

THE MIAMI KID IN THE WILD WEST



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Chapter 1: The Spark

Before the Goodbye

Rafael Manzanillo sat alone in his office as the sun dipped low behind the tall buildings of Miami. The glass windows around him reflected the pink sky, but he didn't notice. His eyes stayed fixed on the screen in front of him. The words "Optimization Strategy" blinked in bold letters at the top of the document, but Rafael wasn't reading anymore. His fingers tapped lightly on the side of his coffee mug, making a soft rhythm. The coffee inside had gone cold hours ago.

Outside his cubicle, voices bounced off the walls. Some of his coworkers laughed about a new design project. Others were huddled together, whispering excitedly about a client meeting downtown. Rafael sat still. No one had invited him to help on the new tech rollout. Again. It wasn't personal—at least that's what he told himself—but it still stung. He had been in this job for nine years. He came in early. Stayed late.



Always met deadlines. But somehow, it felt like the work was passing him by.

He looked down at the folder on his desk. “Ideas for Future Planning,” it read in thick black letters. It had been sitting there for three weeks. He hadn’t opened it once. Every time he tried, he’d stop. What was the point? No one had asked for his ideas in months. His team had new leaders now—young, confident, fast-talking types who always seemed to have ten tabs open and a different language for every meeting. Rafael had tried to keep up, but somewhere along the way, the ground had shifted.

His eyes drifted toward the window. The Miami skyline shimmered with lights turning on for the night. It should have felt beautiful, familiar. It used to. But now, even that view didn’t fill him like it once did. He rubbed the back of his neck and whispered, “What am I still doing here?”

He thought about Yasmin and Alex. With her soft smile and loud laughter, Yasmin runs her little café on the edge of the Grove. She worked harder than anyone



he knew. And Alex—eleven now, full of questions, always drawing, always asking about the stars and the sky. He was so bright, so full of energy. Rafael didn't want his son to see his father come home tired every day. He didn't want to be the man who only complained about emails and meetings.

That night, they all sat together at the dinner table. The kitchen smelled like arroz con pollo, and the fan above made a low clicking sound. Yasmin was telling a story about a customer who had brought his pet parrot into the café that morning. She was laughing as she scooped rice onto Alex's plate.

Sitting across from his parents, Alex sketched something on a napkin's corner. A spaceship. Or a dragon. He looked up now and then, half-listening, half in his world.

Rafael pushed his fork around his plate for a moment. He looked at Yasmin. Then at Alex. He cleared his throat.

“I have something to tell you both,” he said.



Yasmin paused, her spoon halfway to her mouth. Alex blinked and sat up straight.

“I got a job offer,” Rafael said. His voice was quiet but steady. “A new position. In Arizona. A town called Sunset Canyon.”

There was a long silence.

Yasmin lowered her spoon. “Arizona?” she repeated. Her eyebrows pulled together. “You’re serious?”

Rafael nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while. It’s a good opportunity. More responsibility. A chance to lead something.”

Alex looked between his parents, his pencil frozen in mid-air.

“What about us?” Yasmin asked softly.

“We’d all go,” Rafael said. “Together.”

Alex’s face scrunches up. “But... what about school? What about my friends? Mateo and Nico?”



Rafael looked at him gently. “I know it’s a big change, mijo. I do. But sometimes change brings better things. We’d be starting fresh. And we need that.”

Yasmin crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “Sunset Canyon? I’ve never even heard of it.”

“I looked it up,” Rafael said. “Small town. Desert views. Good schools. They need someone who understands how to rebuild their power systems. It’s not just work—it’s purpose. I’d be helping to light up a place that’s kind of... faded.”

Yasmin didn’t speak right away. Her eyes flicked toward the window, out into the night. Then she looked back at Rafael.

“You’ve felt stuck for a long time,” she said quietly.

“I have,” he admitted.

Alex stood up suddenly and walked toward the sink. He didn’t say anything at first. Just turned the faucet on and off. Then he whispered, “I don’t want to move.”



Rafael stood up and walked over to him. He put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "I know, buddy. I do. I'm not asking you to like it right away. But I'm asking you to trust me. I think this move could be good for all of us."

Alex didn't look up. "Will it snow there?"

"No," Rafael said, smiling just a little. "But they've got mountains. And clear skies. You'd see the stars better than ever before."

Alex didn't answer. He just nodded once, barely.

Yasmin began to clear the plates. The clatter of dishes filled the silence.

After Alex had gone to bed that night, Rafael and Yasmin sat in the living room. The TV was off, and the fan above them clicked slowly.

Yasmin finally broke the quiet. "You believe this will help?"

Rafael looked tired but calm. "I need to believe it. For Alex. For us."



She nodded slowly. “Okay. Then let’s make a plan.”

He smiled, more with his eyes than his mouth.
“Gracias.”

Down the hall, Alex lay awake in bed. His room was dim, shadows stretching across the walls. His sketchbook sat on his chest. The drawing wasn’t finished.

He stared at the ceiling and whispered, “Sunset Canyon.” The name sounded strange in his mouth, like something from a movie. He turned the word over in his mind again. Sunset Canyon. Where was that on a map? It didn’t sound like palm trees or ocean air. It didn’t sound like home.

He rolled over and looked at the stack of books by his nightstand. Some were about space, others about weird animals that lived in caves. The book on top was about stars. He flipped it open to the constellation page. Orion. The Hunter. He traced the shape with his finger. He had memorized these patterns when he was



seven, lying on the roof with his dad, a blanket, and two mugs of hot chocolate.

Would he see the same stars in Arizona? Did Orion go that far west? He didn't know. But he hoped so. It felt important.

The house was quiet. The kind of quiet that meant everyone was thinking, but nobody wanted to say anything out loud. Even the walls seemed to hold their breath.

The next morning, nobody talked about the move. Yasmin poured orange juice. Rafael read something on his tablet. Alex ate his toast and didn't look up. It wasn't angry silence. It was that strange pause where your brain still catches up to big news.

At school, Alex told Mateo and Nico about it during lunch. They were sitting under their usual tree near the basketball court. A bee buzzed near Nico's apple juice, but no one moved.

"I'm moving," Alex said. His voice came out too softly, so he repeated it. "To Arizona. My dad got a new job."



Mateo blinked. “For how long?”

Alex looked down at his sandwich. “Forever, I think.”

Nico made a face. “Arizona’s, like, all desert, right? No beaches?”

“Nope,” Alex said. “Just cactus and heat.”

“Do they even have baseball there?” Mateo asked, as if that was the biggest deal.

“I guess,” Alex shrugged. “I’ll have to find a new team.”

They didn’t talk much after that. Just picked at their food, tossing crusts to the birds. When the bell rang, they didn’t rush back inside like usual. They strolled, like the day had suddenly gotten heavier.

The next few weeks passed in pieces. A trip to Calle Ocho to visit Tío Hernando and eat way too many pastelitos. A Sunday afternoon on Abuela’s porch with the whole family, even cousin Laura, who never came to anything. They played dominoes and argued about



who had the better hand while the smell of fried plantains floated in the air. Rafael smiled more than usual, but Alex could tell his eyes were already looking toward the west.

Abuela pulled Alex aside before they left. She handed him a tiny tin box that smelled like cinnamon and old wood. Inside was a rosary and a small Saint Jude card. She closed his fingers around it and whispered, “For when things feel too big.”

He nodded, too choked up to speak.

Packing started slow, then sped up like someone pressed a fast-forward button. Boxes appeared in corners. The walls of the house began to empty. The fridge got quiet. His bookshelf, once a mess of comics and notebooks, turned into cardboard cubes with tape on the sides.

But his sketchpad stayed out.

He couldn’t put it away. It sat beside him every night. He kept drawing the Miami sky—stars above palm trees, constellations peeking through clouds, little



rockets zooming past Orion. Sometimes he'd draw Mateo and Nico in space suits, waving from the moon. Other times, he jotted lines that made no sense to anyone else.

The three boys met at the park again on the last Friday before the move. They lay in the grass like always, arms crossed behind their heads.

"Maybe a portal will open," Alex said, pointing at a strange-shaped cloud. "And I'll fall into a different universe where I don't have to move."

"Or maybe," Nico added, "your house gets eaten by a giant mole and you're forced to stay in Miami forever."

Mateo laughed. "A mole? That's your best idea?"

"It could happen," Nico grinned. "You never know with moles."

They spent the next hour building stories about space dragons, talking trees, and kids who found hidden



maps behind school lockers. For a little while, it felt like nothing was changing.

Then the sun started to set.

Alex sat up and looked at his friends. “You guys think we’ll still talk? After I leave?”

“Of course,” Mateo said quickly. “We’ll text.”

“Texting doesn’t count,” Alex replied.

“Then we’ll video call,” Nico said. “Every Friday. We’ll tell you all the dumb stuff our teachers say.”

“And you’ll tell us about cowboys and cactuses,” Mateo added.

Alex smiled. It helped—a little.

They stood slowly, brushing grass off their clothes. No one said goodbye yet. It didn’t feel like the right time. They just gave each other a look that said, “Yeah, this matters,” even if they couldn’t say it out loud.



Back home, Alex's room looked almost nothing like it used to. Boxes were stacked like towers along the wall. His bed only had one blanket now. The posters were gone. But the sketchpad was still on his desk.

He sat down and opened it again. This time, he didn't draw Miami. He tried to picture what Arizona might look like. He drew a wide road with dust flying behind a car. A house with a tiny porch. Mountains in the back. And a big open sky filled with stars he hadn't met yet.

He wrote a tiny word in the corner of the page:
“Start.”

Later that night, Rafael peeked into his room. “You okay?”

Alex didn't answer right away. Then he nodded.
“Yeah. Just drawing.”

Rafael stepped inside and looked at the page. “New stars?”

Alex nodded again.



Rafael gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “You’ll find your way, mijo. I believe it.”

Alex looked up at him, wanting to believe it too. His dad smiled, not with a big grin but the smile that said he meant it. Then he left, leaving Alex with his sketchbook, the quiet, and spinning thoughts.

The next day was hot, the kind of August heat that made the sidewalks shimmer. But Alex didn’t mind. He had a plan. He stuffed his sketchbook, water bottle, and two granola bars into his backpack and rode his bike to the park. Mateo and Nico were already waiting on the big grassy hill behind the baseball field. They always met there when they needed space to think or talk about weird stuff like time travel and alternate worlds. Today was both.

They flopped down on the grass without saying much at first. The sun was high, and the blades of grass itched their arms, but none cared. It was quiet except for the buzz of a lawn mower somewhere far off and a dog barking in the distance.



Mateo stretched his arms behind his head. “Do you think stars look different in Arizona?”

Alex glanced at the sky. “Maybe. I mean, the sky’s the same, right? But it might be clearer. Fewer city lights.”

“Or more aliens,” Nico added, serious for half a second before grinning.

“I’m serious,” Mateo said. “What if you get to Arizona and there’s a whole new group of constellations nobody told us about?”

Alex laughed. “Like... secret ones?”

“Yeah,” Mateo said, sitting up a little. “Like, there’s Orion and all that, but Arizona has its constellations. Like, a baseball bat star pattern. Or a saguaro cactus one.”

“That would be awesome,” Alex said. He pulled out his sketchpad and started doodling a shape that looked like a cactus made of stars. “We should name it.”



“Call it ‘The Outfielder,’” Nico said. “He stands in the sky forever, waiting for the biggest fly ball in the universe.”

They all laughed, but a little quieter this time. Alex stopped drawing for a second and looked at them.

“I’m gonna miss this.”

“We know,” Mateo said. He didn’t say more. He didn’t have to.

They lay back down again. The clouds above moved slowly, shifting into odd shapes. One looked like a dragon. Nico pointed it out. “Look. Fire-breathing sky dragon.”

“It’s chasing a pizza,” Mateo added. “Obviously.”

Alex laughed again, but his chest felt tight. He closed his eyes and tried to freeze the moment. The sun, the grass, the sound of his friends making up stories, the way the sky looked like it was full of possibilities.



“Fifth grade’s gonna be so weird without you,” Nico said out of nowhere.

“Yeah,” Mateo added. “Like who’s gonna argue with Ms. Carter when she forgets Pluto is still a planet?”

“I never argued,” Alex said.

“You *always* argued,” they said together, then cracked up.

Alex rolled over onto his stomach and watched an ant crawl by. He didn’t want to leave, not really. He liked knowing where every crack in the sidewalk was, what days the ice cream truck came, and that his friends were only a bike ride away.

But the move was happening. Boxes were already labeled with things like “Kitchen Stuff” and “Books—Alex.” His mom had even written “Handle with Love” on the box with his baby photos.

He didn’t want to cry in front of his friends, so he bit the inside of his cheek and focused on the ant.



“You’re gonna make new friends,” Nico said after a while.

Alex didn’t answer.

“But we’ll still be your real ones,” Mateo added, lying on his side to look at Alex. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Alex said quietly. “Always.”

They stayed there until the sun began to dip and the shadows stretched longer. Then they walked their bikes to the corner store and bought grape sodas. No one said it aloud, but they all knew it was probably the last time they’d sit together on that hill.

Later that night, Alex couldn’t sleep again. He sat on his bed, looking at his packed room. The walls were bare. His bookshelf was empty. But his sketchpad sat on the desk, next to his astronaut lamp. He opened to the last page.

He started a new drawing. This one was different.



He drew himself, standing on a small hill under a big sky. Mateo and Nico were on either side of him, pointing at the stars. Above them, a constellation shaped like a dragon hovered. Next to it, a new one—The Outfielder.

He added a speech bubble from himself in the drawing.

“Don’t worry, guys. I’ll find more stars.”

Then he closed the book and slid it into his backpack. Tomorrow, they were leaving for Arizona. But tonight, he still had Miami. The park. The stars. And two best friends who believed in aliens and secret constellations and him.



Chapter 2: The Miami Kid Takes Flight

The house didn't feel like home anymore. Boxes stood everywhere—tall, taped up, and labeled in Yasmin's neat handwriting. "Books." "Kitchen." "Alex – Clothes." The living room was half empty. No more pictures on the walls. No soft music playing from the radio. Just the sound of packing tape stretching and scissors snapping through cardboard.

Alex walked through the rooms slowly, dragging his fingers across the bare table where he used to do puzzles with Abuela. The whole house smelled like packing tape and guava pastries. His mom had baked extra pastelitos, probably to soften the goodbye. The sweet smell filled the kitchen like one last hug from Miami.

In the dining room, Rafael crouched near a box labeled "Cables & Tools." He lifted a coil of wires and



paused before fitting it into the trunk of his dark blue 2019 Toyota Sequoia, sturdy and packed tight with heirloom trinkets, a folded prayer card for St. Expedite, and a cooler full of Yasmin's homemade empanadas. He worked like he always did—careful, focused, like building something invisible that only he could see. He didn't talk much while packing. He was already thinking about power lines and grid systems in Arizona, about new maps in his mind that didn't include Biscayne Bay or Calle Ocho.

Yasmin stood in the kitchen wearing a bright apron with a coffee cup pattern. Her hands moved fast, filling plastic containers with food, wrapping them tightly, and sliding them into the small travel cooler. She reached for a few more pastelitos and slipped them into the last space before closing the lid.

She turned to Alex, smiled, and brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"You'll eat these when we stop," she said, kissing him gently. "Just like old road trips."



He gave a slight nod, looking at her but not seeing. Everything felt too big. The goodbye was happening in little pieces, not one big wave. It crept in with every box sealed shut, every picture taken down.

He walked back to his room. It looked strange—just a mattress on the floor, one pillow, and a backpack leaning against the wall. The desk and shelves were gone. Only the curtains stayed, blowing slightly with the breeze from the cracked window. On the windowsill sat his sketchbook, which is closed now, waiting to travel, too.

Alex took one last look around and whispered, “Thank you.” He didn’t know if he meant the room, the house, or the city. Maybe all of it.

The drive began early, just as the sun started to rise. Rafael adjusted the mirrors three times before backing out of the driveway. Yasmin handed Alex a juice bottle and tucked a sweater beside him in case it got cold in the car. The SUV was packed full, but not messy. Rafael had loaded it like a game of Tetris. Before shifting into drive, Rafael tapped the folded St.



Expedite card and murmured, “Help us move swift and safe,” then told Yasmin under his breath, “I prayed for a sign; let’s trust we’ll see it.” Yasmin squeezed his arm and said, “We carry faith.”

As they pulled away, Alex didn’t wave. He just stared out the window. Miami slipped by—fast-food signs, palm trees, corner stores, bright murals, people walking their dogs. It was all still there, still moving. Only he was leaving.

Yasmin reached for the radio and turned on soft music. It was a song Alex remembered from their last trip to Manzanillo. That was a summer he wouldn’t forget. His parents took him to meet cousins who lived near the beach. They ate street tacos daily and watched sunsets that turned the ocean orange. Alex learned to play a hand-clapping game with his little cousin Mariana. He lost every time, but it made them both laugh.

His mind hopped to Disneyland—two different years, two perfect fireworks shows. He pictured the castle lit bright, the taste of churros, and how he once asked if



Mickey could follow them home. Then the Grand Canyon trip flashed up: the stone lodge, rim trails that felt like the world's edge, and the helicopter ride where the canyon walls looked like giant waves frozen in rock. He even thought of Old Tucson, where actors in cowboy hats staged a showdown on dusty streets and a fake sheriff tipped his hat at Alex, calling him "partner."

Another trip came to mind—Oaxaca. The air had smelled like corn and spices, and a man on the corner made alebrijes out of wood. He carved a jaguar with wings and painted it in colors Alex had never seen before. That's when Alex started drawing strange creatures too—mash-ups of animals with names like "Froglesnail" and "Batgator."

He stared out the window as the Florida palms gave way to long stretches of flat road. Every so often, they passed a gas station or a rest stop. The sky looked wider now. The buildings grew smaller, then fewer. He pressed his forehead to the window and whispered, "Goodbye, Florida."



After a few hours, they stopped for lunch in a small town with a diner called “Sunny’s Grill.” It had a yellow door and booths covered in red vinyl. Yasmin ordered sandwiches while Rafael asked for extra napkins, like he always did. Alex unzipped his cooler and took out a pastelito. He stared at it for a moment before biting in. The sweet filling warmed his tongue and tugged at his heart.

Back in the car, the road stretched long and dry. Rafael started pointing out random facts about the states they passed through.

“This part of Texas used to be under the ocean,” he said. “Millions of years ago.”

“Cool,” Alex said, but he didn’t lift his head.

They drove until the sky turned pink and purple. Alex closed his eyes and listened to the tires humming against the road. In his head, he made a list of things he would miss: Saturday cartoons with Mateo, chasing pigeons in the plaza with Nico, Abuela’s rice pudding, the smell of rain on hot sidewalks, the street musician



who played the trumpet in front of the grocery store, and the echo of cheering crowds at Disneyland's night parade, the hush of canyon wind against lodge windows, and the clang of the saloon doors in Old Tucson.

Then he made a new list. This one had question marks.

Would some kids like baseball in Sunset Canyon?
Would they laugh at his Spanish when it slipped out?
Would they know about Orion? Would they understand his drawings? Would he still be himself out there?

When the car finally slowed again, it was dark. They were still hours from Arizona, but Rafael wanted to sleep. They stopped at a motel with a flickering neon sign and a pool that smelled of too much chlorine. Their room had two beds, a tiny fridge, and a noisy air conditioner.

Alex sat on the bed closest to the window and opened his sketchbook. He drew a road. Then he added a tiny



car on the road. Then a boy in the back seat, watching stars from the window. He labeled the stars with names from his head: “Curioso,” “Nuevo,” “Esperanza.”

He whispered those names under his breath.

Curioso. For the questions in his heart.

Nuevo. For the place waiting ahead.

Esperanza. For hope.

The motel room was quiet except for the humming air conditioner. Alex turned on his side and looked at the drawing again. He added small stars above the car, dotting them like tiny sparks of memory. He thought about his cousins from Manzanillo, how they danced around bonfires on the beach and sang songs that didn’t need perfect voices. He remembered how one of his tías called him “el pequeño explorador” because he always asked questions. Why do stars shine? Where does the sun go when it’s not here? Can wishes ride comets?



He smiled at the thought of her voice, always calling him curious, never annoying. She never told him to stop asking. She always tried to answer, even if she didn't know. She'd say, "Let's look it up together," then dig through old books or call someone who might know.

The next morning, the road waited for them again. Rafael checked the tires and filled the cooler with new water bottles. Yasmin handed Alex a breakfast sandwich wrapped in foil. "Eat slow," she said, kissing his head again. He didn't say anything, just nodded and climbed into the backseat.

Outside, the highway stretched on like a never-ending sentence. The sky was a pale blue, and the sun was already climbing higher. As they drove through smaller towns, Alex watched the stores and houses go by. Some places looked half-closed, some wide open. He wondered what the people were doing inside, if they were waking up to the same morning or something different entirely.



Near El Paso, they stopped for gas. Rafael pulled into the station, took out his wallet, and looked at Alex. “Come on, hijo. You’re going to learn how to do this now.”

Alex followed him to the pump, the desert heat warming his shoulders. Rafael handed him the card and pointed to the screen.

“Start here. Then you press this.”

Alex hesitated but followed the steps carefully. The gas flowed, and Rafael nodded. “Good. Out there, we’ll all be learning new systems.”

Alex looked at the numbers ticking up and thought about systems—power grids, street signs, even lunch schedules. Arizona would have its way of doing everything, and he wasn’t sure he was ready for everything.

Back on the road, Yasmin returned a tiny bag of sweet cookies she had picked up at the gas station. Alex took one, chewing slowly, and looked out the window. The colors outside had changed. The trees were gone,



replaced by rocky hills and brush. The grass looked different—shorter and more challenging.

He took out his sketchbook and started a new page. He drew the road as a long snake, curling through hills, with small gas stations and tiny houses along the way. He added a cactus with glasses. “Explorer Cactus,” he whispered to himself, and laughed softly.

By the time the sign for Sunset Canyon appeared, the sky was turning orange-pink. The sun dropped lower, casting long shadows across parking lots and rooftops. They passed a strip mall with a broken sign, a grocery store that looked half-closed, and a diner with flickering lights. It wasn’t loud like Miami. It wasn’t colorful like Oaxaca. It was quiet. Still. Waiting.

Rafael turned down a street lined with small houses. Some had bikes in the yard. Some had flags on the porch. Their home was near the end of the block, plain and boxy, with no porch swing, no mango tree, no music playing nearby.



Alex stepped out of the car and stretched. The air smelled different. Drier. A little dusty.

He looked at the house. It wasn't ugly. Just... new. Unknown.

Yasmin opened the trunk and started pulling out bags. Rafael helped her, then turned to Alex. "Come here," he said.

Alex walked over. His dad didn't say much at first, but he knelt down and hugged him tightly.

"We're not starting over," he said softly. "We're leveling up."

Alex nodded into his dad's shoulder. He didn't know what leveling up meant in real life, but it sounded better than starting over.

They carried boxes into the house. The rooms were empty, primarily clean but echoey. The kitchen had a working fridge but no food yet. The living room had space for a couch, but they didn't have one. Alex picked the room in the back with the biggest window.



He set his backpack on the floor and took out his sketchbook. Then he looked outside. The sky was darker now, and stars were starting to appear—different stars. He didn't know their names yet.

He pulled out a pencil.

"I'll name them," he said quietly. "Just like I did before."

He sat cross-legged on the floor and began to draw: a new sky, a new explorer, a boy with questions, a place still waiting to tell its story.



Chapter 3: Arrival at Sunset Canyon

The next morning, Alex stood in front of the mirror, tying his new sneakers. They were white and clean, still stiff from the box. He looked at his reflection. His hair was brushed, his hoodie was zipped, and his backpack sat by the door, stuffed with pencils, a notebook, and the sketchpad he couldn't leave behind. It was his first day at Sunset Canyon Elementary, and even though he had everything he needed, his stomach still felt like it was flipping.

Yasmin came to the doorway. "You ready, mi amor?"

Alex nodded, even though he wasn't sure. She walked over, smoothed the collar of his hoodie, and kissed his forehead. "You've got this."

Outside, the sun was already up, casting a soft gold light on the neighborhood. The houses looked sleepy.



Rafael drove him to school quietly, tapping the wheel lightly with his fingers. “New place, new people, but same you,” he said. “Just be yourself, Alex.”

Alex looked out the window. The school wasn’t far—flat buildings, a big flag, kids walking in with bright lunchboxes and bigger voices. He watched them laugh, run ahead, and toss footballs across the grass. His hands tightened around the straps of his backpack.

He stepped out of the car. “Bye, Papi,” he said.

“You’ll do great,” Rafael replied. Alex gave a small wave and turned toward the front doors.

The hall smelled like pencil shavings and floor cleaner. Lockers lined the walls, and kids moved in clumps. Some had hair slicked back or parted neatly. Most wore pastel-colored polo shirts, khakis, and matching smiles. Alex pulled his hoodie closer, wishing he’d picked something else. His hoodie had small stars on it, ones he liked, but now they felt too loud.



He strolled, trying to find the office first. Eyes turned toward him. Not rude—just curious. But it still made him feel like every step echoed louder than it should.

Inside the office, the secretary greeted him with a practiced smile. “You must be Alexander Manzanillo.”

He nodded. “Alex.”

She handed him a small sheet of paper. “This is your class schedule. You’re in Room 14 with Ms. Keller. Here’s a map of the building, too.”

Alex looked at the paper. His name was printed at the top, and his fingers curled around it tightly.

