LEVON BOOKER

With Heart

A Presitage Sports Novel



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Dedication

For those who rise again, even when the world expects them to fall.

WITH HEART

A Prestige Sports Drama Novel

Written by

Levon Booker

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PROLOGUE

THE MOMENT EVERYTHING RETURNS

The stadium is shaking.

Forty thousand voices crash together in a single, thunderous roar that rattles the metal beams and vibrates through the grass. Floodlights burn white against the night sky, turning the field into a stage where legends are made—or destroyed.

Álex Reyes stands at midfield, chest heaving, sweat dripping down his neck, the taste of iron in his mouth. His jersey clings to him like a second skin, streaked with dirt and blood from the last collision. His right knee throbs. His ribs ache. His vision pulses at the edges.

But none of that matters.

The scoreboard above him blinks mercilessly:

Final: 89:12

Home 1 — Visitors 1

One minute left.

One chance left.

The ball rolls toward him, slow, almost deliberate, as if the universe itself is placing it at his feet. The crowd rises. The air tightens. Time stretches thin.

And then—

A voice he hasn't heard in years.

"Con corazón, mijo… with heart."

Álex freezes.

It's impossible.

It's insane.

But it's him.

His father.

Coach Rafael Reyes—dead, buried, gone—whispers through the roar of the stadium as clearly as if he were standing right behind him, hand on his shoulder like he used to before every match.

Álex's throat closes. His pulse spikes. His vision blurs—not from exhaustion, but from memory.

A hospital room.

A trembling hand slipping from his.

A promise he failed to keep.

The world tilts.

Opponents close in.

Teammates shout his name.

The crowd chants in waves.

But Álex hears only the ghost of the man who built him.

"One goal can change everything."

His stepmother, Marisol, watches from the stands—hands clasped, eyes wide, praying he doesn't break again. She has seen him fall apart. She has stitched him back together. She knows this moment could save him... or shatter him for good.

Álex draws a breath that tastes like fire.

He pushes forward.

The defenders swarm.

The clock bleeds.

The stadium becomes a heartbeat.

Every step is a war against the weight of his past—

the addiction,

the suspension,

the nights he almost didn't survive,
the guilt that has lived inside him like a second shadow.
He cuts left.
He cuts right.
He sees the goal.
And for the first time in years, he feels it—
the quiet, steady presence of his father walking beside him.
Álex plants his foot.
He swings.
He strikes.
The ball explodes off his boot.
And as it arcs through the air—
as the stadium holds its breath—
as Marisol whispers a prayer—
as the world narrows to a single, spinning point of destiny—
Álex Reyes finally understands:
This isn't about winning.
It's about coming home.
Black.

CHAPTER ONE

The Making of a Legend

The sun had barely risen over San Isidro, but the field behind the old community center was already alive with motion. Dew clung to the grass like tiny shards of glass, sparkling under the first light of morning. A whistle cut through the quiet, sharp and commanding.

Álex Reyes sprinted toward the cones, legs pumping, breath steady, eyes locked forward. He was sixteen, lean but powerful, with the kind of raw talent that made grown men stop mid-conversation just to watch him move. Every stride was precise. Every turn was calculated. Every touch of the ball was a promise.

And behind him, pacing with the intensity of a general preparing for war, was his father.

Coach Rafael Reyes—broad-shouldered, sun-weathered, and carved from the kind of discipline only hardship could forge—watched his son with a gaze that missed nothing.

"Again," Rafael barked.

Álex didn't argue. He never did. He pivoted, sprinted back, and repeated the drill with even sharper precision.

Rafael nodded once, the closest thing he ever gave to praise during training.

"You want to be great?" he said, walking beside Álex as he

caught his breath. "Then you work when others sleep. You bleed when others rest. You chase the goal no one else sees."

Álex wiped sweat from his brow. "I know, Papá."

"No," Rafael said, stopping him with a hand on his shoulder. "You *think* you know. But greatness is lonely, mijo. It demands everything. Even the parts of you that hurt."

Álex swallowed hard. He didn't fully understand, but he felt the weight of the words settle into him like wet cement.

Rafael stepped back and pointed to the net. "One goal," he said. "One goal can change your life."

It was the mantra Álex had heard since he could walk. But today, it felt different—heavier, almost prophetic.

He placed the ball at his feet. He inhaled. He struck.

The ball sliced through the air and slammed into the upper corner of the net with a satisfying thud.

Rafael smiled—not wide, not showy, but real. "Eso," he murmured. "That's my boy."

By mid-morning, the field had filled with neighborhood kids, all eager to train under the legendary Coach Reyes. Parents lined the fence, chatting, laughing, sipping coffee. The smell of fresh arepas drifted from a nearby food cart. It was a normal Saturday in San Isidro—simple, loud, alive.

Álex thrived in it.

He dribbled circles around boys older than him. He threaded impossible passes. He scored from angles that made the crowd gasp. Every time he touched the ball, something electric happened.

"Reyes!" one of the boys shouted. "Slow down, man! You trying to embarrass us?"

Álex grinned. "If you can't keep up, that's not my problem."

The boys groaned, but they loved him for it. He was their star,

their pride, the kid everyone believed would make it out and put their little town on the map.

But no one believed in him more than Rafael.

From the sidelines, Rafael watched with folded arms, his expression unreadable. But every so often, when Álex wasn't looking, a flicker of pride crossed his face.

Marisol, Álex's stepmother, approached with a thermos of coffee. She handed it to Rafael, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"He's getting better," she said softly.

Rafael nodded. "He's getting ready."

"For what?"

"For everything."

Marisol smiled, though she didn't fully understand. She didn't need to. She loved them both fiercely, and that was enough.

Later that afternoon, father and son walked home along the dusty road that cut through the neighborhood. Kids played soccer with a dented can. Music drifted from open windows. Dogs barked lazily from shaded porches.

Rafael carried the ball under his arm. Álex walked beside him, still buzzing from the morning's training.

"Papá," Álex said, kicking a pebble down the road. "Do you really think I can go pro?"

Rafael stopped walking.

He turned to his son, eyes steady, voice firm.

"I don't think," he said. "I *know*."

Álex felt something warm bloom in his chest.

"But talent isn't enough," Rafael continued. "You must be disciplined. Focused. Humble. The world will try to break you. Fame will tempt you. Pressure will crush you if you let it."

Álex nodded, absorbing every word.

Rafael placed a hand on his shoulder. "You have a gift, mijo. But gifts can be wasted. Promise me you won't waste yours."

"I promise."

Rafael smiled. "Good. Because one day, you'll score the goal that changes everything."

Álex didn't know why, but the words sent a chill down his spine.

That night, after dinner, Álex sat on the rooftop, legs dangling over the edge, staring at the stars. The air was warm, the sky clear, the world quiet.

Rafael joined him, sitting beside him without a word.

They watched the sky together, father and son, bound by dreams bigger than their small town.

"Papá," Álex said softly, "what if I fail?"

Rafael didn't look away from the stars. "Then you get up," he said. "And you try again."

"And if I fail again?"

"Then you get up again."

Álex exhaled. "And if I fail a third time?"

Rafael finally turned to him, eyes fierce and full of love.

"Then you keep getting up until the world understands who you are."

Álex swallowed hard. "And who am I?"

Rafael smiled. "My son."

The words settled into Álex like a heartbeat.

He didn't know it then— but this would be the last perfect day of his life.

CHAPTER TWO

The Night Everything Ends

The rain came without warning.

One moment the sky over San Isidro was a soft, cloud-dusted blue, and the next it had darkened into a heavy, bruised gray. Thunder rolled in the distance, low and restless, like a warning no one wanted to hear.

But the stadium lights were already on, the stands already filling, and the energy in the air was too electric to be dimmed by weather. Tonight wasn't just another match. Tonight was the regional semifinal—Álex's biggest stage yet.

He jogged onto the field, cleats splashing through the growing puddles, heart pounding with anticipation. The crowd erupted at the sight of him. His name echoed through the stands like a chant, a promise, a prophecy.

"¡Reyes! ¡Reyes! ¡Reyes!"

He felt invincible.

His father walked beside him, clipboard in hand, rain dripping from the brim of his cap. Rafael Reyes looked calm, focused, unshakable—as if storms were nothing more than background noise.

"You ready?" Rafael asked.

Álex nodded. "More than ready."

Rafael stopped him with a hand on the shoulder. "Remember what we talked about."

"One goal," Álex said.

Rafael shook his head. "No. Not tonight. Tonight, you play for the team. You play with heart."

Álex smirked. "Same thing."

Rafael gave him a look—half stern, half amused. "Don't get cocky."

"I'm not cocky," Álex said. "I'm confident."

"Confidence wins games," Rafael said. "Cockiness loses them."

Álex rolled his eyes, but he felt the warmth of the moment settle into him. His father's voice always grounded him, even when he pretended not to listen.

The whistle blew. The match began.

The rain intensified, turning the field slick and unpredictable. Players slid, collided, cursed under their breath. But Álex moved like he was born in the storm—fast, fluid, fearless.

He dribbled past defenders with ease. He threaded impossible passes. He danced with the ball like it was an extension of his body.

Every time he touched it, the crowd roared.

Rafael watched from the sideline, shouting instructions, adjusting formations, reading the game like a master strategist. His voice cut through the storm, sharp and commanding.

"Shift left!" "Mark number nine!" "Álex—drop back!"

Álex obeyed without hesitation. Their connection was seamless, almost telepathic. Father and son. Coach and player. Two halves of the same heartbeat.

By halftime, the score was tied 1–1.

The locker room buzzed with adrenaline. Players wiped mud

from their faces, wrung water from their jerseys, and tried to catch their breath. Álex sat on the bench, bouncing his leg, unable to sit still.

Rafael stood in front of the team, dripping wet, eyes blazing.

"You're playing well," he said. "But not well enough. You're letting the weather control you. You're letting the pressure control you. You need to take control back."

He pointed at Álex.

"You especially."

Álex straightened. "What do you need?"

"I need you to lead," Rafael said. "Not with goals. With discipline."

Álex nodded, chest swelling with determination.

Rafael smiled—small, proud, the kind of smile that made Álex feel like he could outrun lightning.

"Let's finish this," Rafael said.

The second half was chaos.

The rain became a downpour. The field turned to mud. Players slipped, fell, collided. The ball skidded unpredictably, changing direction with every bounce.

But Álex adapted.

He stole possession. He created openings. He pushed his team forward.

Then, in the 78th minute, it happened.

A defender slammed into him from behind—hard. Álex hit the ground, pain shooting up his spine. The crowd gasped. The referee blew the whistle.

Rafael sprinted onto the field.

"You okay?" he asked, kneeling beside him.

Álex winced. "Yeah. Just got the wind knocked out of me."

Rafael placed a hand on his chest, steady and reassuring.

"Breathe."

Álex inhaled slowly. The pain eased.

"You're good," Rafael said. "But don't be reckless. Play smart."

Álex nodded.

Rafael stood, signaled to the referee, and turned to jog back to the sideline.

He made it three steps.

Then he stopped.

His hand went to his chest.

His face twisted—not in confusion, but in pain.

"Papá?" Álex said, pushing himself up.

Rafael staggered.

The stadium noise faded into a distant hum.

"Papá!"

Rafael collapsed.

The clipboard hit the ground. The whistle blew. The world shattered.

Álex sprinted to him, slipping in the mud, falling to his knees beside his father.

"Papá! Papá, look at me!"

Rafael's eyes fluttered. His breaths were shallow, uneven. Rain poured over both of them, washing mud and sweat into the grass.

"Help!" Álex screamed. "Somebody help!"

Players rushed over. Coaches shouted. Medics sprinted onto the field.

But Álex held his father's face in his hands, refusing to let go.

"Stay with me," he whispered, voice breaking. "Please. Stay with me."

Rafael's lips trembled. He tried to speak.

Álex leaned closer.

"Con... corazón..."

With heart.

Then his body went still.

The medics worked frantically. The crowd fell silent. The rain drowned everything.

Álex felt something inside him tear open—raw, violent, irreversible.

He screamed his father's name until his voice broke.

But Rafael Reyes was gone.

Hours later, the stadium was empty. The rain had stopped. The lights were off. The world was quiet.

Álex sat alone on the field, soaked, shivering, staring at the spot where his father had fallen.

Marisol approached slowly, her steps soft, her face streaked with tears.

She knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around him.

Álex didn't move. He didn't speak. He didn't cry anymore.

He just whispered one word, over and over, like a prayer he no longer believed in.

"Papá..."

And in that moment, the boy who had been destined for greatness disappeared.

Only the grief remained.

CHAPTER THREE

Marisol Reyes

Marisol Reyes had always believed that grief made a sound.

Not a scream. Not a cry. Not even a sob.

But a silence—heavy, suffocating, unnatural. The kind of silence that settles over a home like dust after an explosion.

Tonight, that silence lived inside her walls.

She stood in the doorway of Álex's room, watching him sit on the edge of his bed, shoulders slumped, hands limp between his knees. His clothes were still wet from the rain. Mud streaked his arms. His cleats were still on.

He hadn't moved since they returned from the hospital.

He hadn't spoken.

He hadn't cried.

He just stared at the floor as if the world had ended there.

And in a way, it had.

Marisol swallowed the ache rising in her throat. She wanted to go to him, to wrap her arms around him, to tell him he wasn't alone. But she knew grief was a fragile thing. Touch it too soon, and it shattered.

She stepped into the room quietly.

"Álex," she said softly.

He didn't look up.

She tried again. "Mijo..."

His jaw tightened. His shoulders rose, then fell. But still—nothing.

Marisol's heart cracked.

She crossed the room and knelt in front of him. Slowly, gently, she reached for his hands. They were cold. Stiff. Lifeless.

"Look at me," she whispered.

He didn't.

So she lifted his chin with trembling fingers.

His eyes were empty.

Not sad. Not angry. Just... gone.

Like someone had blown out the light inside him.

Marisol felt her breath hitch. She had seen grief before—her own, her mother's, her sister's—but she had never seen it hollow someone out so completely.

