

Pharaoh Hounds

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When we first arrived at the house in Oregon, Dave was shattered from the long drive. He lay down on the couch, rolled up the legs of his pants, and strapped the ice packs he always carried in a cooler to his shins.

"Do your thing," Dave said to me. His hands were shaking.

I took off my clothes as if I were alone, moving around the room and giving him plenty to look at. When I was naked, I removed the ice packs and pulled down his pants. I straddled his legs and stroked him with my warm hands until he was hard enough, and lowered myself onto his lap, never taking my eyes off his face. He put his hands on my hips, and I started to move. His fingers kneaded my hips, his breathing became shallow, his mouth fell open. I didn't change the way I moved. I never did. It was up to him. There was always a point when he couldn't hold back anymore, and he had to arch his damaged back and push into me. When he did, he once told me, he felt like a normal man. For my part, I needed the moment I made him lose control, no matter how much it hurt him. I could look forward to it for hours.

"You know, Katie, I still wonder if Dave needs to suffer the way he does," Mikael said to me. "You can have a bad back without feeling any pain. It's a fact." Mikael was Dave's physical therapist. He and I were sitting on the spiky grass around the High Performance Center's practice track. The track was surrounded by forest, and the air was heavy with the smell of pines. Dave and the other runners in his group were doing their last real workout before the Olympic trials. In the two weeks between today and the trials, they would do nothing but rest and hope the training they had done was enough to get them on the team—and that they wouldn't get injured at the last moment. All the coaches agreed the final two weeks were the hardest part of preparation.

Dave was running with long strides and a bounce in his step, and he had a habit of looking to his left and right, as if to see if anyone were following him. He was running exactly the way his coach didn't want him to run. Dave was injury-prone; he needed to run as smoothly as possible. A team of movement scientists had filmed him and were trying to teach him a more efficient running form.

The coach, a small man with a braid and lopsided glasses, stood on the infield and yelled *Slow down—keep it controlled!* Dave's torso was covered in black tape; the stripes started under his chest, came together at his lower back and emerged again from under his shorts, ending at the back of his knees.

"So, do you think he's holding up?" Mikael asked. The professional staff didn't talk to me much, but Mikael did. I was a physical therapist, too; that's how Dave and I had first met. He was still in college then, the fastest runner on his cross-country team, and in so much pain the painkillers didn't help anymore. I took care of his back until he won the national title, and the Center offered him a sponsorship so he could come to Oregon to train. His contract said he had to be treated by a PT who was part of the team. After some discussion, Dave and I thought the option to go to the Olympics was worth the risk, and agreed.

Mikael had asked for my help less than a week after we'd arrived. "I don't know what to do with Dave. I'm afraid I'll do more harm than good. He told me to get you." I followed Mikael to the treatment room; a steel-and-glass cell smelling of disinfectant and sweat, like every room here. The walls were covered in floor-to-ceiling photographs of anonymous athletes who suffered a stylized version of the agony of excellence, drops of sweat as large as grapes flying around their ecstatically contorted faces. Mikael had broad shoulders and muscular legs, but he also had a small potbelly and bags under his eyes, the kind that came with staying up late and enjoying it. He was in his late thirties, although his curly hair—messy as if he cut it himself—was starting to turn gray. Mikael looked like the athletes on the wall, fifteen years later.

Dave was on his stomach, his head in a cushioned circular headrest, a rolled-up towel under his ankles.

"Found your woman," Mikael said.

"Good." Dave's voice sounded muffled. He looked as he had when I first met him: a thin young man, brown skin, a few round scars on his back where moles had been cut out, his back stiff with pain. While Mikael watched, I warmed my hands and eased my fingers down Dave's sides, letting him get used to the touch. When he finally relaxed, I had him get off the table and onto the floor to do the exercises we had come up with. For one of them, he got down on his hands and knees, and I put one foot in the middle of his lower back and pushed down while balancing on the toes of my other foot, as if I were about to climb a stair. In another he lay flat on his belly and I stood behind him, slowly pulling him up and towards me by the arms. I braced myself and we held the position for half a minute.

What we did had no name. I imagined it looked like a mixture of yoga and slow wrestling. We had come up with these exercises when everything else I'd tried failed. I asked him: *Tell me what your body would like my body to do.* He said: *Put me on the floor and stand on my back.* That was the beginning. It released the pain for a few hours before it built up again, from a slight soreness to a cramp so severe even breathing made him nauseous. During the worst periods, we had to do the exercises every few hours.

Mikael was the first outside person to see our exercises. When we were done, I gave Dave a massage; his muscles were like jelly. My skin was glowing as if I had been in the sun for a long time.

"It's the only thing that helps," Dave murmured from below the headrest.

Mikael said, "Your file says nothing about your back. I had no idea it was that bad."

