

STRIDES BETWEEN US

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For my wife and children, whose love and support guided every step.

And for all the Jakes in this world, those who have had to struggle, fight, and rise again.

Chapter One

Dawn crept into the city. The light slipped through leaves of the old maple trees scattered across the park, settling onto a lone figure curled against a stone wall.

Jake lay half-wrapped in a frayed blanket, his back pressed to cold stone, one foot extended awkwardly from an old running shoe whose sole had nearly peeled off. The shoe didn't match the other one. Nothing in his life matched anymore.

A passing bus rumbled somewhere in the distance. A pigeon fluttered down nearby, pecking at crumbs. Jake blinked awake slowly, like a man surfacing from deep water. His joints protested as he sat up, and he stretched his injured leg until the pain settled into something he could tolerate.

Across the path, bundled in a coat layers too big for her, an elderly homeless woman sat hunched over a cold cup of coffee. She smiled a tired smile when Jake lifted a hand in greeting.

He stood, dusting leaves from his clothes, and limped toward the nearby garbage bin. He wasn't hungry yet, these days hunger visited like a shy ghost, appearing only when it wasn't expected. But he checked anyway, because sometimes life offered tiny mercies.

Inside the bin, on top of a cardboard box, he found a slice of discarded pizza. Not moldy, not dirty. Just forgotten.

He didn't hesitate. Not to eat, but to walk it over to the elderly woman. Lowering himself to her level, he placed the slice gently in

her hands.

"You should eat," he said softly.

She touched his wrist, gratitude shining in eyes that had seen far too much.

Jake didn't stay to watch her finish. He never did. Kindness wasn't a performance. It was a reflex. Even now. Even after everything.

He continued down the path, the limp more pronounced in the cold morning air. The park slowly filled with early risers, joggers, dog walkers, a couple pushing a stroller. And then he saw them: two college-aged runners bursting down the trail, strides strong, synchronized, the kind of running that felt effortless.

Jake stopped walking. The rhythmic slap-slap-slap of the runners' shoes faded down the path, but the echo didn't die. It grew louder, faster, sharpening until it wasn't the dull thud of pavement anymore. It was the biting crunch of spikes digging into a synthetic track.

The smell of damp autumn leaves vanished, replaced by the scent of stadium popcorn and ozone.

He was flying.

The world was a blur of motion, colors bleeding into streaks as he rounded the final curve. His lungs were bellows of pure fire, his legs pistons that defied gravity. He wasn't just running; he was conquering.

Coach was screaming to shorten his stride, but Jake tuned him out. He only had eyes for the bleachers.

Paige was there, a vibrant splash of yellow in the sea of gray spectators. And in her arms Emily. Tiny, perfect Emily, her small hands clapping, her mouth open in a cheer he couldn't hear.

He surged forward, the finish line waiting like a ribbon of glory. He planted his right foot, ready to launch into the final sprint.

Then, a sound like a dry branch snapping inside a tunnel.

There was no pain at first, just a sickening lack of resistance.

He hit the track hard, the grit scraping his cheek.

Then the pain arrived, a white-hot lightning bolt shattering his world. The cheering stopped. The silence was worse.

Through the haze, he saw Paige stand up, the joy on her face curdling into a mask of pure terror. She screamed his name, but it sounded like she was underwater.

Jake blinked, and the stadium vanished like smoke.

The roar of the crowd shrank back into the distant rumble of a city bus. He was standing on the asphalt path, his chest heaving as if he'd just run the race all over again.

He rubbed his knee instinctively, his fingers tracing the scar through the fabric of his pants. He kept walking, trying to lose himself in the everyday rhythms of the park.

He reached his usual bench, his temporary "home," if one could call it that. A grocery cart stood beside it, filled with blankets, a jacket he'd found early last winter, a water bottle, and a few other belongings that survived the streets with him.

He sat, letting the morning settle into him. He tried to breathe slow. Tried to quiet the storm inside that never really slept.

Today would be like yesterday. And the day before. And probably the day after.

Still, he lifted his head toward the trail again, toward the place the runners had disappeared. There was something in their footsteps, something familiar. Something he'd once been.

Jake didn't know why, but today... something in him stirred.

Something he thought he'd buried.

Chapter Two

The alley behind the Midtown Fitness Center always smelled faintly of rubber mats and bleach, a scent Jake used to know well. Now it drifted toward him like a memory he couldn't quite place. He pushed his cart slowly, wheels rattling over uneven concrete. Morning light hadn't reached the alley yet; it was still wrapped in a blue-grey chill.

A toppled black garbage bag lay split open beside the dumpster, shoes, clothing, and shredded paper spilling onto the asphalt. Jake normally kept his head down, taking only what he needed, but something made him pause. Maybe it was the faint outline of something familiar in the mess. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was nothing.

He crouched, carefully, because of the leg and brushed aside a strip of plastic.

A pair of running shoes.

Not pristine, not new but intact, breathable mesh, good soles, laces still strong. He inhaled sharply.

He didn't touch them right away. Just stared.

The alley noise softened, the city fading to a distant hum. For a suspended moment, Jake wasn't in the present. He felt the rhythm of his legs moving, pumping, stretching across grass he hadn't run on in years. The sound of cleats, the whistle of a coach, the laughter of kids chasing a ball faint, yet vivid.

He reached out, fingers trembling slightly, and lifted them by the heels. The soles bore the faint imprint of mileage, curves shaped by countless strides. They felt like a relic. Or a ghost.

Jake exhaled long and steady, placing them gently back on the dumpster lid. Almost like laying down a memory he wasn't ready to relive.

He took three steps. Four. Five.

Something tugged at him not just the shoes, but the rhythm of motion, of running. He closed his eyes, letting the faint memory stretch through his body. Then he turned back.

He lifted the shoes again, tucked them carefully into the canvas bag strapped to his cart the bag where he kept the few things that still mattered. He didn't put them on. Not yet. Not that morning, or even that day.

But as he pushed the cart out of the alley, the city hummed around him and in the corner of his mind, a spark of a memory flashed.

A soccer ball skidding across grass. Sharp cuts, long strides, lungs burning. A coach's sharp whistle. And, at the edge of his vision, a young whippet dashing past, unstoppable, ears back, paws barely touching the ground.

Jake blinked, and suddenly he was there, running again, feeling the pull of momentum, the joy of motion he thought he'd lost forever.

The shoes weren't just shoes. They were a doorway.

Flashback begins 14 years earlier

Chapter Three

Dawn crept into the park softly, the light filtering through bare branches and settling over the worn soccer field. A handful of players moved across the grass in loose formation, laughter cutting through the morning air as the ball skipped and rolled between them. The field ran alongside a narrow walking trail, already dotted with early joggers and dog walkers easing into their routines.

Jake sprinted down the sideline, chased the ball into the corner, and cut back sharply. On a few plays, his speed separated him completely long, effortless strides that seemed to pull the air behind him. He didn't notice who was watching.

Coach Roberts walked the trail with a young whippet trotting eagerly at his side, her legs a blur of motion. He wasn't paying much attention until something flashed at the edge of his vision. He slowed, then stopped altogether, eyes tracking the boy on the field. The way Jake accelerated wasn't chaotic or forced. It was natural. Economical. Familiar.

Roberts stayed where he was. He watched the game play out from a distance, hands resting loosely on the leash, curiosity keeping him still.

After a few minutes, the game slowed as the players gathered briefly near the sideline. Coach Roberts crouched and unclipped Dolce's leash. "Go on, show us what you've got," he said.

In an instant, Dolce bolted across the grass, a blur of speed and agility, zig-zagging between the scattered cones the players had left behind. Jake's eyes followed her every move at the corner of his vision, and his chest tightened with the same pulse he felt while running. The freedom, the rhythm, the effortless motion it was all there, mirrored in the whippet's flight.

Jake crouched instinctively, catching his breath, feeling the exhilaration he hadn't realized he'd missed. A smile broke across his face, involuntary and wide.

"That's a fast dog," he said, nodding toward the whippet.

Roberts smiled. "It's a whippet."

Jake crouched lower, letting the puppy sniff his hand. "Makes sense."

"Her name's Dolce," Roberts added. "She's still figuring out how fast she can go."

"Takes one to know one," Roberts said after a beat, studying Jake more closely.

Jake smiled. "Thanks."

Roberts tilted his head. "You run much?"

Jake shrugged. "When I play soccer."

"You should run," Roberts said easily. "You've got something there."

"My school never had a team," Jake replied. "So... never really did."

"Doesn't matter," Roberts said. "It's never too late."

Jake wiped sweat from his forehead. "I'm done with high school anyway. Finished. Headed to Oregon next year."

"Oregon?" Roberts repeated, impressed.

"Yeah," Jake said with a small laugh. "Figured I'd see what's out there."

Roberts reached into his jacket and handed him a card. "If you ever want to find out what that speed can do, give me a call. I'll be expecting it."

Jake took the card, turning it over once before slipping it into his pocket.

From the stands, Paige closed her notebook and stood. She and Jake had grown up on the same street, close enough that his grandmother used to watch her after school when her parents worked late. Their lives had braided together early shared dinners, scraped knees, long summers that blurred into each other. When they got older, the friendship shifted as naturally as breathing. By their teens, they were inseparable, more than friends without ever needing to say it. Now they were both leaving for Oregon, chasing something bigger than the street that raised them.

She had been watching quietly for most of the game, drawn less by the soccer than by the way Jake moved. As the man and the dog turned back toward the trail, she stepped closer, catching Jake's eye for just a moment before smiling.

Jake watched Coach Roberts and Dolce walk away. The whippet now trotted at his side, leash back in hand. The park felt different now unchanged, but charged, as if something had shifted beneath the surface.

Chapter Four

It had been weeks since high school ended. Summer stretched behind him like a quiet road, empty but full of possibilities. Now, standing at the edge of the college track, Jake felt a familiar stir in his chest, the pulse of speed, of motion, of something he had almost forgotten.

The late morning sun glinted off the lanes, each stripe of asphalt perfect and gleaming. Runners moved in seamless rhythm, legs pumping, arms slicing the air with precise angles. Every stride was smooth, controlled, almost musical. Jake exhaled slowly, trying not to make a sound, letting the sharp slap of spikes against rubber reverberate in his chest.

He fingered the card from Coach Roberts in his pocket, remembering the man's words from weeks ago at the park: "If you ever want to find out what that speed can do, give me a call." Now... here he was. Ready to find out.

A whistle pierced the air. Jake hesitated for only a moment before stepping forward. The coach stood near the starting blocks, clipboard in hand, scanning the runners.

"Coach Roberts?" Jake called, his voice catching slightly.

The coach's eyes flicked up, sharp but not unkind. "Yeah?" "I... I just wanted to introduce myself," Jake said, holding out the card. "From a few weeks back, you said to reach out if I wanted to join."

Coach Roberts glanced at the card, then back at the track. "I remember. Alright, walk-ons," he said, voice firm, "today you'll follow instructions. Don't slow anyone down. And get changed first, anything works, but not a green uniform." He looked down at Jake's shoes. "Are you running in those?"

Jake glanced at his worn sneakers and grimaced. "Uh... yeah, unless"

The coach shook his head with a small smirk. "You'll manage. Just try not to trip over yourself."

Jake nodded, a mix of nerves and relief washing over him. He turned toward the locker room, card still warm in his hand. The smell of sweat and liniment hit him immediately. Uniforms were stacked neatly on benches: green jackets, shorts, socks, perfect, unblemished. He pulled on one of the plain warm-ups from the lockers, snug but unremarkable, and ran a hand down his chest as if the fabric could somehow armor him against the intimidation he felt.

Back on the track, he scanned the group again. The runners in green moved like a single, unstoppable unit. The color wasn't just a uniform, it was status, belonging, recognition. Then there were the others, like him: plain warm-ups, hesitant, watching, waiting. His stomach sank. He wasn't one of them yet.

A voice at his side pulled him from his thoughts. "You're a walk-on too?" a boy asked, adjusting his sleeves nervously. His eyes were sharp, assessing.

"Yeah," Jake replied.

"Good luck keeping up. They don't exactly slow down for outsiders," the boy said, nodding toward the green-uniform runners. There was no malice, just truth in his tone. Jake swallowed. He wasn't just behind physically, he was behind socially too.

"I'll manage," Jake muttered, more to himself than the boy.

Coach Roberts blew the whistle. "Warm-up laps! On my mark!"

Jake stepped onto the track. The first footfall was awkward, heavy, wrong. But he pushed forward, one stride at a time, letting the rhythm of the others guide him. The laps blurred. His lungs burned. His calves ached. He was still a walk-on, still outside the circle, still chasing the green.

As Jake slowed near the far curve, a ripple of movement at the edge of the track pulled his attention away.

An entourage had arrived.

They didn't wear spikes or team colors, but they moved with purpose, confident, practiced, familiar. Mitch broke from the group mid-stride, laughing as he jogged over. A man followed close behind him, broad-shouldered, sunburned, stopwatch already hanging from his neck. Two others lingered nearby, arms crossed, eyes tracking splits, posture sharp enough to cut through the casual rhythm of practice.

Jake would learn later that they were Mitch's parents. That both of them had run at the collegiate level. That the others weren't spectators at all, but private coaches, people who had been shaping Mitch's stride and strategy for years before this track had ever mattered.

Even without knowing any of that yet, Jake felt it.

The way the man spoke, quietly, firmly, made it sound like instructions, not suggestions. The way Mitch listened, nodding once before peeling back onto the track, made it clear this wasn't new. The coach noticed it too. Jake saw Coach Roberts glance over, expression unreadable, before turning back to the whistle in his hand.

Someone like Mitch didn't arrive by accident.

He was a five-star recruit. The top middle-distance runner in his state. The kind of athlete programs were built around, not brought in quietly through side doors. The green uniform didn't just belong to him, it followed him.

Mitch moved again, easy and loose, laughing as if the track were his living room. Everyone watched him. Even the walk-ons did.

Jake stood at the edge of the lane, chest heaving, sweat burning his eyes.

And for the first time, the gap between them felt bigger than speed.

Still, as the whistle blew and they fell back into motion, Jake made himself one promise, quiet, stubborn, unannounced. He would catch him. One day.

Chapter Five

The party was already loud when Jake arrived.

Music pulsed through the old sorority house, bass rattling the windows, laughter spilling out onto the lawn in uneven waves. Strings of lights were hung carelessly between trees, glowing soft and forgiving in the warm night air. Someone had dragged speakers onto the porch. Someone else had already lost a shoe.

Jake stood at the edge of it, hands in his pockets, watching.

It was his first weekend on campus. One practice in. One whistle. One glimpse of what he wasn't part of yet.

Green jackets were everywhere.

