

inside juice with a prestigious race. All he had left to do was hit up some charities for corn donations to tempt the Tarahumara, and maybe get a shoe company to put them in something sturdier than those sandals, and . . .

Fisher schemed on, clueless that he was fine-tuning a fiasco.

CHAPTER 9

Make friends with pain, and you will never be alone.

—KEN CHLOUBER,
Colorado miner and creator of the Leadville Trail 100



THE BIG, fat flaw in Rick Fisher's plan was the fact that the Leadville race happens to be held in Leadville.

Hunkered in a valley two miles up in the Colorado Rockies, Leadville is the highest city in North America and, many days, the coldest (the fire company couldn't ring its bell come winter, afraid it would shatter). One look at those peaks had the first settlers shaking in their coonskins. "For there, before their unbelieving eyes, loomed the most powerful and forbidding geological phenomenon they had ever seen," recounts Leadville historian Christian Buys. "They might as well have been on another planet. It was that remote and threatening to all but the most adventuresome."

Of course, things have improved since then: the fire company now uses a horn. Otherwise, well . . . "Leadville is a home for miners, muckers, and mean motherfuckers," says Ken Chlouber, who was an out-of-work, bronco-busting, Harley-riding, hard-rock miner when he created the Leadville Trail 100, in 1982. "Folks who live at ten thousand feet are cut from a different kind of leather."

Dog-toy-tough or not, when Leadville's top physician heard what Ken had in mind, he was outraged. "You *cannot* let people run a hundred miles at this altitude," railed Dr. Robert Woodward. He was so pissed off he had a finger in Ken's face, which didn't bode well for his finger. If you've seen Ken, with those steel-toed boots on his size 13 stompers and that mug as craggy as the rock he blasted for a living,

you figure out pretty quick you don't put a hand near his face unless you're dead drunk or dead serious.

Doc Woodward wasn't drunk. "You're going to kill anyone foolish enough to follow you!"

"Tough shit!" Ken shot back. "Maybe killing a few folks will get us back on the map."

Shortly before Ken's showdown with Doc Woodward on that cold autumn day in 1982, the Climax Molybdenum mine had suddenly shut down, taking with it nearly every paycheck in Leadville. "Moly" is a mineral used to strengthen steel for battleships and tanks, so once the Cold War fizzled, so did the moly market. Almost overnight, Leadville stopped being a bustling little burg with an old-timey ice-cream parlor on its old-timey main street and was transformed into the most desperate, jobless city in North America. Eight out of every ten workers in Leadville punched the clock at Climax, and the few who didn't depended on the ones who did. Once boasting the highest per capita income in Colorado, it soon found itself the county seat of one of the poorest counties in the state.

It couldn't get worse. And then it did.

Ken's neighbors were drinking hard, punching their wives, sinking into depression, or fleeing town. A sort of mass psychosis was overwhelming the city, an early stage of civic death: first, people lose the means to stick it out; then, after the knife fights, arrests, and foreclosure warnings, they lose the desire.

"People were packing up and leaving by the hundreds," recalls Dr. John Perna, who ran Leadville's emergency room. His ER was as busy as a MASH unit and confronting an ugly new trend of injuries; instead of job-site ankle sprains and smashed fingers, Dr. Perna was amputating toes from drunk miners who'd passed out in the snow, and calling the police for wives who arrived in the middle of the night with broken cheekbones and scared children.

"We were slipping into lethal doldrums," Dr. Perna told me. "Ultimately, we faced the disappearance of the city." So many miners had already left, the last citizens of Leadville couldn't fill the bleachers at a minor-league ballpark.

Leadville's only hope was tourism, which was no hope at all. What kind of idiot would vacation in a place with nine months of freezing weather, no slopes worth skiing, and air so thin that breathing

counted as a cardio workout? Leadville's backcountry was so brutal that the army's elite 10th Mountain Division used to train there for Alpine combat.

Making things worse, Leadville's reputation was as scary as its geography. For decades, it was the wildest city in the Wild West, "an absolute death trap," as one chronicler put it, "that seemed to take pride in its own depravity." Doc Holliday, the dentist turned gunslinging gambler, used to hang out in the Leadville saloons with his quick-drawin' O.K. Corral buddy Wyatt Earp. Jesse James used to slink through as well, attracted by the stages loaded with gold and excellent hideouts just a lick away in the mountains. Even as late as the 1940s, the 10th Mountain Division commandos were forbidden to set foot in downtown Leadville; they might be fierce enough for the Nazis, but not for the cutthroat gamblers and prostitutes who ruled State Street.

Yeah, Leadville was a tough place, Ken knew. Full of tough men, and even tougher women, and—

And *damm!* Goddamn! That was it.

If all Leadville had left to sell was grit, then step right up for your hot grits. Ken had heard about this guy in California, a long-haired mountain man named Gordy Ainsleigh, whose mare went lame right before the world's premier horse endurance event, the Western States Trail Ride. Gordy decided to race anyway. He showed up at the starting line in sneakers and set out to run all one hundred miles through the Sierra Nevada on foot. He slurped water from creeks, got his vitals checked by veterinarians at the medical stops, and beat the twenty-four-hour cutoff for all horses with seventeen minutes to spare. Naturally, Gordy wasn't the only lunatic in California, so the next year, another runner crashed the horse race . . . and another the year after that . . . until, by 1977, the horses were crowded out and Western States became the world's first one-hundred-mile footrace.

Ken had never even run a marathon himself, but if some California hippie could go one hundred miles, how hard could it be? Besides, a normal race wouldn't cut it; if Leadville was going to survive, it needed an event with serious holy-shit power, something to set it apart from all the identical, ho-hum, done-one-done-'em-all 26.2-milers out there.

So instead of a marathon, Ken created a monster.

To get a sense of what he came up with, try running the Boston Marathon two times in a row with a sock stuffed in your mouth and then hike to the top of Pikes Peak.

Done?

Great. Now do it all again, this time with your eyes closed. That's pretty much what the Leadville Trail 100 boils down to: nearly four full marathons, half of them in the dark, with twin twenty-six-hundred-foot climbs smack in the middle. Leadville's starting line is twice as high as the altitude where planes pressurize their cabins, and from there you only go up.

"The hospital does make a lot of money off us," Ken Chlouber happily agrees today, twenty-five years after the inaugural race and his showdown with Doc Woodward. "It's the only weekend when all the beds in the hotels *and* the emergency room are full at the same time."

Ken should know; he's run every Leadville race, despite having been hospitalized with hypothermia during his first attempt. Leadville racers routinely fall off bluffs, break ankles, suffer overexposure, get weird heart arrhythmias and altitude sickness.

Fingers crossed, Leadville has yet to polish anyone off, probably because it beats most runners into submission before they collapse. Dean Karnazes, the self-styled Ultramarathon Man, couldn't finish it the first two times he tried; after watching him drop out twice, the Leadville folks gave him their own nickname: "Ofer" ("Offer one, Offer two . . ."). Less than half the field makes it to the finish every year.

Not surprisingly, an event with more flameouts than finishers tends to attract a rare breed of athlete. For five years, Leadville's reigning champion was Steve Peterson, a member of a Colorado higher-consciousness cult called Divine Madness, which seeks nirvana through sex parties, extreme trail running, and affordable housecleaning. One Leadville legend is Marshall Ulrich, an affable dog-food tycoon who perked up his times by having his toenails surgically removed. "They kept falling off anyway," Marshall said.

When Ken met Aron Ralston, the rock climber who sawed off his own hand with the chipped blade of a multitool after getting pinned by a boulder, Ken made an astonishing offer: if Aron ever wanted to run Leadville, he wouldn't have to pay. Ken's invitation stunned everyone who heard about it. The defending champ has to pay his

way back into the race. Heroic grand master Ed Williams still has to pay. Ken has to pay. But Aron got a free ride—and why? "He's the essence of Leadville," Ken said. "We've got a motto here—you're tougher than you think you are, and you can do more than you think you can. Guy like Aron, he shows the rest of us what we can do if we dig deep."

You might think poor Aron had already suffered enough, but little more than a year after his accident, he took Ken up on the offer. New prosthetic swinging by his side, Aron made it to the finish under the thirty-hour cutoff and went home with a silver belt buckle, thereby stating better than Ken ever could what it takes to toe the line at Leadville:

You don't have to be fast. But you'd better be fearless.



iar laces of the black canvas basketball sneakers the Pescador had gotten for them. The Tarahumara shared a last few drags on a black tobacco cigarette, then moved shyly to the very back of the pack as the other two hundred ninety ultrarunners chanted *Three . . . two . . .*

Booooom! Leadville's mayor blasted his big old thunderbuss of a shotgun, and the Tarahumara raced off to show their stuff.

For a while. Before they even made it halfway, every one of the Tarahumara runners had dropped out. Damn, Fisher moaned into every ear he could grab. I never should have stuffed them into those sneaks, and no one told them they were allowed to eat at the aid stations. Totally my bad. They'd never seen flashlights before, so they were pointing them straight up like torches. . . .

Yeah, yeah, check's in the mail. Same old Tarahumara letdown; same old Tarahumara excuses. Few but the most obsessive track historians know it, but Mexico tried using a pair of Tarahumara runners in the Olympic marathon in both the 1928 Amsterdam games and the 1968 Mexico City games. Both times, the Tarahumara finished out of the medals. The excuse those times was that 26.2 miles was too short; the dinky little marathon was over before the Tarahumara got a chance to shift into high gear.

Maybe. But if these guys were really such superhuman speedsters, how come they never beat anybody? Nobody cares if you're a great three-point shooter in your backyard; what matters is whether you stick them on game day. And for a century, the Tarahumara had never competed in the outside world without stinking up the joint.

