



CHASING HOPE



A NOVEL

KATHRYN CUSHMAN



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To Jim and Leah Cushman—

*Your courage and strength are
an inspiration to all of us*

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water.

Exodus 15:22

PROLOGUE

A dozen men in ugly white outfits and weird haircuts ran barefoot along the ocean's edge, moving faster, faster, faster, as the music swelled until it filled the entire theater. Sabrina Rice leaned forward in her seat, clutching her bag of popcorn tight to her chest. Her feet tapped against the sticky concrete floor, twitching with the urge to run alongside those men. And then she saw *him*. The man with his head thrown back, arms churning at his sides, and a strange sense of joy shining in his eyes. In that moment, her life made sense. In that moment, she found her hero.

It made no difference to her that this movie was over twenty years old, or that the revival theater was mostly empty, or that it would have been far more convenient to rent *Chariots of Fire* at the local video rental store and watch it at home—as only a few hours ago she had complained bitterly to her mother—or that she'd really wanted to go bowling with her friends today. For the next two hours, nothing existed but Sabrina and the runners on the screen, particularly Eric Liddell. And watching him, face toward the sky, drinking in God's pleasure as he ran, that's when

she knew. With absolute certainty she knew what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. As she walked from the theater, she turned to her mother. “I am going to be an Olympic runner and I’m going to tell people about God, just like Eric Liddell. Maybe not China, though. I don’t think they allow that anymore.”

Mom threw back her head and laughed. It wasn’t one of those grown-up kinds of laughs that let a kid know how stupid they were. No, this was one of those “I’m so completely happy I can’t hold it in” kind of things. She reached down and scooped Sabrina into her arms and spun around in a circle. “Sounds terrific.”

Sabrina was so happy with her newfound purpose that she wasn’t really too embarrassed by her mother’s public display of affection—thankfully none of the kids from school were anywhere near this old movie theater. “Can we start training now? You want to go for a run when we get home?”

“I think that’s a grand idea.” And just like that, they became running partners.

Much to Mom’s credit, she never balked when Sabrina insisted that they go for a run every single morning, rain or shine. It didn’t seem to matter that Sabrina was only twelve years old and according to most grown-ups, “couldn’t possibly be serious about what she’s going to do with her life.” Even long after the point that Mom had to ride a bike to keep up, she was always there and ready.

Every single day.

At five in the morning.

Rain or shine.

For the next six years.



1

10 YEARS LATER

“Is this seat taken?”

Just when Sabrina thought her day couldn't get better, Koen Conner's baby blues were staring down at her. She smiled at him across the table of Campus Eats, Southern Tennessee State's finest on-campus eatery, suddenly grateful she'd decided to stay there and study after her shift was over. “Uh, no. It's not.” *Definitely not.* She removed her feet from the opposite chair and sat up straighter, wishing she'd spent a little more time on her hair that morning. She reached up to tuck a tangle of stragglers behind her left ear, very much doubting that it looked as nonchalant as she intended.

“I was hoping you'd say that.” He dropped his backpack at the end of the table and instead of taking the chair across from her, he pulled out the one beside her. It made a loud scraping sound as it scooted across the tile floor, causing him to close one eye and pull his head back just a fraction. He dropped into the chair, which rocked precariously forward and to the left. “I'm thinking

it's time to get some new chairs in here. Maybe you should tell your boss, hmm?" As if on cue, the chair rocked backwards and to the right. He quirked his left eyebrow. "See what I mean?"

"Perhaps it is time for some new ones."

"Oh, I don't think there's any *perhaps* about it." He stood, exchanged his defective chair for one at the empty table behind them, and then made a show of sitting slowly, as if waiting to see if it would actually hold him.

Sabrina couldn't help but laugh. "Better?"

"If it wasn't, I'd be on the floor right now." He put his elbow on the table and set his chin in his hand, unleashing the full force of his beautiful boyish grin on her. "What are you working on?"

She glanced at the computer screen, pleased with her early progress. "A brochure."

"For?" He leaned a little closer to the screen, which also brought him closer to Sabrina.

