

ANNE SCHRAFF

URBAN
UNDERGROUND

Dark

SECRETS

 SADDLEBACK
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

CHAPTER ONE

Calico, the Sandovals' cat, let out a long screech, as Ernesto Sandoval and his family were finishing breakfast. Sixteen-year-old Ernesto was about to take off for Cesar Chavez High School, where he was a junior. His father, Luis Sandoval, was about to head out for the same school, where he taught American and world history.

Juanita, Ernesto's six-year-old sister, ran to the window and screamed, "A big old white dog is chasing Calico. I think he's gonna eat her!"

Maria Sandoval, Ernesto's mother, jumped up, almost knocking over the coffee pot. "Oh my goodness!" she cried.

“We gotta save poor Calico,” eight-year-old Katalina shouted.

Ernesto was immediately at the back door, his father right behind him. “It’s Brutus, that pit bull the Martinez family got,” Ernesto shouted. He rushed into the yard to get between the dog and Calico. But Calico had already escaped up the pepper tree. She now sat crouched, trembling, on a limb. “It’s okay, Mom,” Ernesto hollered. “Calico is safe.”

Both Ernesto and his father were tall and skinny, but they were tough. They approached the pit bull, which was barking and leaping at the trunk of the pepper tree.

“Brutus!” Ernesto yelled in as commanding a voice as he could muster. Ernesto didn’t care much for the dog’s owner, Felix Martinez. But he deeply cared about Naomi, Mr. Martinez’s daughter and a beautiful junior at school. Felix Martinez had bought the pit bull against his wife’s wishes. Now Linda Martinez was so terrified of the dog that she was always afraid in

CHAPTER ONE

her own house. Ernesto thought that buying the dog had been a mean thing for Felix Martinez to do. The man seemed to have a sadistic streak. He enjoyed seeing other people afraid because then he could look down on them. He could feel better than them because he wasn't afraid of anything.

Mom came outside and handed Ernesto a length of rope. Ernesto and his father then cornered Brutus by the tool shed. Ernesto spoke softly to the dog. "Come on, boy. Settle down. We want to take you home. You wanna go home, right? Sure you do." As he spoke, Ernesto gently slipped the rope through the ring on the dog's collar and tied it.

"Ernie, be careful," Mom cautioned.

Luis Sandoval was right beside Ernesto, helping him calm the pit bull down. "I don't think he's vicious," Dad remarked. "But you never know. You hear so many bad things about this breed . . ."

Ernesto smiled as he stood up, holding onto the rope. "That wasn't bad, eh Brutus?"

You're just a big old puppy, eh Brutus? You don't want to bite anybody."

"That was good, Ernie," Dad commented. "You handled that real well."

"Dad, you should see how scared Mrs. Martinez is of this dog," Ernesto said. "Her husband told me he got the dog just to force her to overcome her fears. But half the time she locks herself in the kitchen so Brutus can't get at her. I don't know, Dad. I think there's something wrong with a guy who does that to his wife."

Dad said nothing. But he had a hard look on his face, as if he knew about the situation at the Martinez house. He seemed to be aware of some dark secrets in that place. "They live over on Bluebird, right?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," Ernesto replied. "I can take Brutus home before I go to school. It'll just take a few minutes."

"I'll go with you, Ernie," Dad suggested.

"You don't have to, Dad," Ernesto said. Brutus was jumping and straining at the

CHAPTER ONE

improvised leash, but Ernesto was strong enough to hold him. Father and son set off for Bluebird Street.

As they walked, Ernesto recalled a time when Naomi, a slight girl, had tried to control the dog. She had gotten his chain wrapped around her arm, and the chain had left a nasty bruise. Whenever Ernesto thought of Naomi, he felt a deep yearning. Her beautiful face came to mind, and he got goose bumps. “Naomi isn’t afraid of Brutus like her mom is, but she can’t control him,” Ernesto mentioned to his Dad.

“You like Naomi, eh *mi hijo*?” Dad asked as they turned the corner toward the Martinez house.

“Yeah Dad,” Ernesto admitted, “but she’s got this creep boyfriend, Clay Aguirre. She told me she loves him. Is that crazy or what? He isn’t even nice to her.”

Brutus was jumping and straining at the rope. When he escaped from the Martinez yard, he was in his glory. He enjoyed the newfound freedom—chasing squirrels,

cats, anything that moved, even leaves. Now they had taken his freedom away. They neared a bunch of pigeons on the sidewalk, and Brutus lunged at them eagerly. The pigeons escaped in a flutter of feathers.

