Chapter 1: Pilot

León closed the browser tab for the twentieth time that week. The same email. The same phrase in every reply:

"We will contact you if necessary."

They never did.

He leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. His grandmother's apartment smelled of old coffee and that lavender air freshener she bought at the pharmacy around the corner. Outside, a garbage truck made noise. Inside, the silence of someone with nothing to do.

Nineteen years old. High school finished without honors but without failing a single subject. A record that any teacher would describe as "wasted" with that mix of disappointment and indifference that only teachers manage to pull off. León never failed an exam, but he never studied either. He passed because things stuck after hearing them once, and that was enough to score a seven or a nine with barely a glance at the textbook. He left assignments half-done out of procrastination, handed them in late, or sometimes didn't hand them in at all. At school he sat in the last seat, by the window, and looked outside while the teacher talked about things he'd already understood in the first five minutes.

That was the ironic part. He understood everything fast. But he did nothing with it.

His parents had died in an accident when he was six. He didn't remember it well. Fragments: his mother's hand, the smell of gasoline, a siren. Nothing he could piece into a complete scene. His grandmother had taken him in since then, and she was a good person, but she wasn't going to demand anything from him. She let him be. And León, with no one pushing him, became what any directionless kid becomes if no one stops him: a slacker with potential.

He opened Gmail again. Thirty-two CV sent in two months. Supermarkets, warehouses, call centers, and a bookstore. Two replies. Zero interviews. Since finishing high school, seven months of job hunting with nothing to show for it. No close friends, no contacts, zero experience.

He closed.

He sat there looking at the black screen and saw his own reflection. A thin kid, tan skin, dark circles that didn't come from bad sleep but from doing nothing, black straight hair a bit too long because he couldn't be bothered to cut it. Someone who, if you described in one sentence, would be: "that weird emo kid nobody remembers."

And right then, he felt it. A void. No tears, Quieter than that. León realized something so simple it hurt: the problem had never been intelligence, or luck, or circumstances. The problem was that every time something got hard, every time it required sustained effort, he let go. He'd write half a story and drop it. Learn a few guitar chords and a week later the

guitar gathered dust. Read fifty pages of a book and abandon it. He'd start something with enthusiasm and the moment the enthusiasm dipped, he'd look for something else.

Lack of discipline. Lack of will. Always the same story.

"I'm going to do something that hurts," he said out loud, like he needed to hear it from someone else. "Something I can't drop halfway just because I get bored."

The gym was twelve blocks from his house. He'd walked past it a thousand times without looking. A narrow storefront on the ground floor of an old building, with a sign that read "BOXEO REYES" in red letters that were peeling off. León walked in without knocking.

Inside it smelled of sweat, leather, and some disinfectant that didn't quite cover the first two. The floor was cement. There was a heavy bag hanging from a rusted metal stand, a jump rope in one corner, and a small ring with loose ropes. A chubby guy in a baseball cap sat behind a messy desk, watching a fight on a small TV.

"Signing up?" he asked without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Yeah."

"A thousand pesos a month. Come whenever you want. The beginner routine is with Coach Rojas, he gets here at five."

León paid in cash. The guy didn't even ask for a name.

The next afternoon he was there.

Coach Rojas was a man in his sixties with a flat nose and enormous hands. He didn't talk much. Gave short instructions and watched with those eyes that boxing coaches have, like they can see exactly how much you have left before you break.

"Shadow with one-kilo weights. Three rounds of three minutes."

León picked up the weights.
"Straight jab. Cross. Jab. Cross. Keep your feet shoulder-width apart. Don't lean."

By the second round his arms were burning. By the third, he could barely lift them. Sweat ran into his eyes and his breathing was a sharp rasp that couldn't quite become a gasp because he didn't have enough air for even that.

"Good," Rojas said, no inflection. "Now the circuit."

The circuit was stacked tires to jump over, agility ladders taped to the floor, burpees, push-ups with a clap at the top, explosive squats. Three laps. No rest between stations.

León finished the first lap and thought he was going to throw up. On the second, his legs shook so badly he could barely hold himself up on the push-ups. On the third, he dropped to his knees beside the tires and stayed there, hands on the cement, breathing like a dog.

