BOOK ONE OF *THE LITHIA TRILOGY*

OUT OF BREATH

A NOVEL

BLAIR RICHMOND

OUT OF BREATH

Out of Breath

A novel by

Blair Richmond

Book one of The Lithia Trilogy

Out of Breath
A novel by Blair Richmond
Book one of The Lithia Trilogy

Published by Ashland Creek Press
Ashland, Oregon
www.ashlandcreekpress.com

© 2011, 2020 Ashland Creek Press
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-9796475-7-4
Library of Congress Control Number: 2011930904

This is a work of fiction. All characters and scenarios appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover design by Matt Smith.

“Our wills and fates do so contrary run.”

— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

PART ONE: LITHIA, AGAIN

One

They call it a runner's high, a sensation of euphoria experienced after a certain distance, usually a very long distance. Some runners must travel six miles or more before feeling it. But me, I feel that high every moment my worn old running shoes touch the ground.

Since I was eight years old I've been a runner. Not a jogger. A runner. I was always the fastest girl I knew and, during junior high, faster than any boy I knew. I ran cross-country at West Houston High, and I won state during my junior year. A scholarship to a major college seemed all but inevitable until my dad backed the car over my left foot the summer before my senior year. It's funny how quickly dreams can be crushed. Just as easily as my left foot.

The community college didn't have a running team, not that it mattered. I was too busy waiting tables and tending

bar to have the time anyway. My foot eventually grew strong again, and I ran on my own when I found the time, usually late at night. Running was the only thing that kept me sane and out of trouble. I wish I had been running during that last night in Houston.

But because I wasn't, I guess that's why I'm running now. Though not in the conventional form. I've been *on* the run, moving from town to town, scrubbing floors at truck stop restrooms to pay for meals, sleeping in homeless shelters, keeping an eye open at all times. Never fully sleeping. Never relaxed.

Being on the run is different from running. For one thing, on the run, there's no such thing as a runner's high.

It is late in October when I arrive in Lithia. A woman in a huge white pickup truck with a white dog named Kitty on her lap gave me a ride north from Redding. She told me about the jerk who left her last month for a younger woman. She told me you can't pump your own gas in Oregon, not that I'll have to bother either way. She told me that people get lost in these parts; they pull over one day to check out the scenery and they never come back. She shoves ten dollars in my hand as I climb down from the cab.

"Be careful, kiddo," she says. "This town is full of crazies."

I watch her pull away and realize that I forgot to thank her. Her gift is the only money I have. Ten bucks won't buy me a motel room, so I begin looking for a place to sleep for the night.

I try to remember Lithia, searching the recesses of a child's memory. The town is in southern Oregon, so small and so close to the state line that if you're driving south on the interstate, you can miss it entirely and not realize it until you're in California. A speck of a city clinging to the forested legs of a sprawling wilderness of trees. People call Lithia "quaint." They come from all around to see shows at its theaters. But I have a different reason for coming here.

I was only eight when I left Lithia, and maybe that's why I have no memories of the town, or maybe it is just too dark tonight. There is no moon above, or if there is, it's denied viewing by the low-hanging clouds. I can see the beginning of the hills behind the small town square. Houses rising up, growing more expansive as the hills stretch into the white mist.

But the town square is well lit and lively with couples and young people milling about. Families, their little kids leashed to their hands; some older couples, retired and practically living at the theater. People my age, dressed in fatigues or batiks, hair knotted and dreadlocked, beards down to their chests, rings through their ears down to their shoulders. Music drifts down from the second floor of an old brick building. I sit on a bench and let the music calm me.

People look at me as they pass. I don't look like anyone here. I'm not quite a hippie, not a young mom, not a college student. I'm not one of the runners who comes here for training in the mountains; I'm not a theater buff. I don't fit in, even though I'm probably one of the few people who was actually born here.