“I knew Felix Martinez when I was a kid around here,” Dad confided, grimacing. “I’m not surprised he brings a dog into the house to terrify his wife.”

They turned onto Bluebird Street and headed for the green stucco house. “They still live there, eh?” Dad asked.

When they drew close to the house, they heard loud yelling and cursing. Ernesto figured Mr. Martinez was blaming his wife for letting the dog get out.

“You moron!” Felix Martinez was yelling. “Why did you leave the door open?”

Zack Martinez, Naomi’s older brother, spotted Ernesto and his father coming with Brutus. “Hey Dad!” he shouted. “Some guys are comin’ with the dog now.”

CHAPTER ONE

The front door swung open, and there stood Felix Martinez, his face flushed with fury. He looked at Ernesto's father. "I know you," he noted. "You're Luis Sandoval. I heard you came back to the *barrio*."

"Brutus was in our yard," Ernesto stated.

Martinez grabbed the rope leash from Ernesto and said, "Thanks a lot. My idiot wife left the door open, and he just took off. He's wanting to run all the time." He smiled a little, "Come on in for some beer, you guys. I sure do appreciate you getting Brutus back to me."

"No thanks," Luis Sandoval declined. "It's too early in the morning to be drinking. Besides, Ernie and I need to get to Chavez High."

Zack Martinez was sitting on the corner of a chair, drinking from a can of beer. He was probably seventeen. Ernesto hadn't see him at Chavez. Maybe he dropped out, Ernesto thought, or maybe he already graduated. He was trying to mask his shock at the open beer can.

Linda Martinez stood in the darkened hallway, barely visible. She shrank back when the pit bull came in.

“I always keep Brutus on a leash or behind a locked gate,” Martinez asserted. “These wimps around here see a pit bull, and they go nuts. He’s a nice dog, though. Don’t you think he’s a nice dog, Sandoval?”

“I guess so,” Ernesto’s father admitted.

“See, *stupid?*” Felix Martinez glared at his wife. “Nobody’s scared of Brutus but you. This guy and his kid didn’t have a problem with the dog.” He turned his attention back to the Sandovals. “She left the door open. That’s the kind of an idiot she is.”

Zack laughed. He almost choked on his beer. He thought what his father was saying about his mother was funny. Ernesto was glad Naomi wasn’t here to see this ugly spectacle, but then she probably saw enough anyway.

Ernesto saw annoyance turn to anger in his father’s eyes. “Felix, what other people

do is none of my business, but stop it. Enough! *Basta!*”

Martinez looked puzzled. “What? What’s up, man? What are you talking about?”

“Man,” Dad told him, “you oughtn’t be calling your wife names, especially not in front of the boy there. That’s his *mother* man. So she made a mistake and let the dog get out. Okay. But you need to respect her. She’s your wife. You don’t throw words like ‘stupid’ and ‘moron’ around. She’s your woman, Felix.”

Felix Martinez grinned scornfully. “You were always weird, Sandoval. I remember when we were kids, you were this Goody Two-shoes getting offended by everything. Well, lissen up. Me and Linda been together for thirty years, and she ain’t goin’ nowhere and neither am I. We don’t need no scolding from some sissy guy who probably sleeps with his tie on.” Then he added, “But, hey, thanks for bringing the dog back. That was real nice.

You sure you and the boy don't want a cold beer?"

"We don't drink," Dad snapped.

Martinez shrugged and closed the door. As the Sandovals turned and walked away, they heard him yelling. "See what you caused, dummy? You embarrassed me in front of that jerk, Sandoval. He thinks he's got the right to lecture me because he's a teacher. Well, that don't cut no ice with me. I'm a heavy equipment operator. That's a man's job."

Dad shook his head as they headed for home. "Martinez was a bully when we were kids," Dad explained. "He'd pick on the younger kids, me and my friends. He'd give us a hard time. It makes me sick how he talks to his wife. In front of that boy too. Did you see the boy laughing? He's growing up thinking that's how you treat girls and women. He thinks that's how families work. When he gets married, it'll be the same way. It just goes on and on like a stream of polluted water. I hear some of the

ANNE SCHRAFF

URBAN
UNDERGROUND

Leap of

FAITH



SADDLEBACK
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

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