

## CHAPTER ONE

Wow,” Ernesto Sandoval said to his girlfriend, Naomi Martinez. “I saw a couple cars on Sunday that looked really good. I want to replace the Volvo before graduation. People still think I borrowed the Volvo from my grandpa or something. I want to be driving around the *barrio* in a car with some flash.”

“Poor Viola,” Naomi said. “She’s served you so well. Now to be discarded like a pair of old socks.”

“Stop with the Viola stuff, Naomi,” Ernesto groaned. “It’s just an old car. It’s not a pet or anything.”

A few months ago when Ernesto was starting to seriously think about replacing

the Volvo, Naomi named the car Viola. She laid a guilt trip on Ernesto. Naomi loved Ernesto very much, and she felt good about him driving around in a safe, reliable car.

“I saw this sporty Ford Focus that I liked a lot, and then a silver Corolla caught my eye,” Ernesto said. “I’ve saved enough money for a good down payment so my monthlies won’t be too big a burden. With my job at Hortencia’s, I’m getting a lot of tips too. I don’t expect to get anything for the Volvo. It’s too old, and those dents in the back fenders don’t look good. They were there when I bought the car, but I was so anxious for wheels I didn’t care.”

“Oh, so you’re not even going to trade her in. She goes directly to the recycler who’ll crush her,” Naomi said.

“Naomi, *what are you doing to me?*” Ernesto cried, throwing up his hands. “You’re making me out to be some kind of a heartless monster for wanting to get a better car. Babe, I’m a young guy. I’m sick of driving around in an old Volvo and having

dudes laughing at me. They look over and expect to see some seventy-five-year-old guy with a baseball cap, and instead they see me and start laughing.”

“I know,” Naomi said, “but she’s been faithful.” Naomi was a beautiful girl with tawny skin and large expressive violet eyes. Now her eyes were even larger and very sad. Ever since Ernesto first saw the girl in the middle of his junior year at Cesar Chavez High School, those eyes held power over him.

“Okay,” Ernesto relented, “I’ll give the Volvo to one of those charities that take cars. It’ll be better than the recycler, right? Okay, Naomi?”

Ernesto felt like an idiot begging his girlfriend to give permission for him to get rid of his old car.

“Well, at least she’d have a good home,” Naomi said.

“Babe, listen. Do me a favor, will you? Stop calling the Volvo ‘she.’ It’s a car. It’s made of steel and rubber, aluminum, plastic,

whatever. It has no sex. It's not a girl," Ernesto pleaded.

"I suppose after you get rid of her, we'll never see her again," Naomi said, ignoring Ernesto's request.

Ernesto clutched his head, "Naomi, I love you with all my heart, but you're driving me crazy, you know?" he said.

Naomi turned, her magnificent eyes suddenly brightening. "Ernie, I have an idea. We could find her a good home right here in the *barrio*. If you were going to give her to a charity anyway, why not give her to a friend who needs a car and can't afford one? Then we'll still see her from time to time," she said.

"Oh man," Ernesto said, "I can imagine a line forming to get that car. All my homies will be wanting it. They'll be fighting for the Volvo. Paul Morales will ditch his hot Jaguar. Abel Ruiz will dump his cool Jetta. They'll all be vying for old Viola! Oh man. Now you got me doing it too, calling her Viola!"

Naomi laid her soft little hand on Ernesto's bare arm, and, as usual, it sent electric goose bumps through his body. He didn't want to admit it, even to himself, but the girl had him wrapped around her little finger.

"Babe," Naomi said, "leave it to me. I'll find a good home for Viola."

Ernesto looked over at Naomi and smiled. "You do that, Naomi, and meantime, I'm going down to the used car lots this weekend with my homies to scout for cars. I feel like a kid in a candy store. For the first time since I've been going to Chavez, I'll be tooling around in a new set of sporty wheels."

On the next weekend, Ernesto enlisted the help of three friends. Paul Morales, who managed an electronics store, Abel Ruiz who was Ernesto's first friend when he arrived last year at Chavez, and Julio Avila, the best runner on the Chavez Cougar track team.

