strong, swerving around it. He drove to Cavanagh every morning, but it'd been months since he'd taken the freeway.

"I'd say I averaged at least 15 flights a day at State," Gordon said. "Up and down, that's almost 600 steps."

"For what, 32 weeks?"

"Make it an even 40—I took summer classes. We're talking 650 times 40, that's like, uh, 24,000. Five years—you can do the math."

"You'd think that."

“96,000,” Gordon said. “Selling myself short, I’m sure.”

“That’s pretty good, Gordy.”

“I was in my prime.”

The exit signs began announcing Detroit attractions—the Motor City Casino, Ford Field, Comerica Park, the Joe Louis Arena. The Greyhound station. Gordon always felt like he was submerging himself when he drove downtown. The world built up around them as the freeway ramps circled and cut across. Walls and buildings now towering after being vague markers for so long. Gordon felt like he should hold his breath, but holding his breath meant thinking about breathing, thinking about the race. He exhaled.

“I played in the basement,” he said. “As a child. Plastic ball, plastic hoop. You know.”

“I do.”

“I’ll admit there were also bleachers in my past.”

“Getting greedy and I like it.”

He let the engine run in the parking garage, the sound of the rattling exhaust echoing off the concrete walls. When he killed it, Alvin took a deep breath an pulled his backpack strings to his sternum. Gordon grabbed a bottle of water from the backseat. *This is it*—the words were on his tongue when Alvin interrupted.

“You’re going to say something inspirational, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“You were!” Alvin pinched his nostrils to mock Gordon’s voice. “They said we couldn’t do it. They said it was impossible! They said we’d get lost on I-94!”

“Fuck off,” Gordon grinned, but Alvin was already out of the car, high-stepping to the stairs.

As a warm-up, they jogged down Fort to Woodward and lapped Campus Martius. Gordon didn’t time the workout, but he did check the time. In college, he never strayed from his routine: a jog around the complex an hour before first call, then stretches and striders on the infield for second call, stripping down to his race gear just a few steps behind as officials gathered the runners at the start line. The lack of precedence now was unnerving. *Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot.* The pace was too slow for the mantra, but he went to it anyway because thinking wrung his stomach. Routine wasn’t superstition. Routine was what he leaned on to calm his nerves.

They were early this time, at least. Gordon and Alvin ran silently, part of the crowd. Gordon wondered if he’d eaten enough, if something as dumb as under-eating would lead to his failure. *Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot.* Alvin glanced at over at him, and Gordon stopped mouthing the words, moving the mantra to his head instead. He would not think of Boston. He would not think of the Trials. He would not think of the line until he was toeing it.

He had them on the books at 2:30, fast enough to land them in the front corral. Another Crim correction: here, they wouldn’t fight the hordes. There would be no reindeer to push aside.

5:30s until kingdom come, he’d told Alvin at the beginning. It had been early enough in their training, holding a 5:30 pace was still an abstract idea. Some vague, hardly possible thing they’d figure out later. Once or twice over the past four months, Gordon had tried talking strategy without talking time, telling him how Frank Shorter had

waited until the 15K mark to take off for Olympic Gold, but he was starting to think he could have told him the truth, that he planned on keeping a 5:15 pace as long as possible, and Alvin probably still wouldn't have done the math.

They looped back toward the starting line, and Gordon's nerves multiplied, shooting from his stomach to his fingers and toes. His hair follicles buzzed, his kneecaps itched. This was where it started. They unpeeled their sweats and checked them in bags, gave them to race officials to dump in plastic bins. The dull sky cracked for a sliver of sunlight. "Aw," Alvin said, looking up and slapping his thighs. Gordon decided to keep his gloves at the start and toss the cheap cotton during the race.

A few men kissed spouses at the sidewalk, and Gordon briefly thought of Callie—how she might have been standing at the periphery, waving, clutching a cup of coffee between her hands. Alvin was already entering the corral, swinging his arms like propellers. Gordon felt a little like he was heading off to war.

Alvin was more stoic now, more serious, his face hardening at the line. He held out his fist and Gordon bumped it, the grooves of their knuckles locking and releasing. Gordon wouldn't have wanted to face him in the half-mile, a violent race of muscle and speed. He didn't notice it because he saw him every day, but Alvin in a zone was an impressive sight. If he didn't know him, he might have feared him.

Runners jumped up and down, ran in place, punched their quads, whispered, rocked from one foot to the other. Gordon smiled as he shook his own legs out. Who here had broken four minutes in the mile? There was energy in numbers, but not the kind he expected. No one seemed as excited as him.

In the seconds before the gun, it seemed absurd to think about pace. There were 26.2 grueling miles ahead of them, and the idea thy could regulate their speed to such precision was laughable. It *was* impossible, after all. When it came down to it, their strategy was really no different than Jackson's: get out of the gate behind the leaders, leave the crowd at mile one, and jesus, man, try to hold on. A megaphoned voice called the runners to attention, and Gordon became part of the crowd.

The gun cracked the cold, and it started.

Alvin jumped out into space while Gordon negotiated the crowd, and they found each other at the back of the chase pack. About eight there, Gordon guessed, with another ten or so leading. His muscles feigned weakness right away, but he called them on their act. *Just kicking the rust out*. He realized he hadn't done any striders, he hadn't seen anyone doing striders. *Slow-twitch motherfuckers.*

The crowd, thick at the start, took them through the first half-mile, and Gordon fought against the adrenaline that pulsed in response to the noise. *Run smart,* he told himself. *Smart smart smart.*

If he'd looked back, he would have been shocked to see the horde of nylon shorts and sweat-wicking jerseys, Asics and Sauconys and Nikes all pounding, rattling the angry city, white legs fading into sewer-belched steam. The steel monsters grimacing above them. Gordon didn't look back, or up, or even to the side. He and Alvin were part of an exclusive race, separate from the spectacle. They'd earned their ticket.

The chase pack carved a pocket of warmth in the morning chill. Gordon felt the cold in his extremities, but not in his lungs. He and Alvin kept a good pace at the back,

everyone still breathing easy, talking in spurts. They let the leaders push them through the first two miles in 5:17, 5:19.

A few men were wearing sponsored kits—Gordon saw Hansons and Adidas at the front—but he had no angle to see names. It didn't matter. There were no real elites here, no Olympic champions or 2:0X guys. Not in Detroit. Most of them were brandless like Gordon and Alvin, anonymous for now.

Gordon clocked them at 5:20 for mile three. 15:58 and counting, just over 16:20 pace for 5K. Shy of his goal pace, but nothing to worry about—the race hadn't started yet. They continued onto the Ambassador Bridge for the first international mile, and Alvin threw up a fist in mock celebration. His first trip across the border. Gordon lost himself in the water, the ships, the Windsor skyline. The simple detail of color. When he checked back in, he'd fallen a step behind.

Once they eased off the bridge into Canada, Gordon started visualizing the shape of the race. They'd double back in a half-mile, then follow the river northeast for a few miles before taking the tunnel back and looping around to the finish. Alvin called him crazy for memorizing the checkpoints, but it eased his anxiety to minimize the anarchy of the course. Legend claimed the original marathon was run in one direction, no loops or turnarounds, and while Gordon was glad he wasn't chugging along barefoot in the Grecian heat, fighting an incline to Athens, he wouldn't have minded a race that went 26.2 miles one way.

The leaders were already building a cushion when they looped back at the Huron church, and the chase pack dug in together to chip at the lead. It was coming—the test Gordon had been warning his legs about was imminent. He didn't think of the miles

ahead because he didn't want them to feel impossible. At mile five, he shed his gloves. And mile six, he took his first cup of water.

They went through seven in 38 minutes and change. In the Detroit-Windsor tunnel, they made their move—Gordon increased the pace only to find that Alvin was already going with him. They swooped around the chase pack from the back and settled cleanly in front. It was a move made by feel, without a look or word between them. They continued to push the pace a second or two faster. A small hurt, but stretched over the next 16 miles, it would wear them raw.

Gordon's instinct now was to settle, but Alvin kept pushing. The lead pack was now 30 meters ahead and moving faster, and increase so subtle Gordon's body had caught it well before his mind. They had to move. He felt the first real pang of protest in that tunnel, his first glimpse of cowardice, but he grimaced and fought it off, locked in on the leaders. This was the moment distractions died.

The runners emerged, back in the United States, and turned a loop near the Renaissance Center, west along the Detroit Riverfront. Everything was a test now, and Gordon fought an echoing series of doubts: *How? How? How?* It was a familiar fight, different every time. He and Alvin alternated the lead. One went on, and so the other did, too.

At mile nine they passed the Joe Louis Arena, home of the Red Wings, before turning into the city for the next three miles, through Mexicantown and Corktown, where the streets were half as crowded but twice as loud. The pace was below 5:20 now—by only a few seconds, maybe, but the effort had tripled.

"OK?" Alvin asked.

“Feeling it,” Gordon said.

“Yep.”

Alvin looked behind them, and Gordon followed suit. He was surprised to see that the hungry pack he thought they’d been leading was now just a thin trickle of hangers-on. He hadn’t noticed the footfalls fading, had no clue he and Alvin were running alone. Ahead, two runners separated and turned the lead pack into the chase pack. The field was disintegrating, a single cell divided thousands of times. Gordon did some rough, painful math: he and Alvin were ninth and tenth. Maybe. His side punished him for the effort by tightening into a stitch, and he spent the next half-mile kneading his knuckle deep into his abs, hard enough to bruise.

“Who we tracking?” Alvin asked.

“Shit. Green kit?”

“Green kit,” Alvin confirmed, and they began their move.

Gordon knew all about good patches and bad patches, peaks and valleys, second and third winds. He knew the third lap of a mile all too well. What he didn’t realize was the length of such moods in the marathon. The first ten miles had been easy, but now he was feeling it—a tight knot in his guts, a depleting pain. There was some chemical his body was supposed to be producing, but the workers were on strike. He’d send his sweat off in a vial and a scientist from the crowd could come back at mile 20 with a cure.

By the time they passed Green Kit, the chase pack was no longer a pack. At mile 15—a long stretch away from the city down East Lafayette—a trailing runner made a bid to join the leaders. Another division, another lonely cell. Gordon and Alvin now had a line in front of them, ripe for the picking. A slow climb up a tall ladder.

Alvin was punctuating his exhales with bursts of air through the gap in his teeth: *puh, puh, puh.* He loved fishing, thrived on the ultimate control of a slow reel. In high school he ran the quarter in negative splits just for fun, peaking on the final turn and dusting the field on the homestretch. This was Alvin's thrill: not leading, but gaining. Breaking.

They took one straggler, then another. Next to Gordon, Alvin was digging his hooks deep and spinning hard. Their victims were tying up now—not racing, just trying to hold on. Gordon didn't want to be one of them. He fought the cancerous strain that had spread through his chest to his lungs, his bowels. The pace would only get faster from here. *Just go,* he told himself. *Gogogogo.*

Left now, inward toward Indian Village, ritzy, back toward the river. Halfway through the 18th mile and Gordon's mind was a cloud. *Too early fuck fuck this GOGOGO.* He groped for something to ground him, something to hang onto—Alvin's hook, anything—and a single, lucid thought broke through the haze: *I am falling apart*. Then another, the Frank Shorter quote he'd memorized weeks ago: "The marathon is half over at 20 miles."

"Mile," Alvin barked at the 19th marker. Gordon looked down at his watch. His hands clocked the split.

"5:14."

"Come on. Gordon."

Alvin sounded muted, a voice outside the coffin.

"Gordy. Let's. Fucking. *Go.*"

The anger in his friend's eyes woke something in him. He turned to his right and his left and saw they were in no-man's land again. And they were running out of road.

The world came back to Gordon in pressurized *pop*s of sound: the vapid cheers, the distant footballs, the hum of machinery. A splash of color—the blue shirt nearest ahead.

Mile 20. He was waking when he should have been shutting down. This was when the real race started—when *no one* felt good anymore. Gordon surged on instinct, and Alvin followed. Blue T-shirt was an island, a short hop from him to the leaders. Nothing was automatic anymore—Gordon had to talk himself into the idea after the initial surge, promising his body a brief respite on Blue Tee Island he knew he wouldn't take.

They caught him on the MacArthur Bridge to Belle Isle, their second trip to the island in two days. Past the entrance, its new 20-dollar entrance fee. Past the conservatory, the museum. Blue Tee—short and strong with a thick black goatee—finally acknowledged them. He took water from a drink station and sipped for a few steps before crumpling and tossing it behind.

"They getting slower. Or faster. You think?" Alvin asked. Blue Tee grimaced, or he smiled. A shrug was implied.

Fourth, fifth, sixth: if no one made a move, this was where they'd finish. Gordon thought about going, but nothing happened when he sent his legs the signal. He was stretching it now, pushing against a limit of solitary effort. Just one step, then another, until the end of time. Blue Tee Island forever.

It was Alvin unlocked another gear, surging ahead and forcing the other two to follow. Gordon's muscles screamed, a for-real kind of pain radiating through his bones, the pressure so fierce it seemed it might shatter his skull. There was some strength to be unlocked, but he had no access. Alvin gained five meters, then ten.

At mile 22, Gordon remembered he could forget pain. Not forever, but for minutes at a time. He remembered it like a key long forgotten, right when he needed it most, pummeling with his fists an unbreakable door. He gathered the pain from his throbbing ankles, his bloody arches, his over-pumped arms. He took it from his legs, dead, his barking knees, the hot blade slicing from his tailbone to his neck. He packed it in a box, folded its edges, sealed it shut. Enter Gordon-numbed, Gordon reduced-but-made-better. It took every part of his working brain to hold the box, collapse upon it—to balance it, trembling, weighing it closed. The rest of him, he let go.

Three miles out, Gordon began the longest kick of his life. Alvin gasped something in protest, but Gordon hardly heard him. Blue Tee stuck for a moment, gained traction, then fell back for good. Gordon felt Alvin's presence on his shoulder, then forgot it. Instead, he locked in on the orbs that were the leaders, alone in a tunnel of ragged breath. The course swung back to the riverfront and into the city. The crowd grew louder, seeing what might happen, what was happening already. Two of the leaders looked back. The box pulsed, but Gordon pressed it down. The three men were coming back to him, one step at a time. When he caught them, another race would start. The final race—those last two miles might last forever.

The box thumped and shook, and the effort to keep it shut was enough to blind him. He saw the orbs, a mile marker, the road in front of him, but the fringes grew gray.

Third place suddenly fell off the pace, arms flailing like a drowning man, and was immediately devoured. Gordon was aware of a disturbance, his tunnel vision rippling. He was among the orbs now. One of them. A mile a half, he learned from the shouts. *A mile and a half.*

He felt himself screaming, wishing he had the energy to scream, realizing instead it was the crowd around him and he was in the final mile, past the 25.2 marker, Alvin next to him suddenly, both of them clipping the leader's heels. The Marathon. *The Marathon.* Three bodies closed around him, pulsing strong against each other. Fast-twitch—who had it? What was left? Gordon was dripping and foaming, leaving bloody trails on the streets of Detroit. He was going to find out. The orbs blurred and the box pulsed. Gordon thought he might be dying. If he died, the crowd would go wild: they had never seen a death like his.

Finally the box burst open. He didn't know it would until it did, and then he knew—it was the longest he'd ever tried to hold it, the dumbest thing he'd ever done. The pain came roaring back, cracking the coat of numb, the skin over his skin. He saw a foreign wildness in his friend's eyes. In shock, he watched Alvin's shadow unleash an ungodly kick, a move so unnatural he wanted to shield his eyes. It seemed to cruel, discovering this now—this alter-ego he'd suspected but never seen. *Done done done*. For the first time, Gordon lost contact. There was no shame in giving up because there was no such thing as shame.

This is how a runner loses control: first his heart breaks, then the rest of him. His legs lock and his arms test their sockets. His chest empties, and lungs jump the throat. Gliding turns to flopping, to twisting and wrenching, limbs weighed heavy as if in a

dream, a collaboration of broken parts that once made a body. This is how a runner loses control: when there is nothing left to hope for. When there is nothing left.

One leader fell back, and the other matched Alvin. Together they found a finishing gear.

Gordon didn't feel himself cross the line. He didn't see Alvin drop to his knees and scream at the sky, the crowd elated around him. He didn't feel his own collapse, the pavement cold and loose on his cheek, the gritty pellets on his tongue, blood draining from his elbows and knees. He only felt fear—fear that his breath would never return, fear that he'd lost everything forever, that he'd pushed too hard and now everything was broken, everything lost.

CHAPTER 14

FINISHES

At the bell lap of the 10,000-meter final at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, a lead pack of Africans were bunched together at the front of the race. The mighty Ethiopian Hail Gebrselassie was tucked in behind the Kenyan John Korir while Geb's teammate kept Paul Tergat, Geb's Kenyan rival, boxed in behind them. Knowing he had to move, Tergat broke his stride and skipped to the outside of the pack, opening up a lead in seconds. Geb followed, and with 200 meters remaining, the two legendary runners found themselves in familiar positions: the tall Tergat holding a lead, the diminutive Geb preparing to run him down.

The Kenyans—Tergat especially—had been trying for years to beat Geb. In 1996, at the 10,000-meter final in Atlanta, Tergat broke away with five laps to go, trying to best his rival with a sustained kick. It was a bold move, as good as any other. Geb was the world record holder, and no one had proven they could beat him with a balanced 25 laps. No one could match his speed in the last 200 meters, either; he had an answer for any tactics. At the start of the final lap in Atlanta, Geb blew past Tergat with a finishing speed that made his rival look plodding. The Ethiopian cruised to his first Olympic Gold.

In 2000, David Coleman and his broadcasting partner Brendan Foster don't seem overly interested in Tergat's revenge plot, as they narrate in uncharacteristically bored voices what may have been the greatest finish in distance running history. "Tergat may

well have left it too late,’ Coleman observes. Tergat holds his lead around the final turn, into the final 50 meters, when the five-foot-five Geb begins gaining ground on the lanky six-foot Kenyan. Both runners, sprinting the life out of their bodies with perfection, both the picture of poise and intensity and control. Geb grimaces but never breaks form, gaining inch by inch with absurdly long strides until he’s even with his rival, until the two runners are one and the same, until he forces his body ahead—a push from his core, the center of him willing the body forward—and slips ahead in the final meters, finishing 27:18.20 to Tergat’s 27:18.29, a closer margin of victory than that year’s 100-meter dash. Not once does it look like Geb is desperately surging. When he begins his finish, he just doesn’t slow. It’s one fluid motion, an invisible shift from fast to faster to win-at-all-costs. Coleman states, matter-of-factly, “Gebrselassie wins it,” at the peak of his kick, as if his victory had never been in question. Perhaps this is the ultimate compliment for one of the world’s greatest runners, a man who, in 2000, hadn’t lost a 10K in seven years and would go on to make history by breaking 2:04 in the marathon: he made the beautiful and the impossible look mundane.

Geb always finished with grace, but he was a rarity.

Consider Emil Zatopek, the father of interval training. Zatu was at his peak in the 1952 Olympics, where he completed an impossible sweep, taking gold in the 10K, then 5K, then the marathon. His unlikely 5,000-meter win featured a classic finish for the Czech: he took the lead at the bell lap with confidence, but Chris Chataway, Herbert Schade and Alain Mimoun all broke away from him on the backstretch. “And you see gold medal, silver medal, bronze medal; for me, potato,” Zatopek later said of the moment. “What to do?” What he did was gear up for one final, violent, ungainly sprint.

He grimaced and whipped his head from side to side, tucked his arms high and crossed his body with each stride, elbows wide and churning. Zatu growled and bared his teeth and passed all three men around the bend, powering through the finish with desperate intensity. One reporter said Zatopek ran like a man with a noose around his neck. Zatu himself admitted, "I was not talented enough to run and smile at the same time."

Or consider Steve Profontaine, the brash American who always ran from the front. Along with Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers, Pre helped launch the running boom of the late 60s and early 70s. The Oregon prodigy was undersized but handsome, with shaggy sunbleached hair that parted down the middle when he ran. The so-called James Dean of Track was also the biggest critic of the sport's governing organization, the AAU, which kept a strict eye on amateur status, keeping the country's best runners from earning money for their wins. Pre lived off food stamps in a trailer in a garbage dump, bartending part-time to pay his bills. He was also among the rarest of athletes: a cocky competitor who backed up his talk. More importantly, he had an aesthetic: there was no elegance to Pre's running style. Think force, not grace. You could see the effort in every step, and fans loved him more for it.

At the 1972 Munich games—Pre's only Olympics—the 21-year-old lost patience in a tactical 5,000-meter race, unleashing a brutally fast final mile to string out the pack of sit-and-wait kickers. His move shook most of the field except Lasse Viren and Mohammed Gammoudi, two experienced runners who shadowed him for three-and-a-half laps before moving past him on the backstretch. Pre made one final effort, but Viren cruised in for the win with Gammoudi behind him. The American could only watch, broken, as a hard-charging Ian Stewart robbed him even of bronze on the backstretch.

That devastating race was Pre's first and last on the Olympic scene: three years later, he was killed in a car crash in Eugene. At the time of his death, he held every American record from 2,000 meters to the 10K.

When Pre fans relive that race in Munich, it isn't with regret, but with pride that he ran the only kind of race he knew, that he couldn't do it any other way. If there's regret, it's that Pre didn't go sooner—that he played the kicker's game for as long as he did. "I'm going to work so hard that it's a pure guts race at the end," he used to say. "And if it is, I'm the only one who can win it." Another quote that's since made its way to T-shirts, to posters on the bedroom walls of teenage runners from Eugene to Detroit: "The only good pace is a suicide pace, and today is a good day to die."

CHAPTER 15

FALL MARATHON RESULTS

Of course it was Alvin who came to save him, Alvin who found him on his elbows and knees, choking on hiccups and sobs. It was Alvin who puts his arms around Gordon's chest, Gordon's arm around his shoulder, and raised him from the ground. It was Alvin who led them through a throng of people to an empty curb where Gordon could collapse without risk of being trampled. When a reporter guided Alvin away, Gordon turned and vomited on the curb. It was a mostly dry heave, but a thin string of spit stuck to his hand like a cobweb when he wiped his mouth.

Slowly, Gordon entered the world again. He'd lost awareness at the end of races before—his brain receding inward, tending to the flashing switchboard of 911 calls from his muscles, his lungs, his heart—but he'd never lose consciousness before. His skin was cold and his eyes were rebooting, recoloring the city. He began, to feel, to want, and his want made him feel weak, even as he gained strength. His tiny, sickly body—water and food, such stupid needs.

A blanket appeared on Gordon's shoulders, a bottle of Gatorade at his side. His hands shook as he twisted the cap and drank. When he turned to the curb again, his spit was purple. A few minutes after, an old man sat and started asking him questions, measuring his pulse and tracking his pupils. The old man asked Gordon how he felt, and Gordon licked his lips, cringing at the acrid taste. "Fine," he said, standing on wobbly

legs to show him. “I’m fine.” The old man smiled and left a bottle of water. Gordon lowered himself back to the curb to drink when he left, lightheaded from the effort. A swarm of laughing, talking runners was now swelling around him. Gordon grimaced and spit, conscious of his vomit pile, then walked slowly away. He needed to find a more peaceful curb.

