

## Track

The first time I really noticed Cooper, I was ten. It was the day they started calling him a thief. The only things I would steal back then were the milkweed blooms pressed against the back of the schoolyard, but even then, I re-planted the seeds as an apology.

Cooper held a small sun chained to a pendant. I doubled behind him to catch a better glimpse, though I didn't get far. Today, I'm still chasing after this undefined figure – broad back and muscled legs – savoring that first taste of *run*.

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The scruffy track shoes massage my toes as I bounce in anticipation. Marie sits next to me as I fiddle with the thick black goggles that ride my nose like wings.

“Lynn, can't you see without those?” she asks.

“Not a thing,” I say and lift them slightly. “I lost a contact.”

“They're ugly,” she responds, scratching her ankle. “The captain is supposed to look more – I don't know, powerful?”

The runners line up before I can reply, and my t-shirt falls over my shoulders like a rucksack as I grab the clipboard under my seat. Truth is, I wouldn't look like a captain even if I took them off. I'm younger than the others, but Coach says I run like I'm made of pistons.

“Have you ever seen a bank thief trying to make his getaway on foot?” Coach said last meet. “Because you run like you're afraid of getting caught.” I laughed it off, but sometimes when I'm comfortable enough to feel the guide of the track with just the wind, I close my eyes, and that voice screaming “Cooper” comes at me like a greyhound.

Marie scoffs and points at the ones she thinks will fail. Her pen circles a girl. On the track, her red hair practically consumes her eyes, but her leg muscles look like she's been pounding down on these tracks since she could stand.

“That one, too,” she says. This time it's a boy. His scrawny arms flap up as he stretches. I pull my bottom lip into my mouth. He furrows his eyes at the nearby redhead, then looks up. I give him a silty smile. He reminds me of myself, the competitive glares I used to shoot at Cooper when he was a senior on the team.

Coach twirls her thumb at us. I pull the timer from my pocket and signal back. Secretly, my hope is with those two. I mouth “Start” before Coach lets the flag drop. The world bucks

under the field.

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His name is Jed, and a storm is hunched over him.

“I didn’t see him in tryouts,” I tell Marie. She loops the frayed edges of old shoelaces around her wrist. It’s a habit before the run. For me, it’s holding my chest to my legs while stretching. It feels like my heart is in my knees, pumping thunder claps of blood.

“Well, I saw him,” Marie says. She sucks her teeth. “You should know these things.” Her shoulders look perfectly square in the summer air as she bends forward.

“Sorry,” I say half-heartedly. The bleachers creak as I sit.

“I stayed a bit after tryouts.”

“He came late?”

“In an old t-shirt and sneakers,” Marie sighs. “He didn’t even warm up before hand, but coach was captivated by him.”

“He ran that fast?”

“You’re not that special, Lynn,” she chides. “Someone else can make it onto varsity as an underclassman, you know.”

She takes a sip of her water bottle before adding, “and he looks just like *him*.”

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*I’m not that special.* I’ve been made to feel different since I joined the varsity team as a seventh grader. They say Jed runs like me, but he only talks to the track during practice.

“He’s good,” the little tan boy from tryouts says as he waits for the field to vacate. His name is Ados. He weaves thin fingers through his hair before sitting on the bench.

“You’re good yourself,” I tell him, “and pass the compliment on to Amy.” I’m referring to the redhead. “You’re both the pride of our junior varsity.”

“Thank you, but Amy isn’t my friend,” he fumbles, “she’s my rival.”

*Rival.* I watch Jed walking off the field. The sun catches his neck and the side of his face. I understand what Marie meant. He does have an uncanny resemblance to Cooper. I dislike him even more.

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Noon does not arrive but falls on us instead. The first meet is next week, and practices are shelved on top of each other.

Ados and Amy sit next to me before practice. I've taken them under my wing because I know the difference being sheltered can make.

Amy kicks the bench in front of us. "Why did you start running?"

Ados nods his head. "We heard an old member taught you-"

I interrupt before he finishes. "I'm running for a ghost."

Silence unfurls itself.

I laugh because honesty is sneaky as it waits to crawl out the back of my throat. I don't deny it, but I don't say more. I am running for myself, for a ghost, to catch something. It's a half truth. The important thing is that I have a cause.

Marie pulls up next to me later during practice.

"Did you notice that Jed hasn't been here for two practices?" she asks. His name curdles in the air like it's expired.

I shrug. "Coach is the one that wanted him."

Marie frowns. "He's a star. Talk to him."

"I don't want-"

"You're only captain," she sneers, "because you wanted to lord it over us. A real captain *leads*."

All I wanted was to make Cooper proud.