"I just found out I've made it through the first round of interviews for an internship with the Grace Rose PR firm in Atlanta. Round two involves an in-person interview. I'm working on something to take with me that will hopefully help give me an edge."

"Atlanta, huh?" He turned toward her, now even closer. It made it very difficult to form an intelligent response.

"It's the biggest PR firm in the country. They have offices in a dozen major cities. Landing an internship there is what we all strive for. It's the gateway to anywhere we want to go."

"Really?" He leaned just a bit closer. "And where do you want to go, Miss Sabrina Rice?"

She looked at him, felt his closeness, and tried to remind herself to breathe. Any other time and for any other person, she could spout out her life's plan all the way down to the minute details. Right now, with Koen this close, it all went a little fuzzy. "I, uh . . ." Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, which

was just as well, because any answer she might have given was long since forgotten.

He seemed to find this amusing, because he grinned, then finally leaned back against his chair. “How’d you do on that psychology exam?” He had a dimple in his left cheek.

“I’m feeling pretty good about it.” She took a sip of her decaf Earl Grey. “How about you?”

“Well, let’s just say—” he unleashed another grin—“I think I could use a study buddy for the next one. You know anyone who might be willing to help me?”

“I . . . uh . . . think I might.”

He held her gaze and continued to smile. “I was hoping you’d say that, too. You’re just full of the answers I want to hear today.”

“Thanks,” she sort of squeaked, “I do my best to be helpful.” It was impossible not to smile when she looked at him.

“Well, if that’s the case, then what if I—” He turned his head slightly toward the window just over Sabrina’s shoulder. “Wow, what the . . . ?”

Sabrina turned to see what had caught his interest. A girl was racing through the middle of the campus, her legs pumping at an impressive rate. Her shoulder-length hair was bleached white in the front and dyed jet black in the back, and it whipped up and then back with each stride. She jumped down a set of four steps, landed cleanly, and picked the pace right back up, hardly missing a beat. In her left hand she held what looked to be an aerosol can.

A campus security guard rounded the building behind her. Behind her and losing ground fast. In spite of the fact that he was young and appeared to be in decent shape, by the time he reached the steps the girl had jumped over, it was more than obvious his chase was a lost cause. He stopped, doubled over with hands on knees, gasping for air and shaking his head.

“Did you see that? That girl was *fast!*” Koen’s voice grew louder

with admiration. “I’m thinking she must have been part gazelle or something. Can you believe that?”

Sabrina looked down at the table. “No, I don’t think I can.” She started gathering her things. “I’ve got to go.”

He reached over and put a hand on her arm, the warmth of his touch almost managing to restore her to her former mood. “Hey, wait. I wanted to ask, there’s a bunch of people watching the Tennessee versus Duke basketball game over at Jared’s tomorrow. Do you want to go?”

“I . . . I . . .” Inside her, two opposing forces battled. One would do almost anything to spend a day with Koen. The other, meanwhile, couldn’t bear to watch collegiate sports, and most certainly not when it involved Tennessee. A few seconds ago, before she’d seen the running girl, her answer might have been different. But now, well . . . “I can’t.” She put her books in her backpack, her heart aching in so many places she’d forgotten existed, she thought she might burst into tears—something she hadn’t allowed herself to do in years. Three years, to be exact.

She did manage to paste on a smile in an attempt to salvage something of this day. “Thank you for inviting me though.”

His eyes narrowed a fraction, as if he was trying to understand what just happened. “Sure.”

She threw her backpack over her left shoulder and walked from the table. Just as well. She needed to stay focused on her studies now, anyway. At least, that was what she’d keep telling herself. She’d almost made it to the door when Lindy Stewart and her entourage came breezing through.

Lindy and her pack came to Campus Eats almost every day around this time, ordered fat-free chai lattes, and basked in the admiration of every single male in the place. As the number two tennis player and number one most desired female on campus, Lindy never lacked for admirers. “Look who’s here,” Sabrina

heard her whisper to the girl beside her, then she smiled and waved into the snack bar. In spite of herself, Sabrina turned to see who the object might be, although she was pretty certain she already knew the answer.

Lindy bypassed the line and took the seat beside Koen. She put her hand on his shoulder, and he smiled and said something that caused them both to laugh. Of course he smiled. Sabrina turned to go, wishing she had just kept walking.