“Boston, baby,” Alvin said, coming up from behind him. Gordon slapped at his arm and tried to smile as his friend released him. “Un-fucking-believable.”

They cooled down together at a crawl, and it was still too fast. A blister had burst at mile 13, and the blood soaked through Gordon’s socks to the white mesh of his flats. He limped for a few minutes, then waved Alvin off.

“You straight?” Alvin asked.

“Wrecked,” Gordon said. “I’d rather just sleep.”

“I hear you,” Alvin said. He returned a nod and a wave to someone behind them, but Gordon was too exhausted to turn and look. “Is there a ceremony?”

“I don’t think so,” Gordon said. He was already limping in the direction of the parking garage. Alvin slowed to his pace, and finally Gordon collapsed in the driver’s seat, eyes closed.

“You OK to drive?” Alvin asked. There was something accusatory in his voice—like Gordon *better* be.

“No,” he said. “Are you?”

Alvin shrugged. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and when Gordon woke up, Alvin was sleeping and the parking garage was empty. He fit the key into the engine and found enough strength in his engine to turn it, to take them home.

Gordon was comatose the rest of the evening, and he slept so deeply the next morning, he missed his alarm. He woke in a panic, picked his clothes from his hamper and flew out the door, buttoning his shirt at red lights and tucking it in his beltless khakis as he walked through the door with the students, just past the first bell. There was a DVD waiting for him on his desk, a documentary about Watergate. *Stone,* Gordon thought. *Thank god*. He starting setting up the movie as his first students walked through the door.

Most of the time, running felt like an illicit secret he worked to hide during school hours. Stone had no clue, no sense of what running meant to him. Handey knew nothing. Only Mrs. Yorke remembered to ask—she caught him with this knee on his desk and the bottom half of his leg laid horizontally in front of him, bending into a stretch.

"I did...fine," he said.

"Fine?" she said. "What's fine?"

"Third," Gordon said. He dropped his leg and brushed some crumbs from his shirt. It was his turn to bring coffee that Friday—he couldn't forget.

"That's fantastic!" she said. She moved closer to him, through the doorway, but stopped short of his desk. "Out of how many runners?"

Alvin had finished first in 2:20:37; Gordon third in 2:21:10. It was a nice debut—Gordon knew he should be happy, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the time was lying, that, really, something had gone terribly wrong. He'd put everything into the attempt and failed in front of everyone. In Detroit. A waste—he flushed red thinking about it. A complete waste.

"About 16,000 or so," he said, smiling weakly when her eyes bugged wide. He thought about the separation he'd felt on the Ambassador Bridge, how it felt like they belonged at the front of that race. He wanted to tell her that 30 or 40 was more accurate, that 16,000 meant nothing, really, but she'd think he was being humble, playing it off as some small thing.

She congratulated him, forcing him into a hug he tried to shrink away from, her belly pressed into his thigh.

"How does it feel?"

Gordon thought about it. He was still limping, and the muscles on his legs felt like they'd been hollowed—defined, but nothing of substance within them. Each step sent shockwaves up his back, and he couldn't lift a history book with one arm alone.

"About what you'd think," he said.

After she left, he felt a little better. At least there was one person on his wing who could verify his sanity.

The entire week after the race, Gordon was useless. He took his 100-dollar flats—the bloody ones he thought he'd broken in—and threw them in the trash. His body had forgotten how to function, had forgotten how tremendous a task it was to crouch down below the stove for a pan, to crack an egg on the counter, to maneuver the heavy handle of the pan and reach for a spatula, gripping it tight enough to stop it from falling. There were weights in Gordon's calves. He popped and he cracked, rubbed and kneaded and iced his way through seven days he hardly remembered. The race already seemed distant, but every movement reminded him what he had done.

Soon his rest period would be over, but Gordon dreaded its return. He still didn't quite know what he'd given to Detroit, what he still had to give. It was settling into his bones, the belief that his best days were behind him. A feeling he always rejected, except for the one time he didn't. Maybe, he thought, he should move up to ultras—become a career jogger at age 25.

Gordon finally received word that Tayvon had dropped out. His appearances had been fewer and further between, but Gordon always assumed he'd be back, at least to the end of the year. Between that news and the soreness he couldn't shed, Gordon brought his temper with him to class. He broke up two fights, going out of his way to wrap a student in a bear hug and rip him away from the crowd of kids in the hallway. The move set his recovery back at least a few more days—his back now flared with pain—but his students approached him more timidly, granted him a bit more respect. On the same day, he got a student suspended for calling him a *bitch*—the type of thing he heard from under students' breaths often but rarely took action on.

He continued to trawl the message boards, but no one was talking about a pair of 2:20 marathoners in Detroit. He started a new thread—*Fall marathon results?*—and dropped their names, but again, it died with his post. The *Detroit News* did a short write-up of Alvin's win to fill space on the back page. Presumably, checks were in the mail—$4,000 for Alvin, $1,000 for him. They were professional marathoners now.

With three days left in his two-week break, Gordon started running again. It was painless, joyless running. He rarely felt good during runs, but on the best ones he felt good afterward—a transcendent buzz that seemed to stop his feet from settling on the earth as he paced his living room, driveway, his front lawn. Now, nothing felt good—not

the start or the middle or the end. He stopped in the middle of a run down Lakeshore to stretch his calves, looking out at a Grosse Pointe park so empty it was difficult to imagine full. It was the time between fall and winter in Michigan, and he was finding it hard to remember what he'd ever wanted out of this. Hurt—that's what he was getting, and there wasn't anything inspirational about it.

Rest periods were *hard*, and he's never had to recover from a race like this. There were too many promises of pleasure and pain, too many secret reserves, too much to reach for. Too much was possible, too much to gain.

Only one thing was certain: he'd be useless until he got back to running again. He drove around Grosse Pointe on Friday night, ate dinner alone at a brewpub near Kerchival and Alter. On Saturday, he drove to the movies, to Heidelberg, to Metro Beach, where he was proud of himself for not jogging the nature trails. He watched his ghost walk the house with Callie's—cooking together, cleaning together, living the versions of their life that would never be. He'd thought maybe she would hear about the race, somehow, and text or call him—but of course she didn't, and Gordon felt foolish for hoping. By the time Sunday afternoon came around, he was glad Alvin had invited him for dinner at Joe's. He needed the distraction.

"How's the kid?" Alvin asked Gordon arrived.

"Made his move too early at Regionals, the field made him pay," Gordon said. "I'm going to take him to indoor meets at Macomb. The mile, maybe."

"Just like papa bear."

"Are we really sitting outside?" Gordon asked. He'd gone straight for the front door, but Alvin hollered at him from the backyard, where he was in a white lawn chair, shivering, while Joe manned the grill.

"Annual tradition," Joe said. "We grill the day before the first snow."

"Snow's coming?" Gordon asked.

"Snow's coming," Alvin said. "You heard it here first."

"That's right."

Joe claimed his house was the oldest on the block, and for all Gordon and Alvin knew, that could have been true. But it didn't seem like an old block, and there was nothing really notable about the house—it had the same dingy white siding and small cemented backyard patio as the house next to it, and the house next to that. Eastpointe was a boring city, terrified of becoming Detroit when the only threat to its decency was the skate shop a few blocks over where tweens gathered to smoke cigarettes and try lame ollies off the curb. Joe called them clowns; he was a grumpy old man, and he played his part well. Gordon and Alvin teased him about his traditions, but they didn't touch the things he took pride in: his home, his lawn, his garden behind the garage that he mourned every winter. The coming snow seemed to be hitting him hard this year. Joe took too much time describing the last time he raked his leaves, how thankful he was to have Alvin shovel his walk, how he thought this might be the last winter he spent alone. At dinners with Joe, Gordon and Alvin mostly just listened—the old man went on about politics, about family in Eastpointe and Detroit, his grandson who was one misstep away from juvy or boot camp, depending on who caught him.

"He's not a bad kid," Joe said. "But he gets in trouble."

"16? 17?" Gordon asked.

"Almost 18."

"Kids get in trouble," Alvin said.

"My son, his father—he's hard on him. Too hard, maybe, but he says that's what it takes now. Told me his son's lucky to be getting it from him and not the police." Joe paused to chew his hot dog, take a sip of Busch. "I don't know about all that."

Gordon sat back in the stiff kitchen chair. He felt a buzz from two quick beers and found himself staring at Joe's plants—the plants themselves, and then the pictures of plants on the dishtowels and canisters, like Joe had taken photographs of his plant-children and had them transposed on his kitchen. This was good, Gordon thought. A good feeling. One last release before training started. One last chance to savor a clear mind.

"You were a good kid," Joe said to Gordon. "Your parents ever hit you?"

"What?"

"Spankins, the belt, anything like that?"

"No," Gordon said quickly. Alvin laughed, then threw his hands up in feigned innocence.

"What? Don't look at me like that. Mine didn't either, and I wasn't a good kid."

"He needs a friend," Joe said. "A good friend. Like you boys—you're good friends. Keep each other out of trouble with your stupid running games."

"Thanks, Joe."

Gordon sat back and grinned. Alvin was too far away, on the other side of the table, but he wanted to put his arm around him, to bring his body close to his and smile

together like they were posing for a picture. To have Joe actually take one, to document the friendship spoken aloud.

After they helped Joe clean up, Gordon and Alvin wanted back over to Alvin's. Neither of them were drunk, but Gordon had drank enough to want more in his system.

A third beer sent Gordon down the hallway to pee, but he stopped outside Alvin's room. Something caught his eye—a desk where there didn't used to be a desk, a pile of papers on top. He glanced back toward the kitchen, then ducked in the room. The papers were mostly race results, printed from Crim and the marathon, but a few were scribbled with Alvin's handwriting, scribbled numbers and notes. A running log. Alvin cursed from the kitchen, and Gordon heard the thump and rumble of beers hitting the floor. Before he left, he took one last look at the table, at a notebook in the corner, closed and covered. It was filled almost entirely with text—he squinted and could read enough of Alvin's handwriting to know it was about running, but when he heard footsteps he slapped it closed and jumped into the hallway, outside the bathroom door.

"Miller time," Alvin said, tossing him a beer and leading him into the living room. Gordon's line was to thank him for the upgrade, but he was too distracted to play the part. He'd been torturing himself over the last mile of that race, every move and decision that lead him to that final stretch, the gear he couldn't find. All this time, he'd thought Alvin clueless. It was, in a way, a relief: it eased his fear to know that this was Alvin focused, that there might not be another gear for him to reach.

"Hey, Gordy," Alvin said. "Remember that guy we ran with the last few miles in Detroit?"

Gordon traced a finger around his beer can, leaving a skinny trail in the condensation.

“Blue Tee,” he said. “Sure.”

“I talked to him after the race. For a minute, after the reporter.”

“Did you?”

“He was between groups, but he used to run for Hanson’s. Wanted to knew who we ran for, where we’d gone to school, all that stuff. And then he asked about training.”

Gordon began working the tab off his can. A Hanson’s guy. Gordon had modeled their schedule in part off the running group in Troy, the belief that no day of running was more or less important than the other.

“I gave him some totals, top of my head, what we started with and what we hit. The basics, at least. And the guy just looks at me and says, *Shit*,” Alvin said. “I asked him if it was his first marathon, and he said, *No, but it might have been my worst.*”

“Sounds like a dick.”

“Turns out he’s recovering from injury—a broken toe—and his whole schedule was fucked. I asked him his best time, and he says, *Oh, I’m a 2:14 guy.* I thought he was going to shit himself when I told him this was our first.”

Gordon put the empty beer can to his lips and took his time bringing it down.

“We had a good race,” he said.

“Fuck you.”

“Why? Fuck me why?”

“*We had a good race.*”

“So what, we trained hard.”

"*We trained hard*. Fuck you," Alvin said. His face tensed and his mouth opened, and for a second, Gordon thought he was going to spit on him. "We were training like idiots. All those miles, all those workouts."

"You didn't stop us. You could have stopped us, if you thought those workouts were so dumb."

"I didn't fucking *know*," Alvin said. "I *told you* I didn't know. I trusted you to be *sane*. To control yourself. Jesus, Gordon, what were you even shooting for?"

Gordon chewed at his lip and shook his head. Everything was so wrong, it made him sick.

"2:18."

"OK," Alvin said, his head lashing back like he'd taken a blow. "What's that?"

"B-standard."

"For?"

"The Olympic Trials."

"You've got to get the fuck out of my house."

"Listen."

Alvin whipped his beer to the floor, kicking a spray of liquid into the air.

"You delusional *fucker*, man. Why would I listen to you?"

"Delusional?" Gordon knew he deserved the lashing, but he couldn't help resisting. "Listen to you—you were four minutes off! We could have hit it, easy. I knew you'd pull this shit if I tried to tell you."

“You knew, or you were guessing?” Alvin scooped up the beer can and started pacing the room in front of the couch. “You could have just told me. Be an adult. Let me know what you signed me up for.”

“You would have thought it was impossible.”

“I just told you, it doesn’t matter what y—”

“It *does* matter, though,” Gordon said. Alvin showed his teeth and hid them, but Gordon kept talking. “Look how mad you are that I had a fucking goal, and that we almost hit it. I’m sorry, but you got in shape. You won a race. You found out, holy shit, you might be a marathoner, and I did, too. You’re trying to say we’d be here not if I’d told you from the start?”

“That’s too simple,” Alvin said. “You’re always making shit too simple.”

“It’s not simple. Every other fucking runner is simple, but we’re not simple.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nothing,” Gordon said. He was suddenly angry, and he didn’t know why. He wanted his friend to hurt like he was hurting, but he didn’t know how. “It’s nothing. Go drink another fucking beer.” He underhanded his empty at Alvin’s chest and walked outside, letting the screen door bang behind him. Loud enough, he hoped, to make Alvin’s protest, to make him feel bad.

CHAPTER 16

RUNNER AT REST

Joe was wrong—the snow didn't come that week. Gordon raked leaves, bagged them, and dragged all his lawn bags to the curb three days before pickup. After two hard rains, Mrs. Sweetwood came circling with her cell phone in hand, clucking and shaking her head. Last summer, she called his father when he let the grass grow too long. She looked deranged, trying to draw someone out now—either Gordon, or another neighbor who would join her in her disgust. Gordon watched from the window. People inventing problems because they had no real ones in their lives. If he hated her, he hated the entire city—his neighbors on the other side had the land surveyed when Gordon's parents first bought the house, fighting them for a half-foot of space on the property line. As soon as Mrs. Sweetwood walked back inside, Gordon left for his run. As was his habit, he stopped and hawked a loogie over the short fence that barricaded her lawn from the sidewalk.

His first week back was only 60 miles, but he had trouble getting them in, even without practice holding him up after school. He hadn't talked to Alvin—hadn't talked to anyone, really. Just *at* his students and somewhere over the head of Stone.

A transformation happened at the start of every new training period—from runner-at-rest to runner-at-work—and Gordon felt himself stuck between the two modes. He left a trail of running shorts and socks littered down the hallway, farther and farther

from his room. He sank into foul moods on off days, a sticking kitchen drawer enough to make him pound the counter and kick at walls. He didn't know how to live in the present when everything he did was for Monday, April 21, 2014, when he was going to win Boston—when he *had* to win Boston, or else everything was wasted.

In the evenings, he ran to Greater Mack and Vernier, where during the full heat of summer the road was packed with teenagers eating ice cream or drinking iced coffees, poking in and out of shops or circling parking lots on their bikes. Greater Mack was a skinny two-lane road with a grassy median, an old-town kind of road, minus the historic charm, that would soon have white lights strung through the trees for Christmas. Gordon hated the street, and he ran there because he hated it, because there was a bench off the sidewalk that reminded him of East Lansing, the site of his misunderstanding. He ran there because it made him hate himself, and hating himself made him want to change. He stretched his calf against the bench's side, then used it to balance—right quad, left quad, right again. It struck Gordon as disingenuous to think people were defined by series' of turning points, choices carving paths in the map of life. His life, at least, seemed defined by the choices he hadn't made, the ones that lingered out in front of them until they dissolved or froze and cracked, raining down on him sporadically for years to come.

On Friday, Alvin was waiting for Gordon outside of Cavanagh. He was in his running clothes—a SHAMROCKS T-shirt and new black shorts, shorter than his usual pair.

"OK," he said. He was slightly winded, with dilated eyes. "Let's talk," he said. He raised his hands up and out, somewhere between a field goal sign and a surrender. "Let's talk."

CHAPTER 17

THE HOUSE OF SOUL

"Boston Billy? Seriously?"

"That's what they called him."

"And he *liked* it?"

"Sure, I think so."

"Must have been a goofy motherfucker," Alvin said, pausing as they split to pass a jogger. They were on a Monday afternoon eight-miler, their second run together since they'd locked themselves in Gordon's car and driven their two cities until they could look each other in the eye. Gordon knew he still had a ways to go for Alvin to trust him, but he couldn't stop grinning. It'd been miserable the past week, running alone.

"He won Boston four times," Gordon said. "Hometown kid. It stuck."

Rodgers never won Olympic Gold, but he never lost to Frank Shorter in Beantown, at the oldest annual race in the country. Now that he had someone to talk to, Gordon gushed all he knew about Boston—like how Geoffrey Mutai ran a world-best 2:03:02 there in 2011, but couldn't claim a world record since the course didn't meet IAAF regulations. A world record must be run on a looped course, the start and finish separated by no more than 50 percent of the distance, and the net downhill must be no greater than one meter per kilometer. Boston is a straight shot from Hopkinton, Massachusetts to the city's downtown, and, despite being known for heartbreak hill, is

downhill on aggregate. Or he told Alvin about Amby Burfoot, an elder spokesman for the marathon whose training involved slow 140-mile weeks on a vegetarian diet. Burfoot was Rodgers' college roommate, often dragging a lazy, hungover Rodgers out of bed every morning and forcing him to run twenty miles with him—training that led to Burfoot winning the country's greatest race as a college senior, seven years before Rodgers.

"Don't even start with all that," Alvin said.

"Start with what?"

"Burfoot and Rodgers, Rodgers and Burfoot. You know with what."

Gordon grinned, and the runners churned on. Five months to Boston, and they were both all in.

He hadn't apologized in the car, but he had told the truth—that the schedule he made was for elite marathoners, for men who wanted to be great, and Gordon was one of those men. Greatness was what he wanted for Alvin, too, even if it wasn't his goal. He told him he'd added mileage after Crim because he wasn't happy with the way he'd run. Alvin said he knew. By then he was feeling it.

Look at the results, Gordon kept saying. *We qualified for Boston. We found out what we had, and that was only the first time. Can you really be mad at me for getting us here?*

Gordon told Alvin he needed him, and it was the truth. He believed they could do it together, but he doubted he could alone. With Alvin, he felt lifted, childishly excited about running. Without him, it was a slog, difficult and increasingly joyless.

We'll track every mile, Gordon said. *We'll make the schedule together. The same thing all over again.*

Except harder, Alvin said. *We can't keep things the same.*

If they hit the B-standard at Boston, they had two years to get that time down, to get experience in two or three big races, preparing to make an impact at the Trials. If they missed it at Boston, they still had time to qualify. They'd retool, restart, and try again. When everything had been decided, Gordon and Alvin sat nodding, their breath fogging the windows and forming a pact. They were no longer happy with who they were without running. Civilian life, or whatever parts of it they still clung to, was over. The only acceptable thing was to be elite, to live and die for their sport. To be runners, marathoners, professionals.

"What was his deal?" Alvin asked. "Billy Boston?"

"He thought the first few miles were the important ones. Get out too slow or too fast, miss the first water station, you could ruin it all. Liked to run from behind, feel for signs of weakness. He knew what they were for everyone—could spot them from a mile away.

"My kind of guy."

"He didn't sit and kick, though. His first Boston win, he went at mile 11. Tough, goofy, crazy dude. Said there's a time in a marathon where it's all right to lose control. Where you *want* to lose control. Never had two bad races in a row—all about adjustment," Gordon said. "What else? He worry a floppy hat sometimes."

"And he won."

"Three in a row at Boston, three in a row at New York."

"Damn."

They turned off Lakeshore into Gordon's neighborhood. The joggers and walkers were fewer now, as the Midwestern winter made the hierarchy of runners clear: those who only did it in the summer, those who fled to treadmill when snow and ice came, and those who would pound the roads until they crumpled. Gordon had some long Januarys and Februarys in East Lansing, stuck under the cloud of heavy training, the dread of no days off, never getting a break from the cold. Those were the months when it was nice to have a body next to yours, suffering through it. Those were the months when championships were won.

At 4:30 a.m. on Tuesday morning, the House of Soul caught fire and, within two hours burned to the ground. The only remnant of the record-covered house—from Lawrence Welk to Rihanna—were a few scorched pieces of vinyl still fastened to a burnt strip of siding. The rest of it: gone.

Gordon saw the news during first hour, when his freshmen were testing. He tracked it on his phone, from news sites to the Heidleberg Project's Facebook page, where the worst was confirmed: *Our beloved House of Soul has burned the ground in yet another act of arson. More soon.* The Fire Department call it an accident, even though there was no electricity in the house. An empty house fire was an empty house fire—even when the artist's wife said she'd given them the name of a suspect, a young man they claimed they knew was responsible for the fires.

Only one young man—though of course she could be mistaken.

“Hey, Mr. Cooper, I thought we weren’t supposed to be on our phones,” Taylor said, and a few students giggled around him. Gordon set his facedown on a stack of papers and stood up.

“Done already, Taylor?”

“Oh yeah, I’m done.” He sat up straight and proper, waving a mostly blank page.

“Back to work,” Gordon said. “Please?” Taylor laughed and went back to drawing his initials in the margin. Alicia rolled her eyes. Gordon went back to his phone.

By lunchtime, the *Free Press* had posted a video of the artist standing in front of the site of the fire, holding court for a throng of reporters. He wore a tan overcoat—polka-dotted red on the back—with a gray hooded sweatshirt underneath, a knit green collar poking from his neck. On his head, a black beanie, lumpy and wrinkled, an unfolded brim straight above his eyes. His goatee was sprinkled gray, and he spoke slowly, with great affect, pausing and looking at each of the men, so different from him in so many ways, incapable of truly understanding. His hands waved to accentuate his speech, and he looked less like a broken man than a performer on a stage.

Life has a way of preparing you, getting you ready for something greater, he said. A break, a breath, a circular series of nods. *We’re not going to stop. There’s no stopping us. I’m excited, guys.*

An awkward silence, then one reporter asking what they all must have been thinking.

Not angry?

Oh, not at all, the artist said.

I don’t get it, the reporter replied, and the group nervously laughed.

