The Queen's Gambit

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WALTER TEVIS

Walter Tevis grew up in San Francisco as the younger of two children. Growing up, Tevis was a class-C chess player who learned how to play at age 7. At 10 years old, Tevis developed a heart condition, so his parents placed him in the Stanford Children's Convalescent home, and he was given heavy barbiturates for a year. While at the home, Tevis's family moved to Kentucky, and he rejoined them at the end of the year at age 11. Near the end of World War II, 17-year-old Tevis served in the war as a Navy carpenter's mate. After his discharge, he graduated high school in 1945 and entered the University of Kentucky, earning a B.A. and then an M.A. in English literature. He received an M.F.A. in creative writing in 1960 from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. After graduation, Tevis wrote for the Kentucky Highway Department and taught classes in small-town high schools and colleges in Kentucky while publishing books and short stories, including *The Hustler* (1959), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963), and *Mockingbird* (1980). Tevis married Jamie Griggs in 1957; they remained together for 20 years and had two children before divorcing. Tevis was a frequent smoker, gambler, and alcoholic throughout his life, which became part of the inspiration for *The Queen's Gambit*. Tevis spent his final years in New York City as a full-time writer and married Eleanora Walker in 1983. Tevis died of lung cancer in 1984.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Queen's Gambit is set against the political and social backdrop of the 1960s in the United States. One of the biggest political dynamics at play was the Cold War—the ongoing conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, particularly with regards to the conflict between capitalism and communism. This is seen clearly in *The Queen's Gambit*, as Beth's visit to the Soviet Union is tightly monitored and the Christian Crusade offers to fund her trip in order to spread the Christian message in opposition with communism (which they associate with atheism). Other social trends in the United States at the time included suburbanization, which was closely tied to the ideal of the American dream. In the 1950s, the term "nuclear family" emerged to describe the stability of family life at home, often with women serving in traditional roles as homemakers with men working. It is in this context that Beth faces so much opposition, as women were meant to strive for marriage and children rather than ambitious and intellectual goals like competing in chess tournaments. This began to change in the 1960s, however, particularly with the increasing availability of birth control, which gave women greater control over when and if they would have children. In Betty Friedan's 1963 groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she insists that women should break out of the household trap. This is what Beth tries to do, though it is clear that many men in the book maintain more traditional and stereotypical views of the roles that women should play, and Beth faces a great deal of sexism in the opponents and tournaments she encounters. Lastly, Beth could be inspired by several figures from the real-life chess world, including Vera Menchik, who rose to fame in the 1920s and 30s and became the first Women's World Chess Champion. She was also the first woman to play in top-level men's tournaments and is mentioned in the book. Another possible inspiration includes Bobby Fischer, a grandmaster who was a chess prodigy at age 13 and who beat then World Champion Boris Spassky, a Russian player, in the World Chess Championship 1972. The match was known as the "Match of the Century" and bears similarities with Beth's match against Borgov.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Walter Tevis has written several other books on genius in gamesmanship and the struggles that come with that kind of talent, including *The Hustler* and its sequel, *The Color of Money*, both of which examine pool. Other examples of accounts of young prodigies include Frank Conroy's *Body and Soul*, Pascal Mercier's *Lea*, Stuart Rosjstaczer's *The Mathematician's Shiva*, Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted*, Helen DeWitt's *The Last Samurai*, and Myla Goldberg's *Bee Season*. Garret Weyr's *The Kings Are Already Here* has particularly salient parallels with *The Queen's Gambit*, as the two protagonists in Weyr's novel are Russian and excel in chess and ballet. Nonfiction books examining children who excel despite difficult upbringings include *The Man Who Knew Infinity* and *Spare Parts*. Beth's grappling with addiction in *The Queen's Gambit* also bears similarities with several contemporary nonfiction accounts of teenagers dealing with addiction, including Lizzy Mason's *The Art of Losing*, Nic Sheff's *Tweak* and *We All Fall Down*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Queen's Gambit
- **When Written:** 1980-1983
- **Where Written:** New York, NY
- **When Published:** 1983
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, Sports Novel
- **Setting:** 1960s Kentucky, New York, Mexico City, Paris, Moscow

- **Climax:** Beth defeats Vasily Borgov.
- **Antagonist:** Vasily Borgov, Addiction
- **Point of View:** Third person limited from Beth's point of view

EXTRA CREDIT

Authentic Action. While writing the novel, Tevis consulted National Master Bruce Pandolfini to ensure the chess games in the novel were authentic.

An Acclaimed Adaptation. *The Queen's Gambit* was adapted into a miniseries in 2020 to widespread acclaim. Anya Taylor-Joy won a Golden Globe Award for her performance as Beth and the series won a Golden Globe for Best Limited Series.

PLOT SUMMARY

Eight-year-old Beth Harmon is orphaned when her mother dies in a car crash; she then moves into the Methuen Home in Mount Sterling, Kentucky. Methuen is a strict and tense place for Beth, but she finds respite in the **tranquilizers** distributed by the orphanage staff to keep the girls calm. Beth also befriends an older girl, Jolene. One day, Beth sees the janitor, Mr. Shaibel, playing chess against himself in the basement. She learns as much as she can by observing him, and over time, he teaches her the pieces, the squares, and different openings and variations. Beth often sneaks out of class and chapel to play with Mr. Shaibel, and she plays in her head while she lies in bed at night. She shows a natural talent for the game and gradually beats Mr. Shaibel consistently. However, when the school stops giving the students tranquilizers, realizing how harmful they are, Beth experiences withdrawal and steals the jar of pills. She is caught after swallowing thirty pills, and though she survives her subsequent hospital stay, the director, Mrs. Deardorff, does not let her play chess anymore.

When Beth is 13, she is adopted by a couple in Lexington, Mr. Wheatley and Mrs. Wheatley. Mr. Wheatley is indifferent to Beth and is often away on business, while Mrs. Wheatley is excited to have a daughter but also somewhat distant—she drinks and gets sick frequently. She also takes tranquilizers for her illness, and Beth starts to steal some of her pills. Meanwhile, Beth learns of the Kentucky State Chess Championship and enters the tournament, despite the fact that she is an unrated player. She feels out of place, as most players are men in their 20s, but she is able to beat each person she plays. This includes Townes, a handsome man who placed fifth in the U.S. Open, and Harry Beltik, an arrogant young man who is the Kentucky State Champion. After winning the tournament, Beth then opens a bank account, gets more books to study, and plans further trips to tournaments in nearby states.

Beth continues to win in tournaments for three years, traveling with Mrs. Wheatley to Cincinnati, Houston, and New York. She likes traveling with Mrs. Wheatley, staying in beautiful hotels and seeing local sites. When Beth competes at the U.S. Open at 16 years old, Beth once again sees Townes, who is covering the tournament for a magazine. Beth also meets Benny Watts, the current U.S. Champion. Benny is in his 20s and was considered a prodigy when he was younger. When they meet, he points out an error that she made in her game against Beltik. When she faces Benny in her final match of the tournament, Beth gets so caught up in her own game that she doesn't see his surprise attack. It is her first major loss, and she is devastated.

Soon after, Beth and Mrs. Wheatley travel to Mexico City for an international tournament. Beth spends much of the trip studying, knowing that she'll be facing some of her toughest opponents yet, including Vasily Borgov, the World Champion. She also notices over the trip that Mrs. Wheatley seems very lethargic and sick. When Beth finally faces Borgov, she goes in with little confidence. She crumbles under the onslaught of his moves and experiences a demoralizing loss. When she returns to her hotel room, she experiences another loss, as she finds Mrs. Wheatley dead in bed. The manager helps Beth sort out arrangements for Mrs. Wheatley, who appears to have died of hepatitis. Beth also buys tons of tranquilizers, for which she does not need a prescription in Mexico. She contacts Mr. Wheatley, who has effectively disappeared from her life and moved to the Southwest, and informs him of the news. He tells her to handle the funeral arrangements and that if she keeps up the mortgage payments, she can have the house.

Back in Kentucky, Beth gives herself a little time to grieve before she receives a phone call. It's Harry Beltik: he'll be in Kentucky for the summer, and he offers to help train her so that she can stand up to the Russian players. Beth agrees, and Harry moves into her house with her. They spend grueling weeks studying, playing chess, and also having sex. However, by the end of the weeks, Harry can't win against Beth, and Beth feels that he has nothing left to teach her. She continues to study on her own as well as drink and take tranquilizers, hoping to beat Benny Watts at the upcoming U.S. Championship. At the U.S. Championship, Beth surprises Benny by trading her queens early in the game and puts him on the defense. Ultimately, she beats him handily, becoming the new U.S. Champion.

After the winners' ceremony, Benny offers to host her at his apartment in New York to help her prepare for upcoming tournaments in Paris and Moscow, which Beth accepts. They drive together to New York, where Beth discovers Benny's apartment is quite dingy but with a fully stocked library of chess books. They start rigorous study, focusing particularly on Borgov's games. Beth starts to beat Benny consistently, even when they play speed chess. One day after several weeks, Benny asks Beth to sleep with him, and she does so. But she gets aggravated with the lack of emotional intimacy between them. They spend the next several days as lovers, but Beth soon

leaves for Paris. She knows she's fond of him, but that's the extent of their relationship, and she feels that he has little left to teach her.

Beth has never felt more prepared than she does in Paris, and she wins several grueling games before facing Borgov. Despite her study and preparation, however, Borgov still outplays her, and she feels sick and powerless when she loses. She returns to Kentucky to lick her wounds, and when Mr. Wheatley returns, intending to sell the house, she buys it from him. Feeling completely alone, Beth quickly falls into a spiral of alcohol and pills. She barely eats, instead remaining constantly drunk for weeks. She only snaps out of it when the Kentucky State Championship director calls her to remind her about the tournament the next day. She goes, but she quickly realizes how out of shape she is and is set to lose in the first round. Unable to face this humiliation, she drops out, saying she doesn't feel well.

Beth continues to drink, even though she's now worried that the drinking has damaged her mind and her talent. She ultimately calls Jolene—now a graduate student at the University of Kentucky—to whom she hasn't spoken since she left Methuen. Jolene helps Beth exercise, get a better diet, and clean up her home so that she will be less tempted to drink. Meanwhile, a letter arrives from the Christian Crusade, a group that offers to help Beth pay for a trip to Moscow to play in a tournament there. Benny tells her to take their help, because they can also pay for him to accompany her. Beth then attends a tournament in California and is relieved to realize that she can play well again, winning the tournament.

Soon after, Beth learns that Mr. Shaibel has died, and she and Jolene attend his funeral. Beth is touched to learn afterward that Mr. Shaibel continued to follow her career. Later, Beth receives a visit from two women from the Christian Crusade, who remind her of Mrs. Deardorff because of their bullying tactics. When they try to get her to make a statement in support of Christianity, Beth refuses and gives them back their money. Benny is furious; this means he can't accompany her to Russia because he doesn't have the money. Beth realizes her mistake and he tells her that he doesn't want to talk to her anymore.

Beth travels to Russia accompanied by a man from the U.S. State Department, Mr. Booth. Beth is intimidated by the players, but she has been preparing intently for the matches. She makes it to the final, even beating out a former World Champion named Luchenko who tells her that she may be the best player he has ever played. In the final match, Beth faces Borgov, and they play for several hours before having to adjourn. That night, Beth studies the position as best she can, knowing that Borgov has a team of other Russian players helping him sort out different strategies he could use. This is why Beth is thrilled when she receives a phone call from Benny, who has assembled a bunch of other players to help her sort through potential strategies. When she returns to the board, Beth plays a few moves following Benny's suggestions until Borgov makes an unexpected move. However, Beth is able to take Borgov by surprise in return and Borgov ultimately resigns the game. He gets up and hugs her to tremendous applause. After the match, Beth wanders away from the party celebrating the championship and ends up in a park where a bunch of old Russian men are sitting at chess tables and playing. She asks a man sitting alone at one of the boards to play.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Beth Harmon – Elizabeth "Beth" Harmon is the book's protagonist. Beth is orphaned at eight years old when her mother dies in a car accident, and she subsequently lands in the strict Methuen orphanage. There, she befriends an older girl, Jolene, becomes addicted to the **tranquilizers** that the orphanage distributes, and learns how to play chess from the janitor, Mr. Shaibel. She quickly shows talent for the game, playing in her mind at night. When Beth is 13, she is adopted by Mr. Wheatley and Mrs. Wheatley. Mr. Wheatley quickly becomes absent from their lives, but she builds a good relationship with Mrs. Wheatley, who helps her attend chess tournaments. Mrs. Wheatley also enables Beth's addiction, as Beth steals her prescription medication and shares beers with Mrs. Wheatley when she's still a teenager. Throughout Beth's teenage years, she rises through the ranks of the chess world, largely playing intuitively, while she also faces discrimination because of her gender and age. A tournament in Mexico City proves to be a turning point for Beth: there, she both loses badly to the World Champion Vasily Borgov and Mrs. Wheatley dies of hepatitis. After this experience, Beth returns to Kentucky and buys her home from Mr. Wheatley, illustrating how independent she has become. She also starts to study with high-ranked players Harry Beltik and Benny Watts, who force her to be more disciplined about her chess strategies, elevating her game so that they can no longer even beat her. But after suffering another loss against Borgov in Paris, Beth slides into a cycle of alcohol and drug use, getting drunk for weeks at a time and pushing away her friends. Ultimately, it takes reconnecting with Jolene to help her get out of this cycle and build back the physical and mental stamina needed to compete against Borgov in Moscow. Beth redoubles her studying efforts, and during a pause in the key game with Borgov in Moscow, Benny and others help her think through strategies. Her ultimate victory over Borgov illustrates the importance of both Beth's dedication and her friendships, and it affirms Beth's success in the chess world despite the discrimination she faced.

Benny Watts – Benny Watts is a high-ranked chess player whom Beth befriends. Benny was a child prodigy at eight years old, competing in prominent international tournaments. When Beth first meets Benny at the U.S. Open, he is in his 20s while

Beth is 16. He talks to her about her games, points out errors in her play, and he then quickly beats her—one of her first real losses. Years later, after Beth's tournament in Mexico City, she plays Benny again in the U.S. Championship after having studied for weeks with Harry Beltik and beats him. He then offers to host her at his apartment in New York City, where he helps her study for upcoming tournaments in Paris and Moscow so that she can beat Vasily Borgov. Benny also tries to help Beth clear her mind, knowing how devastating her alcohol and drug use can be for her chess game. Gradually, Beth and Benny develop a sexual relationship as well, though she often feels that he is distant and wishes that they had greater intimacy. When Beth starts to realize that Benny has little left to teach her, she pushes him away—particularly after she still loses to Borgov in Paris despite her studying. Then, later, she backs out of an offer from a Christian group that would pay for her and Benny to go to a tournament in Moscow together, leaving him furious and unable to go. Ultimately, however, Benny's friendship proves crucial to Beth. After her final game with Borgov in Moscow is adjourned overnight, Benny calls her from the States. He has gathered other players to help her think through potential strategies for the second part of her game. Even though Beth is a better player than Benny, his support still proves crucial to helping her beat Borgov.

Mrs. Wheatley – Alma Wheatley is Beth's adopted mother and Mr. Wheatley's wife. Mrs. Wheatley is excited to have a daughter, while Mr. Wheatley is largely indifferent to Beth and absent from their lives until he essentially disappears entirely, remaining in Denver after a business trip and cutting himself off from them. Mrs. Wheatley helps Beth enter into chess tournaments, taking a cut of Beth's profits as an agent's commission. Like Beth, Mrs. Wheatley struggles with addiction and, it is also implied, mental health issues. Mrs. Wheatley is often sick or somewhat dazed, and she takes prescription **tranquilizers**, some of which Beth steals. Mrs. Wheatley also drinks frequently, and she inadvertently enables Beth's addiction by offering her alcohol as well when Beth is a teenager. While Beth appreciates being adopted and the comfortable life she has with Mrs. Wheatley, she often feels that she is more mature than her adopted mother. Most of what Beth knows about growing up, having sex, and drinking she learns on her own while Mrs. Wheatley is rarely involved in Beth's decisions. Mrs. Wheatley's illnesses culminate in their trip to Mexico City, when Beth notices that Mrs. Wheatley has gained a lot of weight and is very weak, lying in bed and drinking. At the end of the tournament, Beth returns to the hotel to discover that Mrs. Wheatley has died. A doctor later relays that Mrs. Wheatley died of hepatitis (a liver condition), implying the deadly consequences of her alcohol addiction. Beth subsequently buries Mrs. Wheatley and takes over the house payments, showing how Beth becomes completely independent following her mother's death.

Jolene DeWitt – Jolene is Beth's close friend, whom she meets at Methuen orphanage. Jolene is African American and is 12 when the novel begins. She is protective of eight-year-old Beth, helping Beth with her addiction to the **tranquilizers** at the school and helping her improve in gym so that she's not afraid of sports like volleyball. Jolene also teaches Beth about menstruation and male genitalia, though at one point she touches Beth sexually without her consent, leading to a temporary break in their friendship. Jolene also becomes jealous when Beth is adopted, leading her to steal Beth's chess book out of spite. Later, Jolene and Beth reconnect when Beth is struggling with her addiction. Though she was never adopted, Jolene got a scholarship for volleyball, got a bachelor's degree, and is getting an M.S. in political science at Kentucky State University. She plans to work at a law firm in Atlanta after graduating and hopes to work in government. After reconnecting, Jolene helps Beth recover from her addiction and get into mental and physical shape again. Jolene works out with Beth, helps her clean up the house, and teaches Beth how to improve her diet. Only with Jolene's support is Beth able to rebound from weeks of heavy drinking and ultimately go on to defeat Vasily Borgov in Moscow, affirming the importance of friendship and mentorship to Beth's success.

Mr. Shaibel – Mr. Shaibel is the gruff janitor at Methuen orphanage who teaches Beth how to play chess. One day, while cleaning erasers, Beth watches him play chess alone in the basement and asks him to teach her. Initially, Mr. Shaibel is hesitant to teach a young girl, saying that girls don't play chess, but when Beth illustrates that she has already picked up some of the rules, he agrees to teach her. Realizing her talent for the game, he encourages her. He gives her a book on chess openings, teaches her chess notation, and invites a man who teaches a local high school chess club, Mr. Ganz, for Beth to meet and build her skills. After Beth is adopted, she writes to Mr. Shaibel for money to enter her first chess tournament, which he sends her. At the end of the book, Beth learns that Mr. Shaibel died of a heart attack and attends his funeral with Jolene. Afterward, she takes a trip back to Methuen and discovers that Mr. Shaibel closely followed her career for years, putting up pictures and articles about her on the wall in the orphanage basement. Mr. Shaibel illustrates the importance of mentorship in Beth's life—despite his gruffness, without his encouragement and acknowledgement of her talent, she could not have become a successful player.

Vasily Borgov – Vasily Borgov is a Russian chess player and the reigning World Champion. Borgov is in his late 30s when Beth first encounters him in Mexico City; he has bushy eyebrows, coarse black hair, and an authoritarian scowl. She is completely intimidated by him and his natural sense of belonging in and ownership over the chess world. He is often surrounded by other players, particularly other high-ranked Russian players, which makes Beth feel out of place in comparison. Beth

believes that he deliberately avoids looking at her or interacting with her as a way to make her feel insignificant. The first time Beth encounters him, she completely falls apart, relying only on instinct. She then studies for months with Benny and Beltik to face Borgov in Paris, but even then, Beth cannot beat him. She continues to prepare, again with the help of friends, to face him at a tournament in Moscow, where, at the climax of the book, she is finally able to use both her intuition, her vast base of knowledge, and her friends' help to beat him. After this loss, Borgov smiles warmly at her and hugs her, illustrating how Beth's doubts about him and fear of him are primarily internal and borne of her own sense that she doesn't belong in the chess world.

Harry Beltik – Harry Beltik is a high-ranked chess player against whom Beth competes. At the beginning of the novel, Beltik is the reigning Kentucky State Champion. Beltik is a strong player, but he is somewhat arrogant and underestimates 13-year-old Beth. He shows up late to the championship match at the tournament before she beats him handily. Even after the tournament, Beltik undercuts Beth's talent, giving a statement to a local newspaper that Beth shows "a mastery of the game unequaled by any female." Years later, after Beth loses to Borgov in Mexico City, Beltik offers to tutor her, acknowledging that she needs a lot of rigorous study in order to be able to compete with Russian players. He lives with Beth in her home for several weeks while helping her study for her upcoming tournament in Paris. They also begin a sexual relationship, but it is largely passionless for Beth. She appreciates his help but gradually recognizes that he has little to teach her, and when she starts to beat Harry consistently—even when he plays with a handicap—he grows somewhat demoralized. He leaves her home shortly after with little ceremony, saying that he has to focus on his own studies to become an electrical engineer.

D. L. Townes/The Handsome Man – Townes is a handsome chess player in his 20s whom Beth meets during the Kentucky State Championship. Beth likes him because he acknowledges her skill despite her young age and gender, unlike some of the other men at the tournament. Beth beats him easily in the tournament, and she develops a crush on him. When Beth meets him again at the U.S. Open when she is 16, she is again smitten with him. He writes a story about her for a chess magazine and takes photos of her in his hotel room. There, she wishes that they could make love, but they simply wind up playing chess.

Georgi Petrovitch Girev – Girev is a 13-year-old Russian player whom Beth plays in Mexico City. She is stunned at how well he plays, and how serious he is at such a young age. He notes to her that he wants to be the World Champion by the time he is 16. When Beth asks him what he intends to do after that, he seems confused. To Beth, who is 17 years old when she plays him, she sees in him a reflection of herself at that age—completely serious about chess but also not yet fully aware of how to take control of her life and her dreams.

Mrs. Deardorff – Mrs. Deardorff is the director at the Methuen orphanage. Beth describes her as strict and a bully at the school. If a child breaks the rules, the staff tells Mrs. Deardorff, and it is less likely that the child will be adopted. When Beth becomes addicted to the **tranquilizers** she was given at the school, Mrs. Deardorff punishes her, but Beth criticizes the staff for giving her the tranquilizers in the first place. Mrs. Deardorff then prevents Beth from continuing to play chess despite her talent for it, which Beth resents later in her life.

Mr. Wheatley – Allston Wheatley is Beth's adopted father and Mrs. Wheatley's husband. While Mrs. Wheatley is very excited about the prospect of adopting Beth, Mr. Wheatley is completely indifferent. He often goes on long business trips, until one day he goes to Denver and never returns. Afterwards, Beth only contacts him when Mrs. Wheatley dies, and when she buys their house in Kentucky from him. He feels that he has no connection to Beth, barely viewing her as his daughter.

Luchenko – Luchenko is a Russian player whom Beth plays in Moscow. He is 57, has long, white hair like an orchestra conductor's, and dresses immaculately. He was the previous World Champion before Borgov. In contrast to Borgov, he is very warm towards Beth, who pulls off a stunning recovery in her game against Luchenko. When she wins, he tells her that she may be the best chess player he will ever play.

Annette Packer – Annette Packer is Beth's first competitor at the Kentucky State Championship when Beth is 13 years old. Annette is kind to Beth, teaching her about how to use the chess clock and the tournament rules. Beth beats Annette easily, and later Annette cheers Beth on to beat the men in the tournament.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Margaret – Margaret is a student at Beth's school who bullies Beth for her drab clothing and her smarts. After Beth gains some fame as a chess player, Margaret invites her to a party with the Apple Pis before Beth realizes how boring the club is.

Mr. Fergussen – Mr. Fergussen is a staff member at Methuen orphanage. He is responsible for distributing the **tranquilizers** and the vitamins to the orphans. He accompanies Beth to the hospital after she takes 30 pills.

Mr. Ganz – Mr. Ganz is the chess club coach at a local high school in Kentucky. Mr. Shaibel invites him to play Beth, and he subsequently brings Beth to the high school to play 12 students simultaneously.

Manuel – Manuel is a man with whom Mrs. Wheatley corresponded in high school; he lives in Mexico City, and he meets up with Mrs. Wheatley when Beth has a tournament there.

Laev – Laev is a Russian chess player whom Beth plays in Moscow. Laev underestimates her, and she is able to use this to her advantage to beat him.

Mr. Booth – Mr. Booth is an agent from the U.S. State Department who accompanies Beth on her trip to Moscow.

Beth's Mother – Beth's mother dies in a car crash at the beginning of the novel, leaving Beth orphaned.

Beth's Father – Beth's father died when Beth was young. It is implied that he was an alcoholic.

Tim Tim is the first person with whom Beth has sex. The experience is at first a bit traumatic, then perfectly fine but Beth is aware of not having any sort of emotional connection to Tim.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TALENT, AMBITION, DEDICATION, AND SUCCESS

The Queen's Gambit follows Beth Harmon, an orphaned child who rises to the top of the international competitive chess world. At eight years old, when Beth learns chess from the orphanage janitor, she immediately shows a stunning talent for it, and she becomes quickly known as an "intuitive player." However, the book emphasizes that innate talent isn't the only key to the success that Beth achieves, particularly when she defeats the World Champion Vasily Borgov. Instead, the book highlights how Beth is only able to achieve her greatest successes through intense dedication to study; and without that rigorous studying, Beth's games fall apart. In this way, the book emphasizes that talent can only get a person so far; dedication, drive, and discipline are just as—if not more—important to victory.

When Beth learns chess, her talent immediately shines through, and the reputation she builds early on stems largely from that instinctual skill. Beth learns chess from Mr. Shaibel, the janitor at the orphanage in which she lives. She picks up the game quickly and envisions the chess board in her mind when she plays, sorting through moves and potential problems. As she wins more and more, she thinks about how "simple" it is to beat Mr. Shaibel, and he calls her "astounding." After three months, Mr. Shaibel can no longer beat her, illustrating her instinct in chess despite little academic knowledge of the game. Later, Beth beats a dozen students simultaneously at a local high school. She notes that "At each board it took only a second's glance to read the position and see what was called for. Her responses were quick, sure and deadly." This affirms how, even when facing many students much older than her, Beth's instinctual talent and deadly accuracy allow her to triumph over all of them. When the Wheatleys adopt Beth and she starts playing chess tournaments, she studies games in magazines and some chess books. But, as Mrs. Wheatley notes, the moves where people applaud the loudest are the ones that she makes quickly: "intuition doesn't come from books." Beth's innate talent is what helps build her formidable reputation at the tournaments. Beth herself acknowledges her remarkable talent for the game. At a tournament in Mexico City, she is "quietly amazed at the intricacies that seemed to flow from her fingertips." This image, of the moves flowing from her fingertips, suggests a natural ease and spontaneous skill that helps her beat many international players.

While Beth's innate talent is impressive, without studying, her climb through the chess world stagnates. Beth plays U.S. Champion Benny Watts in the U.S. Open, and though she holds her own, she realizes that he has much more knowledge than she does. Beth acknowledges, "The horrible feeling, at the bottom of the anger and fear, was that she was the weaker player–that Benny Watts knew more about chess than she did." Benny beats her easily, catching her off-guard. While talent has gotten her far, she now understands that she has a lot to learn. Beth finds the same thing in Mexico City, when Beth loses to World Champion Vasily Borgov. She knows that everything Borgov is doing is "unimaginative" and "bureaucratic," suggesting that Beth simply doesn't have the knowledge to match Borgov's studied and rigorous chess. This devastating loss is what spurs Beth to truly study, illustrating her own acknowledgement that her lack of preparation isn't good enough.

After acknowledging that talent isn't enough for Beth to beat the strongest chess players, Beth discovers that only through dedicated study can she achieve her greatest success. Harry Beltik—a chess Master—affirms that she needs to study in order to become a World Champion. At first, Beth is still hesitant, noting that other intuitive players like Capablanca "had almost never studied," while inferior players were forced to rely on books. But Beltik emphasizes that she can only beat grandmasters with "a lot more work," giving her a pile of books with games and strategies to read through. Beltik affirms that only through a disciplined approach can Beth truly improve. Benny confirms Beltik's stance, hosting Beth at his apartment in New York City to help her prepare for a tournament in Paris. Benny has the biggest chess library that Beth has seen, and they play through as many games as they can with rigorous interrogation of each move. While this is tedious to Beth, she admits, "She had been playing grandmaster games in her head from the time she first discovered *Chess Review*, but she had not been disciplined about it," and she follows Benny's strict course

of study. This acknowledges that while Beth's talent has gotten her far, she sees how disciplined study is necessary to improve. Beth's marked improvement as a result of this study becomes clear in her games with both Beltik and Benny. Earlier in the novel, she would only just beat or sometimes lose to Beltik and Benny. But with study, Beth beats Harry and Benny consistently, to the point where they no longer want to play games with her because they cannot win. Only through this rigorous study is she able to achieve a new level of skill. The point is further proven when Beth travels to Russia to play against Borgov. She feels like she is playing the "best chess she knew." In the end, it is only after having rigorously studied Borgov's games that she is able to win. The book's message is clear: Beth's talent and intuition were key to her rise through the chess world, but only the addition of disciplined training enabled her to take down a world champion.

DISCRIMINATION AND BELONGING

From Beth's first foray into the world of chess, she feels like an outsider. Chess tournaments are dominated by older players, almost all of whom are male, and the teenage Beth often expresses that she feels "powerless and silly" there, like a "child peering into an adult world." The male players often underestimate her or insult her intelligence, and even the news reporting on her is laden with sexism. This threatens to throw Beth off, as her sense of not belonging sometimes undercuts her ability to play the men, even though she knows that she is a skilled chess player. This illustrates how discrimination's edge is two-fold: not only does Beth face external obstacles that systematically undervalue and discount her, but it also causes internal doubts that undermine her success even further.

As Beth is first learning how to play chess and entering her first tournaments, she faces discrimination that nearly derails her chess career. Beth faces sexism from the first moments she expresses interest in chess. When she asks Mr. Shaibel, the orphanage janitor, to teach her how to play when she is eight years old, he replies, "Girls don't play chess." Fortunately, Beth persists in asking him to teach her, but Mr. Shaibel's sexist statement highlights that if Beth had listened to him, or if he continued to refuse to let her play, she would never have gone on to her successful career. Similarly, at Beth's first tournament—the Kentucky State Championship—the young men who register Beth try to put her in the Beginner's section. She insists that she's not a beginner, and they tell her that they don't have "a woman's section." Beth goes on to win the entire tournament, but she would not have gained the same exposure, reputation, or prize money if she had not insisted on competing in the regular section. This illustrates how misogyny can undermine and devalue women, limiting their opportunities. Beth also recognizes how the tournament directors are able to further undercut the women who play. There are only four women at the tournament, and the directors make them all play each other to begin—guaranteeing that fewer of them make it further in the Kentucky State Championship. The unfair bias they face in the tournament thus disadvantages the women who do play.

