

CHAPTER ONE

Ernesto Sandoval was planning to take his girlfriend, Naomi Martinez, to the movies tonight. He was ready for a great time like they usually had. Today, at Cesar Chavez High School where they were both seniors, Naomi seemed a little upset, but Ernesto was happy to have gotten an A in his AP History class, and he didn't pay much attention to Naomi.

He didn't think anything was seriously wrong. But the moment Naomi got into Ernesto's Volvo, her violet eyes were narrowed with unhappiness and her lower lip was quivering. "Ernie," she cried, "she is *really* coming to live with us! Mom's sister's kid, Carlotta, is coming for sure! Oh, Ernie!"

Ernesto did not know much about Naomi's cousin Carlotta Valencia, except that her aunt was having a hard time with her seventeen-year-old daughter. The Valencias lived out of town, some hundred or so miles north. Other than a few miserable visits during the year, Carlotta was not a major problem.

"So," Ernesto said as he drove, "what happened?"

"Carlotta and her mother had this terrible blowup, and Aunt Mia and Uncle Franco just lost it. They can't take her anymore. They've been threatening to send her down to our house, but the last fight did it. Aunt Mia begged Mom to let Carlotta move down here with us and finish her senior year at Chavez, and you know my mother. Naturally, Dad is totally against it, and I'm just sick about it. Dad goes, 'Like we need this little juvenile delinquent living with us,' but Mom begged and Dad gave in. It's only until June, until she graduates, but oh, Ernie ..." Naomi groaned.

“Uh, I’m sorry, Naomi,” Ernesto said. Naomi had mentioned Carlotta before, but not often. He knew she didn’t like her cousin, but he was vague on the details.

“She’s such a jerk, Ernie,” Naomi said. “I’ve only been with her a few times when we went up there to visit or she came down. I was so happy when it was over. Aunt Mia and Uncle Franco have two other kids, nice little girls. I’d love to have Maggie and Ali here instead of her.”

Naomi Martinez usually got along with everyone, and Ernesto was really surprised by the depth of her unhappiness.

“That bad, huh?” Ernesto said. He’d seen Carlotta Valencia only once when she had been visiting the Martinez house last summer. Ernesto remembered it was right after Naomi’s father, Felix, bought his pit bull, Brutus. Naomi’s mother, Linda, was already terrified of the dog. It was a bad time for the Martinez family anyway, and Carlotta had made matters worse.

Carlotta kept insulting Mr. Martinez

that he was a cruel monster by forcing his wife to put up with a vicious, dangerous dog like Brutus. Brutus was actually a meek, lovable creature, and in time Linda Martinez loved him as much as the rest of the family. But Carlotta was determined to drive a wedge between Uncle Felix and Aunt Linda.

Ernesto remembered one night vividly. Felix Martinez stepped outside and said to Ernesto, "You know, Ernie, maybe I could just sic Brutus on the kid. You think that'd be okay if I got him to like rip her jeans, something like that, Ernie? Just to get rid of her, you know? I can't take much more."

Ernesto had vigorously advised against that course of action. But recalling the bitter feelings between Felix Martinez and Carlotta, Ernesto could hardly believe the man would consent to her coming to their home.

"Dad's gonna put her in the back bedroom, Zack's old room," Naomi said. "It's the smallest bedroom, and the heater

doesn't work good. It's kind of grungy. Mom pleaded with Dad to get a new mattress for the bed because it's kind of lumpy, but Dad said it was good enough for Carlotta. Dad told Mom if she didn't stop making 'stupid suggestions' like getting a new mattress, he'd make Carlotta sleep on the porch with Brutus."

"Oh, brother," Ernesto said. He was beginning to think this date with Naomi was not going to be as much fun as he hoped.

"Carlotta is so boy crazy," Naomi continued bitterly. "She flirts with every guy she comes into contact with. She's just so brazen too. She wears her jeans like she's been poured into them. She weighs about fifteen pounds more than me, and we're the same height, but she insists on wearing the same size I do. She just looks slutty. She'll be wanting to borrow all my nice things, but I won't let her."

Ernesto was shocked. He loved Naomi with all his heart, but she was sounding like a really nasty person tonight.

