

## RED ZONE

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“We are completely fucked.”

Raul Alvarez heard the words over the crowd—the boos growing in intensity as he walked from the huddle to the line of scrimmage. He tugged on his helmet—a tic he’d had since he first played tackle football as a kid. For fun. It was fun then.

The words had come from his own side—the center, Tommy Detmer, a big, bruising lineman who never gave up a sack. He was a rock. Loyal. Violent in the scrum. He also hated Raul’s guts.

The “why” of that equation baffled Raul. At least in terms of logic. There was none. Raul was quiet, kept to himself, did what was asked of him at practice, and didn’t socialize much. The Southern Florida University Red Wolves were 5-2 and needed to run the table if they had any chance of winning their division—the Southern USA Athletic Conference, part of the NCAA’s Division III, which was just a fancy way of saying “schools that played football but didn’t give scholarships.”

Raul walked up to the line of scrimmage and took his spot behind Detmer. He scanned the defense’s formation. They were facing the Brevard College Tornados, a team known for a swarming defense and a run, run, then run some more offensive philosophy. There were ten minutes left in the fourth quarter, and the Red Wolves were down by 14. Not an ideal situation for a rarely used backup quarterback to step onto the field. Even less ideal when you were hated by most of your teammates.

The safeties were in—meaning they were going to blitz or at least make Raul think they were. He looked to his left—Terrell Malcolm, the team’s speedy top receiving option, was out wide. Raul looked right. Charlie Evans, a solid possession receiver who might have trouble outrunning a sloth, was in the slot. Both were solid route-runners. Both knew what was at stake. Raul just hoped he had the skills to get one of them the ball.

“Set...” Raul said, his voice loud and clear. It was now or never.

“You ever seen a spic quarterback?”

The words slid into Raul’s ears and pierced his brain. He turned and noticed the source. Danny Mathers, the Red Wolves senior starter. Everything about him said QB—tall, well-built, thick-jawed, and a trademark goofball smile. But from this angle, the toothy grin had an air of something more sinister. Raul watched as Danny looked Raul’s way, saw the flicker of realization in his face as he realized Raul had heard, then gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

Detmer, the intended recipient of Danny’s snide comment, chuckled as the two passed Raul, who was heading onto the field for his turn running the offense in practice.

As the backup QB, Raul got little time behind center—just enough so he wouldn’t be lost if he ever had to enter a game (God forbid), but not too much. No one wanted a quarterback controversy. Plus, there wasn’t one. Danny had flunked out of a Division I school

and was slumming with the Red Wolves until he got his academics in order enough to transfer. But as long as he was around, he was the only quarterback that mattered.

Raul opened his mouth, as if ready to respond, but thought better of it. Then he felt the hand on his shoulder—rough, pulling him back, and forcing him to turn.

“You got something to say, rafter?” Detmer’s voice lowered an octave. He squared up, nostrils flaring, Danny standing behind him—that stupid, sly smirk almost glowing on Danny’s face.

Raul could feel Detmer’s hot breath on his face now. Could feel his own face reddening with shame.

“No,” Raul said. “I don’t.”

“S’what I thought,” Detmer said, backing up, then turning around and almost skipping toward Danny as they made a beeline for the bench. The starters rarely watched the second-stringers practice. What for?

Raul took the snap and did a quick three-step drop. He saw Evans on the periphery of his vision making a sharp cut across the field just as the safeties committed to the blitz, overpowering the Red Wolves’ schizophrenic offensive line. Raul released the pass a second before a mammoth defensive lineman brought him down. He felt his helmet slam onto the faded, brown-green grass. Saw the Red Wolves sideline vibrate as he bounced back up from the impact. He let himself lay on his back for a second, then heard the roar of the crowd. Nothing huge, but enough. He knew the pass was complete.

First down.

“Raul?”

His abuelo’s voice shook him back to the present. Back to his front porch in Miami. Back to summer. Back to thinking about his life. His bruised body. The taunts. The environment. The world he’d left—familiar, comfortable, more like him—and the world he’d chosen—distant, achingly white, and foreign to him.

“What are you doing out here, mijo? It’s late. Did something happen?”