She cupped his face. "I'm here."

His lips parted, barely. A whisper escaped—hoarse, broken, childlike.

"I couldn't save him."

Marisol's chest tightened. "Oh, sweetheart..."

"I held him," Álex said, voice cracking. "I held him and he still died."

Tears finally spilled down his cheeks, silent and devastating.

Marisol pulled him into her arms.

He collapsed against her, shaking, sobbing into her shoulder with a force that nearly knocked her backward. She held him tighter, rocking him gently, whispering words she wasn't sure he could hear.

"It wasn't your fault." "You did everything you could." "He loved you more than anything." "You're not alone."

But Álex only cried harder.

His grief was a storm—violent, relentless, drowning him from the inside out.

Marisol closed her eyes, letting her own tears fall. She had loved Rafael too. She had loved him deeply. But her grief had to wait. Álex's was a wildfire, and she was the only one left to keep it from consuming him.

Hours passed.

Álex eventually fell asleep, exhausted, curled against her like he had when he was younger and afraid of thunderstorms. Marisol eased him onto the bed, pulled a blanket over him, and brushed damp hair from his forehead.

He looked so young. So breakable. So unlike the confident boy who had walked onto the field earlier that night.

She stepped out of the room and closed the door quietly.

In the hallway, she pressed her back against the wall and slid to the floor. Her hands shook. Her breath trembled. And for the first time since the collapse, she let herself feel it.

The loss. The fear. The crushing weight of what came next.

Rafael was gone.

And she was all Álex had left.

The thought terrified her.

She wasn't a coach. She wasn't a strategist. She wasn't the voice that lived in his head during every match.

She was just… Marisol.

A woman who married a man with a son already half-grown. A woman who loved them both fiercely but quietly. A woman who never imagined she'd have to fill shoes this large.

She wiped her face and forced herself to stand.

There would be arrangements to make. Calls to answer. People to comfort. A funeral to plan.

But none of that mattered tonight.

Tonight, her only job was to keep Álex breathing.

She walked to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, and stared at the dark window. Her reflection looked older. Tired. Haunted.

She whispered into the quiet:

"Rafael... how am I supposed to do this without you?"

The house didn't answer.

But somewhere down the hall, Álex stirred in his sleep, murmuring something she couldn't make out.

Marisol straightened.

She didn't know how to be a coach. She didn't know how to save a career. She didn't know how to heal a shattered heart.

But she knew how to love.

And love, she decided, would have to be enough.

She walked back to Álex's room, cracked the door open, and sat in the chair beside his bed.

She would stay there all night. And the next night. And every night he needed her.

Because grief had a sound. And she refused to let him face it alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Crack In The Foundation

The funeral was three days later.

Three days of condolences that felt like empty echoes. Three days of neighbors bringing food no one touched. Three days of reporters circling like vultures, hungry for a tragedy they could turn into headlines.

But Álex remembered none of it.

He remembered the coffin. He remembered the rain. He remembered Marisol's hand gripping his so tightly her knuckles turned white.

And he remembered the moment the priest said Rafael's name.

That was when something inside him snapped.

Not loudly. Not violently. Just… quietly. Like a hairline fracture in glass.

A crack no one noticed.

Not yet.

The house felt wrong without Rafael.

Too quiet. Too still. Too clean.

His shoes were still by the door. His jacket still hung on the hook. His whistle still sat on the kitchen counter, coiled neatly beside the clipboard he never went anywhere without.

Álex stared at it for a long time.

The whistle. The clipboard. The last pieces of the man who had built him.

He reached out, touched the metal whistle with trembling fingers, and felt a jolt of pain shoot through him—sharp, sudden, overwhelming.

He snatched his hand back as if burned.

Marisol watched from the doorway, her face soft with worry.

"You don't have to rush," she said gently. "We'll go through his things when you're ready."

"I'm ready," Álex said.

He wasn't.

But he didn't know how to say that.

He didn't know how to say anything anymore.

Later That Week

The team held a memorial before their next match.

A moment of silence. Black armbands. A banner with Rafael's face stretched across the stands.

Álex stood on the sideline, staring at the field where his father had died. His teammates approached him one by one—handshakes, hugs, murmured condolences.

None of it reached him.

The new interim coach, a man named Ortega, placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You don't have to play today," Ortega said. "Take the time you need."

Álex shook his head. "I'm playing."

Ortega hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"I said I'm playing."

Ortega stepped back.

Álex walked onto the field.

The whistle blew.

And for the first time in his life, soccer felt like a foreign language.

His legs were heavy. His timing was off. His vision was clouded. His chest felt tight, like someone was squeezing his lungs.

He missed passes he should've made in his sleep. He stumbled over the ball. He collided with teammates. He played like a ghost wearing his own skin.

The crowd murmured. The commentators whispered. His teammates exchanged worried glances.

But Álex didn't hear any of it.

All he heard was the echo of his father's voice.

"Play with heart."

He couldn't.

Not anymore.

After the match—an embarrassing 3–0 loss—Álex walked home alone. He ignored the fans calling his name. He ignored the reporters shouting questions. He ignored the ache in his chest that felt like it might split him open.

He walked until his legs gave out.

He found himself behind the community center, the same place where he and Rafael had trained every morning. The field was empty now, lit only by a flickering streetlamp.

He sat in the mud, pulled his knees to his chest, and pressed his forehead against them.

He didn't cry.

He couldn't.

He felt nothing.

And that terrified him more than the grief.

Footsteps approached.

A group of older boys—guys he vaguely recognized from the neighborhood—emerged from the shadows. They smelled like smoke and cheap liquor.

"Reyes," one of them said. "Rough game."

Álex didn't respond.

Another boy crouched beside him, offering a small bottle. "Take the edge off."

Álex stared at it.

He knew what it was. He knew he shouldn't. He knew Rafael would've ripped it out of his hand.

But Rafael wasn't here.

And the silence inside him was unbearable.

He took the bottle.

He drank.

The burn in his throat was sharp, but the numbness that followed was immediate.

The boys laughed, clapped him on the back, handed him something else—something stronger.

He didn't ask what it was.

He didn't care.

He swallowed it.

And for the first time since the collapse, he felt something.

Not peace. Not comfort. Just... less.

Less pain. Less memory. Less everything.

It was enough.

Hours later, Marisol found him stumbling through the front door, eyes glassy, steps uneven.

"Álex?" she whispered, horrified.

He brushed past her. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," she said, grabbing his arm.

He yanked it away. "I said I'm fine!"

The anger in his voice startled them both.

Marisol stepped back, eyes wide, heart breaking.

Álex froze.

He didn't apologize. He didn't explain. He didn't look at her.

He just walked to his room, closed the door, and collapsed onto the bed.

Marisol stood in the hallway, trembling.

She recognized the smell. She recognized the signs. She recognized the danger.

She whispered into the quiet:

"Rafael... he's slipping."

And for the first time since the funeral, she felt fear—not for herself, but for the boy she loved like her own.

The crack in the foundation had begun.

And it was spreading fast.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Spiral Deepens

The days after the funeral blurred together, each one bleeding into the next like ink spreading across wet paper. Morning meant nothing. Night meant nothing. Time had lost its shape.

But the pain hadn't.

It sharpened.

It grew teeth.

And it began to devour him.

Álex woke up with a pounding headache and a sour taste in his mouth. His room smelled like sweat and stale liquor. His clothes from the night before were still on the floor—muddy, torn, reeking of smoke.

He didn't remember getting home. He didn't remember what he took. He didn't remember who he was with.

He only remembered the moment he opened his eyes and realized he didn't feel anything.

No grief. No guilt. No memories.

Just numbness.

And numbness felt like relief.

He sat up slowly, rubbing his temples. His phone buzzed on the nightstand—messages from teammates, coaches, reporters, friends.

He ignored them all.

He stood, stumbled, caught himself on the dresser, and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

His eyes were bloodshot. His face was pale. His expression was hollow.

He barely recognized the boy staring back.

He splashed water on his face, but it didn't help. Nothing helped.

He needed something stronger.

Marisol was in the kitchen when he walked out, her hair tied back, her eyes tired but alert. She had barely slept since the funeral. She watched him like someone watching a candle flicker in a draft—terrified it might go out.

"Morning," she said softly.

Álex grunted.

"You didn't come home until late," she added, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I was with friends."

"Friends?" she repeated, not hiding the concern in her tone.

He opened the fridge. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Álex—"

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

The sharpness in his voice cut through the room. Marisol flinched, but she didn't back down.

"You're hurting," she said. "I know you are. But this isn't the way."

He slammed the fridge door shut. "You don't know anything."

Her eyes softened. "I know grief. I know loss. And I know you're drowning."

He turned away. "I'm fine."

"You're not."

He walked out without another word.

Marisol stood alone in the kitchen, hands trembling, heart breaking. She whispered a prayer under her breath, hoping someone—anyone—was listening.

Practice was a disaster.

Coach Ortega watched Álex stumble through drills, missing passes, losing focus, snapping at teammates. Sweat poured down his face, but not from effort—from withdrawal.

"Reyes," Ortega called out. "You're off today. Sit out."

"I'm fine," Álex snapped.

"You're not," Ortega said firmly. "Bench. Now."

Álex kicked a cone across the field, muttering curses under his breath. His teammates exchanged uneasy glances. They had never seen him like this.

Diego Vargas—his soon-to-be rival—smirked from across the field.

"Looks like the golden boy's rusting," Diego said loud enough for everyone to hear.

Álex's head snapped up. "Say that again."

Diego shrugged. "Just saying what everyone's thinking."

Álex charged at him.

Teammates rushed in, grabbing him, pulling him back as he shouted, cursed, fought against their grip.

Ortega blew his whistle. "Enough! Reyes—locker room. Now."

Álex ripped his arm free and stormed off the field, fury boiling in his veins.

He didn't know if he wanted to punch Diego or himself.

Maybe both.

The locker room was empty. Quiet. Too quiet.

He sat on the bench, breathing hard, hands shaking. His chest felt tight. His head throbbed. His thoughts raced like a storm he couldn't outrun.

He reached into his bag.

The pills were still there.

He stared at them.

He knew he shouldn't. He knew it was wrong. He knew his father would've been ashamed.

But the silence inside him was unbearable.

He swallowed one.

Then another.

The tension in his body loosened. The world softened. The pain faded.

For a moment, he felt weightless.

Then the door opened.

"Álex?"

He froze.

It was Mateo—his closest teammate, practically a brother.

Mateo's eyes widened when he saw the pills in Álex's hand.

"Bro... what are you doing?"

Álex shoved the bottle into his bag. "Nothing."

Mateo stepped closer. "Don't lie to me."

"I said it's nothing."

Mateo grabbed his arm. "This isn't you."

Álex jerked away. "You don't know me."

"I know you're hurting," Mateo said. "But this? This is going to destroy you."

Álex's jaw clenched. "Maybe that's the point."

Mateo's face fell. "Don't say that."

"Leave me alone."

"I'm not leaving."

Álex shoved him. Hard.

Mateo stumbled back, shocked.

"Get out," Álex growled.

Mateo hesitated, eyes full of pain. "I'm telling Coach."

Álex's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "If you do, we're done."

Mateo swallowed. "I can't watch you kill yourself."

Álex turned away. "Then don't watch."

Mateo left.

And the door closing behind him felt like the end of something important.

That night, the suspension notice arrived.

One week. Conduct violation. Mandatory evaluation.

Álex stared at the email, heart pounding, stomach sinking.

He had crossed a line.

And the world was starting to notice.

Marisol found him sitting in the dark, the glow of the screen illuminating his face.

"What happened?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

She sat beside him. "Álex... talk to me."

He closed the laptop slowly.

Then he whispered:

"I think I'm losing everything."

Marisol took his hand. "Then we'll fight for it."

He shook his head. "I don't know how."

She squeezed his hand tighter. "Then I'll teach you."

But Álex didn't believe her.

Not yet.

The spiral had only begun.

And the fall was far from over.

CHAPTER SIX

The Breaking Point

The suspension should have been a wake-up call.

Instead, it became gasoline.

Álex stared at the official league email over and over, the words blurring together until they felt like a personal attack.

One-week suspension.Mandatory behavioral evaluation.Final warning.

Final warning.

He laughed—short, bitter, humorless.

Warnings meant nothing when the person you were supposed to fear disappointing was dead.

He closed the laptop and shoved it under his bed.

He didn't want to think. He didn't want to feel. He didn't want to remember.

He wanted silence.

And silence came in bottles.

By nightfall, he was out again.

The same boys. The same alley behind the community center. The same cheap liquor and stronger pills.

They greeted him like a celebrity.

"Reyes! The prodigy returns."

"Suspended already? Damn, bro, you're fast."

"Come on, man, loosen up. You look like you're carrying a whole graveyard."

Álex forced a smile.

He didn't want to be here. But he didn't want to be anywhere else.

Someone handed him a bottle. Someone else handed him a pill.

He didn't ask what it was.

He swallowed it.

The world softened.

The ache in his chest dulled.

The memories blurred.

For a moment, he felt weightless.

Then he felt nothing.

And nothing was better than pain.

Hours later, the boys were laughing, shouting, stumbling through the alley. Music blasted from someone's phone. Smoke drifted through the air. The world spun in slow circles.

Álex leaned against the wall, head tilted back, eyes half-closed.

He felt warm. He felt numb. He felt... gone.

A voice cut through the haze.

"Álex?"

He blinked.

The voice came again—sharper, terrified.

"Álex!"

He turned.

Marisol stood at the mouth of the alley, hair loose, face pale, chest rising and falling with frantic breaths. She must have run here.

Her eyes widened when she saw him.

"Oh my God..."

She rushed toward him, pushing past the boys.

"What did you take?" she demanded, grabbing his face, forcing him to look at her.

He tried to speak, but his tongue felt heavy.

"I'm... fine," he slurred.

"You're not fine," she snapped, voice trembling. "You can barely stand."

