

Robert Granader
10 Burning Tree Court
Bethesda, MD 20817
(240) 747-3030
rgranader@marketresearch.com

75,000 words

DISTANT BROTHERS

by

Rob Granader

CHAPTER 1

9:10 p.m., September 13th
London, England

Sometimes you run so fast it burns.

The physically fit strive for this feeling, stretching for a finish line.

But when you are in your forties and haven't seen the inside of a gym since college, you avoid this pounding against the hard pavement, this gasping for air. The man in middle age doesn't go this far above his recommended daily allotment of steps unless he is running *from* something. And no matter how fast his legs move, or how hard his arms swing, at some point he realizes he cannot outrun whatever is chasing him, and he falls into its arms, and the pain in his heaving chest is now second to the pain being inflicted by whatever force grabbed him.

And in some way he is relieved that the stress of the chase, the intensity of his heartbeat, the rawness of his breath, is over.

Whatever was chasing Rupert that night across the Millennium Footbridge now had him in its grasp, and he squinted, the fading sun blinding him as he hung upside down, the railing gnawing into his side.

The brown River Thames rushed forty feet below.

Two large men, whose names he didn't know, held him there. Not a cartoon character, ankles aloft, coins falling from his pockets, bits of paper caught by the wind. This was much

more menacing, his torso hanging askew, the bridge rail sawing him in half, a pain intensifying with the slightest movement. Rupert tried adjusting himself so his thick brown belt could protect his nerve endings as his body crushed into his hip against the weight. But the nameless men were too strong, their girth immovable. So he gave in, letting his head fall back, which is when the sun hit him, streaming past the reflective glass of the Gherkin, through the buildings and into his eyes.

He could see the dirty wash below, like a giant toilet flushing westward. The push of the water sounded like the scamper of feet that crossed the bridge hours before, Londoners running to the trains that would take them home. But now just some evening tourists passed by. He watched the river rush toward him as it ran over the rocks and waves of history. He feared the fall, the cold impact. Drowning always seemed to him the worst way to go. Suffocating in the cold and dirty water. Now, all that history would be filling his lungs; it was too ghastly a thought. One man balanced him on the rail; the other reached into his pockets trying to find what they were looking for.

And when they didn't find it—after all, who could hold 20,000 British pounds in their pockets anyway—the nameless men took what was there and simply let go.

For a moment there was relief. Relief from the pain in his side, the blood rushing through his temples. Relief that a bullet hadn't seared his skin or that a knife hadn't carved up his belly.

The relief was interrupted by the sensation of falling, which ended when his head slammed into the cold, hard water. The current grabbed him, yanking in strong pulls down away from the city. He coughed, trying to expel the murk that threatened to choke him. His arms flailed, hitting rocks and unknown debris.

The coughing subsided and then started up again, as he inhaled more water in gulps, then

expelled it. The world was a blurry mix of water and light until he felt the pain in his hand as it sliced open against some ragged object. The rocks, glass, and mix that lay across the edge of the Thames hooked him; he reached out, losing any sense of direction, slapping at the water as he tried to grab anything to keep the end from coming. And then the world stopped.

He was cold and wet and cut and bleeding, but no longer tumbling or drowning. Lying on the side of the river, heat coming up from his belly to his mouth, his feet still feeling the push in short bursts downstream. His head sunk into the gray muck, rocks and shells, and he gasped for more air. Turning his head he threw up whatever was left from the steak pie. Then he inhaled for more life. Everything hurt.

CHAPTER 2

5:10 a.m., September 13th
Washington, DC

When Adrian competed he wasn't a middle-aged man trying to defy the clock; he was the captain of a ship, the pilot of a plane. For him it was only partly about the exercise. It was a mission where he focused on a dashboard of things to do, small milestones to achieve: the next stop sign, eat, the next water break, drink, squat, and shit, spit. Repeat.

It was about the games he played in his head to help him reach that mailbox, that street sign, but never about how much or how far the whole endeavor might be.