Beth doesn't only face discrimination from players and the tournaments as institutions; the news reporting on her games reinforces the discrimination she faces. After Beth wins the Kentucky State Championship, a local newspaper runs a story about her. They quote Harry Beltik, whom she defeats, in saying that she shows "a mastery of the game unequaled by any female." This not only devalues the skill of other female players, but it also reinforces sexism against Beth because she beat all of the male players at the tournament as well—a remarkable achievement for *any* player, not just a female one. When Beth does an interview with *Life* magazine, the woman interviewing her asks more about how "frightening" it is to play alongside "all those men" and whether she has a boyfriend. Beth is frustrated, lamenting when the story comes out that it's mostly about her "being a girl," showing how the news focuses more on how remarkable she is *for a girl* rather than talking about her actual achievements. Beth feels this bias a final time when a piece of her in *Newsweek* comes out, calling her "the most talented woman since Vera Menchik." Beth thinks, "what did being women have to do with it? She was better than any male player in America." By focusing on Beth's being a woman, the article undermines her value and simply highlights the ways in which Beth doesn't belong rather than illustrating her dominance in her field.

The discrimination that Beth faces from other players and the media then prompts Beth's internal doubts, which only further shake her confidence and her playing. In Mexico City, when Beth is playing the World Champion Vasily Borgov for the first time, she sees him beforehand talking with other male players. Meanwhile, Beth feels like her clothes don't fit and that she is "embarrassed" and "awkward." As she plays, she feels her loss is "inevitable," and that she is "like a child trying to outsmart an adult." This idea, that she doesn't belong, that she is a young girl in a man's world, only gives her the feeling that she is meant to lose—and this lack of confidence then contributes to that loss. When she goes to Moscow, even after doing months of preparation and having won the U.S. Championship, Beth still feels like she does not belong in the world of competitive chess. She thinks, "She could hardly have felt more out of place. Every time she glanced at the men around her, they smiled faintly. She felt like a child at an adult social function." Even when she plays Borgov, she feels "like a little girl." Though Beth knows she belongs there, her status as a young woman inherently unsettles her, affirming how discrimination causes doubts that undermine her playing, nearly creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that she doesn't belong.

The book's conclusion is symbolic as it shows how Beth has

gained a new sense of belonging and overcome the obstacles that have been put in her path. After winning against Borgov in Moscow, Beth walks to a park where older Russian men are playing chess. The first time she visited the park, she felt nervous and out of place even though she is an accomplished player. But now, having beaten Borgov, she recognizes that she *does* belong; she sits down commandingly opposite a man and asks in Russian if he wants to play chess. This illustrates how despite being devalued and undermined—even by her own self-doubt—Beth has gained the confidence to feel at home at a chess board in any setting.

COMING OF AGE

Orphaned at eight years old, young Beth Harmon faces many challenges: adjusting to the strict life at the Methuen orphanage, dealing with her adopted mother Mrs. Wheatley's mental health issues, and ultimately navigating the world of competitive chess and her own addictions. Perhaps most striking about Beth's character is how self-sufficient she is: opening a bank account at 13 years old with her chess prize money, taking control of her sexuality and pursuing the men around her, or keeping up the house after Mrs. Wheatley dies when Beth is still a teenager. In showing Beth's quick maturation as she moves through life, the book portrays coming of age as learning to take control of one's own choices and becoming independent rather than resigning oneself to powerlessness.

Growing up in the Methuen orphanage, Beth frequently feels trapped, and it is this powerlessness that defines her childhood because she does not yet have the ability to take control of her life. At Methuen, Beth must follow rules or else face threats from Methuen's director, Mrs. Deardorff. She talks about how the taste of the fish she has to eat there nearly gags her, but she has to eat every bite or "Mrs. Deardorff would be told about you and you wouldn't get adopted." Beth's childhood is thus marked by a feeling that she has no control over her life. Beth feels similarly powerless one night when her friend Jolene tries to touch her inappropriately, and guides Beth's hand to do the same. Beth at first is terrified, futilely protesting until adults come down the hall and Jolene returns to her own bed. This is another example of how Beth feels powerless in her life—as a child, she has little say in what happens to her and lacks ways of protecting herself. When Beth finds herself locked in a room while trying to steal some of the orphanage's **tranquilizers**, she feels "trapped, the same wretched, heart-stopping sensation she had felt when she was taken from home and put in this institution." These thoughts reflect Beth's feelings of powerlessness, not only in this moment but in her childhood at the orphanage as a whole.

In contrast to Beth's childhood, Beth's teenage years are defined by Beth trying to take control of her life path; this is what marks her transition into adulthood. Mr. Wheatley and Mrs. Wheatley adopt Beth when she is 13, and she starts to regain some control of her life, especially by returning to chess after Mrs. Deardorff stopped her from playing. She enters herself into the Kentucky State Championship, and when she wins it, she opens a bank account with her prize money. This is the first symbolic shift indicating that Beth is maturing, as she is taking her life into her own hands. Beth also takes control of her own sexuality. At 17, she attends a college party and flirts with a student named Tim, making it clear she wants to have sex with him. She thinks to herself, "it was about time," illustrating her desire to actively change her situation, in contrast to her helpless experience with Jolene. In tying her agency to a rite of passage like having sex for the first time, the book shows how Beth's maturation is marked by taking control of her own life. Beth also does this when she starts drinking heavily—coincidentally, the day after she has sex for the first time. She thinks, "She had made love the night before, and now it was time to learn about being drunk." Again, Beth is going through different rites of passage of her own volition, and in this way the book illustrates how coming of age is tied to becoming independent.

After Mrs. Wheatley dies and Mr. Wheatley disappears entirely from Beth's life, Beth becomes entirely responsible for herself, and this newfound independence marks her true coming of age. When Mrs. Wheatley dies in Mexico City, Mr. Wheatley (whom Beth hasn't seen in years) tells Beth she can keep the house if she continues to make the mortgage payments. Beth buries her mother, deals with lawyers, and eventually buys the house—all while still a teenager. She thinks that after Mrs. Wheatley's death it "had consoled her to know that she could go on living in the house, buying her groceries at the supermarket and going to movies when she wanted to." These simple gestures illustrate how Beth has come into her own as an adult, essentially taking over the house from her adopted mother and finding greater autonomy. Towards the end of the book, when Beth is in Paris at a chess tournament, she contemplates her future. She realizes that she could be the World Champion in her 20s and live wherever she wanted to live. She thinks, "There was nothing to hold her in Kentucky, in her house; she had possibilities that were endless." Realizing her own ability to determine her life shows just how much she has grown, coming into her own not only as a chess player but also as a woman. Whereas her childhood was marked by feeling trapped, here she has the world at her fingertips; the book illustrates that has come into adulthood because of her ability to be independent and determine her own future.

ADDICTION

In the Methuen orphanage, the protagonist Beth and her peers are given **tranquilizers** to calm them. Beth quickly becomes reliant on the tranquilizers to ease her anxiety, beginning a life-long addiction to the pills.

Beth's adopted mother, Mrs. Wheatley, also faces addiction—which causes her death—and she unintentionally enables Beth's addiction to alcohol as well. At first, Beth thinks that drugs and alcohol help her play chess, allowing her to calm her nerves and help her sleep the night before big matches. But gradually, her addiction jeopardizes her chess career, her friendships, and even her life, until she is able to overcome it with the help of her friend Jolene. While Beth's addiction is devastating, the book portrays it sympathetically, acknowledging that it isn't her fault and that, for her, it is a biological imperative to cope with stress and grief rather than a moral failing.

The book makes clear that Beth's addiction is not her fault, but that it is enabled by the orphanage, by Mrs. Wheatley, and perhaps even her genetics. Beth initially becomes addicted to tranquilizers when the school distributes them to the children daily. Over time, she becomes addicted to them, and when the school stops distributing them because of new laws, Beth experiences severe withdrawal and tries to steal the pills. When she is caught and punished for this, she is "aware of the complicity of the orphanage that had fed her and all the others on pills." She tells the staff that they shouldn't have given her the pills in the first place. This makes it clear that Beth is just a child who could not help how she reacted to the pills—the real responsibility for her addiction lies with those who gave her drugs. This is true of Beth's alcohol addiction as well. Beth doesn't drink until she's 16, when Mrs. Wheatley offers her a beer. Beth drinks it quickly and retrieves another. Mrs. Wheatley is at first hesitant to see Beth drink a second so quickly, but then simply says, "if you're going to do that, let me have one too." In this way, Mrs. Wheatley not only enables Beth's drinking at a young age, but also encourages it. The book also suggests that Beth's addiction might stem from her genetics as well, as it implies that Beth's father was rarely sober. Beth's biological mother told her that he died of a "carefree life," a euphemism that seems to imply he was an alcoholic, and so Beth was more susceptible to addiction for this reason—not because of any moral failing.

As Beth turns more and more to pills and alcohol, the book illustrates how she uses these substances to cope with the extensive stress and grief in her life. Even from Beth's first time trying tranquilizers, she relies on them because they "[loosen] something deep in her stomach and [help] her doze away the tense hours in the orphanage." Later, she often takes tranquilizers the night before big chess matches, because she has become so reliant on them that it's almost impossible for her to sleep without them. In this way, the book demonstrates how Beth's habit has turned into a fully-blown addiction: the pills have altered her body in a way that she cannot control because she so desperately needs to cope with the stress in her life. Beth often uses after periods of intense grief, like after Mrs. Wheatley's death in Mexico City—which the book implies may have been caused by Mrs. Wheatley's own alcohol addiction, as she dies of hepatitis (a liver condition). Beth then travels around the city, buying hundreds of pills from various pharmacies. A half hour before the funeral, Beth takes four of them, and she continues to self-medicate in the subsequent days and weeks. While Beth takes the desire to calm down to an extreme, the book allows readers to sympathize with Beth and recognize her vulnerability and need in these moments.

The book also portrays addiction as a deadly and difficult disease—one that almost kills Beth and ruins her career—rather than a conscious choice Beth irresponsibly makes . After Beth suffers a devastating loss in Paris against Vasily Borgov, she returns to Kentucky and drinks for weeks on end—almost becoming so weak that she can't sit up in bed from getting drunk and not eating enough. Still, even when she finally manages to sit up, she finishes a drink on her nightstand. This illogical behavior demonstrates how out of control Beth is—it is truly an illness that she cannot help, and which is killing her. Even when Beth tries to return to chess, she discovers that her mind is too foggy, and she is terrified that she has somehow damaged her talent with her drinking. After losing to a far inferior player, she opens another bottle of white wine at home and starts to drink, even though "A voice inside her [cries] out at the outrage." She knows that continuing to drink will only hurt her body and mind further, and yet this is the crux of addiction's devastation because it has a hold on Beth's body while ignoring and damaging her mind. Through the course of Beth's entire addiction, then, the book illustrates how it isn't Beth's fault, but is instead a physical illness and compulsion.

Beth's recovery from her addiction reinforces again how it is a disease—she cannot simply choose to overcome it; she can only find ways to cope with it. She needs help from her friends, particularly Jolene, who gives her a diet and exercise regimen. Beth also rids her hotel rooms and house of alcohol to prevent temptation in the first place. Thus, the book sympathizes with Beth's addiction as a deadly disease that she cannot cure herself of, but that she can find strategies to mitigate.

FRIENDSHIP AND MENTORSHIP

The Queen's Gambit's protagonist, Beth Harmon, is largely self-sufficient, particularly as she becomes one of the strongest players in competitive chess due to her immense talent. However, she also has key friends and mentors along the way, including Mr. Shaibel, the man who teaches her how to play chess; Jolene, an older girl who looks after her at Methuen orphanage; and Benny Watts and Harry Beltik, two other high-ranked chess players who help tutor her. Sometimes Beth pushes those who care about her away, which makes her chess career and personal life suffer. But by the end, their friendship proves crucial: Jolene helps Beth overcome her addiction and build up the physical and mental stamina to make sure she can compete in tournaments, while Benny helps shore

up her confidence when navigating a match against her most formidable chess opponent, Vasily Borgov. Because Beth can only triumph against Borgov with the help of her friends, the book illustrates that everyone—even the most successful or talented people—need support to achieve their goals.

Growing up in the Methuen orphanage, Beth is only able to foster her innate talents with the help of key mentors and friends like Mr. Shaibel and Jolene. Mr. Shaibel, the orphanage janitor, is initially hesitant to teach Beth how to play chess when she notices him playing in the basement. But once he realizes her talent for the game, he gives her a lot of encouragement. He provides her a book on chess openings, spends hours playing with her, and even invites a man who teaches a local high school chess club, Mr. Ganz, for Beth to meet and grow her talents even further. Without Mr. Shaibel, Beth would likely not have discovered her talent for chess in the first place. Jolene, an older girl at Methuen, also proves to be a crucial mentor and friend. She becomes Beth's confidante, and Jolene teaches Beth about rites of passage like menstruation and helps her with her burgeoning addiction to tranquilizers. In gym class, when Beth hurts her hand playing volleyball, Jolene teaches Beth how to hold her hands properly and tells her to work on her skills so that Beth isn't afraid of the ball anymore. Beth carries this lesson throughout her life: that the more she works on something, the better she gets, and the less afraid she becomes. These lessons help Beth become both a successful chess player and a confident woman later in life.

Beth's relationships with Benny Watts and Harry Beltik—two chess players whose mentorship she values but whom she also pushes away—emphasize further that even with Beth's talent, she needs support from friends and mentors. Beltik and Benny each spend weeks with Beth, helping her prepare for her tournaments in Paris and Moscow. With their help, she feels exceptionally improved, playing what she feels is her "best chess"—again emphasizing that despite her talent, Beth still needs help and coaching to reach her potential. However, Beth gradually forgets this. After Beth consistently beats both of them in chess, she feels that each of them has "little left to teach her." And after suffering a devastating loss in Paris against Vasily Borgov, she pushes Benny away when he tries to resume their training. Without friends around to support her, she quickly falls into a dangerous pattern of getting drunk every day, and she loses to a far inferior player at the Kentucky State Championship. This demonstrates that even if Beth is more talented and successful than Benny or Beltik, she still needs her friends' support in other ways to be successful.

Beth's crowning victory against Borgov in Moscow only comes with the help of her friends, illustrating that even with her talent, Beth needs people by her side to achieve her highest goals. At the end of the book, Jolene returns to help support Beth and recover from her addiction following her loss in Paris. She also helps Beth build mental and physical stamina to be able to play in the tournaments. At the next tournament in Moscow, Beth gratefully recalls how she had worked out with Jolene for five months in Lexington to build up stamina. Even though Jolene can't necessarily help Beth with her chess playing, her support is still incredibly valuable to Beth's success in chess. Benny's support is equally crucial to Beth when beating Borgov. Over the tournament, she wishes that she had other chess players with whom to review her games, particularly after she sees Borgov strategizing with other Russian players about a game that he had adjourned. When Beth has a night to contemplate a game that she is playing with Borgov, she is grateful when Benny calls her the next morning, having gathered a team of players to talk through potential strategies. Even though she thought he had nothing more to help her with, this episode proves how important his support is. Knowing that she has people who are there supporting her calms Beth's nerves and helps her have the confidence to beat Borgov. At each stage of Beth's life and chess career, it is clear how crucial friendship and mentorship are to her success.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT

The Queen's Gambit symbolizes Beth's journey to overcome discrimination and feel greater confidence and control through chess. The Queen's Gambit is an opening in chess—a set sequence of moves to begin the game. In fact, it is the first opening that Beth is able to recognize on her own when she plays with Mr. Shaibel, and she is pleased when she does so. This establishes how the Queen's Gambit, and chess more broadly, gives Beth a sense of control and accomplishment.

Later, however, the Queen's Gambit reflects Beth's uncertainty as she faces sexism that undermines her confidence. When Beth plays Benny for the first time, she feels that she is a weaker player than him, particularly after Benny notes that she made a mistake in her game against Harry Beltik. In her match, she opens with the Queen's Gambit, but she quickly regrets doing so because it is a complicated position. She doesn't feel as assured of herself because of Benny's perception of her as weak. This causes self-doubt, which is in turn a contributing factor to Beth's loss in the game.

The end of the book shows a complete reversal. After studying and gaining greater confidence in her game, Beth chooses to play the Queen's Gambit against her most formidable opponent, Vasily Borgov. This reflects Beth's journey, having overcome the discrimination she's faced and gained greater assurance in herself as a good chess player, and she is able to

win the match after playing this opening. The name of the move is also in and of itself symbolic. The Queen's Gambit is named for the queen chess piece, and it is notable because the queen is the most powerful piece on the board. In playing the Queen's Gambit, the book suggests that Beth is owning up to that power in herself, overcoming the discrimination that undermined her for so long.

PILLS/ALCOHOL

Throughout the book, Beth faces addiction to both tranquilizer pills and alcohol. These substances represent the struggles of addiction and illustrate how addiction isn't a moral failing but a biological need. Beth becomes addicted to pills when the Methuen orphanage gives out tranquilizers to the children who live there to make them calm. Later, Mrs. Wheatley enables Beth's alcohol addiction by offering her several beers when they are traveling for a tournament. In each case, the drugs and alcohol make her feel good, easing her tension and stress. Over time, however, Beth buys more and more pills and has more and more alcohol in the house. Even if she doesn't always drink or take the pills, their presence in her life suggests that addiction constantly threatens to overcome her completely.

Beth thinks at several points that she knows she shouldn't continue to drink or take the pills, but she can't help herself—it is a compulsion. She can't sleep without the pills; she drinks the alcohol in a "mechanical" way, completely cutting off her own thoughts and the voices inside her head that are protesting. Using is thus not a moral failing, it is a disease that Beth is constantly grappling with because it has created this need in her to continue to consume them. When Beth is finally able to rid her home of drugs and alcohol with Jolene's help, it symbolizes her acknowledgement that they are not in fact helping her but are, instead, hurting her deeply.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Queen's Gambit* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Beth tried it, awkwardly at first. Jolene showed her again, laughing. Beth tried a few more times and did it better. Then Jolene got the ball and had Beth catch it with her fingertips. After a few times it got to be easy.

"You work on that now, hear?" Jolene said and ran off to the shower.

Beth worked on it over the next week, and after that she did not mind volleyball at all. She did not become good at it, but it wasn't something she was afraid of anymore.

Related Characters: Jolene DeWitt (speaker), Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth first arrives at Methuen, she struggles to adjust to her new environment. Here, this quote demonstrates the value of mentorship for Beth, especially at a young age. Though it deals specifically with volleyball, it has parallels with Beth's later experiences in chess and when struggling with addiction. This passage demonstrates that Beth's uncertainty or her weakness in a skill can undermine her ability to face her fears or triumph in it.

However, Beth is able to improve in volleyball, both with Jolene's help and disciplined practice. Perhaps more importantly, Beth is able to improve her *outlook* about playing volleyball, and even this adjustment actually makes her play better. This bears comparison with chess, because Beth often feels like a weak player simply by virtue of other people discriminating and underestimating her, particularly later in the book when she is facing some of the best players in the world. She often expresses fear of Borgov, for example, but support from her friends and mentors—as well as practice—enables Beth to overcome this problem.

This is also true of Beth's struggles with addiction, as she later fears that her addiction has damaged her talent but doesn't know how to break out of her cycle of drinking. There again, Jolene helps Beth get into shape—just as she does here. Thus, this episode of teaching sets up that later mentorship, and it affirms how mentors and disciplined study are key components to success.

He moved the pawn next to his queen's pawn, the one in front of the bishop. He often did this. "Is that one of those things? Like the Sicilian Defense?" she asked.

"Openings." He did not look at her; he was watching the board. "Is it?"

He shrugged. "The Queen's Gambit."

She felt better. She had learned something more from him. She decided not to take the offered pawn, to leave the tension on the board. She liked it like that. She liked the power of the pieces, exerted along files and diagonals. In the middle of the game, when pieces were everywhere, the forces crisscrossing the board thrilled her. She brought out her king's knight, feeling its power spread.

In twenty moves she had won both his rooks, and he resigned.

Related Characters: Mr. Shaibel, Beth Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

As Beth plays more and more chess with Mr. Shaibel, she starts to pick up on patterns in the way he plays, and he begins to teach her chess openings. Here the book introduces the opening "the Queen's Gambit." This is not only the sequence for which the book is named, but it also has several layers of symbolic meaning. First, the queen is the most powerful piece on a chess board, and the piece which has the most freedom. Since "The Queen's Gambit" is the title of the book, it can also be taken as referring to Beth, connecting her to this great power and freedom and hinting at her later dominance in the chess world. Her reference to the fact that she likes feeling the "power of the pieces" shows how chess makes her feel more in control and commanding—in stark contrast to how she often feels small, insignificant, and at the whim of others at Methuen.

The fact that Beth is easily able to identify this pattern, and then visualize how best to neutralize it, shows Beth's innate talent for the game and the joy and drive that she gets from being able to win—especially against someone who is much older than her. This adds to the idea that Beth gains a sense of control in playing chess, because she is able to find accomplishment and purpose in the game in a world where she has so little agency over her own life.

Chapter 2 Quotes

After a minute a bell rang and there were the sounds of footsteps and some shouts in the hallway, and students began to come in. They were mostly boys. Big boys, as big as men; this was senior high. They wore sweaters and slouched with their hands in their pockets. Beth wondered for a moment where she was supposed to sit. But she couldn't sit if she was going to play them all at once; she would have to walk from board to board to make the moves. "Hey, Allan. Watch out!" one boy shouted to another, jerking his thumb toward Beth. Abruptly she saw herself as a small unimportant person—a plain, brown-haired orphan girl in dull institutional clothes. She was half the size of these easy, insolent students with their loud voices and bright sweaters. She felt powerless and silly. But then she looked at the boards again, with the pieces set in the familiar pattern, and the unpleasant feelings lessened. She might be out of place in this public high school, but she was not out of place with those twelve chessboards.

Related Characters: Mr. Ganz, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Ganz takes Beth to a local public high school to play chess against twelve students simultaneously, and she quickly becomes intimidated by the students there. This passage highlights the fact that Beth's identity—being a young girl—opens her up to discrimination, which makes her feel that she doesn't belong and undermines her confidence. This is a dynamic that will repeat throughout the book, as the chess world is filled with mostly men who are older than Beth. Beth emphasizes this herself: she notes that her opponents are mostly boys, but that in her mind, they are as "big as men." Their literal size but also their gender builds up their image in her mind. They seem "easy" and "insolent," having innate ownership over the game because playing chess is usually men's territory.

In comparison, Beth feels incredibly uneasy—so much so that she had to take tranquilizers earlier in order to cope with the stress. She feels "powerless and silly" and views herself as a "small unimportant person." It's clear to see how their jeering and bias against her—their underestimation of her because she is a young girl—undermines her confidence and shakes her faith in being able to beat them.

It is only due to Beth's immense talent that she is able to overcome their jeers and bullying. Her recognition that she doesn't fit into the high school but does belong behind a

chess board holds true throughout the book. It suggests that while she may not fit into the institutions that often surround chess—this high school or bigger tournaments or media circuits—she *can* prove that she belongs simply by playing the best game. And she does so, beating all of the boys only because her drive and talent overcome her lack of confidence.

She grew frantic. They would miss her at the movie. Fergussen would be looking for her. The projector would break down and all the children would be sent into the Multi-Purpose Room, with Fergussen monitoring them, and here she would be. But deeper than that, she felt trapped, the same wretched, heart-stopping sensation she had felt when she was taken from home and put in this institution and made to sleep in a ward with twenty strangers and hear noises all night long that were, in a way, as bad as the shouting at home, when Daddy and Mother were there—the shouting from the brightly lit kitchen.

Related Characters: Beth's Father, Beth's Mother, Mrs. Deardorff, Mr. Fergussen, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After the orphanage stops giving Beth tranquilizers, she concocts a plan to climb through the pharmacy window and steal the jar of pills—only to discover that she cannot get back out through the door because it is locked. First, this episode illustrates how deeply Beth has become addicted to the pills—so much so that her withdrawal has driven her desperation, outweighing any consequences that she might face if she were caught.

The prospect of being caught, additionally, provides insight as to how Beth's childhood is defined by being trapped. She is not only trapped in this moment, in the pharmacy, but the long, wandering sentences in the passage suggest the pace of her thoughts as she flashes through other moments in her life. The quote reveals that being at Methuen feels constantly like being trapped because she has no agency over what she does. Even now, Fergussen is "monitoring" the other children, and when Beth sleeps, she feels vulnerable because she completely lacks privacy or control over her own life. Even before going to Methuen, Beth suggests that she felt trapped at home with her parents. Hearing them shout from the kitchen, and yet being unable to do anything about it, conjured up that same feeling of being trapped. Going through all of these examples in this moment illustrates how Beth's entire childhood has been defined by this feeling.

Mrs. Deardorff kept her waiting almost an hour. Beth didn't care. She read in *National Geographic* about a tribe of Indians who lived in the holes of cliffs. Brown people with black hair and bad teeth. In the pictures there were children everywhere, often snuggled up against the older people. It was all strange; she had never been touched very much by older people, except for punishment. She did not let herself think about Mrs. Deardorff's razor strop. If Deardorff was going to use it, she could take it. Somehow she sensed that what she had been caught doing was of a magnitude beyond usual punishment. And, deeper than that, she was aware of the complicity of the orphanage that had fed her and all the others on pills that would make them less restless, easier to deal with.

Related Characters: Mrs. Deardorff, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

After the teachers catch Beth stealing pills and overdosing, Beth awaits her punishment outside Mrs. Deardorff's office. As she waits, she reflects on how she might be punished and thinks about the circumstances that got her there. First, the book emphasizes again that Beth's addiction is not her fault. Even she, as a young girl, recognizes that she wouldn't have become addicted to the pills if not for the orphanage giving them to her—they have "complicity" in her overdose. Even though they were trying to make the children less restless, in reality they only enabled her addiction, which is what got her in trouble in the first place. Especially because Beth is such a young child, the book emphasizes that this is not a moral failing on Beth's part, even though the orphanage is treating it as something to be punished.

Beth's reflection that she has only been touched for purposes of punishment also provides insight into the sadness in her life. Beth has to think back to an article she read on a society that's very foreign to her to conjure up images of parenthood and caring—the only example she can come up with is in a *National Geographic* magazine, as if it is

some scientific phenomenon of which she has no real-life knowledge and which she might never encounter herself. This highlights how she has never truly had parents or mentors who cared about her on an emotional level. This is one of the reasons why support ultimately becomes so crucial in Beth's life, because it allows her to recognize that she is loved and cared for, and that in turn makes her a more confident and successful person, unlike during her time in the orphanage.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Lying in bed, Beth could hear the distant sound of Mrs. Wheatley coughing and later she heard her bare feet padding down the hallway to the bathroom. But she didn't mind. Her own door was closed and locked. No one could push it open and let the light fall on her face. Mrs. Wheatley was alone in her own room, and there would be no sounds of talking or quarreling—only music and low synthetic voices from the television set. It would be wonderful to have Jolene there, but then she wouldn't have the room to herself, wouldn't be able to lie alone in this huge bed, stretched out in the middle of it, having the cool sheets and now the silence to herself.

Related Characters: Jolene DeWitt, Mrs. Wheatley, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

On Beth's first night in the Wheatleys' home, she is thrilled to discover that she will have her own room there. This change symbolizes the broader transition that Beth is undergoing from the orphanage to the Wheatley home, and how that reflects her coming of age as well. Beth's new room gives her greater control over her life. Before, she was constantly monitored by the staff and shared a room with other people, to the point where her sleeping situation made her feel "trapped," as she described in an earlier chapter. Even as a small child, Beth often heard her parents quarreling when she was trying to sleep, and she alludes to those problems again here. Now, she no longer has to deal with the same constriction or incapacity.

In the Wheatley home, having the ability to lock her room and close her door instead gives Beth a sense of ownership over that room. Having a "huge" bed with her "stretched out in the middle of it" suggests an open space and the freedom to do what she wants in it. Beth values that ownership of space, and the bed reflects how Beth is becoming more and more independent and autonomous.

Beth even considers that it is better for her to be alone than to have Jolene there because of the independence that this living situation affords her. Beth spends the next few chapters growing up, and often she finds solace in growing up alone. However, over time, she will also come to acknowledge the value both in independence and also in having friends to support her through these transitions.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "We have a clock-sharing system," he said. "If your opponent doesn't have one, come back to the desk. Play starts in twenty minutes. What's your rating?"

"I don't have a rating."

"Have you ever played in a tournament before?"

"No."

The man pointed to Beth's money. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure."

"We don't have a woman's section," he said.

She just stared at him.

"I'll put you in Beginners," he said.

"No," Beth said, "I'm not a beginner."

Related Characters: Beth Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth arrives at the Kentucky State Championship, the young men who register her try to put her in the Beginner's section. This exchange illustrates how the men at these tournaments systematically undervalue and undermine Beth despite her talent. Because she is a 13-year-old girl, they assume that she will be out of place in the regular section of the chess tournament, both because of her gender and her age. This is clear when the man emphasizes that they don't have a "woman's section." Then, by suggesting that he will put her in "Beginners," he implies that the two are essentially equivalent; women could only have the same skill as the men playing in the Beginner's section.

If Beth didn't have as much confidence in her own talent, stating that she's not a Beginner, she might have started down a very different path. She would not have gained the

same amount of exposure, reputation, or money in playing in the Beginner's section of the tournament, underscoring how another player might have been disadvantaged by the young men's assumption about her. And even though Beth is able to hold her ground here, the constant subtext that Beth doesn't belong will plague her throughout the book. Thus, discrimination undermines her in two ways: first, in actually trying to materially disadvantage her as in this instance, and in making her feel less confident because of the assumption that she might not be as good as other (male) players.

