

SHEILA FINCH

MILES TO GO

WHEELING UP TO THE START in the wintry dawn, he feels a dizzying rush of nervous excitement and spiking fear. He wills his bunching muscles to relax, hands -- palms already hot in leather gloves -- to unclench. He breathes deeply of cold, Pacific air, drawing in energy.

He is the silent center of jittery activity. Wheelers lean toward each other, slapping warmth into cold arms. Women talk in brief spurts together, voices brittle. Stretching tight leg muscles. Waiting. Runners churn around him, a shimmering kaleidoscope against the city skyline. He recognizes many of them. Race gypsies, veterans from all the marathons across the nation and across the globe.

He stretches his head from side to side, working on tension in his neck. A TV camera pans over to his lightweight, three-wheeled racing chair. Adrenaline floods. He raises two fingers in a victory sign. The silver eye pauses, sweeps on.

Murmur of voices drops away.

Two minutes and three seconds to go.

The day was warm for early January, and the city seemed to have sprouted a more elegant skyline in the year Jeff Brandeis had been in Europe. He eased his van into a handicapped slot outside the office of the Long Beach Marathon and took a deep breath, dispelling the empty sensation in his stomach that had been there since he landed at LAX two days ago.

"Well, hello, Champ!" a woman cooed. "Good to see you!"

Jeff waved. Strangers were always recognizing him. Good feeling, being back home. Been away too long. Problem was, after breaking records in a string of races from Oxford to Cannes, he'd been too popular. With a couple of French actresses. One, with long blonde hair, had been eager to show him around Paris after dark.

Life was good to champions. A far cry from the early days when his mother fixed him up with a friend's daughter, a do-gooder who got off on the inconvenience of dating a guy in a chair. Her idea of a swell time was to stir the sugar in his coffee as if he'd lost the use of his hands instead of his legs.

He shut the car door and swiveled the chair. Inside the office, he saw they'd hung a large collection of marathon photographs on the white wall, several of them him crossing the FINISH in previous years. He was in even better form now. Some new training tactics he'd figured out with a couple of European racers, a new aerodynamic wrinkle for the chair from a former Italian auto designer.

Athletics, even the wheeled variety, was a young man's game, and the years were beginning to pile on. The next couple were crucial. He had plans to hammer his own record so hard it'd take anybody else a decade to catch up. Something his mother could think about without tears.

Meg Lowenthal glanced up as the door banged behind him. He admired her expensive-looking yellow linen suit, the deep neckline revealing cleavage, the way her pertly cut coppery hair bounced as she moved. He'd always been more attracted by a woman's hair than by her face, the thicker and longer the better. He wheeled up to her desk. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Jeff! I didn't know you were in town. Give me a minute here" She turned back to the computer.

"Take your time. I'm enjoying the view."

"Sexist pig," she said.

He grinned. She'd liked it enough to hop into bed with him one time after a race. "Just got home. Came right over to register."

"Oh? We thought you might not want to race."

He gripped the chair's arm-rests. "Who told you that?"

"Well -- you were out of the country, but we thought"

She looked as if she were about to say something else, then changed her mind.

Jeff banged a fist on her desk, rattling pencils. "Look. I want to register. You going to tell me I can't?"

The door at the back of the office opened and a middle-aged man in a gray Armani suit stood frowning. Phil Zukowski made his money from a car dealership in Signal Hill, but organizing the marathon was his passion. When he saw who it was, Zukowski came quickly forward, hand out-stretched. "Brandeis. A pleasure to see you, Champ."

"What's this about, Zukowski?"

"That orthopedics guy at UCLA that's been in the news," Zukowski said, frowning. "Dorkins? Dorsey? He called here trying to find you, so we thought --"

"I was in France." He'd heard about the Schwann cell research on CNN. The blonde actress had pretended to get all excited for him. The hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach came back.

"That's right. You did one:twenty-five:thirty-one in Cannes, didn't you? World record." Zukowski picked up a mug by the slick gray Mister Coffee pot. "Want some coffee, Champ?"

Jeff shook his head.

"You know this guy personally, don't you?"