Rojas walked over and stood next to him. Didn't help him up. Didn't say anything encouraging. Waited.

"I can… keep going," León said between breaths. His chest burned and his mouth was dry.

"Same time tomorrow."

He got home and collapsed on the bed without eating dinner. Every muscle screamed. He lay there staring at the ceiling with his shirt stuck to his body from sweat that never fully dried. His grandmother knocked on the door.

—León, I left food in the pot.

—Thanks, Grandma. I'm not hungry.

He heard her footsteps fade down the hall. He closed his eyes.

“I don't want to go tomorrow.” And that phrase felt familiar. He'd thought a thousand times about a thousand different things. “I don't want to write today. I don't want to read today. I don't want to keep going with this.” Always the same phrase. Always the same result: he quit.

León opened his eyes. Slowly pulled himself up, body complaining, and turned on the computer. Opened Gmail. Thirty-two resumes. Zero useful replies. A life going nowhere because every time the road went uphill, he turned around.

He looked at his hands. Still shaking from the circuit.

—Tomorrow I go…

He went. And the next day. And the one after.

The first week was torture. He woke up stiff, went to the gym, suffered, came home and wanted to do nothing but sleep. But he didn't quit. Not because he enjoyed it, but because he'd set a simple rule: it doesn't matter if I don't want to go, I go. Motivation didn't matter. Motivation leaves. What mattered was the decision made the night before, when his head was still clear.

In the second week, something shifted. Not the pain, that was still there. Something else. One night after training, León lay in bed and instead of thinking “I don't want to go tomorrow”, he thought: “How do I improve my jab?” It wasn't a grand epiphany. It was subtle. His brain, that brain that understood everything fast but never applied itself to anything, had found something to sink its teeth into.

He started watching fights. At first as a distraction, but soon with a different kind of attention. He'd watch a guy throw a cross and think: “he's too open after punching, if the opponent moves left he counters him clean.”
He'd watch another fight on the inside and notice the guy dropped his right hand every time he went for the liver hook. He saw mistakes in people who won fights and wondered why nobody corrected them.

He'd always seen things that way. Strategically. With an analytical capacity that outpaced most people. But before, he'd never had a field where he could apply that analysis concretely. Writing had bored him because it demanded emotional depth and expression rather than strategy. Acting felt the same. But boxing was tangible. There was a body in front of you, there were distances, there were timings, there were decisions measured in fractions of a second. And every mistake had an immediate, physical consequence.

He spent hours watching fights.

León watched the fight against Thomas Hearns and didn't blink for three rounds. The way Hagler absorbed punishment without moving back. Patience. The constant pressure. The low, solid guard. But what impressed him most wasn't the power or the endurance. It was something the commentators mentioned in passing: Hagler was naturally right-handed, but could fight southpaw with the same fluidity. A switch hitter. Someone who changed stance mid-fight not as a trick, but as a permanent strategic tool.

León paused the video. Rewind it. Watched the moment Hagler shifted his stance and connected a right hand from the southpaw position.

“I want to do that.”

Third week…

León wasn't the same kid who'd stumbled into the gym. He wasn't good, he was still a beginner hitting the heavy bag with the typical one-two, no real technique, more cardio than boxing. But he didn't hate going anymore. His body had adapted enough for the suffering to be manageable, and his mind was locked into the sport in a way it had never been locked into anything in his life.

One day, after the routine, León stayed hitting the heavy bag. Left, right. Left, right. The right hand was natural, strong, and clean. The left was weak, clumsy, no weight behind it.

He stopped. Looked at his left hand.

If he wanted to be a switch hitter, both hands had to work. And if he was naturally right-handed, his right hand would always be stronger. If he fought a southpaw, his jab would come from the right, his dominant hand, giving him a heavier jab than most natural southpaws. At the same time, it would force his body to develop coordination on the left side, the weak side, which in the long run would give him symmetry when he switched to orthodox.

Good theory. Executing it would be something else.