One of the boys stepped forward. "Relax, señora. He's just having fun."

Marisol turned on him with a fury Álex had never seen.

"Fun?" she hissed. "You call this fun? You're killing him."

The boy scoffed. "He came to us."

"And now he's leaving with me."

She grabbed Álex's arm.

He stumbled, nearly falling.

The boys laughed.

Something inside Marisol snapped.

She stepped toward them, eyes blazing. "If any of you come near him again, I swear—"

"Marisol..." Álex mumbled, swaying.

She caught him before he hit the ground.

Her voice broke. "Please, mijo... please don't do this."

He looked at her—really looked at her—for the first time in weeks.

Her eyes were red. Her hands were shaking. Her face was streaked with tears.

She wasn't angry.

She was terrified.

And that terrified him.

She got him home somehow—half-carrying, half-dragging him through the door. He collapsed onto the couch, breathing

hard, skin clammy.

"Stay awake," she said, tapping his cheek. "Álex, look at me."

He tried.

His vision blurred.

His chest tightened.

His heart raced.

"Marisol..." he whispered, voice thin. "I don't... feel good."

Panic flashed across her face.

She grabbed her phone with trembling hands.

"No," he slurred, reaching weakly for her wrist. "Don't... call..."

"I'm calling," she said, voice cracking. "I'm not losing you too."

He tried to sit up. He couldn't.

His body felt heavy. His breaths came shallow. His head spun violently.

"Papá..." he whispered, not realizing he'd said it aloud.

Marisol froze.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, sweetheart..."

She knelt beside him, holding his face in her hands.

"You're not going to him," she whispered fiercely. "Not tonight. Not like this."

He blinked slowly.

The room dimmed.

Her voice sounded far away.

"Stay with me," she begged. "Please, Álex. Stay with me."

He tried.

He really tried.

But the darkness pulled harder.

His eyes closed.

His body went limp.

Marisol screamed his name.

The paramedics arrived minutes later.

They worked fast—oxygen mask, vitals, questions she couldn't answer. They lifted him onto the stretcher, securing straps, checking his pulse.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked, voice shaking.

"We'll do everything we can," one of them said.

They loaded him into the ambulance.

Marisol climbed in after him, gripping his hand with both of hers.

She whispered through tears:

"Rafael... if you can hear me... help me keep him alive."

The doors slammed shut.

The sirens wailed.

And for the second time in a month, Marisol rode to the hospital with a Reyes she loved more than her own life—praying she wouldn't lose him too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Intervention

The hospital room was too white.

Too bright. Too clean. Too quiet.

Machines hummed softly in the background, their steady beeping the only proof that Álex was still alive. He lay motionless on the bed, an oxygen tube under his nose, his skin pale against the sheets.

Marisol sat beside him, hands clasped so tightly her knuckles were white. She hadn't slept. She hadn't eaten. She hadn't moved except to stand when the doctors came in and sit when they left.

She kept replaying the night in her mind—his slurred words, his collapsing body, the ambulance lights flashing red against the walls of their home.

She had already lost Rafael.

She refused to lose Álex.

A soft knock broke the silence.

Mateo stepped into the room, eyes red, shoulders tense. He looked older than he had a week ago, as if the weight of guilt had aged him overnight.

"Is he...?" Mateo whispered.

"He's stable," Marisol said. "For now."

Mateo exhaled shakily and moved closer to the bed. He stared at his friend—his brother in everything but blood—and swallowed hard.

"I should've done more," he said quietly. "I should've stopped him."

Marisol shook her head. "This isn't your fault."

Mateo didn't look convinced.

"He pushed me away," he said. "But I should've pushed back."

Marisol placed a hand on his arm. "You cared. That matters."

He nodded, though his eyes stayed fixed on Álex.

A doctor entered the room, clipboard in hand. "He's stable," she repeated, "but this wasn't a small incident. His body is under significant stress. He needs rest, monitoring... and help."

Marisol straightened. "What kind of help?"

"Professional support," the doctor said gently. "Counseling. Structure. A safe environment. He's grieving, and he's overwhelmed. This is a turning point."

Mateo looked at Marisol.

Marisol looked at Álex.

A turning point.

She prayed it was true.

Álex woke up hours later, blinking slowly as the room came into focus. His head throbbed. His mouth was dry. His body felt heavy, like he'd been underwater for days.

He turned his head and saw Marisol watching him.

Her eyes were tired. Her face was pale. But she was there.

"Hey," she whispered.

He swallowed. "What... happened?"

"You scared me," she said, voice trembling. "You scared all of us."

He closed his eyes, shame washing over him. "I didn't mean to."

"I know," she said. "But it happened."

He didn't respond.

She leaned forward. "Álex... this can't continue."

He stared at the ceiling. "I don't know how to stop."

Her heart broke at the honesty in his voice.

"You don't have to do it alone," she said. "But you have to let someone help you."

He didn't move. Didn't speak. Didn't breathe for a moment.

Then, quietly:

"I don't want to feel like this anymore."

Marisol reached for his hand. "Then let's change it."

He looked at her—really looked at her—for the first time since Rafael died.

"What do I do?" he whispered.

"You start by accepting help," she said. "Rehab. Counseling. Time away from the pressure. Time to heal."

He flinched. "Rehab?"

"It's not a punishment," she said. "It's a lifeline."

He turned his face away. "People will think I'm weak."

"People?" she said softly. "Or you?"

He didn't answer.

She squeezed his hand. "Strength isn't pretending you're okay. Strength is choosing to get better."

He swallowed hard. "I don't know if I can."

"You can," she said. "And I'll be with you every step."

He closed his eyes, tears slipping down his temples.

"Okay," he whispered. "I'll try."

Marisol exhaled—a long, shaky breath she'd been holding for days.

"Good," she said. "That's all I ask."

Later that evening, Mateo returned with a small bag—clean clothes, Álex's favorite hoodie, a pair of socks Rafael had given him last Christmas.

He placed the bag on the chair and looked at Álex.

"You scared me, man," Mateo said quietly.

"I know," Álex whispered.

"Don't do it again."

"I'm trying."

Mateo nodded. "Good. Because we need you. Not the player. You."

Álex blinked back tears.

Marisol watched the two boys—one broken, one trying to hold him together—and felt something shift in the room.

Not hope. Not yet.

But the beginning of it.

A fragile thread. A small spark. A first step.

And sometimes, she thought, that was enough.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Road Back

The rehab center didn't look like a place where people got better.

It looked like a place where people were stripped down to the bone.

A long, beige building on the outskirts of San Isidro, surrounded by a chain-link fence and a gravel parking lot. No bright signs. No inspirational posters. Just a quiet, heavy stillness that made Álex's stomach twist.

He sat in the passenger seat of Marisol's car, staring at the entrance as if it were a prison gate.

"I don't want to go in," he muttered.

Marisol didn't start the engine. She didn't turn to face him. She just rested her hands on the steering wheel and breathed.

"I know," she said softly.

He clenched his jaw. "Then why are you making me?"

"Because you almost died."

He flinched.

She finally turned to him, her eyes tired but steady. "And because you said you wanted to try."

He looked away. "I didn't mean it."

"Yes," she said gently, "you did. You were scared. And honest.

And brave."

He scoffed. "Brave? I passed out on the couch."

"You asked for help," she said. "That's braver than you think."

He didn't respond.

She reached over and placed a hand on his arm. "I'm not leaving you here. I'll be with you every step. But you have to walk through that door."

He stared at the building again.

He didn't want to walk through that door. He didn't want to face strangers. He didn't want to talk about Rafael. He didn't want to talk about anything.

He wanted to disappear.

But disappearing had almost killed him.

He exhaled shakily. "Fine."

Marisol squeezed his arm. "Good."

They stepped out of the car together.

The intake nurse was kind, but clinical. She asked questions in a calm, practiced voice.

"Any previous incidents?" "No." "Any history of substance use?" "No." "Any family history of addiction?" "No."

Marisol watched him lie with a quiet ache in her chest.

The nurse nodded, typing notes. "And what brings you here today?"

Álex hesitated.

Marisol waited.

The nurse waited.

Finally, he whispered, "I don't want to feel like this anymore."

The nurse's expression softened. "That's a good place to start."

He didn't believe her.

But he didn't argue.

The first group session was a circle of strangers.

A construction worker with trembling hands. A mother who couldn't stop tapping her foot. A teenager younger than Álex, eyes hollow and bruised. A businessman who stared at the floor like it was the only thing holding him together.

Álex sat stiffly, arms crossed, jaw tight.

He didn't belong here. He wasn't like them. He wasn't broken.

He was just... hurting.

The counselor, a woman named Dr. Solano, sat across from him. Her voice was calm, steady, almost soothing.

"Welcome, everyone. Today we're talking about loss."

Álex's stomach dropped.

Loss.

He stared at the floor.

One by one, the others spoke.

"My brother died in a car accident." "My wife left me." "My mother overdosed." "My son won't speak to me anymore."

Each story was a wound laid bare.

When it was Álex's turn, Dr. Solano looked at him gently.

"Álex? Would you like to share?"

He shook his head. "No."

"That's okay," she said. "You can listen."

He didn't listen.

He just tried not to feel.

Later, in his room, he sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the blank wall. The silence pressed against him like a weight.

He hated it here.

He hated the quiet. He hated the questions. He hated the way everyone looked at him like he was fragile.

He hated himself for needing this place.

A knock at the door.

"Come in," he muttered.

Marisol stepped inside, carrying a small bag of clothes and toiletries.

"I brought your things," she said softly.

He nodded.

She sat beside him. "How was your first day?"

He shrugged. "Fine."

"Fine?"

He didn't answer.

She studied him for a long moment. "You don't have to pretend with me."

He swallowed hard. "I don't want to be here."

"I know."

"I don't belong here."

"You do."

He looked at her sharply. "So you think I'm broken?"

"No," she said. "I think you're hurting. And this is where people go when they're hurting."

He looked away.

She placed a hand on his back. "You're not alone, mijo."

He closed his eyes.

For a moment, he let himself lean into her touch.

Just a moment.

Then he pulled away.

"I'm tired," he said.

She nodded. "I'll let you rest."

She stood, walked to the door, then paused.

"Álex?"

He looked up.

"I'm proud of you."

He blinked.

"What? Why?"

"Because you're here," she said. "Because you're trying."

He didn't know what to say.

So he said nothing.

She left quietly.

Álex lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

He didn't feel proud. He didn't feel strong. He didn't feel anything.

But for the first time since Rafael died...

He didn't feel alone.

That night, as he drifted into an uneasy sleep, he heard his father's voice—soft, distant, almost a memory.

"Con corazón, mijo."

With heart.

He turned onto his side, pulling the blanket tighter around him.

He wasn't ready to face that voice.

Not yet.

But maybe—just maybe—he was ready to stop running from it.

CHAPTER NINE

The Verdict

The rehab center had a quiet rhythm—morning sessions, afternoon counseling, evening reflection. Days blurred together in a slow, steady march toward something that looked like healing.

But healing didn't stop the outside world.

And the outside world had been waiting.

On the fourth morning of Álex's stay, a staff member knocked on his door.

"Reyes," she said gently, "you have visitors."

Visitors.

Plural.

His stomach tightened.

He followed her down the hallway, past the muted beige walls and soft-spoken counselors, until they reached a small conference room.

Marisol was there.

Mateo was there.

And sitting across from them, in a crisp navy suit and a league badge clipped to his lapel, was **Luis Herrera**, the regional league's disciplinary officer.

Álex froze in the doorway.

Herrera stood. "Mr. Reyes. Thank you for meeting with us."

Álex didn't shake his hand.

He sat.

Marisol reached for his arm, but he pulled away—gently, but enough to make her heart sink.

Herrera opened a folder. Papers. Official seals. Signatures.

The sound of the folder opening felt like a gavel.

"First," Herrera said, "I want to acknowledge your loss. Your father was respected by everyone in this league."

Álex stared at the table.

Herrera continued. "But we also have to address your conduct."

There it was.

The shift from sympathy to business.

From condolences to consequences.

Herrera slid a document across the table.

"After reviewing the incident reports, the altercation at practice, the behavioral concerns, and the medical emergency..."

Álex's pulse quickened.

"...the league has reached a decision."

The room felt smaller.

Marisol held her breath.

Mateo clenched his fists.

Herrera folded his hands. "Your suspension is being extended."

"How long?" Álex asked, voice barely above a whisper.

"Indefinitely."

The word hit him like a punch.

Herrera continued, tone firm but not unkind. "You will not be allowed to return to training or competition until you complete

a certified rehabilitation program, undergo a psychological evaluation, and receive clearance from both medical and league professionals."

Álex stared at him. "So I'm done."

"No," Herrera said. "You're not done. But you're benched until you're stable."

Stable.

The word stung.

Herrera leaned forward. "You're talented, Álex. One of the best prospects we've seen in years. But talent doesn't excuse self-destruction. And it doesn't protect you from consequences."

Álex's jaw tightened. "I didn't ask for protection."

"No," Herrera said. "But you need it."

Silence.

Heavy. Suffocating.

Herrera slid another paper toward him. "This outlines the conditions for reinstatement. Complete rehab. Attend counseling. Pass evaluations. Maintain clean tests. Demonstrate consistent behavior."

Álex didn't touch the paper.

Herrera softened his voice. "This isn't punishment. It's structure. It's a path back."

Álex looked up, eyes burning. "And if I fail?"

Herrera didn't hesitate. "Then you don't return."

The words hung in the air like a sentence.

Marisol reached for Álex's hand again.

This time, he didn't pull away.

Herrera stood. "We'll check in regularly. Focus on getting better. The league wants you back—but only when you're ready."

He nodded to Marisol and Mateo, then left the room.

The door clicked shut.

And the silence that followed was louder than anything Herrera had said.

Álex stared at the reinstatement document.

The words blurred.

Indefinite suspension. Mandatory rehab. Psychological evaluation. Behavioral monitoring. Zero-tolerance policy.

He felt something inside him twist—anger, shame, fear, all tangled together.

