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UNDERGROUND

The  
**STRANGER**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Ernesto Sandoval passed his aunt's restaurant every morning on his way to Cesar Chavez High School, where he was beginning his junior year. *Tía* Hortencia's homemade tamales were the toast of the *barrio*. Everybody knew that Hortencia made the best tamales in the world. Ernesto's one and only friend at his new school, Abel Ruiz, said, "She must make a fortune in there. There's always a crowd of people wanting to get in."

Ernesto's extended family had lived in this *barrio* for generations. But Ernesto, his parents, and his two sisters had been living in Los Angeles for ten years. They'd just moved back. Luis Sandoval, Ernesto's father,

## THE STRANGER

taught history at a high school in Los Angeles. He was laid off because of budget cuts. When he got the offer to teach at Chavez, he jumped at the chance. Ernesto remembered many nights when his parents would be up late in Los Angeles. They'd be talking about finances and what to do if Luis couldn't find another job. "My sister Hortencia joked with me," Dad said one night. "She said if all else fails, I can work with her at the restaurant making tamales, preparing the *masa* to put the filling in." Dad had laughed nervously at that prospect. He loved teaching. It was his life.

Ernesto also loved his high school in Los Angeles. He had friends there he'd known since first grade. He had a nice girlfriend, Gabriella. The relationship was not serious, but she was fun to hang out with. Ernesto had felt comfortable in the LA high school. He had not lived here since he was six years old.

There were a lot of cliques at Chavez High. Each clique seemed impenetrable to

## CHAPTER ONE

outsiders. A stranger like Ernesto was not welcome inside them. Ernesto had played some baseball in middle school, but he wasn't a jock. The only sport he really liked was running. But, even so, he had been turned down when he tried to join the track team in LA.

“You used to live around here when you were a little kid, huh Ernie?” Abel asked as they walked together to school.

“Yeah,” Ernesto replied ruefully. “I was six when we moved. Dad was still in college. My mom worked in a haircutting store to pay the bills. Then Dad graduated and got this teaching job at a high school in Los Angeles. So we moved there. It was great. Dad loved his job, and Mom was able to quit working and stay home. My little sisters were born up there. Now Dad is trying to fit in teaching at Chavez. He's a stranger too, like me.”

Ernesto was grateful that he didn't have any classes that Dad taught. He figured having his father as the teacher would be

awkward. Luis Sandoval was a tall, thin, dark-skinned man, very handsome and dignified looking. He was much darker than Mom. Mom told Ernesto once that her own grandmother had laughed and said Mom's fiancé was *Indio*. "*Indio*" was a prejudiced word. Mom told Ernesto she didn't care about that. She fell madly in love with Dad when they were only teenagers.

Ernesto worried that maybe his serious father would not fit in at Chavez High anymore than he, Ernesto, was fitting in. Luis Sandoval did not make jokes and banter with his students, as some of the other teachers did. Ernesto worried that the kids wouldn't like him and that maybe he wouldn't be asked back next year. The move from LA had been expensive. A lot of bills had piled up.

The boys passed a high fence covered with graffiti and some graphic art too. The art looked pretty good to Ernesto. The fence had a fire-breathing dragon and a fierce-looking eagle reaching out with its talons.

## CHAPTER ONE

“Dudes who drop out of Chavez come around here at night and decorate the fences and the walls of buildings,” Abel explained. “We got a lotta kids dropping outta Chavez. It’s a big problem. Teachers always griping about it. Sometimes they’re just taggers, but lotta them join gangs too.” Abel shrugged. “What’re you gonna do?”

As they neared the school, Ernesto glanced at the stream of students. Maybe ten years ago he played with some of them, but he didn’t remember. What does a six-year-old kid remember? Most of the students were texting or talking on their phones. They were in a world of their own. They didn’t even seem to notice the people around them. Ernesto had a phone too, but whom was he going to text? Abel, his only friend, who was walking beside him?

Ernesto felt invisible as he drew closer to the school. The buildings looked cold and block-like—like blocks of ice. The only appealing feature was a mural out front bearing the kindly face of Cesar Chavez. In

the mural, Chavez was standing in a field surrounded by weary-looking farm workers. Ernesto remembered reading a short biography of Chavez. He was a good man who spent his short life helping farm workers earn a living wage. He died, probably of exhaustion, when he was sixty-six.