"Tommy Dorseter. He was my surgeon. Played baseball at Cal State -- before my time. He was good, could've played professionally. Went to med school instead." While Jeff had gone on to a series of dead-end jobs and a serious accident, but he didn't say that. "What's it got to do with me racing? I'm ready to roll."

Zukowski gave him a thoughtful look. "We're always delighted to have you, Jeff. You're a superior athlete. The champ."

"Right. Give me the entry form."

"We just thought -- Doctor Dorseter must want --"

Zukowski squirmed under Jeff's gaze. Meg opened a drawer and handed him an entry form. He jerked the chair around, headed for the narrow doorway, and found it blocked by a tiny woman in a wheelchair that seemed two sizes too big.

Carrie Stevens had short, baby-fine, light brown hair. Delicate featured, she wore a pink warm-up suit embroidered with small flowers. He'd known Carrie for several years; her fragile appearance disguised a determined racer though she'd never taken the sport as seriously as he had.

Carrie's glance flicked from Jeff to Zukowski and back again, taking it in. "You look like you need a break. Want to go for coffee?"

He'd taken her out for coffee or a movie a couple of times, before his fame had brought lookers like Meg Lowenthal around, but they'd remained friends. "Sure. Why not?"

"There's a new place opened on the pier since you've been gone," she said. "Let's catch up."

Half an hour later, they sat outside the coffee bar on the pier beside an overgrown fern that seemed about to make a break from ceramic captivity. The breeze off the water was sharp and clean like crystal. He stirred Sweet 'n' Low into his coffee mug as Carrie talked, barely listening to her stories about other racers, thinking about Dorseter.

Tommy's interest in orthopedics had been spinal cord injuries long before Jeff's accident. Prostheses were good and getting better all the time -- Jeff knew a couple of amputees who raced -- but the docs couldn't seem to fix severed cords. Schwann cell transplants, CNN had reported, looked like they might change that.

"That doctor from UCLA was asking about you, couple of weeks ago," Carrie said.

"Does the whole goddamn city know my business?"

She startled at his tone. "I was in the office when he called, Jeff. I'm not racing much anymore, but I drop by once in a while to keep in touch. That's all. I'm not trying to intrude."

"Got nothing to do with me!"

"Well, I thought --"

She broke off and stared out at the ocean, her cheeks showing a faint pink. A gull landed on the rail beside his chair, stared insolently at him for a second. He flicked a finger and it flapped away. It wasn't Carrie's fault, but he didn't want to think about Dorseter or his work.

"Snake oil," he said. "Cold fusion. Perpetual motion."

"I don't think so." She turned back to him, her face a mask he couldn't read. "There were a couple of

articles on Dorseter in the LA Times. You ought to take a look."

"Not interested."

"Haven't you ever thought what it might be like if they could give you back your legs?"

"No."

He could tell from her expression she didn't believe him. They'd always been upfront with each other, but this wasn't something he wanted to talk about, not even with her.

The breeze off the ocean had turned cold. He pulled up the collar of the black Italian leather jacket the French actress had given him, remembering a phone call soon after he'd won his first marathon.

"Animal results show great promise, Jeff," Tommy Dorseter had said. "Someday you'll be able to throw away your chair?" "What if I don't want to?" he'd said. "Don't want to?" Dorseter repeated. "Why the hell would you want to be handicapped if you didn't have to?"

It was ironic, the way he looked at it. The chair had freed him from the handicaps of his youth -- no talent and mediocre looks -- replacing his early lack of success with fame and a fan club of good-looking women. Not even counting the enormous high he got from racing.

"What's so difficult about the concept?" Carrie asked. "People get artificial hearts when they need them. And kidney transplants are commonplace. Why not a fix for legs that don't work?"

"The word is 'need.' I don't."

He pulled money out of his wallet, snagged a passing waitress, and got into a thing about the bill. Easier than answering her question.

The race officials start the wheelers five minutes before the runners as usual. He does not need the other competitors, never has. He aims only to beat his own best time in each race.

The minute he starts rolling, something begins to grow that he calls the Race Mind, blotting out all thought except what he needs to move swiftly and smoothly down the course, knitting together man and chair.