They leaned against railings, sat on porch steps, moved through the crowd with an ease that came from being known. People made space for them without realizing they were doing it. The color meant something here. Jake recognized it immediately.

He stayed near the side of the yard with another walk-on, both of them pretending not to listen while Mitch held court near the porch.

"...telling you, last lap I didn't even feel it," Mitch was saying, cup raised, voice carrying. Laughter rippled outward.

Then Paige arrived. Jake noticed before Mitch did.

She stepped through the side gate like she already knew where she was going, denim jacket loose over a white top, hair pulled back just enough to show her face. She scanned the yard once and her eyes landed on Jake.

Mitch kept talking, but his rhythm faltered. His eyes drifted. Locked.

Jake felt it immediately. Paige crossed the yard and stopped in front of him. "You look overwhelmed."

He smiled, relieved. "You have no idea." She nodded toward the house. "Come on. It's worse inside, but at least you can't hear yourself think."

They slipped through the door together.

The living room was packed, bodies moving, music louder, heat thick in the air. Someone was dancing on a couch. Someone else was shouting lyrics into a phone.

Jake and Paige danced, not seriously, not impressively, just enough to feel part of it. Jake grabbed two cups from the kitchen and handed one to her.

She took it, held it, didn't drink.

A song later, she set the cup down untouched. "I'm good," she said when Jake raised an eyebrow.

"I was going to grab another."

"Not for me."

He nodded and headed back toward the kitchen.

When Jake returned, Mitch was there.

He stood too close to Paige, one arm braced casually against the wall, green jacket open like a badge. Another runner hovered nearby, watching.

“So,” Mitch was saying, smiling, “you always go for track guys, or am I just lucky tonight?”

Paige laughed once. “You’re definitely not lucky.”

Mitch grinned wider. “Careful. I might take that as a challenge.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said easily. “I’m not interested.”

It was light. Almost playful. But Mitch didn’t move.

Jake stepped in just as Mitch reached out and plucked the drink from Jake’s hand.

“Appreciate it,” Mitch said, already taking a sip. “That’s his,” someone said behind him, snickering. “He’s a walk-on.”

Mitch looked at Jake. Then at Paige.

He laughed. “Walk-on,” he repeated, like it explained everything. He handed the cup to the guy beside him. “C’mon.”

He turned to his friends. “Let’s go.”

They left the dance floor laughing, green jackets parting the crowd.

Jake stood there, heat rising in his face. Paige touched his arm.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s nothing.” He searched her face. “That didn’t look like nothing.”

She shrugged, already turning away. “He was just talking.”

Jake didn’t answer.

From the doorway, he watched Mitch disappear into the noise.

It wasn’t about the drink.

And it wasn’t about Paige.

It was about the way Mitch looked at him and decided he didn’t matter.

Jake held onto that feeling.
He would use it later.

Chapter Six

They left the party together.

The noise faded quickly once they reached the sidewalk music swallowed by distance, laughter reduced to echoes behind them. Campus at night felt different than Jake expected. Quieter. Bigger. Like something holding its breath.

They walked side by side, not touching, shoes scuffing softly against the pavement.

“So,” Jake said, searching for normal. “First week verdict?”

Paige smiled faintly. “Overwhelming. Everyone looks like they already know where they’re going.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Like we showed up late.”

She laughed, then slowed.

“Hey,”

She turned abruptly, hand flying to her mouth, and retched into the grass.

Jake froze for half a second, then rushed over. “Whoa, are you okay?”

She stayed bent forward, breathing hard.

“Did you drink too much?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

She shook her head. "I didn't drink at all."

That stopped him.

She lowered herself onto the curb, back against a tree, eyes closed. Jake sat beside her, close but unsure where to put his hands.

"Paige," he said quietly. "You're scaring me."

She stared at the ground for a moment, then looked up at him.

"I have something to tell you."

His chest tightened. "What's wrong?"

She swallowed. "I'm pregnant."

The word landed between them like a dropped weight.

Jake didn't smile. Didn't speak. His face drained of color, eyes fixed somewhere just past her shoulder. For a moment, it looked like he might stand up and run.

Then he didn't.

"How?" he asked finally, the question stupid the second it left his mouth.

Paige didn't answer. She didn't have to.

They sat there in the dark, the campus stretching around them, suddenly enormous.

Jake felt it all at once, the math, the timing, the way everything had just shifted. School. Running. Money. Expectations. The future he hadn't even started yet pressing in from all sides.

"This just got... harder," he said.

Paige nodded. "I know."

She waited, watching his face. Not hopeful. Not defensive. Just steady. "We don't have options," she said softly. Not as a plea. As a fact.

Jake nodded. They both knew what she meant. How they'd been raised. What was off the table without being said.

He looked at her then, really looked at her and the fear twisted into something else.

"Okay," he said. His voice didn't shake, even if the rest of him wanted to. "We'll figure it out."

Paige let out a breath she'd been holding. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

They stayed there for a long time, saying very little.

Above them, the lights along the path flickered on one by one.

Jake watched them glow and understood something he couldn't yet name:

The race he thought he'd come here to run was no longer the only one that mattered.

Chapter Seven

Morning came too quickly.

Campus moved like nothing had happened.

Jake walked to the track with his bag slung over one shoulder, the night before still sitting heavy in his chest. Students passed him laughing, talking about classes, parties, people they'd already decided mattered. No one knew what he was carrying. No one could see it.

At the track, the green jackets were already warming up.

Mitch stood near the inside lane, stretching casually, joking with two other runners. He looked rested. Untouched. Like the night hadn't followed him out of the yard.

Jake took a lane farther out.

Mitch glanced over. "You good?" he called.

Jake nodded. "Yeah."

It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the truth either.

Coach Roberts blew the whistle.

Warm-up laps.

Jake started easy, but his body didn't listen. His legs surged, then checked themselves. Surge. Ease. Surge again. The rhythm came out fractured, uneven. A few runners glanced back.

Mitch fell in beside him for half a lap.

"You always run like that?" Mitch asked, not unkindly.

Curious.

Jake shrugged. "Gets me there."

Mitch smirked. "Looks exhausting."

He drifted ahead, stride smooth, effortless.

Jake tried to copy it.

He couldn't.

During drills, it got worse. On strides, Jake blasted the first fifty meters, then faded hard. On recoveries, he stood bent over, hands on knees, chest heaving while others stayed loose, bouncing lightly.

Roberts watched without saying anything.

Jake felt it all unraveling his legs, his focus, his patience. Every surge felt like panic. Every slowdown felt like failure.

Between reps, he sat on the grass and stared at the track.

What am I even doing here?

He pictured Paige on the curb. The word she'd said. The future pressing in.

Quitting flickered through his mind not dramatically. Practically.

Less time. Less strain. Less pretending.

Mitch jogged past and slowed. "You don't have to kill every rep," he said. "It's not a race."

Jake looked up. "Isn't it?"

Mitch paused, then laughed lightly. "Not yet."

He jogged off.

That laugh stayed with Jake.

Practice ended with cooldown laps. Jake lagged behind, form breaking down as he surged one last time for no reason at all, then

paid for it.

“Jake,” Roberts called.

Jake stopped, bracing himself.

“Stick around,” the coach said.

The others drifted away, chatter returning as if practice had never been hard. Mitch walked past Jake, towel over his shoulder.

“See you,” he said. Not mocking. Almost respectful.

Jake nodded.

The field emptied. That’s when Roberts whistled for Dolce.

The little whippet came tearing across the grass, energy compressed into motion.

Roberts tossed the ball.

Dolce exploded after it.

Jake watched her sprint, stop, pant, recover.

And for the first time that morning, something clicked.

Roberts didn’t lecture. He didn’t correct Jake’s form yet. He just let him see it

. “Fast isn’t your problem,” Roberts said quietly. “You just don’t know when to stop attacking.”

Jake swallowed. For the first time since last night, quitting didn’t feel like the only way out.

Not yet.

Roberts stayed beside him longer than necessary.

“You don’t have to carry everything at once,” the coach said, eyes still on Dolce as she circled back. “Running has a way of making the weight feel heavier than it is.”

Jake nodded, throat tight.

Roberts finally looked at him. "You thinking about quitting?"

Jake hesitated, then answered honestly. "Yeah."

Roberts didn't flinch. "That doesn't make you weak. It makes you overwhelmed." He paused. "Big difference."

Jake stared at the track. "I don't know how to do all of it."

"You don't," Roberts said. "You do today. Then tomorrow. That's it."

Silence settled between them, comfortable.

Roberts clapped Jake lightly on the shoulder, not as a coach correcting form, but as something closer to a father reminding him to breathe.

"Stick with me," he said. "We'll sort the rest out as it comes."

Chapter Eight

Roberts' office smells like dry erase ink and old coffee. A narrow window looks out over the track, the lanes washed pale in afternoon sun.

Jake stands just inside the door, hands loose at his sides, like he's waiting for instructions he's already late to follow.

"Sit," Roberts says.

Jake takes the chair opposite the desk. The coach doesn't sit. He turns to the whiteboard instead, uncaps a marker, and draws a long horizontal line.

"Five thousand," he says, writing 5K at one end. "Your race."

He dots the line in uneven bursts.

"Tell me what you're doing," Jake watches the dots, clusters, gaps, clusters again. He swallows. "I go. Hard. Then I back off. Then I go again."

"How long is 'hard'?"

"Until it hurts."

"And 'back off'?"

Jake hesitates. "Until I can breathe."

Roberts caps the marker and finally sits. "That's not strategy. That's survival."

Jake nods. He feels caught, but not accused.

Roberts uncaps again and redraws the line, this time smooth, with one long, controlled rise. "This is efficiency. Pressure without panic. You don't spike energy like a match and hope it lasts. You burn like a pilot light."

Jake exhales through his nose. "It feels slower."

"It is," Roberts says. "At first." He adds a second line beneath the first, Jake's jagged bursts again. He circles the gaps. "These recoveries? They're theft. You're stealing seconds from later and paying interest."

Jake stares at the board. "I thought surging kept me in it."

"It keeps you alive," Roberts says. "Different thing."

Silence settles. From outside, spikes click against rubber, someone finishing drills.

Roberts turns, studies Jake for a beat. "You've got something else going on."

Jake opens his mouth. Closes it.

"Not my business," Roberts adds. "Unless it's in the way."

Jake looks down at his hands. He can feel his pulse in his thumbs. "It is."

Roberts waits.

"Paige's pregnant," Jake says. The words land and stay there.

Roberts leans back in his chair. "Okay."

Jake blinks. "Okay?"

"That changes some things," Roberts says. "Not who you are."

Jake lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "I don't know how I'm supposed to, school, running"

"We're not solving your life today," Roberts says. "We're keeping you from breaking it."

He stands, sets the marker down, and gestures toward the board again. "This" he taps the smooth line "isn't about being less committed. It's about lasting."

Jake nods slowly. The word settles somewhere new.

Roberts opens a drawer, pulls out a folded practice plan, then stops. "One more thing."

He walks to the locker room door connected to the office and opens it. On the bench sits a green bag.

"Locker room," Roberts says. "Third stall. Try them."

Jake hesitates. "Coach, I"

"Don't make it weird," Roberts says. "They're team-issued. You need them."

Inside the bag are spikes, plain, scuffed, nothing flashy and a green singlet folded cleanly beneath.

Jake doesn't touch them right away.

"This doesn't change expectations," Roberts says from the doorway. "It raises them."

Jake finally reaches out. The fabric is light, almost fragile. He runs his thumb along the seam.

When he comes back out, Roberts is already writing again, this time a single word under the smooth line.

TIMING.

"Tomorrow," Roberts says, not looking at him. "You run controlled. No theatrics. Let the race come to you."

Jake nods. He feels heavier and steadier at the same time.

As he leaves, he catches his reflection in the glass: green at the edges, not worn yet, but real.

Outside, Mitch jogs past with two other runners,
laughing. He glances over, polite smile in place, then his eyes
flick to the green peeking from Jake's bag.
The smile holds.
Just barely.

Chapter Nine

The green feels heavier than it looks.

Jake notices it the moment he steps onto the track. Not physically, emotionally. The fabric pulls at his shoulders, a reminder that whatever he does today will be seen.

Conversations soften as he passes. Not stop. Just soften.

Mitch is already stretching near lane three, one knee down, arms loose, relaxed in a way that looks earned. He glances up, eyes flicking to Jake's singlet, then back to his stretch.

"Looks like Christmas came early," Mitch says lightly.

A few runners chuckle. It's friendly enough. Jake nods once.

Coach Roberts blows the whistle. "Form up."

They move through drills, A-skips, strides, short accelerations. Jake fights instinct. Every cell in his body wants to surge, to prove something immediately. He remembers the board. The smooth line. Timing.

He runs tall. Holds back.

It feels wrong. Like standing still while traffic moves around you.

On the first interval, Mitch floats to the front without effort. Wire to wire. Easy lead. Jake tucks in behind, legs itching. The old habit whispers: go now.

He doesn't.

By the third repeat, his lungs burn in a new way, less panic, more pressure. He's not gasping. He's holding.

Mitch glances back once, surprised to see Jake still there.

During recovery, Jake jogs instead of stopping. He keeps moving. Dolce's blur flashes through his mind, speed contained, not spent.

"Different look," Mitch says as they line up again. "You get new advice?"

Jake shrugs. "Trying something."

"Careful," Mitch says, still smiling. "Five K's don't forgive patience."

The next rep starts fast. Mitch pushes the pace early, daring someone to come with him. Jake feels it, the invitation, the trap. He lets Mitch have the front, settles just off his shoulder.

Halfway through, Mitch's stride lengthens. Overreaches.

Jake notices.

The realization lands quietly: Mitch is forcing it.

They finish the set. Jake crosses the line breathing hard but intact. Mitch slows, hands on hips, sweat darkening the collar of his singlet.

Roberts doesn't say much. Just watches.

After practice, the locker room hums. Laughter. Music from someone's phone. Jake changes quickly, still unsure where he fits.

Mitch bumps his shoulder lightly as he passes. "You're not bad," he says. "For a walk-on."

The word lands heavier than the contact.

Outside, Jake sits on the bleachers tying his shoes again, even though they're already tight. He feels exposed. Green doesn't make him confident, it makes him accountable.

Roberts joins him, hands in his pockets. "How'd it feel?"

"Like I was holding back," Jake says.

Roberts nods. "You were."

"That's the point?"

"That's the cost."

Jake looks out at the track. "Mitch keeps going early."

"He always has," Roberts says. "Wire to wire works until it doesn't."

Jake thinks of the board. The smooth line. "What if I miss my chance?"

Roberts studies him. "You won't. You'll recognize it."