Mateo leaned forward. "Bro... this isn't the end."

"It feels like it," Álex whispered.

"It's not," Mateo insisted. "You can come back from this."

Álex shook his head. "You don't get it. I'm not the same player anymore."

Marisol touched his shoulder. "Maybe you're not. But you can become someone stronger."

He swallowed hard. "What if I can't?"

She met his eyes. "Then we'll rebuild you. Piece by piece."

He looked down at the paper again.

The path back was long. Hard. Uncertain.

But for the first time, it wasn't impossible.

He exhaled slowly. "Okay."

Marisol squeezed his hand. "Okay?"

"Okay," he repeated. "I'll do it."

Mateo smiled—small, relieved. "Good. Because the team wants you back. They're scared for you, but they haven't given up."

Álex blinked. "They haven't?"

"No," Mateo said. "But they need you to fight."

Fight.

The word echoed in his chest.

He wasn't ready to fight yet.

But he was ready to stop running.

And maybe that was enough.

Later, alone in his room, he unfolded the reinstatement document again.

His father's voice drifted through his memory.

"Play with heart."

He closed his eyes.

For the first time since the collapse, he whispered back:

"I'm trying, Papá."

And he meant it.

CHAPTER TEN

Breakthrough and Temptation

The morning sun filtered weakly through the rehab center's blinds, casting thin stripes of light across the floor. Álex sat in the group room, arms crossed, foot tapping restlessly. He hated mornings here. Too quiet. Too reflective. Too honest.

Dr. Solano sat in her usual chair, notebook balanced on her knee.

"Today," she said, "we're talking about anger."

A murmur rippled through the group.

Anger was familiar territory.

Anger was safe.

Anger was easier than grief.

But for Álex, anger was a landmine.

He stared at the floor, jaw tight.

"Anger," Dr. Solano continued, "is often a mask. A shield. A way to avoid feeling something deeper."

She looked directly at him.

He looked away.

"Álex," she said gently, "would you like to share?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Is it because you're not angry?"

He laughed—short, bitter. "I'm angry at everything."

"Everything?"

He nodded. "The league. The team. Myself. God. The world."

"And your father?"

The room went still.

Álex's throat tightened. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not angry at him."

"Are you sure?"

He clenched his fists. "He died. That's not his fault."

"No," she said softly. "But you're allowed to be angry that he left."

He felt something crack inside him.

A small, sharp fracture.

"I'm not angry," he whispered.

"Then why does your voice shake when you say it?"

He swallowed hard.

The room blurred.

His chest tightened.

And before he could stop himself, the words slipped out:

"He promised he'd always be there."

Silence.

Heavy. Raw. Unfiltered.

Dr. Solano nodded gently. "And he isn't."

He shook his head, tears burning behind his eyes. "He left me."

The words broke him.

He covered his face with his hands, shoulders shaking, breath trembling.

For the first time since the collapse, he cried—not from shock,

not from fear, but from truth.

The group didn't stare. They didn't judge. They simply sat with him.

And in that moment, something shifted.

A breakthrough.

Small. Fragile. But real.

Later that afternoon, he sat outside on the rehab center's small patio, staring at the sky. The air smelled like cut grass and distant rain. He felt lighter. Not healed. Not whole. But lighter.

Marisol joined him quietly.

"I heard you had a good session," she said.

He shrugged. "I talked."

"That's good."

"It didn't feel good."

"Sometimes the truth doesn't."

He nodded.

She sat beside him. "I'm proud of you."

He didn't respond.

But he didn't pull away.

That evening, he returned to his room to find a small envelope slipped under the door.

No name. No return address.

Just his name written in messy handwriting.

He frowned, picked it up, and opened it.

Inside was a single folded note.

He unfolded it slowly.

"We're meeting behind the center tonight.If you want out, come.We've got what you need."

His stomach dropped.

He knew the handwriting.

One of the boys from the alley.

His pulse quickened.

His hands trembled.

He read the note again.

What you need.

He didn't need it.

He didn't.

But the thought whispered anyway.

Just once. Just to take the edge off. Just to quiet the noise.

He crumpled the note.

Then un-crumpled it.

Then crumpled it again.

His breath came fast.

His mind raced.

He stood.

He paced.

He stared at the door.

He could walk out. No one would know. No one would stop him.

He reached for the doorknob.

His hand hovered.

His father's voice echoed in his mind.

"Con corazón, mijo."

With heart.

He closed his eyes.

His hand dropped.

He stepped back.

He sat on the bed, shaking.

He wasn't strong. He wasn't healed. He wasn't okay.

But he didn't open the door.

Not tonight.

Later, during lights-out, he lay awake staring at the ceiling.

He whispered into the darkness:

"I'm trying, Papá."

And for the first time, he felt like maybe—just maybe—his father heard him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Returning To The Field of Ghosts

The air in San Isidro felt different when Álex stepped out of the car.

Sharper. Colder. Heavier.

As if the town itself remembered everything he'd done.

Marisol watched him quietly from the driver's seat, hands still on the wheel even though the engine was off. She didn't rush him. She didn't speak. She simply waited—steady, patient, unshakable.

He closed the door gently and looked around.

The streets were the same. The houses were the same. The field in the distance was the same.

But he wasn't.

He felt older. Tired. Raw.

Rehab had stripped him down to the bone. Now he had to rebuild himself in the place where he'd fallen apart.

Marisol stepped out and joined him. "You ready?"

"No," he said honestly.

She nodded. "Good. That means you're thinking."

He almost smiled.

Almost.

The team was already warming up when they arrived. The

sound of cleats on turf, the thud of balls being passed, the sharp whistles of drills—it all hit him like a memory he wasn't sure he wanted back.

Coach Ortega spotted him first.

The field went quiet.

One by one, the players turned.

Some stared. Some whispered. Some looked away.

Álex felt their eyes like weight on his skin.

He swallowed hard.

Mateo jogged over, breathless and relieved. "You came."

"Yeah," Álex said. "I came."

Mateo pulled him into a hug before he could protest. "Good. Because we need you."

Álex didn't know if that was true.

But it mattered that Mateo believed it.

Ortega approached, arms crossed, expression unreadable.

"Reyes," he said. "Welcome back."

Álex nodded. "Thanks."

"You cleared your first evaluation?"

"Yes."

"You staying clean?"

"Yes."

"You ready to work?"

Álex hesitated.

Then: "Yes."

Ortega studied him for a long moment. "Good. Because you're not stepping on this field as a star. You're stepping on it as a beginner."

"I know."

"You'll train alone for now. Conditioning. Basics. No scrimmage. No spotlight."

"I know."

"And if you slip—once—you're out."

Álex met his eyes. "I won't."

Ortega nodded once. "Then let's begin."

Training was brutal.

Not physically—Álex had always been strong. Emotionally.

Every drill reminded him of who he used to be. Every mistake reminded him of how far he'd fallen. Every breath felt like a battle.

He ran laps until his lungs burned. He practiced footwork until his legs shook. He repeated passing drills until his vision blurred.

The team watched from a distance.

Some with pity. Some with judgment. Some with quiet hope.

Diego Vargas watched with something else entirely.

A smirk. A spark. A predator's interest.

When Álex stumbled during a sprint, Diego called out, loud enough for everyone to hear:

"Careful, Reyes. Don't collapse again."

A few players winced.

Álex froze.

His chest tightened. His fists clenched. His vision narrowed.

Old instincts surged—rage, defensiveness, the urge to fight.

But then he heard another voice.

"Con corazón, mijo."

With heart.

He exhaled slowly.

He didn't respond to Diego.

He didn't take the bait.

He just kept running.

And that—more than anything—made Diego's smirk fade.

After practice, Álex sat alone on the bleachers, staring at the empty field. His legs ached. His chest hurt. His mind felt like a battlefield.

Marisol approached quietly, sitting beside him.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Hard."

"Good."

He huffed a tired laugh. "You and Ortega would get along."

"We already do," she said. "We both want you alive."

He looked at her, eyes softening. "I'm trying."

"I know."

He hesitated. "Do you think I can come back?"

She didn't answer right away.

Instead, she took his hand.

"I think you can become someone stronger than you were," she said. "And that's better than coming back."

He swallowed hard.

The field stretched out before him—familiar, haunted, waiting.

He wasn't ready to be the player he used to be.

But maybe he was ready to become someone new.

He stood slowly.

"Tomorrow," he said.

Marisol smiled. "Tomorrow."

They walked home together, the sun setting behind them, casting long shadows across the field.

Shadows of who he used to be.

And the faint outline of who he might become.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The First Test

The morning sun hadn't fully risen when Álex stepped onto the field. The grass was still damp, the air cool, the stadium empty except for the echo of his own footsteps. It felt like walking into a memory—one he wasn't sure he was ready to relive.

He inhaled slowly.

The scent of turf. The faint hum of stadium lights. The distant sound of a whistle from another field.

It all felt familiar.

And foreign.

He wasn't the same boy who used to run onto this field with fire in his chest and his father's voice in his ear. He was slower now. Heavier. Not in body—though rehab had softened his edges—but in spirit.

He wasn't sure if he belonged here anymore.

But he was here.

And that mattered.

Coach Ortega stood at midfield, clipboard in hand, expression unreadable.

"You're early," he said.

"I couldn't sleep," Álex replied.

"Good. Early means you're thinking."

Álex almost smiled. "That's what Marisol said."

"Smart woman."

Ortega gestured toward the cones. "Warm up. Today we see where you really are."

Álex nodded and jogged toward the starting line.

His heart pounded—not from exertion, but from fear.

Fear of failing. Fear of being watched. Fear of proving everyone right.

He started the drill.

Slow. Controlled. Focused.

His footwork was rusty. His balance off. His timing uneven.

But he didn't stop.

He didn't curse. He didn't throw the cone. He didn't storm off.

He kept going.

Ortega watched silently, arms crossed.

After ten minutes, he blew the whistle.

"Again."

Álex reset.

Ran again.

Stumbled. Recovered. Finished.

"Again."

He ran until sweat dripped down his back, until his lungs burned, until his legs trembled.

But he didn't quit.

Not today.

The team arrived mid-session, trickling onto the field with bags slung over their shoulders. Conversations died when they saw him.

Some nodded politely. Some avoided eye contact. Some

whispered.

Diego Vargas didn't whisper.

He smirked. "Look who crawled back."

Álex ignored him.

He focused on the ball.

On the drill.

On breathing.

But Diego wasn't done.

"Careful, Reyes," he called out. "Wouldn't want you collapsing again."

A few players winced.

Ortega's whistle cut through the tension. "Vargas. Enough."

Diego shrugged. "Just motivating him."

Álex kept his eyes on the ground.

He wouldn't take the bait.

Not today.

After warm-ups, Ortega approached him.

"Scrimmage today," he said.

Álex stiffened. "I'm not ready."

"That's why it's a test."

He hesitated. "What if I fail?"

"Then you fail," Ortega said simply. "And tomorrow you try again."

Álex swallowed hard.

He nodded.

The scrimmage started fast.

Too fast.

The ball moved like lightning. Players collided. Voices shouted. Cleats scraped. The field became a battlefield.

Álex struggled to keep up.

His passes were late. His touches sloppy. His instincts dulled.

Diego intercepted him twice, each time with a smirk.

"Too slow, Reyes."

"Try harder."

"Or go back to rehab."

Álex's chest tightened.

His vision blurred.

His breath quickened.

He felt the old panic rising—the same panic that had driven him to pills, to bottles, to the alley.

He froze.

A defender stole the ball from him easily.

Ortega blew the whistle. "Reyes! Focus!"

Álex nodded, but his hands were shaking.

He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't think.

He couldn't—

A voice cut through the noise.

Not loud. Not sharp. Just steady.

"Con corazón, mijo."

With heart.

His father's voice.

Or maybe just the memory of it.

But it was enough.

He inhaled slowly.

Exhaled.

Centered himself.

The whistle blew again.

The ball rolled toward him.

He stepped forward.

This time, he didn't freeze.

He didn't panic.

He didn't break.

He trapped the ball cleanly, pivoted, and threaded a perfect pass between two defenders.

The field shifted.

The team surged forward.

A shot. A goal.

The players erupted.

Mateo jogged over, grinning. "There he is."

Álex didn't smile.

But something inside him loosened.

A knot he'd been carrying for months.

He wasn't back.

Not yet.

But he wasn't gone either.

After practice, he sat alone on the bleachers again, breathing in the quiet.

Ortega approached.

"You did good today," he said.

"I messed up a lot."

"You also didn't quit."

Álex looked up. "Is that enough?"

"For today," Ortega said. "Tomorrow, we raise the bar."

Álex nodded.

He could live with that.

He stood, grabbed his bag, and looked at the field one last time.

It didn't feel like a battlefield anymore.

It felt like a beginning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marisol: The Weight of Watching

Marisol had never realized how loud a soccer field could be.

Not the cheering. Not the whistles. Not the thud of cleats or the crack of a clean strike.

But the silence.

The silence of watching someone you love walk into the place that broke them.

She stood at the edge of the field, arms crossed tightly over her chest, trying to look calm. Trying to look supportive. Trying not to let the fear show.

Álex jogged onto the turf, shoulders tense, jaw set, eyes fixed straight ahead. He looked older than his seventeen years. Not in his face—his face was still young, still soft around the edges—but in the way he carried himself.

Like someone who had seen too much. Lost too much. Survived too much.

Her heart squeezed.

He shouldn't have had to survive anything at his age.

But life didn't care about fairness.

She watched him stretch, watched him run drills, watched him stumble and recover. Every misstep made her breath hitch. Every moment he hesitated made her chest tighten.

She wanted to run to him. She wanted to shield him. She wanted to tell the world to leave him alone.

But she couldn't.

This was his battlefield.

And she was only allowed to watch.

Coach Ortega approached her quietly, hands in his pockets.

"He's doing better," he said.

She nodded. "He's trying."

"That's more than most."

She exhaled. "I worry."

"I know."

"He's fragile."