Chapter 5 Quotes

LOCAL PRODIGY TAKES CHESS TOURNEY. Under this, in smaller letters, boldface: TWELVE-YEAR-OLD ASTONISHES EXPERTS. She remembered the man taking her picture before they gave her the trophy and the check. She had told him she was thirteen.

Beth bent over, reading the paper:

The world of Kentucky Chess was astonished this weekend by the playing of a local girl, who triumphed over hardened players to win the Kentucky State Championship. Elizabeth Harmon, a seventh-grade student at Fairfield Junior, showed "a mastery of the game unequaled by any female" according to Harry Beltik, whom Miss Harmon defeated for the state crown.

Related Characters: Harry Beltik (speaker), Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

After Beth wins the Kentucky State Championship, she later reads a local newspaper article describing her triumph over the other players. This becomes the first example Beth encounters of sexist media coverage of her games. While the article does call her a prodigy, it also doesn't take care to get the facts about her correct—writing that she is 12 instead of 13. Furthermore, the statement that Beth "astonishes experts" suggests that the article doesn't count her among those experts, despite the fact that she beat them all in a tournament.

This same undermining is evident in the quote that they use from Harry Beltik. Declaring that she showed a mastery "unequaled by any female" undervalues female players in general, suggesting that they are in a tier under male players or that they don't have the same innate skill levels.

Additionally, the statement also undermines Beth's skill specifically. She didn't just beat all of the female players in the tournament, she beat all the *male* players, too. Thus, her skill was "unequaled" by any male player as well, including Beltik. In this way, the article illustrates its bias—both Beltik, and the reporter, in reporting his quote, undervalue Beth's immense talent. This adds to the overall discrimination that Beth faces, which consistently undermines her talent—and, as a result, her confidence in that talent.

"How does it feel? Being a girl among all those men?"

"I don't mind it."

"Isn't it frightening?" They were sitting facing each other. Miss Balke leaned forward, looking intently at Beth.

Beth shook her head. The photographer came over to the sofa and began taking readings with a meter.

"When I was a girl," the reporter said, "I was never allowed to be competitive. I used to play with dolls."

The photographer backed off and began to study Beth through his camera. She remembered the doll Mr. Ganz had given her.

Related Characters: Beth Harmon (speaker), Vasily Borgov, Mr. Ganz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93-94

Explanation and Analysis

As Beth competes in and wins at more and more tournaments in her teenage years, a reporter from *Life* comes to take pictures and interview her. Their exchange again highlights the sexism that Beth faces in her media appearances and the discrimination that women face more broadly. Miss Balke's statement, that she wasn't allowed to be competitive and instead played with dolls, shows how women are systematically undermined. If Beth had only been encouraged to play dolls (and in some ways, she was encouraged to do so by Mr. Ganz despite her aptitude for chess), she would never have been able to develop her chess talent, suggesting that there are many women who might have been prevented from playing and improving—or participating in similar activities—thus robbing the world of incredible achievements like Beth's.

Miss Balke's question—whether it's frightening to Beth to play amongst all the men—also highlights how out of place Beth is at the chess tournaments. Her question about whether the men are frightening does the same—except that it also foreshadows how Beth will feel about many of

the men whom she faces (particularly Borgov). But what is ironic is that the men there are not inherently frightening; it's that Beth's status as an outsider and the discrimination she faces often undermines her confidence and makes her more afraid than she needs to be. In this way, the conversation with Miss Balke demonstrates the harm of sexism—it treats girls like Beth as anomalies and as incapable of the same accomplishments as men. In this way, the book suggests that as more women like Beth can break into a field, the more normal their presence becomes, breaking a harmful cycle that often undermines women's achievements and consequently their confidence in a field.

When Beth cries after throwing up, the book shows that Beth doesn't enjoy the experience of drinking at all. However, the biological response she has—which she likens to the addiction to pills that she already has—foreshadows how difficult it will be for Beth to eventually avoid. The beer gives Beth a "swooning" in her stomach and loosens the "tightness," demonstrating how Beth's body needs these substances as a way to combat the tension in her life. It is not something Beth would actively choose, but instead is a disease that compels her to try and stave off the stress and grief that she sometimes experiences and doesn't know how to cope with otherwise.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Beth banged her shoulder against the door frame going into the bathroom and barely got to the toilet in time. It stung her nose horribly as she threw up. After she finished, she stood by the toilet for a while and began to cry. Yet, even while she was crying, she knew that she had made a discovery with the three cans of beer, a discovery as important as the one she had made when she was eight years old and saved up her green pills and then took them all at one time. With the pills there was a long wait before the swooning came into her stomach and loosened the tightness. The beer gave her the same feeling with almost no wait.

Related Characters: Mrs. Wheatley, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth is 16 and attending the U.S. Open, Mrs. Wheatley starts drinking beer in their hotel room and offers one to Beth; Beth then drinks three. In this quote, Beth's discovery about the benefits of alcohol hint at her later struggles with alcoholism. The book also takes care to show this discovery sympathetically, and to suggest that this addiction is not Beth's fault—nor is it a moral failing on her part. Beth is still just a kid, and she would not have taken the beer if she were not unwittingly enabled by Mrs. Wheatley, whom the book later reveals is struggling with addiction herself. This shows how addiction can be a cycle, and it is often prompted by several layered factors, like the opportunity for Beth to drink at a young age combined with her established addiction to pills.

❝ The horrible feeling, at the bottom of the anger and fear, was that she was the weaker player—that Benny Watts knew more about chess than she did and could play it better. It was a new feeling for her, and it seemed to bind and restrict her as she had not been bound and restricted since the last time she sat in Mrs. Deardorff's office.

Related Characters: Harry Beltik, Mrs. Deardorff, Benny Watts, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth plays Benny for the first time at the U.S. Open, she realizes that he is a stronger player than she is. This is a major turning point in Beth's perspective: up until this point, Beth has been winning her matches and tournaments handily and largely based on her talent and intuition. Now, Beth faces the prospect of imminently losing to Benny. Beth's thoughts about Mrs. Deardorff once again connect chess to Beth's autonomy and growing up. Here, her comparison of feeling "bound and restricted" suggests that in this moment, Beth feels completely trapped because she has lost her ability to control the situation. She doesn't feel like an adult; she has been relegated to a child's status in comparison with Benny's skill.

Now, Beth is forced to consider that her talent may only get her so far. In highlighting that Benny "knew more about chess than she did," Beth realizes that studying and rigorously learning different strategies for the game could be helpful to her—perhaps even more helpful to her than her talent, at this point. Benny is just as talented as Beth, and so the only thing that could give her an advantage, the book implies, is learning all that she can about the game. And this is what she later does, working with Harry Beltik to

train and ultimately beat Benny later. In this way, the book emphasizes that talent alone can only get a person so far—dedication is just as crucial to success.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ At noon she put the rest of the eggs in a pot to boil and turned on the hi-fi. She had never really listened to music before, but she listened now. She danced a few steps in the middle of the living room, waiting for the eggs. She would not let herself get sick. She would eat frequently and drink one beer—or one glass of wine—every hour. She had made love the night before, and now it was time to learn about being drunk. She was alone, and she liked it. It was the way she had learned everything important in her life.

Related Characters: Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Beth has sex for the first time, she spends the day alone in a college student's apartment while everyone is out. Just as she decided it was time for her to have sex the previous night, Beth thinks here that it's time for her to learn about being drunk. Putting these two rites of passage so closely together for Beth—and also emphasizing that Beth likes doing these things when she's alone—portrays Beth's coming of age as being very closely tied to her independence. She has hit a transition in discovering what she likes to do: listening to music, even though she hasn't done it before; dancing, because she feels like it; or drinking in the way that she wants. At this moment, Beth has also found a T-shirt and lipstick to put on and felt empowered doing so—her first time wearing makeup, which reflects her newfound control over her sexuality.

Whereas her childhood was defined largely by feeling trapped and by being beholden to the rules and whims of other people, here Beth feels a great deal of autonomy. In relaying that she likes being alone and that it is how she has learned everything important in her life, it illustrates that Beth's independence is inherently tied to her growth and her transition into adulthood. It is also notable that she is making the choice to do all of these things, further reinforcing that having control and autonomy over one's life are also a key part of coming of age.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Now she crossed the ballroom's red carpet and went to the ladies' room and washed her face again. She dried carefully with paper towels and combed her hair, watching herself in the big mirror. Her movements seemed forced, and her body looked impossibly frail. The expensive blouse and skirt did not fit right. Her fear was as sharp as a toothache.

As she came down the hallway, she saw him. He was standing there solidly with two men she did not recognize. All of them wore dark suits. They were close together, talking softly, confidentially. She lowered her eyes and walked past them into the small room. Some men were waiting there with cameras. Reporters. She slipped behind the black pieces at Board One.

Related Characters: Vasily Borgov, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth plays Borgov for the first time at a tournament in Mexico City, her distress over facing him is apparent. In this passage, it becomes clear that the discrimination Beth has faced in the chess world has deeply undermined her confidence, particularly when playing the best players. Beth belongs at that tournament just as much as Borgov does, and yet her thoughts and actions express a deep insecurity over being there and competing against him. Throughout the book, Borgov stands in for the male chess establishment, which Beth often faces but of which she can never be a member.

In comparison to Borgov, who stands "solidly" in a dark suit, talking with other men, Beth is alone, feeling "impossibly frail," and as though her clothes don't fit right. These things illustrate her comparative insecurity, in contrast with someone like Borgov, who seems to have a great deal of ownership over the space. Similarly, while Borgov interacts with reporters, Beth avoids all attention and makes herself even smaller and humbler than she is. This recalls an earlier thought that Beth has—that she sometimes feels that chess is a "thing between men." Watching Borgov talk "confidentially," this moment echoes that quote, as Beth feels like she is an outsider among these men and their secrets.

In this way, the book conveys how Beth's status as a young woman, and the way that people inherently treat her differently because of it, undermines her self-assurance. Beth goes on to lose her match against Borgov because she feels that her loss is "inevitable," showing how discrimination can be detrimental in two ways: it sets Beth

apart systematically, but it also undermines her confidence, such that, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, her eventual, "inevitable" losses only prove to herself that she doesn't belong there.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Some of them were books she had seen before; a few of them she owned. But most were new to her, heavy-looking and depressing to see. She knew there were a great many things she needed to know. But Capablanca had almost never studied, had played on intuition and his natural gifts, while inferior players like Bogolubov and Grünfeld memorized lines of play like German pedants. She had seen players at tournament after their games had ended, sitting motionless in uncomfortable chairs oblivious to the world, studying opening variations or middle-game strategy or endgame theory. It was endless. Seeing Beltik methodically removing one heavy book after another, she felt weary and disoriented. She glanced over at the TV: a part of her wanted to turn it on and forget chess forever.

Related Characters: Vasily Borgov, Benny Watts, Harry Beltik, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

After Vasily Borgov defeats Beth in Mexico City (and prior to that, when Benny Watts beat her at the U.S. Open), Harry Beltik offers to help train Beth and improve her game. Up until this point, Beth has largely relied on intuition. She has played like the players she admired most, like José Capablanca (a real-life Cuban chess prodigy who was the world chess champion from 1921 to 1927). Beth's talent has been considerable and has gotten her far, but Beltik's books remind her that there are a "great many things she needed to know."

Beth views studying as the mark of inferior players—like Beltik, who needed to memorize strategies from books in order to even try to compete with Beth. To her, it is particularly daunting because she knows that there is always more that she can learn. But the book emphasizes that only through this rigorous, "methodical" study can Beth even hope to compete with players like Benny or Borgov. Even though it's less glamorous or fluid than Beth's normal gameplay, talent alone will not enable her to succeed. This passage also illustrates how important mentors can be to a person's success. Without Beltik, Beth would never take on this disciplined approach—she's tempted to give up chess altogether. But with his help, Beth is able to make tangible improvements to her gameplay, eventually enabling her to beat Benny and proving the benefits of that study.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ With an early queen trade, castling would be irrelevant. She could bring the king out the way you did in the endgame. She looked across at Benny again and saw that he was wondering why she was taking so long with this routine recapture. Somehow he looked smaller to her. What the hell, she thought again and took with the queen pawn, exposing her queen.

Benny did not hesitate; he took her queen with his and punched the clock smartly. He did not even say "Check." She took with her king as she had to, and he pushed up the other bishop pawn to protect his king pawn. It was a simple defensive move, but something in her exulted when he did it. She felt naked with no queen this early in the game, yet she was beginning to feel strong without it.

Related Characters: Harry Beltik, Benny Watts, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth plays Benny for the second time, at the U.S. Championship, she makes an unexpected move—trading her queen very early for his. This passage illustrates the benefits of the rigorous study that Beth has been doing with Harry Beltik. Normally, Beth's strategies involve rigorous attacks, and this usually means keeping her queen—the most powerful piece on the board. In giving up her queen, it would appear that Beth is giving up some of her power and control, but in fact, the opposite is true. Rather than relying on intuition, Beth takes a more measured, studied approach—and in doing so, she gets the initiative and catches Benny off-guard. In a way, the queen still gives her a degree of power, because it affords her the ability to be in control of the game.

A few moments earlier, Beth felt like an amateur in comparison to Benny. But now, he seems "smaller" and more doubtful, not knowing exactly what she's going to do. He is on the defensive instead of her. This shows how Beth has greatly improved her game because of the studying she's done, gaining a new confidence in herself and ultimately a victory that relying on her instincts alone would

never have enabled.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"Do you want to play another?"

Benny shrugged and turned away. "Save it for Borgov." But she could see he would have played her if he had thought he could win. She felt a whole lot better.

They continued as lovers and did not play any more games, except from the books. He went out a few days later for another poker game and came back with two hundred in winnings and they had one of their best times in bed together, with the money beside them on the night table. She was fond of him, but that was all. And by the last week before Paris, she was beginning to feel that he had little left to teach her.

Related Characters: Vasily Borgov, Benny Watts, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Beth's time in New York studying with Benny, she observes how their relationship has completely changed. At the beginning of their time together, Beth appreciates Benny for helping her study—giving her a renewed sense of discipline in order to face Vasily Borgov in Paris and then in Moscow. Just as Beltik did, Benny gives Beth a renewed dedication as she realizes that her talent alone will not be enough to defeat Borgov. Beth's study improves her gameplay so much that Benny can no longer beat her at chess, which creates a degree of tension in their friendship. It even prompts Beth to think, as she does here, that Benny has "little left to teach her." However, this suggests that even though Benny has been quite helpful to Beth, she still doesn't appreciate the full value of a mentor and a friend. Not only can Benny help her with chess, but he can also help her by being emotionally supportive as well, though Beth doesn't fully realize this yet.

Beth's changing relationship with Benny also reflects how much she has grown up. When they first met, she was 16 years old and he, in his early 20s, had beat her definitively and made her feel relatively powerless—she even likened losing to him to sitting in Mrs. Deardorff's office. Now, only a few years later, Beth is taking much greater control over her relationship with Benny as they become lovers. Moreover, she also knows what she wants out of her relationship with him—greater emotional intimacy—and when she realizes that she won't get this, she takes charge of her own life yet again and refuses to let herself get more involved with him than being lovers for a brief period and remaining friends. This again shows how Beth's growing up is characterized by a greater control and independence in her life, as she maintains autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Chapter 12 Quotes

By the time she was in her twenties she could be World's Champion and live wherever she wanted to live. She could have a *pied à terre* in Paris and go to concerts and plays, eat lunch every day in a different cafe, and dress like these women who walked by her, so sure of themselves, so smart in their well-made clothes, with their heads high and their hair impeccably cut and combed and shaped. She had something that none of them had, and it could give her a life that anyone might envy. Benny had been right to urge her to play here and then, next summer, in Moscow. There was nothing to hold her in Kentucky, in her house; she had possibilities that were endless.

Related Characters: Mrs. Wheatley, Benny Watts, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

After one of Beth's matches in Paris, she takes a walk along the streets and thinks about her future. This quote demonstrates the new freedom that Beth has found in Paris, and how that is a reflection of how much Beth has grown up. Beth's childhood was so often defined by the feeling of being "trapped"—of having other people set rules she had to follow, make decisions for her, or dictate how she had to look and behave. Beth began to transition into adulthood following Mrs. Wheatley's death, particularly as she became solely responsible for herself and her home.

This passage illustrates the next step for Beth. As she reflects here, Beth can go wherever she wants to be and become whoever she wants to be—for example, living in Paris and crafting an image of herself like that of the other Parisian girls. Chess has enabled her to grow up, essentially becoming her own agent and taking control of her own career. Now, she can take complete ownership over her own life, not just back in Kentucky, but wherever she wants to go in the world. Beth's statement that the "possibilities" are "endless" contrasts with the confinement she always felt as a child and suggests Beth's complete freedom in the world.

Whereas her childhood was marked by constriction, here she has the world at her fingertips; as such, the book illustrates that Beth has truly come into adulthood because of her ability to be independent and determine her own future.

The piece said she was the most talented woman since Vera Menchik. Beth, reading it half-drunk, was annoyed at the space given to Menchik, going on about her death in a 1944 bombing in London before pointing out that Beth was the better player. And what did being women have to do with it? She was better than any male player in America. She remembered the *Life* interviewer and the questions about her being a woman in a man's world. To hell with her; it wouldn't *be* a man's world when she finished with it.

Related Characters: Vasily Borgov, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

After Beth's devastating loss to Borgov in Paris, she returns to Kentucky and discovers an article that had been written about her several months earlier, comparing her to another female player. Vera Menchik was a real-life chess champion, who rose to fame in the 1920s and 30s and became the first Women's World Chess Champion. She was also the first woman to play in top-level men's tournaments. However, Beth sees that comparing her to Menchik is another example of sexist media coverage. It undermines Beth's accomplishments because Beth is better than Menchik—she's better than any male player in America, as she notes. Rather than emphasizing her dominance in her field, the article simply highlights her difference from the rest of the male players.

Beth also explores the only way to change this assessment. Despite people constantly discriminating against her, discouraging her, or undermining her talent, as the article does here, Beth recognizes that the only way to change these perceptions is to prove that she belongs. She wants to change it from a "man's world" to something that belongs to everyone, because discrimination only discourages women from taking up chess in the first place.

She kept staring at the position as it changed gradually from move to move, and it did not open up for her. Foster was good—clearly better than his rating showed—but he wasn't that good. The people who filled the little room watched in silence as she went more and more on the defensive, trying to keep her face from showing the alarm that was beginning to dominate her moves. And what was wrong with her mind? She hadn't had a drink for a day and two nights. What was wrong? In the pit of her stomach she was beginning to feel terrified. If she had somehow damaged her talent…

Related Characters: Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 188-189

Explanation and Analysis

After Beth spends weeks drinking, she returns to the Kentucky State Championship to defend her title and quickly realizes she's going to lose her first match to a much lower-ranked player. This illustrates how devastating Beth's addiction has become. Even when she is trying to overcome it, taking a break from her drinking in order to play in the tournament, Beth realizes that she may have done permanent damage to her body. For so long, Beth was using drinking and the pills in order to alleviate her stress and grief and to help her play better chess. Now, however, Beth sees how detrimental these substances have become. The book suggests that addiction is a disease, not a moral failing, because it is severely altering Beth's brain in multiple ways. It doesn't just "[damage] her talent," as she thinks here, but it has also rewired her brain to *need* drugs and alcohol, creating a cycle that it seems she can't stop. In this way, the book shows how devastating addiction is and how she would not choose this if it weren't for addiction's pull.

This passage also reinforces how critical Beth's talent has been to her success—without the mental acuity that she has always had, she quickly falls apart. Even though the second half of the book has been defined by Beth's need to build on her talent with study, this also serves as a reminder that without Beth's talent and clarity, she would struggle against any player.

She sat at the board and wished for a moment, painfully, that she had someone to call. Harry Beltik would be back in Louisville. And she didn't want to tell him about the game with Foster. He would find out soon enough. She could call Benny. But Benny had been icy after Paris, and she did not want to talk to him. There was no one else. She got up wearily and opened the cabinet next to the refrigerator, took down a bottle of white wine and poured herself a glassful. A voice inside her cried out at the outrage, but she ignored it. She drank half of it in one long swallow and stood waiting until she could feel it. Then she finished the glass and poured another. A person could live without chess. Most people did.

Related Characters: Benny Watts, Harry Beltik, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After Beth returns from a demoralizing loss at the Kentucky State Championship, she returns home and immediately starts drinking again despite her fear that her drinking has damaged her chess talent. First, Beth considers whom she might be able to call, running through Beltik and Benny as her first options. Unfortunately, this realization comes after Beth pushed Beltik and Benny away, believing that they had nothing left to teach her. But Beth's desire to reach out to them shows her acknowledgement that she needs support in order to find success in her life. That support may not necessarily come from chess tutelage but may instead involve people supporting her through this difficult relapse.

This passage also demonstrates how devastating Beth's addiction is, and also how it is a downward spiral. Even as she pours a drink, she has an inner voice telling her to stop, and yet she can't help herself. She knows that continuing to drink will only hurt her body and mind further, and yet this is the crux of addiction's devastation—it has a hold on Beth's body while ignoring and damaging her mind. Through the course of Beth's entire addiction, then, the book suggests that addiction is primarily a physical illness and compulsion. Especially when Beth thinks that she might just be able to give up chess, it's clear how inescapable addiction is in this moment—and readers can sympathize with how hopeless she feels, to the point where it's easier to give up her dream than to fight this disease.

Chapter 13 Quotes

Beth thought about it. There were bottles of red wine and white in the cabinet behind her, and for a moment she became impatient for Jolene to leave so that she could get one out and twist the cork off and pour herself a full glass. She could feel the sensation of it at the back of her throat.

[...]

"You've got to get your ass moving, girl," Jolene said. "You got to quit sitting in your own funk."

"Okay," Beth said. "I'll be there."

When Jolene left, Beth had one glass of wine but not a second. She opened up all the windows in the house and drank the wine out in the backyard, with the moon, nearly full, directly above the little shed at the back. There was a cool breeze. She took a long time over the drink, letting the breeze blow into the kitchen window, fluttering the curtains, blowing through the kitchen and living room, clearing out the air inside.

Related Characters: Beth Harmon, Jolene DeWitt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 196-197

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth reconnects with Jolene, they return to Beth's home and Jolene, seeing the evidence of Beth's addiction, tells Beth that she needs to get moving and snap out of her spiral. In calling Jolene at all and bringing her back to her home, Beth recognizes that she needs help in order to overcome her addiction. This shows that friends and mentors can help in more ways than just material knowledge. Without Jolene's help and motivation, Beth would simply relinquish herself to her addiction—even when Jolene is there, all she can do is think about drinking again. In this way, the book emphasizes how valuable friends and mentors can be, in all aspects of life, and that even talented and successful people need support.

The book again emphasizes how difficult Beth's struggle with her drinking can be. Even the prospect of trying to face and overcome her addiction makes her crave a drink, though she knows she should resist. And yet, even though Beth isn't able to give up her drinking immediately, she does start to wean herself off with Jolene's help. Beth's gesture of opening the windows to the house is a symbolic shift brought on by Jolene's motivation. Beth is clearing the air in her home in the same way she is trying to detoxify her own

mind. But she is also no longer shutting others out from her sadness and shame; she is letting a breath of fresh air into her life, both literally and figuratively.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ At one table where the position looked interesting, she stopped for a moment. It was the Richter-Rauzer, from the Sicilian. She had written a small piece on it for *Chess Review* a few years before, when she was sixteen. The men were playing it right, and Black had a slight variation in his pawns that she had never seen before, but it was clearly sound. It was good chess. First-class chess, being played by two old men in cheap working clothes. The man playing White moved his king's bishop, looked up at her and scowled. For a moment she felt powerfully self-conscious among all these old Russian men with her nylons and pale-blue skirt and gray cashmere sweater, her hair cut and shaped in the proper way for a young American girl, her feet in pumps that probably cost as much money as these men used to earn in a month.

Related Characters: Vasily Borgov, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

During the tournament in Moscow, Beth walks to a nearby park, where nearly 40 chess boards are set up with many older men playing on them. This quote demonstrates how powerfully Beth's lack of confidence affects her. Despite the fact that she is one of the best chess players in the world, she feels out of place among these Russian men. In highlighting how "self-conscious" she feels, looking so obviously like a young American girl, Beth connects this to how she assumes they perceive her—as someone who could never belong among them.

Yet this belief is quickly disproven, both immediately after Beth has these thoughts and then at the end of the book. Soon after this passage, the men start recognizing Beth and shouting her name, wanting to shake her hand. This illustrates how so much of Beth's self-consciousness is coming out of her own lack of confidence, and that in reality she could fit in quite easily were it not for her self-doubt. At the end of the book, after having defeated Borgov, Beth proves this as well: she walks confidently back to the park, sits down opposite a man who shows no sign of recognizing her, and asks him to play chess. In that moment, in contrast to this one, she understands that chess is a universal language and that she belongs wherever there are chessboards. Winning over the best player, therefore, allows her to overcome the doubts borne of her lack of belonging.

❝ No matter how often she told herself she was as good as any of them, she felt with dismay that those men with their heavy black shoes knew something she did not know and never would know. She tried to concentrate on her own career, her quick rise to the top of American chess and beyond it, the way she had become a more powerful player than Benny Watts, the way she had beaten Laev without a moment of doubt in her moves, the way that, even as a child, she had found an error in the play of the great Morphy. But all of it was meaningless and trivial beside her glimpse into the establishment of Russian chess, into the room where the men conferred in deep voices and studied the board with an assurance that seemed wholly beyond her.

Related Characters: Benny Watts, Laev, Vasily Borgov, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

One evening during the tournament in Moscow, Beth takes a walk down the hall in her hotel room and notices Borgov studying a position along with several other Russian players in a nearby suite. Beth's thoughts here illustrate once more how she feels out of place at these chess tournaments, and how that in turn undermines her confidence when she plays. She affirms that despite knowing she's a good player, she doesn't share in the same kind of solidarity that the men display with each other here.

Beth especially notes the characteristics associated with masculinity: deep voices and heavy black shoes. This indicates that the thing that gives them "assurance that seemed wholly beyond her" is largely their status as men in the world of chess, which inherently gives them much greater confidence because they know they belong. Beth, on the other hand, feels constantly like an outsider despite her meteoric rise, and this has the twofold effect of undermining her confidence and consequently her gameplay.

This passage also emphasizes the importance of friends and mentors. Beth laments not being able to have the same kind

of team around her, realizing in this moment how valuable they might be. Even Borgov, the World Champion, is getting help from other players. This suggests that even the most talented or successful people can still benefit from others' help, and Beth feels even more diminished for not having that same help.

> They went on together, exploring possibilities, following out line after line, for almost an hour. Benny was amazing. He had worked out everything; she began to see ways of crowding Borgov, finessing Borgov, deceiving him, tying up his pieces, forcing him to compromise and retreat.
>
> Finally she looked at her watch and said, "Benny, it's nine-fifteen here."
>
> "Okay," he said. "Go beat him."

Related Characters: Benny Watts, Beth Harmon (speaker), Jolene DeWitt, Vasily Borgov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth's final match with Borgov is adjourned, she receives a surprise call from Benny, who helps Beth work through different possible strategies to use against Borgov. In this moment, Beth finally appreciates the true value of having friends and mentors along the way to help her. For so long, she pushed Benny and others away because she thought she had little left to learn from them. But now, the book emphasizes that mentors and friends can provide support not just in providing material knowledge, but simply in being a support network. Jolene did the same for Beth—Jolene didn't have anything to teach Beth about chess, but she did help Beth revive her physical and mental stamina in order to be able to play the long and taxing tournament games.

In Benny's case, he doesn't just help Beth think through strategies. His call in and of itself lets her know that he is there supporting her, and it gives her the confidence she needs to feel optimistic about her game with Borgov. Even though she can't ultimately play Benny's strategies all the way out, it puts her in a totally different mindset from when she played Borgov in Paris—she feels like she might actually have a chance. And it is this support that allows her to make a few moves before figuring out a way to beat Borgov all on her own. Thus, the book illustrates that mentorship and friendship—just the very understanding that someone has other people they can lean on in times of stress—are crucial to success. Despite Beth's enormous natural talent, only with her friends' help can she do exactly what Benny says and beat her most difficult opponent.

> The applause began. She took the black king in her hand and turned to face the auditorium, letting the whole massive weight of the ovation wash over her. People in the audience were standing, applauding louder and louder. She received it with her whole body, feeling her cheeks redden with it and then go hot and wet as the thunderous sound washed away thought.
>
> And then Vasily Borgov was standing beside her, and a moment later to her complete astonishment he had his arms spread and then was embracing her, hugging her to him warmly.

Related Characters: Vasily Borgov, Beth Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

After two days of playing and enormous mental energy, Beth is finally able to beat Vasily Borgov, and the moment he resigns, he offers her his king. This moment is the culmination of Beth's entire journey: the "massive weight" of the ovation reflects how much effort Beth and others have put in to get her to this point. Only through immense talent, rigorous dedication, and friends and mentors' support along the way has Beth been able to accomplish this feat—the victory toward which she's been working for her entire career. As such, the book emphasizes that all these things are necessary for Beth to achieve ultimate victory.

Borgov's reaction and warm embrace also highlight how so much of Beth's journey has been defined by her fear of Borgov as representing the typical male chess player. She always viewed him as solid and authoritarian, projecting onto him the sense of ownership over the game that she never had. But now, Beth's victory shows that Beth *does* belong in the chess world. She isn't the outsider that she always assumed herself to be; he is literally embracing her. Borgov's handing over the king is also symbolic. Where Borgov was once the king of chess, now he has given that title over to Beth. This is particularly notable given the fact that Beth opened with the Queen's Gambit, which takes its

name from the most powerful piece on the board. Beth now has that same power—Beth has become the queen of chess, and she no longer has to prove that she is as worthy as any male player.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Eight-year-old Beth Harmon learns of her mother's death from a woman with a clipboard. The next day, a picture of her, looking plain and stunned, appears in the local newspaper. Alongside the photo is an article explaining that she was orphaned and left without family when her mother was killed in a car accident. Authorities say she will be well looked after.