As he walked toward Room 14, more kids passed by. Their voices sounded different—lighter somehow. They spoke fast, laughed quickly, and made jokes about things Alex didn’t quite catch. He saw a boy with spiky blond hair bump shoulders with another and shout, “Race you to math!” Another kid yelled something about a video game Alex hadn’t played.



When he got to the classroom, the bell rang. He froze for half a second, then stepped inside. Ms. Keller—a tall woman in a soft lavender blouse and gray slacks—stood at the front. Her brown hair was pulled into a low bun, and thin silver earrings caught the light each time she moved. Her smile reached her eyes, and her posture was straight but gentle, like she'd practiced welcoming nervous kids. She looked up and smiled.

"Class, this is Alex Manzanillo," she said, her voice clear and warm. "He just moved here from Miami. Let's make him feel at home." She gestured toward him with an open hand—steady, inviting, no rush.

Alex felt every eye swing toward him. He noticed rows of mostly pale faces, hair shades from gold to light brown, and pastel collars that were neat and even. He wondered if anyone else here spoke two languages at lunch. He lifted one hand in an awkward wave, aware that his star-stamped hoodie stuck out against their polos.



“You must be Alex. Welcome! We’re just getting started. There’s a seat for you near the window.”

He walked past rows of desks. Some kids looked up. A few whispered. One girl smiled at him, but he looked away quickly and sat down. The desk had a nametag already taped on it. “Alex M.” The sight of it made him feel both seen and exposed.

Ms. Keller began the morning routine. “Let’s all get our reading packets out,” she said. “Today we’ll be practicing reading comprehension.”

Alex reached into his backpack and pulled out a pencil. The packet was already on his desk—a short story and some questions. He stared at the first line.

His eyes moved across the words. “The quick brown fox jumps...” But then it started. The letters blurred, moved, and slid over one another. He blinked. Tried again. But it kept happening. The words didn’t want to stay in place. They curled like waves. He pressed his pencil into the paper and tried to focus.



All around him, pencils scratched lightly, turning pages. Some kids had already flipped to the second question. Alex hadn't even finished the first sentence.

He could feel the heat rise in his ears. He adjusted his grip, leaned in closer, whispered the line under his breath, hoping that would help. "The quick... brown... fox..." The word "jumps" twisted, and he had to stop again.

Ms. Keller walked by slowly. She paused, slightly tapped his desk, and slid a laminated bookmark onto his paper. "Try this to help you follow the line," she whispered.

He nodded but didn't look at her. He picked up the bookmark and lined it up. It helped a little. The words stayed put longer. But his brain was still working twice as hard, maybe three times.

Inside, he was yelling at himself to go faster. To not fall behind. To not look lost. But the page didn't care. The words waited for no one.



He managed to answer one question before the time was up.

Ms. Keller moved on. “Okay, pencils down! Let’s talk about the story as a class.”

Alex put his pencil down, heart pounding. His hand had a faint line of sweat from gripping too hard. He looked out the window for a second and saw the big sky. It was the same sky from his drawing, but it didn’t feel like it belonged to him here. Not yet.

At lunch, he carried his tray to the edge of a long table and sat at the corner. Kids filled the room with laughter and loud voices. They swapped snacks, shouted across tables, and joked about things he didn’t understand.

He opened his lunchbox. Pastelitos. His mom had packed them again. They smelled sweet and flaky, full of guava and cheese. He broke one in half and looked around. The boy across from him had a peanut butter sandwich, sliced into perfect squares.

Alex took a small bite and kept his eyes on his tray.



Nobody said anything mean. Nobody said anything at all.

He finished lunch slowly and wiped his hands on a napkin. His mind buzzed with leftover thoughts from reading time. He wanted to do better. He didn't know how to explain what was wrong.

After lunch, they had silent reading. Ms. Keller passed out another book with smaller text and more paragraphs. Alex stared at the first page, then closed it softly.

He didn't open it again.

When the bell rang at the end of the day, Alex packed up quietly. He was one of the last to leave the room. Outside, the sun still shone, but it didn't feel warm.

He walked home alone. His shoes crunched on the sidewalk. He passed a house with a dog barking from behind a fence. He passed a cactus with tiny red flowers at the top. He kept walking.



When he got to the house, he went straight to his room. He didn't take off his backpack. He sat on the floor, opened his sketchpad, and started to draw.

He drew the classroom. The desk. The bookmark. The words are trying to run off the page. Then he pulled himself, sitting under a big sky, with the stars above trying to help him spell something. The stars formed a sentence, but it wasn't finished.

He whispered to the page, "I'll get there even if I read slowly. I'll get there."

The next morning, Ms. Keller handed out another reading worksheet, her smile calm and practiced. When she passed Alex's desk, she slid a laminated sheet beside his paper. It had different colors—blue, green, yellow—each showing a step to help follow along while reading. Alex stared at it for a moment. She didn't say much, just moved on with the same even smile she gave everyone. He forced a quick smile back, not wanting to seem rude, even though something sank a little in his chest. He wasn't sure



what the colors meant, but he figured he'd have to learn.

Reading time came. The colors helped a little, but not completely. Blue meant start with the title. Green was for the first sentence. Yellow was for questions. He moved slowly, tapping his pencil twice before trying each part. The words didn't run as fast this time, but they still didn't walk straight either. Still, he tried. He didn't look around to see what the others were doing. He knew they were faster. He kept his eyes on the page and pushed through the fog in his mind.

Alex walked into the cafeteria, holding his lunch, careful not to spill anything. He found the same table from yesterday and sat on the far end. It felt like a safe corner. He opened his lunchbox and unwrapped a ham and cheese sandwich. Yasmin had packed a pastelito again, too. Its smell made him feel closer to home.

The table next to him was full of kids. One boy shouted, "Dude, I got the gold skin last night!"



Another one laughed and added, “My cousin played all night at the lake. He caught, like, twelve fish!”

They talked fast. They knew each other. Their voices were loud and excited, bouncing off each other like a game. Alex chewed slowly. No one looked his way, making it easier to stay quiet. He peeled the edge off his pastelito, thinking about how different this place felt from lunch in Miami. There, the cafeteria was louder in a different way—more Spanish, more clapping, more cousins yelling across tables. It was noisy but distant here, like a party he hadn’t been invited to yet.

He finished eating and packed his things neatly, slipping the paper napkin into his lunchbox. He thought about saying something to the kids beside him. He even thought about asking what a gold skin was. But the words didn’t come out. He stood up slowly and dropped his tray in the bin before heading outside to the playground.

Out on the blacktop, kids ran everywhere. Some kicked soccer balls. Others spun in circles or chased



each other in zigzags. Alex stood by the fence for a minute, watching. He found a spot under a tree and sat down with his sketchpad. He started drawing again—a baseball field surrounded by desert hills. There were stars again in the sky, still spelling the sentence he hadn’t finished.

After school, he walked home alone. His backpack felt heavier today, though nothing extra had been added. It wasn’t the books. It was something inside him, something quiet and uncomfortable. At one point, he saw a tumbleweed roll across the road. It made him think of nothing and everything at the same time.

When he reached home, the lights were on and the house smelled like warm rice. Yasmin was in the kitchen, humming. Rafael was at the table with his laptop and papers spread around him. Alex went to his room without a word.

Inside, the walls still felt too plain. The desert air didn’t slip through like it did in Miami. He sat on the edge of his bed and opened his small box. Slowly, he took out the things that made his room feel like his.



First, the little St. Jude statue was chipped on one side, but it was still strong. Then, the rosary beads are deep red with a silver cross. Last is a folded note from Abuela, the paper soft from being held so much.

He carefully set them on the windowsill. The sunlight touched the edge of the cross, and the room felt softer for a second. He placed a small photo behind them—one from a beach trip, with him and Abuela holding hands and laughing at something off-camera. The waves in the background looked like they were reaching for their feet.

Alex knelt before the window and whispered, “Please, help me see the words straight. Help me see where I belong.”

The room stayed quiet. Outside, a soft wind tapped the glass. He stayed there for a while, just breathing. His hands rested on his knees. He didn’t expect the statue to speak or the photo to blink. He just needed the silence to hold something for him.



He stood up and took a deep breath. He opened his sketchpad one more time and added to the drawing. This time, he drew himself on a new playground. The kids were still far away, but this version of him was waving. A small wave, but it was there.

Then he added a baseball. Just one. Sitting in the grass. Waiting. Just like him.

He put his pencil down and stared at the picture. It wasn't perfect—the lines wobbled in places, and the shading was too dark on one side—but it felt real.

He didn't say anything else. He didn't need to.

The stars in the drawing still hadn't finished the sentence, but they were closer now. Almost readable. Almost. He looked at them again, then closed the sketchpad slowly and set it on his nightstand.

He climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling. Tomorrow would come with more reading, noise, and faces he didn't recognize. But for now, he had his altar, picture, and a quiet sort of hope that settled into



the room like light through a window no one had opened yet.



Chapter 4: First Day, Dry Air

Alex woke up early. The light outside was soft and pale, not the bold yellow he was used to back in Miami. Here, in Sunset Canyon, the sky looked bigger, but quieter. He sat up and looked at the altar on his windowsill. The St. Jude statue stood still. The rosary glowed a little in the morning sun. His abuela's note peeked out from behind the beach photo. Alex gave them a slight nod, not quite a prayer, just a hello.

He got dressed slowly. His hoodie still felt right. He didn't feel like switching it for anything else, not even when Yasmin left out a clean shirt with buttons. He packed his sketchpad, slid in his pencils, and zipped up his bag.

The kitchen smelled like toast and scrambled eggs. Yasmin was stirring juice with a spoon. Rafael had



already left for work, but he'd written a note on a sticky pad: "First full day—Be strong, mijo."

Alex read it twice, folded it, and slid it into his pocket.

The walk to school was quiet. Dust lifted from the sidewalk as his shoes brushed over it. He passed a lizard on a wall, motionless and watching. A cactus leaned toward the path, and Alex swore it was taller than yesterday.

He stepped through the school gate. The air was dry, and the sun warmed his neck without making him sweat. Inside the building, the hallways stretched long and still. Lockers were on both sides, doors closed, and signs taped to the walls—"Mathletes Club," "Desert Robotics," and "Yearbook Meeting." The sound of footsteps was light and scattered.

The school didn't hum with laughter like his old one. It felt more like a museum. People talked in short lines. Whispers floated down the halls and disappeared fast.



Alex passed a group of boys leaning near the lockers. One of them was talking about a home run from the night before.

“Judge crushed it, bro. Four hundred feet easy.”

“No way! Trout had the longest one this season.”

The other boys nodded, eyes wide, grinning. Alex slowed his steps a little, waiting for someone to mention Báez or Ortiz, but no one did. His hand squeezed the strap of his backpack.

In his chest, he could still hear the echo of his tío yelling at the TV in Spanish, clapping every time Ortiz smashed a hit. He remembered sitting on the floor, drawing Báez in mid-swing, and how his cousins argued about who had more power in their swing. Those were the names that felt alive to him.

But here, no one said that.

He walked into his classroom, nodding to Ms. Keller. Her smile was the same, kind but light, like something she gave to everyone. He found his seat by the window



and took out his notebook. He drew a baseball in the top corner of the page—just a small one, with lines for motion and a bold letter “B” inside it.

Class passed quietly. Math felt long, reading was more complex than usual, and science brought a quiz he wasn’t ready for.

During break, he wandered to the far end of the school where the field stretched behind the gym. It was brownish and dry, with patches of green clinging to the edges. A few kids threw baseballs back and forth. One missed a catch and shouted, “Aw, come on!”

Alex watched for a bit, then looked down at his shoes.

“Hey,” a voice said.

He turned. A boy stood a few feet away, a little shorter than him, with dark hair and a sharp chin. His polo shirt was untucked, and his shoelaces were uneven.

“You’re Alex, right?” the boy asked.



Alex nodded.

“I’m Javi.”

The boy didn’t offer a handshake or a smile. But there was something in his voice—something that sounded like home.

When Javi said “Alex,” the x didn’t sound flat. It rolled, soft and carefully. His r’s sounded like the ones Alex knew.

“Cool hoodie,” Javi said.

“Thanks,” Alex answered.

They didn’t say anything else. But it didn’t feel awkward. It felt like standing beside someone who didn’t know the rules yet.

Javi gave a slight nod. It wasn’t much—just a blink of recognition. But to Alex, it felt like a rope tossed across a vast space. Like someone saying, ‘I see you.’



The bell rang again. Back to class. The rest of the day moved like sand through a small crack—slow but steady.

Later that afternoon, the intercom buzzed: “Students trying out for fall baseball, please report to the gym field after last bell.”

Alex’s heart picked up a little. He packed his things quickly and followed the signs to the back field.

The sun was lower now, orange brushing the tops of the school buildings. The field wasn’t fancy. Just lines painted on dry dirt, two dugouts made of metal, and a chain-link fence that rattled in the breeze.

Kids lined up in a row. Some wore full baseball gear—cleats, hats, gloves that looked broken. Alex wore sneakers and his hoodie.

A man in a blue coach’s shirt stepped onto the field. He wore sunglasses and held a clipboard and a duffel bag in one hand. His arms were thick, and his voice was loud without shouting.



“Name’s Coach Stan,” he said. “I don’t care where you’re from or what your dad says about your swing. You try hard, you play fair, you earn your spot.”

He pulled gloves from the bag and tossed them to the kids without one. When he got to Alex, he paused.

“Have you played before?”

Alex nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“You fast?”

“I think so.”

Coach Stan raised one eyebrow and tossed him a glove. It hit Alex in the chest.

“Let’s find out.”

That eyebrow didn’t say much, but it felt like a challenge. Not a mean one—just a test. One that said, ‘Okay, show me.’

The next thirty minutes were full of drills. Throwing. Catching. Running bases.



Alex didn't speak much. He focused on the ball. He let his legs move the way they used to. He remembered games in Miami—on city fields, with fences that leaned and bats that rattled. His glove was stiff, but his grip found rhythm again.

Coach Stan watched closely, but didn't shout. Just took notes, nodded once.

After tryouts, Alex dropped the glove into the bin and dusted off his hands.

"You got hustle," Coach Stan said, not smiling, but not frowning either. "Let's see what you do next week."

Alex nodded. "Thank you."

He walked home with dirt on his sleeves and sweat still cooling his neck. His backpack bounced against his back, feeling heavier than usual, not because of books but because something new had settled inside him. Not nerves, not fear, but something else. It felt almost like the first page of a new sketch—blank but ready.



The sun was low now, stretching golden light across the sidewalk. As he passed the small grocery store near his street, he caught a whiff of grilled onions drifting from the back. It made his stomach growl. He hadn't realized how hungry he was.

He opened the front door, and the smell of rice and garlic immediately hit him. Yasmin was in the kitchen again, humming as she stirred something thick in a big pot.

"How was it?" she asked without turning.

"I made it through," Alex said, hanging his backpack on the hook.

"That's good enough for now," she said. "Dinner in ten."

Alex went to his room and kicked off his shoes. He opened the window a crack to let in the dry air. It didn't feel as sharp as before. It felt a little like part of his day, like something earned.



He unpacked slowly. First, the sketchpad, then his notebook, and then the folded note from Rafael, still in his pocket, came out. He set it gently on the desk beside the lamp.

His eyes moved to the windowsill. The altar was still there, just as he left it. He looked at the tiny St. Jude statue, the worn rosary, and the faded beach photo. The sky outside the window had turned orange and pink, spreading light across his wall. It made the statue glow quietly, like it was listening.

Alex knelt in front of it. He didn't close his eyes, just lowered his head.

"Today was okay," he whispered. "I didn't mess up too badly. I ran fast. I caught every ball. But I still don't know where to sit at lunch. I still don't know the words in reading time. I try, but they twist. They move around, and I don't know why."

He took a breath.



“Can you help me? With the words? Like how Papi says, can you help fix tangled things? I think my homework is knotted. Like shoelaces.”

He stayed there for a while, just listening to the quiet. No answers came. But he felt lighter. A little. Like he'd told someone the truth.

After dinner, he cleaned his cleats, taking his time brushing off every patch of dust. The laces were uneven, so he untied them and redid the knots carefully. When he was done, he placed them neatly by the door. Then, he returned to his room.

His sketchpad called to him. He opened to a blank page and started drawing the baseball field again. This time, it was wider. He added fences with kids leaning on them. He said Coach Stan with the clipboard, standing firm like a statue. And he told himself at shortstop, glove up, knees bent, ready.

He remembered how it felt during tryouts: the ball slicing through the air, the sound it made when it snapped into his glove, and how his feet moved



without him thinking. It felt like the stage he never asked for but somehow understood. Every throw was a line. Every catch was a beat.

He drew himself in the middle of the dirt, glove raised, the crowd behind the fence pointing. Someone whispering, “Who is that Miami kid?” He wrote the line under the sketch, almost smiling.

The room darkened as the sun dipped lower. He flicked on his lamp and finished the drawing with stars over the field. This time, they spelled a word: “Listo.” It meant ready.

He closed the sketchpad and leaned back in his chair. The room was quiet except for the hum of Rafael working on something in the living room and the soft sounds of Yasmin cleaning up dishes.

Alex stood, stretched, and walked to the window. Outside, the desert night was setting in. The sky above was dotted with stars again, but these were different from the ones he knew. Still, they were there—still steady.



He leaned on the windowsill and whispered, “Let’s do this.”

Morning came with a chill in the air. Alex dressed quietly, choosing the same hoodie that made him feel like himself. He packed his lunch, added one pastelito from the fridge, and slipped on his clean cleats.

Rafael was sipping coffee at the table.

“You nervous?” he asked.

Alex shrugged. “A little.”

“That’s good. It means you care.”

Alex nodded and tied his shoes tightly. He didn’t need a ride today. He felt like walking.

The road to school felt shorter. The sidewalk looked the same, but his steps felt different—firmer. It was like he was getting used to the shape of the street, the sound of the gravel, and the look of the morning sun over the rooftops.



At school, he headed straight to class. Javi was already there, half-asleep at his desk.

“Hey,” Alex said.

Javi lifted a hand, slow but sure.

Ms. Keller began with math again. Numbers danced across the board. Alex followed closely, even raising his hand once, which surprised even himself. After math, they moved to reading. Ms. Keller handed out new pages and again gave him the color guide with quiet encouragement.

The words still moved, but he moved with them. Slowly. Carefully. Each sentence took time. But he was learning to wait for the meaning to show up.

Lunch came with new voices. One kid from math class asked Alex if he liked baseball. Alex said yes, and the kid nodded and said, “You were good yesterday.” It wasn’t a big moment. But it was something.



He found his same corner table. Javi sat nearby this time. They didn't talk much, but their quiet was the same kind.

After lunch, it was gym time. Coach Stan was waiting on the field again. With one hand, he tossed a ball toward Alex and said, "I hope you brought your glove today."

Alex caught it barehanded and grinned. He ran to join the others.

The practice was harder today. More running, longer throws. But Alex didn't mind. He dove for grounders, turned fast at second base, and shouted for the ball when it came his way. He played shortstop like a job, and a dance rolled into it. His glove spoke before he did, answering every challenge that came flying toward him.

By the time practice ended, sweat dripped from his neck and soaked his hoodie, but he didn't care. Coach Stan clapped once and pointed at him.



“You got instincts, kid. Let’s see if you’ve got consistency.”

Alex smiled. That was better than any gold star.

Back home, he dropped his bag at the door and walked straight to the sink to wash his hands. Yasmin looked at him, saw the dirt on his face, and handed him a towel.

“You look tired,” she said.

“I feel good-tired,” he replied.

That night, he ate dinner with both parents. Rafael asked about Coach Stan, and Yasmin asked if he had made any new friends. He answered, but his smile filled in the blanks.

Later, he added more drawings to the same field sketch in his room. This time, he said a dugout, a scoreboard, and fans in the bleachers. He wrote a few names above the fence: Ortiz, Báez, and now his own—small, but there.



He looked at the altar again. St. Jude was still standing firm, the rosary still hung in its curve, and the photo was still smiling.

Alex looked at his cleats by the door. He polished the dust off again and checked the laces. They were tight, even, and ready for another day. He lined them up next to his backpack, then climbed into bed.

The stars outside the window were brighter tonight, or maybe he noticed them more.

He closed his eyes and let the quiet settle around him, the good kind of calm that follows a long day of doing something real.

There was no sentence in his mind, no big speech waiting to be said.

Just a calm feeling in his chest, like something was finally beginning to fit.



Chapter 5: New Codes and Missed Signals

The sky was bright when Alex zipped up his hoodie and grabbed his glove. Today was the first team practice—no more tryouts, no more half drills—just the real thing. The walk to school felt faster, maybe because he was thinking about plays in his head. How to field a grounder clean. How to turn fast at second base. Where to plant his feet before the throw. Every step of the way, he counted out movements like they were beats in a song he hadn't fully learned yet.

Coach Stan was already on the field when Alex arrived. He had a whistle hanging around his neck and a clipboard in one hand. The other players stretched out across the diamond, some tossing balls lazily, some chasing each other and laughing like it was recess.



Javi stood near first base, glove under his arm, chewing gum like he had nowhere better to be. He nodded at Alex when he saw him, and Alex gave a slight nod back.

The coach blew the whistle. “Let’s warm up, boys. No walking!”

They lined up in rows and started jogging around the field. Alex liked the sound of cleats hitting dirt, the mix of sneakers and laughter. The air was dry and warm, but not too hot. The wind picked up a little, just enough to brush across the back of his neck.

Stretching came next. Then soft toss. Then, fielding drills.

It didn’t take long for the practice to turn into something less serious. Balls got dropped. One kid tripped over his shoelace trying to catch a pop-up. Another swung at a slow pitch and spun himself right out of the batter’s box.

No one cared.



They laughed. Even Coach let out a short laugh when someone missed the base by three feet and yelled, “I was aiming for Arizona!”

Alex grinned. He missed one ball that bounced weird off the dirt and rolled between his legs, but Javi shouted, “No worries!” and tossed it back to him. Someone tried to catch a fly ball behind his back just to be funny.

It felt like a picnic. No yelling. No pressure. Just a bunch of kids figuring it out together. For a while, Alex forgot about his reading troubles. He forgot about not knowing which jokes to laugh at during lunch. He just played.

After practice, the team gathered around the bench to drink water and pack up. Ryan, one of the louder kids with sun-bleached hair and a constant grin, turned to Alex.

“You wanna come to my house later?” he asked. “My dad’s doing a barbecue.”

Alex blinked. “Like... today?”



“Yeah,” Ryan said, grinning. “Hot dogs, music, Nerf guns. You should come.”

Alex hesitated. Yasmin was expecting him home. But this... this felt like an open door.

“I can come for a little bit,” he said.

Ryan nodded and scribbled his address on a scrap of paper. “Bring your appetite.”

After going home to check in, change shirts, and tell Yasmin where he was going, Alex walked the three blocks to Ryan’s house. He followed the smell of grilled meat to the backyard, where colorful folding chairs circled a big table and a row of hot dogs sizzled on a shiny gas grill.

Dads in baseball caps stood around the grill like it was a fire they had to guard. Music played from a speaker nearby. Something twangy with guitars—Alex caught the words “Sweet Home Alabama” and didn’t know what to do with them.

Ryan saw him and waved him over. “Glad you came!”



Alex smiled, a little unsure, and walked toward the table. Hot dogs, buns, chips, soda cans, even a big bowl of neon-orange cheese puffs sat in rows. Ryan's mom handed him a plate and said, "Load up, honey."

Alex reached for a bun, then picked up a hot dog with the tongs.

"You got any mojo?" he asked politely, hoping for the flavor he knew from Miami.

The conversation around him stopped for half a second. A dad looked up. Ryan blinked.

"What's that?" someone asked.

Alex felt his face get warm. "It's... like garlic and citrus... a marinade."

"Oh," Ryan's mom said, still smiling but confused.
"We've got ketchup and mustard!"

He nodded quickly and squeezed some ketchup on the bun. "Yeah. That's good."



He moved away from the table and slowly sat on one of the lawn chairs, biting into the hot dog. The ketchup felt too sweet, and the bun too dry, but he chewed and smiled anyway.

Around him, kids tossed foam darts at each other and ducked behind bushes. Ryan shouted, “Headshot!” and another boy screamed like a paintball had hit him.

Alex watched them, holding his hot dog with both hands. He didn’t know what half the jokes meant. One kid shouted something about “leveling up,” and another yelled, “You camped too long!” They all laughed.

He tried to laugh too, softly. But the jokes felt like code—familiar to them, scrambled for him.

Ryan jogged over, breathing hard. “Wanna join the Nerf war?”

Alex shook his head. “I’m good.”

Ryan shrugged. “Okay,” and ran off again.



The sky turned a little pink around the edges as the sun dipped. Alex checked the time and figured he should head home.

He tossed the rest of his hot dog and walked to the side gate.

“Thanks for coming!” someone called behind him. He smiled and waved.

The walk home felt quiet again. He moved slowly, replaying everything in his head. The songs. The hot dogs. The blank stares after his mojo comment. He wasn’t angry. Just tired. Like his brain had worked all afternoon trying to fit a shape it didn’t know yet.

At home, the kitchen lights were on. Yasmin was packing leftovers into containers, and Rafael was cleaning his glasses with a soft cloth.

“You eat?” Yasmin asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “Hot dogs.”

She raised an eyebrow. “With ketchup?”



He nodded, and she made a face. “That’s a sin.”

Alex chuckled. “I know.”

