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URBAN
UNDERGROUND

To Catch a

DREAM

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CHAPTER ONE

You land a job yet, *muchacho*?" Sal Ruiz asked his son, Abel. Abel Ruiz was a sixteen-year-old junior at Cesar Chavez High School, and he'd been searching for part-time work for more than a month. Every afternoon after classes, he walked around the *barrio* looking for "Help Wanted" signs. Nobody seemed to be hiring.

"Not yet, Dad," Abel answered wearily, dropping his books on the kitchen table and unburdening himself of his backpack. He let the backpack drop to the floor with a thud.

"How come?" his dad asked. Sal Ruiz did hard, backbreaking work for a gardening company owned by his wife's cousin.

He dug planting holes for trees and trimmed shrubs. He carried cement for making patios and built block walls. Nothing was too hard for him to handle. He began working when he was thirteen, and he was almost forty. The work had grown harder, but his body had grown weaker.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Abel responded. “I’ve been to lots of places, but they don’t need anybody.”

“Maybe you’re too particular, *muchacho*,” Dad suggested.

The family consisted of Abel, his older brother, Tomás, and thirteen-year-old Penelope, whom everybody called “Penny.” Liza Ruiz, Abel’s mother, didn’t work outside the home. But she made beautiful scarves and sold them through high-end boutiques, making good money. But the family had a big mortgage on the house and college expenses for Tomás. They needed all the money everybody could bring in. Tomás was the shining light of the family, having earned straight As at Chavez

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High and now studying engineering at UCLA. Abel was clinging to a B minus at Chavez.

“I’d do any kind of work as long as it’s legal,” Abel told his dad. He was a skinny kid with a bad complexion. He had just one good friend at school, Ernesto Sandoval, who had just moved into town from LA. Ernesto was a great friend, probably the best friend Abel ever had. He was the son of the school’s history teacher, Luis Sandoval.

“Have you tried the donut shop?” Liza Ruiz asked, coming into the kitchen with one of her scarves in her hands. “That one on Tremayne is always hiring.”

Liza Ruiz was smarter than her husband, and she knew it. She wasn’t a cruel person, but she demeaned her husband sometimes. He had dropped out of high school before he graduated, and he’d never had a really good job. He was a jack-of-all-trades and master of none, as the saying went. If Liza’s cousin had not given him a

job with his landscaping firm, the family would be in dire straits.

“No, I didn’t try there,” Abel admitted. He glanced at his mother. She was small and trim, younger looking than a mother of three.

Abel believed that his mother thought her smart son, Tomás, took after her, and Abel was more like his father. When Liza was in school, she was an excellent student and very popular with the boys because of her beauty. Tomás was bright and handsome, and he always had plenty of friends too. Like his father, Abel was plain looking and not very smart, and he didn’t have many friends. He counted himself really lucky when Ernesto Sandoval became his friend because a lot of kids liked Ernesto.

Once, when Abel’s mother was in a very bitter mood, she said to him, “God took pity on me and sent me a son who shines like the stars before sending me my second son.” She didn’t even know Abel heard that

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comment. She hadn't meant to hurt him, but he did hear it and it stung. The remark remained in his heart like a scar all these years.

Sal Ruiz did not expect much of Abel either, because he expected little of himself. He only wanted Abel to be willing to work and not to be lazy. Mr. Ruiz did not think Abel would amount to much, just as he had never amounted to much. But if Abel worked hard, as his father did, and was honest, he could make his way in the world. A man could not expect more than that. Mr. Ruiz was at peace with the way the world was set up. When Abel was about ten, he explained his view of life to the boy.

“You see this photograph of a pyramid, *mi hijo?*” he asked. “Do you see how little room there is at the top? This is where the smart and rich are. Now look at the great space at the bottom. That is for the rest of us. There are many more of us than there are of them. But that's all right. We survive.”

At times, Abel was not satisfied with the image of the pyramid and what it signified. He wanted more. He was willing to struggle for more. Even at school he studied much harder than most kids. His teachers called him an overachiever.

