

CHAPTER ONE

Abel!” Liza Ruiz, Abel’s mother, cried in an exasperated voice. “*What on earth is wrong with you?* You’re doing good in your senior year at school. I see your report cards. You’re making money at the doughnut shop. You’re even working part-time at that ritzy seafood place, the Sting Ray, and making money there. You have good friends. You have a family that loves you. Why are you acting like someone on death row waiting to be executed?”

Abel Ruiz continued texting, ignoring his mother. At one time in his life, his mother had frightened him. He struggled for her approval. She compared him unfavorably with his older brother, Tomás, who

was away at college. Tomás was handsome, brilliant, and charming. Abel was none of these. But finally Abel had reached the point of no longer needing his mother's approval.

"Abel!" Sal Ruiz, Abel's father, barked at him. Sal Ruiz was a landscaper, and he also failed to live up to Liza Ruiz's expectations. "Answer your mother," his father said. "She's worried about you. We both are."

"I'm fine," Abel snapped. All through Abel's life, his home life was the same. Mom was the boss. She ruled everyone—Tomás, Abel, and Penelope, who was now fourteen. But more than anyone else, she ruled Dad. In her eyes, Dad was the chronic loser who couldn't support his family. Mom had to implore her cousin, who was big in the landscaping business, to give Sal Ruiz a job. Now Sal worked every day at backbreaking tasks, doing grunt work. To Abel, he was a poor mule with a swayback who endured a life of grinding toil with no hope for anything better.

“Sal,” Mom commented, turning to her husband. “Tomás was never moody. He was always such a cheerful boy. He was always such a joy to be around. Wasn’t he a joy to be around?”

“A joy,” Dad agreed. He agreed with everything his wife said.

“Even when Tomás had problems, he would discuss them with us,” Mom recalled fondly.

“Abel, what is wrong?” Liza Ruiz demanded, lasering in on her son again. “Stop that texting! Are you insane? That’s all you ever do around here. I would like to smash that cell phone. You text every minute of the day. It’s like we didn’t exist, your father and me.”

The woman’s face then hardened, and a knowing gleam crept into her eyes. “It’s that girl, isn’t it? It’s that Claudia Villa. I never liked that girl, not from the first moment you took up with her. Stuck-up snotty girl from that private school. Cesar Chavez High School wasn’t good enough for her,

don't you know. She's what's making you depressed, isn't she? It has to be her. My mother always said a woman can make or break a man. I believe that. Isn't that true, Sal?"

"Yes, very true," Dad replied, looking as though he wanted to say more. But he just looked sad. Abel could tell what he was thinking, though. The poor man would never put his bitter thoughts into words.

"It's got nothing to do with Claudia," Abel lied.

Penelope, who was a freshman at Chavez, came into the room and looked at her brother. Abel and his sister had never gotten along well, but they usually tolerated one another. In Abel's mind, Penelope was always sort of obnoxious, though he did admire the fact that she occasionally rebelled against Mom. Though Penelope was nicely built, she was a little plump. So whenever she ate a chocolate bar or a cookie, Mom looked stricken. Sometimes Penelope stuffed her face with sweets, just to stick

it to her mother. That amused Abel. Now, however, Penelope said the wrong thing.

“I bet Claudia Villa has ditched you for somebody else, Abel,” she declared. “And that’s why you’re moping around.”

“Mind your own business, *gorda!*” Abel retaliated.

“I’m not fat,” Penelope screamed, hurling a magazine at Abel. It almost knocked the cell phone out of his hand.

“Stop it!” Mom shrieked. “I will not have my children fighting!”

“I’m not a child,” Abel fumed. “I’m almost a man. After I finish high school, I’m gonna move as far from here as I can.” Abel stalked off to his room and loudly slammed the door behind him.

Alone in his room, Abel plopped down on his bed. He was fuming. What made him so mad was that his mother and his nosy little sister had gotten it right. It *was* about Claudia. A few weeks ago, everything was fine in Abel’s life, at least as fine as it could ever be for him. He wasn’t a genius, but he

was making decent grades in his classes. He was even making a solid C in his worst class, English lit. He stood a chance of getting an A in math. He was sure he'd nailed an A in science.

Then, a little over a week ago, Abel asked Claudia to the movies that Friday night. She had really wanted to see the movie, one of those chick flicks she loved. Abel endured them just to please her. Claudia gave Abel some lame excuse about why she couldn't go. She mumbled something about a sick aunt. Abel was suspicious right away. He and Claudia had been close for quite a while now, and he could read her pretty well. When she was lying, she got a funny look in her eyes. He didn't think she had a sick aunt.

Abel really loved Claudia. She was his first real girlfriend, and she made a huge difference in his life. Just about every morning when he woke up, thinking about her gave him joy. He couldn't bear the thought that she might be going from his life.

So on Friday night, Abel did something that he hated himself for. What he did was low and sneaky, but he couldn't stop himself. Abel drove over to Claudia's house and parked on the next street. He left the car and hid behind a row of heavy shrubs across the street from Claudia's house. Then he watched. He had a gut-wrenching fear that some dude would pull up in a nice car, and he and Claudia would go off together.

It happened at seven. A gray Ford Ranger pulled into Claudia's driveway. She came running out. She looked fabulous in distressed jeans. She was wearing that lime green pullover she looked so good in. Abel had told her several times how hot the sweater made her look.

Claudia got into the truck, and away they went.

Abel's heart sank when he got a look at the guy. He had chiseled features and long curly hair. He looked like a hunk. Abel figured he was a student at that private boys

school. Social events at both schools were held together. Claudia probably met him at a dance run by both schools.

Abel had hurried back to his car, hurt and confused. He was ashamed of spying on Claudia, but his gut feeling had been right. She was cheating on him. No, he told himself sternly. You couldn't call it cheating. They were in high school. They didn't have a commitment. Still, Abel thought Claudia was *his* girl.

At the doughnut shop the next Monday, Claudia was as nice and friendly with Abel as she always was. They worked together dishing out chocolate, powdered, and multicolored sprinkle doughnuts. Claudia acted as if nothing was wrong, but, for Abel, *everything* was wrong.

“Are you okay, Abel?” Claudia asked him at quitting time.

“Yeah,” Abel replied, avoiding looking her in the eye.

“You don’t act like yourself,” Claudia commented. “You’re not sick or anything, are you?”

Abel was confused all over again. She was acting as if they were still close, as if she *cared* about him. Maybe the dude in the Ranger was a cousin, he thought. Maybe he was getting all upset over nothing.

Or was she worried that Abel might be on to her? Did she think he’d found out about her and she didn’t know how to handle it? Was that what brought worry into her eyes?

“I’m okay,” Abel mumbled. “Lotta homework and stuff.”

Abel’s boss at Elena’s Donut Shop was Elena’s brother, Hector Ponce. He was a lot easier to work for than Elena had been. He was an easygoing guy, and he gave nice raises to good employees. And normally both Claudia and Abel were dependable workers.

But during the past week, Abel had been short with a few customers. Worrying