With my way of thinking, studying Plato and Socrates and Dr. Rudolf Steiner, you have to elevate your mind, and you have to see beyond this, the artist said. *You have to see the hope and what's possible.*

In the background, behind the artist, volunteers shoveled debris.

Why was the House of Soul his favorite? Gordon tried to remember the next day, running alone in Grosse Pointe among houses that all looked alike. It wasn't the first Heidelberg house he'd seen—he remembered the Doll House more than anything, the dolls and polka dots on the street itself. He had no attachment to the memories of Motown the building paid homage to, unless you counted the time he asked Callie what she was playing on her iPod and spent an entire ten minutes wondering how a white girl from an Indiana farming town had come to listen to *The Surpremes.* There should have been some obvious reason his heart thumped faster when he thought about the fire, something he shouldn't have to dig for. It should be easier to understand himself—answers floating at the surface instead of coded in his bones. The urge seemed unnatural: he thought he might set on fire if he weren't there to see the ashes, to pay his own sort of homage to the iconic building that was no more.

He thought of something Alvin told him, that kids burned vacant houses because a can of gas was cheaper than a movie. Or that some fires started when people tapped into the gas main with a garden hose, too poor to keep their children warm. It made sense for the Fire Chief to see the House of Soul as just another empty house, low on his list of priorities when they city lit up with 100,000 fires every year. But there was a troubling injustice there that Gordon couldn't stomach. How often did fires go uninvestigated in the

city? How many people were huddled in those old structures for warmth? Where were the culprits? Where were all the guilty men and women that no one seemed to search for?

Alvin agreed to go to Heidelberg the next day, but it was too early in their training to run the full 18. Gordon's car was in the shop, and Alvin didn't trust his, so they had Joe drop them off three miles out on Mack, far enough to make it a full 12 there and back to Gordon's.

"You know you don't *have* to run anywhere," Joe said. "This is the Motor City. They invented the automobile here."

"This one doesn't understand irony," Alvin said.

"You're a saint, Joe," Gordon said.

"You're a damn fool," Joe said. "Both of you."

Alvin slapped the backside of his car, and they finished stretching at a Mobil as Joe sputtered away.

"Sun sets at 5:11," Gordon said. "Figure we'll be close to home by then."

"We'll have a head start on the zombies, at least," Alvin said, making pistols with his fingers.

"Good one." Gordon set his watch, and they leapt over a row of scraggly bushes to begin their run.

"Remember that guy James I told you about?"

"Your friend."

"My obligation," Alvin said. "Saw my name in the paper after Detroit and came around asking for money."

"You give him some?"

“Hell no. I never trust a dude who thinks four grand is a windfall. Like I’m just walking around looking for investment opportunities.”

The gray sky made it darker than it should be, but it had to be a trick. They had an hour of daylight left, at least. Gordon waited for Alvin to say something more about his friends, but he seemed to be doing the same, and the result was silence, both runners falling back within themselves.

“How’s Tayvon?” Alvin asked.

“Long gone,” Gordon said. It pained him to talk about school, to even think about it, verbally acknowledging the time he wasted on lesson plans and incomprehensible essays.

“It’s like I said, you never know.”

“Literally,” Gordon agreed, “I know nothing.”

A mile past Connor Creek, Alvin pulled up lame. Gordon thought at first he’d turned his ankle, but it wasn’t his foot he was grabbing.

“Cramp?” Gordon asked. Alvin was grimacing, clutching his knee.

“No,” Alvin said when he found his voice. “It’s—shit, it’s sharp.”

“Sharp?”

“Yeah, man.” Alvin limped over to him and used his shoulder for a crutch.

“Try to walk it off,” Gordon said. Alvin nodded and stiffly limped away. A few paces down the sidewalk, back, out again, back.

“Ready?”

“Just a minute.” Alvin circled Gordon, hands on his hips.

“Fucking sidewalks,” Gordon said. They had potholes and cracks, big, wide ones that made space for the grass that pushed its way up. For a stretch down Mack, the sidewalk on the other side disappeared completely. Gordon started running in place, and when Alvin looped around him a fifth time, he flashed a thumbs up sign, and they started again. Gordon watched the ground for shards of concrete and other obstacles, chiseled free of the sidewalk but never cleared. A twisted ankle could twist the knee—it was scary, but it happened.

A minute later, Alvin stopped again.

“Fuck!” He jumped and spun in a circle, punched downward at the air around his knees. His falls balled and his arms cocked at his sides. There was nothing around them but empty buildings, not even a passing car. No one to punch but Gordon. Alvin dropped to right knee and began kneading the outside of his left kneecap, whispering curses to himself.

“You OK?” Gordon asked. He stopped running in place and looked out in the distance, a gray turning darker, leaves scattering like ashes.

“Not a cramp,” Alvin said. “Not OK.”

“You want to go back?”

Alvin shrugged and said something to his knee.

“What?”

“I don’t know if I can make it.”

For this first time, Gordon felt worried—this was the same Alvin who ran with the cold, the flu, a sprained ankle, broken wrist, bad calf and quad and on and on. This was the same Alvin who taught Gordon that you could learn toughness, you could train

yourself into it by never stopping, never giving in to the urge to make excuses. An Alvin would couldn't run was an Alvin he couldn't even imagine.

Gordon looked around them: a pawn shop (closed), a burned out gas station across the street. To their left, a string of abandoned lots with waist-high grass. In the distance, vague structures and smoke—always vague structures and smoke. Whether those structures were friendly, whether they had a phone for him to use, Gordon didn't know. He felt safe when he was running, but stopping took his defenses away.

"What do you want to do?" he asked, rubbing his arms for warmth. The spandex kept him warm, and he'd started a lather before Alvin went down. Now the moisture stuck to the fabric, chilling his skin.

"I don't know," Alvin said. He sat all the way down on the sidewalk and continued massaging his knee. Gordon could try to flag down a car. He could continue forward, but there wasn't much from where they were to Heidelberg—at least not much he remembered. Maybe there was something if he cut through a side street, but that was unfamiliar territory, and the sun was setting fast. The only real option was backward, past Conner Creek to a fast food place or a liquor store.

"I'll find a phone. Get Joe to pick us up."

"I'll start walking that way," Alvin said. "It doesn't hurt when I walk."

Gordon flinched and swiveled, startled by a shadow.

"Want to take my gun?"

"Funny," Gordon said. "What's the number?"

"773-4713."

Gordon repeated it three times under his breath, then started back at a much faster clip than they'd been running. Father and farther, now, from the former House of Soul.

He kept his eyes out for color as he ran—preferably a tall sign with bright paint. He'd never thought of what would happen if he injured himself on a run to Heidelberg. They never brought a phone, water, anything but a key that slipped easily into the tiny pocket on the inside of his shorts. His fear was less now that he was running, but he didn't look forward to stopping. He didn't watch the news often, but when he did, there was always someone on the east side getting shot. He doubted that many of those victims were marathoners standing outside in November, waiting for a 75-year-old man to pick them up, but then again, they would make easy targets.

The first sign of life was Daysha's, a party store with a handful of men lingering near the entrance—brown paper bag types. Next door was a pawn shop that simply said PAWN. There as nothing threatening about a pawn shop, not really—people went in to buy CDs and DVDs and to sell jewelry. There were guns, probably, but this one didn't even have bars on the window, at least. Gordon thought of Alvin limping down Mack, then took a deep breath and walked inside.

The space was brighter and wider than he'd expected. Shelves of electronics lined one side of the room, a standard class counter on the other. A middle-aged man walked out of an office and look his place behind the counter. He wore a blue polo shirt with nothing underneath but a patch of wiry hair. Gordon waited for him to speak first, but he only put his hands on the glass and raised his chin in Gordon's direction. His jaw was working on something.

"Hey, sorry," Gordon said, "to bother you." He felt the man's eyes on him, and it occurred to him he might look too absurd to be real: a freckled, gaunt body in running tights and Underarmour cold gear, waltzing into a pawn shop on Mack at dusk like a fawn on fresh ice. "My friend and I—we were just out running down the road, and he got hurt. I was wondering if I could use your phone? So someone can come pick us up."

"Something happen to him?"

"Sorry?"

"Your friend. He get into some trouble?"

"Oh, no. We're just runners. His knee—I don't know, he twisted it or something."

The man pulled a flip phone from a holster on his belt, and Gordon punched the right numbers, his fingers slipping over the greasy device. Joe answered on the first ring, fast enough to make Gordon think he must have been sitting in his chair, waiting.

"What are you two doin' out here?" the man asked after Gordon handed his phone back and thanked him.

"We're just training," Gordon said. "We ran the Detroit marathon a few weeks ago."

"You're from Detroit?"

"No. I—my friend is. We were just running down to the Heidelberg Project."

The man took his hand off the counter, and Gordon knew he'd said too much.

"That junk pile off Mt. Elliott? Bunch of trash all over the yards?"

Gordon swallowed hard and nodded. He took a step backward. Alvin was probably getting close by now—they could have walked here together.

“Got a city been getting’ stolen from and screwed over for years, and people want to talk about a bunch of girls’ dolls some damn lunatic’s been hanging from a crack house window.”

“One of the houses burned the other day,” Gordon said. The man seemed like he was wavering between conversation and attack, and Gordon wanted to push him in the direction that didn’t end with him getting his head slammed into the counter. “They’re still looking for the arsonist.”

“Oh, I know. I know. And you know what? I hope he gets away. I hope he keeps getting away until he burns that whole damn street down,” the man said. “Maybe then they’ll turn the fuckin’ water back on instead of talking about some silly pink houses people like y’all come in to look at and leave.”

Gordon motioned toward the door.

“I—”

“Whole damn thing should be bulldozed, one end of the street to the other. They need volunteers, you tell them to give me a call.”

“I’m sorry,” Gordon said. “Thank you. My friend—I have to go.”

The man looked at him with narrowed eyes and scratched his chest.

“Then get out of here,” he said.

Gordon turned left instead of right out of the pawn shop, and the group of smoking men in front of Daysha’s laughed from beneath the awning. He took one look in their direction and turned on a dime, taking off on a sprint down Mack, pretending he didn’t hear them whistling and cheering behind him, *Come back, Peter Pan, come back.*

CHAPTER 18

ART

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp flipped a urinal, signed it R. Mutt and titled it *Fountain*, leaving it stand without canvas or pedestal, the most famous of his “pure ready-mades.” With *objet trouve* came a shift, a shaping, a departure: art as concept, more than the endpoint of a mysterious, muse-guided process from subconscious to marble, aether to brush. Duchamp informed Dada and the Surrealists, then, much later, the artist, whose work with the Heidelberg Project seemed so unfamiliar, so altogether different than the work it drew from.

The artist himself drew as much criticism as the art itself. They called him insane and erratic, a hoarder and a liar and a cheat. The rich accused him of setting the fires. The poor said he was making light of their poverty, hanging hundreds of dollars in shoes from a tree when they didn’t have enough money to buy their children their own. They blamed the mildew and rot for bringing rats along with suburban gawkers, at the same time shaming the artist for moving from Heidelberg and onto a safer street. Art critics called Heidelberg *social critique.* They called it *activism,* art wringing hope out of something broken and forgotten, but many of the Project’s critics were too broken and forgotten to care what the art critics said.

Both *installation* and *environment* are used interchangeably to describe art that takes into account the viewer’s entire sensory experience rather than a single point of

focus in a plain surrounding space. The painter Allan Kaprow claims that installations imply the dissolution between life and art. The critic Ilya Kabakov says that in an installation, one becomes "both a victim and a viewer," the observer's inclusion in that which he observes taking on extreme importance. The immersion is literal: the observer controls only his or her own preconceptions, the basic rules of time and space—and even that can be warped by the artist.

If the Heidelberg Project is art, the artist must wield tremendous power. To call it anything else is to strip it of its power—to change or highlight, politicize or warp.

To ask whether the Heidelberg Project is art is, perhaps, to ask whether we can really cede so much power one man, to such a man—to ask whether he's capable of such a transformation. To deny it is to fear it, the artist's *environment*, something both idealized and ailing, both colored and gray.

To ask whether the Heidelberg Project is art is to finally ask, are we capable of seeing two things at once? Are we capable of ceding control?

CHAPTER 19

EARLY RETIREMENT

Days after the fire, the Heidelberg Project announced they'd hired a security guard to patrol the street at night. They also installed surveillance cameras and lighting, working streetlights increasingly rare in a city strapped for cash. The media ran its circuit—firefighters and smoldering ash, the artist holding court, a segment on a young woman who had her first kiss in front of the house, reactions from a group of third graders who'd just made their first visit on a school trip—and then forgot about the Project until the next time it was marred by fire.

Gordon was back to running alone. Alvin's knee felt fine the day after their run, but flared up that evening in the first mile of his run. He made an appointment with a doctor in Grosse Pointe, the brother of a teammate from Wayne, and Gordon thought of him as he looped his neighborhood, purposefully staying within its borders. Once, on a long run, Alvin told Gordon he thought of running as the ultimate conversation with yourself. You consoled yourself or your abused yourself, amped yourself up, but you always came back knowing more—about your body or your mind, the way you worked. It was one of his friend's many phrases that echoes in Gordon's head when Alvin wasn't around. What was he telling himself now? Gordon wasn't a good talker—his runs felt more like a diagnosis than a conversation. When he felt like he was talking, it was talking like this—to the ghosts of others, the words and likenesses they'd burned in his mind.

On Friday, Stone was fired. "Early retirement," he winked at Gordon as he carried a box of his things through the hallway, a substitute already at the helm of his classroom.

Stone was known for his creative methods for waking sleeping students, ranging from playing a kazoo in their ears to opening fire on them with squirt guns. Occasionally the third floor was interrupted by the sound of an entire classroom screaming, shocking the sleeper alert. Organizing moments like these were probably the highlights of Stone's teaching career, but apparently he'd gone too far: what happened, Gordon learned later from Reed, was that Little Mike, a five-three, 120-pound senior, fell asleep in the front row, and Stone lifted his desk a full foot off the ground and let it drop. Two of Little Mike's teeth cracked on impact, and when the desk tipped over, the fall broke his wrist. Stone had friends in administration, but not even they could save him from this.

"Early retirement?" Reed said. "Not early enough. He should have found another line of work ten, 15, 20 years ago. That's a man who stayed in teaching way too long."

"It's insane," Gordon said, dumbstruck from the news. "I never even thought—"

"Thinking's the last thing you want to be doing where Stone's concerned," Reed said. "You don't put students in danger, that's rule number one. Cavanagh's a *safe space*—there's a reason they hit on language like that. Kids got enough going on with their lives, they didn't need the threat of broken bones from a man who doesn't like them."

"It's nothing, kid," Reed told him. "Bad for Stone, worse for the kid, nothing to us."

It wasn't nothing to Gordon. When Jackson came by his classroom, Gordon gave him his workouts and sent him away, told him not to come back until after Christmas

break, just before the indoor meets started. He sat at his desk and massaged his calf until he regained some sense of calm, a moment of stability that, as of late, seemed too rare and fleeting for his liking.

Alvin came over with the news on Monday. The news was bad.

“Stress fractures,” he said. “Two in the left knee, two in the right.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Plantar fasciitis in my right foot, too. As bad as any he’d seen, the doctor said.” Alvin scratched behind his ear and blinked at the tall, bright lamp at the corner of the room. “I didn’t ask him how many cases he’d seen.”

Gordon had seen many of Alvin’s masks, but his one was new. He wished he knew what the face beneath it wanted—to be buried in hands, in a shoulder, or for Gordon’s eyes to avoid it as purposefully as Alvin’s did his, flicking around the room like he was following a fly. He spoke plainly, without affect, but Gordon knew what a pair of injuries like that could mean, and Alvin knew that he knew. The weight of that knowledge was heavy enough to make him feel faint.

The only real treatment for a stress fracture was rest, with a few daily exercises—sometimes swimming—to keep the muscles strong. A few of Gordon’s teammates had suffered them before, in high school and in college. Some healed quickly; others were lax on rehab, letting their muscles atrophy. Others had a harder time recovering, for reasons unknown. Bodies worked differently, and that difference was a mystery. Gordon had run the same mileage as Alvin, the bulk of it on concrete, but he hadn’t felt so much as a twinge in his knee.

Plantar fasciitis, he knew little about. It was a pain in the heel that could linger—Haggerty had gotten surgery to fix his, but Gordon never knew whether the decision was made from a place of need or impatience.

"So, what, three months?" Gordon asked.

"If I'm lucky," Alvin said. He rubbed the inside of his knee, fingertips digging into the patella's cliff and hollow. The start of a habit. "I don't feel very lucky."

"That doctor's probably used to chicken legs. Guys like me, we can't even handle a bruise."

"Stress fractures," Alvin said. "Plural."

"Still."

Alvin's eyes bored holes in Gordon's forehead, a crack in the mask. He knew this one: the look that said Alvin didn't need his optimism, especially if it was fake. *Stress fractures, what the fuck.* The same distance, the same surface. They went head to head, Alvin won and now he was getting punished. Gordon couldn't think of any words that didn't sound like insults—any sentences that wasn't him bragging about his own unbroken knees.

"Those extra miles," Gordon said, the realization raising the hair on his arms. "I don't know—I mean, obviousl—"

"Don't," Alvin said. "Don't worry about that."

"Alvin."

"The way the doctor was talking, I can't see an extra twenty miles making a difference. He said he was surprised I hadn't had trouble before, the way my legs were built. Bowlegged and shit."

“But—”

“You’re fine. Trust me, I could have stopped at any time.”

Gordon took a deep breath, fought the urge to reach for his knee.

“You’re tougher than anyone,” Gordon said. “No bullshit, you are.”

Alvin stood and pulled his coat on, zipped it to his chin. He came in looking tired, and when he left he looked exhausted.

His friend’s last sentence hung in the air long after he left—Gordon dodged it every time he entered the living room, swatted it away from the couch. *I could have stopped at any time.* He’d said it so matter-of-factly, with such confidence, Gordon wanted to believe him. He wanted to believe that either of them—both of them—could have said *no*, that they were still capable of that kind of control.

CHAPTER 20

THE PENNY HOUSE

Gordon's parents lived south of Tampa along the coast, where fall weather beat most northern Michigan summers, and they called every few weeks, less to talk to him than to hear about the weather. They had no interest in suffering another miserable winter, but they wanted to know snowfall, temperature, wind chill. *I can believe that*, Gordon's mother said when he described the slushy mess, and Gordon could hear her relief through the line. More than relief—the thrill of having escaped the cold. Michiganders' hatred of snow might be real in late March and early April, but in November, when the weather teases Christmas with a livable chill? They loved it like they loved hot cocoa and a blanket, a warm towel after a run through the rain. It gave them a chance to love their shelter. Gordon's co-workers proudly sipped whipped foam through mittened hands, compared snowblowers and mock-clutched at their backs.

Mostly, though, he saw it at the bench: it was cold enough to discourage lingering, but when they walked out of a store with coffee or food, they grimace-smiled and looked up into the falling snow, the lights now strung, the moon big and simple. They pinned back their hoods, unwrapped their scarves and appraised the early winter with deep, clouding breaths. They linked arms and packed snowballs, or tried. Gordon watched them when he stopped to stretch his calves. He thought the holidays were supposed to make people stressed and sad, but here they were—in couples or alone—

seeming utterly without worry, too hopeful for something. A short winter, maybe. He ran past them and their grimace-smiles and marveled at the limitation of their forward thought. In early March, salt would rust the cars, backs would flare up for real with each now snowfall, heating bills sky-high. And he would still be hurdling snow drifts, dodging patches of ice.

The night after Alvin's news, Gordon ran this route again, but was surprised to see another figure at his bench. It was a man, tall and thin in head-to-toe spandex and a ski mask. He had one leg folded over the arm rest stretching his hip. Gordon kept running past him, convincing himself he had come for the view and not for the checkpoint, but he looped back to the bench, and the man stopped his stretch when he saw him. He pulled his mask up to his forehead and shocked Gordon with his youth.

"Coach?" he asked.

"Jackson?" He was used to seeing the kid with his teammate, he hadn't expected to see him alone, looking this much like a runner. "Where's Walters?"

"He doesn't like the night runs."

Gordon reached down and stopped his watch, still running in place. He wasn't happy to see Jackson, and he didn't want to waste the energy to pretend that he was.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked. "Grosse Pointe's a trip for you."

Jackson wiped his nose on his sleeve, kicking his leg out in an eerily familiar gesture.

"Not that far. Plus," he said, gesturing to the sidewalk, "they do a better job of clearing the ice."

Gordon nodded, watching the bench.

"How's your hip?"

"Fine," Jackson said. "A little sore."

"You're only going 50, right?"

"Yeah." He lifted the ski mask higher on his forehead and glanced away. Not the first high school kid to lie to a coach, and not the last, either, but Gordon couldn't deal with it—not now.

"See you after Christmas," he said.

"Absolutely," Jackson said. When he saw that Gordon wasn't leaving, that Gordon was taking the bench, he pulled his mask back down and jogged away with a hitch in his step, one side favored over the other—not noticeable to the naked eye, maybe, but for Gordon, plain as day.

Alvin brought a lamp from the living room, took off the shade, and brushed aside a row of empties to clear space at the table. He turned off the kitchen light, pulled an X-ray from a manila package and held it in front of the light. With the other hand, he pointed.

"Patella," he said. "This is from the side."

"Where is it?"

"The white spots," Alvin said, almost in a whisper. "The white spots are the breaks."

There were two of them, one at the very tip of the kneecap and the other in the middle. Orbs in the grainy bone. It looked like someone had touched the radiograph, just barely kissed it with their fingertips, and the oils from their skin stained the print.

"These don't show up on the X-ray unless they're far along. When he first clipped it to the board I didn't even know what they were looking for, but he saw them right away. Now I can't see anything else." Alvin switched the prints, grunting as the next one slipped from his hand. The two of them sipped beers and observed it like a painting. "They kept popping up. I didn't think it was going to stop."

After a while, Alvin laid it on the table and brought them two more beers. They drank mostly in silence—Alvin had been a few deep when Gordon got there and hadn't shown any signs of stopping. Gordon checked his watch.

"I've got to work tomorrow," he said. "You've got to work tomorrow. Let's jus—"

"I quit."

"Alv."

"I can't stand all day," he shrugged. "It hurts."

"What are you going to do?"

"Got a membership at Bally's. Doc said I can hit the pool."

"I mean for money."

"Still got that five grand."

Gordon looked at his friend as close as he was allowed. His hair wasn't long and dirty, his face wasn't hidden by a beard, his clothes weren't ragged or dirty. He was the same Alvin, just with slightly glassy eyes.

"Alv."

"When are going to stop running to Heidelberg?"

"What?"

“You’re talking about me, I’m talking about you,” he said. “You think it’s a good thing, like you’re doing the city a favor. You’re not.”

