She rose from nothing to become the decorated head coach for women’s track and field at the University of Texas, winning six NCAA championships, sending countless athletes to the Olympics, and turning the school’s program into the country’s standard for excellence. Then Bev Kearney was abruptly forced to resign because of an illicit affair. But she didn’t get to where she is by giving up without a fight.

FAILURE is not an option.
Imagine, for a moment, that you are seventeen, just a slip of a thing, all elbows and knees but with bright, determined eyes. At the mercy of your mama, you have lived in so many places and gone to so many schools you can’t remember them all. Mississippi, California, Illinois, Nebraska. Sometimes you and your little brother spend all day hiding from her rages at the movies, watching the same show over and over till they shoo you out. Sometimes she’ll gamble with you for your lunch money in a card game, and when you lose, you go hungry.

There are only two things that separate you from the other raggedy kids you’ve seen all your life. One is that you are smart. The other is that you are fast. Your long legs and strong thighs can move you like lightning down a crooked sidewalk or around a dusty track. In high school you win medals for your speed, and the coaches marvel at your gift. But you don’t run for them. You run because you have to, because you long for movement—the sight of tall pines shooting by as you fly down a dirt road. That movement is home.

March 30, 2013, in Austin was the kind of spring day that portends the unbearable summer to come. The clouds were heavy and gray, and the air was thick—not an optimal day for running, but the athletes who crowded into Mike A. Myers Stadium at the University of Texas for the last day of the Texas Relays were undeterred. The Texas Relays is, after all, the most important track-and-field event in the state and one of the most important in the nation, drawing some 6,000 high school, college, and professional competitors from across the country. About 20,000 spectators had come to witness the weekend’s speed events—sprints, hurdles, relays—and to catch sight of big names like four-time Olympic gold medalist Sanya Richards-Ross. Inside the stadium, they crammed into the bleachers to watch as the runners burned up the track, wearing uniforms in electric shades of purple and red, green and yellow—and, for UT, bright white.

It was a mostly black crowd, unusual in Austin, maybe, but not in the world of track and field, a sport dominated in the U.S. by African Americans. Over the years, the Texas Relays has morphed into a kind of South by Southwest for ambitious black Americans, who travel to Austin not only to watch the runners but to network with athletes, politicians, executives, and even movie stars. The weekend’s activities are hardly confined to the track: witness the after-parties, galas, and concerts held around town, including the Austin Urban Music Festival, which has taken place on the same weekend since 2006. For most of the past two decades, the reigning queen of the Texas Relays was Beverly Kearney, the head coach of the Uni-
Added to her already impressive life story—she had risen from a poor and rootless childhood, overcoming countless obstacles—the accident made her a formidable role model and a universal symbol of perseverance. “Failure is not an option,” she liked to say.

At the 2003 Texas Relays, Kearney fulfilled her vow to stand again after a terrible car accident had left her paralyzed; in 2012 she was honored by the BET network. Kearney was also the star of the weekend’s non-athletic events. She had established a nonprofit organization to mentor college and high school students, the Pursuit of Dreams Foundation, and during the Relays she would host the Minority Mentorship Symposium. The affair drew high-profile figures—dubbed Gents of Distinction and Divine Divas—from the worlds of sports, politics, business, and entertainment to serve as inspirational speakers for students. Banquets held over the weekend were likely to feature Kearney honoring hip-hop star Eve or former state representative Wilhelmina Delco or actor Hill Harper (best known as Dr. Sheldon Hawkes on CSI: NY) or state Supreme Court chief justice Wallace Jefferson. During the weekend Kearney also put on a leadership conference at the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders and organized youth rallies. She seemed to be everywhere at once.

She was a magnetic, inspiring presence, and not only because of her success in Austin. In a near-fatal car accident in 2002, Kearney had been paralyzed from the waist down, and yet she now walked with two canes, like a mountain climber in a blizzard. Added to her already impressive life story—she had risen from a poor and rootless childhood, overcoming countless obstacles—the accident made her a formidable role model and a universal symbol of perseverance. “Failure is not an option,” she liked to say, and she was living proof of her own maxim.

That is, until this past spring, when Kearney was nowhere to be found at the 2013 Texas Relays. She didn’t ride onto the track on her burnt-orange scooter. No Divine Divas or Gents of Distinction were honored by her Pursuit of Dreams Foundation. At the parties held that weekend, there was no sign of the woman who had inspired so many people. That’s because right after Christmas, to the shock of many in the world of track and field and beyond, UT and Kearney had bitterly parted ways.

While her former team was competing at the stadium, Kearney spent that weekend holed up in her house, southwest of Austin. She was reluctant to attend the races, she told me, because she didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable. Things were just starting to die down after an intense few months of publicity, and she hoped that the athletes she’d once coached could simply focus on their events. Her resignation, and the reasons for it, had been a major distraction for both students and administrators at UT.

Kearney’s career had come to an end because of a sexual relationship she’d had with a student-athlete named Raasm McIntosh ten years earlier, beginning when McIntosh was nineteen. The affair first came to light in the fall of 2012, and following the university’s announcement of Kearney’s departure, a media frenzy erupted. It was fueled in part by the awkward fact that UT’s investigation into Kearney’s behavior had uncovered another instance of sexual activity between a coach and a
Currently, Kearney is keeping it moving with her attorneys: after months of preparation, she intends to file a wrongful termination suit against UT this month, alleging that she was discriminated against because of her race and gender, in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As for the affair, Kearney’s lawyers insist that school rules do not prohibit such relationships and, further, that many UT professors, coaches, and administrators have had similar dalliances without losing their jobs. A UT faculty or staff member who gets involved with a younger charge is expected to report the relationship to his or her immediate supervisors, who then ostensibly provide sage advice and maybe move a couple of desks around. But, Kearney told me, “you are going to be hard-pressed to find somebody over there who’s filed a self-report, and you’re not going to have trouble finding somebody who’s had an affair.”

Kearney watched me study the books still crammed into a broad, high set of shelves. They were mostly volumes about religion, from Christianity to Buddhism, but she is also a big reader of biographies—Gandhi, Malcolm X, Nancy Reagan, and so on. “Did you know Gandhi never told a lie?” Kearney student; assistant football coach Major Applewhite had confessed to a “onetime occurrence” with a 22-year-old student trainer in 2009. But he had been punished only with a temporary pay freeze, and, even worse, the following year he’d received a promotion and a big fat raise. As a *Sports Illustrated* editorial put it, “Two Longhorns coaches slept with students. One was forced from her job. One was promoted. Is there a double standard at UT?”

The shock of it all—the loss of her job, the ensuing media storm, a looming financial meltdown—was still fresh when I visited Kearney the weekend of the Relays. There was an ominous For Sale sign in her front yard. The Porsche that had awed so many young recruits had already been sold.

Her house, a limestone-faced mansionette in an expensive new development, had been depersonalized for real estate showings, save some luxuriously upholstered furniture and framed inspirational posters. She seemed to be living in one small room that doubled as a library and meditation center, and for our conversation she curled herself up in an oversized easy chair, a child’s blanket decorated with ducks and trees tucked around her feet. The blanket is her talisman, the cover a stranger placed over her body on the night nearly eleven years ago when she was thrown from a car and lay dying on the highway.

