

CHAPTER 1



Hector could tell that Azi wanted to discuss something. He started to turn right on Alameda Avenue, but Azi walked in the direction of the residential neighborhood and the irrigation ditch. It was the longer route to the Kennedy Brothers Apartments, otherwise known as the projects, but it was quieter, better for talking. They had just come out of a chess team meeting where Mr. Lozano announced that next year's captain would be determined by a competition among the team's members. Azi had looked meaningfully in Hector's direction. Now Hector waited for her to say what he knew was coming.

"Well?" Azi asked when they had left the noise of traffic behind them.

"Well what?" Hector pretended ignorance.

"You're trying out for captain, right?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I'm captain material." It was good to say that, even if it wasn't true. "Besides, it's kind of

an unwritten rule that the captain of the chess team should be a senior.”

“Where? Where is it unwritten?”

They both laughed.

Azi went on. “And don’t say you’re not good enough to be captain. I’m Iranian, remember? In Iran it is bad manners to show off, so everyone goes around pretending to be humble. You’re the best player in the team and you know it. The purpose of having a competition instead of an election is to have the captain be the best player.”

“Mendoza is pretty good, and he really, really wants to be captain. And he’s a junior and we’re lowly sophomores.”

“Oh, please!” Azi threw her hands up in the air as if asking heaven for help. “Has he beaten you?”

“Yes . . . once.” Hector smiled. Mendoza was a top-caliber player, but he was better. The loss to him the year before, just after Hector joined the chess team, was the result of a bonehead move on Hector’s part and not because of any kind of brilliant move by Mendoza. When you played and studied the strategies of chess as much as Hector did, you knew with certainty when your game was at a higher level than someone else’s. Still, Hector liked Mendoza, and being the captain of the Ysleta High Chess Team would mean a lot to him.

They were approaching the house where a large brown dog always snarled at them through the backyard’s gate.

They simultaneously walked to the opposite sidewalk. When they were far away from the dog, Azi said, her tone suddenly serious, “Hector, you need to keep in mind two things: First, the team should have the best player as captain. The captain is a teacher to the other players. Having the best player as the captain is what is best for the team.”

“Mmm.” Hector momentarily imagined standing in front of the whole team, explaining the individual moves of the 1972 world championship match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. Hector stopped to pick up a baseball that had rolled to the sidewalk. He tossed it back to the front lawn of the house near a bat and child’s glove. “You know,” he said, “now that I think of it, you should be captain. You’re a better player than Mendoza and you are very good at giving instructions.” Hector tried to keep himself from smiling but was unable.

“Did you just insult me?” Azi asked.

“I meant that you give really good advice. It was a compliment.”

“Yeah, sure. For your information, I would enter the competition for captain if I honestly thought I was the best player.”

“Who says you’re not?”

“Have I ever won a single match against you?”

“No,” Hector said, “but that’s only because I spend more time studying chess than you. You have your science projects and math club and college-level courses. Let’s just say

that if you put some effort into it, you could beat me . . . in a year . . . or two.”

Azi laughed. Hector liked it when she laughed. Azi, who was always so dignified and proper in school, felt comfortable enough to laugh and joke with him.

“I *am* smarter than you in most ways.” Azi looked at Hector, waited for him to protest, and then continued. “But not when it comes to chess. Chess comes natural to you. You have an instinct for making the right moves at the right time. You’re a chess . . .”

“Yes? Go on—I think you’re actually going to say something nice.”

Besides making Azi laugh, Hector enjoyed the rare occasions when he made her blush.

“No, I’m not going to say the word you think I was going to say. It will go to your empty head.”

They walked on in silence. Sometimes he and Azi would walk together like that, each lost in their own thoughts. They had been walking back to the projects together since their freshman year when they’d found out, after the first meeting of the chess team, that they lived a block away from each other. During their first walk, they’d discovered they had something else in common besides the love of chess: Both of them had lost their father in the past year.

Thinking about that conversation, and thinking about his

father, reminded Hector now of the house they lived in before his father had died. It was a four-bedroom cream-colored ranch with flower beds leading up to the front door and a chili pepper garden that his father had cared for meticulously in the backyard. Hector quickly brushed the memory away and asked, “You said there were two things I needed to keep in mind. One was that the captain of the chess team should be the best player. What was the other?”

