

Tyrell Walker



Chapter One

Without warning, my alarm clock erupts in the middle of one of the best dreams of my life. I just won the Patterson City Skateboard Championship. In the darkness, I make several attempts to silence the obnoxious clock, but it is nowhere to be found. Finally, out of frustration I flick on my reading light and there's that stupid clock right in front of me. The second I hit the snooze button, I really want to go back to sleep, but I know I can't because today is the first day of school. Only a minute later I pull back the covers and glare silently out my bedroom window into the darkness, I can hardly believe that the sun isn't even up yet. Obviously, I'm in need of a plan, and as I lie in bed trying to think up an excuse that my mother will believe, the smell of bacon, eggs, and sourdough toast works its way up the stairs and overtakes my room.

At the very same time my mother starts yelling, "Tyrell Walker, it's time to get your little fanny out of bed. You promised Mrs. Purdy that you would get to school on time."

"I'm out of bed, mama, but my brain just isn't working. Why do I have to get going already? The sun isn't even up yet."

Using her sternest voice as she makes her way towards my room, she exclaims, "I don't want to hear those same lame excuses that got you kicked out of Patterson High."

I make a habit of checking my text messages before I get out of bed. This morning there's only one, and it's from my best friend since 5th grade, Sal Marquez. Sal is the quarterback on the Patterson High Varsity football team. After a quick reply, I put on my new school clothes, grab my brand new skateboard, and head downstairs to eat some breakfast. Then when I reach the bottom of the stairs, I decide to give it another go.

After a few dry heaves and a few coughs, I tell her, "Mama, I must have food poisoning. I don't think that I can't start school today. I'm just too sick. I'm sure that I'll feel a lot better tomorrow. I don't remember how long it's been since I felt

this sick.”

Angrily, my mother responds, “That’s the same attitude that got you sent to that hoodlum Del Cielo Continuation High School in the first place. You don’t get it, I’ve heard enough, and I’ll be darned if I’ll let you screw things up this early in the school year. Now is the time to prove to Dr. Davis that you can get to class and pass algebra. Otherwise, he’s never going to let you back into Patterson High. You know darn well that you’re not sick, you’re just lazy.”

Stung by her reply, I awkwardly attempt to defend myself, “Nothing ever happens on the first day, mama. Tomorrow will be much better. I promise you that I will feel much better tomorrow.”

“You heard me, Tyrell. The buck stops here. You’re not going to let your father and me down.”

The second my mother finishes chewing me out, I suddenly realize that Lavonne’s plate is already full of bacon and scrambled eggs.

Famished, I waste no time responding, “How about letting somebody else eat some breakfast, Vonnie?”

“Tyrell, I was here first and you can wait your turn,” she exclaims.

Only a few seconds later my mother finally fills my plate.

Then the moment I start eating she says, “Tyrell, remember to mow the lawn today after school.”

“I can’t do it today, mama. Sal just sent me a text. I’m going to meet him at the skate park after school. We’re preparing for the city skateboard championship.”

My mother doesn’t hesitate to voice her concern.

She says, “Tyrell, it seems to me that you should be working on your math instead of skateboarding. You have a better chance of being a good math student than you do winning the city skateboard championship.”

It’s only the first day of school, but the pressure is already on, and the deck is already stacked against me.

I took a deep breath before finally answering, “Yes, mama.”

When I was a little boy, we lived in the hood in Oakland. One year, our car was stolen three times. Then one day bullets from a drive-by shooting hit our house, and shortly after that my parents moved to Patterson so we could get away from the gangs and violence. What we didn't know is that there are gangs everywhere you go in California, and Patterson is definitely not an exception.

No sooner does my mother finish giving me her lecture when my dad sits down and joins us at the breakfast table.

After my mom places an enormous plate of bacon and eggs in front of him, he asks, “How about me giving you kids a ride to school?”

Lavonne doesn't hesitate.

She says, “I'd love a ride, daddy.”

I have other ideas.

Without hesitating I replied, “Thank you for the offer dad, but I thought that I'd ride my new skateboard to school today.”

“Are you sure, Tyrell?”

“I worked all summer for that bamboo skateboard, and I am looking forward to showing it off at school. You know that it's one of a kind. Nobody in Patterson has ever seen anything like it.”

My dad begins waving his index finger like I'm about to get one of those lectures.

He says, “Whatever you do Tyrell, don't let that expensive board out of your sight.”

His voice is echoed by my mother, who at almost the same time tells me, “If you're going to ride your skateboard all the way to Del Cielo High then you need to get going, Tyrell.”

At that, my mom walks across the room and opens up the front door, and I jump on my board and race as fast as I can go down our driveway. Just a moment

later, I'm quickly down the street and flying past the house on the first corner. Then as I approach Middleton Park, I am still picking up speed.

Soon after exiting the park I merge onto busy Ward Avenue and I'm forced to slow down because of the heavy traffic. Everywhere that I look there are kids on their way to school. The only unobstructed path is down the double yellow line in the middle of the road, and I decide to take it. Then almost before I get going, two school crossing guards begin waving frantically for me to get out of the middle of the street and slow down. Only, I'm not going to let their whistle blowing get to me, and I am only too happy to make them history.

Suddenly, Sunny Luna pulled up to the 5th Street stop sign. Inside her car and sitting shotgun is my former girlfriend Leticia Lopez, and in the back seat are a couple of the other Patterson High cheer leaders. It is going to take something special to impress them, so when I flew off the next curb I went for as much air as possible. The second my board touches down, I proceed to pop the mother of all wheelies down the center yellow lines.

Just as soon as I finish the wheelie I suddenly realize that directly in front of me the cars have all come to a complete stop because two huge manure spreaders are blocking the intersection. They are driven by my friend Chad Campbell and his father.

Nervously, I start screaming at the top of my lungs, "Get out of my way, Chad."

I suddenly realize that there is no way that those huge manure spreaders can get out of my way in time because I am flying at a ridiculous speed. At the same time, I can't possibly stop in time, and immediately I take a hard right and head for the narrow sliver of daylight between the two manure spreaders. Not more than a second later my jaw drops open when I realize that a large group of elementary students are crossing in the crosswalk.

Frantically, I start screaming, "Get out of the way, out of the way!"

The children respond with a chorus of blood curdling screams, which forces me to make another quick decision. Hastily, I hang the sharpest right turn in my life, smacking straight into the raised street corner. I hit it so hard that the force hurtles me through the air like I have been shot out of a cannon, and I land face first with a monstrous thud in the Patterson Elementary petunia garden in front of God and everyone. When I finally came to a halt, there's so much mud all over me that even my mother wouldn't recognize me. The first voice I hear is

Chad Campbell, who is still behind the wheel of his spreader.

Chad asks, "Are you alright, Tyrell?"

I'm a total mess, and the wind has been knocked out of me.

Then as best I could I utter, "Chad, what happened to my new skateboard?"

He answers, "Your board is in pieces. I couldn't believe how fast you were going. Didn't you see those kids? You almost ran into them. Wasn't that the board that you worked all summer to buy?"

"Yeah, it sure was. I'm kind of stuck in the mud. Can you help me get up?"

Chad opens the door and jumps out of his manure spreader. Then after he helps me get on my feet, I make a vain attempt at cleaning off the mud.

I said, "I guess I looked pretty stupid."

Chad chuckles before giving me his answer, "Well, you don't look real bright, Tyrell. You could have killed someone with as fast as you were going."

"I didn't do it intentionally. I just didn't see all those kids."

"The flower garden is destroyed, Tyrell. You better get out of here before Mrs. Sousa sees it. She already doesn't like you."

"How come you're not in school today, Chad?"

"My parents need me on our farm today. Besides, everybody knows that nothing happens on the first day of school."

No sooner had Chad and his father driven away when Mrs. Sousa, the principal of Patterson Elementary, appears. Mrs. Sousa knows me pretty well. When I attended her school, I was always in the detention room, which was next to her office. I can tell from past experiences that she is really angry.

"Are you alright, Tyrell?" she asks.

"Yes, Mrs. Sousa. It was an accident."

“Well, I'm glad that you're okay because someone has to pay to replant this flower bed. Just look at the mess that you have made.”

It's at this time that I notice the steam coming out of Mrs. Sousa's ears. In her hand is a piece of my skateboard minus the wheels. She's so upset with me that her eyes are bugging out of her head, and before I know it she explodes into a tirade about all of the problems I have caused since she has known me. Then things quickly deteriorate when during the process of repeating my entire life story, she realizes that I am not listening to a thing that she is saying.

Frustrated by my lack of interest, she raises the volume of her voice and begins yelling louder, “Tyrell Walker, I've had it with your foolishness. Your parents are going to pay for this.”

Now, she has my attention, shocked I respond with a, “Say what?”

My mom and dad are still mad at me for getting kicked out of Patterson High. They are really going to be upset if they have to pay for a flower bed.

“This is only the first day of school and you're already in trouble. I'm going to let Mr. Ortega handle this. Next time, wait for the signal from the crossing guards, Mr. Walker.”

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Sousa. I didn't see the crossing guards.”

Then, as she stands there staring at all of the damage she continues to voice her disgust, “The garden is a total loss. Community volunteers worked all weekend putting that petunia garden together. They wanted it to look nice for the first day of school.”

I can't believe that she wants me to pay for the petunia garden.

In an attempt to calm her, I try to get her to reason with me, “I keep telling you that I didn't do this on purpose, Mrs. Souza. I saved your students from certain mayhem by diving into your flower garden!”

“You'll be getting my bill, Tyrell. Save your stories for someone who wants to hear them.”

Totally stunned, I stood there for the next minute trying to gather my senses with a big dumb look plastered across my face. In the not so far distance, I can see

that the Del Cielo High School principal, Mr. Ortega, is in the process of putting up the flags. Methodically, I work my way in his direction, and the second he begins hoisting the flags I attempt to sneak past him. Unfortunately, just when I'm almost in the clear his cell phone starts ringing.

He answers, "Tyrell did what? Oh my God. I'm so sorry, Mrs. Sousa."

Then as he continues his conversation his face turns as red as I have ever seen it, and he signals me to come over and talk to him. From the look on Mr. Ortega's face I can tell that he means right now. I can just imagine what Mrs. Sousa is saying. It's enough to make my stomach sink, but before it sinks I'm overwhelmed by nausea. It's only the first day of school and I'm already in trouble.

"Good morning, Tyrell. I have Mrs. Sousa on the phone. She's pretty angry. What do you have to say for yourself?"

I took a couple of gulps of air before trying as hard as I can to defend myself, "Mr. Ortega, the way I see it, I'm kind of a hero. I mean it was my quick thinking that kept those students from being seriously hurt."