He went to his room and placed his glove on the windowsill. Then he reached for the sketchpad again. He flipped to a new page and drew the barbecue. The grill. The lawn chairs. The rows of hot dogs. Then he pulled himself up, sitting in one chair, holding a plate, surrounded by words with little question marks floating above his head.

He added a speech bubble near one of the kids: “Sweet Home Alabama!” Then he said one above himself: “¿Qué?”

He smiled at it, not because it was funny, but because it was true.

He added one last detail to the picture—a bottle of mojo, standing off to the side, unopened but glowing slightly. Maybe one day someone would ask about it.



Then he looked at the altar on his windowsill. The tiny statue of St. Jude, the rosary, and the photo still stood in their place.

He whispered, “Today I learned what not to ask for at a barbecue.”

He laughed softly and pulled his hoodie tighter around him. He placed the sketchpad gently beside the pillow, lay back, and looked out the window.

The stars were beginning to blink into view again. He didn’t know their names yet. But maybe one of them was named “Belonging.” Maybe one was “Patience.”

He turned on his side, pulling the blanket closer, but his thoughts stayed wide awake. His mind played back the whole barbecue again—every word he didn’t understand, every laugh that wasn’t his. Still, he didn’t feel bad. Just curious. Just a little more aware of how many languages people spoke, even when they were all speaking English.

The weekend came fast. Saturday morning, the sun spilled across his bedroom floor, waking him up



earlier than he wanted. Yasmin knocked softly and peeked in.

“Don’t forget—Jake’s party is today,” she said, holding a bag with a small wrapped gift inside.

He sat up slowly. “Right. Laser tag.”

She placed the bag on his desk and smiled. “You’ll have fun.”

Alex nodded, even though he wasn’t sure. Fun had felt different lately. Sometimes it was quiet, like sketching. Sometimes it was full of jokes that didn’t land right. But he wasn’t going to back out.

At noon, Rafael dropped him off at a bright building with glowing signs and arcade music leaking through the glass doors. Jake waved him in from the lobby, wearing a headband and holding a plastic laser gun like a soldier from a video game.

“Alex! You ready to tag and dodge?” Jake called.



Inside the laser tag arena, neon lights flashed across the black walls. The floor had arrows pointing in different directions, and the music thumped through Alex's chest like a drum. Kids ran in all directions, laughing and shouting. The laser guns beeped and buzzed every few seconds.

Alex tightened the vest around his shoulders and looked at his team.

"Okay," he said, thinking out loud, "I'll take the left side like in fútbol defense. I'll sweep behind and block—"

Before he could finish, one of the kids, wearing sunglasses indoors, interrupted, "Just shoot, dude!"

Everyone laughed, not in a mean way, just loudly.

Alex backed up, holding his laser gun a little looser.

The match started. Blue lights flashed. Red targets blinked. He ducked behind fake walls and tried to keep track of the points. He aimed carefully, trying not to waste shots, but the others dashed like they had



jetpacks. He watched someone roll under a divider and tag three players in one move.

He shot once, missed, and got tagged twice in return.

His score blinked on the scoreboard near the bottom when the game ended.

No one teased him. Jake even clapped him on the back. “You’ll get it next time!”

But Alex stayed quiet on the walk to the pizza table. He sat between two kids comparing which YouTubers had the best trick shots. He chewed his pizza slowly, thinking of fútbol again—how there was rhythm and reason to every move, how he always knew where the goal was.

Laser tag had no map in his head.

Later that night, back at home, he sat at his desk with a history book open in front of him. A salsa song played low on the radio. It came from his parents’ room, where Rafael and Yasmin were folding laundry



and discussing the grocery list. Light and swaying, the music floated down the hall, but his brain felt stiff.

The history dates refused to stick.

He stared at the timeline on the page: 1776, 1812, and 1865. They looked like phone numbers without names. His pencil tapped the desk in frustration.

But instead of closing the book, he pulled out a stack of index cards.

He wrote one fact per card—one battle, one president, one year. Then he walked around the room, taping the cards up like decorations—one on the closet door, one on the lamp, one near his window.

Each flashcard was like a pebble. Alone, not heavy. Together, they could build something.

He read each one aloud three times before moving on to the next.

The cards glowed in the faint light from the streetlamp outside when he lay in bed that night. His



eyes moved from one to the other until they blurred. Still, he whispered one fact. Then another. Then one more before sleep pulled him under.

Monday brought a return to practice. The sky was pale and cloudless. Field dust kicked up under the boys' cleats as they lined up again.

Coach Stan blew his whistle and pointed to the infield. "Shortstop's yours, Alex. Let's see what you got."

He jogged into place, the glove snug on his hand, his fingers tight around the leather.

The first grounder came fast and low. He scooped it clean and snapped it to second without thinking.

Heads turned.

The next ball bounced high, but he timed it right, stepped to the left, caught it, and fired to first—a crisp arc. Clean landing.

A sideline boy whispered, "Who is this Miami kid?"



Alex didn't look up. He just stepped back into ready position, eyes sharp, knees bent.

More balls came, faster now. One skipped just past second, but he chased it down, spun, and launched it back to the base with a shout in his chest that never reached his mouth.

He didn't talk much on the field. His glove did.

The practice ended with Coach nodding once and scribbling something on his clipboard.

Javi tossed Alex a water bottle as the other boys picked up their bags. "Good plays today," he said casually.

Alex took it, nodded. "Gracias."

The walk home felt lighter this time. The sun still hit his neck hard, but the dust didn't cling the same way. He unzipped his hoodie as he got closer to the house.

The flashcards still lined the walls in his room. He added a few more, this time verbs from English class:



run, think, draw. He taped them above his mirror.
They were just one word each. Simple. Strong.

Later, he pulled his glove from the shelf and polished the leather with a soft cloth. He leaned over the windowsill for a while, looking out at the stars, wondering what name to give the one that watched over practice days.

He didn't whisper anything this time.

He just stood there, listening to the music drifting from the kitchen again—Yasmin humming along as she stirred something warm on the stove. Rafael's voice is low and steady as he reads numbers from a recipe card. Alex breathed it all in. The smells. The sounds. The words.

His cleats were next to the door, clean and ready.

A folded worksheet rested on his desk. The date was written clearly: 1865—the war's end. A page turned.

Alex sat at the edge of his bed and looked around. The cards were on the walls, the glove was on the



windowsill, and the sketchpad was waiting near the lamp.

He didn't feel like a visitor anymore.

He didn't feel finished either.

But he was building something, piece by piece. Word by word. Catch by catch, like taping together a map that didn't come in one box.

He picked up his pencil and sketched a diamond field under a night sky. The stars weren't perfect, but they were all in place. The shortstop was mid-step, glove wide, ready to throw.

Outside, the night held steady.

Inside, the work continued.



Chapter 6: Cloud Bursts and Cactus Thorns

The sky over Sunset Canyon Elementary looked like it couldn't decide between sunshine and storm. It was the middle of the season, and the dugout buzzed with nerves and sweat. Everyone on the team had heard about the Mesa Sluggers. They were fast. They were undefeated. And worst of all, they knew it.

Their jerseys were bright red with gold stripes, like they were trying to blind their opponents before the first pitch. They arrived in a line of shiny SUVs, stomping into the field like they owned it. One of them, their tall pitcher with a backward cap and sunglasses on his head, made sure the whole world knew who he was.

Alex was pulling on his cleats when he heard the first jab.



“Hey! New kid from the city!” the pitcher shouted across the field. “Hope your soft shoes don’t melt in the dirt.”

Alex froze, one hand still tying his laces. The other players from Sunset Canyon looked over at him. Rye, who usually stood near Alex during warmups, shook his head.

The pitcher walked closer and smirked. “You don’t belong here, Miami boy. Hope you brought your beach towel.”

Alex said nothing. He stood slowly and dusted his hands. The words stung, but they didn’t show on his face.

In his head, he thought, *Mateo would’ve swung a bat at him.* Back home, Mateo wouldn’t have stayed quiet. He would’ve snapped back, maybe even shoved the guy. But Alex wasn’t Mateo.

He wasn’t here to fight. He was here to play.



They warmed up in silence. Rye tossed a few to him at shortstop but said nothing. No chatter. No small jokes like before.

When Coach Stan called the team in, his voice was tight.

“Stay sharp. Don’t let their mouths do more than their bats.”

Alex nodded and looked out at the dry field. The grass was rough. The infield dirt had cracks, like it hadn’t rained in a month.

He stood at shortstop, glove ready, eyes on the pitcher.

The game started fast. Mesa’s first batter slammed a hit over second. Then another. Then, a bunt that no one expected. Within ten minutes, Mesa had scored two runs.

Alex didn’t panic, but something inside twisted. It’s not from the game—it’s something from earlier.



That morning, before the sun reached full brightness, Alex sat in his classroom facing a reading quiz. The words swam. Every paragraph felt like it was written on shifting sand. He blinked and tried again. The letters didn't sit still. His fingers clenched the pencil like it was the only solid thing around.

He hadn't even finished question three when the timer rang.

Ms. Keller said nothing. Just collected the papers quietly, and her smile felt soft but far away.

Back in the game, the heat pressed against his back. Rye walked over during the second inning and said flatly, "Don't call plays. Just stay ready."

Alex didn't argue. He knew what Rye meant. This game was moving fast, and trust had to be earned.

Mesa's pitcher kept trash-talking between innings. "City boy got scared by the dirt!" he yelled when Alex jogged to his position.



By the fourth inning, Mesa was up four runs. The Sunset Canyon team looked tired. Shoulders slumped. Coach Stan shouted from the dugout, but the spark was dimming.

Then came the fifth inning.

Mesa's batter popped a line drive toward second. Rye caught it on instinct. A runner was already sprinting from first to second. Alex's legs moved before his brain even caught up. He darted to the base, stretched wide, caught Rye's throw, and tagged the bag.

Two outs. A double play.

Silence for a second. Then whistles. Even Coach Stan raised his brows. Rye turned and looked at Alex, not a grin, but a nod.

"Okay," he muttered. "Next time, you call it."

The next inning, Alex called two shifts. Both worked. One stopped a bunt. One blocked a grounder.



By the end of the sixth, they were still down by four, but something had changed. The noise from Mesa wasn't as loud anymore. Their pitcher had stopped shouting.

Alex stood in the dugout between innings, wiping sweat from his neck. His chest still felt heavy, but it wasn't just the heat. That quiz this morning had stayed in his head all day. Every time he stepped onto the field, he thought about those letters swirling on the page, about how he froze, feeling like he was the only kid in the room who couldn't see the story.

He grabbed his water bottle and stared out at the horizon.

Rye walked over again, with a light punch on the shoulder. "That play earlier? Sick. You've got a weird style, but it works."

Alex looked up. "Thanks."

"You hear what that Mesa guy called you?" Rye asked.

Alex nodded. "Soft."



Rye kicked some dirt. “Guess he didn’t see your glove bark like that.”

Alex cracked a small smile.

The last inning came. Sunset Canyon didn’t win. They got two runs, and the final score was still in Mesa’s favor. But no one walked off the field with their heads down.

Coach clapped once. “That’s how you fight back.”

In the locker room, the team chattered louder than usual. No one brought up the loss. They talked about the double play. About the blocked bunt. About how Mesa “wasn’t even that good.”

Alex changed into his sneakers and tied them slowly.

Outside, the sky had started to shift. A few clouds rolled in, thicker than usual. The air smelled like rain, even if it hadn’t started yet.



When he got home, Yasmin greeted him with a plate of chicken and rice. Rafael looked up from his laptop and said, “Heard the Sluggers showed up loud.”

Alex nodded. “They did.”

He didn’t say much else. Just ate quietly, cleaned up, and headed to his room.

His sketchbook waited. He opened it and drew the moment he tagged the base—his glove reaching, his foot planted, the ball frozen mid-air.

Then he flipped the page.

He drew a desk, a blank quiz paper, and himself sitting with his pencil trembling.

Underneath, he scribbled two words: “Not done.”

He added a small cactus in the corner of the drawing, its arms stretched up. He gave it a speech bubble: “Keep going.”

The next morning, the classroom buzzed with quiet sounds that only made Alex more aware of the quiz



waiting on his desk. The fluorescent lights flickered above, casting a faint glow on the whiteboard. Ms. Keller moved slowly between rows, her flats tapping lightly across the tile floor. Alex sat at his desk, shoulders tight, eyes low. The paper in front of him looked simple, just five questions, but its words danced in patterns that didn't make sense.

He held his pencil like a fragile stick, trying to force his focus. But each time he read the sentence, the letters shuffled again, becoming unfamiliar. Sweat gathered at the back of his neck. He looked around the room and saw classmates quickly scribbling answers, turning pages, and flipping pencils confidently. He looked at his paper and whispered, “Just get through one.”

The first question started with a paragraph. He tried reading it slowly, sliding his finger under each word. He blinked hard to push the blur away. He remembered the cactus he had drawn last night—the one saying “Keep going.” He let that picture fill his mind and tried again.



By the time the quiz ended, he had only answered two questions. His paper looked more erased than written on. He turned it in with a quiet “thank you,” barely loud enough for Ms. Keller to hear. She nodded with that soft look she always gave him—not pity, not pressure, just something gentle.

Walking home, the sun beat down on his back, and the sweat that clung to him felt like leftover fear. His feet scraped along the sidewalk, and each step carried the weight of those unanswered questions. But as he passed the edge of town and neared the field, a different rhythm started to take over. The sharp crack of a bat echoed from far off, and that familiar dusty breeze carried the smell of dirt and chalk lines.

He stopped at the chain-link fence that framed the baseball field and gripped it with both hands. The infield shimmered in the afternoon sun. Even from here, he could spot where the second base had been worn slightly deeper into the ground. His spot. His rhythm. Here, the world made sense. The ball came, and you caught it. The runner charged, and you tagged. No confusing sentences. No swirling letters.



He dropped his backpack near the bench and jogged to shortstop. The ground under his cleats was dry and cracked, but his steps felt steady. He tossed a ball in the air and caught it again. Toss, catch, toss. Each thump into his glove made a sound he understood. A sound that didn't ask him to decode or translate. Just be quick. Just react.

The pastel-painted walls at 1147 Saguaro Lane greeted him with quiet color. The mural in the living room—a giant orange sun, blue cacti, and cartoon jackrabbits—wrapped the house in warmth. Yasmin had painted it before the boxes were even unpacked. She said the mural would keep the desert from feeling so lonely. Alex liked it more than he admitted.

His cleats came off at the back door, landing neatly near the glove rack Rafael had built. The rack stood beside the sliding glass door before the dusty square yard that had become his practice field. Rafael had leveled it out one weekend and sprinkled some white chalk to mark the bases. It wasn't a real field, but it felt like home, unlike most things in Sunset Canyon.



Alex walked to his room, dropped his backpack on the floor, and pulled off his hoodie. He lay on the bed for a few minutes, listening to the quiet hum of the ceiling fan. Then he sat up and reached for the flashcards he had taped around his room. One card above his desk read “run – correr.” Another above his bed said “write – escribir.” He whispered the words out loud as he passed each one, tapping the corners lightly with his fingers.

The biggest card on his closet door said,
“Believe—creer.” He stared at that one the longest.

After dinner, Rafael found him back, fielding grounders he tossed off the wall.

“You got a game tomorrow?” Rafael said, leaning against the doorframe.

“I know,” Alex answered, still tossing the ball.

“You ready?” Rafael’s voice held more curiosity than concern.



Alex shrugged, caught the ball, and looked at it. “I’m trying.”

“You’ve been doing more than trying, *hijo*.” Rafael walked forward and caught the ball on its next bounce. “You’ve been showing up.”

That night, Alex sat at his window with his sketchpad open. The stars were hiding behind clouds, but he drew them anyway. He attracted the field, the base path, and the ball mid-air. Then he added himself in motion, glove out, eyes sharp. Under the picture, he wrote one word: “Believe.”

The game started slowly the next day. The other team hit two quick runs, and Coach Stan’s jaw twitched with every mistake. Rye yelled a lot, but his voice didn’t bite like it used to. Alex listened, nodded, and adjusted.

By the third inning, he snagged a grounder, spun, and threw to second—a perfect out. The crowd let out a breath. Then a louder one when he caught a sharp line



drive in the fourth. Even parents who hadn't known his name clapped louder.

When he stepped up to bat in the fifth, he could feel the eyes on him. The pitcher was fast, but Alex didn't flinch. The first swing was a miss. He adjusted. The second was a crack—clean, fast, low. It skipped past the shortstop and rolled into left field. The bench roared.

At practice the next week, nobody questioned his play calls. Rye tossed him the ball during warm-ups and said, "Your turn to lead stretches."

Alex didn't say anything. He just nodded and stepped forward.

When they ran drills, Alex moved with ease. His glove snapped shut over grounders; his throws were crisp. Even Coach Stan crossed his arms and gave a slow nod after one double play.

That evening, Yasmin served arroz con pollo at home, and Rafael talked about his work with street light circuits.



“Sometimes the power skips,” Rafael explained, tapping the table, “and you’ve got to trace the line back to the source. Fix the root, not the flicker.”

Alex didn’t say it out loud, but it stuck in his head. Fix the root, not the flicker.

Later, while brushing his teeth, he looked in the mirror and held that thought. The quizzes weren’t the flicker. His brain wasn’t broken. He just had to trace the root and find new ways to follow the words. His flashcards were part of it. His drawing helped, too. Even the field—it gave him strength he didn’t always have in the classroom.

That night, after the dishes were done and the lights were low, he stood near his altar again. The rosary sat wrapped around the base of the St. Jude statue. He placed a fresh sketch under the photo of Abuela—this one showed him leaping for a fly ball under a vast desert sky. His abuela’s note was still tucked behind the frame.



He looked at the stars again through his window. He didn't know their names, but he started naming his own.

Not just "Patience" or "Belonging," but now "Focus," "Fight," and "Fluent."

The wind rustled the leaves of the cactus outside his window. He returned to his sketchpad and wrote one final word under tonight's picture: "Fluent."

Not in the way school meant. But in the way he caught the rhythm of the field. In the way he kept showing up. In the way he knew he wasn't finished—not yet.

He set down his pencil, turned off the light, and let the quiet hold him. The quiz was behind him, the field ahead. And somewhere between the two, he was finding his place.



Chapter 7: Meet the Scorpions

Saturday morning rolled in with the kind of light that filled the whole yard at once. The sky was clear, the sun already heating the sidewalk, and Alex could hear Rafael outside shaking open a fold-out chair and whistling low. Yasmin was inside, packing snacks into a cooler like it was a school lunch expedition. Alex tied his cleats with a little extra pull, checked his glove twice, and gave one final nod at the mirror. His Sunset Scorpions jersey didn't match the others perfectly—it was a size too big, and the red had faded a bit in the wash—but it was his now.

He hopped into the back seat of the Sequoia, cooler wedged beside him, gear bag at his feet. The drive to the field didn't take long, but Alex still felt like it lasted forever. Every block they passed, every turn, every new cactus outside the window reminded him



this wasn't Miami. It was something else. Something waiting.

The field was already buzzing. Coach Stan stood near the third base line with his clipboard, squinting into the sun. His faded green cap sat low on his head, and his whistle hung around his neck like it hadn't been used yet, but it would. He raised a hand when he saw Alex and gave a sharp nod.

Kids ran in uneven directions—tossing balls, chasing foul ones, swinging bats that sounded too heavy for their arms. Mismatched jerseys flapped in the breeze. Some kids wore bright socks, others had wristbands or eye black already smeared on. It didn't look like a team yet. But there was energy—big, noisy, trying-too-hard energy.

"Alright!" Coach Stan called. "Circle up!"

The noise dropped a bit, and one by one, kids jogged in and knelt down on the chalky dirt. Alex sat near the edge, just behind Rye, who didn't look back but shifted slightly, like he noticed.



Coach Stan glanced down at his clipboard. “This is the full Sunset Scorpions roster. Most of you have met, some of you haven’t. Doesn’t matter. By the end of the month, you’re going to know who’s behind you, who’s backing you up, and who’s calling the plays. You’re not playing for yourselves now. You’re playing for the person next to you.”

He paced once across the circle.

“Let’s get this out of the way. Some of you have experience. Some of you are new. Doesn’t mean much until we see how you move together.”

He pointed toward the pitcher’s mound. “Blake, warm up. You’re first.”

Blake Summers stood and walked toward the mound with clean, practiced steps. His jersey looked ironed. His cleats were spotless. His hair was gelled like he had somewhere fancier to be after this. Alex watched him throw. The ball popped into the glove every time. Clean. No wasted motion. Blake looked like he’d been doing this in his sleep.



“Nice,” someone muttered.

Then another name was called. “Noah, your turn.”

Noah Bartlett stood from the far end of the group. His cap was backward, and his socks didn’t match. He had tape around one finger and a smudge on his cheek. But the moment he got the ball in his hand, he lit up. His throws weren’t clean like Blake’s. They came in wild arcs—some high, some low—but all of them fast. Almost too fast. Like he was chasing something invisible with every pitch.

“Whoa,” a kid whispered. “That one had smoke.”

Coach Stan didn’t smile, but he made a mark on his sheet.

In the field, the rest of the kids stretched, tossed, joked. One told a joke about someone tripping over a helmet. Another tried to bounce a baseball off his foot like a soccer ball. Laughter rippled through the outfield.



Alex moved toward shortstop. The dirt there felt soft but steady. He rolled a ball under his cleat, scanned the setup, and crouched slightly into his stance. Rye was a few feet to his right at second base. Blake stood near the mound again, glove at the ready. Coach Stan called, “Let’s run some plays!”

On the second pitch, the ball skipped toward the gap between shortstop and second. Alex sprinted, scooped, and fired to first in one motion. The throw thudded right into the glove. Crisp. Fast.

Blake raised an eyebrow. Rye adjusted his cap but didn’t say anything.

Next ball, Alex shouted, “Shift two steps right!”

Rye side-eyed him. Just a glance. Not full annoyance. Not yet. But enough to say, “Who do you think you are?”

Alex said nothing more. Just returned to his spot and stayed ready.



Practice moved fast. Balls flew. Gloves dropped. Shouts mixed with groans and bursts of laughter. One kid tripped and rolled into left field. Another threw his bat farther than the ball. The infield was sloppy, outfield worse, but something was taking shape.

Alex didn't joke. He didn't trip. He didn't shout. He just moved where he needed to be. Called where others should stand. Backed up every play, even when it wasn't his. He didn't smile much, but his eyes followed every ball.

Later, Coach Stan blew the whistle. "That's enough. Hydrate. Meet back in five."

The team scattered toward water bottles and benches. Alex grabbed his bottle from the cooler and leaned against the fence. A voice came from behind.

"You don't talk much," said Noah.

Alex turned. Noah had a grin that didn't quite match his wild pitches. He wiped his forehead with his arm.

"Not yet," Alex replied.



Noah nodded. “Cool. I don’t listen much either.”

That made Alex smile a little.

Across the field, Rye tossed his glove in the air and caught it again. He glanced toward Alex, then looked away.

Coach Stan walked through the dugout with his clipboard. “Shortstop looks strong today,” he said out loud, not naming names. “Needs to keep it up.”

Alex bent down to tie his cleat again. His hands were dusty. His shirt stuck to his back. But his heart felt light. Not wide-open happy. But steady. Focused.

After practice, Yasmin waved from the car. Rafael leaned across the seat and gave a thumbs-up.

In the backseat, Alex took off his cap and leaned it on his knee. The sweat on his forehead dried fast in the desert air. The glove beside him smelled like sun and leather.



Back home, he peeled off the jersey and hung it on the closet door. His room smelled like pencil shavings and something fried from the kitchen. He sat at his desk and flipped open his sketchpad.

He didn't draw a play. Not today. He drew the team.

He started with cleats, scuffed and different. Then he added jerseys—some tight, some too big. Then faces, mostly loud, some half-smiling, one blinking behind glasses. Then a glove, raised in the air, catching a ball that wasn't quite there yet.

He labeled it “Scorpions.” No title. Just the name. No extra stars.

Before bed, he stood by the window and looked at the field down the block. It was quiet now. Just soft dirt and faint chalk lines. The kind of place where noise faded but something deeper stayed.

Tomorrow, they'd scrimmage again. Practice had gotten louder, messier, but something underneath it all was tightening, forming shape. Alex could feel it in his cleats every time he stepped onto the infield. He



saw it in the way the outfielders called to each other now instead of tripping over every pop fly. They weren't a real team yet, not all the way—but they weren't strangers anymore either.

Rye Dawson's voice was always the first one heard. He shouted from behind the plate like a coach in training, calling out plays before the pitch even came. His eyes were sharp, quick to spot mistakes, and his words hit harder than the fastballs. "Hold the line!" "Cut two!" "Shift left!" His tone left no room for questions, only reactions. The pitchers listened. Most of them, anyway. Blake listened because he respected order. Noah half-listened, which usually meant he'd do the opposite just to see what would happen.

But there was someone else behind Rye during drills. Ben Calloway. The backup catcher didn't say much. His pads were a little too big, and his helmet always looked like it wanted to fall sideways, but he never missed a ball. Even when they skipped in the dirt, bounced wild, or came too low, Ben dropped to his knees and blocked every single one. Quiet. Tough. Never complaining.



Alex watched both of them closely. He noticed how Rye snapped his fingers to get attention and how Ben just nodded once before doing exactly what was needed. The team needed both voices—one to command, one to prove.

In the dugout that day, Javi nudged Alex's elbow and held out a tamarind candy. "Want?" he asked.