So much for her day that couldn't get any better.



2

Saturday afternoon, Brandy Philip ran up the front walk and leapt onto the porch, looking at her watch in midair: 5:59. As much as she wanted to stand outside and enjoy the chill of a Tennessee February while she recovered from her homeward sprint, she only had one minute to spare.

She pulled open the storm door and shoved her way inside, shedding her sweatshirt as she made for the kitchen. “Grandma, I’m home.” She sniffed the air, searching for a hint of what might be for dinner—hoping it wasn’t spinach or black-eyed peas, but something more along the line of creamed corn or chicken and dumplings. She sniffed again and walked into the kitchen to find . . . nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

No Grandma. No food on the stove or counter, and no smell that either had ever been there. Nothing but the always lingering hint of Grandma’s Jergen’s lotion.

“You’re late.” Her voice came from the living room, the same room Brandy had just walked through. She turned back.

“Am not. It’s just now six o’clock.”

“I asked you to be home by five thirty tonight.” It was a statement. Nothing more, nothing less. At least Grandma wasn’t a lecturer, which made her infinitely better than most grown-ups.

“Five thirty, really? When did you say that?”

“Last night. I told you we were going to our neighbor’s house for dinner, my friend who lives just a couple of streets over.”

“Oh, right.” Brandy waved her hand dismissively. “Have a good time. I’ll just fix some mac and cheese right here and call it good. I’m going to the movie with some friends later.”

“Nope. You’re coming.” The determination in Grandma’s voice was unusual enough that Brandy paused to consider. No reason to turn this into a showdown. Just a little bit of reasoning and they would all go their merry ways.

“Why? I’m sure the two of you will have more fun without me around, and I’m plenty able to fend for myself.”

“No, you need to come with me. My friend’s granddaughter lives with her, too. You two can get to know each other. It’s time you found a nicer group of friends.”

“My friends are fine.”

“We are going. Now.”

What was with this newfound bossiness? Brandy hesitated. Would it be best to dig in and fight hard, hoping to avoid a similar situation in the future, or just give in this once and hope it was a one-time thing? Fact remained, she was hungry. And there was no way this dinner could last more than an hour or two at most. Still plenty of time to meet up with her crew later. Might as well give Grandma the satisfaction of believing she’d won this round.

“Okay, let’s get this over with.”



Sabrina watched until her grandmother disappeared from the dining room back into the kitchen, then continued to listen until she was more than certain she could move without being seen. As soon as the coast was truly clear, she reached into her pocket for the two white pills that waited there. She popped them into her mouth, swallowed them dry, then returned to setting the table. She took care to line up the silverware just perfectly. Tonight meant a lot to Nana.

“I don’t know, do you think maybe we should use the fancier plates?” Just that fast, Nana reappeared in the dining room.

Hopefully Nana hadn’t seen the Tylenol, because it would definitely tip her off that Sabrina wasn’t feeling well. “No, I think these are beautiful. It’s just a casual dinner. No reason to be too formal about this, right?” The old lace tablecloth had been around for far longer than Sabrina, she was sure of that. Yet, just like everything in Nana’s house, it felt warm, cozy, and familiar.

“Hmm. I suppose you’re right. Don’t want to come across as pretentious.” She walked closer to the table and looked around. “Yes, these will do just fine.” She still didn’t look quite convinced.

“Mrs. Jenkins is such a nice lady. I look forward to meeting her granddaughter.”

“From what I gather from Maudie, she hasn’t fallen into the best crowd at school. I’m sure hoping the two of you get along, that maybe she can look to you as something of a role model.”

“I’ll do my best.” Sabrina saluted.

“I know you will, darling.” Nana gave a nod of satisfaction, moved as if to turn, but then stopped and jerked back around. “You okay? You look a little pale.”

Sabrina had lived there long enough to know what was going to happen next. Nana would put her hand on Sabrina’s forehead, make a clucking sound, then go in search of the thermometer. Sabrina was pretty certain the results would show a low-grade

fever, which would ruin their plans for the evening. As appealing as it sounded to go to bed, she knew her grandmother was looking forward to this event, so she took evasive action and made for the front of the house. “I’m fine. Just a little tired. You know how I get when I’m working on a school project.”