The book opens with a tragedy when Beth is orphaned and left without family. This sets up an important aspect of Beth's childhood: feeling that she lacks control over her life. The photo illustrates Beth's bewilderment in experiencing this shocking and uncontrollable loss. Meanwhile, the article hints that Beth will simply be shuttled off somewhere with little say in where she goes.

Beth soon moves into Methuen Home in Mount Sterling, Kentucky, where she is given a **tranquilizer** twice a day. She is glad to get the little green pill, which helps keep her calm through the tense hours at the orphanage. A man named Mr. Fergussen gives the children the pills as they line up. It is in this line that she meets Jolene, a tall, 12-year-old Black girl. Jolene asks if Beth is a bastard and if her parents are dead, but Beth doesn't know what bastard means and she can't bear to think of her mother as dead. She says nothing.

Beth's first days in the Methuen orphanage show both her innocence and her fear. Her silence suggests that she doesn't fully understand what's happened to her and that she's unable to face her grief. Beth's passivity—like when she happily accepts the tranquilizers—illustrates the powerlessness in her life. This passage also establishes the origin of Beth's experiences with drugs. Initially, Beth isn't responsible for her drug use, and the tranquilizers have an ambivalent effect—they keep her calm, but they also numb her grief.

Beth starts to acclimate to Methuen: the barber cuts her hair into the bangs they all wear. She occasionally hears boys in the Boy's Ward shouting about "cocksuckers," which she knows would get the boys' mouths washed out with soap even though she doesn't know what the word means. She also notices the janitor, Mr. Shaibel, one day when she goes to the basement to clean the blackboard erasers. There, he is playing on a checkerboard—only the pieces are funny shapes. When he looks up at her, she leaves in silence.

These descriptions of life at Methuen reinforce the idea that Beth has little control over her life: she must keep the same hairstyle as everyone else and do what's expected of her. Any expression of individuality or initiative—whether it's acting out or taking an interest in a new game—could get her into trouble, so she avoids it.

At Methuen, if Beth doesn't follow the rules—like eating the fish they serve even though it nearly gags her—the staff will tell the director, Mrs. Deardorff. If that happens, Beth won't be adopted. Some children get adopted quickly—a six-year-old named Alice who came in a month after Beth was adopted after three weeks by a nice-looking couple. Other children have been there a long time and know they will never leave. Beth wonders if this will happen to her.

The strict environment at Methuen leaves little room for agency. Something as simple as rejecting the food could have devastating consequences for Beth's future. In such an oppressive environment, Beth can't control anything—she can only do what she's told.

Gym is unpleasant because Beth is gawky, to the point where she even injures her hand playing volleyball. Jolene is the best player by far, and Jolene shows her how to hold her hands. With Jolene's guidance, Beth works on it until she gets it right and hitting the ball doesn't hurt anymore. She doesn't become good, but she gets to the point where she isn't afraid of it.

Beth's blossoming friendship with Jolene is the book's first example of the importance of mentorship in helping a person overcome challenges. Beth's strategy—practicing something hard so she won't be afraid of it—applies not just to volleyball, but to later challenges in Beth's life.

Every Tuesday, the Arithmetic teacher sends Beth to the basement to clean the erasers because Beth is the best student in the class. Though she is afraid of Mr. Shaibel, one day she asks him about the mysterious game he plays. He is gruff and irritated by the interruption, but he tells her that he is playing chess. That Sunday, Beth sneaks out of chapel by pretending to go to the bathroom and watches Mr. Shaibel play for 10 minutes. He doesn't look at her, but she watches every move, entranced as he stares at the pieces and moves them with great deliberation.

Beth's initial curiosity about chess—even though she doesn't quite know what it is yet—is a brave expression of initiative in an environment that punishes individuality. Her willingness to make a decision, even when it means breaking the rules, shows she's growing up.

Beth learns to save her **tranquilizers** until night; they help her sleep. For the first two months, she sleeps very little because of all the other girls sleeping around her, the distant noises that make her tense, and the light shining in when staff members open the door to check on them. Now, she snuggles in bed as her anxiety loosens thanks to the green pills.

Besides showing Beth's ability to adapt to her circumstances, this passage illustrates Beth's growing dependency on the tranquilizers. Their function as a stress reliever and sleep aid suggests that the pills are becoming a biological need.

One day, Beth asks Mr. Shaibel to teach her to play chess (she has snuck out of chapel again). He says that he doesn't play strangers. Two days later, Beth returns, saying that she's not a stranger—she lives there. Mr. Shaibel says girls don't play chess. At this, Beth starts to point out the way the different pieces move, indicating what she's already learned. He asks her about the one that looks like a lemon, and she says it moves on the diagonals.

Beth encounters discrimination in the chess world for the first time. If Beth hadn't persisted in spite of Mr. Shaibel's sexist remark, she likely would never have learned. This demonstrates Beth's determination, natural talent, and ambition—even if her ambition at the moment is simply to learn to play—as she has already picked up some of the rules through observation.


Beth continues to save up **pills**, keeping the extras in her toothbrush holder. That night, for the first time, she takes three pills. She feels like she has solved some part of her life: she knows how the chess pieces move and capture, and she knows how to make herself feel good with the pills.

Besides showing Beth's growing addiction, the book also suggests a connection between tranquilizers and chess. Like chess, the pills give Beth a semblance of control over life in the orphanage.


The following week, after Arithmetic and with ten minutes before Geography, Mr. Shaibel tells Beth that they can play chess now. Beth protests that she doesn't have much time, but Mr. Shaibel says they can play now or never. She thinks only a second before grabbing a milk crate and sitting across from him. He beats her in four moves in what she later learns is known as the Scholar's Mate.

Despite Mr. Shaibel's initial hesitation to teach Beth, his mentorship proves crucial in her life. This is particularly true because he doesn't treat Beth as a child—he treats her like any chess opponent. By taking the risk to learn chess, Beth takes initiative and, with that, another step towards growing up.

Even with the quick match, Beth is 15 minutes late to Geography. She says that she was in the bathroom, but the teacher asks if any of the other girls saw her there. They only giggle, but he gives Beth five demerits. She's terrified: with 10 demerits you are whipped with a leather strap. She feels in her breast pocket for that morning's **pill**, and she becomes instantly less anxious just knowing it's there. That night, Beth lies in bed, looking at the ceiling and forcing herself to see the chess board. She imagines the pieces and replays the game she lost. The noises around her fade, and Beth plays happily.

Beth's addiction is worsening: even knowing she has a pill alleviates her stress, which only makes her more dependent and prompts her to ensure that she has a supply of them. Beth's mental chess game not only shows a determination to get better, but a unique capacity to lose herself in the game.

The next Sunday, Beth blocks the Scholar's Mate. It then takes Mr. Shaibel 14 moves to trap her queen. She ignores the inevitable loss, but when she tries to touch a pawn Mr. Shaibel stops her hand and tells her to resign. At first, she refuses to give up, but he tells her that she has lost and that it's sportsmanship to resign the game. She becomes furious and starts to insult him, but in response he tells her that they won't play anymore, and to get out. Beth wishes she were bigger; instead, she gets up and leaves.

Beth's ability to block the Scholar's Mate shows her natural talent. However, Mr. Shaibel's gesture suggests that there's more to chess than skill—she must also learn to compete graciously, even when that means giving up. At the same time, Beth's frustration with being small establishes a pattern of feeling like an outsider in the chess world.

The following Tuesday, the door to the basement is locked, and Beth is frustrated. But on Thursday, the door is open, and Mr. Shaibel acts like nothing has happened. They play a game, and Beth is able to get a pawn to the sixth rank. She watches in delight as Mr. Shaibel wastes a move and Beth's pawn becomes a queen on the next move. He reaches out angrily and topples his king—her first win. It is the most wonderful feeling Beth has ever felt.

Beth's eagerness to play, not to mention the joy of her first win, suggest that chess is becoming a motivating force in her life, something that—rather like tranquilizers—makes Methuen's dreariness bearable.

Beth starts to miss lunch on Sundays, which gives her three hours with Mr. Shaibel. He teaches her different sequences, like the Sicilian defense; he tells her that the squares have names, though he doesn't yet explain what they are; and he shows her some basic moves and variations that she picks up quickly. They then play a game in which none of the things that he has just taught her matter. She glares at him, but she is still determined to beat him.

While Beth's natural talent is important, Mr. Shaibel's tutelage is also crucial to her development. She could not achieve the same success without his patience and willingness to teach her. He also teaches her is the importance of persistence through difficulty, something she's unlikely to learn on her own.

Beth notices that Mr. Shaibel often begins the game by moving the pawn in front of his queen and then the pawn in front of his bishop. She asks if this is a sequence. He says yes: it is **the Queen's Gambit**. She's pleased to have picked up on it, but instead of taking the offered pawn, she leaves it on the board and moves her knight instead—she likes the power of the pieces, their influence over the different rows and diagonals. In 20 moves, she wins both his rooks, and he resigns.

Beth's ability to pick up the sequences shows another aspect of her talent, as she recognizes patterns that become crucial to building her skill. Additionally, this is the first introduction of the sequence "the Queen's Gambit," for which the book is named. Picking up on this sequence shows Beth's growing command of the game; the move also implicitly counters the sexism she'll face. The queen is the most powerful piece on the board, hinting at Beth's future reign in the chess world.

The following Tuesday, the Arithmetic teacher doesn't let Beth go to the basement, which disappoints her. As the week goes on, she saves **pills** and plays chess in her mind at night. On Saturday, she takes all six pills that she has saved, thrilled at her loosening anxiety and the "deep chemical happiness."

Beth's "deep chemical happiness" shows she's becoming increasingly dependent on the pills,. and she's escalating her usage of them in a dangerous way. On one hand, her addiction isn't her fault. On the other hand, she chooses to stockpile pills when other ways of coping—like thinking about chess—are available to her, showing the complex nature of addiction.

On Sunday, Mr. Shaibel asks where Beth was on Tuesday, and she explains that they wouldn't let her out of class. Mr. Shaibel explains that she can move first today, and that they will trade off playing the white pieces—the way it is meant to be played. Beth opens with the king's pawn and quickly recognizes that Mr. Shaibel is playing with the Levenfish Variation. She moves in, neutralizing his attack and bringing out her own, winning in under thirty moves. The checkmate takes him by surprise.

Beth's ability to play with Mr. Shaibel, and the independence she gains from it, contrasts with the restriction and lack of control she has over the rest of her life at Methuen. She also continues to display her talent, such that Mr. Shaibel understands that she is good enough to open against him.

After this loss, Mr. Shaibel says that he will teach Beth the names of the squares. She asks if she's good enough now to learn. He asks how old she is, and she answers: eight. He says in reply that she is "astounding." He then pulls out a bottle of **whiskey** and drinks from it. She asks him to teach her while wondering what the whiskey would taste like.

Mr. Shaibel's statement affirms Beth's "astounding" instinct for chess despite little academic knowledge of the game. Additionally, Beth's curiosity about the whiskey Mr. Shaibel is drinking foreshadows her own foray into drinking as another aspect of her addiction.

In the middle of the night, Jolene comes over and sits on Beth's bed, saying that she wants to try something fun. She puts her hands on Beth's stomach, and Beth tightens. Jolene starts to rub further down Beth's body, and though it doesn't hurt, Beth resists it. Jolene then pulls Beth's own hand under her nightgown, hitting a spot that's warm and damp, asking Beth to press a little. Beth is frightened, but she does as she's told. Jolene asks her to rub faster, but Beth says aloud that she doesn't want to and pulls her hand away. Footsteps come down the hall, and Jolene gets up in a hurry as Beth remains still in the dark. After the women leave, Beth takes three **pills**. The next day, Jolene calls her the "ugliest white girl ever," and Beth says nothing, knowing it's true.

Here, Beth's experience demonstrates another aspect in which her childhood is defined by lack of control. Beth's protest against Jolene's assault is relatively futile—she has no control over the situation or any way to protect herself. Even when adults come into the room, Beth doesn't really know how to find agency in the situation, instead remaining silent. The only thing she can control is making herself feel better through her drug use. The fact that she turns to drugs in these moments allows readers to empathize with her, as she takes the pills when her body is most vulnerable.

In the classroom, Beth imagines that the seats are squares on the board and she moves the kids around in her mind like she's playing a match. She tries not to think about Jolene, with whom she's not spoken in over a week. On one of her Sunday visits to the basement, Mr. Shaibel gives her a book: *Modern Chess Openings*. She says nothing but she holds the book tightly, sitting down and waiting to play.

Mr. Shaibel's giving the book to Beth shows he sees her potential to learn more than he can teach her. It also highlights the value of a more rigorous and studious approach to chess, something that will build on Beth's natural talent.

English is dull, and Beth reads *Modern Chess Openings* in her lap as Mr. Espero drones on. By the third day, she can easily visualize the notations, like P-K4 or N-KB3. She imagines the chess board like a ballet, dancing with the pieces in their endless combinations. Later in the hall, Jolene insults Beth again, and Beth calls her a slur, which stuns Jolene.

Beth's studies with Modern Chess Openings also illustrate the importance of studying as a way of fostering innate talent. These studies work in tandem with Beth's creative visualizations, suggesting that both study and natural knack are vital. In addition, Beth's slur against Jolene illustrates that just because Beth faces sexist discrimination doesn't mean she can't also perpetuate racist and discriminatory behavior herself.

The following Saturday, Beth takes six **pills** and tries to rub herself. She wonders if she's too young for it to feel good—Jolene is four years older than her. Soon after, Beth asks Jolene what a "cocksucker" is. Jolene explains that a cock is what boys have—like a thumb, and that some girls like to suck on that thumb. Beth is aghast, wondering how someone could do that.

As Beth and Jolene reconnect, Jolene mentors Beth in her own way by teaching Beth about sex and anatomy. Jolene's role reminds readers that Beth lacks a parental figure to guide her in such sensitive subjects. Beth's deliberate questions suggest she's exercising greater agency in her own coming of age, much as she's taking initiative in studying chess.

The next Sunday, Beth wins five games straight with Mr. Shaibel. They have been playing for three months, and he can no longer beat her. The following Sunday, Mr. Shaibel invites Mr. Ganz, who coaches the local high school chess team, to join them. She and Mr. Ganz play a game—he's better than Mr. Shaibel, but she knows after six moves that he will be easy to beat. He is forced to resign after 23 moves. He asks her how she practices, and she says she plays with Mr. Shaibel—she doesn't yet want to tell him about playing in her mind.

Inviting Mr. Ganz to play with Beth illustrates how Mr. Shaibel is proving crucial as a mentor. Even though he can no longer beat her—a pattern that will repeat among several of Beth's chess mentors—he still adds value to her abilities and wants to usher her towards greater success. Beth's silence about her practice method suggests that she knows her imaginative abilities are something special, and she's instinctively protective of them.

Beth and Mr. Ganz play another game; after 20 moves, Beth points out her upcoming mate in three. Mr. Ganz takes half a minute to see it and says how astonishing she is. As he leaves, he gives her a present: she hopes it's a chess book, but it's a doll with blond hair and a blue dress. She asks him to play another game, but he says he has to go. As Beth leaves the basement, she drops the doll in a trashcan.

The doll here illustrates Mr. Ganz's own sexism. Even though he knows Beth loves chess, he assumes she'd prefer a traditionally feminine gift, suggesting that even when people recognize Beth's talent, they continue to stereotype her. This foreshadows the discrimination Beth will later face in the chess world

During Health class, Beth finds a picture of male anatomy in the back of the book, but she still can't quite understand it—the men have what looks like a purse with a round thing down in front of it, which she guesses is a cock. Meanwhile, the teacher is talking about the importance of eating vegetables.

Beth's curiosity about male anatomy isn't unusual for her age, but her secretive research hints that she'll look for answers on her own rather than relying on the adults in her life to tell her what they think she should know—another instance of her growing maturity and initiative.

Mr. Ganz returns the next Sunday, and he and Mr. Shaibel offer for Beth to play them simultaneously. She beats them effortlessly, barely thinking about the continuations. They start again, and Beth gets up to look out the window—she took seven **tranquilizers** the midnight before and still feels lethargic. Mr. Ganz tells her that he has moved, and she calls out her next moves to Mr. Ganz and Mr. Shaibel. She quickly mates Mr. Ganz without looking at the board, and Mr. Ganz is in shock.

Here the book begins to hint at the drawbacks to Beth's addiction. Even though the pills make her feel better, the sheer amount that she is consuming is starting to affect her in ways that she can't control. Beth also continues to show her incredible talent in being able to play without even looking at the board, with the moves simply coming to her "effortlessly"—she can win without even trying.


CHAPTER 2

One Saturday afternoon, Mr. Fergussen brings Beth to Mrs. Deardorff's office. She worries that they have found the **pills** or know that she has been skipping class. But when she arrives, Mr. Ganz is sitting there. Mrs. Deardorff explains that Mr. Ganz knows she is a phenomenal chess player, and that he wants to take her to the high school to play with the chess club, which has a dozen members. Mrs. Deardorff comments that they try to encourage their girls to get out into the world, though Beth can't recall anyone ever doing so. Beth says that she wants to go, which settles the issue. But after Mr. Ganz leaves, Mrs. Deardorff warns Beth that she can't play chess in the basement, and that she'll have Fergussen look into getting a board for her.

This moment, which seems so ominous at first, shows how important Mr. Shaibel's mentorship has been, as it's led to opportunities that Beth would never have had otherwise. Beth's eagerness to play chess, which has helped her cope with life at Methuen, might now be a ticket beyond the orphanage walls. Mrs. Deardorff's remark hints that Methuen isn't interested in encouraging the girls for their own sake but wants the girls to succeed when it makes them *look good.*


In bed, Beth thinks about how she'll play so many games with the chess club. She tries to picture twelve boards at once, but she can only picture four or five. She plays late into the night, forgetting about the **pills**. But the next morning, she only gets vitamins—no tranquilizers. Fergussen explains that there's a new law—no tranquilizers for kids. Beth eyes the big glass jar, which is still a third full of green pills. That night, she can only think about the pills.

While the pills do help Beth sleep and relieve her anxiety, it's becoming increasingly clear that Beth's drug usage is more detrimental than helpful. Now that her access to the pills is restricted, she's even distracted from the things that normally bring her joy, like chess.

The next day, while changing after gym, Jolene asks Beth about playing chess at the high school—she heard about it from Fergussen. Beth ignores the question, asking if Fergussen has been giving Jolene extra **pills**, but Jolene says no. Jolene notices that it seems like Beth is going through withdrawal. As they finish changing, Beth realizes how beautiful Jolene is in comparison to her—she feels ugly, and she feels on edge, thinking only of the pills.

Jolene observes that Beth is becoming physically dependent on tranquilizers—without them, Beth is obsessed, not even interested in talking about chess. Beth also feels insecure and anxious without pills. This all shows the downward spiral of addiction—withdrawal symptoms affect a person's mannerisms and deepen their dependency.

The car ride to the high school is Beth's first since coming to Methuen. She thinks about her mother, who died in a car. Her father passed away a year earlier, because of a "carefree life," her mom said. Shirley, a girl in the chess club, also accompanies them, and she tries to make conversation. Beth thinks about how nervous she is—before she left, Jolene gave her three green **pills**, but she hadn't had the chance to take them. Beth asks Mr. Ganz to stop so she can go to the bathroom, and in the gas station she takes all three.

Beth's mother's description of her father's "carefree life" is a euphemism for his own alcohol addiction. Though Beth's mother positions her father's death as a result of a moral failing, it also suggests that Beth's struggle is partially genetic and partially enabled by the orphanage. Again, this points to the complex relationship between addiction and a person's agency. Beth now relies on the tranquilizers to help her face a new, challenging situation.

At the high school, kids arrive in the chess classroom—mostly boys, who seem as big as men. Beth realizes that she will have to stand the whole time, walking around to the 12 boards. As the boys quietly jeer at her, she feels "powerless and silly." But looking at the chess boards, she knows that she is not out of place.

Though Beth feels "powerless and silly" in comparison to the older boys, and their jeers suggest they don't take her seriously, chess changes the dynamic. Her exceptional talent gives her the confidence to know that she does belong behind the chess board, even if she doesn't belong among her opponents.

Mr. Ganz instructs his students to take their seats and to be quiet. Beth moves from board to board. She quickly realizes, in surprise, how badly all of them play. She calmly moves from board to board, her mind bright. Other boys come in to watch her play. At the end of an hour and a half, she has beaten them all without a single false or wasted move. There is scattered applause, but she realizes coming out of her feat that she is just "a little girl again, without power." Mr. Ganz gives her chocolates as a prize and takes her back to Methuen.

Beth's victory against all twelve of the boys affirms her impressive talent, as her "bright" mind plays intuitively such that she doesn't make a single mistake. But despite this triumph, she immediately reverts to feeling like a powerless young girl who doesn't belong there. This shows how thoroughly sexism can undermine a person's confidence.

At dinner, Jolene tries to ask about Beth's time at the high school, but she asks if Jolene has any more **pills**. Jolene simply turns away from her. That next Saturday afternoon, while the movie is on, Beth is exhausted, not having slept much on Thursday or Friday. She asks to go to the bathroom and, knowing that everyone is distracted by the loud movie, Beth examines the padlocked window that says "Pharmacy" and the screws that hold together the hasp where the padlock is connected.

Beth's struggle with addiction worsens, as she experiences such extreme withdrawal that her judgment appears clouded. The situation implies that addiction is not a moral failing—it is physiological desperation that prompts her to consider drastic steps.

That morning, Beth took a screwdriver from the boys' woodworking shop after breakfast. When her father was home and sober, he liked to do odd jobs around the house, and she helped him. Standing on a stool and taking out the screwdriver, Beth gets the hasp's screws free and wriggles through the window, landing on the metal table inside. Climbing down, Beth goes over to the jar and grabs a fistful of **pills**, shoveling them into her mouth. She then stuffs three handfuls of pills into her pockets and plans to fill four Dixie cups with them that she can store in an empty Kleenex box.

Again, it's implied that Beth's own father struggled with addiction (as he was rarely sober), showing how Beth's addiction is also partially due to genetic factors. This episode also illustrates the potentially deadly consequences of addiction, as Beth takes 30 pills without fully understanding the consequences of what she's doing. The book paints her situation sympathetically, suggesting the biological compulsion isn't her fault.

Beth tries to walk out of the pharmacy through the door, but the door will not open from the inside—she needs a key. She can't go back out the window with the four cups, and Beth starts to grow frantic. She feels trapped, just as trapped as when she was taken from her home and put in this institution. She decides to leave the cups on the metal table, climb out, and then grab them.

Beth's thoughts about her predicament are telling. They illustrate her overall powerlessness. She's not just literally trapped in the pharmacy (something that wouldn't have happened if Methuen hadn't given her tranquilizers), she's also stuck in a life that demands all her courage and ingenuity just to survive.

As Beth fills the Dixie cups, she realizes that she could just lift the whole jar out—she knows a place to hide it in the bathroom. Beth feels the **pills** start to take effect, and she climbs back through the window. But when she lands on the other side, her body starts to go limp. She vaguely hears someone calling her name as she picks up the jar. She turns, but the jar slips from her hands and explodes on the ground. Mrs. Deardorff and Mr. Fergussen call out to her, and other teachers and children come out to see what is happening.

The shattered jar of pills represents Beth's own struggle with addiction, illustrating the potentially deadly consequences of the pills that she has consumed. In addition, it foreshadows the way addiction shatters her life in later chapters. The fact that the staff leaves the pharmacy unguarded and intervenes too late highlights how the staff has enabled Beth's addiction, not considering long-term consequences for her and other children.

Mr. Fergussen rides with Beth to the hospital, where they make her swallow a tube. She then falls asleep, feeling them put a needle in her arm. She isn't there very long, and Fergussen drives her back the same evening. He tells her that he thought Deardorff would explode before saying that she's going to have to stop taking the **pills** entirely.

Even though Beth survives, her dangerous potential overdose emphasizes the deadliness of addiction. While Mrs. Deardorff seems to place the blame on Beth, the book takes a different perspective, recognizing that Beth is just a child and that her addiction isn't her fault.

Back at Methuen, Beth sleeps for twelve hours. The next day she goes to Mrs. Deardorff's office, but she's surprisingly calm—while getting dressed, she discovered that, despite her trip to the hospital, she still managed to hide 23 **tranquilizers** in her pockets. Mrs. Deardorff makes her wait, but Beth doesn't care. She tries not to think about her punishment, and she is keenly aware of the orphanage's complicity in giving her the pills in the first place.

Even Beth recognizes the injustice of Mrs. Deardorff's perspective, recognizing that she wouldn't have tried to steal the pills without the orphanage giving them to her in the first place. They created a keen biological need that Beth couldn't help, again affirming that Beth's addiction is a disease for which she cannot be blamed.

Mrs. Deardorff and two other teachers scold Beth for her behavior, but Beth replies that she can't sleep without the pills. Mrs. Deardorff says that's why Beth shouldn't have them, but it's clear that Mrs. Deardorff is frightened. Beth remarks that they shouldn't have given her the pills in the first place. Mrs. Deardorff orders her not to talk back, saying that her library, playground, and movie privileges are suspended. Beth will be in chapel 30 minutes early, and if she whispers to other children in class, she will get ten demerits. She will not slip out of chapel and will write a summary of each talk. And finally, no more chess.

Again, Beth recognizes that her addiction is not her fault—and the book implies, from the fear in Mrs. Deardorff's reaction, that she understands that Beth's addiction is the orphanage's fault as well. Beth also confirms that her addiction has created an uncontrollable need, because she cannot sleep without it. Lastly, depriving Beth of chess strips her of what little agency she has in her life.

The next time Beth goes to get vitamins, the hasp has been replaced on the window. Fergussen smiles at her pleasantly as he gives her the vitamins. Beth is bored at chapel but pays attention to write her report about Mrs. Lonsdale's warnings about communism. She's particularly sad about chess, trying not to think about Mr. Shaibel.

Beth associates chess with independence and self-determination. Taking it away from her makes her feel like a child who has no power over her own life—someone who must instead blindly follow the rules that adults set out for her.

Beth has trouble sleeping again, so instead, she starts to memorize the 57 pages on the Sicilian Defense. When that's done, she moves on to other openings. One morning, she sees Mr. Shaibel in the hall, cleaning. She apologizes, saying that they won't let her play anymore. He doesn't say anything to her; he simply goes back to mopping.

Even though Beth has lost her ability to play chess, she recognizes something that she can still do to improve her game, which is to study everything she can in Modern Chess Openings. Here, Beth acknowledges that while talent is important, dedicated study is also useful to becoming a better chess player.

That Christmas, two girls are adopted—both pretty, Beth thinks. Both white, Jolene says. Then, one day, Fergussen comes in and tells Beth that she's moving to the best bed in the ward, under the window. It is a bit larger and has more space around it. She thanks him.

Here the book highlights discrimination as a factor in adoption. Jolene feels unwanted because she's Black. Beth also feels that, unlike herself, "pretty" girls are more attractive to potential adoptive parents.

CHAPTER 3

Three years later, when Beth is 12, Mrs. Deardorff calls Beth into the office to meet with an excited woman and a disinterested man—Mrs. Wheatley and Mr. Wheatley. Mrs. Deardorff explains that Beth is at the top of her class, but she says nothing about the chess or the **pills**. Over the next few weeks, Beth forgets about the visit—until one day Fergussen tells her that she's being picked up the next day. The couple has decided to adopt her.

The Wheatleys' introduction marks a turning point in Beth's life. Mrs. Wheatley's excitement suggests that she is thrilled to have Beth as a daughter, hinting that Beth may finally gain the support that she hasn't yet received from many other adults in her life, particularly at Methuen.

As Beth packs, she can't find *Modern Chess Openings*. She asks if Jolene has seen the book, but Jolene says that she hasn't. Jolene asks if she's leaving, and Beth glumly says yes. When Jolene asks what's wrong, Beth apologizes that Jolene didn't get adopted. The next day, Mrs. Deardorff goes out with Beth when Mr. Wheatley and Mrs. Wheatley come to pick her up. Mr. Shaibel is also there. Beth wants to go over to him, but instead she simply waves goodbye.

Here Beth recognizes the value of her mentors and friends at Methuen—they helped her survive a lonely, sometimes hostile environment. Even though she isn't able to say a proper goodbye to Mr. Shaibel, his presence when she leaves suggests he'll miss her, too. Additionally, Beth's apology that Jolene didn't get adopted is an implicit acknowledgment of the fact that Jolene has a harder time getting adopted because she is Black.


When Beth arrives at the Wheatley home, Mr. Wheatley goes upstairs, comes down with a suitcase, and immediately leaves for Denver on business. Mrs. Wheatley and Beth have tuna casserole for lunch, which is far too salty for Beth. Mrs. Wheatley tells Beth about all the invasive questions the adoption agency had for them—like whether she had been in psychiatric care. She then chatters constantly and excitedly until Beth asks politely to go to the bathroom. There, she goes into the tiny blue bathroom and immediately vomits up the tuna.

Mr. Wheatley's instant absence from Beth's life hints that he will continue to be nonexistent as she grows up. It's also implied that Mrs. Wheatley might indeed struggle with her mental health. Lastly, Beth vomiting up her lunch represents an attempt at finding a semblance of control in a stressful new situation.

Later, Mrs. Wheatley shows Beth her room. It looks enormous to her, with a double bed and a pink bedspread, a rug, a dresser, and a desk. Beth is stunned; she's never had a room of her own. She can even lock the door. Beth unpacks into a closet that is bigger than her mother's had been. She wishes that Jolene were there to share it with her, but she knew that the Wheatleys would never have adopted Jolene. That night, Beth stretches out happily on her bed and lays awake for several hours. She's thrilled that her door is closed and locked—no one invading her space and no one quarreling.

Beth's new room is another symbolic change as she transitions from the orphanage to her new home with the Wheatleys. At the orphanage, Beth constantly felt tense sleeping with the other girls around and adults always checking in on them, but now Beth has her own space and even the autonomy of being able to close and lock her door. This increased independence seems more valuable to Beth than gaining an adoptive family.

On Monday, Beth starts at seventh grade at the public high school. Her clothes make her stand out among the students, but they mostly ignore her. She gets books and a homeroom and realizes quickly that school will be easy for her. At lunch, she tries to sit alone, but another girl comes up and sits with her. Beth asks if they have a chess club at the school. The girl replies that she doesn't think so—but Beth could be a junior cheerleader.

