

CHAPTER ONE

Naomi Martinez lay on the grass in the small garden in their backyard on Bluebird Street. Her father, Felix Martinez, had designed it. Mr. Martinez was a tough, often harsh man. He operated heavy equipment for a construction company. He had three sons—Orlando, Manny, and Zack. At one time, he had driven them all off. But now the boys were speaking to him again, thanks to Naomi and her boyfriend, Ernesto Sandoval.

Ernesto sat on a stone bench in the garden. He was looking at an endearing little elf that Felix Martinez had carved. The pretty little garden, filled with elves and flowers, was nothing like Mr. Martinez's personality.

“That was so horrible last night,” Naomi remarked, turning to look at Ernesto. “That kid getting shot. I woke up and heard sirens, and I just got sick.”

“Yeah,” Ernesto responded. “Coach Muñoz is counting on Julio Avila and me to lead the track team to victory. I’ve got to get in some running. I got rusty over the summer. I get in my best running at night. Now Mom is giving me a hard time about that.”

“What about during the day?” Naomi asked.

“I’m at school, and I got so much work with the AP History. Then I go to work. I told Mom not to worry. The guy who was shot caught a random bullet. Some idiot was doing target practice or something, and the kid got in the way,” Ernesto said. “It’s not like there’s a crazy sniper loose in the *barrio*.”

“We hope,” Naomi sighed, glancing up at the clouds. They were so beautiful today. One minute they were like gossamer and the next minute like swollen bags

of thunder and lightning. Like people. Always changing. Unpredictable. “Lucky the boy just got a bullet in the leg. It could have been so much worse. What if he’d been hit in the head?” Naomi shuddered.

“Yeah,” Ernesto agreed. “It had to be some fool, maybe reloading a gun or something. I figure the dude got rid of the gun when he realized what happened. He’ll probably never shoot again. But he’s too scared to come forward and own up to what he did. He’s probably shaking in his boots. He’s afraid the cops are gonna knock on his door any day now.”

“The boy who got shot,” Naomi commented, “his name is Alex Acosta. I don’t know him, but Carmen Ibarra said her father knows the family. She said they’re nice people. Alex goes to the community college. He’s not a gangbanger or anything. No drugs. When he was shot, the family just went into shock.”

“I’m just hoping it blows over,” Ernesto said. “I need to go running again. If I don’t

get up some speed before the next meet, I won't be much good to Coach Muñoz. And what really sticks in my craw is Rod Garcia being on the team. He didn't do much running until this year. That was right after I beat him in the senior class president election. I think he joined the team just so he could stick it to me. Ever since I was elected senior class president over him, he tries to make me look bad any chance he gets."

"That is so childish," Naomi replied.

"Yeah, he never misses a senior class meeting," Ernesto added. "He's always raising his hand and offering some lame advice or criticizing what we're doing. He was so sure he was gonna win the election. Then this upstart—me—comes down from Los Angeles and takes it away from him." Ernesto shook his head.

"Ernie," Naomi said, "you're doing such a great job for the seniors. That *compañeros* program where the kids help each other out, it's wonderful. School spirit is really up this year. It's like everybody isn't

just in it for themselves. We all feel like we're making it to the finish line together."

"I wish Rod could see it that way," Ernesto sighed. "People are strange."

At Cesar Chavez High School the next day, Ernesto ran into another member of the Cougars track team, Jorge Aguilar. He was a good runner, but he never had the speed of either Ernesto or Julio Avila.

"Hey, Jorge," Ernesto called, "you get in much practice? The next track meet will be coming up before we know it. I lost a lot of speed over the summer. I'm trying to do stretching exercises and run a lot to get my mojo back."

Jorge shrugged. "I got work and school. I'm thinking about dropping track. It's just not worth it to me," he replied.

"Sorry to hear that, man," Ernesto said. He looked more closely at his friend. Jorge was a nice kid. But last summer he was hanging out with some older guys, and they were all smoking weed. Ernesto

heard about it from Paul Morales. Paul was manager of an electronics store, but he had a lot of connections to wannabe gang-bangers. He knew what was going on in the *barrio*.

“Jorge said he didn’t like the stuff, and it was a one-time thing,” Paul had told Ernesto. “But that’s what most of them say.”

“You doing okay, Jorge?” Ernesto asked. “You look kind of wasted.”

“I’m fine,” Jorge replied.

“Look, if you need help with any of your classes,” Ernesto told him, “you know where to go. We’re all in the home stretch now, man. We’re heading for that graduation day. We don’t want to lose anybody now.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jorge said. He spotted his close friend, Eddie Gonzales, and he walked toward him.

“Jorge, don’t quit the track team until you’ve really thought about it, dude,” Ernesto called to him. “It’s great exercise, homie, and we all like you. It won’t be

the same with the Cougars if you're not with us."

Jorge turned briefly and gave Ernesto a thin smile. "Thanks, man," he responded.

That night, Ernesto worked his shift at the pizza shop. When it was over, he jumped into his old Volvo and drove home. Both his parents were in the living room watching the ten o'clock local news.

"Something going on?" Ernesto asked, glancing at the screen. It didn't look like anything exciting.

"No," Maria Sandoval, Ernesto's mother answered. "We both needed to take a break before we went to bed."

Ernesto didn't believe his mother. Since that dude got shot, they worried when Ernesto wasn't home at night. "You know, you guys," Ernesto commented, "when I drove home tonight, the streets were totally empty. No gangbangers hanging around. The police did those gang sweeps last month, and it's gotten a lot better. I think it's pretty safe now to do

a little running. I need to be ready for the meet.”

Mom frowned. “Gangbangers are like cockroaches,” she declared. “You don’t know how many of them are hiding in dark corners until you shine a light. Then there’s a million of them crawling around. Just because you don’t see them doesn’t mean they’re not there.”

“Yeah,” Luis Sandoval, Ernesto’s father, agreed. Mr. Sandoval was a teacher at Cesar Chavez High. “The police haven’t gotten the guy who shot Alex Acosta yet.” Ernesto’s father also taught part-time at the community college. Alex was in his American history class.

“I don’t know when Alex will be able to come back to school,” Mr. Sandoval went on. “He’s a good student. Luckily the bullet went through the leg without major damage. He’ll heal quickly. But the psychological damage, that’s a whole other thing. Once you get shot like that, you’re not the

same. I can't help but think the gangs had something to do with it."

"Honey," Mom said, "we'd just feel better if you didn't jog at night. I mean at least not until they find out who shot that boy on Washington Street."

"Okay, Mom," Ernesto responded. "Maybe some jerk'll come forward and admit he was shooting at a stray cat or something. Maybe the kid just got in the way."

"Discharging a firearm is a serious crime," Ernesto's father remarked. "I'm not so sure any run-of-the-mill guy would be doing something like that."

Luis Sandoval was a much-loved history teacher at Chavez. He not only ran exciting classes but showed a real interest in his students. And he also went out of his way to search out dropouts and try to bring them back to school. He often walked to the park in the evenings and joined kids in basketball games. He became one of the players and gained the confidence of the boys.