

ANNE SCHRAFF

URBAN
UNDERGROUND

Leap of
FAITH

 SADDLEBACK
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CHAPTER ONE

Ernesto Sandoval had been thinking of running for senior class president at Cesar Chavez High School. Kids were running for vice president and treasurer too. But the senior president election was what most students followed.

Ernesto had been turning the idea over in his mind for weeks. Sixteen-year-old Ernesto had been a student there for just his junior year. He had been born here in the *barrio*. But his father got a job teaching in Los Angeles, and the family had lived there for ten years. Then Luis Sandoval got a job teaching history at Chavez, and the family returned to its roots.

Ernesto had made a lot of friends at Chavez. The tall, handsome young man was well liked and friendly. But he'd be running against Mira Nuñez, a popular, beautiful junior. She had lived here all her life and started Chavez as a freshman. She was already junior class vice president. Also running was Rod Garcia. He'd been president of several clubs on campus. Ernesto knew it wouldn't be easy to convince students to choose a newcomer like him.

"I really think I could do a good job as a senior class president," Ernesto told his girlfriend, Naomi Martinez.

"Then go for it, Ernie," Naomi urged him. "A lot of kids like and respect you. You've been here only a short time. But you've had a big impact on a lot of lives. Take what you and your dad do, for example. You walk around the *barrio* getting dropouts to come back to school. I can't believe the good you've done in such a short time. People notice that, Ernie."

Ernesto smiled at the beautiful, violet-eyed girl. Her dark, curly hair framed her lovely face. “Of course, that’s an unbiased opinion coming from the girl I love,” Ernesto replied with a wry grin.

“The girl who loves you, Ernie,” Naomi told him. “But honest, I’m not just saying this because I love you. You’ve touched so many kids in a good way. You know what I’m talking about. I don’t have to go through the list. Poor little Yvette Ozono was a lost soul. Then you and your dad took her under your wings. And Julio Avila, he almost ruined his whole life that day pulling out a knife in a fight. But you and Abel got the switchblade away from him. Dom Reynosa and Carlos Negrete would have left school long ago except for you and your dad. You were part of the *Zapatistas* who help Mr. Ibarra become councilman. You helped get Oriole and Starling streets repaved. Ernesto, you saved me from that madman who tried to abduct me late one night after work. If not for you, I might not be alive today!”

“Well,” Ernesto said, “I guess I could file. Couldn’t hurt, as *Abuela* always says.”

Ernesto’s best friend, Abel Ruiz, was walking toward them. When Ernesto had first attended Chavez, he was a frightened stranger. Abel was the first to reach out to him, and they became best friends. “Hey Ernie,” Abel hailed.

“Hey Abel, Naomi thinks I should file for senior class president,” Ernesto said. “She thinks I got a chance.”

“More than a chance,” Naomi declared. “You’ve changed lives.”

“You sure changed *my* life, *amigo*,” Abel asserted. “I was so down on myself that I thought I was a hopeless loser. My big brother Tomás was the star in our family. Mom never got tired of telling me I was a loser. Nobody expected anything of me. Then you talked to me, Ernie. You came on strong. You said I needed to go for my dream. I was ashamed to even tell anybody that I *had* a dream. But you got it out of me.”

Abel nodded and pointed at his friend. “*You* were the first person I ever told how much I loved cooking—that I wanted to be a chef. Now I’m studying cooking. When I finish at Chavez, I’m goin’ to culinary arts school. I’m cookin’ meals for my friends and collectin’ kudos. I feel like somebody. You gave me the courage to be myself, Ernie.”

“See?” Naomi asked, smiling. “You helped Abel realize his dream. You got Carlos and Dom off the street. They were just tagging walls and fences. Then Abel came up with the idea of them painting that beautiful mural on the science building. And you ran with Abel’s idea, Ernie. Maybe a third of the kids who go to school here have been blessed to know you.”

“Wow!” Ernesto exclaimed. “Now I’m getting excited. I don’t think I’ll bother running for senior class president. I think I’ll run for king of the world.”

“Ernie!” Naomi chided with mock anger, punching him lightly in the shoulder.

“Naomi’s right,” Abel agreed. “You’re a great guy, Ernie, and everyone sees that.”

Ernesto headed for English class. When he walked into the room, he saw a small stack of filing applications on Ms. Hunt’s desk. Ernesto went up and took one. Ms. Hunt was a young woman and probably one of the best teachers at Chavez.

“You thinking of running for senior office, Ernesto?” Ms. Hunt asked him.

“Yeah, I was kicking the idea around,” Ernesto replied.

“Good idea,” the teacher told him. “There are a lot of wonderful students in the junior class, Ernesto. But they need motivation. Somebody like you could inspire many of them. The dropout rate here at Chavez is pretty bleak. We need all the good leaders we can get.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Ms. Hunt,” Ernesto responded. He was touched and impressed that the teacher saw him in that way. Ernesto always had the feeling that Ms. Hunt liked him. He did well in

class. When a problem arose, she often turned to him to give her a hand. Two weeks ago, a disturbance had occurred outside her classroom. An argument was turning into an ugly confrontation between two girls. Ms. Hunt didn't hesitate to turn her class over to Ernesto while she went outside to break it up. Ernesto kept things going for twenty minutes until she returned.

At midday, Ernesto brought the application with him to fill it out during his lunch period. Usually he ate lunch with Julio Avila, who was on the track team with him. Abel, Dom, and Carlos were typically there too.

“Hey man,” Julio asked, “you runnin’ for something?”

“Yeah,” Ernesto answered. “Senior class president. You’re always beating me in the hundred yard dash. Maybe I can win here.”

“Oh boy,” Dom Reynosa exclaimed. “Me and Carlos’ll make campaign posters for you, dude. We’re great artists, you

know. When we first met you, man, we were tagging a fence. You took one look at the stuff we were doing and said maybe we could be muralists. You know, like those famous Mexican guys.”

“Yeah,” Carlos told Ernesto. “You turned us around, Ernie. Now we’re sticking it out here at Chavez.

“Even though we’re bored stiff most of the time,” Dom added glumly.

Ernesto completed the application. On his way out of school after the last bell, he dropped it off at the vice principal’s office. He knew that Mira Nuñez and Rod Garcia had already filed. But he didn’t think any other juniors would. “Well,” Ernesto thought, “one chance in three wasn’t bad.”

Ernesto jogged home from school to his home on Wren Street. When the weather was good, as it was today, he liked to run. Jogging improved his track performance and it was fun. Ernesto always felt better after a run.

Ernesto’s father wasn’t home when the boy got there. Mr. Sandoval was still at his

desk at Cesar Chavez high school. But Maria Sandoval, Ernesto's mother, was home. She'd just brought Ernesto's two little sisters home from elementary school. Eight-year-old Katalina and six-year-old Juanita had run to their *Abuela* Lena, Dad's widowed mother. Grandma had been living with the family for several months now. She helped the girls with their homework and played games with them. Ever since *Abuela* Lena had moved in, the girls were less interested in video games and TV.

"Hi Mom," Ernesto called. He had talked to his parents about running for senior class president. "I filed today for senior class president, Mom."

"Good for you!" Mom popped her head through the kitchen doorway, smiling. "I'm so glad. You have natural leadership qualities."

Mom didn't work outside the home. But she had written a published children's picture book a few months ago—*Thunder and Princess*. It was the story of a pit bull