

“Feel like racing, Claire?” Jacob asked hopefully.

“No,” Claire replied. “Not now. Maybe later, okay?”

You could see how disappointed Jacob was, but he nodded. Claire and Jacob had been best friends since they met each other here at Homewood Children’s Orphanage. Claire was four years old, and Jacob was five. Now, Claire was seventeen and Jacob was sixteen, and they were still living in the decrepit building called Homewood Children’s Orphanage in Miami, Florida. Homewood Children’s Orphanage was in the center of the city. It was a three-story building with dirty windows, hiding between the Shoppers’ Fair supermarket and a Charter One Bank.

Claire sat at the computer screen, analyzing the races of great track and field stars. She watched a video of Usain Bolt running a one hundred meter dash, and in 9.56 seconds, the video was over. Bolt had run the race in that time: 9.56 seconds. Jacob, tall and slim, stood behind Claire, watching the race. “You’ll be like him someday,” he told Claire.

Claire had lived at the orphanage since she was four years old, when her parents were seventeen years old and carefree. They were slightly too carefree, however. They didn’t know what to do when they learned about Elizabeth’s, Claire’s mother’s, pregnancy. They eventually decided that the job of raising their young daughter should be up to the only decent orphanage in Miami at the time. Claire, young and innocent, arrived at Homewood Children’s Orphanage with the few possessions she had. She had her blanket, her favorite blue pacifier, and her stubborn personality. Even at that young age, you could tell Claire would grow up to be headstrong, just like her mom. Jacob, on the other hand, lost both of his parents in a tragic car accident when he was only five years-old. They had lived at this orphanage for most of their lives, unsure of how to get out, or what to do once they escaped.

Jacob began to walk away, but Claire called after him. “Wait up, Jacob. I’m coming.” She turned off the computer and together they strolled down Harlem Avenue, into the scorching sun. It was the middle of October, but it was unusually hot and humid. Claire marked the starting line with a stone. Jacob declared, “We’ll race to the usual spot, right by that

honeysuckle tree down the block. I'll call it." Claire took her stance at the stone with Jacob close by her side. "Ready, set, go!"

They were off and running stride for stride. Claire and Jacob were inseparable when they ran. About ten strides away from the honeysuckle, Claire gained momentum, passed Jacob, and won the race by a yard.

Jacob, out of breath, whispered, "Claire, you have to get out of that orphanage. People need to know what you can do."

"You say that after every race. I told you. It'll probably be impossible to break out of that orphanage with Ms. Bennett watching us. I have to find my parents first." They talked as they strolled back to the starting point.

Every time they ran a race, they attracted spectators. This time, it was Mrs. Johnson, who was tending to her daffodils.

Mrs. Johnson announced, "I clocked that at 10.4 seconds, Claire. I have never heard of a kid your age that could do that. Not even the great runners out there could."

"I know, right! I'm trying to tell her to go out and make herself known, but she won't," Jacob abruptly stopped. He looked at Claire and knew that he had gone too far.

Claire, obviously annoyed by Jacob's persistence, harshly announced, "I'm sorry. It's getting late, and we have to go. See you later."

As they turned the corner towards the orphanage, Claire patiently announced, "Jacob, this has to stop. Someday it'll happen. I'll be huge and famous. It's just not a good time right now. Do you understand that?" Jacob disappointedly replied, "I'm trying to."

"Come on, Claire. Wake up. Claire!" Jacob hovered over the side of her bed. He grasped a flyer in his hands, waving it in Claire's face. As she slowly awoke, she realized the figure standing over her was a panting Jacob. "Look at this flyer. It says that trials for track and

field in the Olympics are on July 12. It's May 27th. I know you don't want to hear more about this, but please just think about it," he hurriedly finished.

Claire, fully awake, stared at him for a long time. She finally said, "Jacob, I'll think about it. I know you think this is a good idea, and I know I have been stubborn, but I will consider it. Just leave it at that. Please."

Jacob could not believe what he had heard. "Sure. That is all I'm asking for. Think about it."

He left Claire in her room thinking about this new opportunity that had arisen. She wanted to get out of the orphanage, find her parents, and try out at the Olympic trials. "But how? Where would we start? How would we even break out of this place?" she thought. She sat in her room for one hour, then two, then three. It was dusk before Claire finally made a decision. She walked across the hall into Jacob's room, opened his door, and said, "Jacob, I'll do it. But we have to find my parents, too." Jacob sat up from his bed and responded, "Let's get started."

Claire and Jacob started searching online for her parents that night. Jacob also timed Claire in practice races every day. She averaged 10 seconds per race. Jacob had her on a new diet as well. She ate only fruits, vegetables, and a certain amount of meat. Claire spent much of her free time researching the number of Elizabeth and John Marshalls living in the U.S., and eventually narrowed the count to one Elizabeth and three John Marshalls in Miami, Florida. She mentioned this several times to Jacob, who often responded, "Claire, these things take time, and you have to be sure that these people live here." Claire always retorted, "There's no such thing as a sure thing, Jacob. I think you and I have been through enough to know that."