For the first few miles, his concentration is on action, the powerful muscles working in his arms, strong fingers rhythmically turning the shining slender-spoked wheels so that man and machine find a synthesis of efficient motion. He is aware of a background world where sun sparks water below the bridge as he heads over it, the cool breeze slides past his brow, gulls pace him then fall away, spectators along Shoreline Drive wave him on.

A cop on a motorcycle salutes.

THE ANSWERING machine blinked notice of messages from Mai and Jen that had come in while he was out. Aspiring models, his personal groupies welcoming him home. He knew the real reason behind his appeal for them. He was a photo-op, good for publicity. But it was a two-way street. His bed never needed an electric blanket, and there were no strings attached to the transaction.

The third message still waiting was from Tommy Dorseter. What he needed right now was a shot of reality, not some medical fantasy. He grabbed the phone and punched in Salvador Mendez's number. Sunlight reflecting off the bay streamed through open French windows leading onto his balcony. Race money, a Pepsi endorsement, a line of racing gloves he'd designed were paying for this condo unit. Without racing, he'd have been stuck working another dead-end job, maybe selling cars at Zukowski's dealership in Signal Hill, living in a bachelor apartment with furniture from the Salvation Army thrift shop. Or at home with his mother where the furniture was better but the pity worse.

"Sal? Hey, amigo! How much am I gonna beat you by this year?" The Barrio Bear was one of the few who could make a race interesting for him.

"Not racin' this year, 'mano." Mendez said. "Outta practice."

"You gotta be kidding, right?"

He gazed out the French windows at a group of kids in sabots, tacking inexpertly across Alamitos Bay, sails luffing. The streaks of white sunblock on their faces gave them the look of small-fry Apaches. He'd taken sailing lessons on this bay when he was a boy. He'd been hooked early on the thrill of competing even when he was no good at it.

"Been workin' for a livin'. Got me a job out at Rancho." Mendez laughed. "Nurse's aide. Gonna be an inspiration to all them new crips!"

Rancho Los Amigos, the county's orthopedic rehab facility where they'd first met. He couldn't imagine spending time there by choice.

"Hard to believe, amigo."

"Gettin' married, too. No time for playin' 'round no more."

"Congratulations."

He regretted making the call. Sal was a couple of years older than he, same type of injury, but Sal's accident had been gang related. His had been less dramatic; he'd smacked a motorcycle into a utility pole on a day when he couldn't blame the weather. Another example of his general failure at everything in those days. The shared frustrations of rehab had brought them together; racing and women had kept the friendship going. They'd been two of a kind, consumers of all the thrills they could find, freed by their chairs from a world of responsibilities. He'd never considered Sal might get married.

"...bridges the fucked up nerves again, Doc says," Mendez was saying as Jeff shook his attention loose from the past.

"What?"

"Doc Dorseter. He comes maybe coupla times a week, checks out his students."

"So?"

"Don' you watch TV, 'mano? 'Schwann cells,' he calls 'em. Gonna fix us up, one a these days."

"That what you want, Sal? You get your legs back, you'll never race again. You willing to give that up?"

"Just a race, 'mano." Mendez sounded puzzled. "Just a fuckin' race. Chair ain't no badge of sainthood."

There'd be no competition this year. So what? He didn't need anybody else. He hung up the phone and went out. He put in two hours' practice on the track at Cal State before sunset.

He was finishing his second glass of milk after lunch the next day when the phone rang. He almost didn't answer it, thinking it was his mother again. She'd already called once today. Didn't he think Tommy Dorseter's work could be *The Light At The End Of The Tunnel For His Problem*? He could almost hear the capitals in her words.

This time it was Meg Lowenthal. He made a date for dinner, then found clean sheets for the bed just in case he got lucky.

He settles into his pace with an upwelling sense of robust health and fierce strength, the aching happiness that comes to him from racing. After a race, he feels cleansed of all the strangling difficulties of his life. All the hard decisions fall into place. The chair sets his spirit free.