Just like Mr. Shaibel, Beth's lunch companion seems to imply that chess isn't for girls, and that Beth should find a more conventionally feminine activity like cheerleading. This suggests that even beyond Methuen's walls, Beth will encounter sexist expectations and limits. In fact, other girls hold such expectations, not just men and boys.

After a week, Mrs. Wheatley wonders if Beth has any hobbies, though when she asks it seems like she's not really listening to Beth. Beth explains that she used to play chess. Mrs. Wheatley gets excited about this, though she notes that it's mostly a game for boys. Beth insists that girls play too, but Mrs. Wheatley seems miles away in her mind.

Just like the girl at school, Mrs. Wheatley also plays into sexist expectations about appropriate hobbies; Beth's enthusiasm and talent don't seem relevant to her. In fact, Mrs. Wheatley doesn't seem that interested in Beth as a person—she's waited a whole week to learn more about her.

Soon after, a woman from the orphanage stops by to check on Beth, and Fergussen comes along as well. They ask how she's getting along at school, and Mrs. Wheatley assures them that she's adjusting great. She also says that Mr. Wheatley is getting to spend a lot of time with her, he just couldn't make it that day because he's working so hard. Beth is astounded at Mrs. Wheatley's ability to lie. Fergussen bids her goodbye, and Beth wishes that he could stay.

Given Beth's unhappiness at Methuen, it's significant that she'd rather spend time with Fergussen than the Wheatleys. Despite gaining a home, she doesn't feel known or supported. It is clear from Beth's shock at Mrs. Wheatley's words that Mr. Wheatley is not a true father figure to her, and that she longs for one.

A few days later, Beth and Mrs. Wheatley take the bus to Ben Snyder's department store to shop for clothing. On the way to the clothing department, Beth excitedly notices that there are chess sets there. Mrs. Wheatley assures Beth that they can get them on the way back down, but they never stop by. Beth tries on various coats and sweaters, and the next week at school, girls make fun of Beth for her cheap clothing.

Again, chess becomes a representation of Beth's ability to control her own life. Here, instead of being able to buy the chess set she wants, she is instead forced to buy clothes that she doesn't like and which prompt other students to bully her at school. Thus, even though Beth has escaped Methuen's rigor, she can't yet exert much control in her own life or have her preferences respected by those who claim to care for her.

While mid-term exams are ongoing, one morning Beth has no tests. So, she takes the bus downtown, carrying her notebook and 40 cents she has saved. She goes into town and finds a bookstore, seeking out a new copy of *Modern Chess Openings*. She realizes, however, that she can't afford the book, and instead she finds a whole section of chess books. She starts to memorize some of the games before returning to school.

Beth starts to gain some independence in her life, and this is again reflected in her relationship with chess. Her desire to buy the book shows that chess is still important to her sense of who she is, even though she has no opportunity to play.

Beth's Junior High School has some social clubs, but you have to be pledged to join them. The girls in them are always attractive, nicely dressed, and usually very wealthy. When Beth looks at herself in the mirror, she is disappointed with her straight brown hair and dull brown eyes. She would never belong to a club like that—all the other girls make fun of her for her smarts, and she usually walks alone in the hallways. Beth misses Jolene dearly.

Beth doesn't just face discrimination in the chess world. The bullying that she faces at school—due largely to her lack of money—makes her feel like she doesn't belong, and that in turn undermines Beth's own confidence about her looks and her ability to join clubs. Whether among chess players or other peers, Beth doesn't easily fit in. Having just one friend like Jolene makes a big difference in the ability to feel that one belongs.

One day, Mrs. Wheatley says that she has a cold and sends Beth to the pharmacy for some cigarettes with a note. At the pharmacy, Beth notices a chess magazine. Beth learns in the magazine that there are tournaments for chess, and she reads a profile of a famous chess player named Morphy. The pharmacy owner tells her she has to buy the magazine to read it, but she doesn't have enough money for the magazine. So, Beth pays for a newspaper and uses it to hide the magazine inside it as she leaves.

Beth's rule-breaking—particularly when done in the interest of her involvement with chess—is another reflection of her growing independence. Whereas for so long she was forced to adhere to Methuen's rules, now Beth can make her own decisions, even if they are slightly risky.

On the way home, Beth goes over a Morphy game that she had been reading about earlier. She is amazed when she realizes that Morphy could have made a better attack, ending the game seven moves earlier. She had found a mistake in a grandmaster's game. Her mind feels "as lucid as a perfect, stunning diamond."

Here Beth starts to regain her confidence in her talent, even though it has lain dormant for a long time. Her comment that her mind is like a diamond suggests that she knows how brilliant and unique her talent is—so much so that she can find an error even in a grandmaster's game. Even when no one else encourages her, Beth's awareness of her talent fuels her ambition.

At home, Mrs. Wheatley explains that Mr. Wheatley has been detained on one of his trips, and she doesn't know when he'll be back. Changing the subject, Beth asks if she can get a job, but Mrs. Wheatley seems offended that Beth doesn't feel provided for—insinuating that only Black girls need to work at her age. Beth is upset: joining the U.S. Chess Federation costs $6. Another $4 gets a subscription to the magazine. Beth learns in the magazine that there is an upcoming Kentucky State Championship five weeks away that Chess Federation members can play in—the entry fee is $5 and the prize money is $185, and she wants to play.

Beth's willingness to get a job shows her eagerness to play chess again. It also shows she's willing to work hard, even assuming adult responsibilities, in order to pursue her dreams—something that becomes key to her success in the chess world.

Beth continues to be made fun of at school, particularly by a popular girl named Margaret. Meanwhile, Mrs. Wheatley starts to complain that she doesn't know where her money is going. She only has $7 left out of her monthly budget when she should have $20. Beth doesn't admit that she took $6, particularly because she knows that Methuen sent Mrs. Wheatley $70 to take care of Beth, and Mrs. Wheatley doesn't spend that much on her.

Even now that she's adopted, Beth displays the self-sufficiency and initiative she learned at the orphanage. She is making her own judgment calls about what she wants to do with her life—play chess—and independently deciding how to accomplish that (even if it means lying or stealing).

For the $5 entry fee, Beth writes to Mr. Shaibel, explaining her predicament, and assuring him that if he sends her $5 she will pay him back $10 if she wins any prize at all. As the tournament approaches, Beth is worried that she hasn't heard from Mr. Shaibel. Beth takes one more dollar from Mrs. Wheatley's purse and buys another issue of *Chess Review*. She finds several games that she can improve upon, including one from the young U.S. Champion and grandmaster, Benny Watts.

By reaching out to Mr. Shaibel, Beth acknowledges that, especially given her poverty and lack of family support, she must rely on mentors to be successful—plain talent isn't enough. Meanwhile, her talent continues to blossom, even though she's studying alone and lacks opportunities to play.

Mrs. Wheatley gets another cold, and she sends Beth to pick up her medication at the pharmacy. Beth realizes when she picks the medication up that it's the green **tranquilizers** she used to take at Methuen. At home, Mrs. Wheatley wonders why the bottle is only half full, but she thinks little of it. Beth continues to buy copies of *Chess Review*, puzzling over the different games and noting some of the grandmasters' errors.

Not only does Beth's interest in chess recur when she moves in with the Wheatleys, but her addiction and compulsion to take the tranquilizers recurs as well. This passage illustrates how Mrs. Wheatley's own drug use is also enabling Beth's addiction, providing her with the opportunity to take the tranquilizers, as it is implied she does here.

One day, while changing before gym, Beth realizes that Margaret didn't lock her locker after changing. When she opens the locker, she finds Margaret's purse and takes out her money clip. Beth steals $10 out of the clip and replaces the purse. She then swallows two green **pills** to calm her nerves.

Beth is establishing a pattern of stealing to fund her chess hobby. At the same time, she relies on tranquilizers to help her cope with the anxiety of stealing—chess, theft, and drug use becoming a self-reinforcing cycle. The book also suggests that Beth's addiction includes a biological impulse triggered by anxiety.

That night, Beth receives a letter with $5 from Mr. Shaibel. Beth holds the bills in her hand, now having more money than she needs. She realizes that Mrs. Wheatley's prescription has three outstanding refills, which cost $4 for a bottle of 50 **pills**. Beth goes to the pharmacy, pays with the money from Mr. Shaibel, and puts the prescription slip back in Mrs. Wheatley's desk.

The book again highlights how quickly Beth's addiction escalates, as she acquires a supply of 50 pills for herself. Notably, she pays for the entry fee with the money she stole, while she pays for the pills with the money from Mr. Shaibel. This implies that her addiction is corrupting her, making her engage in risky behavior like stealing and taking advantage of others, even people she respects like Mr. Shaibel.

CHAPTER 4

The Kentucky State Championship tournament's players are mostly young white men. At the welcoming desk, two young men ask if Beth has a clock and a rating. She says that she has neither, and they tell her that they'll put her in the Beginners. She asks if there's a rule that she can't play in the regular section. The men hesitate, and she insists that they put her in with the regular players—she's not a beginner. They warn her that the others will eat her alive, but she ignores them.

Beth's experiences at the tournament show how discrimination disadvantages her. The men around her consistently undervalue her, as she knows she can hold her own with the regular players, but their hesitation almost bars her from the exposure and prize money that she could gain from competition.

Beth's first match is against another unranked player—she is seated at the last board on the farthest table. Another woman sits opposite her—all four women are playing against each other in the opening round. Beth's opponent, Annette Packer, explains how the chess clock works—they each have 90 minutes and must record their moves after making them. Annette also explains that if Beth touches a piece, she has to move it.

This is another way in which the tournament directors systematically discriminate against the women at the chess tournament. By putting them all against each other in the first round, the directors guarantee that fewer women advance in the tournament, which reinforces the sense that they aren't welcome.

Annette begins nervously, and Beth quickly starts with the Sicilian Defense. She begins attacking on the eighth move, and by the seventeenth Beth has Annette's queen, and Annette resigns. Beth only used seven minutes to Annette's thirty. Beth records the win on her score sheet and returns it to the basket at the front desk; there, she sees a young handsome man who has also just finished. He nods at her, acknowledging her as another fast player.

Part of Beth's initial appreciation of the handsome man, which continues throughout the tournament, is the fact that he acknowledges her talent from the outset. Despite the fact that she is a young girl, he makes her feel like she belongs there, as so few others do.

Beth walks around, observing the different games. She then goes into another room with a sign that says, "Top Boards," where the handsome man is leaning watching an intense game; the position on the board indicates that these are much better players. She asks the handsome man who they are, and the man quietly explains that Beltik—the younger man—is the State Champion. He's working on becoming a grandmaster. Beltik's opponent, Cullen, studies the board for a long time and offers a draw, but Beltik refuses. Beltik moves his rook, and Beth sees it's a good move. In five more moves Cullen resigns, toppling his king with disdain and shaking Beltik's hand. Beth feels goosebumps, swelling with excitement at the game.

Beth's initial observation of the game between Beltik and Cullen is telling. Even though she's not yet initiated into the chess world, her observations of the games indicate that she belongs here. Beth is able to recognize Beltik's good moves, indicating that her talent isn't too far behind that of a state champion. Her excitement also indicates her intense drive to play in games like the one she's watching and to succeed just as Beltik does.

Beth's next game is with a player rated 1520 named Cooke; they play quickly, and Beth realizes that he's better than Mr. Shaibel or Mr. Ganz. He surprises her by sacrificing his queen's bishop, but she realizes that if she took it, she would be vulnerable, so she avoids taking the bait. His fidgeting irritates her, but she doesn't let this rattle her, instead setting up her rooks for the attack. He's so obsessed with his own maneuvers that he's blind to what she is doing. She knows that he will win in four moves—but she attacks him on the third move, bringing out her queen next to his rook.

Beth continues to demonstrate her own talent at the championship. Not only does she have the wherewithal to recognize bad moves, but her thoughts about the game indicate that she has far greater recognition of the whole board than her opponent does. She has the courage and the innate judgment and skill to allow her opponent to follow his path to win in four moves because she knows that she will win in three.

When Cooke takes Beth's queen, she wants to jump and shout with joy, but she holds herself back and checks his king with her bishop. Suddenly, Cooke sees what is happening. He offers her a draw, but she refuses, and so he resigns. He smiles at her, shaking her hand and explaining that he didn't see her moves coming at all.

Cooke affirms Beth's talent here, recognizing her superior ability to understand and maneuver the board, despite her young age and the fact that she has little technical knowledge of the game.

Beth's third game is with an older man rated 1694, and she beats him in 34 moves. Afterward, the tournament breaks for dinner. There is one more round that evening, three more on Saturday, and a final round Sunday morning. In the bathroom, Beth realizes that her cheeks are flushed with color; she feels more alive, and she actually likes what she sees in the mirror.

Besides giving her agency that she lacks elsewhere in life, chess also makes Beth feel more comfortable in her own skin. This is another reflection of Beth's coming of age as she gains greater confidence and independence.

Back outside, at the registration table, the two young men who registered Beth are writing a list of undefeated players. The first name on the list is Beltik; the last is Harmon. Beth's breath catches, and the handsome man asks if she's Harmon. She says yes, and he tells her to keep it up. The young man who tried to put her in the Beginner's section tells her that she was right—she isn't a beginner.

Here the handsome man again distinguishes himself from the other men at the tournament: he treats her like any other player and encourages her despite her age and gender. However, the fact that the other man recognizes his error in trying to put Beth in the beginner's section indicates his acknowledgement that Beth does belong, even though he initially made assumptions about her.

Beth eats dinner at home before returning. That evening, she plays a young man named Klein, rated 1794. In the middle game, things get complicated, and Beth makes an error by touching a knight despite seeing a better move with her pawn immediately after. She gets frightened at the mistake. Klein attacks her bishops, but after studying the problem for 10 minutes, she finds a continuation that suits her. She is amazed at how sharp her mind and vision are. He still gets her bishop, but she is eventually able to sacrifice her queen to win the game. He gets up, furious, without turning over his king or shaking her hand.

This match indicates two key aspects of Beth's experiences with chess. First, her own amazement at her mind's sharpness reflects the immense amount of talent she has—so much so that she even surprises herself with how she can overcome mistakes like touching a piece unintentionally. Her opponent's reaction, on the other hand, illustrates again the discrimination Beth faces. Such incidents were common among women who beat men—their male opponents sometimes refused to show sportsmanship out of humiliation or disbelief that a woman could win.

That night, Beth can't sleep. All she can do is go over the games in her head. After several hours, she stares out the window at the silent street. She has 17 green **pills** in her toothbrush holder, but she doesn't take them. She returns to bed, exhausted and mentally blank, and she sleeps soundly.

Even though Beth often uses pills in order to alleviate the stress she feels while playing in tournaments, this section illustrates that Beth doesn't actually need them to survive. However, the comfort she gains in knowing that they're there, in her toothbrush holder, shows the mental dependency she has developed on them, even if she doesn't take them. This shows that addiction is as much a psychological disease as a physical one, making people's brains dependent on a given substance.

Saturday morning, Beth is set to play someone named Townes, who has a lower rating than her previous match. She complains to the young men at the desk, insisting that she wants to play the best players. They tell her that Townes is underrated—he came in fifth at the U.S. Open. And, if she wins her next three games, she will play Beltik.

Beth's exchange with the young men illustrates her drive and ambition. Despite the fact that she often feels out of place in this world, her desire to win frequently overcomes that discomfort, allowing her to take initiative to face tougher challenges.

Beth goes to Board Four to find the handsome man—whom she realizes is Townes. She shakes his hand awkwardly before realizing that she should start his clock. They each open with mechanical moves; he is attentive to the pieces. Even when he scowls, he is handsome, and Beth's stomach feels strange when she looks at him. He starts to attack, but she defends nimbly, their pieces dancing.

Chess fosters Beth's coming of age in a different way. Beth develops a crush on Townes here, and the chess match becomes a metaphor for flirtation, as Beth experiences romantic interest for the first time.

It makes Beth somewhat sad when she sees how to beat Townes; in four moves she can take his rook or worse. Townes doesn't realize what she's doing until two moves later, and he loses his rook. He tries to continue playing before resigning the game, amazed to learn that she is only 13 years old. She hears other people murmur about her age, and she knows that she could have played this well at eight years old.

Beth's matches throughout the Kentucky State Championship continue to demonstrate her exceptional talent, despite the fact that she's probably studied and practiced less than anyone else. She also feels a fleeting sense of conflict between her attraction to Townes and beating him, but she doesn't let that stop her from winning.

Beth's next opponent—Goldmann—is tough and silent. He defends against everything she tries, and she gets fidgety waiting for him to move. Once on his move, she goes to the bathroom, feeling her stomach turn. In the bathroom, Annette Packer tells Beth to beat him, and Beth grins. Returning to the board and feeling refreshed, she is able to attack from multiple sides, preventing him from playing so safe. After three moves she's at his throat, and just before his clock runs out, she checkmates him. People applaud.

Annette's encouragement changes Beth's attitude, suggesting the importance of female solidarity in a male-dominated game. Beth is able to return to the game calmer and ready to play more aggressively, her skill drawing onlookers' admiration.

After the match, Beth returns to the bathroom and realizes that she has begun to menstruate. She thinks of Jolene—if Jolene hadn't warned her about this, she would not have known what was happening or what to do. She folds up toilet paper and tucks it into her underwear before walking confidently back to the playing area.

Beth's first period occurs during her first chess tournament—clearly linking her physical maturity with her coming of age as a competitor (and even hinting that playing chess is just as "feminine" as menstruation). The confidence she gains from playing chess helps her deal with the new experience. She also again notes the value of mentors—in the absence of a caring adult, Jolene served as the maternal figure who prepared her for puberty.

Beth's next opponent is Sizemore, a small, ugly man. He hardly looks at Beth, and as the game progresses, it is very even. After a while a crowd gathers—bigger than the one watching Beltik. She can feel Sizemore creeping up on her and tries to figure out how to dislodge his position. She tries to drive distractions from her mind and sees a good option for her bishop, the picture becoming clearer. A few moves later, she sacrifices her bishop, and when he takes it, his position completely falls apart. Six moves later, he sets his king on its side and resigns. The applause is thunderous. Townes congratulates her, warning her that Beltik—her next opponent—is a "killer." Townes wishes that he had Beth's talent. Soon after, Beltik approaches Beth with one word: "Tomorrow."

Beth's match against Sizemore again indicates her incredible talent—particularly relying on her innate ability to clear her mind of everything else and to visualize the board. Townes affirms this talent in expressing his jealousy, even as he acknowledges that she might have difficulty going forward. This suggests that despite Beth's talent, she is still just starting out in the professional chess world. Using the word "killer" to describe Beltik indicates that Beth's opponents can be aggressive and brutal, and she is still learning how to face better and better players.

At home, Beth tells Mrs. Wheatley, who looks pale and strange, that she's started menstruating. Mrs. Wheatley barely reacts, telling Beth to get pads from her bedside table. She also tells Beth that Mr. Wheatley is indefinitely detained in the Southwest. Beth asks if they will send her back to Methuen if Mrs. Wheatley doesn't have a husband. Mrs. Wheatley says that she can lie about it—even though she might not be a real wife anymore, she can learn to be a mother.

Beth's interaction with Mrs. Wheatley shows the reversed parent-child dynamic between them. While being left behind by Mr. Wheatley and lying to Methuen cements a bond between the pair, Mrs. Wheatley's reaction to Beth menstruating for the first time illustrates Mrs. Wheatley's lack of parental instincts in her relationship with Beth. As Beth noted earlier, she only knew what menstruating was from Jolene, and this suggests that Beth's growing up will likely be defined by learning things on her own.


That evening, Beth wakes up at two, unable to go back to sleep. She boils eggs in the morning, planning out her game against Beltik. It's 7:20 a.m. and her match is at 11:00 a.m. She wishes she had a copy of *Modern Chess Openings* to look through. She puts on a pad and leaves before Mrs. Wheatley wakes up.

Again, Beth illustrates how self-sufficient she is. The fact that she wakes up, makes herself breakfast, and leaves for a chess tournament she entered herself, at age 13 and all without Mrs. Wheatley, shows how her coming of age is defined by learning to take control of her life.

At 11:00 a.m., Beth is ready, but Beltik is nowhere to be seen. After 10 minutes, the tournament director says that she should have started at 11:00 and punched his clock. Ten minutes later, Beltik arrives looking relaxed, saying sorry for grabbing an extra cup of coffee. He introduces himself and asks her name, though she knows that he must know her name.

Here the book emphasizes the discrimination Beth faces, even from top-level players. First Beltik tries to undermine her stature, pretending that he doesn't know her name, and he disrespects her talent by showing up late and suggesting that he doesn't need the full time in order to beat her.

Beltik plays the French defense, which Beth does not like—she's never played against it, and she doesn't have the same knowledge. She quickly loses an advantage by giving up a pawn, and she cannot get comfortable in her seat. Her clock is ticking; 25 minutes gone to his 22, including the time he wasted by being late. She wishes she had taken a **pill** the night before. She sees a move that looks sensible and quickly makes it, but Beltik smiles and opens up his bishop for the attack.

This match indicates that there may be a limit to how far Beth's talent will take her. Because she's not familiar with the book moves that Beltik is playing, she is at a distinct disadvantage, suggesting that both talent and study are needed to truly flourish. Additionally, the book reiterates how Beth's drug use is a psychological dependency in times of stress.

Beth knows she has to do something to focus. With her clock still running, she goes to the bathroom, washing her face with cold water and checking her pad. She visualizes the chessboard, knowing that it isn't as complicated as some other games she's reviewed. She thinks about it until she understands what to do, washing her face again and walking back to the gym, making her move.

Here the book emphasizes how much Beth relies on her innate talent of visualizing the board in order to win. This ability is what gives her the drive and the confidence to succeed, especially because she has done so little studying of the game up to this point.

Beltik studies Beth's move, and he quickly makes a sequence of moves that she knew he would. She brings her rook behind her queen and Beltik gasps. He tries to defend himself, but he can't. She threatens his queen, leaving him pinned. Beltik looks at the board for a long time—until there are only ten minutes left on his clock, while Beth has 50—and makes his move. Beth then moves so that she either gets his queen or checkmate, and Beth says that that's it. Beltik only has 4 minutes, but he insists that she continue to play even though she knows that the game is over. She then does what she always intended: she sacrifices her queen to get checkmate on the next move. He angrily gets up as the crowd applauds, and he offers his hand to Beth.

Beth shows the true extent of her skill here in being able to beat the Kentucky State Champion essentially on talent alone. It also demonstrates the pitfalls of discrimination for both the people who experience it and the people who perpetuate it. Beth must overcome additional obstacles in order to win; meanwhile, underestimating Beth is a key failure for Beltik, who runs out of time because he showed up late. This demonstrates that discrimination doesn't just undermine Beth but everyone in the chess world.

CHAPTER 5

After winning the Kentucky State Championship, Beth goes into town one day after school to open a bank account with her winnings, but at 13 she needs a guardian to do so. When she gets home, she finds Mrs. Wheatley sitting hazily next to four empty **beer** bottles. Beth looks at the newspaper, which to her surprise, has a picture of her on the front page. In the article, Harry Beltik said she showed "a mastery of the game unequaled by any female."

Beth's decision to open an account with her prize winnings shows a mature shift: she is gaining independence and making her own decisions about her future. Separately, Beltik's comment shows his bias against Beth even after she beats him. His comment that she is better than other women not only undervalues the skill of women generally, but it also ignores the fact that Beth also beat all of the male players at the tournament—she's good "for a girl," he seems to be saying.

Beth asks Mrs. Wheatley to help her open a bank account, and Mrs. Wheatley is astonished to see how much money Beth won—she didn't realize that people won so much money from chess tournaments. The next day, after going to the bank, Mrs. Wheatley comes up with a plan to have her go to a tournament in Cincinnati the second week in December: the first prize is $500. Mrs. Wheatley has come up with a budget for the trip so that they can make a good profit. Soon after, Beth buys *Modern Chess Openings* from Morris's and then she buys a chess set from Purcell's Department store. When she gets home, she opens the book, starting from the beginning.

This episode again highlights how Beth is starting to take control of her own life and gain independence. She is able to use her money to buy what she wants—namely, a chess set and a chess book—whereas before she had to rely on others to determine what she could or could not have. Even though she needs Mrs. Wheatley's help to travel to these tournaments, she is making the decision to go to them. Additionally, Beth starts to recognize how she needs to study to supplement her talent—she can't rely on talent alone to win future tournaments.

Beth and Mrs. Wheatley stay at the Gibson Hotel in Cincinnati, in a huge suite with a color TV and beautiful furniture. The tournament is in the hotel; though Beth still doesn't have a rating, the men in the lobby know who she is. There are two games a day with a time control of 120/40—two hours to make 40 moves.

The book suggests that even after her first tournament, Beth is already starting to make a splash in the chess world due to her enormous talent at such a young age. People are already starting to recognize her, making her feel like she fits into the chess world after so many instances of opponents assuming that she didn't belong.

When Beth is signing in, she hears a deep voice coming from a strange young man on a sofa dressed in all black. Everyone is listening to him as he talks about the Caro-Kann defense, which he explains is flawed. Beth wanders over to watch as he demonstrates the problem with the move on a board; she is the only girl in the room. Beth has never seen these moves, though she knows them.

Even though Beth is starting to get recognized at the tournaments, the makeup of the tournament players still emphasizes that she is the odd one out, as she is often the only female player in any given room at a chess tournament.

As the man moves the pieces, Beth makes a suggestion about what to move next. He notes that she's the girl who wiped out Harry Beltik, but he shows the holes in her move. Beth is excited watching his display; the game he is demonstrating is dazzling, like some of the best ones that she has seen in books. The man stands up and stretches, explaining that Reshevsky—who played the game he was demonstrating—was playing this way when he was Beth's age, calling her a little girl.

This exchange again highlights some of the discrimination that Beth faces, as the man dismisses her as a "little girl." But it also shows how Beth still has a lot of learning to do about chess before she can become a true master—her talent can only take her so far, and disciplined study is also needed if she's going to take her place among the greats.

Beth wins her first match easily and then goes out with Mrs. Wheatley, hoping to buy a cashmere sweater. She tries to imagine herself as a member of the Apple Pi club, but she still feels somewhat ugly. Later in the afternoon, she plays a middle-aged man ranked 1910, and she beats him after an hour and a half. She sees a few familiar faces and feels comfort in seeing them, but she is disappointed when she doesn't see Townes. That evening, Beth studies some endgames, but she is often bored by endgames because they are subtle and slow—no chance for the violent attack she loves. She takes two **pills** and drifts off—she wants to make sure she can sleep.

Beth continues to grapple with growing up—even as she is becoming more independent and buying new clothing (in contrast to earlier when Mrs. Wheatley bought her clothes), she still struggles with feelings of insecurity. This passage introduces Beth's reluctance to study the less exciting parts of chess, another sign of her immaturity. While Beth's instinctive attack strategy has worked so far, this passage hints that it may not work for her forever.

The second day is as easy as the first for Beth, though she plays better players. In the final match, Beth at first seems trapped and disadvantaged, but she manages to stave off her opponent until he makes a mistake, which she quickly takes advantage of. She wins the match to applause, and Mrs. Wheatley is there to congratulate her. That evening, they calculate that Beth has made over $300. She wonders if she should offer to split the money with Mrs. Wheatley when Mrs. Wheatley asks about taking a 10% commission. Beth agrees, even though she doesn't want to give Mrs. Wheatley any money.

Again, the book emphasizes Beth's growing independence. In contrast to her dependent life in the orphanage, she now takes control over her own life and her money, becoming the primary earner in the household and choosing to give her adopted mother a commission. This illustrates that in many ways, their dynamic is reversed: Beth is behaving like the more adult one.

That evening at dinner, over veal and a carafe of wine, Mrs. Wheatley suggests going to another tournament over Christmas in Houston, and Beth agrees—calling her "Mother." Time jumps to their flight to Houston—their Christmas dinner is microwave turkey on an airplane, with champagne for Mrs. Wheatley. It is the best Christmas that Beth has ever had. They plan out more tournaments for Beth to go to—one a month, so as not to make the school suspicious. In Houston, Beth wins the tournament without any trouble, even though she has to draw her third game. More articles come out about her, calling her a "*Wunderkind*."

The fact that this is Beth's best Christmas reminds readers of just how far she's come in a short amount of time. Her talent and drive have brought her major success—so much so that she is a "wunderkind" and a marvel in the eyes of the chess world. But it also demonstrates that she's been able to gain an incredible amount of independence in contrast with her childhood at Methuen, when everything was regimented. Now, she's able to travel freely and even provide for her household.

Beth continues to attend and win tournaments through March. She loves traveling with Mrs. Wheatley, who is high-spirited and amusing. She loves hotels and restaurants and the excitement of winning. People recognize her there—she is always the youngest and sometimes the only woman. School seems more and more drab in comparison, particularly because she talks to no one about her travels. After the tournament in March, Beth finally gets a rating: 1881. The next big step is Master, at 2200.

Chess has become Beth's primary focus in life. She's not a typical teenager; ordinary things like school have gotten pushed to the margins by her remarkable success. Yet because of her age and gender, she doesn't feel like an insider at tournaments, either.

That summer, Beth attends a tournament in New York, which she loves. Her only problem is that she takes **pills** each night to help her sleep, and sometimes she needs an hour to clear her head in the morning, so she often drinks several cups of coffee. Mrs. Wheatley doesn't know about the pills and largely treats Beth as an adult—sometimes Beth feels as if she were the older of the two. Together, they get fancy dinners and go to the Radio City Music Hall.

This passage returns to Beth's growing addiction. Even though she uses the pills to make sure that she can get a good night's sleep, it also starts to negatively affect her gameplay, showing how it is becoming a growing dependency. In addition, this section highlights Beth's growing responsibility and independence, particularly in contrast with Mrs. Wheatley, as Beth feels more mature than her mother.

Soon after, a reporter from *Life*, Jean Balke, comes to the house to take pictures and interview Beth. The reporter asks about what it's like to play with all those older men, explaining that she was never allowed to be competitive. She asks if Beth has a boyfriend, but Beth says she's 14 and interested in chess. She tries to talk about how she learned the game, but Beth can tell the woman is not really interested.

