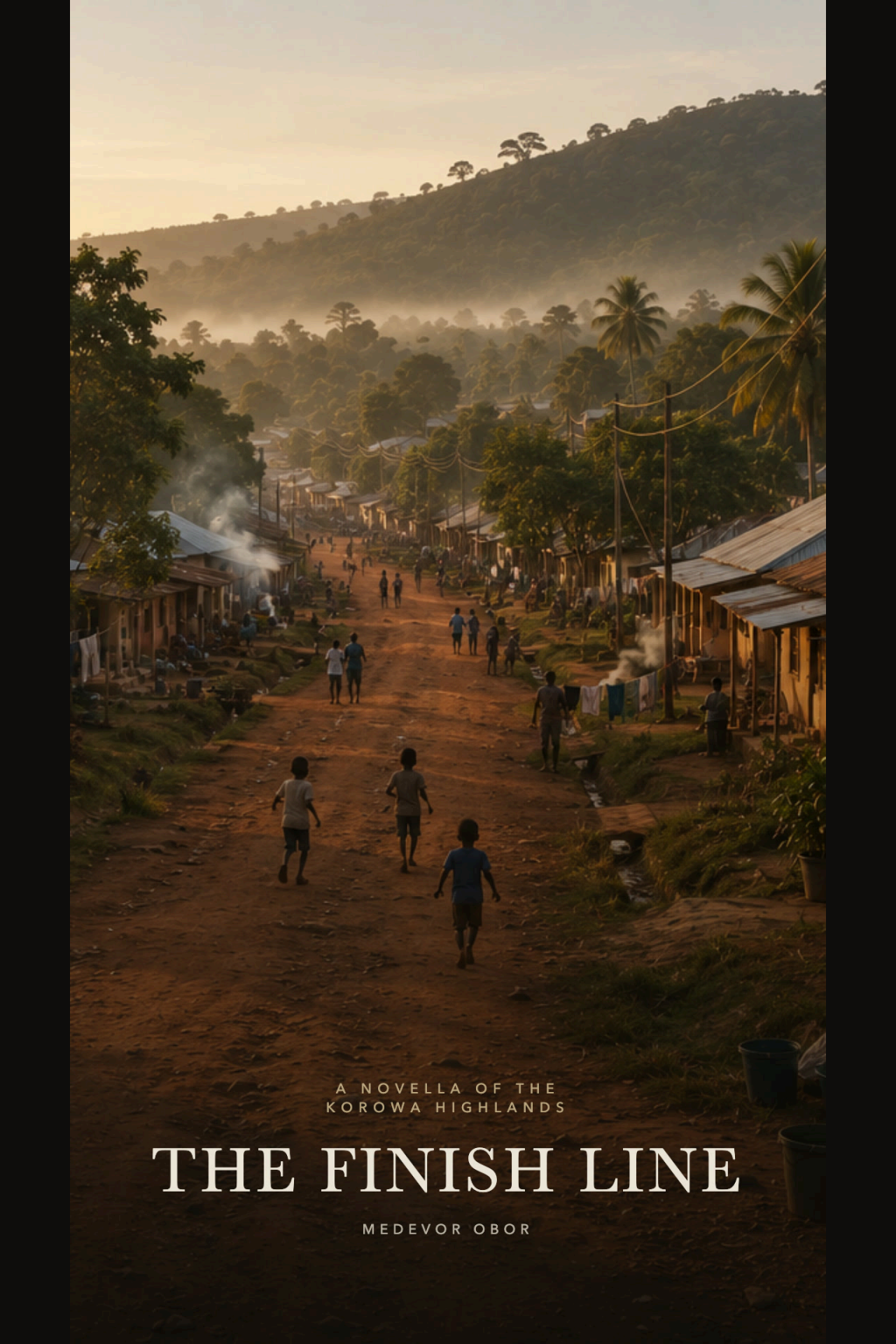




A NOVELLA OF THE
KOROWA HIGHLANDS

THE FINISH LINE

MEDEVOR OBOR

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DYNASTY STUDIOS

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*A father taught his daughter where to look. The rest of her life was learning
what she would do when nothing was there.*

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PART ONE

THE INHERITANCE

Chapter One

The Mark

The earth of the Korowa Highlands was red and old and it kept things.

It kept the rain longer than other earth, dark under the surface for days after the sky had finished. It kept the heat of the afternoon deep into the night, so that a barefoot child crossing a yard after dark could feel the whole day still in the ground. And it kept footprints. After the rains, the red dirt held a footprint for a week, sometimes two.

Dara's father believed the earth kept more than footprints. He never said it. She knew it from the way he touched the ground.

She was seven the morning he took her up the spine of the High Ridge, early, the mist still lying in the valleys. He walked the way he always walked, like the ground had been expecting him, and she half-ran beside him, two of her strides to one of his.

At a stretch of dirt still dark from the night's rain, he stopped. He crouched and laid his whole hand flat against the ground. He did it the way the church people touched the Book. Palm open. Still.

Dara crouched beside him and did the same. Her hand fit inside the shadow of his.

"Running," her father said, "is how you leave a mark on the world."

He rose and walked out across the soft dirt, and she walked beside him. When she looked back there were two lines of footprints along the ridge. His were deep. Hers hardly showed.

She stopped and studied them. Then she turned around, balanced on one leg with her arms out, and put her small foot inside one of his.

