

# Chapter 1

“Goddammit! Coach is going to kill me!”

Marco made a sharp right turn, his shoes screeching against the floor, startling a few students in his way. He tightened his backpack and accelerated through the corridor.

“Today of all days!” he said between two ragged breaths, dodging people by a hair.

The corridor stretched for a while before leading to a descending staircase. Marco’s foot landed on the very edge of the first step and cleared the rest in one jump.

“Damn it, damn it...”

He cleared another set of stairs and found himself on the elevated running track above the basketball courts.

He kept his pace, even passing a few runners along the way.

His mind was racing, spiraling into future arguments and what-if scenarios with Coach Morrison. Mostly wondering which excuse he was going to use. His hamster that never existed had already died. Could he say that he got another one that sadly also passed away?

“That won’t work...” he said aloud.

The echo of the gym below pulled him from his thoughts.

He remembered, stealing glances at the three courts aligned, each filled with players.

Today was also the tryouts for those show-offs from the basketball team. That damn basketball team...

His teeth ground against each other as he moved past another runner, his feet somehow moving even faster.

“As if they needed that many courts...” he said to himself.

Then Marco noticed it from the corner of his eye. Something about that last court captured his interest.

He would have lied if he had said it was the first time. In fact, he had spotted that full-court bouncing pass as soon as he entered the track.

That peculiar pass that tiny kid threw. It was fast. Precise. Impossible to ignore, even if his mind had already filed it away as luck.

The ball bounced through two defenders who had barely enough time to react. Marco could see the look on their faces. From above, it almost looked like the ball simply phased through them.

Marco slowed down, his eyes now glued to the players below.

Another pass tore across half the hardwood floor. It even went through the legs of two players, and yet...

The teammate on the other end failed to catch it.

Marco had fully stopped, his chest pulling in air in short saccades as he leaned over the barricade.

"What do we have here..."

The coach blew his whistle, his cap nearly falling off from the force of his exhale.

"You! Get your stuff together! Those passes are impossible! We want to see some plays, not Flashy Dell!"

The kid simply nodded. Even from above, he looked exhausted.

"You're ruining the tryouts. Play simple ball!"

Marco's eyes narrowed as the coach's instructions faded away.

The kid wore a simple white training jersey. His dark hair, wet with sweat, hid part of his face. Marco could see his knees almost buckling as he ran back on defense.

He was the smallest of the bunch. And on the few trips up and down the court Marco had already witnessed, he wasn't the fastest.

In a way, he felt like that kid didn't belong on a basketball court at all.

And yet, he couldn't stop watching.

The opposing team scored an easy basket before the ball landed in his hands again.

This mysterious kid pushed the ball forward with a few dribbles, and then—

"What?" Marco exclaimed, leaning even farther over the edge.

He threw a pass with what looked like an exaggerated left spin, so much so that when it hit the floor, it nearly changed direction, catching even his own teammate off guard for another turnover.

“Don’t lean over like that!”

One of the school coaches was running by. His warning brought Marco back from his curiosity, and he immediately straightened up.

“Y-yes, sir!”

He glanced back again. He couldn’t help himself, nor the smile creeping across his face.

“Well, well, well... Hello to you, Mr. Mysterious.”

Marco didn’t waste a single second, accelerating back toward the exit. Although, he didn’t leave the gymnasium. Instead, he made another sharp turn, swallowing another set of stairs in a heartbeat.

His momentum carried him downstairs, stepping into the open area. He had to plant his foot to stop himself just short of the inbound line. His head frantically turned left to right.

“Where is he...?!”

The whistle chimed again, and with it, the basketball coach’s temper seemed at its limit.

“That’s it!” he said, waving his hands around, beckoning another player on the bench to come onto the court.

The kid removed his white jersey and nonchalantly walked toward the corner stands. Marco could finally assign a face to the mysterious passer as he slowly approached.

He sat. Though the way his butt crashed onto the bench made it look like his legs had simply given up on him. His arms shook from exhaustion as he struggled to hold his water bottle.

Marco moved between the few seated spectators, his eyes glued to that mysterious kid before he was finally able to stand right in front of him, hands on his hips. His chest pulled in ragged breaths.

Marco had opened his mouth for a few seconds, but the only sound that escaped was his lungs desperately sucking the air in.

“Can I... help you?” the kid muttered, his eyes widening as his body almost froze.

Marco leaned forward, his hands pressing against his knees for support.

“Wait... a sec... I need to catch my breath...”

The mysterious kid emptied his water bottle. His face was pale, and his body slouched a bit more as time went on.

“You look out of breath. You should exercise more,” he said, his hands visibly shaking.

Marco's finger aimed right at him. "What? Look at yourself before talking!"

Is he messing with me? Marco thought. But one look at his eyes told him he was genuine.

"Alright, buddy, you move to the other team," the coach said, putting a halt to their conversation. "Remember. Simple ball."

Marco groaned as he watched the kid reluctantly drag his feet onto the court.

"Hey, you! What's your name?"

The kid's hand ran through his brown hair as he turned.

"My name's Lucas."

Marco pointed at himself.

"I'm Marco. I'm a sophomore, and I play—"

His voice cracked and faded away.

"I play for the football—"

Lucas had long moved away from the conversation, joining the players' huddle.

"I was talking to you, little—"

Marco had been able to steady his breathing, but meeting Lucas for a few seconds seemed to have the same effect on him as running full speed.

"Psst... you see his gear? He is from the football team..." a bystander said, sitting nearby.

"Haven't they won anything for the past ten years or so?"

Marco's smile disappeared right away as he glanced at them both, his hands rolling into fists.

"Say that again?"

The whistle blew again, breaking what was about to escalate. Shoes screeched across the hardwood.

Marco was immediately drawn back to Lucas.

Another ball landed in his hands. This was it. He was much closer now.

"Let's see..."

The ball bounced, reverberating with a low thud against the floor.

A full-court pass, once again. Now he was sure. This was no fluke. This kid was actively and purposely attempting those insane passes.

How many defenders had the ball juked out? Two? Maybe three? Even one between the defender's legs.

"HA! That's cool!" Marco exclaimed before the two bystanders resumed their bickering.

"So loud, those football players..." one murmured while laughing.

Their mocking didn't faze Marco. His eyes were still following Lucas's movements. If he had to guess, he would have said he was around five feet nine inches at best. His body was as frail, although Lucas was standing amongst basketball players towering over him, rendering his frame average at first glance.

It also seemed he was right about his stamina and speed. He was definitely always late on defense. On top of that, his jumping wasn't impressive at all.

He caught a laugh escaping his mouth. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but somehow, it made him want to watch even more.

The ball bounced off a defender's back, landing straight between his teammate's hands, who never reacted in time as the ball grazed his fingers and rolled out of bounds.

"Holy..." Marco's eyes widened, coupled with his lips reaching for his ears. "This is exactly what we need!"

His fingers rolled over his knees. His foot tapped the floor repeatedly.

"Although he looks quite weak," he scoffed. "Will he survive Coach Morrison? I wonder.

The game lasted for a dozen minutes before the final whistle blew. The crowd of new recruits gathered around the coach as he gave his verdict. Lucas was the only one left on the floor, panting for his life.

Marco stepped closer, but one of the assistant coaches beat him to it, crouching near Lucas.

"Sorry, buddy, we won't be going forward with you. I invite you to try again next year."

Lucas's hand raised itself, his thumb proudly gesturing up.

"All... good—I'm dying..."

Marco smiled. A smile that took him by surprise. Was he relieved to hear that?

He made his steps loud enough to draw Lucas's attention.

"Come with me!" he said, arms crossed.

He was met only by Lucas's head barely flickering up to see who was talking.

"Oh, you're... Pedro... coming with you?"

Marco's eyelid twitched. He cleared his throat.

"Name's Marco. You're coming with me to the football tryouts. I'll show you around."

Lucas laughed before his head dropped flat against the wooden floor.

"In another lifetime, I think... my time has come..." he said, pulling in ragged breaths.

"I'm not waiting another lifetime, I'll tell you that," Marco answered, helping Lucas to his feet.

"You want to play sports, right? Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Lucas glanced at the court, already emptied.

"I guess..."

"Then I'm giving you another opportunity," Marco went on, shaking his head. "It's true that you don't seem very fast on your feet."

Lucas blinked.

"And running doesn't seem to be your thing."

He blinked again.

Marco's finger brushed his chin.

"It actually sounds like a totally bad idea, but what I'm proposing is—"

He turned his head to see Lucas already near the benches, reaching for another water bottle.

"Stop doing that!" Marco bellowed as he hurried closer to him.

"The football team?" Lucas asked, steadying his breathing between two drinks. "Isn't it the school's worst team?"

They both lapsed into silence. Marco's head snapped up. He simply glanced at the ceiling.

"It's true, we haven't won anything for the past ten years..."

Lucas took another sip as if his life depended on it.

Marco's hand rolled into a fist. He had heard that sentence so many times already. And yet, he brought his gaze back to Lucas, with only a smile tugging at his lips.

"But this year, we're turning the tide, I'm sure of it!" he said, louder than necessary. "And I think it starts with you! So? What do you think?"

Lucas's hand found the back of his head.

"With me? Isn't there a lot of running in football? No, thank you..." he said before noticing Marco's phone vibrating in his pocket. His head flicked toward it, beckoning him.

"Your phone."

Coach Morrison. The name pulsed on the home screen.

"Oh! That's Coach," he said, pulling his phone out. "He's probably waiting for me at the tryouts."

Only silence followed.

"The tryouts!" Marco shouted, picking his bag up. "I'm a dead man!"

Lucas tried to take one last sip before his bottle fell as Marco pulled him by the collar.

"You're coming with me. You'll be my alibi!"

"Wait, what are you—"

## Chapter 2

"We're almost there!" Marco said with enthusiasm as they circled Building H. That good old little cube of weathered bricks and moss. Every time Marco saw it, he wondered why the school hadn't allowed the team to use it.

Lucas dragged his feet behind him, glancing around.

"Building H? Are you trying to kidnap me? Because my parents are not well off."

A half-amused laugh pushed out of Marco's mouth. "Yeah, right."

His shoulders tensed as he leaned over and tapped the cracked walls.

"We tried to get it last year to use it as a personal gym for the team, but they said no..."

"You guys don't have a gym?" Lucas asked.

Marco answered with a shake of his head as they approached their destination. They had long passed the myriad of students walking around campus. Even if they were still in school, this part of campus always felt abandoned.

The sight of Coach Morrison flashed through his mind as he glanced back at Lucas, who was still looking around aimlessly.

Was he seeing something real? What if Coach Morrison didn't see anything special in him?

The sound of tall grass grazing his shin brought him back. They had reached the football field.

"There you go, Lucas," he said, pointing at a rusting metal fence. "RiverDale's football field."

Lucas gave it a quick look. Marco immediately noticed his eyes staring at the overgrown weeds. Marco wondered when they had last been cut.

Lucas's tongue clicked. "This is where the characters in a horror movie make stupid decisions..." He crossed his arms. "I won't be coming with—"

Marco gripped him by the shirt. "Stop your nonsense. I can see the coach has already started. We're late!" He yanked the fence hard enough to snap it open.

"What do you mean we?"

As they approached, the silhouette ahead started to become clearer. Coach Morrison was standing straight, arms crossed, yelling inaudible words. Marco felt his heart ache.

Only three recruits today? he thought as he watched them warming up.

His lips pressed against each other as he picked up the pace.

“Coach! I’m sorry for being late!” he said, swallowing as Lucas followed closer.

The coach didn’t waver.

“We don’t apologize for ourselves.”

Marco’s body straightened immediately.

“I—I present my apologies for being late!”

The coach slowly turned, almost like a robot coming to life.

“You’re cut from the team,” he said coolly.

“Huh?” Marco’s eyes widened as he stepped closer. “But wait, Coach—” He waved his hands around frantically. “Sure, I didn’t set an alarm this morning again,” he said, his breathing accelerating, “but I met this kid. His name is Lucas.” He pulled his friend closer. “You have to let him try out for quarterback.”

The coach frowned as a low hum escaped him.

“Okay, you’re back in,” he said before shifting his focus back to the new recruits. “Go change now.”

Marco found himself on the ground on all fours, catching his breath.

“Ah! That was close.”

“I should probably leave.”

Marco threw him a death glare. “You stay here. One tryout won’t kill you,” he muttered through his teeth.

After a long sigh, Lucas dragged his feet toward the bench, following Marco, who started changing quickly. It didn’t take long for the football player to notice Lucas’s shoes.

“Wait... you were playing basketball with that? Don’t you have better sports shoes?”

The shoes looked like a cheap knockoff of Xtra’s, the ones you find in retail stores for a dozen bucks.

“Those were the only ones I could afford,” Lucas said, tapping the ground with his feet.

He said his parents were not well off. Maybe that wasn’t a joke... Marco thought, lacing his shoes.

“Listen, Lucas.” Marco’s hands found the back of his neck. “I kinda forced you to come, so I would understand if you don’t want to try.”

Lucas only glanced at the field.

“And you already did a tryout today, so I understand.”

“I’ll do it.”

Marco’s head leaned back. It was Lucas’s eyes. Or maybe the way he stared at the field. He could feel the change in the air.

“I came to play a sport, so why not?”

His body got shoved by Marco’s tap on his back.

“That’s what I like to hear!” he said loudly before the lot joined the recruits, who had finished warming up.

Marco set himself aside, warming up with a few movements of his own as the coach lined up the candidates.

“As you may know, the team is looking for a new quarterback,” he said, arms still crossed. “So today I’ll evaluate you for that specifically.”

He pointed at each of them.

“You’ll be number one, two, three,” his finger lining up at Lucas, “and you, number four.”

He rummaged through his backpack on the floor and retrieved a football.

“Watch carefully. You’ll be hitting four different throws to Mr. Late here,” he said, signaling toward a warming-up Marco, whose body tensed immediately upon hearing his nickname.

“All I’m asking you is to keep your eyes on Mr. Late!”

The coach went into position, beckoning Marco to do the same. He leaned slightly down while firmly holding the ball.

“This is a slant,” he said, taking a wide single step back as Marco began running forward.

Then he made a sharp forty-five-degree turn, and in a heartbeat, the football left Coach Morrison’s hand with a tight spiral, settling between Marco’s hands.

A whistle escaped one of the recruits.

“Smooth…”

“This dude is fast.”

Another nodded.

Marco jogged back into position, sending the ball back to his coach.

"This is a 10-yard out!" he said, setting himself up again as Marco accelerated forward, this time until his feet crossed the ten-yard mark before he made an even tighter ninety-degree turn.

The ball landed in his hands again, effortlessly.

Coach can still throw... He still got it, Marco said to himself as he stole a glance at the four students watching. They leaned into each other, whispering. The only one not moving was Lucas. His eyes were glued to the coach.

"Get rid of that smirk, Mr. Late," Coach said as Marco gave him the ball back. "You're rusted. Summer holidays got the best of you."

He only got a smile for an answer as Marco planted his feet, ready for the third.

"This one is a deep in. It's the same principle as the others."

Marco blitzed forward past the ten-yard mark as Coach Morrison took a couple of steps back, aiming.

He planted his outside foot at the fifteen-yard mark and shifted his hips lower to decelerate before cutting inward at another ninety-degree angle.