Fisher puzzled over it during the long drive back to Mexico, and then the lightbulb flashed. Of course! Same reason you can't grab five kids off a Chicago schoolyard and expect to beat the Bulls: just because you're a Tarahumara runner doesn't mean you're a great Tarahumara runner. Patrocinio had tried to make life easier for Fisher by enlisting runners who lived near the new paved road, figuring they'd be more comfortable around outsiders and easier to gather for the trip. But as the Mexican Olympic Committee should have realized years ago, the easiest Tarahumara to recruit may not be the ones worth recruiting.

"Let's try again," Patrocinio urged. Fisher's sponsors had donated a pile of corn to Patrocinio's village, and he hated to lose the windfall.

PERFECT! Leadville was exactly the kind of wild, Rock'em-Sock'em thrill show Rick Fisher was looking for. As usual, he was out to make a big splash, and a carnival like Leadville was just the ticket. You telling him that ESPN wouldn't jump at the chance for footage of good-looking guys in skirts smashing records on a mythical man-eater? Hell yeah!

So in August 1992, Fisher came roaring back to Patrocinio's village in his big old Chevy Suburban. He'd gotten travel papers from the Mexican Tourism Board, and a promised payoff in corn for the racers. Meanwhile, Patrocinio had cajoled five of his fellow villagers to trust this strange, intense *chabochi* whose name got stuck in their mouths. Spanish has no "sh" sound, so Fisher soon got a taste of sly Tarahumara humor when he heard his new team calling him Pescador—the Fisherman. Sure, it was easier to pronounce; but it also nailed his Ahabness, the constant hunger to hook a big one that radiated off him like heat waves off a car hood.

Whatever. As far as Fisher was concerned, they could call him Dr. Dumbass, as long as they got serious once the race started. The Pescador squeezed his team into the Chevy and hit the gas for Colorado.

Just before 4 a.m. on race day, the crowd at the Leadville starting line tried not to stare as five men in skirts struggled with the unfamiliar

This time, he'd open the team to runners from outside his own village. He'd head back into the canyons—and back in time. Team Tarahumara was going old-school.

Yep, "old" pretty much nailed it.

Ken was none too impressed with the new band of Tarahumara who showed up at the next Leadville. The team captain looked like a Keebler elf who'd taken early retirement in Miami Beach: he was a short fifty-five-year-old grandfather in a blue robe with flashy pink flowers, topped off by a happy-go-lucky grin, a pink scarf, and a wool cap yanked down over his ears. Another guy had to be in his forties, and the two scared kids behind him looked young enough to be his sons. The whole operation was even worse equipped than last year's; no sooner had Team Tarahumara arrived than they disappeared into the town dump, emerging with strips of tire rubber that they began fashioning into sandals. No chafing black Chuckies this time around. Seconds before the race was about to begin, the Tarahumara vanished. *Same eye of the tiger as last year*, Ken thought dismissively; just as before, the timid Tarahumara had hidden themselves at the very rear of the pack. At the blast of the shotgun, they trotted off in last place. And in last place they remained, ignored and inconsequential . . .

. . . until mile 40, when Victoriano Churro (the Keebler look-alike with a taste for pastels) and Cerrillo Chacarito (the forty-something goat farmer) began quietly, almost nonchalantly, pitter-pattering their way along the edges of the trail, picking off a few runners at a time as they began the three-mile mountain climb to Hope Pass. Manuel Luna caught up and locked in beside them, the three elders leading the younger Tarahumara like a wolf pack on the hunt.

Heeyah! Ken whooped and hollered like a bullrider when he saw the Tarahumara heading back toward him after the fifty-mile turnaround. Something strange was going on; Ken could tell by the weird look on their faces. He'd seen every single Leadville runner for the past decade, and not one of them had ever looked so freakishly . . . *normal*. Ten straight hours of mountain running will either knock you on your ass or plant its flag on your face, no exceptions. Even the best ultrarunners by this point are heads down and digging

deep, focusing hard on the near-impossible task of getting each foot to follow the other. But that old guy? Victoriano? Totally cool. Like he just woke up from a nap, scratched his belly, and decided to show the kids how the big boys play this game.

By mile 60, the Tarahumara were *flying*. Leadville has aid stations every fifteen miles or so where helpers can resupply their runners with food, dry socks, and flashlight batteries, but the Tarahumara were moving so fast, Rick and Kitty couldn't drive around the mountain fast enough to keep up with them.

"They seemed to move with the ground," said one awestruck spectator. "Kind of like a cloud, or a fog moving across the mountains."

This time, the Tarahumara weren't two lonely tribesmen adrift in a sea of Olympians. They weren't five confused villagers in awful canvas sneakers who hadn't run since the road was bulldozed into their village. This time, they were locked into a formation they'd practiced since childhood, with wily old vets up front and eager young bucks pushing from behind. They were sure-footed and sure of themselves. They were the Running People.

Meanwhile, a rather different endurance contest was taking place a few blocks from the finish line. Every year, Leadville's Sixth Street partyers cowboy up and spend the weekend trying to outlast the runners. They start pounding at the blast of the starting gun, and keep downing 'em until the race officially ends, thirty hours later. Between Jäger and Jell-O shots, they also perform a critical advisory function: their job is to alert the timers at the finish line by going apeshit the second they spot a runner emerging from the dark. This time, the boozers nearly blew it; at two in the morning, old Victoriano and Cerrillo came whisking by so quickly and quietly—"a fog moving across the mountains"—they almost went unnoticed.

Victoriano hit the tape first, with Cerrillo right behind in second. Manuel Luna, whose new sandals had fallen apart at mile 83 and left his unprotected feet raw and bleeding, still surged back over the rocky trail around Turquoise Lake to finish fifth. The first non-Tarahumara finisher was nearly a full hour behind Victoriano—a distance of roughly six miles.

The Tarahumara hadn't just gone from last to first; they'd done serious damage to the record book in the process. Victoriano was the oldest winner in race history, eighteen-year-old Felipe Torres was

the youngest finisher, and Team Tarahumara was the only squad to ever grab three of the top five spots—even though its two top finishers had a combined age of nearly one hundred.

"It was amazing," a hard-to-amaze participant named Harry Dupree would tell *The New York Times*. After running Leadville twelve times himself, Dupree thought his days of being surprised by anything in the race were over. Then he watched Victoriano and Cerraldo whiz past.

"Here were these little guys wearing sandals who never actually trained for the race. And they blew away some of the best long-distance runners in the world."

"I TOLD YOU!" Rick Fisher crowed.

He was right about something else, too: suddenly, everybody wanted a piece of the Running People. Fisher promised that Team Tarahumara would be back next year, and that was the magic wand that transformed Leadville from a little-known gruelathon into a major media event. ESPN grabbed broadcast rights; *Wide World of Sports* aired a Who-Are-These-Super-Jocks special; Molson beer signed on as a Leadville sponsor. Rockport Shoes even became official backers of the only running team in the world that hated running shoes.

Reporters from *The New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Le Monde*, *Runner's World*, you name it, kept calling Ken with the same question: "Can anyone beat these guys?"

"Yep," Ken replied. "Annie can."

Ann Trason. The thirty-three-year-old community-college science teacher from California. If you said you could spot her in a crowd, you were either her husband or a liar. Ann was sort of short, sort of slender, sort of schlumpy, sort of invisible behind her mousy-brown bangs—sort of what you'd expect, basically, in a community-college science teacher. Until someone fired a gun.

Watching Ann bolt at the start of a race was like watching a mild-mannered reporter yank off his glasses and sling on a crimson cape.

Her chin came up, her hands curled into fists, her hair flowed around her face like a jet stream, the bangs blowing back to reveal glinting brown cougar eyes. In street clothes, Ann is a pinch over five feet; in running shorts, she reconfigures to Brazilian model proportions, all lean legs and ballerina-straight back and sun-browned belly hard enough to break a bat.

Ann had run track in high school, but got sick to death of "hamstering" around and around an artificial oval, as she put it, so she gave it up in college to become a biochemist (which pretty much makes the case for how tedious track was, if periodic tables were more spell-binding). For years, she ran only to keep from going nuts: when her brain got fried from studying, or after she'd graduated and started a demanding research job in San Francisco, Ann would blow out the stress with a quick patter around Golden Gate Park.

"I love to run just to feel the wind in my hair," she'd say. She could care less about races; she was just hooked on the joy of bustin' out of prison. It wasn't long before she began defusing job stress in advance by jogging the nine miles to the lab each morning. And once she realized that her legs were fresh again by punch-out time, she began running back home again as well. Oh, and what the heck; as long as she was racking up eighteen miles a day during the workweek, it was no big deal to unwind on a lazy Saturday with twenty at a pop . . .

... or twenty-five . . .

... or thirty . . .

One Saturday, Ann got up early and ran twenty miles. She relaxed over breakfast, then headed back out for twenty more. She had some plumbing chores around the house, so after finishing run No. 2, she hauled out her toolbox and got to work. By the end of the day, she was pretty pleased with herself; she'd run forty miles and taken care of a messy job on her own. So as a reward, she treated herself to another fifteen miles.

Fifty-five miles in one day. Her friends had to wonder, and worry. Did Ann have an eating disorder? An exercise obsession? Was she fleeing some subconscious Freudian demon by literally running away? "My friends would tell me I'm not addicted to crack, I'm addicted to endorphins," Trason would say, and her comeback didn't much put their minds at ease: she liked to tell them that running huge miles in the mountains was "very romantic."

Gotcha. Grueling, grimy, muddy, bloody, lonely trail-running equals moonlight and champagne.