Yesterday Ernesto noticed a really pretty girl in his English class. She was wearing a pink sweater and jeans that fit awfully good. Seeing her was the only good thing that happened in English class. Ernesto could hardly keep his eyes off her. She looked up from texting once before class began, and Ernesto tried to smile at her. But he was so nervous that his smile came off as a grimace, and the girl looked away. He didn't blame her.

Now as Ernesto and Abel walked into English class and took their seats, Ernesto looked for her again. There she was, this time in a bright red T-shirt. Abel saw Ernesto staring at her, and he said, "That's one hot chili pepper, eh man?"

## CHAPTER ONE

“Yeah!” Ernesto agreed. “You know her?” For a minute, Ernesto thought she might be Abel’s girl. He sure didn’t want to tick off the only friend he had at Chavez.

“That’s Naomi Martinez,” Abel replied. “I know her to say ‘hi’ to her, but I don’t mess with her. She’s got a boyfriend, and he’s real possessive. She’s a cheerleader and he’s a jock. It’s the same old story, man.”

Ernesto decided he wouldn’t smile at her anymore.

“Her boyfriend plays for the Chavez Cougars,” Abel went on. “Pretty good linebacker and good-looking, but stupid. Hanging on to a C in most classes and worrying about losing his eligibility to play. Clay Aguirre. First-class creep.”

Ernesto thought back fondly to his school in Los Angeles and Gabriella. She was easy to be with. She and Ernesto had nothing heavy going, just holding hands sometimes and a few pecks on the lips. Ernesto wondered whether there was

anybody like Gabriella around at Chavez High.

The English teacher, Ms. Hunt, came in. She was an Anglo, young and cool and sort of pretty. She made some lame jokes about how excited everybody must be about studying good old Shakespeare. Most of the students were Latino, but there were a few Asians, African Americans, and Filipinos, along with some Anglos. Ernesto could see that the kids liked Ms. Hunt. He hoped that the kids in American History I were liking his dad as much. He wouldn't be making jokes, though. He'd be teaching very seriously about the explorers coming to the New World. Luis Sandoval was a serious man. He was kind and dedicated but not out to win a popularity contest.

Ernesto's father graduated from California State at Northridge. He graduated *magna cum laude*, and then he got his master's degree. Ernesto was only seven when he watched Dad get his master's. Luis Sandoval was the first in his family to

## CHAPTER ONE

graduate from college, and graduating with honors was awesome. Ernesto remembered the day, watching his father marching in the solemn procession of scholars. Ernesto's grandparents, *Abuela* Lena and *Abuelo* Luis Senior, wept tears of joy as their boy's name was called out. Ernesto remembered his grandmother turning to him, squeezing his arm, and whispering, "*Mi hijo! Mi hijo! Su padre!*"

Now, Ernesto was thinking, Luis Sandoval was standing before a class of teenagers here at Chavez High School. Maybe they didn't like the serious, dignified man who didn't crack jokes. Maybe word of their dissatisfaction would reach the administration office. Maybe the administration would think that this new teacher, who had lost his job in Los Angeles, was not very good. Maybe they would tell him that he should move on. The thought sent a shudder through Ernesto's body, not only because the family was in a shaky financial situation and his Dad needed the job. More important,

Ernesto loved his Dad, and the thought that his proud father would be so humiliated hurt him. Ernesto felt sorry for his father. He felt sorry for himself too.

“We’re starting with something fun,” Ms. Hunt chortled. “A lovely story of a bloody impending murder!”

Everybody laughed. Ms. Hunt asked, “What is the story of *Macbeth* about?”

Naomi Martinez raised her hand. When Ms. Hunt nodded toward her, she answered, “It’s about Lady Macbeth and how she pushes her husband to do violence.”

“Exactly,” Ms. Hunt said. “Let’s face it. Isn’t that just the sort of story we love? Look at what we watch on television. Stories about murders, detectives, plotting. If there’s not at least one dead body on the screen, we feel cheated. When those gory images appear, don’t we widen our eyes a little bit?”

Everyone laughed again. “How do we find out right away that horrible events are coming?” Ms. Hunt asked.