It swallowed hers whole. She stood there in the middle of her father's footprint and looked up to see if he had seen.

Her father laughed.

It came out of him all at once, a big laugh that bent him over with his hands on his knees, and she laughed too without knowing what was funny.

She was seven and she had heard that laugh maybe four times in her life. She kept count. Other children in the village collected stones, or feathers, or bottle tops. Dara collected her father's laughs. There was nowhere to keep them and nobody to show them to. She kept them anyway.

* * *

She was eight the day of her first race.

It was a children's race, a chalk line in the cropped grass of the village field and a ribbon strung between two poles a hundred meters off, with half the Highlands sitting on blankets and the food already out. Dara stood at the chalk in a borrowed kit two sizes too big, and her heart was going hard, and she kept looking at the wrong things. Her feet. The chalk. The other children, who were all taller. The grass between her and the ribbon.

She didn't hear her father come up behind her. His hands settled on her shoulders, one on each, and turned her until she faced straight down the field.

"The race is too big from here," he said.

She looked up at him. He pointed at the tape.

"Don't start here. Start there. See yourself there first. Then come back and run."

She looked at the ribbon. She looked at it a long time, long enough that the noise of the field went somewhere else and something in her went quiet. The ribbon stopped being far away. It was just where she was going to be.

The whistle went and she ran. The strange part — the part she never told anyone — was that none of it felt like going somewhere new.

She won by so much that the cheering had laughing in it. Her father didn't cheer. When she found him at the edge of the field, he put his hand on her head, briefly, the way he put it on the ground. Then there was the food, and the blankets, and somebody's radio, and the long gold evening.

* * *

The rain held the footprints on the ridge for nine days.

On the ninth day she walked up alone to look at them before the weather took them back. Two lines, side by side. One of his with her small print inside it.

She stood there a while. Then she ran home, downhill the whole way, as fast as she could go, for no reason at all.

Chapter Two

The Track

She was eleven the day she decided she could beat him.

“Race me,” she said. “Mango tree and back.”

“I am an old man.”

“Then I’ll win.”

Her father considered this the way he considered everything, as if it had been submitted in writing. Then he was gone — not down the road, which was the only sensible way to the mango tree, but sideways, through the goat pens, under Mama Osaro’s washing lines, over a fence she had never seen anyone climb, scattering hens in every direction. By the time she understood what was happening, the race was already lost.

He was at the tree when she got there, hands on his knees, breathing hard, grinning like a boy.

“You cheated!”

“I navigated.”

“There’s a ROAD!”

“The lane is for the stadium,” her father said. “The Ridge belongs to the cunning.”

She shoved him. He did not move at all. He laughed.

That was the fifth.

* * *

The track sat below the village, six lanes of red dirt beaten hard by more feet than anyone could name. There was a wooden stand on the home straight that leaned a little, and a finish post gone silver from the weather. Her father walked the lanes at first light most mornings, slowly, looking down, the way a

farmer walks a field. Sometimes he crouched and pressed the dirt with his thumb. He never said what he was checking for.

By the time she was seventeen she trained there every morning. The sound of it was her footfalls and her breath and nothing else, the mist still on the lanes, the village above them not yet fully awake.

Except for the humming.

Her father hummed while he timed her. The same tune, always — some old Highland song, four bars of it, slightly wrong. It had probably been right once, years ago, and then worn into its current shape like a path. He hummed it through every drill, eyes on the watch.

“You’re ruining my splits,” she told him, hands on her hips, chest heaving.

“If you can hear me,” her father said, “you are not running hard enough.”

She went again. Somewhere off the bend the tune slipped under her heartbeat and she couldn’t hear him anymore.

* * *

The only person who teased her father was Cheta.

Cheta kept the grounds. He was old in a way that seemed permanent, as if he had been issued to the track along with the lanes, and he carried a rake in one hand and a small cloth-bound book in the other. He stood at the rail most mornings, and he and her father argued the way other men breathed.

“Slow track today.”

“The track is fine. Your eyes are slow.”

“In my day we ran on worse dirt.”

“You ran on excuses.”

“I beat you on excuses, then.”

Her father took a moment with that one. “Twice. In forty years.”

“A man remembers his harvests,” Cheta said.

Then Dara came down the straight, and both old men stopped talking. They always did. They never decided to; it just happened to them, every time, like weather.

Cheta licked his pencil and wrote her split in the little book. He had books like it going back longer than she had been alive. She had asked him once

what he did with all the numbers. He said somebody had to keep them. She had not thought to ask why.

* * *

One evening she came home early from the track and stopped in the doorway.

The radio was playing. In the kitchen her father was dancing with her mother. He danced terribly — stiff, deliberate, counting under his breath. “One-two. One-two-three.”

“It’s a dance, not a relay,” her mother said.

“Everything is splits.”

Her mother laughed at him, and there were years inside the laugh, and he turned with the next count and saw Dara in the doorway.

He stopped. Completely. A man that size, frozen by a girl with a kit bag.

Her mother did not stop dancing.

Dara backed out into the yard before the smile got away from her, and stood by the wall, and listened. The radio played on. She could not see whether he kept dancing. She liked to think he did.

When the song finished she counted to twenty and went in. Nobody said anything about it.

Dinner was rice.

Chapter Three

Three Meters

The day of the regional championship, the track stopped being theirs.