“You don’t get enough rest, that’s for sure and for certain. You need to take better care of yourself. When you came to live here I promised your mother I’d see that you got healthy meals and enough rest.”

“Oh, Nana, grown-ups worry too much. I get as much rest as any other college student.”

“Yes, but you’re not any other—”

Dingdong.

“I’ll get it.” Sabrina hurried toward the door, thankful for the interruption from the rest of the all-too-familiar lecture. She turned the knob and pulled the door, her words already forming. “Good evening, Mrs. Jenkins. How are you?”

Mrs. Jenkins had the kind of permanent dark circles under her eyes that declared her a woman who had spent years being pushed past her limits. In spite of this, her smile was bright and cheerful. “Just fine, Sabrina. It’s so good to see you again. Your grandmother has kept me updated on your happenings, but I’ll be glad to hear the details straight from you.”

“Bless your heart, I’ll just bet she has. Nana does like to talk about her family.”

“You count that as a blessing is what I’m saying. There’s lots of people who wish they could say the same.” For just a split second the look of weariness encompassed her entire face, all the way to her eyes. She turned to look over her shoulder. “Brandy, hurry on up, now. Sabrina’s standing here waiting to meet ya.”

Sabrina peered into the darkness, searching for the young girl who needed a nice older friend. Maybe she could be a kind of

mentor, the same way a couple of college girls had taken her under their wing several years ago. It would be nice to pay it forward.

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head. “We walked over here. You’d think it would be the old lady instead of the teenager that was lagging, wouldn’t you?” She glanced over her shoulder then nodded with satisfaction. “Oh, here she is. Sabrina, I’d like you to meet my granddaughter, Brandy. Brandy, this is Sabrina.” She held out her arm toward the driveway, just as the girl walked into view.

“What’s up?” Brandy nodded her head back slightly.

Sabrina found that she was unable to respond in any way. Absolutely could not speak.

It wasn’t the tiny loop earring that pierced the girl’s nose, or the thick line of dark black eyeliner, or the cold hard eyes that left Sabrina unable to speak. It was her hair. Shoulder length, white in front, black in back. There could be no mistaking who this girl was or where she’d seen her before.

“Oh, please do come in, you two.” Nana picked just the right moment to arrive at the door. Sabrina took a step back so that the two could enter, but she still couldn’t find her voice to speak as Nana ushered them inside. “Now, Brandy, you come right in here and tell us all about yourself. How are things at the high school? You’re a junior, right? Is old Mrs. Monroe still teaching chemistry and physics? How is the basketball team doing this year?”

Sabrina attempted to work through her shock and at least fake some interest in Brandy’s answers. It proved to be harder than she’d imagined. *Be a good role model. Set a good example. At the very least, be polite.*

In spite of Nana’s insatiable list of questions, Brandy managed to answer most everything with a single syllable, two at most. She made no attempt to be sociable or to even appear that she was remotely interested in having a conversation.

Sabrina's initial shock at seeing this girl was soon replaced by a deep and growing dislike. Did she have no concept of manners, or common courtesy? And then Nana asked her the question whose answer sealed Sabrina's dislike into a deep and permanent state. "Do you play any sports at school?"

"No."

"Oh really? I thought I remembered Maudie telling me that you ran track."

Brandy shrugged. "Used to. Not now."

"Oh right, since you just moved here, you probably haven't gotten the chance to get started in all that. I'll bet you'll be involved soon, huh?"

"Nah. Don't much like it. Coaches are a pain."

The circles under Mrs. Jenkins' eyes seemed to darken by the second. She shook her head and stared off in the distance. Nana glanced at her, then back to Sabrina, her eyes wide with panic, and Sabrina swallowed the "somehow I don't think it's the coach who's a pain" retort that'd been on the tip of her tongue.

This Brandy girl might be a spoiled, selfish punk, but Nana was a wonderful lady, and Sabrina would do her best to help. She forced herself to work up a friendliness she most certainly did not feel. "Brandy, have you thought about what you want to do when you graduate high school?"