The reporter's questions are sexist, making this interview no better than the newspaper article about Beth after the Kentucky State Championship. The questions are more about highlighting her gender—noting how she doesn't belong in the chess world among all the older men—rather than expressing interest in the uniqueness of Beth's story.

A week later, the article comes out, talking about how chess is a "birthright" for Beth, who exploded onto the male-dominated world of the nation's top chess tournaments. Beth buys a copy, and she sees that it talks about the orphanage and gives one of her games—but it's mostly about her being a girl. Mrs. Wheatley assures her that it makes her a celebrity, but Beth laments that it doesn't talk enough about chess or the way she plays.

Even Beth recognizes how these stories highlight her outsider status in the chess world, understanding that they care more about her as a girl than as a player. Mrs. Wheatley, too, sees Beth more as a "celebrity" than as an individual. At the same time, the article's recognition that chess is a "birthright" for Beth recognizes her instinct for the game.

The next day, Margaret invites Beth to a pledge party for the Apple Pi's. Mrs. Wheatley helps Beth pick out a dress, but at the party, Beth finds it tedious. The girls don't ask her about chess, they only ask her about the boys at the tournaments and whether she dated any of them. Later in the evening, they watch a movie. She is astounded at how dull it is—she doesn't participate in the gossip and laughter. She's relieved when she gets home, spending an hour with another chess book.

This is another turning point in Beth's coming of age. Finally having gained a sense of belonging in the Apple Pi club, Beth realizes it's actually not the kind of club she wants to belong to and that the other girls don't care about her as a person. Part of her emergence into adulthood is finding greater comfort in her own skin and choosing what she wants to do rather than conforming to others' expectations of her.

At the next tournament, Beth doesn't even have to lie about being sick because the school now knows about her winnings. At the tournament, the director takes Beth and Mrs. Wheatley out to dinner, and they talk about Beth's wanting to compete in the U.S. Open and then internationally. He warns her that Russian players are very good: Russia pays people to play chess.

The tournament director's description is Beth's first introduction to Russian players. It hints not only at how her ambition and talent drive her to want greater and greater success, but also that she is soon to face formidable foes and may reach the limits of her talent.

Unfortunately, Beth is unable to go to the U.S. Open that year. Mrs. Wheatley is sick in bed for two weeks and Beth doesn't want to make the trip to Los Angeles alone. The Open isn't as important as the U.S. Championship, but she's sad to miss it, because she wants to start getting into invitation-only tournaments. She wants to become a truly professional woman and the finest chess player in the world, traveling confidently by herself. By the time Beth turns 16, she's taller and better looking, and her bank account is growing. But she is too old to be called a prodigy anymore—she feels like she has plateaued.

Here Beth faces a tension common among teenagers: she is starting to gain greater independence (and in Beth's case, considerably more independence than most). And yet, at the same time, she isn't fully in control of her life—she still relies on Mrs. Wheatley to travel with her and dreams of her future as a professional woman, implying that she's not quite there yet. This builds on the book's portrayal of coming of age as gaining agency over one's own life. At the same time, the book hints that, now that Beth is no longer a little kid, she'll have to develop her talent in new ways.

CHAPTER 6

The U.S. Open is being held in Las Vegas, and upon arrival, Beth immediately sees Townes. He's not there to play—he's there to cover the tournament. He remarks at how much she's grown, and how much better looking she's gotten. They eat breakfast together before he offers to do a story on her. After they eat, he tells her that he has a camera and chessboards in his room, asking if she wants to come upstairs. She agrees.

While in the previous chapter Beth yearned to be able to be a professional woman, here she is starting to come into her own, competing in the U.S. Open where she wasn't able to before. In addition, she is branching out in her romantic life as well, showing how she's maturing socially as well as professionally.

In Townes's room, he takes a few shots of Beth posed in front of the window and a chess board. She realizes that her heart is beating fast, and that her fingers are trembling. When he's finished, they start to play skittles—speed chess—but all Beth can think about is wishing he would touch her on the arm or the cheek. He smiles easily at her, and she realizes she's alone in his hotel room. She doesn't want to play this game—she wants to make love with him.

Just as Beth is gaining independence in other aspects of her life, here the book illustrates her desire to take control of her sexual life as well—in fact, she wants sex even more than she wants to play chess. This again highlights how Beth's coming of age is characterized by her desire, and later her ability, to take control of her choices.

When Beth returns to their room, Mrs. Wheatley asks where she's been. She replies that she was playing chess. Mrs. Wheatley asks her to pass a **beer**, and then offers one to Beth herself. Beth drinks it quickly, feeling warmth pool in her stomach. She thinks about leaving Townes's room, after they had finished playing. She won seven games against him. Beth finishes her beer quickly and walks over to get another. Mrs. Wheatley is slightly concerned, but she resigns herself to letting Beth have it. Soon after, Beth throws up in the toilet, but she's made an important discovery: the beer gives her the same feeling as the pills, with almost no wait.

This episode suggests that Beth's addiction is not entirely her fault. In many ways, it is enabled by Mrs. Wheatley, who not only struggles with addiction herself, but also fails to discourage Beth's own alcohol usage. Beth's discovery that the beer makes her feel the same way as the pills hints at her future struggle with alcohol addiction, just as she became hooked on the tranquilizers.

Beth's first two games are easy, crushing her opponents. Over the course of the day, Beth catches Benny Watts there. He's in his 20s but looks as young as Beth—he, too, had been a child prodigy at just eight years old. He has straw-colored hair, and he is debating another male player about a defense. Listening to the two of them, she gets the sense that chess is a thing between men, and she is an outsider.

Even though Beth has been incredibly successful up to this point, this passage underscores how sexism really hurts her. Despite the fact that she's held her own among male players for years, the male-dominated atmosphere undermines her confidence, as she feels like an "outsider" around male conversations.

Benny notices Beth and introduces himself. He read the article about her in *Life*, and he compliments her on the game of hers they printed—the one against Beltik. He tells her, however, that she shouldn't have castled—she could have lost her king pawn. Beth isn't sure what he's talking about, wondering if he's just trying to show off. He tells her to set up the position and think it out, but she protests as he leaves that she doesn't need to set it up to think it out. Alone, Beth goes over the game, realizing to her horror that Benny was right. And not only was he right, but she hadn't even seen her weakness.

Benny's comment indicates that while Beth's talent has gotten her far, she is soon to face opponents of a skill level that she's never faced before. Even though Benny is trying to undermine her confidence, he points out Beth's weakness—that she's often reluctant to study chess from a technical standpoint, choosing to rely on her instincts. However, it is also worth noting that when Beth was younger, she, too, found an error in one of his games (back in Chapter 3).

Soon after, Beth plays Benny, and he asks her about the Beltik match—she admits through gritted teeth that he was right. She opens with **the Queen's Gambit** against him but quickly realizes that it's a mistake—it's a complicated position and she grows nervous, while Benny looks calm and precise. She can't find any way to attack. She is frustrated, knowing that she is the weaker player—a new feeling for her.

Beth's uncertainty about the Queen's Gambit opening symbolizes Beth's journey in chess—on one hand, she has strong instincts, but on the other hand, instincts aren't always enough. That's especially true now, as Beth is forced to acknowledge that she doesn't have the same knowledge and skill as Benny does. Particularly given Benny's perception of her as a weaker player, this further undermines Beth's confidence in herself and leads her to feel like she's going to lose—a new experience.

Beth looks around for Mrs. Wheatley but doesn't find her. She then sets her elbows on the table, focusing and realizing that she's not playing Benny—she's playing chess. She sorts through several continuations in her mind, and 40 minutes passes until she finds a branch that she likes. She offers to sacrifice her knight, and they exchange a few pieces. At the crucial trade, she worries that he won't take her knight. But he does, and she starts to double up his pawns, out to win.

When Beth looks to Mrs. Wheatley for support and finds her missing, it suggests that Mrs. Wheatley has never been the best support mechanism for Beth, which in turn has prompted some of Beth's independence and self-reliance. Even in Mrs. Wheatley's absence, Beth is able to refocus on the game at hand, setting distractions aside.

Then, Benny quietly captures Beth's center pawn, sacrificing his queen. Beth is stunned; she's completely open to checkmates. It's the kind of surprise that she does to other people. She looks desperately for a way to escape, searching for half an hour. She tries a few moves to get out of it, but he keeps attacking her, and she knows it's over. She wants to scream; her legs and back are stiff and her stomach is in knots. She sets her king aside and gets up; she shakes his hand when he holds it out and people applaud. They will split the prize money as co-champions.

Here Beth finally hits the limits of her talent, as she realizes that she doesn't have the same experience as someone who's been playing a long time like Benny. Benny is the first person who has truly matched her, and it's because of his extensive knowledge. This illustrates why discipline and study will become so vital for Beth, as without them, she can only achieve so much. Her physically stressed reaction underlines the shock of the moment.

Mrs. Wheatley tries to console Beth, but Beth is distraught at not seeing what Benny was doing. She says that Mrs. Wheatley doesn't know anything about chess. When Mrs. Wheatley says she knows what it's like to lose, Beth replies, "I bet you do," to which Mrs. Wheatley replies, "And now you do, too."

This is one of the first examples of Beth pushing away those she thinks cannot help her. But even though Mrs. Wheatley doesn't know much about chess, she emphasizes that she can still comfort Beth by sharing her own life experiences. Her comment also indicates that she knows talent isn't the only key to success, and that Beth needs to learn this for herself.

Beth does a radio show in Lexington, but she is annoyed that the interviewer asks her about whether chess is a waste of time. Townes's article also comes out, and she likes herself in the picture. Beth is in high school now, and though there is a chess club, she doesn't belong to it. She spends about an hour a night on homework and makes As, but the only thing that matters to her is getting better at chess—and learning Russian at a nearby university.

Here Beth kicks up her ambition even further, refocusing on how to improve rather than just relying on her talents. In addition, her decision to learn Russian at a university also illustrates her drive, discipline, and ambition—she wants to be able to rise to the top of the chess world, and to do that, she's willing to go above and beyond.

CHAPTER 7

One evening after Beth's Russian class, one of the college students invites her back to a party. She makes conversation with one of the guys there, Tim, while drinking a **beer** and smoking a joint. He talks to her about wanting to read Dostoevsky in the original Russian. She likes talking to him, and she goes to the bedroom to call Mrs. Wheatley to tell her not to wait up that night. After she gets off the phone, Tim sits on the bed beside her, and she starts to flirt.

Beth demonstrates another way in which she's starting to become more independent and mature—clearly taking control of her sexuality. She makes a deliberate plan not to come home that evening and pursues another student in her class.

When Beth and Tim first start to have sex, Beth panics—she feels helpless for a moment. But he's careful and wears a condom, and she feels like it's time for her to have had the experience. She thinks that what they're doing is all right—it's nothing like books or movies. She wishes he were Townes, though, and afterwards, she falls asleep with all her clothes on.

Beth feels largely in control of her first sexual experience. In tying this rite of passage to Beth's agency (in contrast with her earlier experience with Jolene, where she lacked agency), the book portrays coming of age as learning to take initiative in one's life, not being passive.

In the morning, everyone is gone. There's a note on the fridge that says everyone went to Cincinnati to see a movie, and Beth can stay as long as she likes. She showers before smoking another joint, making herself breakfast, having a **beer**, and cleaning the entire apartment. She finds jeans, a white T-shirt, and lipstick and puts them all on. She feels good about how she looks.

This is one of Beth's first experiences having true independence: getting to spend time how she likes, consuming alcohol as she likes, and dressing as she likes. Putting on lipstick in particular is notable, as it is the first time Beth has been shown to wear makeup. This is a symbol of femininity and often of sexuality, and having control over these aspects of her life clearly empowers Beth as she transitions into adulthood.

Later, Beth calls Mrs. Wheatley, saying she won't be home that night either—she'll be back after school on Monday. Mrs. Wheatley asks if she's with a boy, and Beth admits that she was the night before, but she assures Mrs. Wheatley she's fine and won't get pregnant. She spends the rest of the day listening to music and getting drunk—she thinks it's time to learn about how to be drunk, and she likes being alone. She then goes out to buy two bottles of **burgundy** for herself. She drinks them all night and the next day.

Here Beth experiences what she sees as another rite of passage—getting drunk. Emphasizing that she likes being alone while doing these things (i.e., doing them without her mother's input or influence) associates such things with Beth's desire for independence and control over her own life. Her indulgence in alcohol suggests that drinking is already becoming an addiction.


Going to school on Monday, Beth feels light in the May morning. She's ready to finish high school and devote her energy to chess. She has $3,000 in her savings account, she's no longer a virgin, and she knows how to drink. After school on Monday, Mrs. Wheatley seems uncertain how to treat Beth, but she seems glad that Beth is finding a life outside chess. Beth graduates from high school in June, and Mrs. Wheatley gives her a watch. But what Beth likes even better is her new rating: 2243. She starts to study, first for an international tournament in Mexico City, then the U.S. Championship, then an invitational in Paris. She feels like her career is starting to take off.

This point of transition in Beth's life shows just how much she has grown—and that she has done so by taking control of her own life. Not only has she undergone common rites of passage like sex and drinking, she has also gained a new appreciation for studying, acknowledging the work that she has to do in order to nurture her career. And as a result, she has been rewarded with even greater success, earning the title of a chess Master. Thus, the book emphasizes that even though talent can get a person far, discipline and dedication are even more important to reach one's highest goals.


CHAPTER 8

On the plane to Mexico City, Mrs. Wheatley explains that when she was in high school, her Spanish class did a pen pal exchange with students in Mexico. She's kept up her correspondence with her pen pal Manuel, who will be meeting them at the airport. Beth sees that Mrs. Wheatley is very excited, and over the next few days as she gets happier and happier and comes back very late to the hotel room, Beth figures that they are probably having sex, and that this is likely why Mrs. Wheatley wanted to travel to Mexico City several days before the tournament.

This exchange reinforces the role reversal between Beth and Mrs. Wheatley. Beth is at the tournament on business, while Mrs. Wheatley is having fun, traveling, and spending time with Manuel. This provides even further insight as to how Beth has become so adult and independent over the course of her teenage years, because Mrs. Wheatley's immaturity prompts Beth to be much more responsible and independent.

The night before the tournament starts, Mrs. Wheatley invites Beth to come out with her and Manuel as she sips a **margarita** in their hotel room. Beth wants to keep studying, but Mrs. Wheatley tells her that chess isn't all there is, and that she should enjoy herself more. It's important to live and grow. Beth gets angry, saying that if she loses to the International Grandmaster she's playing, they'll have to pay for the trip out of pocket. Mrs. Wheatley insists that she's an intuitive player and she needs to relax. Mrs. Wheatley then sips her margarita and says she hasn't been feeling very well. Beth does note that Mrs. Wheatley is pale, distant, and very clearly overweight.

Mrs. Wheatley's advice here touches on Beth's dedication but also her independence. While it's important to live and grow, as she tells Beth, part of that living and growing is being able to make one's own choices, as Beth is increasingly getting to do. But at the same time, her suggestion that Beth shouldn't study because she's an intuitive player ignores the hard work that Beth has already done to get there, counteracting the idea that she needs discipline to succeed. Lastly, this passage also foreshadows Mrs. Wheatley's own struggle with addiction as Beth notes her health issues.

Beth doesn't go out to lunch with Mrs. Wheatley and Manuel, but she does decide to go to the Mexico City zoo. While there, she drinks an iced **beer**—her first beer since graduating from high school. She knows she doesn't need it, but she drinks anyway. She buys two more as she walks and observes the different animals. But then, she sees a family and recognizes the father: Vasily Borgov, the Chess Champion of the World. Beth didn't know that he would be there, and she is intimidated by his authoritarian scowl. She doesn't want him to see her drinking and she resolves not to drink anymore during the tournament. Beth goes to bed early but wakes when Mrs. Wheatley returns in the middle of the night. She waits for her mother to stop making noise and quietly fumes.

Here Beth acknowledges that her addiction doesn't actually help her chess, particularly because she doesn't want Borgov to see her drinking. And yet, even though she knows she doesn't need to drink, she does so anyway. This illustrates how drinking has become a compulsion for her—a reflex that she finds natural regardless of whether it's necessary to help her cope with stress. Additionally, Beth's first encounter with Borgov sets up Beth's ongoing perception of him. She associates him with the male chess establishment, and seeing him with his authoritarian scowl cements that impression, because he becomes a symbol of the players who make her feel like an outsider. Meanwhile, the role reversal between Beth and her mother continues.

The next day, Beth plays Marenco, a player from Portugal. Beth feels irritated and dizzy, but she eases into the match as they follow the maneuvers of the Sicilian defense. By 11:30, she has him down to two pawns, and just after noon he resigns despite being nowhere close to an endgame. Beth wanders over to Board One, where Borgov is playing in front of a silent crowd. Studying the board, Beth sees that Borgov seems to have an edge. She returns to Mrs. Wheatley, offering to get lunch, as she won't play again until the next day. Mrs. Wheatley feels sick from going to a cabaret the previous evening but agrees to go.

Beth's match against Marenco again indicates her sheer talent, but also shows how her increased study is helping her. Now familiar with more of the book moves, Beth is able to beat her opponents without even getting into the endgames that she dislikes so much.Additionally, the passage hints at Mrs. Wheatley's continued health struggles, likely as a result of her consistent drinking on the trip.

This competition is more intense and professional than anything Beth has seen before, but she feels calmer the more matches she wins. The next day, she plays **the Queen's Gambit** Declined against an Austrian player, and she impresses even herself at her relentless pressure and deadly accuracy, forcing him to resign by the 23rd move.

Beth's use of the Queen's Gambit reflects her growing confidence in herself and the benefits of her discipline. In her earlier game with Benny, Beth didn't feel familiar enough with the opening to win, but now she wields it effectively against this Austrian player.

That evening, Beth finds Mrs. Wheatley fully clothed in bed at 7 p.m. Beth asks if Mrs. Wheatley wants to get a doctor, but Mrs. Wheatley says she just needs rest. She also admits that Manuel had to leave on business and wouldn't be back before they left. Beth apologizes, but Mrs. Wheatley says at least he had a sense of humor, and it was fun while it lasted.

This exchange illustrates just how much Beth and her mother have reversed roles: Beth is more responsible and consoling, while at the moment it seems like Mrs. Wheatley is a lovesick young person. This contrast again demonstrates Beth's growing independence and maturity.

Beth's third game is a shock: she is playing against a boy who looks twelve years old. He is very serious, introducing himself as Georgi Petrovitch Girev. He plays a very sophisticated defense, which goes on for hours. She thinks that he is like a machine, unnerving and unperturbed. By the afternoon, most games have finished, while Beth and Girev are on move 34. She has 25 minutes on her clock left, realizing that she is in a bit of a time crunch and has to get to move 40. She's not used to being behind on the clock.

Girev here becomes a reflection of how much Beth has improved, because Girev is as much of a child prodigy as Beth was. In this match she recognizes that she not only has to be disciplined in order to face much older players, but she also has to maintain that discipline against up-and-coming challengers.

Beth and Girev quickly exchange several pieces; they are now in an endgame, where the question is one of getting a pawn to the eighth rank and promoting it to a queen. Girev offers to adjourn, as both of their flags have fallen. Beth seals her next move in an envelope before getting up, realizing that there are no more games in progress. Before she leaves, Girev asks her excitedly about drive-in movies in America. She confirms that they exist, and he smiles broadly at her.

Girev's excited comment about American drive-in movies highlights a disparity between him and Beth. While Girev is still an excitable child, Beth has grown a great deal since her first tournament at the Kentucky State Championship and has in many ways become a professional woman.

Mrs. Wheatley sleeps soundly through the night and is still sleeping when Beth leaves for the tournament. Her morning game goes quickly: she catches her opponent off-guard in the 19th move, which eventually seals his fate and causes him to resign. He tells her that she plays an awesome game, that she "make[s] a man feel helpless."

Beth's opponent's words here affirm her talent. But highlighting her gender in his comment—saying that she makes men feel helpless—still underscores her abnormality in a tournament filled largely with men.

Beth plays out the rest of the Girev game that afternoon. She sits there impatiently, often pacing the ballroom as she waits for him to move. She hates his seriousness and his youth. When she hears her clock click, she returns to the board and remains standing. Within 45 minutes, she has him—a matter of trading rooks at the right time, which allows a pawn of hers to be queened. He resigns immediately, and she sees how it devastates him. Beth asks how old Girev was when he started playing. He says four, and he hopes to be World Champion in three years—at 16. She asks him what he'll do with the rest of his life if he achieves this, but he doesn't seem to understand the question.

Girev's talent and ambition rival Beth's, and again the book makes a connection between Girev and Beth, who was also quite serious at a young age and was also devastated on the rare occasions when she lost matches. But it also shows how Girev has a lot of growing up to do. He was set on a path to become a chess champion at four years old, and he doesn't seem to imagine a life beyond that. Beth's question also hints that she's wondering what to do with her future, too.

That night, Mrs. Wheatley goes to bed early and seems better the next morning, to Beth's relief. That day, Beth is playing a man named Solomon. Solomon is by no means easy—the game lasts four hours—but Beth doesn't let up any advantage and he has to resign. Beth can tell from the way he stalks off that he's furious about being beaten by a woman.

The book again focuses on the sexism that Beth faces from other players. In this instance, it is clear to Beth that Solomon is furious about being beaten by a supposedly inferior woman.

Beth examines the bulletin board after her match and sees that the next day she'll be going up against Borgov. She eats dinner in her room and immediately starts to study Borgov's games in the chess books she has. Concentrating as hard as she possibly can, she finds no weaknesses. She becomes terrified of how endless chess can be; how she can lose herself in it for hours. She goes to bed after 4 a.m. and dreams of drowning.

Beth recognizes that particularly with Borgov, relying on talent alone will not be enough, and she needs to study his games. Borgov is also a stand-in for the typical male chess player who has enjoyed advantages—like training and support—that Beth's never had. The dream of drowning suggests that Beth feels in over her head—completely overwhelmed by the prospect of her opponent's skills and the consuming demands of chess in general.

Beth awakes tense and jumpy, unable to ease the tension with a shower or coffee. In the hallway before the ballroom, she sees Borgov with several men in dark suits, talking secretively. She slips into the room and sits behind the black pieces, and he joins her shortly afterward. Their match starts, and Beth immediately feels out of her depth, worried about playing into the sequences that he knows the best.

Here Beth stands as an outsider among the men in the hallway. This sense of not belonging is completely discouraging, and it's one of the big reasons that Beth feels so defeated before she has made any mistakes in her match against Borgov. This shows how sexism can be doubly problematic: not only in disadvantaging Beth, but also in undermining her own confidence, which then puts her at greater risk for losing.

Beth and Borgov play through some familiar continuations, but this does not relieve her. She feels like her loss is inevitable. But she shakes herself out of this, realizing that the only advantage he has is that he got to move first. Soon, the game enters a wide-open phase, where it can take unexpected turns. Every move seems suspicious, and she starts to take more time with her moves. After trading a few pieces, she realizes that she is in a bad position, in danger of losing a knight. She wonders how she could have missed what he was planning. Everything he's doing is obvious and unimaginative, and she feels like she could scream. With her knight gone, she knows she's in even greater danger, and she feels herself reaching out a hand to topple her king. There is applause, and looking at no one, she leaves.

Beth's match against Borgov illustrates two key conflicts in Beth's character arc. First, it demonstrates that Beth, up to this point, has not been as disciplined and rigorous as she could have been about her studying. In noting that everything Borgov is doing was "unimaginative," it suggests that Beth simply hasn't spent enough time learning all the different strategies a person might employ to get out of this kind of obvious play. But it also shows how the lack of confidence—brought on by her sense of not belonging to the chess world the way Borgov does—has also undermined her gameplay. In essence, feeling that her loss was "inevitable", has made it so.


CHAPTER 9

Beth's loss means she will place fourth or fifth in the tournament. Before the ceremony at 2:30 p.m., she drinks four **cocktails** to make the pain and shame go away. She's upset she played like such a novice. She doesn't go to the ceremony; instead, she goes to her room. There, she sees Mrs. Wheatley lying in bed, but Mrs. Wheatley doesn't look right. Beth takes her arm and realizes that she is dead. After staring at her for five minutes, Beth picks up the phone. The manager helps her sort out the situation; a doctor surmises that she died of hepatitis. Beth asks for a prescription for a tranquilizer to calm herself, but the doctor says she doesn't need a prescription to buy tranquilizers in Mexico.

Mrs. Wheatley's death comes as a huge shock to Beth—but the diagnosis of hepatitis (a liver disease) implies that it was a result of Mrs. Wheatley's ongoing battle with alcoholism. And yet, even though Beth is confronted with drinking's potentially deadly ramifications, she too has a compulsion to drink and use tranquilizers under stress. This shows how, in defiance of all logic, addiction becomes a biological need that's difficult to overcome.

With the manager's help, Beth tracks down Mr. Wheatley to tell him that Mrs. Wheatley died. He doesn't recognize Beth's voice at first and he asks her to handle it, telling her that Mrs. Wheatley had a family plot in Mexico. He says that he's strapped for cash, but if she can bury Mrs. Wheatley and make the mortgage payments, she can have the house and the equity.

Mr. Wheatley's relative indifference to Mrs. Wheatley's death and his insistence that Beth handle it become a symbolic shift for Beth. Whereas she was hoping to have support from a parental figure, instead she is being pushed into a much more adult role in her own life. She no longer has anyone to look after her, and she's now expected to look after needs that few teens ever have to deal with.

The manager and the doctor take care of everything for Beth as she sorts through government forms. At the airport, Beth watches as the coffin is lifted into the plane, and she has a vision of it falling off the lift and crashing on the tarmac. On the plane, Beth declines a drink. Instead, she takes out a bottle of **pills**. She spent three hours the day before going to various pharmacies, buying 100 pills from each.

The vision that Beth has of Mrs. Wheatley's coffin crashing and exploding reflects not only the devastating impact of her mother's death, but also Beth's fears for her own future and her battles with addiction. However, despite this fear, she still accumulates huge amounts of drugs because she has a physiological need for pills to help her deal with the stress. This is one of the first instances in which the book illustrates how addiction can be circular, where people abuse substances to cope with the ramifications of addiction itself.

The funeral is simple and brief. A half hour before it begins, Beth takes four green **pills**. That afternoon, she finishes unpacking, and she cries for a long time. Suddenly, the phone rings, and it's Harry Beltik. They talk about her game against Borgov, and he offers to help train her, saying that he's in Lexington for the summer. He knows that she's better than him, but also that she'll need help if she's playing Russians. Looking around at the reminders of Mrs. Wheatley, Beth invites Beltik over.

Again, Beth uses the pills in order to distract herself from the grief of losing Mrs. Wheatley. But Beth's acceptance of Harry's help here illustrates her acknowledgement that she needs support in order to succeed—not only in facing players like Borgov, but also in dealing with more personal struggles like her mother's death.

Beltik arrives 20 minutes later with a stack of chess books, which make Beth feel weary and disoriented. She says that she usually tries to play intuitively, and he replies that her intuition wasn't good enough to beat Borgov. They quickly set up games and examine different endgame positions, working through lunch and dinner. He lectures her about keeping in good physical shape and getting enough sleep. While she examines a position, he goes to get groceries for her, and then he helps her work through a theoretical game that he learned in a book.

While Beth has done some studying in the past, she implies here that her gameplay itself has relied almost exclusively on her own talent and intuition for the game. However, Beltik's point illustrates that intuition can only get a person so far. Instead, disciplined study—particularly at this level of chess—can be even more important than innate talent because the other players are equally as talented as Beth and have a lot more experience.

Beltik goes back to his hotel after midnight, and Beth continues to study a middle-game book, reviewing the games in her mind. She realizes that it's more of an effort to visualize the board now than when she was eight or nine. She plays into the night, occasionally missing Mrs. Wheatley.

Beth's statement that it's harder for her to visualize the board now indicates that despite her talent, it will require more work for her to keep up the mental sharpness that she displayed as a younger girl. This is why, the book implies, it's important for her to dedicate herself to so much study. Study also helps her cope with grief—implicitly better than alcohol or drugs.

Beltik returns at 9 a.m. They play a few five-minute games, which Beth wins, but he insists that her strategies won't work against Borgov—she needs to do a lot more work. He tells her to read Borgov's book about his life and his career. As the days pass, Beth becomes caught up in chess in a new way, and her **tranquilizers** go unused in the nightstand. When Beltik mentions that he's moving into an apartment soon, she offers to let him stay at the house with her, and he smiles, saying he thought she'd never ask.

Here again Beltik highlights the necessity of putting in huge amounts of work for Beth to improve her game—even though she's winning against him consistently, her talent can only get her so far. This passage also illustrates that Beltik's mentorship is helping her maintain discipline not only in her chess game, but also helping her battle her addiction—while she's working hard, Beth doesn't need to use tranquilizers.

Beth hasn't been this immersed in chess since she was a little girl. Beltik is in class three afternoons a week and two mornings, and she spends that time studying his books. On his second night in the house, they also have sex. It's simple and tame for them, and afterward he goes to bed in her old room. The next morning, she plays him in four quick games, hardly looking at the board. As they clean up breakfast, Harry says that the previous night was nice, but Beth can tell his feelings are mixed. She avoids the subject, asking to play chess instead.

Beth's relationship with Beltik becomes another reflection of her coming of age. She is again taking control of her sexuality in choosing to pursue him, and their dynamic afterward illustrates her independence. Beth stays in her mother's old room while Beltik goes back to Beth's room, suggesting that Beth is in control of her choices and has taken the adult place in the house.

After three weeks, Beth has gone through most of the game books. As she and Beltik discuss the game more, Beth begins to get frustrated that he's not as quick as she is, which he senses. That Saturday, she starts to play him with a handicap: starting without one knight. She can sense that he hates it, and even with the odds skewed, she beats or draws him. That night and the next, he doesn't come to bed. She doesn't miss the sex, but she misses something. On the second night she has trouble falling asleep, and so she pulls out a **beer** and sits at the chessboard in Mrs. Wheatley's pink robe, playing over some **Queen's Gambit** games. She finishes three more beers before going back to bed and sleeping soundly.