"Mrs. Sousa says that you were going way too fast, and didn't even slow down for the crossing guards. She says that you popped a wheelie down the double yellow line endangering some of her students, and then destroyed the school's new petunia garden."

"But, Mr. Ortega I didn't even see those crossing guards and those manure spreaders, why they go so slow that they should be illegal."

Mr. Ortega shook his head in disgust before expressing his concern, "Tyrell Walker, this is the first day of school and classes haven't even started. I can't believe it. Mrs. Sousa is as angry as I have ever heard her. Tyrell, you owe me an hour of detention after school. This wild and reckless behavior better not become a habit. Mrs. Sousa says she is going to send your parents the bill for this mess."

I replied, "Yes, Mr. Ortega, whatever you say."

At the same time, Mr. Ortega looks down at what was left of my board, and asks, "Tyrell, is that your skateboard. I've never seen one completely destroyed before. Can it be repaired?"

“It is made out of bamboo. I don't know if it can be fixed, Mr. Ortega. I'm going to take it to Mr. Boreman at the skate shop just as soon as I finish my detention.”

“Just be here for detention, Tyrell, or I'm going to put you on independent study. Go on, head to class.”

“I have plans after school, Mr. Ortega.”

He acts like he doesn't hear me, and I already know that I can't win. Mr. Ortega's mind is made up, and his word is the law at Del Cielo High. What he's saying makes me sick because Sal doesn't have football practice today, and I was going to meet him after school at the skateboard park. Besides, staying after school on the first day isn't what I had in mind.

My mother is right when she says that Del Cielo High is a hoodlum school. Most of the boys who attend here are either in the Latin Kings or the First Street Boyz gang. Eddie Cruz, the leader of the Latin Kings, is the first person I see when I enter the school's main room. Eddie and I get along pretty well and never really had any problems.

I immediately disappear into the bathroom to clean up. Luckily for me a lot of the mud is already drying, so it's starting to fall off my clothes. After I cleaned up and returned to the main room, Eddie already has his shirt off, and he is showing the Del Puerto Farm Camp girls his new jail tattoo. His entire back is emblazoned with his last name, “Cruz.” It looks professional, not like a jail tattoo.

“Tyrell, your board looks like it was run over by a car,” Eddie says.

Sickened by reality, and still reeling from the crash, I reply, “I worked all summer just to get it.”

“Whatever you say, Tyrell, but from here it looks like a total loss. It must have set you back a fortune.”

“I'm sure that Mr. Boreman, the owner of the skateboard store, can fix it,” I answered.

Mrs. Purdy, the school secretary, is one of my mom's closest friends. When you see them standing together, you would swear that they are sisters. She is also

in charge of handing out class schedules. Just as soon as she sees me, Mrs. Purdy starts releasing a tirade in my direction.

She says, "Tyrell Walker, you're already in trouble. How can you do this to your parents? It's only the first day of school!"

"Mrs. Purdy, how did you hear about my accident already?"

"Accident? From what I hear, it was a kamikaze mission. Patterson is a small town and word travels real fast when you're out making a fool out of yourself. I was so proud of you the way you helped your father with his carpet cleaning this summer. I know that it's hard work. I told everybody in Patterson how you've changed, and how you have become responsible. Then you go and get in trouble on the first day."

"I know what you're saying, Mrs. Purdy, but it was just an accident."

"Tyrell, I have your schedule here somewhere, along with your new locker assignment."

Mrs. Purdy spent the next minute shuffling through her huge stack of class schedules until she finally found mine.

Relieved, she says, "I think you're going to like your schedule. You have Mr. Phish for four classes."

I grin from ear to ear because Mr. Phish coaches our sports teams and he is my favorite teacher. He also teaches our non-English speaking students, who follow him from class to class learning English. Most of these students live in what the people in Patterson call Del Puerto Farm Camp. Del Puerto Farm Camp is a large cluster of old shanties on the bank of the Stanislaus River. People who live out there are usually trying to survive under the radar of the local immigration authorities. It's also a high crime area. My dad says that even the police don't want to go out there.

At last, the first warning bell sounds. The first bell tells us that we have ten minutes to get to class. I decide to go ahead, and get to Mr. Phish's class early so that I can get a good seat. However, once inside the classroom I quickly realize that I'm already too late. All of the good seats in the back row are already taken, and the only available seat is the one facing Mr. Phish's desk.

Just as soon as I sit down, I lift my eyes and stare straight ahead in the direction of Mr. Phish's face.

Mr. Phish immediately stares right back at me like he can't believe what he is seeing, and he asks, "Tyrell, what happened to your clothes?"

"It's a long story, Mr. Phish. I saved some Patterson Elementary students."

"Well, I'd love to hear about it."

At that he reaches across his desk and grabs a huge stack of papers, and hands them to me.

Mr. Phish then politely utters, "Tyrell, please pass out the classroom rules while I take roll."

"Yes, Mr. Phish, whatever you say," I reply.

I am in the middle of passing out the rules to each student when the final bell sounds. At this time, Mr. Phish is busy calling out our names one by one in an attempt to get each pronunciation right. The room looks like the United Nations Assembly. After Mr. Phish finishes taking roll, he clears his throat and begins reading to us the classroom rules and the school dress code.

He starts with, "Wearing the colors blue and red are strictly prohibited on school grounds. Students can only wear neutral colors."

When he's done going over the rules, he hands each of us a piece of lined paper.

Mr. Phish says, "I want you each to write a speech about what you did during the summer."

This idea is met by a chorus of, "Again, not again. Didn't we do this last year?"

Before we can get started writing, I can't help notice that all of the First Street Boyz are writing with enormous red pencils, and all of the Latin Kings are clutching huge blue pencils. I know that we can't wear the gang colors of red or blue, but nobody ever said anything about pencils.

After 15 minutes passes, Mr. Phish says, "Eddie Cruz, why don't you give the

first presentation.”

Eddie replies, “How come you're picking on me, Phish?”

Mr. Phish isn't going for it.

He tells him, “Come on, Eddie. Let's get going.”

Eddie, who always has a big stupid looking smile on his face, slides out of his chair like he is in pain. He then proceeds to walk to the front of the class with his pants so low that his crack is showing. Every time I see his smile, I check my pocket for my wallet. Eddie doesn't look nervous at all, but for some reason it takes a while before his lips start moving. Then, just when I can tell that Mr. Phish is running out of patience, he grabs his crotch, pulls his pants up high enough to cover the crack in his rear, tightens his belt, and starts his speech.

Eddie tells the class, "It was the last day of the school year; I didn't have a ride so I walked home to Del Puerto Farm Camp. I was starved and as usual there was nothing to eat in my house so I emptied my piggy bank and decided to walk to McDonald's. I hadn't walked more than a block before I passed by a '85 Honda with the keys in it. At first I thought that it was broken down, but when I turned over the ignition the engine started and away I went. You can't believe how shocked I was when only a block later the engine stopped and the doors locked.

At the time I remember saying to myself, “Oh no, this can't be another bait car, but it was and before I knew it the sky flashed red and I was surrounded by police cars.”

Mr. Phish said, “You mean this isn't the first time that you have been caught in a bait car, Eddie.”

“Are you talking about this year, Mr. Phish? It was my first time I got caught in a bait car this year.”

Then as the entire room broke into hysterics, Eddie kept talking, “When Sergeant Sanchez finally let me out of the car, and I tried to explain to him that I just wanted a Big Mac, but he didn't want to listen. The next thing I know I'm in the back of a patrol car, and I'm on my way to juvenile hall. The juvenile court judge called me a chronic car thief. Can you believe he said that about me? The judge sentenced me to spend the entire summer in juvenile hall.”

Mr. Phish is shaking his head in disbelief, but those of us who have known Eddie for a long time are not surprised.

He asks, "And what lesson did you learn from this experience, Eddie?"

"Well, it seems like bait cars are always old Hondas."

"Didn't you learn that you shouldn't steal cars?"

"This is the fourth time that I've been caught stealing cars this year. That's why I got locked up. At first, I thought I was going to go to California Youth Authority, but there isn't any room because all of the cells are filled with those hard core gangsters who are locked up for serious crimes. They let me out of juvenile hall early so that I could attend the first day of school."

Mr. Phish is quick to praise him, "Very interesting presentation, Eddie. Sounds like you had an interesting summer. Who would like to go next?"

Once again he looks around the room, but nobody is about to volunteer. Unfortunately, I'm not too hard to find.

Mr. Phish looks at me straight in the face, "It's your turn, Mr. Walker. You're next."

"Say what, Mr. Phish?" I respond.

"You heard me, Mr. Walker. You're up," he replies.

So much for sitting in front of the class, but before I have a chance to start speaking from the podium, a patrol car enters the school grounds and the entire class gets out of their seats and presses their faces against the classroom window. Only a moment later, the patrol car heads straight for a parking space in front of Mr. Ortega office. In the back seat of the car I can see the silhouette of a tall dark haired young man. At the same time, Mr. Phish is losing his patience.

Using his raised voice, he says, "You all need to get back in your seats. What's going on out there is none of your business. Everyone stay on task, Tyrell is about to speak."

His attempt to get them to return to our seats fell on deaf ears. This is because they all have a good idea who is in the back seat. In what seems like only an instant, the patrolman jumps out of the driver's seat, opens the back door of his patrol car, and Mambo Rosas jumps out of the back seat. Then, as his long braided black pony tail blew in the wind the police officer removes the handcuffs from the wrists of his heavily tattooed arms. Just as soon as the handcuffs are removed Mambo turns and waves in the direction of our class.

Everyone in Patterson knows Mambo. He is the leader of the First Street Boyz, one of Patterson's oldest gangs. Mambo has been locked up for five months, with a murder charge. After what he did none of us ever thought that we would see him again.

Just as soon as he starts waving, Chili "Pepper" Rodriguez, the mother of Mambo's children, shouts, "I knew he'd beat the rap. Nothing can keep Mambo locked up. That scab had a knife. Mambo was only protecting himself."

According to the local newspapers, Mambo chased a member of the Latin Kings into the alleyway behind the Patterson High Gym, and a knife fight ensued. The end result was that Mambo lived and the other boy died. At the time, almost everyone in town had been inside the gym watching a Patterson High basketball game. From the very beginning Mambo had claimed it was self-defense. At the same time, there were lots of witnesses with conflicting testimonies. The killing had been the only thing that people in town had talked about for weeks.

