

CHAPTER 1

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.