



Chapter 1

Waking to a Nightmare



Mali always loved the moment just before a race began—crouched in starting position, muscles tense. Waiting... waiting... then, CRACK! She lunged forward, arms and legs pumping, the wind streaming through her hair.

But something was wrong. Mali's legs felt strangely heavy, and each step she took seemed to push the finish line further away. She was running in slow motion, pushing through air that was more like water. Yet the other athletes sprinted past, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Mali flung herself onto the track, unable to run through air that was now as thick as honey. She rolled onto her back, exhausted and blinded by the sun.

Riding High

A light was blazing in Mali's face. Was it the sun? She half woke to drifting whispers and darting shadows. Relieved that the race hadn't happened after all, Mali smiled dreamily. She'd never come last in her life and she wasn't about to start now.

Falling asleep once again into swirling blackness, Mali found herself still lying on the track. The race winners were now receiving



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their medals. Why didn't she walk over and congratulate them? Lucky this was just a dream or she'd get into big trouble for poor sportsmanship.

Mali's father appeared, blurry and somehow unfamiliar. Ah, that's it. He'd grown a beard. This dream was getting weirder by the minute.

"Mali? Can you hear me?"

At the sound of her father's voice, Mali slowly opened her eyes. Everything was hazy and painful in the glare of the light. A hospital room gradually came into focus, and Mali realised that both her parents and her brother Aran were gathered around her. She felt strangely weightless, as if floating above the bed, rather than lying in it.

"Hey," she whispered to her father, "you really *do* have a beard. How did you talk Mum into that one?"

Her father seemed flustered. "Oh, your mother's not really thinking about that at the moment," he answered nervously.

"But how did you grow it so fast? You didn't have one yesterday," Mali persisted.

He glanced at her mum before saying, "Mali, you're in the hospital. You've been in here for over a week."