Again, the ball landed safely in his arms as he moved over the down line.

"That's better," he told Marco as he jogged back.

"Give me a couple of days. I'll be fully back."

The coach hummed before beckoning him to go back into position.

"And lastly, the go ball!"

The words sent the signal as Marco leapt forward, tearing over the yards in a straight line before receiving the ball that shot through the sky in an arcing, spiraling motion.

Marco rolled on the floor, tightly holding the ball. He could hear the coach scream, "Unnecessary," which made him chuckle.

Mr. Morrison turned around.

"Any questions?"

They all shook their heads but Lucas. Marco could see their feet fidgeting over the grass.

“Number four?” The coach directed his focus onto him.

“I’m—I’m good...I think?”

Coach Morrison caught Marco by the collar, tightening the fabric around his neck.

“I know you were about to give them some tips,” he said, letting go of his grip. “Let them throw first. We’ll see if they got it.”

Marco pressed his lips together, letting out a groan before he went back into position.

Number one was a lefty. Marco had rarely run with a left-handed quarterback. The first throws were off as Coach gave some directions. It took a couple of attempts to get into number one’s rhythm.

The same pattern repeated for the other recruits before it was time for Lucas to step on the line.

Marco’s feet felt heavier as he braced himself for another route. His breathing grew ragged.

“What are you waiting for? Give the signal,” the coach noted.

“Huh... sure...”

He exhaled longer than needed before a very low, “Go,” escaped his mouth.

The coach leaned his head closer as if he had never heard anything.

“What?”

“G-GO!” he said, taking a wide step back as Marco launched forward before making a forty-five-degree turn. His eyes finally met Lucas, whose face had blushed, but it wasn’t from exhaustion.

Marco’s body decelerated before coming to a full stop. The sound of the ball bouncing across the grass, wobbling in the opposite direction, was the only sound around.

“Hmm,” Lucas hummed, picking up another ball. “This really feels awkward. How do you throw this?”

The silence answered for him. It even took Coach a few seconds before stepping closer.

“You’ve never thrown one of those before?”

Lucas shook his head, still examining the leather.

“Is this your first time playing football?”

Lucas turned the ball around in his hands, inspecting it from every angle.

“Yes. First time.”

The same robotic turn of Coach Morrison’s head sent a chill down Marco’s spine as he waved his hands around.

“I should... I should have mentioned it,” Marco said, massaging his neck. He could hear the recruits suppressing their laughter. One even tried to look away.

“But you have to see him throw his passes. I’m sure he can do the same here!”

Coach Morrison turned and walked toward the benches. Metal clanged as he rummaged through a duffel bag.

He returned holding a handball. The recruits stayed silent. Some blinked twice. Only Marco smiled.

“There you go,” he said, tossing the ball to Lucas, who caught it half surprised.

“Try this.”

Lucas looked down at the ball.

# Chapter 3

Lucas's hands ran around the ball, occasionally pressing it and lightly tossing it between them. Marco didn't miss the recruits looking away or barely able to contain their laughter. In a way, he was glad that Coach was giving him a chance after that awful throw.

"Same thing?" Lucas asked simply.

Coach Morrison nodded, beckoning Marco to get in position, which he did immediately.

"Whenever you are ready, kid," the coach said. Lucas's body naturally leaned into position, his hands firmly holding the handball.

"Go..." he said, his voice shaking.

Marco glanced over his shoulder. "Dude... you're going to have to be louder," he complained while noticing the recruits tearing up silently from the corner of his eyes.

"Sorry..." Lucas cleared his throat as he leaned down again. "G-Go!"

It was definitely another shaky signal. It even made Marco grin. But that was enough for him to blitz forward for a slant. He cleared the few yards quickly before his inside foot pressed against the grass, making a sharp forty-five-degree cut inside.

Then he felt a bump around his right forearm. The recognizable feeling of leather bouncing off his arm. It hit him before his head had fully turned to align with Lucas's pass. In fact, he didn't even see the throw.

His body came to a halt. His eyes followed the handball rolling away. Then he shifted his focus to Lucas.

"What the hell was that? I wasn't even facing you yet!" He pointed at him. "At least give me a second to finish the route!"

He was only met with Lucas blinking.

"But you turned... you should have caught it..."

Marco clicked his tongue.

"Tss... 'You should have caught it,'" he repeated, mimicking Lucas's timid voice as he jogged back into position.

His gaze shifted onto the recruits. Two of them puffed out a laugh. Number One, on the other hand, frowned, his eyes glued to Lucas.

"It looked, how can I say... too fast, don't you guys think?"

"He's obviously pre-throwing."

Number Three shrugged. "Yeah. He's already seen all the routes."

"Anybody can throw early if they already know where you're going. Even if Mr. Late is fast, that won't work," Number Two said with a laugh.

Hearing his ridiculous nickname would have made Marco's blood boil. But the comment that followed left him speechless.

Lucas trying to show off? Did he throw that insanely fast ball on purpose? To look cool? He could not say he knew Lucas well, but it didn't fit the profile at all.

His mind spiraled into those assumptions, so much that he didn't even realize Coach Morrison had crossed the field to pick up the ball.

Coach Morrison picked up the handball. His eyes lingered on the brown-haired kid for a few seconds, a low hum escaping him.

He tossed it back to Lucas.

"Again."

All he got was a nod. The recruits stopped bickering, and even Marco walked back over to his starting mark. His mind still replayed what had happened. Number One's words flashed through his mind again.

Was it really a pre-shot pass? Did Lucas throw that fast because he knew I would cut for the slant? After all, he had already seen a few attempts.

Marco dropped his shoulders. He glanced at Lucas again, who was awkwardly getting into position. They both waited for the coach's instructions.

I'm sure that pass was calculated, Marco told himself, his eyes still glued to the brown-haired kid with a handball and shaky hands.

"Deep in!" Morrison shouted.

The instruction startled Marco. His feet skidded, completing half a step in a rush.

Deep in? Coach skipped the out...

He still ran forward, clearing the yards easily. Blitzing past the ten, then the fifteen, passing by in his view. He decelerated and turned inside with a sharp ninety-degree cut.

The ball zipped right in front of his upper chest, grazing his shirt. He felt the swift rush of air that came with it before recognizing the worn white leather. He only realized he had missed the ball when he heard it fall onto the grass farther down.

“Lucas! Would you give me time to react at least?” Marco shouted as he ran to pick up the ball.

“Coach said to throw when you turn,” he said, glancing at Morrison. “Wasn’t that what you asked?”

“You’re throwing it before I turn! Come on!” Marco kept complaining, jogging back toward them.

“Kid.”

Coach Morrison’s voice, sharp and cold, got Lucas’s attention right away.

“Humor me,” he pointed toward the field. “Which route did you just throw?”

Marco jogged back. He could see Lucas looking directly at him, like a kid stuck and awaiting an answer.

“You said... a deep slant?” Lucas’s voice bobbled.

Coach leaned his head back slightly.

“And what’s a go ball?”

Lucas looked toward the sky as if the answer were written in the clouds.

“The third shot...? I don’t know...”

Coach didn’t answer. He glanced at Marco, who had just joined them. Marco tossed the ball back to Lucas, catching him by surprise. The running back leaned closer to him.

“Wait just a second before I turn, or I won’t be able to catch your throws.”

“Hmm...” Lucas paused. “Okay. I’ll give it a try...”

The coach signaled to Marco with a nod.

“Go outside for the next one. Don’t tell him,” he said while glancing at Lucas. “And you can run for real.”

Marco’s head tilted.

“Are you sure?”

He hummed, as usual.

“Yes,” he answered coolly.

Marco acquiesced and turned back, setting his feet on the white line. Both found themselves waiting for the signal once again. Marco didn't feel tired, and yet his heart settled heavily in his chest.

Lucas... show us what you've got...

"10-yard out!" Coach Morrison yelled.

Marco flew forward, tearing over the first ten yards. He pictured a defender in front of him, attacking his inside shoulder and baiting him to turn the wrong way.

Then he snapped. His hips dropped as he turned sharply to the outside instead of the inside.

He gave it his all. The run couldn't have been better. The drop. The turn. Everything was as fast as he could make it.

And yet, he never had time to see Lucas's throw. He only felt the ball graze the fingers of his right hand, tipping it out of bounds.

His body came to a stop again. Marco took a few deep breaths as he watched the ball roll away slowly.

He turned toward Lucas, who stood still, seemingly unfazed. Only Coach Morrison's fingers poking his shoulder made him react.

"This is your first time throwing football plays?"

Lucas nodded as he cleared some sweat from his forehead.

"Ha!" The coach crossed his arms, harboring a smile for the first time today. "What planet are you from, kid?"

Lucas could only let a nervous smile stretch across his lips while Marco joined them.

"I knew it! You're definitely made for this, Lucas!"

"Y-you think so?"

Marco was still holding the ball. Without skipping a beat, he slipped into Lucas's awkward stance, mimicking his throw.

"Are you kidding? I mean, sure, your throws need adjustment," he paused slightly to breathe, "but you got the talent—"

Coach Morrison's throat cleared, louder than necessary, but enough to halt their discussion and straighten their bodies right away.

"You've got something, kid. I'm not going to deny it," he pointed at the ball Marco held, "but this is not a football, and the tryouts are not over."

He signaled for the recruits to get closer.

"I still need to assess your athleticism," he added while looking through his bag again before pulling out a set of red cones.

Marco made his best attempt to avoid Lucas's gaze.

"This is a lot of running, right? You said—"

"Technically, I didn't say anything. We got cut off," Marco grinned, raising his shoulders.

Coach Morrison finished setting the cones around the field before joining them.

"Alright, let's start, shall we?"

The recruits looked pumped up. With one glance, Marco could see Number Two rolling his arm around and Number Three squatting a few times. Even Number One asked to go first. Within this sea of motivated recruits stood Lucas, whose skin turned white.

"Oh crap..." The words, barely audible, flew out of Marco's mouth.

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Coach Morrison finished arranging the last cones before stepping back to the group.

"We'll start with a forty-yard dash. One at a time."

Number One volunteered immediately, setting his feet between the set of cones, bending his knees and leaning forward.

"Good starting position," Marco muttered before the whistle shrieked.

He watched him explode off the line. His strides were long, his head kept aiming forward. He crossed the finish with enough speed to earn a small nod from Coach Morrison.

"Four eighty-seven," he said, loud enough for Marco's body to tense up. "Not bad at all."

He got distracted only by Lucas, who leaned closer.

"What time should I aim for?"

"I don't know," Marco said, his nervous smile still vivid on his face. "Just run as fast as you can... Imagine something you're afraid of is chasing you... I don't know..."

Lucas frowned.

"Integrals chasing me... I see..."

Another whistle blew as Number Two took off. He wasn't as quick but moved well enough. Number Three finished a step behind, breathing hard, yet still clocked a five-second run.

Then it was Lucas's turn. Without a word, he stepped onto the starting line. His feet planted awkwardly, his body leaning forward.

Coach Morrison gave the signal, and Lucas pushed off.

For a few strides, it looked decent. Enough for Marco to lean forward instinctively. But then Lucas's pace faded. His knees didn't rise as much, and by the time he crossed the finish line, it was obvious that this was a five-plus.

"Five thirty-two," the coach announced. "Seems we have a new center on the team."

"That's—a—good thing—right?" Lucas said while trying to catch his breath.

"You'd still need a good hundred pounds or so."

Lucas couldn't resist as his body slouched over the grass.

"A hundred pounds... oh well..."

Damn it... almost a 5.4. It's worse than what I imagined... Marco said to himself as they joined the others.

Coach Morrison then explained the cone drill, and it seemed changing directions quickly only made things worse for Lucas.

He finished the drill all right, but every turn felt forced and heavy, as though his body had separated his brain from his muscles and somehow the communication was delayed.

The timer placed him last once again.

Marco rubbed the back of his neck.

"Come on, Lucas, hold on..."

The ladder drill was even more of a surprise. Lucas couldn't figure it out, at least not at any great speed. He had to complete the drill painfully slowly. Even Marco, who rooted for him, couldn't stop a laugh from escaping.

The final whistle rang out, and with it, the recruits gathered. Lucas lay flat on the grass. Marco could see that his only concern was getting as much air into his lungs as possible.

“Alright, boys! That’s enough for today!” Coach Morrison said as he crossed his arms, waiting for Lucas to join the huddle, which he did painfully slowly.

“I’ll be blunt. None of you are ready for varsity.”

Nobody spoke. Even Marco raised an eyebrow.

Coach scratched his chin.

“But at the moment, ignoring four recruits would be a stupid move.”

They shared confused looks.

“So, you’ll be joining the newly formed freshman team and assisting the varsity during training.”

Relief spread across their faces almost instantly. Number One squeezed his fist, another jumped, and Lucas exhaled more than he needed.

“I didn’t know RiverDale had a freshman team!” Number Three chimed in.

Morrison shook his head.

“We don’t. You’ll be the sole four players.”

The smiles faded as Marco gently tapped Lucas’s shoulder.

“You made the team because we need players,” he cleared his throat. “But at the same time, if you expect playing time, you’ll have to earn it.”

“Y-yes, sir!” they said, their bodies almost saluting him in a military greeting.

“Alright, now clean up. Have yourselves a nice weekend,” he said as he turned to grab his duffel bag. “Real training starts Monday.”

The recruits rushed to clear the cones and other equipment. Lucas followed while dragging his feet.

“So, what do you think, Coach?” Marco asked as he pointed discreetly at Lucas.

“No doubt this kid has freakish aim,” he said, bringing his gaze back to the recruits. “But it would have been known if that was the only thing you needed to succeed in football.”

Marco didn’t answer. His eyes were glued to Lucas from afar as Coach continued.

“If talent got him onto the field, hard work will probably break him.”

He let out a slow breath.

“Or make him great.”

## Chapter 4

"Your index finger is going to be your spiral finger, so try to apply a bit more pressure on the football—"

Lucas paused the video as he caught himself drawing a football on the blank parts of his math paper. He had done this type of problem before, and yet his paper was full of scribbles, formulas being crossed over, and doodles of footballs.

He skipped back a few seconds, realizing he had missed part of it.

"Understanding Football: Throwing (4/13)."

"Four over thirteen," he muttered before his eyes jumped onto his bedroom clock. "Wait—it's already 1:30!"

"Here is my champ!" Lucas's father said as he opened the door, quickly stepping inside. "Studying hard?"

Lucas hid away his phone between his thighs and turned the page as if he had just started the verso.

"Dad... I told you to knock..."

The father leaned over Lucas's shoulder. "Functions, huh? Pretty easy stuff for you, I assume."

The brown-haired kid pretended to read the first question, his pen following each syllable. "I guess it's not that hard..."

"Well, great!" Dad tapped his shoulder. "Have you had time to register? Your mom keeps asking about it. I heard this year's team is pretty strong."

Lucas's head shot up. "Actually, the team is pretty b—" His eyes widened as he retracted right away. "Y-yes, it's a solid team."

"Nothing to scare the son of RiverDale's double Math Olympiad champion," his dad added, sitting on the bed. "Hey, how about I give you some thought questions? From my time—"

The house buzzed, startling them both and saving Lucas from this conversation.

"I wonder who this is..." his dad muttered as he went down the stairs.

Lucas's body relaxed right away, his phone even hitting the floor as he realized he had kept his legs fully contracted to keep it hidden.