Dave sat up very slowly. His face was red. "I don't want anyone to know. Anyway, it's under control."

"We didn't want him to lose the chance to come here," I said.

"But where's this pain coming from?" Mikael asked.

"I don't know," Dave said. "It started when I was around fifteen. It got worse for a while. And now we've halted it. Well, Katie halted it."

"And you never wanted to find out what was causing it?" Mikael asked me.

I didn't. Yes, I had asked Dave whether he had seen a doctor about this, and been surprised when he said he hadn't. I had tried to make sense of his symptoms, and when we were talking to the people recruiting him for the Center, I suggested he take advantage of the experts and facilities there and admit to at least a mild version of his problem. But I didn't do more than suggest. I liked having his symptoms to myself, and I liked having the power to halt them.

I cleaned my hands and tossed the oily towel in the laundry basket. "You won't tell?"

"I have to, if I think he's damaging himself."

Dave stood next to me. "No damage. What we do works for us."

During the next few weeks, I joined Dave's scheduled sessions with Mikael. I did the exercises with Dave while Mikael watched us.

"This way, you can take over when I'm not around," I told Mikael, and he said, "I still have a lot to learn." On the whole, we talked little during the sessions, but outside of them, we started to do more stuff together: drive downtown, have a few drinks, stay up late talking about politics and life outside of track. Mikael was an outsider at the Center because he didn't subscribe to its ascetic life style. He used to run, too, with a group called the Pharaoh Hounds that ran on secret trails at night. Dave and Mikael often went for what the Pharaoh Hounds had called a blind run, taking lefts and rights at random with no idea where they would end up. Dave had a reckless streak, probably because of the constraints caused by his pain. When they came home from these late-night runs, Dave was steaming with life: sweat on his face, dead flies on his neck, hairs standing up on his legs, mud spattered on his calves. His voice was louder, and there was a casualness in how he took off his shirt and bent and untied his shoes.

While they were running, I stayed at home and made greasy, spicy pork stew the nutritionists at the Center would not have approved. I was an outsider, too. Some athletes brought their partners, but the partner was either another athlete or a parent of small kids, too busy to become friends. Not that I was a friendly person.

The other athletes at the Center probably resented me, because Dave and I had become the favorite couple. A photo of us from our sponsor's *Olympic Hopefuls* campaign was in running stores all over the country and in irritating online ads, and we'd been on the cover of *Runner's World* together. Dave was running past me, and I was holding a stopwatch. My stupid Instagram *SpeedAndGlam* had more fans than all of theirs together.

Our fame as a couple started with an article in *Track and Field News*. Dave had won the 5K and made the cover, mainly because he hadn't been pegged to win by anyone. Although he had made the final the previous year, his name hadn't been mentioned as a contender. Now here he was on the cover, crying or celebrating, it was hard to tell.

I was in that issue, too, in a smaller picture together with Dave. I was the cute blonde in the orange dress, who embraced Dave after his finish. I was the girl that made the ever-mature messageboarders on LetsRun.com speculate whether Dave, despite his being a skinny distance runner, had it all.

I don't get it. If she's into athletes, why doesn't she date a football player? She's pretty fit herself. Check this out:

And there followed a link to the website of the modeling agency I worked for. *Holy shit. She's available for nude pictures, too.* Not if they were ridiculous, though. No fur and fireplaces, no wild surf or pink, heart-shaped pillows. Just me, the room, and, if necessary, the other person. Or persons.

The messageboarders didn't know about Dave's 100-mile weeks, or the nights I fed him oatmeal and syrup because he was too weak to hold a spoon, or that his father had beat him when he was small and called him a pussy. They appreciated the way my ass

looked in the orange dress, but they didn't know that when Dave had squatted on the track after the race, accepting his competitors' pats on the back, he was vomiting between his knees, and that I still smelled the vomit when I embraced him.

Two weeks before the trials, when Mikael and I were sitting together watching Dave during his final serious workout—when we had already started thinking he might make it to the starting line in one piece, and with a shot at making the team—Mikael appeared uncomfortable. I hadn't often seen him like this. I asked him what was the matter, and he said, "They took MRIs of Dave's back the other week. Did he tell you?"

He hadn't. I pushed my hands deeper into the grass where we were sitting.

"Apparently his coach noticed something in the way he walked, and wanted to rule out injury. And it turned out there's nothing wrong with his back at all. Absolutely nothing."

I pulled at the stalks of grass and felt them come loose in the soil. "What are you saying?"

"Back pain is a mystery. It's possible to have a messed-up back and not feel any pain. So why shouldn't the opposite be true? Feel a lot of pain even if your back is fine? Still, I was surprised."