But yeah, Ann insisted, running *was* romantic; and no, of course her friends didn't get it because they'd never broken through. For them, running was a miserable two miles motivated solely by size 6 jeans: get on the scale, get depressed, get your headphones on, and get it over with. But you can't muscle through a five-hour run that way; you have to relax into it, like easing your body into a hot bath, until it no longer resists the shock and begins to enjoy it.

Relax enough, and your body becomes so familiar with the cradle-rocking rhythm that you almost forget you're moving. And once you break through to that soft, half-levitating flow, that's when the moonlight and champagne show up: "You have to be in tune with your body, and know when you can push it and when to back off," Ann would explain. You have to listen closely to the sound of your own breathing; be aware of how much sweat is beading on your back; make sure to treat yourself to cool water and a salty snack and ask yourself, honestly and often, exactly how you feel. What could be more sensual than paying exquisite attention to your own body? Sensual counted as romantic, right?

Just goofing around, Ann was logging more miles than many serious marathoners, so by 1985, she figured it was time to see how she stacked up against some real runners. Maybe the L.A. Marathon? Yawn; she might as well be back hamstering around behind the high school if she was going to spend three hours circling city blocks. She wanted a race so wild and fun she'd get lost in it, just the way she did with her mountain jaunts.

Now this looks interesting, she thought as she eyed an ad in a local sports magazine. Like Western States, the American River 50-Mile Endurance Run was a horseless horse race, a cross-country ramble over a course previously used for backcountry roughriders. It's hot, hilly, and hazardous. ("Poison oak flourishes along the trail," racers are warned. "You may also encounter horses and rattlesnakes. It is recommended that you yield to both.") Sidestep the fangs and hooves, and you've still got a final punch in the face waiting before you finish: after forty-seven miles of trail-running, you hit a one-thousand-foot climb for the last three miles.

So, to recap: Ann's first race would be a double marathon featuring snakebites and skin eruptions under a sizzling sun. Nope, no risk of boredom there.

And, no big surprise, Ann's ultramarathon debut started miserably. The thermometer was hitting sauna levels, and she was too raw a rookie to realize that maybe carrying a water bottle on a 108-degree day might be a smart idea. She knew zip about pacing (was this thing going to take her seven hours? Ten? Thirteen?) and even less about trail-race tactics (those guys who walked uphill and flew past her on the descents were really starting to piss her off. Run like a man, goddammit!).

But once the jitters wore off, she relaxed into her cradle-rocking stride. Her head came up, those bangs blew back, and she started feeling that jungle-cat confidence. By the thirty-mile mark, dozens of runners were wobbling in the damp heat, feeling as if they were trapped in the middle of a freshly baked muffin. But despite being badly dehydrated, Ann only seemed to get stronger; so strong, in fact, that she beat every other woman in the race and broke the female course record, finishing two back-to-back trail marathons in seven hours and nine minutes.

That shock victory was the beginning of a scorching streak. Ann went on to become the female champion of the Western States 100—the Super Bowl of trail-running—*fourteen times*, a record that spans three decades and makes Lance Armstrong, with his piddlin' little seven Tour de France wins, look like a flash in the pan. And a pampered flash in the pan, at that: Lance never pedaled a stroke without a team of experts at his elbow to monitor his caloric intake and transmit microsecond split analyses into his earbud, while Ann only had her husband, Carl, waiting in the woods with a Timex and half a turkey sandwich.

And unlike Lance, who trained and peaked for a single event every year, Ann was a girl gone wild for competition. During one stretch, she averaged an ultramarathon every other month *for four years*. Such a relentless battering should have wasted her, but Ann had the recovery powers of a mutant superhero; she seemed to recharge on the move, getting stronger when she should have been wilting. She got faster with every month, and came within a flu shot of a perfect record: she won twenty races over those four years, only

dropping to second place the time she ran a sixty-miler when she should have been on the sofa with Kleenex and Cup-a-Soup.

Of course, there was a weak spot in her armor. There had to be. Except . . . no one could ever find it. Ann was like a circus强man who fights the toughest guy in any town: she won on roads and trails . . . on smooth tracks and scabbly mountains . . . in America, Europe, and Africa. She smashed world records at 50 miles, 100 kilometers, and 100 miles, and set ten more world bests on both track and road. She qualified for the Olympic Marathon Trials, ran 6:44 a mile for 62 miles to win the World Ultra Title, and then won Western States and Leadville in the same month.

But one prize kept slipping out of her fingers: for years, Ann could never win a major ultra outright. She'd beaten every man and woman in the field in plenty of smaller races, but when it came to the top showdowns, at least one man had always beaten her by a few minutes. No more. By 1994, she knew her time had come.

that she'd be at Leadville. Instead of asking whether the Tarahumara would win, they were now wondering whether Rick Fisher's team would be humiliated—again. “The Tarahumara consider it shameful to lose to a woman,” article after article repeated. It was an irresistible story: the shy science teacher heading bravely into the Rockies to battle the macho Mexican tribesmen and anyone else, male or female, who got between her and the tape in one of the sport's premier events.

Of course, there was one way Fisher could ease the media pressure on Team Tarahumara: he could shut up. No one had ever mentioned Tarahumara machismo until Fisher began telling reporters about it. “They don’t lose to women,” he said. “And they don’t plan to start now.” It was a fascinating revelation—especially to the Tarahumara, who wouldn’t have known what he was talking about.

The Tarahumara are actually an extraordinarily egalitarian society; men are gentle and respectful to women, and are commonly seen totting infants around on the small of their backs, just like their wives. Men and women race separately, that’s true, but mostly for logistical reasons: moms with a passel of younguns to look after aren’t free to spend two days traipsing across the canyons. They’ve got to stay close to home, so their races tend to be short (by Tarahumara standards, “short” clocks in at forty to sixty miles). Women are still respected as crackerjack runners, and often serve as the *chō’kéame*—a combination team captain and chief bookee—when the men race. Compared with NFL-revering American guys, Tarahumara men are Lilith Fair fans.

Fisher had already been embarrassed once when his entire team had crapped out. Now, thanks to his own mistake, he found himself in the spotlight of a nationally televised Battle of the Sexes that, quite likely, he was going to lose. Ann’s best time at Leadville two years before was only thirty minutes behind Victoriano’s 20:03, and she’d improved phenomenally since then. Look at Western States; she’d gotten ninety minutes faster in the space of just one year. There was no telling what she’d do when she came roaring into Leadville with a score to settle.

Plus, Ann was holding all the aces: Victoriano and Cerrillo weren’t coming back this year (they had corn to plant and had no time for another fun run), so Fisher had lost his two best racers.

THE WEIRDNESS STARTED as soon as Rick Fisher’s dusty Chevy rolled to a stop outside Leadville race headquarters and two guys in white wizard capes stepped out.

“Hey!” Ken Chloubert called as he came outside to greet them. “The speed demons are here!” Ken stuck out his hand and tried to remember the phonetics for “welcome” that the Spanish teacher over at the high school had taught him.

“Uh . . . Bee en benny—,” he began.

One of the guys in the capes smiled and put out his hand. Suddenly, Fisher shoved his body between them.

“No!” Fisher said. “You must not touch them in a controlling way, or you’ll pay. In their culture that’s considered criminal assault.”

What the—Ken could feel the blood swelling in his head. You want to see some criminal assault, buddy? Try grabbing my arm again. Fisher sure as hell never had a handshake problem when he was begging Ken to find his guys free housing. So what, now he’s got a winner and a pocketful of Rockport sponsorship money and everyone’s supposed to treat them like royalty? Ken was ready to drive a steel toe up Fisher’s tail, but then he thought of something that made him exhale, relax, and chalk it up to nerves.

Annie must really be making him edgy, Ken thought. Especially the way the media is playing this thing.

The news stories had shifted dramatically since Ann confirmed

Ann had won Leadville twice before, so unlike whatever newcomers Fisher had drafted, she had the huge advantage of knowing every bewildering twist in the trail. Miss one marker at Leadville, and you could wander in the dark for miles before getting back on course.

Ann also acclimated effortlessly to high altitude, and knew better than anyone alive how to analyze and attack the logistical problems of a one-hundred-mile footrace. At its essence, an ultra is a binary equation made up of hundreds of yes/no questions: Eat now or wait? Bomb down this hill, or throttle back and save the quads for the flats? Find out what is itching in your sock, or push on? Extreme distance magnifies every problem (a blister becomes a blood-soaked sock, a declined PowerBar becomes a woozy inability to follow trail markers), so all it takes is one wrong answer to ruin a race. But not for honor-student Ann; when it came to ultras, she always aced her quizzes.

In short: thumbs up to the Tarahumara for being amazing amateurs, but this time, they were meeting the top pro in the business (literally; Ann was now a hired gun backed by Nike money). The Tarahumara had their brief, shining moment as Leadville champions; now they were coming back as underdogs.

Which explained the guys in the wizard capes.

Desperate to replace his two missing veterans, Fisher had followed Patrocinio up a nine-thousand-foot climb to the mountaintop village of Choguita. There, he found Martimano Cervantes, a forty-two-year-old master of the ball game, and his protégé, twenty-five-year-old Juan Herrera. Choguita is bitterly cold at night and sun-scorched by day; so even when running, the Choguita Tarahumara protect themselves with fine woolen ponchos that hang nearly to their feet. As they fly down the trail, capes flowing around them, they look like magicians appearing from a puff of smoke.

Juan and Martimano were doubtful. They'd never left their village before, and this sounded like a long time alone among the Bearded Devils. Fisher cut right through their objections; he had cash and was ready to talk turkey. It had been a dry winter and worse spring in the Choguita highlands, and he knew food supplies were dangerously low. "Come race with us," Fisher promised them, "and I'll give your village one ton of corn and a half ton of beans."

