

CHAPTER ONE

Not everyone at Cesar Chavez High School liked the senior class president, Ernesto Sandoval. Most did, but he had enemies too. Rod Garcia, who wanted to be president of the senior class, bitterly resented that Ernesto was president. Clay Aguirre, a rising football star, hated Ernesto for taking Naomi Martinez away from him in their junior year. Clay had abused Naomi, but he refused to own his role in losing the girl he loved.

There were other seniors who resented that Ernesto was smart and good-looking and so well liked. But Ernesto didn't focus on any of that. He had helped to establish several new programs at Chavez, and he was

proud of them: for example, seniors were now mentoring seniors who were having problems academically and/or socially. In another mentoring program, seniors were “adopting” at-risk freshmen.

Ernesto participated in the at-risk mentoring program and had a little “brother” named Richie Loranzo. Richie had no family to care for him because his father shot his mother to death in a horrific domestic abuse incident. Richie lived in foster care, and he desperately needed a friend.

Naomi Martinez was big “sister” to Angel Roma, a girl struggling to help care for a sick grandmother. Abel Ruiz, Ernesto’s best friend, had taken Bobby Padilla, a rebellious runaway, under his wing.

Ernesto never asked Richie for details about what it had been like in his house when his parents were together. He thought if the boy ever wanted to open up about it, he’d listen. All Ernesto wanted to do was give the boy some fun experiences, like when the seniors and the freshmen

they were mentoring went camping in the mountains.

After school on Friday, Ernesto and Naomi took Richie and Angel over to Naomi's house on Bluebird Street. Naomi's brother Orlando performed with a Latin band in Los Angeles, and lately he'd been getting a lot of attention. Orlando was a handsome young man, and his song "Estrellas fugaces" was a hit. That song was chosen as the theme of the homecoming dance at Chavez High, and Orlando surprised and delighted everyone by making a personal appearance at the dance. The girls went a little crazy.

When Ernesto and Orlando met at the Martinez house, Orlando had a guitar in his arms. He led the way out to the magical little garden Felix Martinez had created in the backyard of the house. Everyone in the neighborhood was amazed that Naomi and Orlando's father, who was a gruff person, could have carved elves and made a rock garden. Orlando sat on the stone bench and began to strum his guitar.

Naomi's mother, Linda Martinez, served cookies and punch to Angel Roma and Richie Loranzo, but soon both freshmen followed the sound of guitar music to the garden. When Angel Roma saw Orlando Martinez, she was amazed. "I've seen your videos on YouTube, and I check out your Facebook page all the time. Are you *really* Orlando Martinez?"

Orlando grinned at the dark-haired fourteen-year-old. "Yeah, I guess I am," he said.

"What are you doing *here*?" Richie Loranzo found the voice to ask. "Why would a famous guy be sitting in the backyard of a house in the *barrio*?"

"He's my brother, Richie," Naomi said, laughing. "Orlando is my big brother."

"For real?" Richie gasped, his eyes bigger than Ernesto had ever seen them.

"I think so," Naomi said, laughing again. "I know he was always around when I was a little girl, and my parents told me he was my brother, so I guess he is."

"You're really *hot*," Angel said.

"Hey, thanks," Orlando said. Naomi was

so used to her brother that she never really noticed how good-looking he was with his thick, curly hair, his marvelous dark eyes, and his brilliant smile. “Would you guys like to hear a song?” Orlando asked.

“Yeah!” Angel said. Richie nodded.

Orlando sang a classic Mexican folk song that brought Felix Martinez, his father, outside.

“Sounds great, Orlando,” Mr. Martinez said.

When Orlando finished his song, Naomi said, “Dad, this is Angel Roma, the freshman I am mentoring. And this is Richie Loranzo, Ernie’s freshman.”

Felix Martinez looked at the freshmen and said, “Hi there, kids,” in a half-hearted way. The eyebrow over his left eye went up a little, a sign that all was not right.

Ernesto volunteered to take Angel and Richie home after they had eaten their fill of cookies, but Angel hesitated. “Mr. Martinez,” she said to Orlando, “may I have your autograph?”