Shortly after the patrolman finishes speaking with Mr. Ortega, he returns to his car and drives off with his lights flashing. Soon afterwards, Mr. Phish attempts one more time to get order in the room, but it is nearly impossible now that everyone knows for sure that it is Mambo. Chili Rodriguez is leading the turmoil. She is completely out of control and having a difficult time controlling her emotions. Her man has been released from behind bars and from what I can tell she is at least 5 months pregnant with their third baby.

Mr. Phish still hasn't given up on the situation, "Everybody needs to sit down right now, and get back to work. Ms. Chili Rodriguez, I'm talking to you."

The second she calms down, Tiny Garcia is visibly elated.

The enormous Tiny isn't the least bit shy about expressing his excitement, "Mr. Phish, I knew they couldn't keep Mambo locked up in the hall. Can you believe that he beat the charges? Chili told everybody that Mambo would get out today.

I didn't believe her. I mean, who beats a murder charge? You know that Mambo ruled juvenile hall. Ask that sod buster Eddie Cruz who ruled the hall.”

Immediately, every eye in the room focuses on Eddie. The rumor around the school is that Mambo had kicked Eddie's butt in the hall. Not long afterward they all return to their seats, and I make my way to the podium. At the same time, Mr. Ortega surprises us all when he walks in and takes a seat in the back of the class so that he can hear our speeches. At last, the room is quiet and Mr. Phish nods for me to get started.

I tell the class, “I worked for my father all summer cleaning carpets. It was hard work and not very much fun. A lot of the time we worked in Modesto. There’s a huge homeless problem in Modesto. In Modesto, they travel with everything that they own in shopping carts and baby carriages. My dad says a lot of them are drug addicts. Seeing them made me feel good about having a job. I spent my evenings preparing for the upcoming Patterson Skateboard Championships. I plan on winning it this year.”

The very moment that my speech ends Mr. Ortega asks, “Mr. Walker, if you’re so great on the skateboard, then how did you get that dirt all over you?”

“Mr. Ortega, I told you, my quick thinking saved those children from certain doom.”

Mr. Phish chose his next victim, “Mr. Tiny Garcia, you're up next.”

Tiny is the biggest guy in the school, and he is one of Mambo’s right hand men. Everyone in his family is big. Tiny has lived his entire life in Del Puerto Farm Camp, on a levee road. In his big boisterous voice, he tells the class how his dad's brakes went out and their truck rolled into the Stanislaus River. According to him, they had to swim for their lives.

The CORE classes that I'm in this year are made up of all juniors and seniors. After the second CORE class ends, I have algebra in the same classroom with Mr. Phish. We spent the entire period reviewing. Then just as soon as the math class ends, Mr. Phish hands me the volleyball net and tells me to string it between two classrooms. Most of the students here like volleyball. It's popular because it's the game of choice in juvenile hall. At least that's what Mambo and Eddie Cruz tell us. From what we hear, they play volleyball every day and it is what keeps them from going crazy.

Before we get started playing volleyball, Mambo joins us on the court. At this time Mr. Phish is doing a quick review of the rules of volleyball. He says that we are playing rally serve, and the winner must score 25 points. Finally, after we stop listening, Mr. Phish tosses out the ball. Sides here are already predetermined. At Del Cielo High, Latin Kings get on one side of the court and the First Street Boyz get on the other. I join the Latin Kings' side because they're outnumbered 2-1 by the First Street Boyz. At the same time, most of the migrant kids follow my lead and join the Latin Kings' side of the court.

At first, things don't go very well and the ball rarely makes it back over the net. The problem is that this is the first time the students from Mexico have ever seen a volley ball. Gradually, however, they begin to catch on and little by little everyone gets better. At the same time, I'm having a good time blocking almost everything that comes my way. Eventually, the period ends and we argue about which side won the game.

Lunch at Del Cielo High is cooked in the Patterson High cafeteria and then trucked over to us. We also have a snack bar that is manned everyday by the teachers. The money that's earned from the snack bar supports our sports program. Today, Mr. Horseman is working in the snack bar, and I'm first in line when he opens. Then as I walk past today's lunch, it's hard to tell what kind of meat is being served. On days like this, we call the food "mystery meat." I think it's a good description.

After lunch, I have two periods in the computer lab with Mrs. Hasselblad. I like it because she lets me listen to my headphones while I'm doing my assignments. Listening to music always makes me feel better.

Chapter Two

Mr. Ortega is waiting for me outside my classroom with a plastic bag in his hand, as the first day of school comes to an end.

The second I exit Mrs. Hasselblad's computer class, he tosses me the bag and says, "Tyrell, I want you to clean up all of the ground litter, and when you're done, you can finish serving the rest of your detention in the main room."

It only takes me a few minutes to pick up the trash, so I am forced to spend the rest of my detention in the main room staring at the clock. The second that I have done my time, I race out the front door and head directly to the Patterson Skate Shop, which was where I originally bought the board. Clint Boreman, the owner of the shop, was one of the first people I met when we moved here from Oakland. When I finally make it to the Patterson Skate Shop, Clint is in the rear of the store repairing an old dirt bike.

The moment he finishes he looks up long enough to focus on the shattered remains of my skateboard and says, "Wow, it looks like you blew it up with a stick of dynamite."

"Just about Mr. Boreman, I guess I was going too fast. I hit a curb on the corner of M Street and Ward Avenue. Please, I need it fixed as fast as possible. The Patterson Skateboard Championships are in three weeks."

Clint shook his head several times before telling me "Let's see what we can save."

About a minute later, without saying a word, he begins tossing the pieces of my bamboo board into the trash can. Then just as soon as he finishes, he quickly checks out each of the wheels one by one to see if they still work.

Finally, he says, "I can save all four of the wheels, but that board is history. That's the most expensive board that I carry. It will take at least a week before I can get you a new board. That board was a one of a kind, custom made in Santa Cruz. The polyurethane wheels held up much better than that bamboo board. The board will cost you \$75 dollars to replace."

“Whatever you say, Mr. Boreman, but please fix it as fast as you can. I need it as soon as possible for the city championships. I'll check back with you in a week.”

“I'll call you the minute it's ready, Tyrell,” he replied.

The second I leave the skate shop I realize that I am getting really hungry, so I decided to go down the street and get a slice of pizza at Wilbur Garcia's Taqueria. Wilbur Garcia's is the after school hangout for most of Patterson High. The food is cheap, greasy, and popular.

Once I'm inside of Wilbur's, I am surprised to find the First Street Boyz hierarchy inside. Sitting at a table scarfing down a cheese pizza are Mambo and two of his subordinates, One-eyed Joey Galvan, and Jesus Christo Reyes. All three are “flaming” in red clothes, including red bandannas and red socks. Then only a moment later I hear the toilet flush in the men's bathroom. Soon afterward, Tiny Garcia strolls out. The second Tiny sees me he starts laughing.

Tiny is still chuckling when he says, “Too bad about that board of yours, Tyrell. How did that mud taste? If I were you I wouldn't worry about that stupid board because Mambo is going to win the city championship.”

Without thinking about what I was saying I told him, “I didn't know they had a skateboard park in juvenile hall, Mambo.”

Immediately, I realize that I have really blown it because Mambo looks like he wants to punch me.

His eyes bulge, and then he snarls, “I don't need to practice, Tyrell, and if you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of my way.”

“I'm going to win the Patterson Skateboard Championships, Mambo.”

At that very second, I tried to run for my life but before I could flee, the First Street Boyz surrounded me like rats. There are way too many of them to fight off. Suddenly, Mambo leaps out of his seat and starts smacking me in the chest with his open hands. He then proceeds to smack me until I am flush against the ice-machine. Then, just when I think that things are as bad as they can get, Tiny Garcia takes out his brass knuckles.

I plead with them, "Come on you guys. I didn't do anything to you. Why don't you just leave me alone?"

Before I can even finish Mambo again whacks me in the head, but before he has the chance to hit another time, out of nowhere I hear a familiar voice, "You boys need to leave Tyrell alone. What the heck do you guys think you're doing in here?"

It's Mr. Phish. He has come into Wilbur Garcia's for a burrito, and when he sees that they are about to pound me to death, he came unglued.

Without hesitating, Mr. Phish leaps in Mambo's face shouting, "My God, Mambo. You just got out of juvenile hall a couple of hours ago. How about taking a break, and leave poor Tyrell alone? All of you guys need to back off, or I'm going to have to call the police."

Mambo and Tiny aren't about to fight Mr. Phish. It is a battle they know they can't win. At the same time, Mambo doesn't want to be sent back to juvenile hall.

When Mr. Phish realizes that they still haven't budged he refuses to let up, he shouts, "Do not make me repeat myself. All of you guys need to take your act down the road, so get out of here."

He then repositions himself at the front door, where he waits until the First Street Boyz are out of sight. The very moment they are gone, Mr. Phish rushes over to see if I am alright, and he sees how shaken up I am so he offers me a ride home. I thought that it was a good idea.

Just as soon as we get in his car Mr. Phish asks, "What was that all about, Tyrell? It looked pretty grim in there. They were really going to work you over."

Still shaken, I responded, "They've been trying to get me to join their gang since I came to Del Cielo High. If you hadn't come along when you did they would have killed me. I made a mistake by skipping classes and not taking school seriously. I don't want to join a gang, Mr. Phish. I just want to play football again at Patterson High."

"That's all good, but right now they don't want you back, Tyrell. You're going to have to prove yourself before they'll give you another chance. That means passing algebra, getting good grades, and coming to school every day. Only

then will they let you back in to Patterson High. ”

“Mr. Phish, you sound like my father.”

“Well, you should listen to your father.”

About a minute later we pull in front of my house. At the same time, I am completely surprised that he knows where I live because I haven't told him where I live.

I said, “Mr. Phish, you know where I live?”

“It's a small town,” he answers.

“Thank you, Mr. Phish. Thanks for saving me.”

Shortly after Mr. Phish drives away, my dad pulls up in front of our house in his carpet cleaning van. He is always working. Immediately, he senses that something is wrong. It is going to take a while to explain it all. I start by telling him about how my new board had disintegrated in a crash. I left out the parts of the story that make me look stupid. Eventually, I get around to what happened at Wilbur Garcia's Taqueria, and he really doesn't like what he is hearing. Just as soon as I finish, he let out a loud scowl.

Then he vents, “There's trouble everywhere that Mambo Rosas and Tiny Garcia go. Thank God that Mr. Phish came along. You really owe him, Tyrell. He saved you. Go in and get cleaned up, son. Your mom made you and your sister some chocolate chip cookies for the first day of school. I think that I better give you a ride to school tomorrow.”