There's a pizza shop on the edge of the square, and I spend half my money on a slice and a large coffee. I don't normally eat pizza but right now I'm so hungry I could order an entire pie. Yet I resist. I have to make the money last. Hunger is a fact of life now, and there's nothing to do but ignore it.

Same with the cold. When I left Houston, I didn't have time to pack much. Working my way through community college, I didn't own much anyway. And back then, there was no need for a jacket, not in the heat of the summer.

I headed for Austin, where I lied my way into a bartending job, adding two years to my life and saying I was twenty-one. Drunk men staring at me in my requisite low-cut tank top and jean shorts was a small price to pay for tips. It was the tips that had kept me in school back in Houston, and I got over the indignity of flaunting what I had for strangers a long time ago. Not that I have much to flaunt, with a runner's build, but I do have good legs.

Austin was a paradise. The bar owner was a salty woman who had inherited the bar from her ex-husband after he

died—"He forgot to change the will, bless his dumb old heart," she said—and every night after closing she walked me back to my motel room, waiting till I was locked in safe before going home herself. I risked working there for a few weeks to save up money, but in the end it was still too close to Houston, so I moved on. I found a homeless shelter in Lubbock. Then one morning, after I woke up on my cot with a smelly man rolling back and forth on top of me, I left the state of Texas for good.

I headed north and then drifted west. As summer slipped into fall, I picked up a sweatshirt in Colorado Springs, a hoodie in Reno.

I didn't realize it at first, but from the very beginning, I was headed home. To Lithia.

So here I am, and though I'm wearing every piece of clothing I own right now, still I'm frozen through. I move to a spot that's close to a flamethrower—a woman with a baton burning at both ends. She's wearing a long, gauzy skirt, and I worry about it catching fire until I see a fire extinguisher next to her tip jar. I look at it with longing, all those bills and coins, but there's a guy sitting really close, and I'm not sure I could steal from her anyway.

The flames don't offer enough heat to keep me warm, so I stand and start walking again. I enter a park just off the town square and walk past a duck pond. I hear a creek running. A couple, hand in hand, passes me, and then I'm alone in the

darkness, invisible. But I welcome it. I'm tired of the eyes that seem to judge me, take pity on me. Or worse. This is why I used to run at night, in spite of the warnings against it. Nobody could catch me anyway, I always believed. And I was right—nobody ever did.

I find a bench and consider making this my bed for the night. There's a public bathroom just beyond. Maybe I can withstand the cold. Maybe. Then I notice the sign on the bathroom building.

WARNING
Recent bear attacks
Proceed with caution
Avoid park after dark

My stomach clenches, triggered by a childhood memory I'm not expecting yet always dreading. I quickly turn around and escape the darkness of the park.

I return to the pizza shop and spend the rest of my money on pizza so that I can sit in the warmth, with all the good smells of pizza bread and the familiar smell of spilled beer. I take a table next to the window so I can watch people pass.

I'll have to leave eventually—then what? Even if I find a homeless shelter, I don't want to spend the night there. I'm tired of shelters and their rules and the men who inevitably sneak into the women's dorms. I don't like bunk beds, and I get

claustrophobic when I'm lying in a room full of cots, listening to everybody breathe around me. Lately I've been looking for hiding places to sleep, places tucked away and warm, where nobody can find me or bother me. Where I can be alone.

The pizza shop closes, and I'm back on the street, now much emptier, quieter. I keep walking and find myself in a crowd of people, hundreds of them streaming from wide-open doors.

It's a theater, and I bask in the warmth of the crowds, probably the only person here who doesn't mind getting shoved around, bumped into.

I push against the current and into the theater. People everywhere, coming and going and talking and cleaning up. I work my way down a flight of stairs, then another, seeking out the quieter areas. One door leads to a dark room, a closet. I wait. It's warm here, and I sit on my fingers to warm them up. Soon I'm able to move my toes again.

An hour passes, or maybe more. When I finally open the door again, all is quiet, and I venture out. I wander through the dark hallways, guiding myself along by feeling the walls stretch out in front of me, until they curve around and up and I find myself in the theater, tripping over a row of seats and looking down on the stage, barely lit by little floor lights.