Adrian squinted into the morning light, his goggles magnifying the sun. He wanted so badly to dive into the river, to get his heart beating, to feel the burn. But he couldn't. He adjusted his mask, pushing on the lenses with the heels of his hands so the air burped and they locked into place. Millions of tiny sparks leapt off the Potomac River, fireworks, a thousand Fourth of Julys dancing on the water. Row upon row of bodies, tight, athletic, strong, bouncing on their toes trying to keep warm, the pace of their blood flow increasing. Adrian's heart ran faster, faster, beat after beat after beat. The temptation to hit the water was almost too much. Before the gun. Before the 4,000 other swimmers who all wanted the same edge.

He'd trained for the Nation's Triathlon for three months, which for a normal middle-aged man was unthinkable short. But for Adrian Woodward it was plenty. His physical life in perfect

sync with the environment. The business had grown, even through the recession; his eldest child, from a previous relationship, though barely a marriage, would soon be off to college, a transition he hoped would bring calm into their lives. His current wife remained, to him, in a supporting role, staying at home, healthy dinners for the twins and himself. Yet he was miserable, unable to grab pleasure from anything but solitary victories by chipping away seconds from his athletic feats that nobody else cared about.

She, too, had a training schedule, though not as rigorous as Adrian's, he would tell her. It had a different purpose. Hers was not about beating times on a stopwatch; instead it was beating back time and keeping the thighs and arms in good form. Maybe she got the occasional medicinal help, a Botox injection here, a shot of something there, just to try it. Adrian wouldn't care, she told her doctor. He'd have to notice to care. He would be more interested in the end result anyway.

The gun sounded and he was off, two steps at most, and then the kicking, the wild pumping. Thousands of legs, tens of thousands of fingers and toes punishing the water, creating currents, his world a tumble of bubbles and darkness. And then like all the races before, his eyes would clear, and the water would find its way into his ears. All he could hear were the sounds of his own breathing getting faster as he reached for the first buoy.

Two hours and thirteen minutes later, he was running down Ohio Drive, the Jefferson Memorial in the distance, the Tidal Basin, the expanse of Washington's beauty. The façade he called it. It looked majestic, but to him it had become such crap. The pounding intensified. He wanted to run faster, but his legs were rubber. He just wanted to beat two hours and ten minutes.

The Lincoln Memorial was in sight. Balloons bounced at the finish waving him home. A low-flying plane floated along the Potomac toward National Airport drowning out the music. He

didn't see Jeannie or the kids, but they were there. He looked past them and the homemade signs, his gaze on the finish. He didn't see the little boys shouting over the noise of the plane or the sign tearing at the edges as they jumped. He didn't notice they misspelled "doddy," something Jeannie almost made them correct, but she kept it.

She watched her husband pass, a grimace on his face as he tried to beat the clock. Always trying to beat back something. If he'd kept going just a few miles more, he'd have reached Sibley Hospital, where unbeknownst to him his father lay dying. Even if he had known, he wouldn't have run there.

CHAPTER 3

He couldn't take off his sweater.

His clothes were so heavy from water that he needed help getting it over his head. But he had no one to ask, even after he got home.

“Spotty” and “patchy” were favorite terms of London forecasters, because the weather changed from sunny to clouds, warm rain to bone-tightening wind that blew through clothing as if it were rice paper. And so the dress code was always layers.

Rupert shivered as he walked along Bankside Street toward home. His T-shirt stuck to his skin; a blue knit sweater dragged on him with water weight, a thin jacket torn and bloodied. What he must have looked like, limping along with a pain blazing down his right side, where he'd hit the water, his hip aching from the grinding along the bridge rail. His right hand was cut, and now he noticed so was his leg. Something jagged in the water had tugged at him, and the current scratched out a pattern that drew blood from his knee to his upper thigh.

Too sore to run, he walked as quickly as his body would let him to the George Inn, the public house where he worked and lived. The people in the small complex had been his life since he'd left America almost fifteen years earlier. He felt close to them, more than coworkers, although none could say they knew him. Except Siobhan.

He always had a quality about him. Something from when he was a kid, the ability to draw sympathy from people. No, it was more than that. Bigger. People wanted to take care of

him. He was still handsome, in a way that a man in his forties is handsome. He had his hair, a reddish color which hid the gray. The Brits called him Ginger. He combed it to look windblown, like Robert Redford, whose hair fell easily across his forehead. He was a poet in his heart, and that came out when he spoke.

Only the words weren't his. He memorized lines that he liked, trying to copy them into his writing, but would fail, only succeeding when he dropped them into conversation on unsuspecting women.

