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URBAN
UNDERGROUND

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URBAN UNDERGROUND

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Time of Courage

To Catch a Dream

To Die For

Unbroken

The Unforgiven

Vengeance

The Water's Edge

Winners and Losers



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CHAPTER ONE

Ernesto Sandoval, a sixteen-year-old junior at Cesar Chavez High School, was talking to the girl he desperately wanted to date, Naomi Martinez. They were standing by the colorful mural in front of the school. Naomi had just broken up with her long-time boyfriend, Clay Aguirre. Ernesto was slowly, awkwardly trying to make his move. It was Friday, and Ernesto needed to ask Naomi out before the weekend.

“This guy, Oscar Perez,” Ernesto was explaining, “I heard him sing at a party at Carmen’s house, and he was great. I thought maybe you’d enjoy—” Ernesto stopped talking because Naomi had stopped listening. She had turned and was

watching Clay Aguirre arrive on campus. A cold chill went through Ernesto's body. *She still loved Clay.*

Naomi and Clay had been friends for a long time, ever since elementary school. They had dated seriously in high school. Clay had often been rude to Naomi, but she put up with his attitude because she loved him. Then they had had a big argument, and Clay punched Naomi in the face. She broke up with him then and there. Since then, he'd gone missing from Chavez, but this morning he was coming back to classes.

Clay's dark eyes fixed immediately on Naomi and Ernesto. Before the couple had broken up, Clay had been jealous of Ernesto. He'd feared Ernesto had his eye on Naomi, and he was right. Ever since coming here from Los Angeles with his family a few months ago, Ernesto had been drawn to the beautiful violet-eyed girl with the shiny black hair. In addition to being lovely, she was sweet and kind. Ernesto thought about her a lot, and he fantasized from the

start about their being together someday. Once Clay had become so angry that he cornered Ernesto on a remote campus spot to warn him to stay away from Naomi.

“So,” Naomi interrupted Ernesto’s thoughts, “what were you saying about that singer, Ernie?”

Ernesto was going to suggest that he and Naomi go to the park on Sunday where Oscar Perez was giving a concert. There would be a lot of little bands and food booths as well. But the sight of Clay had made him tongue-tied. “Uh, I was just saying,” he stammered, trying to ignore Clay, who was standing a few yards away glaring at him. “This dude, Oscar Perez, is gonna sing at the park Sunday, and it’s sort of a festival. He’s real good, and the food’ll be good too. I just thought if you had nothing better to do, we could go over there, you know, and hear some hot music. We could have some tacos and chips and salsa too.”

“That sounds nice, Ernie,” Naomi surprised him by saying. But even though

she was smiling, Ernesto could tell she was tense. She had loved Clay Aguirre for a long time, and maybe she still did. When Clay struck her, she was shocked and angry. She told him she never wanted to see him again. He apologized and pleaded with her to forgive him, but she stood her ground, at least at the time.

Ernesto hoped against hope she would continue to stand her ground. Yes, Ernesto hoped to get close to her. But even if she never wanted to date him, he cared for her as a human being. He hoped she knew that she owed it to herself to end the relationship with Clay. When a guy hits a girl, Ernesto believed, he's saying that this is the beginning, not the end, of a pattern of abuse. Ernesto cared about Naomi, and he didn't want her going down that frightening, painful road. He didn't want her hurt again. She didn't deserve to be hurt. No girl did.

"Okay then," Ernesto confirmed. "I'll pick you up about two in the afternoon."

"Good," she agreed.

Ordinarily, Ernesto would have been on top of the world. Naomi Martinez had actually agreed to go someplace with him! It was a date—exactly what he'd been hoping for and dreaming of. But seeing Clay Aguirre, with pure hatred boiling like volcanic lava from his eyes, stole the joy from the moment.

Before Naomi started walking toward English, she turned briefly in Clay's direction. "Hi Clay," she called. "I'm glad you're back in school." Then she walked on.

She was determined to be polite to him. She didn't hate him. She didn't think she could ever hate him, even though he had hurt her deeply. The black eye he gave her had hurt a lot, but the wound in her heart was much deeper and more painful. She had given her heart to him, and she had trusted him. She had never thought he would hit her, and, when he did, he broke her heart. All her dreams about their future together crashed to her feet like shattered crystal. All the wonderful memories of their times together mocked her now.