The course climbs a small hill, then flattens again. Plum trees line the next block, white petals drift like confetti. Music blares at an intersection, a local combo playing enthusiastically. Women in bright tracksuits cheer. A dog barks. Children on bicycles keep pace along the edge of the course. The scent of fresh-cut lemon teases his nose.

He feels as if he could race like this forever.

AFTER THREE MORE pleading messages from his mother over the next week -- followed by a fax of the LA Times articles about Dorseter's work, marked up carefully so he wouldn't miss the important parts -- Jeff gave in and called Dorseter at UCLA. Couldn't hurt to see what was on his mind. Maybe they'd swap tall stories about glory days on Cal State's diamond.

"Come on out to Rancho and we'll talk," Dorseter said, sounding rushed. "I'm there Thursdays, supervising interns. Got a proposition for you."

"You got Sal already. I'm not looking for work." But he could guess what Dorseter wanted to propose, and it wasn't emptying bedpans.

Dorseter laughed. "Come anyway, Champ."

Waste of time, he told himself. He went out and spent several hours circling the university track until rain splattered in from the ocean, driving him indoors.

Rancho's parking lot was wet as he drove up on Thursday. He slid out of the driver's seat into his folding chair. The van in the next slot had the back door open, and beside it a woman was opening an umbrella over a small girl in a chair. The child grinned when she saw him and held up a hand.

"She has photos of you on her wall, Mr. Brandeis," the mother said. "You're her hero."

He high-fived the girl's tiny hand. "Gonna win the next one for you, sweetheart."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

The child giggled. In a good mood now, he wheeled away as raindrops spattered his leather jacket.

He figured he'd listen to Dorseter to satisfy his mother, put an end to the tearful messages. But he wasn't interested. What was the big deal about walking, anyway? He'd been quoted in the papers once saying, if God had shown a little imagination, He'd have equipped people with wheels instead of legs. Caused quite a reaction in some quarters with that remark. His mother hadn't liked the joke either; she took this disabled stuff too seriously. Then he thought of the child and his mood darkened again.

Dorseter's office was at the end of a white corridor lined with children's art, but Dorseter himself wasn't in it. A nurse indicated Jeff would find the surgeon down the hall in physical therapy, a room he and Sal had referred to in the old days as the "TC," the Torture Chamber.

A buzz of noise came from the TC as the door sighed open at his approach. He remembered this place well. A cross between a high school gymnasium and a NASA training facility for astronauts, it contained some of the most fiendishly designed equipment ever to coax damaged body parts to work again. Half a dozen men and women practiced new strategies for old tasks, some moving scarred arms against the resistance of weights and pulleys, some climbing low racks of stairs on crutches, or walking up and down ramps getting used to new prostheses.

A young guy sitting on a bench at the far end of the room caught his attention. Two male physical therapy aides in white coats lifted him to his feet and propped him upright. Judging by the way the guy's face scrunched, he wasn't enjoying it.

Dorseter was halfway down the TC, talking to a female intern. He glanced up and motioned for Jeff to come over. "Well, what d'you think?"

Jeff played it cool. "Same old TC."

"You said you'd read about my work."

"Saw the articles. Not necessarily read. Not my game."

Dorseter studied him thoughtfully. "That sounds defensive, Champ. Look. I'll give it to you straight.

Animal results are so good, we're ready to use this treatment on humans."

"Cruel and unusual experiments on humans went out of fashion with the Nazis, Doc."

The orthopedic surgeon laughed. "You don't change, do you?"

"No. Should I?"

Dorseter turned serious. "Yes, I think you should. This is revolutionary. We grow the Schwann cells in the lab, then transplant them into the spinal cord. They coax nerve fibers to regenerate. We've never found anything like this, Jeff. Severed nerves re-grow. Establish their own blood supply. Even develop protective myelin sheaths."

"In a petri dish."

"In lab animals."

"Don't look at me. I'm not a guinea pig."

Somebody shrieked nearby. Jeff turned to stare. The guy he'd noticed was now doubled over, vomiting -- a sour stench. Not uncommon in the TC. An orderly arrived to clean up.