Two days into his third week, he started training southpaw. At first it was messy. His feet didn't know where to go, his hips didn't rotate properly, the southpaw jab was a push with no power behind it. But León had something most beginners don't: the patience to break a problem into small pieces and solve each one separately. He didn't try to get everything right at once. First the foot position. Just that, one week. Then the hip rotation. Then the jab reached. Step by step, like assembling a puzzle without the picture on the box.

He was now a month into training, two weeks as a southpaw. The jab with the right hand had weight and basic accuracy. It wasn't perfect, but when he connected the bag, it sounded different. Sharper. The guys at the gym, the ones who hadn't looked at him before, started noticing.

"You a southpaw?" asked one of the guys, someone who'd been there months and sparred regularly.

"No. Right-handed."

"And you train southpaw too? You're not a beginner?"

"Yeah, I feel more comfortable this way."

The guy looked at him for a second and went back to his business. In boxing, people do what they do and don't ask much.

But León was already thinking about the next step. The southpaw jab was coming along, but his footwork was still that of a beginner who moved forward and backward in a straight line. To be a switch hitter, to change stance mid-exchange and have it work as an offensive tool instead of a disaster, he needed to move well. Very well. He needed to be able to stand in southpaw, take a lateral step, switch to orthodox, and connect without the opponent understanding what had happened.

Hagler made it look natural. León knew it wasn't. Behind that naturalness lay thousands of hours of work that he didn't have yet.

He sat down that night and wrote out his thinking:

“If I want to be a good ambidextrous boxer, I need to base it on how Hagler did it. From what I've read in magazines about his training, the fundamentals are developing the jab and footwork. First I need to master the counterclockwise movement of the southpaw stance and advance forward. The southpaw stance, from what I've seen in fights, will serve me for surprise attacks and for being more aggressive with the added advantage that the other guy can't hit me clean, if I use a southpaw guard, I have an edge with my lead foot on the outside. Master the counterclockwise movement to fight at short-to-medium range, then step out and reposition in orthodox and come in with a jab. My orthodox game should focus more on finding difficult angles and attacking in windows when the opponent is focused on fighting

a southpaw. Knowing myself, I'm naturally flexible, basing my game on a dual system with different characteristics and styles will make me unpredictable. But looking at all this, what I need to focus on most is footwork. Mastering my footwork, or at least building a solid fundamental base, will give me an edge over other beginners. I should spend the first months of training on displacements in both stances, basic movements, and solidifying clockwise and counterclockwise movement so the stance switches come naturally, creating more hitting angles."

He shut the Hagler video. Checked the time. Eleven at night. Training at five tomorrow. He closed the laptop, got into bed, and before falling asleep thought something he'd never thought before lying down:

"I want to get up tomorrow."

Not out of blind discipline. But because he had something he wanted to do, and for the first time in nineteen years, that was enough.

When León woke up, he felt more energetic. It was an hour he wasn't used to six a.m. He got to the gym by nine. During the training session, he decided to break his goals into steps. He'd noticed that professional boxers trained with weekly objectives, one objective worked for at least a week. It was like a schematic, something that interested León because he liked diving deep into strategy. Using that as a reference, on autopilot his brain put together a two-month technical plan:

Wake up at 5:45 a.m. Banana smoothie for breakfast. After eating, jog three days a week for one month to build cardiovascular endurance. After training at the gym and lunch, increase meat consumption. After a two-hour rest, do ab sets (3×25) and burpees (2×15) four days a week. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays after the gym, start with basic combinations and shadow work (focused on jab, body hooks, and straight punches), plus basic defense based on slipping and traditional blocking. Prioritize basic movements during the first month. Four sets of two-minute shadow rounds.

"During months one and two, 70% of training time is in southpaw, the rest in orthodox."

For southpaw: specialize in an aggressive inside style, focusing on southpaw straight, uppercuts and overhands, body hooks. Basic combinations: 1-2. 1-2-3. 3-2 (body hook to straight). Double jab. Jab+overhand. Body hook to right uppercut—Tyson style.

For orthodox: mixed style (counterpuncher/puncher). More strategic, focused on jab, liver hooks, and straight punches. 1-2. 3-2. Jab to the body. Lead hand uppercut. Specialize both months in: fast jab, lead hook, straight, liver hook. Learn to feint, block, and parry as defensive tools. Develop feints and slips for basic straight counters.