The next few weeks continued like this with Claire researching and training and Jacob coaching. With July 12 quickly approaching, Claire and Jacob doubled their practices, and spent the entire Fourth of July weekend training. That weekend, Claire and Jacob devised a plan to slyly break out of the orphanage with permission, have Claire run at trials, find her parents, and return safely to Homewood Children's Orphanage. On July 12, Claire and Jacob were ready for the trials.

Their plan was simple. The night before the trials, they told Ms. Bennett, the head supervisor at Homewood Children's Orphanage, that they were going to be out for most of the next day.

Claire said, "Ms. Bennett, Jacob and I think we have found the perfect job opportunity. It's pretty far out, though. The interviews start at 9 o'clock sharp tomorrow morning. Jacob and I will take the early train downtown. Don't worry about us. We have it all figured out. We'll be back probably around dinnertime. What do you think?"

Ms. Bennett pondered the idea for a long time. Jacob was already starting to hatch out Plan B, when Ms. Bennett answered, "That sounds like a fine idea. It's about time you two looked for jobs. Just be back by dinner. Do you have money and a map of the city? You both know where you're going?"

"Yes, of course," Jacob and Claire unanimously replied. "Thanks so much." They hurried off to bed before Ms. Bennett could change her mind. Claire turned to Jacob and said, "Phase one, complete."

Claire and Jacob awoke at 5:30 a.m. sharp, put on their best clothes, and filled their briefcases with their track and field gear. At six, they left the orphanage, and walked down Harlem Avenue to the bus stop. As they walked, they were surprised to see Mrs. Johnson in her garden.

"Good morning, kids," Mrs. Johnson greeted them. "Where are you two going at this early hour on a Saturday?"

Claire looked at Jacob, and decided it was safe to tell Mrs. Johnson the truth. "I'm going downtown to Bustamante Stadium for the Olympic track and field try-outs. We told Ms. Bennett that we're going for job interviews. There was no way she'd let us out for something like the trials. Would you mind keeping this a secret?" she rushed through.

Mrs. Johnson replied, "Of course. You don't think I know how Ms. Bennett would react if she heard about this? I think it's wonderful that you're trying out. You're as fast as any of those pros out there. Good luck and be careful."

Jacob and Claire couldn't hide their shock. "Thank you. Don't worry. Claire will race her heart out. I'll make sure of it," Jacob promised.

All Claire could think of to say was, "Thanks, Mrs. Johnson. I won't let you down." Claire and Jacob made their way down Harlem Avenue, and barely caught the 6:15 bus downtown. They dropped their coins in the slot, found two seats in the back of the bus, and made themselves comfortable for the long ride ahead.

They reached Bustamante Stadium at 7:45. There were probably five hundred runners already waiting in line for their race lineup. Stretching in line, trying to get warm for her race, Claire anxiously waited. Maybe it was her nerves, but before Claire knew it, she was third in line to receive the track information. She dressed in her track gear, stretched even more, and soon received the lineup for her race. Jacob noticed that she had about an hour and a half until her race.

"Okay, Claire," he cautiously began, "we have a little time to kill before your race. You said that you contacted the only Elizabeth Marshall and all of the Johns here. You narrowed down the three John Marshalls to one living here downtown. What exactly did you say to them?"

Claire patiently responded, "I called them both. I started out easily with my questions. I eventually had to tell them, though, who I was and why I called. I just told them that I worked at the Homewood Children's Orphanage, which is not a complete lie. The Elizabeth Marshall I contacted was once married to John Marshall, and her maiden name was Smith. John Marshall was once married to an Elizabeth Smith." She couldn't finish, as she had tears in her eyes.

"Come on, Claire. Tell me. We've been through all this together. You can't bail on me now."

Claire tried again. "They had a daughter, but had to give her up for adoption. I couldn't believe they told me all this, to a complete stranger. But I believe them, Jacob. He was once married to an Elizabeth Smith. She was once married to a John Marshall. And their daughter's name is Claire." Claire finished this, out of breath. "I told them I'm Claire. I told them everything I knew about them. I told them things about myself that only the real Claire Marshall

could know. I believe them, now they have to believe me. I told them that if they did, they should show up to my trials. Together, though. They kept in touch. If they believe me, they'll show up. It's a long shot, but I'm desperate."

The time had come. Claire was ready to go, in her track gear, lined up at her blocks. She looked at Jacob to see if he would give her the signal that her parents were there. She had told Elizabeth and John to find a slender boy, dark-skinned with brown hair, waiting at Track 3. Jacob was on the lookout for them too, as Claire had given him a description of what Elizabeth and John had said they looked like. She still couldn't believe they had shared so much information over the phone with a stranger, but right now she didn't care. She peered at Jacob, who shook his head no. It was time for the race, and they hadn't shown up.

Claire danced in her lane, trying to get even looser. The announcer told all of the runners to take their stance in the blocks. She jumped twice, stretched her legs, and got in the blocks. "Ready!" Claire had her head bowed down in a crouch. "Set!" She raised her body into an arch, ready to run. She glanced up at Jacob. And there they were. Two people: Elizabeth and John Marshall. She knew it was them. She had her mom's hair and slim figure, her dad's long legs. She smiled to herself. She had already won her race. "Go!"