“No, nada, nothing, abu,” Raul said, standing up and walking up the porch steps briskly. He gave his elderly grandfather a warm hug and kiss on the cheek. “Todo bien.”

“I wasn’t expecting you tonight,” abuelo Alfredo said, his smile wide but a bit shaky. He knew something was up, and he was fishing for it. Hard. “Are you back...for good?”

Raul paused for a moment before responding. *Was he?*

“No,” he said, with more firmness than he felt. “I’m going back in a week. Summer practices are starting, and I want to get my reps in.”

His abuelo nodded slowly. Understanding *why* Raul was doing it even if he didn’t accept it.

*Why be with people who hate you, Raul? Why play this game that has nothing to do with you or who we are? I didn’t escape Cuba for that. I left for you—your mother, your entire family—to be happy. Fulfilled in this great country. Not despised.*

The argument had been brief, heated, and jarring. Raul thought back to it often, especially in his lowest moments, when he doubted every aspect of his decision. Why had he chosen to go to school in the middle of Florida, far from his mama’s arroz con pollo, far

from his friends, far from his family—just to ride the bench on a football team that was a blip on the radar, with no chance at anything beyond a few stories after graduation?

His abuelo, five or six inches shorter than Raul, wrapped an arm around his grandson's shoulder and ushered him into the house.

"Tengo un poco de picadillo," he said, referencing Raul's favorite dish—ground beef, heavily seasoned and mixed with a variety of delectable ingredients. "Tienes hambre?"

"Abuelo, siempre tengo hambre."

21-28. Down by seven. Two-minute warning. Red Wolves' ball on their own 30.

Raul stood up from the bench. He looked down the sideline. The medics had come back from the locker room. The word was out. Danny Mathers was done. Knee blown out. Done for the game's remaining two minutes. For the season. Maybe forever.

Art Schenker, the Red Wolves head coach—a stocky, well-built man with a bullfrog's demeanor—moved toward Raul, eyes on his iPad display. When he got within a foot of Raul, he looked up.

"You got this, Alvarez?"

Raul nodded at the coach before looking onto the field. He watched as the eleven men who made up the Red Wolves' offensive team sauntered toward what could be their last meaningful drive of the season. Or the beginning of the rest of one.

"Yeah, Coach, yeah," Raul said, sliding his helmet on. "I got this."

"Jeez, you're a lifesaver, Raul," Jennifer Reed said, her smile soft and warm. Her amber hair framing her wide eyes and sharp features. "I don't know how I'd pass this class without you. I feel like such a dumbass."

"Don't say that. Of course you'd pass," Raul said, a forced chuckle inserted for good measure. "I'm just helping you get there faster."

The remnants of their Chemistry and Society class had all but filtered out of the lab, leaving them alone at their shared desk.

She leaned forward, her face next to his. He could smell her tangy perfume, feel her cheek brush on his. She kissed his cheek—not a casual hi/bye peck, but a kiss, her lips lingering on his face in a way that, to Raul, felt like so much more than it actually was. But he could dream. Hell, he would dream about this for a long time.

She pulled back, smiling that soft smile.

"See you at the party?"

Raul started to reply but stammered out of the gate.

"Please tell me you're coming," Jennifer said, mock surprise on her face, her hand resting on his leg. A touch that ran hot through Raul's body—like sweet torture. "It's gonna be great. Trust me. It won't be boring. Nothing I do is boring."

She got up and slung her small black backpack over her shoulders. She gave him a friendly shove.

"See you there, buddy."

He watched her walk out of the classroom and let out a long sigh.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he said to himself as he started to slide his books into his bag. He heard the door swing open. She was back, he figured. Forgot something, like she always did.

“Left your pen?” Raul said, turning around. That’s when he noticed it wasn’t Jennifer. It was Detmer. And Danny Mathers. As in her boyfriend, Danny Mathers.

*Shit.*

“You got some balls on you, Speedy Gonzales,” Detmer said, grabbing Raul’s bag and tossing it across the room. “Some serious—what do you taco-eaters call it? Cojones? Yeah, that’s it.” He pronounced the ‘j’ as in jack—accentuated it on purpose.