Two months later…

León was ready for his first sparring. Or at least, he was eager. He couldn't study his opponent in depth because the pairing was random, chosen by the coach among the regulars. That didn't matter, León adapted fast.

His opponent, José Quiroga, was an amateur. Eight fights: six wins, one draw, one loss. Two of those wins by knockout. Same height as León but two years older with longer arms.

León watched his rival the moment he stepped into the ring. Mouthguard in, headgear on. He saw José stretching and analyzed him.

“He's got some KO wins as an amateur, so his punching power must be decent. Longer arms than mine. I haven't seen his fights, but on the bag he moves a lot and focuses on jabs and hooks. Not a brawler. A stylist. So he'll try to create distance and use feints on me. He knows I'm a beginner, so he'll naturally underestimate me. But I have an advantage, something I've been developing for two months. My stance switching. Two rounds. I need to bait him in the first round with the southpaw guard, land what I can while blocking his shots. I'm still not good at slipping. Then in the second round, I wait for the moment he's gotten used to my guard, switch fast to orthodox, and catch him with a 1-2. I've been training southpaw almost the whole time. He and nobody here thinks of me as a switch hitter. I need to use my low profile.”

León climbed through the ropes. The ring was smaller than a regulation one, the canvas soft in some spots and hard in others. He bounced on his feet once. The gloves felt heavier than on the bag. The headgear narrowed his peripheral vision.

José came in behind him, loose, already shadow-boxing with the casual ease of someone who'd done this before. He glanced at León, smiled behind his mouthguard, and looked away. Not disrespect, just the way amateurs look at beginners. A quick assessment that ends fast because there's not much to assess..

"Two rounds. Two minutes. Light contact. Touch and move. This isn't a war, it's a class. Both of you keep your hands up." Say Rojas.

León raised his guard. Southpaw. Right foot forward, left foot back, hands high but not tight.

Round 1.
Bell sound.
José came forward circling to his left, which was León's right side. Standard move against a southpaw: step to the outside of the lead foot and control the angle.
José's jab arrived first. A long, snapping jab that caught León on the edge of his glove and grazed his forehead. Light contact, but the message was clear: “I'm in range and you're not.”

León stepped forward. José stepped back. The footwork gap showed immediately. José moved like he'd been doing this for years, weight balanced, small steps, never crossing his feet. León moved like someone who'd been drilling footwork for two months: correct in theory, stiff in practice.

Another jab. This one León blocked with his right glove, but the impact pushed his hand back into his own face. Not hard. Annoying. José was testing distance, measuring him.

He's not going to rush in, León thought.
“He 'sa stylist. He wants to pick me apart from the outside.”

So León closed the distance. Not smoothly, he stepped in with too much lean, the way beginners do when they want to get close fast. José immediately circled left and popped a hook that caught León on the side of the headgear. Clean. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to say: “you're open every time you step in like that.”

León reset. His breathing was already heavier than it should've been. Two months of training had built a base, but it wasn't the same as having someone try to hit you. The heart rate was different. The legs felt different.

He threw a jab, his right hand from southpaw and it was slow. José slipped it by an inch and countered with a short right to the body. León absorbed it on his elbow. Not clean, but the force still pushed the air out of him.

Stop throwing single shots…

Round 2.

León came out the same way. Southpaw. Same guard. Same posture. He could see José settle into a rhythm, already comfortable, already reading the patterns. Good. That was the point.

José opened with a jab. León blocked it. Another jab. Blocked. José stepped in with a quick 1-2, and León took it on his gloves. The shots were sharper now, José had warmed up and was increasing the pressure, sensing the beginner was tired.

Wait. Not yet.

Now…

León shifted. He simply stepped his right foot back and his left foot forward, rotating his upper body, and in half a second he was orthodox. The guard changed. The stance changed. The angle changed.

José's jab flew over León's right shoulder—where the head had been a moment ago in southpaw and hit nothing but air. For one second, maybe less, José's eyes showed confusion. Don't panic. Just a brief where did he go?