“The other,” Azi said without missing a beat, “is that you need to stick to your plan for the future just like I need to stick to mine.”

“The one where you get a scholarship to a great college and then to a great medical school and then become a great brain surgeon.”

“Neurosurgeon. That’s my plan. And yours?”

“I become a chess grandmaster before my eighteenth birthday and go on to win the world championship and get super rich doing commercials for luxury cars,” Hector said, rolling his eyes.

“Hector, be serious for a moment.”

“Okay. What I really want is to get me and my family out of the stupid, miserable housing projects where we live.”

Azi nodded and waited for Hector to calm down. Then she said softly, soothingly, “And to do that you need to get a scholarship so you can go to college and become the engineer you

want to be. Being the captain of the Ysleta High School Chess Team is something that will help you get that scholarship.”

They reached the end of the street and then climbed up the embankment to the top of the ditch. The ditch was dry now, but Hector knew that once a week water flowed through it to irrigate the one or two cotton fields that had survived the area’s development. The same ditch crossed the neighborhood where Hector and his family used to live. His father had liked to come to the ditch on Sunday afternoons and wade his feet into the murky flow. Hector’s older brother, Filiberto—or Fili, as everyone called him—had no problem jumping in, but Hector preferred to sit on the banks. He had seen snakes slither in and out of the ditch, and once, Fili had pulled a dead cat from the rushing current.

On the side of the ditch where they walked, there was a dirt road wide enough for a car to travel, plus a few places where kids could drive up or down the slopes of the embankment with their cars. The beer cans, cheap wine bottles, and used condoms strewn around were a reminder to Hector that they were approaching the housing projects.

“Just promise me you’ll think about it,” Azi said.

“I promise,” Hector said, distracted by a blue car parked up ahead on the dirt road. The sound of music and laughter reached them.

“We better turn around,” Hector said.

Azi shaded her eyes with her hand and peered. “It’s just some kids drinking.”

“It’s a blue Impala,” Hector said.

“So?”

“It’s Chavo’s car.”

Chavo, their local drug dealer, lived with his younger brother, Joey, in the building next to Hector’s. Joey was sixteen, just like Hector. They were even in the same social studies class except that Joey rarely showed up—and when he did, he picked a desk in the back of the class and slept. Hector had always tried to stay under Chavo and Joey’s radar, but something had changed in the past two weeks. Recently, there had been enough hostile stares and belligerent gestures by both Chavo and Joey to make Hector believe that he had been noticed and even singled out. Or it could be that his fear of those two was making him see what wasn’t there.

“Do you really want to go all the way back to Alameda?” Azi said. “They’re inside the car. We’ll go down and walk on the path beside the ditch. They won’t see us.”

They climbed down the ditch, Azi leading the way. It was embarrassing to have Azi see him act like a scared rabbit. But then again Azi knew that it made good sense to stay as far away as possible from Chavo and his friends.

“I need . . .” Azi started to speak, but Hector raised his

finger to his lips. She tried again, this time whispering. “I need to ask you a favor.”

“What?”

“Will you teach me to play basketball? In gym class, I’m the only player who’s never made a basket. I’m terrible. No one ever passes the ball to me. We can go to the playground in front of your apartment building.”

“No, not there.” Hector nodded in the direction of the blue car. “Chavo and his brother hang out there. We can practice after school at the courts there. I’ll borrow Aurora’s basketball.”

“When?”

Hector touched his lips with his finger. “Tomorrow morning, first thing. I’ll call you.”

“But you work on Saturdays.”

“Not tomorrow. Frank changed my shift to this evening.”

The back door of the blue car opened, and out came Joey. Hector and Azi stopped and watched him step to the front of the car and begin to urinate, a cigarette hanging from his left hand. Hector tried to pull Azi behind a bush, but Azi wouldn’t budge.

Joey was zipping up his pants when his eyes landed on Hector and Azi. He jerked his head back with surprise, and then, looking directly at Azi, his face broke into an ugly, leering grin.