There was bunting on the leaning stand and drums down by the first bend and more people on the rail than she had ever seen in one place. The blankets were out on the slope with the food already going. Somebody had painted the finish post.

The junior races ran first. Dara warmed up on the grass behind the stand, and the morning came to her in pieces, the way mornings did before a race. The drums. The smell of frying. A whistle. At some point a boy fell in one of the junior heats and her father went over the rail to set him on his feet, and the boy ran on crying and finished last, and people cheered him the whole way. She was retying her left spike. When she looked up again her father was back at the rail with his eyes on the stopwatch.

Before her final, he came to the edge of her lane, crouched, and laid his palm flat on the dirt. He always did that. She had stopped wondering about it years ago, the way you stop wondering about anything a person does every day.

Then he walked the line of athletes and passed behind her without stopping.

“Where are you?”

“At the finish,” she said, without looking up.

“Good.”

She had been there since breakfast.

The gun went, and the race was short the way her races were short. She came off the last bend alone, the drums lost somewhere behind her heartbeat, and broke the tape with the field still turning in.

The announcer was saying something about a record. Twenty-two years, he was saying. Older than she was.

She found her father at the finish post. He had the watch up.

“Your start was late. Two tenths.” He turned the watch so she could see it, though she couldn’t read it from there. “And you ran the bend wide. That’s three meters you gave them for nothing.”

The crowd was still loud around them. People kept touching her shoulders as they went past.

She stood there a moment longer, in case there was more.

There wasn’t.

* * *

At dinner she sat with a bag of ice on each shin and ran the bend over in her head, the wide line, the three meters, where exactly the lane had gotten away from her.

“She broke a record today,” her mother said.

“The record was soft,” said her father, not looking up.

Her mother looked at her then, for a while.

“When will you stop running?”

It was such a strange question that Dara didn’t answer it. Nobody stops running.

She finished her rice and took the ice off when it started to burn.

In the morning there were hills.

Chapter Four

After the Rain

The big rains came at the end of that season and stayed three days. The yard turned to red soup. Water ran off the roof in a line you could have put a cup under, and the track was unusable, and her father made her do strength work in the doorway while the rain came down behind her like a wall.

On the fourth morning the sky was clean, and she went up to run the ridge because the track would still be mud.

The valleys were gone.

There was cloud where the valleys should be. Not mist — cloud, the real kind, the kind you saw from underneath on ordinary days. It lay over the whole lowland, white and still, going out to the edge of everything. The hills to the south stuck up out of it. The High Ridge stood above all of it in the early light, and the path along the spine was empty and the earth was soft from three days of rain.

She stood at the top of the path for a while. Then she ran.

The ground took her prints clean, one after another. Birds went up out of the wet grass ahead of her, two and three at a time. The sun came up out of the cloud itself, not from behind the hills where it usually came from, and the light off the white was so much that she ran the first stretch squinting, half-blind, laughing at nothing.

She ran the whole spine and turned around at the far cairn and ran it back, which she never did, because the session had hills in it and this was not the session.

Coming back along the top she saw her father at the old line.

He didn't have the stopwatch.

He didn't say anything about the session, or her knees, or the bend. He stood with his hands at his sides and watched her come up the spine, and when she passed him he didn't call a split, and she ran on because she didn't know what else to do with that.

When she came back down he was still there.

They walked home without talking. The cloud burned off before they reached the house, and the valleys were back, and everything was where it had been.

Chapter Five

The Letter

The letter came on a Tuesday, in the middle of a session, carried down the track road at a dead sprint by Ek hose's boy, who was waving it over his head and shouting her name with no breath left to shout it with.

It had a crest on it. The paper was heavy. She read it twice and the words didn't change.

The village arrived the way the village always arrived, all at once and from everywhere. The slope emptied. The stand emptied. There were drums from somewhere — there were always drums from somewhere. People she barely knew held her by the shoulders and looked into her face and laughed.

She looked for her father.

He was across the lanes at the rail, and for a moment, before anyone reached him, his face was doing something she didn't have a name for. Then Mama Osaro got to him and pounded his shoulder, and by the time Dara could see him again through the crowd he looked the way he always looked.

Pride, she decided.

Later, when the track had mostly emptied and what was left of the food was being argued over, she saw her father and Cheta standing apart at the rail. Cheta said something. Her father said something short. Cheta looked away down the lanes and raked dirt that didn't need raking.

She was too far to hear any of it, and too happy to wonder.

* * *

He doubled the hill sessions that week.

On the third climb of the first morning he stopped halfway up, which he never did, and stood looking out at the valley while she finished the rep above

him. When she came back down he said the view was the point of hills.

She had never heard him say anything was the point of anything except splits.

Good mood, she thought. The letter.

On Friday he came back from town with a paper bag that went into his coat pocket and stayed there. She was stretching in the yard and thinking about lane draws.

The Games were fourteen weeks away. He doubled the hills again.

She didn't complain.

Chapter Six

Before Light

The village threw the party the way the village threw everything, with drums and frying oil and somebody's generator running lights out to the road. It was for her. People kept saying her name into her face. Mama Osaro told the story of the letter four times that Dara heard, and the boy who had carried it stood near the food all night, getting fed for it.

Her father wasn't there.

She looked twice, three times, working the edges of the crowd. He hadn't come down. After a while she took the letter and went up the hill to the house, the music falling away behind her a little with every step.

