

CHAPTER ONE

The United States was well established as a world power in the early twentieth century. It was then that President Franklin Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating peace between Russia and Japan in 1905.” Mr. Jesse Davila, senior history teacher at Cesar Chavez High School, was lecturing.

The class broke out into snickers and, in a few cases, outright laughter.

Ernesto Sandoval, senior class president, winced as Rod Garcia broke out into loud guffaws. Then Garcia declared loudly enough for the teacher to hear, “Dementia strikes again.” Rod’s friend, Clay Aguirre, chuckled loudly.

Mr. Davila looked mortified. “Did I say *Franklin* Roosevelt? I’m sorry, I meant Theodore Roosevelt, of course.” Poor Mr. Davila, Ernesto thought. He was a good teacher, but he was dealing with problems at home. Misspeaking was no big deal to Ernesto, but some students in the class were clearly out to get the teacher. The class continued without Mr. Davila making another gaffe.

However, the teacher wasn’t himself lately. Somebody had told Ernesto that Mr. Davila’s wife had Parkinson’s disease. Also, his daughter and her child, a freshman at Chavez, were living with them. Caring for the grandchild, Angel Roma, was largely in the hands of Mr. Davila. Ernesto thought the poor man had good reason to be distracted sometimes. Ernesto couldn’t understand why the kids couldn’t cut Mr. Davila some slack. Why couldn’t they show some compassion for his troubles?

After class, a little knot of students continued to discuss Mr. Davila. Rod and

Clay led the discussion. They were saying that the teacher was obviously too old to be at Chavez High and that he should retire. Ernesto, his girlfriend, and his best friend got near the group. They could hear what was being said.

“He’s gotta be in his middle sixties,” Rod Garcia declared. “That’s *old*.” Rod had run for senior class president, and Ernesto had beaten him. Ever since then, Rod hated Ernesto. Rod felt the office was his because he had headed so many boring clubs during his first three years at Chavez. Then, last year, Ernesto Sandoval, an outsider from Los Angeles, joined the student body as a junior and walked off with the position. Rod considered Ernesto a thief who took what was rightfully his.

“Yeah,” Clay Aguirre agreed. “The old guy isn’t fit to teach anymore. He should be fired. We deserve better.”

Naomi Martinez, Ernesto’s girlfriend, chimed in. “That’s so unfair, you guys. Mr. Davila is an excellent teacher. This is

my favorite class this year. Anybody can make a mistake.”

Clay Aguirre glared at Naomi. She was probably the most beautiful senior at Chavez, and she had dated Clay for a long time. But Clay had treated Naomi rudely, and one day he went too far. He slapped her in the face, leaving a bad bruise. That was the end of their relationship. Soon after that, she and Ernesto started dating. Clay hated Ernesto for that. Clay and Rod were united in their hatred of Ernesto Sandoval. They both felt he had taken something precious from them.

Abel Ruiz, Ernesto’s best friend, was the first guy to befriend Ernesto when he came on campus last year. Abel spoke up. “You guys are nuts. Mr. Davila’s a sharp guy. He’s made American foreign policy clearer to me than any teacher ever.”

“But he *is* awfully old,” a girl piped up. “He’s the age of my grandfather!”

“So what?” Ernesto said. “Any of you know how old Benjamin Franklin was

when he helped draft the Declaration of Independence? He was seventy. And when he took part in the Constitutional Convention, he was eighty-one. I wrote a paper on him when I was a freshman. I was blown away by what this guy did in his old age.”

“You’re such a know-it-all, Sandoval,” Rod griped bitterly.

Naomi grinned at Ernesto and winked.

Ernesto, Abel, and Naomi walked on toward the vending machine before going to their next classes.

“Sometimes I think there are people with no hearts at all,” Naomi commented. She pondered the peaches and pears in the machine’s little windows. “Can’t they have a little pity for a good man like Mr. Davila who makes a little slip? We *all* make mistakes, but they pounce on him like wolves.”

She slipped coins into the slot, chose the peach, and spoke again. “I’m so ashamed of the fact that I actually used to date Clay! What was I thinking? What a mush head I was. And he’d make me write papers

for him and get mad when I wasn't quick enough."

Abel got an orange drink, and Ernesto got a box of raisins.

"You know what really bothers me?" Ernesto remarked. "All that rotten stuff that those jerks text and tweet about Mr. Davila, it's gonna get back to the administration. Mrs. Sanchez sitting there in the principal's office, she's gotta know about it. I love my iPhone and Facebook, but all that can be a weapon against somebody you're out to get. In five seconds, you can ruin a reputation."

Abel Ruiz used to be an average student without any big dreams in life. Then Ernesto encouraged him to develop his talent for cooking. Now Abel was making fabulous dinners for his friends and worked as a junior chef at the Sting Ray, a ritzy seafood restaurant. He planned to go to culinary school after graduating from Chavez.

When Ernesto started a program at Chavez where seniors paired up with at-risk freshmen, Abel was the first to sign up.

Abel's freshman little brother was Bobby Padilla. Bobby was a kid who'd run away from home and was a handful for his single mother.

"How's it going with Bobby?" Ernesto asked as he popped raisins into his mouth.

"Pretty good," Abel replied. "He's a nice kid. I think I'm enjoyin' it as much as him. Y'know, all my life I lived in the shadow of my big brother. Oh yeah, my brilliant, wonderful big brother, Tomás. But now, at last, I'm the big brother to a little guy who actually looks up to me. I'm tellin' you, dude, it's a trip." Abel took a slug his orange drink.

"I like my little freshman girl too, Angel Roma," Naomi added.

"Is she an angel?" Ernesto asked wryly.

"Not really," Naomi admitted. "But then neither am I. She has some problems at home. You know her mom's Mr. Davila's daughter, and there are problems there. But she seems to relate to me. Your idea for this senior-freshman deal is really good, Ernie.

Like so many kids drop out of Chavez in the tenth grade. If we can keep them interested through that time, maybe they'd make it to graduation."

Later that day, Ernesto, Naomi, Abel, and his on-and-off girlfriend, Bianca Marquez were sitting together at lunchtime. They were eating what they had brought from home. Eating at the cafeteria was getting too expensive.

"Look!" Bianca announced. "Abel made my lunch today!"

"Wow," Ernesto remarked.

"Yeah, he made me these ham and cheese *tortilla* roll-ups," Bianca explained. "Abel kept the filling in his little cooler, and it's all fresh. I shouldn't be eating so much, but it looks so good." Although she was too thin, she thought she was overweight.

"I've got a crummy cheese sandwich with really ugly yellow mustard," Naomi complained. "I think the bread is kinda stale too. Ernie, I may have to drop you as a boyfriend and steal Abel from Bianca."

“You guys,” Abel said, “I got enough stuff for two more *tortilla* roll-ups. Dump your sandwiches in the trash.”

“He’s a saint!” Naomi declared.

“Absolutely,” Ernesto agreed.

Within a minute or so, they each had a freshly made *tortilla* roll-up.

“Know what?” Bianca said. “I got four text messages about a Mr. Davila. I don’t have him in class. Do you guys know him?”

“Yes,” Ernesto replied. “We have him in United States as a World Power.”

“You poor things!” Bianca said, rolling her eyes. “All those text messages say he’s an awful teacher. He’s so senile he doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“That’s a lie!” Ernesto objected. “You’re getting those text messages from some creeps who’re out to make Mr. Davila look bad. He’s a good teacher.”

“What have they got against the poor guy anyway?” Abel asked. “I’ll never understand people. I mean, he hasn’t hurt anybody. He’s a fair grader. He’s easier