# Chapter 6: Smile

“I often wish that I could save everyone, but I’m a dreamer.” — Scarface

I wish I could save every one of them.  
  
Every kid who walks into a gym carrying weight they don’t have words for. Every player who flinches at feedback because they’ve only known correction without care. Every child who once loved this game but now plays with a clenched jaw and a tight chest.  
  
I wish I could save them all.  
  
But I can’t.  
  
And that’s the ache I carry.  
  
This chapter isn’t a warning. It’s a lament.  
  
There was a kid on an opposing team once—maybe twelve, maybe thirteen. Middle of the game, he broke. Not physically. Emotionally. His body folded, his hands covered his face, and he sobbed. In front of everyone.  
  
And his mother?  
  
She didn’t move.  
  
She sat in the stands, watched it happen, and did nothing.  
  
If a stranger had been yelling at her son in a grocery store, she would’ve stepped in. But in that gym, in this system, she froze.  
  
And I don’t blame her.  
  
Because I get it. We’ve been conditioned to normalize the pain. To mistake it for preparation. To think this kind of suffering is part of development.  
  
But it’s not.  
  
It’s erasure.  
  
Joy gets wiped away. Play gets replaced by pressure. And we watch it happen because we’ve been told this is what “serious” sports look like.  
  
That moment still haunts me.  
  
So does the kid who said, “Coach Hold makes it fun again.”  
  
He didn’t say it to me.  
  
He said it in the backseat, on the ride home, while his mom was driving. She told me later. And that detail mattered.  
  
It wasn’t performance. It was relief.  
  
He didn’t need to impress me. He just needed to feel safe again. And he did.  
  
That’s how deep the damage goes. Kids don’t even realize they’re drowning until they catch a breath somewhere else.  
  
I walked out of a game once.  
  
Older kids. Loud gym. Too many grownups yelling. Too many drills masquerading as joy. Too much control. Too much of everything that breaks kids and calls it coaching.  
  
And I left.  
  
Because staying would’ve felt like cosigning.  
  
I’ve seen too much.  
  
And no, I can’t fix it all.  
  
But I’m still going to try.  
  
Because silence isn’t neutrality. It’s complicity.  
  
Because that breakdown on the court? That whispered joy in the backseat? That hollow noise in the gym?  
  
They’re not isolated moments.  
  
They’re signals. Signs.  
  
We are watching kids suffer and calling it preparation.  
  
And that doesn’t sit right with me.  
  
So I smile.  
  
Not because it doesn’t hurt. But because it does.  
  
Because smiling is the most human thing I’ve got left in a culture that rewards coldness. Because if I stop smiling, I might start screaming. And I need my voice intact.  
  
This isn’t about being a hero.  
  
This is about being present.  
  
I’m not loud in these moments.  
  
I’m just here.  
  
With my eyes open. With my heart still beating. With my dream intact.  
  
I often wish I could save everyone.  
  
I know I can’t.  
  
But I still show up.  
  
That’s the dream.