"At least the video didn't play back," he muttered as he picked it up.

"It's for you. There's a Marco here," his dad said, coming back up.

The news sent a chill over Lucas's body, and he straightened by reflex, making his phone fall again.

"M-Marco, yes. We were supposed to be studying this afternoon," Lucas said, jumping off his chair and passing by his father, who stood at the door.

"Okay, just don't be late!"

The door closed, and with it, Lucas exhaled more than he needed to in front of a confused Marco.

"What's going on with you? It looks like you've been running."

Lucas grabbed Marco's arm and pulled him onto the sidewalk. He cleared a small distance before opening up between heavy breaths.

"I told you to wait for me at the light, Marco."

"Well, you were late—"

"Next time, like we said, at the light, or just don't wait for me."

Marco's head tilted. "What's the matter with you? Why is it such a big deal?"

"Nothing..." Lucas turned back toward the road and kept walking. "We're late anyway."

Marco shoved him with a tap on the shoulder. "You need to lighten up, Luc! Smile! Today is your first real training session."

Lucas grumbled a few inaudible words as Marco kept on. "You better be ready for Coach's insane conditioning." He laughed as he glanced at the orange sky. "He even made me puke the first—"

Marco realized Lucas had fully turned back toward his house.

"Hey! Come back, you coward!" he said, barely holding onto his backpack.

"Maybe all this football thing wasn't a good idea."

Marco had to tug him by the arm. "What are you saying now, of all times?"

"I don't want to puke. Who would brag about that?"

Marco yanked him harder. "Come back, you coward!"

---

The whistle echoed across RiverDale's practice field. Lucas stood there as Marco stepped in first, greeted by an army of players. Lucas had watched and played a few games of basketball. He had seen games with five players on the team. He counted at least a dozen standing and stretching on the grass.

"Hey, Luc!" Marco waved from afar. "What are you waiting for?"

"What—what am I waiting for..." He glanced at his feet, firmly planted behind the poorly painted white line. "Come on, one step..." he muttered, then followed with a nervous smile. "Just go... you don't have to talk to all of them."

A throat cleared loudly enough to pull him out of his frozen state and make him look up. A tall, dark-skinned man stood next to him, his body almost casting a shadow over him. He was probably a good ten inches taller than him.

"Hey, are you a new recruit?"

Lucas nodded.

"I am too. My name's Pomo. I played my first year of varsity at StoneWall."

"Great—I played basketball at my uncle's place during the summer."

Pomo raised an eyebrow. "You're a weird one." He stepped in without a care.

What is this behemoth... I've seen videos about tackles. If he gets one on me, I'm just as good as minced meat... Lucas said, seeing Marco wave at him again from afar. "Damn it..."

He finally stepped in, dragging his feet over the grass as if each step grew heavier. He was about to enter his first training session as a member of RiverDale's football team.

"Everyone gather around!" Coach said, beckoning everyone to come closer. "Before we start, I'd like to introduce you to our newest members." He glanced at the new recruits one by one, his eyes passing across Lucas, whose whole body shook.

"I'll call your names. I want you to state your age, the position you'd like to play, and a goal of yours."

He cleared his throat. "Owen!"

The recruit moved forward. Lucas recognized his frame. This was number one from the tryouts. He had noticeably long arms and a buzz cut.

"I'm Owen Price. I'm fourteen, and I'd like to be a quarterback. I plan to make varsity by the end of this year!"

Murmurs rippled through the crowd of young athletes. Lucas noticed all the eyes were on him. That alone made him want to puke. He dug his hands into his pockets to hide his shaking.

“Diego!”

This was recruit number two. He strode through the crowd. He was the tallest of the tryout recruits. He had a round face and dark hair.

“My name’s Diego Morales. I’m fourteen, and I’d like to play cornerback. My goal this year is to win the state championship!”

A few laughs broke out. A few comments were said out loud, making the recruit’s face flush as he backed into the crowd.

The coach glanced at his notes. “Ethan!”

The recruit lifted his arm. This was number three. Lucas would not forget that proud grin that seemed to be glued to his face at all times.

“Ethan Brooks. I am fifteen,” he puffed out a muffled laugh. “My father was the mighty BB.”

“Wait? BB? With the Rockland Rampage?”

Ethan nodded. “And I’ll be the team’s quarterback.” Naming the position earned its share of murmurs. “As for my goal,” he fixed his hair, “playing professionally and beating my father’s records, obviously.”

“Damn, the son of Bullet Brooks,” one of the players muttered. “One of the top ten quarterbacks in history.”

“More like top five,” another chimed in as Lucas kept listening.

“What is this guy doing at this school, though...”

“Lucas!”

Lucas’s body almost went into a military salute. His lips were already twitching from what seemed like an impossible task for him.

“Lucas? Come on.” Morrison motioned for him with his head to step forward.

“I’m—” the kid stuttered as he finally gained control of his legs, forcing a dreadful step forward.

“I’m—nice to meet us—you, my name is Lucas Reed and...”

The silence that followed could have made him pass out. All eyes were glued on him.

“And...”

Marco cleared his throat. “Position...”

“I want to be the—the quarterback.”

Coach Morrison exhaled louder than necessary as he brought his gaze toward a man still stretching behind the wall of students.

“Mason! Looks like your job is in danger this year,” the coach yelled.

For the first time, Mason paused his warm-up and met Lucas’s eyes for a brief moment before resuming. Lucas noticed his legs and arms. They looked well-defined, thicker than the recruits he saw so far. This Mason guy was definitely not a freshman.

“More like a part-time job, Coach,” he joked back.

“Well, Lucas, your goal?” Morrison asked right away, driving all the attention back onto a relieved Lucas.

“G-goal?” He glanced at the grass. “I don’t know... make a pass? Isn’t that what a quarterback should do?”

The crowd erupted in laughter as Marco leaned closer to Lucas’s ear. “He meant your own goals.”

“My—my goal...”

His feet couldn’t quite find their footing. They were restless, as if standing on a hot surface. He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. Suddenly, his shirt seemed too tight, the collar gripping his throat like armor.

“Well, go on, kid. We don’t have all day,” Morrison said.

Lucas abruptly turned back, quickly disappearing behind the crowd before Marco rushed to pull him back. “You better stop doing that!” he groaned, bringing the shy kid back into place.

“It’s okay if you can’t articulate your goals. There’s no shame in that,” the coach added while looking at everyone. His brow furrowed, and that was enough to make the few remaining laughs fade away.

“And last one for today, Pomo!”

The giant stepped forward, ironically not needing to since he was obviously towering over everyone else.

“My name’s Pomo N’Diaye. I played center with the varsity team at StoneWall High School. My goal is to play pro.”

Lucas didn’t miss the chatter that ensued. It felt different than with Ethan. Players leaned toward one another, chatting quietly. Sure, Pomo was tall and big, but Lucas wasn’t sure if it was worth those reactions.

“Why is everyone murmuring?” he asked Marco.

“Pomo played with StoneWall. They lost in the final last year, and on top of that, he was ranked the fourth-best high school center in the country.”

“Oh, I see, that’s why he kept mentioning his school.”

“It’s a big deal,” Marco nodded.

Lucas scratched his head. “From a top team to RiverDale—”

“I’m not complaining,” Marco talked over him, cutting him off. “With him, we have our chances. Why he’s with us, that I don’t really care.”

The coach cleared his throat again to bring the ruckus down a notch. He opened a file he had tucked under his armpit.

“We will start with the forms signed by the parents.” Everyone rushed, rummaging through their bags. “Then we will start!”

Lucas stood frozen.

“Lucas?” Marco asked. “What are you doing?”

“I kind of forgot the form...”

# Chapter 5

Lucas leaned down, legs shaking from bending so many times. The football rested tightly between his hands as he looked forward, picturing Marco setting his feet on the line. He blinked repeatedly to clear the sweat from his eyes, the heat licking at his face.

A whisper escaped.

“Go...”

He pulled back a couple of steps. He pictured Marco clearing the first ten yards, then...

“Left...” he whispered again before his arm launched the ball straight into Marco’s imaginary body. The ball wobbled through the air, missing his imagined target entirely as it bounced farther left.

“More pressure on the index?” he asked himself while glancing at his reddish hand, burned by the leather. He pulled out his phone and played the video back.

“My thumb should have been a bit lower, shouldn’t it?”

Shouts broke out, pulling his attention back. The team was running another game, and all the players were setting up. The new recruits stood on the sideline, simply observing. He tapped his screen a few times to replay the video as his tongue clicked.

“Leave a small gap between your palm and the ball.”

Lucas hummed as he grabbed the last ball from the basket Coach Morrison had reluctantly agreed to give him.

“Gap between palm,” he repeated, moving his index finger higher on his grip. “Index finger... thumb...”

His body leaned again as he went through the same mental preparation. This time, he moved Marco to his right. He would wait until the last second before deciding which route to throw.

“Hmm... Hunt-Hut! Set!” he whispered as he took three steps back, scanning the empty field in front of him.

“Right again...” he said before the ball tore awkwardly through the air. This time, the wobble was less noticeable, at least to him. But the ball landed well short of where he intended. Lucas frowned. He was sure he had aimed it correctly, but something felt off.

He glanced at the dozen balls resting on the grass in front of him. His chest pulled in uneven breaths, the blood rushing to his face. He wasn’t sure whether the stifling heat came from the temperature or from nearly passing out.

“Oh... my arm is tired... actually, my whole body is tired...”

He could already picture Marco arguing and complaining about the throw. In fact, he imagined exactly that for all one hundred and forty-three throws he had made before.

He rubbed the muscles in his neck as a grin spread across his face.

“Even if I aim right, that won’t work if I’m gassed out...” He pulled his heavy legs forward, dragging the basket with him. “And I’m almost always gassed out.”

The scrimmage came with its share of shouts, commands, and contact. Lucas attempted to pick up the same ball three times before finally looking down. His eyes had stayed glued to the players the entire time. The way Mason threw the ball, Marco changed directions, or Pomo’s physical superiority.

“He is slightly late...” he muttered as he watched number 28 fail to make the catch. “This is definitely not like the professionals I watched on PlayTube...”

He crouched to pick up another ball before his knees fully gave out, carving into the grass where he landed.

Only two hours... and I only threw at my rhythm, he thought, laughing nervously. What the hell am I doing—

“What are you doing? Praying?”

Marco stood behind him, a towel over his head, casually sipping from one bottle while holding another.

“Dude, you better sign that paper next time. What were you thinking?”

The water bottle landed between Lucas’s hands.

“I told you I forgot. I’ll bring it Saturday.”

“You better, because you won’t learn much throwing alone out here.” Marco eyed him from top to bottom. “So, how was it?”

Lucas gulped down the water.

“Out of one hundred and forty-four shots...” He gasped for air. “I was only happy with the last one,” he muttered even more quietly. “Although the distance wasn’t that great...”

“One—one hundred and forty-four throws?”

Marco froze, only his lips twitching, before holding up a couple of fingers.

“That’s—”

“One shot—” Lucas cleared his throat. “One throw a minute, give or take.”

Marco frowned at his own fingers.

“...Yeah. Exactly one throw a minute...” Marco nodded as if he had calculated it himself. Then his eyes bulged.

“Wait a second?! One throw a minute for two hours?!” He pointed at the out-of-breath Lucas. “Ha! You’re hooked, aren’t you?”

“Hooked?” Lucas said as he pulled himself back up. “What do you mean?”

An impossible smirk spread across Marco’s face.

“This is the magic of football. Once you throw, you run...” He clenched his fist toward the sky. “Once you taste that feeling on the field, nothing can—”

He found the brown-haired kid already a few yards away, nonchalantly picking up another ball.

“That one was a slant, but I threw it a bit too far to the right...” he murmured as he leaned down.

“I told you to stop doing that!” Marco bellowed, running toward him as he slapped Lucas across the back with his towel. “I was onto something quite—”

“Yeah... I’m not hooked. Sorry...”

The words seemed to render Marco paralyzed, as if struck by lightning.

“But it’s interesting,” Lucas said with a smile.

A laugh burst out of Marco.

“Sure, sure... Mr. One Hundred and Forty-Four Throws.” He blinked. “Not hooked at all. Got it.”

Lucas’s expression didn’t change, though his eyes narrowed at Marco.

“I’m telling you, I’m not hooked.”

“Okay, okay,” Marco answered, waving his hands. “You’re throwing, at least. I’ll take it.”

His friend picked up the last ball.

“I also learned that I need to take fatigue into account when throwing. I never thought about it...”

The wide receiver tilted his head.

“Well... isn’t that obvious?”

“You knew about it? Even you?”

Marco pulled out his towel again.

“Hey! What do you mean by ‘even you,’ you—”

“Repetition builds intuition.”

“Huh?”

He stopped mid-motion, his towel still twirling above him.

Lucas rolled the leather over in his hand.

“Something my mother told me.” He lifted his gaze to Marco. “Throwing is a problem for me, so I’ll throw as many times as it takes to solve it.”

“Bro, you’re definitely hook—”

The whistle blew again.

“Everyone gather around!” the coach yelled as the athletes gathered around him. Marco and Lucas joined the others just before Morrison started the day’s recap. He went over a few routes and gave the team some pointers. Some of the terminology went right over Lucas’s head. He glanced at Marco, who seemed to follow every bit of it. Not daring to ask, he simply listened.

“Alright, boys, let’s clean up, and I’ll see you all Saturday.”

The team spread out, picking up empty water bottles, cones, and other equipment. Marco followed, leaving Lucas to set the basket aside before reaching for his bag.

“Mr. Reed!”

The kid’s body stiffened as he turned around. “Y-Yes, sir.”

Coach Morrison flicked his hand, signaling him to come closer, which he did.

“Tell me something, Reed. Do you actually want to play football?”

Lucas grumbled something inaudible under his breath.

“The worst thing you can do, for yourself and your teammates, is not want to be here. Not want to play.” He let the words linger, as if trying to force a reaction out of the freshman, who hastily avoided the coach’s gaze.

“Let me tell you something, kid. I’d rather have a player who struggles every practice but wants to be here than a talented one who doesn’t.”

The comment pulled Lucas back from whatever had caught his attention off to the side.

“Next time I see you, I’d like you to answer that question for me. Is that fair?”

Lucas’s hand shot to his forehead in an open-palm salute. “I will, s-sir.”

“Relax, kid. This isn’t the army.” He snorted. “I hope to see that form signed next time.”

Lucas nodded before the coach motioned for him to leave.

His hand reached for his bag, but he didn’t lift it immediately, as if it weighed a ton.

Do you want to play football?

The coach’s question lingered in his mind.

Why couldn’t he answer?

It was the same with Marco.

Was he afraid?

Only silence remained, heavy with unanswered questions, as his hand tightened around the strap.

“Luc! Let’s go!”

Marco stood behind him, backpack slung over one shoulder and a smile on his face.

Lucas peeked over his shoulder. Most of the athletes were already on their way out. Only Coach Morrison and Mason remained, having a conversation.

“Sure... let’s go...” He stood up.

“Don’t forget the form, Luc. You’d be stupid to skip two practices before the season starts.”

“The season...” Lucas stammered as they walked away before a voice stopped them both.