“Guys, what—what is this?” Raul said, annoyed now, his patient veneer cracking.

The emotions he’d been feeling—the desire and attraction, the lust and delirium, had morphed into anger and disappointment. *Who the fuck did these guys think they were?*

Mathers said nothing. No “that’s my fucking girlfriend, bro” or “keep your hands off my woman”—nothing like that. Raul would’ve almost appreciated something, anything that felt human. Instead, the quarterback leaned against the teacher’s empty podium and watched.

Detmer came at him fast and hard, like the deceptively fast lineman he was—his tree-trunk arms grabbing him by the shirt and slamming him back onto the table behind him.

Raul didn’t fight back. Didn’t swing. Didn’t kick. Didn’t use the ruler within arm’s reach to gouge Detmer’s eyes out. He took it. He realized this after the fact, as he sat in the nurse’s station, declining to answer her repeated questions about “what happened?” and “you should really go to the hospital...” Why? Why hadn’t he fought this monster, this lumbering oaf? Raul didn’t know. He just knew—felt deep inside himself—that sliding down to their level...fighting like animals without any other recourse, responding to their hate with his own...was not the path he’d been raised to take.

Raul tried to hold him off but was instantly overpowered and overwhelmed—the first fist cut through his meager defenses, crashing into his face like a giant hammer. Then another punch to the stomach. Raul felt his body crumple to the ground as another fist connected with his skull. Then things went gray and brown. When he could open his eyes, he was on the floor. He saw blood on his shirt and felt an aching pain spread over his face and midsection.

“Learn your fucking lesson, Pancho,” Mathers said, his black boots sliding briefly on the streak of dark red blood on the linoleum floor. Raul’s blood.

*My blood.*

27-28. No time left on the clock.

Coach Schenker decided to go for two points rather than an extra point for the tie. A tie wouldn’t get them in the playoffs, but it wouldn’t be an “L.” Schenker didn’t play for ties, though. Raul knew that.

“We win or we die,” Schenker said as he slapped Raul’s helmet hard with his palm, his face close—so close Raul could smell the cheap whiskey and cheaper aftershave.

Raul nodded and took the field. The team was waiting, in an I-formation, the halfback and fullback lined up behind him. There was no need for a huddle here. They knew the play. Had known it since the season started. The only difference was who was captaining the ship.

Raul stepped toward Detmer and looked down at the center, a giant, glowering mass of anger and muscle gripping the football that needed to cross a certain line or send the entire season into oblivion. Raul saw Detmer's head turn slightly, and their eyes met.

"Danny's gone, man," Detmer said, loud enough for the entire team to hear. "This is all you, Alvarez. We're riding on your back tonight. Can you carry us?"

Detmer's message was a potent mix of bravado, apology, and confidence. Raul nodded and settled in behind Detmer. He looked around at the players. Some looked back. The opposing defense seemed to snarl at them. They knew it was all on the line here, their season and the Red Wolves'. For a college football division that many seemed to write off, for a game that most college football fans in the nation didn't think mattered—it sure as hell felt important.

"You're on my back right now," Raul said, loudly, his voice taking on a decibel he'd never felt before. "We got this, all right?"

He saw the nods. Detmer's sly smile as he turned to face the opposing defensive tackle and said something gruesome about his mother. Saw Terrell Malcolm rub his hands together in anticipation. This was it, Raul thought. And nothing else mattered. Not the flying punches or the garbage talk from Detmer or Mather's misplaced jealousy. Not coach's drinking problem or the call Raul had gotten before the game—the one that let him know his abuelo had died quietly in his sleep in a hospital in Miami. No. What mattered was this play, this moment.

He took the snap and dropped back, rolling right. Evans was covered, his lead feet keeping him close to the line of scrimmage. Their star running back, Deshon Avery, had gone off route and paid the price—a speedy linebacker on him like a basement cobweb. But there was Malcolm, a half-step ahead of the Tornados' drowsy corner, dragging. The game had been long; everyone was tired. He was hoping Raul wouldn't see him asleep at the wheel.

Raul Alvarez let rip with a tight spiral and watched it head toward Malcolm's long, outstretched hands, his feet resting on his toes, on the fringe of the end zone's far right side.