CHAPTER ONE

The First Absence

The Man I Planned to Destroy

Before I ever met my father, I had already rehearsed the encounter.

Not calmly.
Not rationally.
Not with maturity.

With force.

In my imagination, I would confront him physically. I would not begin with questions. I would not open with curiosity. I would begin with impact. I had built an entire internal script around the idea that if he did not come seeking forgiveness, I would crush him without mercy.

That was the word I used inside myself.

Mercy.

And I planned to withhold it.

It is unsettling to admit that now. But it is true.

Anger had been fermenting for decades without a face to absorb it. Absence is abstract when you are young. You do not know what to aim your frustration toward. You only feel the space. The missing voice. The missing presence. The unanswered questions about resemblance.

Why do I look like this?
Where does this intensity come from?
Who do I come from?

As a boy, you don't articulate it that way. You just feel it.

As a young man, that feeling hardens.

I told myself that if he had no apology ready, if he stood before me casual or dismissive, I would not hesitate. I would impose the strength I had built on the field. I would use the body that had trained for impact. I would make him feel what I had carried.

And if the confrontation did not become physical, it would certainly become verbal. I had rehearsed those words too. Years of stored accusation. Years of narrative. Years of what I imagined I deserved to hear but never did.

I would force him to admit guilt.

I would extract acknowledgment.

And if he resisted, I would walk away coldly — victorious in detachment.

It sounds dramatic now.

But for a young man who had spent years building identity around strength and control, confrontation felt like justice.

Absence demands explanation. When explanation does not come, imagination fills the gap. And imagination, unchecked, grows teeth.

I did not meet my father until I was thirty-three.

By then I was already a husband. Already a father. Already a man with a professional degree underway. Already someone who had built an image of stability. Already someone determined never to resemble him.

That was the irony.

The anger I carried toward him had shaped the very structure of my life.

I would not disappear.
I would not drift.
I would not abandon.
I would not be weak.

I would be present.
I would be strong.

I would be formidable.
I would not fail.

And underneath all of it was a silent vow:

I will never be you.

But the body remembers what the mind avoids.

The intensity on the field.
The near fights.
The edge I carried.
The refusal to show fear.
The need to dominate.

Those traits did not grow in isolation.

They were reactions.

Reactions to absence.
Reactions to uncertainty.
Reactions to a father-shaped space that had never been filled.

When the opportunity to meet him finally came,
the anger did not disappear.

It condensed.

I was not a boy anymore.
I was not a teenager fantasizing about revenge.

I was a grown man with children of my own.

And yet the script remained.

If he does not ask forgiveness, I will destroy him.

That is what unresolved absence does.

It creates a courtroom long before the defendant arrives.

I did not yet understand that what I wanted most was not confrontation.

It was acknowledgment.

And what I feared most was not his denial.

It was indifference.

Anger is easier to carry than vulnerability.

It feels strong.
It feels active.
It feels righteous.

But beneath it is something far less armored.

Grief.

And grief does not know how to defend itself.

So it borrows strength from rage.

When I finally stood face to face with him, I was ready.

Not physically postured.
But internally braced.

The years between boyhood and thirty-three had not erased the absence.

They had only layered accomplishment over it.

You can build a life on top of a wound.

You just cannot prevent it from shaping the foundation.

The First Time I Saw His Face Move

I had never seen my father in motion.

Only in a photograph.

A single frozen image that carried no breath, no voice, no mannerisms. Just a face printed on paper — still, distant, undefined.

Photographs are strange placeholders. They allow you to imagine personality without evidence. You can project tone into a silent mouth. You can assign strength to a still jawline. You can invent presence from a flat image.

For years, that photograph was all I had.

I studied it more than I would admit.

Searching for resemblance.
Searching for explanation.
Searching for proof that something of him lived in me.

But a photograph cannot answer questions.

It cannot apologize.
It cannot defend itself.
It cannot disappoint you further.