I text messaged Sal, and told him what happened, and that I couldn't make it to the skate park. We decide to try again tomorrow. The next morning, I get up not wanting to go to school, but I don't really have a choice. The school is filled with degenerates and they are degenerates who pack guns, sell drugs, and carry knives. After we each eat our bowl of cereal, Lavonne and I kiss my mother good-bye and we get in our dad's carpet cleaning van, which is our only form of transportation. This is because our Chevy Malibu is broken down in the driveway, and we don't have the money right now to get it fixed.

Just as soon as my dad gets behind the wheel of his van, he turns on his favorite country western station and before we knew it we are merging onto

busy Ward Avenue. On both sides of the street, the sidewalks are packed with kids loaded down with backpacks filled with school books. Up until now my father has remained silent, but we are driving so slowly that I might as well have walked to school. It is when we pull up to the stop sign in front of Patterson Junior High to let Vonnie out of the van when I realized that I am about to get a lecture.

Then one more time my dad starts in with his standard lecture, “Tyrell, the last football game you played at Patterson High was one of the highlights of my life. Son, you have talent, you were a starting receiver on the varsity team as a sophomore. You could have gotten a scholarship. Your mama and I don't want you at that hoodlum school. We want to see you play football at Patterson High your senior year, and graduate.”

With each word I shrank further and further into my seat. I know that he is disappointed because I have heard the same lecture all summer. He wants to make sure that I know I could do it, but the math scares me. Even if I did manage to pass algebra, and I did go to school every day, I will still have to make up credits in summer school if I want to graduate from Patterson High.

Shortly after, I get out of my dad's van, the Westly-Greyson school bus pulls up loaded with migrant students. Some of the migrant girls are really pretty, but my Spanish is really lousy. The first person I ran into when I walk into the main room was my friend Wendell Chung. Wendell and his family moved here from China a little over 3 years ago. Their native language is Mandarin Chinese. After 2 years in Mr. Phish's language acquisition class, Wendell speaks fairly good broken English with a thick Chinese accent. His face cracks a big wide grin when he finally sees me. Then as he reaches out to shake my hand, his grip surprises me because it is almost as strong as mine.

He says, “I washed dishes all summer in my family’s new Chinese restaurant.”

I thought that pushing the carpet cleaner all summer had gotten me into pretty good shape. Wendell is real excited about something that Mrs. Purdy had told him before I arrived.

“Tyrell, Mrs. Purdy wants me to try out for the school volleyball team. She says that we have been invited to the Rosehaven High Volleyball Tournament in Turlock. It's the largest continuation school volleyball tournament in California. The players on the top three teams get amazing trophies,” he enthusiastically informs me.

Surprised, I told him, “Did she also tell you that the last time we entered the tournament we got our butts kicked, and we only won one game. They're going to have to buy extra body bags if we're going to enter it again. I'd hate to be involved in a repeat.”

Wendell said, “You know that Mr. Phish is the coach.”

I shook my head before giving him the rest of my sermon, “I think he'll be lucky if he gets enough players for a team. Most of those other schools are huge. I don't think that we have a chance.”

Wendell isn't about to quit on me.

He says, “Tyrell, if we had you, at least we would have some height. We need taller players who can block the ball at the net and spike.”

“I'll think about it, Wendell, but I like football and skateboarding.”

I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but we don't stand a chance. It isn't like Del Cielo High is known for sports. The school has been around forever, yet according to Mrs. Purdy, the best that a Del Cielo High team had ever done was fifth place in a ping pong tournament in Los Banos. We have a trophy case, but the only thing in it is a fire extinguisher. He must be desperate if he thinks we can win the Rosehaven Tournament.

Suddenly, Wendell utters, “Tyrell, I heard about your wreck from Sunny Luna. She and the other cheerleaders saw the whole thing. Your old girlfriend, Leticia Lopez, is telling everyone at Patterson High that you landed on your face in the mud. The whole town is talking about it.”

Instantly, I am horrified by what he is telling me. It makes me feel so small, almost mortally wounded. Still, I need to hear it one more time.

I choked, sputtered, and then when I could I asked, “Wendell, Leticia said she saw the whole thing?”

Wendell frowns, and without hesitating nods his head “yes,” and the result is I feel even worse. I probably am never going to have another girlfriend. I mean who would want a boyfriend who had flunked out of Patterson High and was famous for sticking his face in the mud.

The instant our conversation ends, the most elegantly dressed woman I have ever seen enters the school through the front door. The first thing that I thought was that she must be lost because nobody ever came to Del Cielo High dressed that nicely. She looks expensive and everywhere she goes she makes the room smell better.

Gracefully, she floats over to Mrs. Purdy's desk and asks, "Is Mr. Ortega in?"

Mrs. Purdy replies, "Yes, of course, Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington, go ahead and take a seat in his office, he is expecting you. Mr. Ortega will be right with you. It's so wonderful that you came here yourself this year."

Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington grinned from ear to ear before making her way into Mr. Ortega's office. At the same time the students are all staring at her like she is covered in dollar bills. Just as soon as she steps into his office, Mrs. Purdy brings her a cup of coffee.

Then as Mrs. Purdy exits Mr. Ortega's office she peers in my direction, and says, "Tyrell, you make sure that the kids in your class are on their best behavior. Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington is the President of the Bank of Patterson."

I replied, "Mr. Phish warned us yesterday, but he didn't say anything about Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington herself coming. My dad says that she has more money than God, and that she owns the whole town."

Every year, during the first week of school, someone from the Bank of Patterson comes to sign us up for savings accounts. No one really expected that she was personally coming. It was highly unusual because most of the prominent people in town stayed as far away from Del Cielo High as possible.

Just a short time later, the warning bell rang telling us that we are to start moving in the direction of our first class. Unfortunately, when I finally get in the classroom, all of the good seats in the back rows are gone and the only seats left are the ones in front of Mr. Phish's desk. I took a deep breath and sat down.

After taking role, Mr. Phish calls on the remaining students one by one up to the front of the class for their presentations. The first up was my buddy, Wendell Chung. Wendell tells the class how he spent the summer working in his family's new restaurant. His parents opened up the first Mandarin Chinese restaurant in town, and it's directly across the street from Wilbur Garcia's Taqueria. Next up is

Jesus Christo Reyes. Everybody in the class knew how Jesus spent his summer. Reyes occupied the corner of First Street and M Street with his pit bull named Kilo.

Next, it is my friend Veech Martinez's turn. Veech is the nicest guy I have ever met. Unfortunately, his life recently took a turn for the worse when his mother couldn't take his father's drinking any longer, and she filed for divorce. Then, just after his mother found a new boyfriend, Veech's dad got jealous, and in a jealous rage his father shot and killed his mother. It is a bad assignment for him.

Many of the speeches are about working in the fields, or in a packing shed. Finally Mambo's girlfriend, Chili "Pepper" Rodriguez delivers the last speech. She tells us that being pregnant means that she spent most of her summer going to the bathroom, eating ice cream, and getting kicked in the stomach by the baby. She also tells us the story about how her first baby had been born in her cell in juvenile hall. Thankfully, we are finished.

The moment Chili finishes, Mr. Phish calls the main office to tell Mr. Ortega that we are ready for Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington. Our eyes glare out the classroom window as we watch her walk across the school yard in the direction of our classroom. None of us have actually ever met her, but we have all seen her around town in her beautiful pink Cadillac. We also know her by reputation because during the economic collapse, she had foreclosed on homes all over town. The second she walks into the classroom all the eyes in the room are drawn to the glare of the giant diamonds on her fingers.

She immediately shakes Mr. Phish's hand and says, "Please to meet you, Mr. Phish. Thank you for inviting me to speak to your class."

Mr. Phish blushes before turning to address the class, "Attention class, we have a very important guest here today, Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington, the President of the Bank of Patterson. She is here to talk to us about the importance of opening up checking and savings accounts."

Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington looks like she hasn't exercised a day in her life. Huge jowls hang from her cheeks, and she wears so much makeup, that it makes you wonder what she actually looks like.

Grinning ear to ear she begins her presentation, "Thank you, Mr. Phish. I am so happy to be here. I have heard nothing but great things about your school and the remarkable job Mr. Ortega is doing here. This is the first time that I have

been on your campus and I hope that this is just the first of many visits to come. Does anyone know what the president of a bank does?

Wendell's hand quickly shot up in the air.

Mrs. Huffington immediately calls on him, "Yes, young man, speak up!"

"You own the bank!"

"Well not exactly, there are also many shareholders. Largely, I run the daily operations and supervise the loans. Does anyone know the difference between a savings account and a checking account?"

The entire room went silent because none of us had a clue. However, she knew that we didn't know, and she is prepared. She proceeds to explain the difference between both types of accounts. She also tells us about the importance of saving money, and how money can work for us. I think that her presentation is actually pretty good.

Then after Mrs. Huffington has spoken longer than any of us can listen, she asks, "Does anyone have any questions?"

I have a question, "What if you're out of money, but you have checks left. Can you still write checks?"

"No, young man, but it happens all of the time. You can go to jail for that. You can only write checks for the amount of money you have in the bank. Mr. Ortega tells me that many of you have worked hard all summer, and don't have a safe place to keep your money. Your money is much safer in the bank than under a bed or buried in a tin can. Besides, we will pay you interest if you keep your money with us. Let me see the hands of those who would like to open a savings account with me right now."

Five of the migrant students shot their hands into the air. She isn't going to get any response from the Latin Kings or the First Street Boyz. Stolen cars and selling drugs are cash businesses. They don't need a checking account. One by one the migrant students went up to her desk and Mrs. Huffington enrolls them in a savings account. Then, just as she was finishes, Mr. Ortega enters the room.

He then tells Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington, "Mr. Horseman's class is ready for you

next door. After you finish with Mr. Horseman's class, would you like to have lunch with us, we're having cheeseburgers. The ladies make them in the Patterson High cafeteria. If I do say so myself, I think that they're pretty good."

"Why I would love to stay for lunch. Everything that I heard about this school is wrong. These students are so well behaved. I can't wait to tell the people in this town how wrong they are about this school. They are just wonderful, and they ask such good questions. I'm so glad I came here. What a refreshing experience!"

Not long afterward the bell rang, and the next class I have is English. English is followed by the ultimate nightmare called algebra, and when algebra ends we play volleyball. Nobody likes P.E. more than I do and volleyball can be fun, especially when there are rallies that go on forever.

I start the game with a sizzling serve that nicks the top of the net. Then, I hit another and then another, until finally one hits the net and drops on our side with a thud. Everyone is playing much better than yesterday, and the rallies are lasting longer. At the same time, most of us are pretty surprised by our success.

Wendell is doing a great job of setting me up for the kill, and the First Street Boyz are having trouble returning the balls that I'm hitting. My serves are really starting to make Mambo angry. Over and over he tries to stop them at the net and make us eat it, but so far he's not having much success.