Jake swallows. "And if I don't?"

"Then you learn," Roberts says. "And you don't break."

As Roberts walks away, Jake stays seated a moment longer. He presses his palms into his thighs, grounding himself.

Across the field, Mitch laughs with two teammates, already recovered, already performing.

Jake stands.

For the first time, he doesn't feel behind.

He feels early.

Chapter Ten

The bus ride to the meet is louder than practice ever is. Music leaks from cheap headphones. Someone jokes about lane assignments. Someone else pretends not to care.

Jake sits by the window, knees bouncing, watching farmland blur into bleachers and banners. He tells himself it's just another run. Just distance, just pace. But his chest won't settle.

Coach Roberts walks the aisle once, checking shoes, nodding. He stops beside Jake.

"Same thing," Roberts says quietly. "Nothing new today."

Jake nods. Nothing new feels like a lie.

The track is fast, tight turns, fresh rubber. Green jackets stand out immediately. Mitch is already there, laughing with two teammates, loose in the shoulders like the outcome is settled.

Jake warms up on the infield, trying not to watch him. His strides still look a half-beat awkward too much reach, not enough patience. He hears Roberts behind him.

"Easy," the coach says. "You're not proving anything in warmup."

They call the event. Jake steps into his lane and feels the hush descend, the strange, collective pause before effort. He glances once toward Mitch. Mitch doesn't look back.

The gun cracks.

Jake comes out controlled, almost cautious. The field surges. Mitch goes straight to the front, clean and confident, making it clear this is his race.

Jake settles where Roberts told him to, close enough to feel the pace, far enough to breathe. The first lap clicks by smoother than he expects. He holds. He listens.

Halfway through, instinct whispers: Go now.

He doesn't.

He remembers the field. Dolce. The word timing.

With two laps to go, the race tightens. Mitch quickens. Jake responds, not a surge, just presence. He's there. The gap doesn't widen.

People notice.

On the final bend, Jake finally lets it open. His stride stretches, cleaner than it's ever felt. He moves past one runner, then another but the leaders are already gone.

He crosses the line mid-pack. Sixth. Maybe seventh.

He bends over, hands on knees, lungs burning, vision tunneling. The sting comes quick this time. Not failure but distance. How far he still is.

Roberts meets him at the fence. No smile. No disappointment.

"You ran it right," he says. "That's new."

Jake nods, swallowing hard. Right doesn't feel like enough yet.

Across the track, Mitch breaks the tape easily. Clean. Controlled. Applause follows him like it's expected.

As Mitch slows, he finally glances over at Jake. Not long. Not curious.

Dismissive.

On the ride home, the bus is quieter. Jake stares out the window again, replaying the laps. He didn't factor. Didn't threaten.

But he didn't blow up either.

For the first time, the race didn't own him.

That, Roberts had said, was where progress started.

Chapter Eleven

The first race doesn't change Jake's place on the team.

He is still a name called without emphasis. Still a body in the middle of the pack. The green jackets keep their hierarchy, and Mitch stays exactly where he's always been, at the front, untouched.

But something in Jake has shifted.

He stops chasing moments and starts chasing margins.

That freshman year unfolds in increments so small they're almost invisible. A second shaved here. A place gained there. He learns how to finish races without folding, how to hold form when his lungs scream. He learns when not to go.

He doesn't win.

He doesn't medal.

Mitch, meanwhile, becomes inevitable.

Records fall. School firsts. State attention. Mitch's name is spoken with certainty now, when, not if. Jake hears it in locker rooms, on buses, in the way coaches from other teams look past everyone else.

Jake watches. Trains. Goes home tired.

That summer, Emily is born.

She is smaller than he imagined, lighter than the weight he's been carrying all year. When he holds her the first time, her fingers close around his thumb with surprising strength, and something in him steadies.

The nights are long. Sleep comes in pieces. He learns the sound of her cry, the way it sharpens right before it breaks into something softer. He walks the apartment with her against his chest, pacing slow circles, singing *You Are My Sunshine* under his breath until the words thin into melody and her breathing finally evens out.

Running changes then.

It's no longer escape. It's structure.

He runs early, before work. He runs late, after she sleeps. Some days his legs feel hollow. Other days they feel unbreakable. He doesn't question either.

By the time sophomore year ends, life has narrowed. Emily is a year old now, walking unsteadily, reaching for him with both hands when he comes through the door. Paige works evenings, so Jake picks up whatever shifts he can. Training fits into the leftover spaces, early mornings, late nights, miles run on borrowed time.

When junior year begins, Jake returns leaner, quieter, more exact. He no longer wastes energy proving himself. He just shows up.

The results follow slowly.

Fourth. Fifth. Third.

Still no win.

Mitch continues to win, cleanly, publicly. Bigger crowds. Louder applause. Jake hears his name announced with reverence and feels none of the old heat rise in him. Mitch is running his race.

Jake is running his life.

At the final home meet of junior year, Jake places second.

Paige waits for him beyond the fence, Emily balanced on her hip. Emily claps without knowing why. Jake lifts her, sweat-soaked and grinning despite himself.

Mitch wins, of course.

After the race, Mitch approaches. He claps Jake on the shoulder, congratulates him, but his eyes drift, to Paige, to the way she stands close, protective without trying to be.

"You're looking good," Mitch says to her, casual, practiced.

Paige smiles thinly. "Thanks."

Jake notices. He doesn't react.

That summer is the best one.

Jake trains harder than he ever has, but joy threads through it now. Emily rides his shoulders during cooldowns, squealing as he picks up speed. He pushes a stroller between intervals, lungs burning, laughter spilling out of him when she laughs first.

Strength and softness coexist.

He doesn't know it yet, but these are the moments that will last.

When senior year opens, the home track is full.

Mitch's parents sit near the finish line. Paige stands with Emily tucked against her chest. The gun fires.

This time, Jake doesn't fade.

He waits. He moves when it matters. He crosses first.

The noise comes late, but it comes.

Mitch slows behind him, jaw tight. His father reaches Jake first, smiling wide, hand extended.

"You ran a hell of a race," he says. "You should come by for dinner sometime."

Jake nods, still catching his breath.

He doesn't know yet what that invitation costs.

Chapter Twelve

The house sits back from the road, lights glowing through tall windows like something staged. Jake slows as they walk up the drive, Emily balanced against his chest, Paige beside him.

The green jacket feels heavier than it should.

Paige notices it before anyone else. She smooths the sleeve, a small, unconscious gesture. "Looks good on you," she says quietly.

Inside, the air is warm. Open. The kind of house that expects company. Mitch's mom greets them first, kneeling immediately to Emily's level, eyes bright.

"Well hello there," she says. "Aren't you perfect."

Emily stares, then smiles.

Dinner is easy. Too easy. Stories, laughter, plates passed without ceremony. Mitch's dad asks Jake about training, about patience, about how it feels to finally see things line up. He listens like the answers matter.

Paige looks around more than she speaks. The space. The calm. The certainty of it. When she comments on the house, Mitch's mom waves it off.

"Oh, you should see our place in California," she says. "This is just what we bought so we could be close while Mitch was here."

Paige's eyes widen. "I've never been out of state."

“Well,” the mom says warmly, “that should change.”

After dinner, Mitch’s dad rises with his glass. “To Jake,” he says. “A hell of a race. Discipline like that doesn’t come easy.”

Jake shifts, uncomfortable. He clears his throat.

“If we’re toasting anything,” he says, lifting his glass, “it should be her.”

He nods toward Emily.

“She’s the reason I get up early. The reason I come home tired. Everything works because of her.”

The table goes quiet for a beat then softens.

“To Emily,” Mitch’s mom says.

Glasses clink.

Later, Mitch’s dad gestures toward the back of the house. “Boys,” he says. “Come with me.”

The room beyond is darker, quieter. A television hums before the image appears. Mitch’s dad lowers into a chair, remote in hand.

“Watch this,” he says. Not to Mitch. To Jake.

The screen flickers to Belmont Park. A chestnut horse breaks clean and takes the lead immediately.

“Right there,” the dad says, pausing it. “From the first step, he decides the race.”

The tape rolls. Secretariat stretches out, smooth, unbothered. The dad speaks calmly, like this is a lesson he’s given before.

“You don’t give anyone comfort. You make them run your race.”

Mitch watches, arms folded. “Once you’ve got it,” he says. “Don’t give it back.”

Jake feels the idea settle in him, the space, the reach, the control. The screen fills with daylight as the horse pulls away.

“This,” the dad says softly, lowering the volume, “is how legends are made. Gate to wire.”

When the tape ends, the room is quiet. The blue screen returns.

As they leave, Mitch’s dad claps Jake on the shoulder. “You can do this,” he says. “You’ve got the engine.”

Jake nods. He believes him.

Outside, the night is cool. Paige walks close, Emily asleep against her shoulder. The house glows behind them, steady and sure.

Jake doesn’t know it yet, but this is the last night everything feels possible

Chapter Thirteen

The stands are louder than Jake expects. Not roaring, just restless. The kind of sound that presses in from all sides and never quite goes away.

He jogs a slow loop along the infield, spikes whispering against the track. Coach Roberts stands near the finish line, arms folded, eyes moving the way they always do counting, measuring, already somewhere ahead of the race.

Jake rolls his shoulders. He feels good. Too good, maybe. Light in the legs. That dangerous calm that makes big ideas feel reasonable.

He thinks of the tape. Belmont Park. The chestnut breaking clean. The open stride. The space in front.

Decide the race.

They call them to the line. Jake settles into lane two, hands on his hips, breathing steady. Mitch is a few lanes over, loose, unreadable. He doesn't look nervous. He never does.

The gun cracks.

Jake breaks fast. Instinctively. He always does. But instead of easing, instead of letting the surge breathe, he keeps pressing. He slides to the front before the curve finishes unwinding, feels the lead lock in.

Good, he thinks. This is good.

He opens his stride. Lets it stretch. Feels taller because of it.

The first lap clicks by clean and controlled. The pack strings out behind him. No one challenges. No one panics.

Show them daylight.

On the backstretch the rhythm tightens. His breathing sharpens, but he keeps the pace honest, too honest. Every step reaches a little farther than it needs to. Every footfall lands just ahead of where it wants to.

He tells himself it's strength. He tells himself this is how you make people uncomfortable.

At the mile mark, his legs begin to speak. Not pain yet, weight. Like gravity has quietly increased.

He thinks of the tape again. Secretariat widening. Never looking back.

He refuses to float. Behind him, someone moves. Just briefly. Enough to be felt.

Jake responds the only way the tape taught him how.

He lengthens.

From the infield, Coach Roberts sees it happen. The cadence drop. The reach. The fight where there should be flow.

"Jake....shorten it!"

The voice cuts through the noise, sharp and urgent.

Jake hears it.

But shorten sounds like slow. Like giving something back. And giving it back is the one thing he's decided not to do.

So he reaches instead. One more long step, thrown out in front of a tired body chasing an idea it doesn't quite understand.

Something snaps.

It isn't loud. It isn't dramatic. Just a wrongness, like a rope pulled too far and suddenly having nothing left to give.

There is no pain at first. Just shock. Absence.

His foot hits the track again and there's nothing there to catch him.

The world tilts.

The lead keeps going without him.

Jake stumbles, instinct trying to pretend nothing happened, one more step, another

And then the pain arrives.

Not creeping.

Not gentle.

A white-hot bolt that tears through him and tells him, with cruel certainty, that this isn't something you shake out. Something is broken.

In the stands, Mitch's mother is already standing.

Her hand flies to her mouth. "Oh no," she says, breathless, eyes searching the infield, the fence, the space where Paige should be.

Beside her, Mitch's father doesn't rise.

He exhales. A long, measured breath. The tension leaves his shoulders as his gaze shifts, not to Jake, but to the pack surging ahead. To the finish.

Mitch is moving clean now. Unchallenged.

The pack flows around him. Mitch slips past without a word.

Jake steps off the track and sits hard on the infield grass, hands braced behind him. His heart is still racing like the race never ended.

Coach Roberts is there quickly. Too quickly.

"Don't move," he says, already kneeling. His voice is calm, but his jaw is set. "Just breathe."

Jake nods, staring at the curve where the race disappeared.

"I was holding it," Jake says. He isn't sure who he's talking to. "I didn't want to give it back."

Roberts looks at him for a long moment.

"Sometimes," he says quietly, "holding on is exactly how you get hurt."

The crowd noise swells as the race finishes somewhere behind them. Jake doesn't turn to watch.

Later, he'll remember the tape, not the finish, not the legend, but the early frames. The open stride. The space in front. The idea that speed comes from reaching for it.

He won't remember being told to stop.

Chapter Fourteen

The hospital smells like antiseptic and burned coffee.

Jake wakes to a ceiling he doesn't recognize, tiles sliding slowly past as someone pushes his bed down a hallway. The pain comes in waves now duller than the track, heavier. Settled. Like it has decided to stay.

"Jake."

Coach Roberts' voice reaches him before he can place where he is. He turns his head slightly. The effort costs more than it should.

"You're okay," the coach says, too quickly. Then, correcting himself, slower: "You're stable."

Jake swallows. His throat feels scraped raw.

"Did I finish?" he asks.

Roberts doesn't answer right away. He walks alongside the bed, one hand gripping the rail, knuckles pale.

"No," he says. "You did the right thing stopping."

Jake stares back at the ceiling.

"I didn't stop," he says quietly. "My leg did."

They wheel him into a room. Curtains. Beeping machines. Someone slides an IV into his arm. Jake flinches but doesn't say anything.

Time stretches. Contracts.

The door opens again. Paige stands there, Emily pressed against her shoulder. Emily's face is blotchy from crying, eyes wide and confused by the lights and the wires and the unfamiliar quiet.

Jake's chest tightens.

Paige crosses the room in three steps and stops short of the bed, like she isn't sure she's allowed to touch him yet. Her hand hovers, then settles on his forearm.

"You scared me," she says.

"I'm sorry," he says immediately.

She shakes her head. "Don't."

Emily reaches out, fingers grasping for his shirt. Jake lifts his good arm and draws her close, careful of the wires, breathing her in. The weight of her grounds him in a way nothing else does.

"I won," he says suddenly. The words slip out before he can stop them. Not proud. Just stunned. "I was winning."

Paige presses her lips together. She nods once, like she understands exactly what he means.

"I know," she says. "I saw."

A nurse enters, checks his monitors, asks him to rate the pain. Jake gives a number that feels meaningless.

"Doctor will be in soon," she says, already turning away.

The door closes.

Silence settles.

Coach Roberts clears his throat. "I'm going to step out," he says. "Give you some time."

Jake looks at him. There's something unspoken there, regret, responsibility, care. The coach meets his eyes and nods once, like a promise he hasn't put words to yet.

