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URBAN  
UNDERGROUND

To **DIE** For

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# CHAPTER ONE

Ernesto Sandoval was finishing his oatmeal before heading for Cesar Chavez High School. He had to turn in a big project for his AP History class. Mr. Quino Bustos, the teacher, was very demanding, and Ernesto was nervous. He had a senior class meeting at the end of the week too, and since Ernesto was senior class president, he was thinking about that a lot.

Suddenly, Ernesto's mother, Maria Sandoval, let out a small cry of dismay. "Oh my," she said, "how sad."

The local television news was on, and Ernesto had been paying no attention to it until now. "What happened, Mom?" he asked, turning toward the screen.

“That poor homeless man who hangs out behind Hussam’s store ... he was found dead this morning,” Maria Sandoval said.

Luis Sandoval, Ernesto’s father who taught history at Chavez High, looked up from his eggs. “Poor guy. Probably had a heart attack or maybe he overdosed. I saw him just a few days ago. He was breathing really hard. He asked for change, and thank God I gave him a couple bucks. I’d feel bad if I’d turned him down, and he was so close to the end.”

Ernesto’s sisters, nine-year-old Katalina and seven-year-old Juanita, were looking at the television screen intently now.

“The news said the police were looking into it,” Juanita said. “What’s a ‘homicide’?”

A worried look passed through Mrs. Sandoval’s eyes. “They think he might not have died of natural causes ... that, you know, somebody killed him,” she said.

“That’s awful,” Katalina said. “He never hurt anybody. Why would somebody kill him?”

Ernesto had spoken to the homeless man—Griff Slocum—a few times. Like his father, Ernesto had given him a few dollars. Griff was very hard to understand. He had a severe speech defect, and he talked softly, barely above a whisper. His head was shaved, and he had a scar on his chin. He looked gaunt, especially in the oversized clothing he usually wore. Ernesto and his best friend, Abel Ruiz, had bought Griff a sub sandwich and coffee a few times, and the man always smiled gratefully and bowed.

“The guy was completely nonviolent,” Ernesto said. “One day, I was passing him when somebody gave him a shove and said street people should all be put in jail. He shoved Griff so hard that he almost lost his balance and fell in the street. Griff didn’t fight back. He just cowered.”

“When was this, Ernie?” his father asked.

“Oh, last year. I gave the mean dude a dirty look and pretended I was taking his

picture on my cell phone, and he ran. I never saw him again,” Ernesto said.

Ernesto had planned to take his girlfriend, Naomi Martinez, to the mall this afternoon, so he wasn't jogging to school as usual. He drove his Volvo over to the Martinez house to pick up Naomi so they could ride to school together. When Ernesto rapped on the door, he heard Naomi shout, “Come on in, Ernie. I'm almost ready.”

When Ernesto went in, he saw Linda Martinez, Naomi's mother, coming from the kitchen. “Hi, Ernie. I'm making cookies for a bake sale,” she said.

“Did you hear about Griff Slocum?” Ernesto asked in a voice loud enough for Naomi to hear in her bedroom.

“What about Griff Slocum?” Naomi shouted from the other room.

Naomi came down the hall, looking beautiful as usual. Ernesto caught his breath. “He was found dead in an alley,” Ernesto said. “The homicide guys are investigating.”

“They think he was murdered?” Linda Martinez asked in a shocked voice.

“I don’t know, but there must be some reason why the homicide guys were brought in,” Ernesto said.

As they drove the short distance to Cesar Chavez High School, Ernesto recalled how Rod Garcia and Clay Aguirre, two of his least favorite seniors, had been so sure Griff Slocum was guilty in that break-in and shooting at the Torres house. Ernesto and Clay had bad blood between them because Clay had once dated Naomi Martinez and Ernesto took her from Clay—but only after Clay had abused her. And Ernesto had beat Rod Garcia out of senior class president, a job Rod thought he deserved.

“I bet Clay and Rod won’t shed any tears over poor Griff,” Ernesto said. “They’re both down on the homeless people, especially Rod. When he sees one, he acts like the guy is some feral animal or something. I’d seen him taunting Griff and another guy.”