The kitchen had one lamp on. The little television was going with the sound off, and on it, frozen, was her — her own race from the regional, stopped mid-stride in lane three. Her father sat at the table with the notebook and the pencil and the stopwatch lying on the wood by his hand. He was running the tape back and forth over the same stretch of race.

"They posted the heats," she said. "Lane four. Coach Emeka says nobody from the Highlands has ever—"

"Your last two hundred."

She stopped.

"You fade." He touched the screen where she was frozen. "Here. Forty meters where your knees stop lifting. At the Continental, that fade is the whole race."

She came to the table. She put the letter down on the wood and pushed it across, next to the stopwatch.

"Pick it up."

"I've seen it."

“You haven’t held it.”

“Holding it doesn’t fix your knees.”

She laughed. It came out wrong, even to her.

“One night,” she said. “I’m not asking for the medal. I’m asking for one night where the man at this table is my father and not my coach.”

“They’re the same man.”

“No.” She heard her own voice drop. “The coach showed up. I’ve been waiting seventeen years for the other one.”

He didn’t raise his voice. She had never once heard him raise it.

“When you stand on that line, none of those people will love you. The clock does not love you. I am the only one who tells you the truth — and you call it—”

“Nothing I do will ever be enough for you.”

The lamp hummed. Down the hill the music was still going, very small from here.

She gave him time. She stood there and gave him all the time in the world.

For a second he looked like he was going to say something else.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Hills. Before light.”

She left the letter where it was and walked out.

In the yard she looked back once. Through the window he was bent over the notebook, writing. Tomorrow’s session, she supposed. She watched him write it, the lamp on his hands, the letter at the edge of the light where she’d left it.

She walked down the hill. The music got bigger the closer she came, and at the bottom everyone wanted to dance with her, and the night was warm.

She danced.

Chapter Seven

The Session

For four days they spoke in numbers.

He called splits. She ran them. At breakfast nobody said anything, and her mother looked between them and let it alone. Dara figured it would pass the way these things passed. He would say something first. She was not going to be the one to say something first.

On the fourth evening he called a final split and she walked past him at the gate without breaking stride.

It felt like winning something.

* * *

On the fifth morning she was at the hills before light, because that was the standing session, and he didn't come.

She stretched. She waited. The sky went from black to grey over the ridge. Good, she thought. Let him be the late one, for once in his life.

She ran the session alone. All six climbs, harder than he would have asked for, so that she could tell him she had.

Coming back down the track road she saw people standing in front of the house. Standing, not going in. Cheta was in the yard with his hat in his hands. Her mother was sitting on the ground.

Grown women did not sit on the ground.

Nobody had to say it. Somebody said it anyway.

They had found him on the ridge, at the old line, where he stood every morning of his life. She did not go up. Later she could not have said why.

* * *

The funeral was on the open hillside, in the red earth, and it seemed to her that the whole of the Highlands was on the slope in white. People kept taking her hands. People kept telling her who her father had been, as if she might not know.

Near the end a man she half-recognized from town took her hand in both of his and leaned close, meaning only kindness.

“Eighteen months,” he said. “Most men don’t get a year. He fought, your father. He fought.”

She heard herself ask it from somewhere outside herself.

“Fought what.”

The man’s face changed. He looked at her, and then past her, and Dara turned and saw her mother standing with her hand over her mouth, and understood that her mother was hearing it for the first time too.

Eighteen months. She started counting backward through them and had to stop.

The paper bag came back to her — Friday, the coat pocket — and she walked away from everyone, around the side of the church, and stood with her back against the wall until she could make her face work again.

* * *

The others went down with the evening. She stayed by the fresh earth, and after a while Cheta came and stood beside her, and held something out in both hands, the way you hand over something living.

The stopwatch. On its cord.

The numbers were still going.

Eighty-one hours, nine minutes, and the seconds turning over while she looked at it. Nobody had thought to stop it. Or nobody had been able to.

“It was with him,” Cheta said. “I couldn’t—”

He didn’t finish.

She took it. She watched the seconds change for a moment longer.

She pressed the button, and the numbers stopped.

“You knew?”

“Yes.”

“And you said nothing?”

“He asked me not to.”

She looked at him. The old man stood with his feet planted, his hat still in his hands, and gave her the rest of it without flinching.

“He was right to.”

There was nothing in her to answer that with. She put the stopwatch in her pocket and walked down the hill.

* * *

She packed that night. The spikes, the kit, the letter with the crest, folded smaller now than it used to be.

Her mother stood in the doorway and watched her do it.

“Dara.”

She stopped. She didn’t turn around.

Whatever her mother had been going to say, she put it down somewhere, and said instead:

“Eat something before the road.”

The bus left from the junction where the village road met the tar. She took the seat by the back window with her fist around the stopwatch in her lap. The ridge had gold along the top of it, first light, getting smaller.

She didn’t look at it for long.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

THE GHOST

Chapter Eight

Seven Years

She won.

That was the shape of the years, if they had a shape. She won on the coast. She won in the capital. She won in cities where the announcers said her name wrong, and she didn't correct them, because the race didn't care.

The cities had different names. The hotel ceilings were the same ceiling.

She trained the way he had trained her. There was no other way she knew, and she didn't go looking for one. Mornings, track. Knees. Evenings, tape — her own races, run back and forth over the same forty meters. Not enough. She fixed the forty meters. She found forty more.