When he's gone, Paige sits on the edge of the bed.

"What happens now?" she asks.

Jake doesn't answer. He stares at his leg, wrapped and elevated, like it belongs to someone else.

"I just need it to heal," he says finally. "I'll be back."

Paige watches him. Not unkindly. Not disbelieving. Just carefully.

Emily yawns and rests her head against his chest. Jake hums without thinking, the same low melody he sings when she won't sleep. His voice wobbles but doesn't break.

The machines keep time around them.

For the first time since the gun went off, Jake lets himself stay still.

Chapter Fifteen

The doctor uses careful words.

“Complete tear.”

He points to the scan like it’s a map Jake should already understand. Ligament fibers ghosted and frayed. A mess of white and gray.

“You’ll need surgery,” the doctor says. “Reconstruction. After that rehab. Months.”

Jake nods, absorbing only what he wants to hear.

Surgery. Rehab. Back.

Paige sits beside him, Emily asleep in her arms. Paige’s free hand rests on Jake’s knee careful, protective.

“Full recovery?” Jake asks.

The doctor pauses. Not long. Just enough.

“Our goal is function,” he says. “Running is... we’ll see how you respond.”

Jake doesn’t like the way that sounds, but he doesn’t push. Not yet.

The surgery is early. The room is bright and cold. Jake cracks a joke to the nurse that doesn’t land. When the anesthesiologist tells him to count back, he gets to seven.

When he wakes, his leg feels foreign, heavy, wrapped, distant.

Paige is there. So is Coach Roberts.

And Dolce.

"She insisted," the coach says quietly, already bracing for trouble. "Snuck her in my jacket."

Jake almost laughs. It hurts to do even that.

Dolce hops up carefully onto the chair, tail wagging once, restrained. She rests her chin on the edge of the bed and looks at him like he's late for something.

"Hey," Jake whispers.

Coach Roberts pulls a chair close. He looks older here, stripped of the track, the whistle, the authority.

"You did nothing wrong," he says.

Jake looks at him. "I did," Jake says. "I didn't listen."

Roberts shakes his head. "You competed. That's not a flaw. That's what I recruited."

Jake swallows. "What if I can't come back?"

The coach doesn't rush the answer.

"Then you'll still be a father," he says. "And that matters more than any time you ever ran."

Jake looks at Emily. Her chest rises and falls steadily. The simplicity of it almost breaks him.

"I didn't really have that," Jake says after a moment.

"Parents. They died when I was young. Car accident. My grandmother raised me. She did her best."

Roberts listens. Doesn't interrupt.

"I learned to take care of myself early," Jake says.
"Guess I never really learned how to stop."

The coach nods once. "You don't have to do this alone," he says. "I'm here. I'll always be here."

Jake believes him.

Later, when the afternoon light tilts, Jake thinks he sees Mitch in the doorway. A familiar shape. A pause that feels intentional.

He blinks.

The doorway is empty.

Paige returns after getting coffee.

"Mitch?" Jake asks.

She shakes her head gently. "No."

Jake exhales, relieved and disappointed at the same time.

The first weeks of recovery are rules.

Don't bend.

Don't lift

. Don't rush.

Jake breaks them all in small ways. He carries Emily when Paige isn't looking. He shifts his weight too soon. He tells himself pain is progress.

It isn't.

The swelling lingers. The strength doesn't come back the way the charts say it should. Each week plateaus sooner . At physical therapy, they talk about expectations.

"You're doing well," the therapist says.

Jake hears: This is it.

He argues with doctors. He pushes for timelines. He asks about experimental treatments.

“Your knee may never tolerate impact the way it used to,” one specialist says, kindly. Final.

Jake leaves furious.

At home, the frustration leaks.

He snaps at Paige over nothing. He raises his voice when Emily won’t settle, then hates himself instantly for it. Paige steps between them without saying a word.

That night, Jake doesn’t sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Jake comes home to an apartment that feels smaller than it used

Emily is on the floor with a plastic cup and a wooden spoon, tapping them together with serious concentration. Paige sits at the table, paperwork spread out in front of her, hospital bills, notices, envelopes she hasn't opened yet. She looks tired in a way sleep won't fix.

Jake lowers himself into the chair carefully. His knee throbs, not sharply, just enough to remind him it's there. Always there.

"How was today?" Paige asks.

"Good," he says automatically. "Physical therapy went fine."

It's not a lie. Not exactly. Fine has become a word that means nothing.

Paige nods, waiting for something else to follow. When it doesn't, she gathers the papers into a neat stack.

"I talked to my mom," she says.

Jake stiffens. He keeps his eyes on Emily, who laughs when the spoon slips from her hand.

"She thinks we should come stay with her for a while."

"For how long?"

Paige exhales. "Until things stabilize."

The word lands heavier than it should.

"I'm getting better," Jake says. "They said recovery just takes time."

"They said maybe," Paige replies gently. "And time doesn't pay rent."

He finally looks at her. Really looks. She isn't angry. She isn't dramatic. She's already past the part where emotions solve anything.

"I can work," he says. "I've been looking."

She nods again. "I know."

Silence stretches between them. Emily scoots toward Jake, pulls herself up by his pant leg. He winces as he lifts her, pain flaring, then settling into a dull ache.

Paige watches the movement. Every part of it.

"I can't keep doing this," she says quietly. "Waiting. Hoping. Watching you disappear into it."

"I'm not disappearing," Jake says, too quickly.

"You are," she says. Not accusing. Just stating it. "And I won't let Emily grow up inside that."

The words hurt more than the knee.

"What are you saying?" he asks. Paige swallows. "I'm saying I need you to get help. Real help. A job. A plan that isn't just hoping your body forgives you."

He nods, even though something tightens in his chest.

"I will," he says. "I swear."

"I believe you," she replies. "But belief isn't enough anymore."

She stands, crosses the room, and takes Emily from his arms. Emily protests softly, then settles against her shoulder.

"We're not disappearing," Paige says. "I'm giving you space to fix this."

Space. Like a track with no one on it.

"When?" Jake asks.

"Tonight."

He watches her pack the bag. Diapers. Clothes. The stuffed rabbit Emily sleeps with. The apartment empties itself without drama.

At the door, Paige hesitates.

"I love you," she says. "But loving you doesn't mean staying while you break yourself."

The door closes softly behind her.

Jake sits alone on the couch long after the apartment goes quiet.

The factory smells like oil and heat and something burned just enough to never leave.

Jake doesn't mention his knee during the interview. He doesn't mention track at all. He keeps his answers short, steady, practical. When the supervisor asks if he can lift fifty pounds, Jake says yes without hesitation.

The man nods. "Start Monday."

Jake walks out gripping the paper like a medal.

The work is brutal. Standing too long makes his knee swell. Bending sends a hot pulse up his leg. He learns how to shift weight without anyone noticing, how to grit through the sharp parts and live inside the dull ones.

Pain becomes routine.

At night, he searches.

Clinical trials. Experimental procedures. Regenerative therapies. Articles filled with promise and disclaimers buried at the bottom. He reads testimonials that sound too good to be true and tells himself

that's just bitterness talking.

There are places that don't take insurance. Places that talk about healing instead of management. Places that say full recovery without flinching.

He saves links. Writes numbers down.

When Paige calls, he tells her about the job. About the progress. He doesn't tell her about the limp getting worse.

"Keep going," she says. "Emily asks about you every day."

He hangs up and goes back to the screen.

Somewhere out there, he's sure of it, is a way back.

He just has to earn it.

Chapter Seventeen

The factory floor hums like a held breath. Machines thump and whine in steady intervals, heat rising in waves that cling to skin. Jake learns the rhythm quickly, where to stand, when to shift, how to hide the way his knee stiffens if he stays still too long.

He doesn't complain. He doesn't explain.

Pain becomes a background noise. Something to tune out.

At night, he sits at the kitchen table with his laptop open, the apartment dim except for the glow of the screen. Tabs multiply, clinical trials, forums, clinics with clean websites and words like restore and full recovery. He reads testimonials until they blur, tells himself the enthusiasm sounds fake only because he's tired.

Some places want scans emailed. Others want deposits wired. A few call back fast, voices smooth and confident, promising timelines that feel like oxygen.

He writes everything down.

When Paige calls, he answers on the first ring.

"I started the job," he tells her. "It's good. Hard, but good."

"That's great," she says, relief audible. Emily babbles in the background

. "I'm making progress," Jake adds. "PT's helping. I'm..." He searches for the right word. "Focused."

“I can hear that,” Paige says. “I’m proud of you.”

The praise steadies him. After they hang up, he opens another

Days stack. Weeks thin out. He learns how to favor the knee without thinking, how to sleep on his side so the ache doesn’t wake him. On paydays, he transfers most of the check into a separate account, labels it treatment.

One afternoon, Paige texts.

Someone reached out.

He waits.

Who? he types.

One of Mitch’s parents. His mom.

The words sit on the screen longer than they should.

What about? he asks.

Just checking in. Offering help. She said I don’t have to do this alone.

Jake exhales. He tells himself it’s kindness. He tells himself it doesn’t mean anything else.

That’s good, he replies. You deserve support.

Paige sends a heart. He stares at it, then locks the phone and goes back to work.

The calls keep coming, from clinics now. One in particular sounds different. Less hedging. More certainty. They talk about innovative protocols, about athletes who came back stronger than before. They don’t talk about limitations.

Jake wires the deposit.

That night, he calls Paige.

“I found something,” he says. He can hear the urgency in his voice and doesn’t try to soften it. “It could really work. I just need a little time.”

Paige is quiet, then careful. "I want to believe that."

"I know," he says. "But this is different."

"Okay," she says finally. "Just...keep showing me."

He promises he will.

After the call, he sits on the edge of the bed, knee throbbing, phone warm in his hand. Outside, a runner passes under the streetlight, stride easy, unburdened. Jake looks away.

Momentum, he tells himself. That's all this is.

If he keeps moving, nothing can catch him.

Chapter Eighteen

The call comes in the middle of a shift.

Jake is stacking pallets when his phone vibrates in his pocket. He ignores it at first, no one calls during the day unless something's wrong. It vibrates again. He steps aside, wipes his hands on his jeans, answers without looking at the screen.

"Jake," the voice says. Not loud. Careful.

It's one of the assistant coaches. He knows immediately.

"I'm sorry," the man continues. "It's Coach Roberts. He passed early this morning."

Jake leans back against the wall. The concrete is cool through his shirt.

"Oh," he says.

There's a pause, as if the coach on the other end is waiting for more. When nothing comes, he clears his throat.

"They think it was his heart," he says. "He went quick."

Jake nods, though no one can see him. "Okay."

The man hesitates. "There'll be a service this weekend. I wanted to make sure you knew."

"Thanks for calling," Jake says. His voice sounds normal. Even to him.

After he hangs up, he stays where he is, phone still in his hand. The machines keep running. Someone shouts for a forklift. Nothing slows down.

He waits for something to hit.

It doesn't.

On break, he sits alone on an overturned crate and eats without tasting. He thinks about Coach Roberts standing at the finish line, arms folded. About the way his voice cut through noise when it mattered. About the shoes. The jacket. The belief.

The thoughts arrive without emotion. Like facts read from a list.

He goes back to work.

That night, Paige calls.

"You okay?" she asks before he can say hello.

"Yeah," Jake says. "Just tired."

She hesitates. "I heard about Coach Roberts."

"Oh," Jake says again. "Yeah. He passed."

Her breath catches. "Jake... I'm so sorry."

"Thanks."

Silence stretches. Paige is waiting...for grief, for anger, for something she recognizes.

"Are you going to the service?" she asks.

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

He looks at his knee, swollen slightly, skin tight. "I've got work," he says. It sounds reasonable.

Another pause. Longer this time.

"Jake," she says carefully, "this was someone who mattered to you."

"I know."

"But you're acting like.." She stops herself. "Like nothing does."

He doesn't argue. He doesn't defend himself. He just listens.

"I'm handling it," he says finally.

Paige exhales. "That's what scares me."

After the call, Jake opens his laptop. The clinic page loads quickly now, saved to his favorites. There's an email waiting, confirmation, next steps, instructions.

He reads it twice.

He doesn't tell Paige.

The service happens without him. People speak about Coach Roberts' integrity, his eye for talent, the way he cared for his runners like family.

Jake is on the factory floor, counting bolts, moving boxes, keeping pace with a belt that doesn't care if you fall behind.

That night, Paige texts. I wish you'd gone.

He types I'm okay.

Then deletes it.

He sends nothing at all.

Later, lying awake, Jake stares at the ceiling. He thinks of the coach's voice...shorten it...and realizes he can't remember the sound of it anymore. Only the words.

The numbness isn't loud.

It's efficient.

And for the first time, Paige understands that whatever Jake is fighting now isn't his knee.

Chapter Nineteen

The clinic's website looks clean. Too clean.

Soft blues. Smiling faces. Words like restoration, breakthrough, return. Jake scrolls past testimonials that read like victory laps, former athletes, before-and-after photos, timelines that promise neat endings.

He knows better than to trust it.

He also knows better than to stop.

The man on the phone speaks calmly, confidently. He never interrupts. He uses Jake's name often, like a reassurance. He explains the treatment as if it's already worked, stem cells, alignment, regeneration. A process. Not a gamble.

"It's not covered by insurance," the man says. "But that's usually the case with real innovation."

Jake nods, even though the man can't see him.

"How long until improvement?" Jake asks. "A few months," the man says. "Some patients feel changes sooner."

Sooner is enough

Jake wires the money in pieces. Savings first. Then overtime. Then the envelope he's been pretending isn't emergency-only anymore. Each transfer feels like crossing a line he won't admit

exists. That night, scrolling through old emails, he notices a missed voicemail he's never played.

Coach Roberts.

A week after the surgery.

He presses the phone to his ear. "Hey, kid. Just checking in... I know it's rough right now, but listen, don't shut down on me. You hear? You don't have to carry this alone. Call when you're ready."

His thumb hovers over the button to replay it.

He doesn't.

He deletes it instead.

And instantly regrets it.

When Paige calls, he tells her about the treatment.

"Mexico?" she asks carefully.

"It's legitimate," he says quickly. "I did the research. This is different."

There's a pause on the line.

"If it works," she says, "that would be... incredible."

He hears the hope in her voice, thin but real. He clings to it.

"I'll get back," he says. "I'll fix this."

"I want that," she replies. "I really do."

She doesn't say for us. She doesn't have to.

The treatment itself is anticlimactic. A rented building. A waiting room with magazines that are years old. A doctor who avoids specifics and smiles too often. Jake tells himself that skepticism is just fear trying to protect its territory.

Pain follows.

