

# CHAPTER ONE

Who do you think you are, Sandoval?" came a voice as sharp as a razor. Ernesto Sandoval was heading for his first class at Cesar Chavez High School. It was his first morning as a senior. It was his first morning as senior class president.

Rod Garcia was a tall, thickly built senior who thought he should have been class president at Chavez. Ever since he was a freshman at Chavez, Rod Garcia joined the right clubs and took part in the most important activities. His one goal was to be senior class president.

But Ernesto, a newcomer, took it away from him. Ernesto had been a total outsider when he arrived from Los Angeles last year.

Although his parents were from this *barrio*, Ernesto had grown up in Los Angeles. That was all he knew. Luis Sandoval, Ernesto's father, had taught history at a Los Angeles high school. Then the school downsized, and he lost his job. When he was offered a job teaching American history at Cesar Chavez High School, he jumped at it. Ernesto's parents were coming home to where they lived as children and young adults. To Ernesto, though, the move was strange and scary.

Ernesto had come to Chavez last year as a junior. He was scared, insecure, a loner who wasn't sure if he'd ever fit in. Those first few days, Ernesto made just one friend. A guy named Abel Ruiz took pity on the lonely outsider standing in the shadows. If not for Abel, Ernesto thought he would not have made it through the year. He then made other friends quickly, and pretty soon he was feeling at home. Later in his junior year, Ernesto's friends urged him to run for senior class president. He

didn't think he'd win. But now that he had, Ernesto was determined to be the best senior class president ever. He was going to make a difference for all the kids.

"Uh, hi, Rod," Ernesto greeted. Ernesto was never close to Rod, but last year they used to say "Hi" to one another when they passed on campus. Ernesto didn't quite know how to deal with Rod now.

"You think you're pretty hot stuff, don't you, Sandoval?" Rod snarled. The depths of his hostility stunned Ernesto. He knew the guy was disappointed that he didn't win, but he never thought Garcia was this bitter.

"No, Rod . . . I, uh . . . don't think that," Ernesto stammered. "I'm just a guy who loves our school and wants to help the seniors."

"You came out of nowhere, you little punk!" Garcia stormed. "Only talent you got is undermining other people. I was going to be a great senior class president. Everybody said I deserved it and I'd get it. You,

a nobody, you come out of nowhere. You hang with dirty homies and taggers. You took it away from me.” The hatred spewed from Garcia like lava from a volcano.

“Hey,” Ernesto finally found the courage to say, “I entered the election fair and square, man. The kids could’ve voted for anybody. I didn’t do anything wrong. The kids voted for me, okay? And I don’t hang out with gangbangers, dude.”

Rod Garcia laughed. “Every little creep at this school with a rap sheet is your bro. Dom Reynosa and Carlos Negrete have tagged every wall in the *barrio*, and you’re in solid with them. That thug, Paul Morales, he hangs with hardcore criminals, and you’re his homie.”

“Look, those are good guys who’ve had problems,” Ernesto came back. “You should have such good friends. They’re trying to—”

“Yeah, right,” Garcia interrupted. “Shaved heads and tattoos and hoodies. Morales has a rattlesnake tattooed on his

hand. I remember him when he went to Chavez. He was a snake. Those are your kind, Sandoval. I bet most of your uncles and cousins up in LA are in prison or haven't been caught yet. And now you're our senior class president," Rod Garcia hissed. "Go figure!"

"Look, man, I don't deserve this," Ernesto countered, a little shakily. His hand trembled. He'd never been the subject of such a barrage of hatred. He'd never seen it coming. He didn't hang with Rod Garcia's friends. They were from a better neighborhood than where Ernesto and his friends lived. True, Ernesto felt more at home with his friends, but he tried to treat everybody with friendliness.

"Another thing, man," Rod continued. "You've ruined the Chavez Cougars. We had a football team headed for the division championships. Then you slithered down from LA and took the heart right out of the team. Clay Aguirre was our star. But you moved in on his chick, Naomi Martinez,

and took her away. That drove Clay down and ruined his game, and you know it. Our team tanked last year, thanks to you. I'm telling you, man, you're like poison gas around here."

At that point, Ernesto felt a lot like that first day he walked onto the campus of Chavez High. He felt like everybody was against him. He felt like some alien who just stepped off a spaceship, surrounded by angry Earthlings. Ernesto was shocked that Garcia could drain away all his self-confidence so easily. He felt vulnerable and sick. He stared at Garcia for a moment and then said the first thing that came to mind.

"Right now, I don't know who's the bigger idiot. You or Aguirre. . . . I gotta get to AP History," Ernesto mumbled, turning away.

Rod Garcia crowed, "You're gonna have Quino Bustos, man. He's the toughest teacher in the school. I'm in the class too. He'll see right through you, Sandoval.

He'll see you're a phony, a big mouth with nothing to back it up. I hope he flunks you, man. I hope you flunk all your classes." With that Garcia wheeled and stalked off.

Ernesto felt as though he'd just been ambushed. He thought this was how his dad felt in Iraq a few years ago when his unit hit an IED at a place they thought was secure. Dad ended up almost losing an eye. Now he carried a scar on his right cheek from the close call. Ernesto had no scar from Garcia's attack, but he was shaken.

On his way to class, Ernesto ran into Abel Ruiz, his best friend. "Oh man, Abel, I just walked into a buzz saw," Ernesto groaned, his voice uneven.

"What went down, dude?" Abel asked.

"Rod Garcia," Ernesto answered. "He's really ticked that I won senior class president. He unloaded on me just now like I'd killed his brother or something. I don't know him that good. Is he some kind of a psycho or what?"

“He’s hot tempered,” Abel explained. “He wants what he wants. You don’t cross him. He’s always got what he wanted. His father is a big financial advisor who makes good money. His mother teaches at the community college. Only kid. He’s the only student at Chavez driving a BMW. I guess you taking senior class president away from him is the first big downer in his life.”

“Man, I feel like I was mauled. The guy’s a grizzly,” Ernesto said.

“Probably his old man is giving him a hard time about losing,” Abel suggested. “He once said his father liked to say, ‘Only losers lose.’ He’ll get over it.”

“Yeah? I wonder,” Ernesto responded.

Ernesto walked on alone toward his AP History class. It was a tough class. He knew that going in. But he planned to go to law school, and he thought he better get used to tough classes. His uncle Arturo, a local *abogado*, had told him how hard law school was. But Ernesto had his heart set on it.



Ernesto was disappointed in himself for letting Garcia get to him so bad. He should have given as good as he got. Instead, he reverted to being that scared junior who hit the campus last year. At the time, Cesar Chavez High was sort of a big block of ice that he couldn't penetrate. Ernesto was much skinnier then and a bit shorter. Now he was six foot two and really built. He lifted weights, ran, and worked out almost every day. He was ripped. Even his little sisters, nine-year-old Katalina and seven-year-old Juanita, said he looked good. Ernesto now weighed more than his father, who was fairly well built himself. Still, he felt like the skinny little rabbit of last year after the barrage of hatred from a red-faced Rod Garcia.

Mr. Joaquin "Quino" Bustos was already at his desk when Ernesto entered the AP History classroom. There were about twelve students, including Rod Garcia, who was already seated in front. Garcia was having a cordial conversation with Mr. Bustos