Dressed in faded sweats, her face makeup-free, Kearney had the plainness of a penitent. But it wasn’t in her nature to let grief take over; two iPads, a laptop, and an iPhone beeped and pinged around the perimeter of her chair, competing with the small, bubbling serenity fountain a few feet away. “I keep it moving,” she explained.
from its good ol’ boy past to a more sophisticated, more diverse future. “I didn’t get [negative] reports on my white athletes,” she told me, referring to their academic development. “Only on the black students.” Furthermore, she complained, the athletics department had turned a blind eye to the failings of the men’s track coach while she had been investigated for dead-end NCAA violations. “I almost felt at times that [women’s athletics director] Chris Plonsky was more interested in breaking me than making me,” Kearney said. As she told it, in 1992 UT had hired a head coach who was black and female and from that moment on blocked her progress at every turn. Who wouldn’t have fallen prey to the temptations of an affair? “I realized I wanted to be bad,” Kearney told me. “I was tired of being beat up and talked about.” (UT, citing the pending litigation, at first declined to comment on this story but later responded to specific queries via email. School representatives dispute all of Kearney’s characterizations of her treatment and that of her athletes.)

Kearney is convinced that it was a series of demands she made during a contract negotiation last year—not an affair from ten years ago—that cost her the job. She’d wanted a raise in pay from about $280,000 to somewhere in the environs of $400,000. In addition, she’d asked for a five-year instead of a four-year contract; she had plans to retire in five years and didn’t want to negotiate a single, final year. She had also asked that she be put in charge of both the men’s and women’s track teams if the two programs were combined, a common practice at many universities. “I think they just wanted me out so bad,” Kearney told me. “I was tired of being beat up and talked about.” (UT, citing the pending litigation, at first declined to comment on this story but later responded to specific queries via email. School representatives dispute all of Kearney’s characterizations of her treatment and that of her athletes.)

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DeLoss Dodds makes $1.1 million.) And the pressures go far beyond the university. A coach is now the first line of defense against agents, managers, shoe companies, helicopter parents, and the unrealistic expectations of the student-athletes themselves. “Parents used to come to me and say, ‘How are you going to help my child become an Olympian?’” Kearney said. “Now it’s, ‘I want to go pro. I want a big contract.’ And the Olympics became a means to earning that money.”

Then there was the university’s internal politics. “Texas is an amazing brand and I love it, but you’ve got power structures, with everyone fighting for position,” Kearney said. She contends that the school is in conflict with itself because it is unable or unwilling to complete the transition...
Imagine now that you are another seventeen-year-old. You live in a part of Houston that most people have never seen, much less want to visit. Your dad isn’t around much. Your mom does her best, but she struggles as a single parent. Sometimes you go hungry because there is no food in the house; sometimes the house is filled with so many strange people doing strange things that you try to stay with your grandmother or your cousin or your best friend, but you are often unsure where you’ll be sleeping on any given night. Yet there’s one thing you do know: you can run faster than any other girl in your class, faster than just about anyone you’ve met. That ability is the main reason you’ve stayed in school when other girls dropped out, and it has allowed you a glimpse of a bigger world, carrying you to track meets in nice parts of town, and then all over the country, and finally as far away as Europe. It is that ability, you know, that will be the bridge from your past to your future, the one in which you go from a college scholarship to a national championship and then, finally, to the Olympics. Nothing and no one can stop you.

For the millions of coaches, players, and fans who make up the heart of college athletics, these are the best and worst of times. From the major sports to the minor ones, the audiences have never been as loyal and the story doesn’t quite make sense. Why would UT dismiss—a rather than just punish—a coach who had made the school proud for almost twenty years? From a legal and PR standpoint, why create an adversary like Kearney, who has the potential to draw the university into one of the messiest scandals in its history? UT athletics department spokesman Nick Voinis told me that the university had what it had to do, taking action against Kearney as soon as the affair came to light. But what looks to be a familiar story of an illicit romance is in fact more convoluted, encompassing matters of gender, race, and the state of college sports. And at the center of it all is a highly gifted woman whose internal complexity threatens each and every thing she’s won.

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For the millions of coaches, players, and fans who make up the heart of college athletics, these are the best and worst of times. From the major sports to the minor ones, the audiences have never been as loyal and rabid, or as large. But with this popularity has come great controversy—over whether players should be paid, over scandals regarding abusive coaches—that has everything to do with the gilded, bloated system that college athletics has become. If college sports is supposed to be “all about the kids,” it’s really all about the money: schools invest in bigger and better facilities, fancier stadiums, and crazily compensated coaches to attract better players, who in turn will help win more games, better merchandising deals, and TV contracts. For some student-athletes, the payoff is confounding: a multimillion-dollar pro career, a life doing what they love. But most student-athletes will never go pro, and what they take away from their college experience is not a priority for athletics departments focused on winning and winners. That a lot of these kids are poor and black taints many universities with what historian Taylor Branch described in the Atlantic in 2011 as “the unmistakable whiff of the plantation.”

Not coincidentally, Bev Kearney’s story reflects this system in a microcosm, as she was a beneficiary of the evolving opportunities for women and minorities in college sports as well as a master of its transformation into a multimillion-dollar enterprise. Her “Failure is not an option” mantra is just a variation on Vince Lombardi’s old saw about winning being “the only thing,” which has come to mean much more than just beating another team. “At the end of the day it’s about results,” Kearney told me. “It’s not about emotions. It’s about business. Everyone knows I’m all about business.”

Kearney was born in Mississippi in 1958, to an alcoholic mother and a father who was only intermittently present in her life, partly because of his career in the military and partly because his relationship with his wife was so toxic. Bertha Kearney was the kind of woman who today might receive a personality disorder diagnosis. She was charming and smart and cared about her seven children (five girls and two boys; Bev was the second to the youngest). Bertha always worked, though her jobs—maid, dry-clean presser—were near the bottom of the pay scale. “She was fearless and bold in times where others would simply buckle under the pressure,” Kearney wrote in an unpublished memoir she has been working on for years, titled Just Stand: The Bev Kearney Story. But on the weekends, Bertha let go, drinking until she passed out. In between, there were wild parties full of dancing, gambling, violence, and indiscriminate sex, with the Kearney children often serving as unwilling participants.

Restless and impulsive, Bertha moved her children so often that Kearney is not sure how many states she lived in as a child, but they included California, Illinois, Nebraska, Florida, and Massachusetts. “We’d make drastic moves across the country, like moving from the North to the South or from the South to the West Coast,” Kearney wrote. “We traveled from state to state as if we were simply changing from one neighborhood to the next.” Seeking order and control wherever she could find it, Kearney took on the role of responsible one, doing well in school and caring for her little brother. “I never wanted to be the one who didn’t know the answers,” she told me. On visits to her grandmother, she helped the older woman clean houses and got the chance to see how other people lived. “I was determined to someday own a house like the ones we were cleaning.”

It was sports that provided the way out. Kearney’s older sister Gerettia was good at basketball and track, and Kearney followed her lead. She found she loved to compete. “Playing on a team was a lot like having a family, or what I imagined,” she wrote. “It felt good to me, if only for the duration of practice.” To fit in, she pretended she came from the same kinds of happy families as her teammates, inventing stories about imaginary relatives. But most important, Kearney discovered she loved to win. “I realized somewhere along the way that you get more attention for being the best, and I was hooked,” she wrote.

Still, nothing came easily. When she was seventeen, Kearney’s mother died. Her father moved into the house with his new wife, and Kearney soon had to find another place to live. It was her senior year in high school in Brandon, Florida; she was eight months away from graduation. She slept at a sister’s apartment and even lived in her car, but she never stopped going to school. She understood just how much was riding on her success. “Sports was the tool that I would use to save my family,” she wrote. “I would work hard my senior year and get a scholarship and a great job someday. I would save us.” Kearney was lucky in one regard: by the time she graduated from high school, minority students were finally getting the same scholarship opportunities as white students, and just a few years before, in 1972, the law known as Title IX had been passed, requiring schools that receive federal funds to equalize sports and education programs for men and women.