Ortega shook his head. "No. He's wounded. That's different."

She looked at him, surprised.

"Wounds heal," Ortega said. "Fragility breaks. He's not broken."

She wanted to believe that.

She needed to believe that.

But then she saw Diego Vargas smirk at Álex from across the field, saw the way Álex stiffened, saw the flicker of old anger flash in his eyes.

And her stomach twisted.

"He's not ready for that boy," she whispered.

"No one is," Ortega muttered. "But he'll learn."

She wasn't sure if he meant Álex or Diego.

When the scrimmage began, Marisol stood at the fence, fingers gripping the chain links so tightly they dug into her skin.

Álex struggled at first.

His timing was off. His confidence shaky. His movements hesitant.

She could see the panic rising in him—the same panic she'd seen the night he collapsed on the couch, the same panic that had driven him into the alley, into the pills, into the darkness.

Her breath caught.

"Come on, mijo," she whispered. "Breathe."

Then something shifted.

A pass. A pivot. A moment of clarity.

Álex threaded the ball between two defenders with the precision she remembered from before the tragedy.

The team surged forward. A shot. A goal.

The field erupted.

Marisol pressed a hand to her mouth, tears stinging her eyes.

He did it.

Not a miracle. Not a comeback. Not redemption.

Just one good moment.

But sometimes one moment was enough.

After practice, she waited by the gate. Álex walked toward her slowly, sweat-soaked and exhausted, but standing taller than he had in months.

"How was it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Hard."

"Good."

He gave her a tired smile. "You and Ortega really are the same person."

She laughed softly. "He's smarter than he looks."

They walked home together, the sky turning gold above them.

After a few minutes, Álex spoke quietly.

"Do you think I can really do this?"

She didn't answer right away.

She looked at him—really looked at him.

At the boy who had lost his father. At the boy who had nearly

lost himself. At the boy who was trying, step by painful step, to come back.

She took his hand.

"I think," she said, "that you're stronger than you know."

He swallowed hard. "I'm scared."

"I know."

"Are you scared?"

She hesitated.

Then: "Every day."

He looked at her, surprised.

"But," she added, squeezing his hand, "I'm more proud than scared."

His eyes softened.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Not the heavy silence of grief.

But the quiet, steady silence of two people rebuilding something fragile together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Diego Vargas... The Rival's Eyes

Diego Vargas liked to arrive early.

Not because he cared about discipline. Not because he wanted to impress the coaches. But because he liked watching the others walk in—tired, nervous, unsure—while he was already warmed up, already sharp, already in control.

Control mattered to him.

Control was everything.

He juggled the ball lazily at midfield, the morning sun glinting off the studs of his cleats. The field was quiet, empty except for the soft thud of leather against his foot.

Then he saw him.

Álex Reyes.

Walking onto the field like a ghost wearing a jersey.

Diego smirked.

So the prodigy had survived rehab. Good. A comeback story made the fall more satisfying.

He watched Álex stretch—slow, stiff, cautious. He watched the way the team looked at him—half pity, half fear. He watched the way Álex avoided eye contact, shoulders tight, jaw clenched.

Weakness.

It radiated off him.

Diego thrived on weakness.

He jogged over, ball tucked under his arm.

"Well, well," he said, voice dripping with mock warmth. "Look who crawled back."

Álex didn't respond.

Diego stepped closer. "How's rehab? They teach you how to pass again?"

Still nothing.

Diego felt a spark of irritation. He wanted a reaction. A flinch. A crack.

He leaned in. "Careful, Reyes. Wouldn't want you collapsing again."

A few players shifted uncomfortably.

Álex's jaw tightened—but he didn't look up.

Coward, Diego thought.

Or maybe broken.

Either way, it didn't matter.

Broken players were easy to beat.

During the scrimmage, Diego hunted him.

Every play. Every possession. Every moment.

He pressed him hard, shoulder-checking him, cutting off his angles, whispering poison in his ear.

"You're slow." "You're scared." "You're done."

And for a while, it worked.

Álex stumbled. Hesitated. Froze.

Diego felt a thrill—sharp, electric.

1. This was the boy everyone worshipped? This was the legend's son? This was the future star?

Pathetic.

Then it happened.

A pass. A pivot. A perfect thread between defenders.

The field shifted.

The team surged.

A goal.

Diego stopped mid-stride.

What the hell?

He looked at Álex—really looked at him.

The boy wasn't smiling. Wasn't celebrating. Wasn't even breathing hard.

He just stood there, steady, calm, eyes focused on something Diego couldn't see.

Something inside him.

Something Diego didn't understand.

And for the first time, Diego felt something he hadn't expected.

Not anger. Not irritation. Not superiority.

A flicker of unease.

Because broken players didn't pass like that. Broken players didn't rise like that. Broken players didn't scare him.

But this Álex?

This one might.

Diego clenched his jaw.

Fine.

If Reyes wanted to climb back, he'd climb over him.

And Diego Vargas would be waiting at the top—ready to knock him down again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Narrative War

The camera flashes were blinding.

Álex hadn't expected reporters to be waiting outside the training facility—not today, not after a simple scrimmage, not after weeks of silence. But the moment he stepped through the gate, microphones shot toward him like spears.

"Álex! How does it feel to be back?" "Are you clean?" "Is the suspension still in effect?" "Do you think you can return to your old form?" "Is Diego Vargas the new star of San Isidro?"

That last question hit harder than the rest.

He froze.

The reporters sensed blood.

"Diego's been dominating since your absence—any comment?" "Do you feel threatened by him?" "Is he replacing you?" "Is this the end of the Reyes legacy?"

Álex's throat tightened.

He wasn't supposed to talk to the media yet. He wasn't supposed to answer anything. He wasn't supposed to be here.

Mateo pushed through the crowd. "Back off! Give him space!"

But the reporters only pressed closer.

"Álex, is it true Diego outperformed you in today's scrimmage?" "Sources say he's the future of the team—do you

agree?" "Are you worried he's taking your spot?"

Álex clenched his jaw.

He wasn't worried about losing his spot.

He was worried about losing himself.

He kept walking, head down, ignoring the questions—until one reporter stepped directly in front of him, blocking his path.

"Álex, do you think Diego is better than you?"

The world went quiet.

Álex lifted his head slowly.

The reporter's eyes gleamed—hungry, eager, waiting for a crack.

Álex didn't give him one.

"I'm not here to compare myself to anyone," he said quietly. "I'm here to get better."

The reporter smirked. "So that's a yes?"

Álex walked past him without another word.

But the damage was done.

That afternoon, the headlines exploded.

REYES RETURNS — BUT IS HE STILL THE STAR?VARGAS OUTSHINES TROUBLED PRODIGYIS DIEGO THE NEW FACE OF SAN ISIDRO?REYES: "I'M NOT HERE TO COMPARE MYSELF" — IS HE AVOIDING THE TRUTH?

Every article had the same tone.

Every headline had the same message.

Every comment section had the same venom.

Álex Reyes was no longer the golden boy.

He was the question mark.

And Diego Vargas was the answer.

Diego read every headline with a slow, satisfied smile.

He leaned back in his chair, scrolling through the articles, savoring each one like a victory.

"Outshines troubled prodigy." "New face of San Isidro." "Future star."

He liked the sound of that.

He liked it a lot.

But what he liked even more was the look on Álex's face when the reporters swarmed him—tight, tense, uncertain.

Fear.

Real fear.

Diego closed his phone and stood, stretching lazily.

If the media wanted a rivalry, he'd give them one.

And he'd make sure Álex Reyes never climbed back to the top.

Not while Diego Vargas was standing there.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Line Crossed

The tension on the field was thick enough to choke on.

The team gathered for drills, but no one was focused. Not really. Not after the headlines. Not after the interviews. Not after the sudden explosion of the Reyes-Vargas rivalry across every sports feed in the region.

Álex felt the eyes on him.

Some sympathetic. Some curious. Some doubtful.

But Diego's eyes?

They were something else entirely.

Predatory.

He jogged past Álex during warm-ups, shoulder brushing his with deliberate force.

"Nice interviews yesterday," Diego murmured. "Loved the part where you dodged the question."

Álex ignored him.

Diego smirked. "Smart move. You can't compare yourself to me. You'd lose."

Álex inhaled slowly. "Walk away, Diego."

"Why?" Diego said. "You gonna run to rehab again?"

The words hit like a punch.

Álex froze.

The field went silent.

Even Ortega looked up.

Diego stepped closer, voice low and venomous. "Face it, Reyes. You're weak. You're broken. And everyone knows it."

Álex's hands curled into fists.

Diego leaned in. "Your father would be ashamed."

The world stopped.

The air vanished.

Álex's vision blurred.

He didn't hear the gasp from the team. He didn't hear Mateo shouting his name. He didn't hear Ortega blowing the whistle.

He heard only one thing:

"Your father would be ashamed."

Álex lunged.

He didn't think. He didn't breathe. He didn't see anything but Diego's face.

He grabbed Diego by the jersey and slammed him backward onto the turf.

The team rushed in. Hands grabbed him. Voices shouted. Cleats scraped. Chaos erupted.

"ÁLEX, STOP!" "BRO, LET GO!" "COACH!" "GET HIM OFF!"

But Álex didn't let go.

Not until Ortega physically pulled him back, shouting in his face.

"REYES! ENOUGH!"

Álex stumbled away, chest heaving, eyes wild.

Diego sat on the ground, stunned—not hurt, but shocked.

He hadn't expected Álex to snap.

He hadn't expected the rage. The force. The fire.

And for the first time, Diego felt something he'd never felt around Álex Reyes.

Not superiority. Not confidence. Not control.

Fear.

Real fear.

Ortega turned to Diego, voice sharp. "Vargas. My office. Now."

Then he turned to Álex.

"You too."

The team watched in stunned silence as the two rivals walked off the field—one shaken, one burning.

The line had been crossed.

And nothing would be the same again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Marisol: The Clash At Home

The front door slammed so hard the picture frames rattled.

Marisol flinched in the kitchen, nearly dropping the dish she was washing. She wiped her hands quickly and stepped into the hallway just as Álex stormed past—jaw clenched, eyes wild, breath sharp and uneven.

He didn't look at her.

He didn't say a word.

He just moved like someone trying to outrun something inside his own skin.

"Álex," she called softly.

He didn't stop.

He went straight to his room and slammed the door again.

Marisol closed her eyes.

Something had happened. Something bad.

She waited a moment—long enough to breathe, not long enough to calm the dread rising in her chest—then walked down the hall and knocked gently.

"Álex? Can I come in?"

Silence.

She tried again. "Please."

A beat.

Then a quiet, strained: "Yeah."

She opened the door.

Álex sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, hands tangled in his hair. His chest rose and fell in uneven bursts. His knuckles were scraped. His eyes were red—not from crying, but from holding everything in.

Marisol's heart cracked.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "Talk to me."

He didn't look up. "I don't want to."

"I know," she said gently. "But you need to."

He laughed—short, bitter, exhausted. "You sound like the therapists."

"Then maybe they're right."

He shot her a glare. "Don't start."

She didn't flinch. "I'm not starting anything. I'm trying to help."

"I don't need help."

"Yes," she said softly, "you do."

He stood abruptly, pacing the room like a caged animal. "I'm fine."

"You're not."

"I said I'm fine!"

His voice cracked on the last word.

Marisol didn't move. "What happened?"

He stopped pacing.

His shoulders rose. Fell. Rose again.

Then, quietly: "I snapped."

She waited.

He swallowed hard. "Diego said something. Something about Papá."

Marisol felt her stomach twist. "What did he say?"

Álex's voice dropped to a whisper. "He said Papá would be ashamed of me."

The room went still.

Marisol felt heat rise behind her eyes—not from sadness, but from anger. A deep, protective anger she rarely let surface.

She stepped closer. "That wasn't true."

"You don't know that."

"Yes," she said firmly, "I do."

He shook his head, pacing again. "I lost control. I grabbed him. I threw him down. I almost—" He stopped, breath catching. "I almost hurt him."

"You didn't," she said.

"But I wanted to."

Marisol's breath hitched.

There it was.

The truth he was terrified to say.

She approached him slowly. "Álex... you're grieving. You're hurting. And he attacked the deepest wound you have."

"That's not an excuse."

"No," she said. "It's a reason."

He turned away, fists clenched. "I'm tired of being a reason."

Marisol felt the words like a punch.

She stepped closer. "Look at me."

He didn't.

"Álex," she said again, voice trembling now. "Look at me."

He turned slowly.

His eyes were wet. His jaw tight. His whole body shaking.

"I'm trying," he whispered. "I'm trying so hard. And it's never enough."

Her heart broke.

"Who told you that?" she asked.

He blinked. "What?"

"Who told you it's not enough?"

He hesitated.

Then: "Everyone."

"No," she said. "Not everyone."

He looked away. "Feels like it."

Marisol stepped forward and placed a hand on his cheek. "Listen to me. You are fighting battles most people never see. You are rebuilding yourself from the ground up. And you're doing it one day at a time."

He swallowed hard.

"You didn't fail today," she said. "You reacted. You're human."

He shook his head. "I scared people."

"You scared yourself," she corrected. "And that's why you're here. That's why you're talking to me."

He closed his eyes.

A tear slipped down his cheek.

Then another.

Then he broke.

Not loudly. Not violently. Just... quietly.

A soft, shuddering breath. A trembling exhale. A collapse inward.

Marisol stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him.

He didn't resist.

He leaned into her, forehead against her shoulder, hands gripping her like he was afraid she might disappear too.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry, Marisol."

She held him tighter. "For what?"

"For everything. For the fight. For the anger. For putting you through all this."

She shook her head. "You don't owe me an apology for hurting. You owe yourself forgiveness."

He cried harder.

She stroked his hair gently. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

He nodded against her shoulder.

After a long moment, he pulled back slightly—eyes red, face streaked with tears.

"I mean it," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

She cupped his face. "And I accept it."

He leaned forward and hugged her again—tighter this time, steadier, real.

Not a collapse.

A connection.

A choice.

