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A Boy Called Twister

Dark Secrets

Deliverance

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If You Really Loved Me

Leap of Faith

Like a Broken Doll

The Lost

No Fear

One of Us

Outrunning the Darkness

The Quality of Mercy

Shadows of Guilt

The Stranger

Time of Courage

To Be a Man

To Catch a Dream

The Unforgiven

The Water's Edge

Wildflower



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CHAPTER ONE

Hey homies, check out that red hot convertible!” Paul Morales pointed as he walked with his friends toward Hortencia’s restaurant and tamale shop. All three boys wore hoodies in the cool night. They stopped and watched the car go by. “Whoa!” he yelled. “Check out the chick at the wheel! She’s even hotter!”

Carmen Ibarra was driving the convertible. It was a birthday gift from her parents for her seventeenth birthday. It was a used convertible, but it was still nice. Carmen was shocked at how the dark-haired boy was yelling at her. Carmen was a pretty girl. She had big, brown eyes and cascading reddish brown hair to her shoulders. But she

didn't consider herself one of the real hotties at Cesar Chavez High School, where she was a junior.

“So many other girls are more striking than I am,” she thought. “Girls like Naomi Martinez and even Mira Nuñez. They get a *lot* of attention from the boys.” Both of those had handsome boyfriends. But Carmen never had a serious boyfriend. She hung out with boys and danced and went to parties with them. But she never paired off with one special boy.

Carmen's twenty-year-old sister, Lourdes, was in the car too. Lourdes was in college. “Carmen,” she asked in a critical voice, “do you *know* those boys?” One of the guys wore a white T-shirt and skinny jeans. The other two wore baggy clothing. They all looked as though they might be gangbangers.

“No, I've never seen them before in my life,” Carmen answered. But the tallest boy, who looked kind of cute, seemed vaguely familiar. She thought that he might have

been a senior when she was a sophomore. But, if it was him, he looked much different now. He looked taller and tougher.

The convertible stopped in front of Hortencia's. Lourdes and Carmen got out of the car and walked toward the tamale shop. Two of the boys stood on the sidewalk, watching them. The tall one moved away from the other two and came up to Carmen. "Remember me?" he asked.

"Uh no," Carmen replied, "I don't think so." Carmen was well-known for being a chatterbox and talking too much. But right now the boy intimidated her. She wasn't used to guys yelling that she was "hot," especially not a handsome boy like this one. She was embarrassed and thrilled, both at the same time. The hair stood up on the nape of her neck.

"I'm Paul Morales," he explained. "I graduated from Chavez last year. I think you were in the tenth grade. I kept noticing the girl with the big, brown eyes. But hey, you've changed. You're smokin'. I go to

the community college now. I'm learning computers and film."

Lourdes Ibarra was attractive but not as pretty as Carmen. She chimed in. "I'm Carmen's sister. I'm studying nursing at State."

"Great," Paul responded. "We need all the pretty nurses we can get. They're what saves a guy when he gets sick and stuck in a hospital. Without cute chicks taking care of us, we'd just forget it and jump out the windows."

Lourdes looked at Carmen nervously. The young man made her uncomfortable.

"Well, nice to have met you," Lourdes ended the conversation. "Carmen and I are going in to have our tamales now."

Inside the shop, the girls ordered their tamales and found a table. Carmen's face felt very warm. She was shaken by the encounter, but it was fun too. She often saw guys at Chavez come on to girls like that. But none had ever happened come up to her. She felt excited now and strangely special.

The three boys came in too, sat at the counter, and ordered. Paul Morales turned around occasionally and glanced at Carmen. He smiled a little. Carmen got goose bumps.

“I don’t like them,” Lourdes announced in a grim voice. “Those guys creep me out. Did you notice Paul Morales has a tattoo on the back of his hand? A lot of gang members are tattooed. He has a snake tattoo.”

Lourdes shuddered. She was seriously dating a young man named Ivan Redondo. He was a college student. He was tall and skinny, and he wore glasses. Carmen thought Ivan Redondo was awful. Oh, he was a nice enough guy. But he was about as exciting as a limp salad. He seemed like a nerd to Carmen. But the girls’ father, Emilio Zapata Ibarra was very strict with his daughters. To their father, Lourdes’s nerdy boyfriend was ideal.

“I don’t think they mean any harm,” Carmen objected.