"I didn't want anything." I tap my water bottle, and wonder when Jed was recognized as an asset, when he began to be treated equally by the rest of the varsity team, something for which I've been longing for years.

"I'll see what I can do."

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I see him on my way home. His shadow is wrapped around a stop sign like a ribbon on a maypole. A cigarette hangs off his bottom lip and a red flannel flares out from under his sweatshirt.

"Your lungs will dry," I say. He sometimes pants after practice. He shouldn't be so careless with his health.

He doesn't reply. I notice his sooty blonde hair is gelled back.

"Some people don't even have the liberty to breathe anymore." I pull the cigarette out of his mouth and press on it with the tip of my shoe. "You've been skipping practice," I say.

“I have a job. That’s more important than practice.” The pavement is split on either side of him.

Cooper stole and worked two jobs to get by. But he never skipped practice. He was after his dream, and a scholarship was always at the back of his head. On bad days, he shook after practice.

“They say we’re alike, but we’re not.” I curl my hands until the last word fades.

Jed walks away.

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He’s there at practice early, half-hidden by the rounds of bodies on the field.

Ados runs up the bleacher steps with Amy. Her hair catches my sight like a trail of fire, and I wait for smoke to follow her heaving figure.

“Lynn!” they say in unison.

Ados continues, “Why is Marie talking crap about Jed being better than you? I don’t think he is.”

“Thanks, but I wouldn’t waste my breath on him.”

“But—”

“I’m not threatened by someone with no purpose.” *Cooper* sounds off in my head like a church bell. Track team has never been more important to me than when he left.

“I want you to prove them wrong!” Amy bellows, and Ados nods. “We look up to you. What if they had belittled *your* mentor?”

I look down at Jed, sitting next to Marie on the field. My legs carry me down without further protest.

“I challenge you,” I say coldly.

Marie rolls her eyes.

“Not you,” I say, “*you*.” I look at Jed.

A blank look remains on his face, but he gets up. Then he smirks. “When I win, you’ll have to admit that I’m better.”

I dig my fingers inside my palm like I’m grounding herbs. “You’re good at long distance, so I’ll make it the 800 meter run.”

My foot ticks the seconds before he mouths, “Go.”

There is a weight in my knees keeping me back. We lock at the shoulders when there are

ten yards left. “You’re not Cooper, Lynn,” he says.

I swallow the base of my tongue. He has no right to mention the name, no right to comb through my thoughts as if they were tangled. I lunge ahead. My eyes blur as I win. When he crosses, I turn and knock him onto the ground.

“I won,” I say. “You can’t belittle me.”

Marie drags me off, and I repeat, “You can’t belittle me.”

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When I held up my varsity team t-shirt to Cooper in seventh grade, he patted my head and said, “You little crook. You finally stole a spot next to me.” I memorized how the corners of his mouth lifted his whole face like a pulley system, so different from the half-smiles Marie would give me.

I like to think that his death was from his ambition to succeed and not because he was scared of being caught.

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I feel around the pavement, hoping that Coach won’t be too mad when I return to practice. I find the small memorial road sign behind an arm of weeds. I rip the foliage from the ground so the view of his name is no longer obstructed.

I hear footsteps. Jed is there, and I frown.

“You have no right to follow me,” I say, rubbing grass stains off on my track shorts.

He ignores me. “It’s stupid to idolize the dead.”

“I’m not idolizing him. I’m remembering.”

“The way he died was stupid. Cooper was a stupid thief. He thought he was helping us.”

*Us.* The word pierces me. My mouth feels like it’s stuffed with cotton. I knew Cooper had a brother, and that they didn’t have the same father, but I should have recognized his mother’s surname when I first set eyes on the roster. And then there was the obvious resemblance.

He speaks up again. “I remember seeing you a few times – always sticking around him like a tick. I hate that you replaced him as captain.”

“Shut up!”

He doesn’t budge. “Coach put me on the team because I sorta run like him-”

“You don’t.” His body doesn’t displace the air in the same manner.

“I know,” Jed says harshly.

I’m quiet. Cooper’s presence is already fading. It’s been two years.

“She thinks I can be like him – that you should teach me. You knew him best. Maybe you can.”

“So now you *want* to be like him?” I ask sarcastically, tracing the worn sign.

“Not like you do. It’s as if he’s haunting your skin. That moment I said his name, you took off like a bullet. Still.” Jed extends his hand in submission. “Teach me. I’m supposed to be his brother. I *am* his brother.”

“They say I run like a thief,” I say, defeated. “They only acknowledge that part of him in me.”

“No,” Jed says. “He might have, but that was his track, not yours. The past is what holds footprints, and you run like the future.”