In response to his repeated failure, I yelled, "What's wrong, Mambo? Can't take the heat?"

We had all heard it before, nobody makes fun of Mambo on his turf, but after he tried to jump me at Wilbur Garcia's, the rule book was about to be rewritten.

After a short while, Mr. Phish senses that things are about to boil between us, so he jumps in, "Cool it, Mambo. This is only a game, if you want to get even, then learn to block with your eyes open."

Without hesitating, Mambo snarls, "I know how to block Cat Phish, I bet I've played more volleyball than anyone here. That's all we did in juvenile hall."

Mambo wants nothing more than to beat the Latin Kings and me, and soon the ball is moving faster and faster, and the game is getting more and more exciting. Before we know it, the period was over and the lunch bell rang. We had won,

and it had been so much fun that everyone on our side had big smiles on their faces.

Mr. Ortega was correct when he said that the cheeseburgers here are pretty good. On a day like today we like to eat outside on the wooden tables. It looks like Mr. Ortega has asked all of the teachers to join Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington at the faculty table. Veech, Wendell, and myself all sat down at the empty table next to them. At the same time, Mambo, Chili, Jesus, One-eyed Joey, and Tiny Garcia all decide to sit down a couple of tables away.

In his most boisterous voice we can all hear Mr. Ortega's spiel, "No matter what, Mrs. Huffington, we have to teach to the test. If we don't keep the test scores up, the state will take over the school, and we certainly don't want that to happen. At Del Cielo High, we are very academically oriented. We don't tolerate foolishness, and we expect a lot from our students. We haven't had a fight here for a long time."

Then as Mr. Ortega continues to speak I can see a guy in the distance emerge from behind the administration building. He wore a blue bandanna, and in his right hand he is holding an enormous blue pencil. At the same time it looks like he is heading straight for the First Street Boyz, and I can see fire in his eyes. In just seconds he thrusts the pencil deep into Mambo's neck. It happened so fast that nobody has the time to react, and almost immediately blood shoots out of his neck like a geyser. Chili Rodriguez can't believe what she is seeing, and she lets out the most horrific scream that I have ever heard.

At that very moment, Mr. Ortega leaps from his seat and takes off running in hot pursuit of the attacker, who is now running as fast as he can towards a waiting car. Then just as the attacker is about to escape, Mr. Ortega tackles him. End over end they tumbled across the sidewalk and into the street, until he has the attacker pinned to the ground. At the same time, the driver of the getaway car realizes that it is hopeless and he takes off. Inside the car, there are three guys wearing blue bandannas, which is the formal attire of the Latin Kings.

Just as fast as she can, out of the corner of my eye I can see Mrs. Wadsworth Huffington heading in the direction of her car, leaving behind a large puddle of urine. Then no sooner is she gone when Mrs. Purdy races as fast as I have ever seen her toward Mambo's convulsing body with the First Aid Kit. She doesn't waste even a second, as fast as she can she put pressure on Mambo's wound, in a desperate attempt to stop him from bleeding to death.

Suddenly, without warning, the sound of peeling tires erupts in the school parking lot. The noise frightens us all to death. That is until the cloud of smoke disappears and we realize that it's Mrs. Huffington's pink Cadillac. She is fleeing for her life as fast as her car could move, and only moments after she vanishes, the first police cars begin arriving on the scene.

Sergeant Sanchez is driving the first patrol car that arrives on the scene. He pulls up right next to Mr. Ortega, who is still sitting on top of Mambo's would-be assassin, and places the Latin King member in handcuffs. Just a short time later, the first ambulance drives on to the school lawn and pulls up next to Mambo. Immediately, the emergency technicians placed him on the gurney. Chili is overwhelmed by what is unfolding. She clenches Mambo's hand as tightly as she can while they load him into the ambulance.

We can all hear her pleas, over and over she says, "Please don't die on me, Mambo. Please don't die."

Hastily, the EMT's slam the door of the ambulance shut and sped away with the siren blaring. The ground under where Mambo had laid is soaked in blood because no one had been able to stop the flow. The nearest hospital is in Turlock, thirty miles away. We all wondered if he would live. Then, just as soon as the ambulance is gone, Mrs. Purdy bursts out sobbing.

You'd think that we would get to go home after all of this, but instead we're told to go straight to class. My next class is Mrs. Hasselblad's computer class. After I take my seat, I'm having a hard time concentrating. During the entire class period, I keep looking over my shoulder. Then as class is about to end, Mr. Ortega enters our classroom accompanied by a Patterson police officer. At first, the two of them just stood there looking around the computer room.

Finally, Mr. Ortega announces, "The police department is here to collect all of the large blue and red pencils. Please do so voluntarily. Let's not make this experience any worse. The police department tells me that several kids got stabbed with pencils in juvenile hall this past summer. From now on only pencils of 4 inches in length will be permitted at school. Did anyone know this guy?"

Mr. Ortega is met with deafening silence. No matter what has transpired it is an unwritten rule that we can't talk to the police, and if we do we will be chastised. Maybe if Mr. Ortega had asked the class without the policeman, he would have gotten a response. No one was going to talk in front of a policeman and be labeled a snitch.

Nobody gave up a pencil, and I can't wait for the last bell to ring. Under normal circumstances some of the students would have hung out after school and shot some baskets but not today. The campus empties so fast I couldn't believe it. I immediately texted Sal Marquez and ask him to meet me at the skate park after football practice ends.

When I first arrived at the skate park, I just took my place on the side lines watching my old friends go through their moves. The fact that I don't have a board makes me really jealous of everyone else's. Finally, after about a half an hour, Sal shows.

He says, "Tyrell, Sunny tells me that you had a bad crash on the way to school, and that your board exploded into pieces. I brought along my old board for you to use. You can keep it until yours gets fixed. It's funky, but at least your moves won't get rusty?"

"Thanks, Sal. I promise that I won't wreck this one."

"When are you going to get your board back?" he asks.

"In about a week, but it's going to leave me flat broke," I replied.

"Are you and your family coming to my first game football game Friday night?"

"Of course, we wouldn't think of missing it, everyone in town will be there,"

"The team looks pretty good this year," he said.

"I wish I could be out there with you," I told him.

"How are your grades so far, Tyrell?"

"I still don't think I can do the math."

Sal doesn't like what I'm telling him.

He states, "Sure you can, you just need to get off your rear end and apply yourself."

I said, "I wish it were that easy."

The second he stops talking Sal takes off on his board and heads straight for the small ramp for a 180. Then he roars up and down on the quarter pike each time going for more air. Right now, Sal is the best one out here, and at this point he is probably unbeatable. He really does some great tricks. On the other hand, I don't like the way his old board handled, which is probably the reason he got a new board.

After an hour of failing to do a 360 with his clunker board I decide to head home. The entire way home all I could think about was how different my life would be if I had gotten to school on time, and kept my grades up. It isn't that I didn't like playing football; I just didn't like taking classes. Every subject in school is hard for me, except P.E. The only thing that I know for certain is that right now I'm a big disappointment to everyone in my family.

Soon after I round the last corner, I am really surprised to see Mrs. Purdy's car in our driveway. Mrs. Purdy and my mama first met at the First Baptist Church. People often remark that the two of them could pass for sisters because they both have similar facial characteristics. The moment I enter through the front door, my heart skips a beat when I realized that they are talking about the stabbing. Word travels fast in Patterson. The second I walk into our living room my mother hugs me so tightly that I feel like I am the one that had gotten stabbed, not Mambo.

Then as she checks me for puncture wounds she asks, "Did you see it happen? Mrs. Purdy says the boy might die."

"Mama, do we have more of those chocolate chip cookies? I'm starving. I didn't get to finish my lunch."

"Tyrell, did you know that Mambo's the same boy that stabbed that boy after the basketball game? How did he get out of juvenile hall?"

"I don't know, mama, but I think he said it was self-defense."

Mrs. Purdy replied, "They stopped punishing these kids a long time ago. None of them has ever faced any serious consequences for their actions."

I grabbed a box of cereal and then took some milk out of the refrigerator, but before I can sit down and eat it, I had something to say, "Mama, don't you always say that this is what comes around goes around world, and that we reap

what we sow?”

“Yes, of course, Tyrell. Of course I do.”

“Mambo acts like he has nothing to lose.”

My mother replied, “But that doesn't excuse him for stabbing that poor boy.”

“I know it, mama, but the other boy had a knife. I'm not saying what he did was right, but I can't help believe that if he'd had a father he wouldn't have turned out so bad.”

Mambo and his nine brothers and sisters grew up in a small two bedroom house on an alleyway just off of First Street. The police are always at the house because someone in the house is always in trouble for something. All ten of the brothers and sisters have different last names, and there never has been a father figure. When I asked Mambo where he slept, he told me that he slept in the bathtub. He says that there is never any food in the house because his mother trades their food stamps for drugs. That's why he's so street smart. He had to be street smart to survive. His gang is his real family, and before the gang, it was like Lord of the Flies.

Mrs. Purdy said, “One day, Mambo's mother came to school to pick him up. She was so out of it that she could barely stand up. Then when she reached across my desk for the sign-out sheet, she exposed her right arm. It was covered in infected drug tracks.”

I could tell that my mom wanted to change the subject, when she asked, “Tyrell, would you like a piece of chocolate cake?”

My eyes lit up, “Can I have a large piece?”

Suddenly, Mrs. Purdy shook her head like a light bulb had just gone on.

She asks, “Oh my, Tyrell, I almost forgot. I hope that you're going to try out for the volleyball team? Wendell said you weren't interested, but Mr. Phish could sure use you.”

I am a little confused, so I asked, “Why do you want me to play volleyball, Mrs. Purdy?”

“Mr. Phish's job is on the line, the school budget is empty, and the school district is laying people off that can't perform up to expectations. After four years of coaching, Mr. Phish hasn't won a single title. Superintendent Davis and the board are only interested in winning coaches. Dr. Davis told Mr. Ortega that if Mr. Phish can't bring home a winner this year, then he is going to be out of a job.”

I had no idea.

I told her, “Yes. Of course I'll play. I like Mr. Phish, but fielding a team good enough to win will be really tough. We really don't have much in the way of athletes. I read the volleyball rules on the poster. We have to have two girls in the lineup. That tournament is only a month away.”

Chapter 3

The next day when I arrive at school, Mr. Ortega is in his office talking to a new migrant girl. She is long and narrow and her long jet black hair is neatly tied in a ponytail. Most of the boys in the main room are rubber necking in an attempt to see what she looks like. The vast majority of the students that go to school here are boys, and most of the girls that enroll here do so because we have a Head Start New Born program on our campus. The result is about 80% of the girls on campus are pregnant or have a new born baby.

