

Chapter 1

It was Rodrigo Garcia's last chance. That's what the judge said.

“Young man, I'm looking at your juvenile criminal record. It dates back to your eleventh birthday! Vandalism, theft, burglary. You're almost eighteen years old now. You could be looking at serious jail time. But I'm giving you this last chance to straighten up. And that's mostly because of a few letters. People who believe in you wrote them. They think you're worth taking a chance on. So I will take a chance on you. It's time to act right.”

With that, the judge sent Rodrigo to the Chaparral Camp. It was a youth camp in

the mountains north of Los Angeles. No TV. No cell phones. No Internet. It was pure hell. Nothing to do but work.

Across the courtroom, Rodrigo glanced at his parents. His mom cried silently. Rodrigo knew he'd brought her a lot of grief. He was sorry about that. His parents had raised four good boys and girls. Then there was Rodrigo, the only troublemaker.

“He’s the black sheep,” Aunt Carla had said bitterly.

His dad sat stone-faced. He was not able to understand how this had happened to his youngest son. Rodrigo didn’t understand it himself. Ever since he could remember, he had gotten into fights. He had a hair-trigger temper.

Another guy might insult a kid who cut the line in the school cafeteria. But Rodrigo? He would show his anger with violence. If someone even looked at him funny, he

would react with his fist. It was like he was a volcano ready to erupt. The hot lava was just below the surface.

But there was another Rodrigo too. The other Rodrigo was smart. He got good grades. This kid was a math genius. In his math class, Mr. Bruno let him tutor some students. Rodrigo was amazingly patient with them. He never blew up when he was tutoring others. He did a great job. One of the letters urging another chance for Rodrigo had come from his teacher.

Mrs. Vasquez, Rodrigo's next-door neighbor, wrote a letter too. She said Rodrigo was the only kid in the barrio who helped her grandson. Some gang members had beaten him for mistakenly wearing the wrong colors.

Most people who knew Rodrigo wanted him to go to jail. They only saw him as a hothead, a troublemaker, and a thief.

The judge had looked at everything before him. He'd decided Rodrigo deserved one last chance.



Chaparral Camp was a tough program. The boys who came there roughed it. Inmates lived in small cabins. There were no air conditioners. The mountains were hot and dusty in the summer. And they were bitingly cold in the winter.

There were plenty of jobs. One was to clear the trails. Keep things neat for the hikers. Cabins had to be scrubbed clean. The boys cooked their own meals. Two guys were assigned laundry duty. The worst job was scrubbing the toilets. Or climbing high on the peaks in the dead of summer. Nobody wanted to do that.

The man in charge was Henry Montrose. He'd had a long career. Montrose had been a fighter pilot and a sheriff. Now he was the

boss of this tough program for boys. Boys who otherwise would be in prison.

While chasing a killer a few years ago, Montrose had taken a bullet in the stomach. Another bullet had left a bad scar on his chin. He'd gotten his man, sure, but he had almost died of his injuries. He survived with scars and an even deeper hatred of crime.

It was the morning the boys arrived. Montrose was ready and waiting.

“You guys,” he said. “Be ready to work hard. You *will* take orders. And you *will* get along with everyone. If you do that, maybe you’ll have a shot at a good life. If you screw up? You *will* be dead meat. Might as well send for the vultures. Don’t get kicked out of here! Or you’re heading for hard time. You will experience hell, where teens like you are eaten for breakfast.”

Rodrigo didn’t like the man from the

start. Montrose was tall and lean. His face was leathery. He looked like a beat-up old dude. A man who liked to show his power. Rodrigo had seen his type before. Montrose was a typical cop. He was a guy who got his kicks from playing the big man.

But Rodrigo was determined to put on a good act at this stupid camp. If he messed up? Montrose would throw him back into the criminal justice system. Then Rodrigo would be looking at a couple of years in serious prison.

“Please, *mi niño*,” Mom had pleaded. “Do the right thing at the camp. Then you can come home. You can get a job. Have a future.”

“Do not shame us anymore than you already have,” his father had warned him. His mouth had been tight and grim.

Rodrigo was teamed up in a tiny cabin. One roommate was eighteen-year-old Jon

Chandler. He'd been in trouble for drugs. He'd also vandalized a teacher's car.

The other guy in their group was Lonnie Bowman. He'd been charged with attempted murder. Lonnie was the youngest at seventeen.