Mason held a football, casually tossing it from one hand to the other. Up close, he was even more impressive. Lean muscles, long arms, and a tall frame. He was probably around 6’1”, and the way he carried himself suggested someone completely at ease, as though he always knew exactly where he belonged.

“You’re Lucas, right? Care to stay for a couple of throws? I need to get back into it.”

Marco didn't let Lucas say a word before jumping between them. "Mason! Throw me some routes!"

"Calm down, Marco. We'll just throw it around between us. What are you made of anyway? Haven't you been running the whole workout?"

The only answer he got was Marco raising both hands as he rushed to line up. "That was not enough!" he yelled.

The ball landed in Lucas's hands, almost catching him by surprise.

Mason stepped closer. "Well, if he insists on running routes, you go first. I'll throw right after."

"O-Okay..." Lucas stuttered, holding the ball firmly.

"Let's start with your grip first," Mason said as he adjusted Lucas's index finger.

---

Mason dragged his feet into the movie theatre. His head hung low, and he had to make an effort to scan the people around him.

"Damn you, Mason! You ruined our double date!"

Tyler had found him first, wearing a nice outfit for a night out. "They bailed on me. You owe me forty bucks, by the way..."

"Sorry, Tyler. I've been stuck with the team today."

"Stuck with the team? You?" Tyler blinked. "Since when do you stay late after practice?"

"How about since you left us last year? And how did you even graduate? Your grades were horrible."

Tyler poked him in return. "You should be saying congratulations to your senior, you brat!"

They shared a look before laughter got the best of them.

Mason wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Coach asked me to stay with a freshman," he said as they exited the building together. "It was supposed to be only thirty minutes, but that kid didn't know when to stop."

His friend laughed.

"Sounds like a passionate freshman. Remember? We were like that."

Like that...?

The image of Lucas throwing countless passes flashed through Mason's mind. Every attempt either missed Marco, bounced off his arms, or wobbled through the air.

"You know... he didn't throw a single good spiral. Hell, he missed most of his throws, and he had Marco as his receiver."

His friend leaned back.

"Missing with Marco as your receiver? Maybe that kid should forget about playing quarterback."

Mason finished his drink.

"His eyes..."

"Huh?"

"His eyes. He wasn't smiling or laughing, but they told me enough."

He looked up at the night sky.

"He looked like he enjoyed every throw."

# Chapter 6

"A prolate what?" Lucas's mom almost choked on her morning coffee. He should have probably led with something softer than the actual scientific name of a football. "What was the question again?" she asked.

There were three plates set at the table, one empty because Lucas's dad had an emergency at work. Another remained untouched, Lucas's attention fixed on the rough football outlines he had drawn.

"It's called a prolate spheroid," he told her while writing down the dimensions he had learned by heart. His mother took another bite, still not paying enough attention to even glance at the shape.

"Right... and what was your question again?"

A low hum escaped Lucas's mouth, his eyes wandering all around as if the exercise title were written on the wall.

"Hmm... If this shape had to travel through the air, what would be the optimal rotation?"

As he asked the question, he winced, seeing his mother had immediately stopped chewing.

"That's a peculiar problem... Are you sure it's from your math book? It sounds more like it's trying to tackle physics instead."

"Do you—"

"And what kind of question is that? This is missing a lot of data."

"So... do you think you can still solve it?" Lucas asked, still glued to what he was scribbling.

"Well... like I said, we need much more," she said, pouring herself another cup.

"Let's say... I need to throw that object for... ten yards."

"Ten what?"

"...Yards."

She stopped pouring at once.

"Yards? Why would your book use yards? Show me that problem. This is obviously a poorly designed one. I'll check with the editor."

Damn it... of course she would ask the editor. Her of all people...

"I-I'll bring it later," he said hastily before she would ask again to see the non-existent problem. "I need to finish breakfast first." He added, pulling the paper away and looking for his fork.

She chuckled.

“More like start.”

Silence reclaimed the room before Lucas’s phone buzzed. Marco’s name appeared on the screen, something his mother didn’t miss.

“Your study friend is calling.”

His thumb reached for the snooze button.

“I-I’ll answer him later...” he stuttered.

“You know, your father and I are so glad you already have a friend. We should invite him over one day, don’t you think?”

Lucas spilled his drink in an attempt to answer and drink at the same time.

“Invite him...” he coughed. “Sure...”

Then his face lit up. It reminded him of the instant before a pass, when everything around the receiver seemed to disappear and only the opening remained. For an instant with his mother, he could see an opening to work with.

“Did you know Marco likes to play football? He asked me to play with him.”

Lucas’s heart throbbed through how many reactions he tracked on his mom. Whether it was a slight blink or an exhale. Yet the mention of the sport didn’t seem to generate any.

“Football?” she said with a surprising smile. “Well, that’s good. Intramurals are a nice way to stay active.” She exhaled. “But football? Really? I used to play squash when I was your age. You should try it instead. Much safer.”

This was the first time since the tryouts that he had pushed the conversation this far.

“He... also wanted me to meet the coach and—”

“Wait... coach?”

Her face tensed.

Lucas’s grin disappeared.

“You mean the actual RiverDale football team?” she asked. “I thought they barely had enough players, or so I’ve been told.”

Lucas buried himself in the plate he had barely touched.

"I don't know... He just mentioned it once last time."

"Lucas, that's not the same thing. Competitive football is dangerous. Do you know how many injuries it causes? And what about the Olympiad? Aren't you and Marco supposed to be preparing together?"

Right... the Olympiad. He'd forgotten about that.

"You're right, Mom..." he said, hitting the snooze button again after another one of Marco's calls.

He stood up. "I'm done."

"But... your pancakes?"

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"What? You love my morning pancakes," she said as he rushed upstairs. "At least finish your juice!"

Lucas closed his bedroom door shut, leaning against it as he took a much-needed moment for a few deep breaths. His phone buzzed again.

"Dude, Coach is going to kill us if we're late." Marco's notifications popped up one after the other, with a few interrogation points here and there.

"I'll see you on the field then. Don't be late!"

His mouth opened as if to shout. Instead, only a hushed, "Damn it," escaped as he threw his phone onto his bed. "What was I thinking?"

He quickly found himself slouching over his desk, his old chair catching him as he realized he had collapsed into it. The form was sitting there in front of him, still empty.

He gripped his hands until the shaking slowed. He felt like he'd hit a wall he couldn't clear.

"Maybe if I ask Dad..." he muttered. "Actually, that would be even worse..." His eyes wandered over the form's title. For some reason, he found himself completely frozen as he read it out loud.

"RiverDale Football: Parental Form..."

Coach Morrison's question flashed through his mind.

"I'd rather have a player who struggles every practice but wants to be here than a talented one who doesn't."

Lucas jumped out of his chair, almost knocking it over. He only picked up his backpack and rushed down the stairs.

"I'm out studying, Mom!" he called out without giving her a chance to respond as the door closed behind him.

---

It felt weird not to hear Marco's comments on Building H as Lucas circled it, realizing that was the first time he came alone. A couple of half steps in, and he was already standing in front of the rusted gate. Would someone even call this a gate? More like a decorative wicket that would break open at the first rough push.

They had already started running, while a few were still stretching on the grass. There were probably more than 20 today, and they were all faster and obviously stronger than him. Would he be playing amongst them?

The thought sent a chill through his body. What was he talking about? Playing? Him, of all people? He never had the courage to sign an insignificant paper, and yet he allowed himself to ponder such an idea.

Marco waved at him from afar, but Lucas had been too absorbed by Coach Morrison standing still with his arms crossed. He could only see his broad back as he shouted some commands. "Now was the time, you damn legs..." he muttered, almost jerking his own leg forward.

He got close enough for Coach to notice him.

"Mr. Reed! You're late. Care to explain why I should allow you in today?"

The brown-haired kid glanced at his feet.

"I need—"

The sentence never formed. His fingers tapped against each other while his eyes fled from the coach's.

"I believe you have something for me?"

"I—I don't..."

"Then no training for you today!" He beckoned him toward the basket full of footballs, but Lucas barely looked at it. This time, his focus shifted onto the athletes warming up.

"I'd like to watch..." His eyes widened, seeing the coach's face tilt slightly. "If that's okay with you..."

He flicked his hand toward the bleachers behind him, and Lucas obliged, making his way to the old weathered bench without a word. From high up, he had a great view of the plays. Lucas never took his eyes off Mason, the way he shouted before the ball landed in his hands. He could even hear the cadence from over there. “The heartbeat of the team...” he repeated from a Playtuber he had watched before.

Pomo’s frame also stood out. Not only that, but his ability to create space. They were not able to move past him easily. And that gave Mason all the time in the world to throw.

“The most vital partnership...” he recalled. “I’d still think you should be more in tune with the wide receiver...” he spoke before thinking.

The plays kept on. Lucas slowly recalled the videos he had watched at home, piecing them together with how both teams moved.

So this is what they meant...

Mason threw another spiral across the field in a high arc. The receiver fainted outside, but the ball missed him by a few inches, falling incomplete.

“Marco would have been better.”

The comment escaped before Lucas realized he had spoken aloud. His head slowly turned as his eyes widened, meeting Coach Morrison’s gaze.

“What did you say, Mr. Reed?”

“He—Marco... he was open, and—” Lucas stopped himself at once, his eyes dropping to the ground.

“Out with it.”

“Marco was fully open on the right side,” Lucas answered quickly. “He keeps beating the defender covering him. He’s clearly faster than everyone else. Giving him the ball was the best way to score.”

He was met only by Coach Morrison’s cold, unmoving stare.

“Or... so I think...” Lucas muttered, lowering his gaze again.

“Ha! So you saw it. Indeed, our defense is still pretty raw. But Mason is moving the ball around to help the receivers learn. Otherwise, we’d rely on Marco for every play.”

Lucas’s eyes drifted back to the field.

“So Number 21 should stop being so lazy on his slants. This is the second time.”

The sentence erased the coach’s smile. His brow lowered.

“Lazy?”

“He can run faster. Looking at his hips and the way he walks between plays, he doesn’t seem exhausted. For some reason, he’s just not running at full speed.”

The coach scoffed, the whistle cord hanging from his mouth.

“And what would you do if you were Mason?”

“Me?” Lucas blinked. He had never imagined himself in that position. “I’d give the ball to Marco. It’s safer.”

“And if Marco wasn’t there?”

“Well...” Lucas hesitated. “...I’d account for Number 21.”

“So you wouldn’t tell him to stop being so lazy?” Morrison asked.

“No...” Lucas answered, his gaze drifting toward the school buildings as if the coach’s gaze was weighing on him.

The whistle tore through the air as the team picked up the scrimmage, drawing Lucas’s attention back to it. Mason’s ball streaked across the field, finding Number 21. Mason was precise. Lucas could tell he could throw farther, yet he frowned upon watching the senior step back and launch the ball for another play. He couldn’t really put a finger on it, but something gnawed at him, something he had noticed since that afternoon.

So far, Lucas had watched countless professional quarterbacks, and they all had something he noticed.

Their eyes...

“Mason is not a quarterback, is he?” Once again, the question leaked out before he realized it.

“Didn’t he tell you?” Morrison said. “Mason is supposed to be our running back.” He coughed. “You mentioned Marco being the fastest on the team? Well, Mason is actually the fastest.”

He sighed.

“But he is also undeniably good at quarterback, and the team needed his vision and precision.” The coach blew the whistle again, glancing at Lucas over his shoulder, a grin on his face. “Why do you think we need a quarterback?”

Lucas answered only with silence. Mason was faster than Marco... and yet we keep him at the back calling the routes. It was simply not optimal at all, but he kept that thought to himself.

The afternoon dragged on with more plays before the coach gathered the team for the final recap. Something about school starting soon and a few friendly games before the season. He didn't get all of it and would ask Marco next time.

If there is even a next time...

"Hey, Lucas, the water, please?"

The call brought him back from his spiraling thoughts. He was holding Marco's water bottle as he changed.

"Oh... here. Sorry."

"You're awfully absent today." He drank before handing it back to him. "And come on! I told you not to forget that form," he added, pulling his shirt off, still talking from inside it. "You know, we kinda need you at the—"

Lucas was already a few meters away, picking up his bag.

"Hey! I was talking here!"

His bag held only a change of clothes and an empty water bottle, but for some reason it felt like dead weight.

The form... How am I supposed to—

"Mr. Reed."

Coach Morrison appeared in front of him out of nowhere, towering over the brown-haired kid.

Lucas looked down.

"Sorry, I'm not sure I can bring the form next time."

"I don't care about the form, kid. I care about football. Do you?"

"Huh?"

Marco called and waved from afar, with Mason standing next to him. Everyone had left the turf but them.

"Say, do we want to play for RiverDale or not?"

His hands curled into fists before Lucas's head snapped back up.

"I want to play football. I want to throw for Marco and the others. I enjoyed every second I spent learning about this sport."

Morrison smiled while resting a hand on his shoulder.

"That's all I wanted to hear. Go throw with them. I'll see you soon."

"Soon?"

The coach's car keys rattled between his fingers as he turned and walked away without another word. Lucas stood there with his head slightly tilted.

---

His parents usually stayed in their room at this hour, but strangely, the living room light was the only one lit.

"Probably that stupid romance show..." he said to himself while grazing his shoes on the entrance carpet before pushing the door open.

His theory crumbled. Three pairs of shoes. They had a guest. A guest who seemingly practiced some sport since they were sports shoes.

He had actually seen those before.

"Wait... is that—"

He sprinted toward the living room before the whole picture hit him. His mother's eyes were wide with a hint of disappointment. A look he had seen rarely. Like that time he snuck her Olympiad medal into school and lost it there.

His father also bore the same look. Silent.

And sitting beside them, he recognized that large back and broad frame. Coach Morrison sipped his coffee before glancing back at Lucas.

His mother was the first to break the awkward silence.

"Honey... what's this about football?"

# Chapter 7

"There...make sure the flat part is over your shoulder"

Although he gave pointers, Marco ended up being the one doing the fitting. The brown haired kid simply stared ahead in utter silence, absentmindedly rubbing the signature his father had written on the parental form. He could feel the bump left by the ink grazing his fingertips as if wanting to be sure the thing was real.

Wednesday was already here and his first real training session was about to start. The thought made him hold his stomach. The spark of excitement he had expected had shown himself as a knot tightening inside him.

"I'm going to throw up Marco..."

"Yeah...you look straight out of a zombie movie. Chill out" he said jerking Lucas's arms for a last readjusting, "there you go"

Lucas moved around, the gear felt like a steel armour burning, "it feels I doubled my weight" he said while wiggling himself into it, "and why is it so hot?"

"Ask your parents with some compressive stuff to wear under, you won't survive long without it" Marco laughed.

His parents...right. How long was it already since Coach's surprise visit? Four breakfasts already... since that day, they became like a chore. Good morning and good bye were the only words he shared with his mother. Meanwhile his dad wore the good cop hat and argued with him all week end about trying swimming, or volleyball.

"Less dangerous..." Lucas repeated

"You're blabbing again" Marco shoved him lightly, "it's your first real day! Focus!"

"Eight injuries per thousand hour..."

"Huh?"

"My dad told me football caused on average eight injuries per—"

A sharp pain shot through his forehead before he noticed Marco had pinched him with his knuckles, "and each year, sheep kill 8 people so what?"

"But...I'm not a sheep?"

"Right, that was just to show you there are risks everywhere"

Lucas blinked, "where did you get those numbers from?"