He had a wrenching memory of the first day they got him out of bed at the hospital after the accident, the nausea that tore through his gut as they hoisted him painfully upright, the despair that flooded through him when he glanced down at legs he couldn't feel anymore. He remembered the clumsiness of that first chair, the energy it took to perform the simplest tasks, the frustration of learning to accept limits. The aching sense of loss. It had taken him a long time to put all that behind him.

Dorseter said, "I could show you the dogs --"

"Bizarre, man! Why me? Got to be a lot of other guys salivating for the chance. I've got my life together without it."

"Have you, Jeff? How long's it going to last?"

Across the echoing room, Jeff saw the young man resting alone on a bench, towel pressed to his forehead, looking washed out as if he'd just finished a race. A deep yearning swept through him, but he

wasn't sure for what. The renown of being a star athlete? The thought of walking again? His hands clutched the armrests of his chair till he could feel the pulse hammering at his wrists. He let go, expelling tension in a long sighing breath.

"Later. I've got work to do."

He swiveled the chair to face the exit. Dorseter put a hand on his shoulder.

"Something else. Something you should seriously consider."

"Give it up, Tommy."

"There may not be a 'later' for you. You need this chance now. How long's it been since your accident?"

Four years? Five?"

"You're thinking foot drop, muscle atrophy --"

"No."

Jeff shook his head. "You don't understand. I don't have the time. I need another couple of years racing before I even consider something like this."

"You don't have another couple of years!" Dorseter said. "Wait much longer and we won't be able to reverse the changes in the vertebrae that're taking place, no matter whether the nerves regenerate or not." He stared at the surgeon's grim expression. Face the truth, he told himself. This was why he hadn't come back home sooner, not the French actress. Ever since he'd heard the CNN report, he'd been afraid of getting hit with an impossible choice.

"Think about it." Dorseter squeezed Jeff's shoulder. "You could be just the way you were before the accident."

"Right," he said, his eyes stinging. "A straight-C bozo the chicks avoided. A zero on the field. A world-class nothing. Great, man. Fucking great!"

He wheeled urgently out of the Torture Chamber.

Breath burns in his throat now. His lungs labor. His chest seems encased in crushing iron. Fingers cramp. Pain knifes his shoulder muscles. Blood roars in his ears. In spite of the headband he wears, sweat pours off his brow and stings his eyes, blinding him.

The day grows hotter. The breeze fails him. Despair claws at his heart. He's a fool to put himself through such agony. He doesn't have to prove anything to anybody.

In the sweaty fog, he sees dimly a jumble of spectators waving flags -- gaunt palm trees -- volunteers sprinkling water from garden hoses--pelicans gliding overhead like stone age icons -- police cars blocking traffic. Everything passes in a slow-motion, nightmarish blur of silence and pain.

So many more agonizing miles to go.

He has hit the Wall.

Carrie refused his invitation to go out for dinner. He didn't tell her he'd called Meg Lowenthal first but she'd turned him down. Mai was on location; Jen hadn't called back. He hadn't seen Carrie since the day he'd registered, but he needed to do something to clear his mind. She offered to cook at her place instead. He told her he'd be there at five.

It'd been a mistake to go out to Rancho, a distraction from the serious training he needed to do. For days after his conversation with Dorseter, he'd tried pouring all his energy into preparing himself for the race, wheeling along the race route for several hours in the gray light of early morning until the swelling rush hour traffic drove him off. But he couldn't rid himself of Dorseter's words.

The phone rang while he was dressing; he let the machine answer. His mother again. Another guilt rap for him to come to his senses, not to be scared, to take advantage of his golden opportunity. To her, his choice seemed clear. But only a fool would trade the future he had in sight for the uncertainties of pain and obscurity that would come with Dorseter's surgery. If it even worked. How could he make a decision like that?

He went down to the condo's garage and found the van.

Carrie lived alone in an old house she rented, a small guest house behind the larger one on the bluff. All she could afford on her salary, probably. She was a teacher, maybe a librarian, he couldn't remember. Something unspectacular but socially useful.