All of the conversations this morning are about the stabbing. Everyone has their own version of what had happened to Mambo Rosas. Almost every day police and probation department cars come to Del Cielo High for one reason or another, but according to Mrs. Purdy this is the first stabbing in the history of the school. Students have stabbed other students after school, but we've never had an actual stabbing on school grounds.

Everyone in town has long formed an opinion of Mambo. This is because you would have to live under a rock to not know about Mambo and the First Street Boyz. Mambo has been arrested over and over since he was old enough to walk. Since I have lived in Patterson, he has been arrested for breaking into the local mini-mart gas station, selling methamphetamine, car burglary, and assaulting the Patterson High school security guard. All of the local policemen know Mambo and his homies by sight.

Before long, Mr. Ortega's interview with the new girl is over, and he gets up from behind his desk and opens his office door. We are all dying to see what she looks like. Finally, at last she turns to leave the office and we all get our first look. She is so pretty that she makes my heart flutter. She is wearing a white blouse and skin tight blue jeans, and her eyes sparkle. Then, every eye in the place began to stare at her she strolls across the main room towards Mrs. Purdy's desk.

Mrs. Purdy is waiting in anticipation, and just as soon as the new girl approaches she hands her a schedule. At the same time, Mrs. Purdy waves furiously for the other migrant girls to come over for an introduction. Then as they do so, they all giggle in unison as Mrs. Purdy cordially introduces them to each other. It is amazing to watch. In just minutes they act like they have all known each other forever. Then just as she finishes doing the introductions, Mrs. Purdy catches me staring at the new girl with my mouth wide open.

She says, "Tyrell, this is a brand-new student, and her name is Katrina Cortez. Katrina is from Zamora, Michoacan, and she knows just a little English."

Katrina replied, "Mucho gusto."

I am so nervous that I am having trouble getting my lips to move. I swear, the second she locked eyes with me I forgot my own name. All that I can manage is to move my head up and down like I have forgotten how to talk. Then just when I am about to finally say something, I look up at the clock and realize that the first bell is about to ring and I am going to be late to class.

Finally, I mutter, "Please to meet you. I need to get to class if I'm going to get a good seat."

The school is almost deserted. Less than half of the students have shown up today. Not a single member of either gang is at school. I'm certain that the Latin Kings are afraid that the First Street Boyz will retaliate. Then just as the bell is about to ring, Eddie Cruz walks through the front door.

I told Eddie, "I'm surprised that you came to school today. I didn't think that you would want to be here after what happened yesterday."

Eddie says, "So you think that I want to be here. I'm on probation, and they don't give me a choice. Either I go to school, or I go to juvenile hall. The cops told the judge that when I'm not in school, I'm stealing cars. The judge said that this is my last chance. If I screw up here, he's going to send me to the California Youth Authority until I'm 25 years old. I didn't want to come, but I have to because my probation officer is coming today to check on my progress."

No sooner did Eddie finish talking when two of my close friends Veech Martinez and Wendell Chung pull up and lock their bicycles. Veech has been staying at Wendell's house since the death of his mother, and the two of them have become good friends. Just as soon as they finish locking their bikes, they both

came inside the main room. Wendell can't wait to tell everybody what he had heard about the stabbing.

He is barely through the front door before he announces, "I hear that the guy who stabbed Mambo is the brother of the guy who Mambo stabbed to death last year."

I am completely taken by surprise, "You mean the guy in the alleyway next to the gymnasium?"

Now everything is starting to make sense.

Wendell went on, "Yes, that's what I mean and those Latin Kings in the getaway car, they go to Patterson High and they live in Del Puerto Farm Camp. The police arrested them in front of Wilbur Garcia's last night."

"Do we know any of them?" I asked.

"All I know is that they are Latin Kings."

Just as soon as Wendell finishes dishing his gossip, the bell sounds announcing that the first class is starting. I immediately don't want to be here, and all day long the class periods drag by. My guess is that none of us want to be here. At the same time, it is obvious that Mr. Phish doesn't want to be here either. He's lecturing with one eye out the window and the other eye on the class. We all know what his problem is, Mr. Phish is afraid of what might happen next.

We've just started a unit on World War II, but as Mr. Phish attempts to lecture, nobody is listening. Finally, out of frustration, he decides to hand out a worksheet on Adolph Hitler and the Nazis. Then just as soon as he gets us started on the assignment he starts working with the English Language Learners.

During PE class, we didn't have enough students to have a volleyball scrimmage. Instead, we are practicing our serves. Then when the lunch bell rings, they tell us to eat our lunch in the main room. They're serving hamburger tacos. I didn't bring a lunch so I'm stuck. Today, no one is allowed to eat outside, but as usual, I sit down with Wendell and Veech.

The second I sit down Veech Martinez affirms what we all are thinking, "Tyrell, did you see that new girl, Katrina? I heard that she and her family just moved

into Walnut Acres Camp.”

I gulped before replying, “Have you met her already?”

“Why no, but “¿Que bonita?” replied Veech.

I didn't need a translator.

Today, Wendell seems to know something about everything.

He said, “I heard her family has been working in the lettuce fields in Arizona before they came here.”

After lunch, I went straight to my class in the computer lab with Mrs. Hasselblad. Then about 5 minutes after sitting down, Mr. Ortega made an announcement over the intercom system.

He announces, “I have some good news. I called Turlock General Hospital and Mambo is no longer in critical condition. They say he's going to live. The police have apprehended all four of the guys involved in the stabbing, and they are all locked up in juvenile hall.”

All of my classes at Del Cielo High are small except my CORE class. I think that the classes at Patterson High were too large and my needs were so great, that I got behind and could never catch up. The result was that after a while I quit going to class, which got me here. Mr. Phish's class is different. There are only 12 students in his algebra class, and he makes sure that we all understand how to solve the problems before moving on in the book. I think he's use to teaching students that don't get it. His classes are hands on, and he often calls on us to go to the front of the class and explain on the board how to solve problems. Knowing I might get called on keeps me focused and on my toes. Most importantly, I understand Mr. Phish when he explains how to solve the problems. Our first test is next week, and he's already put us into study groups.

When the final bell of the day rang, Mrs. Hasselblad tells us that before we can leave we have to clean up around our computer stations. She also reminds us that we all have a graphic arts homework assignment. My skateboard is waiting for me, and I'm ready to get going. Just as soon as I clean up around my computer station I hurry out the door and head across town to Patterson Skateboard Shop. I am especially excited because the city skateboard championships are still a couple of weeks away, and I have needed time to

prepare.

Then as I walk across town a warm southern wind is blasting me in the face, and because the farmers are shaking the almond trees for their nuts, the sky is a stained brown. Before long, I can't help but notice that the streets are dead quiet except for the sound of a lawn mower and the occasional sound of chirping birds. There isn't a car on the road.

Not long after, I take a left on 5th Street, and immediately sense that something is wrong. In the distance, I can see two First Street Boyz posted at the entrance of an alleyway. I have no idea what they are up to, but they sure are acting guilty. At the same time, I can hear what sounds like a very large group of kids getting all worked up. Then, when I move closer for a better look, I spot 40 First Street Boyz dressed in flaming red. They look like they are preparing for war, and getting them all worked up into a frenzy is Mambo's lieutenant Tiny Garcia. Tiny is standing on the roof of an abandoned car shouting as loud as he can shout.

He roars, "Are we going to let those fools get away with what they did to Mambo?"

The First Street Boyz, reply in unison, "No!"

Once more he shouts, "It's time to make Mambo proud. It's time to even the score. It's our turn to kick those scabs where it really hurts."

Tiny is doing an amazing job of getting them fired up, and just as soon as he finishes Jesus Christo Reyes jumps on the roof of the car and began shouting orders.

He exclaims, "All of you dogs gather around in a circle."

The second they gather around, the First Street Boys let loose with a series of Del Cielo High Bulldog growls, and when the barking is loud enough, it can be heard all over the town. Tiny orders them to line up. It's at this time that they begin their march on Patterson High. At the head of the pack, and marching straight down the middle of the street is Tiny Garcia. His gold teeth and gold chains glisten in the afternoon sun. Then just when the First Street Boyz are about to set foot on school grounds, Tiny pauses to shout out one more round of encouragement.

He tells his men, "Let's kick those scabs hard and make them pay for what they did to Mambo."

They are hell bent on a mission, and I don't think that anyone is going to stop them from going to war. Not after what the Latin Kings had done to Mambo. Marching directly behind Tiny are the other First Street Boyz lieutenants, Jesus Christo Reyes and One-eyed Joey Galvan. Only moments later they cross onto the Patterson High School grounds, and quickly broke into six groups. Then in what looks like a carefully orchestrated military maneuver, each group heads straight to a pre-designated classroom where they take their positions outside of the door.

No sooner have the First Street Boyz taken their places when Mr. Phish's Ford Taurus suddenly rounds the corner and heads in our direction at a high rate of speed. Sitting in his passenger seat is Mr. Ortega. Mr. Phish then slams on his brakes the second he arrives in front of Patterson High. Before the car can even come to a complete stop Mr. Ortega leaps out of the passenger seat and runs over to confront the Tiny Garcia. We can't hear what he is saying, but his hands are waving wildly in all directions. However, he isn't getting anywhere because the First Street Boyz refused to listen to him. Then, Mr. Phish decides to take his turn. He is yelling at Tiny so loudly that I can hear every word he is saying a block away.

He shouts, "Tiny, you know that you're not allowed on Patterson High School grounds. You're going to be expelled for this if you don't stop right now. Please don't embarrass our school."

Jesus Christo Reyes quickly snarls out a nasty reply, "Get out of my face, Catfish. You saw what those scabs did to Mambo. They tried to kill him. Don't try to stop us. They have to pay for what they did."

Both Mr. Phish and Mr. Ortega are desperate to stop them, but to no avail. Now, they are both walking in circles with their phones up to their ears. I'm sure that they are calling 911 for help, but it's obvious that there is nothing that they can do.

Then it happens, with only minutes left before the final bell, Tiny Garcia walks over and smashes the fire alarm glass, setting off a chorus of fire bells. The instant Tiny shatters the glass, Joey Galvan and Mr. Phish get into a serious scuffle. They roll end over end across the grass, and it looks like Joey is winning.

The Del Cielo First Street Boyz caught the Patterson High Latin Kings totally off guard as they're exiting their classes. Classroom after classroom they surprise the Latin Kings as they leave their classes in response to the fire alarm. In an instant, the school explodes into total chaos. At the same time teachers and administrators are all attempting to break up the fights, but they are vastly outnumbered.