Marco dragged him over the players already gathering around Coach Morrison, "I made them up! Let's go now."

“You guys can’t let go of each other, I see.”

The voice cut right through their motion. The student stood beside them, a grin on his sun-beaten face. He was only a bit taller than Marco, but his arms and legs were thicker. This was undeniably a junior or senior, and his stature screamed the fast, reactive type.

“What are you saying, Jayden?”

“Hey, chill. I have nothing against a good bromance.”

Marco’s face flushed as he stuttered. A gentle poke on his shoulder from Lucas drew his attention.

“He thinks we are—”

“Yeah, I got it, Luc,” he shouted, cutting him off.

Jayden brought himself closer. He couldn’t tell why, but Lucas couldn’t take his eyes off his arms. They were long, longer than Mason’s. This was a... the one who stops the passes... a cornerback. He was an optimally built human cornerback.

And that human leaned closer, almost body-checking Lucas.

“You shouldn’t waste Marco’s time, kid,” he said. “I’ll be honest, I have no idea what your deal is and why Coach would even give you a chance. I mean...”

He glanced at Marco this time, like Lucas was insignificant. “Didn’t he clock a 5.3 or something?”

“How dare you, Jayden? Lucas is—”

Marco didn’t reach the end of his argument. Lucas pointed his finger toward the towering, slender athlete.

“Jayden... that’s your name, right?”

His voice was lower this time. His breathing wasn’t accelerated at all. In fact, he felt in total control. For some reason, the words he uttered froze both Jayden and Marco completely. Their eyes looked like they were waiting for something and he wasn’t sure what it was.

Did I say something bad... he thought before resuming. “Nice to meet you, Jayden. My name is Lucas.” He threw an awkward smile into the mix before he walked toward the huddle.

“What the—”

Marco shrugged. “He does that sometimes.”

Lucas had to circle the players as he couldn't see the Coach from the back. It was the first time he stood on the turf with the team, and just like that, his stomach ached again.

He stood amongst literal human towers. Hell, they were all around 6 feet and more with a few exceptions. His eyes went over all those around his size and there were only a handful. Smaller frame favours speed and agility... he repeated, perfect for runners.... Then he noticed Pomo, recalling the heavy build players from the videos. These giants were more useful for defense.

I'm small and I run like a center... what was I thinking coming here...

His hand reached for his mouth to stop whatever was about to come out before he felt Marco's hand resting on his shoulder pads. "Take a deep breath, you'll be fine."

"Jayden was right..." He almost puked again as he saw Coach put away his clipboard and clear his throat. "I'm too slow for any of this, too weak for—"

"Dude, you just have to throw the ball. It's not a big deal."

He was right. The quarterback was privileged. The ball snapped into his hands, and a few seconds later, it was off to someone else, someone like Marco who would put himself in danger just to catch it.

Put himself against those guys...

"And just throw fast enough before you get tackled by the linebackers."

"Linebackers?"

Marco pointed at the behemoths standing next to Pomo, who was by himself on another scale altogether.

"These guys."

"I'm going to throw up..."

Coach Morrison had finally put his clipboard away, staring at all the recruits around. For some reason he lingered a bit more over Lucas. Was it because he was the weakest of the bunch? Or he had forced Coach's hand so much he had to talk with his parents? Anyway the idea was enough to make Lucas shiver.

"Alright, boys! We only have 2 sessions before the season starts. Let's make it count."

Some rocked back and forth, others' fingers and feet seemingly moving for the sole purpose of moving. Lucas could feel the excitement building up, an excitement that had the inverse effect on him.

But amongst the crowd some of the unfamiliar faces caught his attention. They still appeared restless but somewhat it felt more...natural, as they were simply waiting orders. These were probably the juniors and seniors, with nothing clothes-wise to differentiate them, and yet Lucas could tell.

"What are you waiting for, then?" Coach blew the whistle. "Laps! Now!"

They hurried their feet onto the sideline and started running. It only took a couple of seconds before Lucas found himself at the back, with only Marco at his side.

"How... how many laps?"

"We never know. You either give up or wait for Coach's whistle."

"Huh?"

He wasn't lying. Lucas could have sworn they ran for two hours straight. But he was also sure the real time was around 15 minutes or so. It felt like an eternity. And every time he passed the coach, he earned a new comment on his physical prowess.

"Mr. Reed! How could you play a full game if you can't give me 15 min of jogging?"

Then the drills rolled around: the ladder thing, the cone thing, a few 40-yard runs with 15-second recovery. So far, he had asked for a time-out 6 times, and each got turned down by the coach, accompanied by a few laughs.

"How are you holding up?" Marco asked with a mouthful of water.

Lucas was too focused on bringing in as much air as possible. Coach Morrison was buried in his clipboard again. This meant a few seconds, or even minutes, of peace.

"Why do you keep trying?"

The voice was different, forcing Lucas to get a good look at their new interlocutor. This was Owen, the blond Mr-Perfect freshman. So far, he had gotten nothing but praises from the coach.

Lucas hummed.

"This is not a joke. And I'm sure you know it yourself. You're not fit for this type of sport."

Marco cracked his neck as he also lean closer to Owen, "hey rookie I would suggest you—"

"Oh I know" Lucas added still struggling to steady his breathing, "I'm actually the worst so far"

The pair waited for a second sentence that never came out.

"And?"

He had to wait to finish his water before Lucas kept on, "and? That's it..."

The comment made Marco burst out of laughter leaving a confused Owen standing like a statue.

"What are you—"

The whistle chimed loudly, bringing the commotion to a halt as Coach Morrison divided the players into groups. He mentioned some kind of skill-based group, and before he had the time to catch his breath, Lucas found himself with Mason, Owen, and other aspiring quarterbacks.

The coach then selected group leaders, apparently to ensure things ran smoothly. Mason was chosen for Lucas's group with no surprises.

"Are you okay?" Mason asked, probably wondering why Lucas was so absorbed in the other groups forming.

"I watched some videos on PlayTube. Aren't teams supposed to have dedicated coaches?"

"Yes, and dietitians and masseuses," he laughed. "Sure, with a full team like ours, we would need more coaches. But so far, Mr. Morrison is the only one who accepted to work with us."

"I see..."

"Bear in mind, during my sophomore year, we had no coach. It was Coach Steven who balanced between basketball and us." The grin on his face widened. "So we are lucky Coach Morrison is here."

"Hmm..."

"Anyhow," he added while clapping, "let's get in position, everyone."

The group gathered while Lucas recognized the familiar faces. Marco was already waving his hands around frantically, arguing with Mason to go first.

Diego, Owen, and Ethan did a couple of stretches off to the side, but Jayden was the one who caught Lucas's attention. He wasn't warming up, and his breathing was almost too perfect. Did the gruesome drills have no effect on him at all? All he could say was that Jayden's eyes didn't let go of him one bit.

Do I have something in my teeth...?

The drill was pretty simple, as Mason explained. One on one. Diego, Jayden, and Marco would rotate between receiver and defensive back. The rest would handle the throws.

The teams formed as Lucas watched the line where he had to stand. The line where he had to throw the ball.

"We all have three shots, then we rotate," Mason added, spreading his fingers around the leather before setting his feet over the line.

He leaned over Marco and asked what route he liked. It gave everyone a few well-deserved seconds to catch their breath before they all scrambled back into position.

"Sseeet... Hut!"

Shouting would have been an understatement. It felt like an order urging every pair of eyes to focus solely on what was going on. And with it, Marco exploded forward.

He faced Diego, who wasn't physically impressive compared to what Lucas had witnessed so far. All he remembered was that his goal was to become a cornerback for varsity. But one thing was sure, even for Lucas: Marco was the fastest on the team, but what stood out was his ability to change direction quickly.

"A slant..." Lucas murmured.

And that's what happened. Marco feinted, and Diego unfortunately bought it right away, allowing for a perfect spiral that landed right where it needed to be.

It ended with three good catches for Marco, who didn't give Diego a single chance. Then they rotated, allowing Ethan, the golden boy kid of whatever famous player's son he was, to show his skills.

"Hut!"

The scream resonated around as the players sprinted. Lucas felt the cadence was forced, like someone simply screaming from the top of their lungs. He winced. Who was he to judge? He would never dare scream like that to give out a command anyway.

Ethan's movements were fine, not bad, but maybe less refined. His arm threw good-looking spirals, but his timing felt off completely, and it showed. Diego only got one of the three attempts.

"Come on! You should have caught those!"

Diego cleared a bead of sweat. "Dude, Marco is not letting me breathe..."

He was right. It was actually the first time he had watched Marco in action. Marco the joker, the funny guy who always spoke his mind. On the field, he was something else. His speed was dangerous. Even he himself didn't seem to realize it.

Then came Mr. Perfect Owen, and once again, nothing seemed out of place. The ball landed perfectly in all three attempts, giving Marco a perfect 3 to nothing.

“Reed? Your turn.”

Mason’s comment startled Lucas, who was too absorbed in watching the plays unfold. His knees started giving out already as he stepped forward, Mason showing him where to set his feet.

“Thank—thank you...”

Lucas waved at Diego. His face was drenched in sweat, with no sign of excitement in sight. Probably from all the misses today.

“Whatever you want to throw,” Diego beat Lucas to it. “Marco is too fast for me anyw—”

“You should vary your acceleration at the start. Marco is hot-headed. Meet him at your top speed right away, and he will probably pick it up. Since you’re not fast enough, make him hesitate.”

Lucas’s words made Diego freeze.

“And attack his right. He is a bit slower there.”

He turned and pulled the ball out of Mason’s hands, who also seemed mysteriously rooted to the spot.

“I’ll... take that...”

Mason shook his head. “Sure...”

Diego went back to his position without a word. For a few moments, the turf went silent. Only the faint grunts from the other groups were alive.

“Hmmm... go...?!”

No one moved, not even Lucas.

“You’re going to have to speak up!” Ethan added with snark as the others laughed.

“Yeah. Come on, Lucas, give the order!” Marco shouted behind Diego’s shoulder.

“Okay...” Lucas said, clearing his throat while gripping the ball tighter. This was it; the form was signed, the coach had recruited him. He was actually throwing the ball for real now.

“H—Hut!”

The mere bark was enough to make Diego accelerate as Lucas took a couple of steps back like he had been doing for weeks now.

His arm fully stretched forward, his hips rotated just enough to generate power, launching the ball toward the target. A non-existent target.

The ball came zipping way above Marco and Diego, who could only stand watching the overthrown leather fly by and hit the turf.

Whoops... I was so focused on throwing a good one, I didn't look at Diego...

"Hmm... sorry..."

He expected the laughs that erupted from his little misadventure, but in reality, his mind was already past it, and it showed on his face.

"Stop smiling like that. It was terrible," Diego said as he approached a grinning Lucas.

"But it didn't wobble."

"Right, whatever..."

They set themselves back into position, waiting for Lucas's call. The kid exhaled longer, as if trying to buy some time. The shaking that took his knees seemed to have faded away. I can throw...

"Hut...!" He scraped out another low call before arming his throw.

Like he had advised, Diego didn't fully accelerate at first. And that hesitation prevented Marco from reaching his top speed. Then came the feint and the attack on his right side.

Everything was aligned as the ball screamed toward Diego and flew by his side before he even had time to turn.

Damn it... he is way slower than Marco...

"Damn it, Lucas! For the love of me, just wait for a bit before throwing!" Marco yelled as Diego went and picked the ball up silently.

Some slick remarks didn't escape Lucas's attention this time, nor did Owen shaking his head in disappointment. I told you so. That's what Lucas imagined most of the comments consisted of. They had all watched him fumble two throws in a row now.

The sound of Diego's cleats brought him back.

"I'm sorry, Diego—"

"It worked."

Lucas blinked as the ball landed between his hands.

"I can't believe it, but... I got him. Did you see it? I had him exactly like you said."

"Well..." Lucas scratched his head. "But still, you didn't catch the ball..."

"Duh! Just wait before throwing next time."

"Not optimal..."

"What?"

Lucas put the ball down and lifted his hands toward Diego, mimicking the width and length of a football.

"For the next one, Marco will expect you on the right. That won't work twice in a row..." He held his hands to show him. "So just show me your hands like this when you decide what to do."

"Show hands? Decide what to do? Wait, what?"

"When you decide if you're feinting left or right, show me your hands at that moment."

"So... I'm going left? Or we keep the slant on his outside—"

"You decide, I'll adapt. Just show me the hands."

Lucas picked up the ball and walked back toward his line, leaving behind a confused Diego.

Okay... this should work...

"Hut...!"

Diego pushed forward, and at the same time, Lucas skipped back for a few steps. It looked like Diego was following the same plan, although Marco was backpedaling way closer, as if already accustomed to the variation in speed.

Then Lucas threw the ball, and with it came a throbbing sensation burning through his hand. That was it. He didn't know how, but he knew. It was perfectly released. He could still feel the leather leaving his index finger, the last part in contact, rolling the ball into the air.

Diego had feinted outside before completing the slant onto Marco's weak right side. But Marco stayed close. He probably was expecting the same angle of attack.

Then the sound of the ball impacting Diego's gloves resonated. His pace slowed before he noticed the ball was sitting tightly between his hands. Hands he had shown exactly as Lucas asked.

Marco had been successfully shadowing him, meaning he had read the play accurately. And yet it was Diego who somehow received the pass before he had even completed his turn. His hands were still rising through the cut when the ball found them.

“Ha! That totally worked!” Lucas exclaimed, looking at Mason, who didn’t reciprocate. In fact, Lucas seemed to have disappeared totally as everyone was glued to the ball, as if wondering how it got there.

“What—what was that?” Mason stuttered.

# Chapter 8

Diego kept staring at the ball that sat tightly between his palms. Even Marco, to Lucas's surprise, didn't jump around screaming like he always did. In fact, everything fell into a quietness, forcing him to be the only one to speak up amongst them.

"Hmm...is there a problem?"

Mason didn't leave Diego's sight. "No...it's just that—"

"How did you do that?" Owen stepped in. "You threw before he made the turn. Was that a lucky throw? Did you plan this—"

"It's obviously a lucky one." Ethan spoke loudly but didn't bother getting closer from where he stood. His arms were crossed, and his face oozed confidence. "You've seen his throws before."

Murmurs erupted, shifting the focus from the ball to Lucas. What were they expecting exactly? He had thrown the ball simply into Diego's hands. It was an optimally chosen path, away from Marco's hands and assuring the ball was secured. Easy way to gain yards.

The thoughts were clear, but he couldn't articulate them. How could he? The six of them surrounding him felt like vultures waiting for meat.

"Damn, Lucas, that was insanely clean!" Diego exclaimed, joining the huddle, followed closely by Marco, whose face looked undecided between annoyed or impressed.

"So? You're taking our job now? We don't have to receive anymore. Just wait?" he said jokingly.

Diego threw the ball back at Lucas. "You really did this on purpose?"

"Yes...it's better that way. You'd beat the defender every time—"

"Every time?"

Jayden skittered between the freshmen before stopping right in front of Lucas. He was definitely above 6 feet now that he had seen him closer, and a crease was already forming between his brows. Lucas wasn't sure if Jayden was a junior or senior, but picking a fight with him already on his first day seemed a bit counterproductive.

I'll just be nice and agree with everything he says—

"You're saying that was calculated?" the cornerback asked.