Then swelling.

Then nothing.

Weeks pass.

Nothing changes.

When Jake calls the clinic, the number routes to voicemail. When he emails, the replies become slower, vaguer. When he pushes, they stop altogether.

He sits on his mattress one night and does the math.

There is no money left.

He doesn't tell Paige right away.

Their calls become shorter, more spaced out. Not

because she refuses him, but because he has less to offer in return. Less news. Less certainty. Less proof that leaning toward him is safe.

She still asks about work. About his knee. About how he's feeling.

"I'm managing," he says.

She believes him the way you believe someone crossing thin ice, hoping your trust doesn't become the thing that breaks them.

Around this time, Mitch enters the story again.

Not through Jake.

Through Paige.

It starts with Mitch's mother, an email, then a call. Gentle. No agenda stated. Just concern. An offer to help with Emily for an afternoon. Then a second.

"She's very kind," Paige tells Jake once. "She just... checks in."

"That's good," Jake says. And he means it.

What he doesn't picture is structure. A quiet house. Predictable meals. A child sleeping without tension in the walls.

Mitch himself appears gradually. Never alone at first. Always appropriate. Always distant enough to be harmless.

He doesn't apologize. He doesn't explain. He doesn't compete.

He's just there.

Paige doesn't tell Jake about every interaction. Not because she's hiding anything but because not everything feels like it belongs to him anymore.

One night, she doesn't call.

The next, she texts instead. Shorter. Practical.

Emily is good. Work is busy. Hope you're okay.

Jake types a reply, deletes it, types again.

I miss you, he writes.

The dots appear. Disappear. Appear again.

I know, Paige sends back. Take care of yourself.

He stares at the screen long after it goes dark.

Somewhere, a door has closed.

Not slammed.

Not locked.

Just left unopened long enough to stop being a doorway at all.

Jake doesn't realize it yet, but this is the moment the future begins to happen without him.

And it doesn't need permission.

Chapter Twenty

The clinic is quieter than the others.

No posters promising recovery. No smiling athletes, frozen mid-stride. Just beige walls, molded chairs, and a receptionist who barely looks up when Jake gives his name.

He sits carefully, knee angled just right, foot flat, hands resting where they won't shake. He has learned the choreography of waiting.

The doctor is older. Not tired, precise. He scans the chart without rushing, fingers pausing at places Jake already knows by heart.

"You've had surgery," the doctor says.

"Yes."

"Rehab."

"Yes."

"And experimental treatment."

Jake nods.

The doctor looks up, not curious. Recognizing.

"You're here for clarity," he says.

Jake doesn't answer. The silence does it for him.

The doctor turns the screen, not to impress, just to include. Jake's knee fills the space between them. Gray, grainy, familiar.

"This," the doctor says, "is your knee as it is now."

Jake leans forward.

"So why does it still hurt?"

The doctor doesn't rush the answer.

"Because pain doesn't always follow healing," he says.

"Sometimes it outlives it."

Jake sits back.

"The ligament is stable," the doctor continues. "The surgery did what it could. Structurally, you're not broken."

Jake's chest tightens. "Then what is it?"

The doctor hesitates, not uncertainty, but care.

"Pain isn't always a signal of damage," he says.

"Sometimes it becomes a habit."

Jake frowns.

"Your scans don't explain what you're feeling," the doctor continues. "Which means the source may no longer be in the tissue itself."

Jake's jaw tightens. He's heard this before, in softer language, wrapped in encouragement.

"You're saying it's in my head," Jake says.

The doctor shakes his head. "No. I'm saying it's in your system. Learned. Reinforced. The body remembers danger even when the danger is gone."

Jake looks away.

"For some patients," the doctor adds, "we call that psychosomatic, not imagined, not exaggerated. Real pain, generated by a nervous system that never received the signal to stand down."

"So, I did this to myself?" Jake asks.

"No," the doctor says immediately. "Your body did what it was designed to do. It protected you. It just never stopped."

Jake exhales, slow and shallow.

"The ligament is stable," the doctor repeats. "But the pain is persistent. That makes it chronic."

Jake blinks.

"For some people," the doctor continues, "it fades with time. For others, it lingers longer. We can't predict which one you'll be."

Jake swallows. "So what do I do?"

"You adjust," the doctor says. "Load. Expectation. Identity. You stop demanding your body behave like it used to."

"Running?" Jake asks.

"You can run," the doctor says. "Movement is possible."

Jake waits.

"Racing," the doctor says after a pause, "would be unwise."

"Your knee may still swell or flare if you overload it," the doctor adds. "It isn't fragile, but it is sensitive."

Jake's throat tightens.

"Competition teaches the body to ignore itself," the doctor adds. "That's not what you need right now."

Jake stares at the screen again, the curve of bone, the quiet certainty of it.

"Could it get better?" he asks.

"It can," the doctor says. "Often does. But not while you're chasing it like a finish line."

At the door, Jake says, "if I hadn't pushed so hard that day."

The doctor shakes his head.

"Injuries aren't moral," he says. "There's no version where you behaved better and earned a different outcome."

Jake nods. He understands that sentence the way you understand a language you'll never speak again.

Outside, the light is too bright. The sidewalk longer than it should be.

For the first time since the gun went off, there is nothing left to fix.

Only something left to live with. And somewhere, quiet, unfamiliar, a possibility settles:

Maybe the pain isn't the enemy.

Maybe the fight is.

Chapter Twenty-One

The factory doesn't fire Jake.

It simply stops needing him.

At first, it's small things. A supervisor reminding him to keep pace. A look when he asks to sit for a minute longer than allowed. The way his name moves lower on the shift board without explanation.

Jake adapts the way he always has by enduring.

He learns which motions trigger the sharp pain and which settle into something manageable. He favors his right leg without thinking about it. He stops volunteering for overtime. Stops talking unless spoken to.

The noise is constant. Metal on metal. Heat. The smell of oil soaked into everything. It used to help, something loud enough to drown out his thoughts.

Now it just presses.

At night, he doesn't search anymore.

The laptop stays closed. The notebooks with phone numbers and clinic names sit untouched in the drawer. When he opens it for bills or email, his cursor never wanders.

Hope, it turns out, takes energy.

Paige still calls. Less often. Shorter conversations.

“How’s work?” she asks.

“Fine,” he says.

“How’s your knee?”

“Same.”

Emily babbles in the background sometimes. Jake listens harder than he speaks. He pictures her growing without him noticing words arriving, steps taken, a life assembling somewhere else.

Paige fills the silence with updates. Practical things. Doctor appointments. Childcare schedules. Nothing that asks anything of him.

Jake realizes one night that she hasn’t said we in a long time.

At work, the mistake happens quietly.

He misjudges the weight of a crate. Twists wrong. The pain blooms sharp and electric, bright enough to steal his breath. He drops the box. The sound cuts through the floor.

The supervisor looks over.

“You good?” he asks.

Jake nods too quickly. “Yeah.”

But he isn’t. The rest of the shift, his knee swells until the fabric of his jeans pulls tight. He moves slower. Misses a cue. A machine idles longer than it should.

At the end of the day, the supervisor pulls him aside.

“Take tomorrow,” he says. “Get yourself right.”

Jake understands the sentence beneath the sentence.

The next day becomes two.

Then a call.

“We’re restructuring,” the supervisor says. “Nothing personal.”

Jake thanks him anyway.

He sits on the edge of the bed afterward, phone still in his hand. The room feels unfinished without Paige's things. Like a place someone forgot to come back to.

He considers calling her.

He doesn't.

There's nothing to report.

Days stretch. Jake sells the watch his grandmother gave him when he graduated. Then the old speakers. Then the bike he hasn't ridden since before the injury. Each exchange feels less like loss and more like inventory.

Some afternoons he walks the park near the apartment. He sits on the same bench, watching people pass joggers, parents, kids on scooters. He notices how no one looks at anyone else for very long.

It comforts him more than it should.

One evening, Paige texts.

We're okay. Just wanted you to know.

He reads it three times.

I'm glad, he types.

She doesn't reply.

Jake lies on the couch that night, staring at the ceiling, listening to the building settle around him. He tries to remember the last time he felt urgency, real urgency, not pain, not fear, but motion toward something.

It feels distant. Like remembering a language, he once spoke fluently and now can't place.

Outside, a siren passes. Then another. Life continuing without his input.

Jake doesn't feel angry.

He feels lighter.

Not relieved, just unanchored.

The reaching is gone.

And without it, there is suddenly nothing pulling him
forward only the quiet work of staying where he is.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It doesn't happen all at once.

Jake misses a payment. Then another. The notices come in thin envelopes he stops opening. He stacks them by the door like something he'll deal with later.

Later doesn't arrive.

The landlord leaves a voicemail, polite, firm. Jake deletes it without listening to the end. He already knows how it finishes.

On the last night, he packs what fits into a backpack.

Clothes. A photograph of Emily with food on her face, laughing at something he can't remember. His old running shoes, worn flat, useless, impossible to leave. His phone, cracked but still alive.

He sets the key on the counter.

The apartment echoes when he closes the door. He waits for something to happen inside him, panic, regret, grief.

Nothing does.

The shelter is loud and close and temporary. He lasts three nights. The smell gets into his clothes. The noise into his sleep. He leaves before anyone learns his name.

He learns which parks stay quiet after dark. Which benches have just enough backrest to make sitting feel like rest. He learns to sleep lightly, waking before dawn, before questions.

Days become practical.

Bathrooms with doors that lock. Coffee refills that don't require conversation. The kindness of strangers that never quite meets your eyes.

One afternoon, his phone stops lighting up.

No warning. No final vibration. Just a blank screen that doesn't respond.

He tries the power button. Holds it. Releases. Nothing.

He asks at a corner shop if there's a charger he can borrow. The clerk shakes his head before Jake finishes the sentence.

Outside, Jake checks the screen again. A small notice flashes when it finally wakes: Service suspended.

He stands there longer than necessary, thumb hovering, as if waiting for the phone to argue with him.

It doesn't.

He walks to a trash can and drops it in.

The sound is dull. Final.

Without the phone, time loosens. Days blur at the edges. No calls. No missed calls. No numbers to remember.

He walks when the stiffness settles in his knee. Stops when it doesn't. The pain has flattened into something constant, no longer demanding attention.

One afternoon, he passes the track without meaning to.

The gate is open. Kids run drills under a coach's whistle. The sound cuts through him, clean, sharp.

He keeps walking.

That night, he sleeps against a stone wall, backpack tucked under his arm, shoes set beside him like habit.

Morning comes pale and quiet.

He reaches for them without looking.

His hand meets pavement.

The shoes are gone.

He sits there for a moment, processing the absence the way he's learned to, without urgency, without protest. Of all the things to take, it makes sense. They were the only thing that still looked worth something.

He stands carefully. Tests the knee against bare soles and thin socks.

It hurts.

He starts walking anyway.

At night, the city hums the way it always has. Jake moves slower now, counting steps instead of miles.

He thinks of space. Of leads. Of how he once believed motion alone could carry him somewhere better.

Now he understands something simpler.

You don't fall out of a life.

You drift.

And once you do, the current doesn't rush.

It just doesn't turn back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The cafeteria is warmer than the street, heat trapped low to the floor. Jake sits near the back with a chipped mug of coffee he didn't pay for, hands wrapped around it like it might anchor him. The room smells of soup and disinfectant. Plastic trays scrape. A radio murmurs something harmless.

A stack of newspapers sits by the door.

Jake avoids them. News has edges.

Someone leaves a paper on the table beside him when they stand. It lands open, folded awkwardly, the ink still dark. He doesn't look right away. He watches steam rise from his cup, thinning as it climbs.

Then the photograph catches.

It's large. Centered. Impossible to miss.

FORMER OREGON UNIVERSITY STAR MAKES
OLYMPIC TEAM

Mitch stands in the middle of the frame, taller than the people around him, shoulders squared, jaw set in that familiar way, controlled, victorious without trying to look like it. He's holding a small flag. The smile is modest. Earned.

Behind him, slightly out of focus, Paige stands with Emily on her hip.

They're smiling.

Not posed. Not aware of the camera. Just present, caught mid-moment, as if the future had stepped in front of them and said, stand here.

Jake doesn't move.

The cafeteria drains of sound, like someone turned the world down without asking. His eyes trace details he wishes he couldn't see: Emily's hair pulled back clumsily, the strap of Paige's bag digging into her shoulder, Mitch's hand resting lightly at Emily's back, not possessive, just certain.

He reads the article.

Once.

Twice.

It's clean. Celebratory. Mentions discipline, perseverance, second chances. Quotes Mitch on gratitude and support systems. There's a line about family near the end. Paige's name appears there, briefly, naturally, as if it belongs.

No mention of Jake.

There wouldn't be.

This isn't betrayal. There's no villainy in the wording. No theft. Just time moving forward in full sentences.

Jake folds the paper carefully. Not to protect it, just to give his hands something to do. He places it back on the stack by the door before anyone can notice he touched it.

Outside, the air is sharp. Honest.

He walks until his knee insists on slowing him, until the city softens into trees and worn paths. His shelter sits where the park bends, cardboard layered thin, tarp weighted with stones, a backpack wedged against the trunk to block the wind.

He crawls inside as night settles.

Sleep doesn't come.

The image stays, fixed, complete. Not haunting.
Finished.

His chest tightens. He exhales slowly, the way he used
to before races. In through the nose. Out through the
mouth. Count it. Control it.

A sound slips out instead.

At first, it's nothing, just breath shaped oddly. Then it
steadies, finds a pitch.

A hum.

The lullaby.

The one he used to hum when Emily wouldn't settle.
Low and quiet so Paige could sleep. Tuneless on purpose,
like if he didn't care about it, it couldn't be taken away.

The sound wavers. His throat tightens. Tears come
without permission, hot and sudden, blurring the dark. He
presses his lips together, but the hum continues, breaking,
reforming, carrying the weight he won't name.

He doesn't speak.

The night listens.

Eventually the sound fades. The park fills it back in
with wind through branches, distant traffic, a cough
somewhere nearby.

Jake leans his head against the tree and stares into the
dark.

The future has already chosen its shape.

And for the first time, he understands that it didn't
leave him behind out of cruelty.

It simply kept going.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Time stops asking Jake what day it is.

It moves instead through temperature.

Through the way the park smells different in spring. Through the ache in his knee before rain. Through the quiet reshuffling of who sleeps where and who doesn't come back at all.

He learns where to be when the city cleans itself and where not to be when it doesn't. He learns which churches lock their doors early, which kitchens don't ask questions, which corners look safe and aren't.

The cart changes. So do the blankets. The jacket from last winter lasts two more, then doesn't. The runners come and go. Sometimes there are none.

