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CHAPTER ONE

Mama,” eight-year-old Katalina Sandoval said at breakfast, “can I have an extra brownie in my lunch today?”

Maria Sandoval, her mother, replied. “Sure, honey. But maybe I should pack you another sandwich if you’re hungry.”

“No, Mama, it’s not for me,” Katalina explained. “It’s for Andrea Lopez. Yesterday she was crying all during lunch. If she’s crying today too, I thought giving her a brownie would make her feel better. You make such good brownies, Mama. They always make me happy, even when I’m sad.”

Sixteen-year-old Ernesto Sandoval was Katalina’s older brother. He was also a junior at Cesar Chavez High School. Ernesto

looked at his little sister. He was proud of her for having such a big heart. But he was worried too.

Luis Sandoval was Katalina's and Ernesto's father. He taught history at Chavez High. He said, "Do you think she was crying because she was hungry? A lot of families are going through hard times right now. They're struggling and sometimes the kids have to go without."

Six-year-old Juanita Sandoval nodded. "I *always* cry when I'm hungry, like when dinner is late."

The Sandovals had three children and another on the way. Ernesto really admired his father. Not only did he teach history in an exciting and interesting way. He also reached out to the kids, especially those in trouble. Ernesto's father had brought several dropouts back to school. He was trying to rescue more who were aimless in the *barrio*.

"No," Katalina answered, as she put butter and raspberry jam on her slice of

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toast. “I think Andrea is crying ’cause her mama is sick and Andrea feels bad.”

“Oh, that’s too bad!” Mom said. “Is the doctor giving her medicine so she gets better?”

Katalina looked very sad. She took a small bite of her toast. When she answered, her voice quivered a little. “Andrea’s mother has been sick a long time. They didn’t have money for a doctor ’cause Andrea’s daddy’s out of work. Now Andrea’s mother is really, *really* sick . . .”

“Sweetheart,” Mom said, “what did you say Andrea’s last name was?”

“Lopez,” Katalina responded.

Ernesto looked at his parents. “That’s Cruz Lopez’s family,” he said. “My friend, Paul Morales, is close to them. Paul and Abel and I took some groceries over there to them. The fridge was empty except for a half jug of milk. Nothing but salt and flour in the cupboards. But Carmen’s dad, Councilman Ibarra, he got the family on SNAP.”

“What’s SNAP?” Katalina chimed in.

“It’s a government program that helps people get good food,” Ernesto explained. Then, turning to the others, he went on. “Mr. Ibarra also helped them get their health insurance back. When Mr. Lopez got laid off, his boss told him he had no more health coverage. But Mr. Ibarra found out that’s a lie. The coverage continues for six months after a layoff. Mr. Lopez has been off work just three months. So now Mrs. Lopez can finally go see a doctor.”

Andrea Lopez was in third grade with Katalina at Adams Street Elementary School. The girls were good friends. Katalina always noticed that Andrea didn’t have clothes as nice as Katalina’s. That made her feel sorry. So once Katalina gave Andrea one of her sweaters. She told Katalina she didn’t like it anymore herself, though that was not true.

Ernesto finished his breakfast. He called Paul Morales on his cell phone before heading for school. “Hey Paul,” he said. “My little sister, Kat, she goes to

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school with Cruz's sister, Andrea. She's telling us this morning that Mrs. Lopez is really sick. I thought that problem with the health insurance was cleared up. She was getting some help . . .”

Cruz Lopez and Paul Morales were as close as brothers. One time Cruz, Paul, and their friend Beto Ortiz were hiking in the Anza-Borrego Desert. A rattlesnake bit Paul when they were miles from help. Cruz and Beto carried Paul to the highway, where the paramedics picked him up and saved his life. Ernesto knew Paul would do anything he could for Cruz.

Paul's voice was heavy when he answered. “Mrs. Lopez has been sick a long time. She kept hopin' she'd get better. She pushed off getting the MRI. Mr. Lopez's boss always discouraged employees from getting too many medical procedures. He said it was running up his premiums. Now that she had the insurance card, she went in. They did the exams, and the doctor said it's kinda too late.”

Ernesto's heart sank. "What do you mean man?" he asked, even though he knew the answer.

"It's gone too far, Ernie," Paul explained. "When they had insurance, the boss told them not to use it too much. Then he lied and said they had no insurance at all when Mr. Lopez got laid off. Now they're saying it's inoperable, but they're gonna try chemo and radiation."

"Paul, that's terrible," Ernesto gasped. Ernesto's own family was never rich. On his father's teaching salary, they would probably never be. But they always had good health insurance from Dad's job. The family could always go in for checkups and preventative care. The thought of Mom or Dad or the Sandoval kids being sick and unable to afford medical help shocked Ernesto. It seemed inhuman. "Paul," he said, "that shouldn't happen."

"Yeah, right," Paul responded in a bitter voice. "Ernie, will you put your dad on?"

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“Sure,” Ernesto replied, handing the cell phone to his father. “Paul wants to talk to you, Dad.”

“Hello Paul,” Luis Sandoval said. “Yes, I’ll be at the community college tonight. I’ll go there right after I leave Chavez High and meet with my friend in the admissions office. It’ll take no more than an hour for us to have the paperwork ready. Cruz and Beto should come by, say, six. We’ll have all the papers ready for the guys. Paul, you tell those boys they’re doing the smartest thing they’ve ever done.”

Paul said something at the other end of the call. “Yeah, Paul, I know,” Dad responded. “It’s heartbreaking. But I know that nothing would console Beatrice Lopez more than knowing her boy is taking a solid step toward a good future. She doesn’t need any more stress right now. Cruz hanging around the streets and getting into trouble isn’t doing her any good. . . . Yeah Paul, you bet.”

When Luis Sandoval disconnected the call, he turned to his family. "That was about Cruz and his buddy, Beto. They're getting into the electrician program we've got at the community college while they get their GED. It's a two-year program, and it's going to be hard. But scholarship money is available from the Nicolo Sena fund that Councilman Ibarra just revived. Both Cruz and Beto are eligible for help. Any needy kid in the *barrio* can get help. I've already filled out papers for them."

Maria Sandoval sat sipping her coffee. She had been hungry this morning. Now, as they said, she was eating for two. She was expecting her baby soon. She had felt like another having piece of toast, but suddenly her appetite was gone. She'd seen Beatrice Lopez at a few of the parent's nights at Adams Elementary. She was a frail-looking woman. Ernesto's mother always felt sorry for her because she was so poorly dressed. Obviously, the husband had a menial job, and they had three children. Maria Sandoval remembered

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chatting with her about their children. They swapped notes about Katalina, Juanita, and her Andrea and Sarah. Sarah was in the fifth grade. It was just small talk.

Now, looking back, Ernesto's mother wondered whether she could have done something. She wished she'd gotten more friendly with Mrs. Lopez. Perhaps Maria could have helped her with her medical issues. But the Lopez girls seemed happy, and Mrs. Lopez appeared to be all right. There did not seem to be an emergency. Even if there was, Maria Sandoval thought some government agency would be helping.

But apparently nobody was helping.

Maria Sandoval packed an extra brownie in a lunch bag for Andrea.

"Thanks Mama!" Katalina said. "Andrea will feel much better today if she has one of your brownies. You make the best brownies in the whole world. Andrea told me her mama always made cookies for her and her sister. But she doesn't anymore. That's what Andrea said anyway."