The stage is made to look like a bedroom, and I walk down the steps, pausing every so often to make sure I'm still

alone. I step up onto the stage and stand above the bed. It's real—it has a soft mattress and a bedspread, even if there aren't any sheets underneath. I look around. Still alone. There's a fake window that's darkened out, a nightstand, a mirror. When I look into it, I see a pale face, a ghost of a girl. Her hair is in a mussed-up blonde ponytail and she looks hunched over and worn out and grubby.

But she is smiling, even if it looks as though she's forgotten how. She knows she's about to get the first good night's sleep she's had in months.

Two

Hey. You. Wake up!"

I open my eyes and, squinting in the bright light, see a man standing above me, his face red with anger. I blink and realize I am in bed, on a stage. The lights in the theater are on. And there is a man in a janitor's uniform yelling at me.

"Who are you?" he demands.

"I'm sorry." I scramble out of bed as fast as I can, grabbing my shoes and backpack off the floor in one quick motion. Then I hop off the stage and start up the aisle. I can hear him shouting after me.

"Stop her!"

I pick up speed until I'm running. I follow the Exit signs and make my way outside, and I keep running until I'm back in the square. I don't know what time it is, but I can tell it's

early because most of the shops are still closed, even the pizza place.

My stomach reminds me that I'm hungry. But I have no money left. When I walk past the park, I see a homeless person holding a cardboard sign. I don't want to infringe on his territory, so I leave the square and head up Main Street.

As a rule, I try to avoid begging, but I can't claim never to have done it. I've always worked and saved and gotten by on as little as I could, but there were a few times when I had no choice. Like that afternoon in Colorado, when I stood outside a supermarket with a sign, a lot like the one the guy in the park has, handwritten and crumpled and asking for something, anything. Sometimes people look at you as if you need to get off your lazy butt and get a job already. They don't understand that it's not laziness that brought you there. Sometimes people are kind. In Boulder, they were very kind, and I ate that night.

Today, I'm as desperate as I was back in Boulder, but I'm determined not to beg. I continue up Main Street and watch the stores begin coming to life. Merchants start to set up tables out front, prop open doors, and put out water dishes for passing dogs. Despite their busyness, everyone smiles at me or says hello. I'm reminded of what a nice town it is—maybe I'm also remembering that my life back then was nice, too—and I don't want to leave. But I don't know how in the world I can stay.

I find a wooden bench and sit, watching people. A block

away, a man has begun strumming an acoustic guitar, and I feel like closing my eyes. I always hear better with my eyes closed. With the music and the sun shining on my face, I feel lucky to be here, to be free. I try to force thoughts of the future from my mind. Right here, right now, I am content. And that counts for something.

I spend the morning wandering from bench to bench, seeking sun and music, both easy to find on one of the fall's last warm days. For a while I sit near a woman playing the flute and watch her with interest. She can't be much older than I am, and she's wearing a crown of flowers in her hair and a green dress that's all raggedy at the bottom, as if she lives in a forest. Her music lulls me into something like peace.

Finally my growling stomach wins out, and I feel light-headed as I begin to walk again, wondering what I can do for money, for food. I have no instrument, no talents other than running. And right now I'm too weak even for that.

I ask a stranger for the time, if for no other reason than to interact with someone. He is friendly and tells me it is two o'clock, much later than I thought. I need to eat.

I turn off Main Street and make my way away from the high hills behind me to the flatter part of town. The houses here are smaller than the ones along the hill, and older, even though some of them have been renovated to look brand-new. The street comes to an end at a set of railroad tracks. Two

empty railroad cars wait idly on the tracks, as if they might run again someday.

I follow the tracks to a small shopping plaza, jammed with cars and people. A sign reads Lithia Food Co-Op, and another beggar stands near the parking lot entrance. I walk into the store. I don't know why, since I have no money, but maybe they'll have some samples.