Jake stays.

People begin to recognize him, not by name, but by presence.

He's the one who watches bags when someone has to use the restroom. The one who gives directions without expecting anything back. The one who breaks food in half automatically, without ceremony.

When a new guy shows up shaking and too proud to ask, Jake leaves an apple where it can be found.

When someone disappears, Jake doesn't speculate. He just shifts his cart a little closer to the wall.

Kindness becomes logistical

. It's not hope. It's habit.

Some mornings he wakes before dawn, the city still holding its breath, and hears running on the path. He never looks right away. He waits for the sound to pass, for the echo to fade, for the memory to loosen its grip.

Other mornings he watches.

He can tell who's new to it. Who's forcing the stride. Who's running angry. Who's running free.

Once, a young woman stops nearby to stretch. She smiles politely when she catches him looking.

"Morning," she says.

"Morning," Jake replies.

She jogs off. The park cycles through faces. Through couples who argue and don't come back together. Through dogs that grow old. Through kids who stop being kids.

Jake doesn't count birthdays.

His body settles into its limits. The knee doesn't surprise him anymore. Pain becomes a known quantity, something you plan around, like weather.

What surprises him is what hasn't left.

He still notices when someone's cold.

Still hears fear in voices.

Still steps in between arguments before they turn.

Still shares his food with others.

Years pass like that.

Quietly.

Uneventfully.

Completely.

And then one morning, standing by a garbage bin with a black bag torn open at his feet, Jake pauses. He's in the alley behind the Midtown Fitness Centre.

Morning light hadn't reached the alley yet; it was still wrapped in a blue-grey chill.

He crouched, carefully, because of the leg, and brushed aside a strip of plastic.

A pair of running shoes.

Not pristine, not new, but intact, breathable mesh, good soles, laces still strong. He inhaled sharply.

He didn't touch them right away. Just stared.

He reached out, fingers trembling slightly, and lifted them by the heels. The soles bore the faint imprint of mileage, curves shaped by countless strides. They felt like a relic. Or a ghost.

Jake exhaled long and steady, placing them gently back on the dumpster lid. Almost like laying down a memory he wasn't ready to relive.

He took three steps. Four. Five.

He turned back.

He lifted the shoes again, tucked them carefully into the canvas bag strapped to his cart, the bag where he kept the few things that still mattered. He didn't put them on. Not yet. Not that morning, or even that day.

He pushed the cart out of the alley.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Footsteps passed. Shoes scuffed pavement.
Somewhere nearby, a leash jingled.

He looked up.

A whippet moved slowly along the path, her steps measured now, gray dusting her muzzle. A young woman walked beside her, speaking softly into her phone.

Jake froze.

The dog paused.

Sniffed the air.

Her head tilted slightly, listening.

“Come on, Dolce,” the woman said pulling on the leash.

Dolce.

The name brushed something loose inside him.

A thread from another life.

He smiled before he meant to.

Not a big smile. Not the kind people give to cameras. Just something small and real and surprised, tugging gently at the corner of his mouth. It stayed. Longer than it should have. Longer than smiles usually belonged to him anymore.

The woman and the dog moved on, the leash slack between them. Dolce didn’t hurry. She didn’t strain to keep up. She just walked, steady and calm, like time had finally stopped asking her to be fast.

Jake watched until they disappeared around the curve.
Even then, he kept smiling.

He leaned back on the bench. Let the air fill his lungs slowly. It had been a long time since something warm stayed in his chest without burning.

For a moment, he didn't feel broken.

For a moment, he didn't feel like a mistake that had kept going.

He felt... remembered.

He closed his eyes and just sat with it. The park kept moving around him, wheels, footsteps, laughter, a dog bark somewhere far off, but none of it pulled him away.

When the feeling finally softened, he exhaled and looked down at his cart.

At the canvas bag strapped to the side.

He hesitated.

Then he reached for it.

His fingers brushed fabric. Then laces. Then the familiar textured mesh.

He pulled the shoes out slowly, almost carefully, like they might disappear if he moved too quickly. He set them on the ground in front of him. They looked smaller than he remembered. Or maybe his life had just become bigger around them.

He swallowed.

For a second, he almost put them back.

But something in him leaned forward.

He slipped one foot in. Then the other. The fit wasn't perfect. They weren't new.

But his body remembered what to do. He tugged the laces tight.

He sat there for a heartbeat, staring at his feet like he'd just done something dangerous.

Then he stood.

Slowly.

Carefully.

The knee protested, because it always did. But he stayed upright. He took a breath.

Then another.

He took one step.

Then one more.

Not running.

Just moving.

He didn't know why. He didn't know where he was going.

He only knew that for the first time in a long time, he didn't feel like standing still.

He didn't rush.

He didn't have rushing in him anymore.

Jake walked the way someone tests ice, carefully, listening for cracks. The path curved ahead, gentle and familiar. His footfalls sounded different in these shoes, softer than boots, lighter than everything else he wore.

He felt it in small places first.

In the way his shoulders relaxed without asking permission.

In the way his breathing found a rhythm instead of a battle.

In the way the world didn't feel like it was pushing him forward or pulling him backward.

He was just... in it.

A jogger drifted past him, earbuds in, oblivious. Years ago Jake would have compared strides. Would have measured. Assessed. Converted movement into numbers and potential.

Now he didn't.

He just watched the motion and let it pass.

He walked a little farther than he meant to. The bench he'd started from was well behind him now. He noticed the pond. The cold ripple on the water. Ducks carving lazy paths across the surface. A kid on a scooter, laughing too loudly. A father pretending not to worry when the kid wobbled.

Life doing what life does when you aren't winning at it.

His knee ached, but it was an honest ache. The kind that didn't pretend to be anything else. He knew this pain. He understood its language.

He could live with that.

He stopped eventually, not because he had to, but because stopping made sense. He stood there for a moment, hands in his pockets, looking at the path ahead, then back at the distance he'd covered.

It wasn't far.

It was something.

He sat on a nearby bench, slower this time, careful not to jar the joint. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, staring at the shoes.

Not as relics.

Not as ghosts.

Just as shoes.

He brushed a thumb across the fabric, smoothing nothing in particular.

A breeze moved through the trees. Leaves rustled. Somewhere behind him a dog barked and a woman laughed and the city breathed

like it always had, with or without him.

Jake let the afternoon settle around him and, for the first time in years, he didn't feel like he was falling through his own life.

He felt... grounded.

Still poor.

Still alone.

Still broken in places that didn't heal.

But not erased.

He sat like that a long while, not thinking forward, not looking back, just staying inside the moment without trying to outrun it.

Eventually, when the light began to tilt toward evening and shadows stretched out across the path, Jake stood again.

He adjusted the strap on his cart.

Then he walked.

Not because he had to.

Because he could.

And somewhere, half a park away, the memory of a dog named Dolce trotted calmly along with him, not dragging, not sprinting, just moving at a pace that life could live with.

Chapter Twenty-Six

At first, Jake pretends he isn't doing anything different.

He tells himself he's just walking a little more because the days are getting lighter. Because the park feels easier to stay in when the sun doesn't hide. Because movement keeps the cold from settling into the bones that no longer argue when it does, they simply accept.

He tells himself these things and lets them sound like truth.

He takes a second lap one morning.

Then a third another day.

He doesn't measure distance in strides anymore. He measures it in breaths. In how long he can stay inside his own body before it reminds him why he stopped trusting it.

Some days the knee aches right away, a familiar warning, clear and honest, like an old friend who never sugarcoated anything.

Some days it flares halfway through and he stops, stretches, waits, then limps the rest, resigned but not surprised.

And then there are the other days.

The dangerous ones.

The days where it doesn't hurt.

Those days feel wrong.

It starts small, an easy step, a good placement, the quiet shock of weight supported correctly. His body remembers before his mind does. Hips shift. Shoulders loosen. Breath falls into rhythm without being asked. His feet find that old whispering sound they used to make against track and pavement alike.

And then, before he can talk himself out of it, he jogs.

Not far.

Not fast.

Just a body testing itself.

Ten meters.

Maybe fifteen.

A handful of seconds.

Enough.

He stops after each attempt like he just committed a crime and needs to check if anyone saw.

He looks around.

Nobody cares.

The world does not pause to record his miracle.

He tells himself good. He wouldn't want witnesses anyway.

He tries again another day.

Tiny bursts.

A few strides.

A slow return to walking like nothing happened.

He drinks in those moments quietly, like something sweet he isn't sure he deserves.

And sometimes the pain comes late and bites him hard, and he nods as if being punished feels reasonable. As if this is the balance the universe insists on keeping.

But sometimes,
sometimes it doesn't bite at all.
Those are the worst.
Because if it doesn't hurt...
If it wasn't always the knee...
Then what has he been hiding behind all these years?
That question arrives slowly. Settles deliberately. It
doesn't explode, it sinks.

All afternoon, it sits under his ribs.
You could've kept going.
You could've fought harder.
You gave up.
You used the pain like a blanket and crawled
underneath it and stayed there.

He hates that voice.
He hates how familiar it sounds.
He hates how much of it is his own.
By night, the city cools and the park thins. Lights blink
out in buildings he'll never enter again. People go
somewhere. He doesn't.

He lies down with the others tucked into shadows and
corners and hollow spaces the city pretends not to see. He
makes himself smaller. He shifts the blanket. He curls
around the ache in his leg like it's a child he has to protect.

He waits for the pain to roar.
It doesn't.
It just pulses quietly.
Survivable.
His throat tightens.
It would almost be easier if something stabbed, if
something tore, if something screamed inside his body just
to justify the last years of silence and surrender.

Instead, there is only... possibility. And that hurts
worse.

He pulls the blanket over his face so no one sees.
Hides behind fabric the way he's been hiding behind
excuses.

He presses his jaw shut to keep whatever's inside from
getting out.

It doesn't work.

Tears come slow.

Then harder.

Then helpless.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just a broken river he lost the right to dam years ago.

He cries for the race that never finished.

For the kid he used to be.

For the life that drifted out of reach and never came
back.

For every year he stayed small because moving forward
terrified him more than losing ever had.

He cries until his chest empties out, until his body runs
out of permission to feel that much at once. Eventually his
breathing softens.

Eventually the blanket stops shaking.

Eventually night takes him.

In the morning, he will stand again.

He will walk.

He may even run those few fragile metres.

But for now, beneath thin fabric and city shadows, Jake lies still, heart aching, knee quiet, and a terrible, impossible truth slowly waking inside him:

His body remembers.

And that means he might have to try.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Late afternoon.

The park had that tired quiet to it, when the heat leaks out of the day and people start breathing easier. Jake walked the path slow, steady, not testing anything today. Just moving.

Ahead of him, two joggers had stopped near the water fountain, mid-thirties maybe, flushed and grinning, shaking out their arms the way people do when their bodies still belong to them. One guzzled water. The other leaned on the railing, stretching, talking about splits and how the last kilometer “killed him.”

Normal runner noise.

From a world Jake used to occupy.

He kept walking.

Didn't plan to look.

Didn't want to.

But people feel eyes.

The man stretching glanced over.

Paused.

Looked again.

Recognition didn't hit all at once.

It built.

He squinted, like comparing an old memory to the face in front of him.

“Hold on,” he said quietly. “No way...”

Jake kept walking.

The guy took a small step forward, not blocking, not demanding, just drawn in.

“Hey, sorry,” he said, a little breathless still. “This is gonna sound crazy but... are you Jake?”

Jake’s steps hesitated before stopping.

The world didn’t stop with him.

Voices still moved.

Wind still moved.

Life still moved.

He turned slightly.

The man studied him harder, then the disbelief turned into a grin of certainty.

“You are. You’re Jake. Oregon Jake.”

Identity, spoken aloud after years.

Jake didn’t answer.

The second jogger wandered closer, curious now.

“Who’s..”

“This guy,” the first one said, pointing gently like you point at a landmark, not a person. “He was a monster back in college track. You remember those clips? Conference finals? That closing kick out of nowhere?”

The second man blinked, then his face opened with late recognition. “Ohhhhh... him.”

He looked at Jake with something close to respect. Not pity. Not curiosity dressed as kindness. Respect.

“Man,” the first runner said, shaking his head with an amazed kind of nostalgia. “You used to fly. My old coach made us study your form. Said you were what ‘efficient’ looked like.”

Something very old and very fragile inside Jake shifted.

They weren’t mocking.

They weren’t performing.

They were remembering something good.

The first jogger wiped sweat from his forehead and laughed.

“Crazy timing, too. You hear about the big charity race they’re hyping up?”

Jake blinked.

“No.”

“Yeah,” the guy said, excited again. “They’re bringing back Mitch. Headlining it. Big hometown return story. Posters going up everywhere. Media’s eating it up. ‘Olympian comes back to where it all started.’”

Mitch.

The name didn’t echo in Jake.

It detonated.

The jogger didn’t notice the impact.

He was still talking casually.

“City’s making a big deal out of it. Guess they want people to remember what the old days felt like. Those two..” he stopped himself, grinning. “Man, those races? You and him? Best stuff I ever saw.”

He meant it like praise.

Jake heard it like a ghost breathing on his neck.

The guy finally seemed to realize this might be...
personal.

He softened.

“Anyway. Didn’t mean to weird you out. Just..had
to say something. You were something special to watch.”

The second jogger nodded.

“Legend,” he said simply.

They didn’t linger.

Runners never stand still for long.

A stretch.

A nod.

A quiet kind of goodbye.

Then they jogged off.

Their footsteps faded into rhythm.

Then into distance.

Then into nothing.

Jake stood alone again.

Except he wasn’t alone.

Not inside.

His name.

His past.

His rival.

A race.

A city that hadn’t forgotten everything.

Mitch is coming back.

The world tilted, just enough to change direction.

Not faster.

Not slower.
Different.
Jake started walking again.
Not because he knew what it meant.
Because suddenly...
things meant something again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

He ran.

Not far.

Not fast.

Just enough to wake something old and unfamiliar
inside his lungs.

His knee held... mostly.

The rest was fear pretending to be pain.

He slowed, hands on his thighs, breath shaking in and
out.

And that's when memory stepped forward.

Not thunder.

Not magic.

Not madness.

Just the sound of a man who once stood on the edge
of a field and saw something worth believing in.

"Relax your shoulders, kid. You're fighting the wrong
thing."

Jake's head dropped.

The voice wasn't loud.

It wasn't heroic.

It was steady, practical, the kind of kindness that never advertised itself.

“That shaking?” Coach Roberts said. “That’s not fear. That’s effort.”

Jake closed his eyes and suddenly the world wasn’t this park anymore.

it was every park.

Every track.

Every sideline he had ever stood on with Coach watching quietly before speaking.