He didn't worry about the things that scared everybody else, like money and health. He was old enough to feel the aches and pains of age, but young enough not to think about serious injury, disease, or death. And as for money, it always just seemed to come. Everyone knew he had it. Everyone wondered where it came from. Everybody had stories that went back to the days of grade school, friendships they had, things they could verify. He arrived only fifteen years earlier with money. Nobody knew how.

Besides the size of his wallet, his physical attributes set him apart. He had great teeth, a politician's smile they used to say about him. The others in his world couldn't spell orthodontist, or if they could they wondered how someone could be so rich and so vain as to need one. No matter how much coffee or ale or Guinness passed through those lips, his teeth had their own resistance. A core of whiteness that fended off the worst stains of British life.

Rupert limped along the promenade that overlooked the water. St Paul's Cathedral in the fading distance behind him now. He avoided eye contact with the couples passing in front of the art galleries and pubs. Groups of bankers and clerical workers lingered. It was as if no time had passed since he slipped into London that first night. He always feared being recognized by someone from the other side.

CHAPTER 4

No one ever knew if Adrian was happy crossing the finish line, certainly not Jeannie. She assumed he wasn't, and he liked it that way. The look from his wife or others in his running group seemed to always ask a question that he was unwilling to answer. Without words they wanted to know his time or how he felt about it, whether he reached whatever unspoken goals were in his head.

He assumed none of them wanted him to succeed. Maybe they didn't want him to fail, but the others in the group surely wanted to beat his time. He was the old man after all, and he thought that made him a target for the others, but really it made him an afterthought. As for Jeannie, he didn't really give it much thought, as long as she was there with the clock, and didn't screw it up. He didn't recall ever hearing her discuss his times; without getting specific she'd just ask, "Are you happy?" Which annoyed him.

He had times and splits, but they were his. His success or his failure set the course for smiles, pleasant moments later in the day, maybe even into the following week. But usually not that long. So when people asked how he did, he could give them numbers or some complicated formula that only meant something to him and be content. Meaningless numbers to everybody else, but to him they were precious price tags indicating his worth.

He used terms like *split*, *times*, *wind*, and *Goop* that meant something to him but were foreign to most. Jeannie tried to listen and learn, but like so many things, he made it so hard, she

gave up. They were past the point where he wanted to share and maybe even where she wanted to learn. But his happiness determined the status of the house.

Of course he would joke that “if Momma ain’t happy, the house ain’t happy,” or “happy wife, happy life.” But everyone knew it was the other way. He was the selfish one. It wasn’t Momma who needed to be happy, it was him. He needed the care and feeding. He was the one with the temper. It wasn’t so much a temper as a pout. A grimace. An unhappiness that unsettled the rest, spreading like a contaminated vapor.

He would describe it in a word that caused pain to friends, family, and work subordinates alike. It was “disappointment.” Nobody wanted to disappoint him, but they couldn’t help doing it.

He reached the finish, but never raised his hands, as everyone else seemed to do. There was an automatic camera taking memento photos as you crossed the line, everyone knew it, they all played along, but he didn’t care. The Nation’s Triathlon Organizing Committee’s photos were inserted into snow globes of the capital, key chains, and picture frames across the city. But not for him.

“Who really wants a picture of me crossing the line? My mother? My father?”

The moment was his and nobody else’s.

“If it was Peter, my parents would order dozens and give them out at Christmastime,” he told Jeannie after a particular grimaced-looking shot.

“I want to order one, but you look so unhappy,” she said.

When he crossed the finish, he ran straight to Jeannie, even before the medical tent. Raising her head she looked at his face, neither of them showing emotion, sharing what was inside with the other. Reaching past a large purse slung over her shoulder, he grabbed her arm,

which held his watch. A number that would drive his moods in the coming days.

Most athletes timed themselves, but he didn't like the feel of the watch on his body. It slowed him down. So she kept his time. The torment it caused, worrying she would somehow turn it off, the kids could bump it. A shove at the Starbucks could decimate his carefully calibrated life by a second here or there.

Panting in the chilly afternoon, he looked at his time, sweat dripping from his forehead onto his wife's arm, further smearing the signs from the children. The misspellings turned to a puddle of red, yellow, and green, an oil slick floating on the black pavement.