Inside, everything smells fresh, from the vegetables stacked high in wooden crates to the simmering foods in the take-out area. I wander through the produce section, plucking a few organic grapes when no one is looking. Past the cheese shop are the bulk-food bins—rice and beans and lentils and other things I can't nibble on, but also nuts and dates and candied ginger. I slip my hands into the bins as often as I dare, but none of it is enough. It seems as though these little bites of food are only waking up my hunger, and I can hear my stomach literally groaning.

I pick up a bottle of orange juice and walk around the store, wondering if I can drink it and deposit the bottle someplace without being seen. Employees are rushing around, busy. But I'm not a thief. I put the juice back.

As I do, I glimpse a tofu sandwich, wrapped in plastic and ready to eat. It was made yesterday and is on sale, half off, only three dollars, which of course I don't have. I pace back and forth in front of the prepared-foods refrigerator. I hate

myself right now, for what I'm about to do. But I do it anyway.

I pass the fridge one last time, reaching over and sliding the sandwich into the left pocket of my hoodie. I step toward the door as slowly and nonchalantly as I can, blood rushing to my head because I feel as though everyone is staring at me. I try to walk out but realize that I'm trying to exit through an entrance-only door, so I have to turn back. More self-conscious than ever, I pretend to shop some more. It gives me a chance to make sure nobody's following me. When I glance over my shoulder, I see only a woman with a toddler behind me.

I'm pretending to peruse the selection of pineapples when I get an opportunity. The toddler begins to cry as his mother leads him out through the automatic doors. Then he starts to scream, digging in his heels and refusing to take another step. I thank the universe for unruly children as I start past them. A screaming child always commands more attention than a small young woman slipping out the door. Even if her pocket is bulging with stolen food.

Outside, I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm about to turn the corner and quicken my pace when I feel a strong hand on my arm.

"Hold it right there."

I turn to face one of the co-op clerks. He's young, like me, and his thin, goateed face has a serious look on it.

"What is it?" I ask, trying to look innocent.

"You have something that belongs to the store. Something you did not pay for."

I look around for the fastest escape route. It's a habit I've been able to perfect over the years, finding the quickest way out of a bar, or a motel, or a shelter dormitory. I feel my legs tensing, ready to propel me like a deer from this parking lot and through the alley, to take me out of this town for good, once and for all.

"I think you're mistaken," I say.

"Then what's that in your pocket? And don't say you're just happy to see me." He is smiling now, the serious look gone. Even though his joke is really lame, I feel my body relaxing. Is he going to let me off the hook?

"Please don't call the cops," I say, still uncertain. "I'm out of money and I'm really hungry. I'll return it. I haven't even touched it, see?" I reach inside my pocket and remove the sandwich.

"Tofu sandwiches pair well with our organic orange juice," he says. "I see that you and I have a similar palate."

So he saw me with the juice, too. "I didn't take that juice." I hold up my arms, as if inviting him to search my pockets. "I promise."

But he doesn't frisk me; instead, he hands me the juice container that he saw me contemplating in the store. He must've been following me all along. I'm embarrassed that

he witnessed me drooling over all that food, and still a little worried that maybe he's already called the cops.

I shove the juice back and give him the sandwich at the same time. "Look, I don't know what you're up to, but I haven't eaten anything so please just take it back and I'll go, okay?"

"Don't worry," he says. He takes my hand and pulls out my clenched fist, revealing my palm. He places the sandwich there and puts the juice in my other hand. "I paid for this, as well as your sandwich. Enjoy it."

I stare at the food in my hand. "I don't get it."

"I get an employee discount." He smiles again, then shrugs. "You looked like you could use a break. But don't do it again, okay? I don't want to lose my job. There's a food bank about six blocks from here. They've probably even got tofu."

