

RUN TO ME

by
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It's an odd thing, but anyone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco.

—Oscar Wilde

CHAPTER ONE

Beth Standish braced herself against the icy wind that slapped her cheeks. As she stood alone in a pool of light at the all-night gas station, frigid gusts snapped up the back of her jacket. She rocked in time to the click-click of the gasoline pump, mostly to stay warm, but also in a feeble attempt to cajole the gas into her tank faster. The attendant, who had said nothing when she passed three twenty dollar bills through the tray, sat in his bulletproof enclosure staring blankly her way.

She looked south, in the direction she'd just come, then turned her gaze to the mountains that represented the dividing line between L.A. and the expanse of Central and Northern California. Staring up at the black peaks, she wondered if she would ever feel better, or if, perhaps, the shifts she felt within were permanent, like erosion—the alteration of her inner landscape by external forces. Maybe she would never get back to being herself, because that woman no longer existed.

With a sharp sigh, she capped the gas tank and got back in her car. She still had a four-hour drive ahead of her, but her journey was more complicated than mere geography. She had tried to frame it in her mind as an adventure, rich with possibilities, but she still felt like she was simply running

away. Her race number and directions to the San Francisco Half Marathon were tucked neatly inside an envelope on the passenger seat next to her. She was looking forward to the challenge of a long and difficult race, but she had much more painful reasons for leaving Los Angeles. The race was just an excuse.

“God damn, Stephanie,” she muttered, wishing she sounded angry instead of wistful and broken.

Pushing those excruciating, ever-present thoughts out of her head, she started the car and rejoined Interstate 5 north. The dark miles rolled endlessly on, with the sky as black as the road, and the horizon imperceptible in between. By the time the clock in the dash of her Mercedes 280 coupe ticked past three a.m., she was well north of Bakersfield. Over two hundred miles stretched ahead, broken by an occasional faded billboard or tired farm-road sign. The straight road in front of her seemed to swim. Beth blinked as the road seemed to wash into a clean black screen on which images of the last few months played over and over. Through her windshield it was as if she could see some kind of warped, late-night rerun in which she was the star.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” Stephanie screamed at her.

“I don’t need you to be facetious, Steph.”

“Don’t think for a minute I don’t mean it.”

“This conversation isn’t going anywhere.”

Stephanie’s expression was cynical. “Yeah, just like our relationship.”

Beth’s chest hurt. She could still feel the tension crushing her as the most painful events ran and reran, the voices screaming in her ears. Late-night arguments, public scenes, bitter looks. The shock. The isolation. And finally, the disbelief.

A million different emotions had beaten her down over

the last ninety unbearable days. By the time her race packet arrived, her only desire was to get out of Los Angeles. She was thankful she'd entered on a whim, when she saw the Half Marathon advertised. She usually only ran in the L.A. area but the San Francisco race sounded interesting and she'd always intended to enter, one day. At thirty-six, her involvement in running remained steadfast. In fact, through all the ups and downs in her life, athletic escapes were tantamount to sanity. And with the way she felt tonight, if by some rotten luck her car had broken down when she tried to leave L.A., she would have gladly run the distance.

She glanced at herself in the rearview mirror and marveled that what she'd been through was not detectable on her face. Her hazel eyes were a bit tired, but not drastically puffy. Her thick, sandy brown hair still shined as it rested on her shoulders. Though she felt beaten down, she was still holding her five-foot-eight frame together fairly well. She'd lost a few pounds, tilting toward the lean side of the scale, but she wasn't unhealthy.

She rolled down the window, letting in the cold manure smell of the cattle yards around Coalinga. Had she been drinking, the frigid stench spilling into her car would have sobered her. As it was, her overworked mind just ached more. And in the blackness of nowhere, as her tires hummed in cadence to the droning in her head, Beth knew, without a doubt, that where she was going couldn't possibly be worse than what she had left behind.



Beth pulled up to the curb at Fisherman's Wharf. It was just past seven in the morning and the sun, from somewhere above the clouds, was beginning to brighten the streets. The

seagulls were already squawking at the fish vendors, who busied themselves for the day's trade, packing fish in icy beds, stoking fires under cauldrons of clam chowder, and cracking crab for tourists' cocktails. The vendors yelled back and forth to each other, comfortable in their habitat and fluid in their movements.

Scanning the merchant signs, Beth chose a diminutive diner touting "The West Coast's Best Seafood Omelets." She didn't order an omelet but instead chose coffee as black as her mood and toast just as dry.

There were three other patrons dining that early. A couple, probably married, bickered over travel arrangements at a booth. And a man with a beard long enough to rest in his lap sat at the counter, hunched over a newspaper.

Beth slid her keys into the pocket of her jeans and made a mental check of her vital signs as she sat down and ordered breakfast. Her heart ached just slightly more than her splitting head. Her eyes burned from crying between Coalinga and Los Banos. And her stomach threatened to refuse even the toast and coffee she'd just requested. The notion that she'd just driven five hundred miles was only now sinking in.

Now what? Her relationship had been over for over three months, but the nasty taste wasn't going away. The idea that she could leave her pain behind was obviously a foolish one. She knew she couldn't expect instant relief, but a change of scene was supposed to help people move on. It was worth a six-hour drive to find out. The Half Marathon was two weeks away, plenty of time to regroup. She would be concentrating on race preparation and training. She would have a lot on her mind, a new routine, and different surroundings to explore.

Beth was immediately jarred. In her haste to leave L.A., and her general lack of concentration, she hadn't made any plans for a hotel. Great. That was all she needed, no shower

when she arrived and a hassle finding a place to stay. She'd thought that through pretty well.

She wrapped her hands around the mug of black sludge the waitress set in front of her and closed her eyes to the coffee, the diner, the city, and the whole fucking world. The piercing reality of her escape hurt more than she could bear and she wanted to block everything out. But in the shadow behind her eyes, she still existed. And that fact she couldn't escape.

"Are you all right?"

Beth looked up at the waitress. No, she wasn't all right. She was sitting in a diner five hundred miles from home and she wanted to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge but instead, she was just going to run a race and see if she could get thirteen more miles away from this ache.

"Coffee's too strong, isn't it? I'll make another pot," the waitress offered.

"No, that's okay. I need to go."

Beth paid the check and walked back to her car. She drove slowly west, toward Van Ness Street, watching the wharf start its daily commerce. Crafts merchants armed with jewelry, pottery, and T-shirts were setting up their stalls along the streets. The shops were opening and tourists were beginning to buy loaves of freshly baked sourdough bread and Golden Gate Bridge key chains.

The air felt different, crisper than L.A. The streets were up and down, not flat. Even the trees were dissimilar. And suddenly the murky charcoal cloud that hung behind Beth's eyes parted for a second, letting through a lone fragment of a thought. By removing herself from her home, she'd eliminated the constant triggers that jogged painful memories. She no longer occupied the rooms she'd shared with Stephanie. There were no familiar streets or houses. She would not pass cafés where they ate together or stores they shopped in. Certainly if

she thought long enough the memories would come knifing their way back, but she was already beginning to have moments void of pain. And though fleeting, a nanosecond's reprieve was better than none.

She found Market Street and turned west. It had been a year since she'd been in San Francisco, but as cities went, it was an easy one to get around. If lost, a driver couldn't go too far without seeing water and recalibrating. And though it wasn't home, Castro Street felt strangely comfortable as she followed the cars streaming through the gay Mecca of Northern California. Anyone could be anyone, here. And right now, though Beth wasn't sure of most things, she knew at the very least that she was gay.