Brandy looked at her, green eyes cold and hard. "Well, I can tell you what I won't be doing. I won't be living at my grandmother's house while my mother and father are paying my tuition at some lame college. I've never been much of one for freeloading, or for freeloaders, as far as that goes. I'll be doing something interesting, and I'll be standing on my own two feet."

"Brandy." Mrs. Jenkins hissed her granddaughter's name, but offered no words to follow it up.

Brandy continued to look at Sabrina, a dare in her eyes.

“Brandy,” her grandmother said again, firmer this time.

Brandy shrugged. “Sorry. No offense intended.”

Hate.

The word so seldom entered Sabrina’s mind that the initial thought stunned her. But try as she might, she couldn’t squelch it.

Hate.

When she looked at Brandy it welled up inside her and poured over into places she hadn’t gone in a long time.

I. Hate. Her.

Sabrina saw the absolute mortification in her grandmother’s eyes. The evening that she had planned so meticulously was going down in flames, thanks to this juvenile delinquent who had no idea what she should appreciate. It was up to Sabrina to somehow overcome, to be the bigger person for her grandmother’s sake.

“I’m sure there wasn’t.” Regardless of how she was feeling, regardless of how much she wanted to let that little brat know some things about real life, Sabrina was going to salvage the evening. For Nana’s sake. She dug deep and pulled out what she hoped was a radiant smile. “Nana has made her famous artichoke spinach dip. Who’s game to give it a try?”



3

Driving home at last, Sabrina felt the weight of a long and exhausting day, and the lingering aches and chills of that low-grade fever. At least she had a nice warm dinner and some comfy sweats waiting for her at home. Less than two blocks to go until relief, she saw probably the only person who could make her day worse.

Brandy was standing out on the curb in front of her grandmother's house, leaning against a black muscle car that practically screamed "punk" and talking on her cell phone. Probably planning her next delinquent adventure with her friends. Even today, tired as she was, Sabrina felt her hackles rise. That girl needed to be taken down a notch or three.

Well, Sabrina had neither the time nor the energy to devote one more second of thought in that direction. She pulled into the driveway and had to will herself to stand up and get out of the car.

It had been a few years since she'd felt this way, and back then it was after a hard day of training. But there was no forgetting the complete muscle exhaustion, the worry that she couldn't take

another step, the inner voice that begged for just a short rest. That was the voice she knew had to be ignored at all costs. You just dug deep and looked for something inside you that could make you keep moving in spite of the overwhelming desire to stop. It boiled down to the drive to achieve, to be the absolute best you could possibly be, even when things got hard, even when you wanted to give up.

Sabrina made it up the steps and into the quiet of the house. Tonight she was especially glad for Nana's Monday night dinner with her ladies' group from church. There would be no need to expend extra energy to put on enough of a front to prevent Nana from guessing she was ill. And, she could make something small for dinner, something cold that would feel good to her sore throat. A Greek yogurt and berry smoothie would be just the ticket.

She made her way to the kitchen, poured in her own special recipe of juice, frozen berries, yogurt, and a banana, then let the blender grind it all up into a nice pink concoction that was sure to make her feel better.

Minutes later, she was sitting at the kitchen table, feeling the coolness of her liquid dinner. Much better.

She clicked on her iPhone and scanned her list of emails. One in particular caught her eye. The sender was Rita Leyva, a missionary whose newsletter Sabrina had been receiving for the last six or seven years. This wasn't a newsletter though. Instead, the subject line read, "Sabrina—a potential job/ministry opportunity." Out of curiosity, Sabrina opened the email.

Hello Sabrina,

I hope this email finds you well. I'm writing to you now because I often think back to our conversations when I visited with your youth group. I remember how dedicated you were to someday working for a missions organization, and most of all, I remember hearing you

speak on the Children of Israel at the youth gathering and the little devotional you presented me. Those words have stayed with me all these years as being so powerful. At that time, I could not only see your gift for inspiring a group, I could also see your heart for missions and following God with all your heart.