A vegetarian-friendly food bank—only in Lithia. Certainly not in Texas. I want to throw my arms around him, I'm so happy, but instead I nod until my head feels as though it'll bobble off my neck. "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

I watch him return to the store. Perhaps this was a sign, the sign I needed. Maybe Lithia is a place I can still call home after all.

I go to the park to eat. I sit near the pond and pull apart the sandwich with my fingers, making every bite last as long as I can. A couple of ducks glide past me on the water, mumbling to themselves, and they stop in front of me, hanging out at the

water's edge, begging for a piece of bread. I know I shouldn't feed them, me of all people, but I toss down a small piece. From one beggar to another.

The day is aging quickly, but it's still nice and warm. The deciduous trees are losing their green, and even the pine needles are dry and dying. I walk back through town, suddenly wanting to be among people, though I don't know why because it's not something I normally enjoy. But Lithia feels better to me somehow. It's amazing how one act of kindness can make an entire town, even an entire world, seem friendly.

The courtyard around the theater complex is crowded. I see that there was a matinee on the Elizabethan stage. *Hamlet*. I've never seen *Hamlet*, have never even read any Shakespeare. Shakespeare wasn't among the courses offered at the community college I went to.

I keep walking, past the restaurants and shops. Then I see the shoes. A bright new pair of Brooks running shoes whose blue-and-yellow coloring seems to mirror the sky. I can't help but look down at the shoes on my feet. They're the same brand—if there's one investment worth making, it's in good shoes—but they're more than four years old and worn past the point of recognition. The rubber bottom has completely worn off my left shoe, and the right has a gaping hole tearing through the toe.

As if possessed by a force I can't control, I go inside and

find the shoe on the wall. I take it from its little metal shelf and hold it up, breathing in its new-shoe smell. The untested nylon. The freshly stamped and glued rubber soles. It's as yummy to me as a bakery is to a normal person.

"You want to try on a pair?"

I turn to see a tall blonde woman watching me. She's wearing a T-shirt that reads Lithia Runners.

"Oh." I put the shoe back. "No, thanks. I'm just looking."

She stares down at my feet, dubious. "Looks like you could use a new pair."

"I can't afford them."

"Well, why don't you try them on, just to get a feel for them. Let me guess, eight and a half?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I'll be right back."

The woman exits into a back room, and I sigh. Trying on new running shoes will be like being in that co-op—the temptation will be too great. A sandwich is one thing, but a hundred-dollar pair of running shoes is another. And after this morning, I'm not sure what I'm capable of anymore.

I have to get out of here. I'm on my way out when a flyer on the bulletin board near the door catches my eye. It's advertising an upcoming race called "Cloudline." A half marathon, only a few weeks away. I feel my legs growing twitchy, eager to be running again.

"Have you run Cloudline?"

It's that woman—she's back again, standing over my shoulder, a shoebox in her hand.

"No."

"It's brutal. It climbs up the side of Mount Lithia—one vertical mile."

"Sounds like fun."

She laughs. "We runners are such masochists, aren't we? Good thing I chose to marry another one—the only person who ever really gets it is another runner. I'm Stacey, by the way. My fiancé and I own this place."

I pause before telling her, "I'm Kat."

"Well, Kat, let's get these shoes on you," Stacey says, holding up the box.

"That's okay," I say. "I really should be going."

"Are you sure?" She looks down at my feet again. "Really, Kat, you shouldn't be walking around in those things. Bad shoes can affect your knees, your back, cause all sorts of problems. If you really are a runner, you have to take better care of your feet."

"If you think my shoes are scary, you don't want to see my socks."

"Is that it? I can get you new ones. We keep a few pairs on hand for people who walk in with sandals and that sort of thing."

Stacey crosses the room in three steps, and the next thing I know a pair of white athletic socks is hurtling toward me. "Think fast!" she calls out, and I grab the socks just before they hit me in the head. They are so white and clean I want to press them against my cheek.