When he gestured, he knocked an empty from the table. Gordon picked it up and stacked it among the others—12? 13? Only a few were his. He hadn’t known this version of Alvin before. Was this what he was like before? Is this what he was sweating out the day he saw him on the track? He refused to believe it was anything other than a setback—a night Alvin needed to have before he could get to the business of rehab, of preparing for greatness again.

Alvin shook an empty can, frowned and sat back in the padded kitchen chair, rubbing his knee.

“What does it feel like?” Gordon asked.

“It’s just a little hot spot. I feel fine walking around, and I think maybe things are better, maybe the doctor was wrong,” he said. “But then I reach down and touch it, and it makes sure you don’t forget.”

On Thursday, November 21, the Penny House was the next to go. Security patrol was on the west end of the block when they saw smoke coming from across Mt. Elliott at the Project’s far east end. The structure was engulfed in flames by the time firefighters arrived at 3 a.m., too late to do anything but stop the blaze from spreading. By sunrise they were gone, and the artist was once again probing through soot for pieces to salvage. The Penny House had been covered in photographs and paintings, copper heads and tails between the artist’s totemic Faces of God, but now there were only a few ragged and torn, stacked against the fence near the road as memories. The building the artist told

reporters he'd planned to turn into Heidelberg offices was now only half of the back brick wall, charred and partially fallen, resting on a tree.

Newspapers parroted the numbers: the fourth suspected arson in five months, the second in two weeks. The artist revealed that two more attempted attacks went unreported in October—small fire damage to the Numbers House and the Penny House. The night of this latest fire was also the night of the Heidelberg Project's fourth annual fall fundraiser. For their part, the fire department finally deemed the latest attack an arson. With federal agents now involved and half the installment destroyed, they could finally admit Heidelberg was under attack.

The media ran its usual circuit—former Penny House residents to remembering the pear tree across street, family barbecues in the old backyard—but Gordon found himself digger deeper, past the videos and articles and into the comment sections. There were Heidelberg supporters in the bowels of the Internet, a few of them at least, but they were overpowered by faceless commenters who seemed to take joy in the artist's suffering—conspiracy theorists who claimed that, with the insurance payoff he must have been getting, he wasn't really suffering at all.

At ClickOnDetroit.com, DTroitLiving led the charge:

> *We are dancing every time one of those atrocities burn. Here are 6 words for whoever is doing this: THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU. Keep up the good work.*

When James2275 asked why he hated the Project so much, DTroitLiving responded with another rant:

Why wouldn't I hate tour buses in front of my house? Why wouldn't I hate people taking pictures of my son while he mows the lawn? Why wouldn't I hate coming home to Strangers sitting on MY porch? NO THANK YOU. That man has no right to that street. Did he buy the pavement? Did he buy the trees? He's a thief and a nuisance, BURN BABY BURN!

Gordon searched profiles for location. James2275 commented through his Facebook profile, which placed him in Troy. Another defender, Megatron87, posted from Livionia. DTroitLiving had created a ClickOnDetroit.com profile that consisted only of a picture: a defiant face in poor lighting. People always said not to read the comments, but how else were you supposed to learn? Before the man at the pawn shop, Gordon had no clue the arsonists would have supporters, and before he dug into the comments, he had no clue there were so many. Gordon quickly created an account—Coop2:21—and responded to DTroitLiving's latest diatribe:

Anyone who hates the Heidelberg Project enough to want to see it burn never really understood it in the first place. Stop making up stories. Give it a chance. The place you're describing doesn't exist.

Gordon brought his winter gear to school the next day; after the final bell, he closed his door, turned the lights off, closed the blinds and changed into black tights and long spandex sleeves, a Turkey Trot shirt to block the wind. When the hallways were clear, he took off out the back door, stopping two blocks away at a light pole to stretch. He took his first deep breath of the day.

The plan was to jump 20 miles in the first three weeks of training—from 60 to 70 to 80—and then climb slowly to 140. Gordon pushed through most of the first week

alone and hit 60, but the next week was the week of Alvin's injury, and Gordon only hit 60 again. From Cavanagh to Heidelberg and back was 15 if he cut down Hayes—25 percent of his weekly total in case he failed again. *Just this once*, he told himself. He needed the trip. First you want and then you need—his was the story of an addict.

Since he'd seen the X-ray, Gordon couldn't stop thinking of his knees. He was always gauging his body—Bill Rodgers said that only lesser runners disassociated from the task at hand—but this was more horror fantasy than status check: he imagined bones grinding and slipping and chipping, splintering like firework or fraying like tightly coiled wire. He transposed a radiograph over his knees and surveyed the damage of more than ten years of pounding. He'd taken them for granted, his fragile and complicated machines. He ran on front lawns and grassy medians, tripping over tree roots, sacrificing footing for shock absorption. He'd push to 70 miles, but he'd do it as carefully as he could. Alvin's body had lied to him, and now Gordon was afraid his would do the same. Already, there might be some hidden crack or tear spreading deep and wide but not yet deep or wide enough to feel. It was in the early days of training, after all, when the runner was most susceptible—to injury, but also to dangerous thoughts that grew into worry or fear. Sickness or habit. Alvin didn't do doubt—when he doubted, he surged, and Gordon went with him, the hard pace flicking away the flutter of worry in his gut. They'd been so thoughtlessly synchronized, their bodies and their minds, but Gordon was thinking again. He'd find a pace, lose himself to a vision of failure on Heartbreak Hill, then the pace would slip and he'd panic. He grit his teeth and got back to it, but each return was a monumental task. It used to be simple. He needed to put his head down and fight through—to trust this would alter the future he'd begun to fear was his.

Gordon lolled his head from side to side, wincing at the ladder of cracks. He started down Kelly Road, running in mid-afternoon for the first time since the marathon. His watch was off, but he guessed his splits for the first few miles, down Kelly to Hayes, then East Outer Drive to Alter. He wanted the pace to be only as fast as it would have if Alvin was with him. Alvin, who'd butt dialed him in the middle of the night breathing, cursing and clicking the call dead. If Gordon was the injured one, he'd want to surround himself with distractions and encouraging words—not from everyone, but at least from his friend, the only who really knew. Other than the butt dial, Alvin hadn't called him. If their other conflicting habits were any indication, Gordon guessed he probably preferred to deal with things alone.

Alter spit him out just across the Detroit border on Mack, less than a mile from Connor Creek. Again, clouds made the day darker than it should have been. He felt an urge to pick up the pace, so he did—if his body wanted to make up for a shitty two weeks of training, he certainly wasn't going to fight it.

The sky got darker, and strange light played tricks in Gordon's periphery: movement that wasn't movement, pockets of darkness evaporating into light. He cut through Detroit with his head up and eyes forward. The only thing now was sidewalk, was Heidelberg, was standing tall and alone at the Penny House ruins. He wanted to be a part of the makeshift installment the artist always created swiftly in the aftermath of a fire, salvaged art from salvaged pieces, broken and reinvented. He needed that promise of restoration. He needed to feel that triumph as his own.

When the glint of a reflector pricked his eyes, he thought it was the watch of someone walking toward him. It was dark now, darker, but not too dark to see the bike,

low and wide and sharp, pegs spiked to both sides. Gordon turned to spit, kept his pace and place. He lost the bike for a second, then found it again, cruising toward him on the sidewalk. When it looked like the rider wasn't going to move, Gordon moved to the side, running on the grass. The wheels buzzed, and the figure on the bike stood, pedaling faster. When it veered off the sidewalk, Gordon jumped, and the collision flipped him. His head cracked another, and he saw stars, literal stars that delayed for a moment the pain of metal slicing into his thigh, the rubber in his shin. His head thumped on the grass like a padded mallet. There were hands on Gordon and then the hands were off, a man was cursing and the bike was snapping and clicking down the sidewalk the way Gordon had come.

There was a moment without pain, a pause after contact and before pain's descent, when Gordon lay on his back and felt his breath heave his chest high. A moment when he looked up at the swirling sky and felt like he'd gotten exactly what he deserved.

A series of scattered bursts flashed his body into awareness the way a good night sky is revealed as you drive out of the city, stars popping one by one until you're surrounded. A trick of the mind, but some people get tricked all the time. Gordon couldn't move. He couldn't keep a thought. He grazed his thigh with his fingers and his hand came up bloody, like he'd dipped it in a jar.

Finally he rolled over, balanced his weight on his knees. He straightened his back, then doubled back over. *Ribs.* He planted a foot in front of him to power into a standing position, and blood gurgled up through a gash on his thigh. *Leg*. He put his hand on his hip and felt a series of thinner wounds, scrapes from a tiny blade. *Leg again*. *And hip*. He felt lesser aches in his shoulder and chest, a smarting pain in his ankle—flesh already

beginning to bruise. *Ankle. Ankle, ankle, ankle.* With each step, his head echoed: the first crack, then the thud. He reached back to feel his skull, but his hand came back clean and cold. He was wearing gloves at the start of the run—he swore he was.

Gordon took a few steps toward Heidelberg, then stopped, turned and limped the other way. He was missing a shoe. One foot, then another, with each step a flash of pain. He limped, bleeding and ghoulish, past Alter. The pain started to numb, cuts sealed by the wind. Limbs locked stiff. He groped for something to help him, but there was only fog, cool and terrifying. Another step. Another. He bent and cracked and splintered. Past Cavanagh and the city that grew him. Across the borderline. He knew only sidewalk, only straight ahead without stopping. He staggered and fell, screamed a silent scream, a rock in his ribs. He stood. Another step. He didn't know how many were left but he put them up and down and up and down until he couldn't tell which parts of him were grounded, which parts in flight.

Later, he wouldn't remember staggering down Mack under the icicle lights, past the gaping stares of teenagers with coffee in their hands. He wouldn't remember the woman who jogged with him for a half-mile, taking him by his arm and trying to pull him to safety. He wouldn't remember breaking out into a scream at the sight of his bench, hobbling over and finally collapsing onto the snowy wood. He wouldn't remember the police officer that came to lift him, the whirring of lights, his rolling entrance through the hospital doors.

When he was discharged and home again, he would think back to that night and remember nothing but the moment he broke into a run. He would remember only how much pain he felt at the moment he thought his body might tear apart in three different

places. He would remember, lucidly, the absurd thought he'd had when he ran across the border from one city to the other—that it was the best he'd felt in weeks.

CHAPTER 21

THE WAR ROOM

The last time Gordon had been in a hospital was in high school, when he had his blood drawn at Bon Secours to prove he had mono—an explanation, finally, for his drooling in English class, all the times he fell asleep draped over his easel in Art. When he'd told his doctor he hadn't done any kissing, she told him excessive exercise without the proper rest and nutrition could also be a cause, and had he been pushing himself lately? Did it sound at all like that could be the case?

When Gordon woke up in a hospital bed, he felt the same thing he felt back then: shame to have been discovered as weak, to have had strange hands on his body, to have inspired in others a clinical gaze. After the shock of waking, he spent the next day flickering in and out, shifting to the left or right so the nurse could change his bandages, taking the painkillers offered in a cup. When he woke for good, the nurse came in to ask him what happened, and he told her all he remembered: the run, the thump, the cracking. She nodded, clutching her clipboard to her chest.

"Did I already tell you?" he asked.

"It was more coherent this time," she said. "Less about the stars."

She held her hand over his eyes, then uncovered it and flashed it with light. She asked him the day and date, the year. If he could feel her touching his wrists, if it felt the same on both sides, if he could tell what number she was tracing in his palm.

"Four?" he guessed.

The nurse frowned. "Have you ever had a concussion before?"

"No," Gordon said, "but they did baseline at State."

She left him with homework: a sheet of paper that asked him to rank his symptoms on a scale from 0-6. *Nausea, neck pain, drowsiness, dizziness. "Doesn't feel right." Difficulty remembering. Difficulty concentrating. Feeling more emotional.* Gordon marked 3s for most of them. A swell of drowsiness came over him, and he scratched a few to 4s before falling asleep.

When he woke, his head felt less foggy, his brain recovering from its collision with his skull. He lifted his bed sheet for a better view of where he was bandaged and gauzed, if he was broken like he feared he might be. He was part mummy from the waist down, but his ribs hurt too badly to check. Gordon grunted and leaned back in the bed, back to SportsCenter on the TV. It had been easier in the morning, when he was in and out. All he'd had to do was take his pills.

Later, a different nurse ran him through word tests, asking him to repeat: *Elbow, apple, carpet, saddle, bubble.* She was harder, sharper—probably on the tail end of her shift, mad she was stuck with the foolish runner in Room 314. *Candle, paper, sugar, sandwich, wagon.* Next were numbers: she read a list of them, and he repeated them backward: *4-9-3, 3-8-1-4.* He balanced on one leg, then the other, was shuttled down the hallway for X-rays and scans. He wanted to tell the nurse he was fine now, that whatever stupidity still lingered was probably his. But she commanded, and he responded—that was all. A policeman came in later, and Gordon repeated what he'd told the nurse.

"A bike," the policeman said, eyebrows raised. His head was waxed bald, his chest a half-barrel, his shoulders mere inches under his eyes.

"A bicycle, yeah."

"Anyone you recognize? Any enemies?"

"He was just a guy on a bike."

"A bicycle."

"Uh huh."

The policeman smirked and took a quick glance to his side, like he was missing a partner who would have found all this hilarious.

"Can you tell me why you didn't stop and ask for help? The woman who called 911 told me you were rough with several people, including her," the policeman said. "She's not pressing charges—"

"Finally, good news."

"—but it seems like you caused a bit of a commotion."

The nurse appeared beside the policeman and gave him an incredulous look.

"I'm told I was concussed," Gordon said.

"What were you doing in Detroit?"

"I bet you played football. Linebacker, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where were you the night of the incident?"

"Mr. Cooper—"

"I told you," Gordon said. "I was running in Detroit because that's where I run."

"But Grosse Pointe *is* your legal residence?" he asked. "Home with mom and dad?"

Gordon nodded, let it pass.

"I probably don't have to tell you there's not much we can do with *guy on a bike*. You seem to be OK, and that makes you lucky. Here's some professional advice: next time you go for a jog, stick to your own part of town. We get lots of kids coming over the border looking for a thrill, they come back with a bullet through their chest. It's not civilized out there. Don't get caught out after dark."

Afterward, the nurse checked his bandages, cleaned his scrapes. The biggest wound was stitched, a thick, nasty red worm that distorted the rest of his thigh.

"It's a deep cut," she said, watching his reaction. "The muscle's fine. Might not feel great for a while."

"I guess I'm staying overnight."

"We'll have you out in the morning if everything checks out," she said. "Nasty accident, but I think you'll be OK. He was right about one thing—you *were* lucky."

She smiled at him—her first sign of warmth—and patted him on his arm. He flinched and squinted at her nametag. *Liz, Henry Ford Hospital.*

"Shit, that guy was an asshole," he said. "We're in Detroit right now."

There wasn't enough of Gordon's blood spilled on the streets of Detroit and Grosse Pointe to merit a transfusion, but before he cleared him to leave, his doctor told him it was closer than he would have liked. His post-concussion symptoms had faded, but he was supposed to schedule an appointment if any of them returned—dizziness nausea,

headaches, irritability, depression, fatigue. The doctor listed them all, but Gordon's mind was on his blood in the streets—all the oxygen he'd lost, releasing upward from the pavement where his mark was crusted. Scrapes mapped his middle and thighs. Bruises contoured his skin. A cracked rib lay beneath, stabbing at him when he crouched to enter the taxi in front of Henry Ford.

When Gordon got home, he emailed his principal to let her knew he'd be extending his Thanksgiving break to a full week, taking Monday and Tuesday off. It would take a month, at least, for his rib to recover, and the doctor told him he should ease back on even the most basic physical activities. He looked him in the eyes when he said it, like he'd had experience with men like Gordon before. Gordon promised, but by Monday afternoon he was back out for an easy nine, setting his sights once again on 60 miles.

He stabilized his rib with Kinesio tape, a rainbow hashtag from waist to armpit, and kept straight and tall. It hurt more to sit up in bed than it did to run. If anything, he worried about the stitches in his thigh stretching to the point of breaking, the impact of his stride splitting the wound wide open. Even more, he worried about developing a hitch—how these injuries might alter his form, quietly spawning replacement injuries from the strain of accommodation.

Gordon was on an 11-miler around Grosse Pointe when he saw them again. At first he thought it was the way the light was falling, or that his vision now came with spots. He thought they were actual shadows of actual men, or that they might flicker and disappear, behind a building or anything else. There were three of them, shadow-men of changing heights. They snuck and ducked and crouched, moving and stopping fast,

sending a jolt of pain though Gordon's side each time they darted from his periphery. They lingered at the edges of things, quick enough to make him jump and light enough to make him squint, to draw him into concentration before bursting out of sight. Jolt after jolt. Gordon scraped his nails along the Kinesio tape, cupped the rounded turn of his side. He kept his eyes forward to deny them, to take control of his run, his heart rate, his pain. But he recognized the shadows, and the panic that shot up through him like a rocket that never launched. Something had shook them loose. He showered and ate painkillers and hung sheets over his windows, slept on his back in the dark. He ran in the morning, a four-mile slog, jumping at each noise and movement around him.

The night before Thanksgiving, Gordon tried a new route, away from Grosse Pointe and into Detroit through Saint Clair Shores. He'd done 10 in the morning and wanted to go another eight, to punish himself, remind his body what high mileage felt like. At Stephens and Gratiot, he saw them—not swarming as they usually did, but across the five-lane road, under a light pole in front of a Dodge dealership. He'd been looking for them the whole time, oblivious to pace, and they weren't even near him. When Gordon looked closer, he saw there was a fourth—three shadows stood while another, shorter than the others, bent over and clutched at his legs. Gordon's stomach sank, and he felt sick. He knew it was Alvin as he watched the figure run away, arms churning too far out on either side, his strides deceptively short. He felt bile at the back of his throat, tried to spit and ended up with a long string of saliva dribbling onto his chin. It wasn't until that moment that he realized just how terrible was the silence that had grown between them—how they'd turned from unstoppable training partners, first and third, into two damaged runners on the opposite side of a wide street, unable to do anything but hurt

themselves more. What else had they taught each other, except how to break themselves down?

After Alvin left, the shadows paced Gordon home. He made the run back a violent one—a long sprint that made wind sting his scratches, his thigh burning with each hard step. His plan was looking more and more like foolish pipe dream, a disaster already made. Boston was a city in Massachusetts he'd probably never see. Gordon wondered how it burned—if it lost in a year what Detroit took in a month. His eyes watered and blurred as two shadows split his periphery, the leader urging him on. There was nothing to do but keep moving—to tire himself into collapse.

Before he fell asleep that night, Gordon thought fleetingly of Callie—not as a lover, but as a time when it seemed possible to know someone, to have someone know him, to have hands on him that weren't paid to care. He hadn't thought he was dooming himself with what he'd denied, but he was feeling the physical anxiety the shadows seemed to bring. He thought, before he fell asleep, of everything he didn't want coming up in his dreams, damming the subconscious with handpicked memories and fears. Only when he finished did he give in to exhaustion.

Thanksgiving morning, Gordon woke hungry and sore, his skin sensitive and stinging in a radius around his wound. He'd gone too hard on last night's run, tried too hard to stay straight and tall, and his rib was back to smarting at the smallest movements, his arms weighed heavy from the effort, spasms developing in his lower back. He swung his legs off the bed and pushed his arms straight off the mattress to lift his torso without bending. A new motion for everything—nothing was easy anymore.

He could forget about the shadows in the daytime. He could change the bandage on his thigh, put a bagel in the toaster, drink coffee and peer out the window at the dusting of snow he hadn't shoveled, Mrs. Sweetwood shuffling enough down the sidewalk to clear it with her slippers.

Gordon brought breakfast and coffee into his living room and settling on the couch. The house was quiet and cold enough for a blanket on his lap. Days like this, it felt completely foreign from what it was in his childhood. His father killed quiet, always moving from office to basement to garage, talking in the language of business that neither Gordon nor his mother understood. Or the house flared hot from his mother baking in the kitchen, chasing he and his father down with samples of brownies and fudge, banana nut bread. It seemed stupid to miss his family, even dumber to be happy they weren't around. He turned on the TV and was keying in the number for ESPN when the local news blared on, an image of flames on the screen.

It started at 5:37 a.m., around the same time Gordon remembered seeing on his phone when he woke up to drain glass of water. Heidelberg security failed again, though this time they repeated seeing a man in dark clothing running from the scene. "A man in dark clothing"—Gordon wondered if it was code for "man who is dark," if the artist and his people had any interest in labeling or not labeling the suspect by race. A man in dark clothing—a shadow, a shape appearing as a man, surrounded by darkness. A shadow, a gas can, a match—that was really all it took.

There were no suspects, not officially, but an agent announced that they were conducting interviews. Only four of Heidelberg's seven anchor structures were standing, but the Project's publicity director insisted it was the safety of their neighbors they were

most concerned about now. This latest fire had come dangerously close to a nearby resident, out of town at the time of the blaze.

Another arson, another pile of rubble becoming its own installation, Heidelberg in miniature: a synthesizer, half a vinyl record, a yellow, red and blue roller skate. A small fire burning at the center of what was now a marker, an empty shape, the small plot of land formerly know as the War Room. The artist had again been seen circling the installment just hours after the fire, talking to neighbors and investigators but saying little to the news. *We will move forward*, he offered. This is what frustrated Gordon most about the artist—that he could care so little about what people said about him and his art. He was content to let reporters craft his story, blank words crudely drawing an image of him seen across the world. The arsons were now a regular spot on CNN and NBC, who couldn't care less what the houses had looked like, what the artist intended them to mean. They were colorful, they were polarizing, they were aflame in a burning city. What they cared about was the artist's sanity and criminality, and all he could say was *We will move forward*—not a defense, not an attack, not even a lament. They were going to skewer him in the comments. The arsonist was going to come back for more.

After the report, the news switched to a preview of the Lions game, then flashes of the Macy's parade, tips to avoid burning the turkey. Gordon turned the TV off and threw on a pair of jeans and long-sleeved shirt, dug through his closet for his winter coat.

It was the second time Gordon had driven to Heidelberg. He felt nervous crossing over in a way he never felt on his runs anymore. You run a route long enough, you feel like you know it. You drive a street every day, you still don't know shit. You know a city through car windows like you knew a country from a plane. Gordon felt like he was

driving through the Detroit he saw on the news, not the Detroit he knew. But what did he know of it, anyway? And who was to say this new fear within him wasn't the voice of his ribcage, the wound on his thigh, the lurking shadows?

Runners *did* know places differently, though. They cared about them more, driven to explore by their need to find solitude, even in a city of thousands. They so often dealt with the business of emptiness—of streets and trails of themselves.

A long time ago, when Gordon and his mother drove to Kalamazoo to visit his aunt, she shook her head at the Detroit buildings visible from I-94, broken and boarded and tattooed. She said it was terrible how those people treated their property—they, at least, were lucky to live in a city where people had some respect. Gordon was young, and what his mother said seemed logical at the time—after all, the proof was right in front of them.