When I flew to Dallas, I carried that image in my mind — the man from the photograph. The one I had mentally constructed. The one I had rehearsed confronting.

The airport was crowded, indifferent to what it meant for me to stand there waiting.

And then I saw him.

Not the photograph.

A moving body.

An aging frame.

A man pulling an oxygen tank behind him.

The thin clear tube ran beneath his nose. The machine hummed softly as he walked. He adjusted it awkwardly as if trying to appear more capable than he felt.

In that instant, the photograph dissolved.

I had imagined confronting strength.

Instead, I was looking at fragility.

The first time I ever saw my father move, he was already struggling for breath.

That detail does something to a son.

You do not get to confront a myth.
You confront mortality.

He was smaller than I expected.

Not just thinner.

Smaller in presence.

Time had reduced him before I ever had the chance to measure myself against him.

And something inside me faltered.

For years I had imagined the physical confrontation. If he did not ask forgiveness, I would impose it. If he resisted, I would overpower

him. If he dismissed my pain, I would dismantle him verbally.

But standing in that airport, watching him steady himself beside an oxygen tank, I realized how grotesque my rehearsals would look against reality.

You cannot physically strike a man who is already tethered to breath.

You cannot verbally annihilate someone whose body is visibly declining.

And I felt something I did not expect.

Disappointment.

Disappointment that I could not execute the script I had carried.

Disappointment that justice would not look the way I had imagined.

Disappointment that my anger suddenly had nowhere to land.

That startled me.

Because what does it say about a man who feels disappointed he cannot hurt his father?

The oxygen tank revealed more about me than it did about him.

It exposed the violence I had nurtured privately.

The years of imagined retribution.

The internal courtroom I had constructed.

He looked at me with uncertainty.

Not defiance.
Not indifference.

Uncertainty.

Like a man unsure how much damage he deserved.

The photograph in my mind had held posture.

The man in front of me held tubing.

He extended his hand.

It was not the grip of dominance I had anticipated.

It was tentative.

Human.

Aging.

The years between boyhood and thirty-three
compressed into a single breathless moment.

For decades, I had been angry at absence.

Now absence had a face.

And that face was vulnerable.

Rage feeds on resistance.

But there was none.

Only breath.

Only age.

Only the hum of oxygen reminding me that time was already doing what I once wanted to do.

And something inside me shifted — not toward forgiveness yet — but toward reality.

The confrontation I had prepared for would not occur.

The man I had planned to overpower was already diminished.

And that realization dismantled my strength in a way no physical struggle ever could have.

For the first time, I saw my father not as a symbol of failure — but as a mortal man nearing the end of his.

And I did not know what to do with that.

He Called Me Son

I do not remember what he said at the airport.

That surprises people when I tell them.

You would think a first meeting between a father and son after thirty-three years would be etched into memory in full detail.

But I was too consumed with my own internal noise to absorb much of what he said.

I was still recalibrating.

Still adjusting from the photograph to the oxygen tank.
Still trying to reconcile anger with fragility.
Still holding decades of rehearsed confrontation that now had nowhere to go.

The words he spoke that day did not register clearly.

But one word did.

Son.

He called me son.

It was simple.
Ordinary.
Natural.

But it landed heavier than anything else he could have said.

I had built my life reacting to a father I did not know.

I had vowed never to resemble him.
Never to disappear.
Never to fail in presence.

And here he was, calling me son — as if that identity had never been interrupted.

As if it had existed all along.

Something in me resisted it.

You do not get to call me that, I thought.

You forfeited that right.

But another part of me — quieter, deeper — felt something I was not prepared for.

Recognition.

Identity does not disappear because relationship fractures.

Blood does not rewrite itself.
Resemblance does not vanish because contact did.

I was his son whether I liked it or not.

And hearing him say it forced me to confront something I had avoided:

My entire identity had been shaped in response to a man whose voice I had never heard.

And now I was hearing it.

Not strong.
Not commanding.
Not imposing.

Aging.
Measured.
Attached to oxygen.