I slowly untie the laces of my decrepit shoes, and I'm grateful when another customer walks in and Stacey turns away. Hurriedly I take off my shoes, revealing socks that are stained so dark with dirt and sweat it's hard to believe they were ever white. Both of my big toes burst out of the fabric as if they're trying to make a prison break. I quickly remove the socks and slip on the new ones. They are so soft I never want to take them off. I stuff my old socks into my pocket.

Then, the shoes. After I put them on, I stand and feel half an inch taller, my old shoes so flattened by mileage and weather and time that it was like I'd shrunk. I'm five foot three and a half, but in these shoes I can claim five-four without getting doubtful looks.

"They fit you well," says Stacey, walking back toward me. I see that someone else is helping the other customer now, a man at the cash register wearing the same Lithia Runners T-shirt. There's a small pile of clothing on the counter, running pants and shirts, a hat. What a luxury, I think, to be able to walk into a store like this and buy anything you want.

"What do you say?" Stacey continues. "Should I hold

them for you until you have the money?"

"That might be a very long hold," I say. "I sort of have to find a job first."

She turns away. "Honey, come over here," she calls to the man in the other Lithia Runners shirt. "That's my fiancé, David," she tells me as he hands the customer a receipt. When he comes over, I notice that they're about the same height, both a head taller than I am, both muscular and strong, though David is longer and leaner.

"David, this is Kat—" Stacey looks at me, waiting for my last name. I don't have time to think, so I give her the first name that pops into my head.

"Jones."

"This is Kat Jones. She's new in town."

"Oh, welcome. I see you're getting off on the right foot." He laughs, but Stacey and I only stare at him. "Come on," he says. "That's at least sort of funny, isn't it?"

"Not really, honey. Listen, do we need any part-time help?"

"Not unless you start slacking off."

"Don't tempt me," Stacey says.

David tilts his head toward the storeroom. "Hang on, I think I hear the fax machine. Be right back."

"Coward," Stacey says, rolling her eyes. "Give me a sec."

She follows him to the back, and I return to the Cloudline

flyer and study the details. I grew up in the imposing shadow of Mount Lithia, gazing up at it from town, from the shorter hills I used to climb as a kid. This run looks brutal. A vertical climb of 5,300 feet. Fog and snow likely along the route. I want to run it, badly. I want to conquer this mountain. To prove that life hasn't conquered me.

Stacey returns with David wrapped around one arm, both of them smiling.

"Kat, how would you like a little part-time work?" David asks.

"I—well, I wouldn't want to impose," I say, looking from one of them to the other. I have the same feeling I had at the co-op, that this must be some sort of joke, that it's impossible for people to be this kind.

"You're not imposing," Stacey says. "With Cloudline coming up, we get a surge of runners from around the region. They need shoes. They need gloves. They need jackets. It's our version of the Boston Marathon."

"It's not permanent or anything," David says. "Just a few weeks."

"That's great. That's perfect. I'll do whatever you need."

"You can start tomorrow at ten," says Stacey. "You'll help me open the store."

"Okay."

"What's your phone number?" Stacey asks, picking up a

pen from the counter.

"Um. I don't have one."

"Address?"

"Not yet."

"You mean you don't have a place to live?"

"I'm still looking," I say. "I just got into town yesterday. But I can be here at ten, no problem."

She and David exchange a look. "We've got a small studio out back, behind our house," Stacey says. "It used to be a garage but we got it all fixed up, with a little kitchenette and a bathroom and everything. You can stay there tonight. And tomorrow we'll work out a rental agreement."

"Really?"

I see Stacey's grip tighten around David's arm. "David, you do not hear that fax machine again," she says, then adds, to me, "Yes, I'm sure. It's not the Ritz, but you can afford it."

"How do you know?"

She grins. "Because I know what you're making."

She digs around in a drawer and finds her purse, pulling a single key off her keychain. "Come on," she says, "let's go take a look. We're only a few blocks away."

She leads me out the back door, through an alley, down sidewalks covered with dead leaves. They crunch under our feet.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. "It must be the water."

