



# GIRLS PLAY, TOO

## Chapter 1

**The aroma of grilled** corn on the cob wafted through the festival. My stomach growled loudly. My best friend, Sierra, shook her head and laughed as we waited for our order from the MexiExpress food truck.

“Here you go, Itza,” said Mrs. Mendez. I grabbed the hot-off-the-grill corn, called an elote, from her. She had prepared it just the way I liked: with mayonnaise, cotija cheese, a squeeze of lime, and Tajín, a tangy lime and chile pepper seasoning.

“Gracias, Mrs. Mendez!”

It was October in Washington, DC, which meant the Columbia Heights neighborhood was celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month with a fiesta. DC’s official fiesta is held near the National Mall, but my family prefers this smaller fiesta smack in the middle of Columbia Heights.

Outside, a large stage was set up for bands and dance groups. A children’s soccer match was about to begin in an empty grassy lot, and all around us were food trucks and stands serving tasty treats from all over Latin America.

“You make us all proud,” Mrs. Mendez said, pointing at

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the shiny first-place medal draped around my neck. “Keep it up!”

“Thank you!” I managed to say through a mouthful of juicy elote. Running always makes me hungry. And since I had just won first place in the youth 5K race, I could have eaten a dozen elotes.

“The band is about to begin!” Sierra squealed, stuffing a bunch of napkins in my hand. She hooked elbows with me and pulled me from the food truck toward the stage. “My dance group is next!”

Sierra has been my best friend since we were in diapers. We both live in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, DC, and attend DC Bilingual Middle School. We’re both seventh-graders, and we’re both Mexican American. I’m also Bolivian American on my mom’s side. Still, that’s not why we’re best friends. We’re best friends because we both enjoy the same things: festivals, food trucks, bookstores, baby goat videos, pugs, dancing, and, more importantly, we love soccer. Except this year, after nearly seven years of game-winning goals, heartbreaking losses, scraped knees, and a few bloody noses, Sierra quit our school team, the DC Jaguars. She made it clear that soccer wasn’t *that* important to her anymore, which made me feel like I wasn’t that important either.

When I told my parents how I felt, Dad said I had to

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support Sierra's passion for Mexican ballet folklórico the same way she supports me. In fact, at this morning's race, she had joined my family near the finish line, holding a big pink sign that said, "Itza Ochoa's #1 Fan!" In those last few seconds of the race, when I could hear my classmate Raheem huffing and puffing close behind me, Sierra's pink sign was like a power boost!

Still hooked at the elbows, Sierra and I zigzagged through the crowd toward the stage. As we inched forward, several people called out my name with a felicidades or congratulations for winning today's youth race.

"You know, you're practically a celebrity now, Itza," Sierra said. "The young girls look up to you. You have to start dressing the part."

I stopped in my tracks, unhooking my elbow with hers.

"What's wrong with my style?" I said playfully. I did a slow twirl showing off my usual look of leggings, track jacket, sporty fanny pack, and my "I Run DC" T-shirt. "I think I look very sporty-chic!"

Sierra was definitely more dressed up than I was, but that's because she was dancing tonight. She had silk ribbons woven into her long braids. Large gold hoops dangled from her ears, and she wore a turquoise traditional Mexican blouse with embroidered blue and purple flowers over a denim skirt.

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“Stop being a goof,” Sierra said. “After the race you should have changed into the beautiful blouse I brought you from Guanajuato, you know? Instead of a T-shirt.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. The blouse she gave me was identical to the turquoise embroidered blouse that she was wearing, but in coral. I relinked elbows with her. “I love that blouse, but Raheem has been texting me about a rematch, and I can’t run in a blouse.”

“Tell that to Lorena Ramírez and the Tarahumara women of Chihuahua, Mexico. They run marathons in traditional blouses, skirts, and huaraches on their feet.”

“Huaraches!” I exclaimed in disbelief. There’s no way I could run in flat leather sandals. “Do they win?”

“Yes!” Sierra said incredulously.

“They win ultramarathons—they’re amazing. I can’t believe you haven’t heard of them.” I made a mental note to look up Tarahumara runners. If they were Mexican athletes, I should definitely know about them.

“I promise I’ll wear the blouse for something super important.” Sierra seemed satisfied with my answer and linked arms with me again.



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When we finally got to the performance area, I spotted my parents and my abuelos in the front row.

“VIP seating! Vamos! Let’s go!” I exclaimed. As we took our seats, the band came onstage. They played music from Veracruz, Mexico, called son jorocho. At the very first joyful thrum of the guitars, the crowd jumped to its feet. Sierra and I danced around.

“Javier is up soon,” my mom said, nudging me excitedly. On cue, my big brother walked out onto the stage dressed in all white with a red sash around his waist and a straw hat. The crowd roared as he took his place on a wooden platform and began stomping out a fast-paced dance step in sync with the band. It was like playing a drum with your feet! My parents pulled out their phones to record him.

“Someday, I want to do zapateado,” Sierra shouted to me over the music. “Do you think I could do it?”

“You’ve always been good with your feet,” I said, sending her a sly reminder that she used to be really good at soccer. If she caught my reference, she didn’t show it.

The entire crowd danced. It was times like these that I truly loved Columbia Heights. Because my mom grew up here and my abuelos still live here, I feel like I have two neighborhoods: Capitol Hill and Columbia Heights. Sort of how I feel being Mexican American and Bolivian American. I belong to both. Can you belong to two

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communities? Two cultures? I say, yes! Definitely.

Just then, I noticed a small girl in a soccer jersey and shorts weaving through the crowd toward me. It was Yesenia from the soccer team that my father coached. I helped him with the team every weekend. They named themselves the DC Azules for the color blue that is in the flags of all the countries the team members are from: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and the United States. As Yesenia moved closer, I noticed that she looked sad. Before she could reach me, I rushed to her.

“Everything okay?” I asked as Yesenia threw her arms around my waist.

“I’ve been looking all over for you and your dad,” Yesenia said, taking my hand. “The children’s soccer game is about to start and they won’t let girls play. And if we can’t play, we can’t win any prizes,” she said, touching my first-place medal. “And the prizes son buenisimos—so great!”

Sierra joined in. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“For some reason, they’re not letting the girls play in the soccer match,” I explained.

“What?” Sierra said with disgust. “Who’s the organizer?”

“This year it’s Mr. Ramos,” Yesenia answered. Sierra and I exchanged a knowing look. Sierra and I used to play on a coed team and whenever we came up against Mr. Ramos’s all-boy team, he’d criticize his players for losing to a team

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of girls. As if losing to girls was the worst possible insult! I didn't know Mr. Ramos very well, but what I did know was that he had some very old-fashioned beliefs. Someone had to challenge him on this! For a second I thought about telling my dad, but I didn't want to pull him away from Javi's performance.

"Hold my elote," I said to Sierra.

"With pleasure!" Sierra said with raised eyebrows. "I'd go with you, but I have to get ready for my performance."

"I got this," I said confidently. "Could you let my parents know where I am?" Sierra gave me a thumbs-up.

"Please be back for my performance, okay?" she said, taking a huge bite of the elote. My stomach growled.

"Definitely!" I yelled back.