Kearney did win a scholarship, and she became a track star at Auburn University, where she was one of about 400 black students among nearly 17,500 whites. She graduated in 1981 with a degree in social work and several athletic honors, including athlete of the year and team MVP. She also qualified for the Olympic trials in the 200-meter dash. Kearney began coaching as a way to pay for the master’s
degree she was pursuing in physical education. Her first job was as a graduate assistant coach at Indiana State University, but soon afterward, as sports for women blossomed, Kearney was putting her MA to work at the University of Toledo, first as an assistant coach, then as women’s athletics director, and finally as co–head women’s track coach. It was a quick move from there to a job as assistant coach at the University of Tennessee, which then had the country’s best women’s track program. She was 26.

Her time at Tennessee was unhappy, however. Kearney says she experienced repeated racism and sexism, and after three years, in 1987, she jumped to the University of Florida as head coach. There she built a struggling team into one that earned the school’s first national championship in track and field, and she became the first African American female head coach. As she wrote in Just Stand, “I learned that … Texas was one of the most visible schools in the country and that I could make a greater impact if I went there.” Kearney arrived in Austin in the fall of 1992. She told Florida that her departure wasn’t about the money. “I am doing what God has set out for me to do,” she said.

When it comes to sports at the University of Texas, it’s natural to think of the male football coaches who made the school an athletic powerhouse, from Dana X. Bible to Darrell Royal to Mack Brown. It is less well known that UT has a nearly forty-year record of taking women’s sports very seriously. That’s largely thanks to Donna Lopiano, who became the director of women’s athletics in 1975 and stayed for seventeen years, during which time she built the best women’s sports program in the country: under her tenure, UT produced 395 All-American female athletes and won 18 national championships, as well as 57 Southwest Conference championships. Unafraid to take on the likes of Royal, who was far from alone in his opinion that Title IX would bury college football, Lopiano increased the budget for women at UT, from $57,000 in 1975 to $3 million in 1987. Lopiano also hired the best coaches, such as Conrardt, who even after also taking over as women’s athletics director in 1992, continued to make women’s basketball a nationally respected sport.

Kearney, who came in just as Lopiano was departing, seemed like a perfect fit. As Conrardt’s first hire, she sent a strong message of change. She had an inspirational story. She understood the new demands of college sports. She was a compelling public speaker, which made her even more useful as a face for a university too often associated with blond, blue-eyed belles. “I thought I was getting the best track coach in the country and thought I would be happy with that,” Conrardt told the Dallas Morning News in 2000. “But I got someone who influenced our department in significant ways. The African American young woman doesn’t see a lot of strong female role models, and Bev is unique in that regard.” In fact, for all of its progress with women athletes, UT left something to be desired when it came to race. In 1964, just one year
after the school lifted its ban on minority students in sports, James Means Jr. became the first black athlete to win a varsity letter in track. But Royal refused to integrate the football team until 1968 and didn’t put a black player on varsity until 1970, insisting his hands were tied by his wealthy, conservative alumni backers. (SMU managed to integrate its football team five years earlier.) Problems continued well into recent times: Gary Bledsoe, the president of the Texas NAACP, who has both a bachelor’s and a law degree from UT, recalls that Donnie Little, the university’s first black quarterback, was booed unmercifully in the late seventies and early eighties, while many fans wanted Vince Young, who attended Texas from 2002 to 2005, moved from quarterback to wide receiver in his first year. And though A&M, Baylor, the University of Houston, Rice, and SMU have all managed to find black head coaches for major sports in the past few years, UT has not.

When Kearney arrived, there was only a smattering of African Americans on the coaching staffs and none in women’s track. Two years later, when Bledsoe was asked by UT to complete a study of racial issues within the athletics department, he discovered that there was only one person black athletes were comfortable discussing their lives with, both inside and outside their programs: Bev Kearney. “She was unofficially the athletics director for black athletes,” Bledsoe said. The environment must have been even more isolating for Kearney. After speaking her mind at her first coaching staff retreat at Barton Creek Country Club—“the fanciest place I had ever been to,” Kearney wrote—she was pulled aside by a black assistant coach she had recently hired. “Bev, this is Texas. You can’t talk to people like that, telling them what they need to do,” Kearney recalled him saying. “We are the only black people out here. You are going to get us both fired.”

Whether or not the perceptions of the assistant coach were correct, his words served as a clarion call to Kearney. “In life, you can either kick ass or kiss ass,” she told him. “And I don’t know about you, but I didn’t come to Texas to kiss ass.”

Given the benighted status of track at a school that ranked football far above every other sport, Kearney knew she needed to win big to keep her job. “I’ve always told African American coaches that if you’re not in a revenue-producing sport, then you have to bring visibility,” she said. “And in order to gain visibility, you have to win.” Hence, while she was building up a struggling team, she started mentorship programs and brought in speakers not just for young athletes but for women and children in the wider Austin community. Whenever UT asked her to speak on the university’s behalf, she obliged.

At the same time, the strategic thinking that made Kearney such a talented coach made her a terminator when it came to office politics. She wasted little time on social niceties, preferring to surround herself with a small cadre of loyalists. “I never went on the boat rides,” she told me. “I never went to the after–parties.” As her star rose and she enjoyed Conrad’s unqualified support, Kearney, who had the persuasiveness and relentlessness of a federal prosecutor, managed to muscle out those who opposed her. She was not afraid to ask uncomfortable questions. How could white male coaches possibly understand the needs of inner-city athletes of color? Why were other people in the athletics department allowed to meddle in her business? She had the ability to sound both aggrieved and righteous simultaneously, and most of the time she got her way.

She was particularly contemptuous of a new head coach for men’s track, Bubba Thornton, who arrived in 1996. A large man with a good ol’ boy manner and a name to match, Thornton was a nemesis straight out of central casting, and it wasn’t long before he and Kearney were accusing each other of sabotage. Thornton may or may not have given Kearney the wrong departure time for a team flight to a Big 12 championship meet, causing the plane to leave late. Thornton refused to allow a friend of Kearney’s to bring his team of Olympic contenders—a smattering of African Americans on the track—to the after-parties. “You run faster than anyone you know, and almost instinctively, you know how to hurt yourself through the air too. Your mom, who was an athlete when she was a teenager, started coaching you when you were little; your father dug a long-jump sandpit in the backyard so you could practice. You’ve won state gold medals and set a national high school record. Scholarship offers arrive in the mail, and everyone—your family, your friends, your church—is so proud of you. You will be the first in your family to go to college. Your dream is their dream, their dream is yours: for you to get where you belong, brandishing a gold medal at the Olympics. One day a woman appears at your house. Later you won’t remember whether she was driving a Bentley or a Lexus, you were so dazzled. Her skin is black, like yours. She knows how scary a big university can be to a small-town girl, because she made that move herself. She’s coached Olympians, and she has her own network of physical therapists, masseuses, agents, shoe company representatives—Nike!—you name it. She will be both mother and mentor. You have lots of offers from other schools, but you decide to put your dream in the hands of this stranger, who closes her fists around it, hard and tight.”