Hmm. Fifty bags of corn wasn't a lot for a village . . . but at least it was guaranteed. Maybe if they had some companionship, it would be okay.

We have other runners here who are also very fast, they told Fisher. Can some of them come?

No dice, Fisher replied. Just you two.

Secretly, the Pescador was working on a little social-engineering scheme: by taking runners from as many different villages as possible, he hoped to pit the Tarahumara against each other. *Let them tear after each other; he figured, and win Leadville in the bargain.* It was a shrewd plan—and totally misguided. If Fisher had known more about Tarahumara culture, he'd have understood that racing doesn't divide villages; it *unites* them. It's a way for distant tribesmen to tighten the bonds of kinship and buddyhood, and make sure everyone in the canyon is in fine enough fettle to come through in an emergency. Sure it's competitive, but so is family touch football on Thanksgiving morning. The Tarahumara saw racing as a festival of friendship; Fisher saw a battlefield.

Men versus women, village versus village, race director versus race team manager—within minutes of arriving in Leadville, Fisher had storms brewing on three fronts. And then he really got down to business.

"Hey, okay if we take a picture together?" a Leadville runner asked when he spotted the Tarahumara in town before the race.

"Sure," Fisher replied. "You got twenty bucks?"

"For what?" the startled runner asked.

For crimes against humanity. For the fact that "white guys" had taken advantage of the Tarahumara and other indigenous people for centuries, Fisher would explain. And if you don't like it, too bad: "I couldn't care less about the ultra community," Fisher would say. "I don't care about white people. I like for the Tarahumara to kick white butt."

White butt? Must have been a while since Fisher swiveled around for a look at his own behind. And what was he here for, anyway: a race, or a race war?

No one could chat with the Tarahumara, or even pat them on the back and say "Good luck," without the Pescador forcing his way

between them. Even Ann Trason found a wall of hostility facing her. “Rick kept the Tarahumara unnecessarily secluded,” she would later complain. “He wouldn’t even let us talk to them.”

The Rockport executives were bewildered. They’d just launched a trail-running shoe, and the whole marketing campaign was based around the Leadville race. The shoe was even *named* the Leadville Racer. When Rick Fisher called them for sponsorship (“Keep in mind, he came to *us*,” then Rockport vice president Tony Post told me), Rockport made it clear that the Tarahumara would be a big part of the promos. Rockport would kick in cash, and in return, the Tarahumara would wear the banana-yellow shoes, work the crowd, appear in some ads. Was that cool?

Totally, Fisher promised.

“Then I get to Leadville and meet this strange guy,” Tony Post went on. “He seemed like an inconsolable hothead. That was the contradiction. Here you had these really gentle people, being managed by the worst of American culture. It was like . . .” Post paused to reflect, and in the silence you could almost hear the realization dawning and forming in his mind. “It’s like he was jealous they were the ones getting all the attention.”

And so, with battles brewing all around them, the Tarahumara snuffed out their cigarettes and edged in awkwardly beside the other runners in front of Leadville’s courthouse, same place they used to hang the horse thieves. Among the hugs and handshakes, the we-who-are-about-to-die camaraderie shared by the other runners during the final countdown, the Tarahumara looked lonely and alone.

Manuel Luna’s genial smile disappeared and his face hardened into oak. Juan Herrera adjusted his Rockport cap and shifted his feet in his new \$110 screaming-yellow Rockports with the thick hiking-boot sole. Martimano Cervantes huddled inside his cape in the freezing Rocky Mountain night. Ann Trason stepped in front of all of them, shook herself loose, and stared into the darkness ahead.

CHAPTER 13



He who loves his body more than
dominion over the empire
can be given custody of the empire.

—LÀO TZU, *Tao Te Ching*

DR. JOE VIGIL, a sixty-five-year-old army of one, warmed his hands around his coffee as he waited for the first flashlight beams to come stabbing toward him through the woods.

No other elite coach in the world was anywhere near Leadville, because no other elite coach could give a hoot what was going on at that giant outdoor insane asylum in the Rockies. Self-mutilators, mean mothermuckers or whatever they called themselves—what did they have to do with real running? With *Olympic* running? As a sport, most track coaches ranked ultras somewhere between competitive eating and recreational S&M.

Super, Vigil thought, as he stomped his feet against the chill. *Go ahead and sleep, and leave the freaks to me*—because he knew the freaks were onto something.

The secret to Vigil’s success was spelled out right in his name: no other coach was more vigilant about detecting the crucial little details that everyone else missed. He’d been that way his entire competitive life, ever since he was a puny Latino kid trying to play high-school football in a conference that didn’t have many Latinos, let alone puny ones. Joey Vigil couldn’t outmuscle the meat slabs on the other side of the line, so he out-scienced them; he studied the tricks



of leverage, propulsion, and timing, figuring out ways to position his feet so he popped up from a crouch like a spring-loaded anvil. By the time he graduated from college, the puny Latino kid was a first-team All-Conference guard. He then turned to track, and used that tireless bloodhound nose to become the greatest distance-running mind America has ever seen.

Besides his Ph.D. and two master's degrees, Vigil's pursuit of the lost art of distance running had taken him deep into the Russian outback, high into the mountains of Peru, and far across Kenya's Rift Valley highlands. He'd wanted to learn why Russian sprinters are forbidden to run a single step in training until they can jump off a twenty-foot ladder in their bare feet, and how sixty-year-old goatherds at Machu Picchu can possibly scale the Andes on a starvation diet of yogurt and herbs, and how Japanese runners trained by Suzuki-san and Koide-san could mysteriously alchemize slow walking into fast marathons. He'd tracked down the old masters and picked their brains, vacuuming up their secrets before they disappeared into the grave. His head was a Library of Congress of running lore, much of it vanished from every place on the planet except his memory.

His research paid off sensationally. At his alma mater, Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado, Vigil took over the dying cross-country program and engineered it into an absolute terror. Adams State harriers won twenty-six national titles in thirty-three years, including the most awe-inspiring show of strength ever displayed in a national championship race: in 1992, Vigil's runners took the first five places in the NCAA Division II Championship meet, scoring the only shutout ever achieved at a national championship. Vigil also guided Pat Porter to *eight* U.S.A. Cross Country titles (twice as many as Olympic marathon gold medalist Frank Shorter, four times as many as silver medalist Meb Keflezighi), and was named College National Coach of the Year a record fourteen times. In 1988, Vigil was appointed the distance coach for American runners heading to the Seoul Olympics.

And that explained why, at that moment, old Joe Vigil was the only coach in America shivering in a freezing forest at four in the morning, waiting for a glimpse of a community-college science teacher and seven men in dresses. See, nothing about ultrarunning

added up; and when Vigil couldn't do the math, he knew he was missing something big.

Take this equation: how come nearly all the women finish Leadville and fewer than half the men do? Every year, more than 90 percent of the female runners come home with a buckle, while 50 percent of the men come up with an excuse. Not even Ken Chlouber can explain the sky-high female finishing rate, but he can damn well exploit it: "All my pacers are women," Chlouber says. "They get the job done."

Or try this word problem: subtract the Tarahumara from last year's race, and what do you get?

Answer: a woman lunging for the tape.

In all the hubbub over the Tarahumara, few besides Vigil paid much attention to the remarkable fact that Christine Gibbons was just nosed out for third place. If Rick Fisher's van had blown a fan belt in Arizona, a woman would have been thirty-one seconds from winning the whole show.

How was that possible? No woman ranked among the top fifty in the world in the mile (the female world record for the mile, 4:12, was achieved a century ago by men and rather routinely now by high school boys). A woman *might* sneak into the top twenty in a marathon (in 2003, Paula Radcliffe's world-best 2:15:25 was just ten minutes off Paul Tergat's 2:04:55 men's record). But in ultras, women were taking home the hardware. Why, Vigil wondered, did the gap between male and female champions get smaller as the race got *longer*—shouldn't it be the other way around?

Ultrarunning seemed to be an alternative universe where none of planet Earth's rules applied: women were stronger than men; old men were stronger than youngsters; Stone Age guys in sandals were stronger than everybody. And the *mileage*! The sheer stress on their legs was off the charts. Running one hundred miles a week was supposed to be a straight shot to a stress injury, yet the ultrafreaks were doing one hundred miles in a day. Some of them were doing double that every week in training and still not getting hurt. Was ultrarunning self-selective, Vigil wondered—did it attract only runners with unbreakable bodies? Or had ultrarunners discovered the secret to megamileage?

So Joe Vigil had hauled himself stiffly out of bed, tossed a thermos

of coffee in his car, and driven through the night to watch the body geniuses do their thing. The best ultrarunners in the world, he suspected, were on the verge of rediscovering secrets that the Tarahumara had never forgotten. Vigil's theory had brought him to the brink of a very important decision, one that would change his life and, he hoped, millions of others. He just needed to see the Tarahumara in person to verify one thing. It wasn't their speed; he probably knew more about their legs than they did. What Vigil was dying for was a look inside their heads.

Suddenly, he caught his breath. Something had just come floating out of the trees. Something that looked like ghosts . . . or magicians, appearing from a puff of smoke.

Right from the gun, Team Tarahumara caught everyone by surprise. Instead of hanging back as they had the last two years, they surged in a pack, hopping up on the Sixth Street sidewalk to patter around the crowd and take command of the front-running positions.