The end of Beltik's time with Beth indicates some of Beth's ongoing struggles. This is an instance in which, feeling like Beltik has nothing left to teach her, Beth pushes him away. However, as soon as he's gone, the book hints at how people can be supportive in more ways than knowledge. Beth immediately lapses into drinking without Beltik's watchful eye there, suggesting she needs his moral support more than his chess coaching. Additionally, Beth's playing of Queen's Gambit games while drinking beer in Mrs. Wheatley's robe shows how she has become fully independent, essentially taking over Mrs. Wheatley's position in the house.

On Monday, Beltik says that he's taught Beth everything he knows, and he has to start focusing on his own studies; he's going to be an electrical engineer. He is also moving into an apartment, because it's closer to the university. He leaves at noon without much ceremony. For a moment, she wants to ask him to stay, but instead she takes four green **pills**. She hates being alone. That night, Beth watches TV and gets drunk, falling asleep on the couch and waking in the middle of the night to vomit. She takes more tranquilizers and sleeps again.

Again, Beth illustrates how mentors and friends like Beltik provide important support even outside their knowledge of chess. Beth immediately takes drugs and drinks in order to overcome the anxiety and grief she feels. Her realization that she hates being alone is a reversal from her thoughts when she got drunk for the first time, showing how even though being alone gives her greater independence, it doesn't always mean that she is good at taking care of herself.

The next morning, Beth wakes with a determination to get on with her career. Mrs. Wheatley is dead, Harry is gone, and the U.S. Championship is in three weeks; she'll have to beat Benny Watts. She takes out two books, including a book with Benny's games, and she starts to analyze them, poring over them the rest of the day. That night, she takes two more **tranquilizers** and falls asleep instantly. She rises eagerly the next day to read more books of Paul Morphy's games—there has never been anything like him before or since. He was a prodigy who would stay up all night drinking and talking before his games and then play the next day like a shark. She wants to be like him; she wants to win the U.S. Championship.

Again, Beth's determination and drive come to the fore as she yearns to win the U.S. Championship, and Beth sets herself on the path for even greater success in poring over some of Benny's important games. However, Beth's idolization of Paul Morphy as she takes more tranquilizers hints at some of Beth's conflicts to come, as she doesn't yet recognize how addiction may prove damaging to her chess abilities.

CHAPTER 10

Before Beth's first game at the U.S. Championship, Beth immediately runs into Benny Watts. He offers his condolences on the game with Borgov, and she admits she felt like a fool. He sympathizes with her, recognizing how helpless losing can feel. She's surprised at his honesty; not many chess players talk about humiliation and weakness. The director announces that play will begin in five minutes, and they nod to each other.

This conversation contrasts with Beth's conversation with Mrs. Wheatley after her loss to Benny, as Benny recognizes how best to support Beth in this moment. This also makes Beth feel less like an outsider, as Benny acknowledges weakness—something most chess players, especially men, seldom do.

There are fourteen players in the tournament, and Beth is the only woman. They are the highest-ranked players in the country, but it has the feeling of a high school tournament. Beth wins her first game handily, using a move that she had gone over with Beltik. She is the first one to win her game, and she is intent on becoming the U.S. Champion.

While Beth again recognizes her outsider status at the tournament, she also goes in with more confidence. Thanks to Beltik and her rigorous study, Beth is able to succeed. This highlights how talent is important, but mentorship and discipline are also crucial elements to success.

Beth's games over the next few days are grueling, but she is never in danger of losing. As time goes on, other players look at her with more and more respect. Benny is doing just as well, and she studies his games between her own matches. The tournament is round-robin style, and she will meet Benny in the 11th game.

Despite facing some of her most difficult opponents, Beth appears more prepared than ever as she's never in danger of losing. The fact that she studies Benny's games between her matches also suggests that she recognizes the value of rigorous study, something that wasn't true before.

The tournament takes place over two weeks with one game a day; on a day off, Beth walks to the university's student union for coffee and finds Benny with two other players and a board. He asks her to look at the position and make a move. When she moves the knight, Benny agrees with her move, showing the other players what she's done. Beth feels good, knowing that he trusts her judgment.

This exchange with Benny shows a reversal from the interaction with the man dressed in all black in Chapter 5. There, Beth felt singled out as the only girl and the man pointed out Beth's mistakes, while here the opposite is true. Beth feels that she truly belongs because Benny trusts her judgment, and Beth is more knowledgeable because of the rigorous study she's done.

Benny offers to play Beth in speed chess, offering $5 a game. She agrees, and he beats her in only three minutes on his clock. He moves incredibly fast, playing brilliantly. He continues to offer her more games. She has 60 dollars in her pocket and continues to play; by noon there are 40 people watching. It is thrilling and frustrating chess, and though Beth wins some games, she has never been beaten so consistently. Benny seems to have a resource beyond her understanding. At 5:30 p.m., Beth gives him her last five dollars. People applaud and Benny shakes her hand, but she wants to hit him.

Beth's consistent losses in speed chess against Benny again demonstrate that talent can only get her so far—there is always room for improvement. Even though she feels that she learned all there was to learn from Beltik, there are still other people who are better than her and who have a lot to teach her—as she notes, Benny has "some resource beyond her understanding" despite her incredible talent. She is angered and frustrated by this realization.

That night, Beth stays in her room and takes four **tranquilizers**. She feels rested in the morning, but stupid. She gets anxious, thinking about playing Benny on Thursday, but she assures herself that he is not unbeatable. She handily beats another opponent in the afternoon, and that evening Benny joins her as she is eating dinner. He apologizes for the previous day, explaining that he just wanted to play against someone good. He assures her that he plays a lot of speed chess. When she reminds him that he beat her in Las Vegas, he says that that was a long time ago and he couldn't get away with the same strategy. Before he leaves, she asks if he plays games in his head when he's alone. He replies, "Doesn't everybody?"

Here the book foreshadows Beth and Benny's eventual team-up. Despite her frustration with being beaten so consistently, they recognize each other as solid players, particularly when Beth discovers that Benny has the same instinctual talent of visualizing the board in his mind. Benny's ability to console Beth on her loss to him in Las Vegas—again, where Mrs. Wheatley wasn't able to—shows his value as a mentor and friend to Beth.

Back at her room, Beth misses Mrs. Wheatley—this is her first tournament without her mother. She also appreciates Benny for reassuring her, and she thinks that he has good-looking hair. She wins Tuesday and Wednesday's games, and she prepares herself for her match against Benny. She wants to drink, but instead she resorts to taking **pills** so that she can sleep.

Beth has come of age within a short time, now able to compete without her mother's support. Nevertheless, she still resorts to drugs and alcohol to help her cope with the stresses of competition.

When Beth sits down at her board, she realizes, looking at the gathered crowd, that she and Benny are the best players in America. Even though he's only 24, he looks older, and as they start their game, she feels as she did playing Borgov: that she's like a child trying to outsmart an adult. This isn't true: she knows in her heart that she played many professionals in Mexico City before wilting against Borgov. Still, she feels inexperienced.

Despite Beth's acknowledgement that she is one of the two best players in the United States, she still feels insecure. She is plagued by the sense of not belonging, again undermining her confidence and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that she's not good enough.

In the middle game, Benny makes an unusual move. At first, Beth wonders what he might be up to, but she realizes quickly that there's nothing sinister in the move—he might just be trying to get a quick advantage, like speed chess. She counters his move and immediately puts him on the defensive. Just a few minutes ago she felt like an amateur, and now Benny's in trouble.

This exchange both reaffirms Beth's talent and also shows how Beth is subverting the feeling that has plagued her for so long. She is starting to realize that being underestimated can actually be beneficial, because it puts the other players at a disadvantage when they assume she is weaker than she is, like Benny does here.

Beth then makes an unexpected move: trading her queen early in the game for his. This catches Benny off guard and puts him on defense. She feels naked without her queen, but she also feels strong, having the initiative. She makes a simple but unobvious move with her pawn, and when the director makes the move on the display board, the spectators are surprised. She starts to relax: she is going to beat him soundly. She finds a continuation that is a "beautiful and subtle wonder," as if the sequence is projected on a screen in front of her. It becomes clear that she is going to queen a pawn before him, and Benny topples his king. Beth won in 30 moves. As they leave to applause, Benny says he never thought she would trade queens, and she didn't think she would either.

Beth's sound beating of Benny again affirms her talent and also shows how valuable the disciplined study with Beltik was. The book illustrates that both are needed to beat Benny. This unexpected move is a move Beth would not have made intuitively: she usually likes to be on the attack, and the queen is the most powerful piece on the board. And then the "beautiful and subtle" continuation she finds shows the other side of her gameplay: her intuition and talent for it. The book demonstrates that both are needed to beat her most formidable players.

CHAPTER 11

After the Saturday evening ceremony, Benny takes Beth out to a bar. Beth quickly drinks two **beers**, and he warns her to take it easy. Beth feels high—she's got a perfect score in the tournament. Benny admits he's raging inwardly, but on the outside, he appreciates her success.

Here Benny fully registers Beth's addiction, and he is probably the first one who really notices it. He recognizes not only the damage that it can do to her chess game, but also the damage that it can do to her life.

Benny asks what Beth's going to do about the Moscow Invitational: the U.S. winner is invited. He explains that when he went, the Federation bought his ticket and a church group put up the rest. He tells her that she doesn't want to go to Moscow alone. When Beth grabs a third **beer**, he again warns her not to drink so quickly. As they discuss the Russian players, Beth tells Benny that she likes his hair. She hasn't thought of him sexually before, but she's thinking that way now. Benny dismisses her comment.

Here Benny starts to transition into Beth's next mentor. Even though Beth is starting to think of him sexually, in reality he starts to take on a protective role with her. He not only counsels her on going to the tournament in Moscow, but he also cares about her ongoing struggle with addiction and tries to help her work through it, showing how mentors and friends can provide crucial support in many aspects of a person's life.

Benny tells Beth that she's the only American he knows who could beat all the Russian players. He invites her to New York to study with him, and then she can leave for her next tournament in Paris from there. Beth is nervous, unsure if she's ready, but he assures her that she is. She agrees to come to New York, leading him to offer to drive them there. As he stands up to leave, he also tells her to forget about sex.

Here Benny cements his status with Beth as her next mentor, offering to help her prepare for the next tournaments. Even though he acknowledges Beth's talent, he also affirms that she needs disciplined study in order to have a chance to beat the Russian players—and he can offer her help to achieve that goal, affirming the benefit of friendship and mentorship.


On the drive to New York the next day, Benny suggests that he come with Beth to Russia. Beth protests, saying she's only thinking about Paris and hasn't decided to go to Moscow yet. But when Beth thinks about Benny coming with her, she feels warm. She thinks that if they were to have sex, there would be more to it than with Tim or Beltik. She wonders if he'll change his mind when they get to his apartment.

Again, Benny recognizes that he can offer Beth support in Russia, not just in helping her prepare but also serving as a companion to help her navigate the tournament. While Beth thinks about sex with Benny, it's clear that she's also looking for emotional intimacy to combat the loneliness she's experienced since Mrs. Wheatley's death. Benny also offers her the friendship she so rarely finds elsewhere.

Benny suggests they play chess, and they call out moves, visualizing the board in their minds. Beth is uncertain at first; she has never shared her interior chessboard before. She plays a variation called the Levenfish, and when Benny says he doesn't like that strategy, she tells him to play his knight. He tells her icily not to tell him what to move. They drive in silence for a while, and then Benny admits that she was right and does as she suggested. They continue to move until Beth forces him to resign on the 27th move and feels better.

Beth continues to demonstrate her talents in playing high-level chess with Benny purely in her mind—and winning over him yet again. Beth also seems to relate her playing chess with Benny to sex, as she experiences it as a way of opening up something vulnerable to him. This is part of an ongoing dynamic of relating chess to Beth's coming of age, as it becomes a vehicle for Beth to understand her relationships with other people and herself.


Benny's apartment is somewhat dingy—it has a kitchen with a door going off to the bedroom, but there are no sofas or chairs, just pillows to sit on with lamps beside them and piles and piles of books, all about chess. Beth is exhausted, and Benny pedals a blow-up mattress for her to sleep on, giving her sheets. Beth wonders if she'll be able to sleep, knowing that she has some **pills** if she needs them. She also knows that Benny has nothing to drink in this apartment, though he didn't say so. Nonetheless, Beth is able to sleep soundly, waking in the morning to the sound of a siren and Benny in the kitchen. He offers her coffee, which touches her, as no one has ever offered her anything in the morning.

In staying at Benny's, Beth is able to find a friendship that she hasn't had since Jolene—someone willing to teach her and also take care of her. Mrs. Wheatley was never awake in the morning to offer Beth anything, and she certainly didn't counsel Beth on her chess game. In addition, Mrs. Wheatley enabled Beth's addiction, whereas Benny is trying to help her maintain her sobriety as much as possible, showing the value of his friendship and mentorship in multiple ways.

After Beth showers and dresses, she and Benny spend the day playing through Borgov's games. Benny stops her after any obscure moves and asks her to analyze them. It is rigorous and intense, but she sees its usefulness. These games are serious and workmanlike, requiring huge mental energy that rarely pays off. They keep this up for six days, talking very little outside of their studies, and Beth goes to bed every night exhausted. Sometimes, she feels like being with Benny is like being with no one—completely impersonal. But sometimes, when she finds a false move in a game, he hugs her, smiling.

Like Beltik, Benny helps Beth work hard to improve her game. Even though Beth is a better player, Benny has key insight into how to help Beth improve her game, illustrating how valuable this kind of mentorship is to Beth's improvement. And again, like Beltik, Benny illustrates that Beth cannot win on talent alone—she needs extremely intense study and mental effort to beat her most formidable foes. This is a far cry from the easy and intuitive chess that Beth played in her earlier years.

One evening, Beth invites three young people over: Hilton Wexler, Arthur Levertov (a Grandmaster) and Jenny Baynes. Jenny is strikingly beautiful. They greet Beth warmly and sit down at the board on the floor. Hilton asks Beth to solve a problem for him, setting up an unnatural position where white wins in three. Beth solves it extremely quickly, and he's amazed at how fast she is.

Here Beth demonstrates her talent, demonstrating just how quickly her skills in chess come to her. As much as her studying has paid off, she still has incredible intuitive skill around other top-level chess players, and that has been an enormous driver of her success.

Benny suggests a simultaneous with the three men—Jenny explains that she doesn't even know the rules. Beth accepts, suggesting they play speed chess. Benny reminds her that it gives them an edge, and that she's not very good at speed chess. Annoyed, Beth bets $10 on each of them, and Benny shrugs. Beth then beats the three of them with time to spare. Asking for another round, Beth beats them handily once more. When she suggests a third round, Benny refuses. Jenny tries to laugh, saying it's male chauvinism. Beth is furious that Benny is easy to beat and furious that he's trying to look impassive about it. But Benny says, "I think you've got it," and everyone laughs. Jenny looks at Beth with admiration.

Here Beth continues to prove how much her studying and Benny's mentorship have actually helped build up her intuitive game. Whereas before she could barely beat Benny at speed chess, now she beats him and other top-level players handily. In addition, Benny's reminder that she's not very good at speed chess downplays her talent and skill—as Jenny points out, it's an extension of sexism by assuming that Beth can't beat him. Jenny's admiration then illustrates how Beth's winning is not just important because of her skill at chess, but her ability to prove that women do belong in the chess world.

Beth spends the next few days studying, and she continues to beat Benny handily. She lies awake for hours, envisioning new strategies. They spend their third week repeating the Borgov games, finishing the last after midnight on Thursday. When Benny yawns, Beth says it's time for bed. However, Benny stops her and asks her to go to bed with him. At first, she protests—she's tired and she had completely forgotten about sex—but she warms toward him and agrees.

This passage illustrates that Beth has become so intent on her studies that she even forgets about other desires—like her desire to have sex with Benny. Conversely, Benny now recognizes Beth's independence and maturity. It seems earlier that he had set boundaries on their relationship because of his role as her mentor, but now this breaking of that boundary also suggests Benny's own acknowledgment that he may have little left to teach her.

The next morning, Beth is startled to wake up next to Benny. Making love had been nice, though not as exciting as she hoped. He was gentle and easy with her, but still distant. Benny wakes, and when she says good morning, he tells her that she shouldn't play the Sicilian against Borgov—he's too good at it. As they play games through breakfast, Beth is annoyed, wishing for more intimacy from him.

Even though Beth and Benny had sex, Beth recognizes that she didn't exactly get what she wanted, which was emotional intimacy. This again suggests that Beth's independence has also simultaneously created a certain loneliness in her life, because she doesn't have anyone to take care of her.

At noon, Benny says he has to go to a poker game, to pay the rent. When Beth asks to join, Benny says that the game's all men—but she can watch if she wants. He says it will last all night. Beth gets annoyed again, wondering how long he had known about the game. The game is in a small suite in a hotel in midtown, and Beth merely watches, just as she watched Mr. Shaibel. She doesn't care how poker is played, even though she knows she'd be good at it. Eventually, she tells Benny she's leaving—she's furious at the way he seems to have planned it: quick sex with her, and then off to play with the boys.

Beth discovers sexism in another context when talking to Benny about the poker match. Even though Beth knows that she would be good at this game, she's barred from the game simply because she is a woman. More than that, Benny's attitude seems to further undermine the emotional intimacy Beth wants.

Benny returns in the middle of the night; Beth wakes when he gets into bed. She's glad he's back but doesn't want to make love; he tells her that he made $600 and promptly falls asleep. In the morning, they have sex, but Beth doesn't enjoy it much. Benny can tell that she's angry at him, and she admits that it frustrated her that he didn't tell her about the poker game and that his timing was bad. He apologizes, saying he knows he keeps his distance, and she admits that she does, too.

Beth's fury at Benny illustrates again how her coming of age is connected to her agency and independence. Beth is deliberate about the emotional intimacy she wants from sex life and refuses to be manipulated.

Later, when Beth offers a game, Benny refuses. She knows he would have played her if he thought he could win, and she feels much better. Over the next few days, they continue as lovers and don't play any more games, except from books. She's fond of him, but that's it, and by the last week before Paris, she feels that he has little left to teach her.

This is another example of Beth pushing away mentors when she feels that they have nothing left to offer her. But she overlooks the fact that even though Benny has little left to teach her, he can still support her in other ways, and that emotional support can be just as valuable.

CHAPTER 12

Benny drops Beth off at Kennedy Airport, wishing her luck. She thanks him for the help, and though she wants to kiss him goodbye, she only grabs her suitcase and walks to the terminal. When she arrives at the building where the tournament is being held, she sees Borgov there, talking to reporters. She steels herself, knowing that she can beat him.

Beth's decision not to kiss Benny goodbye shows another moment of growth for her. She is in control of what she wants, and because he doesn't want to share emotional intimacy with her, she makes her own decisions about their physical intimacy as well—a mark of her agency.

It is the smallest tournament that she has participated in: six players and five rounds, one round a day for five days. The others are strong, but she doesn't think anyone else can beat her. Beth has never felt more prepared. She begins by playing the black pieces against a Dutch player, gaining equality by the ninth move. By the sixteenth move she threatens him all over the board, until he is forced to yield.

Beth's dominance shows how critical her rigorous study has been in preparing her for this tournament. Thanks to her study, she has never been more prepared in her life, even though she is also facing her toughest opponents.

Beth spends the rest of the afternoon enjoying the sunshine, walking the Paris streets. She realizes that she had been so wrapped up in studying that she didn't fully appreciate that she was going to Paris. She dreams about having an apartment there—by the time she is in her 20s she could be World Champion and live anywhere. She realizes that her possibilities are endless.

Beth's thoughts here show just how much she has grown and the independence she has gained. Whereas Beth's childhood was marked by a lack of options, Beth's newfound adulthood seems essentially limitless and totally within her hands.

Beth returns for a reception at the tournament at 4:30 p.m. When she sees the pastries wheeled in, she misses Mrs. Wheatley, who would have liked them. But when she notices Borgov there, her stomach turns to ice. After the reception, she walks back to her hotel and plays through a dozen of Borgov's games, goes to bed at 11 p.m., and sleeps beautifully. She refuses to be humiliated by him, and she has an advantage: he would not be as prepared for her as she was for him. Beth beats a Frenchman, an Englishman, and another Dutchman in subsequent days; the next day, she will play Borgov.

Beth's victories continue to underscore the benefits of study. Hard work not only improves her game, but it also allows her to sleep, such that she doesn't need to take pills. And despite her fear of Borgov, she again affirms that there is an advantage to being underestimated—that she will have the element of surprise on her side. In this way, she displays growth as well, because she doesn't let sexism undermine her confidence.


When Beth sits down across from Borgov, he shakes her hand but does not smile. She's playing white, and despite Benny's advice, she plays the Sicilian, having played through so many of Borgov's games that she thinks she knows what he'll do. By the fifteenth move, she sees combinations opening up. Her possibilities for attack increase, and even though he sidesteps them, she feels that she has never played better. His pieces are tied down, while hers are free.

Beth affirms that she is playing the best chess of her life—aided by the studying that she has been doing with Benny. Yet at the same time, she does not take Benny's advice—instead, she wishes to prove how that study has aided her because she has so rigorously investigated each of Borgov's games.

Beth looks around; the other games are finished. They have been playing for three hours. Beth starts to apply more pressure, but Borgov makes a simple move that starts to unravel her plans. She backs off, but she realizes that she is now on a path that will cost her in some way, whatever she tries. She searches, finding excellent moves, but they are not enough. He is simply outplaying her. On the 38th move, she sees that eventually he will mate her or take her queen or gain a second queen. She feels sick and powerless. She does not turn over her king; she simply stands and says that she resigns, feeling physically ill.

Not taking Benny's advice here—playing the Sicilian despite his counsel—illustrates Beth's desire to be self-sufficient, and even though she feels good about her strategy here, she soon discovers that Borgov is still able to outplay and triumph over her. This shows how Beth doesn't just need people to help her study; she needs to learn to trust their input, even if she's more talented.

Beth cannot escape the memory of the game as she returns to New York, and she takes **pills** to cope. She doesn't want to see Benny; she thinks that she'll stay a week in Kentucky to lick her wounds and then go back to studying in New York. Thinking of how much she studied and still lost, she feels sick all over again. But she knows she has to get ready for Moscow. When she tells Benny about her plan, he implores her not to quit, and she says she isn't going to.

Beth's addiction rears its ugly head again after her devastating loss in Paris, again confirming how imperative and constantly threatening her addiction is—even after having gone so long without the pills or alcohol. She can't seem to help it, particularly in cases of immense loss; in this way, the book portrays addiction as a physiological response to stress and grief.


At Lexington, Beth has received letters from Michael Chennault, the lawyer who arranged for the deed to the house. She calls him, and he tells her that Mr. Wheatley has changed his mind about giving her the house and that he wants to sell it. She sets up a meeting between them and Mr. Wheatley, who's in town, so that she can talk to him.

Mr. Wheatley's reentry into Beth's life reminds readers of how independent she is at such a young age. Beth's home is a symbol of her autonomy, so the fact that Mr. Wheatley is trying to take control of the house is a direct threat to that.

Mr. Wheatley and Chennault arrive in the house, and Chennault speaks for Mr. Wheatley, who can't even seem to look at Beth. Chennault explains that Mr. Wheatley says Beth misconstrued his previous comments, and that she could only stay in the house until she got settled. She reminds him that she's his daughter, but he says that Mrs. Wheatley was the one who wanted to adopt and that she's not entitled to everything he owns. In his book, she is not his daughter. Beth offers to buy the house for $7,000, even though she knows it's worth less than five—but, she says, she's subtracting what she paid to bury Mrs. Wheatley. Mr. Wheatley sighs and agrees.

This exchange with Mr. Wheatley illustrates how few friends and mentors Beth has had in her life. With Mrs. Wheatley gone, Mr. Wheatley essentially disowning her, and now having pushed away both Beltik and Benny, Beth is extremely isolated. While this is partially connected with Beth's ability to grow up and be independent—particularly in negotiating with Mr. Wheatley as she does here—this isolation also proves to be detrimental to Beth in the long run.


After buying the house, Beth only has $2,000 left in the bank. She doesn't like having so little money saved, but she can earn more at tournaments. The house feels different now that it's hers—she could get some new pieces and brighten up the house. But the next day, she grows angry again at having to pay Mr. Wheatley so much for it.

Now keeping up the house on her own, Beth has gained complete independence and autonomy at 19. She has sole control over her home, her finances, and her life, and the book suggests that this is what marks her entry into adulthood. It also suggests that chess isn't just a talent for Beth, but her means of self-support.

Beth starts to study using pamphlets from Benny, but she doesn't use the same rigor as when she studied with him—she doesn't stop to think through every move. Gradually she grows bored: she does not want to study chess, even though she knows this is the only way to beat Borgov in Moscow. She starts to think of ways she can fix up the house, but then she gets overwhelmed with everything she has to do.

This section illustrates how critical mentors and friends can be, no matter how successful a person might be on their own. Beth is one of the most talented chess players in the world, but without Benny to help her, she quickly grows unmotivated and fails to do what's necessary to beat Borgov.

Beth goes to the bookstore to buy more chess books, but she realizes angrily that she could stop wallowing and go back to New York to study with Benny. Yet immediately, she wonders what Benny has to teach her. She is the best player in the United States—she will have to teach herself. For lunch, she goes to a restaurant in town, and when a waiter offers her a **cocktail**, she asks for a Gibson and ends up drinking four; she never gets around to ordering a main course. She takes a taxi home and gets out all the alcohol in the house, making more cocktails for herself.

As with Beltik, Beth questions what Benny might have to teach her. But Beth's next moves illustrate that support from mentors and friends doesn't only come from the knowledge that they can impart. They also show that Beth needs help with other things in her life besides chess—like her addiction. Beth's reliance on alcohol indicates that she's not just anxious about Moscow, but deeply lonely.

In the subsequent days, Beth gets drunk and usually passes out by noon. Sometimes she drinks just to get rid of the pain in her stomach. On Sunday she spills wine on her kitchen chessboard, and on Monday she sends some of the pieces falling to the floor. She drinks through the week until she realizes she has to get more alcohol and food. She eats lunch out of a can and washes the food down with burgundy. Sometimes the phone rings, but she rarely answers, and when she does, it is often people asking her for publicity engagements, which she refuses.

Beth's weeks-long drinking period illustrates how detrimental her addiction is. It becomes cyclical, such that she drinks to avoid the pain she feels from drinking. The fact that she spills wine on the chessboard and knocks over pieces represents how the drinking is getting in the way of her chess playing—the thing she loves most in the world. Thus, she's not trying to be irresponsible; instead, the book takes a sympathetic view of her addiction, illustrating how Beth is battling a difficult disease that she would not choose if she could escape it.

In Beth's third week of drinking, she goes through the pile of magazines in the house and finds a story about her victory at the U.S. Championship over Benny. She gets annoyed when she sees that the story called her the most talented woman since Vera Menchik, because Beth knows she's better than any male player. Beth closes the magazine and eats canned spaghetti with **wine**.

This magazine story provides another example of the sexism that Beth faces in media coverage. By focusing on Beth's being a woman and comparing her solely to other women like Vera Menchik, the article undermines her talent and simply highlights the ways in which Beth doesn't belong rather than illustrating her dominance in her field.

A week later, Beth is too sick to get out of bed. She's too weak even to take her clothes off. She grows frightened, alone and afraid of dying—afraid of slipping in the shower and breaking her hip. After a bath, she feels steadier and eats two eggs. She feels isolated and incapable of calling other people. She assures herself that she'll be all right and that she can taper off drinking.

In showing Beth's fear and genuine physical deterioration, the book underscores how vulnerable Beth is and suggests that her addiction is a dangerous, potentially fatal illness rather than a moral failing. Beth's fear is well-founded, particularly after Mrs. Wheatley's death from alcoholism. Her situation is another example of how addiction can be cyclical: Beth drinks to cope with loneliness, but drinking also makes her less likely to reach out to others, further entrenching loneliness.

The next morning, a man calls to remind Beth about the Kentucky State Championship the next day, which she has completely forgotten. Her head is throbbing, and she does not want to play chess. She reaches for more **alcohol**, but realizing she has to clear her head, she gets orange juice instead. She feels disgusting and she knows that she doesn't have to play to defend her championship—no one important will be there. She tries to go through the Levenfish Variation, but it's hard for her to picture the board, and her head is aching. Still, she gets the first 18 moves right and she decides to play.

The book again shows how mechanical Beth's addiction is—she instinctively reaches for a drink at her bedside even though she knows that it is making her sick. The fact that it has made her mind so cloudy only shows how problematic an illness it is, because it does damage to both her body and her brain—clouding Beth's ability to do the things that come most naturally to her, even play chess

At the tournament the next morning, Beth feels queasy, though she didn't drink anything the previous day. At 18 years old, she feels 40. Her first opponent is a man with a rating in the 1800s. They go through the book moves until Beth grows tired, trying to go for his throat to get it over with. She sacrifices a pawn, but she realizes quickly that this was a hasty move. She makes a series of mistakes and does not like the way the match is going. Her head pounds, and she gets some aspirin from the board director.

The match against this much lower ranked opponent emphasizes that talent isn't everything, because Beth is starting to lose to someone of weaker ability. The book shows how her addiction, even though it is a mechanism for Beth to cope with her grief, has become an illness that is damaging her mind, throwing her off her game.

Returning to the board, Beth is furious. She can't find a combination to give her back an advantage. She feels terrified, realizing that she had damaged her mind—possibly damaged her talent. On the 23rd move, Beth realizes she is playing out a lost game. She is humiliated. She lifts her king from the board before he can win and leaves the room without looking at him, telling the director that she's not feeling well and that she's dropping out.

This loss underscores just how much Beth's addiction has devastated her. Her need to drink is now interfering with the thing she loves the most—chess. Readers know from watching Beth's journey that this isn't a choice that she would ever make on her own, and that her compulsion to drink has forced her hand.

Going home, Beth realizes that she has to get herself together. Her humiliation is overwhelming. She is shocked at the idea that she might have wasted her own talent and wishes that she had someone to call. At home, she pours herself a glass of **wine** despite a voice in her head telling her not to. She continues to drink, telling herself she could live without chess. The next day she continues to pour herself drinks mechanically, and she keeps on that way for days. She realizes one morning that she has to get a foothold—she has to get help, and she realizes who to call.