Alex took it with a nod. The taste was sharp, sweet, and familiar. Like home.

"They'll learn," Javi said, eyes still on the field. "You just keep playing."

The words weren't loud. They didn't need to be. Javi said them like they were obvious.

There was something about Javi—he didn't force his way into conversations or laugh just to join the noise. He kept a small notebook in his back pocket, the corners soft and bent. Sometimes, in the middle of drills, Alex caught him whispering Spanish under his breath like he was running plays through his head. Not to show off, just to stay sharp.



Alex looked at Javi's curls, a little shorter than his own but shaped the same. His skin, like his, warmed from the sun. The way he moved—quiet steps, sharp turns, attention in his fingertips. It felt like seeing a version of himself in a mirror with different shoes.

They sat on the same side of the dugout during water breaks. They didn't talk about everything. They didn't have to. Sometimes, Alex just handed him sunflower seeds, and they watched the sky shift colors as the day moved along.

Coach Stan once passed the dugout during a break, his clipboard under his arm. He paused and said, "That kid—Manzanillo. He plays like he lives on the field."

He wasn't talking to Alex, but the words hit him in the chest.

"One-four-one-seven Saguaro Lane," Coach added.
"Backyard diamond and everything."



A few players looked over. Blake raised an eyebrow. Noah blinked. Rye didn't say anything, but he leaned forward like he'd just heard something important.

Alex kept sipping his water, pretending not to notice the stares. But he felt it. They were starting to see him—not just as the new kid who read slow or wore a hoodie instead of a polo, but as the kid who stayed after practice, ran drills by himself, and polished his cleats without being told.

Later that evening, the sun dipped behind the hills and left streaks of orange across the living room walls. Yasmin had painted a desert mural on one of them—cacti, mountains, and a road leading somewhere open. The house at 1147 Saguaro Lane wasn't big, but it felt full. Alex walked past the kitchen where pots clinked and music played softly in the background. Salsa filled the room—not just the beat, but the kind of rhythm that held the family together when words didn't.

Outside, his cleats waited by the back door. He laced them up again, even after dinner. The sky had



darkened, but the little field behind their house still held light in the dirt. The chalk lines were faded, but he knew where first base was, and he didn't need markers to find second. He practiced grounders by himself, tossing the ball off the wall and catching it before it skipped. His arm moved smoothly now. Not perfect. But sure.

Inside his room later, the air was cool and still. Flashcards covered the wall beside his bed. One for each verb, each phrase. "To run." "To catch." "To try." He read them out loud once. Twice. Then again, this time slower, like each word needed space to land.

He sat at his desk and opened the sketchpad. He drew Rye barking out a play, finger pointing like an arrow. Then Ben crouched behind the plate, eyes steady, glove out. Then Javi, standing at second base, notebook in his back pocket, glove tucked under his arm like he wasn't done yet.

He labeled the page: "Scorpions—In Progress."



When he looked out the window again, the stars were there. Fewer than back in Miami, but brighter somehow. He traced one with his finger on the glass, then turned off the light and slid into bed.

Tomorrow would be another game, another chance. More fly balls, more side-eyes, maybe even a moment to call a play that stuck. The team still buzzed with voices louder than his, but now they were starting to wait a beat—just long enough to hear him too.

And in that pause, he felt it. Not arrival. But almost.



Chapter 8: First Game of the Season

The morning of the first game came fast, too fast for Alex to feel ready. He had slept in his practice shirt, the one with the faded Scorpions logo across the chest. It was soft from all the washes, which somehow made it feel lucky.

Sunlight sliced through the clouds and spilled across his bedroom floor. His alarm didn't wake him—his heartbeat did. It felt like it had been thumping all night.

Yasmin knocked on his door and peeked in. She carried a small bowl of cut-up fruit, a glass of water, and her usual warm smile. She didn't say "good morning." She said, "Today's the day, mijo."

Alex sat up slowly, wiped his eyes, and swung his feet to the floor. "I know," he whispered.



She placed the fruit and water on his desk, then sat down on the edge of the bed with his cleats in her hands. They were already clean, the laces looped carefully. She knelt in front of him and began to tie them. Tight. Not too tight. Just right. The way she always had when he was younger, before neighborhood games in Miami, before big tests, even before his first school play, where he only had two lines but still shook like a tree.

“La pelota no miente,” she said quietly, her fingers finishing the final knot. “Let the ball tell your story.”

Alex nodded. The words stuck in his chest like a drumbeat.

Rafael stood by the front door downstairs, holding a folded lawn chair and a cooler bag. He looked calm but alert, like he looked when fixing something complicated. “Are we ready?” he asked.

“We’re ready,” Yasmin answered before Alex could speak.



The rest of the team was already gathering in the field. The grass was short, the dirt freshly raked. Orange cones marked the foul lines. The bases were white, square, freshly dusted, and almost too clean to touch. The bleachers filled slowly with parents holding coffee cups and folding umbrellas for shade. Some had shirts that matched the Scorpions' team color—gray with a streak of gold.

Coach Stan paced near the dugout, clipboard in hand, baseball cap pulled low. He nodded when Alex arrived, but didn't say anything else.

Alex found his spot on the bench and tied his hoodie around his waist. He watched the other team warm up. The Green Hills Gators wore matching green jerseys with a white G across the chest. They were tall, taller than most of the Scorpions. They moved like they had done this a hundred times. Easy throws. Sharp catches. No fumbles. No extra laughs.

One of their players—number 22—kept pointing at the Scorpions and grinning. He said something to his



teammate, and they chuckled without hiding it. Alex didn't need to hear the words to know it wasn't kind.

The Scorpions stretched and tossed a few balls around. Rye did most of the talking, like always. "We stick to the plan," he said. "I'll call the plays. Don't mess up."

Alex nodded with the rest, but inside, something different was brewing. It was not fear, not quite. It was just a steady beat of knowing.

When the first inning began, the Gators batted first. Blake took the mound. His wind-up was sharp, clean, his eyes locked in. Rye crouched behind the plate, fingers flashing signs too fast for anyone else to catch.

The first batter swung and missed. Twice. Then, a sharp grounder shot to third was picked up clean out number one. The second batter cracked a line drive past second, safe on first. The Gators clapped loudly. Rye barked another set of signals, calling for a shift.



Alex squinted, reading the field. The next batter wasn't looking for a big swing—he was watching the ground, waiting for the perfect spot to slap a bunt.

He stepped forward and shouted, "Shift up! Watch the bunt!" His voice cut through the noise.

Rye turned around fast. "I got this," he snapped.

But Coach Stan didn't say anything, and no one moved to stop Alex.

The next pitch came. The batter laid down a bunt, just like Alex expected. It trickled toward third base, but the infield had already moved up. Blake charged the ball, fired to first, and the runner was out by two steps.

The bench erupted. The Gators looked surprised. Even Rye stayed quiet, staring at Alex momentarily before nodding once.

By the third inning, the Gators were up by two. Their outfield caught everything, and their pitcher's



curveball dipped at the last second. The Scorpions were trying but not connecting.

In the fourth, Alex made a diving stop at short and threw from his knees to first. The crowd gasped. The ump called the runner out. Even some of the Gators muttered under their breath.

During a timeout, Coach Stan called them to the side. “Listen,” he said. “They’re good. But you’re smarter than them when you trust yourselves. Alex—keep seeing the field. Keep calling what you see.”

Rye didn’t argue this time. He nodded slowly and backed up to his spot.

In the next play, the Gators tried a hit-and-run. Alex saw it before it happened. “Second base—cover!” he yelled. Javi slid into place, and the runner was caught halfway, a double play.

In the dugout, the team clapped louder now. Javi bumped Alex’s fist and grinned. “You’re not just reading the field,” he said. “You’re writing the story.”



At the bottom of the sixth, the score was tied. The sun had dipped behind a small cloud, but the heat lingered in the dirt.

Alex stepped to the plate. He was Sunset Canyon's strongest hitter—the one the team counted on when everything was on the line. He had studied the Gators' pitcher the whole game. Fast arm, but slow between pitches. Predictable when nervous.

He waited. The first pitch ball. The second strike. The third—he fouled off. Still calm.

The fourth pitch came fast and high. He leaned back, let it come, then swung. Crack.

The ball sailed past second, dropped into the outfield, and skipped once before stopping. He sprinted to first. Safe.

The crowd cheered. The coach waved. Javi was up next.

A single brought Alex to third. Then a sacrifice fly. He tagged up, waited for the coach's arm, then ran like he



was chasing the last page of a book he needed to finish.

He slid home. Dust flew. Safe.

The Scorpions were led by one. They held it in the final inning. Blake closed strong. The Gators didn't score again.

When it was over, the Scorpions didn't yell much. They smiled, clapped each other on the back, and breathed easier. Coach Stan said, "Good work," and that was enough.

Alex stood near the dugout, his jersey sticking to his back and a chalk smudge on his right sleeve. He pulled off his cap and shook the sweat from his curls. The sun had dipped behind the trees, leaving a soft orange behind the fence. He breathed and watched the other team jog off the field, still high-fiving and carrying the buzz of their win. The Scorpions hadn't won, but something else had happened.

The start of the game hadn't gone well. The first few innings felt heavy, like the team was stuck in slow



motion. Rye had called a play that no one moved on, and two runners scored before the ball returned to the pitcher. The bleachers stayed quiet, except for a few coughs and one dad opening a bag of sunflower seeds too loudly. Yasmin's hands were folded tightly in her lap. Rafael sat still, leaning forward just a little.

In the dugout, nobody said much. Blake stayed at the end of the bench, stretching his throwing arm, his face calm but unreadable. Noah paced in small circles, holding a ball and mumbling to himself. His glove was taped at the thumb, and his shoes had a red streak of clay that never seemed to brush off.

Back on the field, the Scorpions dropped two easy fly balls. One bounced off a glove. The second one landed in the grass with no one near it. Coach Stan didn't yell. He just adjusted his cap and scribbled something on his clipboard.

Alex stayed ready at shortstop, eyes darting, knees bent. Every pitch, he watched the batter's grip. Watched the angle of the front foot. Listened to the whisper of the swing.



Then came the fourth inning. A sharp line drive screamed toward second. Alex ran without thinking. He leapt, caught the ball midair, his glove popping louder than the cheers. Before his feet hit the ground, he twisted and fired to first base. The runner was already diving back, but the ball beat him—a double play.

The dugout exploded. Javi stood and shouted something that got drowned out by clapping. Even Coach Stan cracked a grin. Blake gave Alex a firm nod from the mound, and Rye slapped his glove twice.

It wasn't just a play. It was a switch.

From then on, the team moved differently. They chased harder, shouted louder, and clapped after every out. Noah got the ball next and threw like he had a score to settle. His windup was wild, but the pitch came in like thunder. One batter ducked. Another flinched. A third struck out swinging so hard he nearly spun in a full circle.



But the Green Hills Gators were good. Clean swings. Smart base-running. By the last inning, they were up by three.

Still, no one looked down.

In the final inning, Blake walked to the mound again. His pitches were sharper now, hitting corners with a snap. He struck out the first batter. The second grounded out to third. The third, their power hitter, sent a rocket toward center. It landed just past Javi's glove and rolled to the fence.

The runner rounded second, heading for third.

Alex ran out to meet the relay, caught the throw, and turned fast. The runner slid, but Alex's tag came down hard and true. The ump raised his arm. "Out!"

The field froze for a second, then came alive again.

The inning ended. The Gators won by three, but no one on the Scorpions walked with their heads down.



Back in the dugout, Coach Stan gathered them. “That,” he said, “was how a team plays. Not perfect, but real.”

The boys didn’t cheer, but something softer passed between them. Shoulder bumps. Nods. Small smiles that felt earned.

On the ride home, Alex sat in the backseat, knees bouncing. Yasmin looked at him through the mirror and smiled. “Proud of you.”

Rafael glanced back at a stoplight. “That tag at third—like lightning.”

Alex just nodded. He was too full of the game to say much. Every play replayed in his mind like a movie on loop.

At 1147 Saguaro Lane, he dropped his bag by the door and walked straight to the backyard. The field behind their house looked smaller after the stadium lights, but it still called to him.



He ran the base path twice, touched home, and stood still. The moon was out, and the night air felt cool against his skin. He looked up and whispered something he didn't plan. Just a thank you.

Inside, he washed up and sat at the table where Yasmin had left a plate of arroz con pollo and a slice of mango. He ate quietly, his eyes half on the food and half on the sky outside the window.

Later, he went to his room. His cleats sat by the door. His sketchbook was on his desk, already open to a clean page.

He didn't draw the score. He didn't draw the other team.

He drew the leaping catch. The glove was raised high—the tag is third. The dugout was filled with shadows and clapping.

Then, in the corner, he added something new—a small line of boys in mismatched jerseys, shoulders back, eyes lit with belief.



He stared at the drawing until his eyelids got heavy.

The Scorpions hadn't won, but they had found something. A spark. A beat they could build on. The next game might go differently. Or maybe not.

But they weren't guessing anymore.

They were growing.



Chapter 9: First Game of the Season

The morning light cut through the bedroom blinds in long stripes. Alex sat on the edge of his bed, already dressed in his uniform, the fabric still stiff from being new. His jersey read “Scorpions” across the chest in black block letters. The number eight was printed in bold on the back. He wore it with care, like it meant something. His socks were bunched just right, and his glove rested beside him like a quiet friend.

Yasmin had scrambled eggs and a glass of juice waiting in the kitchen. She hummed softly, something old and familiar, and her eyes twinkled as Alex sat down. She didn’t say much, just gently slid the plate in front of him and touched his shoulder.

After breakfast, she helped him with his cleats. She knelt down, carefully tying each lace, double-knotting



like always. “La pelota no miente,” she whispered.
“Let the ball speak.”

Alex nodded. He didn’t say anything back, but the words settled in his chest like something solid. He grabbed his bag and headed to the car with Rafael waiting by the door.

When they arrived, the field was already busy. Kids zipped around in mismatched socks, tossing balls back and forth and shouting over each other. Coaches talked with clipboards in hand. The Green Hills Gators were already warming up. They looked sharp. Their uniforms matched perfectly, and their cleats made even crunches in the gravel sound serious.

Alex joined the Scorpions on the third base side. Javi was there first, tossing a ball with Ben near the dugout. Blake stood quietly at the foul line, stretching his arms with slow, even movements. Rye bounced on the balls of his feet, already loud, shouting instructions no one asked for.



“Let’s tighten the line today, boys! No sloppy throws, got it?” Rye called out, pointing across the field like a mini-coach.

Alex slipped on his glove and walked to shortstop. He didn’t need to say much. He just watched. His eyes moved from the Gators’ pitcher to their batters warming up. Every swing, every stance. They were big—taller than most of the Scorpions. Confident. But something about their smirks made Alex’s jaw set tighter.

The ump called both teams to the plate. Coach Stan gathered the boys in a small huddle before the game. “Play smart. Play clean. Listen to your gut. Win or lose, I want a heads-up and gloves ready. Go, Scorpions.”

The first pitch came fast, and the first inning was rough. A bad bounce at third sent the ball rolling into foul territory. Rye missed a sign, and the runner on second slid home untouched. The Gators clapped from their dugout, already acting like they had the game won.



Alex stayed quiet. He kept moving. On the next play, he scooped a grounder cleanly and tossed it to Ben at first without blinking. His throws were sharp today. His hands are steady. His eyes never left the ball.

Rye called a shift in the outfield, but no one moved.

Alex stepped in.

He waved his glove slightly and called, “Left field, one step in. Javi, take a step back.” His voice wasn’t loud, but it was clear. The outfielders moved without question. Even Rye hesitated, then nodded.

The next batter hit a shallow fly ball, landing where Javi had stepped back to. Catch.

Rye looked over at Alex, but said nothing.

By the third inning, the Gators were up by two. Still, the Scorpions weren’t folding. Noah pitched with his wild, fiery energy, striking out two and walking one. Blake took the mound next, calm and focused. His first pitch was a perfect strike.



In the dugout, Coach Stan gave out short notes.
“Tighten your stance. Keep your glove low. Trust your eyes.”

Alex sat on the bench next to Javi. He wiped his hands on his jersey and looked toward the bleachers. Yasmin sat in the front row, sunglasses on, waving a small fan to cool herself. Rafael stood at the fence, arms crossed, nodding after every play.

When it was Alex’s turn to bat, he stepped to the plate with a calm that surprised even himself. The pitcher for the Gators was tall and had a quick wind-up. The first pitch flew by. Strike one.

Alex exhaled and squared his shoulders.

The second pitch came, and he connected. A clean hit past second base. He didn’t smile. He just ran.

By the fifth inning, the Scorpions had closed the gap. Only one run separated them now.

Rye tried again to call a play, shouting, “Third! Watch the bunt!” But it was too late. The bunt dropped



perfectly and rolled slowly near the pitcher's mound.
The runner scored.

Alex didn't flinch. He turned toward the team and calmly repeated, "Next pitch. Everyone ready?"

Ben pounded his glove, Blake nodded from the mound, the infield pulled in, and Alex kept his stance loose but alert.

A high chopper came next, bouncing wildly between second and third. Alex moved fast, scooping the ball cleanly, his feet barely touching the dirt before his throw zipped across the field. Out.

The dugout jumped. Javi whooped. Even Blake let out a cheer.

Yasmin clapped hard, yelling, "¡Vamos, Alex!" across the fence.

The Gators were rattled. Their coach started pacing. Their catcher shouted across the diamond, but the noise didn't sound the same.



In the bottom of the sixth, the Scorpions had one last chance. Alex stood in the on-deck circle, twirling his bat slowly. Rye got a hit but was tagged out at second. Ben walked. Javi hit a long ball, but it was a foul.

Then it was Alex's turn again.

He stepped to the plate, hands tight on the grip. The sun beat down, but his focus didn't shake. The first pitch was high. Ball one. Next, a strike. Then another ball. Then a foul tip. Full count.

The final pitch came fast. Alex swung with everything, timed just right. Crack. The ball soared past the shortstop, bounced once, and rolled to the fence.

Ben ran. The crowd stood. Alex reached second base standing.

The game tied. The dugout roared.

Coach Stan gave one sign. Blake stepped to the plate with two outs. He grounded out, but no one groaned.



The game ended in a tie, but the Scorpions jogged off like winners. No one walked. No one slumped.

In the postgame huddle, Coach Stan kept it short.
“That’s what heart looks like.”

Alex sat on the bench, breathing slowly. His glove, dusty and worn now, rested on his lap.

In the car ride home, Yasmin looked at him through the rearview mirror.

“You let the ball speak,” she said.

Alex smiled quietly, watching the sunset turn the golden orange road, the color that makes silence feel full instead of empty. The window next to him hummed gently with the wind, and his cleats sat on the seat beside him, still holding onto the dirt of the day.

Back home, Rafael was already at the dining table, hunched over something with a printer buzzing nearby. The smell of dinner—rice, grilled chicken, and roasted peppers—floated into the room. Yasmin



headed straight to the kitchen, humming as she unpacked leftovers from the cooler she had brought to the game. Alex dropped his bag by the door and followed the printer's sound.

Rafael looked up and slid a photo across the table. “Look at that,” he said, his voice calm but proud in a quiet, deep way. The picture showed Alex mid-air, glove outstretched, the ball frozen inside the webbing like it knew it belonged there. His face looked serious, focused, almost older than it should have been.

Alex stared at the photo. In the background, he could see the dugout—teammates standing up, Coach Stan halfway out of the bench, mouths open in surprise. He hadn’t realized it when it happened. It had felt quick and natural. But now, looking at the frozen frame, it felt like something shifted.

“Game 1 – The Turn Begins,” Rafael had typed across the bottom. It wasn’t fancy, just bold letters in black ink. But it felt right.



Alex placed the photo gently beside his sketchbook on his desk. He'd tape it up later, maybe next to the picture of him and Abuela at the beach or the drawing of stars he still hadn't finished. For now, he wanted to look at it a little longer.

Dinner was quiet, but not the tense kind of calm. Just peaceful. Yasmin asked about the game, and Alex told her the parts that didn't show up in the box score—how the Gators kept smirking even when the Scorpions tied it, how Javi blocked a wild pitch with his whole chest and didn't even flinch, how Blake nodded once from the mound after a clean third strike.

He didn't mention the feeling in his stomach when he stepped onto the field. He didn't have to. Yasmin and Rafael understood. They had known it long before he could explain it.

Later that night, Alex sat cross-legged on his bedroom floor, his glove beside him, his socks still dusty. He pulled out a few flashcards and tried to review spelling words. His fingers tapped the carpet with each word,



like little beats keeping time. “Predict. Adapt. Reflect.” Some stuck, some didn’t. But he kept going.

The house was quiet. Rafael’s footsteps faded down the hallway. The desert breeze whispered outside his window. He could hear a dog barking a few streets over. Somewhere far, a car door slammed.

He looked over at the new photo one more time. Then he opened his sketchbook. He drew a small diamond, then added tiny figures—each in motion, each in their spot. This time, the team didn’t look scattered. They looked connected. Alex drew the glove, reaching high. Then the ball. Then the dugout behind it, alive with sparks.

He shaded the sky above them with soft pencil strokes and started writing names across the top of the field—Blake, Javi, Noah, Rye. Even Ben. He didn’t write “Scorpions.” He drew a shape at the top that looked like something between a sun and a burst. Like the moment after a light switch is flipped.



The next morning, Rafael handed him a second copy of the photo. “Thought you might want to keep one with you,” he said.

Alex nodded. He slid it into the pocket of his binder, right behind his class schedule and a few loose worksheets. It felt good to have it near, not as a trophy, but as a reminder.

School was the same as usual. Some kids talked about the game. Javi bumped shoulders with him in the hallway and said, “Told you they’d learn.” Alex just grinned.

Reading time came, and the words still moved too fast sometimes. But now he paused, took a breath, and kept going. When the letters blurred, he tapped the edge of the page twice and whispered to himself, “Let the ball speak.”

After school, practice was full of chatter. Rye wasn’t as loud. He still called out some positions, but he glanced at Alex first now. Coach Stan gave a few short instructions, then let them play.



Grounders rolled in every direction. Blake's pitches snapped. Noah's throws are curved and wild. Javi popped up from his squat to throw to second and missed, but Ben caught a foul tip bare-handed without blinking.

Alex called out twice: once to shift the infield and once to warn Blake of a bunt. Both times, the team responded.

Coach Stan watched from behind the fence. He didn't say much, just scribbled something on his notepad.

After showering and finishing his math homework that night, Alex sat outside in the backyard. The makeshift field glowed under the porch light. His cleats were clean again, resting by the glove rack. He looked up at the sky. The stars were clear, quiet, and waiting.

He thought about how the game had gone. Not perfect. Not a win. But better. Different.

He didn't feel like the new kid today. He felt like part of something. Not because of one catch or throw, but



because the team had started believing in each other. Because even though they didn't win, they didn't quit either.

Inside, Yasmin was folding laundry and humming again. Rafael had his laptop open and was fixing something for work. The house felt still, like it was finally sinking into its new skin.

Alex pulled out his sketchbook again. He flipped past drawings of stars, cactus, and baseball gloves and found a blank page. He wrote one word in the middle: More.

He didn't add anything else.

Just that.

Then he closed the sketchbook, placed it gently beside the photo, and leaned back on his hands, letting the night hold him. The next game will come soon. So would more quizzes, more running drills, more names to remember. But right now, he had this. This moment. This beginning. This new chapter. And he was ready to keep going.



Chapter 10: The Rivalry Game

The morning of the Mesa game began too early. Alex was already awake before his alarm went off. The light outside was still gray; the only sound was a bird calling from the cactus near his window. He sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes, the feeling in his chest already tight and electric.

Rafael was clicking the coffee machine down the hall, and Yasmin was packing snacks in a cooler. The smell of toasted bread reached his room. Alex slipped into his uniform and laced his cleats carefully, double-knotting each side like it mattered more today. Maybe it did.

By the time they reached the field, the sun had climbed higher, brushing the fences and bleachers with gold. Cars filled the lot. Parents pulled coolers, chairs, and fold-up canopies from trunks. The Mesa



Sluggers' bus arrived last, doors hissing open like a warning. Players poured out wearing fresh white and gold uniforms. Their coach wore sunglasses and didn't speak much, but his presence said enough.

They were back. And everyone noticed.

The Mesa team walked in with loud steps, cleats clanking like they were stomping on the season itself. They moved in rows, calm but sure, joking loudly and tossing balls in tight spirals to one another. Will, their pitcher, strutted past the Scorpions' dugout and said just loud enough, "Hope you brought tissues."

Rye muttered something under his breath. Ben stayed quiet, his helmet in his lap, eyes narrowed.

Alex didn't speak. He just watched. Will had a sharp way of moving. Each warm-up pitch looked like it came out of a machine. His elbow snapped, his glove popped, and he smirked after every throw. Alex studied his rhythm, the way he twisted his foot slightly on the mound before releasing the ball. He



noticed how Will stared too long at the batter, as if trying to scare them with his eyes.

Coach Stan gathered the team near the fence. “You know who they are,” he said. “But they’re not perfect. You stay smart. You stay steady. Let the game come to you.”

When the first inning started, the bleachers were already full. The Scorpions’ parents clapped loudly. Mesa’s side wore matching shirts and carried cowbells. The energy buzzed from every corner of the field.

The early innings were tight. Blake threw strongly, Noah was fast and wild as usual, and the fielders held their ground. But Mesa was smooth. Their batters placed hits just right, sending grounders to the edges and testing the corners. By the third inning, the score was 2-1, Mesa leading.