His chest tightened.

He sank into the grass.

For a moment he just breathed, waiting for the voice to fade.

It didn’t.

“You still have it,” Coach said, like he was simply reporting weather.

“I told you that the first day I saw you. Remember?”

Soccer field.

Morning light.

Dolce tearing across the grass like freedom itself.

It’s never too late.

Jake’s throat burned.

He swallowed hard.

Then the truth he’d been dodging for years crawled to the surface.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Nothing answered immediately.

So he kept going.

"I should've come. I should've. I should've... I don't know. I should've shown up for you. You were there for everything and I."

His voice broke.

"I disappeared," he said.

There it was.

"You didn't disappear," Coach's voice said at last. Firm. Simple. The way he always corrected form before correcting confidence. "You got hurt. That's different."

Jake let out a shaking breath.

"That's life, kid," Coach said. "Nobody teaches you how to lose the things you thought made you... you."

Jake nodded, eyes wet.

"I didn't show up when it mattered," he whispered. "Not at the end."

Silence.

Then:

"Okay," Coach said .. the same way he always had in practice when Jake messed something up. Never dramatic. Never disappointed. Just steady. "Then you start showing up now."

Jake's jaw tightened.

"You don't owe me an ending," Coach added softly. "You just don't get to throw the rest away."

Jake stood there a long moment, breathing.

The park came back.

The air settled.

The voice didn't vanish ...it simply stepped aside, like something placed carefully back where it belonged.

He pushed himself to his feet.

He didn't sprint.

He didn't collapse.

He jogged.

Carefully. Ungracefully. Honestly.

And for the first time in years, he wasn't running to escape the past.

He was running because it had finally forgiven him enough to let him try again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It turns out the hardest part isn't pain.

It isn't doubt.

It isn't fear of failing in front of people who once believed in him.

It's sixty dollars.

He finds out standing in front of a bulletin board taped to the wall of a community center. Flyers overlap in layers, yoga classes, lost dogs, language courses. Then he sees it:

Charity Race Registration Now Open.

He steps closer without realizing he's moving.

The image of a finish line. Faces cheering. Runners in motion.

He feels something inside lift.

Then he reads it.

Entry Fee: \$60. Registration closes soon.

For a second, the words don't land.

Then they do.

A volunteer in a neon vest smiles at him from the doorway. "You running?"

He swallows. "Thinking about it."

“Great event,” the volunteer says. “Big turnout this year.”

He gestures casually. “Just bring the fee when you sign up.”

Jake nods, thanks him, and walks away.

He waits until he’s around the corner before he stops and lets the weight sink in.

Sixty isn’t a number.

Sixty is days of stretching food.

Sixty is colder nights because he won’t spend on a blanket.

Sixty is choosing discomfort on purpose when life already gave him enough of it.

It would be easy to take this as a sign.

It would be easy to say, See? That’s life telling you to back off. Stay where you belong.

He doesn’t.

He starts working for it.

Not jobs you fill out forms for.

Not jobs with break rooms and lockers.

The quiet city jobs that happen before anyone’s day really starts.

He sweeps the front of a convenience store while the owner fumbles keys in the lock. The broom scrapes grit. He gets paid with a folded ten and a genuine thank you.

He carries crates behind a deli, hands raw from cold plastic. Nobody asks where he sleeps. Nobody asks why he looks exhausted. A man presses money into his palm like a handshake.

He helps a café, stack chairs after closing. Someone leaves a half sandwich “by accident” on the table near him. He wraps half for later. He’s careful with “later” now.

He sleeps outside every night.

Same park.

Same familiar trees.

Same patch of ground where the wind breaks a little
and the grass doesn't dig into bone too hard.

He learns the rhythm of the dark.

Where footsteps sound safe.

Which dogs bark.

Which lights stay on.

Some nights are loud.

Some are impossibly still.

He lies awake, stomach light, body aching, the cold
threading through his jacket and for the first time in years,
the ache isn't pointless.

He is hungry for something, not just hungry.

He tucks what he earns deep into his bag, wrapped
tight in a sock. He counts in the dark sometimes, not out of
desperation, but to remind himself he's not imagining
progress.

Coins turn into bills.

Bills start to stack.

There are ugly days, too.

A man promises to pay him and never returns.

Someone calls him "buddy" in the voice people use
for things, not people.

The knee swells and he wonders if this is foolish.

Every time that voice rises, he sees the number:

Sixty.

And beneath it, the truth:

A chance to stand at a starting line again.

So he keeps going.

One night, sitting beneath the same tree he has slept
under through rain, heat, and indifference, he empties the
sock into his hands.

Bills fan out under the dim park light.
His chest tightens.
Not fear.
Not sadness.
Something like pride.
He doesn't laugh.
He doesn't cry.
He just breathes.
This isn't survival money.
This is hope money.
He tucks it back away carefully, like it could break.
For the first time in a long time, his life isn't just about
getting through the day.
He is moving toward something.
And he will pay the price to try.

Chapter Thirty

Morning doesn't greet Jake anymore.

It measures him.

Cold air.

Wet grass.

Breath he can see, proof he's still here.

He runs now.

Not far at first. Not fast. Just enough to feel his body moving through space again. Enough to feel the difference between fear and damage. Enough to remember what rhythm feels like.

Every day has a border inside his head.

A distance where his brain whispers, That's far enough.

Every day, he nudges it.

Not recklessly. Not like the old days.

He isn't chasing pain or heroics.

He's chasing trust.

Some mornings, the wind leans against him like a hand trying to push him backward. Some afternoons the rain needles his face, turning the path slick and uncertain. Cold wraps his muscles tight at

the start, loosening only when he proves he deserves warmth.

He keeps showing up anyway.

He's not rebuilding strength, already has that.

He's rebuilding belief.

The fear still lives in him. Sometimes mid-stride, a flash of stadium lights slices through his thoughts, and for a heartbeat he's there again, hearing the crowd turn into a sound he never wants to hear again. His chest locks. His shoulders tense. His legs hesitate.

Nothing's wrong.

Memory is the injury.

He stops. Breathes. Grounds himself. Starts again.

Try, doubt, try again.

Weeks stack like stones placed carefully, steadily, on top of one another. Not dramatic. Not cinematic. Real.

There are days he runs longer than planned.

There are days he stops earlier than he wishes he had.

There are days the only victory is lacing his shoes.

Once, halfway along the path, he sits on a bench, laughing breathlessly into the wind.

"Maybe this is stupid."

He means it.

No one expects anything from him.

No one is watching.

There's no scholarship, no contract, no future hinging on this.

He could stop.

He doesn't.

He stands, because something in him refuses to accept that the rest of his life has to be smaller than the part that broke.

Slowly, something changes.

His breathing finds cadence.

His stride loosens.

His body doesn't flinch every time his foot strikes the ground.

The park learns him again.

And he learns it back.

Then one afternoon, when the sky hangs low and the air smells like rain-that-hasn't-happened-yet, a pack of college runners comes through the park. They move in easy formation, shoes whispering over the path, laughing between breaths, strong, confident, young.

Jake is already moving when their route merges with his.

For a moment, they're beside him.

Then he eases past.

Not sprinting.

Not proving anything.

Just running.

One of the boys glances over, expecting to see another trained athlete, not a weathered face, unshaven, layered in worn clothes. His eyebrows lift. Another, mutters under his breath:

"Who the hell is that guy?"

No one chases him.

They don't need to.

They already know.

He's fast.

Not once-fast.

Still fast.

Jake hears them.

He doesn't look back.

He doesn't celebrate.

He doesn't break down.

He just keeps going, heart steady, stride smooth,
breath in rhythm.

And for a terrifying, exhilarating second, something
honest lands in his chest:

He can still do this.

Not how he used to.

Not in the same world.

But the engine isn't gone.

One morning soon after, he runs farther than he's
meant to. No plan. No internal negotiation. He simply
doesn't stop when the border appears in his mind. He
moves through it like mist.

When he finally slows, hands on his hips, lungs
burning, wind scraping sweat cold against his skin, he
realizes what he's done.

Farther than since that day.

Farther than fear ever allowed.

He looks back at the path behind him.

Then it hits him.

Not triumph.

Not glory.

Joy.

It bursts out of him raw and startled, a laugh that
sounds like something unused and somehow unbroken. He
bends forward, breath shaking, laughing into the space
around him like someone who has just remembered a truth
his body refused to forget.

He is not fixed.

He is not perfect.

But he is moving.
And for the first time in years,
he isn't running away from something.
He's running toward something.

Chapter Thirty-One

It happens by accident.

Jake is cutting through downtown late morning, moving with everyone else even though he doesn't belong to the flow. A breeze pulls at posters taped to streetlight poles. Most he ignores.

Until a familiar name taps against the wind and refuses to be ignored.

He stops.

A laminated race banner hangs across the building wall. Big sponsors. Bright colors. A smiling photo of runners mid-stride.

And there he is.

Mitch.

Older now.

More muscle around the shoulders.

Calm confidence in his posture.

The smile of someone who didn't lose the road. There's a second smaller picture under it publicity still from a magazine interview. Mitch holding a medal, expression serious and proud.

Jake's breath leaves him slow.

He stares.

He thinks, absurdly,
He looks like he stayed alive.
Two teenage boys walk past behind him.
One nudges the other.
“Dude, that guy’s gonna smoke everyone.”
“Yeah, charity run but still, Olympian? That’s insane.”
They keep walking.
The world keeps moving.
Jake doesn’t.
He waits for bitterness.
Waits for anger.
Waits for the familiar tightness in his chest that blames
anyone who got to keep living the life he lost.
It doesn’t come.
What rises instead is quieter and heavier.
Grief.
Not loud.
Not violent.
Just... weight.
He thinks of how they started together.
Of locker rooms and laughing and stupid bets.
Of the one race that ended everything.
He wonders what Mitch thinks when he remembers
that day.
If he does at all.
Jake glances at the corner of the poster, like he expects
to see himself accidentally captured in the background
somewhere.

He isn't.

A group of university runners pass by on the sidewalk, talking about training, pacing, shoes. Their voices fade into the same distant hum every dream eventually becomes.

Jake presses his lips together.

He feels something complicated settle in his chest: a strange mixture of pride...

envy...

regret...

and something surprisingly close to admiration.

Mitch kept running.

Mitch made it matter.

Jake nods once to the poster.

Like a silent acknowledgment between two lives that once touched and then split.

He could walk away now.

He probably should.

But for the first time, instead of thinking, That should have been me...

he thinks,

Maybe I don't have to stay gone.

He touches the edge of the poster.

Just a fingertip.

Just long enough.

Then he turns, breath steady,

and walks back toward the park,

toward the path that finally belongs to him again.
He doesn't hurry.
He doesn't limp.
He just moves forward.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Emily lay on her bed with the room dark except for the rectangle of her laptop screen.

The same search bar.

The same name.

Jake Clark running.

Old articles loaded, grainy race photos, half-forgotten headlines, stories from a state she barely remembered. She hadn't been to Oregon since they left. Sometimes she wondered if her memories were real or just borrowed from the pictures kept in a shoebox.

She clicked one image anyway; Jake crossing the finish line, eyes bright, smiling.

She didn't know him.

Not really.

Just what Mom told her.

Just the photos she'd stared at long enough to recognize parts of herself in them.

She opened the hidden folder she never mentioned.

One photo of her at three years old, sitting on his shoulders, both of them laughing at something just outside the frame. She zoomed in on her face.

She zoomed in on his face.

The jaw.

The eyes.

Her eyes.

The charity race was on Saturday. Mom said they were going "Just to Watch", she'd added lightly, like it meant nothing.

But Emily's stomach had been twisting about all week.

She closed the laptop softly, letting the room fall back into darkness.

Lying there, she whispered into the quiet, a wish she didn't expect to work, but one she couldn't swallow

anymore.

“Please be there.”

Outside the city hummed.

And somewhere, far from the Oregon she barely remembered, the man she had never stopped wondering about was moving toward the same day.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The sign-up tent looked temporary, like it could fold up and disappear if the wind pushed hard enough. A plastic table. A stack of forms. A line of regular people doing a regular thing.

Jake waited his turn with his hands in his pockets, every nerve telling him this was stupid, that he could still walk away and nothing would change.

When the line moved, he stayed.

“Next?”

A kid barely out of high school sat behind the table. Hoodie. Backwards cap. A half-eaten granola bar beside a pile of safety pins. He didn’t look up right away, just slid the clipboard across.

“Name. Age. Division choice if you’ve got one.”

Jake stared at the blank lines.

Name should have been easy.

It wasn’t.

He wrote slowly. His hand shook halfway through the last letter, not from weakness, but from meaning. He paused, swallowed, and finished it.

Jake _.

He stared at it a second longer, like if he handed it over it would become real in a way he couldn't take back.

He slid the form forward.

The kid glanced at it. Then actually looked at it.

His eyebrows lifted a little.

"You ever run before?" the kid said casually, like it was just conversation.

Jake hesitated.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Long time ago."

"High school?"

Another pause.

Jake shook his head.

"No."

The kid waited, curious now.

Jake's voice dropped without meaning to.

"College."

There was a beat.

The kid blinked... then leaned back a bit, thinking. He turned the paper toward himself like it might look different from another angle. Then he stood.

"Hang on a sec."

He disappeared behind the tent flap.

Jake stood there, heartbeat loud in his ears, part of him already wanting to chase the paper down and ask for it back.

Before the kid returned, the volunteer beside him tapped the table.

"Entrance fee."

Jake nodded, reaching into his pocket.

He pulled out a handful of crumpled bills soft, tired money that had lived the kind of life he had. Wrinkled. Worn. Edges nearly torn. He flattened each one carefully on the table with his palm, embarrassed at how long it took. Embarrassed that there wasn't anything crisp in his life anymore.

The volunteer didn't say anything.

Didn't smirk.

Didn't pity.

Just counted.

Nodded. Dropped the bills into the cash box like it was normal.

Like Jake was normal.

He set a wristband beside the form.

Jake didn't put it on.

His hand hovered there.

Just for a second.

He could still walk away.

He could still pretend this never happened.

He didn't.

He slipped it on.

The tent flap rustled.

The kid came back holding a bib.

Different from the others.

A small gold circle stamped beside the printed name.

He set it down gently, like it meant something even if he didn't fully understand why.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "Organizers' rules. Recognized collegiate times... you go here."

He slid it forward.

“Elite division.”

Jake didn’t touch it.

“I haven’t...” he started. “In a long time.”

“Still counts,” the kid shrugged. “Some people sign up dreaming about standing where you’re standing right now.”

He meant it as encouragement.

To Jake, it felt like gravity.

Jake reached out.

Lifted the bib.