He called me son.

And the anger I had curated did not know how to respond to that.

We spent time together during that visit.

Conversations that I only half remember.
Stories I did not know how to process.
Details of his life that arrived too late to integrate easily.

But there was no grand apology that first trip.

No dramatic reckoning.
No confession at the airport.

The courtroom inside me remained partially open.

It would take years before it fully closed.

A few years later, I flew back to see him again.

This time, he was dying.

The oxygen tank had given way to something quieter.
More final.

He could not speak.

His body no longer supported conversation in the way it once could.

Instead, we wrote.

Back and forth.
Short sentences.
Fragments.
Clarifications.

There is something sobering about watching a man use his last strength to form words on paper.

He wrote what he could not say aloud.

He apologized.

Not defensively.
Not conditionally.

Directly.

For not being there.
For the absence.
For what I had carried.

The words were not long.
Not eloquent.
Not rehearsed.

But they were clear.

I had spent years preparing to force
acknowledgment.

And there it was.

Offered freely.
At the edge of death.

The violence I had once imagined felt grotesque in
retrospect.

I had planned to dominate a man whose final act
toward me would be humility.

As we passed paper back and forth, something
loosened inside me.

Not instantly.
Not theatrically.

Gradually.

Anger is loud when it is imagined.
It becomes quiet when it is witnessed.

He did not argue.
He did not justify.
He did not deflect.

He wrote.

I'm sorry.

That was enough.

Not to erase the years.
Not to recover childhood.
Not to undo absence.

But enough to dismantle the courtroom.

And in its place, something unexpected began to grow.

Relief.

The Collapse of Anger

When I left his bedside that final time, I did not feel triumphant.

I did not feel resolved.

I did not feel spiritually elevated.

I felt exhausted.

The kind of exhaustion that does not come from physical labor, but from decades of tension finally loosening.

For years, anger had been structured inside me like scaffolding. It supported a version of strength I believed I needed. It kept me upright. It kept me vigilant. It gave my ambition direction.

Anger had been useful.

It had fueled performance.
It had sharpened edge.
It had justified intensity.

And now, sitting beside a dying man passing handwritten apologies back and forth, that scaffolding had nowhere left to attach.

There was nothing to fight.

No resistance.
No denial.
No debate.

Just a man nearing the end of his breath, offering ownership.

Anger does not evaporate in a single moment. It collapses in stages.

First, it loses its target.
Then it loses its justification.
Finally, it loses its energy.

At the bedside, something in me stopped bracing.

Not because I was suddenly gentle.
Not because I became saintly.
But because I could no longer sustain the posture.

The man I had prepared to overpower was writing apologies with fading strength.

The years I had imagined unleashing rage now looked disproportionate to reality.

I had carried a storm meant for a battlefield.

Instead, I was sitting in a quiet room with a man who could barely speak.

When I walked out of that room, I felt drained.

Not angry.
Not euphoric.
Drained.

It was as if my body had been holding a position for thirty-three years and finally allowed itself to rest.

Exhaustion often follows long-held tension.

The adrenaline fades.
The rehearsed arguments dissolve.
The body recalibrates.

On the flight home, I did not replay confrontations in my mind.

I replayed the word he had written.

Sorry.

It was simple.
Unearned in my imagination.
Freely given in reality.

And something inside me shifted from aggression to grief.

Not grief for what had happened in that room.

Grief for what would never happen.

There would be no rebuilding of childhood.
No shared seasons.
No extended conversations that spanned years.

The apology closed a chapter, but it did not create a new one.

That realization weighed heavier than anger ever had.

Anger energizes.

Grief quiets.

I had spent most of my adult life fueled by anger I disguised as discipline.

Now I was facing something far more difficult to carry.

Loss without hostility.

And emotional exhaustion is often the body's first response to that kind of truth.

It is the cost of finally laying something down.

I did not walk away from his bedside healed.

I walked away emptied.

And that emptiness created space.

Space for something I had not allowed before.