They were moving out fast—*Much too fast, it seemed*, thought Don Kardong, the 1976 Olympic marathoner and veteran *Runner's World* writer watching from the sidelines. Last year, Victoriano had shown shrewd restraint by steadily climbing along from last to first, gradually getting faster as he got closer to the finish line. *That's how you run one hundred miles.*

But Manuel Luna had spent a year reflecting on gringo-style racing, and he'd done a nice job of briefing his new teammates. The course is wide open under the streetlights, he told them, then suddenly funnels onto a dark single-track trail as it enters the woods. If you're not up front, you hit a solid wall of bodies as runners pause to fumble with flashlights and then caterpillar along in single file. Better to move out early and avoid the jam-up, Luna advised them, then ease back later.

Despite the dangerous pace, Johnny Sandoval of nearby Gypsum, Colorado, stuck tight with Martimano Cervantes and Juan Herrera. *Let everyone go nuts over Ann and the Tarahumara*, he thought, *while I stealth myself to a trophy*. After finishing ninth the previous year in 2:45, Sandoval had the best training year of his life. Quietly, he'd been coming to Leadville throughout the summer, running each segment of the course over and over until he'd memorized every twist,

quirk, and creek crossing. A nineteen-hour run should win it, Sandoval figured, and he was ready to run one.

Ann Trason had expected to be in front, but an eight-minute mile right out of the box was just nuts. So she contented herself with staying within sight of Team Tarahumara's bobbing flashlights as they entered the woods around Turquoise Lake, confident she'd reel them in soon enough. The trail ahead was dark and knotted with rocks and roots, and that played to one of Ann's peculiar strengths: she absolutely loved night runs. Even back in college, midnight was her favorite time to grab a flashlight and a friend and trot through the silent campus, the world reduced to glitters and sparkles in a tiny orb of light. If anyone could make up time running blindly on a treacherous trail, it was Ann.

But by the first aid station, Sandoval and the Tarahumara had opened a good half-mile lead. Sandoval checked in, got his split—about 1:55 for 13.5 miles—and shot right back on the trail. The Tarahumara, however, veered into the parking lot and ran over to Rick Fisher's van. They began kicking off their yellow Rockports like they were crawling with fire ants. Rick and Kitty, as planned, were already standing by with their huaraches. So much for product endorsement.

The Tarahumara knelt, looping the leather thong around and around their ankles and high up on their calves, adjusting the tautness as carefully as you'd tune a guitar string. It's a fine art, custom-fitting a strip of rubber to the bottom of your foot with a single lash of leather so it doesn't shift or flop for eighty-seven miles of gritty, rocky trail. Then they were up and gone, hard on Johnny Sandoval's heels. By the time Ann Trason arrived at the aid station, Martimano Cervantes and Juan Herrera were out of sight.

Sick pace, Sandoval thought, as he shot a glance over his shoulder. Anyone tell these guys it had been raining here for the past two weeks? Sandoval knew they were heading straight into a world of slop around the Twin Lakes marshes and down the muddy back end of Hope Pass. The Arkansas River would be a roaring mess; they'd have to haul themselves hand over hand along a safety rope to cross, and then claw their way two thousand feet to the top of Hope Pass. Then spin around and do the same again coming home.

Okay, this is suicide, Sandoval decided after he came through mile

23.5 in three hours and twenty minutes. *I'll save my strength and cram those guys when their tires go flat.* He let Martimano Cervantes and Juan Herrera go—and almost immediately, he was passed by Ann Trason. *Where the hell did she come from?* Ann should know better; this was crash-and-burn speed.

At the thirty-mile mark in Half Moon campground, Martimano and Juan were ready for breakfast. Kitty Williams slapped thin bean burritos into their hands. They ran on, chomping contentedly, and were soon swallowed up by the thick woods around Mount Elbert.

Ann raced in a few minutes later, pissed off and shouting. “Where’s Carl? *Where the hell is he?*” It was now 8:20 in the morning and she was ready to shuck weight by dumping her headlamp and jacket. But she was so far under record pace, her husband hadn’t yet made it to the aid station.

To hell with him; Ann kept her night gear, and disappeared on the trail of the invisible Tarahumara.

At mile 40, the crowd milled around the ancient wood firehouse in the tiny cabin village of Twin Lakes, checking their watches. The first runners probably wouldn’t show up for another, oh, about—“There she is!”

Ann had just crested the hill. Last year, it took Victoriano seven hours and twelve minutes to get this far; Ann had done it in less than six. “No woman has ever led at this point in the race before,” said an incredulous Scott Tinley, the two-time world champion Ironman triathlete who was doing TV commentary for ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*. “We’re witnessing the most incredible demonstration of raw courage in sports today.”

Less than a minute later, Martimano and Juan popped out of the woods and came scrambling down the hill behind her. Tony Post of Rockport was so swept up in the drama, he didn’t care for the moment that his boys were not only losing but had also shit-canned the shoes he was paying them to wear. “It was the most amazing thing,” said Post, once a nationally ranked marathoner himself, with times in the low 2:20s. “We were just flipping out, watching this woman take control.”

Luckily, Ann’s husband was in position this time. He got a banana into Ann’s hands, then ushered her into the little firehouse for her

medical exam. All Leadville runners need to have their pulse and weight checked at the forty-mile mark, because shedding pounds too quickly is an early warning sign of dangerous dehydration. Only with Doc Perna’s okay are they cleared to plunge into the meat grinder ahead: there, looming across the marsh, was the twenty-six-hundred-foot climb to the top of Hope Pass.

Ann munched the banana while a nurse named Cindy Corbin adjusted the scale. A moment later, Martimano stepped up on the scale beside Ann.

“*¿Cómo estás?*” Kitty Williams asked Martimano, laying an encouraging hand on his back. How are you feeling after nearly six straight hours of high-altitude hill running at impossibly fast speed? “Ask him how it feels to get beat by a woman,” Ann called out. Nervous laughter rippled through the room, but Ann wasn’t smiling; she glared at Martimano as if she were a black belt and he was a stack of bricks. Kitty shot her an appalled look, but Ann ignored it and kept her eyes locked on Martimano. Martimano turned questioningly toward Kitty, but Kitty chose not to translate. In all her years of running ultras and pacing them for her dad, it was the first time Kitty had ever heard one runner taunt another.

Despite what most people in the room heard, a video of the incident would later suggest that what Ann actually said was, “Ask him how it feels to compete with a woman.” But while her exact words were debatable, her attitude was unmistakable: Ann didn’t just win by running hard; she won by *racing* hard. This thing was going to be a death match.

As Martimano got off the scale, Ann pushed past him and hurried out the door. She slung on her fanny pack—freshly loaded with carbohydrate gel, gloves, and a slicker in case she hit sleet or freezing winds above the timberline—and began trotting down the road toward the snow-capped mountain. She was out there so fast, Martimano and Juan were still biting into slices of orange while Ann was heading around the corner and out of sight.

What was wrong with her? The trash talk, the hasty exit—Ann didn’t even take time to slip on a dry shirt and socks, or get a few more calories down her neck. And why was she even in the lead at all? Mile 40 was only round one of a very long fight. Once you jump ahead, you’re vulnerable; you surrender all element of surprise, and

become a prisoner of your own pace. Even middle-school milers know that the smart tactic is to sit on the leader's shoulder, go only as fast as you have to, then jam 'er into gear and blow past on the bell lap.

Classic example: Steve Prefontaine. Pre came out too quickly *twice* in the same race in the '72 Olympics; both times, he was chased down. By the home stretch, Pre had nothing left and faded out of the medals to fourth. That historic defeat pounded home the lesson: nobody gives up the pursuit position if they don't have to. Not unless you're foolish, or reckless—or Garry Kasparov.

In the 1990 World Chess Championship, Kasparov made a horrible mistake and lost his queen right at the start of a decisive game. Chess grand masters around the world let out a pained groan; the bad boy of the chessboard was now road kill (a less-gracious observer for *The New York Times* visibly sneered). Except it wasn't a mistake; Kasparov had deliberately sacrificed his most powerful piece in exchange for an even more powerful psychological advantage. He was deadliest when swashbuckling, when he was chased into a corner and had to slash, scramble, and improvise his way out. Anatoly Karпов, his by-the-book opponent, was too conservative to pressure Kasparov early in the game, so Kasparov put the pressure on himself with a Queen's Gambit—and won.

That's what Ann was doing. Instead of hunting the Tarahumara, she'd hit on the risky, inspired strategy of letting the Tarahumara hunt her. Who's more committed to winning, after all: predator or prey? The lion can lose and come back to hunt another day, but the antelope gets only one mistake. To defeat the Tarahumara, Ann knew she needed more than willpower: she needed fear. Once she was out front, every cracking twig would spur her toward the finish.

"To move into the lead means making an act requiring fierceness and confidence," Roger Bannister once noted. "But fear must play some part . . . no relaxation is possible, and all discretion is thrown to the wind."

Ann had fierceness and confidence to burn. Now she was deep-sixing discretion and letting fear play its part. Ultrarunning was about to see its first Queen's Gambit.



SHE'S INSANE! She's . . . awesome.

Coach Vigil was a hard-data freak, but as he watched Ann plunge into the Rockies with her ballsy do-or-die game plan, he loved the fact that ultrarunning had no science, no playbook, no training manual, no conventional wisdom. That kind of freewheeling self-invention is where big breakthroughs come from, as Vigil knew (and Columbus, the Beatles, and Bill Gates would happily agree). Ann Trason and her compadres were like mad scientists messing with beakers in the basement lab, ignored by the rest of the sport and free to defy every known principle of footwear, food, biomechanics, training intensity . . . *everything*.

And whatever breakthroughs they came up with, they'd be legit. With ultrarunners, Vigil had the refreshing peace of mind of dealing with pure lab specimens. He wasn't being hoodwinked by a phony superperformance, like the "miraculous" endurance of Tour de France cyclists, or the gargantuan power of suddenly melon-headed home-run hitters, or the blazing speed of female sprinters who win five medals in one Olympics before going to jail for lying to the feds about steroids. "Even the brightest smile," one observer would say of disgraced wondergirl Marion Jones, "can hide a lie."