"It doesn't make sense," he'd said to Alvin months ago. He swept his arm toward an artless tag on the side of a windowless house in Cass Corridor—a house that would have aged beautiful with care and restoration. "Why would they do that?"

"They?"

"I'm not saying it's a black or white thing," Gordon had said, angry at the implication.

"That's not what I asked," Alvin said. "When I see something like that, I don't think of a city. Or I think of the city that forced a person out of their home. But that shitty graffiti—that's not a city. That's one person, maybe two."

"They means they. The people who did it."

"Good," Alvin said. "People. Not the city."

"The city's filled with people," Gordon said. At that point he'd been trying to stop himself—he knew the point Alvin was making, even if he didn't quite understand it.

"Don't be an idiot," Alvin said.

Gordon pulled down Elba and parked just before the corpses of the War Room and the House of Soul, their plots side by side. He'd expected a crowd, but instead it was quiet and empty, and the street smelled like bonfire, like the thick log still smoking in a pit the morning after. Gordon balled his fists in his coat pockets, clutching his keys. He felt suspicious.

The War Room had been a protest house. On it, the artist's famous faces were wounded and damaged, flanked by the words GOD and WAR on planks of wood, paintings of Detroit police cars and tall, white crosses. Everything was gone now, of course. The plot was roped with police tape, reward signs stapled to the telephone poles between stuffed animals and clocks, street signs and shopping cart wheels. A piece of paper with boring black letters—it looked pathetic amid the magic trash. Gordon heard a thump from across the street, near the house the arsonist had almost taken down. *Gawker*, Gordon cursed himself, thinking of Alvin's latest question. He wasn't going to stop until fire destroyed it all.

He walked back to his car and turned his keys in the ignition, his engine the only sound for miles. No volunteers, no art aficionados weeping in the street. Just a scrawny 26-year-old white guy who felt like a teenager, sitting in a car his parents bought him. Just him, always hoping no one was watching from their windows. Just him, devastated

when not even the artist would show his sadness—when he could look at the destruction and say, *This is nothing. This is the real world, this is life.*

Back in Eastpointe, Gordon knocked on Alvin's door until he answered, leaning against the wall with a beer in hand. He greeted Gordon with a smile that didn't seem to want to commit to either side of his face.

"Buddy," he said. He reached up to scratch his eyebrow, and a tab rattled inside the can. He walked away from the door, and Gordon took it as an invitation.

"What's up?" Gordon asked, and Alvin threw his hands in the air. The house didn't look as bad as him—a few empties scattered but nothing broken or breaking. Still a little bit empty, a little bit cold.

"Oh, you know," Alvin said. He lowered himself in the recliner, but Gordon stayed standing.

"Rehab?"

"You said leg lifts?" Alvin barked a laugh and raised his leg high enough for his shorts to fall up his thigh. "Clench, unclench. Tough stuff. I keep 'em steady."

"The pool?"

"Bally's, Captain. Eight Mile and Gratiot. I get there early enough to see the last wrinkly dick swinging around the locker room."

"That's funny."

"Life's a fucking comedy," Alvin said. "Why are you here?"

Gordon shoved his hands in his pocked and avoided Alvin's cold stare. This wasn't a friendly person—this wasn't his friend. Why *was* he there?

"Joe invited me to Thanksgiving," he said. "You, too."

"That motherfucker's been banging on my door all week."

"Listen, I know how it feels." Gordon wanted to tell him he'd seen his log, had seen the paragraphs where he wrote only fragments. He knew what it was like to feel like the world was conspiring against you to rob you of the one thing that made you feel whole. He wanted to tell him what he hadn't known for sure before: Alvin was, at the core of him, a runner, and nothing else. He was no different than Gordon. And if he felt like without running there was nowhere to go, it was only because it was true. It wasn't the end of things, though—far from it. "I mean, I know how you feel."

"Hail Gordon, prince of empathy."

Gordon threw his arms up and winced at the pain. "Shut," he said. "Fucking shit."

"You take a dive?" Alvin asked.

"I'm fine."

"Uh huh. Heard another of your houses went down."

"I got hit," Gordon said, "by a guy on a bike."

"Where?"

Gordon didn't answer. Alvin curled his lip and spit on his living room floor.

"Were you carrying a wallet?"

"It was an accident," Gordon said. He tried to remember the moment after the crash, the haze of pain and realignment. For a moment, his body had been tangled with another. Their bones had hit. He remember the man's hand on his chest, the dagger of his push as he straightened himself and launched away. Had his hands slid down his leg, searching for pockets? Had they swiped at his chest, gripped his wrist, pulled at his ears?

"I'll bet it was."

"How's this work, Alv? You drink a few beers and suddenly you're a prophet?"

"I predict that scrawny motherfucker, if he pushes his luck long enough will get jumped running in his short shorts through the most dangerous city in the U.S. of A. You really need a second opinion here?"

"Scrawny white motherfucker. That what you mean?"

"Kids crash their bikes into other kids when they want their bikes. Don't project your own shit on a simple thing."

"Fuck off."

"Tell you what, we'll go hunt the dude down. You feel safer out there with me, don't you, Gordy?"

Alvin leaned forward in his chair, eyes locked on Gordon's.

"Let me tell you what I need from you right now. I need you to leave me alone. Completely and entirely. Absolutely. Just get your mileage in, buddy. Just get those miles. Everything you don't like is an accident, everything you love is yours. It's got nothing to do with me. Does that sound good, buddy? Does that sound like a *plan*?"

"Alvin."

"How many times, G. How many times do I have to say it before you disappear?"

On his way out, Gordon saw Joe's face through his front window. They met eyes for a moment, and then he disappeared, leaving the blinds to swing. Gordon hadn't been lying: Joe had called him and invited him to dinner—both of them, he said, but Gordon had a feeling Alvin wouldn't attend. He tried not to think of the old man working in his kitchen, cooking for only himself. Gordon closed his car door before Joe's front door opened, before Joe could expect him walking to his porch.

Gordon drove the city of Eastpointe, from 10 Mile to Kelly, then down to Gratiot all the way into Detroit, 8 Mile, the Eastside Mall. His mind was on the shadows, his eyes were on the road. They only came when he was running—even thinking it felt like a jinx. A chill crept up his shoulder, but he refused to look behind him at the backseat, cool and empty. He looped through the mall parking lot, the Macy's, the Target, the Burlington Coat Factory. The buildings looked empty, but he knew they were full. He circled the mall under there was no lingering fear, until his driving left him dizzy, until he'd driven his mother away and his father, too, until he'd forgotten about Callie and the bench that ended them, until he'd forgotten about Joe and Stone and Mrs. Yorke and finally Alvin—until he felt, for the first time, truly and irreversibly alone.

CHAPTER 22

GHOST

In mid-July, when the days had been so full fast and tiring they seemed to melt together into one long and painful surge, Gordon took Alvin out on his father's boat with a half-case of beer and a cooler full of ham-and-cheese sandwiches stacked like bricks of gold. Gordon remembered enough about boating to get his father's old Four Winns away from the docks and into some water that felt a little bit open, views of two countries on opposite horizons of Lake Saint Clair.

"Pretty good lake," Alvin said, grinning like he was walking to a friend's house for the first time, examining the walls.

"Not great?" Gordon asked.

"You're going to make a terrible father some day."

Gordon dropped anchor and peeled off his shirt. They'd gone fourteen that morning, hard enough to earn some beer and sandwiches and sun, to appreciate the day how only runners with their mileage behind them could. Gordon didn't know if that was the first day he and Alvin were together as friends and not just two rogue runner with common goals, but that's how he remembered it. There had been mornings in Gordon's kitchen, afternoons in front of Alvin's TV, but those times were different than now, in the middle of a lake, a place they couldn't have run to if they'd tried.

They made lazy conversation as the boat bobbed. Gordon told Alvin the story of the first time he went fishing with his uncles at the Beaver Dam in northern Michigan: how he was too scared to bait his own hook or touch the feel he reeled in. How he had to pee but wouldn't do it off the boat, not in front of his uncles, so he cried until they turned back to shore.

"Shameful, man," he said when they stopped laughing. "That's got to be the most ashamed I've ever been."

"That's not true."

"No, Gordon said. "Probably not."

"So what was it, then?" Alvin asked. He had a serious smile on his face as he cracked another beer. "Your most shameful moment?"

"I'd have to think."

"Don't think. Something like this, you know right away."

The memory that came first for Gordon was a time years ago on the very same lake when he and his dad were out on one of the father-son Sunday's his mother always encouraged. They didn't talk much, and Gordon spend the entire time with his line in the water, hoping nothing bit. On their way back to shore, Gordon watched two jet skis buzz behind them, carving the lake in zigs and zags, circling tighter and tighter until both machines broke one way, crashing head on, and both bodies flew into the water. Gordon remembered squinting at the site of the crash, unable to see the figures rise up for the spray and wake of the old Four Winns chugging back to shore. He remembered wishing he could have take the wheel of the boat, turned back and saved the men, wishing he had the strength to dive deep and pull them up, one on each arm. What he didn't remembered

why he didn't tell his father—whether it was fear or shyness of shock. Instead, he tried to convince himself the men had never gone under, their ankles hadn't broke from the tethers, he hadn't seen what he hadn't seen.

Instead of telling Alvin that story, his told him instead of one of his first indoor meets at State, a mile run he'd expected to win. One lap in, he didn't feel right—the pack was separating too quickly, accelerating too fast, and at the start of lap four his gut turned coward, his legs to rubber. When the second-to-last runner went around him on the turn, Gordon pulled up lame, staggered onto the infield and collapsed, holding his left calf when the only thing hurting was his lungs and his 18-year-old pride. He closed his eyes until he felt the hands of trainers on his back, and a man he let serve as a crutch as he limped into the locker room for a bag of ice he didn't need.

Alvin gave the story a moment of silence, then flicked at his tab with his middle finger.

"I sold my mom's pain pills," he said. "Oxy. Mike and Manny knew some guys who wanted to buy, so we split the cash three ways. I don't know why—I didn't need the money."

Gordon stared out at the water. Immediately he wished he'd told the first story. He regretted it, even though he was relieved his part was over.

"She asked for them, and I lied to her face," Alvin said. "That's the worst part: she never would have guessed, not in a million years. I told her I'd call the doctor about it and she kissed me on the cheek and dealt with the pain."

Alvin looked at Gordon like he was just waking up and nothing else had sharpened. Then he shrugged and rummaged through the cooler for a beer.

"It doesn't really matter," he said. "Or it did, but it doesn't now. It wasn't going to save her, and she wouldn't have stopped loving me if she'd known. She would have been worried about *me.*"

"It's hard to imagine," Gordon said.

Alvin nodded and appraised him, and Gordon got the sense he'd said the right thing. With Alvin, the shorter thing was usually the right thing.

"It is, isn't it," he said. "For me, too. Hard to know how you're going to respond to something until it happens, I guess. You think you're one way and turn out the other."

The weather turned on them that afternoon, the sky flushing dark and the wind showing storm as Gordon drove them back to shore. He glanced behind him from the captain's seat and saw Alvin on his back on the bench with this T-shirt half pulled over his head, somehow sleeping through the choppy ride. The boat dipped and rose, and Alvin's body slid and bumped against the back of the bench. The whole way back, Gordon played a moving in his mind: Alvin flipping overboard, woken from his nap by cold lake water rushing in his mouth and nose. Gordon killing the engine and standing at the edge of the boat, searching for the white of Alvin's T-shirt in the water. Gordon spotting him, then scanning the horizon for help. He knew, on this day that would leave him sunburned and dehydrated, that he would jump in to save him. He was absolutely sure.

When Gordon finally hit 70 miles, it felt like 200. The shadows were still shying from light, so he cut his schedule to once a day, racing sunset after school. His stitches were removed, but the wound still throbbed.

He had two voicemails from Alvin, but he deleted them without listening. He thought back to the story Alvin told him on the boat—if Alvin's own mother couldn't know him, what chance did Gordon have? Two runners could be, in so many ways, closer than family, and he'd been starting to think he knew him better than anyone. Now it seemed like a lost cause.

One afternoon, a guidance counselor kept him to talk about a student he was failing, and Gordon sprinted out of Cavanagh afterward, desperate to beat the shadows. He was almost back when he saw then, when the sky was too dim not to. His sweat turned cold as they flickered around fences, a shade darker than dusk. *Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot.* The mantra didn't stop the panic from weighing his limbs heavy, racking him with shivers and pangs. Pain flared in his ribs and the sidewalk in front of him knocked fuzzy, then refocused. *Ocelot, ocelot, ocelot.* His legs churned in slow motion: he was late, he was losing, he was paralyzed with fear. If he could block everything out, he could save himself. It started with the shadows—the second they slipped in, the rest would follow. It was more than he could take.

He spied his car in the Cavanagh lot and felt his pocket for his key. His things were inside the school, but he wanted to go home—he wouldn't need his wallet that night anyway, and his student papers would have just guilted him from the corner of this table. There was a spare house key under the front doormat. He needed to go.

Gordon took off his shoes and collapsed against his car's side. The shadows lingered in the far corner of the parking lot still, and Gordon used his vehicle as a shield. He took his hat and gloves off, then his shoes and socks, letting his toes numb in the dirty slush. He sat with his head against the back tire and waited, shivering himself numb. *I'm*

not running, he thought, clenching his eyes shut tight enough to see colors float and ripple. *I'm not running*. When he recovered the strength to stand, the shadows were gone.

Later, in sweats and double socks, hands around a mug of tea, the panic was replaced with a blind spot—a feeling he feared but couldn't replicate. Last time, they'd made him quit, but that wasn't happening now, and they knew it. They'd morphed and shifted, changed into something new to fit the city. And there was no telling, this time, what they might make him do.

After the voicemails came the texts: loose thoughts and questions, jarring and short, revealing no hint of the motivations behind them.

Do you remember Yonas? Alvin asked.

Gordon did, but he wasn't sure what good the memory served him. Yonas was an Ethiopian immigrant at Grosse Pointe South who went undefeated in the two-mile run his last two years of high school. He beat Gordon in cross country and beat his teammates in the deuce, but Gordon outlasted him in the mile when Yonas doubled at the state meet. *Yonas.* What did he have to do with Alvin? Gordon remembered a story he heard from a teammate who ran the deuce at leagues: Yonas was put on the outside instead of in lane one, and when the starter tried to correct his mistake, Yonas said, *It doesn't matter what lane you put me in*. He had a ten-meter lead by the time he cut over, and he went on to win by nearly a minute. Yonas was a dick, was Gordon's teammate's point, but their coach remind them the kid barely spoke English, and that if he sounded like a dick, it might not have been because he was trying. Last Gordon had seen, Yonas was

academically ineligible at some Division 2 school in mid-Michigan. Just another runner who'd passed him, another runner he'd passed.

Heidelberg, Alvin texted him before he could reply. Just the one word. Gordon imagined him dangling it with his half-dangerous smile—a dare—and chose not to respond. He pictured Alvin drunk, maybe getting high with friends he'd never met. If Gordon was going to do this—Boston, the Trials—he would have to do it alone. No distractions, nothing to slow him down. If he could just carve out an hour and a half every day free from shadows, from Alvin's texts, from the guilt of teaching poorly, from Callie and Heidelberg and the man on the bike, the pain in his ribs and leg and the fogginess in his head he swore he wouldn't report—if he could think, for a moment, only of the road in front of him, simple and fast, he might have a chance. But the *if*s were piling up. Each time he went out, it was harder.

To make matters worse, the next time Jackson appeared at his door, he was on crutches—and Walters, next to him, had his arm in a sling.

I swam five miles today, Alvin texted. *It's the only way I can sleep.*

"Let me guess," Gordon said. "Touch football."

"Basketball," Walters said. He didn't look too sorry about it, but Jackson had yet to bring his eyes from his shoes.

"You, too?" Gordon asked.

Jackson shook his head and scratched at his upper lip, a soft mustache growing in patches. *Summer mustache*, Donnelly had said of Gordon's his freshman year. *Some are over here, some are over there*.

"It's just my ankle, and it's not that bad."

“You’re in crutches.”

“They’re from the trainer. I tweaked it a few days ago—it was feeling better until I tried to run on it today.”

“You should have told me,” Gordon said. “Why were you running on it today? Thursdays off, we said.”

The two runners exchanged glances. When Walters didn’t give, Jackson took a deep breath and raised his eyes from his shoes for the first time.

“Coach saw us running last week,” he said. “He asked what we were doing, and we told him we were just training on her own.”

“He didn’t like that,” Walters said.

“So he started voluntary practices.”

“Mandatory voluntary practices.”

“I told him I’d tweaked my ankle, and he didn’t believe me,” Jackson said. “He asked me when it happened. Said I shouldn’t be running unless I was running for him.”

“This is my fault,” Gordon said. He knew his face was twisting in horror, but he didn’t bother to stop it, didn’t bother to let his hatred for Handey show in front of his runners.

The heat wakes me up, Alvin texted. *I put my hand on my knee and it lights me on fire.*

The shadows began using his running as a bridge to his life, flitting down the hallway when he picked his running clothes out of his drawer, lingering in the hallway while he tied his shoes. They spread out on both sides of him on his runs, twitching and feinting,

making him gasp and stutter step to avoid bodies that sounded too heavy, too flesh-like to fade.

We never talked about that girl, Alvin texted. *We could if you wanted.*

Gordon didn't plan to see Handey, but the day after he talked to Jackson and Walters he found himself rapping on the athletic director's door after school, knowing she would be gone and Handey would be savoring the illusion of power.

"Damn, Cooper. Bust down the door." Handey sat on his desk took an elaborate sip of coffee. He'd stripped down from a Cavanagh polo to a white wife-beater, revealing wrinkled skin by his shoulders.

"Jackson's hurt," Gordon said.

"You talked to the kid? He had a little incident the other day, went running to the trainer just as we were getting started. Might be state champ material if we can toughen him up."

"He's hurt, you dumb fuck," Gordon said. Handey stopped with his coffee cup tipped to his lips. "He's hurt because he's been training with me. I've been giving him workouts since the start of the season. He's not state champ material—he's got potential, and he could be good with a decent coach."

"I'm the coach here," Handey said, stumbling for words. "I am. *I* am."

"You're a fucking joke. And you're going to hurt him."

"Get out of my office."

"It's not your office."

"Oh, look at you. All riled up," Handey sneered. "It's high school cross country, for god's sake. You *loser*—you've always been a loser. Get the hell out of here."

Before Gordon knew what he was doing, he had slapped the mug from Handey's hands, the rim stinging his palm. He reached out to grab him but could find nothing to grab—the bacon-necked wife-beater collar tore in his hand, so Gordon brought the other to his chest, slid them up the old man's throat and slammed him to the wall.

"I'm done with you," Gordon said, energized by Handey's fear, the whimper that escaped him when his shoulders cracked against the brick. "And you better leave that kid alone. Let him run what he wants to run. He tells you he's hurt, you send him to the trainer. He tells you he feels good, you let him fly. You got that, you pathetic sack of shit? Do you?"

Gordon brought his face closer to Handey's and watch the old man's face tighten. He tried to squirm but Gordon gripped him hard, shook him once against the wall and walked away, slamming the office door behind him.

The impact of what he'd done didn't register with Gordon as he walked away, down the hall to the back door, to his car. The past two weeks, he's showed his class videos and movies, assigned worksheets and free-writes. Deandre called him a *fucking faggot* when Gordon asked him to put away his phone. J.T. called Mrs. Yorke a *bitch* and Gordon wrote him up, too. Alicia asked for help on her assignment, and Gordon turned her down. There were good kids and bad kids and Gordon had nothing for any of them. What he'd felt with Handey up against the wall was influence. It was the first time all year he thought he might have made a difference in a Cavanagh student's life.

That night, Gordon ran past sunset, shadows be damned. *Ocelot* meant nothing against the panic that locked him into stiff legs and a plodding pace, a mind that never settled, thinking of his cell phone at home vibrating with stories—pleas to remember, to

be remembered. How long since he'd seen Alvin? A week? The pull between them had snapped, the threads and cables once connecting them buried in fragments, deep underground.

The shadows lined up single file in front of him on the lake path and made themselves thick, obscuring his view. They shifted the path in front of him, and when they parted, revealed—too late—a thick yellow pole. Gordon cried out and tried to pivot, then tried to jump. He knocked his knee and shin hard against the pole, and his opposite ankle turned as he crumpled to the ground. His rib felt like it might burst from his chest, cutting through the tape that supported it, and his head knocked the gravel, a flash and a spin and vision blurred. He jumped up fast and kept running. The shadows swarmed closer the longer he stayed down.

At home, his phone was lit and waiting.

Do you remember that night in Eastpointe you shit in the alley and I stood guard?

That time we dove into the water at Stony Creek?

I'm sorry. I miss you, man. I'm sorry.

Gordon woke with a headache and blood on his sheets. He showered, changed his bandages, taught the same stale lessons and dutifully ran six miles during his prep. His stride had a hitch now, a half-limp on his left side, a pulsing ankle and knee. The shadows were getting louder—a noticeable *thump* with each footfall. They came and went and Gordon's joints locked until he felt like he'd fastened belts tight over his joints, like he was a cripple re-learning to jog.

I don't understand it. That's the secret. You don't understand it and I don't understand it & the question is how much are we even supposed to try? Together. If that's even the shit we should be asking. It's scary, man, it is.

Gordon couldn't stop reading the texts, but he wished Alvin would stop sending them. He imagined his eyes drooping as he staggered and slurred, his living room blurring around him. Gordon deleted the text, and as soon as he did, another one pinged.

I feel like I'm being punished, and I don't know why.

He'd told her how they moved. He'd forgotten the moment entirely, but it came back to him at night when he was restless. He'd been up, tense, and he told her how they hovered in the hallway, how they sometimes folded their shapes into a crouch that made him fear their launch. *Where are they now?* she'd asked, and when she did, they disappeared. *Waiting*, he'd said. *Waiting for me*.

For stretch, Alvin's texts got better. He told Gordon about his workouts at the pool, how he thought he might be getting stronger despite it all.

My knee doesn't always hurt. I can't explain it. The doctor tells me to rate the pain, and when I tell him it's more discomfort, he stops giving a shit. There's only pain when I test it—the thing's just useless the rest of the time. Or he just stares at me like I'm wasting his time, so I give him a number. Six, I guess. Seven.

When Gordon hit his mantra early and had a run uncrippled by shadows, when it seemed like Alvin was trending toward recovery, it was hard not to be optimistic—to

believe in a time when they both might be whole again, healthy and decided. A time to rebuild.

I'm done, Alvin texted. It was a Friday afternoon—Gordon waited for a follow-up, but nothing came. It was this text, more than any of the others, that made Gordon want to respond. This: *cowardice*. How easy it was for him to give up.

Gordon typed a few letters, then deleted them. He screamed silently, and the vibrations through his skull made him feel faint. Spit collected in front of his teeth. He didn't reply. Instead, he collapsed on the couch and woke to more messages, signs of Alvin's declining lucidity.