Lightweight. Harmless. Just paper and ink.

It felt heavier than anything he’d carried in years.

“Welcome back,” the kid said, already calling the next person forward.

Jake stepped aside, staring at the number in his hand. The gold circle caught the light and flashed like it was laughing at him... or blessing him.

He couldn’t tell which.

He breathed.

In.

Out.

His hand closed slowly around the bib.

And this time, he didn’t let go.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The city didn't feel like a city that night.

It felt like a tide that had finally gone out.

Traffic thinned. Voices faded. Even the wind seemed tired. Jake lay on the patch of grass that had become "his spot," hood pulled over his head, backpack under his neck, the race wristband around his wrist like something he wasn't sure he deserved to wear.

He closed his eyes.

He didn't sleep.

Not yet.

Memories didn't come in order. They never did. They came in the way pain does just enough to make sure you feel it before it leaves.

Oregon.

He sees sunburned days on the track. The warm synthetic smell of lanes heating under summer. The absolute certainty back then that his life was an arrow, not a question. He remembers standing on the line with legs humming, lungs ready, fear and joy tangled together like they belonged.

Coach.

Coach's voice drops in, just... steady. Honest. That tone he only used when he cared more than he'd ever say out loud.

You don't run because you're fearless, kid.

You run because you're scared and you do it anyway.

Paige.

He remembers her laughing at something stupid he said, light hitting her face in a way he always thought he'd have a lifetime to keep seeing. He remembers the warmth of simply being next to her, how nothing about that felt temporary back then.

Emily as a baby Heavy in his arms the first time. Fragile and fierce at the same time. Tiny fingers curling around his thumb like she had already decided who he was supposed to be. He can still hear the small sounds she made when she slept on his chest. Soft breaths. A heartbeat that trusted him completely.

For a moment, he lets himself have that.

Then the fear thought hits.

Hard.

What if tomorrow proves everyone right about me?

What if this wasn't redemption?

What if this was proof he was still broken?

What if Mitch ran away from the wreck?

What if Jake had never crawled out?

His throat tightens. His chest hurts in that way that's not physical but feels physical anyway. He presses the heel of his hand over his eyes until darkness turns to color.

He wants to run.

He wants to disappear.

He wants to wake up anywhere except here, the night before something that matters.

Something shifts inside him.

Not courage.

Not confidence.

Something simpler.

Choice.

He turns onto his side. Pulls his jacket tighter. Feels
the grass under him. Hears the hush of the city breathing.

He doesn't get up.

He doesn't leave.

He stays.

At some point, the noise of his head softens. The
world settles. His breathing finds rhythm.

In.

Out.

Somewhere inside all of it, a sound surfaces.

Not a memory. Not quite.

Almost like a lullaby.

Not music.

Steady breath.

Steady ground.

Steady heartbeat.

For the first time in years, the night doesn't feel hostile.

It just feels like a night before something.

Jake's eyes finally close.

He sleeps.

Not peacefully.

But enough.

And when morning comes,

he will be there.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Race mornings have a sound.

Soft chatter layered with nervous laughter. Zippers. Velcro straps. Shoes being slapped against pavement to settle laces. Volunteers calling out instructions. A speaker crackling with music that doesn't quite fit the seriousness in people's eyes.

Jake stands among them, not hidden anymore, not drifting at the edges of things. He is inside a world again.

Sunlight stretches across the street, turning breath into thin ghosts of mist. Color everywhere jerseys, charity shirts, kids on shoulders waving signs. A looping course, the announcer keeps reminding them. Start here. Finish here. Same place. Same faces waiting.

He doesn't need the reminder.

He knows the power of circles. He rolls his shoulders.

Shakes his hands. Hears footsteps all around him elastic, confident, familiar. The sound of people who sleep indoors and train in shoes that haven't seen winters.

He still belongs.

He just hasn't stood here in a while.

"Elite bibs to the front, please!"

The announcer's voice carries above the crowd.

Movement begins. A ripple of gold-circled runners drifting forward.

Jake stays where he is.

Someone taps his arm.

“Hey man your bib. You’re supposed to be up there.”

Jake hesitates.

Then he nods.

Steps forward.

But only to the back of the elite group, like he’s borrowing space instead of owning it.

He feels eyes on him. Curious. Indifferent. Confused.

Is he someone?

Was he someone?

The horn readies.

The world compresses into a narrow, electric silence.

Then...

Sound explodes.

They launch.

Elite bodies burst forward fast, as if pavement is optional. Jake doesn’t chase. He settles. Breath. Rhythm. The kind of running that listens instead of fights.

Crowds line the barriers, leaning in, cheering anyone and everyone. Hands clap. Names are shouted. Bells ring.

He hears his own footfalls and something like peace layered beneath nerves.

Then..

A voice.

Soft at first. Uncertain.

“...Jake?”

Fifty meters ahead, on the right side of the barrier,
Paige leans forward, hand shading her eyes. She didn't
expect to see him. Didn't plan for this.

Emily hears her say the name.

Her head snaps up.

She looks. Searches. Scans the moving pack
desperately.

And then she finds him.

She doesn't hesitate.

"Daddy!"

The word isn't a cry.

It's a collision.

Jake almost stops.

The race disappears for a second. Noise fades like
someone pulled it underwater. It's just her face older,
straighter hair, longer limbs but still the same child who once
fell asleep on his chest listening to the sound of his heart.

He breathes in sharply, the moment hitting his chest
harder than any finish line ever has.

Emily is still yelling.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

He doesn't wave.

He doesn't speak.

He just runs.

Because he can now.

Because running isn't loss anymore.

Mitch hears her too.

He turns mid-stride.

Sees Paige.
Sees Emily pointing.
He follows the line of her arm.
Sees Jake.
Time folds.

Two men, same road, different lives but one thread
still tying them together. Mitch doesn't smirk. Doesn't glare.
Something passes through his face, shock, understanding,
something like history settling where it belongs.

Then he faces forward...

...and pushes.

Too fast.

Too hard.

Not strategic.

This isn't pacing.

This is urgency.

Crowd roars as he breaks from the group, pulling a
gap. The announcer climbs in pitch. "Looks like Mitch
Hughes is opening up early, bold move"

Jake doesn't chase yet.

He runs his race.

Body steady.

Breath clean.

Mind quiet.

The fear that always stopped him... doesn't.

He leans into rhythm instead of memory.

Runners begin falling behind him. One. Then another.
Then a cluster. Not with drama. Just inevitability. His stride
lengthens like

his body finally remembered what it was built to do.
Halfway mark.
Mitch has two hundred meters.
Jake takes one meter back.
Then another.
Not by speed alone
By refusing to stop believing his body.
Crowd volume swells. People are screaming. Phones
up. Kids banging on barriers.
Final kilometer.
Jake is tenth.
Then seventh.
Then fourth.
Mitch's shoulders tighten.
Stride stiffens.
Breath gets ragged.
Emotion burns fuel faster than oxygen ever could.
Jake keeps gaining.
Four hundred to go.
One hundred meters left between them.
Mitch sees the finish arch.
Sees Paige.
Sees Emily bouncing and yelling and crying and
everything at once.
His face breaks, not fear.
Something closer to conflict and relief tangled together.

Three hundred meters.
Jake is flying.
Not desperate.
Not furious.
Alive.
People see it now.
The murmur builds into something reverent.
“Who is that?”
“Oh my God.”
“That’s...wait...that’s Jake!”
Two hundred meters.
Ten meters between them.
Emily’s voice slices through everything.
“GO, DADDY! GO!”
Jake hears it like wind at his back.
Mitch hears it like gravity pulling him and pushing him
at once.
One hundred meters.
They’re almost shoulder to shoulder.
The world narrows to a ribbon of road and the sound
of a city holding its breath.
Fifty meters.
Mitch digs with everything he has left.
Not to defeat Jake.
To reach the people he loves.
Jake digs too.
Not to erase Mitch.
To prove he still exists.

Ten meters.

The crowd explodes.

They lean forward like two lives reaching the same point from different histories.

Finish.

Mitch wins.

By inches.

He stumbles.

Catches himself.

Jake crosses a heartbeat later and collapses to one knee, chest heaving, laughter and tears tangled in the same breath. It isn't broken laughter. It's bright. Shocked. Joyful.

He did not win.

He did not lose anything that mattered.

He is here.

He is whole.

Emily runs.

Mitch opens his arms automatically, bracing for the hug

She runs right past him.

Straight to Jake.

He barely has time to get to his feet before she hits him, launching into him like she used to when she was small.

He catches her.

Instinct.

Memory.

Love.

His arms wrap around her and the world falls away.

She cries into his neck.

He closes his eyes.

"I'm here," he whispers, voice breaking and steady all at once. "I'm here, kiddo. I'm here."

Paige presses a hand to her mouth.

Mitch stands a few steps away, breathing hard, chest rising and falling. He watches them. There's pain there, but no bitterness. No anger.

Just... something settling right.

Jake looks up.

Their eyes meet.

No words.

Mitch nods once.

Jake nods back.

A truce.

A truth.

A quiet, human peace.

The crowd keeps cheering.

Not because an Olympian won.

Because a man who had lost everything ran his way back into being part of the world again.

And that mattered far more.

Epilogue Anniversary

The restaurant wasn't grand or loud. It didn't have chandeliers or a stage or anything that demanded attention. It was the kind of place chosen deliberately soft lighting, the murmur of conversation, glasses clinking gently, laughter drifting instead of bursting. Outside the windows the city moved, but in here time felt slower, kinder.

Fifteen years since Oregon.

Years since heartbreak.

Years since everything shattered and somehow stitched itself back into a different shape.

Tonight was simple.

Tonight was happiness.

Mitch stood near the far table, jacket open, sleeves rolled once at the wrist, smiling in that easy way he never used to have when everything in his life was about winning. Paige was beside him, her hand resting lightly on his arm, laughing at something someone had said. There were flowers on the table. A small sign set near the cake:

Happy 5th Anniversary

Emily was the first to see him.

She didn't walk.

She didn't wave politely.

She lit up.

"Dad!"

Heads turned not in judgment, not in curiosity, just in recognition. She crossed the room in quick, excited steps and Jake barely had time to brace before she wrapped herself around him like she used to when she was little and believed that any world that had arms like his in it must be safe.

He laughed softly into her hair.

"Hey, Em."

She pulled back to look at him and there was pride in her face. Not pity. Not worry. Pride.

"You look... good," she said with that slightly teasing, slightly emotional tone of a daughter who'd been afraid once and didn't have to be anymore.

Jake smiled. Clean shirt. Jacket. Hair trimmed. The tiredness in his eyes belonged now to long days and real effort, not exhaustion and survival.

"Work does that to a man," he joked lightly.

"Coach work," she corrected, and her grin widened.

He still wasn't used to that word belonging to him. Assistant Track Coach, University of California. A whistle. A clipboard. Kids who listened. Kids who rolled their eyes affectionately. Kids who believed he knew something worth teaching.

Kids he showed how to run without fear.

Emily tugged his hand. "Come on. Mitch and Mom are going to freak when they see you finally showed up instead of pretending to be busy."

"I was busy," he protested quietly.

"With what?"

He hesitated, then shrugged.

“Life.”

They reached the table just as Mitch looked up.

For a split second, time bent backward stadiums and rivalry and hurt threading the air between them.

Then Mitch smiled.

Not strained.

Not generous.

Just... real.

“Hey,” he said simply.

“Hey.”

They shook hands, the brief squeeze of something understood passing between them. There was no contest here. No scoreboard ticking between them. Just two men who had gone through fire and somehow stepped out carrying better versions of themselves.

Paige’s eyes softened when she looked at Jake.

She didn’t rush him.

She didn’t cry.

She didn’t apologize.

She just reached out and touched his arm, and there was gratitude in it for his presence, for his survival, for the fact that their story didn’t end in bitterness or ash.

“It’s good you’re here,” she said.

“Yeah,” he answered. “It is.”

Someone called for a toast. Glasses lifted. Words were spoken about love and time and choosing each other every day. Mitch slid an arm around Paige’s waist; she leaned into him with easy affection. Emily stood between them and Jake, right where she’d always belonged: not divided, not torn, just loved by all of them.

Jake raised his glass too.

Not as an outsider.

Not as a regret.

As family.

Later, when the crowd loosened and the night drifted into gentle conversations and laughter, Mitch crossed to him. No rehearsed speech. No heavy emotion.

"Thanks for coming," he said.

"Thanks for wanting me here," Jake replied.

Mitch nodded once. That was enough.

Outside, when things finally wound down, Emily hugged him again, arms tight around his middle.

"Walk me to the car?" "Of course." They stepped into the cool night air together. A car door opened and from inside came a burst of frantic, eager movement. A sleek, ridiculous little whippet launched forward, tail whipping, paws skittering, eyes bright with absolute devotion.

Emily laughed.

"Bullet!"

Jake scooped the dog before she could sprint away, the little body vibrating with life and joy and a future. He held her close, scratching behind her ears as she tried desperately to lick his face.

"Yeah, yeah," he murmured. "I missed you too."

Emily leaned against him, head on his shoulder.

"You happy, Dad?"

Jake watched the restaurant glowing warm behind them.

Watched Paige laughing inside.

Watched Mitch leaning in to listen to her.

Watched the life that might once have broken him...
and didn't.

He breathed in, slow and full.

"Yeah," he said softly.

And the best part was...

he meant it.

Emily smiled, resting her head back on his shoulder,
content in a way neither of them would have believed
possible years ago. Bullet squirmed happily between them,
whining for attention, tail slapping against his wrist like a
heartbeat.

Life didn't look the way he once imagined it.

It wasn't the dream he'd chased.

It wasn't the future he'd broken himself trying to hold
onto.

It was something quieter.

Something steadier.

Something real.

Inside, someone laughed loudly. A glass clinked. Music
drifted out into the night, soft and celebratory. Through the
window, Jake saw Mitch slip his arm around Paige as they
leaned together, smiling at friends, at each other, at the
world they'd managed to build.

Not a world Jake had lost.

A world he belonged to in a different way.

He closed his eyes for a second and let the night settle
around him. The past no longer pressed against his ribs. The
ache was still there but it wasn't a wound anymore.

It was a scar. And scars meant healing.

Emily squeezed his hand.

“Come on,” she said gently.

“They’re gonna cut the cake without us.”

Jake laughed under his breath and nodded.

“Alright. Let’s not miss cake.”

They walked back toward the warm light together,
Bullet trotting happily at their side, the door opening ahead
of them into laughter and life and everything that came next

. And somewhere, faint and steady like a memory that
no longer hurt, he could almost hear Coach’s voice again...

Easy, kid.

Let it come to you.

Jake smiled.

He already had.

End.