Compassion.

Not immediate.
Not dramatic.
But possible.

The Wave

Exhaustion was the first feeling.

Relief was the second.

It did not come in theory.
It did not arrive as reflection.
It came as a wave.

Not complete relief.
Not tidy.
Not total.

But unmistakable.

Somewhere between the hospital and the airport, something inside me loosened in a way it never had before.

I had spent decades bracing against a man I did not know.

Decades building strength in reaction to absence. Decades sharpening edge so I would never resemble what I imagined he was.

And now the confrontation had ended not in violence, not in dominance, not in argument — but in apology.

Written.
Simple.
Unequivocal.

The body knows when something has shifted before the mind articulates it.

I remember feeling lighter.

That startled me.

How can you feel lighter leaving a dying father behind?

But that is the paradox of long-carried anger.

When it finally has nowhere left to land, it dissolves into something else.

I had imagined that forgiveness would feel like surrender.
Like weakness.
Like letting him off the hook.

It did not.

It felt like oxygen.

The irony was not lost on me.

The man tethered to oxygen had unknowingly given me breath.

For the first time in years, I was not mentally rehearsing arguments.
Not revisiting absence.
Not replaying imagined confrontations.

The courtroom was quiet.

Not because the past had been rewritten.
Because it had been acknowledged.

And acknowledgment matters more than revenge.

I did not walk away excusing anything.

I walked away understanding something.

He had failed.
Yes.

But he was also human.

And I had built him into something larger than life in my anger.

When anger shrinks back to scale, relief follows.

Not because the past disappears.
But because it no longer dominates the present.

The wave was immediate.

Incomplete.
But undeniable.

And beneath it was something deeper I would only understand years later.

Compassion not just for him.

But for myself.

Because I realized something I had not been willing to admit:

The intensity I carried.
The refusal to show fear.
The obsession with strength.
The drive to dominate.

None of it had been random.

It had been armor.

Armor built around absence.

And when the absence was finally acknowledged, the armor did not need to stay fully engaged.

Relief does not mean reconciliation of history.

It means release of burden.

That wave did not fix my life.
It did not immediately change my marriage.
It did not automatically make me a gentler man.

But it removed one layer of silent pressure I had carried since boyhood.

And sometimes that is enough to begin changing trajectory.

The Fear of Resemblance

The relief that followed his apology did not erase the years I had built in reaction to him.

It only revealed them.

For most of my adult life, I was not simply trying to succeed.

I was trying not to resemble.

Not abandon.
Not disappear.
Not drift.
Not weaken.
Not emotionally detach.
Not become the man whose absence had shaped me.

The fear of resemblance is subtle.

It does not announce itself loudly.

It disguises itself as discipline.
As ambition.
As commitment.
As strength.

I told myself I was driven.

But beneath the drive was vigilance.

I will not fail like he did.
I will not leave like he did.
I will not be passive.
I will not be forgettable.

I built presence aggressively.

Bedtime prayers.
Intentional conversations.
Structured involvement.
Performance on the field.
Performance at work.
Performance as a husband.
Performance as a father.

Winning and losing were not just about competition.

They were about identity.

If I won, I was strong.
If I dominated, I was undeniable.
If I endured, I was stable.

And stability meant I was nothing like him.

That was the logic.

What I did not see at the time was how fear shapes intensity.

The anger I carried toward my father had sharpened me.

It had also hardened me.

I did not show fear.

Fear was weakness.

I did not slow down.

Slowing down felt like drifting.

I did not rest.

Rest felt like vulnerability.

My mother had warned me often:

“You cannot burn the candle at both ends.”

I believed I could.

Not because I was superhuman.
Because I was afraid.

Afraid that if I relaxed even slightly, something would fracture.
Afraid that if I softened, I would resemble.
Afraid that if I admitted exhaustion, I would confirm weakness.

The body can sustain that for a while.

The mind can rationalize it longer.

But relationships eventually feel it.

