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URBAN
UNDERGROUND

Dark

SECRETS

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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

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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

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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.”

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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