She looked at the finish line before she looked at anything. She had always done that.

He was usually there.

The watch up. The face she knew. The first year she flinched. After that she didn't. He came with the line the way the line came with the race, and she stopped asking herself about it, because it didn't change her splits either way.

After a final on the coast, somebody's hand came into the edge of her vision, held out. She was already walking.

A journalist asked her what was left to want. The next one, she said. They printed it under a photograph of her not smiling, and called her the coldest closer in the sport. She read it on a plane and didn't disagree.

The stopwatch traveled in the side pocket of the kit bag, where the medals went. In every room, she put it on the nightstand. The numbers said 81:09:15. They had said that for seven years. She didn't look at them much. She needed them where they were, that was all.

Finals were all one final. The gun. Knees. The bend, tight, no gifts. Three hundred meters and the world going quiet the way it did. Don't look back. Again. The tape. Him at the line with the watch up, and the cameras, and the anthem, and the same ceiling.

In an athletes' lounge in the capital, on a television with the sound turned low, a map came up with a region shaded gold. The Continental Games. The federation circulated the memo a week later: altitude preparation, six weeks, the highland training grounds.

Korowa.

She read the memo twice. The words didn't change.

She packed the kit bag. The stopwatch went where it always went.

Chapter Nine

The Junction

The bus stopped where the tar met the village road, the way it always had. She stepped down onto the dirt.

The ground had give in it. She had been running on rubber for seven years.

She walked up through the village with the kit bag on her shoulder. Children she didn't know chased a ball across the road in front of her. The provision store still leaned. On its wall there was a poster gone almost white in the sun — a girl mid-stride, lane three, and under her some letters that had mostly given up. She looked at it for about a second.

The turn to her mother's house came up on the left.

She walked past it.

The federation had taken rooms at the school for the camp. She dropped the bag on a cot and went to look at the track before the light went, because that was what you did with a new training ground, and this was a training ground now.

The track was perfect.

Lanes raked. The rail mended. The finish post carried paint that couldn't have been a season old. Nobody ran here anymore — she could hear the kids playing football in the lower field — but somebody was keeping it anyway.

Across the lanes, at the equipment shed, an old man was winding a hose.

Cheta. Older.

He saw her. She saw him.

Neither of them crossed.

* * *

In the mornings she ran the ridge. She took the old routes — the climbs in their old order, water at the bend where water had always been taken. It was the program. It had always been the program.

The grass at the old line was cut. She noticed it at speed and was past it, and ran the rest of the spine hard.

On the way down she passed the mango tree. It was still there. It was just a tree.

Evenings she ran the track alone, after the football had gone home. Her spikes left a clean line of prints down lane four in the raked dirt.

By morning the lanes were always smooth again.

Chapter Ten

Lane Four

The program said six four-hundreds at altitude pace. She was at the rail before light, spikes over her shoulder, mist on the lanes.

There was a voice in the mist.

“—Ayo of Korowa takes the bend! The crowd cannot BELIEVE it — nobody in HISTORY has ever—”

A boy. Eleven, maybe. All elbows. He came off the bend in lane four with his arms flailing and his head thrown back, announcing himself to a stadium that wasn't there, and there was something wrong with the picture that took her a moment to find.

He was running her race.

The head carriage. The strike. The way he attacked the bend. A bad copy, but hers.

That was also how she learned his name. He announced it.

“You're in my lane,” she said.

He spun around and his whole face went off like the letter arriving.

“Forty-four oh-two,” he said. “Coastal final. You went out in twenty-one flat which everybody said was suicide and then it wasn't, and in the Capital meet you false-started and they almost—”

“Go home.”

“—and nobody from the Highlands has EVER—”

“Go home.”

He went. Backwards. Still talking.

* * *

The next morning he was there.

She ran her session at the far side of the track and he ran his races in lane four, providing his own crowd, and they ignored each other completely, except that only one of them was ignoring the other.

* * *

The third morning she managed not to look at him for a while.

Then he ran another one, and his hands came up around his ears on the back straight the way they always did, and something in her could not stand it.

“Stop. STOP.”

He stopped in the middle of the track like he’d been shot, terrified and delighted.

“Your hands are at your ears. You’re strangling yourself. The arms swing the legs — loose hands, or you’re carrying two stones for four hundred meters.”

By the time she heard herself, she was already three corrections in.

“Again,” she said. “From the bend.”

He grinned like he had won something, and she put him on the bend before he could enjoy it.

The next morning she brought cones.

Chapter Eleven

Zeros

She trained him the way she had been trained. There was no other way she knew, and she didn't go looking for one.

Cones at dawn. Drills before the sun cleared the ridge. Starts until his starts stopped being apologies. He ran; she watched with her arms folded; he finished and looked at her, and she gave him the correction.

"Again," she said.

He didn't commentate the drills. Drills weren't races, she supposed.

Cheta watched from the rail some mornings, leaning on the rake. He never crossed.

* * *

By the second week the boy was running real sessions, and real sessions needed real times, and she could not keep carrying splits in her head.

The stopwatch was in the side pocket of the kit bag, with the medals. She took it out by the cord.

81:09:15.

The numbers had said that for seven years. She had never pressed the button again.

Ayo was at the line, shaking his arms out, waiting for her.

