

SPRINTER

by Bria Burton

Chapter One

The slope of the pavement descended slowly. Riley increased speed, quickening her footfalls. She leaned into the downward gradient, kicking back hard. Less than three miles until home. If she didn't finish at a sprint, the run wouldn't feel complete. She steadied her breathing, keeping it even at the faster pace.

“What are you running from?”

Like she'd been slapped, Riley stiffened, the tightness in her shoulders a bad habit she worked on breaking.

A woman she hadn't registered—which happened often during early morning runs—passed her going the other direction, hitting Riley with the question.

Who asks questions in passing on a running trail? Riley didn't want to look back. That might imply she was open to a conversation, which she wasn't. By now, they'd be a hundred

meters apart. She'd never seen that woman before, had she? The urge to turn around increased in strength, pulling her cheek to one side.

The woman's hat and the darkness had made it difficult to see her face as they passed each other. Did Riley only imagine that she spoke?

It didn't matter. Riley wasn't running from anything. Not right this second, at least. She ran almost every morning, and didn't need to justify that to anyone, especially some random stranger.

She faced ahead, unwilling to confirm whether the woman waited or was long gone. Riley hoped she wouldn't see her again. All sorts of people made use of the Valia Trail, and Riley preferred not to interact with any of them.

Her apartment complex backed up against the trail, one of the main reasons she rented there. The wide and winding path for cyclists and runners had sixty miles of hilly, paved runway. Although the trail was scenic—mountains to the east, some forestland, some rural grasslands—she loved taking detours through the woods on the dirt trails that branched off the main route.

This morning, she needed a fast course to get to work on time. South from her apartment had a flatter segment. The little change in topography lasted about ten miles before a section of difficult inclines. She'd turned around at seven miles. Her Akin watch clocked a six forty-five pace. She'd been making good time.

Two more miles. Riley held her rhythm, pushing six flat, she guessed. She felt strong, able. Nothing hurt. Her adrenaline flowed. It was a good run, minus the brief jolt the stranger had given her.

The first hints of sunlight outlined the mountains. At this point, she'd be able to shower and leave by seven thirty. One more week arriving to work on time, and the spring office prize, a patio table and chairs, would be hers. She really wanted that furniture for her empty back porch.

Ahead a sharp right cut around a steep rock face. Trees lined the rest of the trail through most of the city.

Ding, ding, ding.

Bikes coming up on her left. She hugged the inside of the curve, focused on her consistent stride. Several cyclists whizzed past, tossing her a few "good mornings." Neither questions nor statements would interrupt her. She didn't understand the need people had of speaking to strangers on the trail, let alone that female inquisitor.

At the straightway, her cream-colored building came into view. Half a mile left. She dug deep, pushing hard to finish as strong as she felt. The meters dwindled. At the start of the manicured lawn, she leaned into an invisible finish line, releasing her arms and de-cycling her legs.

She slowed to a walk, breathing in through her nose, out through her mouth. It felt good to be done. A water bottle hid in some bushes. She twisted the lid, breaking the seal, and sipped the cool, refreshing liquid.

With a quick glance, she looked over her shoulder. She couldn't help it. No one was there. At least the woman hadn't tried to chase after her. That would've been creepy.

A sidewalk led around the building and she followed it to her front door. Inside, she clicked on the TV. The local news anchor's voice carried through her apartment. The pre-timed coffee pot gurgled to life. She stretched for a few minutes.

After a quick shower, she scrunched her wet hair in a towel, scrolling through her remaining mental checklist: blow-dry hair, iron blouse, and find the beige pumps that helped her sell a living room set last week.

In the kitchen, the bold Cuban roast wafted past her nose, a welcome scent after waking up at four forty-five.

“Good morning, Valencia, California. It’s a beautiful May the first, two thousand and one. In sports news, the Big Sur International Marathon took place in Carmel yesterday just a few hours north of us.”

She poured the dark coffee into a mug and stirred in hazelnut creamer.

“That’s right, Charlie. Something special happened yesterday at the fifteenth anniversary for the race,” the female co-anchor said. “The first fifteen women who crossed the finish line received an honorary medal created by the race directors as a one-of-a-kind prize.”

She blew first, then sipped the hot, flavorful drink.

“The medal was crafted to honor the winner of the inaugural race in 1986.”

Riley snapped her head up.

The co-anchor continued, “The late Darlene Sprinter, winner of the first-ever Big Sur Marathon, is pictured on the medal.”

A wave of nausea crashed into Riley’s gut. “No, no, no.” She knew what was coming next.

“Sprinter, a world-famous marathoner in the 70’s and 80’s, was murdered the same year she won Big Sur.”

The words slammed into Riley’s chest, knocking the wind out of her. She dropped her mug. The porcelain shattered on the kitchen tile. Hot coffee splashed onto her feet. She cringed.

Adrenaline rushed into her limbs. She caught her breath and dashed into the living room. She had to make it stop. Where was the remote?

“Before she ran the Athens Marathon, Sprinter had shocked everyone by claiming a finish time, which would secure her a world record.”

Riley spun around, searching but not finding. Her body quaked. She knocked books off the shelves. She threw couch cushions onto the floor. “Where is it?!”

“Pam, I remember watching that televised event. She broke the world record, and right after she crossed the finish line, she was shot. We’re going to show excerpts from a documentary called *The Sprinter* which include that moment at the marathon in 1986. Viewer discretion is advised.”