It means something. And I never lit it. Not ever once.

Fuck you. Fuck you fuck you.

Gordon woke and deleted—it wasn't hard anymore. He peered through the blinds before getting into bed. No shadows. Finally, he could get the sleep he needed.

His phone rang in the middle of the night, this time not a text but a call. Gordon woke feeling a shuffling, a rustling, some disturbance in the space, but there was nothing and no one next to him, just the lit face of a phone at 3:05 a.m. The light faded, but Gordon found it on the table and touched it alive. One missed call and voicemail from Alvin Bailey. He felt it again, a fleshless body rearranging itself around him, but there was nothing there—just he and whatever Alvin wanted to drunkenly make known. Gordon rubbed his eyes. He should have turned the phone off and went back to sleep, but instead he put it to his ear and listened.

Ten seconds of silence. 15. Gordon pulled the phone from his ear to check to the length of the message, but as soon as he did, he heard breath on the line. One in, one out. Labored. Then Alvin's voice, weak and strangled.

"Help me," he said. "Please. Help."

Silence and a click.

Gordon moved then as he'd always moved best—thoughtless, with economy and speed. In a minute he was in shoes and a coat, his keys still in the pocket, and in another he was crunching over sidewalk snow, avoiding the ice he'd sworn he hacked away. He crossed the sidewalk stepping in the footprints of Mrs. Sweetwood, her mark frozen almost all the way around his parents' house.

Alvin wasn't answering his phone. Gordon took side streets, doubling his speed as he left Grosse Pointe. In front of Alvin's house, he stopped and stared. *What's wrong*, he texted. He called again. When it was clear there'd be no answer, he left his car, braved the cold wind that blasted him in the face, chilling his leg through the hole in his sweats. He stood for a moment on the walk, put a hand under his shirt and on his heart, wincing as he pressed his palm hard into his ribs. He looked down the street in one direction, then the other, and felt like a criminal again. Like he'd just woken up somewhere he wasn't supposed to be.

He pounded the front door until his knuckles flaked and bled. He yelled Alvin's name and then looked around, waiting for a dog to bark or a porch light to flicker. The street was alive somewhere, but not here. Here, he was on his own. His knuckles numbed, the blood tricking down the back of his hand and onto his wrist. He leaned back and eyed Alvin's window, then stepped forward, twisting the doorknob, and let himself inside.

Gordon realized as soon as he saw him that he'd expected him to be a ghost. Not dead, but missing, junk-veined and scrawny, his body sucked inward—years' worth of atrophy in a week's time. He'd expected Alvin's face to be bloodless, his face pulled tight and white. What he saw instead was the body he knew. Alvin was shirtless, standing in the hallway with his arms hanging limp at both sides, squinting to discern the man who'd broken into his home.

"Alvin," Gordon said, "What happened?"

"Don't," Alvin said. His voice slurred and cracked, but he stepped forward when he spoke, and when he did he looked more balanced, more capable. He took another two steps toward Gordon, and Gordon took two steps back. They kept that distance between them—the only good thing one could give the other—until Alvin was closing the door and Gordon was staring at him from the bottom of the porch steps repeating his name, loud enough to break the silence of the night, but not loud enough to hide the click of the lock as Alvin shut him out.

He could have imagined it all. It could have been a vision, as real as the shadows and no more. This was how Gordon justified it later—his decision not to go back up the steps, not to call the police and tell them what he suspected, what might or might not be in Alvin's system. Instead, he went home and let the shadows fool him into seeing a figure by his imprint, a body wrapped around the space he'd left cold. *This is the when she would have left me*, he thought, but he wasn't looking at her. He was looking at himself from the shadow's perspective, more gaunt than the gaunt Alvin he'd constructed—had

wanted to construct—in his mind. More scared, more tired, more stubborn and dumb. He saw himself as another might, a man eaten by demons, capable of throwing friends away.

CHAPER 23

THE CLOCK HOUSE

Because he didn't know what else to do, Gordon ran. His Asics crunched the tightly packed snow, the inch-thick surface beneath hardened by nighttime temperatures in free fall. He ran before sunrise, shielded by spandex and cotton, a thin ski mask when the wind bit cold. His muscles, tight as violin strings, loosened in the second or third mile, around the time his pain defrosted. He ran despite the grinding and splintering and stabbing. The cogs threatened to freeze, but he forced the gears around. His headaches returned, and the shadows grew taller. But Gordon was tough. He turned his head when the wind cut his breath, hurdled snow drifts when they imposed themselves on the sidewalk. He slipped on an icy corner, but his ear broke his fall. Gordon was tough. He lost a toenail. He pissed blood in the middle of a park on Jefferson. The red slush, the tears in his tights—Gordon was tough. He ran to prove his toughness.

Back in early June, one of their first real weeks of training, Alvin had led Gordon through a furious storm. The temperature dipped to almost freezing, and rain came down sideways, hard enough to flood their path—a tornado had been whipping east from Jackson and just narrowly missed them, veering north toward Novi instead. Gordon would have stopped if he were alone, but instead, he and Alvin fought all the way through, half-blind, cold water to their ankles, praying a car didn't veer over the curb and knock them into oblivion. Gordon lost track of geography as Alvin pushed the pace

through industrial parks and back over train tracks he didn't remember crossing. Afterward, he realized they'd gone a full two miles more than they'd planned—Alvin had led them further out along the border of Eastpointe and Warren without Gordon noticing the change.

Something was different between them after that day. Gordon was less angry than scared of what he'd seen drive Alvin through that storm, a motor that revved and sputtered but still pushed forward at a frightening pace, elements be damned. A will like that could make a career. It was when the day was most challenging that his will shone through—when it was too hot or cold, when the terrain was uneven, when Gordon made their run into a trio by inviting an old college teammate who wore a tie-dyed bandanna and called Detroit *the D.* Alvin became a force unto himself tapping into a fury that left as fast as it came. Guts was what it was. Alvin was tougher, but Gordon was learning. Sticking with Alvin on runs like those became a source of pride—Gordon would look in the mirror afterward and feel stronger, leaner, sharp enough to cut. This was how it felt to be near Alvin when Alvin was at his best. That toughness was supposed to be the thing that saved him, but instead it lay dormant. Gordon was starting to think that to shed Alvin would be to shed weakness, too—that something had swapped, and he might grow stronger without him. The Alvin who powered through tornado-fueled rainstorms was still alive. Either he'd be back or he wouldn't, but Gordon couldn't pull him out. Alvin had succumbed to weakness. When he overcame it, Gordon would forgive.

On a quiet Sunday night, Gordon went to bed early and woke feeling watched. The clock read 9:47 p.m., and three shadows stood at the window. Gordon didn't feel the usual panic, the static that started in his toes and crackled upward. What he felt was

relief—the shadows had stayed away the past three days, and he'd been waiting to know for sure they hadn't left for good. They blended into the dark and reappeared outside the window. One of them tipped its head, and the other flicked its arm, gestured the three of them into the night.

Gordon slid off his bed and kicked into the motions that started so many of his days. Tights, double socks, a long-sleeved cotton shirt of a spandex top. Running vest, cotton hat, gloved. Shoes laced tight but not too tight.

He knew it too deep to identify it as thought. It was more a reaction, a recognition in his belly. He knew it as if he'd read the news, as if the shadows had woken him by whispering it in his ear.

Another Heidelberg house was about to burn.

In the days following the arson—the eighth in seven months at the installment—papers reported the fire must have started just before 11 p.m., minutes before security was scheduled to arrive. The Project was fundraising for more cameras and alarms, but the money didn't come fast enough to save the Clock House. Though it only took four minutes for fire trucks to arrive, all but one wall of the structure was eaten by flames.

The Project's press release was terse and repetitive. When the artist declined to comment, reporters crafted narratives without him: he was, they said, frustrated and broken and tired. His speeches preaching optimism and hope were reduced to footnotes—*he once said, but now*. They said his mindset might change with four of his original pieces gone. He was incapable, finally, of rebuilding—his defiant words forgotten on an emptying street.

Like most of the others, the Clock House was covered in props: wooden boards painted as analog clocks, different shapes, sizes and times. A few red clocks were painted on the white house directly, mirrored in blue and white and orange on the sidewalk squares. After the fire, all the remained was the foundation and a single corner, a single charred wall, empty in splotches where the fire ate through. Soon, someone would hang round, cream-colored clocks on the inside frame. He'd drape shoes along the top. Someone would set a television on the foundation, its screen declaring DETROIT IS A PHOENIX in light blue paint, styled with the Tigers' Old English D.

The fireman took their familiar route to the Project, on time to the call when so many went unanswered, and saw the Clock House already spotlighting their way to the crime. And in front of it, a shadow. A suspect. A man on his knees on the sidewalk, watching it burn.

Gordon only saw and heard the lick and the crunch, the heat he was crawling toward. His knees had banged hard on the cold cement, and now he was scaling his joints. Him and the fire—he was testing how close they could be. He was testing what he could come back from.

He gave his hands up freely. A strong arm pushed him forward, into the concrete, and he felt his nose break. There was blood on his face, and he didn't realize he was crying into he was alone in the back seat, rocking from the shakes coming from his own terrible chest. As he was driven away, he watched the fire trucks blasting the their hoses, trying to salvage the wreck. Nothing was simple—nothing so simple as this.

They gave him swabs for his bloody elbows, but he said nothing about the raw skin he felt fusing with the fabric of his tights. The Detroit Police didn't have to know about his ribs that were still healing, his body still aching from accidents on Lakeshore and Mack.

The investigator was round and tall and babyfaced, a thin mustache hanging to his upper lip and a shadow of a beard under his chin. He wore a DETROIT ARSON zip-up over a hoodie and kept an ARSON DFD beanie on in the warm room. He was everything the police officer from the hospital was not: black instead of white, competent even in his movements, strong despite his roundness, careful and articulate in speech.

Gordon stared at him blankly, without the energy to like or hate him. What did he look like to the man? He was flushed. To normal men, he looked weak and effeminate—the tights didn't help. *Chicken legs.* Every few minutes a wave of tiredness threatened to close his eyes. Crazy, too. The type of man you might find prostrate in front of a burning building on Detroit's east side.

"I guess the first thing is to ask where your friends are," the man said.

Gordon squinted at his nametag—HALL. He told Hall he didn't know what he was talking about, and Hall asked if he'd started all the Heidelberg Project fires alone. Gordon told him he didn't light any fires. He didn't have any friends, either.

"I'm from the suburbs," Gordon said. "Grosse Pointe."

"I know," Hall said. He smiled, but not a kind smile. It wasn't meant for Gordon. "You were the first person on the scene of an arson. You beat the firefighters. They found you in front of the subject of an FBI investigation, and that subject happened to be on fire."

Hall spoke slowly and clearly, softly, but Gordon was gaining consciousness, and consciousness meant his head was screaming. He burned his tongue on his coffee and pressed it to the roof of his mouth. He could still feel the heat of fire on his cheeks, and was trying not to float away.

"You're from the suburbs, that's even worse," Hall continued. "You want to tell me what you were doing on the east side? I get the feeling you weren't just passing through."

Gordon hesitated. *Don't sound like an arsonist,* he instructed himself. *Sound like a runner.*

"I'm a runner," he said. "That's all I am. I run there every week because that's where I run. I know the houses are burning—I wanted to see the place before they all went down."

It was a lie—he went because the shadows led him. It wasn't even that he thought he could save the place. He'd seen the shadows that weren't shadows, and he let them pass. He had his chance to be a savior, and that chance passed with them.

"At midnight on a Tuesday, you felt the urge?"

"I'm a runner. That's all."

Hall chewed his lip and looked concerned.

"Mr. Cooper, you're aware this is a federal investigation."

"I'm on the books, you can look me up. We're all a little crazy but I'm not that kind of crazy. It makes me crazy to see those houses go down. It makes me feel like I'm burning down with them. That's the truth. You're looking for an arsonist, and I'm not him.

"You get a feeling a house is going down, and down it goes," Hall said. "Amazing."

"I'm a runner."

"You keep saying that like it means anything. Stupid isn't a free pass."

"Am I free to go?"

Hall winced and looked toward the door. He checked his phone. Gordon wasn't just a runner—he was also a waste of their time. He was sitting in someone else's chair.

"You're not as anonymous as you think," Hall said. "Vacant homes in Detroit get torched in the summer. In the winter, it's space heaters and revenge fires. What happening to these houses right now, this reeks of revenge. I need to know how you know this place. What your connections are. Because right now you're a suspect. You might be the best suspect we've got."

"I'm a runner," Gordon said. "Last I checked, that's not a crime."

Hall narrowed his eyes and, for a moment, stared at the wall above Gordon's right shoulder. He looked, in that moment, like he might be the one person in the city as tired as Gordon. It had two be two, three in the morning. Hall walked out of the room and left Gordon for a minute, five minutes, ten. Gordon's head fell to his chest and shocked his body with pain when he snapped it back up. He'd left without his watch, wallet, phone, keys. He dropped his head to his arms on the table and fell asleep immediately. A different officer woke him by shaking his shoulders and telling him to leave. Gordon found the right door by trial and error, half-suspecting someone to call out for him to stop. Maybe they'd searched his home and found nothing. Maybe one of the Heidelberg neighbors saw everything and told the officers he was clean—stupid, but clean. Maybe he

was too white to be the villain they'd pictured. Or maybe he was perfect, but his innocence was spoiling it.

He stepped outside the station and realized he was downtown, 3rd Street and Abbott, and started shuffling south toward the river, looped around the Joe and onto Atwater, through Hart Plaza, the wind biting hard off the water on his right shoulder. It was a shuffle at first, but he felt better the longer he ran. Past the Renaissance Center and Milliken State Park—the same route they'd taken during the marathon, same direction and all, the spot where he'd started to fade and Alvin carried them through. The sun fully rose when he was passing through English Village, and the added warmth made him stronger. He was working on nearly 30 miles in the last 12 hours, but he needed to make it to Alvin. Whatever he needed his body to do, it would do.

This time, the door was locked. Gordon checked the back door, then hopped the fence for Joe's metal shovel, hopped back and, with his last ounce of strength, used to it to shatter the kitchen window.

Alvin was in his Lay-Z-Boy recliner, fully reclined, and when Gordon ran up to him and shook his shoulder, his shoulder didn't shake. Instead, his body flopped over and started to slide down the chair. Gordon grabbed him by his armpits and lifted him back up, repeating his name loud and frantic, panic vibrating in his throat. He put a finger to his friend's pulse, his head to his chest. A few long seconds passed, but Gordon heard a heartbeat, felt a pulse—soft, slow, way too slow.

Gordon scanned the room for something more sinister than beer cans, finally spotting an unlabeled pill bottle resting in Alvin's lap. He shook it, heard a rattle and slipped it in the pockets of Alvin's shorts. He found Alvin's phone on the side table,

dialed 9-1-1 and slipped it into the pocket of his vest. Alvin's head slid to his chest and Gordon propped it back up. He put one hand behind his head and plucked the jagged fragment of pill that clung to his lip.

While he waited for the ambulance, Gordon climbed into the chair and sank into the cushion, propped his friend's body against his, putting an arm over his shoulder to keep them together. Gordon had no tears. He had no thoughts. He buried his face into above Alvin's ear and willing him not to give up—willed whatever was in him that stopped him from taking the last few pills to put up its barricades. He prayed, not to some forgotten mythology, but to the strength of his friend. He prayed to whatever it was that would always link the two of them together.

Alone, he sat in silence with his friend. When they took him away, he locked Alvin's door, stood on the porch and watched them go, steadying himself against the house when he felt faint.

At the end of their tornado run that June, they'd changed and stretched at Alvin's, allowing their hearts to find their resting rates, recalibrate together. Gordon had collapsed on the couch and Alvin in his recliner. Gordon tried but couldn't remember if Alvin had popped a handful of pain pills, if instead of water he went for beer. He just remembered his friend leaning back and going stiff, closing his eyes.

"You good?" Gordon had asked. One of the first iterations of an exchange that became ritual—half challenge, half concern.

"Numb, man," Alvin said. "Just numb."

That was what Alvin's face looked like as they took him away. Not drained or hurting. *Just numb.*

CHAPTER 24

ARSON

Before nearly 3,000 buildings burned in the ‘67 riots, before Devil’s Night yielded 800 fires in 1984, before tourists started flocking to the Motor City with police scanners to photograph flames, there was the Great Fire of 1805. Detroit had just been named capital of the newly established Michigan Territory when it was set ablaze, the fire spreading fast among wooden buildings on narrow streets. Men and women evacuated the fort in canoes, watching the settlement burn from the river.

Even in 1805, Detroiters suspected arson, placing the blame on lumber barons in present-day Port Huron, but eventually the conspiracy theory was debunked; the fire was traced back to a local baker who ignited a pile of hay with the ashes from his clay pipe.

“The town of Detroit exists no longer,” claimed *The Intelligencer*, the *Detroit Free Press* in its earliest form. The destruction prompted Father Gabriel Richard to pen the Latin motto still on Detroit’s flag today: “We hope for better days; it shall rise from the ashes.”

In most cities, modern arson can be linked to four common motives: insurance, revenge, pyromania and youth. But in Detroit, vigilante fires are their own category. If a house is empty for more than 24 hours, scrappers gut it for copper, and when a house is scrapped, there’s a 50 percent chance it will burn—sometimes taking homeless squatters with it. Detroiters living on streets full of ghosts get impatient with the city’s slow

demolition—a process that would cost $850 million to take on in earnest—and so the vacant homes are broken and burned, responsible for a quarter of the city's arson. Some go to ash, but two-thirds of them stay standing, scarring the streets for years. Neighborhood groups reach into their own pockets for lumber, hammer and nails, boarding windows with wood decorated by children to keep the arsonists away.

Detroit has long been the country's leader in confirmed arson cases. But in a city where citizens once had to pool their money to buy firefighters toilet paper and cleaning supplies, a city where nearly three quarter of fires are classified as *suspicious*, less than a quarter of the blazes are investigated and confirmed as arson. A depleted arson squad is forced to prioritize, painting a red X on the doors of vacant houses already torched. Detroit, a city of 700,000, averages more than seven suspicious fires per 1,000 residents. New York, with a population of 8.5 million, averages just one, staffing an arson squad of 100 to keep that number low. At its lowest point, after the worst of the city's emergency services downsizing, Detroit was down to just seven men chasing fires.

Arson, firefighters say, is part of the city's culture. People burn houses to settle debts, to scam insurance companies for a few nights in a nice hotel. Children view their city through arson-made peepholes. The problem, for firefighters, has become more than a problem—more, even, than a war. Detroit is a city that knows how to burn, and arson is a crime without witness, often without guilt, and its victims are rarely in the houses that burn. The city's bankruptcy declaration freed up money for blight busting and an arson squad rebuild. But the idea of solving arson in Detroit is just that, an idea, and fire is one problem tied into others in a city that has its fair share. Politicians propose the destruction

of entire blocks, forced relocation. Social scientists talk of shrinking the city inward, but that talk of change is coded. The fringes still burn.

Fire isn't a prophecy, but it's troublesome as an origin story. When Reverend John Dilhet watched the Great Fire of 1805 "ascend to a prodigious height, giving the city the appearance of an immense funeral pyre," the destruction transfixed him. "It was the most majestic," he said, "and at the same time the most frightful spectacle I have ever witnessed."

He said it from the river, where he and his flock were safe.

CHAPTER 25

UP NORTH

Three hours into the drive, Gordon stopped at West Branch for coffee and fuel, pulling his hood down to shield himself from snow that had been coming down lightly in Grosse Pointe, but was blowing in flurries now. *Only a preview*, Gordon thought. Another 100 miles north, the snow would already be thick and heavy, packed in drifts alongside country roads, snapping tree branches and burying small cars. His parents' house sat at the top of a hill in a small village on Odawa reservation land, 30 miles from the nearest small city. It might take him all night just to get his car up the drive.

After the ambulance wailed away, he'd run home and moved, on reflex, through the hurried motions of packing, stuffing a blur of gray layers in a duffel in the backseat of his car and roaring down the on-ramp of I-75 North. He tried not to think of Alvin being admitting to the emergency room on a stretcher, whether Alvin's breath was still releasing from his nose, faint as a private sigh, as they forced a tube down his throat. Whether stuffing that bottle in Alvin's shorts had been the last good thing he'd ever do for his friend. He thought, instead, of everything else he'd left at home: his running shoes, his watch, his cell phone, three shadows standing motionless in his driveway as he pulled away.

Gordon's family vacationed in northern Michigan every summer of his childhood. He'd hated the ride but loved the escape from suburban claustrophobia into the strange,

clean air. After he discovered running, he gained a new love for the backwoods hills, the up and down of near-empty country roads heading neither to the water nor the city, but circling around acres of farmland, cows and horses and corn to his knees. His heart beat stronger in the city. The machine ran clean. Going north did something to Gordon, as it did to his father and his father before him, a contractor who raised the frame of his house with his best hunting buddies and a few cases of beer. Gordon's parents had since done some remodeling: a guest room to the east, where the house sat on flat land, and porch wrapping around the south end, where the house was propped over a backyard hill that sloped into the valley, surrounded by shallow woods that looked through to farmland. Their address said Harbor Springs, a ritzy lakeside city 30 miles south, but the closest post office was in Cross Village, 300-person town with a Catholic church, Polish restaurant and a Marathon station. When he was asked where he'd grown up, Gordon's dad always said *up in Little Traverse Bay.* He and Gordon's mom lived there briefly when Gordon's grandparents passed, before moving downstate and making enough money for an early retirement. Now they used the house only in late summer, when it was breezy enough on the hill for porch sitting, warm enough to swim in the lake.

Violent northern Michigan winters weren't kind to runners, but Gordon hadn't brought his running shoes. His only thought had been to leave, and north was the only direction he knew. He wasn't worried about what would happen in Grosse Pointe when the snow would pile up on the walk and his parents would receive a call from Mrs. Sweetwood or the city. He was thinking only of that northern Michigan landscape: those rolling hills, perfect and white.

The moon was full to welcome him into town. He passed the gas station that used to be a meeting place for locals until a couple from downstate bought it looking to turn a profit. Last he knew, Cross Villagers were boycotting it, driving 30 miles for fuel instead of a few feet down the road. He took a highway deeper into wilderness, the nowhere land between village and city, through woods on a badly paved road, then into a clearing. When he arrived at the long driveway to the house, he stopped his car and parked it in the road, then sat and listened: nothing but the *pop* and *hiss* of the engine, coolant leaking onto the metal and puffing steam. His car would be safe here, at least until he could shovel out the base of the driveway. He opened his door, his breath already out in front of him. The snow was higher than his knees, blanketing the entire 50-meter driveway. His parents used to pay a man to plow the driveway—Gordon hadn't been counting on it, exactly, but he'd been holding out hope.