And for the first time in a long time, Marisol felt something shift in him.

Not healing. Not yet.

But the beginning of it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Cost of Losing Control

The house was too quiet the next morning.

Not peaceful. Not calm. Just... waiting.

Marisol sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee she wasn't drinking, listening to the soft creak of the hallway floorboards as Álex paced back and forth in his room. He hadn't slept. She could tell by the way his footsteps dragged, by the way he kept stopping and starting again, like he couldn't decide whether to sit or run.

She didn't knock.

Not yet.

He needed space to brace himself for what was coming.

Because today wasn't about apologies or hugs or emotional breakthroughs.

Today was about consequences.

The call came at 9:14 a.m.

Coach Ortega.

Marisol answered before the second ring. "Coach."

"Morning," he said, voice tight. "Is Álex awake?"

"He is."

"Good. I need both of you to come to the facility. Ten o'clock."

Her stomach tightened. "Is this about yesterday?"

"It's about everything," Ortega said. "The league wants a formal review."

She closed her eyes. "I understand."

"Tell him to be honest," Ortega added. "And tell him to breathe."

She nodded even though he couldn't see her. "We'll be there."

When she hung up, she didn't move for a moment.

Then she stood, walked to Álex's room, and knocked softly.

"Come in," he said.

She opened the door.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. His hair was a mess. His eyes were tired. His hands were clasped so tightly his knuckles were white.

"They want us at the facility," she said gently. "Ten o'clock."

He nodded once. "I figured."

"You ready?"

"No."

She sat beside him. "Do you want to talk?"

"No."

She nodded. "Okay."

But after a moment, he spoke anyway.

"What if they suspend me again?" he whispered.

"They might."

"What if they kick me off the team?"

"They might."

He swallowed hard. "What if I ruined everything?"

She turned to him. "Then we rebuild it."

He didn't look convinced.

But he stood.

And that was enough.

The facility conference room felt colder than usual.

A long table. A stack of papers. Three league officials. Coach Ortega. And Diego Vargas.

Álex froze when he saw him.

Diego didn't smirk this time. Didn't taunt. Didn't even look confident.

He looked... shaken.

But not sorry.

Never sorry.

The lead official cleared his throat. "Let's begin."

Álex sat beside Marisol, hands clasped in his lap.

The official folded his hands. "Yesterday's altercation was serious. Physical contact. Aggressive escalation. Violation of conduct policy."

Álex nodded. "I know."

"Do you have anything to say before we proceed?"

He hesitated.

Then: "I lost control. I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

The official nodded. "Thank you for your honesty."

He turned to Diego. "And you?"

Diego leaned back in his chair. "I didn't touch him."

"That's not what we're asking," the official said. "Did you provoke him?"

Diego shrugged. "Words aren't against the rules."

Marisol's jaw tightened.

Álex stared at the table.

The official sighed. "We reviewed witness statements. Both of you contributed to the escalation."

Diego stiffened. "I didn't—"

"Enough," Ortega snapped.

The room fell silent.

The official continued. "Here are the consequences."

Álex braced himself.

"Diego Vargas: one-week suspension from team activities. Mandatory sportsmanship counseling."

Diego's eyes widened. "What? That's—"

"Sit down," Ortega said sharply.

Diego sat.

The official turned to Álex.

"Álex Reyes: two-week suspension from team activities. Mandatory anger-management sessions. Continued compliance with your rehabilitation program. One-on-one evaluation before reinstatement."

Álex exhaled shakily.

Not relief. Not devastation.

Just... acceptance.

He nodded. "Okay."

The official studied him. "You're taking this well."

"I deserve it," Álex said quietly.

Marisol placed a hand on his arm.

The official closed the folder. "Meeting adjourned."

Outside the facility, Álex stood on the steps, staring at the ground.

Marisol waited beside him, giving him space.

After a long moment, he spoke.

"I messed up."

"You're learning," she said.

"I'm tired of learning the hard way."

"I know."

He swallowed. "Two weeks."

"It's not forever."

"It feels like it."

She stepped closer. "Álex... look at me."

He did.

"You didn't lose everything today," she said. "You faced consequences. You took responsibility. That matters."

He blinked hard. "I'm scared."

"I know."

"Are you disappointed?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm proud of you."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because you didn't run," she said. "You didn't hide. You didn't lie. You stood there and faced it."

He looked away, eyes wet.

She touched his cheek gently. "That's strength, mijo."

He leaned into her hand.

Then, quietly: "Can I... have a hug?"

She smiled softly. "Always."

He stepped into her arms, holding her tightly—tighter than yesterday, tighter than he had in months.

Not out of fear.

Out of gratitude.

Out of trust.

Out of the fragile hope that maybe—just maybe—he could still come back from this.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Room With No Escape

The anger-management office was smaller than Álex expected.

Not clinical. Not cold. Just... plain.

A round table. Two chairs. A box of tissues he pretended not to notice. A window overlooking the parking lot, where people came and went like they had somewhere better to be.

Álex sat stiffly, hands clasped, foot tapping against the floor. He hated being here. Hated the idea of someone analyzing him. Hated the idea of needing help.

But he was here.

And that mattered.

The door opened.

Dr. Camila Rojas stepped inside—a woman in her forties with calm eyes and a voice that sounded like she'd seen every kind of storm and survived all of them.

"Álex," she said warmly. "Good to meet you."

He nodded. "You too."

She sat across from him. "So. First session. No pressure. We're just talking."

He exhaled slowly. "Okay."

She studied him for a moment. "Tell me what happened with

Diego."

He tensed. "He provoked me."

"How?"

"He said something about my dad."

Her expression softened. "And that hit a nerve."

He looked away. "More like ripped it open."

She nodded. "What did you feel in that moment?"

He hesitated. "Anger."

"What kind of anger?"

He frowned. "There are kinds?"

"There are always kinds."

He thought for a moment. "It wasn't... normal anger. It was like—like something grabbed me from the inside. Like I wasn't thinking. Just reacting."

"Like a switch flipped?"

"Yeah."

She leaned forward. "Álex, that's not unusual. Trauma rewires the brain. It makes certain triggers feel like threats. Your body reacts before your mind can catch up."

He swallowed. "So I'm broken."

"No," she said firmly. "You're wounded. And wounds heal."

He looked down at his hands. "I don't want to be like this."

"That's why you're here."

He nodded slowly.

She continued. "Tell me something. When you grabbed Diego... what did you want?"

He froze.

He didn't want to say it.

But he did.

"I wanted him to hurt," he whispered.

Dr. Rojas didn't flinch. "And afterward?"

"I hated myself for it."

She smiled gently. "Good. That means you're not lost."

He blinked. "What?"

"People who are lost don't feel remorse. You do. That's your compass."

He exhaled shakily.

She sat back. "Our goal isn't to erase your anger. It's to understand it. To control it. To make sure it doesn't control you."

He nodded again.

For the first time, the room didn't feel like a trap.

It felt like a beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Story They Wanted

The headlines hit before noon:

REYES SUSPENDED AGAIN — IS HE A LIABILITY?VARGAS VS. REYES: THE FIGHT THAT SHOOK SAN ISIDROANGER ISSUES? TROUBLED PRODIGY STRIKES AGAINIS THIS THE END OF THE REYES LEGACY?

Every article twisted the story. Every headline sharpened the rivalry. Every comment section turned into a battlefield.

Some defended him.

Most didn't.

Marisol tried to hide the worst of it, but Álex saw the notifications anyway—his name trending, his face plastered across sports feeds, his mistakes dissected by strangers who didn't know him, didn't care about him, didn't understand anything except the thrill of tearing someone down.

He sat on the couch, scrolling through the articles with a numb expression.

Mateo texted him.

Bro don't read that crap. They don't know you.

Another teammate texted.

Keep your head up. We got you.

Then another.

You good? Need anything?

But mixed in were messages he didn't expect.

You're unstable. Get help.Vargas is better anyway.Reyes is finished.Should've stayed in rehab.

He dropped the phone onto the couch and pressed his palms to his eyes.

Marisol walked in quietly. "You saw it."

He didn't answer.

She sat beside him. "They don't know the truth."

"They know enough," he muttered.

"No," she said. "They know the story they want."

He swallowed hard. "What if they're right?"

"About what?"

"That I'm a problem. That I'm dangerous. That I'm not the player I used to be."

She turned his face toward her. "Álex. Listen to me. You are not defined by headlines. You are not defined by mistakes. You are defined by what you do next."

He looked away. "What if what I do next isn't enough?"

"Then you try again."

He exhaled shakily.

She placed a hand on his back. "You're not alone in this."

He nodded, but the weight didn't lift.

Because the world wasn't just watching him now.

It was judging him.

And he wasn't sure he could outrun the story they were writing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lines in the Locker Room

The locker room felt different when Álex returned.

Not hostile. Not welcoming. Just... split.

Two groups.

Two energies.

Two sides.

Mateo walked up first, clapping Álex on the shoulder. "Ignore the noise. We're with you."

Behind him, a handful of teammates nodded—quiet, steady, loyal.

But across the room, Diego sat surrounded by his own circle—players who laughed a little too loudly, who whispered behind their hands, who shot Álex looks that weren't quite friendly.

The divide was clear.

And everyone felt it.

Ortega stepped into the room, tension radiating off him. "Listen up. I'm going to say this once."

The room fell silent.

"We are a team. Not a battlefield. Not a gossip mill. Not a fan club for either of you."

His eyes flicked between Álex and Diego.

"You don't have to like each other. But you will respect each

other. And you will respect this team."

Diego smirked.

Álex stared at the floor.

Ortega continued. "Anyone who fans the flames of this rivalry will sit. I don't care how good you are."

A few players shifted uncomfortably.

Then he added, voice sharp: "And if I hear one more comment about the fight, the suspension, or the media, I will make you run until you forget how to speak."

Silence.

Heavy. Tense. Uncertain.

When Ortega left, the room stayed quiet for a long moment.

Then Diego stood, stretching lazily. "Guess we're not allowed to talk about the truth anymore."

Mateo stepped forward. "Shut up, Diego."

Diego raised an eyebrow. "Or what?"

Álex stepped between them—not aggressively, not angrily, just firmly.

"Enough," he said quietly.

Diego smirked. "Look who found his voice."

Álex didn't rise to it.

He just held Diego's gaze.

Steady. Calm. Unshaken.

And for a moment, the room held its breath.

Then Diego scoffed and walked away, his circle following.

Mateo exhaled. "Bro... this is getting bad."

"I know," Álex said.

"You okay?"

"No."

Mateo nodded. "But you're trying."

Álex looked around the divided room.

Trying didn't feel like enough.
But it was all he had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The breakthrough

Dr. Rojas didn't speak for the first full minute of the session.

She just watched Álex.

Not with judgment. Not with pity. With patience.

The kind of patience that made him feel seen and exposed at the same time.

He sat across from her, arms crossed, foot tapping, eyes fixed on a spot on the carpet. He hated silence. Silence made room for thoughts he didn't want.

Finally, she said, "You look tired."

He huffed. "I'm always tired."

"Why do you think that is?"

He shrugged. "Everything feels heavy."

"What feels heavy?"

He hesitated.

Then: "Me."

Dr. Rojas nodded slowly. "Tell me more."

He swallowed. "I feel like... like I'm carrying something I can't put down. And every time I try to move forward, it pulls me back."

"What is it?"

He didn't answer.

She leaned forward. "Álex, what are you carrying?"

He closed his eyes.

The answer came out before he could stop it.

"Guilt."

The room went still.

Dr. Rojas's voice softened. "Guilt for what?"

He opened his eyes, tears already forming. "For not saving him."

Her expression didn't change—but something in the air did.

"Your father," she said gently.

He nodded, jaw trembling. "I should've done more. I should've been faster. I should've—"

"Álex," she interrupted softly, "you were a child."

He shook his head violently. "I was there. I was right there. And I couldn't—"

"You couldn't stop death," she said. "No one can."

He looked away, tears slipping down his cheeks. "I keep thinking... if I had been stronger... if I had been better..."

"You loved him," she said. "That was enough."

He covered his face with his hands. "It doesn't feel like enough."

"That's grief," she said. "Not truth."

He let out a shaky breath.

She waited.

He finally whispered, "I miss him."

"I know."

"I don't know how to live without him."

"You're learning," she said. "And learning hurts."

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I don't want to be angry anymore."

"That," she said, "is the beginning of healing."

He looked up.

For the first time, he didn't see a therapist.

He saw someone holding a lantern in the dark.

"Álex," she said gently, "you are not broken. You are grieving. And grief is not a flaw. It's love with nowhere to go."

His breath caught.

Something inside him—tight, knotted, suffocating—finally loosened.

Not all the way.

But enough.

Enough to breathe.

Enough to hope.

Enough to believe he wasn't beyond saving.

Dr. Rojas smiled softly. "That's your breakthrough for today."

He nodded, wiping his face again.

And for the first time in months, he felt lighter walking out of the room than he did walking in.

THE NEXT DAY—THE GAME

The stadium lights were blinding.

The crowd roared like a living thing—thousands of voices, thousands of expectations, thousands of eyes waiting to see if the fallen prodigy would rise or crumble.

But Álex wasn't on the field.

He was on the bench.

Tracksuit. Water bottle. Hands clasped between his knees.

Benched.

Not punished. Not forgotten. Just... waiting.

Coach Ortega stood beside him, arms crossed. "You good?"

Álex nodded. "Yeah."

"You sure?"

He exhaled. "I'm trying."

Ortega smirked. "Good. Trying is underrated."

The whistle blew.

The game began.

San Isidro started strong—fast passes, sharp footwork, clean transitions. But the opposing team was aggressive, pressing hard, forcing mistakes.

Diego Vargas was everywhere.

Explosive. Sharp. Hungry.

The crowd loved him.

Every touch. Every sprint. Every shot.

But Álex watched something the crowd didn't.

Diego was playing angry.

Too angry.

He was forcing plays, taking unnecessary risks, ignoring open teammates. His ego was louder than his instincts.