Just as quickly as they can, the fire trucks respond to the fire alarm, but with all of the pandemonium that is unfolding the firemen did not want to get involved. Instead, they wait for reinforcements. Soon afterwards, the entire Patterson police force roars onto the school grounds with their sirens blaring and their lights flashing. They are closely followed by the first ambulance just as the parents begin arriving to pick up their children. Soon afterward, the police begin telling the parents to remain in their cars until the situation is under control.

It takes another 25 minutes before the police get a handle on the fighting. They arrest everyone wearing gang colors. It takes three policemen to get Tiny in handcuffs. The moment they have Jesus Christo Reyes under control, things slow way down and the fighting stops. At this time, I resumed my trip to the skateboard shop.

The skateboard shop is really quiet. I figure that most of the probable customers have been drawn to Patterson High by the endless stream of sirens. Once more, Clint Boreman is in the back of his shop working on another dirt bike. Then as he watches me come closer, he grabs my new board and lifts it up with both hands. Clint got me really excited.

He is really ecstatic as he tells me, "Tyrell, you're going to love this new board. It has the same cool design as your old board, and your polyurethane wheels are as good as new. The wheel manufacturer says that there is nothing wrong with them."

At that moment, Mr. Boreman hands it over the counter for me to check out.

He can't stop talking, "I even took it for a spin myself. This is a far superior board. Both the nose and the tail have a perfect 10% grade. I think that you can win the city championships with this board. You know, the contest is in less than 2 weeks, and Tyrell, you still haven't signed up."

Then just as soon as he quits talking, he reaches behind the counter for the sign-up sheet.

I replied, "Thank you for getting it repaired so quickly. I was getting nervous because the tournament is coming up so soon."

I am in the Masters Division. The competition is divided up into five tiers. The tiers are based on ages and sex. I can't help but notice that there are a lot of young kids signed up, both boys and girls. Competition begins at age five. Sal Marquez is the first name I see on the list for the Masters Division. He is followed by Mambo Rosas, Eddie Cruz, and Leticia Lopez's new boyfriend Collin Craven.

Mr. Boreman then smiles before telling me, "Tyrell, you know that I'm a judge again this year. This is going to be the biggest city championship ever. We have over 100 kids signed up, as of today. This could be your year. I see you spend more time on a board than anyone else in town. I also hear that this new kid Collin Craven can do a caballerial."

I didn't even know what he was talking about.

I shook my head like he was speaking a different language.

I asked, "A caballerial? Say what?"

My reaction made Mr. Boreman laugh.

He said, "It's a 360-degree turn done backwards. I'm telling you Tyrell, be prepared, some of these other BAT (Bay Area Transplant) kids know how to do some pretty sophisticated tricks. It's not just local skaters anymore. You're going to have to do something special if you want to win."

The second I finish paying Mr. Boreman, I open up the shop's front door and as fast as I could go I took off for the skate park. If it is going to take a 360-degree turn to win it, then I am going to have to do one. The only skater I know who can do a 360 forward is Sal, and even he can't complete one every time. There are so many kids at the skate park that I can hardly believe it. Instead of practicing our tricks, we are all spending our practice time trying not to crash into each other.

For the time being, Eddie Cruz and some of his Latin Kings are hogging the half-

pike. Then when football practice ends, Sal and Sunny Luna arrive. The first thing Sal does is go off the mega jump for some major air. Then, just as he lands, he waves for me to go. Over and over I try to complete a 360-degree rotation and land on my feet, but all I did was kiss the pavement. Each time the results are the same. I'm in the air for an eternity, but before I can complete my full 360 rotation things fall apart.

When I finally get home, I find my mother glued to the television. The Sacramento news stations are running specials about the riots at Patterson High. They are showing cell phone videos that have been recorded by students. The segment that is being played over and over is of Mr. Phish and Joey Galvan rolling end over end across the school lawn. I can't believe that the news stations already have a video. I mean, I have just gotten home.

My mother shakes her head, and then asks, "Tyrell, did you see what happened?"

"I was walking by Patterson High when it happened."

She shook her head in disbelief before continuing, "Mr. Purdy says those First Street Boyz are from your school. You know it's a one way street Tyrell, once you join one of those gangs they won't let you out."

I bet she's given me the same lecture every day since she found out that I was going to Del Cielo High.

I smiled, before answering, "Yes, mama, I know. I'm going up to my room to study. Mr. Phish has loaded me up with algebra, and I have a graphics art project that's due tomorrow."

The next day, Del Cielo High is crazy. The main room is filled with the First Street Boyz and their parents. Inside Mr. Ortega's office is the mother of Mambo Rosas, and the two of them are in a heated argument. She is yelling so loudly that even with the door closed we can all hear her. Mrs. Rosas is angry about Mambo getting stabbed on school grounds. From what I can hear, it didn't sound very good.

Just as soon as Mambo's mother leaves, Mr. Ortega begins meeting with the parents of the students who attacked Patterson High. He then suspends each of them for 3 to 5 days depending on the roll the played in the calamity. The following Monday night, during the monthly school district board meeting, One-

eyed Joey Galvan, Jesus Christo Reyes, and Tiny Garcia, are all expelled. This means that if they want to get a diploma then they will have to attend a county school independent study program. They are told that they could all reapply for admission at the end of the semester, providing that they stayed out of trouble.

What makes things really bad for the entire school is that the Rosehaven Volleyball Tournament is in 3 weeks, and many of our best players are suspended, expelled, or recovering from a stab wound. Joey, Mambo, Jesus, and Tiny Garcia are some of the best volleyball players in the school. For a moment, I was actually thinking that we had a chance at winning a trophy. Right now, all we have are pregnant girls and migrant farm students to replace them. At least Mambo's girlfriend, Chilly Rodriguez, hasn't been kicked out of school. The rules are clear. The tournament is co-ed, and we can't play if we don't have two girls.

This Friday night is the first Patterson High football game of the school year and it is against Orestimba High in Newman. Next to the Patterson Apricot Celebration, it is the biggest event of the entire year. This is because everybody in Patterson knows everybody in Newman, and as a result the stadium will be packed.

Friday afternoon, my dad came home early from work. Our plan is to get some burritos at Wilbur Garcia's Taqueria and then take them to the game. This will be the first year that the team will be playing on artificial turf and I want to see if it's any different. One by one we climb into our carpet cleaning van dressed in Patterson High red and gray. Then as soon as the doors are shut, we head downtown by way of the Patterson Circle, but when we pull up to Wilbur Garcia's the line is all the way out the door.

All of the parking places in front are taken so my dad pulled into a parking space in the post office parking lot across the street. He then handed me twenty dollars.

He says, "Get us 4 super beef burritos to go, and tell them to put extra salsa on mine"

"Yes, sir."

Without hesitating a second, I jump out of the van and take my place at the end of the line. Then soon after placing my order I am surprised by a familiar voice. It is my old girlfriend Leticia Lopez.

She asks, "Are you going to the game, Tyrell?"

I am completely caught off guard, and when I look up, Leticia has a huge smile on her face. She really looks pretty dressed in her red and gray Patterson High cheerleader's outfit.

"Of course, I wouldn't miss it," I told her.

It was at that moment that I realize that her new boyfriend is standing behind her paying for their order.

"How are your mom and dad, Tyrell?" Leticia asks.

"They're doing great. I worked all summer for my dad. I've never worked so hard my whole life. They're outside in the van. We're all going to the game together," I replied.

Leticia then introduces me to her new boyfriend.

She said, "Tyrell, I don't believe that you've met Collin Craven."

I tried to be as polite as possible.

Immediately, I reach out to shake his hand, "No, I haven't. You're new in school."

"We moved here from El Cerrito. We bought a house here. They're much cheaper than the Bay Area. My mom and dad like it here."

I said, "I see that you signed up for the city championships."

Leticia can't wait to tell me about how great he is at skateboarding.

She declares, "Collin won a skateboard trophy in El Cerrito. You should see it Tyrell, it's enormous."

I had seen him on his board at the park and he hasn't impressed me.

"There are a lot of good skateboarders in Patterson. Have you seen Sal Marquez?" I replied.

He states, "I'm use to Bay Area competition. It's a lot tougher over there. This championship is going to be really easy. I hear the Patterson trophy is a real beauty."

My burrito order is ready, and the girl behind the cash register is waving frantically to get my attention so that she can get me to pay for my order.

I said, "We'll it was a pleasure meeting you, Collin. I hope we win the game."

We were lucky to get here early because the line at Wilbur Garcia's is now half way down the block. I paid the girl for the bag of burritos and quickly rejoined my family in the van. Then, while we drove away I can't help but to check out Collin and Leticia as they walk down the street holding hands. They look so happy that it made me sick. I don't think that I've ever been so jealous. Then all at once my appetite is gone.

Inside the van, Lavonne still had her phone glued to her ear. I doubt that she has noticed that I was gone. She is gossiping on the phone a million words a minute, and trying to send text messages at the same time. The conversation is always the same, who's on this week's list of the cutest guys at Patterson Junior High. I think she's trying to set a world record for gossiping. I swear, around here, they start when they're still in diapers. Maybe it's in the Patterson water.

Finally, we pull into the packed stadium parking lot as the Patterson High Marching Band is warming up. They're practicing the Star Spangle Banner. The only reason that I know it's the Star Spangle Banner is because I have lived here for several football seasons. However, if you hadn't heard them playing it before you probably wouldn't recognize it. After purchasing tickets, my mom heads straight to the refreshment booth where she buys us each a soft drink.

The second we sit down Lavonne says, "Tyrell, isn't that your old girlfriend Leticia Lopez kissing that boy on the field in front of everybody."

"Yeah, his name is Collin Craven. I just met him."

"We'll he's real cute," Lavonne gushed.

"I think that I'm better looking," I said.

Lavonne rolls her eyes. And then replies, "If you say so, Tyrell."

My dad is listening to our every word.

He says, "Leticia looks beautiful in that cheerleader's outfit."

My mother, knowing full well that I am still hurt, came to my defense.

She says, "Don't you worry for a minute son, there are plenty of more fish in the sea."

The final score of the JV game is 26-0. Ten minutes after the junior varsity leaves the field, the home crowd stands on their feet to cheer the home team as it enters the stadium. At the same time, Sal Marquez and Chad Campbell lead the Patterson Varsity through the goal post banner and on to the field. Coach Long, who is as wide as he is tall, is the last one onto the field. Long has coached football at Patterson High for more than 25 years.