As you may remember, I work for Bridges. We are experiencing rapid growth in our efforts to take hope and help into the poorest countries in the world, in the form of job training, food, medicine, and mostly God's Word. Recently, we began looking for someone who could help us spearhead an awareness campaign here in America. Your name kept coming to my mind, so I called my contacts at your home church and found out that you are about to graduate with a degree in Public Relations.

I would consider it a personal honor and favor if you would apply for the job. I've already spoken with Dennis and Susan, the directors of the organization, and asked them to give you serious consideration. They have agreed.

I hope that you will consider this prayerfully, and if you are led as I am confident you will be, send a resumé as soon as possible.

If you would like to contact me with any questions you may have, feel free to email or call my cell, (805) 555-7239.

In Him,
Rita Leyva

Weird. That had come out of the blue, for sure.

It was a nice thought, but Sabrina's life had gone another direction. She supposed she should compose a nice "thank you but no thank you" response—maybe this weekend when she had a little more time. She flagged the email for follow-up and moved on to the next one.

"Sabrina?"

She jumped at the sound of her name. She put her hand to her heart, which was racing from the sudden burst of adrenaline. “Oh, Nana, I didn’t hear you come in. You’re home early, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I am.” Nana squeezed the palms of her hands together, then twisted them in a wringing motion. “Listen, Sabrina, I need to ask a favor.”

“Sure. You know you can ask me anything.”

Nana continued to rub her palms together, her brow furrowed in concentration. “Nana, are you all right? Come in here and sit down.”

She waved Sabrina aside. “I’m fine, just fine. It’s just that, this favor, well, I know it’s going to be something that’s hard for you to do. I hate to ask it, I really do.”

“What is it?” Sabrina could never remember seeing Nana so worked up. “You know I’ll do it for you, just tell me.”

“Maudie’s granddaughter, Brandy . . .” Nana shook her head slowly side to side.

Well, that explained the angst. And Sabrina thought that perhaps she’d been a little too quick to give her word without knowing what it was all about—or more correctly, *who* it was about. That girl was the least likable person Sabrina had ever met. “What about Brandy?”

“She’s gotten into some trouble lately and it seems like the court system is done being lenient. She has a hearing late next week, and it looks like she might end up in juvenile hall. As you can imagine, Maudie is broken up about it. Brandy is the only person she has left, and troublemaker though she might be, Maudie loves her with all her heart.”

“Where are her parents, anyway?”

“Brandy’s father—Maudie’s only child—died when Brandy was just a baby. He was never married to Brandy’s mother, who is now a drug addict and has been in and out of prison for most

of Brandy's life. Brandy's uncle took her in with his family for a while, but they kicked her out right before Christmas. That's why the poor thing is as messed up as she is—she's never had anyone to really count on. Anyone except for Maudie, who's trying her best to provide a stable home environment for her."

"I guess I'm not sure how I can help her."

"Well, Maudie's lawyer said this judge is a bit of a maverick. He's a stickler for the law, but he is usually willing to employ some unusual tactics to help kids straighten out their lives. Her suggestion was to get Brandy enrolled in some extracurricular activities. It will look good for the court, and hopefully convince them that she'll be too busy to get into more trouble. The lawyer thinks the judge just might give her another chance if she can show she's making an effort."

"Okay?" Sabrina still had no idea how she fit into this picture.

"Maudie says Brandy is a fast runner."

Yes. *She is.* "Then she should sign up for the track team."

"There's the problem. They talked to the coach, but because of her behavior issues, she won't even consider giving Brandy a chance."

"I don't see how there's anything to do about that."

"Well, you know the cross-country coach pretty well, right? Could you maybe talk to him?"

"Nana, cross-country is a fall sport and it's only February. I don't see how talking to him is going to be helpful."

"Please, Sabrina, just tell me you'll try. I can't bear this for poor Maudie if she loses that girl."

Nana was such a warmhearted person, there was no way Sabrina could let her down. "Sure, Nana, I'll try. I wouldn't expect much, though. Who knows if Coach Thompson will even remember me."

"Not remember you? Sabrina, how many training runs did the two of you make together?"

“He’s paced hundreds of runners through the years, Nana.”