And the team was suffering for it.

By halftime, the score was 1–1.

In the locker room, Ortega paced. "We're losing shape. We're losing discipline. And we're losing control."

Diego scoffed. "I'm carrying the attack."

"No," Ortega snapped. "You're suffocating it."

The room went silent.

Álex sat quietly in the corner, watching.

Ortega turned to him. "Reyes."

Álex straightened. "Yes, Coach?"

"What do you see out there?"

The room shifted.

Everyone looked at him.

He hesitated—then spoke.

"They're baiting Diego," he said. "He's taking it. Every time. They're doubling him because they know he won't pass. They're leaving the wings open. We're not using them."

Ortega nodded slowly. "Go on."

"If we switch play faster," Álex continued, "we break their press. If Diego draws the double and releases early, we get behind them."

Diego glared. "You think you know everything because you're sitting on the bench?"

Álex didn't rise to it.

He just said, "I'm trying to help."

Ortega stepped between them. "He is helping."

The room shifted again.

This time toward Álex.

Halftime ended.

The players returned to the field.

Álex stayed on the bench.

But something was different.

He wasn't watching the game like a punishment.

He was watching it like a student.

Like a leader.

Like someone who still had a place here.

In the 78th minute, the opposing team scored.

2–1.

The stadium groaned.

Ortega turned to the bench. "Reyes."

Álex's heart jumped. "Yes?"

"You're not going in," Ortega said. "But I need your eyes."

He pointed to the assistant coach. "Sit with him. Help him read the game."

Álex blinked. "You want me to... coach?"

"Not coach," Ortega said. "Contribute."

Álex nodded.

He sat beside the assistant coach, pointing out patterns, weaknesses, openings. The assistant relayed them to Ortega. Ortega adjusted the formation.

In the 89th minute, San Isidro equalized.

2–2.

The stadium erupted.

Diego looked toward the bench—toward Álex.

Not with hatred.

Not with fear.

With something new.

Recognition.

The game ended in a draw.

Not a victory.

But not a loss.

And as the team walked off the field, Mateo clapped Álex on the back. "Bro... you helped win that."

Álex shook his head. "I didn't play."

"Yeah," Mateo said, "but you showed up."

Álex looked at the field.

At the crowd.

At the team.

At himself.

For the first time, he didn't feel like a ghost.

He felt like part of something again.

Not the star.

Not the savior.

Just... part of it.

And that was enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS — THE NARRATIVE THEY WANTED

The TV in the locker room wasn't supposed to be on.

But someone had left it playing, volume low, the morning sports recap looping on repeat.

A montage flashed across the screen:

"Reyes benched again — is the prodigy fading?""Vargas shines despite team struggles.""Sources say the locker room is divided.""Is San Isidro becoming a two-camp team?"

Clips rolled:

- Diego scoring a goal, arms raised, crowd roaring.
- Álex on the bench, expression unreadable.
- Ortega pacing the sideline, jaw tight.
- A split-screen graphic: **REYES vs. VARGAS — WHO'S THE FUTURE?**

The anchor's voice cut through the static:

"Insiders report growing tension inside the San Isidro locker room. Some players are aligning with Vargas, others with Reyes. The question now: can this team survive the divide?"

Mateo grabbed the remote and shut the TV off.

Too late.

Everyone had heard it.

Everyone had seen it.

Everyone felt the truth in the room.

Two sides. Two energies. Two futures pulling in opposite directions.

THE TEAM MEETING

Coach Ortega stood at the front of the room, arms crossed, eyes sharp enough to cut through steel.

"Sit," he said.

No yelling. No barking. Just one word.

The team obeyed.

Álex sat near the middle — not hiding, not shrinking, not posturing. Just present.

Diego sat across the room, surrounded by his usual circle.

The tension was thick enough to choke on.

Ortega scanned the room. "You've all seen the news."

No one spoke.

"Good," he said. "Because now we're going to talk about it."

A few players shifted uncomfortably.

Ortega continued. "The media thinks we're two teams. Two camps. Two leaders pulling in opposite directions."

He paused.

"Are they right?"

Silence.

Then a voice spoke.

Álex.

He didn't stand. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't try to sound wise or heroic.

He just spoke.

"We're not two teams," he said quietly. "We're one team acting like two."

Every head turned.

Even Diego looked up.

Álex continued, voice steady but raw. "I'm not giving a speech. I'm not trying to be a leader. I'm just telling the truth."

He took a breath.

"When I was gone... you all kept this team alive. When I came back... I didn't expect anything. Not forgiveness. Not trust. Not a spot. Nothing."

He looked around the room.

"But what I didn't expect was for us to start acting like enemies."

A few players lowered their eyes.

"This isn't Reyes vs. Vargas," he said. "This isn't about who's better or who gets the spotlight. This is about us. All of us. Wearing the same colors. Playing for the same badge."

He swallowed hard.

"And if we keep acting like two teams, we're going to lose. Every game. Every chance. Every future we're trying to build."

The room was silent.

Not tense.

Listening.

Álex finished softly:

"I'm not asking anyone to choose sides. I'm asking everyone to stop pretending there are sides."

He leaned back in his chair.

Done.

No applause. No dramatic music. Just truth.

Coach Ortega stepped forward.

"Good," he said. "Now let me make something clear."

He pointed to the team crest on the wall.

"This is the only side in this room."

He paced slowly, voice low but powerful.

"I don't care who scores the goals. I don't care who gets the headlines. I don't care who the media loves or hates. I care about one thing."

He tapped the crest.

"This team."

He turned to Diego.

"You want to be the star? Earn it."

He turned to Álex.

"You want to come back? Earn it."

He turned to everyone.

"You want to win? Then stop acting like strangers and start acting like teammates."

He let the words settle.

Then:

"Because if I see one more divide — one more whisper, one more ego, one more stunt — I will bench every single one of you until you remember why you're here."

Silence.

Heavy.

Then Mateo spoke.

"Coach... we hear you."

Another player nodded. Then another. Then another.

Even Diego didn't argue.

Not today.

Ortega clapped his hands once. "Good. Now get dressed. We train in ten."

The room moved.

Not as two groups.

As one.

For the first time in weeks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BEFORE THE GAME — THE PRIVATE CONFRONTATION

The locker room was buzzing with pre-game energy — cleats clacking, tape ripping, players hyping each other up — but Álex felt the tension before he even stepped inside.

Diego was alone in the corner.

Not surrounded by his usual circle. Not smirking. Not talking.

Just sitting there, staring at the floor, jaw tight.

Álex hesitated.

He didn't owe Diego anything. They weren't friends. They weren't allies. They weren't even neutral.

But something about the silence pulled him in.

He walked over.

Diego didn't look up. "If you're here to lecture me, save it."

"I'm not," Álex said.

"Then what do you want?"

"To talk."

Diego scoffed. "We don't talk."

"We should."

Diego finally looked at him — eyes sharp, guarded, but tired in a way Álex recognized too well.

"What do you want, Reyes?"

Álex took a breath. "We can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

"This rivalry. This... war."

Diego's jaw clenched. "You started it."

"No," Álex said quietly. "Life started it. We just kept feeding it."

Diego looked away.

Álex continued. "The team is splitting. The media is twisting everything. And we're letting them."

Diego didn't respond.

So Álex said the thing he'd been avoiding.

"I don't hate you."

Diego froze.

Álex added, "I don't like you either. But I don't hate you."

Diego's voice was low. "You should."

"Why?"

"Because I pushed you. I provoked you. I said things I shouldn't have."

Álex nodded. "Yeah. You did."

Diego swallowed. "And you still don't hate me?"

"No," Álex said. "Because I know what it's like to be angry at the wrong things."

Diego's eyes flickered — a crack in the armor.

Before either could say more, Ortega's voice boomed across the room.

"Team meeting! Let's go!"

Diego stood, grabbing his jersey.

As he walked past Álex, he muttered, "Don't expect anything from me."

Álex replied, "I don't. But I'm done fighting you."

Diego paused.

Just for a second.

Then he walked away.

But something had shifted.

Not peace. Not friendship. But the first step toward something different.

THE GAME — THE MOMENT EVERYTHING CHANGES

The stadium was electric.

Second-to-last game of the season. Playoff implications. A packed crowd roaring like thunder.

Álex sat on the bench, heart pounding, eyes locked on the field.

Diego was on fire.

Explosive runs. Sharp passes. Dangerous shots.

The opposing team knew it too — especially their star midfielder, **Rafael "Rafa" Castillo**, a player with Diego's talent and twice his ego.

The two clashed all game.

Shoves. Shoulder checks. Trash talk.

But in the 63rd minute, everything exploded.

Diego stole the ball cleanly — cleanly — and Rafa went down like he'd been shot.

The whistle blew instantly.

Red card.

Straight red.

The stadium erupted in boos and confusion.

Diego's face twisted in disbelief. "What?! I didn't touch him!"

Rafa clutched his ankle dramatically, rolling on the ground.

The referee didn't hesitate. "Vargas, you're out!"

Diego's voice cracked. "That's a lie! He's faking!"

The ref ignored him.

Diego looked around wildly — at the crowd, at the ref, at his teammates — and for the first time, Álex saw something he'd never seen in Diego's eyes.

Fear.

Real fear.

He wasn't angry. He wasn't cocky. He wasn't smirking.

He was scared.

And alone.

Álex stood.

Before he knew it, he was on the field — not subbed in, not called, just *there* — walking straight toward Rafa Castillo.

The opposing players tensed.

Rafa smirked from the ground. "What? You gonna hit me too, Reyes?"

Álex didn't flinch.

He crouched down, voice low and deadly calm.

"Get up."

Rafa blinked. "What?"

"You heard me," Álex said. "Get. Up."

Rafa hesitated.

Álex leaned closer. "You're good. One of the best. You don't need to fake anything. So get up and stop embarrassing yourself."

Rafa's smirk faltered.

The crowd buzzed.

The referee froze.

And Diego... stared.

Like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Rafa finally stood — perfectly fine — and the stadium erupted in boos.

The referee's face went pale.

He couldn't take back the red card.

But everyone saw the truth.

Everyone.

Diego looked at Álex, stunned.

"You... backed me up," he said quietly.

Álex shrugged. "You were right."

Diego swallowed. "Why?"

"Because we're on the same team," Álex said. "Whether we like it or not."

For a moment, Diego didn't speak.

Then he nodded — small, subtle, but real.

A crack in the rivalry.

A shift in the war.

A moment neither of them would forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Aftermath

The locker room felt different after the win.

Not loud. Not chaotic. Not wild.

Just... full.

Full of breath. Full of relief. Full of something the team hadn't felt in weeks:

Unity.

Coach Ortega stood in the center of the room, arms crossed, trying — and failing — to hide the pride in his eyes.

"Good work," he said.

The team cheered.

"Not perfect," he added.

The cheering softened.

"But good."

He looked at Diego first.

"You kept your head after the red card. You didn't explode. You didn't make it worse. That matters."

Diego nodded, still stunned from everything that had happened.

Then Ortega turned to Álex.

"And you," he said. "You showed leadership without touching the field."

Álex blinked. "I just—"

"You stepped up," Ortega cut in. "You defended a teammate. You read the game. You helped us adjust. That's leadership."

The room murmured in agreement.

Even Diego.

Ortega continued, voice steady and proud:

"This is what a team looks like. Not perfect. Not polished. But together."

He paused.

"Next week is the final game. Everything we've worked for comes down to that."

The room tensed.

Ortega smirked. "Rest up. Because next week... we finish this."

AT HOME — THE QUIET MOMENT

The house was dim when Álex walked in, the soft glow of a lamp spilling across the living room. Marisol sat on the couch, waiting for him with a blanket draped over her legs and a cup of tea in her hands.

She looked up.

"You did good today."

Álex dropped his bag and sat beside her. "I didn't even play."

"That's not what I meant."

He leaned back, exhausted. "It felt... different."

"How?"

He thought for a moment. "Like I wasn't fighting anymore. Not Diego. Not the team. Not myself."

She smiled softly. "That's growth."

He exhaled. "I'm scared for next week."

"I know."

"What if I mess up?"

"Then you get back up."

"What if I freeze?"

"Then you breathe."

"What if I'm not ready?"

She placed a hand on his cheek. "You are."

He swallowed hard. "I miss him."

"I know."

He leaned into her shoulder, letting the weight of the day melt away.

For a long moment, they just sat there — no words, no pressure, no expectations.

Just presence.

Just peace.

Just home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS — THE STORM BEFORE THE MATCH

The morning broadcast was relentless.

"San Isidro faces their biggest test of the season.""Reyes expected to return to the field — will he deliver?""Vargas and Reyes: from rivals to unexpected allies?""Opposing team star Rafa Castillo promises revenge."

Clips rolled:

- Diego warming up, laser-focused.
- Álex stepping off the bus, headphones on, eyes sharp.
- The opposing team chanting in the tunnel.
- Fans waving signs: **"REYES REDEMPTION"**, **"VARGAS VENGEANCE"**, **"FINISH THE FIGHT."**

The anchor's voice cut through:

"This is the final game. Everything is on the line."

KICKOFF — COMMENTARY BEGINS

The stadium was a wall of sound.

The commentators' voices boomed over the broadcast:

"And we are LIVE for the final match of the season!""San Isidro needs a win to clinch the playoffs.""Reyes is on the bench — but expect him in the second half.""Vargas looks dangerous already."

The whistle blew.

The game began.

FIRST HALF — THE STRUGGLE

San Isidro came out strong.

But the opposing team came out stronger.

Rafa Castillo was everywhere — slicing through the midfield, taunting Diego, pressing the defense.

"Castillo with the run—he's through—SHOT—just wide!"

"San Isidro looks tired already."

"They're getting worn down."

Diego fought hard, but he was double-teamed every possession.

"Vargas is isolated — no support!"

"San Isidro needs a spark."

By halftime, the score was 1–0.

San Isidro losing.

The players walked into the locker room drenched in sweat, breathing hard, frustration thick in the air.