"Y—yes."

Jayden glanced at Mason. "Run it again. I'll cover Marco this time."

"Jayden, we need to rotate first—"

“Just this one,” he added without giving Mason time to answer back. He was already jogging to the starting line farther away.

“You got Jayden’s attention now,” Mason said to Lucas, signaling everyone to give them space. “Show us.”

Lucas nodded, his hands rolling around the ball, making sure each of his fingers had a good press on the leather. Luck...why would anyone think it was luck? Diego’s slant and feint were too obvious for anyone to follow, so he simply sent the ball—

“So what are we running? 10-yard out?”

Marco’s question caught him off guard. His blond hair was already drenched in sweat. And not even mentioning that piece of armor he was wearing. He should have looked tired from all the drills. And yet, only a grin spread across his face like an excited kid at Christmas.

“Jayden...should I know something about him?” Lucas asked.

“Hmm, not really. He is a junior and has played since freshman year. He’s a bit like Mason but meaner.”

That didn’t help at all. Lucas should have probably mentioned that he was talking about Jayden’s cornerback skills. Oh well, everyone was already watching them, which made Lucas rush his answer.

“10-yard out is fine.”

“Are we doing the thing?” Marco asked smiling. “The hand thing?”

“Sure, you don’t have to hold them as blatantly as Diego. I’m more used to your cuts.”

“Cool!”

They set themselves into position. Lucas used this moment again to clear his mind. This was only his fourth shot, but he enjoyed that small window when everything went silent. Before the snap. A silence only he could break.

“Hut!”

He pulled the ball back in a swift motion while his feet dragged backward. He was glad his cadence was loud enough because Marco was already bursting forward; his route deviated a tad to the right, and yet Jayden kept his pace matched.

This is it...

The ball left his right hand and once again spiraled toward the pair still battling for every yard. Then Marco shifted his weight with his outside foot, cutting inside. Lucas had seen

Marco countless times. His top speed was already elite, but his cuts and his speed out of the break were something else. Marco's greatest gift.

But Jayden stayed close, almost matching Marco's pace. From a seasoned junior this athletic, it didn't come as a surprise. Lucas could tell he wasn't all talk.

The ball landed between Marco's hands as his torso was barely aligned with his change of direction. His hips hadn't even fully turned. The timing was perfect. No one could stop such a fast throw. Football seemed quite easy now, eating away a few yards like this until you reached the end zone.

Marco slowed down a couple of steps, the ball sitting between his hands. Jayden followed, but neither uttered a word. Not even Mason or the others.

Again with the silence... Surely they had seen an optimal throw like this before. Lucas wasn't reinventing the sport. He was simply following basic geometry.

"That was good, right?" he muttered, trying to get Mason to speak up.

"Good? You're kidding me, Lucas? This is insane!"

Mason coming back to life somehow made the crowd relax. At least, that's what Lucas got from the chatter ripping back to life all around him. Marco was rage-baiting Jayden by waving the ball he had caught right in front of his face.

Lucas earned a tap on his shoulder as Mason smiled. "I knew you had something, buddy. That was one hell of a throw."

"Explain."

Owen's cleats stomped over the turf, his face too close for comfort, making Lucas awkwardly skid back. "Sorry—Owen... explain what?"

"Show me how you do it. If you can do something like that, there's no reason I can't."

"Well... I—"

"Out with it!"

This time, Ethan tore between them. His nostrils flared and his face flushed. It probably took everything he had to ask Lucas for some advice.

"Where do I start—I—"

Jayden cut him off. "This is some bullshit. You guys have definitely rehearsed that joke of a throw."

“Rehearsed? I can’t even remember my history lessons. You’re just embarrassed I caught it,” Marco chimed in.

“Come on, Lucas. What’s your secret?” Mason’s question closed the commotion that was coming alive.

Lucas drew a deep breath. “Well. I’ve seen Marco run routes a hundred times. Humans—I mean Marco, even if he has mastered his slants, through repetition, they develop a tell...”

“Repetition builds intuition!”

Lucas nodded at Marco’s enthusiasm before he kept on. “Marco has a specific cadence in which he draws his steps. His deceleration differs depending on whether he decides to cut in or out. 1/5 of a step is lost when he picks his weak side.”

Lucas had to wave his hand in front of his friend, seeing that mentioning he had a weak side was already tickling him. “I’m not saying weak. You’re just not the fastest when cutting with your right leg... anyway...”

He inhaled again.

“So when that happens, there’s roughly a 2 out of 3 chance of him cutting between a 45 and a 65-degree angle, which is what he prefers. The margin is small at this point, and leaving him a couple of steps in, even if he is fast enough, would be less optimal...”

They all glared as if Lucas was speaking another language. His confident voice slowly faded.

“...So that’s when I account for it by sending the ball...”

No reaction but gaping mouths.

“...directly into his hands...”

They all burst into incomprehensible laughter. Aside from Owen’s stoic face, they all either had trouble breathing or couldn’t look Lucas in the eyes. He even started laughing awkwardly in case he missed the joke. His own joke, apparently.

“And here I thought Mason’s group would be the most serious.”

The voice rushed within the group, loud enough to stop the bickering. It was low and with a familiar hint of old age, which made everybody straighten immediately.

“Sorry, Coach, it’s just Lucas here. His throws are actually insane,” Mason stuttered as he was the only one Coach Morrison approached.

His hand brushed over the grey hairs at his chin. He hummed as usual, like a machine about to start. “Insane, you said?” he asked without giving Mason time to answer, as he was already closer than Lucas would have liked.

“Reed! Did I recruit another clown by mistake? We already have Marco.”

“Hey—” Marco complained from afar.

“Care to explain?” the coach kept on.

“I threw a pass, and when I explained how, everyone started laughing.”

“Hmm... that insane throw Mason mentioned.” He leaned closer. “And what do you think about it?”

“Nothing...” Lucas shrugged. “It’s the safest, most optimal way to score a few yards effectively.”

“Show me, then.”

They executed right away, although this time Ethan insisted on running the route, which got Marco even more excited. It would have made more sense for Marco to run again since he was used to him. Allowing Ethan now would force a few unknown new variables and would defeat the purpose of showing his pass.

The rebuttal was completely clear in Lucas’s mind, but nothing came out of his mouth. He didn’t dare cut Marco and Ethan’s incessant rambling. Fortunately, his friend got the upper hand, as expected.

They ran a slant this time; the play was straightforward, and the ball zipped right at Marco’s hands while he made his turn. Jayden’s jaw clenched as he hissed inaudible words through his teeth. This time, everyone fell into silence, waiting for only one thing: Coach Morrison’s reaction.

“Ingram! Come here, would you?” He yelled at the other group of linemen and centers, who looked like they were training to fight bears. Ingram probably didn’t stand out, as Lucas realised the dark-skinned kid always stood near Pomo. But he was... large? Abnormally large for a high schooler. Marco sent the ball toward Lucas, who didn’t even notice as it bounced off his chest. Watching that new titan jogging toward them surely wasn’t good news.

“Mason, you’ll play center. Don’t let Ingram get to Lucas. Understood?”

“Center? Me? Ingram will tear me apart!”

The coach murmured a few things to Ingram, who nodded. They weren’t actually murmurs, but the sound seemed to have muffled into an incoherent buzz. Lucas couldn’t concentrate; he needed to pick up the ball and start. He knew that, but somehow his hands wouldn’t move.

He will tear Mason apart... what about me?

They decided to run the same route again. Marco as receiver and Jayden covering. But this time, two new pieces were added: Ingram the ogre and Mason as a line of defense.

I'm dead...

"Whenever you're ready, Reed!" Coach Morrison bellowed.

"H—Hut!"

That was the same route, the same movements he had done several times. Nothing changed, nothing changed. Somehow, he thought repeating that would make it true, but in reality, for the first time, Lucas had lost sight of Marco, like a background coming out of focus. His body screamed at him to get out of Ingram's way, who had already shoved past Mason like he didn't matter.

The ball never left his hand. His fingers were still deeply dug into the leather, but it never launched. His calf hit the bleacher before he realized he had sidestepped way too much. Or maybe he was escaping that juggernaut running at full speed.

"What the hell?" The words scraped out of Ethan's mouth. "Where were you going like that?"

Lucas didn't know where to look at first. Only Ingram, scratching his head, probably wondering why Coach had asked him here. It was only when the tall lineman stopped that Lucas's vision came back as a whole. Between the comments and the confused looks, it was Coach Morrison who broke the silence.

"Did you really think football could be solved that easily?"

Lucas didn't say a word. Coach Morrison's eyes remained fixed on him.

"The moment you start thinking like that, you've already lost."

# Chapter 9

Marco jogged back toward Lucas, breaking the awkward silence.

"Damn, Lucas. Where were you going like that? It looked like you were running away."

"I kind of was," Lucas replied, still fixated on the newly added variable. A wall of muscle named Ingram.

"I guess it's also the first time you're facing linemen like him. I get it, they can be scary." He shook Lucas lightly. "But fear, my friend, is only a—"

"Oh, I wasn't afraid. I overcorrected," he said. "I was expecting to see a line at some point, but I guess I was too focused on Ingram..."

"Come on, I was about to drop a nice quote here."

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"Fear is only for the— no, fear is—"

Lucas had already moved away, closer to Ingram, who still had that confused look written all over his face. Probably wondering why Coach had called him here.

"You're annoying."

"What did you just say to me?"

He was about to repeat himself, as Lucas was confused about what part of being annoying Ingram had missed. But his answer never came out as Marco pulled him aside.

"Ingram! Chill! Lucas speaks in obscure ways sometimes."

"I really don't."

"Zip it, you!"

A dry laugh escaped from the Coach's mouth. "Alright! Back onto your rotations, boys. Ingram, you can go back. Thanks, buddy."

"Whatever." His tongue clicked before he jogged back to the other group. Lucas dragged his feet toward the line of players waiting for the rotations. Owen and Ethan didn't say a word, only the occasional side-eye. Even the usually vocal Jayden casually moved up to receiver.

"Damn it..." Lucas muttered. This was such a wasted occasion. Why didn't he dare ask for another attempt? Facing Ingram opened a myriad of new variables. Another more complex approach to optimization.

Maybe I'll ask Ingram after practice...

"You would have a bit more time to throw during a real game. Mason is not made for center," Owen said, cutting Lucas's train of thought without breaking eye contact with the drill ahead.

"You're right..."

"By the way, I apologize for my comments. You definitely have something in that arm of yours."

"Th—thank you."

"I mean, don't get me wrong, you're terrible at everything else."

Ethan chimed in, "Yep, the worst."

Owen laughed as he kept on, "But you better show us how to throw like you did."

They were acting like Lucas was some kind of magician. Throwing was pretty simple once you understand that prolate shape's behaviour. Then just aim for the receiver's hands. Not sorcery.

"Sure, I'll show you."

Mason made sure the rotation kept rolling. At first, Lucas found himself at the receiving end. What a disaster that was, although he knew what he signed up for. Running forward, then changing direction, was already putting a lot of strain on his legs, and then he had to look up while running to catch that ball? This was nothing like being a quarterback. This was hell.

And defense was even worse. Could he even call his attempt a defense? They all tore through him like he didn't matter. Jayden shoved him with one arm, and that was enough to make a catch. Marco was simply too fast and, in a heartbeat, was already ahead for a deep in.

As the drill reached its end, Lucas knew he wouldn't get another chance at throwing that day. Flat on the field, he tried to catch his breath. For the fifth time this session, his knees had hit the ground, sweat streaking from his forehead as he panted for his life.

The team was already gathering for the last scrimmage. Some even jogged back laughing. What were they made of? Is this really one of the worst teams in the country? What would he expect from the higher-ranked high schools? Aliens?

His eyes followed Ingram as he joined the huddle. One encounter wasn't enough... His tongue clicked. I won't be able to picture him on the field when I practice...

So far, he was only able to do it with Marco. But now that he officially joined the team, Lucas needed more, and the scrimmage was the perfect occasion.

Coach Morrison gave some pointers first about the drills and what improvements he sought for next time. He then congratulated everyone and mentioned that Saturday was the last session and that the training would drastically change after that.

Lucas missed the rest, or maybe he heard, but his brain was too busy thinking of a way to throw around linebackers. Then he caught himself. Was he trying to solve football? Why did the coach advise otherwise? Through his pondering, an unknown name caught his attention.

“Cape Coral will be our first game next Friday,” Morrison said while poking at his temple. “I need all of you to already be there, understood?”

They all hurled a “Yes, sir!” while Marco leaned closer to Lucas. “Cape Coral went to Regionals last year.”

Right. There were tournaments and such. Some people would come and watch them play, from both sides...

“That means we’re probably losing this, right?” Lucas said, resisting his stomach turning. Marco’s tap on his back made it somewhat worse.

“Aah... not sure. We’re not the same RiverDale as last year.” A grin was already forming. “Pomo is here, and Mason will probably be able to play running back. That and your freak of a throw and—”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t count on that. I’m miles away from even playing a game.”

“I don’t think you are that far,” Marco added before he straightened himself almost too fast. It didn’t take long for Lucas to notice the coach had stopped talking and only had a death glare ready for both of them.

“Like I was saying, Friday is a friendly game, but that doesn’t mean we’ll take it lightly.”

A few nodded, mostly the older members.

“This year, RiverDale goes to Regionals! That’s non-negotiable! Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Alright, boys, let’s run some plays now!”

They all scattered pretty fast. Lucas rushed to the bleachers to clean them. He was already used to doing it, as he would not be picked for the scrimmage for obvious reasons. This was usually the time Marco tried to motivate him, but Lucas made sure to skitter between the players fast enough.

He didn’t care. From the old benches, he could see better. The view from the highest part was perfect. Every moving piece, every movement could be analyzed. He wished to be able

to see a game like this and play at the same time. Maybe with some kind of VR set? Would that work? That would be a real cheat code for sure.

Then he saw Ingram and Pomo rushing toward Mason. Unlike him, Mason was able to release the ball right at Jayden's hands for a quick 10-yard.

He grumbled under his breath, "I can't see..."

When he faced Ingram, he would be lying if he said he didn't really get scared. Surely that kid was close to 250. But when he rushed past Mason, it was like Lucas's body sidestepped on its own. Maybe it attempted to erase Ingram from his line of sight.

It's easier when it's just me throwing...

He saw Mason again throwing another good one. This time, Jayden was practically on his hip. Yet it didn't matter.

None of Mason's throws were optimal, and yet they found the receiver most of the time. What was Lucas missing?

"Reed! Come down, will you?"

Lucas obliged as he descended rapidly and planted his feet near Coach Morrison.

"Watch the game from ground level. I think you'll learn a thing or two."

"Yes..."

At first, it only confirmed what Lucas had already noticed. Mason was a bit taller, so his line of sight was probably less cluttered. But something stood out: Mason's drops varied. Sometimes it was 3, 7, sometimes even none.

"Separation..." The word found his mouth as if forcibly squeezed into existence. He had seen some videos addressing this, although on the field, it felt easier said than done.

"Reed!" Coach Morrison said coolly, making Lucas realize he had stepped over the line and was seemingly not stopping. "This is a poor attempt at sneaking in to play."

"Sorry, I was thinking..." Lucas stammered before turning back. The plays kept on, and with each throw from Mason, Lucas didn't miss a single frame. In fact, the thought made his head tilt as he asked,

"Can I record?"