León threw the 1-2. Right jab, left cross. The jab caught José on the glove, but the cross, thrown from his natural hand, the hand he'd been training in southpaw for two months and now finally released in its native stance, landed clean on the side of José's headgear.

Thwack.

The gym went quiet for a beat. Not because it was a hard shot, it wasn't. But because the skinny kid who'd been getting picked apart for a round had just changed his entire stance mid-exchange and caught an amateur with eight fights clean.

José blinked. Touched his headgear. Looked at León with new eyes.

But José had eight fights for a reason. He didn't freeze. He didn't panic. He adjusted. Within fifteen seconds, he'd recalibrated, the southpaw was gone, this kid was orthodox now, shorter range, different angles. José started circling to his right this time, away from León's power hand, and popped a jab that caught León flush on the nose.

León's head snapped back. Not from the force, from the surprise. He'd been so focused on the switch that he'd stopped moving his feet. Standing still in boxing is a sin, and José punished it immediately.

The last minute was José pressing and León surviving. José came forward with a combination and León blocked it clean, gloves tight against his face, elbows tucked to the body, absorbing the shots on the forearms the way Rojas had shown him. Nothing pretty, nothing flashy, just a wall that didn't break. León tried to switch back to southpaw. Not crisp like the first time. But it completed. His right foot slid back, his left foot came forward, and he was in southpaw again. Not perfect, not fluid, but there. José caught him during the switch with a jab that slipped through the guard and glanced off his forehead, then a hook to the body that landed on his elbow. León took it, reset, and kept his hands high. José threw one more combo before the bell. León blocked every punch. When Rojas called time, round finish..

León put his hands on his knees. Breathing hard. Sweat pooling under him. José walked over and tapped his gloves together, the sign of good spar. Nothing condescending. Genuine.

"Where'd you learn to switch like that?" José asked, pulling out his mouthguard.

"Self-taught."

José nodded slowly, looking at him with something that hadn't been there before. Real Recognition.
León climbed out of the ring. His legs were shaking. He'd draw in Round 1, but lost in the two round. José had outboxed him in every measurable way: more punches landed, better movement, cleaner technique.

But that one cross. That one moment where the stance switched and José jab hit air and León left hand found the target.

That moment was real.

León walked home. His knuckles hurt inside the wraps. His shins ached from the movement. His nose was slightly swollen.

He didn't feel like quitting.

He felt like figuring out why his feet had stopped moving after the switch, and making sure it didn't happen again.

2 days later…

The gym smelled of old leather and the kind of sweat residue that disinfectant never fully covered. The lights were half dimmed. Rojas sat on the edge of the ring, legs dangling, thermos at his side. His assistant, Gutiérrez, a guy in his mid-thirties with ears mangled from years of amateur sparring, leaned against the heavy bag with his arms crossed.

Gutiérrez was the first to speak.

"That kid, León. The one who sparred with José."

"What about him."

"He switched stance in the second round. I saw it from here. José didn't see it coming."

"I know."

"It's his first month. I don't know about you, but I've never seen anyone do that in the first month. Not even the third."

"Did you see what happened after the switch?" he asked.

"He landed the cross. Clean. José didn't see it."

"After that."

Gutiérrez frowned. Thought for a second.

"He froze. José caught him with the jab."

"He froze," Rojas repeated, tasting the words. "Just pulled off the smartest move in this gym in months and instead of moving, he stood there looking at what he'd done. Like he needed to confirm he'd actually done it."

Gutiérrez said nothing. Waited.

"That's not a boxer's move. That's a kid who thinks too much. A boxer throws and moves. The kid threw and stayed there admiring his own work."

"But profe, the way he read the first round was also good. He didn't fall apart when José was picking him apart. He held."

"That I did like. I liked it a lot. But don't mix one thing with the other. Character is one thing, the head is another. Character you don't teach. Either you have it or you don't. That kid has it: he took some clean shots and didn't make a face. Didn't turn his head, didn't ask for time, didn't drop his hands. That's not learned. You're born with it or you're not."

"But the head… the head worries me."

"Why? If he's smart, isn't that good?"

Rojas looked at him. That look he gave when someone said something that sounded logical but wasn't.

