

The Chase

Jacob Jollimore didn't hesitate; his fight-or-flight instinct was missing the fight half. His feet barely touched the aisle as he dashed to the rear doors of the bus, just as they began to close. He felt every throb of his heart in his throat. But here was the exit. Once through, he'd be safe. He leapt through the door, landed squarely on the sidewalk, and enjoyed the brief sensation of flight.

Whew!

But he couldn't believe it, the bully—the Neanderthal—was still coming for him, shoving his way through the half-closed doors.

Jacob blanched, turned, and sprinted. Faces blurred as he dodged in and out. He glanced over his shoulder. Could he outrun such an athletic-looking kid? Maybe. Running was the one sport that he did well. Some really stupid part of him was even enjoying this chase. He was a jaguar, a cheetah, his legs pumping furiously, the breeze whipping at his clothes.

He glanced back again. The small distance he'd opened between them brought another rush of adrenalin.

No sweat.

Something caught his shoulder; it was more a brush than a bump. For half a second, he saw a couple of cans and maybe a zucchini in midair. He didn't have time to apologize. He didn't hear the bones snapping or the thud of a fragile skull on concrete. But later his imagination filled in those horrible sounds a thousand times and he was embarrassed to admit to himself that his first thought was: *Good! That might slow him down.*

He kept running for seven more strides before he heard the shouts, followed by more of the mocking laughter he'd come to hate. The commotion told him it was bad even before he looked back. There, in front of the deli. The Neanderthal had joined a group surrounding a figure slumped on the sidewalk. It was obvious that the chase was over, at least for today. And that this mess was far worse than the

thumping the Neanderthal had been planning.

As if by tractor beam, Jacob was dragged into the gathering crowd. One Francophone woman called him a jerk, throwing him a fierce glare that was like a punch to his belly.

“Puis ça c’est le petit morveux qui a jeté la femme à terre!” she spat.

“And he was just going to keep running, did you see?” snarled the Neanderthal. He winked at Jacob and blew a kiss before melting into the foot traffic.

An old woman lay motionless on the ground. She was neatly dressed in a navy-blue floral dress, colourless cardigan and sensible navy slip-on shoes. Her pencil-straight salt-and-pepper hair was pinned behind her ears. Her tidiness looked *wrong* on the grimy, gum-splotted sidewalk.

Jacob couldn’t move as he stared at her. He didn’t think that he could knock anyone down. He was a shrimp, and he knew it. But there she was, her cans of coconut milk and vegetables scattered on the ground.

Mr. Weinstein, of Weinstein’s Deli, hurried into his shop for a phone.

A young man in a business suit was holding the old woman’s hand, speaking gently in her ear, but she wasn’t moving. Jacob felt like he was floating, looking down at the disaster he’d caused. He forced himself to reach for the loose vegetables and made a pile of battered zucchini, ginger and lemongrass.

God, why won’t she move?

Finally, she stirred. She jerked slightly and stifled a yelp—the suited man called after Mr. Weinstein that her humerus was fractured, too. She turned her head and Jacob gasped at the ugly bruise that was blossoming across her cheekbone.

Why didn’t she say something? She was Asian, like him, and so, so old, wizened like an apple doll. He couldn’t take his eyes off her bruise—until he noticed the blood. The back of her head was bleeding, puddling around her like a crimson halo. Jacob almost threw up. He shrugged off his hoodie with a vague thought of stanching the wound.

Then she was looking around, blinking rapidly. She spoke quickly, in a language no one recognized. Her good hand started twitching, brushing her head, her arm.

Mr. Weinstein reappeared with a bag of ice in one hand and a cellphone pressed to his ear. The crowd grew.

“... La tête. Oui, Weinstein’s Deli sur Saint-Laurent. L’original,” said Mr. Weinstein as he knelt by the old woman. He seemed to know her. “Elle est éveillée, et elle parle.”

He gently pressed the ice pack against the bruise on her cheek. “Try not to move around so much, Mrs. Nguyen,” said Mr. Weinstein, switching to English. “Does it hurt anywhere else?”

Jacob closed his eyes. She was Vietnamese.

Could it be any worse?

He still held out his sweatshirt, but no one noticed.

One of Mr. Weinstein’s waitresses, the pretty one, Tova, hurried from the deli with clean dishcloths and more ice. She gently packed it beneath the old woman’s head and turned toward Jacob.

“Snap out of it, Jacob. You didn’t do it on purpose,” she said sharply. Then, softly, “Mrs. Nguyen, is there someone we should call?”

“No. No one.” The old lady’s voice was strong now, surprising Jacob.

In the distance, ambulance sirens keened.

Mr. Weinstein was speaking. Jacob was so distracted that he missed the first part.

“What?” he mumbled. Not his finest hour.

“We won’t move Mrs. Nguyen in case she has a concussion, but we have to keep her warm. Your sweatshirt will help.”

Jacob handed it over, and then had nothing to do. His brain processed just bits and pieces of what happened next. Tova draped his hoodie around Mrs. Nguyen, whose good hand fluttered over the fabric, compulsively rubbing it between her fingers. The ambulance emblazoned with SANTÉ MONTRÉAL pulled up. The paramedics, a calm African Canadian man and a Quebecker with tattoos down both arms, assessed the old lady’s injuries efficiently.

They strapped her in a neck brace to protect against any spinal injuries.

“Spine seems okay. . . A humeral fracture. . . and I’d say the radial fracture is compacted,” the African Canadian said, speaking in English, perhaps for Mrs. Nguyen’s benefit.

“We’re going to stabilize your arm, ma’am. It might hurt.”

The tattooed one asked her several dumb questions—what is the date? which city is this? who is the prime minister?—and she answered correctly, grimacing with pain.

She cried out just once, when the quiet paramedic moved her arm, but bit it back in an instant. Loading her in the ambulance seemed to take forever.

“You coming with grandmère, kid?” asked the French guy, jerking his head towards the open ambulance doors.

The assumption was reasonable. Jacob was a thin, thirteen-year-old teenager who had been adopted from Vietnam as a baby. He might have been born in the same city as the old lady. They might even be related!

“He is *not* my grandson!” the old woman snapped in that strong voice.

The French guy looked at Mrs. Nguyen, then back at Jacob, his eyebrows raised. Mr. Weinstein smoothed things over.

“The kid isn’t her relative,” he said, lowering his voice. “He accidentally knocked her down.”

The paramedic’s face went hard. “You stay here.”

As the ambulance pulled away, Jacob turned and started running again, running through the busy streets towards the old hotel, only slowing when tears blinded him.