He wheeled up the ramp and rang the doorbell. Across busy Ocean Boulevard, the water churned with

white caps. A lone sailboat beat into the stiff wind, rounding the oil island, coming home before darkness fell. He watched for a moment, admiring the unknown sailor's pluck challenging the weather. Taking risks. Going all out for life no matter what.

Inside, the house was warm and unpretentious, what he would've expected of Carrie. He felt comfortable, as if he'd just taken off a heavy winter overcoat. She turned on a lamp; light and shadow quilted the living room. Mozart played softly in the background. A water jug waited on a small oak dining table. Carrie poured him a glass, then went into the kitchen, explaining the casserole needed a few more minutes.

"I heard you went out to Rancho," she called.

Dishes rattled and he caught the rich smells of onions, tomatoes, and baking bread.

"Must everybody get on my case?"

"Sorry. Sal was just excited for you."

Mozart wrapped it up. In the silence he heard the slow tick of an antique clock somewhere in the house. He gazed through the window at the tiny back yard. Miniature orange and lemon trees made splashes of color along a battered redwood fence. A large tortoiseshell cat slumbered next to a pot of scarlet geraniums. Tomato plants heavy with winter fruit, pots of chrysanthemums and cactus crowded on benches and shelves for easy reach from her wheelchair.

She came back into the room and refilled his water glass. "That's Gertie," she said, nodding at the cat.

"Never understood what people see in cats."

"She's my best friend."

"Kind of lonely with only a cat in your cheering section, isn't it?" She gazed at him, something in the blue eyes he'd never seen before, maybe anger at his remark. "I don't know, Champ. Is it?"

He stared out the window, avoiding her gaze. But he couldn't avoid this. And maybe she was the only one he could talk to, the only person with no stake in what he did or didn't do.

"Would you do it, Carrie?"

"I've used a chair since I was fourteen. I'm not a good candidate like you."

"But if you could?"

"I read about a blind man once," she said. "They restored his sight somehow. But then he took to wearing dark glasses indoors."

"You figure I'm scared?"

"Not of the surgery, no."

"I don't think I could live without racing."

She said lightly, "If you're not the champ, you're nobody?"

He regretted the cheering section remark. But she was right. No point in arguing; she saw clear through his pretenses.

"Maybe it won't work on humans."

She folded napkins and set them in place before answering. "There are never any real guarantees in life, Jeff. Things happen."

"Why would I want to take the risk? I've got it good now."

"I remember a poem that meant a lot to me in my blackest moments. 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep.'"

"Robert Frost." He was mildly surprised to dredge up even one name from his mediocre undergraduate performance. "'And miles to go before I sleep.'"

"The promises were to myself," she said.

A bittersweet memory from childhood flooded over him: A picnic in El Dorado Park by a lake speckled with ducks -- Running barefoot over fragrant summer grass -- A flop-eared dog barking excitedly beside him. There'd been endless possibilities to his world back then and infinite time. Pain lanced through his stomach. It had seemed so simple before Dorseter interfered. Now all the alternatives looked wrong.

"Only promise I make is to be the champ."

"Maybe there's more than one race."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe that's the possibility you're afraid of."

"Let it go, Carrie," he said.

When the casserole was ready, they sat stiffly at table together, forking pieces of meat, making awkward stabs at conversation, avoiding the one topic on both their minds.

He excused himself soon after and went home.

And then all at once the fog lifts from his eyes. His body -- a magical machine itself -- floods with power, at one with the chair that has turned into an elfin carriage. He soars, weightless, free, over the wall that once threatened to defeat him. This is what he lives for.

Nothing can stop him, not even Time itself. He is an eagle breaking out from a cage and leaping up into silky vastness of sky.

Exhilarated, he yells. Wind carries his voice away as he sweeps down the course on invisible wings.

Crowds, trees, birds, ocean - - all fall away.

He could go on forever.

He is invincible.

He has reached the Race Mind.

He dreamed of Carrie's cat and woke in a tangle of sweaty sheets. Jerking upright, he reached for the phone. In the darkness, he punched out Dorseter's home number.

The phone rang several times before the surgeon picked it up.

Dorseter sounded groggy with sleep. "Jeff? D'you know what time it is?"