When Naomi was out of sight, Ernesto started for Ms. Hunt's English class. They were starting to study *Oedipus Rex* in the drama unit. It was a Greek tragedy, a horrible tale of human suffering, shame, and guilt.

"It was all your fault, you know, Sandoval!" Behind Ernesto, Clay's sharp voice penetrated the warm autumn air like a knife.

Ernesto tried to ignore him. But the other boy came up alongside him and spun around to face him. "You messed up the best thing I ever had," Clay Aguirre accused him face to face. "I love Naomi so much. I always loved her. But that night when she was saying how ripped you looked, one thing led to another. I got so mad. I knew you were trying to take her from me. I was just crazy with fear that you'd succeed, Sandoval. I don't know why I hit her. I never hit her before. I never would again. But she took it so hard. She dumped me, man."

Ernesto tried to be reasonable. “Aguirre, it wasn’t my fault. It was your fault. It’s an awful thing for a guy to hit a girl. You did it, man. It had nothing to do with me.”

“Now you’re movin’ in on her, just like you wanted,” Clay snarled bitterly. His voice was raspy with rage. “She’s weak and sad. She’s vulnerable, easy pickin’s for a nobody like you. She’d never go for a wimpy jerk like you if she was herself.”

Ernesto pushed past him, walked on, and joined a crowd of students. In the group were his best friend, Abel Ruiz, and two guys from his track team, Julio Avila and Jorge Aguilar.

“I see old Aguirre is back,” Abel noted with a shudder. “Be careful, man. Better steer clear of Naomi for a while. She’s poison, dude, with that creep on the prowl.”

“I’m not gonna let fear rule my life,” Ernesto declared, showing more bravado than he felt. As the group moved toward the school building, Ernesto recalled a incident

of just a few weeks ago in the *barrio*. A gangbanger nicknamed Coyote shot and killed his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend. Coyote was so angry when his girlfriend ditched him for another guy that he killed the new guy, Tommy Alvarado. The gangbanger stalked Yvette Ozono to her own sixteenth birthday party and took down Tommy right in front of her. That story was in the back of Ernesto's mind, but he didn't really think Clay Aguirre was that dangerous.

"Me and Naomi are going to a festival in the park on Sunday," Ernesto announced, as he and Abel entered the building. "This guy Oscar Perez is performing, and he's a blast."

"Oh man!" Abel moaned. "You're playin' with fire, dude."

They reached Ms. Hunt's classroom. Naomi was already at her desk. Ernesto walked in and sat down, and then he saw Clay slip in the back door. Ernesto could feel the boy's hostile gaze boring into his skull. But Ernesto made up his mind he'd just ignore Clay.

Clay wasn't a good student. Now he had such a low grade point average that he'd lost his eligibility to play football, which he loved. He was at a really low place in his life. He couldn't play football, and he'd lost his girlfriend. Ernesto didn't feel sorry for him, though, because he'd brought it all on himself. Still, the guy had to be pretty torn up.

Toward lunchtime that day, Ernesto and Abel were looking for someplace to eat.

"Hey Ernie," Carmen Ibarra yelled. "You wanna eat lunch with us?" She was sitting with Naomi and Yvette Ozono.

Ernesto's father, Luis Sandoval, taught history at Chavez High. He tried very hard to teach well and to influence his students to stay and graduate. But he also sometimes walked out into the *barrio* in the late afternoons and evenings and talked to dropouts, urging them to return to school. One of them was Yvette Ozono, who was with Naomi and Carmen Ibarra at lunchtime. Ernesto's father knew how insecure Yvette

would be returning to school. So he enlisted two of his best and kindest students, Naomi and Carmen, to help her through the first days.

“Sure!” Ernesto called back. “Abel and I’ll be right over.”

The five of them sat down with their lunches under the eucalyptus trees. Yvette then looked at Ernesto and said, “I remember you. You were at Tommy’s funeral with your father.”

“That’s right, Yvette,” Ernesto acknowledged with a smile. “I’m so glad to see you back in school. There’s nothing out there for kids who don’t have a high school diploma. I mean, I got a little job at the pizzeria. But they won’t even hire a kid there if you can’t prove that you’re still in school. No dropouts allowed, you know?”

“Yeah,” Yvette affirmed, “that’s what Mr. Sandoval told me. But it’s scary coming back. My old boyfriend—Coyote—he talked me into dropping out. He kind of controlled me. I did everything he asked so