This passage again illustrates just how destructive addiction can be—it has become so mechanical that Beth doesn't know how to stop herself from drinking. And even though it doesn't yet reveal whom she calls for support, the book highlights how Beth recognizes her need for a friend in order to help lift her out of this rut.

CHAPTER 13

Beth searches in every directory she can for Jolene. She takes **tranquilizers** in order to stop herself from drinking, even though she knows that they likely don't help her brain either. She calls Methuen and is shocked when Mrs. Deardorff picks up. Mrs. Deardorff is just as surprised, telling Beth that they've been reading about her. Beth asks for Jolene's number insistently, and despite the fact that they're not allowed to give out information, Mrs. Deardorff eventually gives it to her.

Here Beth demonstrates how difficult addiction is to overcome, because she feels that she needs to take different substances in order to ease off the effects of alcohol. Her desire to reach Jolene suggests how isolated Beth feels—Jolene helped Beth at one of the lowest, most friendless points in her life, and Beth feels similar now.

On the phone with Jolene, Beth nearly cries in relief at hearing her friend. Jolene has been keeping up with Beth in the magazines; she's at graduate school in Lexington. They make plans to get dinner that evening, and when Jolene arrives, Beth barely recognizes her. She has a Coco Chanel suit and a bushy afro. She looks like a movie star. As they sit down, Jolene hands her a manila envelope, and inside is *Modern Chess Openings*, which Jolene stole all those years ago. Jolene apologizes—she was mad at Beth for being adopted.

Jolene's return to Beth's life again emphasizes how important she was as a mentor and a friend growing up. Jolene's image also suggests that she's doing well for herself and can help get Beth's life on track. Giving back Modern Chess Openings, however, also reminds readers of the break between them and the fact that Jolene often felt unwanted, unlike Beth and other white girls who were quickly adopted.

Beth and Jolene talk about Methuen for a while, and Beth starts to feel more and more comfortable as they reconnect. Jolene explains that she got a scholarship to go to college by playing volleyball. Afterward, she got a bachelor's and now she realizes that she wants to be in law or government.

Jolene demonstrates that she, too, fostered her own talent in volleyball and leveraged that into greater success for herself. But she also shows that she worked hard in addition to having talent in order to earn her bachelor's, and now in aiming to work in law.

Beth and Jolene then talk about the **tranquilizers** they used to get, and Beth admits that she still takes them. Jolene notes that Beth doesn't look very good. After dessert, they return to Beth's house, and seeing it through Jolene's eyes, she grows embarrassed at the stale smell and the empty bottles. Beth says she needs to stop drinking to play in Moscow the next year.

Here Beth discusses her addiction with someone for the first time, a significant step; subsequently opening her home up to Jolene illustrates how vulnerable she is and how desperate she is for others' help. The fact that Jolene doesn't judge her also shows that Jolene understands Beth's struggles stem from an illness, and that Beth needs help.

Jolene gives Beth advice, telling her to come over to the university gym the next day to work out together so she can start to feel in shape and get out of her funk. Beth agrees. After Jolene leaves, Beth has one glass of wine but stops herself after that. The next day, she goes to the gym, and though it's difficult, Jolene coaches her through weightlifting and cycling. Beth does all she can, though she rages inwardly at Jolene. Jolene also helps Beth eat better. Beth hires a few students at the University to help clean her house, and she continues to work out with Jolene. They start playing handball, and within 10 days, Beth is able to win a game; she hates losing.

This sequence illustrates how crucial mentorship and friendship are, even when people don't have the same talents. Even though Jolene can't help Beth with her chess playing, she helps Beth get her body, mind, and even her living space back into shape, and this puts her on the path back to playing top-level chess. Jolene's support is thus incredibly valuable to Beth's success, in the same way that Benny's refusal to keep alcohol in his house in New York helped Beth avoid the pitfalls of her addiction.

That day, a letter arrives from the Christian Crusade, asking if they can help pay for Beth's trip to Russia—particularly because she grew up in a Christian institution. Beth calls Benny, who starts out icy, but when she tells him about the letter, he tells her to take it and asks if he can come along with her. He then asks if she's coming back to New York; she replies that she's staying in Kentucky a bit longer to work out and to enter a tournament in California. She then writes to the Christian Crusade, accepting their support.

Now that Beth is able to appreciate how mentorship and support are improving her life, it enables her to accept even more help—first from the Christian Crusade, and then in reconnecting with Benny for him to accompany her to Moscow. Beth's recognition underscores the book's message that accepting help is an important step toward maturity and success.

At the tournament in California, Beth feels much fitter. She sits down at Board One, and everyone is looking at her. She's a little nervous; the last game of chess she played was five months before in Kentucky, and she lost. She plays a cautious game, and when she starts to attack, she's pleased with her opponent's look of confusion. When her queen is poised to do major damage, he resigns immediately. There is loud and enthusiastic applause, and Beth smiles at her win. She gives autographs for fans, and it's both exhilarating and frightening to have so many people admire her and compliment her. She regains some confidence in her own abilities.

This tournament is a major turning point for Beth, as she recognizes that she hasn't permanently damaged her talent and thereby starts to regain confidence. But this experience has also shown Beth that talent isn't everything—she needs discipline in her life and help from friends like Jolene in order to be the most successful version of herself and to achieve her goals.

Walking back to her hotel, Beth thinks about her trip to Russia in six months. She's been studying for six hours a day, and she plans to keep it up. In early spring she might go to New York and play the U.S. Open and spend a few weeks with Benny. In the cool San Francisco air, Beth feels fresh and happy.

Knowing how valuable discipline is, Beth rededicates herself to study because this is the only way that she has any hope of beating Borgov. She is looking at competition in a more balanced and realistic way, and she's willing to open up to others again.

Beth comes home with $2,000 in prize money and a first-place trophy. She also discovers a $400 check from the U.S. Chess Federation and $4,000 from the Christian Crusade. The Christian Crusade's letter speaks of the need to promote international understanding through Christian principles and to annihilate Communism. It makes Beth slightly uncomfortable, but she's thrilled at the money and calls Benny immediately.

This passage hints at Beth's internal struggle with the Christian Crusade's ideals. Even though they are giving her support, Beth notes that it is coming at the expense of some control over her own life, because she is now indebted to an organization whose values may not necessarily align with hers. This suggests that while success brings opportunities, those opportunities may have strings attached.

A few days later, Mrs. Deardorff calls Beth and tells her that Mr. Shaibel passed away the previous evening from a heart attack. Beth is surprised, and she immediately makes plans with Jolene to attend his funeral and to visit Methuen. As they drive to the orphanage, they talk a little about Shaibel, and also how little they know about their own parents.

Here Beth recognizes the value of two close mentors of hers. She needs Jolene's help in working through her shock at Mr. Shaibel's death, but this also allows Beth to reflect on how much he impacted her life—in a way that not even her parents did.

Beth asks about what Jolene will do when she graduates; Jolene replies that she has a job offer from a law firm in Atlanta to do public relations. Beth says that Jolene is too smart for that—she could teach at the University. But Jolene assures Beth that she's ambitious and she knows what she's doing. She says that she wants to be like Beth—she wants to be the best at something.

Jolene's response shows how highly she regards Beth. Like Beth, Jolene recognizes that she can only become her most successful by putting in a lot of work and having that ambitious drive Jolene admires in Beth.

Beth and Jolene pull into Methuen, and Beth relives several memories: stealing the jar of **pills**, playing chess with Mr. Shaibel, setting up chairs for chapel. She thinks that no one had ever really encouraged her except Mr. Shaibel—she could have been playing in tournaments at nine or ten like Benny. It would have been something for Methuen to boast about, but instead Mrs. Deardorff wanted to cut her off from the thing she loved.

Beth again recognizes how important Mr. Shaibel's mentorship and friendship was in putting her on a successful path. She also knows, by contrast, how detrimental the rest of the staff's treatment of her was because they didn't offer her support that could have led her to be even more successful. Instead, they discouraged her talents, and Beth knows that this cost her years of growth.

Beth and Jolene don't go inside; instead, they go to a motel before attending the funeral the next day. Only a dozen people are there, and none of the staff from Methuen attend. Beth and Jolene leave immediately after the service. Beth feels no grief for Mr. Shaibel; she only feels guilt at not sending him the ten dollars she owed. But as they pass Methuen on the way back, Beth asks Jolene to stop there.

Even though Beth isn't emotional about Mr. Shaibel's death, her attendance at his funeral shows she understands his significance in her life. Conversely, even though Mr. Shaibel was inconspicuous, as the sparse attendance shows, he still had a huge impact on at least one person—just by showing a little kindness.

Jolene stays in the car while Beth walks into the orphanage and into the basement. Beth sees Mr. Shaibel's table and chair, along with something more remarkable: a partition covered with photographs and clippings from *Chess Review* and other newspapers. The clippings are her games and pictures of her. Beth returns to the car and cries quietly on the way back.

Here it's clear that Mr. Shaibel's mentorship wasn't only important to Beth, in setting her on the path to success that led to the articles on Mr. Shaibel's wall. It also shows how important her friendship was to him in giving his life some meaning.

Soon after, two women from the Christian Crusade visit Beth to chat with her about the trip—and, Beth knows, to look her over. The women remind her of Mrs. Deardorff, and one of them asks if Beth would give a statement condemning the spread of Communism and atheism. Beth protests that she's just a chess player, but they tell her that she is also a Christian. Beth is frustrated, feeling like the woman is threatening and bullying her into their cause. Beth contradicts them, saying that she has no intention of giving a statement. The women are shocked, noting that they have invested money in her trip. Beth immediately writes a check to give the money back.

The book connects the Christian Crusade to Beth's experience at Methuen in several ways. First, both are Christian institutions. Second, the women remind her of Mrs. Deardorff. Third, Beth feels bullied by the women—forced into a corner in the same way that Beth so often felt trapped at Methuen. Thus, giving money back is a way for Beth to affirm that she's no longer a child who can be manipulated—she's an adult who has independence and control over her own life.

When Beth calls Benny to tell him what she's done, he says that she's crazy. Nothing is paid for. Benny says that he doesn't have the money to go and tells her to call the Federation or the State Department. She says that the Federation doesn't like her because she hasn't done much publicity for them. Benny suddenly gets angry, telling her that she can go to Moscow alone. Beth realizes, then, that she shouldn't have given the check back. Benny gets frustrated, cursing at her and saying that he doesn't want to talk to her anymore.

Here Beth realizes that friendship is a two-way street. Benny was going to be in Moscow to support her if she could help him with the money to go. But now, without it, he is frustrated because he feels that she doesn't value his role in her life. While he has spent so long supporting her, she doesn't support him in the same way, and the loss of this friendship and mentorship threatens her success.

The Federation can't spare any money for Beth, and a man from the State Department says the only thing they can do is send someone to accompany her. After getting off the phone, Beth resolves to take it in stride. She has studied Russian, and she can do her own training—she has been training alone most of her life.

Even after being helped so often by friends and mentors, Beth again falls back on going it alone. On one hand, her independence and resourcefulness are admirable. On the other hand, she keeps pushing away people who want to support her.

CHAPTER 14

Beth boards the plane to Moscow alongside the State Department agent, Mr. Booth. She has disliked him from the moment she met him when he told her that he could show her the ropes in Moscow. He also told her that he played chess at Yale in the 40s. She wishes Benny were there; she hadn't even been able to get a hold of him before she left. She again thinks that she shouldn't have given back the money, but she didn't want to be bullied. Still, she misses Benny, wishing that they could play games and eat and see Moscow and have sex together. Beth and Mr. Booth land in Russia and take a cab to their hotel. Moscow looks like any other city, but it makes Beth tense. She feels totally alone and frightened.

Beth's dislike of Mr. Booth stems from his entitled attitude. Even though Beth is the top ranked player in the U.S., Mr. Booth speaks somewhat condescendingly to her. She's also reminded of the value of Benny's friendship beyond his ability to study with her, knowing how valuable his companionship would be in Moscow. Mentorship is valuable beyond the practical contribution a person might give.

The tournament begins the next morning. A director welcomes them all, and Beth notices three Russian players: Luchenko, Laev, and Shapkin, all of whom are formidable next to American players. She doesn't want to look at Borgov. There are also several other men from Brazil, Finland, and Belgium, all dressed very dapper. She feels entirely out of place, like a child at an adult event.

Again, Beth is dogged by her old insecurity in the chess world. She can't even look at Borgov, whom the book portrays as representative of the male chess establishment—suggesting that Beth feels inadequate beside such professionals.

After the director finishes his speech, the players all migrate to the vast auditorium. As Beth files out, Luchenko greets her, saying he's delighted she's here and that he looks forward to playing her. His warmth is unmistakable, and she thanks him. In the auditorium, there are four large tables with chess boards inlaid on them, with water and glasses. Behind each one stands a male referee with a display board showing the game. Every seat in the auditorium is filled. The director introduces each player, who receives thunderous applause.

Luchenko's warm welcome towards Beth provides a strong contrast with Borgov, who is often described as stoic and authoritarian. This small gesture of greeting is a huge comfort, making Beth feel acknowledged and welcomed as a competitor.

Beth's first opponent is Laev, a youthful man in his 20s. The director punches the clock, and the match begins. Beth is relieved to play, and she feels comfortable in her chair. Beth has studied Laev's style, but she knows that he probably doesn't expect much from her. Laev is playing white and still has the advantage as they quickly move into the middle game. Beth isn't playing attack chess—she's playing subtle and intricate chess. When she achieves equality, Laev looks at her in a new way, as though realizing that she is better than he thought.

Here the benefits of Beth's dedicated study come out. No longer is she relying on the "attack chess" that she became famous for and that was largely intuitive to her. And the book suggests that while Beth may have thought she didn't belong, Laev's reconsideration proves that she does belong and is a better player than the Russians believed.

Five moves later, Beth adds to her advantage, pressing Laev and forcing him to defend. Gradually, he begins to yield, until he attacks his rook. She offers her bishop as sacrifice, and when the referee posts the move on a display board, the audience gasps. Beth knows that she has him. He studies the board for 20 minutes and then stands up and they shake hands. The tournament director also shakes Beth's hand, and she walks off the stage to sudden applause.

Now, playing this subtler and more intricate game—built on the hours of dedication she put in—Beth is able to beat a player like Laev and impress her audience, proving that she now has the skill and has put in the work to compete with these players.

Beth eats alone that afternoon in one of the hotel restaurants. She thought about taking a tour of Moscow, but she's exhausted, so she returns to her hotel room and lies down. She plays over her game with Laev, finding that she made no mistakes and had no weaknesses. Beth plans to go over Duhamel's games—she is playing him tomorrow. That evening, dinner is infuriating; all the Russians laugh and chat while Beth can't really make conversation with any of the other players.

The book again highlights how important dedication is to success, as Beth chooses to focus solely on keeping up her stamina and studying Duhamel's games to best prepare herself for her next games. Away from chess, however, Beth's cultural isolation reinforces the feeling that she doesn't belong.


The next day, Duhamel makes an error in judgment early in the game, and Beth pounces on it—their game takes barely an hour. As Beth leaves, she notices Borgov get up from his game and study the position left on her board, which satisfies her, as he has largely ignored her until now.

Not only does Beth's preparation pay off, but the more she wins, the more the other players take her seriously. Beth feels a greater sense of belonging when Borgov looks over at her board, realizing that he has to study her games and treat her as a threat just as she is treating him.


After lunch, Beth takes a walk to a nearby park and finds many men playing chess, with more than 40 boards going. There is very little talk, and she weaves through the games, observing the players, all of whom are very old. Beth stops at one of the boards, where the men are playing the Richter-Rauzer. It's first-class chess being played by two old men in cheap working clothes. One of the men looks up at her and scowls, and Beth feels self-conscious. Then, he recognizes her, getting up and throwing his arms around her, shouting "Harmon!" to the other men. They all stand up and hold out their hands for her to shake.

Beth's welcome from elderly workers contrasts with her cold reception by Russia's chess establishment, suggesting that talent and love for the game transcend cultural, gender, and class barriers. As soon as the man recognizes her—her skill and her belonging in his world—Beth is able to shed her self-consciousness.

Beth's next two tournament games are rigorous and exhausting, but she is never in any real danger. Now, she is playing Luchenko. He is the oldest player there; he had been World Champion before Beth was born. She has gone through dozens of his games; he is a formidable player, but Beth is ready. On the twelfth move, he begins to attack, and she has to delay her strategy. She brings her knight over to defend before realizing that, in seven moves, he could pick off her rook in exchange for a bishop. She is in shock; she should have seen it coming.

In playing Luchenko, Beth again realizes the value of studying—particularly in describing herself as ready to face him, whereas so often before she went into her matches with doubts. Only through rigorously sorting through his games does Beth even have a chance of beating him, showing the value of discipline in addition to pure talent.

Beth studies the position for a long time, but she cannot get out of the attack. She allows it to happen, and she tenses, now behind in the game. She and Luchenko make a few trades, but if they continue to trade, she will be ground down to no pieces. Every time she tries to find a glimmer of possibility, he defends. Suddenly, she realizes that she has to make three moves in 15 minutes, while he has 40 minutes. She makes a few moves before they adjourn, and she walks wearily off the stage.

Despite Beth's intense preparation, she is still battling one of her toughest opponents ever. Yet she is able to understand where she has to defend and where she has to attack after being so surprised, indicating that Beth's strategy has grown more sophisticated over time, contributing to her ability to hold her own against this phenomenal player.

That night, Beth studies the position with Luchenko until she becomes dizzy with too much chess and too little food. She decides to take a walk, and as she walks down the hall, she hears several male voices coming out of a suite whose door is opened to let the heat out. She glances in; there are three men there talking over a chess board—Borgov and two other Russians, talking over the position he had adjourned in his match with Duhamel. Beth feels in that moment like a child peering into an adult world. She wishes that she had the help that Borgov did.

Beth recognizes the true value of having friends and mentors. Even if she felt she couldn't learn much more from Benny or Beltik, she sees that even the best players can find value in help, and she knows that she could find the same if she didn't push others away. Additionally, Beth's thoughts that she is like a child peering into an adult world suggests that the feeling of not belonging always stays with her—a lifelong disadvantage she can't shake, unlike Borgov who's had every kind of support.

When Beth arrives the next day at the tournament, crowds have gathered, waving and shouting at her. She will play Flento in the morning and then finish her game with Luchenko in the afternoon. Flento is the weakest player in the tournament, and she beats him, but it takes four hours and is a lot more grueling than she suspected. She eats a quick lunch and decides to take a nap, but she's too hyped up to sleep. By the time she returns to the chessboard facing Luchenko, she feels more tired than she has ever felt.

Even though Beth sometimes feels like she doesn't belong in the chess world, the people cheering her on give her a greater dose of confidence, because they recognize her astounding talent and celebrate her—especially because she has overcome discrimination about her age and gender to get to the tournament. Still, Beth is playing the most demanding chess of her life.

As the match starts back up, Luchenko moves the pawn that Beth expected. She is relieved; now she can focus on the primary strategies she considered. She forgets about how tired she is and goes through three strategies, which will use his currently ineffective rook against him—which she had found after hours of study. She hopes that he doesn't see what she's planning, but she knows he had probably analyzed the position as much as she had—and with help.

Again, Beth recognizes the value of study. Only through her rigorous discipline the previous evening has Beth been able to find a strategy that might help her get back on track, showing again how even talented people like Beth need intensive study and work. In fact, Beth has to work harder, because unlike Luchenko, she doesn't have anyone else helping her.

Beth moves her bishop, hoping that she looks like she is attacking his pawn formation, and to her excitement, Luchenko moves his pawn rather than considering other possibilities. She moves her knight; if he takes it, she can trade the rook for her bishop—but she would also get his knight in return. When she looks up at him hesitantly, his appearance is a surprise to her. His hair is mussed, and he has loosened his tie. He thinks for a half hour and finds nothing, and so he takes the knight. Beth wants to shout with joy. The game will be even now.

Beth's studying is now allowing her to put a great chess player in a place of equality. The fact that his appearance is now so ruffled—when usually Beth expresses that she feels uncomfortable in her clothes or in general—illustrates a reversal between them. Beth has confidence and ownership of her own game while she is making her opponent worried.

From that point on, Beth whittles away at Luchenko's pawns while attacking his remaining bishop. She gives 20 of her remaining 25 minutes to work out how to mate him and then makes her move, using his time to figure out every variation on each move he might make. When he finally makes his move, she knows she has him. He seems lost in thought, and then he stands up. He says "excellent," in English, turns over his king, and smiles at her, calling her recovery "amazing."

Just like Luchenko's warm greeting for Beth, here he recognizes her incredible playing, affirming her own belonging in a world that so often discriminates against her. Her victory over Luchenko also illustrates that her hard work, in addition to her intuition, has paid off.


Beth is surprised at Luchenko's lack of rancor, and she tells him how much she admires him. He is astounded that she is 19 and says that he has gone over her games—she may just be the best chess player he has ever played. She stares at him in disbelief. When she leaves, Mr. Booth congratulates her in the lobby. He's holding a newspaper, and Beth manages to translate the caption on a picture of her: "Surprising strength from the U.S."

Beth again feels the sentiment around her shifting. The more she is able to beat the others, the more the coverage and the treatment around her shifts—others stop second-guessing her and start bolstering her confidence by affirming that she does belong there.

The next day, Beth plays Borgov. She is playing the white pieces, and she knows that she must hang on to that advantage for dear life. She will play **the Queen's Gambit**, which she and Benny discussed for hours, months before. When she enters the auditorium, every seat is full, but the crowd falls deadly silent. She realizes, seeing Borgov already seated, that she's not just terrified of chess; she's terrified of him, of his lack of weakness.

The fact that Beth is going to play the Queen's Gambit as her opening to play Borgov reflects Beth's journey in her life and in her chess game. With Benny at the U.S. Open, she wasn't sure if playing it was the best strategy, but now Beth recognizes its power. The fact that it takes its name from the Queen—the most powerful piece on the board—also suggests that Beth has become that powerful piece, taking control of her life and her game.


The match begins, and Beth opens. Everything is silent. Borgov plays the Albin Counter Gambit, which Beth is familiar with. The dance begins, and though Beth still feels like a little girl, her mind is clear. Seven moves in, the game bursts wide open, and Beth plays the best chess she knows, developing her pieces and defending everywhere she can. She sees the whole board in her mind. For hours, she does not look at Borgov or the audience or the referee. Her entire attention is devoted to the game, which is why when Borgov says "adjourn," she is surprised. They have already played 40 moves.

Beth still feels a sense of being a little girl when facing Borgov, despite Luchenko's encouragement and the general growing sensation around her. However, Beth's intense preparation—as well as her innate talent—help her overcome the feeling that she is playing someone with much more command of the game, and Beth is able to focus and hold her own.


In the lobby, Mr. Booth has a half dozen reporters waiting for Beth, even though she's exhausted. She poses for pictures in the lobby and her room. She knows she should be setting up the position for her game and studying it—that Borgov would be in his suite with other players, looking for weaknesses in her position. The reporters ask about Methuen, and Beth—for the first time—tells them honestly that Methuen stopped her from playing chess, that they were cruel on principle. She says that a few were not: Fergussen, and the man who taught her to play, William Shaibel. She says that he was a good player.

Beth's honesty about Methuen's cruelty not only reflects her true experience there—that she felt trapped and unsupported there—but it also highlights the importance of the few mentors and friends she did find there, acknowledging their value in her life. Beth's strong playing also gives her the confidence to speak honestly, disregarding what anyone else thinks.


After they leave, Beth takes a bath and goes over her position. She doesn't know if she can beat Borgov, but she studies as much as she can. The next morning, she wakes at dawn—she has only slept two and a half hours. She keeps going through different scenarios in her head. She eats breakfast and drinks tea, but when she sits down behind the board, all she feels is tense—she cannot come up with anything creative, she can only imagine her response to his threats. This is a passive strategy, and she will lose doing it.

Beth continues to underscore the value of studying, as she knows she must think about potential strategies to face Borgov. And again, chess becomes a metaphor for Beth's life and emergence into adulthood. Beth knows that she has to take control of her game in the same way that she must take control of her life—remaining passive will not help her succeed.


Suddenly, the phone rings, for the first time since Beth has been there. When she picks up, a voice tells her what to do if Borgov moves his knight—it's Benny. Her game was printed in the *Times* and he and a few others have been working on the game for three hours. Benny runs her through different scenarios, and she is thrilled, grateful for their help. After they've finished, Benny gives her a final, "Go beat him."

Benny puts a final point on the value of mentors and friends. Seeing Borgov work through his games with other Russian players, Beth finally recognized what she missed about having others to support her. Here, Benny and the other people he has gathered are able to give her that support and that confidence to "beat him." They come through for her even after she'd dismissed their help, showing their genuine loyalty.

When Beth approaches the building, she sees a display board outside with her game position on it for the crowd who can't get in the building to see. When they see her, they start chanting, "Harmon! Harmon!" Hers is the only game left to finish, and Borgov is already sitting at it when she arrives, at center stage. When the referee makes Borgov's move, Beth sees it was the move she wanted him to make.

As Beth approaches the building, the crowd gathered outside shows how Beth does truly belong in the chess world. After facing so much discrimination, this moment proves that Beth is worth rooting for—giving her the confidence that she can go toe to toe with Borgov.

The next five moves follow a line from Benny, but on the sixth, Borgov makes a surprising move. The call from Benny had covered her fear, but now Borgov has started a line that she has no continuation for, moving his rook to the center of the board. She is alone once more. Beth takes in the board, and she closes her eyes, picturing it in her mind instead. She has the clarity that she had as a child, envisioning the board on her ceiling. There is no clear-cut attack, but she knows Borgov's rook can dominate the board. She can only attack it with her queen, but she doesn't know where to put it. But then, she starts to see something, and she sees how to use her knight instead and sacrifice her queen.

This shows how valuable Benny's help has been to Beth. His strategy might not have panned out completely, but it bolstered her confidence enough to help her get a foothold at the start of this phase of the game. In addition, this passage also emphasizes how Beth has needed both instinct and study to be able to beat Borgov. She closes her eyes and uses the chessboard in her mind—a hallmark of her innate talent, taking her back to her earliest experiences playing chess. But she also has a great deal more strategy that she did back then, thanks to her independent study as well as the input of mentors over many years.


When Beth moves, and Borgov starts the continuation, he offers her a draw. She is stunned; he never offers draws. Her mind tells her to take it, knowing that Borgov is famous for endgames. But a draw is not a win, and she can see Borgov is tired. She refuses. They continue on, exchanging queens and threatening his rook so that he has to move it. But after that, Beth doesn't know what to do. For a moment she feels stuck and unsure. She closes her eyes again, holding her mind in silence as she combs over the board.

While Beth considers taking the draw, the book also illustrates the importance of Beth's ambition. Only in maintaining her drive to win and her confidence in her ability to do so—something that has been so key to Beth's success from the outset—is Beth able to continue. The book thus highlights the importance of drive and self-assuredness in reaching one's goals.


The more mental energy Beth puts into the game, the more she realizes it is hopeless. She cannot figure out a way to queen her pawn, especially before Borgov does. But she sees with a start that he had used his bishop to take her rook, and now the knight can help queen her pawn. Mate would follow in four moves. She looks at the clock. She has 12 minutes left; she has been thinking about the problem for over an hour. If she makes an error, there will be no time for a new strategy. She moves the pawn. Borgov responds, and it starts to go the way that she wants it to. She moves the pieces with deliberate speed, while Borgov takes more time between moves now.

This is the culminating moment of the book for Beth, and the book illustrates how much she has overcome in order to get to this moment of figuring out how to win. Beth has relied on mentors and friends to have the opportunity to play Borgov and to have the stamina to expend this kind of mental energy. She overcame her addiction, keeping her mind clear enough to work through these continuations. But perhaps most importantly, she has fostered her talent with rigorous study and is now able to queen her pawn—exchanging it for the most powerful piece on the board—to take control of the game. The book suggests that Beth has become that powerful figure in the game.

When Beth moves the pawn to the seventh rank and defends with her knight, there is silence. Borgov smiles grimly and says, "It's your game," offering her his king. She takes it in her hand as thunderous applause begins and people start to stand. And then, to her shock, Borgov comes beside her and hugs her warmly to him.

Borgov's smile and warm congratulations in this moment of triumph is a surprise. It suggests that Beth's perception of Borgov, as an authoritarian man who owned the world of chess, was just in her head. He did not assume her to be inferior, as it seems she suspected—she was instead projecting this idea, which then undermined her confidence and her gameplay.

During the party at the embassy, Beth refuses **champagne**, despite everyone drinking and toasting her. Borgov doesn't come. She eats and answers reporters' questions, but she feels weightless, tired, and oddly out of place. She thanks the woman hosting the event, and before she leaves, she says goodbye to Luchenko. He bows and says that all this—the party—is not like chess at all.

Here, Beth truly belongs in the chess world—essentially replacing Borgov at the party as the new center of attention. The book also reinforces a final time how Beth, now an adult, has true control over her life. She avoids the pitfalls of her addiction, having regained some power over her disease. And just like the Apple Pi club party, Beth recognizes that she would be happier on her own, and she achieves that independence by saying goodbye to Luchenko and leaving. After wanting to belong all her life, Beth sees that public recognition isn't what she loves about chess.

As Beth rides back to the embassy with Mr. Booth, she wonders what to do now. She has her trophy and her prize money; maybe she can sleep for a while, eat, and go to bed early. She had beaten the Russian establishment; in two years, she could be playing Borgov for the World Championship. But she doesn't want to think about that. Before arriving at the hotel, Beth sees the park with the chess boards and asks the driver to stop and let her off at the park. She walks up the steps and sits down across from an old man playing alone. She says in Russian, "Would you like to play chess?"

The book's final passage puts a symbolic final point on Beth's story as it reflects her success, confidence, and maturity. Earlier, Beth felt out of place among the Russian men playing in the park. Now, Beth realizes that she belongs anywhere there is chess. Even though Beth invites the man to play in Russian, chess is a universal language that she is fluent in. She is able to find her independence for a final time in the book by simply doing what she wants to do—to play chess.

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