"The water?"

"Lithia Springs," she says. "You never heard about the springs?"

I have only a vague memory of the water, so I shake my head.

"Our water comes from natural springs that contain traces of lithium. Lithium has been used for years to improve moods. That's what put this town on the map a hundred years ago. People from around the country would travel here to drink the water, soak in it. They thought it had healing properties, too."

"Does it?"

"Beats me." We turn down a quiet street, the trees forming a canopy above us. "I don't drink it," she adds. "Stinks too much."

"What does it smell like?" I ask.

Stacey smiles at me as she leads me down a brick walkway and opens the door to the cottage. "Remind me to show you the fountain in the town square. You can't live in Lithia without drinking from the springs."

As she says that, a memory resurfaces—of someone holding me up to the fountain in the square, of a sulfur-like smell, of me spitting water out, of laughter.

"We have a filter on the faucet in here," Stacey says, "so

you won't notice the smell."

The cottage is beautiful. It's tiny, with only two windows, but its old wood floors are whitewashed, and it's painted in light blue and white, like a cloud-dusted sky. I peek into the bathroom, which is sparkling clean, the nicest bathroom I've seen in ages.

"I'll bring you some towels," Stacey says, "and you'll join us for dinner. Most of the time, we just grab take-out because we're working right through. But the co-op has good healthy stuff. Do you know the co-op?"

"Um." I feel my ears burn and imagine they must be bright red. "I think I saw a sign, yeah."

"I'll have David pick up some bread and juice for you while he's there. Just so you'll have a little something in the morning. Busy day tomorrow."

I look around the little room—a place of my own, after all these months. For now, anyway. Then I look at Stacey, at her kind face. She is so tall I have to stretch my neck backward. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Tell you what," she says. "You can accept those Brooks as an advance on your salary and go for a run with me tomorrow. I'm behind in my Cloudline training and need a running buddy who won't smoke me the way David does."

"You're on."

Three

This morning, a couple walks up to me and asks where the theater is. And I tell them—just like that, with confidence, like I've lived here all my life. It's been a week, and I'm starting to wish I *can* live here for the rest of my life. I have a place to sleep. I have a job. And I love being around shoes and people who love the outdoors as much as I do.

And then there is running. Every morning before work, I go out for a quick run, each time in a different direction, with no idea how far I will go or what I will see. Yesterday, I went north, wandering through the residential streets until I nearly ran right into a family of deer. I startled them—a mother and father and two younger ones—and they all jerked their heads up and stood frozen, staring at me with their big eyes wide and their ears focused on me like satellite dishes. I stopped and waited as they tiptoed across the street. I've seen them eating

the vegetation outside my cottage, wandering through backyards and open grassy lots. The deer are year-round residents of Lithia, Stacey told me, and she likes them, too—*They do my weeding for me*, she said—but she also said that not all the homeowners share our enthusiasm. I don't see why not; the deer are so peaceful. I love their silence most of all.

My first customer of the day is an elderly woman who is trying on her first pair of running shoes. She just retired here from Los Angeles, and she wants to start working out.

"Better late than never," she says.

"Running will change your life," I tell her. "It changed mine."

After work, Stacey invites me for a run up the hill. Even though I ran this morning, I'm excited to go out again. She changes her clothes in the back. Me, I'm already ready to go; I don't have much else to wear other than running shorts and T-shirts, and I've been wearing my new shoes everywhere.

While Stacey is still in back, David approaches, his voice low. "Is she taking you up the Lost Mine Trail?"

"I think so," I say. "We went up there yesterday, but we didn't make it all that far. It's quite a climb."

He looks worried. "Stay together," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"Keep an eye on each other," he says. "Don't let her out of your sight."

"Bears?" I ask. His anxiety is a little catching.

"Stacey says I'm paranoid, but there have been attacks up there. Just last month, a tourist in town for the theater went missing."

"Don't worry. I'll look out for her."

He smiles. "By the way, you're doing great. I wish I could hire you permanently."