“That man adored you since the first time he saw you running wind sprints around the high school track. You were visiting during Christmas vacation and it was snowing that day, remember?”

For just a moment, Sabrina could almost feel the featherlike caress of the snow as she rounded the corner, see her mother’s mittened hands holding the stopwatch, feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins. She remembered the man who came to stand beside Mom and Nana at the rail.

After finishing her last lap, Sabrina had walked over, curious about this person talking to her mother. He introduced himself as the cross-country coach from the local high school. “I was just telling your mother I’m excited about having someone like you on my team in a year or two. It near about popped my Achilles when she told me y’all live over near Chattanooga and were not considering relocating. Ah well, I guess the good news for me is that you won’t be direct competition.” He smiled then, nodded at Mom. “That girl of yours is something special. She’s bound for greatness.”

Sabrina shivered and the memory faded back to blackness, back where she liked those memories to stay. “I remember, Nana.”

She’d soon find out if Coach Thompson did as well.



“Sabrina Rice. What a surprise to see you here.” Coach Cal Thompson set aside the *Runner’s World* magazine, stood, and came around his desk. Even at almost sixty, he moved with the agility of a great athlete and a world-class runner. “How are you these days?”

Sabrina sort of smiled. “Oh, I’m fine.”

But the look of sympathy on Coach Thompson’s face said

that he did not believe that. Would never believe that, because he knew that she would never be *fine* again, at least to their way of thinking. “What brings you here? This is quite out of the blue.” When he smiled, a road map of wrinkles gathered across his face—a face that had spent years in the elements and showed it—with eyes that radiated warmth and genuine concern. And, though he probably wouldn’t admit it, pity. She hated that look, hated that others couldn’t keep it from their eyes around her. She just wanted to leave. Finish up this thing she did not want to do and then get out of there.

“Well, yes. Actually I have a favor to ask.”

“Whatever it is, count me in. You know I could never say no to anything you ask.”

“Uh, in this particular case you might want to hear what the favor is before you say that.”

He leaned back against his desk and folded his arms across his chest, his smile only broadening. “I must say, I am more than a little intrigued.”

“Well, here’s the thing. My grandmother has this friend, Maudie Jenkins, and Mrs. Jenkins’ granddaughter moved in with her a while ago and she attends school here. I gather she was pretty good at track back in junior high.”

The hint of a new prodigy lit his eyes with interest. “Jenkins? I don’t recognize the name. She’s new here did you say?”

“The girl’s last name is Philip. Brandy Philip.”

He blew out a long, slow puff of air. “That name I do know.”

“Somehow I thought you would.”

The interest faded from his eyes. “That kid is trouble on two feet.”

Sabrina nodded. “So I gathered. But fast feet, and well, here’s the thing. There are some legal issues at hand, and her grandmother has been led to believe that getting her signed up for an

extracurricular activity will increase her chances of staying out of juvie. I know that the track coach has refused to take her on, but I was hoping maybe you could, sort of, I don't know, count her as a project for the semester? Her grandmother is desperate.”

“Rossina’s never been one to take on the troublemakers, so I’m not surprised she refused to take her. Brandy is welcome to give cross-country a try next year. Of course, everyone around here knows that I have a zero-tolerance policy with conduct issues. She wouldn’t last a week.”

“You’re right.” Sabrina had no doubt that he was. Well, she’d done what she set out to do, asked the favor as her grandmother had requested. “Thanks for taking the time to talk to me about it.”

“You know I’m happy to talk to you at any time.” His face grew serious. “How are you, really? Are you . . . you know . . .”

“Good. I’m good. Concentrating on graduating *magna cum laude* in a few months, that’s the goal now.” She turned to go, relieved it was over. Yet, when she got to the door, she wasn’t quite sure why she did it, but she turned. “You know, I actually saw Brandy Philip run last week.”

“And?”

“She runs faster than any sixteen-year-old I’ve ever seen. Her form’s not quite right, but I would say the kid has some of the rawest talent I’ve ever been around.” No reason to mention the fact that she’d had a can of spray paint in her hand and campus security hot on her tail. “Nice talking to you.” She walked from his classroom, but not before she noticed the glimmer of interest reignite in his eye.