"Guti, how many smart kids have come through this gym?"

"I don't know. Several."

"How many made it anywhere?"

Gutiérrez thought. His face changed when he understood where this was going.

"None."

"None. You know why? Because the smart kid is the one who gets bored first. He's the one who after two months wants to do advanced stuff. He's the one who shows up with a notebook full of notes and a training plan he put together watching YouTube. He's the one who tells you 'profe, I already get this, let's move on' when what he gets is the theory and his body doesn't even know how to stand properly."

"This kid showed up with a plan. I saw him writing

Gutiérrez let out a snort.

"He had a notebook?"

"Yes"

"Exactly.. Because that notebook tells me this kid isn't thinking like a boxer. He's thinking like someone trying to solve boxing with his head before solving it with his body. And that works until they put someone in front of you who hits you in the nose and your whole notebook goes to shit."

"Did you see his footwork?" asked Gutiérrez.

"4/10. And I'm being generous."

"But it's his first month."

"Which is why it's not a disaster. He's got good natural coordination, decent balance, the build helps him. But he moves like someone who knows where he wants to go but doesn't know how to get there. Like a guy looking at a map who says 'there it is,' but trips over every crack in the sidewalk when he starts walking."

"And the southpaw?"

"The southpaw is the problem. The kid latched onto the southpaw in the third week because it gives him the feeling of being special. Of having something the others don't. In orthodox he's just another kid in the gym. In southpaw he's 'the one who switches stances.' And to a kid who feels like he's going nowhere, feeling special is like a drug. I don't blame him. But I have to cut it before it becomes a crutch."

"What are you going to do?"

"What I did today. Steps. Nothing else. Fifteen minutes of steps on the canvas, no punches, no combinations, nothing his brain can grab onto to keep itself entertained. And I'll see what happens."

"And if he gets bored and doesn't come back?"

Rojas looked at him with something that was almost a smile.

"That's the answer, Guti. If he gets bored and doesn't come back, then he was never a boxer. He was a kid who wanted to feel capable of something. There's a huge difference. The bored boxer comes back the next day. The one who isn't a boxer finds the door."

Gutiérrez nodded slowly.

"And the sparring? You gonna put him back in?"

"When I say so. Not before. I don't need him to fight more right now. I need him to walk. I need his body to learn something his head can't interfere with. Because as long as the head is in charge, this kid is going to try to run before he crawls. And in this sport, the one who runs before he crawls lands face first."

"What, Guti, is that he has something. That cross after the switch wasn't luck. He chose it. Waited for the moment, let José settle, and executed. You don't teach that. Either you have it or you don't. And this kid has it. He's got a ring reading ability I haven't seen in anyone with one month of gym. Not even close."

"Then what's the problem?"

"He just stood there, frozen, like his body forgot it was in a fight."

"If this kid lasts the month of steps without complaining, without proposing, without trying to speed things up, I'll start taking him seriously. If he doesn't last, I save myself years of headaches.
Then I let him do whatever he wants. I don't stop him, don't correct him, don't pay him any attention. I let him burn out on his own. Kids like him get tired on their own when nobody's watching. They need to be seen. If nobody looks at them, they leave."

"That's kind of harsh, profe."

"It's not harsh. It's honest. This sport eats you if you're not convinced. And I'm not going to be the one who convinces anybody. Not this kid, not anyone else. Either you want it or you don't. And if you want it, you endure the steps on the empty canvas without asking every five minutes when you get to punch again."

He walked to the door. Stopped before leaving.

"One more thing, Guti. Don't say a word. To anyone. Not the kid, not José, not the others. This kid doesn't need anyone telling him he has potential. He needs to be left alone with his boredom. Boredom is the best teacher I've got in this gym. Better than me. Because I can be wrong. Boredom can't."

He opened the door. The street light poured in for a second and was gone.

"Turn the lights off when you leave."

Gutiérrez stood alone. Looked at the empty ring. The flat canvas with nobody on it. Fifteen minutes of steps. Nothing else.

Boredom doesn't make mistakes, he'd said.

He looked at the canvas a moment longer. Then turned off the lights.