Alex crouched at shortstop, glove ready. His knees were tight, but his eyes were sharp. He didn’t talk much during the game but nodded at each player and



adjusted his stance with every pitch. He wasn't thinking about what happened last time. He was thinking about now.

In the fourth inning, things shifted. Will walked up to bat and cracked a loud double that bounced just before the fence. The Mesa fans roared. Rye turned red behind his catcher's mask. Two plays later, another Mesa player slid hard into second, brushing Alex's leg.

"Soft footwork, Miami," the runner muttered as he stood up.

Rye heard it, yanked off his mask, and charged forward. "Repeat it!" he shouted.

Alex didn't think. He dropped his glove, stepped between them, and shoved Rye backward with both hands.

"Stop," Alex said, steady but firm. "Not like this."

Coach Stan called time, stepped out from the dugout, and didn't speak a word. Just looked. Rye growled but



didn't move again. Alex picked up his glove and walked back to short.

Something crackled in the air after that. Not fear—focus.

When the next batter came up, Alex whispered to the second baseman and motioned to Javi near third. Without checking with Coach Stan, he called the shift.

"Now," he said, just loud enough.

The pitch came. A hard grounder toward second, exactly where Alex had moved. He scooped it, stepped on the bag, and threw to first in one clean arc.

Double play.

The crowd stood up. The dugout yelled. Even Coach Stan smiled, just for a second.

The next inning, the score stayed tight. Mesa was ahead by one. But they weren't laughing as much. Will walked a batter. Their shortstop dropped an easy ball. The energy shift was slight but genuine.



In the final inning, Blake stood tall on the mound. He nodded once at Alex before each pitch. Mesa's last batter swung hard but missed. The Scorpions didn't win. The score stayed 3-2. But when it ended, something hung in the air—respect.

Mesa walked off quickly, and their fans were quieter. Will didn't say anything as he passed; he just tossed his bat into his bag and looked away.

Alex stayed on the field a moment longer. He knelt and scooped a little dirt into his hand. It felt like nothing and everything.

In the dugout, Coach Stan clapped once. "That's baseball," he said. "Takes more than hits. Takes heart."

Rye patted Alex's shoulder. "That shift was smart," he said.

Alex smiled. "Thanks."

Back home, he showered and then sat cross-legged in the backyard. The sun was starting to drop, coloring



the sky with streaks of orange and blue. Rafael came out holding something.

"I printed this," he said, handing Alex another photo.

It showed Alex mid-throw, right after the double play. His face was calm. His foot was on second, and the ball was flying from his hand.

"Called this one 'Shift Change,'" Rafael said.

Alex laughed just once. That night, he taped it on his bedroom wall, just above the first photo.

At dinner, Yasmin made rice with garlic and peppers. They ate quietly, and no one talked about the score.

That night, in bed, Alex opened his sketchbook again. He drew the field. Then the runners. Then the shift. He labeled each spot like a map. Then he drew the ball mid-air, moving from second to first. He drew a small arrow above it and wrote one word:

"Direction."



He stared at the page, thinking about how the dugout sounded right after the play. It was loud, yes, but it wasn't just about noise. It was a different sound, like something inside the team had finally clicked into place. They all looked toward him for the first time instead of past him.

The next day at school, nothing changed on the surface. Ms. Keller still handed out morning packets; the hallway echoed with lockers slamming and sneakers squeaking. But Alex walked a little straighter. He still wasn't the loudest or the fastest, but something in him stood taller.

At lunch, Javi found him and handed him a wrapped tamarind candy, smiling with a quiet nod. It didn't need explaining. It was something solid between them now. They didn't always need words. Not when they both knew how it felt to carry homes in their pockets and stories in two languages.

Practice that afternoon was tougher. The sun was hotter, and the drills lasted longer. Coach Stan didn't slow down, and neither did the Scorpions. Blake's



pitches bit harder, Noah's throws snapped louder, and Alex's glove felt like an extension of his hand now, not just something he wore.

Between drills, Alex stood near Nico at short. Nico, always quiet, had never hit higher than the fifth spot in the lineup. He rarely said much and barely smiled. But today, something flickered in his eyes as he stepped into the batting cage.

Coach Stan waved his hand. "Nico, let's go."

Nico nodded, set his feet, and waited for the pitch. The first ball came in fast. Nico swung clean. The crack echoed through the field like a slap to the sky. The ball sailed. It soared over the fence, bounced off the track, and rolled into the dry brush.

Everyone froze for a second.

Then someone whooped. Rye whistled. Even Coach Stan raised an eyebrow.

Alex turned to Javi and mouthed, "Did you see that?"



Javi just grinned.

That night, Alex walked home slower, the dirt still on his socks. He didn't mind the dust. It was becoming part of the game, part of the story he told one inning at a time.

At home, Yasmin had made black beans with rice, and Rafael was fixing a lamp that had been flickering for weeks. The house felt like it always did—soft light, warm smells, quiet voices—but something in the air was shifting. It wasn't the food or the weather. It was something in Alex himself.

After dinner, he grabbed his phone and sat on the front steps. He stared at the sunset for a while. The sky looked stretched wide and full, like there was still room for more.

He opened his messages and tapped Mateo's name.

His fingers hovered briefly, then typed slowly: *Took down giants today.*

He hit send, then leaned back and smiled.



The next game came fast. Mesa again. Same faces, same uniforms. But this time, it felt different. The Scorpions didn't look nervous. They didn't fidget or whisper. They stretched and jogged like they knew something the other team didn't.

Rafael took photos from the fence. Yasmin sat beside Javi's mom, holding plastic water bottles and wiping their brows with napkins.

Coach Stan kept his talk short. "You know what to do. Play smart. Play loud. Play like it's yours."

In the first inning, Mesa scored early. One sharp hit. One mistake at third. But nobody panicked. Alex clapped once and shouted, "Next one!"

The second inning stayed even. Blake threw tight, and the outfield held strong. Alex covered second and called out shifts, pointing with his glove.

In the third, Mesa loaded the bases. The stands tensed. Then Alex scooped a sharp grounder, stepped on second, and fired to first. Double play again. The cheers came, strong and solid.



By the fifth inning, the score was still close. Mesa ahead by one.

Then came Nico.

He walked up with his bat already set on his shoulder. He didn't tap his shoes. He didn't shake his head or whisper anything. He just stood there, still and ready.

The first pitch flew by. Ball.

The second came faster. Nico swung, and the field went silent. The sound was crisp, clean, and the ball rose like it had been waiting to leave.

Over the fence.

Over the path.

Out of reach.

The dugout exploded. Players jumped. Helmets flew.

Nico jogged the bases slowly but with purpose, not in show-off speed. He touched each base like he was planting flags.



When he stepped onto the field, Rye slapped his helmet first.

Alex was second.

From there, the team didn't stop. They played like they had something under their cleats—like they couldn't be knocked off balance.

Earlier, in the fourth inning, everything almost fell apart. Will, the Mesa pitcher, had stared at Alex and called across the infield, "Soft hands, city boy. You don't belong here." The words were loud enough to reach the bleachers. Rye heard it too. He dropped his glove and started walking toward the mound, fists clenched.

Alex stepped in his path, one hand firm on Rye's chest. "Leave it," he said, quiet but clear. Rye stared at him, breathing hard, then nodded once and picked up his glove.

That moment changed everything.



Rye stopped calling all the plays. He looked at Alex, then nodded, saying, “Go ahead.”

Alex studied Will like a puzzle. Then, without checking with Coach Stan, he moved the second baseman two steps right and motioned for the outfield to shift left. It wasn’t on the play card. It was in his gut.

Alex called the shifts, watched the pitcher, and moved the fielders with small gestures. He was not shouting or bragging, just steady.

On the next pitch, the batter cracked a line drive toward short. Alex sprang right, caught it mid-air, landed, and in the same motion fired to second. Javi caught it and threw to first—just in time. A double play. The dugout roared.

They didn’t win by much—just two runs.

But the win wasn’t in the numbers. It was in the way they left the field—together, laughing, high-fiving, not needing anyone to remind them what had changed.



On the bus ride back, everyone was loud. Even Nico laughed. Javi shared more candy. Sitting across the aisle, Rye leaned over and knocked Alex's shoulder.

"Captain material, Miami," he said, nodding once.

Alex blinked, then smiled.

That night, Rafael had already printed a photo at home. He held it out to Alex like a gift.

"This one's for the wall."

It showed Nico mid-swing, the ball already gone, Alex clapping in the background.

But in the corner, you could just make out Javi mid-throw—part of the double play.

Rafael had written in marker across the top: Game 2 – The Turn Begins.

Alex took it, held it in his hands for a long second, then walked to his room.



He placed it right under the last one. Side by side, they didn't look like trophies. They looked like pages from a story still being told.

He didn't open his sketchbook that night. He didn't need to draw the field or the shift. He already knew the lines. He had lived them.

Instead, he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Somewhere in the house, a radio played soft music. Outside, the wind brushed the fence lightly.

The stars blinked above Sunset Canyon, quiet and steady.

Alex closed his eyes, and for the first time since he arrived, he didn't ask if he belonged.

He knew.



Chapter 11: Code, Cleats, and Power Lines

Sunset Canyon had started to change, and Alex felt it with every step he took down his street. The nights weren't so dark anymore. New streetlights lined the sidewalks, flickering slightly but holding steady once they settled. They cast soft glows on curbs and mailboxes, stretching shadows across the sidewalk like paint strokes. The air still smelled dry and dusty, but the quiet had shifted—now it carried voices from porches and the clink of glasses from new cafés opening near the town center.

Sometimes, after dinner, Alex would walk to the corner with a bag of sunflower seeds and sit on the low wall by the café. It was called Casa Nube, painted soft blue, with wire lights strung overhead. The owner, a tall woman with short curls and an easy laugh, always nodded when she saw him. "The baseball boy," she'd say. "You bring good luck to the street."



Inside the café, Lena sat at the front table most nights, her fingers flying over her keyboard. Her eyes didn't blink often, but her face lit up every time she cracked a line of code. She didn't say much, but sometimes, Alex would catch her muttering things like, "Smart light connects... Home base active..." She was building software to link all the smart homes in town. Omar, who managed the town's community board, called her "Lena the Lightning" and added, "Ever since your kid showed up, this whole street's been waking up. We call it the Alex Manzanillo Effect."

Alex didn't know what to say when he heard that. He'd smile, wave a little, then keep walking. He didn't feel like a big deal. He was still figuring out science quizzes and sometimes forgetting his lunch at home. But the way people talked—it was like the town had started to see itself differently, and somehow, his name got folded into that story.

At school, new students joined every week. Classrooms filled up faster, and Ms. Keller had to switch to double rows. The playground buzzed louder, and the library ran out of copies of their most popular



books. In the cafeteria, kids sat closer, squeezing together on benches. One day, Alex saw a boy with a Cuban flag keychain, and they gave each other a nod that didn't need explaining.

But baseball was where everything still felt the most clear. The Scorpions practiced harder now. Not because anyone told them to—but because they wanted to. Games had gotten tighter. More parents came to watch. More cheers filled the air. Sometimes, even Mr. Ramirez, the janitor, leaned on his mop outside the gym to catch an inning.

Alex's room mainly stayed the same. His altar stood on the windowsill, his sketchpad on the desk, and cleats beside the bed. But now, a shelf held framed photos—snapshots from games, a picture of the whole team huddled with orange dirt streaking their pants, and one mid-jump, where Alex stretched across second base, glove out, the ball frozen in flight.

Then came the game that no one forgot.



The Scorpions faced a team from a nearby city with crisp uniforms and matching warm-ups. They showed up in three vans and walked in together, chins high, bats shining like they'd been polished before the trip.

Coach Stan said little. He just passed out gloves and said, "Play your game."

By the second inning, the score was even. The sun sat high, throwing sharp light over the diamond. The bleachers were packed. Javi's abuela waved a flag from the third row. Yasmin sat beside Rafael, who had his camera ready.

In the fourth, the other team lined up a shot to center. Two runners rounded second. The Scorpions chased the ball as it bounced into the deep grass.

Alex sprinted. His legs burned, but he didn't slow. The ball bounced once more. He launched into the air, glove stretched. For a moment, time bent. The crowd gasped. His cleats left the ground. His fingers closed. The ball thudded into his glove as he hit the ground and rolled.



The field went silent.

Then it exploded.

Everyone jumped. Even Coach Stan clapped. Rye raised both fists and shouted, “No way!”

Alex stood slowly, brushing dirt from his elbows. With a quick nod, he tossed the ball to the pitcher. Then he jogged back to the shop, his face calm but his heart pounding.

That play reached every phone. Omar posted it on the town board. The café played the clip on a loop behind the counter. Rafael printed it and added it to the growing photo wall.

Back home that night, Alex stood in front of the mirror, still wearing his uniform. His knees were scraped, his shirt streaked with sweat and red dirt, but he didn’t want to take it off yet.

He walked to the backyard. The sun had dipped behind the hills, but the field still held heat. He picked up a ball, tossed it gently, and caught it. Again. Again.



Then he looked at the sky. It was deeper now, ink blue and scattered with stars. He whispered, “That was for you, Mateo.”

He returned to the house, passing Rafael at the table, still editing photos. Yasmin smiled from the kitchen, where the air smelled like roasted peppers and warm tortillas.

Up in his room, Alex opened his sketchbook. He drew the leap. Not perfectly, but close. He added the glove, the stretched arms, the frozen moment. He wrote under it:

“Hold your ground. And fly when you have to.”

He stared at it a while, then flipped the page.

This time, he started drawing the town. Not just the field, but the café, the corner with the low wall, the lampposts, and the little flag waving from Javi’s porch. He drew people sitting on steps, talking—a kid running with a soccer ball. A parent tying a shoelace.

At the center, he drew a field.



And standing on it, not big or loud, just steady, he drew himself holding a glove, looking ahead. He was not smiling, not scared—just ready.

He didn't use too many lines. Just enough to tell the truth.

The next morning, the sky stretched wide and clean. The air carried the scent of dry grass and something electric, like a switch had flipped across the town. On his way to school, Alex passed a section of sidewalk that hadn't been there before. Fresh pavement curved neatly where cracks and dirt had once ruled. Ms. Maria Rodriguez stood near the edge with her clipboard, pointing at the new strip with sunglasses on her head.

"Look at that line," she said to her husband, tapping her pen against the air. "It's clean. Level. You feel that? That's not just cement. That's progress."

Her husband, Mr. Rodriguez, nodded slowly, remembering. "Last year, we had a generator that



coughed whenever you asked it to work. Remember that night it rattled through dinner?”

“I thought the table was shaking,” Maria said, shaking her head. “And now look. New grid. No noise.”

Alex kept walking, quiet, but listening.

He turned the corner and heard the buzz of power lines—steady, humming. A new metal pole stood at the end of the street. At night, it threw light across the sidewalk so evenly that his shadow looked like it belonged.

At school, things felt different, too. The halls weren’t silent anymore. They were alive. More kids joined the lunch tables. The art wall had new drawings. In the library, a shelf was labeled “Student Picks,” and Alex’s name was written under one of the drawings of a book cover—one he had chosen himself. It wasn’t perfect, but it looked like something that belonged there.

Even in class, more hands went up when Ms. Keller asked for volunteers. Not all the answers were correct,



but the room was louder, more alive. It didn't feel like a museum anymore.

That afternoon, the field was already filling before the team even arrived. The bleachers were packed.

Parents held umbrellas. Kids wore shirts with painted numbers on the back. There were folding chairs behind the dugout, and cheers rolled like waves even during warmups.

Coach Stan looked over the fence and let out a breath. "This wasn't here three months ago," he muttered.

Rye jogged past him and said, "That's the Manzanillo effect," half-grinning.

Alex stretched his glove open, fingers flexing as he stepped onto the dirt. He looked up at the stands. People from his block were there. The café owner waved a small blue flag. Lena stood beside Omar, who wore a cap backward and shouted, "Let's go, Scorpions!"

There were new faces, too—families who had just moved in. A dad held a baby and a juice box in one



arm. A group of kids kicked a ball along the fence. Laughter ran across the crowd like a breeze.

Coach Stan called the players into a circle. “You know what to do. Don’t overthink. Play ball.”

They nodded, clapped hands, and ran to their spots.

Alex took his place at shortstop. The dirt felt familiar under his shoes. The sun was just right—not too sharp, not too soft. His glove rested easily in his hand.

From the first pitch, the energy felt sharper than before. Blake’s throws landed with a pop. Noah’s curveballs swerved wildly but dangerously. Rye barked commands from behind the plate, steady and loud.

But it wasn’t the noise that moved the team. It was the rhythm.

Grounder to second. Throw to first. Out.

Pop fly to the right. Caught.

Strike three—fist pump.



Alex didn't think. He moved. Reacted. Watched. When the ball came his way, his glove met it like it had waited all day.

In the fifth inning, the other team tried a steal. The runner sprinted from first, eyes sharp. The catcher hesitated. Alex stepped into place without being called.

The ball shot from the plate to second. Alex caught it, turned, and tagged.

The umpire threw his hand in the air. "Out!"

The crowd roared.

The runner walked off, shaking his head. Alex didn't say a word. He just turned back to his position.

Later, between innings, Javi sat beside him in the dugout and held out a small red wrapper. "Tamarind," he said. "For focus."

Alex took it with a smile. "Gracias."



They didn't say much more. They didn't need to. The silence between them said enough about where they came from, what they carried, and how far they still wanted to go.

On the field, the game tightened. The score didn't matter yet. What mattered was how the Scorpions played like one heartbeat. Every pitch, every shift, every nod—it all started to make sense.

Alex dove for a grounder that skipped fast down the middle in the seventh. He slid, stretched, and caught it on the edge of his glove. He flipped it to second just before the runner touched the bag—double play.

The crowd jumped again. People stood. Clapped. Even Coach Stan cracked a rare grin.

In the final inning, the score sat tied. The other team looked sharp, but rattled. Their coach shouted, but their eyes flicked toward the crowd, unsettled.

Rye walked over to Alex before the last pitch.

“You see what I see?” Rye asked, voice low.



Alex nodded once. “Yep.”

Rye grinned. “Then you call it.”

Alex took a breath. He looked at the runners, the batter, the wind, and the sky. Then he pointed his glove, gave one sign, and stepped into place.

The pitch flew. The batter swung. Crack.

A line drive.

Alex moved without thinking. The ball sped low and fast. He dropped, scooped, and fired to second. Then the second turned and fired at the first.

Double play again.

The game ended just after that.

They didn’t win by much. Just enough.

But the way the team moved, the way the crowd stayed after, and the sun dipped low behind the lights—it felt like something had changed.



After the game, Coach Stan gave a short nod. “Good work.”

Rye clapped Alex’s back. “You’re making me lazy,” he said, half-joking.

In the crowd, Maria Rodriguez pointed at the field and whispered to someone, “That kid? The one with the glove? He’s not just good. He’s part of this place now.”

Later that night, back home, Rafael printed a photo.

Alex is mid-dive, glove wide, and is dirt flying. He labeled it in soft pen under the frame: **“Play by play. Block by block.”**

Alex looked at it before bed.

Then he looked out the window.

The streetlights were steady. The café lights glowed. And the stars waited above—quiet, but always there.

He turned off the lamp, pulled the blanket up, and closed his eyes.



The next day would come.

And he'd be ready.



Chapter 12: The Season Opener

The sun burned straight overhead, and there were no clouds in sight. The bleachers were packed tight with families waving folded rosters and holding homemade signs. The field looked sharper than ever—fresh white chalk hugged the baselines, and the grass trimmed along the outfield danced a little in the breeze. The metal bleachers were hot to the touch, and even the scoreboard blinked slower, like it, too, was feeling the heat.

Alex stood beside the dugout, head down, fingers carefully folding a small cloth—his abuela’s bandana. It was red with tiny white flowers along the edge. He tied it around his wrist, tight, then took the photo from his back pocket and stared at it for a second. It was the one where she stood outside her bakery in Miami, wearing her apron and smiling with her whole



face. He tucked the photo into his jersey, just over his heart.

“Vas conmigo,” he whispered.

Javi was by the bench, lighting a small prayer candle. The breeze made it flicker. He shielded the flame with one hand, then nodded toward Alex.

“Que Dios nos guíe,” Javi said low, like a promise.

Alex nodded back. “Siempre.”

The others were stretching, tossing balls, and cracking knuckles. The energy buzzed through everyone. This wasn’t a regular game. This was the opener. The first real shot. The beginning of something bigger.

Coach Stan stood in front of the dugout, drawing signals on the chalkboard nailed to the side. He scratched a few arrows, circled a base path, and marked a runner sign with two lines. Alex stared at it, squinting. The lines tangled together. He blinked, looked again. They didn’t settle. His stomach knotted a little.



He glanced at Rye, who watched with crossed arms, then nodded like he understood everything already.

Alex stepped closer. Tried to read again. The chalk was smudged in spots, and the arrows danced like they had legs. He bit his bottom lip.

“Just patterns,” he told himself. “Just moves.”

But the page in his head stayed blank.

He turned to the field instead. Watched the way the Green Hills players stood. Their pitcher warmed up like a machine—same motion, over and over. The catcher slapped his glove with confidence. Their shortstop tapped his cleats on the dirt with rhythm, like he owned it.

Alex looked at his team. Nico cracked his neck and flexed his fingers. Javi crouched, glove ready, humming something under his breath. Rye spat into the dirt and looked bored. The others jogged in a half-circle near the fence, their nerves buzzing like wires.



Alex stepped onto the dirt. He didn't need to read the board. He could feel the plan.

The first inning started rough. Their leadoff batter struck out swinging. The next grounded out. By the time Alex stepped up to the plate, two outs already loomed. The sun glared into his eyes as he squared up. He thought of Abuela. He thought of his bandana.

The pitcher grinned like he already knew what would happen. Alex took a breath. First pitch—fast and low. He held back. Second pitch—he swung.

Crack.

It wasn't perfect, but it dropped right between center and left. He sprinted to first, cleats digging into the dirt, jersey flapping at the sides.

Safe.

Coach clapped once. No big shouts. Just a nod.



Alex wiped his forehead with his wristband. He looked over at Javi, who tapped his bat on the ground, ready to go.

Javi took a pitch. Then another. Then, swung and tapped one down the first baseline. The ball trickled like it was thinking. The first baseman grabbed it and tagged the bag, but Alex was already halfway to third.

He didn't stop. His legs didn't ask for permission. He ran through the signal.

The throw from first came late.

He slid into third. Dust cloud, silence, then—

“Safe!” the umpire shouted.

The dugout cheered.

Coach raised an eyebrow. “Not the call I gave,” he said.

Alex shrugged, breathless, “I read the field.”



Coach looked away, but not before the corner of his mouth twitched.

The next innings tested everything. The other team scored two in the second, and the Scorpions fumbled a play in the third. Blake's pitches hit the corners, but the other team was quick. Noah took the mound in the fourth. Fireball after fireball. But even that couldn't stop Green Hills from loading the bases.

Alex tightened his glove. He watched the field again. His eyes didn't look at symbols. They watched shadows, watched weight shifts, listened to cleat movements.

The batter slammed one toward the gap between short and third.

Alex didn't think. He ran. Glove out, foot sliding through the dirt. The ball smacked into his palm. He pivoted on one knee and hurled it to second. Javi caught it out one. Javi turned—fired to first.

Our two.



Double play.

The dugout leapt. The crowd roared.

Rye yelled, “Let’s GO!” and slapped Alex so hard he almost lost his balance.

In the bottom of the fifth, it was Alex at bat again. The stands were louder now. Someone shouted his name.

He closed his eyes. Heard Abuela’s voice.

“Let the ball speak.”

He opened them. Saw the pitcher lean. Wind-up.
Throw.

He swung.

The ball soared high—too high, probably. The center fielder sprinted back, tracking.

Then his glove missed it.

Alex flew past first. Second. The coach waved him forward.



Third.

He slid into home. The dust cleared.

Safe.

Tied game.

His chest pounded like a drum. Javi tackled him in a hug. The others joined. Even Coach gave him a thumbs-up.

As the last inning crept in, Green Hills looked tired. Their throws slowed. Their calls got quieter.

The Scorpions didn't yell much. But they moved like they shared a secret.

Javi lit a second candle in the corner of the dugout—this one is unlit, just for hope.

When the final out came, it wasn't a big play. Just a catch. Simple. Clean.

Game over.



They didn't win, not on the scoreboard.

But in the dugout, no one sat heavily. They looked at each other like they knew something the scoreboard didn't.

Coach said nothing. Just nodded. Again.

Rye offered Alex the scorebook. "You should start calling it," he said. "You see it better than I do."

Alex took it, unsure. But his fingers wrapped around the spine. Firm.

Later that evening, at home, he sat on the porch steps. The heat had faded. The candle Javi gave him sat on the rail, flickering softly.

He held the photo of Abuela again. Smiled.

Then opened his sketchpad.

He drew the field. Again. This time with candles at the corners. He attracted the chalk lines. Not straight. Just real.



He drew himself at shortstop. And behind him, not a crowd, but a whole town. Some people are cheering. Some are just watching. Some building. Some waiting.

Then, above them, he wrote two words.

“Still beginning.”