You can be present and still unavailable.
You can provide and still be distant.
You can love and still lead from tension.

The fear of becoming my father made me overcorrect.

I overcompensated in strength.
In dominance.
In endurance.
In intensity.

And here is the painful irony:

The more you try not to resemble something, the more it quietly shapes you.

Not in identical behavior.
But in reactive architecture.

I did not abandon my children.

But I built fatherhood with a clenched jaw.

I did not drift from responsibility.

But I overextended myself trying to prove I never would.

I did not disappear emotionally.

But I rarely admitted fear.

The resemblance I feared was not behavioral.

It was structural.

Absence creates hyper-presence.
Weakness creates hyper-strength.
Silence creates hyper-performance.

When I left my father's bedside and felt that wave of relief, what I did not yet understand was this:

The man I had been trying to outrun had already shaped the course.

Not because I was doomed to repeat him.

But because fear had been my compass.

And fear, even when productive, is still fear.

The apology he wrote did not just release anger.

It exposed motive.

I had not been building strength purely from aspiration.

I had been building it defensively.

And defensive architecture always carries tension.

That tension would follow me into marriage.

Into fatherhood.
Into work.
Into every arena where I believed performance secured identity.

The fear of resemblance does not disappear because forgiveness occurs.

It must be examined.

And that examination would take years.

How Absence Wires Performance

Looking back now, I cannot separate the athlete from the son.

I used to believe my aggression on the field was pure competitiveness. That I simply loved the

game more. Wanted the win more. Refused to yield.

There was truth in that.

But it was not the whole truth.

My dominance was not only about sport.

It was intertwined.

Competitiveness.
Anger.
Identity defense.

All moving through the same body.

On the field, everything was clean. There were lines. There were rules. There were referees. There was a scoreboard. If you were stronger, faster, more relentless, it showed.

Life off the field was not that orderly.

You cannot out-sprint absence.
You cannot tackle abandonment.
You cannot score against silence.

But you can dominate an opponent.

You can outlast.
You can intimidate.
You can make impact visible.

That visibility matters to a young man trying to prove he is not invisible.

When I pounded shots off the indoor arena wall.
When I played at a level that hovered just below full fights.
When I ran harder and longer than others.
When I refused to back down.

It was intertwined.

There was love for the game.

And there was something else.

I did not want to disappear.

Absence wires the nervous system.

It teaches vigilance.
It teaches scanning.
It teaches intensity.

It teaches you that if you are not strong enough, visible enough, dominant enough — you may be forgotten.

That wiring does not announce itself.

It just becomes personality.

People called me driven.

They called me relentless.

They admired the discipline.

They did not see the architecture beneath it.

Performance can be aspiration.
It can also be insulation.

When you build your identity on proving you are not someone else, you are still orbiting them.

That is the paradox.

For years I believed I had escaped resemblance.

But I had not escaped influence.

The absence of my father shaped the way I moved through arenas.
The way I structured fatherhood.
The way I measured worth.
The way I braced inside marriage.

Not because I wanted to replicate him.

Because I was afraid to.

Fear and ambition can look identical from the outside.

Both produce effort.
Both produce achievement.
Both produce forward motion.

But one produces peace.
The other produces tension.

It would take me decades to distinguish between them.

Standing in that airport in Dallas, watching a man I had only known through a photograph pull an oxygen tank behind him, something foundational shifted.

Not because he suddenly became a hero.

Not because absence was redeemed.

But because anger lost its organizing power.

And once anger loses its organizing power, performance must find a new motive.

Chapter One is not about forgiveness alone.

It is about recognizing how deeply absence can wire a life.

Before I ever stepped onto a field.
Before I married.
Before I held my own children and whispered blessings over them.

I was already reacting.

Already building.

Already proving.

And I did not yet know why.

That understanding would unfold slowly —
through marriage, through collapse, through
estrangement, and eventually through open hands.

But it began there.

With a photograph.

An oxygen tank.

And a word I did not know I needed to hear.

Son.