So whose could you trust? Easy; the smiles on the oddballs in the woods.

Ultrarunners had no reason to cheat, because they had nothing to

gain: no fame, no wealth, no medals. No one knew who they were, or cared who won their strange rambles through the woods. They didn't even get prize money; all you get for winning an ultra is the same belt buckle as the guy who comes in last. So, as a scientist, Vigil could rely on the data from an ultramarathon; as a fan, he could enjoy the show without scorn or skepticism. There's no EPO in Ann Trason's blood, no smuggled blood in her fridge, no ampules of Eastern European anabolics on her FedEx account.

Vigil knew that if he could understand Ann Trason, he'd grasp what one amazing person could do. But if he could understand the Tarahumara, he'd know what *everyone* could do.

Ann sucked air with deep, shuddering gasps. The final push up Hope Pass was agony, but she kept reminding herself that ever since the time Carl cursed her out, no one had beaten her on a big climb. About two years earlier, she and Carl were running on a rainy day when Ann began grousing about the endless, slippery hill ahead. Carl got tired of hearing her kvetch, so he blistered her with the most obscene name he could think of.

"A wimp!" Ann would later say. "The big W! Right then, I decided I was going to work to be a better hill climber than he was." Not only better than Carl, but better than everybody; Ann developed into such a relentless mountain goat that hills became her favorite place to drop the hammer and leave the competition behind.

But now, as she approached the Hope Pass peak, she could glance back and see Martimano and Juan steadily closing the gap, looking as light and breezy as the capes that swirled around them.

"God," Ann panted. She was so hunched over, she could almost pull herself up the slope with her hands. "I don't know how they do it."

A little farther down the mountain, Manuel Luna and the rest of Team Tarahumara were also catching up. They'd gotten scattered in the early miles by the startlingly fast pace, but now—like an alien protoplasm that re-forms and gets stronger every time you blast it to bits—they were tightening back into a pack behind Manuel Luna.

"God!" Ann exclaimed again.

She finally reached the peak. The view was spectacular; if Ann turned around, she could see all forty-five miles of tumbling green wilderness between her and Leadville. But she didn't even pause for a

slurp of water. She had an ace in her hand, and she had to play it now. She was woozy from the thin air and her hamstrings were screaming, but Ann pushed straight over the top and started chop-stepping downhill.

This was a Trason specialty: using terrain to recharge on the move. After a steep first drop, the backside descent quickly softens into long, gently sloped switchbacks, so Ann could lean back, make her legs go limp, and let gravity do the work. After a bit, she could feel the knots easing in her calves and the strength creeping back into her thighs. By the time she reached bottom, her head was up and the glint was back in her cougar eyes.

Time to fire the jets. Ann veered off the muddy trail and onto hard-packed road, her legs spinning fast and loose from the hip as she accelerated into the last three miles to the turnaround. Juan and Martimano, meanwhile, had gotten a little sidetracked. As soon as they'd broken past the tree line above, they were startled to see a giant herd of strange, woolly beasts—and among them, some animals. "SOUP'S ON, FELLAS," a hoarse voice bellowed to the uncomprehending Tarahumara from somewhere inside the herd. The Tarahumara had just made first contact with another wilderness tribe: the Hopeless Crew.

Twelve years earlier, Ken Chlouber had mustered enough of his neighbors to staff a good half-dozen aid stations, but he refused to put anyone at the top of Hope Pass; even the tough-guy miner who delighted in his race's high hospitalization rate considered that inhume. A volunteer on Hope Pass would have to haul enough supplies up the mountain to feed, water, and bandage an endless parade of battered runners, and then camp out for two nights on a snowy peak with gale-force gusts. Nothin' doin'; if Ken sent anyone up there, he'd have hell to pay when they didn't come back down.

Luckily, a group of Leadville llama farmers shrugged and said, Eh, what the hell. Sounded like a party. They loaded their llamas with enough food and booze to make it through the weekend, and hammered in tent stakes at 12,600 feet. Since then, the Hopeless Crew has grown into an army eighty-some strong of llama owners and friends. For two days, they endure fierce winds and frostbitten fingers while dispensing first aid and hot soup, packing injured runners out by llama and partying in between like a tribe of amiable

yets. "Hope Pass is a bad son of a bitch on a *good* day," Ken says. "If it weren't for those llamas, we'd have lost a good many lives." Juan and Martimano shyly returned high fives as they jogged through the raucous Hopeless Gauntlet. They stopped to drink in the sight of the weird gypsy camp (as well as cups of some really tasty noodle soup someone shoved into their hands), then began quickly stepping down the back side of the mountain. Ann was nowhere to be seen.

Ann hit the fifty-mile mark at 12:05 p.m., nearly two hours ahead of Victoriano's time from the previous year. Carl loaded her up with sports drink and Cytomax carbohydrate gel, then snapped on his own fanny pack and gave his shoelaces a tug. According to Leadville rules, a "mule" can run alongside a racer for the last fifty miles, which meant Ann would now have a personal pit crew by her side all the way to the finish.

A good pacer is a huge help during an ultra, and Ann had one of the best: not only was Carl fast enough to push her, but experienced enough to take over if Ann's brain fried out. After twenty or so hours of nonstop running, an ultrarunner can get too mind numb to replace flashlight batteries, or comprehend trail markers, or even, in the unfortunate true case of a Badwater runner in 2005, distinguish between an imminent bowel movement and an occurring one.

And those are the runners who are really keeping it together. Hallucinations are no strangers to the rest; one ultrarunner kept screaming and leaping into the woods whenever he saw a flashlight, convinced it was an oncoming train. One runner enjoyed the company of a smokin' young hottie in a silver bikini who Rollerbladed by his side for miles across Death Valley until, to his regret, she dissolved into heat shimmers. Six out of twenty Badwater runners reported hallucinations that year, including one who saw rotting corpses along the road and "mutant mice monsters" crawling over the asphalt. One pacer got a little freaked out after she saw her runner stare into space for a while and then tell the empty air, "I know you're not real."

A tough pacer, consequently, can save your race; a sharp one can save your life. Too bad for Martimano, then, that the best he could hope for was that the shaggy goofball he'd met in town would actually show up—and could actually run.

The night before, Rick Fisher had brought the Tarahumara to a prerace spaghetti dinner at the Leadville VFW hall to see if he could recruit a few pacers. It wouldn't be easy; pacing is so grueling and thankless, usually only family, fools, and damn good friends let themselves get talked into it. The job means shivering in the middle of nowhere for hours until your runner shows up, then setting off at sunset for an all-night run through wind-whistling mountains. You'll get blood on your shins, vomit on your shoes, and not even a T-shirt for completing two marathons in a single night. Other job requirements can include staying awake while your runner catches a nap in the mud; popping a blood blister between her butt cheeks with your fingernails; and surrendering your jacket, even though your teeth are chattering, because her lips have gone blue.

At the spaghetti dinner, Martimano locked eyes with some long-haired local who, for some bizarre reason, immediately began cracking up. Martimano started laughing, too; he found the shaggy guy totally cool and hilarious. "It's you and me, brother," Shaggy said. "You follow? *Tú* and *yo*. If you want a mule, I'm your man." "Whoa, whoa, hang on," Fisher interjected. "You sure you're fast enough for these guys?" "You're not doing me any favor," Shaggy shrugged. "Who else you got lined up?"

"Yeah," Fisher said. "Okay, then."

And just as he'd promised, Shaggy was hollering and waving by the aid station the next afternoon when Juan and Martimano came running into the fifty-mile turnaround. They took a long, cool drink of water and grabbed some *pinoles* and thin bean burritos from Kitty Williams. Rick Fisher had also roped in another pacer, an elite ultrarunner from San Diego who'd been a longtime student of Tarahumara lore. The four runners traded Tarahumara handshakes—that soft caressing of fingertip—and turned toward Hope Pass. Ann was already out of sight.

"Saddle up, guys," Shaggy said. "Let's go get the *brija*." Juan and Martimano barely understood anything the guy said, but they caught that all right: Shaggy was calling Ann a witch. They looked closely to see if he was serious, decided he wasn't, and started laughing. This guy was going to be a kick.

"Yeah, she's a *brija*, but that's cool," Shaggy went on. "We've got

stronger mojo. You understand that, mojo? No? Doesn't matter. We're gonna run the *bryja* down like a deer. Like a *venado*. Yeah, a *venado*. Got it? We're gonna run the *bryja* down like a *venado*. *Poco a poco*—little bit at a time."

But the *bryja* wasn't backing off. By the time she summited Hope Pass for the second time, Ann had widened her lead from four minutes to seven. "I was heading up Hope Pass, and she just blew by me going the other direction—*vrrro-o-o-on*!" a Leadville runner named Glen Vaassen later told *Runner's World*. "She was *cruisin'*."

She threaded her way to the bottom of the switchbacks and plunged back through the Arkansas River, fighting to keep from being swept downstream in the waist-deep water. It was 2:31 p.m. when she and Carl arrived back at the Twin Lakes fire station at mile 60. Ann checked in, got her medical clearance, and trudged up the twenty-foot dirt ramp to the trailhead. By the time Shaggy and the Tarahumara arrived, Ann had been gone for twelve minutes.

Coincidentally, Ken Chloubter was just arriving at the Twin Lakes aid station heading outbound when Juan and Martimano came through on their return trip. Everyone in the firehouse was buzzing about Ann's record pace and ever-growing lead, but as Ken watched Juan and Martimano exit the firehouse, he was struck by something else: when they hit the dirt ramp, they hit it laughing.