They all piled into the Volvo on the car hunting expedition.

*"I wonder if she knows,"* Julio said softly. He had overheard Naomi humanizing the Volvo and calling it Viola. Now Julio was yanking Ernesto's chain. "I wonder if she knows this might be her last ride."

"What?" Ernesto asked.

"Viola," Julio said. "She must know you're plotting to get rid of her."

"Knock it off, man," Ernesto said grimly.

"Sure she knows," Paul Morales said. "Chicks know when you're getting tired of them and you're getting ready to dump them."

"Dude, the Volvo is not a chick," Ernesto growled.

Abel laughed. "We're just having fun, man. It's kinda cute how Naomi has developed a love for this car. It's like an extension of her love for you, man. It's such a dorky car, but she's right. It's safe and reliable, and she feels good about you driving it. I

love my Jetta, but I've been in the garage already a couple times with big bills."

"My old Jag is well-known at the local garage too," Paul admitted.

"Well, I'm going to get a really good used car. Naomi is gonna try to give the Volvo to someone who needs a car in the *barrio*. So it's a win-win situation. I don't think anybody will want the Volvo, so then I'll just donate it to charity."

"Man," Paul Morales said, "I bet if Viola could talk, she'd have some juicy tales to tell about this dude and his chick getting hot and heavy."

"Yeah," Julio said. "Viola has seen it all."

"How would you guys like to get out and walk home?" Ernesto said.

The three boys roared with laughter.

They pulled into a well-stocked used car lot, and Ernesto immediately spotted a Chevy Astro. "Hey, look at the cool van. Roomy too. I wouldn't have to borrow Cruz's hideous van with all the crazy

graffiti on it all the time. I've been stopped by the cops twice in that thing."

"Lucky for you Cruz isn't here to hear that, homie," Paul said.

"Look," Abel said, "there's a Chrysler Voyager. It says it can hold seven passengers, and it's only got fifty thousand miles. What a deal."

A handsome man about thirty-five with a thin mustache came walking over. Ernesto just noticed that the car lot was called Vanning with Vann. This guy's name was probably Vann, and all his vehicles were vans. "Hi, boys," he said, "see anything you like? They're all in tip-top shape. We do thorough inspections of every van before we put them out for sale." He held out his hand and said, "I'm Jim Vann."

Ernesto was distracted when a Ford Aerostar van came speeding onto the lot. An angry-looking young man in his twenties was driving it. He jumped from the Aerostar and yelled at Jim Vann, "You ripped me off on this piece of junk, man. I want my money



back. I've had this junker for two weeks, and it's been in the garage five times. The transmission is shot, the water pump is leaking."

"Look," Jim Vann said in a reasonably calm voice, "it's a fifteen-year-old van, and you paid less than two thousand. What did you expect?"

The young man came closer. The veins were bulging in his neck. "You crook, why would I want to pay two thousand for a van that doesn't run! I want my money back, and I want it now!"

Ernesto looked at Abel, Paul, and Julio. This was not a good introduction to Vanning with Vann.

Jim Vann turned to the four boys, a smile on his face, "This gentleman is a psycho. I told him when he bought the van that it needed a little work, and he said that was fine, that his friends and he were good at fixing cars," he said.

"You never told me the whole engine was shot! You just said it needed a new battery and a little tweaking," the outraged

customer said. "Are you gonna give me my money back or do I get the cops?"

Jim Vann laughed. "Do you see what it says on my sign? I guarantee your money back if you're not satisfied, but you must return the vehicle in ten days. After that, you're on your own. You've had the car for two weeks, so now it's your problem, man. You call all the cops you want, I'm on solid legal ground."

"Four days after I bought the van, I called you, Vann. I left messages. You never answered. You're not getting away with this, you creep." The young man began advancing on the car dealer. "I been fighting a war in Afghanistan to save your freedom, jerk. I got a wife and two babies, and if I haven't got reliable transportation, I'll lose my job! You give me my money back, or I swear I'll take it out on your hide." He grabbed Vann's shirtfront and began shaking him.

Jim Vann turned pale with terror. "Call nine-one-one," he gasped to Ernesto.