**Raasin McIntosh**

**Imagine this time that you are a high school—**

**senior living in a tiny Texas town. Your mom and dad grew up here, like their parents. There’s never been much money, but you have been surrounded by love. On summer nights you race your friends up the caliche drive, back and forth, back and forth, until you are the last one standing. You run faster than anyone you know, and almost instinctively, you know how to hurt yourself through the air too. Your mom, who was an athlete when she was a teenager, started coaching you when you were little; your father dug a long-jump sandpit in the backyard so you could practice. You’ve won state gold medals and set a national high school record. Scholarship offers arrive in the mail, and everyone—your family, your friends, your church—is so proud of you. You will be the first in your family to go to college. Your dream is their dream, their dream is yours: for you to get where you belong, brandishing a gold medal at the Olympics. One day a woman appears at your house. Later you won’t remember whether she was driving a Bentley or a Lexus, you were so dazzled. Her skin is black, like yours. She knows how scary a big university can be to a small-town girl, because she made that move herself. She’s coached Olympians, and she has her own network of physical therapists, masseuses, agents, shoe company representatives—Nike!—you name it. She will be both mother and mentor. You have lots of offers from other schools, but you decide to put your dream in the hands of this stranger, who closes her fists around it, hard and tight.**

**Raasin McIntosh** grew up in one of the toughest parts of Houston, a semirural neighborhood southeast of town called Sunnyside. As a child she had long, strong legs and an easy, contagious laugh that floated over the rickety ranch houses whenever she raced her grandfather up and down Rosehaven Street. There wasn’t much for McIntosh at home: her dad, a Vietnam War veteran, was just an occasional visitor, and her mother struggled to make ends meet. There was never enough money and often not enough food for McIntosh and her four siblings. When living at home got to be too much, she stayed with friends or relatives, never sure where she’d be sleeping from one night to the next. By middle school she was getting in trouble for fighting with her classmates. But then as punishment one day, she was sent to see a coach, who put her out on the track. “There,” she told me, “the journey began.”
I first met McIntosh in her lawyer’s office. The 31-year-old, who was working in the career office of UT’s athletics department when she admitted to having the affair with Kearney, initially hired Austin plaintiff’s attorney Dicky Grigg and his co-counsel and daughter, Erica, to protect her from the media after Kearney’s resignation. Now, however, she was preparing to sue UT, both for failing to protect her as a student and for refusing to pay her after she was put on administrative leave during the investigation of the affair. (Between Kearney and McIntosh, in other words, the university is getting it both coming and going.)

McIntosh has an arresting, radiant beauty; she moves with an athlete’s grace, and her broad smile electrifies her face even when she is talking about the saddest things. On the day we met, she had just come from track practice; she runs professionally and competed in the 2013 Texas Relays—the same event Kearney avoided. Among her many honors, she is a 2003 USA outdoor champion and, in 2012, went to the Olympics in London.

McIntosh met Kearney in 1999, when she was a senior at Westbury High School, which is known in Houston for producing talented athletes. She had an impressive 3.6 grade point average, but it was her athletic gifts that attracted top-level colleges: by her senior year she had set a national record in the 400-meter hurdles, been named state champion twice, been ranked number one in the nation by Track and Field News, and placed first at both the Junior Olympics and the USA Track and Field Youth Athletics championships. “I got baskets of mail,” McIntosh said of her scholarship offers, which came from Stanford and Harvard and LSU, among others. Her coach at Westbury, Rose Brimmer, pushed hard for UT, saying that Kearney could get McIntosh to the Olympics. (Briminator would join Kearney at UT as an assistant coach in 2004 and temporarily filled in as head coach after Kearney resigned.) Her father wasn’t so high on Kearney; he thought she was too pushy and didn’t like her insistence that his daughter give up basketball, which she also loved, to concentrate on track.

But McIntosh, who was seventeen at the time, found Kearney’s recruitment hardball tough to resist. The coach offered her a scholarship that would cover 80 percent of her college education and gave her 48 hours to think it over. Basketball was out; McIntosh would have to focus on winning a state track championship that year if she expected to make the UT team. McIntosh felt belittled, but she was hooked. “She made me hungry,” McIntosh told me. “I was gonna prove to this woman I was the best.” When McIntosh visited the campus, Kearney picked her up from the airport in her luxury SUV and wasn’t receptive to McIntosh’s request to meet stars like hurdler Angel Patterson. “I’m the star of this show,” Kearney told her.

In the fall of 2000, McIntosh moved to Austin. For a girl from Sunnyside, UT might as well have been Oz: the tall buildings and opulent oaks, the Texas Union with its bowling alley, Gregory Gym with its cardio sports theater and multiple swimming pools, the dining halls with mountains of free food she couldn’t stop stuffing into her pockets. She unpacked the brand-new sheets and towels her aunt and uncle had bought her at Walmart and decorated her walls with a poster of Muhammad Ali and another from the Texas Relays. She wrote her goals—“Win nationals”—on the mirror as a daily reminder.

“I had a place of my own. I wasn’t going from home to home anymore,” McIntosh said. “It was a new beginning.”

And there was Kearney, whose fierceness drew her from the start. Like all students on athletic scholarships, McIntosh’s days were spent struggling for balance between academics and practice. Mornings began in the weight room at six. Then there was class, practice,
study hall, more practice, and finally study hall again from seven to nine in the evening. McIntosh learned the hard way that Kearney had many unwritten rules; somehow the coach always knew when she had stayed out late partying, and she found herself branded a bad influence. But by the end of the first semester, McIntosh had caught on. She partied less and ran better. That year, Kearney kept a roster outside her office in Bellmont Hall, where she ranked the fastest girls “warriors” and the slowest “soldiers,” and soon McIntosh was a warrior, listed ahead of more seasoned runners. “Bev had to figure me out,” McIntosh said. “That’s when the relationship started to change.”

It doesn’t take a psychologist to see how McIntosh could have reminded the 42-year-old Kearney of her younger self—the poverty, the splintered family, the ambition—or how the sunny young athlete might have brought light into the darker corners of the coach’s psyche. It isn’t surprising either that McIntosh relished the attention she got from the kind of powerful black woman she had never seen before. The first time Kearney offered to buy her a hamburger at Culver’s, she was overwhelmed with gratitude. When Kearney started asking for special favors—maybe she needed something brought to her house, say—McIntosh was honored to oblige. “I liked that. It made me feel good. That I was a part of something, that I had a family,” she said.

In fact, McIntosh felt herself drawing closer and closer to Kearney. “Bev started to find out everything about me at the end of freshman year,” she said. “I thought she just wanted me to be the best.” The two started sharing confidences, Kearney whispering secrets and tips in her ear. That this happened at the same time McIntosh was accepting her gay identity only made them closer. In 2002, after the national championships that were held at LSU—McIntosh came in among the top three in the 400-meter hurdles—the coach made a pass at her. A few weeks later, the two women spent the night together. “In 2002, after ten years of service to the University of Texas, I was once again faced with the dilemma of whether to flee or fight.” UT views the situation differently; responding to my queries, Plonsky, athletics department spokesman Voinis, and UT’s vice president for legal affairs, Patti Ohlendorf, wrote in a joint email that “there is no question that Plonsky was at all times committed to Kearney’s success at UT” and that “Kearney was treated no differently than any other head or assistant coach,” meaning that problems were addressed as they arose and she was not “persecuted in any respect.” Nevertheless, the burden Kearney felt to succeed was real, and she turned to McIntosh for emotional support. The two often met at the end of the workday; Kearney left her car unlocked in her parking space so McIntosh could jump in and hide behind the seat until Kearney arrived and gave her the all clear. Later, Kearney would drop McIntosh off a few blocks from her dorm. Yet despite their secrecy, people began to suspect. Once, a roommate answered McIntosh’s cellphone, and Kearney began chatting away, unaware she wasn’t talking to her lover. Others wondered how such a poor girl could afford a new green Volkswagen Jetta. And where did McIntosh go when she disappeared all night at out-of-state meets?