He closed the sketchbook and rested it beside his lamp. The room was quiet, but not empty. The desert air drifted through the window. Alex sat at the edge of his bed, slipped on his socks, and then laced up his cleats even though there was no game tonight. He just needed to feel ready. The laces pulled tight, and something inside him clicked into place. His jersey lay folded at the end of the bed. He picked it up and ran a finger over the stitched letters—Scorpions. He smiled softly, then stood.

Downstairs, Yasmin was in the kitchen chopping tomatoes. The sound of the knife on the board made a steady beat, and the smell of lime and garlic filled the space. She looked up and nodded when she saw him.



No words needed. He grabbed a water bottle and stepped outside.

The backyard field still wore the marks of yesterday's game. Faint, precise lines. Flattened grass. The chalk had long blown away by the wind. He walked across the dirt, stopping at shortstop, crouched, and waited like the ball was already flying toward him.

In his head, he could hear the count. Bottom of the seventh. Two outs. Tie game. The pitcher nods. The batter leans in.

Alex took a deep breath. "I play with my soul," he whispered.

He stood and swung an invisible bat. The motion felt light and clean. He returned to the spot and tried repeatedly, not rushing, letting the rhythm lead.

Later that day, practice felt different. Not because the drills were new. They weren't. It was the way everyone moved—faster, louder, more together. Coach Stan didn't shout as much. He walked with his clipboard, but more often, he watched. Blake pitched from the



mound with his usual calm focus. His face never showed nerves. Every pitch hit the catcher's glove like it had a plan. Nico handled first base like he owned it. Javi jogged to second, rolling his shoulders, ready.

The field quieted a little when Alex stepped into the batter's box for drills. The pitcher wound up, sent one straight down the middle. Alex stepped forward and swung.

The sound cracked across the field.

The ball shot into the outfield, between left and center. Clean. Loud. True.

Someone in the dugout shouted, “That’s what I’m talking about!”

Alex ran the bases—not too fast, not showing off, and just running with purpose. When he slid into third, Javi was there clapping, not saying anything, just grinning like he’d seen it coming.

Coach Stan checked his clipboard, then looked at Alex. “You’re hitting third,” he said.



Alex nodded. He didn't need to ask why. He already knew.

At home, dinner was quiet again. Rafael asked how practice went. Alex answered with, "Good," and that was enough. Yasmin passed the rice, and they ate together like they always had—no big talk, just together. After dinner, Alex went to his room, pulled out flashcards, and stuck a new one on the wall. It said "Focus." He pressed it flat and read it three times before walking to his window.

Outside, the desert stretched out wide. The stars had just started blinking above the rooftops. Somewhere in town, music played low from a passing car. A dog barked two streets over. Alex breathed it all in and let his shoulders drop.

He looked back at his glove resting by the door. He picked it up, rolled the ball inside, and tossed it into the air. Catch. Toss. Catch.

Each throw had its beat.

Catch.



He imagined standing on the field again, eyes locked on the pitcher. The pitcher winds up, throws, and everything goes still. Just the ball, the air, and his swing.

The next morning, school was full of hallway noise. Kids yelled across lockers, traded snacks, and complained about math. But when Alex passed by, he got nods. Not big ones. Just small, quick ones. But they meant something like people were watching now. Not just to see if he'd mess up, but because he'd shown something.

In class, Ms. Keller handed out another worksheet. Alex didn't panic this time. The lines still swam a little, but he picked up his color-coded sheet and traced his finger down each section. One sentence at a time. He didn't finish first, but he didn't finish last either. When he turned in his page, Ms. Keller gave a slight nod, as if she knew how much that one paper had cost him.

That afternoon, the Scorpions lined up again. Their mismatched socks and faded jerseys didn't matter as



much now. The field felt more like theirs. Even the dust seemed to move with them.

Green Hills showed up for a scrimmage. They looked the same—sharp uniforms, clean bats, serious faces. But something had shifted. Sunset Canyon didn’t just stand there this time. They didn’t watch. They didn’t wait.

In the first inning, Alex was already in the action. A fast grounder shot toward third. He sprinted over, scooped it on the bounce, and hurled it across the diamond. Nico stretched wide and caught it just in time. Out.

Javi slapped his glove. “We’re awake now!” he shouted.

In the second inning, Alex walked up to bat again. The pitcher gave him a look like he remembered the last hit. Alex didn’t blink.

The pitch came.

He didn’t swing. Not yet. It was high.



Second pitch. Fast.

Alex stepped forward.

Crack.

Another solid hit. This one is straight up the middle.

He rounded first with ease and gave a quick look to Coach Stan, who waved him to hold. He stayed put, bouncing slightly on his toes.

In the dugout, someone said, “He’s dialed in.”

By the fifth inning, Sunset Canyon was leading. Not by much, but enough. The crowd had grown. More parents. More neighbors. Some brought folding chairs. Others leaned against the fence, arms crossed, watching.

One man said, “That shortstop kid? He plays like he’s from the big leagues.”

Another nodded. “He plays like he belongs here.”



When the last inning came, the sun had dropped a little. Shadows stretched across the field. The wind picked up, light but steady.

Alex crouched in his spot, glove low, eyes steady. The batter tapped the plate with his bat.

The pitch came—a sharp hit toward the gap.

Alex moved fast. He didn't think—just trusted. Glove out. Step across. Pivot. Throw.

Out.

The dugout jumped.

Game over.

No big speech followed. Just a slow walk back to the dugout. Glove in hand. Dirt on his knees. He sat down next to Javi, who passed him a water bottle and said, “Told you. They'd feel it.”

Alex leaned back against the bench and looked around. The bleachers. The flagpole. The field.



He didn't just see a baseball diamond anymore. He saw a place that had taken a chance on him. And now, it felt like home.

Rafael was already at the grill when they returned to the house. Yasmin had a plate of fruit on the table. The sun dipped lower. Lights from the porch hummed softly.

Alex changed into shorts and came back out barefoot. He stood at the edge of the yard, just looking. Behind the fence, the makeshift backfield waited—dusty, uneven, but ready.

He ran across it once, just for fun. Then again. And again.

He didn't want to stop.

Later, after dinner, he stood in his room in front of the wall where the flashcards were, adding a new one.

It said: “Believe.”



Then he reached for his sketchbook again. And started the next page.



Chapter 13: The Regional Downpour

The rain didn't just fall—it slammed. Thick, fast drops punched the air, making the world blurry and loud. The chalk lines on the field vanished almost instantly, melting into puddles and mud. Water ran across the diamond like it was chasing something. The bases turned slippery, the dugout filled with wet shoes, and everyone's jersey stuck to their arms.

Alex stood at shortstop, blinking against the rain. His hair dripped. His socks squished. He could feel his gloves getting heavier. The coach hadn't called the game yet, maybe hoping the storm would pass. But it wasn't passing. It was growing.

"Eyes open," Coach Stan shouted from the dugout, but even his voice sounded far away, lost in the pounding of the storm.



Alex nodded without looking back. He wiped his face with his sleeve, but the rain replaced the water he cleared. The score was tight—one run difference, bottom of the fifth. The Scorpions needed to hold it together, but everything was falling apart.

Blake pitched. The ball sliced through the wet air, but the batter connected. A hard grounder, fast and spinning, shot toward Alex's side of the infield. He crouched, glove low, ready—

And missed.

The ball bounced under his glove, rolled into the outfield, and the runner at second sprinted home. The scoreboard lights blinked—another run. The dugout went quiet.

Alex picked up the ball and threw it in, but it was too late.

He didn't say anything. He just walked back to his spot. His cleats slipped once. His heart beat too fast. He looked at his hands. They were shaking.



He tried to breathe, but the letters on the board behind the dugout swam again. The lineup. The signals. All chalk, smeared and running. It looked like a different language. His eyes couldn't hold it still.

The next play came too fast. Another grounder, slower this time, but his brain was still spinning. He moved, stretched, but fumbled it again. The ball bounced off his glove and hit the muddy ground. He dove, grabbed it, stood—but again, too late.

More shouting. A few groans from the bleachers. Someone in the stands slammed a cooler lid shut.

Alex stared down at his cleats. Mud stuck in thick patches. His socks were turning a darker shade. He blinked hard, trying to keep the tears from showing. They weren't about pain. They were about everything else.

He turned toward the dugout. Coach Stan wasn't looking at him. He was watching the game. But that somehow made it worse.



Then, through the roar of the rain, a voice carried across the field—not loud but strong.

“No te rindas, hermano.”

Alex turned his head toward second base.

Javi stood there, soaked just like him, jersey clinging to his chest, but eyes steady.

Don’t give up, brother.

Alex didn’t nod. He didn’t move. He just stared back. Something in his chest shifted. Not everything was ruined. Not everyone was mad. Not everyone had given up.

A new batter stepped up—another runner on base. Alex dropped into position again. The rain wasn’t stopping. It fell harder now, bouncing off the bill of his cap and dripping into his eyes.

The pitch came.

This time, the batter popped it up—a short fly—awkward, right between second and short. Alex



moved first. He didn't think. He just ran. Mud pulled at his shoes, and water sprayed from every step. Javi shouted again, "¡Tú puedes!"

Alex dove, arms out, glove stretched.

Caught.

He landed hard, chest-first, the wind knocked out of him for a second. But the ball was in his glove. Secure. Closed.

The field paused. Then the dugout erupted.

"That's what I'm talking about!" someone yelled.

Alex stood, dripping, but he held up the glove. The ump signaled the out. He jogged back to his spot, still silent, but something small sparked inside.

The inning ended, and the teams switched. The Scorpions came in to bat. The rain hadn't let up, but nobody cared anymore. The bleachers were half-empty, but those who stayed stood and clapped.



A few parents shouted encouragement. A little kid with a poncho yelled, “Go, Scorpions!”

Javi sat beside him in the dugout, handing him a barely dry towel.

“You got that one,” Javi said, not needing to say more.

Alex nodded. He rubbed the towel over his face and arms, then dropped it in a heap. He looked at the lineup posted on the dugout wall again. The letters still danced a little, but he didn’t need them. He knew his turn. He knew what he had to do.

When he approached the plate, the rain still came down in sheets. The pitcher wiped his hands on his jersey, but the ball was slick. Alex gripped the bat tightly.

First pitch—outside. Ball one.

Second pitch—closer. He didn’t swing at ball two.



Coach Stan gave a signal, but Alex didn't read it. The chalk was gone, the plan was messy, but his gut was clear.

Third pitch—fast.

He swung.

The bat cracked. The ball flew—not far, not deep, but enough—a sharp grounder right between first and second.

He sprinted.

The first baseman fumbled the wet ball. Alex reached safely.

The dugout cheered.

He stood at first, dripping, breathing, and smiled a little. Not wide. Just enough.

Two more hits, and the Scorpions were tied.

The next batter grounded out, but it didn't matter. The dugout had noise again. The players had life.



Later, when the game ended, they were still down by one. But the mood didn't match the score.

They'd fought. In the mud, the storm, the mess—they didn't quit.

In the locker room, everyone peeled off wet jerseys. Socks slapped the tile. Cleats squeaked. Someone sneezed.

Alex sat on the bench, staring at his muddy glove. Javi dropped beside him and unwrapped a tamarind candy.

“Still want one?” he asked.

Alex took it without a word and popped it into his mouth.

Sweet. Tangy. Home.

He didn't talk much that night at dinner. Rafael said something about the field flooding. Yasmin said to throw his jersey straight in the washer. But no one



asked about the errors. No one mentioned the fumbles.

Instead, Yasmin reached over and placed Abuela's photo on his bookshelf. "She was watching," she said.

Later, in his room, Alex pulled out his sketchbook again. The pages had started to curl a little from all the use. He flipped to a fresh one and began to draw.

Not himself this time.

He drew the glove.

Then Javi at second base, mouth open mid-yell.

Then the rain. Long lines streaking the whole page.

In the corner, he wrote: "Storm doesn't mean stop."

He closed the sketchbook slowly, as if it needed time to breathe, too. The lines weren't perfect. The rain didn't fall straight. But everything felt right about it. He set it beside his bed and leaned back against the pillow, his damp hair still cooling from the shower. The air in the room smelled like soap and faint grass.



He stared at the ceiling for a while, just watching the shadows from the streetlight shift across the paint. Then he thought about the voice—Javi’s voice.

That voice had sliced through everything. The self-doubt. The blur. The weight of mistakes. One line—“No te rindas, hermano”—and something inside him had cleared.

Alex pulled the covers up, the kind with the stitched baseball patches. Not babyish, just familiar. He liked how they felt under his fingers, smooth and worn. He turned on his side, eyes still wide open.

In his mind, the game played again. The bad parts too. The missed grounders, the way the ball had slipped past him like it had a mind of its own. But this time, those plays didn’t sting as much. They just sat beside the good ones—the diving catch, the base hit. He didn’t try to push anything away. He just let the whole game stay, messy and real.

The next morning, the sun showed up like it had something to prove. It bounced off the windows, lit up



every tile in the kitchen, and made even the cereal bowls look alive.

Alex walked in, dragging his backpack behind him. Rafael was at the table with a mug and a newspaper. Yasmin hummed near the stove.

She turned and pointed her spatula at him. “You get some rest after yesterday’s storm?”

“Yeah,” he said, pouring cereal. “We almost came back.”

“You did come back,” Rafael said without looking up. “You got up. That’s coming back.”

Alex didn’t say anything. He just chewed and let that idea sit with him.

When he got to school, the hallway felt less narrow. He still didn’t know everyone’s name, but now there were nods. One kid even tapped his shoulder and said, “Nice grab yesterday.” Alex smiled, small and tight, but it reached his eyes.



In class, the letters on the board looked like they always did—kind of wiggly, kind of still. But his hands didn’t shake when he picked up his pencil.

After lunch, he slipped a folded paper from his pocket. It was another sketch. A glove. A ball mid-flight. Below it, he’d written: “Try again.”

Practice that afternoon wasn’t easy. The ground was soft, and cleats sunk in like the earth didn’t want to let go. Coach Stan ran drills that made everyone groan.

“Line up! Let’s go again!”

Alex dropped into position, glove open, knees bent. Rye shouted, “Let’s not slip on our faces today!”

The next ball was fast and bounced awkward. He tracked it, adjusted, and snagged it before it hit his chest. He threw to first—low, but catchable.

“Better,” Coach Stan called.

Alex nodded and jogged back. He didn’t need more words.



As the sun dipped, the team huddled near the bench. Javi passed him a bottle of tamarind soda.

“You’re reading the field better,” Javi said.

“I can’t read the board half the time,” Alex admitted.

Javi shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. You read this.” He tapped his chest.

They sat in silence for a bit, watching the last group of kids finish base running. The orange sky made the diamond glow.

“Storm doesn’t mean stop,” Alex said softly.

Javi grinned. “Nah. It means move faster.”

That night, Alex added something new to his wall. A strip of tape, holding up a flashcard he’d made himself.

“Slip. Catch. Throw.”

Below it, he wrote: “All part of the game.”



The next few days passed with the kind of rhythm he didn't expect but liked. School still had hard parts. He still stumbled on reading assignments. He still wrote slower than anyone else. But he didn't freeze. He worked through them.

The team practiced again before the next game. Coach Stan started using hand signals more often, which helped. Blake pitched with his usual cool face. Noah growled with every throw.

Alex stayed sharp. He called positions. He corrected a missed cutoff. He made eye contact and held it.

Then came another game. Different team. Dry skies. No mud.

He stood at shortstop, glove ready, eyes forward.

A sharp grounder came in hot. He moved quick, scooped it, turned, and fired to second. Rye caught it—double play.

The dugout exploded.



He walked off the field, chest rising fast. Not with pride. With breath. Real, earned breath.

At home, after dinner, he sat outside on the porch steps. The sky stretched wide above him. Stars blinked slowly.

He pulled out his sketchpad and drew the diamond again. But this time, he filled the outfield with flashcards. Each base had one. Each position had a word.

Trust. Catch. Grit. Try.

He closed the book and leaned back.

It wasn't perfect. It wasn't easy.

But it was his.

And it was just beginning.



Chapter 14: The Comeback Thriller

The sky over Sunset Canyon was still blue, but it looked like evening was creeping in early. Shadows stretched across the field. The scoreboard glowed in bold red numbers, and none were kind to the Scorpions.

The visiting team had pulled ahead—a lot. Every inning had felt like another drop in a bucket already too full. The bleachers had gone quieter. The moms still clapped, but slower now. The dad's folded arms. Coaches leaned on the fence with tight lips and crossed arms.

Alex sat on the dugout bench, helmet in his lap. His glove rested beside him, its leather soft from use, the laces worn from nervous fingers twisting them. He stared out at the field without blinking much.



It was the sixth inning. Just a few more chances left.

The bases were nearly empty. The Scorpions were out of rhythm. Someone had struck out looking. Someone else popped up too early.

Javi sat beside Alex, his uniform stained with dust. His cheek had a dirt smear under the eye, but his expression was calm. Not sleepy, not bored—just steady. Like a lake with something deep beneath.

Javi leaned closer and said quietly, “Así se hace, mi campeón.”

Alex turned toward him. The words didn’t rush. They filled the space.

He held Javi’s eyes for a second longer, then nodded once. No speech. Just a breath. Then he stood.

Coach didn’t say much. Just gave a quick thumbs-up as Alex stepped out with his bat.

He walked up to the plate. Not fast, not slow. He tapped his cleats gently and set his feet in the box.



He didn't look at the signals from the third-base coach. Not because he didn't care. But because something more substantial than signals was buzzing inside him.

He held the bat a little higher. His knees are loose, elbows wide. The pitcher wound up.

The ball came in low, fast, daring him.

Alex swung.

The sound cracked through the field. Not loud like thunder. Sharp like breaking a branch clean.

The crowd gasped. It wasn't just a hit—it was the kind that made people rise to their feet before the ball landed.

Outfielders sprinted back, eyes tracing the ball. It bounced off the fence.

Alex was already flying—first base was behind him. Second came fast. Third was waving him in, but Coach held up a hand. Stop.



He slammed into third, breathing hard, sweat running into his eyes.

The crowd came alive again. Even the fence seemed to buzz.

In the dugout, the boys jumped and hollered. Blake slapped the fence. Noah whooped.

Rye grabbed his helmet. “Let’s go!”

Now the momentum shifted.

Javi stepped up next and knocked a line drive into right. Alex sprinted home—a clean run.

The Scorpions kept going. One run. Then another. The gap closed. The scoreboard changed.

Pitchers on the other side looked rattled. Their coach started pacing.

The sun dropped lower, the shadows stretched longer, and the air thickened—not with heat but with something electric.



Alex stayed loud in the field. “One play at a time!” he shouted.

A double play ended the other team’s turn at bat in the next inning.

Rye pointed at Alex. “Call it again!”

Alex nodded. “Two steps back, Noah! Blake, inside corner!”

The boys followed. No questions now.

In the final inning, the Scorpions were down by one. Runners on base. Two outs.

Alex was back at the plate.

He could hear Javi’s voice again, even through the noise. “Así se hace.”

He took the first pitch—a ball.

The next was high—another ball.

The third came straight and sure.



He swung again.

It wasn't a homerun. But it was enough—a shot between second and short.

Both runners scored.

The dugout exploded.

The scoreboard flipped.

The final play came fast. One more stop in the field.

A grounder came at Alex like a bullet. He dove. Snagged it. Popped up.

Throw to first.

Out.

Game.

The crowd rose. Clapping, shouting, stomping.

The Scorpions swarmed the field. Hats flying, gloves tossed.



Coach Stan gave Alex a slight nod. Not much, but more than enough.

Back in the dugout, someone slapped Alex's back as the team packed up. Another passed him a soda.

Rye dropped onto the bench beside him and said, "You didn't follow signals."

Alex tilted his head, a half-smile forming.

Rye bumped his shoulder. "Good."

On the bus ride home, the team was loud. Snack wrappers crinkled, cleats tapped against the seats. But in the middle of it all, Alex pulled out a folded paper.

He began sketching.

The dugout. The scoreboard. The box. The swing.

And this time, he wrote one word under it all.

"Choice."



When he got home, Yasmin opened the door before he could knock.

“You look taller,” she said.

Alex grinned, stepped inside, and smelled arroz con pollo warming on the stove.

Later, in his room, under the soft light of his desk lamp, he taped the newest drawing on the wall, next to the ones from earlier.

He looked at all of them, from the one with “Not done,” to “Storm doesn’t mean stop,” and now, “Choice.”

Each word marked something.

A mistake.

A win.

A storm.

A swing.



He stared at them for a while, then turned out the light.

The drawings stayed, taped quietly to the wall, holding their stories like old friends.

He climbed into bed and closed his eyes.

The noise of the day still buzzed somewhere behind his ears, but he didn't mind. It was a good buzz that came after doing something that mattered. His muscles were sore in the best way. His cleats were still sitting by the door with dust packed in their bottoms. He didn't want to clean them yet. Not tonight.

In his mind, he replayed the swing. That one clean crack. The way the ball flew—not just high, but with a purpose. He didn't even see exactly where it landed. He remembered how it felt coming off the bat, the way his arms followed through, the noise it made, and the roar that came after.

It wasn't just a hit. It was a message. Maybe to his teammates. Maybe to the fans. Maybe just to himself.



His eyes opened again. He rolled onto his side and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars above his bed. Some had peeled at the corners but still held on like him.

He thought about how things had started. The day he walked into that classroom with the words swimming on the page. The desk felt too small. The hoodie that felt too loud. He hadn't stopped being that kid. He still read slowly. He still needed bookmarks. His hand still cramped sometimes when he wrote. The words still scrambled when he got nervous.

But out there on the field, none of that slowed him down. On the field, his brain didn't trip. It moved. Fast. Sharp. Free. He didn't need to read signals when he could read people. Read the curve of a shoulder. The glance of an eye. The twitch before a runner broke for second. That was reading, too just not with letters.

He didn't sleep right away. He lay still, breathing quietly in the dark. Now and then, he stretched a leg or adjusted the blanket. He didn't want the day to end yet. Not completely.



His room was silent except for the sound of the ceiling fan. The drawings on the wall faced him like teammates watching over him. Some were neat, others full of crooked lines and scribbles, but every single one told the truth—his truth, the one he was still learning to speak out loud.

In one, he had written, “Storm doesn’t mean stop.”

That stuck in his chest because there had been storms. Not just the kind that rained. But the type that came inside his head—when the quiz made no sense, the jokes at lunch flew past him, and the coach raised a brow like Alex didn’t belong. But he stayed. He played.

His legs kicked once under the blanket, remembering the sprint around the bases. The way his cleats dug in. The feel of the wind on his face. His feet knew what to do even when his mind didn’t. His brain worked differently. But it worked.

He wasn’t broken. He was built for motion.



At practice, he didn't talk much. He wasn't the loudest. But when he called a play, they listened. Not because he barked orders. But because he was steady. Because when he moved, the team moved with him.

Tomorrow, there'd be another game. Another moment to prove something. Or maybe nothing at all. Perhaps just a chance to play. To feel the ball hit the glove with a solid thump. To make eye contact with Javi across the diamond. To breathe deep before a pitch and trust his body.

That was enough.

He turned to face the window. Outside, the desert night was soft. There were no cars, no sirens, just stars and dust and the occasional chirp of something small. Somewhere in the dark, the field rested, too. It was quiet. It was waiting.

Alex knew he'd be back there soon. He'd stand at shortstop again. The ball would come fast. It always did. But he'd be faster.



He thought of the scoreboard and how it had looked when the game turned. Not because of luck. But because the team had believed. Not just in him, but in each other. They weren't perfect. The jerseys still didn't match. Blake still argued with umpires. Rye still called out too soon. But they moved as one. Not because someone told them to, but because they felt it.

Hope had a heartbeat now.

And Alex? He was part of it.

He turned onto his back and looked at the ceiling again. Maybe he'd draw tomorrow. Or maybe not. Maybe he'd play. Or perhaps he'd breathe.

Whatever happened, he was still beginning.

And that was enough.



Chapter 15: The Elimination Thriller

The bleachers were packed. Folding chairs lined the fence. The smell of popcorn, dust, and sweat filled the late afternoon air. You could feel the pressure rising from the field like heat. It was the elimination game, and everyone knew it. One mistake, and the season could end. Every glove snap, every footstep, every cheer felt louder than usual.

Alex stood at shortstop, hands on his knees. The sun leaned low, cutting long shadows across the diamond. He squinted at the batter. The scoreboard behind him read 3-3, bottom of the sixth, two outs, runners on first and second. One bad throw could cost them everything.

Coach Stan had called for a shift. Rye pointed and shouted across the field, but the signs blurred in Alex's mind. The runner took off. The ball cracked off



the bat and curved hard to his left. He moved the wrong way. Too slow. The ball shot past his glove and skipped into the outfield.

Gasps burst from the crowd like a single sound. The Gators' bench jumped to their feet. Alex didn't chase the ball. Blake did. Alex crouched where he was, glove on the dirt, chest heaving. He could feel the eyes on him—Coach Stan, the team, the whole crowd.

His stomach dropped. His head hung low.

Then, over the noise, he heard Javi. Not yelling. Just steady.

“Vamos, ahí, juntos.”

Alex looked up. Javi was standing tall at second base, eyes locked on him. Not mad. Not disappointed. Just there. Just with him.

Alex nodded, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Something steadied in his chest. Not all at once. But enough. He looked around and saw the others refocusing, too. Blake tugged his hat down. Rye spat



in the dirt. Ben smacked his mitt twice. They were all still in it.

The next batter stepped up. The first pitch came. A grounder. Fast. Right between the second and the third. Alex moved cleanly this time. No thinking, just reacting. He slid, scooped, popped up, and fired to first. The crowd held its breath. Out.