Dave lumbered towards us, exaggerating his exhaustion in order to mask the fact that he couldn't walk upright. He dropped down next to us. I knelt behind him and started to massage his shoulders. The long-distance coach was watching us. Some of the other runners were watching, too. If Dave was injured it changed his odds of making the team. I said, *well done, honey*, and kissed the back of his head. Then I laughed as if he had said something funny. *You're so crazy!* and I pinched the side of his neck as hard as I could, treating pain with pain. His hands were lying twisted in the grass, a bad sign. "It will pass," I whispered.

Later that night, we had to decide whether we wanted to go to the T-Minus-Two-Weeks party at Mikael's house, traditionally the last chance to get drunk before the breathless period of silent prayers

and responsible behavior preceding the trials. Dave had recovered from his pain attack, but he was still queasy and tired. I removed the strips of tape.

"So why didn't you tell me?"

He stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror and kept touching the glass with his fingertips.

"Because it doesn't make sense to me that there's nothing wrong with my back," he finally said. "There has to be something."

It did make sense to me. The things I did with Dave, standing on his back or stretching his limbs with the weight of my body, had the feel of something that went beyond the physical—perhaps some old guilt or fear that seized him this way, and paralyzed him so he couldn't run away. But this made for a cheap psychological story, and I did not find it all that interesting. I liked what we had, including the pain.

"Do you think I'm acting?" He seemed to be wondering himself.

"No." I reached around him.

He grabbed my wrists and freed himself. "Maybe later."

Parties at the Center were always the same: pizza would be delivered to one of the athlete's houses, we would choose the Hawaiian pizza and drink recovery drinks, and go to bed around eleven.

But Mikael's parties were different: he cooked real food, there was alcohol and a barrel filled with packs of cigarettes on the porch, there was music and dancing and gossip. Not many people were willing enough to mess up their sleeping and fueling regimen to show up, but those who did were always hungry and excited. At these moments, I could see the people they had been before their freakish ability had set them on this path of training and competition; before they had been picked up by places like the Center and connected to a system of medical monitoring and performance optimization. I'd posed as an athlete in photo shoots, and photographers would shout, "Show us your power, be fierce, attack!" But real athletes were shy and constantly fatigued. Their bodies were so specialized to do one particular kind of running, jumping, or throwing, that they were uncomfortable

with anything else. Up close, they were pathetic and fragile. I liked to be near them because I could pass as one of them but still have the freedom to leave.

Late that night, when most of the athletes were tipsy, Mikael stood in the kitchen and sprinkled grated cheese on a bowl of nachos, swaying in time to the music. He wore a blue shirt with many small buttons down the front. A girl stood next to him cutting avocados. She ran the 3000m steeplechase, and now she had a wet green smudge on the back of her track pants from wiping her hands. She leaned against Mikael and put an arm around his waist. I could tell Dave was watching them, too. When Mikael knelt to open the oven door and retrieve a plate of sausages, the steeplechase girl looked at me over his back and took out her phone. "You guys are the cutest. Say cheesel!" I gave her the V for Victory sign and a well-practiced smile.

A Euro-dance version of an Andrew Lloyd Webber song came on. "Let's dance," Dave said. He got up slowly; I could tell his back was starting to bother him again. Or was it? I took his hand and pretended to let him help me up, and we danced slowly. He guided me very properly, like a ballroom dancer, and people took more photos. His hand was warm on my back, his other arm looked uncomfortably stiff. I put my head on Dave's shoulder. He smelled of the Center's shampoo and the massage oil I used. There was another smell I didn't know, something like mud and fresh sweat.

Had he been lying to me all this time about the pain? As well as I knew him in some ways, the truth was that I didn't know much about the facts of his life. His painkiller addiction, for instance. When he first came to see me he'd mentioned that he took painkillers every day, even though they didn't help anymore. But later he stopped mentioning them. Then there was that diagnosis he claimed he didn't want to know. I had to admit that it gave him a lot of freedom to adapt his symptoms to—to what? My expectations?

One thing I did know was that his father was an asshole who had beaten him and his brothers regularly to toughen them up. I had met him once, at a Fourth of July barbecue at their home. He

was a nice-looking man in pleated shorts and a salmon-pink polo shirt, a doctor. I stood at the grill and he sidled up to me with a tray of raw meat. "You're a surprise," he said. "I didn't know Dave had it in him." Then he squeezed my hips with one hand while I turned the burgers. We never visited again.

When we sat down from dancing, Dave had a film of sweat on his brow and upper lip. Mikael handed him a water glass filled with red wine. "Here. Good for your heart." Dave gulped it as if it really were water.

"Leave some for me." I pulled my legs under me and sat close to him.

"Two weeks before the trials," Dave said. "Thank you for getting me here. I feel bad, but somehow you made it feel good."

We kissed. More photos. I felt Mikael's gaze on us.