Naomi cheerfully lent her sweaters to her friends Carmen, Mona Lisa, Yvette, almost anybody. Naomi was a beautiful girl who was more compassionate than almost anybody Ernesto knew. She was so bighearted she was willing to remove a cherished sweater and give it to a girl on the street who seemed cold. Now she actually seemed selfish and spiteful.

“I’m going to put a special lock on my closet so she can’t get in, *ever*,” Naomi said.

“That’s, uh ... a good idea,” Ernesto said, driving slowly through the heavy traffic on their way to the multiscreen theater. “Head off trouble before ... you know ... it starts.” Ernesto was a good driver in his old Volvo, and he was proud of the fact that he had never gotten a ticket or been in an accident. The dents in the Volvo’s fenders were inflicted by the previous owner.

“It’s not that Aunt Mia and Uncle Franco are poor, Ernie. No way, Uncle Franco makes more money than Dad. He’s a financial advisor. And Aunt Mia has these

phony house parties where she trots out all these useless beauty products. Silly women think they're there to drink coffee and eat dainty little cookies, and they end up being pressured to buy some sixty-dollar bottle of cream supposedly guaranteed to make a sixty-year-old woman look twenty in six weeks. Lotta has more clothes than me, and expensive ones too. The only reason she doesn't look good in her clothes is that she buys two sizes too small," Naomi said.

"Oh man," Ernesto thought to himself. "This is not looking good. Where is my sweet, cheerful babe?" He sighed, then said, "You know, Naomi, maybe it won't work out, and she'll go home early. A lot of parents and kids fight, and Carlotta might want to split."

"Oh no," Naomi said bitterly through clenched teeth. "We're stuck with her until June. For years, her parents have been holding us, especially Dad, over her head. One more misstep and she gets the ultimate punishment—living with the Martinez

family. The parents have lost control of her. When she went off the road this last time, it was over. We're the Devil's Island on Bluebird Street, and she's been condemned. Lotta cheated on her tests at that ritzy private school she goes to, and when the principal caught her, she called her 'a crazy old crone' right to her face. That did it. She was expelled. Now the boom has been lowered, and we're trapped."

"I hope at least you guys are getting paid for having her," Ernesto said, searching for a parking place in the underground lot.

"Oh, generously, but it's not worth it. They said they'd write a check if we had to spend extra. The Valencias are so happy to be getting rid of her that money is no object," Naomi said.

"Well, that's good anyway," Ernesto sighed. The movie was a clever animated feature that appealed to teens and adults. It was supposed to be hilarious. Ernesto was praying that it was so funny Naomi would forget her cousin, at least for a little while.

As they walked toward the theater, Naomi said, "I bet you think I'm a horrible person, Ernie. You must think I've been hiding all these dark impulses beneath my phony exterior, and Lotta coming has exposed me for what I am."

Ernesto stopped walking, turned, and grasped Naomi's shoulders firmly. He kissed her on her full, sweet lips.

"Babe, I think you're wonderful. Don't you dare say anything against the girl I love. There's not a phony bone in your body. You obviously have a lot of history with this girl, and you dread her coming to your house and disrupting everything. It'd be different if she was staying for the weekend, but this is long term. I don't blame you for being upset. It would be like Clay Aguirre moving into our little house on Wren Street. I'd run away from home."

Clay Aguirre and Naomi once dated, but when he abused her, she became Ernesto's girlfriend. Ernesto could not think of anyone he would rather avoid than Clay Aguirre.

He was arrogant, cruel, inconsiderate, and heartless, at least in Ernesto's opinion.

Naomi smiled. "Thanks for being so understanding, Ernie. Like I didn't know you would be! You're the only human being in the world I can safely dump on. Mom would start bawling, and Dad would go off the wall. If he knew how I really felt, he'd want me to help him barricade the house and keep Carlotta out when she appears. Dad is so angry about this that he's ready to explode, and all he needs is to know I feel the same way. Poor Mom wants to help her sister out with the monster. Poor Mom, it'd break her heart if we refused Carlotta. I can't pile on Mom like that."

"When is she coming?" Ernesto asked as they bought popcorn in the lobby of the theater.

"This weekend, Saturday morning," Naomi said with a shudder. "Her parents are bringing her down. Aunt Mia said she packed ten suitcases for her. *Ten suitcases!*"

The movie was very entertaining, and