Kearney spent just over three agonizing months in the hospital, her doctors unsure whether she would walk again. Kearney herself had no such doubts. She had ten staples in her head, vertigo, and high blood pressure. She’d had three major back surgeries and lost forty pounds. Her vision was impaired and the pain was constant. But when she wasn’t dictating orders to her assistant coaches and reviewing tapes of her runners from her hospital bed, she was pushing herself to the limit in physical therapy; determined to walk. CNN, People, USA Today, the New York Times, and even President George W. Bush kept tabs on her rehabilitation.

That she had become a walking NCAA violation was not foremost in Kearney’s mind. Her team had begun struggling to stay in the top ten, a failing Kearney blamed on two factors: women’s athletics director Plonsky, whom Kearney saw as a weak, cautious administrator, and the continued antagonism from the men’s side. “How do you fight those who are by design meant to work with you or more importantly that you are working for?” Kearney wrote in Just Stand. “In 2002, after ten years of service to the University of Texas, I was once again faced with the dilemma of whether to flee or fight.” UT views the situation differently; responding to my queries, Plonsky, athletics department spokesman Voinis, and UT’s vice president for legal affairs, Patti Ohlendorf, wrote in a joint email that “there is no question that Plonsky was at all times committed to Kearney’s success at UT” and that “Kearney was treated no differently than any other head or assistant coach,” meaning that problems were addressed as they arose and she was not “persecuted in any respect.”

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Kearney made McIntosh promise over and over that she would never tell. “I cared about Bev so much and wouldn’t jeopardize her career or the program,” McIntosh told me. She was also a little frightened, because people who crossed Kearney—student or coach—sometimes wound up transferring to another school or losing their job. Over the next two years, however, as the pressure at work increased, Kearney grew more insecure and demanding. Chafing under her control, McIntosh began dating girls her own age. According to McIntosh, Kearney retaliated; whenever McIntosh performed poorly on the track, she’d withdraw her attention or bring up a confidence McIntosh had shared and use it against her. McIntosh’s once unshakable faith in herself wavered. She began to withdraw from her teammates, and her temper grew short. At least one person mentioned her behavior to a supervisor in the athletics department, but no one investigated. McIntosh grew more erratic and angry. “I was all over the map,” she said.

So was Kearney. Juggling a high-pressure career, office politics, mentorship programs, and aolatile affair was taking its toll. Worse, rumors were swirling around the athletics department—there were questions about a scholarship athlete who was driving around in a new Jetta.

And then, on December 26, 2002, everything changed. Kearney was traveling from a meet on a lonely stretch of highway near Jacksonville, Florida, with her two housemates, 33-year-old Michelle Freeman, a former student of Kearney’s and Olympic athlete who worked as a volunteer assistant coach at UT, and 40-year-old Ilrey Sparks, another former Kearney student who worked as a UT academic counselor. Also in the car were Freeman’s 63-year-old mother, Muriel Wallace, and Sparks’s two-year-old daughter, Imani.

Freeman was driving. The SUV drifted into an oncoming lane, and as Freeman tried to right the car, she instead lost control. The vehicle flipped at least four times, so violently that the roof was crushed. Freeman and Imani survived; Sparks and Wallace were killed instantly. Kearney, thrown from the car, lay on the highway, her spinal cord mangled and her skull fractured. She was barely breathing when the ambulance arrived.

McIntosh was at a track meet when she got the news, and she fell to her knees. “Oh my God,” she thought. “Bev will probably die because of the bad things she did with me.”

Kearney spent just over three agonizing months in the hospital, her doctors unsure whether she would walk again. Kearney herself had no such doubts. She had ten staples in her head, vertigo, and high blood pressure. She’d had three major back surgeries and lost forty pounds. Her vision was impaired and the pain was constant. But when she wasn’t dictating orders to her assistant coaches and reviewing tapes of her runners from her hospital bed, she was pushing herself to the limit in physical therapy; determined to walk. CNN, People, USA Today, the New York Times, and even President George W. Bush kept tabs on her rehabilitation.

And then in April, less than four months after her accident, Kearney appeared at the 2003 Texas Relays before 20,000 people. Her brother pushed her toward the middle of the field in a wheelchair, and her physical therapist placed a walker in front of her while the crowd cheered. Kearney shooked her helpers away and gripped the walker tightly with her fists. Then she stood. She lifted up an arm and waved, and the roar in response could probably be heard all the way to the Capitol.

Within the next few months, Kearney
began walking with the help of leg braces. Whatever stress she may have felt was invisible to others: in 2005 and 2006 the women’s track team won the NCAA outdoor and indoor championships, respectively, and Kearney was named outdoor coach of the year and indoor coach of the year during the same period. “After her accident, she went into this mode of ‘We’re gonna win. I’m gonna prove to this world I can still move this team forward by any means necessary,’” Evelyn Dwyer, a former track student-athlete, recalled.

Kearney’s recovery raised her profile nationally—along with that of her employer. She spoke at campuses and to corporate groups, state agencies, and health care organizations around the country, and the accolades, large and small, poured in. In 2004 she was named to the International Women’s Sports Hall of Fame, and the same year the National Consortium for Academics and Sports honored her for significant contributions to her community. A grateful UT inducted her into its Women’s Hall of Honor in 2006 and offered support for the Pursuit of Dreams Foundation, the nonprofit she started that year to “strengthen individuals and communities” by using “proven sports-based coaching methods.” Her election to the U.S. Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association Hall of Fame came in 2007. Five years later, she won the U.S. Sports Academy’s Distinguished Service Award.

In 2012 the television network BET also honored her, along with Spike Lee, Mariah Carey, Maya Angelou, and the Tuskegee Airmen. Kearney, glamorous in a black-lace designer gown, gave a speech that won a standing ovation from, among others, Colin Powell and a teary Michelle Obama. “When people ask me how is it that you have succeeded in spite of your obstacles, I tell them I don’t have a choice,” she declared. “I don’t have a choice, because my hero is my history, and my history is a legacy of people who have triumphed over tragedy.”

Kearney had practically returned from the dead to become one of the most successful African American coaches in any NCAA sport, not to mention one of the most successful female coaches of all time. The accident could have ended her career, yet once again Kearney had turned loss into victory, another opportunity to impart life lessons to the youth of Texas and beyond. She was stronger, sharper, and more powerful than ever.

Imagine that you are a high school state champion from a tough Texas neighborhood. You have so many scholarship offers you store them in trash bags, but you decide on UT, because the coach drives all the way from Austin to your house, sits in front of your worried granny—that’s what she knows to call her—and promises to take care of you. To get you where you want to go: the Olympics. But when you get to Austin, everything changes, like a fairy tale gone wrong. The coach doesn’t seem to know you unless you do well. She tells you that you are too fat. She puts you on a roster to compete in a race and then, the morning of the event, replaces you with another girl, someone you’ve beat in practice. She tells your granny you are lazy. Your teammates ignore you except when they report you to Coach for eating ice cream in the dining hall.

