

When everyone had taken a turn, the coach started over and gave everybody a chance to give it another go to see if they could beat their first time. So Lu was up for another go. He did that same cocky swagger over to the starting line. Did a few stretches, some jumps. And the lady on the other side of the track screamed again. The boy was just getting loose and she was going off like he was doing something. The people around her looked at her like she was crazy, obviously annoyed. All of his teammates looked on. Some of them seemed to be bubbling with anticipation to see the mighty Lu run again. Others looked . . . over it. That's probably

how I looked. That's definitely how I felt. Over Lu, over Brandon, and over anybody else who thought they were unbeatable. Not to mention I was all out of sunflower seeds, so I had nothing to hold me back from getting up and showing him that he really wasn't all that, and that I ain't never had a running lesson in my whole life and I could keep up with him, if not beat him. So I stepped over all the sunflower seed shells that had piled up between my feet like a mountain of dead flies, and walked, not on the track, but just beside it, on the grass. I lined up with Lu, who had now dropped into his "on your mark" stance. I didn't need to do all that. I just needed to roll my jeans up and tuck my laces in my high-tops and I was good to go.

Coach Turtle Face noticed me and called out, "Kid, what are you doing? Tryouts were last week."

I didn't say nothing, and the coach followed up with, "This is a private practice."

I still didn't respond, and just started scrunching the sleeves of my T-shirt up to my shoulders.

"Did you hear me?" the coach now asked, a little louder this time. He started walking toward me. The other kids were looking at me like most kids did. Like I was something else. Like I wasn't one of them. But whatever. "Do you not understand what *private*

means?" the coach jeered. I thought of a funny comeback but kept it to myself.

"Yeah, man, the track is for runners, not people who want to *pretend* like they runners," Lu jabbed, now standing straight. He looked me up and down, then flashed an arrogant grin.

"Just blow the whistle!" I finally called back to the coach. He stopped in his tracks and glared. Then he looked at Lu before continuing in my direction. He pointed his clipboard at me.

"Listen, you get one run, hear me? After this, I don't wanna see you around here no more," he threatened. "This is serious business, you understand?"

I gave him the *whatever* face and nodded. He pointed his stupid clipboard at me again, like I was scared of that. Please. Then, as the coach headed back to the finish line, Lu shook his head at me and growled, "Hope you ready to get smoked."

This time I said it. "Whatever," and gave him my best ice grill to make sure he knew he didn't scare me. And he didn't. We were just running, not fighting, so why should I be frightened by some milk-face running boy?

Now back at the other end of the track, the coach yelled out, "On your mark . . ." Lu dropped down on



all fours again. I just put my right foot forward. "Get set . . ." Lu put his butt in the air. I leaned in. Then . . . *badeep!* I wish I could tell you what I was thinking. But I can't. I probably wasn't thinking nothing. Just moving. Man, were my legs going! I pumped and pushed, my ankles loose and wobbly in my sneakers, my jeans stiff and hot, the whole time seeing Lu out the corner of my eye like a white blur. And then it was over. And everybody watching, all the other runners, clapped and hooted, pointing at us both. Some had their mouths open. Others just looked confused. The lady on the other side of the track—not a peep. But all the people around her were standing and cheering.

Lu walked in circles with his hands on his head, trying to catch his breath, panting, wheezing out, "Who won? Who won, Coach?"

"I don't know, son. It was pretty close." The coach said it like the words were sour in his mouth. I walked back over to my bench, grabbed my backpack, and to keep my part of the deal, headed out. I'd made my point, and it wasn't like I wanted to be part of their little club. I just needed everybody to know that the fancy, white-black boy wasn't all that.