The dugout roared. Sunset Canyon was still alive.

They jogged in. Coach Stan slapped his clipboard.
“Stay sharp!”

Alex took his helmet from the hook. His hands still trembled slightly, but his breath slowed. The error still stung, but it didn’t own him. He had time to fix it. Not just for himself. For them.

Next inning. Tension is thicker now. Every pitch pulled heartbeats tighter. Alex retook the field. Ball after ball came his way. He didn’t fumble again. He charged one slow roller and threw while spinning. Nailed it. He caught a line drive that nearly took his



head off. Caught it and smiled. Not to show off—to say, “I’m here.”

He didn’t speak much. Didn’t need to. His feet, his glove, the way he moved—they said enough. He watched every runner. Predicted every bunt. He wasn’t guessing. He was reading. The rhythm of their shoulders. The shift of weight. Their hesitation. His focus sliced through noise like a laser.

The whole team lifted. Javi turned a double play. Blake struck out two in a row. Ben blocked a wild pitch with his chest and grunted like it was nothing. The crowd was on their feet now. Parents shouting names. Kids banging empty bottles on fences. Yasmin stood near the backstop with her hands clenched and eyes wide. Rafael held up his phone, recording every second.

Top of the seventh. Tie game—last chance. Alex stepped into the batter’s box. The dugout fell quiet. Coach gave a sign, but Alex didn’t see it. He didn’t need to. He knew what to do.



The first pitch came fast. He let it go—ball one.

Second pitch—he swung hard. Missed.

He stepped out, took a breath, and reset his grip. Then, he looked at the pitcher like he was looking through it.

The third pitch came, and he didn't think.

He just swung.

The sound was sharp. Clean. Everyone knew. The crowd didn't wait to see where it landed. They just jumped.

Alex ran. Around first. Around the second. A stand-up triple. His chest heaved, but he smiled for the first time in two innings.

The next batter bunted. Alex broke for home. The throw came in, but he slid under the tag. Safe.

The dugout exploded.

Scorpions up by one.



Back on the field, they had to close it out. Alex wiped his palms and whispered to his glove: “One more time.”

Grounder to third. Out.

Fly ball to center. Out.

One more.

The final pitch was a curve. The batter swung. A hard chopper. Off the edge of the bat. Straight to short.

Alex charged. Glove low. Ball kissed the edge of the dirt.

Into his glove.

One step. Two. The throw.

First base caught it. The ump shouted: “Out!”

Game over.

Alex stood still for a second, glove raised. The crowd was thundering now. Not for the win. For the fight.



The team swarmed him. Javi grabbed his shoulders.
“You answered it, hermano.”

Rye ruffled his hair. “You’re a wall, Manzanillo.”

Coach Stan gave a tight nod. “That’s how it’s done.”

They walked off the field together, sweaty, muddy, exhausted. But full.

Alex glanced back once. Saw the chalk lines, the footprints, the scuffed base where he had slid home.

It wasn’t perfect. But it was his.

By the time they made it back to the bus, the sun had dipped and the sky above Sunset Canyon was layered with purple and gold. The lights from Lamade Stadium glowed tall in the distance, casting wide halos on the parking lot gravel. Players sat in their seats, jerseys sticking to their backs, cleats tapping slowly on the floor. Nobody shouted. Nobody had to.

The win still buzzed under their skin.



Rye leaned his head back against the window and closed his eyes. Javi pulled a tamarind candy from his bag, broke it in half, and passed the other piece to Alex without a word. The taste was sharp and sweet and strong—just right.

When the bus rolled forward, Alex looked out the window. In the side mirror, he could still see the field behind them, now quiet, almost sleeping. But inside him, something kept playing.

Later that night, the team would arrive at Lamade Stadium. They'd already made it to the regionals, but this was different. Bigger. The stands weren't bleachers anymore—they were real seats. The kind that held a thousand people. The lights were higher, the dirt softer, the grass neater, as if someone had trimmed each blade one by one.

Families filled the rows, wrapped in sweatshirts and holding snacks in crinkly paper bags. The smell of warm earth, buttered popcorn, and sports tape floated in the air.



Alex stood in the dugout, looking up at it all. He didn't feel small this time. Just ready.

Javi came up beside him, touching the laces of his cleats. He looked up and whispered quietly, "San Expedito, ilumina mi prisa."

Alex smiled, turned his face to the sky, and murmured, "St. Jude y abuela, ayúdenme a descifrar el juego; denme fuerza."

The prayers didn't need to be explained. They lived quietly in their hearts, echoing in the beat of the game.

When it was time, Alex took his position at shortstop. The sun had set, but the lights beamed down brighter than ever. The field wasn't just a place to play. It was a place to remember and become.

The game began. The first pitch came. Then the second. Each one snapped into the catcher's glove with a thud that echoed through the stadium.



The other team played hard—fast runners, strong hitters, loud chants. But the Scorpions played differently. Together. Focused.

Every time the signs on the dugout board blurred in front of Alex's eyes, he stopped fighting. He didn't panic. He just watched the field. Watched the batter's feet, the pitcher's grip, the runner's lead. He moved like the rhythm was inside him, not on the page.

Coach Stan didn't say much. Just nodded after each clean play.

In the fourth inning, the score was tied. A high pop fly floated into shallow center. Alex took off, calling, "Mine!" even before he knew if he'd get there. Javi held back. Alex ran full-speed, glove up, legs churning.

The ball dropped fast. He dove, arms stretched out, heart pounding. His glove hit the dirt, and he felt it—thunk—right inside the webbing.

The crowd leapt to their feet. Javi pumped his fist in the air.



Alex rolled onto his back, breathing hard, glove in the air. The ball still sat safely inside.

By the time the sixth inning rolled around, the Scorpions were down by one. The dugout quieted. Alex sat on the bench, hand gripping his bat, replaying every move in his mind. Not every play was perfect, but the story wasn't finished.

Coach Stan gave a look. "You're up," he said.

Alex nodded. He stepped into the box, adjusted his helmet, and tapped the bat once on the plate.

The first pitch curved outside. Ball.

The second pitch came faster. He swung. Crack.

The ball shot between second and short. A clean single.

Next batter grounded out, but Alex had already taken off. He slid into second, dirt puffing around his legs.

Two outs now. Everyone watched.



Javi stepped in. Looked back once. Nodded.

The pitch came.

Javi made contact—strong, low, slicing. It shot into the gap, and Alex was already moving.

Around third. Feet digging in. The throw came late.

Alex dove home, arms outstretched.

The catcher reached.

The tag came—

Too late.

Safe.

He lay there for a second, chest heaving, helmet askew. Then he stood up.

The stadium roared.

But the sound wasn't just noise anymore. It was recognition.



They saw him now. Not just a kid from Miami. Not just a shortstop.

They saw the heart.

The hustle.

The way he brought something different to the game.

The scoreboard blinked 4–4.

Final inning. One out. Runner on second.

Next batter hit a grounder to short. Alex charged it, barehanded the bounce, and fired to first.

Out.

Two down.

Then a walk.

Runners on first and second.

The next pitch—slow roller to third.



Rye fielded it, looked toward home, then back to first.
Too slow.

He turned. Threw to Alex at second.

Alex caught it, then twisted—flung it to first.

Bang.

Double play.

Side retired.

In the bottom of the inning, Blake hit a long fly. Deep.

It dropped just beyond the right fielder's glove.

He reached second.

One out later, Ben bunted. Blake took off.

The throw came.

Alex watched from the dugout, barely breathing.

Safe.



The crowd stood now. Clapping, stomping, shouting.

Final pitch.

Another bunt. Blake broke for home.

He slid.

Tag came.

Ump's hand shot out.

Safe.

Game over.

The Scorpions exploded onto the field.

Javi found Alex, wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and whispered, “Así se hace, mi campeón.”

The team didn't just cheer. They knew.

They had seen every inch of the road Alex had walked.

Not the wins alone—but the mistakes, the recovery, the effort that never stopped.



Lights beamed down. The crowd still loud. Rafael snapped a photo. Yasmin's eyes were wet.

But Alex stood still for a second, eyes closed.

He heard it.

Her voice.

Soft. Strong.

“You are exactly where you belong.”



Chapter 16: Road to Williamsport

Coach Stan didn't shout. He didn't need to. He cleared his throat, looked at the players circling around him on the dusty Sunset Canyon field, and said, "Regional finals. We made it."

For a moment, it was quiet. Not from disbelief, but from something bigger. The kind of silence that comes right before a firework takes off.

Then it burst.

Ben whooped so loud it made a bird flap out of the bleachers. Blake lifted his cap and slapped it against his leg. Noah grinned wide enough to show the missing molar he'd lost sliding into second the week before.

Javi turned to Alex and gave him a soft punch on the shoulder. "We're going, hermano."



Alex smiled but didn't say much. He just looked at the dirt beneath his cleats. He knew the journey wasn't finished. It was just reaching its edge.

The next morning, the yellow school bus pulled up in front of the middle school. Its paint faded, its windows streaked, but its seats were full of energy. Parents waved from cars. Coach Stan checked his clipboard twice, even though he knew all ten boys by heart.

Rye had brought enough beef jerky to feed a hiking group. Ben had a pillow shaped like a baseball. Javi held a plastic grocery bag filled with candy, a rosary, and his glove.

Alex climbed aboard with his sketchbook tucked under one arm, earbuds dangling from his neck. He found a seat near the middle, by the window, and pulled out his pencil.

As the bus rumbled out of Sunset Canyon, he started to draw.



The first page showed the road, long and open, split by faded yellow lines. Then he added signs: Rest Stop 10 Miles, Regional Finals This Way.

He drew his teammates next. Javi was asleep with candy still in his hand. Blake stared ahead, focused. Rye tipping a sunflower seed into his mouth.

He looked out the window and added a cloud. Not just any cloud—a small one shaped like a glove.

The ride took hours, but it didn't feel slow. There were moments when the boys played cards in the back, others when they just stared at the desert passing by. Alex didn't talk much. He was too busy listening, catching little pieces of nervous laughter, whispered game plans, and sharing quiet thoughts with friends.

When they reached the hotel, a plain beige building with too many windows and insufficient decoration, the team dragged duffel bags and snack wrappers into the lobby.

Room keys were handed out two by two. Alex roomed with Javi.



Their room smelled like minty soap and old carpet.
The curtains barely closed.

That night, after lights out, the whispers began.

Ben asked if they'd be on TV. Blake mumbled something about his cousin watching from California. Noah tried to make everyone laugh, but his jokes sounded smaller in the dark.

Alex lay on his side, sketchbook open beside him on the pillow. Javi's voice came softly from the bed across the room.

"I've never played under stadium lights," he said. "Not real ones. Not like this."

Alex stayed quiet for a few seconds, then replied,
"Neither have I."

But he wasn't scared of the lights.

He was scared of not hearing himself through the noise.



When sleep finally came, it was uneven. Dreams full of glowing scoreboards and fastballs that wouldn't stop.

Morning arrived too early. The hotel breakfast was loud and messy—waffles stuck to plates, and cereal didn't stay in bowls.

Alex sat with Javi and Noah near the back. He wasn't hungry but peeled an orange to keep his hands busy.

At the table behind them, boys from another team laughed loudly. They wore matching warm-up suits, names embroidered on their sleeves.

"Easy game," one of them said. "Scorpions? They sound like a science project."

Another replied, "Coach said their shortstop's just a fast runner. That's it."

Alex didn't turn around.

He didn't have to.



Instead, he glanced over, catching how they walked and nodding when the coach spoke. He watched as they practiced on the small patch of grass outside the lobby while waiting for the vans to arrive.

He studied their pitcher's windup. Noted who stretched longer than the rest.

He didn't feel angry.

He felt ready.

By noon, the team had arrived at the regional stadium. It was taller than any field they'd played on. Metal seats curved around both baselines. Flags flapped at the top of the poles, each one showing a different team's logo.

The grass was bright and perfect. The dirt was smooth.

The boys changed into uniforms inside a locker room with too much echo.



Alex tied his cleats tight, double-knotted. He pulled out the photo of his abuela and tucked it into the lining of his cap. Then he tied his bandana around his wrist.

Javi held a small glass candle in his palm, the kind you'd find in a kitchen back home. He lit it quickly near the bench and whispered, "Que Dios nos guíe."

Alex didn't need to speak. He just stood beside him.

When they took the field, the sun sat high overhead. The heat was sharp, but the shadows from the lights stretched wide.

Alex felt the noise rising in the stadium as he walked to shortstop.

During warm-ups, things moved like usual—gloves snapping, feet shifting, small chatter bouncing off the dugout wall. Alex jogged across the infield, flipping a ball to Rye, who stood first, giving his usual side-eye grin. But something shifted too fast. A thud. Then a groan.



Everyone turned. Noah Bartlett was on one knee near third base, glove on the ground, grabbing his ankle. His face scrunched tight, trying not to let out a sound. Coach Stan hustled over with Javi right behind him. Alex stood frozen, the ball still in his hand.

Noah tried to stand but winced and shook his head.

“I think I landed wrong,” he said, voice low.

Coach Stan signaled the assistant coach, who helped Noah off the field. It was quiet again, even with the crowd still talking.

Alex swallowed hard. Noah wasn’t just a teammate. He was the loud one, the rough one, the spark. Now, without him, the field felt wider. The air felt heavier.

Coach didn’t say much. He looked at Alex, then nodded once.

It was clear.

Step up.



The game started tense. Pitchers on both sides worked fast, throwing heat and curves like puzzles. Blake held steady on the mound for the Scorpions, his eyes locked in, breath even. The other team's pitcher was taller and quieter, but just as fierce.

First inning: no runs.

Second: one walk, no hits.

By the third, the fans leaned forward in their seats, eyes sharp, voices hushed.

Alex kept his eyes on the batters. He watched how their feet moved in the box. Some twitched before swinging. Some blinked twice before loading up.

Then came the fourth. Two outs. One runner on second. Alex felt something off in the batter's hands—too tight, too eager.

He called to Rye softly, motioning for the second baseman to slide left. Then he took a few steps toward the line. Coach Stan didn't say a word.



The pitch came in fast. The batter swung.

Crack.

A liner flew toward where second base had been—if they hadn’t shifted.

Alex dove. Glove out. The ball hit leather.

He rolled, popped up, and fired to Rye, who tagged the runner out trying to head to third.

Inning over.

Coach Stan didn’t clap. He didn’t cheer. But he gave the slightest nod—just one eyebrow raised—before returning to his clipboard.

Alex jogged to the dugout, heart thumping. His hand tingled from the catch.

Tension filled the dugout. The kind that buzzed in the air. Bats leaned against the fence. Gloves were squeezed too tightly.



Rye leaned back against the wall, sighing through his nose. Blake sat with his towel over his head.

Alex looked around. Then pulled a folded piece of paper from his bag. He grabbed tape from the trainer's kit and walked to the dugout wall.

He taped it up in the middle, right above the lineup sheet.

A sketch of the whole team.

Each player is drawn as a superhero: Rye with a cape and a rocket arm, Blake with glowing eyes and lightning on his cleats, Javi with wings, and Ben lifting an entire base with one arm.

There was even Coach Stan, drawn with laser vision and a clipboard that shot stars.

The boys stared.

Then they laughed.

Not loud. Not wild.



But enough.

Enough to let the tightness fall off their shoulders.

Javi gave him a bump with his elbow. “That’s me?” he asked, pointing at his flying version.

Alex nodded. “Of course.”

Bottom of the sixth. Still no runs.

Then Rye hit a double. Javi bunted perfectly—runners on the corners.

Coach gave the steal sign. Blake took a breath and stepped in.

Crack.

The ball dropped short in center field.

Rye sprinted home. The throw came fast.

Too fast.

It bounced off the catcher’s glove.



Run scored.

One to zero.

They held on through the seventh.

Blake pitched two strikeouts. Ben caught a fly ball so clean it looked rehearsed.

The final out came on a slow grounder to Alex.

He scooped it, stepped, and threw.

Game over.

No one screamed.

Not right away.

They just stood there, looking at each other.

Then the smiles started.

Slow, wide, real.

They didn't jump into a pile. They didn't throw gloves in the air.



They stood in a circle.

Letting the win settle into their bones.

The Scorpions were going to the Little League World Series.

Alex looked at his teammates. At the crowd. In the sky.

This wasn't luck.

It was an effort. Trust. Heart.

And he had more to give.



Chapter 17: Welcome to Williamsport

The bus pulled up slowly, the brakes sighing like it had finally reached something important. Alex looked out the window. Signs with team names hung from fences and light posts. Flags waved in the breeze. People clapped and held phones up like they already knew these kids. Big letters across the welcome arch read: “Little League World Series – Williamsport, PA.”

He leaned into the aisle for a better look. Every corner buzzed with color and motion. Kids in uniforms from different countries laughed and talked, some already tossing baseballs back and forth. This was not Sunset Canyon anymore. They weren’t just the team from Arizona now. They were part of something big.

Rye let out a long whistle. “This is... real.”



Coach Stan stood and pointed toward a big tent with check-in signs. “Alright, Scorpions. Welcome to the show. Grab your gear.”

They stepped off the bus, shoulders stiff from the ride but eyes broad with newness. As they approached the check-in desk, a volunteer smiled and called, “Welcome, Suncrest Canyon!”

Alex’s eyebrows twitched.

He took a step forward, calmly, without rushing.

“It’s Sunset Canyon,” he said. “From Arizona.”

The volunteer blinked, then nodded. “Right. Sorry about that. Sunset Canyon.”

Alex nodded back, not angry, just clear. It mattered to say it right. That was their name. Their story.

Inside the dorm building, everything echoed. Sneakers squeaked. Laughter bounced off the walls. Bags hit the floor. Every room was marked with



numbers and flags. The Scorpions were in Room 3C. The hallway smelled like laundry and sunflower seeds.

Their room was packed with bunk beds, one window, and barely enough space for all their stuff. Flags from other countries lined one wall. Javi dropped his bag and called the top bunk, where Ben was already digging out his headphones. Rye was staring at the mini fridge like it might grow snacks.

Alex found a bottom bunk near the corner. He pulled out his glove, placed it on the shelf above his pillow, then added his sketchbook. He unfolded a small picture frame from his backpack and set it between them. It was a photo of Abuela, smiling widely in her kitchen, hands dusty from rolling dough. That photo went everywhere now.

Above the bed, he taped up one of his drawings. This one showed a baseball field with stars overhead and names scrawled under each base. Home plate had one word: “Courage.”



After dropping bags and grabbing water bottles, Coach Stan called them down to the field. It was time for the opening parade.

They lined up behind their team sign. Volunteers handed out small flags and white hats. The field was lined with people cheering. Parents, reporters, fans. Alex walked with the others, his cleats clicking on the pavement.

He waved once or twice. Then his eyes searched the crowd. Faces passed in a blur—until one caught him.

Near the end of the line, behind the rope, Yasmin stood on a cooler, waving a big sign with glitter letters: “VAMOS SCORPIONS.” Her smile was so big it made his chest warm. Next to her, Rafael held a camera high, zoomed in and focused.

Alex waved fully now. He lifted the small flag and held it up. She blew him a kiss.

After the parade, Coach Stan gathered them in front of the media tent. “Split into two groups,” he said. “One goes to interviews, one picks up gear.”



Alex and Javi were sent to interviews first.

Inside the tent, the lights were too bright, and cameras pointed in all directions. A woman with a clipboard asked them questions: “Tell us your name, position, and what you love about baseball.”

Javi stepped up, opened his mouth, and froze. Words stuck. His fingers twitched.

Alex saw it.

He stepped forward, gently.

“I’m Alex Manzanillo,” he said. “Shortstop for Sunset Canyon. What I love most is how baseball helps me speak. I don’t always get the words right, but I can always find the play.”

The woman smiled and nodded. “Thank you. That was great.”

Javi took a small breath and bumped shoulders with him afterward.

“Thanks, hermano.”



Later, they picked up gear—uniforms with bold lettering, hats with the team logo, and water bottles already covered in stickers. They each got a name tag for their bags.

The rest of the day moved quickly: team photos, field tours, and dinner in the cafeteria with teams from Japan, Mexico, Canada, and New Jersey.

Alex noticed how players everywhere shared jokes, food, and sometimes words in different languages. But mostly, it was all baseball talk.

That night, the dorm quieted slowly. Some kids whispered late. Others snored. The hum of fans whirred through the room.

Alex sat on his bunk, flipping through the pages of his sketchbook. He didn't draw right away. He just looked at what he had already captured—the bus, the parade, the flags hanging in the dorm, Javi's face mid-laugh. Then he turned to a blank page. His pencil moved carefully. He sketched their room again, but this time with more detail. Every bunk had a label. "Rye—can't



stop tapping his cleats.” “Ben sleeps like a statue.” “Javi—laughs with his shoulders.” “Omar—tells jokes louder than the TV.” Each drawing had something that made them feel like more than teammates. They felt like family now.

The next morning, the team walked to the practice field together. The sun wasn’t too intense yet, but the light bounced off the bright white chalk and stretched their shadows long across the grass. The field felt different here. Bigger, for sure. But also sharper, like every inch counted. The grass was short and firm, and the dirt didn’t puff up like back home—it stayed packed, ready.

Alex ran his fingers along the edge of the third-base line. Then he looked up and scanned the outfield. “It’s tighter,” he said. “No bounce.”

“Means we gotta move faster,” Javi replied, adjusting his cap.



Coach Stan blew the whistle and waved them in. “Let’s keep it clean,” he said. “Williamsport level ball. Nothing sloppy. Heads up, hands ready.”

They started drills. Fielding. Short throws. Long throws—cutoff plays. Blake tossed pitches, and Noah—back on the field, his ankle taped tight—called signals with quiet fire. Alex stayed focused. Every grounder he fielded felt like a test: a message, every throw.

He caught one hard liner that almost popped his glove off, but kept it steady. “Nice hands,” Rye called.

Alex nodded once. His breath stayed steady, but inside, he felt something building. Something real.

Lunch was a blur—sandwiches and apple slices, and the cafeteria so loud it echoed like a gym. Teams in different languages yelled across tables. One kid from Japan did a card trick. Another from Italy balanced a spoon on his nose. But at their table, it was all about nerves.

Ryan leaned across the table. “You nervous?”



“A little,” Alex admitted, then grinned. “But we’ve already played the hardest game—against ourselves.”

Everyone paused for a second, then started nodding.

Ben said, “Okay, Confucius.”

Javi laughed, almost spitting out his milk.

The evening crept in slowly. After dinner, most of the team returned to the dorms, tossing sunflower seeds into each other’s mouths and comparing stats on their gear. Alex walked behind them, glancing at the sky. The clouds were thin, but they shifted fast. It looked like something was changing.

Inside, the dorms buzzed with leftover energy. Rye was trying to juggle baseballs. Omar was humming something that wasn’t even a real tune. Blake leaned against the wall, stretching his arm with a resistance band. Someone had a speaker playing music low—enough to feel it but not enough to hear the words.



Alex returned to his sketchbook. He opened it to a new page and began to draw again. This time, he didn't draw action. He drew stillness. Each bunk. Each teammate. A small caption beside each face: "Ryan—quiet when he's thinking." "Omar—loud even when he's asleep." "Noah—watches every move." "Javi—prays before games and hides candy in his socks."

He was halfway through a sketch of Coach Stan—hands in his pockets, eyes narrowed, cap low—when the lights blinked. Once. Then again. Then out completely.

Silence hit the room, and then Omar shouted, "It's a sign! We're gonna bring thunder tomorrow!"

Laughter exploded. Someone yelled, "Omar, sit down before you summon lightning!"

Phones lit up the room in soft circles. Javi flicked his flashlight and shined it at the ceiling like a movie premiere. The power came back five minutes later, but something had changed. The pressure that had filled



the air like a thick fog had broken. Everyone moved more easily now. Softer. They started settling into beds without being told. Blake even gave Ben a rare high-five on the way to his bunk.

Alex placed his pencil down. He didn't need to draw anything else that night.

Instead, he opened the drawer beside his bunk and pulled out the rosary. He let the beads slide between his fingers, one by one, slowly and quietly. Then he knelt beside the bed. No one noticed. No one needed to.

He whispered, "Not just to win. To belong. To finish."

The air felt cooler now, like it had exhaled.

He climbed into bed, pulled the blanket over his chest, and stared at the ceiling. For a while, he listened. To breathe. To the steady thrum of fans. To the soft thump of feet shifting under sheets.

He reached over and tapped the corner of his sketchbook. Tomorrow, they'd step onto the biggest



field they'd ever seen. But tonight, they were here—together, steady, and ready.

And that was enough.



Chapter 18: The Championship Path

Alex woke up before the alarm. His eyes blinked open in the gray-blue early light. His heart was thumping fast, even though the dorm was still and quiet. He listened for a second—soft breaths from the bunks, a distant hum of water pipes, shoes lined up neatly on the floor. He sat up and swung his legs down, feeling the cool wood under his feet.

Across the room, Javi was already awake. He didn't say anything, just stared at the ceiling with his hands folded on his chest. When Alex caught his eye, Javi nodded once. That was enough. Both boys understood what today meant. There was no need for big words.

He pulled on his practice shorts and the Sunset Scorpions t-shirt with the peeling numbers. He tucked his abuela's photo into his back pocket, touched it once for luck, and reached for his sketchbook. There



was no time to draw now, but it felt right to hold it, just for a second, before a day like this.