When you go home on weekends, you don’t want to go back to school. You aren’t even sure you want to run anymore. But if you don’t, you’ll lose your scholarship and your education. In the office of your academic adviser, you start to cry. He tells you to transfer; how can you get anywhere in life without finishing college somewhere? This coach, she’s like a tornado barreling through your life.

My first sign that Kearney’s story was anything other than a straightforward tale of triumph over adversity was when I started doing the most conventional work of reporting: calling people in search of anecdotes. As I reached out to former student-athletes, I expected to find near-universal affection and gratitude for a coach so widely known as a mentor. At my request, Kearney connected me with Kim McGruder-Roberson, who ran for her from 1996 to 1999 and is now a high school track coach in Houston. She praised Kearney’s loyalty and toughness. “I can honestly say that aside from my parents, Bev Kearney is the person who made me who I am today,” she said. “Beverly forced me to grow up.” Kearney also led me to Cynthea Patterson, who trained with her for an Olympic run in the nineties and simultaneously worked for her as an assistant coach. “She pushed me into the office of your academic adviser, you start to cry. He tells you to transfer; how can you get anywhere in life without finishing college somewhere? This coach, she’s like a tornado barreling through your life.

But as I continued my research, I hit a curious roadblock. Kearney had suggested that UT might have intimidated many current and former athletes into silence, but in the emails declining my requests for interviews, what emerged was a different story. It was too painful, several writers said, to return to that period in their lives. A woman might agree to speak but only off the record or without being identified, fearful of retribution from Kearney or UT. When I did finally meet a few of them,
the women wept as they recounted their experiences on Kearney’s team, and not from joy.

By almost all accounts, Kearney was a brilliant recruiter, able to pick the girls who had not just the talent but the grit and the focus for college athletics. Most had been state champions, most were single-minded about getting to the Olympics. At the very least, they wanted to run professionally, in hopes of making enough money to support their families after graduation. Kearney lavished them with individual attention—phone calls, home visits—and understood the power of arriving at a modest frame home in a Bentley. To be young, black, and female and be recognized by such a successful black woman was an inducement no other school could match. “I was captivated by her,” one recruit recalled, her voice still dreamy a decade later.

Once a girl signed her contract and moved into the dorm, however, the coach’s affection became conditional. “To Bev, you had to earn good treatment,” a former athlete recalled. There was a lot to be earned: better running shoes, better training gear, massages, free trips. Kearney used these things to incentivize her runners, most of whom were eager for the kinds of status symbols wealthier kids had had since birth. But the rewards could also be withdrawn if a girl broke the rules, and Kearney had a lot of rules: she forbade her runners to talk to members of other teams during competition, for instance, or to cheer on members of Coach Thornton’s men’s team. (Kearney disputes this.) She always seemed to find out about infractions, thanks to the keen eyes of her entourage and those of older athletes, who had learned to trade gossip for favors. A girl who broke one of Kearney’s rules—maybe she didn’t perform well, maybe she just talked back—would find that her name wasn’t called for a massage or that it had disappeared from the list of those scheduled for a meet when it had been there the night before. The roster change, Kearney might say, had come to her while she was praying.

It was the sprinters who really mattered to Kearney, girls who often had grown up like her: poor and black, fast and hungry. The runners on the cross-country team, meanwhile, mostly white girls from better high schools, barely seemed to interest her. It was an inside joke among the sprinters that the cross-country girls ran in oversized uniforms, ones that weren’t washed as often by the track team laundry services. “The white girls got the trash,” recalled a former team member, Adrienne Crenshaw. “She humiliated them. Their shirts came down to their knees.” Asked about cross-country’s second-class status, Kearney answered that she favored speed over distance because that was the only way to win national championships, which have far more speed events. And in Texas, it just so happens that the fastest sprinters tend to be black. “It isn’t about black and white,” she told me when I brought up the question. “It’s about what’s most conducive to your area. If I was in Wisconsin, I couldn’t build a program like Texas’s.”

Many team members recalled Kearney’s displeasure when a girl became too heavy, which could affect both health and performance. Not only was the student made aware of her predicament, so were her teammates, who hazed her mercilessly, even checking on what she ate in the cafeteria. Crenshaw, for one, spent her nights at a nearby 24 Hour Fitness, making herself so thin that her teammates could count her vertebrae. Alarmed by the pressure his daughter was under, Crenshaw’s father spoke with Conradt, to no avail. (UT’s representatives told me that athletics directors investigated every complaint. “Differing views on the rigors of training and the style of coaching often surface on athletic teams,” they wrote.) Another young woman, Zenobia Reed, reacted to Kearney’s hectoring by overeating, which only resulted in more hazing and more hectoring. Eventually, though her teammates begged her to stay, she quit school, giving up a scholarship. When she left, Kearney would not release her to run for another school because, her teammates believed, the coach didn’t want her competing against UT. (A student-athlete cannot legally transfer to another school without a written release; Kearney says she never held back an athlete who wanted to transfer.)

Then there was Evelyn Dwyer, who came to UT from Philadelphia in 2002. Kearney offered her a scholarship on the spot at a track meet on the East Coast, and she did extremely well her freshman season. She chafed, however, at Kearney’s constant warnings about runners’ dating habits. Dwyer recalls being singled out by Kearney in front of the team as “one of those Philly girls,” a suggestion that she was promiscuous. (Kearney denies this took place.) She also threatened to yank the scholarship of any girl caught “sleeping around.”

So when Dwyer unexpectedly got pregnant in the spring semester of her freshman year, she couldn’t tell Kearney why she was getting heavier. Instead, she endured Kearney’s jabs about her weight and said nothing when her name went on a list of girls whose body fat Kearney deemed too high. Dwyer went home during summer break, had an abortion, and returned to campus determined to work her way back into Kearney’s good graces. “I was going to do whatever I had to do to stay on top,” she told me. Soon, after every meal, she was
racing to the bathroom to throw up, and by the end of her third semester she had developed a full-blown case of bulimia. “What Bev saw as laziness was trauma,” she said.

Kearney was always on the alert for slackers, and many runners took their cues from her, shunning teammates who didn’t measure up. When the mother of a sprinter-hurdler named Angel Boyd watched her once gregarious daughter sink into depression, reluctant to go back to school after weekends at home, she contacted Kearney, who said that Boyd would most likely end up on welfare if she didn’t shape up. (Kearney denies making the statement.) “My mom went to the athletics director. [Plonsky] just told her that college is an adjustment,” said Boyd, who after a year at UT transferred to LSU, where she thrived. When a jumper named Yohilindria Spears—written up in the New York Times as the best in the nation—began complaining of pain, Kearney told her she was lazy and needed to work harder. More than one of Kearney’s runners remember the day that Spears broke down and wept in front of the team, promising to do better, while everyone just stared, offering no comfort because, well, she was slowing them all down. Later, after Spears collapsed at an out-of-town meet, doctors found she’d been running and jumping with a hairline fracture in her shin. Surgeries kept her out of sports for much of the rest of her years at UT, and she would never compete again. (Kearney told me she never let anyone run against doctor’s orders.) “I’m sure if our children suffered, past athletes suffered,” the parent of one runner told me. “Why? Why didn’t they investigate? Because it’s a big program and you don’t want negative publicity.”

Another reason may have been that most of Kearney’s athletes were afraid to speak up. Often they were the first in their families to go to college, and if they quit the team, they would lose their scholarships, dashing not just their own hopes but those of their parents and their communities. And they didn’t see themselves winning against the brilliant, beloved Bev Kearney. “Who would have believed us?” asked one former sprinter.

