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## CHAPTER ONE

Sixteen-year-old Ernesto Sandoval was buying an apple from the vending machine at Cesar Chavez High School when Carmen Ibarra came running up to him. She was a good friend of Ernesto's, but she wasn't his girlfriend. Naomi Martinez was the girl Ernesto loved.

"Ernie! Ernie! Ernie!" Carmen yelled. "My dad is running for city council!"

Ernesto smiled. Carmen could talk more and louder than anybody else he knew. She was very excitable. Everybody liked Carmen because she had your back when you were in trouble.

"That's great, Carmen," Ernesto said. "We need a good person in there."

Emilio Zapata Ibarra, Carmen's father, was a larger-than-life character. At Carmen's parties, he wore a plastic sheriff's badge from a cereal box. But nearly all his neighbors had stories of when he reached out to them with advice, money, or comfort in times of need. Ibarra defended the streets from gangbangers and drug dealers. He worked with veterans' organizations and programs for the homeless, seniors, and teenagers.

"Yeah," Carmen went on, "the guy who's in there now, that Monte Esposito, he's a big bag of wind. He likes to get on television and talk about all his big plans, but he doesn't do anything. He's been in almost ten years, and he's done nothing. Problems that our *barrio* people took to him when he first got elected are still on the back-burner. Like that gangbanger hangout on Starling—the creeps are using it again. Some of the parents on that street have gone to Esposito for help, and his assistant says, 'He's studying the problem.'

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The place needs to be condemned. If my dad gets elected, he'll take care of business."

"Yeah, I believe it," Ernesto agreed, grinning. He was a little afraid of Mr. Ibarra, but clearly the man had a passion for justice and a sincere desire to help people. That was clearly not the case with Esposito. He was an entrenched politician who became less effective every year.

Naomi Martinez came walking over. "What's going on, Carmen? What's all the excitement about?" she inquired.

"My dad's gonna run for the city council to unseat Monte Esposito," Carmen bubbled. "Oh, there's so much he wants to do for the people around here. He wants to have an open-door policy so anybody with a problem can come in and talk to him. With Esposito, you have to like wait three months just to see his assistant!"

Naomi grew very quiet. Then she spoke. "Monte Esposito is my dad's cousin.

They grew up together, and they're very close now. Dad really likes Monte. He gets perks and shares them with Dad, like tickets to the football games."

Carmen's eyes grew very large. "Oh, I didn't even know that, Naomi," she responded.

"Yeah," Naomi said. Her father, Felix Martinez, was a tough man who could be harsh. He domineered Naomi's mother. He bought a pit bull a few months ago. Even though his wife was terrified of the animal, he forced her to accept it. His wife, Linda Martinez, locked herself in the kitchen when the dog was loose, and she trembled with fear. Now she was used to the dog—Brutus. She even liked him, but for a while living in her own home was terrible for Mrs. Martinez

Ernesto felt weird. He loved Naomi, and he really liked Carmen. Ernesto's father, Luis Sandoval, taught history at Chavez High, and Ernesto had heard a lot of political talk around the dinner table.

Dad often mentioned that Monte Esposito didn't serve the people in the *barrio*. He served himself and his cronies.

"Esposito keeps his chair warm down there at city council, but that's about it," Ernesto's dad would say. "We were trying to get a traffic light installed across from Veterans Hall. That way, some of those poor older guys don't have to risk life and limb crossing at that dangerous intersection. But Esposito just stonewalled us. He's been asleep at the wheel for a long time."

Ernesto and his family had just moved back into the *barrio* a short time ago. For ten years they had lived in Los Angeles. So Ernesto didn't know too much about local politics. His father, though, had kept in touch with friends he'd known in town since childhood.

Ernesto looked at Naomi and told her, "Your dad's cousin will probably be re-elected. People usually vote for the person who's in."

“Yeah,” Carmen fumed, her eyes catching fire. “That’s the problem. After you get elected, you don’t have to do anything. They just keep on electing you. You can just sit there collecting your salary and let the *barrio* go to the dogs.”

