

# ONE

Pedro Morales loved playing basketball with Ned Hancock.

It didn't make Pedro different from any other sixth-grade basketball player at Vernon Middle School. Or in the whole town of Vernon for that matter. Ned made everybody around him better, every time he stepped on a court, whether it was for a real game or just scrimmaging.

But the thing Pedro liked best about playing with Ned is that Ned made *him* better.

Made him want to keep getting better at basketball.

And that meant every time Pedro stepped on a court.

Ned was doing that for him now, in the pickup game they were playing in the gym at the middle school. Which in their town, because the school district was so big, was for sixth-graders only. A school all their own is the way they looked at it, no seventh- or eighth-graders to bother them or bully them or bigtime them.

Today the kids had the gym all to themselves, school having been dismissed early because of teacher conferences. But Mr. Lucchino, the principal, had offered to stick around and let them use the gym, knowing that the first practice for the town team was the following Wednesday night, now that the players had been selected.

"Last day of spring training," Mr. Lucchino had said before rolling out the cart with the balls on it.

Pedro, a point guard, was on Ned's team today. Ned had picked him first even though he could have gone for a bigger guy. Ned liked playing with Pedro, too, because Pedro could pass. Not as well as Ned could. Nobody their age in Vernon could do anything in basketball as well as Ned could.

But Ned always wanted guys around him who knew how to pass. Even though he was only eleven years old, it was as if he already knew exactly how basketball was meant to be played. And that started with moving the ball.

Pedro felt the same way. Playing with Ned, going back to last year when they were old enough to play on their first town team together, reminded him why he loved basketball so much. Pedro loved basketball the way his father, who had been a star soccer player as a boy in Mexico, had always wanted him to love soccer.

Now the game Pedro and the rest of his friends were playing—first to ten baskets, didn't have to win by two—was tied at 9—all. Pedro's team had the ball. As they were taking it out under their basket, Ned said to Pedro, "Let's do this."

Ned was serious. It wasn't a pickup game to him now. If they were keeping score, he wanted to win. Even though they all knew there would be another game after this, and another game after that, until Mr. Lucchino finally told them to go wait out front for their parents.

When it was game point, Ned Hancock always played like he was playing for the championship of something, even if it was just the next time down the court.

Ned was a small forward, even though he wasn't small. He was tall enough to play center and a good enough shooter to play shooting guard. If he wanted to play point guard, he would have been better at handling and distributing the ball than Pedro was.

But he played forward. Point forward—that's the way Pedro thought of him, like they had two point guards in the game at the same time when they were on the same team.

Ned was a point *everything*, really.

Mr. Everything, that's what he was in basketball, and in their school, where he was the best student among the boys. He was even about to get elected president of Vernon Middle.

Forget about president of Vernon Middle, it was as if Ned was the mayor of all the kids their age in Vernon.

Before Ned inbounded the ball, he bent down to tie his sneakers, just as a way of buying a little time. As he did, he said to Pedro, "Let's run a high pick-and-roll. You and me. Just without the roll."

"Could you try that again in plain English?" Pedro said.

Ned did.

Pedro smiled as he began dribbling up the court.

Joe Sutter, the best rebounder in their grade and Pedro's best bud, was also on their team. Pedro wasn't worried about Joe getting in the way, because even though Joe didn't say much, he also didn't miss much. Sometimes he had a way of reading Pedro's mind, in a basketball game, a soccer game, or even in a video game.

Jeff Harmon—Ned's best bud—was guarding Pedro.

"Watch out for a trick play," Jeff called out. "I saw them talking down there."

Pedro was past half-court now, holding up a fist, which everybody on both teams knew meant absolutely nothing.

"Very funny," Jeff said.

*No*, Pedro thought, *just plain fun*.

This was always the best of it for him, in any sport, when he could see a play inside his head, and was about to make it happen.

As soon as he began dribbling to his right, Joe cleared out of there and ran to the other side of the court. Like he just knew it was going to be a two-man game now—Ned and Pedro—the same way it had been so many times last season on the fifth-grade town team.

As soon as Joe cleared out, Ned came running up to what the announcers on television liked to call the "foul line extended," and set a monster pick on Jeff Harmon, who had been sliding to his left as he guarded Pedro. Jeff may have been Ned's bud, but it didn't help him now on game point, because when he ran into Ned's pick, nobody having called it out, Pedro could actually hear the air come out of him like it was coming out of a balloon.

Jeff was still sure he knew what was coming.

"Pick-and-roll!" he said, gasping for breath. "I've got Ned."

He stayed home on Ned. Bobby Murray left Ned now and picked up Pedro. And they would have had the play covered if Ned had kept going toward the basket, the way you were supposed to on the kind of pick-and-roll play they had been using all game long.

Only Ned, instead of cutting toward the basket, popped out a couple of steps *away* from it.

And instead of trying to beat Bobby Murray off the dribble, Pedro suddenly pulled up, too, spun and put the ball over his head and whipped a two-hand pass, hard, over to Ned.

The ball barely seemed to touch Ned's hands before it changed direction and came right back at Pedro.

Like the ball was on a string.

Or had bounced back to Pedro off some kind of invisible wall.

It was just enough to make Jeff Harmon turn his head. As soon as he did, Ned was gone.

The only thing missing was that *whoosh* you got in a superhero movie when Spidey or the Silver Surfer or one of those guys was there and gone.

Pedro didn't even bother catching the ball, just tap-passed it back to Ned over Jeff's head and over the rest of the defense, a sweet little floater of a pass, almost like they were playing volleyball on the beach and he was setting Ned up for a spike.

Ned didn't spike it. He just caught the ball and laid it up in one motion.

Ballgame.

Even a couple of the guys on defense put their hands together.

So did Mr. Lucchino, standing in the open gym door.

Pedro stood in the exact same spot from where he'd delivered the pass and watched as Ned, as usual, got high-fives all around. Joe once said that you didn't need one of those GPS guidance gizmos from your parents' car to locate Ned Hancock—just the sound of applause.

Everybody was acting as if Ned had somehow passed the ball to himself.

Pedro didn't care. If you played with Ned you knew it was his game, and you were just playing in it. It had pretty much been that way since they'd first become teammates, and Pedro accepted it. He was a point guard and he always remembered something he'd read once from a famous coach named Larry Brown, who said that the only stat that mattered for a point guard was the final score—whether or not his team had won the game, not how many points and assists he had.

Their team had won, and that was enough for Pedro. That and the satisfaction of making that pass, delivering that baby like it was the afternoon mail.

He quietly walked over to the water fountain to get himself a drink before they started up all over again.

Joe Sutter, when he did talk, liked to say that the best thing about his buddy Pedro was that he knew who he was. He never needed to be a star, on any team he'd ever played for. He didn't need to put himself out there, to say to everybody, *Hey, look at me*.

He just wanted to win the game.