Paul Morales glanced back at Carmen several times. Every time he did, she got bigger goose bumps. She loved Hortencia's tamales. They were the tastiest in the *barrio*. But right now she scarcely knew what she was eating. She kept sneaking glances at Paul. She liked his blue-black longish hair and his big shoulders. Paul took his hoodie off. Under his T-shirt was a marvelously ripped torso. His eyes were kind of disturbing, but not in a bad way. They smoked and flickered like a fire.

Then the other boys removed their hoodies. "Look," Lourdes remarked in a frightened voice. "Their heads are shaven! That's bad. That's a sure sign they belong to a gang. Look, one of them has a tattoo on his head! Ugh!"

"Oh, a lot of boys shave their heads now," Carmen objected. "It doesn't mean they belong to a gang."

"Carmen," Lourdes commanded, "don't look in their direction. You're encouraging them. That Morales boy keeps

giving you sly grins. Don't let him see you smiling. Carmen, *why are you smiling?*" Lourdes had an accusatory look in her eyes. "You're not smiling at him, are you?"

"Oh no," Carmen lied. She kept reliving the first moment she saw Paul. She kept hearing his words. "Check out the chick at the wheel. She's even hotter!"

Carmen liked a lot of boys at Chavez High. A few months ago, she met Ernesto Sandoval. He had been born in the *barrio*, moved to Los Angeles with his parents ten years ago, and recently returned. He really caught Carmen's eye. But Ernesto quickly fell for Naomi Martinez. Now they were a couple, walking around school hand in hand. Carmen liked other boys too, and they became friends. But no boy really, *really* liked her the way she liked some of them.

Carmen wanted a boy to look at her as Ernesto looked at Naomi. She wanted someone to think she was the most beautiful creature on earth. She wanted a boy who thought she was precious beyond measure.

Carmen wanted a boy to put his arms around her, as Abel Ruiz put his arms around Claudia Villa. Carmen didn't want a great big serious relationship. She just wanted a boyfriend who thought she was special.

"Carmen," Lourdes cautioned, "you've got to be careful around here. There are some really unsavory characters hanging around. And they're looking for girls."

"I know," Carmen responded. "I can take care of myself." Carmen didn't know exactly what an "unsavory character" was. But she wouldn't mind a boy a little more exciting than Ivan Redondo.

When they were finishing their tamales, Carmen cautioned her sister. "Lourdes, don't mention to our parents what happened here tonight. You know how Papa gets."

"He ought to know that a gangbanger was hitting on his daughter," Lourdes declared sternly.

"Paul Morales isn't a gangbanger," Carmen snapped. "He's a college student.

What could be more respectable than that? I just wish you wouldn't say anything."

"Carmen, you're my little sister," Lourdes explained. "I have to watch out for you. You don't have a big brother to look after you, so . . ."

"Lourdes, that's sweet," Carmen interrupted. "But honest, I don't need looking after. You can ask anybody at school. I'm strong and I'm tough. Nobody gets the best of me."

The two sisters got up. Lourdes got behind Carmen and urged her toward the door faster than Carmen wanted to go. Clearly, Lourdes wanted Carmen away from Paul Morales as quickly as possible.

But Paul was faster. As the girls went out the door, Paul was beside Carmen. "Hey doll," he said to Carmen. "I work at the computer store on Washington. If you need a new iPhone or you wanna see the new gadgets, I'm your guy. Come on in. You'll have my undivided attention."

“Oh, thanks,” Carmen replied. She noticed that Paul had a dimple in his chin. She thought it was very cute. Her goose bumps came back. Carmen could sense that the boy really liked her.

Paul Morales stood there, smiling. He called to Carmen as she walked away, “Hey, I voted for your dad.” The girls’ father, Emilio Zapata Ibarra, had recently been elected a city councilman. “It’s great that he made it. He’s gonna turn the *barrio* upside down in a good way. And, boy, do we need it. Give him my regards, Carmen.”

“I will . . . thank you,” Carmen sputtered, getting behind the wheel of the convertible.

“Boy, what a creep,” Lourdes commented. “*Let’s go!*”

Carmen turned and glared at her sister. Then they pulled away from the curb. After a few moments of driving, she spoke. “He’s *not* a creep. Why do you say that, Lourdes? Honestly, he’s probably a very nice guy. What’s with you, anyway?”