Ortega looked at Álex.

"You ready?"

Álex nodded.

"Then get in."

The room shifted.

Everything shifted.

SECOND HALF — THE TURNING POINT

The crowd erupted as Álex stepped onto the field.

"Reyes is coming in!""This is the moment everyone has been waiting for!"

Diego looked at him.

Not with rivalry.

With trust.

"You good?" Diego asked.

Álex nodded. "Let's finish this."

The whistle blew.

And everything changed.

THE HIGHLIGHTS — BOTH TEAMS UNLEASH

San Isidro Attack:

Álex threads a perfect pass through two defenders.

Diego sprints onto it, fires — blocked.

Rebound falls to Mateo — shot — saved.

Crowd roars.

Opposing Counterattack:

Rafa Castillo breaks down the wing.

Cuts inside.

Shoots — off the post.

Danger everywhere.

San Isidro Midfield:

Álex controls the tempo.
Quick touches.
Smart switches.
The team breathes again.
Opposing Pressure:
Hard tackles.
High press.
Bodies flying.
The referee losing control.
The clock ticked.
70 minutes. 75 minutes. 80 minutes.
Still 1–0.
The crowd restless.
The tension suffocating.
Then—
A turnover.
Álex intercepts.
Pushes forward.
Diego runs beside him.
Two defenders closing.
Rafa charging from behind.
The stadium holds its breath.
Álex hears it.
Not the crowd.
Not the commentary.
His father's voice.
"Con corazón, mijo."
With heart.
He takes the space.
Cuts left.
Draws the defender.

Diego breaks free.
Álex slips the ball through — perfect.
Diego takes one touch.
Two.
Shoots.
GOAL.
The stadium explodes.
1–1.
But the game isn't over.
Not yet.
Not until the final moment.
Not until the final play.
Not until Álex decides the ending.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Moments of truth

The stadium was shaking.

Not from noise. From belief.

1–1. Final minutes. Everything on the line.

The commentators were losing their minds.

"San Isidro pushing forward—this could be the last attack!""Reyes and Vargas linking up beautifully!""The crowd is on its feet!"

Álex felt the pulse of the game in his bones.

The sweat. The breath. The heartbeat of thousands pounding in his ears.

He wasn't tired. He wasn't scared. He wasn't broken.

He was alive.

And the ball was at his feet.

THE BUILDUP — BOTH TEAMS UNLEASH

San Isidro surged forward.

Mateo sprinted down the right wing, beating his defender.

Diego cut inside, dragging two defenders with him.

Álex drifted between the lines, reading the field like a map only he could see.

The opposing team countered with equal fire:

Rafa Castillo shadowed Álex, refusing to give him space.

Their center-back towered over Diego, shoving him every chance he got.

Their keeper barked orders, gloves ready, eyes sharp.

The commentators were breathless.

"This is football at its finest!""Both teams refusing to break!""One goal decides everything!"

The clock ticked.

88:14 88:15 88:16

Time was slipping.

THE TURN — THE MOMENT BEFORE DESTINY

Álex received the ball near midfield.

Rafa closed in instantly.

"Not this time, Reyes," he hissed.

Álex didn't answer.

He didn't need to.

He flicked the ball past Rafa with a touch so smooth the crowd gasped.

Then he ran.

Fast.

Faster than he had all season.

Faster than he had since before the collapse.

Diego sprinted beside him.

"Left!" Diego shouted.

Álex cut left.

Two defenders converged.

Diego yelled again. "Back!"

Álex back-heeled the ball into Diego's path without looking.
The stadium erupted.
"WHAT A PASS!"
Diego took one touch— Two— Then fired.
The keeper dove.
Fingertips. Just enough.
The ball deflected wide.
Corner kick.
The stadium groaned.
But Álex didn't.
He jogged to the corner flag, heart pounding, vision sharp.
This was it.
The moment.
The last chance.
He placed the ball down.
The world went quiet.
And then—
A voice.
Soft. Steady. Familiar.
"Con corazón, mijo."
His father.
Not a memory. Not a ghost. A presence.
Álex closed his eyes.
Then opened them.
Fire.

THE FINAL PLAY — THE BALL THAT DECIDES EVERYTHING

He raised his hand.

The team shifted.

Diego moved near the penalty spot, wrestling with the center-back.

Mateo hovered at the far post.

The midfielders lined up at the edge of the box.

The opposing team braced.

The whistle blew.

Álex ran up.

Struck the ball.

Perfect curve. Perfect height. Perfect speed.

The stadium held its breath.

The ball arced through the air like destiny itself.

Diego broke free.

Jumped.

Headed the ball—

But it wasn't clean.

The ball ricocheted off the defender's shoulder.

Chaos.

Bodies everywhere.

The ball bounced once.

Twice.

And rolled toward Álex.

He didn't think.

He didn't hesitate.

He didn't fear.

He stepped forward—

And struck.

Left foot. Clean. Pure. True.

The ball rocketed toward the top corner.

The keeper leapt.

Stretched.

Missed.

The net rippled.

The stadium exploded.

GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAL!

Commentators screamed. Fans cried. Players tackled Álex to the ground.

Diego was the first to reach him.

He grabbed Álex by the shoulders, eyes wide, voice cracking.

“You did it,” he said. “You actually did it.”

Álex laughed — breathless, overwhelmed, alive.

“No,” he said. “We did.”

The final whistle blew.

San Isidro had won.

And Álex Reyes — the fallen prodigy, the broken son, the boy who almost lost everything — had risen.

Not as a star.

Not as a savior.

But as himself.

With heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

The Locker Room

The moment the final whistle blew, the stadium erupted — but the real explosion happened in the tunnel.

San Isidro sprinted into the locker room like a wave breaking free.

Shouts. Laughter. Tears. Bodies colliding in celebration.

Mateo tackled Álex first, nearly knocking him over.

"BRO! BRO! YOU DID IT!"

Álex laughed — breathless, overwhelmed, alive. "We did it!"

The rest of the team piled in.

Hugs. Back slaps. Shouts of "LET'S GO!" echoing off the walls.

Even players who barely spoke all season were grabbing him, shaking him, yelling his name like he'd just rewritten the history of the sport.

But the room shifted when Diego walked in.

The noise softened.

Not because of tension.

Because everyone knew this moment mattered.

Diego approached Álex slowly — no smirk, no swagger, no armor.

Just honesty.

"You saved us out there," Diego said quietly.

Álex shook his head. "We saved each other."

Diego exhaled — a breath he'd been holding for months.

Then he extended his hand.

Not as a rival. Not as an enemy. As a teammate.

Álex took it.

The room erupted again.

Mateo shouted, "FINALLY! ABOUT TIME!"

Someone threw water in the air. Someone blasted music. Someone started chanting Álex's name.

But Coach Ortega didn't shout to quiet them.

He let them celebrate.

Then, when the noise finally settled, he stepped forward.

His voice wasn't loud.

It didn't need to be.

"I'm proud of you," he said.

The room froze.

Ortega never said that.

He continued, eyes sweeping across the team.

"You fought. You grew. You learned. You became a team again."

He looked at Álex.

"You came back stronger."

He looked at Diego.

"You learned to trust."

He looked at everyone.

"And you earned this win. Every second of it."

The team cheered again — not wild, not chaotic, but deep. A cheer that came from the heart.

Ortega raised a hand.

"One more thing."

The room quieted.

"This isn't the end of a season," he said. "It's the beginning of who you're becoming."

The players nodded.

Some teary. Some smiling. All changed.

The music kicked back on.

The celebration resumed.

But Álex slipped out quietly, heart full, mind buzzing, soul steady.

He needed one more moment before the night ended.

AT HOME — THE FINAL QUIET

The house was dark when he walked in.

But Marisol was awake.

Sitting on the couch. Blanket around her shoulders. Eyes soft with pride.

He didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

She stood.

He walked into her arms.

And for the first time since his father died, the hug didn't feel like holding on for survival.

It felt like letting go.

Letting go of guilt. Letting go of fear. Letting go of the boy he used to be.

She whispered, "I'm proud of you, mijo."

He swallowed hard. "Thank you... for everything."

She pulled back, brushing his hair from his forehead. "You played with heart."

He smiled — small, real, earned.

"Yeah," he said. "I did."

They sat together on the couch, the quiet warm and full.
No pressure. No fear. No weight.
Just peace.
Just home.
Just the end of one chapter — and the beginning of another.

CHAPTER TWENTY - NINE

Epilogue - The Grave

The cemetery was quiet in a way stadiums never were.

No roaring crowds. No flashing lights. No pressure. Just wind brushing through the trees and the soft crunch of gravel under Álex's shoes.

He walked slowly, hands in his jacket pockets, breath visible in the cool morning air. The final game had been last night. The celebration had gone late. The city was still buzzing.

But he needed this.

He needed to come here before anything else.

He stopped at the familiar headstone.

RAFAEL REYES*Beloved father. Beloved coach.*

Álex stared at the name for a long moment.

Then he sat on the grass.

Not like a child. Not like someone broken. Like someone ready.

He exhaled.

"Hey, Papá."

The rustled the leaves.

"I, uh... I played yesterday."

He smiled softly. "We won."

He traced a finger along the engraved letters.

"I scored the last goal. The winning one."

A breath. A laugh. A shake of his head.

"You probably saw it, huh?"

He swallowed.

"I heard you. In my head. That last moment. You said it again."

His voice softened.

"*Con corazón, mijo.*"

He blinked hard, eyes stinging.

"I used to think that meant playing fearless. Playing perfect. Playing like you."

He looked down at his hands.

"But now I think it means something else."

He paused.

"It means playing honest. Playing with everything I have — even the broken parts."

A tear slipped down his cheek.

"I miss you."

He didn't hide it. Didn't wipe it away. Didn't apologize for it.

"I miss you every day. And I'm still learning how to live without you. But I'm trying."

He took a shaky breath.

"And I think... I think you'd be proud of me."

The wind blew gently across the grass, brushing his hair.

He closed his eyes.

"I'm not done. I'm not fixed. But I'm getting there."

He placed his hand on the headstone.

"And I'm not running anymore."

He stood slowly.

Looked at the grave one last time.

"I love you, Papá."

Then he turned and walked back toward the path — not lighter, not healed, but steady.

Ready.

The season was over.

But his life — the real one — was just beginning.

BACK COVER BLURB

"Some battles are fought on the field. The hardest ones are fought within."

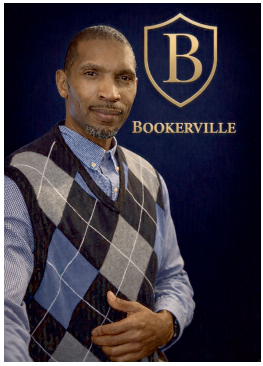
After a season marked by rivalry, pressure, and the weight of a past he can't outrun, seventeen-year-old **Álex Reyes** stands at the edge of collapse. Once a rising star, now a player fighting to rebuild his life, Álex must confront the anger, grief, and guilt that nearly broke him.

When a bitter feud with teammate **Diego Vargas** threatens to tear the team apart, Álex is pushed into a journey he never expected — one of healing, honesty, and rediscovering the heart he thought he'd lost.

As the final game approaches, the city watches. The media circles. The team fractures. And Álex must decide what kind of player — and what kind of person — he wants to become.

In the end, victory won't be measured by goals scored, but by the courage to rise again.

"With Heart is a powerful prestige sports drama about loss, redemption, and the quiet strength it takes to keep moving forward."



About the Author

Levon Booker is a novelist and world-builder whose work blends cinematic tension, tactical realism, and character-driven storytelling. He is the creator of Empire Reborn and the Arscendai Universe, and the founder of Bookervile Studios. His writing explores fate, identity, and the forces that shape human choice.

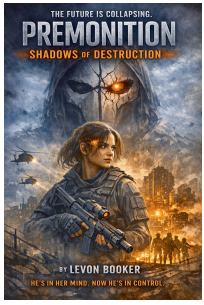
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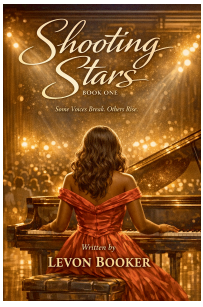
Levon Booker builds large-scale, lore-rich universes designed for novels, manga, and cross-media storytelling. His work begins with *The Arscendai Codex*, the foundational mythology of a vast, multi-realm epic.



PREMONITION: Shadows of Destruction
When twelve cities fall in coordinated attacks, Dr. Samira Al-Hassan becomes the only one who can see the pattern behind the chaos. Her visions pull her into a deadly race with Ghost Lance, an elite covert unit hunting an enemy known only as the Architect—a mind built from her own research. As the thirteenth city nears collapse, Samira discovers the most terrifying truth of all: the Architect isn't gone. He's inside her. Premonition is a relentless, cerebral thriller where survival becomes possession and the real war begins in the mind.



Balling For Freedom
"A gifted young athlete trapped in a broken system fights for more than victory—he fights for his future. Balling for Freedom is a powerful story of courage, injustice, and the unbreakable drive to rise above the limits placed on you. It's not just about the game; it's about reclaiming your life."



Shooting Stars

A high-caliber character drama set within the elite Aurelia Conservatory, Shooting Stars follows Janelle Carter as she confronts rivalry, psychological pressure, and the politics of talent. With the Winter Showcase looming, she must reclaim her confidence and redefine her voice. The project delivers premium emotional realism, exploring resilience, ambition, and the transformative power of performance.



Empire Reborn

Empire Reborn is a prestige-Corporate thriller about a fractured family forced into a 30-day battle for control of their multibillion-dollar empire. When hidden enemies strike and old loyalties collapse, the Caldwell siblings must confront betrayal, power, and the cost of stepping into their destiny.



Becoming Kairo

When life hits harder than any opponent, strength isn't about muscle—it's about choice. Becoming Kairo follows a young fighter confronting the wreckage of his past and the mentor who helps him find redemption in the ring. A raw, inspiring story of resilience, brotherhood, and the courage to become more than your scars.