Naomi looked troubled. She was a bright student. She knew, as did everyone else, that Monte Esposito was a poor public servant. But she also knew how close her father was to the man. Naomi’s father didn’t take kindly to family members defying him. He had already kicked his two older sons, Orlando and Manny, out of the house just for standing up to him.

“Well,” Carmen declared, “I’m going to do all I can to help my dad get elected. The club we’ve formed, me and my friends, it’s called the *Zapatistas*. We’re gonna canvas the neighborhood and talk to people, pass out flyers.”

When Carmen walked away, Ernesto said to Naomi, “Well, I’ve never liked politics much.”

Naomi shrugged. “Last time Monte Esposito ran for reelection, I helped paint posters for his campaign. Me and Zack worked hard. We even had little parties at our house to raise money for him.”

“Uh, do *you* like the guy, Naomi?” Ernesto asked carefully.

“I don’t know,” Naomi answered. “My brother Zack said he’s a crook. Zack didn’t say that around Dad, though. Zack pretends he likes him. I guess Monte is Dad’s claim to fame. When the councilman goes to some big party, he always invites my parents. And they get to sit with the big shots. I think Dad would feel really bad if Esposito lost the election and wasn’t a councilman anymore.”

Ernesto was a little nervous. Deep in his heart he knew that Monte Esposito was not good for the *barrio*. Rumors even went around that the guy was a crook. Ernesto thought that Carmen’s father would do a lot of good in the community but wasn’t about to upset Naomi. So he kept his mouth shut.



Nothing meant more to Ernesto than Naomi. Ernesto hoped that Carmen Ibarra wouldn't expect him to join the *Zapatistas*. He just couldn't.

Later that day, Ernesto had lunch with his best friend, Abel Ruiz. Abel was the first kid who reached out when Ernesto first came on campus as a stranger. Also at lunch were two teammates from the Chavez Cougar track team that Ernesto belonged to, Julio Avila and Jorge Aguilar.

"Carmen is really charged up about her dad running for city council, huh?" Abel asked. "That girl is hotter than a jalapeno pepper. With her working for her dad, he's a sure thing to get elected."

"Yeah," Ernesto replied. "Emilio Ibarra is a good man, that's for sure."

"Esposito got in some trouble last year for going to the Bahamas on our tax money," said Jorge Aguilar. "But he weaseled out of that somehow."

Ernesto didn't want to hear that. It was bad enough that Monte Esposito was not a

good councilman. If he was also dishonest, that bothered Ernesto. The thought that he wouldn't help to elect a good, honest man made him feel guilty—that he'd rather see the inept crook remain in place just so his girlfriend wouldn't be upset. Ernesto felt like a creep, and he hated the feeling.

"I guess there's always gossip about people," Ernesto commented in a lame voice. "Esposito probably isn't any worse than the other politicians we got in there."

"My dad, he's a war veteran, you know," Julio chimed in. "And he's got a buddy, calls him Rezzi. He's a vet too. Rezzi used to work for Esposito. He's told Dad stuff about Esposito that'd turn a guy's curly hair straight. That's what my dad said."

Ernesto often saw Julio's dad at the track meets. He wore old, threadbare clothing, and he looked as though life had stomped on him pretty hard. But Mr. Avila was proud of Julio. When Julio won a race, as he often did, the man beamed with pride. Julio was his only child, his only relative.

His mother was long dead. Mr. Avila said his only reason for living was to see his son be successful. Maybe one day, Mr. Avila hoped, Julio would go the Olympics and win a gold medal.

“My grandpa was a vet,” Jorge said. “And he’s really old now. He says a lot of veterans hang out in the ravine ’cause they’re homeless. Grandpa wrote a letter to Esposito asking him if the city could do something to reach out to these guys. Grandpa’s doing okay. He lives with us. But the other guys, some of them have nowhere to go. You’d think something could be done. But Esposito never answered the letter. I guess he had better things to do, like hanging out in the Bahamas and playing golf with his fat cat *amigos*.”

The boys laughed and finished their lunches. Ernesto didn’t laugh. He always prided himself on having the courage to do the right thing. Luis Sandoval, his dad, walked the *barrio*. He struck up conversations with dropouts and even gangbangers,