Jeannie had a towel over her arm which he grabbed after briefly showing some relief from shaving five seconds off his time.

"Good news?" she asked, after his almost imperceptible fist pump.

"Not bad," he said, wiping his mouth and looking down at the boys, who bounced up at him like popcorn.

CHAPTER 5

His shoulders shook until his back ached. The cold wouldn't leave him. Crossing over Borough Street Rupert looked into the courtyard that housed The George Inn. Dozens of weekday revelers remained at the picnic tables, scattered over the pebbled square, half-empty pint glasses, bottles, amber liquid, and laughter. None of the faces registered, which was good. He hurried through looking down, stopping for only a moment to peer into the window of his home and place of employment, the center of his existence. He watched his world go on without him, the bartenders, waiters, and runners all working through the busy scene, but he was missing. Amidst the chill of it all, he felt the warmth of a memory: George Bailey. It seemed like when he was a kid, they watched it every Christmas weekend in Washington. It was one of those childhood memories that may have only happened once, but he remembered it was a regular occurrence: snowing on Christmas Eve, a fire burning full. Even though he knew it must not have been that way. He closed his eyes and tried to recite the poem he had memorized from the poster he'd seen on the Tube when he first arrived:

“I imagine the earth when I am no more:
Nothing happens, no loss, it's still a strange pageant,
Women's dresses, dewy lilacs, a song in the valley.”

Through the window he could see Terry behind the bar, arms flexing every time he pulled the lever dispensing the ale. Siobhan looked tired, piling glasses onto trays. The rest of the waiters and washers were running hard, everything sweating from the people to the windows.

Business was good. The irony of so much work is that when business is good is when you are most miserable. He was late for this shift. Late for his life. He would have been late even if he hadn't been swimming in the Thames.

The unseasonably warm weather brought everyone from their rat hole after two straight weeks of rain. Rarely were the Brits put off by the weather, but even they were shut in during the previous weeks when it came down unabated. The Americans, like Rupert, were more than happy to stay in and avoid the wet. It's what got him into trouble. He worked the pub at night, but made his money during the day. Or at least tried to. The appeal of the table games, the easy access to them, the empty daylight hours combined to create a toxic atmosphere that landed him in the muck of the ancient river.

And worse were the horses. He loved betting the horses and everything that came with it. He could walk downstairs to Coral or William Hill and spend his day, eyes pressed up to the television screens watching the horses trot and feel like he could see something nobody else could. Or he put money down on who might score the first goal in a Premier League game, the final tally, the greyhounds in Florida, the camels in Dubai. Everything was available, and when his luck ran out, he assumed it was momentary. It had run out only on that sport, or that horse, or that country, or that pitch. And he would try again, a different animal, another locale.

Although they needed him behind the bar, he was wet and cold and hurt and had to get to his bed, which was angled in a small room above the bar. He needed to wash and warm himself. Tend to his bruises. Figure out how to escape the men who dropped him forty feet. Figure out how to explain to Siobhan.

Rupert walked quickly past the window that opened the pub up to the world. He slipped into the alley and labored up the long exterior set of wood steps that led to his small room three

floors up. He could smell the stale beer that seeped into the wood flooring and made it lag. The smell gave him comfort though; it reminded him that he was home. Pushing a thin unlock-able door, he was already turning on the water and letting the bath run in his mind. He knew that soon the bar would suck up all the hot water and he would be left with little. He needed something deeper. A heat to loosen his muscles. Heal his cuts. Dig deep into his joints. Soften the marrow and bring out the healing powers of the youth he no longer had.

He hung his wet and dirty clothes along the outdoor railing and eased his aching body into the warm bath. Not as hot as his body needed, but it was all the old water heater could muster this late into a shift. It was barely enough to bring his temperature up from the chill inside to room temperature. He laid his head back on the crown of the tub and looked up at the ceiling, the brown circular stains growing like alien saucers as more rain fell on the flat roof. The roof needed repair, but didn't get the attention because the owner of the pub never came up there. Never saw it. It would only make its way onto the to-do list if the roof collapsed, crushing his small room and making some barely perceptible noise on the pub ceiling.

He exhaled and felt the air leave his body and wondered why the money hadn't arrived. It always had and now he needed it. What could have happened? Would it ever come again? The following morning he would be at 19a Borough High Street when it opened.