What they really wanted was to earn their way into the inner circle, where Kearney’s affection radiated like the sun. Her “warriors” were regulars at parties at her home, with its plush carpeting and pinball machine. Relying on her extensive network for gossip, Kearney graced her favorites with intelligence about competitors at other schools and even their own teammates. How did Kearney know? She could read their minds, they told one another. It wasn’t long before her best girls believed she was the only one who could mold them into champions.

It may be that Kearney was so focused on winning that she lost sight of how vulnerable seventeen-year-old girls are. (In fact, by this point, many girls on Kearney’s team were more comfortable confiding in cross-country coach John Hayes.) It may be that her own psychological makeup made the existence of even minor personality flaws in her athletes intolerable. When I asked Kearney about her former runners’ complaints, she told me, “At the end of the day, I don’t think there’s a coach who has coached as long as I have who’s had everybody be happy with everything they do. You are balancing so many athletes and so many parents and outside influences that no matter what you do, you’re not always going to be right, and you’re not always going to be wrong. I’ve always tried to make the best decisions for the program and the athletes. I’ve never done anything with the intent to do harm.” In any case, the theories and the explanations don’t matter: thanks to her volunteer work, her overtime on behalf of UT, and her death-ray stare, no one was interested in looking too carefully at how Kearney achieved her results.

In 2007 the Women’s Sports Foundation, maybe sensing a growing national problem, issued a white paper on the abuse of female athletes. The report defined abuse as anything that deterred girls and women from participating and developing as athletes. It included “the willful infliction of injury, pain, mental anguish, unreasonable confinement, intimidation or punishment through physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual means.” The report also denounced romantic or sexual relationships between coaches and athletes as “an abuse of professional status and power.” Even with the problem identified and defined, however, no one paid much attention to the abuse inflicted by female coaches until this past May, when it came to light that Julie Hermann, hired as the athletics director at Rutgers University, had generated complaints sixteen years earlier as a volleyball coach at Tennessee, where players said she subjected them to “unbearable” mental cruelty. They reported that she called them “whores, alcoholics, and learning disabled,” pitted them against one another, and publicly humiliated them by ridiculing them about their weight. Hermann has said she was an intense coach but denies being abusive.

As for Kearney, her evaluations from Plonsky continued to be glowing. Within the athletics department it was perceived that Plonsky went out of her way to keep Kearney happy, directing a secretary to make Kearney a priority over other coaches and urging those who had conflicts with Kearney to smooth the waters. In 2010 the athletics
director rated her “outstanding” and called her “a gift to UT.” Only the most churlish athletics department gossips noted that some of her student-athletes transferred to other schools or disappeared from the program; there was, after all, always a new girl desperate to take her place. That some top-notch female recruits ceased to run entirely after their exposure to Kearney was, simply, the cost of doing business. “I had to take off my cape sometimes,” Kearney told me, meaning that even with her superpowers, some girls were beyond help.

“We all became shells of ourselves under Bev’s tutelage,” one of her former athletes told me. “When other women were finding themselves and discovering the amazing potential they had in life, we were learning to hate ourselves, to believe we would never be good enough, pretty enough, skinny enough, or fast enough.” Or as another runner who lost faith in Kearney’s methods said, recalling her dread about returning to school: “When I would fly over the campus, I’d get sick.”

McIntosh was beginning to feel sick too. While Kearney was recovering from her accident, McIntosh wrote her affectionate letters and visited her frequently in the hospital. But with the help of three coaches, she won a national championship in 2003 as a junior and ran the second leg on the UT relay team with the fastest time ever recorded; that same year, she won a spot on Team USA for the world championships in Paris. For the first time, McIntosh began to suspect that Kearney might be more of a hindrance than an asset.

Still, the thought of leaving Kearney when she was so vulnerable was more than McIntosh could bear. During her senior year, she became so withdrawn and angry that Coach Brimmer asked about her behavior. McIntosh wouldn’t explain. She felt the pressure of her looming professional career, the one she had always hoped she could use to support her family after graduation. Then, at the all-important Olympic trials, she and Kearney argued. McIntosh came in fifth in her race, just missing a slot on the team.

It didn’t matter that she had won eligibility to run professionally and had a potential contract with Adidas. After graduation, in December 2004, she wanted out. McIntosh walked away from all of it, including Kearney. “It was devastating for me when I left. I didn’t want to leave Bev, because I felt it would be disloyal,” she told me. “I couldn’t talk to anybody about what I was going through. I was really on the edge. I didn’t want to hurt anybody, so I just left.”

McIntosh went back to Houston, where she taught ESL and coached at her old high school. She worked at a program to help poor kids with middling grades become college-bound. “I had a lot of growing up to do,” she said. “I was helping other people with their dreams and realized I had to get my dream back.”

During that time, McIntosh and Kearney never entirely cut ties. They spoke on the phone—according to Kearney, McIntosh continued to ask for tips; according to McIntosh, Kearney could not let go—and Kearney sometimes made surprise visits to her apartment. In 2010, after McIntosh had been away from running for six years, they discussed a return to Austin. When Kearney offered to help her find volunteer work at UT and to coach her to Olympic victory, McIntosh agreed. She felt that at age 29 she would be strong enough to take the best of Kearney and resist the worst.

It didn’t work out that way. As with so many unhappy love affairs, many misunderstandings and misreadings followed: McIntosh moved into Kearney’s house (they did not resume a sexual relationship), and they often fought; depending on whom you talk to, it was either because McIntosh did not respect house rules or because she began to date another former UT sprinter who had turned pro (“Bev acted like a jealous lover,”

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said one person familiar with the situation). Still, after months of training—and after McIntosh moved out—the two met up in London for the Olympics. In an interview before her race, McIntosh was generous to her coach, despite their troubles. “Bev said today in practice that losing can be a win depending on how you look at it. Any loss that you take is making you better for the greatness that is ahead for you,” McIntosh said.

She came in sixth in her heat for the 400-meter hurdles. After the race, Kearney was nowhere to be found. McIntosh called and texted Kearney but got no response. (Kearney says she was busy searching for a missing passport and then fell in the shower, which made her unable to reply.) When McIntosh returned to Austin, a friend of Kearney’s broke the news: Kearney was no longer working with professional athletes. Their relationship was effectively severed.

After her poor London showing, McIntosh was hurt by what she saw as Kearney’s rejection. She stopped going to the track and went through the motions at her job in the athletics department. Her moods fluctuated between paralyzing depression and angry frustration.

McIntosh’s supervisor was a woman named Tina Kien, who was an academic counselor and the director of career development. Kien was in many ways Kearney’s opposite: she was soft-spoken and gentle, a supportive figure to UT’s athletes for nearly twenty years. According to McIntosh and other sprinters, she was much beloved by Kearney’s team, in part because she sometimes dared to clash with the coach. Over the years, McIntosh had become particularly close to Kien, who, she told me, could soothe her moods without demanding explanations.

On a warm day in October 2012, McIntosh asked Kien to change her hours so she could begin working with a new coach. But the pain of her pending separation from Kearney was showing in her face. Kien wanted to know what was wrong.

McIntosh collapsed into a chair and began to sob. “You don’t know what I’m going through,” she said.

“Tell me the truth,” Kien urged.

“You wouldn’t understand,” McIntosh replied.

“Does this have to do with Bev?” Kien asked.

“Yes,” McIntosh answered.

And then, McIntosh told me, Kien asked another question. Something about her bright-green Jetta.