"Everybody else walks that hill," Chloubter thought, as Juan and Martimano churned up the slope like kids playing in a leaf pile. "Everybody. And they sure as hell ain't laughin' about it."



The flesh about my body felt soft and relaxed, like an experiment in functional background music.

—RICHARD BRAUTIGAN, *Trout Fishing in America*

"SUCH A SENSE of joy!" marveled Coach Vigil, who'd never seen anything like it, either. "It was quite remarkable." Glee and determination are usually antagonistic emotions, yet the Tarahumara were brimming with both at once, as if running to the death made them feel more alive.

Vigil had been furiously taking mental notes (*Look how they point their toes down, not up, like Gymnasts doing the floor exercise. And their backs! They could carry water buckets on their heads without spilling a drop! How many years have I been telling my kids to straighten up and run from the gut like that?*). But it was the smiles that really jolted him.

That's it! Vigil thought, ecstatic. *I found it!*

Except he wasn't sure what "it" was. The revelation he'd been hoping for was right in front of his eyes, but he couldn't quite grasp it; he could only catch the glim around the edges, like spotting the cover of a rare book in a candlelit library. But whatever "it" was, he knew it was exactly what he was looking for.

Over the previous few years, Vigil had become convinced that the next leap forward in human endurance would come from a dimension he dreaded getting into: character. Not the "character" other coaches were always rah-rah-ing about; Vigil wasn't talking about "grit" or "hunger" or "the size of the fight in the dog." In fact,

he meant the exact opposite. Vigil's notion of character wasn't toughness. It was compassion. Kindness. Love.

That's right: love.

Vigil knew it sounded like hippie-dippy drivel, and make no mistake, he'd have been much happier sticking to good, hard, quantifiable stuff like VO₂ max and periodized-training tables. But after spending nearly fifty years researching performance physiology, Vigil had reached the uncomfortable conclusion that all the easy questions had been answered; he was now learning more and more about less and less. He could tell you exactly how much of a head start Kenyan teenagers had over Americans (eighteen thousand miles run in training). He'd discovered why those Russian sprinters were leaping off ladders (besides strengthening lateral muscles, the trauma teaches nerves to fire more rapidly, which decreases the odds of training injuries). He'd parsed the secret of the Peruvian peasant diet (high altitude has a curious effect on metabolism), and he could talk for hours about the impact of a single percentage point in oxygen-consumption efficiency.

He'd figured out the body, so now it was on to the brain. Specifically: How do you make anyone actually want to do any of this stuff? How do you flip the internal switch that changes us all back into the Natural Born Runners we once were? Not just in history, but in our own lifetimes. Remember? Back when you were a kid and you had to be yelled at to slow down? Every game you played, you played at top speed, sprinting like crazy as you kicked cans, freed all, and attacked jungle outposts in your neighbors' backyards. Half the fun of doing anything was doing it at record pace, making it probably the last time in your life you'd ever be hassled for going too fast.

That was the real secret of the Tarahumara: they'd never forgotten what it felt like to love running. They remembered that running was mankind's first fine art, our original act of inspired creation. Way before we were scratching pictures on caves or beating rhythms on hollow trees, we were perfecting the art of combining our breath and mind and muscles into fluid self-propulsion over wild terrain. And when our ancestors finally did make their first cave paintings, what were the first designs? A downward slash, lightning bolts through the bottom and middle—behold, the Running Man.

Distance running was revered because it was indispensable; it was

the way we survived and thrived and spread across the planet. You ran to eat and to avoid being eaten; you ran to find a mate and impress her, and with her you ran off to start a new life together. You had to love running, or you wouldn't live to love anything else. And like everything else we love—everything we sentimentally call our “passions” and “desires”—it's really an encoded ancestral necessity. We were born to run; we were born *because* we run. We're all Running People, as the Tarahumara have always known.

But the American approach—*ugh*. Rotten at its core. It was too artificial and grabby, Vigil believed, too much about getting stuff and getting it now: medals, Nike deals, a cute butt. It wasn't art; it was business, a hard-nosed quid pro quo. No wonder so many people hated running; if you thought it was only a means to an end—an investment in becoming faster, skinnier, richer—then why stick with it if you weren't getting enough quo for your quid?

It wasn't always like that—and when it wasn't, we were awesome. Back in the '70s, American marathoners were a lot like the Tarahumara; they were a tribe of isolated outcasts, running for love and relying on raw instinct and crude equipment. Slice the top off a '70s running shoe, and you had a sandal: the old Adidas and Onitsuka Tigers were just a flat sole and laces, with no motion control, no arch support, no heel pad. The guys in the '70s didn't know enough to worry about “pronation” and “supination”; that fancy running-store jargon hadn't even been invented yet.

Their training was as primitive as their shoes. They ran way too much: “We ran twice a day, sometimes three times,” Frank Shorter would recall. “All we did was run—run, eat, and sleep.” They ran way too hard: “The modus operandi was to let a bunch of competitive guys have at each other every day in a form of road rage,” one observer put it. And they were *waaay* too buddy-buddy for so-called competitors: “We liked running together,” recalled Bill Rodgers, a chieftain of the '70s tribe and four-time Boston Marathon champ. “We had fun with it. It wasn't a grind.”

They were so ignorant, they didn't even realize they were supposed to be burned out, overtrained, and injured. Instead, they were fast, *really* fast. Frank Shorter won the '72 Olympic marathon gold and the '76 silver, Bill Rodgers was the No. 1 ranked marathoner in the world for three years, and Alberto Salazar won Boston, New

York, and the Comrades ultramarathon. By the early '80s, the Greater Boston Track Club had half a dozen guys who could run a 2:12 marathon. That's six guys, in one amateur club, in one city. Twenty years later, you couldn't find a single 2:12 marathoner anywhere in the country. The United States couldn't even get one runner to meet the 2:14 qualifying standard for the 2000 Olympics; only Rod DeHaven squeaked into the games under the 2:15 "B" standard. He finished sixty-ninth.

So what happened? How did we go from leader of the pack to lost and left behind? It's hard to determine a single cause for any event in this complex world, of course, but forced to choose, the answer is best summed up as follows:

\$

Sure, plenty of people will throw up excuses about Kenyans having some kind of mutant muscle fiber, but this isn't about why other people got faster; it's about why we got *slower*. And the fact is, American distance running went into a death spiral precisely when cash entered the equation. The Olympics were opened to professionals after the 1984 Games, which meant running-shoe companies could bring the distance-running savages out of the wilderness and onto the payroll reservation.

Vigil could smell the apocalypse coming, and he'd tried hard to warn his runners. "There are two goddesses in your heart," he told them. "The Goddess of Wisdom and the Goddess of Wealth. Everyone thinks they need to get wealth first, and wisdom will come. So they concern themselves with chasing money. But they have it backwards. You have to give your heart to the Goddess of Wisdom, give her all your love and attention, and the Goddess of Wealth will become jealous, and follow you." Ask nothing from your running, in other words, and you'll get more than you ever imagined.

Vigil wasn't beating his chest about the purity of poverty, or fantasizing about a monastic order of moneyless marathoners. Shoot, he wasn't even sure he had a handle on the problem, let alone the solution. All he wanted was to find one Natural Born Runner—someone who ran for sheer joy, like an artist in the grip of inspiration—and

study how he or she trained, lived, and thought. Whatever that thinking was, maybe Vigil could transplant it back into American culture like an heirloom seedling and watch it grow wild again.

Vigil already had the perfect prototype. There was this Czech soldier, a gawky dweeb who ran with such horrendous form that he looked "as if he'd just been stabbed through the heart," as one sports-writer put it. But Emil Zatopek loved running so much that even when he was still a grunt in army boot camp, he used to grab a flashlight and go off on twenty-mile runs through the woods at night. In his combat boots.

In winter.

After a full day of infantry drills.

When the snow was too deep, Zatopek would jog in the tub on top of his dirty laundry, getting a resistance workout along with clean tighty whities. As soon as it thawed enough for him to get outside, he'd go nuts; he'd run four hundred meters as fast as he could, over and over, for ninety repetitions, resting in between by jogging two hundred meters. By the time he was finished, he'd done more than thirty-three miles of speedwork. Ask him his pace, and he'd shrug; he never timed himself. To build explosiveness, he and his wife, Dana, used to play catch with a javelin, hurling it back and forth to each other across a soccer field like a long, lethal Frisbee. One of Zatopek's favorite workouts combined all his loves at once: he'd jog through the woods in his army boots with his ever-loving wife riding on his back.

It was all a waste of time, of course. The Czechs were like the Zimbabwean bobsled team; they had no tradition, no coaching, no native talent, no chance of winning. But being counted out was liberating; having nothing to lose left Zatopek free to try any way to win. Take his first marathon: everyone knows the best way to build up to 26.2 miles is by running long, slow distances. Everyone, that is, except Emil Zatopek; he did hundred-yard dashes instead.

"I already know how to go slow," he reasoned. "I thought the point was to go fast." His atrocious, death-spasming style was punchline heaven for track scribes ("The most frightful horror spectacle since Frankenstein." . . . "He runs as if his next step would be his last." . . . "He looks like a man wrestling with an octopus on a con-

veyor belt"), but Zatopek just laughed along. "I'm not talented enough to run and smile at the same time," he'd say. "Good thing it's not figure skating. You only get points for speed, not style."