A throbbing ache radiated in Riley’s side. “No!” She gasped, squeezing her eyes shut. An invisible hand with spiked fingernails twisted her organs and stabbed holes in her diaphragm. She couldn’t keep the tears from streaming. Her knees met the carpet first, then her palms.

Almost three months without pain. She’d been such a fool to think it wasn’t coming back. She jabbed her hand into her ribcage, moaning, wishing she could push the pain out.

A different, familiar male voice. ““She was the first female member of the exclusive elite running team known as the Akin Twenty, and she is the only runner who has ever attempted to predict her own record-breaking finish time at a marathon. But no one could’ve predicted what would happen after Darlene Sprinter crossed that finish line.””

Tears poured down Riley’s face. The back of her eyelids glowed red. On her knees and elbows, she covered her mouth with one hand, screaming. Her muffled wail hollowed her out, but didn’t ease the stabbing ache or the sensation of spikes raking the flesh between her ribs. With her other hand, she clawed the carpet beneath the couch, still searching for the remote.

The power button. On the TV. Riley stopped screaming, uncovered her mouth. She turned to the television.

“...daughter, Riley Sprinter, stood twenty meters past the finish line at most of Darlene’s major races.”

She crawled, the pain still stabbing her side. Her shaking hands skimmed the outer edges of the screen. On the right, she felt several buttons.

“It was no different in 1986 at the Athens Marathon. Twenty-one-year-old Riley waited just like the rest of us to see if her mother would meet her goal time and break the world record.”

“Stop!” She hit every button from top to bottom. Menus flashed on and off, words blinked on the narrator’s face. She knew him. John Bauer, Akin President. Finally, the screen flicked off, Bauer’s face fading to blackness.

The pain roiled in Riley’s side. A weak moan escaped her lips. A tremble rolled over her. On her feet, she stumbled into the bathroom in search of ibuprofen. She took it in case it miraculously worked one of these times. She spilled a handful, bent to sweep the pills back into the bottle. When only four sat on the floor, she scooped them up and washed them down with a drink from the bathroom sink where she kept a glass. Some water missed her mouth, pouring down the front of her robe.

She stared into the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy, her glowing hot face crimson as a strawberry. Her damp hair looked like the end of a mop. She groaned, turning away, not wanting to look at herself.

The shot.

Riley heard it and flinched, catching herself in the doorway. White flashes blinded her. Clicking cameras surrounded her. A splash of red hit her face. The blood. She smelled it. Her

eyes felt hot. More tears poured out. Images of her mother's grimacing face flashed before her eyes. Hadn't she turned off the TV? She checked.

It was off. The remote sat right next to it on the stand.

She marched over. As soon as she picked up the remote, a hot poker jabbed through her diaphragm. She doubled over, crying out. The stab brought her to her knees. "Why!" she wailed, hurling the remote at the television.

It hit hard. The screen cracked in the center.

She lowered to the floor, sobbing. On her side, she drew her knees up until she was in a tight fetal position.

Fourteen years. But it felt like yesterday, like she just lost her mother. From the first instance, the pain was a hurricane, ravaging her, destroying everything in its wake. The feeble woman on the floor was a pathetic shell of a person. D-Day, her term for the day of her mother's death, not only altered but dictated the course of her life. If she didn't have control, she fell apart. She hated it. She hated God for letting this happen to her.

Too many things were outside of Riley's control. Sometimes she could hear mention of her mother's death and nothing happened, at least nothing to make her writhe in agony. Other times, reminders of D-Day impaled her as if they were nails on a swinging baseball bat. At the worst times, visions of what Riley saw on D-Day accompanied the pain, flashing like gruesome horror film scenes whether her eyes were open or not. Like now.

She hurt everywhere. She had to get control of her sobbing, which exacerbated it. She exhaled like running taught her. Deeper breaths. Slow it down.

She raised to a seated position, arms wrapped around her legs. Her forehead, weighed down with bad memories, dropped between her knees. She inhaled and exhaled until the

trembling subsided. Her side ache weakened. She lifted her head as the images flashing before her eyes dimmed like the TV.

Control. That's all she wanted. But she didn't know how long it would last until the next spell. She couldn't predict when the pain would come. Or when the news would start playing snippets from her mother's public murder. They never got all the facts right. Her mom broke her *own* world record at Athens, not just the record.

Riley could Velcro the remote control to the coffee table. It was absurd, but it was all she could do. Take each occurrence as it came.

The cracked screen glared at her. She needed a new TV. On the way to work, she'd price one at Best Buy. This flat screen model was boxy. Maybe she'd upgrade to one of those new flat screens that was actually flat. Then she'd pick up Velcro at Home Depot.

She wiped the wetness off her cheeks, glancing at the kitchen where broken porcelain rested in a coffee pool. Her feet were tinted brown from the spill. The closest thing to a tan she'd probably ever see. Her skin pinked in the sun, it didn't brown.

One last deep breath and Riley rose. She pushed the memories out of her mind and shifted into task mode, the only way she knew how to get through a day that started like this. Her apartment was often spotless.

The clock dinged once. Seven thirty. If she walked out the door right now, she'd get to work on time.

Not happening. She wasn't winning any prizes. No point in being a few minutes late just to have Bill from accounting crow over her. She'd rather make it a half day and, in the meantime, regroup the pieces of herself that were still floating around the room.

She glanced out the back window to her empty porch. So long, patio furniture.