

Chapter One

Altafulla, Spain, 1969—

“He beat me again,” the Boy muttered as he climbed onto his customary perch.

The Old Man nodded, his ancient, twisted hands resting lightly on the tall bamboo fishing pole anchored in the rocks between his feet.

“...For no reason,” the Boy added. *“It’s not fair.”*

The Old Man nodded a second time.

“I don’t know about fairness,” the Old Man began, in a deep, gravelly voice. *“It seems to me that all of us are dealt cards, both good and bad. Some learn to play theirs better.”*

Out of habit, the Old Man pulled lightly on the line that stretched flaccid into the purple and black waters of the Mediterranean. Nothing.

“He hit her, too,” the Boy continued. He wondered when he had started calling his father and mother ‘him’ and ‘her.’ It didn’t matter. The Old Man understood. The Old Man understood most everything.

“You must have done something,” the Old Man admonished. *“You usually do—though even in that, you have a choice.”*

The Boy smirked. *“After he smacked her, I jumped on his leg,”* he said. *“He kicked me away, into the bookcase. When he finished with her, he turned on me with his belt.”*

The Boy spoke with little emotion, as if giving a school history report.

“Stand and pull up your shirt, Boy,” the Old Man stated. *“I have aloe.”* The Old Man pulled his *navaja* from the folds of his wide, cloth belt and cut a long strip from the leaf in his bag.

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Gently, he smoothed the plant over the swollen welts on the Boy's back.

The Boy stiffened without a sound.

"He's a wounded bird, that one," the Old Man mused. *"And a poor card player."*

"He shouldn't take it out on me," the Boy complained.

"Nor should you incite him," the Old Man pressed back.

The Old Man had a way of pushing the Boy's buttons without ever making him wrong, exactly, or putting him down. It was almost as if he wanted to challenge the Boy, test him and make him think.

Still, the Boy loved the Old Man more than anyone, and loved Sunday afternoons more than any other day.

The breeze picked up slightly and caused white flecks of foam to crest over the tips of the dark swells that extended from beneath the rocks into an open sea.

"I have a new movie," the Old Man said and the Boy's face lit up in an instant.

"It's about baseball," the Old Man added.

The Boy snapped his neck around. *"What? Baseball? You don't even like baseball. You don't even know how to play."*

The Old Man bobbed his head. *"Not baseball exactly,"* the Old Man corrected. *"Pedro recommended it. He said it was about dreamers, like us—about a guy who had a vision and built a field before he had players because somehow he knew they would come."*

"That's crazy," the Boy snorted.

"Maybe, maybe not," the Old Man contested. *"Sometimes you have to see things in your mind long before they can happen. We'll have to check it out for ourselves, find out what we discover."*

The wind grew progressively stronger and caused the spray to rise high into the sky and sprinkle down on them.

"Can we watch it right now?" the Boy asked after a few moments.

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“After the fishing,” the Old Man answered as the Boy knew he would.

“Why?” the Boy grumbled selfishly. “You never catch anything anyway. In the years we’ve been out here, you’ve never caught a single fish. Why can’t we go?”

The Old Man sighed.

“Ahhh, Boy. That’s where you are mistaken. I had a nice bite earlier. If I keep on fishing, I am sure to catch a great fish. It’s only if I quit that I might fail.”

“Sure,” the Boy muttered with a hint of disgust. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Yes, you will,” the Old Man smiled. “Yes, you will.”