And dear God, was he a Chatty Cathy! Zatopek treated competition like it was speed dating. Even in the middle of a race, he liked to natter with other runners and try out his smattering of French and English and German, causing one grouch Brit to complain about Zatopek's "incessant talking." At away meets, he'd sometimes have so many new friends in his hotel room that he'd have to give up his bed and sleep outside under a tree. Once, right before an international race, he became pals with an Australian runner who was hoping to break the Australian 5,000-meter record. Zatopek was only entered in the 10,000-meter race, but he came up with a plan; he told the Aussie to drop out of his race and line up next to Zatopek instead. Zatopek spent the first half of the 10,000-meter race pacing his new buddy to the record, then sped off to attend to his own business and win.

That was pure Zatopek, though; races for him were like a pub crawl. He loved competing so much that instead of tapering and peaking, he jumped into as many meets as he could find. During a manic stretch in the late '40s, Zatopek raced nearly every other week for three years *and never lost*, going 69-0. Even on a schedule like that, he still averaged up to 165 miles a week in training.

Zatopek was a bald, self-coached thirty-year-old apartment-dweller from a decrepit Eastern European backwater when he arrived for the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki. Since the Czech team was so thin, Zatopek had his choice of distance events, so he chose them all. He lined up for the 5,000 meters, and won with a new Olympic record. He then lined up for the 10,000 meters, and won his second gold with another new record. He'd never run a marathon before, but what the hell; with two golds already around his neck, he had nothing to lose, so why not finish the job and give it a bash?

Zatopek's inexperience quickly became obvious. It was a hot day, so England's Jim Peters, then the world-record holder, decided to use the heat to make Zatopek suffer. By the ten-mile mark, Peters was already ten minutes under his own world-record pace and pulling away from the field. Zatopek wasn't sure if anyone could really

sustain such a blistering pace. "Excuse me," he said, pulling alongside Peters. "This is my first marathon. Are we going too fast?"

"No," Peters replied. "Too slow." If Zatopek was dumb enough to ask, he was dumb enough to deserve any answer he got.

Zatopek was surprised. "You say too slow," he asked again. "Are you sure the pace is too slow?"

"Yes," Peters said. Then he got a surprise of his own.

"Okay. Thanks." Zatopek took Peters at his word, and took off. When he burst out of the tunnel and into the stadium, he was met with a roar: not only from the fans, but from athletes of every nation who thronged the track to cheer him in. Zatopek snapped the tape with his third Olympic record, but when his teammates charged over to congratulate him, they were too late: the Jamaican sprinters had already hoisted him on their shoulders and were parading him around the infield. "Let us live so that when we come to die, even the undertaker will be sorry," Mark Twain used to say. Zatopek found a way to run so that when he won, even other teams were delighted.

You can't pay someone to run with such infectious joy. You can't bully them into it, either, which Zatopek would unfortunately have to prove. When the Red Army marched into Prague in 1968 to crush the pro-democracy movement, Zatopek was given a choice: he could get on board with the Soviets and serve as a sports ambassador, or he could spend the rest of his life cleaning toilets in a uranium mine. Zatopek chose the toilers. And just like that, one of the most beloved athletes in the world disappeared.

At the same time, coincidentally, his rival for the title of world's greatest distance runner was also taking a beating. Ron Clarke, a phenomenally talented Australian with Johnny Depp's dark, dreamy beauty, was exactly the kind of guy that Zatopek, by all rights, should hate. While Zatopek had to teach himself to run in the snow at night after sentry duty, the Australian pretty boy was enjoying sunny morning jogs along the beaches of Mornington Peninsula and expert coaching. Everything Zatopek could wish for, Clarke had to spare: Freedom. Money. Elegance. Hair.

Ron Clarke was a star—but still a loser in the eyes of his nation. Despite breaking nineteen records in every distance from the half-mile to six miles, "the bloke who choked" never managed to win the

big ones. In the summer of '68, he blew his final chance: in the 10,000-meter finals at the Mexico City Games, Clarke was knocked out by altitude sickness. Anticipating a barrage of abuse back home, Clarke delayed his return by stopping off in Prague to pay a courtesy call to the bloke who never lost. Toward the end of their visit, Clarke glimpsed Zatopek sneaking something into his suitcase.

"I thought I was smuggling some message to the outside world for him, so I did not dare to open the parcel until the plane was well away," Clarke would say. Zatopek sent him off with a strong embrace. "Because you deserved it," he said, which Clarke found cute and very touching; the old master had far worse problems of his own to deal with, but was still playful enough to grant a victory-stand hug to the young punk who'd missed his chance to mount one.

Only later would he discover that Zatopek wasn't talking about the hug at all: in his suitcase, Clarke found Zatopek's 1952 Olympic 10,000-meters gold medal. For Zatopek to give it to the man who'd replaced his name in the record books was extraordinarily noble; to give it away at precisely the moment in his life when he was losing everything else was an act of almost unimaginable compassion.

"His enthusiasm, his friendliness, his love of life, shone through every movement," an overcome Ron Clarke said later. "There is not, and never was, a greater man than Emil Zatopek."

So here's what Coach Vigil was trying to figure out: was Zatopek a great man who happened to run, or a great man *because* he ran? Vigil couldn't quite put his finger on it, but his gut kept telling him that there was some kind of connection between the capacity to love and the capacity to love *running*. The engineering was certainly the same: both depended on loosening your grip on your own desires, putting aside what you wanted and appreciating what you got, being patient and forgiving and undemanding. Sex and speed—haven't they been symbiotic for most of our existence, as intertwined as the strands of our DNA? We wouldn't be alive without love; we wouldn't have survived without running; maybe we shouldn't be surprised that getting better at one could make you better at the other.

Look, Vigil was a scientist, not a swami. He hated straying into this Buddha-under-the-lotus-tree stuff, but he wasn't going to ignore it, either. He'd made his bones by finding connections where everyone else saw coincidence, and the more he examined the compassion

link, the more intriguing it became. Was it just by chance that the pantheon of dedicated runners also included Abraham Lincoln ("He could beat all the other boys in a footrace") and Nelson Mandela (a college cross-country standout who, even in prison, continued to run seven miles a day in place in his cell)? Maybe Ron Clarke wasn't being poetic in his description of Zatopek—maybe his expert eye was clinically precise: *His love of life shone through every movement.*

Yes! Love of life! Exactly! That's what got Vigil's heart thumping when he saw Juan and Martimano scramble happy-go-lucky up that dirt hill. He'd found his Natural Born Runner. He'd found an entire *tribe* of Natural Born Runners, and from what he'd seen so far, they were just as joyful and magnificent as he'd hoped.

Vigil, an old man alone in the woods, suddenly felt a burst of immortality. He was onto something. Something huge. It wasn't just how to run; it was how to *live*, the essence of who we are as a species and what we're meant to be. Vigil had read his Lumholtz, and at that moment the great explorer's words revealed their hidden treasure; so that's what Lumholtz meant when he called the Tarahumara "the founders and makers of the history of mankind." Perhaps all our troubles—all the violence, obesity, illness, depression, and greed we can't overcome—began when we stopped living as Running People. Deny your nature, and it will erupt in some other, uglier way.

Vigil's mission was clear. He had to trace the route back from what we've become to what the Tarahumara have always been, and figure out where we got lost. Every action flick depicts the destruction of civilization as some kind of crash-boom-bang, a nuclear war or hurtling comet or a self-aware-cyborg uprising, but the true cataclysm may already be creeping up right under our eyes: because of rampant obesity, one in three children born in the United States is at risk of diabetes—meaning, we could be the first generation of Americans to outlive our own children. Maybe the ancient Hindus were better crystal-ball-gazers than Hollywood when they predicted the world would end not with a bang but with a big old yawn. Shiva the Destroyer would snuff us out by doing . . . nothing. Lazing out. Withdrawing his hot-blooded force from our bodies. Letting us become slugs.

Coach Vigil wasn't a maniac, though. He wasn't proposing we all run off to the canyons with the Tarahumara to live in caves and gnaw

mice. But there had to be transferable skills, right? Basic Tarahumara principles that could survive and take root in American soil?

Because my God, imagine the payoff. What if you could run for decades and never get injured . . . and log hundreds of weekly miles and enjoy every one of them . . . and see your heart rate drop and cholesterol, and greed melting away as your energy soared? Imagine crime, finally rediscovered its stride. More than his Olympic runners, more than his triumphs and records, this could be Joe Vigil's legacy.

He didn't have all the answers yet—but watching the Tarahumara whisk past in their wizard capes, he knew where he would find them.

CHAPTER 16



FUNNY, because Shaggy was looking at the same thing and all he saw was a middle-aged guy with a demonic knee.

Shaggy's ear caught the problem first. For hours, he'd been listening to the faint *whish . . . whish . . . whish* of Juan's and Martimano's sandals, a sound like a drummer beating rhythm with the brushes. Their soles didn't hit the ground so much as caress it, scratching back lightly as each foot kicked toward their butts and circled around for the next stride. Hour after hour: *whish . . . whish . . . whish . . .*

But as they came down Mount Elbert on the single-track trail toward mile 70, Shaggy detected a little hitch in the beat. Martimano seemed to be babying one foot, placing it carefully rather than whipping it right around. Juan noticed, too; he kept glancing back at Martimano uncertainly.

“*¿Qué pasa?*” Shaggy asked. “What's up?”

Martimano didn't answer right away, most likely because he was mentally scanning the previous twelve hours to see if he could pinpoint the cause of his pain: was it running those thirteen miles wearing trail shoes for the first time in his life? Or pivoting around those jagged switchbacks in the dark? Or slip-sliding over slick stones in a raging river? Or was it . . .

“*La bruja*,” Martimano said; must've been the witch. The whole episode back at the firehouse suddenly made sense. Ann's glare, the mumbo jumbo she spat at him, the shocked look on people's faces,