The nacho bowl was on the coffee table, now almost empty. The only two guests, apart from Dave and me, were the steeplechase girl—I think her name was Brianne—and another runner, a miler. He obviously had a crush on her and was staying around so he could walk her home. He hadn't refilled his glass in a while, and he kept yawning.

"It's not fair," Brianne was saying. "No matter how hard I train, men will always be faster than me."

"Here's to testosterone," Mikael raised his glass.

"Cheers," Brianne said. "Speaking of testosterone. Someone told me you like to pitch for both teams." Her smile made it clear she regarded it as a plus.

"Of course." Mikael put a chip in his mouth. "We all know I have a crush on Dave."

"Aw," Brianne said. "That's cute."

"And you're okay with that?" the miler asked me.

"I'm in agony," I replied lightly. "But no one believes me."

Brianne and the miler left. Dave and I stayed behind, ostensibly to help Mikael clean up, but we soon plopped down on the couch again, listening to jazz from his big speakers. The only light in the living room came from a paper lamp that stood in the decorative fireplace. Dave lay on his back, his legs across my lap and his arms

behind his neck. Mikael sat on the floor, his back to a footrest and his feet braced against the couch. I raised my bottle of beer, and Mikael raised a glass of red wine.

"Cheers," Mikael said. "Catch your Olympic Dream."

"We should go out for a blind run," Dave said, without moving. Mikael leaned over to put the half-empty glass of wine on the table. "That would be nice."

"You know," Dave said. "I thought it was brave of you to admit... You know."

"There's nothing to *admit*," Mikael said. "It's not a crime."

Dave shifted his legs on my lap. "When I was a kid," he said, "my dad caught me messing around with a boy. In our basement."

I hadn't known this.

"Dad wasn't happy," Dave said. "Not happy at all."

"I'm sorry," Mikael said.

"What did he do when he found you?" I said, though I could guess the answer.

Mikael got up and brought his glass into the kitchen. Once there, he lit a cigarette and opened the window.

"It was bad," Dave said. "For days I could barely walk."

"Was that when the pain started?" I asked.

"It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?" Dave appeared lost in thought.

"Did you like being with the boy?" I asked.

"Why do you think I took him down there?"

"Would you like to do it again?"

Mikael stubbed out the cigarette and closed the window, and stood in the kitchen entrance. I could see his face, Dave could not.

"Would you?" I repeated.

At first they touched awkwardly. Dave stood still with his back against the doorframe, his eyes closed and his hands on Mikael's shoulders, and Mikael stroked his torso through the T-shirt as if he were looking for something. I sat on the couch, watching them. Dave leaned back his head, and Mikael kissed him, meeting my gaze afterwards. I nodded at him, encouraging him to go on. This

was a new treatment I was trying for Dave. Mikael closed his eyes, too. Their kiss became deeper, a movement of their whole bodies, down to their bellies and hips and legs. Dave braced himself against the doorframe with one foot, and Mikael slid his hands under his shirt and into his track pants. His movements soon became jerky and impatient. He started to undo his belt. "Bedroom," I heard him say. Dave grabbed his hands and gently pushed him back. "Wait."

They looked at each other with glassy eyes, their faces flushed. Slowly, Dave started to unbutton the many small buttons of Mikael's blue shirt. When he was done, he opened it, kissed Mikael's hairy chest, and laid his head on his shoulder, his face turned away. Mikael put his hand on Dave's head.

"Leave," Dave said—I could barely hear him. Then he turned around and looked right at me. "Please."

"Why?" I said. I thought: *Mikael watched us, too.*

"This isn't a treatment. I need some privacy. Please." The *please* was only half for me.

At around three in the morning, I heard the back door, but not Dave's steps on the stairs. I held my breath.

When he came into the bedroom, he moved with exhaustion and ease, the way he did when he came back from a good run. He kicked off his shoes and lay next to me on the bed. "Thank you," he said. "Not many women would have been okay with this." He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. "It's weird," he said. "Before I met you, I used to feel pain from time to time. It was a problem. When we were together, though, the pain got worse than it ever was. But you made it go away better than anyone ever could."

I put my hand on his belly. He held it in place. "I love being with you," I said.

"I know." He closed his eyes again. "I feel good now. Maybe you cured me."

"Then I should leave," I said. "Maybe it's over." He stiffened next to me, but he was too tired to argue. He fell asleep, and soon I did, too.

I woke when he bumped into me trying to find a more comfortable position. "It's killing me," he mumbled. His teeth were chattering.

I massaged his back, I unfolded him and stretched him out. Again and again, I put my weight against his pain. It felt so familiar. I could do this in my sleep. In the end, I was lying on top of him and pressing him into the mattress. I heard him say something, I leaned in so I could hear. "Make it stop," he said.

"I will," I said. "I promise." ∞