And now Abel really wanted a job. His friend, Ernesto, worked at the pizzeria, and he saved enough money to buy a car. It was a used car. Worse, it was a horrible Volvo once owned by an old lady, who was now in a nursing home. But at least Ernesto had wheels. Abel wanted a car too, even if it was an old junker. Mom managed the finances in the Ruiz house, and she was very frugal. She insisted that Dad hand over his paycheck every two weeks, and she paid the mortgage and the utilities. She gave Dad a little spending money, just as she gave Abel money for lunches and maybe a pair of socks. No way would she give Abel money for a car.

Ernesto had a beautiful girlfriend, Naomi Martinez, and they'd go driving in the Volvo. Ernesto took Naomi to the

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movies and to concerts. Abel didn't have a girlfriend, but he hoped to have one eventually. Abel thought that, if he found a girl who was hard up enough to go out with him, he couldn't expect her to ride the bus to the movies with him. He'd have to provide her with a ride. Abel was straining at the bit. He needed money. He needed freedom. He had to get a job.

After school on Tuesday. Abel walked down Tremayne to the donut shop. It was a small place with four tables. Most of its customers bought donuts and other baked goods to go.

When Abel entered the shop, he was struck by the wonderful smells. The display case contained all kinds of donuts, apple fritters, and bear claws. The owner of the place, Elena Suarez, about forty, was a plump, pretty woman who wore too much makeup. She looked like she sampled a lot of her own merchandise.

“Hi, what can I do for you?” she asked Abel, thinking he was a customer.

Abel was so used to going into a place, asking for a job, and then being turned down, that he had little hope here. And his feelings showed. He felt like saying, “I want a job, but you probably don’t want to hire me. So I’ll just be on my way.” He didn’t say that, though. He forced himself to smile and speak up. “I’m Abel Ruiz, a junior at Cesar Chavez High School, and I’m looking for a part-time job after school. I got some references from teachers and stuff.”

“Yeah?” Elena responded. “Well, go sit at one of the tables and fill out this application. I’ll be over to look at it and interview you. I need some help here.”

Abel’s heart leaped. He had never gotten this far. He never even got an application to fill out. At the hamburger joint and the taco stand, they just said they didn’t need anybody.

Abel sat down and began filling out the application. Under “References,” he put down the name of Luis Sandoval, his history teacher. He included two other teachers who

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seemed to like him too. He put down the name of the old lady at the end of the street. A couple times he mowed her lawn. She called him a “nice *muchacho*” when she paid him. Finally, he listed a man on the street who once paid him to help move a piano. After that, the guy always waved to Abel.

Elena Suarez noticed Abel was finished with the application. She came over and sat opposite him at the table. She glanced at the application and commented, “Looks good. Lot of nice references. Well, we need somebody for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, in the afternoon. I have two employees now, but they can’t work some days. I’d need you between four and seven. Would that work for you?”

“Oh yeah,” Abel replied, happiness rising in him like a great tide. He couldn’t believe he was actually going to get a job. “Yeah, that’d be great, Mrs.—”

“Elena. Everybody calls me Elena,” the woman answered. “So, Abel, I’ll see you at four tomorrow, okay?”

“You bet. I’ll be here,” Abel affirmed. He didn’t ask about the salary. He just wanted a job. He thought he’d grab the job even if the pay was just a few dollars an hour.

“Oh, it’s minimum wage, Abel,” Elena went on. “But we got a tip jar, and people are pretty generous. I always split the tips evenly among the kids working on the shift. You might end up with five extra dollars every day you work.” She smiled at Abel. Elena had dyed carrot red hair and a bad perm. But at that moment she was the most beautiful creature on earth. She had given Abel a job.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” Abel babbled on his way out. The minute he was out of the donut shop, Abel texted his friend Ernesto. “Got the job! Got the job!” Abel didn’t have any other friends close enough to care about what was going on in his life. But he’d told Ernesto he was going for the donut shop job. Ernesto had told him about his job at the pizza shop. They were friends.