He reached into the passenger seat for his winter coat—snug with two sweatshirts beneath it—and pulled a shovel from his trunk. For a moment he felt like he was dumping a body. Was he dumping a body? Coyotes howled, and a few small shadows danced across the snow. Gordon was already imagining the pain in his arms and shoulders, the soreness of his healing rib. He was already looking forward to the blankness of that pain, the tremendous relief that would come when he dipped his head in the snow to drink, and his entire body went numb.

The house Gordon inherited from his father stood on a threshold of landscapes: the forest, the long, flat table of brush, and the valley. There was only one other house in the area, nearly a half-mile away, barely visible through the brush despite the still-skinny pines

Gordon's father had planted to block the view. An old bachelor lived there, but the only thing Gordon had ever seen of him was the smoke from his chimney rising above the trees.

Gordon had been too tired to notice the night before, but there were no shades on his bedroom window, and the sunlight blasted him awake. His room was in the back of the house, opposite the road, which seemed far in the distance, as long as the driveway was. He sat up and winched at the soreness ripping up his body—he'd finished a quarter of the driveway, maybe. He got up and flipped the breakers, surveying the place he'd navigated by muscle memory the night before, too tired to do anything but crunch over dead flies on the hardwood and collapse into his musty bed.

The house had four bedrooms, two on the north side and two on the south. There was a small bathroom at one end of the hallway and an open space at the other, demarcated as kitchen, dining room and living room by a wraparound granite counter from the remodel. The decorations were part family heirloom, part Grosse Pointe castoffs: Gordon's father's old recliner, a few mounted deer heads, a showcase of his grandfather's Cadillac trunk emblems, a glass cabinet of his grandmother's porcelain angels. He walked out onto the porch overlooking the valley, his breath in front of him and hard snow underneath, thick with ice bonded to the wood. Gordon added it to his list of things to clean, polish and chip away.

The cupboards were mostly bare: coffee grounds, filters, a few boxes of the instant oatmeal with dehydrated fruit his mom sent him away with for college. Chicken noodle soup, salt, sugar, hot sauce. The snow outside was swirling. Gordon could live a while on oatmeal and soup; he started the coffeemaker and ran water in a pot to boil. He

found an old pair of snow pants in his closet, and everything else he needed in his dad's: boots, gloves, a red-and-black checkered flannel. An orange Carhartt hat and matching coat. When Gordon finished his coffee and oatmeal, he set out to finish what he'd started hours before. Dig, scoop, toss. Stiffness and strain, beaded sweat beneath the cotton, the feeling of almost-piercing he'd gotten used to in his side. The sides of the driveway grew mountainous—it all felt simple and right.

Gordon shoveled another quarter of the way up the drive—clean to the asphalt underneath—then ate soup and slept through the evening and night. He woke the next morning—oatmeal and coffee—and did it again. There was little pleasure in it, but he welcomed the routine. He didn't think of running. Occasionally an image of Alvin would force itself on him, and he would endure the wincing guilt of not-knowing, would have to relive the memory of listening for the ambulance's wait, his ear on Alvin's chest, hanging on heartbeats. He shoveled, he slept. Days passed. Around the house, a radius cleared: the front deck and back deck, the paved patio at the bottom of the backyard hill. His shovel left dents in the frozen ground that would show in muddy scars come springtime. Gordon collapsed in bed, then woke to a fresh four inches the next morning, the snow still blowing in a line and then circling for a place to land. The banks were taller than his car now, taller than him.

In a week, he felt himself caving inward. He ate but ate quickly because eating stopped time. He prayed for snow, for sweat. When it didn't come, he brushed what had accumulated on the woodpile—still tall from a shed he'd helped his father tear down years ago—and evaluated the stock. He split logs with an awkward stroke, then burned them in the pit to cancel the effort. A snowless day was a day spent chopping and a night

spent watching fire grow tall and wide, filling the spit, stretching to the stones. Around it, a circle of snow.

When he drove to town for groceries, he avoided all eye contact. The store wasn't busy—it was winter in northern Michigan, nothing but the ski slopes really was. He was home, unloaded his basic supplies when he heard a new noise—a car climbing up the drive instead of roaring past. His first thought was police, but when he looked out the window, he saw it was an old blue Ford. A man opened and slammed his truck door, and when Gordon saw he wasn't turning back around, he stepped out on the front porch to intercept him before he could knock.

"Morning," the man called. He was pale and bearded, thin in a jean jacket and jeans, walking toward the porch with a slight limp. "Cold enough for ya."

His beard might have branded him as a homeless man or an academic, depending on the place, but up here it implied expertise. Gordon branded him as a man who could probably name three great ice fishing sports off the top of his head. A man who had a hand-drawn map of local rhubarb patches sitting in a drawer. A man like his grandfather, who built his own house.

"You looking for my dad?" Gordon asked, surprised by the croak of his voice.

"Is he around?"

Gordon shook his head. The man nodded, then a smile parted his beard and he unsheathed a surprisingly pale hand

"John Jeska," he announced as he crushed Gordon's hand.

"I'm Gordon. Richard's son."

"Goes by Rick up here," Jeska grinned again, revealing white where Gordon didn't expect it.

Gordon opened his mouth to respond, but had his breath taken by a freezing gust of air. He turned a shoulder to the wind, looking out over the valley. The cold pissed him off, and when he turned back to Jeska, he had nothing to say.

"The snowbirds asked me to keep an eye on the property while they were away," Jeska said. "I saw a car in the drive and thought I'd swing by to make sure it was a Cooper setting up camp. And if so, to say hello."

"Hello," Gordon said.

"Well, all right," Jeska nodded. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and made to turn toward his truck. Gordon wondered if he wouldn't call his father anyway—if he hadn't already, or if his father had already called him. "I'm right over there," he said, pointing to the house through the trees. "You need anything, a stack of firewood, some venison, whatever, just let me know."

"Thanks," Gordon said, "but I think I'll be fine."

"All right," Jeska repeated.

Gordon watched him take a right at the end of the driveway and another at the next crossroads, maybe an eighth of a mile down the road. He heard the truck slow as it pulled into a driveway. He heard the door slam. He thought maybe he heard the faint jingle of keys, but that might have been the wind playing games with him. He squinted across the field, seeing movement, maybe, or nothing at all. The skinny pines obscured, and for the first time, Gordon was grateful for their efforts.

Keeping the house wasn't difficult, but Gordon enjoyed it—was good at it—and it kept him in routine. There was no TV, and only a few books on the shelves—a Steve Prefontaine biography he loved in high school but now couldn't stomach. He was learned to use the axe more efficiently, taking longer and more powerful swings, putting less strain on his back. There was heat, but if the power went out—no rarity in the snow-blind north—Gordon had a fireplace and stacks of fuel outside the basement door. When there was fresh snow, Gordon shoveled it. When the squeaking of mice kept him up, he slathered an old beer can with peanut butter and bridged it across a bucket with twine. When there was trash to be burned, he burned it, stacking wood in the pit afterward and sitting in the cold, watching it go to ashes.

Gordon hadn't planned on running, but running interrupted his routine. He was scouring his bedroom closet for batteries when he found a pair of lightly used running shoes—Asics Kenseis, the same model he'd been wearing since high school—and a set of winter gear he must have retired from his normal rotation to bring north. Cold-weather spandex, a black winter hat with tassels, thin cotton gloves. The gear was discarded but not done—it still had pull. When Gordon saw the tread on the shoes, he shook his head at his own wastefulness. He knew he would use them. The woodpile was beginning to take over the backyard. He hadn't come here to run, but he hadn't come here to abandon running either.

He started with the old six-mile loop he used to run on summer vacations in high school, feeling like he was running it about twice as slow as he did at 17. It was only a feeling—Gordon hadn't brought his watch, and he had no plans to buy one. If he'd gained any weight in his time off, it was the muscle in this arms and back from chopping.

No, there was only the beautiful strain of returning to a loved one after a long period of absence—a frantic, pulse-thumping strain speaking into your skin the impossible task of coming back together, as you were, in an instant. The ache of frostbit lungs. Gordon accepted the pain but welcomed the flood of dopamine he'd given up cold turkey. Even after those bursts faded, when he still felt good and free, like hadn't in years, he couldn't think of *why*, except to say that the whiter ground and fresher air was lifting him as nothing else could. It was the type of run that opened him up to the world, fostering a brief joy and appreciation he'd forgotten—for years!—was sometimes the side effect of great exercise, of time alone spent well. It wasn't until he was almost home that he realized he hadn't once looked for shadows—that he hadn't thought to, and didn't plan on starting.

Gordon ran the next two days. The day after that, he ran twice. When he trained, he was constantly monitoring his time, his stride, his breath, his strains, but now he thought of none of those things. He thought of nothing, and the memories he'd been working to avoid came through in lucid blasts on empty country roads, where there was nowhere for Gordon to hide.

His mind excavated the night of the accident, his bloodied trek down Mack, and he remembered, now, their faces—the people too shocked by what must have looked to them like the walking dead. He remembered the invasive chill on wounds that had now mostly healed, despite his attempts to reopen them, to re-punish himself. It was like the wind took hold of him and peeled him back, trying to strip him raw. He remembered a man calling out to him that he didn't stop for. He remembered getting closer to the bench, how nothing else mattered but getting here. *The bench.* The policeman blamed pride, but

that wasn't what stopped Gordon from asking for help or accepting it—he was too bloodless and blind to be so discerning. It wasn't pride, though Gordon felt a necessary flush of shame now. Alvin had been right. He tried to run faster, to surge on Hill Road, but when he couldn't escape, he let feeling come to him, take him over, then pass. He took a deep breath of 10-degree air. He let it go.

Mostly, he thought of Alvin. The last time he'd seen him, he'd been alive—Gordon had felt it—but he didn't know if that was still true, whether he'd missed the funeral or Alvin was sitting on his Lay-Z-Boy recliner wonder where the fuck he'd gone.

What Gordon couldn't handle was how fast it happened, how little time he'd had to do anything and how badly he'd squandered it. How many weeks, beginning to end? He hadn't known what was starting. He didn't, but he could have. He had no idea how badly he would fail his friend.

One night, a trunk honked at Gordon and shifted to the other opposite lane to pass him. By the time he made it back to his house, there was a box on the porch with a note taped to the top:

SOME FRESH STEAKS. EAT BACK WHAT YOU BURN! —JESKA

Gordon couldn't even escape to rural Michigan without someone trying to take care of him. How must Alvin have felt, alone in the bottle-lined walls of the small house he'd inherited from his dead mother? The closest people to him were an elderly neighbor and a friend who abandoned him, left him to destroy himself.

It was easy, what Gordon had done. He could have forced himself back through the door. He could have read through Alvin's words. He knew him better than anyone—just because he was blunt to Gordon didn't mean it wasn't hard for him to ask for help.

There's nothing you can do. It was the last thing Alvin had said to him. Selfishly, Gordon wished it were something else. And he wished more than anything else that it wouldn't prove true.

Eventually Gordon graduated to the runs he loved best: long and meandering, on unpredictable paths. He kept to the shoulder and tracked the curves of M119 through the Tunnel of Trees, crusted now with snow and ice. The rich lived here, on the bluff, certain that they owned the beach. If you had money, you bought land by the water; if you didn't, you built in the wilder woods.

One morning Gordon took State Road all the way into Harbor Springs, sat to watch the sunrise on Lake Street, then stretched his calves and ran back. He thought nothing of mileage, except on the final stretch when his muscles let him know he'd never run so far before.

Back in Detroit, when he thought of this place he thought only of its sameness: scenes of wooded land with water on the horizon. But there were the rich with their houses peeking over Little Traverse Bay, the poor with their trailers in the brush, their wood stoves and outhouses. There was the beach and the valley and the woods, the small city grid of Harbor Springs, front lawns a foot higher than the sidewalk, small steps leading to invisible fences and barking dogs. Gordon ran past the Harbor Springs elementary school and high school, at the mercy of those who woke much earlier than he to plow roads and shovel paths. He ran through the one-room schoolhouse in Cross Village where his grandfather had gone to school. He ran the back roads alongside acres of farmland. He ran through Walkerville, the stretch in the village where one man's

extending family spread their shacks and cabins, clotting most sides of the forested road for more than a mile. He thought often of the long Grosse Pointe driveways shortening at the border. He thought about it every time he finished with a sprint up the blacktop, 50 meters at least.

Gordon saw a woman carrying a painting out of a Harbor Springs art gallery and felt a pang for Heidelberg. He missed it—what was left of it, what he hoped it would become. But at least he had no responsibility for the woman's flowery print. He wouldn't blame himself if she dropped it in the snow or warped it with smoke. He wouldn't silence his friend's phone calls to run to it, to wish for it, to see himself in the wreckage.

His friend. His dead friend. His friend who survived.

What exactly was Gordon responsible for? The homes he borrowed, the job he'd left and the body he abused. The body he *had* abused—right now, running felt new to him. Not a requirement, not a means to an end, just a motion he could always choose not to make.

Gordon was cleaning when he saw his duffel back in the corner of his bedroom. He'd pulled all the clothing out of it by now, worn all the shirts three times and finally washed them. But when he picked up the bag, something small and hard clattered onto the floor. Alvin's phone. Gordon held it in his hand before flipping it open, rubbed his thumb along the dead screen.

He went long that morning, to the bench in Harbor and back, pushing harder than he should have. He felt better afterward, and feeling better made him feel worse. He decided to go again that evening—to take a shorter loop, three lefts around a long block,

finishing with the monstrous hill that climbed to the driveway. He'd been eying that hill for weeks now, avoiding it when possible. He guessed each lap, each loop, was a little under a mile.

Snow kept the night lit—the stars were out and the moon was luring him, hanging tall and wide like a saucer looking to land. All around him, a stillness both dead and alive. A place to come to terms. *Everything is frozen*, Gordon thought. There was peace here, until a lazy snowflake turned into a pill on his lip. Gordon pounded his fists in his quads and started the run.

The bite of cold was just a sting to his heart where it once was a stab. Gordon's lungs worked like big, wooden bellows pumping despite the cold, breathing life into his bones. He cut the whiteness fast with color: his red cap and orange vest, blue shorts over black tights and neon shoes. Running wasn't an obligation, but this one was.

The first three turns came fast, and then the hill—long and steep, the best of both worlds. During cool summers long ago, Gordon used to sit on the front porch and watch it break cyclists. The ones without road bikes stood no chance, but it was the ones in spandex bike shorts, slim and tan, who were the most focused, their faces scrunched and ugly, bodies curled into a cat-like arc. The hill just didn't end when it was supposed to end. *Wings on your back*, he repeated the mantra until the ground finally leveled. At the top he was sweating, grateful for the rest, but by the time he turned the first corner he was ready for it again.

He felt the second loop as a throb in his calves, breathless at the hill's peak, his pace fast but fair. Now, the moon recharged his muscles as he ran. Now, his arms were pistons, forcing energy to his legs. Now, the wings again. The third summit left him

wide-eyed. The first valve opened, and adrenaline rushed in to wash the pain. Left. Left. Left again.

It would have been criminal to waste this night. The anger Gordon had felt all day since the cell phone was rising—the soft, deep snow beneath the crust. The thing you sank into when you pressed too hard.

He took the hill a fourth time, then a fifth. There were no cars, no witnesses to the madman's flailing arms as he pounded the hill a sixth time, no one to hear the inhuman howl that marked summit number seven. Another valve opened, and so did Gordon's anger, almost to the top. He gave in, accepted that it was beyond him. *It,* the dance between the body and the road. His mind slunk off, too exhausted to envy. This wasn't a breakdown. This was not a breakdown. To cede control was to be conscious. He gave his body freely to the run.

Gordon stopped after the tenth loop to vomit. He wiped the last string of bile from his teeth, noted his face's imprint in the snow, then went again. There was only this loop and the next one. This hill, for Alvin. This hill, for Heidelberg. Pain pierced him at the top, shocked him into the next loop. Each one meant nothing and everything, even more nothing, even more everything. This hill, for the serum that wasn't. This hill, for a healthy body. This hill, for a broken one. This hill, everything. This hill, nothing. He could do this forever—his heart would stop before the rest of him. It was easy, too easy to run himself to death. It would never be easier.

Gordon flickered out of consciousness, summited, realized he'd lost count. He hadn't left a note. The sky looked lighter, the moon turned to sun. What there was left to prove or save, he didn't know. Another loop and another. He was drinking from the snow

now. He was falling and bruising, laughing at the morning's first car. He was emptying and emptying, rejecting whole histories, his face suddenly burned, buried in the burning cold. He was man turned to shadow turned to imprint in the snow. *Another,* he willed himself when his body threatened cowardice. *Another. Again.*

CHAPTER 26

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I strive to be a part of the solution. I see and understand how order is needed in the world and in our individual lives. My experiences have granted me knowledge of how to create art and how to see beauty in everything that exists.

The artist grows up poor on Heidelberg Street. The phones and toys he later plants around the installation are emblematic of what he didn't have. His grandfather, the man who put a paintbrush in his hand, gives him a green toy car from the scrap heap, and when the artist sees the faces of a family painted on the windows, he clutches it to his chest and wishes for one of those faces to be his.

Even in the smallest molecule or things in this life that we can't see, we are all bound by this same energy, we are all bound by gravity and we breathe the same air. I can see the evolution of life in everything, in every second. How beautiful is it to witness this process in action. What is beyond space and can we possibly look that far into ourselves?

One of ten children, the artist takes to wandering the streets of Detroit's east side, studying the shapes of discarded objects in the trash. *Crazy,* the neighborhood kids are already calling him. The artist is nine years old.

What is art? I ask myself this question over and over. Is my life an art form? I began to see and hear my own work in a new way that opened up my third eye of wisdom

and my mind to see how everything is connected to this one source of energy or this divine power. I believe that it will take a lifetime for me to understand and appreciate this power. However, I find my art to be just like that power of creating energy in a negative space. It is this energy that becomes my focal point.

This is the artist's biography: his grandfather, the commercial painter, shares his tools, tells the young artist to never stop painting—to listen to the voice within him and salvage himself. "I felt as if I was holding a magic wand," the artist later says. He finishes high school and art school in Detroit, but instead of moving to New York or L.A., he comes back to Heidelberg, spends hours painting in the basement of his childhood home, listening to John Coltrane and Thelonius Monk. He serves his country, and when he comes back, he declares that the neighborhood looks like it's been hit by a bomb. The artist marries. He and his grandfather begin polka-dotting the city, the artist not letting the old man climb too far up the ladder with his paint can around his wrist. His grandfather ages, then dies, and the artist pants polka dots on his casket. Then the Project's first destruction, a brother dead from AIDs, a nephew gunned down in the street. Divorce, poverty, homelessness—the artist spends nights driving around the city he grew up in, past crack houses and half-charred family stores, a city he doesn't recognize. The city he believed he could change. He spends a moment alone with a .25 automatic, weighing the mark his life has made on the world, whether the good he'd done was worth the pain it caused him.

The word composition according to Webster's Dictionary means to form by putting together; to make up from many ingredients, etc. I have come to the realization of knowing and understanding the fact that I have been called to create art that is unusual

and compositional in form. The traditional and conventional way is a thing of the past. We live in a world full of corruption from the top to the bottom, values no longer exist and rules are broken every day. For me, art is a way of expressing life.

The artist recalls stepping outside and hearing the neighborhood speak to him. The artist has dreams he presents as prophecies. The artist creates his own reality. The artist paints Black Gods on the pavement, and when his critics say he isn't Black enough, the artist doesn't speak to them directly. He says, "They don't want me to be universal. They want me to take a stand, stand over there, and I said no." The artist dreams the O.J. House is burning when he is in Switzerland, and when he comes home, it happens. "You can't burn a vision," the artist says. The artist is excited. He talks of chapters, old and new. Of new beginnings. "The greatest payback is to get up and keep moving," the artist says. "We must be unstoppable," the artist says. "We will not be stopped." He says he sees something greater coming out of this, and when he says *this*, his hand sweeps wide, so wide we have to follow it outside the camera's frame.

My work is a science that deals with colors, shapes, objects that bring about a rare beauty to the mind and eyes of people, a type of esthete. My art is life, life that lives on with time because the entire creation is an art form.

The artist speaks broadly and dramatically, but if there's anything that justifies his theatrical prophecies and proclamations, his assertion that his art heals, it's the results—when polka dots go up on abandoned houses, the addicts and prostitutes flee. The street gets safer. For a long time, the artist has this to support him: Heidelberg is safe. Then, the fires.

I see magic in what I do as an artist. This magic helps me to understand how to create compositions of unusual taste. It's a journey that keeps me searching to know more about life in general and in my own life. The whole world is a stage and we, as humans, are playing our part—acting out our purpose.

"I used to feel fear," the artist says after Heidelberg's first demolition. "I realized that they can take all these material things, but your spirit, your soul, as long as I've got my spirit and soul, I can create this again.

"Realizing this," the artist says, "has made me fearless."

CHAPTER 27

THE DOLL HOUSE

Gordon didn't open his eyes until he was sure he could move his tongue from one side of his mouth to the other, proof he could command his body's response. There were vague brown shapes in his field of vision, a blurry glow he suspected he was fire. For a second, he lost himself, taken by panic. Then Jeska came into the room, and everything sharpened. He laughed as if Gordon had said something, and Gordon realized he had.

"Braindead? Maybe a little, but you came out all right," Jeska said. "Have some water. You've been in and out today, but too stubborn to drink."

Gordon was lying on an old floral couch, white and pink and green, that had to have been inherited. The house was clean and basic—wood floors, wood panels on the walls, old bronze side lamps and a TV with rabbit ears twisted on top of the mid-90s tube. No antlers on the wall, just a few pictures of family—no kids except for the ones in grainy black-and-white that must have been Jeska and his sisters. Gordon sat up while he drank and surveyed. His head pulsed with each heartbeat, a thump that traveled up his neck and over his eyes.

"Thanks," he said. "For—"

Jeska swatted the sentence away with *Yeps* and hands patting his jeans. He was still circling his recliner, picking at the blanket at the back of the chair, like a dog making his spot.

"How do you make a living, Gordon?" he asked. "Downstate."

"I'm a teacher," Gordon said.

"That's important work," Jeska said. He stood pensively, and the look he gave Gordon told him he'd probably expected less.

"It can be," Gordon said. He was taking inventory: legs, fine. Arms, core, ribs? Fine, OK, definitely not OK. Feet? His blisters from Detroit had never really healed, and not everything down there felt melded together. Head? Messy and pained, but he'd just woken up.

"My sister, she's passed now, but she was a teacher for many years," Jeska said. "Guess you're on sabbatical now."

"How long did I sleep?"

"Full day, almost. March 8 is the date," Jeska said. "Springs has almost sprung."

It was March. Gordon had quit his job and run through the winter.

"I'm training for the Boston Marathon," Gordon said.

"Figured it was something like that," Jeska said. "That's some hard training, I bet."