"Sure..."

That was perfect. Professional videos on PlayTube had their strengths, but they never got into the grit of a real game. Even though it was a simple scrimmage, Lucas found himself almost drooling at the myriad of sequences he could analyze.

“Reed. You got heart and a freakish aim, I’ll tell you that.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll be adding an extra day of training for you, alone. You and I will be hitting the gym every Wednesday. I can’t have RiverDale’s future quarterback run above 5.”

“Gym—you said gym? That’s where you use rusted metallic disks? I have to check if I got my tetanus—”

“Goddamn kid! Was the last time you visited a gym in 1960?”

The plays kept on, enough for Lucas to have a solid 10 minutes of footage to review later. The players finally gathered for a final recap before everyone was finally set free.

Marco, with his usual enthusiasm, decided to walk with Lucas. Which he did every time anyway. Lucas would have loved to check the recording on the way back. He fidgeted with his phone between his fingers, but Owen joining made it impossible to ask for some privacy.

Owen had been bombarding him: How do you do that exactly? How many years have you been throwing? And so many more questions with no end in sight. He was even able to overshadow Marco’s incessant post-training babbling. And for some reason, Lucas’s answers didn’t seem to satisfy him.

I mean... dude, I told you... Lucas said to himself before reiterating his answer, “I just aim for Marco’s hands.”

“Initiating Lucas’s Pass: Bullet Pass.” Marco waved his hands like a stiff robot, which even made Owen chuckle.

The joke probably did its thing since the topic was now dropped and went into sports and girls. Finally, something Lucas wouldn’t be harassed for, and this allowed him to divert some brain power into Mason’s throws.

“Alright, guys, I’ll see you Saturday!” Owen said as the group arrived at the first junction. Owen was actually quite close to their neighborhood, which only meant one thing: they’ll probably walk together every time.

So much questioning in sight...

“Oh, and Lucas!” He waved from afar. “I’ll be the team’s quarterback. You better keep that in mind.”

Marco shoved his elbow into Lucas's arm. "Oh, you better not let him get away," he muttered as Lucas stepped forward. "Yeah, go at him."

"That's a nice goal to have! Good luck!"

Lucas's shout made both of them freeze. He turned and kept on, passing by a frozen Marco. "Are you coming?"

"Lucas, what was that?"

---

Lucas pushed the door open with his shoulder, already pulling his phone out before his cleats were even off. He had exactly 13 min and 51 seconds of footage to go through. Still, Mason's drop on that second play had looked different. Maybe five steps? He would have to slow it down and—

The house was quiet. He realized he hadn't noticed one of the usual lights being on from outside. Were they sleeping?

"Mom?"

Lucas glanced toward the kitchen before dropping his bag near the entrance. His dad's shoes weren't there either. That was odd for a Wednesday. There should have been at least one of them, if not both. Half a week of work; they were usually too tired to go out.

Then he noticed the shoes. A red pair he didn't recognize sat neatly against the wall. Someone was here, a woman judging by the size. And his parents were nowhere to be found.

His eyes slowly moved toward the stairs. Either there was a thief in the house or—

"If they had told me my brother would someday get back home late from football practice..."

Lucas turned so fast his shoulder slammed against the wall.

"I would have said they didn't know my Lucas." A woman stood at the kitchen entrance, arms crossed over her chest. Her dark hair fell well past her shoulders now, much longer than the last time he had seen her. She looked mostly the same otherwise, except maybe a little more tired.

"Claire?"

"Luc."

"What are you doing here?"

Claire's eyebrows furrowed. "Hello to you too, little brother. I'm doing great. The trip was wonderful. Thank you for asking."

Lucas stared at her. His adult sister was here without warning. It didn't take long to connect the dots. That's a textbook mom move...

"What are you doing here?"

"You tell me? Why is Mom, and also Dad, by the way, asking me to come here to reason with you?"

"So you drove 310 miles to see—"

"367. I took a longer road, needed to clear my head and prep myself to deal with this."

"That's not optimal." He grinned.

"Depends on who you ask." She smiled back.

Claire sighed before walking over and pulling him into a hug. Lucas barely had time to lift his arms before she squeezed him against her, shoulder pads and all.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

"Football equipment."

"I can see that." She released him and took a step back, looking him up and down. "So? What's that all about?"

Lucas bent over to untie his cleats. "Mom really called you..."

"Mom called me. Dad called me. Then Mom called me again because apparently Dad wasn't supposed to call me before she explained everything." She fixed her hair. "And according to them, you woke up one morning and decided you wanted brain damage."

Lucas looked up. "That's statistically unlikely."

"Lucas."

"What?"

Claire rubbed both hands over her face. "I drove 5 hours for this. All because you can't communicate with them?"

"They won't get it. You know how they are. All Mom and Dad want are perfect grades and the Olympiad."

“And joining medical school,” Claire added, making both of them laugh. “They’ve always been tense with this. I mean, I got it too, remember? I’m no more a doctor than you are a football player.”

Lucas considered arguing, but his phone was still in his hand. Mason’s footage suddenly felt considerably more interesting.

“What are you watching?” she asked, seemingly noticing the video.

“Practice.”

“You just came from practice.”

“Yes.”

“And now you’re watching the practice you just attended?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Lucas finally looked at her. “To get better.”

For once, Claire didn’t immediately answer.

Her eyes moved from the phone to the pads still sitting over his shoulders. “Mom said you were obsessed with this all of a sudden.”

“I’m not obsessed.”

“You’re reviewing footage before taking your shoes off.”

Lucas looked down. One cleat was still on.

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“Come on, Lucas, we are not the sports type. I mean, you of all people could see that, right? We use our brain, that’s our gift, not muscles.”

This time, Lucas was able to take off his remaining shoe, eyes still glued to his screen. Using his brain? That’s exactly what he was doing.

“It’s just a sport, a sport I find interesting.”

“But you have other better options. Take me, for instance. I’ve been swimming for a while and I never felt any—”

“Judging by your chin and hips... also, the shirt you’re wearing is a Medium, which is unusually baggy. I’m assuming you gained 6 or 8 lbs since—”

“Oh yeah? This early?” She cut him off, pulling out a familiarly old notebook with only Lucas written on its cover. Her pen clicked as she read today’s date out loud.

“Subject 1. Questionable hygiene...”

“I just came from prac—”

“Social awareness remains severely underdeveloped. Spontaneous speech is still apparent, unfortunately. Thought process is still excessively analytical. The subject hasn’t made any progress in years.”

They glanced at each other before both lapsing into laughter again as they stepped into the kitchen.

“At least you’re doing okay, Luc,” she said, rummaging through what looked like takeout.

For once, he came home without the dreadful feeling of a need to argue or justify. This new breeze felt nice. It wasn’t new, maybe forgotten. It had been a while since he could simply speak to someone casually. He even rested his phone on the kitchen top.

“You started that new job? How is it?”

“Oh, Luc, you won’t believe it. I’ve seen real criminals, like for real.”

“Wow...”

“It puts things into perspective...”

Lucas got the plates ready. “And you like it?”

“Love it! The human brain is such a marvel. I should know, I was living with you.”

“I don’t know if that’s a compliment...”

Claire chuckled with a mouthful of soda before she wiped her face. “Mom told me your next practice is Saturday, right?”

Lucas nodded.

“I’ll come with you. I need to assess all of this in the field, then I’ll present a case to the authorities.”

“Wait... what?”

# Chapter 10

"I can't believe it's still standing!" Claire said as she approached Building H. That piece of concrete was already abandoned when she was a freshman back in the day. The tall grass reclaiming its rightful place, coupled with the many cracks, brought a smile to her face. For a moment, spending time here, far from the cars or the students howling, didn't look so bad.

Then she stumbled upon the rusty gate and the overgrown field lying ahead. Even from afar, the bleachers looked rotten and in dire need of repainting. Her smile faded.

"I'm not sure if it's relaxing or depressing now..." she muttered before noticing Lucas straggling behind. "Lucas? What are you waiting for?"

"You really don't have to do this..."

It had been two days since she came back, and they had barely interacted. The situation at home didn't help at all; Lucas stayed in his room the entire time watching that footage.

"You can say you don't like spending time with me."

"It's not that..."

His face had already flushed past the normal range. Good for him. That would teach him a lesson. She'd gladly take any occasion to embarrass him.

"I told you. I want to see it for myself." She beckoned him to follow. "So let's go!"

He sighed as the pair crossed the field, getting closer to the few players already there stretching. The tall man in black was probably the "famous" Coach Morrison her mother had been talking about. She could still hear her mom complaining that he had to be the one who brainwashed Lucas.

"Lucas!"

Another kid waved from afar. Amongst the few players that were calmly stretching, this one was literally jumping in place. Was he waving at Lucas? With such enthusiasm? Seeing Lucas wave back made it clear. That was new.

The kid jogged toward them, still calling her brother's name. His face harboured some Hispanic features and at first glance he seemed to have a strong lower body. He didn't appear very tall for this kind of sport, but that was just from what she had heard about football players being literal monsters.

"Oh?! Well, hello to you, Ma'am?"

Lucas didn't give her time to answer. "Marco, this is my sister Claire. Claire, this is Marco, wide receiver."

“Wide receiver? That’s it? That’s how you’d introduce me to anyone?” he protested while poking Lucas’s head.

So this was Marco. The one who texted Lucas almost every day about football. If there was a brainwasher amongst them today, she wouldn’t start with the coach; Claire would put her money on Marco.

“So Marco, Ma’am you said? Do I look 40 to you?”

“N—not at all, Ma’am C—I mean, Claire! Nice to meet you!”

His hands jammed into his pockets while his eyes looked everywhere but her face. It was endearing how timid he looked because of her, but as soon as he shifted his focus onto her little brother, Marco’s eyes lost that awkwardness. He tapped his shoulder, talking, almost yelling, about some kind of bullet thing. The football jargon was already going over her head.

“I’ll introduce myself to the coach! Lucas, just act as if I’m not here.”

“It’ll be even more difficult now that you asked...”

“I’m not here at all!” she said while moving past the duo. The rest of the players lay on the grass, stretching their legs and backs under the scrutinizing eyes of their coach. He looked like a statue from afar; each of her steps brought her closer to him until she finally had a good grasp of his size. He was definitely on the genetically gifted side. At least he looked like he used to be.

Coach Morrison... I’ve dug into him. He is quite the mystery. This was his second year under RiverDale’s care. For a man with such a track record, why all the trouble coaching such a team?

“Mr. Morrison? My name’s Claire. I’m Lucas’s sister. Nice to meet you.”

His face turned mechanically. She almost expected the sound of old cogs coming alive in the way he glanced at her.

“Oh, Lucas’s sister! Welcome to RiverDale’s football, then,” he said, an unexpected smile tugging at his lips. “You’ve come to watch your brother? You won’t regret it, then. I guess the parents called?”

“How did you—”

“Just a guess. Although from what I’ve seen, communication is not Lucas’s strongest suit.”

It took her longer to formulate an adequate answer. Was she expecting a rugged old man stuck in his old ways and incapable of socializing aside from football?

“Unless he is playing and calling the plays, that is.”

"What do you mean?" she finally asked, not sure if the coach was really describing Lucas. Him calling plays? Surely this was a mistake.

"You'll see for yourself," he said, still staring ahead.

Claire sat comfortably as she watched Lucas join the others. Marco didn't let him get a word in edgewise. She knew Lucas well. A couple minutes of this and he would completely disengage, sometimes physically removing himself from the conversation.

Then Lucas started answering, once, twice... This was dangerously getting close to a normal conversation. Even a third blonde guy joined them. He was taller and more composed, which meant older, maybe a senior? But the crux was that he was also engaging in a conversation with her brother.

What was going on here? Is Lucas putting on an act because I'm here? she wondered.

The remaining players filled the field rather quickly. Now a crowd was forming as Coach Morrison gathered them. His voice was so loud she was able to hear him clearly, something he said about the last training session. The athletes had trouble staying in place. Some paced back and forth while others smoothed their hands over their equipment. Only Lucas waited patiently at the edges of the crowd, which was at least to be expected.

The coach made them run a few laps. Most finished without a hitch. They were even joking and talking while running. Lucas, on the other hand, was dead last. Her timid little brother was now running with gear on; the sentence landed awkwardly for Claire.

She remembered that summer trip. Lucas wasn't thrilled when Mom told him there would be a lot of hiking. She had seen her brother give up the first day and stay in the hotel for the whole vacation.

Now he was breaking a sweat, followed by Marco, who she assumed was only encouraging him. Claire leaned forward, scratching her chin. "Well, what is going on here, Lucas?" she muttered.

He finished last. Not really, Marco was behind him, but it was obvious. Yet Lucas earned a pat on the back. His face was drenched in sweat, and he had to cling to his knees, fighting for breath. So why did he have a half-smile creeping up?

They went on with some weird drills, one with a ladder. She could infer it was for speed. Another with cones and sidestepping; so far, no ball had been used. She overheard Lucas talking a few times about his role. Quarterback was apparently the cornerstone of the team, which didn't fit Lucas's profile at all.

She waited. Lucas was obviously bad at these, yet Coach Morrison was adamant about keeping him on the team. So much so that he had to visit her parents. She was expecting to see Lucas running around bringing towels and water to his teammates. That would have made more sense.

Then the whistle blew. It was time for the plays, which resulted in a wave of excited murmurs. She didn't know much about how football was played. In fact, she had only looked up the positions yesterday, even watched a few videos before she fell into PlayTube's black hole.

Coach Morrison allowed them a water break. Claire almost jumped down. This was the perfect moment to do some scouting.

"Luc? How are you holding up?"

Between chugging his water and realizing she was there, he raised a thumb up and tried to speak with a mouthful of water, which only resulted in him almost choking.

His face was red, and his chest was heaving. He sat on the grass immediately after emptying his bottle.

"Ah, 3 times..."

"What?"

"It's the third time I've sat today. I'm expecting 2 more... that's a 16% improvement so far..."

He wasn't acting. In fact, Lucas rarely pretended, and he wouldn't start today, even less with physical activity. No, he missed a few questions she asked, too absorbed in steadying his breathing.

"What route are we doing, Lucas?" Marco asked with that same otherworldly energy.

"If you're paired with Jayden, 10 out. But wait until I see the defense."

"Still afraid of Ingram, I see."

"I just need more data, I told you."

"Yes, of course, my AI buddy!" Marco laughed, mimicking a chatbot voice as he helped Lucas up. "I can't wait to see it for real."

"Yeah, it's not on demand, right? I need more time to account for Ingram or whoever is trying to sack me."

Claire was definitely lost in that conversation, but that last part sparked a question in her mind. "Sack?"

"He's talking about those guys," Marco chimed in, pointing at the linemen. Her eyes immediately noticed the one towering over the rest. What did they feed those kids? she thought. Then it hit her. Sack... this could only mean one thing...

"Wait, are you saying—"

“Their job is to get to Lucas before he throws. Actually, last time he ran away to the sidelines when he saw Ingram—”

“I overcorrected,” Lucas cut him off.

Claire didn’t know who that Ingram was, but if he was supposed to be standing amongst those giants, then it was only bad news. It looked like a bad joke; those guys were probably double Lucas’s weight.