Her thumb found the reset. The button was worn smooth. She held it there, not pressing, while the mist moved on the lanes and the boy bounced on his toes a hundred meters away.

Eighty-one hours was five days, give or take. She had done that arithmetic before.

She pressed it.

00:00:00.

“Positions,” she said.

He ran.

Chapter Twelve

The Split

The session was two-hundreds, six of them, descending. He took the first four well. On the fifth he went out too hard and died in the last forty, and came in over.

“Again,” she said.

He ran it again. Better — visibly better, and he knew it was better. He finished almost smiling.

She clicked the watch.

Not enough.

He walked back to the line. He set himself.

Again.

He ran. He gave her everything an eleven-year-old has, all of it, his arms loose the way she’d taught him, and he came up out of the rep gasping and looked at her, and his face did the thing — young, winded, scanning hers for one word.

She knew the word. It was right there behind her teeth.

And then she heard it. Not the word — the last command. It was still in the air over the lanes, the way sound stays a moment in mist.

It had been her father’s voice.

It had come out of her mouth.

She looked down. The stopwatch was in her hand, on its cord, her thumb on the button. His button.

She put it in her pocket and walked off the track. She didn’t say anything to the boy. There wasn’t anything in her mouth she could trust.

At the gate she looked back once.

He was standing in his lane, looking down at his own feet, checking them for the mistake. Then he walked back to the start line and toed it, and set himself, and stood there in position, waiting.

She kept walking.

Chapter Thirteen

Beans

She walked off the track and down through the village, and when the turn to her mother's house came up on the left, she took it.

She had been walking past that turn for five weeks.

Her mother was at the table shelling beans into a bowl. She looked up at the doorway, and she didn't look surprised, and after seven years what she said was:

"There's tea."

Dara came in and sat. The kitchen was smaller than she remembered, or she had been in too many big rooms. The radio was still on its shelf.

Her mother shelled beans. The pods went one way, the beans went the other.

"The village says you're training the little one," her mother said. "The dawn boy."

"I stopped."

"Why?"

Dara opened her mouth. The thing that had happened on the track didn't have a shape she could hand to anyone.

Her mother went back to the beans and let it alone.

For a while the only sound in the kitchen was the pods.

"When will you stop running?" her mother said.

And this time Dara answered it.

"If I stop, there's nothing there."

The shelling paused. Her mother looked at her — a long look, the kind that took its time because it had earned the right to.

"Did you know?" Dara said. "That whole year. Did you—"

“No.” Her mother’s hands started again, slower. “I shared a bed with a dying man and woke up beside a healthy one every morning. He was that strong. Or that afraid. I never learned which.”

The pods. The beans. The bowl filling.

Then her mother said, not looking up:

“There was a whole man there, Dara. You only kept the coach.”

Dara sat very still.

Her mother slid the bowl two inches across the table toward her.

“Sit. You can be angry and eat at the same time. Your father never learned that. Learn it.”

She pulled the bowl closer and ate, and her mother went on shelling, and for a while the kitchen was just the sound of that.

Chapter Fourteen

Four Bars

The next morning she was at the track before light, and so was he.

He was careful with her. He didn't announce anything. He set himself at the line and watched her hands.

Her hands were empty.

"You're not timing?"

"I can see it."

He ran. She watched the whole of him come off the bend instead of the part of him the watch could see — the arms, the head, where the stride went long and where it went brave — and gave him the corrections one at a time, and he took them one at a time, and the mist sat on the lanes and the morning went on like that.

He came off a two-hundred and stood with his hands on his knees, and when he had his breath back he said:

"What song is that?"

"What song?"

He didn't answer. He just looked at her.

And then she heard it — the tail of it, still in her throat. Four bars. Slightly wrong.

"...My coach's," she said.

He nodded, the way children nod at facts, and went back to the line.

"Again," she said. "From the bend."

He went. He came through with his hands loose and his head quiet and the last forty still alive, and she clicked nothing, because there was nothing to click, and said:

"Better."

He went back to the line at a jog.

He had never jogged back before.

The sun cleared the ridge and the mist went off the lanes, and they ran until the football arrived.

Chapter Fifteen

The Old Line

She was running the spine when she saw him.

A figure at the old line, kneeling in the grass. She slowed, and then she stopped, which she had not done at that place in seven years.

Cheta. On his knees in the wet grass with a pair of hand shears, trimming.

The grass was cut in a neat rectangle, maybe three strides by two, high on a wild ridge where nothing else was tended. She had been running past it at speed for five weeks.

This was where they had found him.

“Stop,” she said.

Cheta finished the stroke he was on.

“Stop. Why do you — nobody runs here. He’s not—” She couldn’t finish it. “STOP.”

He sat back on his heels and set the shears down in the grass and looked up at her. He was older than she kept remembering he was.

“Seven years,” she said. Her chest was still going from the climb. “Seven years you rake a dead man’s lanes. You cut his grass. You kept his track — and you couldn’t give me one sentence when it mattered.”

“He asked—”

“He asked you to watch me lose him without knowing I was losing him!”

Cheta didn’t move. His voice didn’t apologize. It never had.

“He knew you would choose him over the race. He could not live with being the reason you stopped.”

“It was my choice,” she said. “He stole it.”

The wind moved in the cut grass. Down the valley a dog was barking at something, and stopped.

