

# THE SILENT SYMPHONY

## Chapter 8: The First Team I

The weeks following Mateo's visit to the Camp Nou passed in a blur of excitement and preparation. Don Carlos had been true to his word, making the necessary arrangements for Mateo to join CF Barceloneta, the local youth team coached by Señor Vásquez.

The prospect of playing organized football for the first time filled Mateo with a mixture of anticipation and nervous energy that made it difficult for him to concentrate on anything else.

CF Barceloneta was a modest club that served the working-class neighborhoods surrounding the port area of Barcelona.

Their facilities were basic: a single grass pitch with uneven surfaces, a small clubhouse that doubled as a storage area for equipment, and changing rooms that had seen better days. But for Mateo, it might as well have been the Camp Nou itself.

The morning of his first training session arrived with the kind of crisp clarity that made Barcelona beautiful in early spring.

Mateo had been awake since dawn, checking and rechecking his small bag of equipment.

Don Carlos had managed to find him a pair of second-hand football boots that were only slightly too large, and Sister María Elena had sewn his name into a simple training shirt that would serve as his uniform.

"Remember," Don Carlos said as they walked toward the club's facilities, "this is about learning and having fun. Don't put too much pressure on yourself."

Mateo nodded, but his mind was already racing ahead to the training session.

He had been practicing with his ball every day since the Camp Nou visit, working on the techniques he had observed from the Barcelona players. His touch had become even more refined, his understanding of space and movement more sophisticated.

The training ground was already bustling with activity when they arrived. Boys ranging in age from seven to ten were scattered across the pitch, some juggling balls, others engaged in small-sided games.

The noise level was considerable with children shouting instructions, coaches calling out encouragement, and parents offering advice from the sidelines.

Señor Vásquez spotted them immediately and jogged over with the energetic stride of a man who had dedicated his life to youth development.

Antonio Vásquez was in his forties, with graying hair and the lean build of a former player. He had spent fifteen years coaching children, and his reputation for developing talent was well-respected throughout the Barcelona youth football community.

"Mateo!" he called out warmly. "Welcome to CF Barceloneta. Are you ready to play some real football?"

"Sí, coach," Mateo replied, his voice quiet but determined.

"Good. Let me introduce you to your teammates."

The introductions were a whirlwind of names and faces.

There was Pau, a stocky defender with a fierce competitive streak; Marc, a goalkeeper whose reflexes were already drawing attention from scouts; David, a midfielder with excellent passing ability; and Sergi, a striker whose speed made him dangerous in behind opposing defenses.

But it was the team's captain, eight-year-old Álex Moreno, who made the strongest impression.

Álex was tall for his age, with the kind of natural leadership qualities that made other children gravitate toward him. He approached Mateo with the confident stride of someone accustomed to being the best player on any team.

"So you're the famous orphan everyone's talking about," Álex said, his tone carrying a mixture of curiosity and challenge. "I heard you think you're pretty good."

Mateo met his gaze steadily. "I just like to play football," he said simply.

"We all like to play football," Álex replied. "The question is whether you can play it well enough to help us win."

The exchange was watched closely by the other boys, who sensed the underlying tension. Álex had been the undisputed star of the team since its formation, and the arrival of a new player with a growing reputation clearly represented a challenge to his status.

"Alright, boys," Señor Vásquez interrupted, clapping his hands to gather the team's attention. "Let's start with some basic drills. Mateo, you can partner with David for the passing exercises."

What followed was Mateo's introduction to the structured world of organized youth football. The training session was more formal than anything he had experienced, with specific drills designed to develop particular skills. They worked on first touch, passing accuracy, shooting technique, and basic tactical positioning.

Mateo adapted quickly to the new environment, his natural ability allowing him to excel in every drill.

His first touch was consistently perfect, his passes found their targets with metronomic precision, and his shooting was both powerful and accurate. But what impressed Señor Vásquez most was the boy's tactical understanding.

During a small-sided game designed to practice positional play, Mateo demonstrated an awareness of space and movement that was remarkable for his age.

He seemed to know instinctively where his teammates would be before they got there, threading passes into spaces that others couldn't see.

When defending, he anticipated attacking moves with uncanny accuracy, intercepting passes and breaking up play with the timing of a seasoned professional.

"Incredible," Señor Vásquez murmured to his assistant coach, Miguel Santos. "I've never seen a seven-year-old read the game like that."

"He's special," Miguel agreed. "But look at Álex's face. The boy's not happy about being upstaged."

Indeed, Álex's expression had grown increasingly stormy as the training session progressed. Every perfect pass from Mateo, every moment of individual brilliance, seemed to chip away at his confidence and status within the team. By the time they moved to shooting practice, the tension was palpable.

"Let's see what the new boy can do from distance," Álex announced, placing a ball twenty yards from goal. "Marc, get ready for an easy save."

The challenge was clear, and every boy on the team understood the subtext. This was Álex's way of asserting his dominance, of putting the newcomer in his place. Mateo approached the ball calmly, his expression giving nothing away.

What happened next would become part of CF Barceloneta folklore.

Mateo struck the ball with his right foot, his technique perfect and his follow-through smooth.

The ball rose slightly off the ground, traveling with the kind of pace and precision that made Marc's attempted save look futile. It struck the top corner of the goal with such force that the net bulged dramatically before the ball rebounded back onto the pitch.

The training ground fell silent.

"Dios mío," someone whispered.

Mateo simply retrieved the ball and jogged back to the group, his expression unchanged. For him, the shot had been a natural response to the challenge presented. The fact that it had been executed with such perfection was simply a reflection of the countless hours he had spent practicing his technique.

"Lucky shot," Álex muttered, but his voice lacked conviction.

"Let's see if it was luck," Señor Vásquez said, placing another ball in the same position. "Mateo, can you do that again?"

The second shot was even better than the first.

This time, Mateo used his left foot, curling the ball around an imaginary wall and into the opposite corner of the goal. Marc didn't even attempt a save,

recognizing that the shot was unstoppable from the moment it left Mateo's foot.

The third shot was a chip that floated over Marc's outstretched hands and dropped just under the crossbar with the delicacy of a butterfly landing on a flower. The fourth was a low drive that skimmed the grass before nestling in the bottom corner. The fifth was struck with such power that it seemed to accelerate after leaving Mateo's foot.

By the time he had scored five consecutive goals from twenty yards, using both feet and demonstrating a variety of techniques, the entire team was staring at him in amazement. Even Álex had fallen silent, his challenge thoroughly answered.

"That's enough shooting practice," Señor Vásquez announced, his voice carrying a note of awe. "Let's move on to tactical work."