"That's okay. I'll find something."

Tonight, Stacey leads me through town to the Lost Mine Trail. Just getting to the trailhead is no simple feat. We start up Frontier Street, which climbs sharply for several hundred feet. Then we turn right onto Highview Drive and follow it along two arching switchbacks, passing ever-grander mansions that cling to the side of the hill.

As we heave our way up, she tells me about Lithia's theaters, how these three stages have supported the town for decades, bringing in tourists from around the world. "When I first came here five years ago," she says, huffing a little, "it was to be an actress. I didn't get offered a role that first season, so I worked for an accountant. And then there was David."

"How'd you meet?"

"Met him at the store, first day he opened. He'd just

retired—he sold his software company when he was thirty and moved up here, bought the store to keep himself busy. I'd just started running myself, so I went in and found the whole place a mess. Poor guy's great at software but doesn't know the first thing about inventory or customer relations. So I became employee number one."

Eventually the paved road turns to gravel, then dirt, then narrows to a trail. I glance over my shoulder to take one last look at the town below. We must've gained at least five hundred feet in elevation—Lithia looks so small from up here. Then we enter the forest.

The Lost Mine Trail is a winding trail that meanders up the side of the Siskiyou National Forest and continues for hundreds of miles. It connects with the Pacific Crest Trail, that two-thousand-mile trail that committed (or crazy) hikers can take from San Diego all the way up to Canada. But even this part of the Lost Mine Trail is also for committed (or crazy) runners, and it's pretty desolate; we've seen no one else since leaving town. *I promised David that I wouldn't run on this trail alone in the evening*, Stacey said when she first brought me up here, but when she rolled her eyes, I knew she did anyway.

Stacey is a strong runner, with a longer stride than I have, but I keep pace with her. I can hear her breathing grow louder, and soon we cease our conversation. She stops talking first, and I wonder if she's been pushing herself because I'm here, or

if she's testing me.

I'm tempted to pull ahead of her, to prove that I can do more than just keep pace, but I'm too grateful to her to risk showing her up. Runners are a strange lot. I've seen friendships formed and lost based on who is faster, and most of us can't help being competitive. I wouldn't want anything to come between our new friendship.

The sun has fallen behind Mount Lithia, and the forest grows more dense until the darkness forces me to blink my eyes to adjust.

I remember what David said, and I stick close to Stacey, though I feel her trying to pull ahead. Now it's me who's pushing too hard; I feel my lungs straining for oxygen, and I'm trying hard to breathe through a cramp in my side.

Suddenly, I hear a noise in the brush on my right.

I stop and try to listen, but I can only hear my breath. Stacey stops a few yards ahead.

"What's wrong?"

"I heard something."

"Probably just a bear."

I look at her and she's smiling. "More likely a deer," she assures me.

"That's not funny," I say. "David said we should be careful up here." I peer into the thick grove of trees, hoping to see a pair of big deer eyes, a pair of wide ears. I can't see anything,

but I feel as though something is staring back at me, and my skin tingles with fear.

Stacey walks down the hill to me and looks into the forest. "David likes to worry about me," she says. "I did see a bear once, a year ago. I think I scared him more than he scared me."

"What about the missing tourist?"

"I don't know. Lithia attracts all types of people, and lots of them come and go. Some people even live up here."

"Really?"

"Hill people. Tree-huggers. True survivalists. They come out of the hills for food and supplies, or just supplies. Then they come back up here."

I still have that uneasy feeling, like we're being watched, but I don't tell Stacey.

"Maybe we should head back," I say, trying to make my voice sound casual. "Let the deer get back to her dinner."

I don't know who it is I'm trying to reassure.

Read on…

Get your copy of *Out of Breath* at:

Amazon.com

Barnes & Noble

Your local bookstore

Or buy a copy from the Ashland Creek Press store at:

www.AshlandCreekPress.com

Out of Breath is first book in a planned trilogy.