

CHAPTER 1

HECTOR

The bell rang. Fourth period was over. Hector Turcio tossed his books into his book bag. Wednesdays were always tough. Dr. Miller's labs often ran past the bell.

He burst through the side door and walked quickly to the parking lot. He didn't have to search for his car. He knew right where he'd left it. Same spot every day. Backed in against the far fence. But even if he hadn't parked in his usual spot, he could pick it out.

The black Lexus ES 350 was the hottest car in Capital Central High School's parking lot.

Leaning against it, trying to use the side mirror as she put on lipstick, was Jacleen Thompson. The hottest girl at Cap Central.

Cap Central kids didn't have the money for

nice cars. The school was located in the Northeast quadrant of Washington, D.C. Although people with money were moving in and fixing up houses, most of the kids who attended Cap Central were from families who didn't have much. Those who were lucky enough to have a car mostly had beaters—their own family's cast-offs or junkers bought cheap.

No one else had a Lexus. Or anything even close. And his was as sweet a ride inside as it looked outside. Fully loaded. GPS. Rear back-up camera. Leather seats.

A car like that should make anyone happy. Especially someone as crazy about cars as Hector was. Just as a girl like Jacleen should make any guy happy. She was tall, with perfect skin, long processed hair, and huge dark eyes. Jacleen wanted to be a model. She was pretty enough to make it. In fact, she had already gotten some jobs.

Hector knew he was the envy of most of the boys at Cap Central. They'd be surprised to know how miserable he felt.

The deal he'd made with Dez Arnold for the use of the Lexus was turning into a nightmare.

One he couldn't see his way out of. And to be honest? Hector knew that without the car, Jacleen would be gone.

She pressed herself against him in a hug. "Hey, baby, I looked for you everywhere this morning," she cooed. "Where were you hiding?"

"I was around," he said.

In spite of himself, he was thrilled at being so close to Jacleen.

"I missed you," Jacleen said. Her face was so close to his that Hector could smell her lipstick. "I wanted to make sure you were coming back to Cap Cent after your Tech classes so we could spend the afternoon together."

"I'll be back," Hector said. He was embarrassed that his voice sounded funny. But Jacleen always seemed to have that effect on him.

"'Cause I need you to take me to the nail spa after school. I want to get my nails done," Jacleen said. "Brennay and Zakia too."

Hector's heart fell. Just once, he wished Jacleen would suggest spending time together that didn't involve him having to drive her somewhere. And he didn't look forward to having Brennay Baxter and Zakia Johnson in

the car. When the three girls were together, he was invisible.

“I have to pick up my grandmother from the dialysis clinic at four thirty,” he said. “But I can drive you before that.”

He heard footsteps from behind.

“Sorry I’m late,” Marley Macomb said.

Hector turned around. Marley attended classes at D.C. Vocational Technical Academy with Hector in the afternoons. Hector studied automotive science, while Marley studied computer technology.

Hector pulled away from Jacleen and used his remote so that Marley could get into the car.

“I can’t believe you’re friends with her,” Jacleen whispered in his ear. “She’s so ... rough.”

Marley looked like someone whose family didn’t have much money. Her clothes weren’t fashionable—or even new—and sometimes her hair needed a little work. She worked long hours at the Kwik n’Carry, a convenience store on Benning Road. But Marley was funny and smart. She and Hector had become good friends on their daily rides to Tech. Hector didn’t like hearing Jacleen criticize her.

“She’s okay,” Hector said. “Anyway, I’ll see you later, okay? I’m gonna be late if I don’t get going,”

Jacleen kissed him on the mouth.

“I’ll be waiting, sugar,” she whispered. She pressed herself against him. “Any chance you could pick us up when our nails are done? After you drop off your grandma, of course?”

Seemed like everyone he knew needed rides lately. Hector was glad to help out his grandmother and happy to give Marley a ride to Tech. As for Jacleen? He’d drive her anywhere if it meant she’d continue to stand so close.

“Sure,” he said.

“You’re the best,” she gushed. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

Hector watched as she walked away.

He knew this came at a price. The things Dez Arnold wanted him to do were becoming dangerous. So far, Hector hadn’t broken any laws. At least, he didn’t think he had. But he had seen things going on at Dez Arnold’s car repair shop that he knew couldn’t be legal.

Arnold had given him the car in exchange for helping out around the shop on weekends.

The deal seemed perfect. On-the-job experience, plus the use of a great car. For free.

And then he learned what Dez Arnold was really up to.

It wasn't fixing cars or doing oil changes.

Hector got in the car and started it up. He knew the right thing to do was to give the car back and stay as far away from Dez Arnold as possible. But life with a car was so much better than life without one.

Especially *this* car.

The appeal was just too great to give it up.

As Hector found out, the car wasn't free after all. The only question left was how high a price would he end up paying.