Kearney spent most of the early fall of 2012 focused on trying to get a raise and growing ever more frustrated with Plonsky, whom she had been told was dragging her heels because of funding fights between university president Bill Powers and the UT regents. (Plonsky did write Powers on Kearney’s behalf and submitted a raise request that would put her salary at $397,000 along with a $25,000 longevity bonus. “I believe Beverly should be among the highest-paid Olympic sports coaches in the nation,” she wrote, citing her gifts as a mentor.) When Plonsky asked Kearney to come see her at Bellmont at the end of October, the coach had a bad feeling. They met in a workroom adjacent to the press box; closing the door, Plonsky explained the reason for the meeting: a former student had admitted to having an affair with Kearney ten years ago, which is a clear NCAA violation. After her conversation with McIntosh, Kien had reported the information to her supervisor, as she was obligated to do. Plonsky had spent three hours listening to McIntosh’s account of the affair. Was it true? Plonsky now wanted to know.

Kearney’s mind churned. “I actually hadn’t thought about the relationship for years and no longer saw her in that manner,” she told me. “It had been over ten years, and I had even helped this young lady since then.” She said yes but added that she hadn’t initiated the affair.

Plonsky grimly pressed on. Had there been other relationships?

No, Kearney told her.

Then, according to Kearney, Plonsky relaxed a little and began to think out loud. It had been a decade ago, after all. And Kearney had brought nothing but accolades to the university for the past twenty years. Something could be worked out, Kearney remembers her saying. “You’ve done a lot of good and we’ll take care of you.” (According to UT, Plonsky used somewhat different language, intended to convey both the gravity of the infraction and the fact that it would require “thoughtful, serious deliberation.”)

In the second week of November, Kearney was put on paid leave pending the outcome of an investigation into possible NCAA violations, and her salary negotiations were tabled. She began to get a strange vibe whenever she dropped by the office, and once the news broke about her leave in the press, friends began urging her to get a lawyer. On the other hand, the university hadn’t asked her to cancel any speaking engagements, so she wasn’t too worried. She decided to take Michelle Freeman, Freeman’s daughter, and Imani Sparks—for whom Kearney had become the legal guardian after the accident—on a Christmas cruise in the Caribbean, thinking she could cover the cost with her upcoming raise.

Just before boarding, Kearney got a call
from her attorney, Derek Howard. Plonsky wanted to see her as soon as possible. Once the boat docked back in Florida, Kearney drove all night to make it to Plonsky’s office by ten in the morning, meeting Howard and his co-counsel and son, Logan, in the Bellmont parking lot. It was a cold, blustery day, and because of the holidays, the building was virtually empty.

When they arrived at Plonsky’s office, Patti Ohlendorf, the vice president of legal affairs for UT, was there too. They all went into a looming conference room and took their seats at a sprawling table. Briefly, the two women praised Kearney for her service to the university, but Howard noted that Plonsky would not make eye contact, and Ohlendorf’s hands were shaking. (Plonsky and Ohlendorf do not recall this.) Then they told Kearney that UT had begun a process that could lead to termination, though she would have a formal opportunity to present her side of the story. No financial settlement or severance pay was offered. The option to resign was floated regarding this alleged heightened standard for teachers with students, student-athletes, student employees, and subordinate employees.” He ended his letter with a request to meet, so as to resolve the matter without litigation. When his invitation was rebuffed, he and Kearney submitted a legally required filing to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in March 2013, which then put them in position to file a lawsuit after 180 days. Kearney added a big-time trial lawyer from McAllen, Texas, and is preparing to file her discrimination suit by early October. McIntosh, who is a few months younger than ten staff members and professionals associated with UT who had engaged in affairs with students and not been fired or even punished. In a letter to UT’s general counsel, Howard argued that “there is no written policy regarding this alleged heightened standard for head coaches” and noted that the university “has apparently turned a blind eye toward other coaches, professors, and administrators who have also carried on consensual relationships with students, student-athletes, student employees, and subordinate employees.”

Kearney and Howard managed the media storm that raged into the early spring pretty well, with some thanks due to the university’s refusal at the time to talk to the press. In various reports, Kearney was fired for being gay (Huffington Post), was fired for asking for a raise (Associated Press), and was a victim of UT’s double standard for men and women (Austin American-Statesman). Howard declared that he had assembled a list of more than ten staff members and professionals associated with UT who had engaged in affairs with students and not been fired or even punished. In a letter to UT’s general counsel, Howard argued that “there is no written policy regarding this alleged heightened standard for head coaches” and noted that the university “has apparently turned a blind eye toward other coaches, professors, and administrators who have also carried on consensual relationships with students, student-athletes, student employees, and subordinate employees.” He ended his letter with a request to meet, so as to resolve the matter without litigation. When his invitation was rebuffed, he and Kearney submitted a legally required filing to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in March 2013, which then put them in position to file a lawsuit after 180 days. Kearney added a big-time trial lawyer from McAllen, Texas, and is preparing to file her discrimination suit by early October. McIntosh, who is a few months behind Kearney in filing her own suit against the university, is following the same path to the courthouse.

UT is in a dicey position. As the university’s representatives explained to me, while they remain grateful for Kearney’s contributions, "she made a serious mistake by having an inappropriate intimate relationship over a prolonged period." On the other hand, the rule that allows student-teacher affairs as long as they are disclosed is, perhaps, too smart by half: it acknowledges reality but ultimately protects no one, including the university itself. Two recent events elsewhere have changed the calculus for the administration, the athletics department, and Kearney: the 2011 scandal at Penn State University, in which assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was convicted of sexually abusing boys who were beneficiaries of his charity, and the 2013 scandal at Rutgers, in which basketball coach Mike Rice was found to have verbally and emotionally abused his players. In both cases, the universities are now on the hook for tens of millions of dollars—and counting—for looking the other way and putting the vast profits generated by their athletics departments ahead of the needs of their students. To win a case against Kearney, UT’s lawyers will, most likely, have to strike a deal with McIntosh, who certainly appears as of this writing to have been wronged by both parties.

In the meantime, UT has undertaken some long-planned changes in the track-and-field division. Bubba Thornton announced his retirement in June, and one of his protégés, Mario Santegna, was promoted to head coach—and is being paid about $200,000 less than Kearney would have been. Tonja Buford-Bailey was brought in from the University of Illinois to be the new associate head coach. The men’s and women’s programs will be combined going forward, as Kearney once hoped, but this gives her little consolation. "They were never going to let me be the head coach," she said.

Kearney is, for now, maintaining her game face, at least publicly. The last time I saw her, she had moved back into a slightly less grand house she owned in the same neighborhood. She misses some of her old things but is making do: after she sold her Porsche to pay expenses, Kearney told me she found a way to visualize the presence of a new one. "Imani and I drove to different dealerships. In my mind, I replaced the car." She added me to her email list too, so every few days I receive an inspirational note about how God can help us find our way to the mountaintop, about finding glory in our tribulations and peace in our challenges, about how whatever we give out will come back to us tenfold. A missive from last May noted that one of the hardest things to say is “I’m sorry.”

Imagine, finally, that you are a middle-aged woman, an icon. As a kid, you were dragged all over the place because your mama was running from the bill collectors, or some man, or maybe just herself. You were beaten and raped, and you learned that life can be ruthless, and eventually you become that way too. The compromises, the disappointments, and the losses—you fashion them into a better story, one that is more palatable, more inspirational. And when people ask now how you have triumphed over all the adversity in your life—and they do ask, often—you give them a simple, palatable answer. “I keep it moving,” you say. ✝️