"Two A.M. I got questions."

"Can't they wait till morning?"

"You came looking for me, remember? First question. Why me?"

Dorseter let out a deep sigh. "You need this, Champ. I'm doing you a favor --"

"Bullshit."

"Okay. Try this. You're high profile."

"Got it. A photo-op for the Nobel committee." He wasn't surprised. That was life too. You gave and you got back. "Next question. Gotta be risks. Give 'em to me."

"Bottom line, the cells might not take." Dorseter sounded as if he were choosing his words carefully.

"Could be a lot of pain and wasted time for nothing. Maybe infection, possibly serious. All medical procedures entail a certain amount of risk, Jeff, especially experimental ones."

"And I'd be back to square one?"

He heard the hesitation in Dorseter's reply. "It's hard to be one hundred percent certain of anything."

He hung up.

The FINISH looms, a hundred yards ahead. He flies toward it, whooping with excitement. Everything melts dizzily in the bright sunshine.

This is what he lives for. This is who he is. The one thing he is certain of. He is a champion.

Then he is through the tape.

And suddenly the blur of faces waiting for him sharpens. He sees the cameras, the T-shirt vendors, Meg Lowenthal, a child in a wheelchair waving a flag. He sweeps past. Sound bursts roaring on his ears again.

The crowd yells, jubilant, huge as the sound of winter surf. Hands reach out toward him as if to catch some of his wild energy for themselves.

Carrie is waiting for him behind a barrier.

Slowing, he lets go of the wheels and throws his arms up into the air in fierce exultation.

"You made great time," Carrie says, draping a sweatshirt across his shoulders. She maneuvers her chair beside his as they move away from the FINISH line.

The reporters who took Jeff's picture as he crossed the line turn back to the course where the runners will soon be coming in. The crowd jostles behind the race barriers to catch the first sight of the winners.

A few yards away, a TV crew vies with photographers to catch a Hollywood starlet who's here with her entourage to be seen at the race.

The high mood of the race is still on him. He could wheel over, make a photo op. But he senses this one

is waiting for a runner. Jeff makes a vee with his fingers to a camera that isn't watching him. Carrie's van is parked nearby. Exhaustion is catching up with him now. Lungs burn, shoulder muscles ache and his fingers have sprouted blisters. It's an effort to keep turning the wheels. He waits patiently while she lowers the ramp, seeing the way her short brown hair lifts off her brow in the breeze.

"This calls for steak and lobster," she says. "Out of my league, though."

He glances at her, catches the barely hidden smile, and says, "I'm buying tonight."

"Champagne too."

This end of the parking area, where the handicapped slots are, is almost empty. In the space, two young boys, tired of waiting for something exciting to happen, are playing baseball with a plastic bat. A flop-eared dog runs in circles between them. One of the boys hits high and wide. The yellow tennis ball sails out of reach and comes arcing toward Jeff.

"Hey, mister!" one kid yells. "Get our ball?"

His hand shoots out and cups the ball as it falls.

"Nice catch," Carrie says.

He bows in her direction then sends the ball winging back. The dog barks. The kids wave.

Behind him, a roar goes up from the crowd as the runners begin to cross the FINISH line. He half-turns, his throat tightening.

"Ready?" she asks.

The race has to be over, one way or another, someday, he knows that. Nature will see to it if Dorseter doesn't. Then what? And is a man given only one chance to do something with his life, or are there many races over many different courses as Carrie seems to think? He prides himself on being a tough competitor, sharp-eyed trader in uncertainty. Afraid of nothing.

He swings the chair toward the van. Stops again. The wave of excitement and adulation sweeping out from the race buffets him till every nerve in his body thrums with tension and he shuts his eyes against the pain.

"Jeff?" she says.

He glances at Carrie's face. Her face isn't beautiful, but strong. He's never really looked at it before. He realizes he's never really looked at any woman before. Maybe he was afraid they'd look away. Safer not to care.

He sighs. "I've made my decision."

She brushes his cheek with her lips but says nothing. He reaches up and touches her short hair. Behind them, the crowd roars again.

He wheels up the ramp and into Carrie's van.