Cheta looked at the shears. He looked at the rectangle of tended ground. Then he looked at her, and something behind his face moved — she watched it move and could not tell what it was. It went on for a long time, whatever it was. Longer than she had ever seen him take over anything.

Then he got up, slowly, in stages.

“Come with me,” he said.

Chapter Sixteen

The Keeping-Place

The shed at the edge of the track was bigger inside than she had ever had a reason to know.

Tins of film in rows, each one labeled in the same small hand. Newspaper clippings gone the color of weak tea. Trophies nobody had ever claimed. The little cloth books had a shelf of their own; there were more of them than she could count from the door.

Cheta took down one of the tins and threaded an old projector without looking at his hands. His hands knew the way. He hung a sheet from two nails that were already there for it, and turned the machine on, and the wall of the shed filled with silver.

A start line. Eight runners shaking out their legs in a stadium she didn't recognize, in clothes thirty years out of date.

The man in lane four was laughing. He said something to the runner beside him and the runner laughed, and then he laughed at whatever came back, easy, with his head tipped to the sky.

"Who is that?" she said.

"Your father."

She looked again. She found the height first. Then the shoulders. Then she stopped finding things, because the face wouldn't hold still long enough to be his.

She had a number for her father's laughs. She had kept the count her whole life.

On the sheet, it wasn't rare.

The runners came to their marks. And lane four crouched, and pressed a palm flat to the track, and rose.

Then it was true.

The gun. They went, in silence, the projector clattering along on its own. The young man ran the way water comes downhill. By the back straight he was clear of everyone, and the grainy crowd was up on its feet, and the race had stopped being a race.

Then the man in lane five went down.

Hard — a leg gone wrong under him, the lane rope dragging. The young man's head turned. The gap was still growing. The line was maybe twelve strides away.

He stopped.

He went back. He got the fallen man up off the track, took his arm across his shoulders, and carried him over the line.

Last.

At the line, with another man's weight on him, the young man looked up into the stands.

He looked for a long time. The film clicked through it frame by frame, like it didn't want to either.

Nobody came.

Cheta's voice came out of the dark beside her, level as ever.

"By morning the sponsors were gone. By the end of the season his name was a joke. The man who stopped." A breath. "He spent his whole life believing his kindness was his flaw. Everything he burned out of you — he was burning it out of himself first."

The reel ran on a moment longer. The young man stood at the line under the silent stands, holding another man up.

"Why did no one ever tell me?" she said.

Cheta took his time.

"Because we were ashamed too."

The reel ran out. The sheet went white, and the loose end of the film went around and around, slapping the machine.

She got up and stepped into the light. It lay on her arms, on the front of her, bright as the cloud sea had been.

She put her palm flat against the sheet, where he had been.

Chapter Seventeen

Prints

She went up the ridge that night without a light. She didn't need one for that route.

The rectangle was grey in the dark, the cut grass holding what little the sky gave. She stood at the edge of it, where she had stood shouting at an old man that morning, a different life ago.

She had things to say. Seven years of things, and one new day of things underneath them, and she stood there with all of it and none of it would line up into speech.

She sat down in the cut grass.

She stayed there a long time. The valley made its night sounds and stopped making them and made them again.

"He'll never see it," she said, finally, out loud, to nothing.

Nothing answered. Nothing was going to.

"I'm done," she said.

She came down off the ridge in the dark, and packed before she slept. It didn't take long. She had never really unpacked.

* * *

He was already running when she got to the track.

Better than he had any right to be — the arms loose, the head quiet, the last forty still alive. She stood at the rail with the kit bag on her shoulder and watched him come off the bend, and waited for him to finish, because you didn't interrupt a rep, even to end things.

"Ayo. I came to say—"

“Look!” He had her by the wrist before the sentence had anywhere to go.
“LOOK. I’ve been doing it every day, you have to see—”

He pulled her off the lanes to the strip of soft dirt along the rail, and pointed, breathless, prouder than a medal.

Two lines of footprints.

Hers — her warm-up strides from these past weeks, pressed into the soft ground. And beside them, set carefully, stride for stride, matched as close as eleven-year-old legs could match them: his.

“Almost yours,” he said.

She looked at the two lines of prints for a long time.

Whatever she had come to say, she didn’t say it. It wasn’t true anymore.

“Run them again tomorrow,” she said. “Wider arms.”

“You’ll be watching?”

“After the Continental.”

He went back to the line at a run.

END OF PART TWO

PART THREE

THE LINE

Chapter Eighteen

Covered Earth

The stadium came up between two buildings and was gone, and then the road turned and there was nothing else to look at.

It was the biggest thing she had ever seen that wasn't a mountain.

Inside, the track was the color of rust and gave back exactly what you put into it. Nothing kept, nothing lost. She ran a stride-out down the back straight on the first evening and looked behind her once.

No prints.

She looked at the finish line before she looked at anything. He was there. The watch up. She had never in her life looked at a finish line and found it empty, and this one was the loudest he had ever been, because this was the line all the others had been practice for.

She won her heat and her semi the way you take stairs.

* * *

The call room before the final was eight plastic chairs and seven other women and the sound of everyone managing themselves. The woman in lane two held a string of beads she wasn't praying with so much as holding. Somebody's headphones leaked something, a sermon or a song. The woman in lane six had a photograph she kept in her shoe and took out and put back.