“Yeah,” Naomi said. “A lot of people resent the homeless. Some of them *are* pretty aggressive asking for money, but Griff never was. He’d ask in that small, mumbling voice, as if he were ashamed to be asking at all. The poor guy seemed like somebody life had really dumped on. I felt sorry for him. Who wants to sleep in alleys and look for stuff in dumpsters?”

“Yeah,” Ernesto said. “With all the work we do in school, you’d think if you got educated, did it all by the books, life would fall into place, and you’d never have a problem. Sure, that’s the ideal thing to do, but sometimes life throws you a curve. What if you got a mental illness? What if the company you worked at for ten years downsizes or sends your job overseas? So much can happen. I don’t know what Griff’s story was, but nobody chooses to be like that.”

“Yeah,” Naomi said, “like those kids in our mentoring program. They’re only fourteen years old, and they’re dealing with so much already.”

When he became senior class president, Ernesto started a senior-to-senior tutoring program to help seniors in academic trouble. He also launched a program where seniors mentored at-risk freshmen. Ernesto mentored a student named Richie Loranzo, who was orphaned when his father killed his mother. Richie now lived in foster care. Naomi mentored Angel Roma, daughter of a single mother and granddaughter of a lady very sick with Parkinson's disease. Abel Ruiz mentored Bobby Padilla, who'd run away from a troubled family.

Ernesto wondered what Griff Slocum had been like when he was fourteen. Maybe he had dealt with problems, and nobody had ever reached out to him. Or maybe his problems had been so deep and terrible that he was almost beyond help.

Ernesto parked in the student parking lot at Chavez, and he and Naomi started walking toward the school.

Clay Aguirre had just pulled up in his brand new Hyundai Equus that his parents



had just got for him. It was the most expensive car on campus. Ernesto couldn't imagine why anybody would want to drive a car like that at a school where kids were so poor; if they had a car at all, it was a beater. Why did Clay want to be in everybody's face like that?

"So that bum finally bit the dust, huh?" Clay Aguirre said when he neared Ernesto. Clay was handsome, and he made decent grades. He was also a good football player. He was going out with a beautiful senior, Mira Nuñez. Both Ernesto and Naomi thought the girl was crazy for hanging with Aguirre.

"If you mean Griff Slocum is dead, that's not something to celebrate, man," Ernesto said.

"Why not?" Clay snapped. "What good was he? A dirty old bum looking for hand-outs all the time. A dirty drifter is all he was. What was he contributing to society? He had no right to keep on breathing, dude. He finally did something good. He croaked."

“Clay,” Naomi said, “we have no right to judge people like that. A couple weeks ago, my dad saw Griff shivering in the cold, and he stopped and gave the guy an old, worn-out but warm jacket he didn’t want anymore. He and Griff were about the same size, and it was a nice warm jacket, better than anything Griff had. He was so grateful he almost kissed my father’s hand.” Naomi had tears in her eyes.

“We saw him wearing the jacket almost every day. Griff gave my father the opportunity to do something kind, and for that reason alone, Griff’s life was worthwhile. He was the reason a lot of people extended a kindness to him, things they wouldn’t have done otherwise. Dad was going to throw that jacket in the trash.”

“That’s a crock,” Clay said. “If you want to do something good, give money so smart kids can go to college and be an asset. Don’t even waste a ratty old coat on a bum.”

Ernesto turned and glared at Clay, “Listen up, man. We got a great program

here at Chavez where seniors help each other out. You're good in math. How come you haven't signed up? And what about helping an at-risk freshman? I notice you're not in that either, so what good things do you do, Clay? Ride around in a fancy car flipping off kids in beaters? Is that your good deed?" he said.

Clay Aguirre's eyes narrowed. "I haven't got time for your stupid little do-gooder projects. If some dope can't figure out algebra by himself, he's going nowhere anyway. And the at-risk freshmen are losers too. That's the trouble with you, Sandoval. You like to hang with losers 'cause, deep down, you're a loser too. You got all these big ideas of being a lawyer, but you got a loser mentality, man. You ain't going nowhere," Clay said. "I play great football, and that's what Chavez High is all about."

"Oh, great, as long as we can rah-rah for the home team, who cares what other problems we're ignoring," Ernesto said bitterly.