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URBAN
UNDERGROUND



The
UNFORGIVEN

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CHAPTER ONE

Naomi Martinez was quite happy coming home from school on her bike. Naomi was a sixteen-year-old junior at Cesar Chavez High School. She had a nice boyfriend—Ernesto Sandoval. She was doing well in her classes. Now she was starting her first real job this afternoon at Chill Out, the yogurt shop.

Only a few months ago, Naomi was dating Clay Aguirre, a handsome junior with a bad temper. They'd been together a long time when his chronic rudeness turned to violence. One day he got mad at Naomi and punched her in the face. She'd cared for him for many years. Yet she found the courage to break up. Although Clay

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continued to hope to get back with her, it was completely over for Naomi. She was falling in love with Ernesto.

Naomi jumped off her bike and rolled it into the family garage. She didn't have to go to work for an hour. Naomi heard Brutus, the family pit bull, barking a loud greeting. Whenever family members came home, Brutus was thrilled to see them. When the Martinez family first got Brutus, Naomi's mother was terrified of the dog. Now Brutus had won her over too.

As Naomi was opening the front door, her father's pickup truck pulled into the driveway. The hairs on the back of Naomi's neck stood up. She could always tell when something was wrong with her father by the way he drove. He roared into the driveway now and slammed on the brakes. He was angry.

Naomi loved her father, but he was a hard man to deal with. Felix Martinez had already kicked his two older sons out of the house after bitter family fights. Orlando

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and Manuel had not spoken a word to their father now in years. The rift was deep and bitter.

Naomi's father considered himself the unquestioned ruler of the family. Everybody had to dance to his tune or else. Linda Martinez, Naomi's mother, was a timid woman who obeyed him completely. Years ago, when her husband hit her, she accepted even that abuse. She never dared to oppose Felix Martinez.

Naomi's father got out of the pickup. Right away, Naomi could see he had not come directly home. He worked as a heavy equipment operator, guiding a big crane. It was hard, dangerous work, and he was good at it. He'd started as a forklift operator but quickly learned the heavier equipment. On any day he had to work, he was very careful not to drink.

But it was Friday, the beginning of the weekend. Dad had stopped at his favorite bar and had a few drinks. Naomi hated that her father drank and then drove, even

though it was only a few blocks. He was a good driver. He'd never had a DUI or an accident. But he still came out of that bar and got behind the wheel of the truck. Every time he did, he was putting his life and the lives of other people on the road with him at risk. And that was inexcusable.

"Hi Dad," Naomi greeted him. "How's everything?"

"How do you think it is, girl?" Dad barked. "My back aches. I had a lousy, miserable day with those idiots I gotta work with. Nobody knows what they're doing. I gotta stop my work and get them going right. I'm telling you, I'm working with morons. I'm trying to get the crane in position. They're jumping around like idiots in front of me. I don't know where they get those people."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Naomi sympathized. "Why don't you take a nice hot bath? That always makes you feel better."

"Nothin' makes me feel better anymore," Dad fumed. "I'm gettin' too old for

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this, girl. I'm almost fifty years old. I'm the old man down there now, except for Eppy and Pogo. You know how old fifty is? My old man was dead when he was fifty-five. Dropped dead of a heart attack. Worked himself to death. That's gonna be me in a coupla years, and who cares?"

Felix Martinez followed Naomi into the house. "Linda," he yelled at his wife. "It askin' too much for you to leave the soap you're watching on TV. Maybe you could drop that trashy celebrity magazine you got your nose in. How 'bout makin' me a cup of coffee? I need to sit down and have a cup of coffee. A man ought to be able to get that in his own house."

Dad looked at Naomi and declared, "Your mother don't do nothin' all day. All she does is read about those celebrities and watch trash soap operas."

Naomi bit her tongue. She never saw her mother reading a celebrity magazine. The only television she watched was the food network. She spent most of the day

doing laundry, cleaning the house, and fixing meals. There wasn't a lazy bone in Mom's body.

"I'm getting the coffee, Felix!" Mom hollered from the kitchen. "Just sit down, and I'll bring it in."

Dad sank into his favorite leather chair in the living room. He closed his eyes and sighed, "Yeah, gonna be fifty next month. The end of next month. The big five-oh. I thought things would be different when I got this old. Fifty years on this stinking planet, and what have I got to show for it? A wife who won't do any more than she needs to. Two sons who don't care if I'm dead or alive. Scum of the earth. Lousy bums is what they are. I worked like a dog for my family. I spent a ton of money getting Orlando's teeth fixed at that crooked dentist's office. I did that just so the kid would look good. What thanks do I get for it? Orlando, he raised his hand against me, against his own father. He knocked me down. What kind of a son is that?"

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Naomi dropped her backpack by the door and sat down on the sofa. She didn't know what to say. A few years ago, both Orlando and Manuel were thrown out of the house. Orlando had struck his father. Manuel had not obeyed the rules. Dad hadn't seen the boys since. But Ernesto Sandoval sneaked Naomi and her mother to secret meetings at small restaurants in town to visit with them. Naomi and her mother were very happy to see the boys. But they always feared that Dad would find out and fly into a rage. To him, the secret visits would be a betrayal of his authority.

Both Orlando and Manny were now doing well, working with the Oscar Perez Latin band. Orlando was a singer and guitarist, and Manny worked on the equipment. They worked mainly in Los Angeles, two hundred miles away. Naomi's dream was that someday her family could be healed. She hoped that Dad would accept the boys back and that they could all be

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friends again. But that dream seemed almost impossible, given Dad's bitterness. Dad often said he would forgive Orlando only if he apologized for hitting his father. Orlando swore he would never apologize. He'd struck his father to keep him from hitting Mom. So father and son were at a terrible impasse.

Linda Martinez brought the coffee in to her husband. "Here, Felix, this will make you feel much better," Mom said. She hopped nervously around Dad's chair like a little bird. She set the coffee on the end table where he could reach it.

Felix Martinez tasted the coffee. "It's too sweet," he complained, almost spitting out the mouthful. "Whadja do, woman? Pour the whole bag of sugar in here? You trying to kill me? You want to give me diabetes or something?"

"Felix, I put in three teaspoons of sugar like I always do," Linda Martinez explained. "You said you wanted three teaspoons of sugar."

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“Get rid of this and get me some decent coffee,” he commanded. He slammed the cup down on the table so hard that it splashed on the wood. Naomi’s mother snatched it up, wiped up the spill, and scurried to the kitchen. Naomi got up and followed her mother.

“Mom,” Naomi whispered, “he stopped at that bar on his way home from work. Two drinks makes him mellow. On the third drink he turns into a bear.”

“It’s the birthday coming up that’s got to him,” Mom groaned. “He feels old, Naomi. He feels like life has passed him by. And then his cousin, that Monte Esposito, getting voted out of office. That hit him hard. He was so proud of having his cousin on the city council. It made him feel like somebody. Now that’s gone too, and Monte is in trouble with the law. And worst of all, the boys being estranged like they are. That eats at him. He likes to pretend he doesn’t care, but he does. He loved those boys, still does. He misses them. He really, *really* misses them.”