“He is joking, right?” she asked her little brother directly.

“No. That’s their job. Mine is to get the ball to him.” He pointed at Marco, who held a peace sign.

You have to be kidding me, Lucas... There was not a single stutter in his sentence. Claire did what she usually did at work: she looked for a slight twitch of the lips, hands fidgeting, or something else. But nothing. Lucas was calm. That was it.

The whistle brought the end of the conversation as she was asked to return to the bleachers. Coach Morrison gave them what looked like position names, building two teams of eleven players. Lucas, alongside three other youngsters, was waiting on the sideline.

Then it started. She had watched a few professional clips, but up close, the power and speed they were showcasing were impressive. She glanced at Lucas, who seemed to miss nothing from the plays.

One kid grabbed the ball while running at full speed and was immediately met head-on by another who dropped him on the floor. She could hear the impact from up here. How could one hear two people colliding at a distance? “I understand why Mom was against this...”

The plays kept rolling. Sometimes they cheered, high fives flying; other times they cursed and almost got into a scuffle. Coach was slowly rotating Lucas’s quarterback teammates. She wasn’t sure if they were doing a good job, but so far none of them had gotten rolled over by one of those line-something.

Then it was Lucas’s turn.

He jogged onto the field, glancing left and right. One would say he gave the impression of being completely lost in the middle of the field. But unexpectedly, he went straight for that ridiculously tall one.

Lucas pointed at some other player, saying something she couldn’t hear. All she saw was a simple nod from the giant. Even she wouldn’t dare come up to someone like him to give some pointers. The thought forced her to step down from the bleachers. She needed to be much closer.

“That’s what I meant,” Coach Morrison said, beating her to it.

"I've never seen him talk to so many people in one day."

Morrison laughed. "Give him a football, apparently."

The players crouched down while Claire tried to remember what she had watched yesterday. Lucas was the quarterback. The big players in front protected him. Marco was a receiver, which meant he would run ahead and—

Lucas hummed. It was obviously from hesitation. It almost felt like a confused warning of some sort. Weren't quarterbacks much more vocal? Like that blonde guy?

"His cadence still needs work, though," the coach added, still watching.

"Hut!"

Claire lost track almost immediately. Marco sprinted to the side while Lucas stepped backward with the ball in his hands. The large bodies collided in front of him, and Claire heard another loud crack of shoulder pads.

Lucas never threw it. As he sidestepped, a shadow emerged from his side, and in a heartbeat, Claire saw her little brother getting ragdolled into the ground.

"Nice work, Ingram!" one shouted as he bumped helmets with him. Nice work? He almost killed Lucas! Claire stood up immediately and rushed over the line. "Lucas!"

The coach grabbed her arm. "Give him a minute. Your brother is fine. That's why we wear gear."

Gear? Gear won't protect Lucas from a 200-lb man charging at him. She glanced back toward the field. He probably had a few broken ribs or worse now...

Marco slid through the players and helped him up.

"You're supposed to throw, remember?" He laughed as Lucas got back on his feet with a faint smile.

A smile of all things...

"I'll get it," Lucas said, fixing his helmet. "Ingram was faster than I anticipated."

"We're still doing the thing?"

"We are."

They resumed their positions as Lucas rubbed his shoulder. She had to shake her head to make sure she wasn't hallucinating any of this.

Her gaze shifted onto the kid with dreads. “So this is that Ingram he was talking about...”

“Yep, promising lineman,” Morrison answered back.

“You let that thing run at my brother?”

“Only way to learn, for both of them, actually.”

How was Ingram getting anything out of this? He was tackling a much smaller and slower opponent.

The next few plays weren’t as clean. One throw hit the ground, and another went past Marco’s hands. For some reason, everyone’s eyes were still glued to Lucas as if something was about to happen. He exchanged a few words with Marco and the tall guy before moving back into position for another attempt.

An awkward call for the ball later, and the ball snapped. Lucas stepped backward again. Ingram rushed straight through the middle, and for a moment, Claire expected Lucas to do exactly what Marco had described earlier.

He moved to the side, and Ingram broke through again quite easily.

“Come on...” Morrison muttered.

Claire held her breath as Ingram reached for him.

Then it happened. The ball left Lucas’s hand, spiraling in an almost-straight line before landing between Marco’s hands. Oddly, the pass felt disconcerting; Marco hadn’t fully turned like he used to do with others, but the ball landed magnetically between his hands.

Ingram, Lucas, that tall lineman, and even Marco. Actually, everyone froze. She looked at Coach Morrison to pick up a semblance of a hint about what was going on. But nothing. Surely this was a successful pass. Why did everyone just stop?

“Ball is still live, Jayden! What are you doing?”

The yelling seemed to have stripped the players from their frozen state. That Jayden was probably the one near Marco because he immediately jumped at him.

The whistle blew, and the players shared confused looks. The same as Claire’s.

Marco had been tackled, and yet his head snapped back toward Lucas.

“You did it, Lucas!” He rushed to stand up, threw the ball aside, and ran toward him. “You actually did it!”

“Yeah, I could have been a bit faster. Ingram still took me by surprise here. Thanks to Pomo, I was able to stay—”

Marco grabbed Lucas by both shoulders and shook him. "You did it!"

Lucas finally stopped talking. That same half-smile appeared on his face, only this time it was unmistakably full.

Lucas was still covered in sweat. His hair was a mess under his helmet, his shirt was sticking to him, and she couldn't even imagine how getting flattened by that guy would feel. Yet there he was, grinning while Marco celebrated beside him.

The blonde guy joined them. "This is so freakish, Lucas! Good job!"

Claire slowly sat back. She had watched Lucas finish last and smile about improving. She had watched him talk with people he barely knew a few weeks ago. She had watched him listen, fail, get back up, and ask questions. Now he was walking straight back toward a kid almost twice his size because one successful throw had given him something else to test.

Claire reached into her bag and pulled out the old notebook.

She flipped past pages filled with years of stupid observations, fake assessments, and jokes that only the two of them would understand.

Her pen stopped over a fresh line.

He likes it.

# Chapter 11

The wall's clock was late by about 5 minutes. He should have noticed it earlier; this meant this class would end in 27 minutes instead of the expected 32. His syllabus paper had already been swarmed by little dots of black ink on the margins. That won't work against the likes of Ingram... he thought as he crossed out one of the formations he was working on.

Alphabetical seating was a stroke of probabilistic luck. 'Reed' allowed him to sit at the back, away from the teacher's eyes. A low murmur slipped out. "Wait, what was it again?" He scrolled down on his phone, carefully tucked against his legs. Quarterback principles: cadence. He lingered on the first page. It was the third time he had scrolled back to it. Coach had mentioned 'cadence' like such a mundane thing, but it was actually giving him trouble.

It wasn't optimal, but what other choice did Lucas have? Two training sessions with the team were enough to know that he had a lot to solve.

"Learn—not just solve... learn."

"Beg your pardon?"

A wave of heads turned directly at him. Even the teacher looked up from the heap of words in that syllabus; an unblinking stare locked onto him from behind glasses sitting too low on his nose.

"Huh— no—nothing—" Lucas stuttered as his face flushed from the 20 pairs of eyes drilling right through him.

"Out with it. If you have something to share, now's the time, young man."

It almost felt like the weight of each student was pressing against the back of his neck. His lips twitched as if the words were about to come out, but his muscles had forgotten how to activate. Like that time he almost puked before starting a play...

A play...

The teacher was on the receiving end. Of course, the others were irrelevant at the moment. He only had to throw—answer to that bald-looking receiver.

"I'm trying too hard to solve football. Deep down, I don't really think it's solvable like Coach said..."

This time, some faces tilted, others blinked twice. Even the teacher had to put down his paper.

"...but another part of me thinks it can be solved... in some ways..."

The class erupted into laughter, jolting Lucas out of his thoughts. Why are they laughing like that? They think football is solvable?

“Mr... Reed?” The teacher leaned toward the list of students he had left on his desk. “Please refrain from commenting on something outside of this class matter, would you?”

“Y—yes,” he said, hiding back into his doodles without a word, while only the last few specks of laughter still resonated in the classroom.

Talk about communicating more. Isn’t that what Claire told him before leaving Sunday? Her voice was still clear in his mind, in a mildly infuriating low pitch. “You have your voice on the field. Mom and Dad won’t take that away from you, but you need to tell them that. Make them hear it from you.”

So many academic blank words. What was he supposed to do, really? Tell them what? They already knew he played football. Claire was oddly vague for someone working with investigators. Curse you, Claire. Problems have a very clear outline.

His tongue clicked before his eyes stumbled upon the still-open article on his phone. Cadence, right... where was I...

The bell finally blared over the PA system, exactly on time at the 27-minute mark. Usually, he would stay in the class like in elementary; otherwise, leaving at the buzzer would mean colliding with dozens of students.

This time, he made sure to leave first, heading for the cafeteria, already texting while bumping into the other students. Marco was already waiting for him. As for Mason, he had left him on seen.

RiverDale was a big institution. The hallways were actually quite spacious, still packed but significantly less of a hassle than his elementary school, a testament to the number of students attending here. The cafeteria was even wilder. You could fit hundreds of students at once. He watched the huge line of hungry mouths holding those peculiarly red plastic platters, the school’s colors.

Marco waved at him from a booth, sitting with a few people. His plate was already filled to the brim, and yet his mouth was already full. It made sense for someone constantly running and talking.

“Lucas! How’s the first day?”

“Fine.” Lucas joined the smaller group, making sure to sit at the edge of the table. That way, he had an easy way to escape.

“Guys! Guys! This is the one I’ve been talking about,” Marco added with the same energy he always had, presenting Lucas as a trophy one would brag about.

The kid sitting beside Marco eyed Lucas up and down. “He throws insane passes, right? What did he call them again?”

“Bullet thing-y,” a girl chimed in from the opposite side.

“Apparently, you have a superpower!” another kid added.

Lucas sat there slightly gawking. Great, another 5 pairs of eyes waiting for him to say something. He had expected the cafeteria to be a challenge, but it was already off to a bad start. A superpower? Is that why everyone reacts weirdly to his throws? He is just sending the ball right at Marco’s hands.

The words never made it past his lips. In fact, he stayed completely frozen. Marco probably noticed because Lucas earned a pat on the back. “First of all, it’s Bullet Pass, and guys! Let him breathe a little, damn!”

A couple of chuckles followed, and that was enough to make the feeling waft away. The conversation resumed without those piercing eyes aiming at him.

“Maybe I’ll come watch a game this year,” the girl added, looking at Marco. “You made it look like you have a team of superstars.”

“We do! This year is ours!”

“Yeah, right,” Marco’s friend said. “Like last year was also ‘ours,’ huh?”

Marco was about to start arguing, only for Lucas to pull his sleeve back and point at the black dots he had been drawing. “Look, this is apparently called a full house formation.”

“I’ve seen this before! I’m the receiver on the right here?” he asked, pressing the dot that was resting far from the line of scrimmage.

Lucas nodded. “Next time we face someone aggressive like Ingram, I’ll use this.”

“Look at you looking up formations, Luc! Just say it already.”

“Say what?”

Marco gently shoved his elbow onto Lucas’s side. A sneaky smile was already spreading. “Ah! I won’t! You have to say it.”

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about—” Lucas shook his head. “I’m just figuring out a better way to deal with—”

“So? What was so urgent?”

Mason appeared out of nowhere, making everyone at the table stop what they were doing. He hadn’t answered Lucas’s texts, so seeing him standing there was a surprise.

“Hey, Mason!”

“Marco,” he said coolly before shifting his gaze onto Lucas. “So, I’m here. You mentioned something urgent?”

The table fell into an awkward silence, almost like they were all afraid of him. Lucas noticed it right away, but his research and asking Mason were far more important right now.

“I need help with cadence. I don’t really understand how it works.”

Mason leaned back, blinking. “What?”

“I—” Lucas stammered. “I said I need help with the cadence.”

“You said it was urgent!”

“It is.”

“Really? And what will happen if I don’t explain it to you?”

“I’ll ask Coach for more details, then,” Lucas answered. Somehow, it made Marco hide his mouth behind his hand while Mason kept stuttering. “That’s—that’s not—damn it, forget it.” He flicked his head for Lucas to make some room.

“Cadence is a hard thing to get. I could go on and explain how it works, but it’s not an exact science.”

“So it’s flawed?”

“What—no... it’s just, how can I put it...” A low hum escaped from his mouth while he scratched his cheek. “Marco? What’s Marta Marta, set—Hut!”

It made Marco put down his fork right away. His head snapped back up like a student finally finding an answer. “In-route, middle field.”

“How about Red 50! Red 50! Set—”

“Nothing! You’re baiting.”

“Yep,” Mason said with a proud smile before turning his attention to Lucas. “Get it now?”

Lucas did not answer, too busy writing the last cadences Mason had just shared like they were prophetic teachings. “So some sort of obscure language that needs to be decoded...” he grumbled.

“Keep feeding him, Mason. Lucas has a database that updates regularly!”

“What?” Mason blinked while Lucas answered without looking up. “He is talking about my brain. I remember things easily.”

“Not just easily, it’s even weirder!” Marco said while shoveling another spoonful of mashed potatoes. “Check this out. Lucas, what did you eat two days ago?”

“Don’t remember.”

“Who won the PBA finals in 2007? Third game score?”

“San Solano Condors 4-1. Third game was 117-98.”

For the first time, Mason stuttered. “Is that—is that true?”

“I won’t even check. I did it a couple of times. He is always right. Every basketball game since 61—”

“69. Before that, they didn’t record the games accurately,” Lucas added, still writing.

“So I’m pretty sure he’ll handle cadences, right, Luc?” Marco said without skipping a piece from his meal.

“Well, I’m impressed!” Mason pushed himself up. “But I hate to break it to you: it’s not as easy as a code. It’s all about knowing your teammates, and that takes time.”

“Knowing your teammates?” Lucas repeated with furrowed brows. The code part was pretty self-explanatory, but that second comment? He could only watch Mason chuckle, probably because he saw his confused face.

“You’ll understand at some point, Lucas. Anyway, guys! Have to go!” He leaned closer to Lucas. “You have to rethink your definition of ‘urgent’ next time.”

“I told you it was!”

“Only for you, buddy!” Mason spoke louder as he was already walking away. “See y’all this afternoon.”

“What does he mean, only for me? That’s what I’m saying, isn’t it? That was urgent.”

They all shared a look. They had been pretty silent during the whole conversation, but now, all of a sudden, smiles appeared here and there before the laughter ensued.

“This guy is the captain? He’s hot, not going to lie,” the girl said, teasing Marco, whose face was already blushing for some reason.

“I—mean... yeah, whatever...”

Well, Lucas’s plan to solve the cadence now seemed more difficult than anticipated. He glanced at the notes he took. At least it was a step forward. How hard could it be to speak another language, a language that was mostly gibberish?

"I need to watch more videos." Lucas stood up. "I'll see you during the film study, Marco!"

"Wait, you haven't eaten yet!"

Lucas glanced at the row, which had somehow grown since he entered the cafeteria earlier.

"I'll eat later—"

He felt his shirt pull in the other direction. Marco grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him into the queue that Lucas had tried so hard to avoid.

"There is no way our future QB is not eating! Are you insane? Do you want to stay at 165 lbs?"

"I'm not really hungry—"

"Don't care!"