“Yeah, sure, *muchacha*,” Orlando said. “Just call me Orlando. The only Mr. Martinez around here is my dad.” Orlando fished out a photo of himself from his wallet and wrote on the back “To *mi amiga* Angel Roma.”

“Wow,” Angel said. “Thanks!”

“Could I have one too?” Richie asked shyly.

“Sure,” Orlando said, and signed the back of the photo “To *mi amigo* Richie Loranzo.”

Ernesto had never seen the two freshmen so excited as they followed him to his Volvo. Ernesto would have been happy about how everything went, but he felt uneasy. There was something wrong with the look on Felix Martinez’s face. Something was bothering him. Ernesto felt bad about leaving Naomi alone with a brewing storm, so after he dropped the kids at their homes, he circled back to Bluebird Street, just to make sure everything was cool.

It wasn’t.

When Ernesto pulled into the driveway of the Martinez house, he heard loud, angry voices. A big argument was underway. Ernesto's suspicions that all was not well were correct.

"Pop," Orlando shouted, "he's just a little kid. He's a fourteen-year-old kid. Why are you blowing a gasket over a poor little *muchacho*?"

"Oh man," Ernesto muttered to himself. He went up the walk and rapped on the door, causing a brief lull in the argument.

"Wonderful," Felix Martinez stormed, "now somebody else is here." When he swung open the door, his face was dark with rage. "Listen, Ernie," he said, "I like you. You're a great kid, but you got yourself and my little girl in one lousy deal playing buddy-buddy to some criminal kids."

"Mr. Martinez," Ernesto said as he came in. "Our at-risk mentoring program is just for seniors to help kids who have challenges. The freshmen aren't criminals."

"Okay, maybe the girl Naomi got stuck

with is okay, I don't know nothin' about that, but this Loranzo kid. You maybe don't know the story there ... his old man—" Felix Martinez stormed.

Before Ernesto had a chance to explain that he did know Richie's background, Orlando shouted in a voice as loud and out of control as his father's: "You're making a *bobo* of yourself like usual, Pop. It's not the *muchacho's* fault that his father took out his mom. That's all the more reason Ernie has got to help the kid. Are you *loco*? What should we do, punish the poor kid because of what happened with his parents? Yeah, his father did an awful thing, and he's in prison for it. Hasn't the *muchacho* been punished enough by what went down?"

Linda Martinez stood in the doorway, her face transfixed with sorrow. Naomi went to her father and put her hand on his arm. "Dad, we *know* what happened to Richie's mother. *We know*. The boy was traumatized. He didn't even want to come to

school anymore. He lives in a foster home, and he's been a total loner. Now his foster parents told us that since Ernie and the rest of us are helping him, he's actually coming alive again. We're helping him heal. Don't you understand, Dad?" she said.

"Please. He don't understand anything," Orlando bellowed. "He never did."

"Listen to the kid," Felix Martinez growled. "The big shot in LA. He ain't got any respect for his old man. His face is all over the Internet, and he thinks he knows it all."

"Ay!" Orlando yelled, striding across the room. "Mom, Naomi, how about if we go down to Hortencia's for tamales? Let the old grizzly bear stew in his own juice. You too, Ernie, come with us."

"Thanks," Ernesto said. "I think I'll hang around here for a while."

With everybody else gone, Ernesto sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs and said, "Mr. Martinez, I understand how you feel. You hear about a terrible crime and

you naturally don't want your kid involved with those people."

Felix Martinez looked at Ernesto and said, "Listen, Ernie, you got a good heart. I know that. I just don't want my little girl mixed up with bad people. That Loranzo guy, the boy's father, he murdered his wife and the kid saw it. It was in all the papers. You were still up in LA then. It was a big deal all over the *barrio*. The poor lady had a big funeral at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. They wouldn't let the father come 'cause he was in jail."

"I understand, Mr. Martinez," Ernesto said, "but the boy is being raised by good people now. I met his foster parents, and they're decent people. We're all trying to help Richie. He lost his mother. He lost all the years of love and support a mother gives. And he lost his father too. He has suffered so much, and he's a good kid. He cares about people. He'll go out of his way to help Angel Roma, the little girl you met. I think we can help Richie grow up to be a