Breakfast in the dorm cafeteria was quiet. No one was trading jokes or flipping pancakes. The trays clattered softly. The eggs were scrambled, and the toast was already cold when Alex sat down. Around him, the team picked at their food in silence. Even Omar, who always talked too loudly, just sipped his orange juice and stared into space.

Ben folded his napkin over his toast. “Can’t eat,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Ryan shrugged and kept chewing, slow and steady, eyes on the table. “Gotta eat something.”

Rye tapped a beat on his water glass, then stopped. Usually, he would have said something to break the tension, but today he just gave Alex a little nod.

As soon as they finished eating, Coach Stan gathered everyone by the doors. His cap was on straight, and he didn’t even have his whistle.



“Listen up,” he said. “No speeches. Just play like you know who you are.”

No one answered, but the team all straightened up. There was no more shuffling or whispering. Just a focused line of kids, each ready in their way.

In the golden light of late afternoon, the sky glowed deep orange, and the stadium’s steel frame gleamed ahead. Banners snapped in the warm breeze, and the grass looked sharper under those fading rays. The Scorpions stood silent, cleats on the concrete, feeling every heartbeat in the humid air. Alex tightened his glove, the worn leather cool against his palm, and Javi drew a slow breath, eyes fixed on the field as if it already belonged to them.

The bus was waiting outside. The driver gave them a thumbs-up as they climbed aboard, carrying bags full of gear and dreams. Alex took a seat by the window. On the way to the field, he took out his pencil and sketchbook, drawing the sunrise stretching over the hills of Williamsport. He shaded the sky, then added the team’s bus moving along the road. He pulled every



cloud he could see, and one small star hiding behind the morning light.

Coach Stan stood up in the aisle as they neared the stadium. “Remember, this is the same game you’ve always played. Don’t let the size of the place mess with your head.”

Alex felt his hands shake just a little as the bus pulled in, but he gripped his pencil tightly and tucked it away. They filed off the bus and walked together through a tunnel of cheering fans, bright flags, and television cameras. The noise felt huge. The field looked enormous. The grass was bright green and trimmed low, and the lines were so straight you could measure with a ruler. The dugouts were painted blue and gold, and the stands filled with families waving homemade banners.

The other team was already warming up. They wore sharp, matching uniforms and stood taller than most Scorpions. Their voices echoed with practiced cheers. When the California Thunders coach called, they snapped into line, tossing baseballs in perfect arcs.



Blake nudged Alex. “They look like they belong in the movies.”

Alex shrugged. “So do we. We’re just from a different part of the movie.”

Coach Stan pulled them together for a quick huddle. “Look at me,” he said. “Every game is a new game. Play your game. No one else’s.”

Alex listened to his heart when they took the field for the anthem. It beat loudly in his ears, but he didn’t feel scared. It felt ready.

The first inning hit hard. California Thunders’ leadoff hitter smacked a double into the gap. The next kid hit a clean single. Sunset Canyon’s outfielders chased the ball down, but the runs came in quickly. The Scorpions made two mistakes—one bad throw, one missed cutoff. By the end of the inning, California Thunders was already up by three.

Alex watched the scoreboard. He felt the weight in his chest but didn’t let it settle. He turned and called the infielders together near the mound.



He looked each player in the eye. “We’ve come back before. Let’s start with one clean play.”

Rye looked back, his usual jokes gone for now. “One clean play,” he repeated.

Ben slapped his glove, ready. “Let’s go.”

In the second inning, things started to shift. Blake pitched carefully, throwing strikes and trusting his defense. Noah scooped up a tough grounder and fired it first for the out. Javi made a sliding stop at second. Alex dove for a soft line drive and knocked it down. They cheered, just a little, for every out. Slowly, the crowd’s nerves started to shift to hope.

At bat, Alex focused on seeing the ball, not the pitcher. He closed his eyes for a second and breathed in. When the pitch came, he connected with the ball, sending it bouncing between first and second. He sprinted to first base, safe by a half-step. The dugout erupted, and Coach Stan pumped his fist.



Next up, Javi laid down a perfect bunt. Alex sprinted to second, then to third on a ground ball. He waited, timed the pitch, and slid home, dust flying. Safe.

One run back. They still trailed, but it didn't matter as much now.

The California Thunders team tried to rattle the Scorpions with loud chatter and a few sharp plays, but Sunset Canyon stayed together. Every inning, Alex kept the team steady. He called out signals, calmed Rye when he got too fired up, and gave Javi a thumbs-up after every imaginative play.

In the stands, Yasmin waved her homemade banner—ALEX 7, ¡VAMOS SCORPIONS!—and Rafael snapped photos whenever Alex was on base.

The middle innings were tense. Both teams traded outs and small mistakes. The crowd gasped and cheered for every close play. Ben made a leaping catch behind home plate. Blake struck out two batters in a row. Coach Stan's signals flashed from the dugout—some easy to read, some just for show.



When Alex came up to bat again, the bases were loaded. He breathed deep, remembering all the nights in Arizona and Miami, all the practices in his backyard, the prayers with Javi and the talks with his abuela.

He told himself: “Play like you know who you are.”

The pitcher glared at him from the mound, his uniform clean and face set like stone. Alex stared back, steady. The first pitch came fast, almost too fast, and Alex swung but only clipped it. Strike one. He stepped out of the box, tugged his sleeves, and stared down at the chalk by his feet. He took another breath, feeling every eye in the stands.

The next pitch came low. Alex watched it zip past, refusing to swing at something he knew he couldn’t reach. Ball one. The game was over when the pitch was perfect, right over the plate—the barrel of his bat, sending the ball skipping past the second baseman into the outfield. Cheers shot up from the Sunset Canyon side as two runs scored. Alex slid into second, safe, the red dirt dusting his pants. The dugout



erupted, but Alex just got up, brushed off, and gave a nod to Javi at third.

Noah Bartlett, who had been pitching with a sore ankle since the third inning, gritted his teeth and kept throwing. He wasn't the fastest, but every pitch had heart. When the pain became too much, Coach Stan swapped in Blake, who jogged out with his hat pulled low, eyes sharp. Blake's first pitch was a fastball, right down the middle. Strike. He didn't say a word, just got to work, throwing with the same focus he'd always had at practice.

California Thunders's next batter cracked a ground ball between short and third. Alex dashed left, stretched out, and scooped it up on a tricky hop. In one motion, he barehanded the ball and flipped it to Javi at second, who fired to first for a double play. The crowd lost it, jumping to their feet. Coach Stan clapped once, then grinned. Alex let himself smile, even if only for a second.

Now, with the dugout buzzing, Javi stepped up for his at-bat. He tapped his bat on home plate, looked down



the third base line, and then squared up for a bunt. The infielders didn't see it coming. He popped a gentle bunt just to the left of the mound. The third baseman sprinted in, but the ball rolled to a perfect stop—no play to make. Javi was safe at first, hands in the air, grinning at Alex.

That one play seemed to break the game open. The Scorpions picked up energy. Rye called a deep double, sending Ryan racing from first to home and putting Sunset Canyon ahead by a run. When they took the field again, Alex signaled for a shift on defense, shifting the infield without even checking with Coach Stan. Rye and Javi trusted him and moved right on cue. The next batter hit straight into the shift, and Rye tagged him out running to second.

The scoreboard finally started to lean toward Sunset Canyon. Every run felt hard-earned. The California Thunders team tried to rally, but the Scorpions answered with solid fielding and quiet confidence. Yasmin, up in the stands, gripped her rosary so hard her knuckles were white. Rafael barely blinked, holding his phone steady and recording every pitch.



Blake kept pitching strong. Ben stayed low behind the plate, calling out to his teammates and keeping the defense alert. Javi kept flashing signals and giving quiet encouragement in Spanish and English, never forgetting where he came from. Each time Alex walked out to his position at shortstop, he let the noise fade away and focused on the game in front of him.

When the final inning came, the sun was sinking low. The light streaked across the outfield and the crowd had gotten louder. With two outs and a runner on first, the last California Thunders batter stepped in. He hit a high pop fly, twisting toward the gap between second and short. Alex turned and ran, tracking the ball as it spun in the sky. The sun was in his eyes, but he didn't blink. He stretched out his glove, felt the ball drop in, and squeezed it tight.

The field went silent for a split second. Then it exploded. But the Scorpions didn't jump around or yell. They just stood there, catching their breath, looking at each other, smiles breaking out as the moment sank in. Coach Stan tipped his cap at the



team, and the California Thunders coach gave a little wave of respect.

Alex walked straight to Javi. They didn't need words. "One more," Alex said, and Javi just nodded, a small, proud smile on his face.

Back at the dorm, the mood was totally different. Omar cranked up some music and started dancing with his socks pulled over his hands, making everyone laugh until their sides hurt. Rye reenacted the double play, sliding on his knees in the hallway. Even quiet Blake let out a loud whoop, banging his fist on the wall and grinning.

Alex grabbed his sketchbook and tape, drawing a mountain with one last flag at the peak. He taped it to the dorm wall, next to the other pictures—one more goal, one more game left to win. The team gathered around, pointing at their names on the mountain, imagining what it would feel like to place that final flag.



When the lights went out, everyone got quiet. Some kids slept fast, wiped out by nerves and excitement. Others whispered across bunks, making plans for the next day. Alex climbed up to his bed, pulled out his abuela's picture, and placed it next to his pillow.

He knelt down on the thin mattress, fingers brushing his rosary. He whispered, "Tomorrow, I leave everything on that field." The words felt real, as if he was promising not just himself, but his family, his team, and his old home in Miami.

In the dark, he thought about the day—the double play, Javi's bunt, Rye's big hit, and the way the whole team had pulled together. He remembered Yasmin's face in the crowd, the way Rafael had given him a thumbs-up. He remembered the other team's cheers and how they had kept believing, even when things got tough.

He closed his eyes and saw the field again. The dirt, the grass, the lights shining down. The way the whole world seemed to pause for that one catch. The feeling



of finishing something big, but also starting something new.

In the morning, it would all begin again. But for now, the dorm was quiet. The banners from home teams and faraway places hung everywhere, fluttering in the breeze from the open window. Alex fell asleep with a smile on his face, already dreaming of the last flag, the last game, and the last chance to show who he really was.

That night, there were no nightmares. No worries about reading quizzes or fitting in. Just dreams of teammates cheering, of sliding into home, of a field that belonged to everyone who worked and hoped and played as hard as they could.

And when the sun started to rise, painting the sky with colors, Alex woke up feeling ready. Not just to play, but to lead, to believe, and to finish the story he'd started back in Miami. He pulled on his Scorpions jersey, laced up his cleats, and headed out with the team for one last run at the championship,



heart light, mind clear, and hope shining right
alongside the morning sun.



Chapter 19: The Final Flag

Alex woke up before anyone else in the dorm. The sky outside was dark, and the world was so still that even the floor seemed to hold its breath. He crept, trying not to wake his teammates. He reached for his sketchbook, sitting beside his glove on the small table, and started drawing. This morning, he didn't just draw the field. He pulled the whole stadium as he remembered it—the big archway, the colorful flags, the seats rising high all around the diamond. He attracted the dugout, too, and the patch of sunlight that always seemed to land near third base.

Drawing helped his hands feel calm, and it helped his heart slow down. He added the scoreboard, empty for now, and above it, he drew a little flag waving. Just beneath the sketch, he wrote, “One more step.”

Soon, the rest of the team began to wake up. Javi rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Noah rubbed his eyes and groaned. Rye was already talking, whispering



the play signals under his breath as if he were getting ready for a spelling test. Everyone seemed in their world, not quite prepared for talking or laughing. Alex listened to the silence and thought about what today meant. It was the day they had dreamed about since the start of the season. The day that could turn all those hours in the backyard, the late-night prayers, the tough practices, into something they could never forget.

When they headed to breakfast, the cafeteria felt different than before. Usually, there was noise and chatter, but today everyone chewed their eggs and toast, heads bent, eyes darting around the table. Coach Stan sat with them, but he didn't talk much either. He just drank his coffee and watched the team, nodding sometimes, as if checking off a list in his mind. Alex looked down at his plate. He wasn't hungry, but he made himself eat every bite. He needed all the strength he could get.

When breakfast ended, the team walked together to the stadium. It was still early, but already, there were people outside waiting. Alex saw volunteers holding



signs, fans with painted faces, and news cameras setting up. Flags from around the world hung from the fence, flapping in the wind. The stands weren't full yet, but Alex could feel the energy, like a low hum in his bones.

As they walked through the tunnel, Coach Stan put a hand on Alex's shoulder. He didn't give a speech. He just said, "You know what to do." Then he gave Alex a firm nod. That was enough. Alex felt the weight of those words. He wanted to lead, but more than that, he wanted to play with heart and leave nothing behind.

The team pulled on their hats and checked their gloves in the dugout. The field outside was perfectly green, the bases shining white in the sun. The other team was already warming up. They looked taller, stronger, their uniforms crisp and clean. Alex stared for a moment, then looked at his team—the mismatched socks, the different colored wristbands, the way some jerseys hung loose and others were tight. They didn't look like a picture-perfect team, but



Alex knew better. They had something different. They had each other.

Before stepping out, they stood together in a tight circle near the dugout. Cleats pressed into the dirt, arms linked. Alex raised his glove skyward, and the others followed.

"This is for Miami."

"This is for every kid who had to fight for their space."

"This is for the ones who doubted us."

"We play for each other. We fight for every run. We bleed for every inning."

The circle broke with a clap of gloves—sharp, clean. Then each player knelt, grabbing a fistful of dirt, rubbing it into their hands. It wasn't about luck. It was grounding. It was history. It was respect.

Before entering the field, each Scorpion paused, touched the team name across their chest—Sunset



Canyon—and ran their fingers over it, like they were signing their name to the moment.

Alex stood still for a beat, closed his eyes for exactly five seconds.

"Give me strength. Not for me. For them. For the game."

He opened his eyes, stepped forward, and the others followed.

The game started with Sunset Canyon in the field. Blake pitched the first inning, and the crowd's noise grew with every throw. Alex's heart thumped in his chest. The first batter hit a slow roller toward third. Javi scooped it up and fired to first—out! The team cheered softly, trying not to let nerves show.

But in the second inning, things got tough. The other team hit hard and ran fast. Two runs scored before the Scorpions could get the last out. The scoreboard glowed 2-0. Alex could feel the tension in the dugout. Ryan kicked the bench. Noah stared at the ground. Coach Stan just watched, arms crossed, lips tight.



Alex looked at Javi and nodded. Javi nodded back. It was just the second inning. There was still time. They had been behind before. He thought about the words he wrote that morning: “One more step.” That’s all they needed—just one play at a time.

In the third inning, Alex came up to bat. The crowd was louder now, chanting for both teams. He gripped the bat and stepped into the box. He remembered Yasmin’s voice: “Let the ball speak.” The pitcher threw a fastball. Alex swung hard. The ball bounced off the bat and rolled between shortstop and third. He dashed for first, barely beating the throw. Safe! The dugout clapped and cheered, and Alex smiled, feeling lighter.

Javi followed with a single. Now there were runners on first and second. Blake tried to bunt but popped it up for an out. Then Ben walked, loading the bases. Rye stood tall, tapped the plate, and locked in on the pitcher. He sent it high to right field, the next pitch—deep enough for Alex to tag and score—the first run for Sunset Canyon. Alex raced home, sliding



across the plate, and jumped up with a grin. His team was in the game.

Back in the field, the Scorpions played with more energy. Blake struck out a batter. Javi made a diving stop at second. Alex called out the plays, his voice clear and sure. The crowd started to notice, cheering louder with every good play.

In the fourth, Noah stepped onto the mound. His leg still hurt, but he wanted the ball. He pitched with everything he had, and though the other team got runners on base, the Scorpions held them off. Alex caught a line drive and doubled a runner off first. The dugout erupted. The coaches smiled. The parents waved flags and cheered.

Still, the other team stayed ahead, 2-1. Alex sat on the bench and tried to quiet his mind. He closed his eyes and thought of his abuela, of Miami, of dusty diamonds in Arizona. He remembered how hard it was to read, how much he struggled with words on paper. But here, he knew what to do. Here, he could read the field, feel the game.



In the fifth inning, Ryan singled. Ben hit a grounder, moving Ryan to second. Javi stepped up and smashed a double to the fence—Ryan scored! The score was tied. The fans were on their feet. Alex jumped up and hugged Javi as he ran off the field. The Scorpions huddled, hands on shoulders, eyes shining.

The sixth and final inning came fast. Sunset Canyon needed one run to win. Blake led off with a single. Rye bunted him over to second. Now Alex was up. He stood in the box, breath steady, heart pounding. He saw Yasmin in the stands, hands together, lips moving in a silent prayer.

He dug his toes into the dirt, feeling the bat's weight in his hands. The pitcher stared him down, winding up, and threw hard and low. Alex let the first pitch go. Ball one. He glanced at Coach Stan, who just nodded once, calm as ever. The crowd was so quiet he could hear the umpire breathing. The next pitch came fast—Alex fouled it off, bounced it toward the dugout, and backed out to breathe.



From second base, Blake clapped, trying to keep the team's energy up. Across the diamond, the Gators were restless, shifting on their feet, shouting for another out.

The third pitch was a curveball. Alex saw it spinning and let it go by. Ball two. He thought about every late practice, about how many times he'd swung at air or missed a grounder in the Arizona dust. But he also remembered every lesson from his dad, every word of encouragement from Yasmin, every time he and Javi whispered hope into the desert night.

The next pitch came. Alex swung with everything he had. He heard the sharp crack as the ball jumped off the bat, slicing past the shortstop into left field. Blake dashed to third, rounding the bag, and Coach Stan waved him home. The throw came in, but it was off-target. Blake slid, arms out, touching home before the catcher could turn. The dugout exploded. The Scorpions' bench cleared, rushing the plate, jumping and shouting, a rolling tide of hats and high-fives and grins.



Alex didn't even realize he'd dropped his bat. He was swept up by his teammates, their arms around his shoulders, their voices a steady, happy roar. The whole team piled in a circle at home plate, laughing and shouting, some with tears in their eyes. He spotted Javi near the edge, his face feeling relief and pride.

But just before that win, there was a moment. Javi had fumbled a grounder at the top of the inning, his head dropping in shame. Alex had walked over, knelt beside him, and tapped his glove gently. "We've got time," he whispered, voice steady. That was all he said, and it was all Javi needed. The next play, a hard grounder, Javi snagged and fired to Alex at second. Alex spun, falling to his knees, and somehow managed to throw to first. The ump shouted, "Out!" and the crowd erupted. It was a double play, and it changed everything.

Tired but still burning with energy, Noah pitched the bottom of the inning. Every throw looked like it hurt, but he never quit. The dugout chanted his name, and even Blake, who usually stayed quiet, added his voice.



When Noah finally handed the ball off, Blake finished it with two strikeouts, his face red and sweaty, but his spirit unbroken.

In the final moments, the score was tied, and Alex found himself back at the plate. The stadium held its breath as he dug in again, this time for the very last swing of the game. He felt the whole season sitting on his shoulders, all the good, hard, and dreams that brought them here.

He breathed more, watched the pitcher's glove, and swung. The line drive shot straight to left field, skipping across the grass. Javi, who'd gotten on base with a single, tore around third, arms pumping. The outfield throw came in, too late, and Javi dove headfirst across home plate. This time, the cheers were softer, full of emotion, and Alex dropped to his knees, dizzy with relief and happiness.

The team didn't dogpile him or scream. They came together, hands on backs, quiet hugs, even a few tears. Coach Stan met Alex's eyes, then nodded once, that silent respect they'd all learned to love.



Alex stood up, dusting dirt from his pants. He watched the other team shake hands, saw their coaches offer tired smiles. The crowd in the stands, parents and fans from both sides, clapped and whistled. Yasmin's face was wet with tears and laughter, and Rafael held up his phone, capturing the whole moment.

After the handshake line, Alex walked back to the dugout. He pulled out his sketchbook and a marker, kneeling in the corner. He drew the field, the flags waving high, the teammates circling home, and at the top of the page, he sketched a big, bold flag waving over the words “Sunset Canyon.”

His hands shook a little, but he kept drawing. Blake came over and clapped him on the back. Rye plopped beside him and started retelling the play-by-play, getting louder with each detail. Javi sat on the bench, wiping sweat from his face, but smiling that wide, brave smile he always had when it mattered most.

The announcer's voice boomed through the speakers, calling the Scorpions to the podium. Each player got a



medal and a handshake, and Alex blinked at the weight of it all. He didn't feel different—just fuller, like everything he'd hoped for had found a place.

Later, as the field emptied and the stadium lights glowed softer, Alex sat on the bleachers with his family. Yasmin hugged him and whispered, "You did it, mijo. You played with your heart." Rafael nodded, proud and quiet, his eyes shining in the evening.

Alex stared at the field, listening to the hum of voices fading and his teammates' laughter as they packed up for the bus ride home. He opened his sketchbook one more time and added a final touch—a tiny figure holding a flag standing at the center of the diamond.

He closed the book and smiled, feeling the cool night air on his face, the steady weight of his medal, and the promise of everything still to come. The season was over, but the story wasn't finished. Not for Alex. Not for Sunset Canyon. Not for the flag waving high in the sky, waiting for new dreams and beginnings.



Chapter 20: The World Series Finale

Night fell over Lamade Stadium, covering everything in a deep blue shadow. The scoreboard was bright against the dark, showing a score that felt impossible and wonderful at the same time. For a second, everything was quiet—so quiet that Alex could hear his own breath, fast and shaky, in the silence. His glove dangled from his hand, his hat felt crooked, and his heart was loud in his ears.

He blinked hard, not moving. Around him, the world seemed to freeze. The grass under his cleats was cool now, and the dirt by home plate looked like a story waiting to be finished. He could see the dugout, the stands, and the endless sky above all the lights.

Then, the silence broke. It didn't crack gently—it exploded. Fireworks shot into the night, bursting over the outfield fence in a rush of color and noise. Confetti sprayed from both dugouts, curling down like paper rain. The stadium was no longer still; it was alive,



every voice joining together, roaring so loud that Alex felt it in his bones.

Javi sprinted across the diamond, eyes wide and face lit up. He reached Alex first, shaking him by the shoulders. “We did it!” Javi yelled, voice cracked with disbelief and joy. “Alex, we did it!”

The rest of the team was there in seconds, arms around each other, laughing, crying, yelling things that tumbled over each other. Rye, still in his gear, let out a long whoop that echoed to the very top row. Noah, grass-stained and tired, dropped to his knees and just smiled. Even Coach Stan, who hardly ever showed his feelings, had a grin that looked like it hurt his face.

Somewhere behind all the noise, Alex saw Yasmin waving her phone, her face wet and shining with happiness. Rafael had both hands in the air, cheering louder than anyone. Other parents leaned into the fence, some with hands over their mouths, others hugging each other or snapping photos as fast as their fingers could move.



A man in a blue jacket stepped onto the field, waving for the champions to come forward. Coach Stan guided them, his hand steady on Alex's back. The team walked together—Blake, Noah, Rye, Javi, Ben, and the rest, their jerseys dirty and mismatched but proud. Medals gleamed on a silver tray. The championship trophy stood waiting, tall and perfect, its gold edges catching every stadium light.

One by one, each player stepped up to accept a medal. Javi kissed his, then slid it over his head, holding it to his chest. Rye punched the air, his medal swinging. Ben, quiet as always, just nodded, his cheeks red. Alex waited his turn, hands twitching at his sides, feeling his heart beat out every second.

When they handed him his medal, he stared at it for a moment. It was heavier than he thought. Coach Stan gave him a look—a look that said he'd earned this, every bit of it. Alex slipped the medal over his head and stepped forward as the team captain.

They handed him the trophy, cool and shining and real. He turned and lifted it high, and the roar from



the crowd grew wilder. Flashbulbs popped, cameras flashed, and Alex could see Javi bouncing on his toes. Rye and Noah grabbed the trophy too, and together the team raised it even higher. It felt like they could hold up the sky.

Around them, the confetti kept falling. The announcer's voice filled the stadium with their names, with "Sunset Canyon Scorpions—World Series Champions!" The team cheered, jumping, hugging, not caring about dirt or sweat or the bruises that would hurt tomorrow. They stood together, a wall of friends, of brothers, of dreamers who had crossed the line from wishing to winning.

Alex looked around, wanting to remember every detail. The stands were still full—fans from every team, waving flags, some clapping even though they had lost. Lamade Stadium was bright with hope and noise and all the stories that only baseball could tell.

He found Yasmin and Rafael in the crowd and waved. Yasmin mouthed, "Te amo," and Rafael held up his fist, proud and quiet and full. Alex blinked, not from



the lights, but from everything rising in him—pride, relief, belonging.

In the middle of all the noise, Javi leaned close, voice rough with feeling. “We made history, hermano. Sunset Canyon, the world knows now.”

Alex didn’t need to shout. He just whispered, “We made history,” letting the words hang in the air like a promise. The trophy glinted in his hands, cool and heavy, real as the desert, as family, as every hour of work and hope.

The stadium lights flared brighter, shining down on the team, on Alex, on the dirt and the grass and every memory. He felt it—belonging. A glow that settled deep and sure, like something he’d carried his whole life, finally shining for the world to see.

And as the night stretched on, with cheers echoing and the trophy high above their heads, Alex stood with his friends, the stadium lights burning like new stars. He looked up, feeling every bit of the journey, every win, every hard moment, every hope that had



led him here. The season might end tonight, but the glow would last, tucked in his chest, ready for every new beginning waiting in the sunrise.