Dara unzipped the side pocket of the kit bag and looked at the stopwatch lying on its cord among the medals.

She zipped it again.

* * *

They walked out into a wall of noise. The light towers had turned the night white, and the stands went up and up on every side, and everything in them was moving.

Except one thing.

High up, on the back straight side, in a crowd that was all motion, one person was sitting still.

Her mother did not come to races. She never had. Not the regionals, not anywhere, not once in nineteen years of finish lines.

She was here.

Dara looked back down at the track, because the race was in four minutes and there was nowhere to put it.

At the blocks she did what she did. She found the line, far down the covered earth. He was waiting at it, the watch raised, where she was taught to look, where he always was.

And then, with the stadium roaring somewhere above her, her hand went down and lay flat against the track.

She had never done that in her life. Her hand had.

She settled into the blocks.

Chapter Nineteen

The Wall

The gun.

She took the first hundred the way it had been planned for seven years. Knees. The bend, tight, no gifts. The field came with her and then it didn't. Don't look back. Two hundred. The noise of the place pressed down on the lanes and she went through it. Not enough. More. Three hundred meters, and the dead place coming, the place his voice had carried her through every race of her life, and the commands rising to meet it the way they always rose. Again. Don't look back. Again—

Nothing.

Breath.

Footfall.

Blood, in her ears.

No voice of any kind.

She looked where she had looked since she was eight years old.

The line.

It was empty.

Nobody was standing there. Nobody told her what to do next.

Eighty meters of covered earth, and nothing in them but her.

And then her legs did something her legs had never done — found a rhythm that had no author, longer at the back and quieter at the front, and she went down the last eighty meters on it, on nothing, on nobody's voice, on her own breath in her own ears, and somewhere around sixty out her face was wet, and it wasn't rain, because there wasn't any.

The tape broke across her. She hardly felt it.

And at the line, exactly where she had looked for him her whole life, for one second:

Her father.

The man from the sheet. Smiling. His hands were empty.

Gone.

Then the sound came back all at once and she was on her knees on the covered earth with the stadium pouring down on her, and the wet on her face just kept coming, and she let it.

Somebody hung the gold on her neck. Cameras went off like weather. She had her hand around the medal and could not have told you what it weighed.

High on the back straight, in all of that standing, one person was sitting still, with a hand over her heart.

The line, when she finally looked back at it, was just a line.

Chapter Twenty

The Recorder

There were places she was supposed to be that night. She had been to enough of them in seven years to know what they were like.

She went back to the track instead.

The stadium was empty and most of the lights were down. The banners moved a little, somewhere up in the dark. She sat on the covered earth in lane four with the gold still around her neck, because taking it off meant deciding where to put it.

Footsteps came out of the tunnel.

Cheta did not leave the Highlands. He was famous for it. He crossed the whole infield to her anyway, an overcoat over his good clothes, taking his time about the distance, and when he reached her he held something out in both hands, the way you hand over something living.

A recorder. Small, older than the stopwatch, its corners gone round from handling.

“He told me to give it to you,” Cheta said, “when you stopped running from him.”

She took it. She turned it over once. Then she pressed the button.

A hiss. A breath. And then —

“You don’t have to win for me.”

That was all. The hiss ran on into nothing.

She pressed it again.

“You don’t have to win for me.”

It was his voice with no coach in it anywhere. She had a number for that voice too. It was small.

She pressed it a third time.

The third time, it was true.

Cheta lowered himself down onto the track beside her, with some negotiating, and sat.

She had never once seen him sit.

They stayed there a while, the two of them, on the covered earth under the one light that was still on, in a place built for eighty thousand. The banners moved up in the dark.

After a long time, Cheta said:

“Your bend was wide.”

She laughed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Good

She flew home with the medal in the side pocket of the kit bag and the recorder in her hand luggage, where she could reach it.

The village did what the village does. It took three days for the drums to stop.

On the fourth morning she was at the dirt track before light, and so was he.

“Full lap,” she said. “Everything.”

He went. He ran the bend tight and came home with his hands loose and his head quiet, and the last forty did not die. Off the final bend he did something with his shoulders she had never taught him.

It worked.

He came through, pulled up, turned — chest going, hands on his hips — and looked at her, and his face did the thing. Young, winded, scanning hers for one word.

She looked back at him.

“Good,” she said.

For a second he didn’t move at all.

Then he turned and started back up the track, and halfway there it broke out of him — arms up, to the empty morning, at full volume:

“—AND AYO OF KOROWA, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! AYO! OF! KOROWA!”

She let it run.

“Again,” she said, when he came past.

He went. He was still announcing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dawn

She went up before light, the old route, no torch.

The rectangle at the old line had been cut in the last day or two. He was home, then.

She took the stopwatch out of her pocket, on its cord. She pressed the button one more time.

00:00:00.

She set it down in the red dirt at the old line, face up, where the first sun would find it.

Then she ran.

There was no session. She wasn't training for anything. It was an ordinary morning — the valleys were where they belonged, the mist low on the lower fields, the birds going up out of the grass two and three at a time — and she ran the spine of the High Ridge through the middle of it, at a pace nobody had set, breathing easy, going nowhere that needed her.

The sun came up over the shoulder of the ridge and lit the dirt red ahead of her.

Behind her, the whole way back along the spine, the earth held a single line of prints.

It was red, and old, and it kept things.

THE END