There was something too familiar in Jeska's tone, something that made him think of all the similar moments he'd had this year. Of Detroit, those lost minutes between the final quarter-mile and vomiting on the curb. Of Grosse Pointe, his insistence on the bench. Gordon felt dizzy—that run had stripped him raw. He felt a sudden need not to be in the house, to no longer be in the care of a stranger. He unpeeled the blanket that covered him and looked for his shoes.

“Hey, hey,” Jeska said, holding out a stop-sign hand. He left the room and came back with Gordon’s shoes in one hand, the rest of his gear in a Glen’s grocery bag. “I’m happy to give you a ride back.”

“No thanks.”

“All right,” Jeska said, his hands falling back into his pockets. He was wearing red flannel and blue jeans, his hair tied back into a ponytail. “I know I’ve got no business interfering with your life—”

“That’s right.”

“—but your dad asked me to watch out for you, so I’ll say my piece. I’m here if you need anything. And so is Adam Krupke, down on Hill Road. Same with the Walkers, Walt and Susan.” Gordon imagined his father calling everyone he knew, telling them his son needed looking after, and flushed red at the thought. “That said, it seems to be a little bit like you’re running away from something. And I’ve got to tell you, this might not be the best place to run to.”

“I keep to myself,” Gordon said. “It’s not like I brought a whole team up here and we’re terrorizing the village store.”

“Running’s not a solitary sport if you need an ambulance running behind you,” Jeska said. “We’ve got long winters. Fathers and mothers and sisters dying or dead. We’re getting old. Can’t see you proving much, pounding up and down these hills in front of everybody. It’s too tough on yourself, and the rest of us, too.”

“I didn’t ask you to watch out for me. I didn't ask anything from anyone.”

“It’s not always about you,” Jeska said. He paused at the end of the sentence, and Gordon could practically see the word *kid* hanging on his lips.

"So, what, you're kicking me out?"

"Your father's house is your house," Jeska said, "and I am not your father. Just be careful about the places you're using and abusing. The people, too—sometimes they're one and the same."

"What a beautiful lesson."

"It's not a lesson."

"Go back to where you came from, but leave the past behind."

"Just don't leave it here," Jeska said with a smile.

"How about off in the trees," Gordon said. "The side of the road."

"People hunt there," he said. "They walk their dogs."

Jeska looked away as Gordon wrestled his feet into his shoes. When he stood, he saw he'd stained the end the couch crimson.

"Sorry," Gordon said.

"Yep, yep," Jeska said, still looking away.

On his way out, Gordon stumbled on to the only bit of clutter in the house, a stack of newspapers on the washing machine near the door. On the top was a *USA Today* Jeska must have picked up that morning at the gas station. Gordon scooped it and curled it under his arm.

"You mind if I take one of these papers?" he called. Jeska hadn't gotten up when he left the room, not even to shake his hand.

"Just goin' to recycling," he answered.

Outside, Gordon snapped the page out flat in front of him. The pictures were small, penned into the corner of the front page, but the colors of Heidelberg still jumped off the page.

The Doll House had defined the Heidelberg Project for years. It was, for many, the most memorable, and for some the most obscene—the stuffed animals and dolls were truly filthy, soiled and weather-worn against the faded green paint.

The *USA Today* ran two photographs side by side: one of the house at its peak, full and vibrant despite its wear, a spectacle against the backdrop of snow; the other, an empty lot—a snow square within a charred foundation, dolls lying soft and dead in the wreckage. A single brick column defiant in the middle of the grave.

The Doll House—the Party Animal House, it was sometimes called—went up in flames at 3 a.m. and was again missed by security patrol. The Detroit Fire Captain called it a *tinderbox*, the wood dried out from years of abandonment. It was the ninth fire at the Heidelberg Project since May.

When the War House burned in November, it had also damaged the side of a neighbor's home, a couple that had lived on Elba for more than 40 years. In response, the artist had solicited a volunteer organization to make repairs. When the Doll House went down, the neighbors' home was damaged again, and this time, the couple was upset. The husband remained quiet, but his wife had a message to share. The cameras flocked to their front porch, eager to hear what charges she'd level at the artist and his art.

"It's sickening," she said. "Why should I have to suffer because of someone else's stupidity?"

The artist's? reporters asked.

"He never did anything to anyone," she said. "Someone just didn't like what he was building. Either that, or they didn't understand it."

Gordon set the newspaper on the kitchen table and spent the day circling around it, re-reading it from a standing position, never committing to the act of sitting down with it, engaging it with it directly, holding it with both hands and giving it all his focus. It was only a picture—a pair of pictures—but if he looked at it long enough, it warped into his own reflection.

He drank his first beer in months, a weak pilsner that stung his tongue. He shoveled the driveway, took a moonlit run. His heart pumped blood. The blood stayed in his body. He spent and refueled. There was nothing to decide. The Doll House news echoed around the house like a distant phonograph. *Tinderbox*. If he didn't let that sound soak into his bones, it might haunt this place forever—*he* might haunt this place forever, a shadow in a large, bright room. There was nothing to decide. He was starting to hear footsteps—he didn't deny or fear them, but he didn't know how much longer he could run with them beside him, doubling his patter through empty country roads. He fingered the chipped casing of Alvin's phone, and ancient thing that snapped open and closed like a briefcase lock. There was nothing to decide—not really. He locked the doors and switched the breakers, refilled his duffel with clean clothes. He left the venison in the freezer. His running clothes, he gathered in a musty pile and lay them in the corner of his closet, beneath his varsity jacket, the medals playing the clothes down to their final resting place.

Gordon drove down the long driveway one last time, and silence let the tires feed a rhythm from the road. Through the rearview, Gordon watched the acres recede.

After the Clock House arson, a private Detroit donor gave a large sum of money to boost security at the installment, and several Michigan-based companies came together to fund solar-powered cameras. The panels supplied power to the streetlights, and the cameras streamed directly to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms. When the Project was hit again, damage from the Doll House blaze rendered those cameras useless, in need of repair.

People declared Detroit dead in as many ways as language allowed: apocalypse, wasteland, ghost town, ghetto, graveyard. Gordon knew how much those words distorted, but he couldn't help but thing that Heidelberg looked more like a graveyard now that any blighted part of Detroit ever had. The char marked the bodies, symbolic foundations serving as reminders of what the place had been. What was it for? Not art aficionados or the people who were burning it down. The streets were still polka-dotted—faded in the winder and bright when the road thawed—but gaps in the art were growing. In their places were the makeshift shrines, found objects stacked like flowers on a grave.

Gordon didn't park near the Doll House, near the neighbors. Instead, he drove past and looped around to the Numbers House, the gift shop. Two women and a man approached Gordon almost immediately after he got out of his car. They were, as far as he could see, the only other people on the street.

“Did you come to volunteer?” one of the women asked. They both wore jeans with holes in them and coats with fur-lined hoods.

"Maybe," Gordon lied.

The two women contorted their faces into pouty beaks they shared first with each other, and then with Gordon.

"At least we're not the only ones," one woman said.

"I feel so much better now," said the other.

"You're too late," the man explained. "They had 30 people out here Tuesday."

"That's great," Gordon said.

"We were in Birmingham Tuesday morning," one woman explained. "And then Wednesday after work, we got all that snow."

"Out of town," Gordon said when they looked at him expectantly. The trio groaned and told him how they felt *so bad*. The man asked Gordon if he knew about the email chain.

"They send it out whenever they need volunteers," he said. "So, next time, for sure."

Gordon turned and spit in the street after they walked away. He wasn't sure whether the cameras were working yet, whether there were eyes on his return visit. If there were, he hoped they accurately captured his disgust.

There was another man at Heidelberg, at the end of the street, hovering around the Doll House remains, and when Gordon walked closer, he saw he was holding a stuffed animal above his head. He saw the green pickup truck with open paint cans in the back, color splashed all over the bed. He saw the red polka dot on the back of the man's tan peacoat.

Gordon always imagined the artist entering the street to great fanfare, dispensing wisdom to a crowd of followers. Instead he was here, alone, wearing work gloves, grunting and muttering to himself. Sweating and wiping that sweat away. The artist at work—there was an expertise to his movements, nothing wasted. He surveyed, dove, sorted and scanned, not an idea untried. If Gordon ever looked like this, it was when he was on the road, but he hadn't decided whether to call running work again. Whether he'd be toeing the line at Hopkinton in a month.

"I used to dream of growing this space," the artist said, suddenly near Gordon without ever having given the impression of approaching him. "I mean, doubling in size. Tripling! They talk about downsizing the city, but I talk about growing it. I talk about spearheading not a revolution but an *ev*olution. Take that space and give it to the children. Put art on all the houses, let creativity transform their minds." He looked down the street and frowned, as if he was disappointed it wasn't teeming with children right now.

His dialect was half French, half poet—he spoke almost in verse, with an elevated lilt. Gordon's eyes wandered to his clothes: a simple black scarf under his peacoat, black leather shoes under torn, paint-stained jeans with natural tears. Gordon wore a neon hat and layers of sweatshirts, old running shoes with a wormhole opening over his big right toe.

"They tore this down, and I said *OK, we will rebuild.* It happened again, and what did I say? *OK, we will rebuild.* For the people—the spirit is strong in this city, stronger than me. But I'm part of that spirit. We all are. People ask me, *Why aren't you angry? What kind of person sets fire to art?* I tell them, that person is not at rest. That person is

looking for answers, and I wish I could help him. I do. I want to thank him. Friction: it's in the spirit of Detroit. We get all different kinds, and it all comes out beautiful in the end. Believe me, it does."

"But what about you?" Gordon asked. "What about what it does to you?"

The artist met the question with a frustrating calm.

"You can't burn a vision," he said. "If they're trying, they've already lost. They sit bloated with their deed, thinking they can see a future in which I am always building and they are always burning me down. But I'm thinking bigger. I want to transform. *Tornare:* to shape on a lathe. *Transformare:* metamorphose. Change is always in the air, and that spirit doesn't die. Quite the opposite, in fact. The same people burning this city are the people keeping it alive."

The artist said all this and clenched his fist with flair, his breath curling and exploding in front of him. Gordon waited for the words to make him feel stronger, for him to feel them in his muscles and in his mind. It all seemed important, it did.

"What's your name?" the artist asked.

"Alvin," Gordon said. "Alvin Bailey."

The artist extended his hand and Gordon grasped it, the fingerless gloves rough and warm against Gordon's uncovered hand, bare and small and cold.

"Thanks you, Alvin," he said. "Thank you for believing."

He paused for a moment, and Gordon saw his last chance to speak—to ask questions only the artist could answer—disappearing in front of him.

"Thank you," he said. There was no release, no closure, no ending to the arc. Just his own words whispered unanswered into the Heidelberg air.

CHAPTER 28

SNAIL Q

In Grosse Pointe, his parents' driveway was shoveled. The mail was on the countertop, bunches of it bound by rubber bands. He would have to write them now, or muster up the courage to call. Or not—the mail-checking and sidewalk shoveling would stop now that his car was in the driveway. This city was never unprepared—everyone had a backup plan for keeping appearances, or else their names would be dropped in the gossip that flew out of old ladies' mouths like spittle during their morning walks. Everyone was always jetting off somewhere; why should Gordon's departure be the source of drama? He wasn't even one of them—he wasn't invited to the holiday block parties, though maybe they'd ask him now, in search of fodder for their gossip.

There were no letters from Alvin in the pile. No notes stuffed in doors. Gordon grabbed at the phone in his pocket—it had been dead for a long time, maybe since he took it. There was no clue in the energy it didn't send crackling back into his hand, no clue in the pleasant crack in his knee as he got out of the car, no clue in the strange loudness of Alvin' block: trucks and dogs and backyard children, a barrage of sound without visual cues to explain them. Alvin's car was gone from his driveway, but Gordon walked around to the back of the house and saw the window was fixed. These weren't clues, either, but his heart beat faster as he came back around to the front porch and

knocked on the door. Once, twice, three times. His fist on the door froze time. On the fourth knock, Alvin appeared.

Later, Gordon would learn the details—not from Alvin but from Joe, who'd been Christmas shopping with his son while Gordon was using his shovel to bust through a window. They hadn't pumped Alvin's stomach, instead giving him activated charcoal to bind the drugs and keep them out of his bloodstream. Alvin spent the rest of that day and night in a hospital bathroom, passing charcoal sludge by throat and bowels.

It was only because Alvin had been found so quickly that he was still alive—that was what Joe told Gordon repeatedly. The shock in the old man's eyes told Gordon he must have thought that he was dead, that he'd taken Alvin to the hospital and then gone somewhere to off himself. He'd planned to come check on Alvin, he swore—he would have been home in an hour at most. Gordon trusted his summary, though he didn't take as much pride in what he'd done as Joe did for him. If he was a hero, he was other things, too—names far less appealing and twice as true.

Gordon and Alvin didn't talk about what happened. They didn't embrace. They stood and stared at each other, and it was only through extreme force of will that Gordon kept tears from falling. Alvin sat on one end of the couch, and Gordon sat on the other. The recliner was gone.

Alvin's arms had slimmed. Gordon chanced a look at his legs, invisible under sweats, and wondered whether they'd atrophied, and if so, how weak they'd been stripped. The quiet grew so heavy, it forced the phone out of Gordon's pocket and into

Alvin's hand. He set it on the coffee table with an odd half-smile, like Gordon had given him a rock.

"You were up north," Alvin said.

"How'd you know?"

"Figured it was that or you were camping out in the Packard Plant. Pitching a yurt down Gratiot."

Alvin laughed at his own joke. It was so fucking quiet in the house, and here Gordon was, talking to someone he'd last seen half-dead like they'd each gone of different vacations.

"I was a bad friend," Gordon said. He didn't want to take the time to set it up, to let the bubble of tension grow any tighter. "I could have helped you, but instead I played dumb."

"Playing?"

"I was selfish."

"You feel guilty."

"Things didn't have to happen the way they did."

Alvin reached for his phone, snapping it open and closed and open again. He held down a button like he was expecting it to turn on, and for a moment, Gordon thought it might.

"I've been out, you know. A few times," Alvin said. "It's a bad idea, but I get something like the shakes. Nervous. I walk around, do my crunches and pushups, leg lifts and all that, even take the basketball down to Cavanagh—anything to stop it. But running is the only thing. And it's not like it used to be."

"It's recovery," Gordon said. "Instead of burning yourself down, you build yourself back up."

Alvin looked at him strangely and put the phone back down.

"I'm not saying what it is or what it isn't," he said. "It's just different."

"I'm sorry," Gordon said.

Alvin smirked and put his hands out in front of him, like he was going to build something heavy with this words, then pass the weight to Gordon's lap.

"Gordon, you're a good guy, but you're really not as important as you think," he said. "I can't thank you enough for what you did. But this isn't about you. I fucked up—*I* did—and now I've got some shit to figure out. And honestly, this whole time you've been gone, I'm halfway there. I've got a start, at least."

"That's good."

"You did a good thing, G. You did what a good person would do. But really, it's not about you. You can blame yourself or give yourself credit for anything more than that."

"I can, though."

"Yeah, OK, of course you can," Alvin said. He picked at the fibers of the couch, a loose thread breaking free between his thumb and forefinger. "William Clay Ford died last week. Isn't that some shit? Last surviving grandson of William Ford and the Lions are the only reason we care. You know, you've got as much to with his death as you do with arson in Detroit—at Heidelberg or anywhere else."

Alvin got up and turned on a lamp, adding light to a room that was fading to darkness.

"They brought me in," Gordon said. "For questioning."

"You're more suspect than savior, G. That's just a fact."

"I'm not saving anything. I'm not good enough at anything to save. If anything, I'm hurting Detroit."

"Selfish," Alvin said. "They're shutting the water off—I mean, right now. The city's cutting people dry. *That*'s what's hurting Detroit. People more important than you and me are fighting fires, fighting for the people."

"What, you're a protester now? An activist?"

"Well, I have been considering a career change," Alvin said. "You're a runner, Gordy. Some people run, but you're a *runner*."

"And that's all."

"It's important—to you and me, too. Maybe others. You never know."

"I can't do Boston," Gordon said. "I should stay here. Try to get my job back."

"If you don't do Boston, you really are hopeless," Alvin said. "That's not an endorsement."

A ringtone sounded, and Alvin took the call. A new phone, of course. What kind of person lives without a phone? Alvin drifted toward the kitchen, and Gordon walked down the hall toward the bathroom, then turned toward Alvin's room instead.

The log was in the same place on the desk. This time, Gordon studied the markings, flipping through the months.

> August 12, 2013
>
> *Long run w/G. Calf felt explosive. Sometimes in the middle of a run G looks at me like he's waiting for me to go, and that's the only thing that*

makes me go. Pink sky, breeze off the water. There was a mile in the middle I'd live in for the next three lifetimes. G says the pace is right. It's fast, but I let him push it.

September 18, 2013

G's pumping up the mileage. Want to tell him we should just give in, run three times a day like the Kenyans. Would be something to win Detroit. I think about it, G would be shocked to know. Slow out-and-back to H-Berg. G says he wants to meet the artist. I want to camp behind the one with the dolls and shake the hand of the man who burns it down.

November 23, 2013

Doc took my leg and pointed to every part that's fucked, would have been fucked years ago if I'd pushed 100 miles/week. Everything will heal, but he says this won't be the last one. Body wasn't built for this kind of mileage—now he tells me. Haven't told G. Can't tell G. He'll think I'm quitting. Better for him to think that, I guess, than for him to really know.

Gordon frantically flipped through the page—an entire journal full of everything he'd ever failed to push Alvin to say aloud. He wanted to find December, the last thing he'd written before the pills. To answer the question he couldn't ask. But Alvin's footsteps were halfway down the hall now, and the pages labeled December were

empty—at least as far as he could see. Alvin had marked that they'd happened, but not what happened within them.

Alvin appeared in the doorway with two glasses of water, but didn't offer one or the other. Together, they scanned the walls, the race numbers and singlets, trophies and medals—a tomb for a love, for a career. Gordon felt a deep sadness for his friend. Alvin had taken to the marathon—attacked it, really—in a way Gordon hadn't yet. *He* should have been the one running, not the one who'd had running taken away.

'To transformation," Gordon said.

"To Boston," Alvin said, clinking both glasses together.

The next day, Gordon visited Heidelberg for a final time. He ran there, but walked the street. The sky twisted itself aluminum above him, but was prepared with a light rain slicker over long sleeves.

He told himself he hadn't come to look for the artist, but he looked for him even so. If he was there, Gordon would have asked him about how he knew where to start, how he built a foundation and knew it was sound. He would have asked him why he didn't tear the rest of the street down and turn it into a garden, a park amid the blight. Why let the city do it for him? He would have asked him what he knew about ashes. About the color of them, how they scattered and flew.

At the People's House, Gordon saw the shadow again—just one of them, or so he thought, but when he followed it around the house there was nothing, just the open field that lay behind it, the natural landscape that wasn't natural at all. He walked back, tight

around the house, and traced the paint with his hands. He might have looked like arsonist now, if the federal officials were watching. It didn't matter.

A strange shaped stopped him at the corner of the house. In the middle of a yellow polka dot, drawn in what looked like permanent marker, black against the vibrant wall, was graffiti Gordon recognized: a snail with a question mark hanging above its shell. Gordon traced it and covered it with his palm. A sign, if there ever was one, that *Alvin was here.*

CHAPTER 29

BOSTON

Gordon said his goodbyes to the wind and the lake, the joggers and the dogs, the happily manicured lawns. He drove to Cavanagh after hours and parked in front of the track, expecting to see Handey barking at mass of runners, sprinters and distance, racing uselessly on the backstretch. Instead he saw a familiar figure, churning around the bend with his signature robotic gait. He looked good—tall and strong, more confident in his stride. Jackson told him his injury wasn't serious, but Gordon hadn't believed him—*couldn't* believe him. He was hopeful for a minute, before he saw Handey with a trio of sprinters at the opposite end of the track. Some mark, Gordon thought. He drove away before he was recognized, before he was forced to interact with any of the people he'd ignored since December.

He'd finally called his parents, told his dad they could put the house on the market. They put him in contact with a real estate agent, told him what to sell and what to keep, what they'd pick up later when the house was sold. Gordon would be out by the end of April. Until then, he trained.

His body didn't fight him the way it had for Detroit. He'd done the thing once, and now he knew to do it better. Training with Alvin taught him how to respond to a body; training without him taught Gordon how to push that hard alone. It taught him confidence salvaged from the days when his competition truly feared him, when they

offered him fish-finger handshakes at the start line. Again, during his taper, Gordon's excess energy swelled, hammering at his muscles. He began to crave the race.

It was cold in Boston, but no colder than in Detroit—they were predicting this year's race to be on the chilly side, around 40 degrees. Gordon drove straight through to Hopkinton, crashing at his hotel a day early. He brought a duffel bag full of options to wear beneath his Grosse Pointe North singlet, but he knew he'd take a cue from Alvin and run bare.

The day before the race, Gordon took a cab into Boston and wandered the city, reading placards at the Old North Church and along the Freedom trail. The city seemed walkable, the paths too friendly. There was something unsettling about the pride people took in occupying spaces that history made famous. Detroit could have had this, he thought, it did have this, but there was no way to compare what had been stripped away. He went out for an easy jog at night, feeling good, relaxed, with no one to tell about it.

Last year had been the year of the explosion, the tragedy at the finish line, the chase the followed. The winner of the race, safe from the blast, was East African, just like every male winner for the past 12 years. This year, the Americans would be led by Meb Keflezighi, an Etriean-born runner coming off a fourth place finish at the 2012 Olympics. The top American finished fourth last year. 2:12:12. That, at least, would get Gordon out of his high school kit. A time that fast would give him somewhere to go.

He woke early with the rest of them, gathering in the darkness with the quickly growing crowd in front of the doughboy statue, the man with the rifle slung over his shoulder, marching forward, the American flag at his back.

Gordon was in the second corral of the first wave, right with the elites. Bodies buzzed and hummed, generals commanding their armies of twitch and synapse, limps snapping out and shaking like flags in a storm. These men were fast—Gordon could feel their speed, recognize it with his own. A few men looked at him like he was a stranger, studying his number and his face. He touched his hand to his chest, the crude drawing he'd done in marker over his heart. No hat, no gloves. There was no man in this corral and the one in front of him that he didn't plan on showing his obnoxious, anonymous yellow back.

There were 30,000 runners prepared to take off from Hopkinton, but Gordon heard only hs own heart, his own breath. *Some people run, but you're a runner*. All these men shared a body, here at the line, each of them appropriately tense, poised for explosion. Each of them knowing their bodies would stream across TV screens, screaming across the city. Someone slapped Gordon on the back, but he didn't turn around. His eyes were on the road ahead, on Meb and Kogo and Korir, the path they were about to take together. Sunlight, now, was implied at the horizon. His great transformation would happen during the day.

The official bid the men to take their marks, and Gordon obeyed. There were thousands of men and women behind him, and a few in front, who believed they could beat him—who really believed they would. Gordon smiled at the thought. When the gun went off, he left it behind.

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