Ten minutes later the referee flipped the coin, and Patterson wins the toss. We chose to receive, and soon after Sal got the team off to a fast start. On the first possession, he completes his first 5 passes to 5 different receivers. Then when he gets the team to the 5-yard line, Sal walks the ball into the end zone. The Newman team is much smaller than our team, and as a result, throughout the night they struggle to put up any kind of defense. At the same time, our defense is led by Chad Campbell who sacks their quarterback three times. The result is that Patterson wins the game, 35-10.

At the end of the game, everybody in the stands heads down to the field to congratulate the team. Sal is completely surrounded, and I can tell that he is feeling pretty good about himself. Finally, he spots me in the crowd.

He asks, "Tyrell, how did we do?"

"You played really well, Sal."

"I hope that the rest of the season goes this well," he tells me.

Just a second later, Sunny walks up and gives Sal a kiss and a hug.

Feeling like a third wheel, I declared, "I better get going. My parents are waiting for me in the van."

However, Sal doesn't want me to go.

He says, "Hold on a second, Tyrell. Have you forgotten that the city skateboard championships a week from today? I want to win."

What he is saying really got me excited, especially when I realize how enthusiastic he is about the tournament.

"I can meet you at the skate park to practice this week after I get my homework done. I want to win it too, but if I don't pass algebra then I'm never going to make it back to Patterson High," I told him.

The moment our conversation ends, Chad Campbell came up and lifts Sal into the air.

Sal immediately yells, "Put me down, Chad."

Chad chuckles like a crazy man as he held Sal in the air.

At the same time, he tells Sal, "Great game, little buddy."

The second Chad puts him down, Sal asks, "Tyrell, how about coming to the dance tonight with Sunny and me?"

Dejected, I told him, "Sal, you know that Del Cielo High students can't go to Patterson High dances."

"Sorry, Tyrell. I forgot."

"Well, again, my folks are waiting for me in the van. I hope you and Sunny have a great time tonight at the dance. Send me a text when you're on your way to the skate park and I'll try to join you."

By Thursday, most of the First Street Boyz, have finished serving their suspensions. There are now enough players available that we can play some competitive volleyball. Before long, both sides are doing a great job of setting each other up for the kill. At the same time, I am really smacking the ball over the net, making it hard for the opposition to return.

The following Tuesday, I came to school early to meet with my algebra group. I am stumped by a couple of problems and need some help. When I arrive Wendell Chung and Eddie Cruz are already busy studying at the big table. It

seems like I'm not the only one having problems.

Almost to the second that I sat down, a small Hispanic family bursts through the double wide front doors. Desperate, they wander into the main room looking for anyone that could help. They are dressed in rags and their bodies are little more than skin and bones. At this time, Eddie is the only Spanish speaking student in the school. It doesn't take long for him to figure out that they were all starving. The parents want to enroll their boy in school so that he can eat.

The moment he understood, Eddie emphatically expresses his concern, "Mrs. Purdy, these people need food. They're at the end of the road, and I don't think that they can go any farther without food."

Mrs. Purdy said, "What's his name?"

"They call him Chico."

Just as fast as she can, Mrs. Purdy turns and opens up the school pantry. Then she reaches up and takes out some individual boxes of cereal. They are so hungry that it looks like they are going to eat the box and all. I bet he's never even seen a volleyball.

I am really happy to with the results of my first Algebra quiz. I got a score of 88 out of 100, which is a pretty high score for me. I owe a lot of my success to Wendell Chung. He makes sure that I get all of my work in, and with his help I have time to practice my skateboarding every day. I want to beat that Collin Craven in the worse way.

Chapter Four

After the first game of the season, the Patterson High football team looks good enough to win the league title. Their second game is Friday night and it's against another small school, Gustine High. Gustine is located 25 miles south of Patterson, and it has a population of about 5,000. Their stadium is unique in that it is completely surrounded by dairies, so you know what the air smells like. We play them in the preseason every year, and their stadium only holds about 300 people.

When we arrived at the stadium, we were all surprised to find that they have only 22 players on their team. At the same time, none of us can believe how few Gustine fans are in the bleachers. In fact, when the game finally started there were more Patterson supporters in the stadium. The entire game, Sal is on fire. During the game, he completes 22 of his 28 passes and throws for five touchdowns. Sal also runs the ball for another 75 yards. Coach Long uses the game as an opportunity to play everybody. The game was never close and it ends with a final score of 35 to 7. Throughout the entire game, I wished that I was out on the field.

I keep saying to myself, "Next year."

All I must do is go to school every day, stay out of trouble, and pass algebra. So far so good because I haven't gotten into any more trouble since I stuck my head in the Patterson Elementary flower petunia garden. At the same time, I have perfect attendance and I'm passing Mr. Phish's algebra class.

When Monday morning rolls around, Mambo Rosas surprises everyone by returning to school. Only this time he doesn't arrive in a patrol car. Instead, it is his mother who drops him off at school. His neck is still black and blue, and bandaged, but beyond that he looks the same. Personally, I'm glad to see him because it means that we have a chance of winning the Rosehaven Tournament. Mambo passes most of the morning hanging around with Chili "Pepper" Rodriguez.

Mr. Ortega is a good man and he's out to save us all, but I don't think that Mambo and some of his crew can be saved. I hear what Mr. Ortega keeps telling Mrs. Purdy. He believes that Mambo's close call with death has chilled him, but we all know different. I heard during yesterday's volleyball practice that Mambo isn't in a forgiving mood. At the same time, they said that he is mad as heck that his homies have been kicked out of school. Translated, this means that there's more to come.

No doubt about it, it's good to have Mambo back on the volleyball court. He's clearly one of the best volleyball players in the school. The Stanislaus County Blue Gum Juvenile Facility is where Mambo spends a lot of his time; they have both indoor and outdoor volleyball courts. They play rain or shine. Mambo's return to Del Cielo High means that we have a chance of winning a trophy. The important thing is that we believe in ourselves because we are the smallest school to be invited to the Rosehaven Volleyball Tournament.

According to tournament rules, we need one more girl besides Chili. Chico, the Mexican giant, has been learning the game as fast as anyone that I've ever seen. He really likes to spike the ball in people's faces. Every time he strikes somebody in the head he smiles, which makes me think that his parents knew what they were doing when they brought him to Del Cielo High. Chico tells Wendell that he has played a lot of soccer in Mexico, and although the two sports are not related, he definitely shows signs of being an athlete. Chili Rodriquez and Wendell are both good setters. Chili is as good as any guy, and at the same time we have the height to win. Mambo, Chico, and I can all spike the heck out of the ball.

I have made up my mind that the only way I can be successful is to stay after school and finish my math homework before going to the skate park. If I just head to the skate park straight from school, then I'll forget about my homework. I see the same people at the park every night. All of them have signed up for the city skating championships on Saturday. Collin Craven, Eddie, and Mambo are all putting in a lot of practice time.

Mambo and his gang have been selling drugs in the skate park since the day it opened. Over the years, for the sake of my own health, I have tried to ignore his illegal activities, and as a result I have never paid much attention to his skills on a skateboard. This is because he spends so much time locked up that it is hard to believe that he would be any good on a skateboard. However, I have been analyzing the competition, and Mambo stands a decent chance of getting in the

Master Level Finals. Maybe he can't win it, but he is a pretty good skater with a decent assortment of tricks. This is despite his lack of practice time. His arch enemy Eddie Cruz is also in the park every night preparing, but unlike Mambo, he has no known natural talent and he doesn't stand much of a chance.

The Masters Level competition at the city championships is scheduled to begin at noon, and it is the very last event of the day. Most of the entrants have been on a skateboard their entire lives. After analyzing the entire pack, I think that I can beat everyone but Sal, which means that I have a good chance at second place. Then if everything goes right and I nail a 360 degree rotation without falling off my board, I can win the whole thing.

Late Friday morning, during 1st period Mr. Phish finally realizes that the Rosehaven Volleyball Tournament is less a week and a half away, and we still need one more girl player. This is despite the fact that I have been warning him for more than a month that we are in trouble. It's not his fault that we only have one girl player, Chili.

Unable to find an answer to his problem, he looks in my direction and then asks, "Tyrell, where are we going to find another girl player for the volleyball team? Do you have any ideas? If we can't find one then we're going to have call Rosehaven, and tell them that we are canceling."

I really didn't even have an idea.

Then finally I give Mr. Phish my reply, "We've asked every girl in the school, but most of them don't want to play. It's a rough game. I think that most of the pregnant ones are afraid that they'll have a miscarriage."

Mr. Phish stood there shaking his head not knowing what to do, and then finally he utters, "There must be one girl in the school that can play."

I spent the next minute trying to think of a girl to no avail, and then suddenly a miracle happened. Katrina Cortez locked eyes with me and smiled.

Completely startled, I return her smile, and with butterflies in my stomach I asked, "Mr. Phish, how about asking the migrant farm girls if one of them wants to play."

He replies, "I don't think so. I've asked the girls over and over if they would like to play, but none of them has ever played the game."

“Mr. Phish, I don't think that we have a choice, unless of course, you know about a girl who is about to get kicked out of Patterson High,” I answered.

At last Mr. Phish realizes that there isn't another choice, and for the next couple of minutes he glares silently in the direction of the migrant farm girls. It is obvious to all of us that he is unable to decide. Then finally he swallows, and in Spanish he asks if one of them would like to be on the volleyball team. Unfortunately, not a single hand went up.

Then when we have all just about given up hope, to everyone's surprise, Katrina Cortez raises her hand.

In Spanish, a grinning Mr. Phish asks her, “Has jugado volleyball?”

She smiles and tells him, “No, pienso que es muchisimas diversion.”

Even those who didn't speak Spanish knew what that meant, “No she had never played, but volleyball looked like a lot of fun.”

I can tell that Mr. Phish is disappointed that he doesn't have an experienced player, but he has no choice but to give in.

Finally, he tells her, “It looks like you're on the team, Katrina.”

Immediately, Katrina gets really excited, almost rising out of her chair. At the same time her excitement spreads like contagion and the entire room broke out in applause. Then just when the applause abates the entire class erupts into a series of frenzied Del Cielo High Bulldog barks. The sound of the barks shakes the entire room, and when they ended all we can hear is Mambo's sinister laughs.

He snarls, “The Rosehaven Tournament is the biggest continuation school volleyball tournament in California. We can win it if we want it. I've played against a lot of those guys in juvenile hall and they've got nothing on us. We'll kick their rears. The first place trophy is ours if we want it.”

Everyone in the room shakes their heads in agreement. My next class is algebra, and it is immediately followed by P.E. When we finally all get out on the court and take sides the entire class is all jacked up. Now that we are officially going to the tournament it seems like everyone wants to be on the team, and the

volleyball is moving so fast that I can't believe it. At the same time the rallies are longer and longer. If you can't keep up, then you're getting run over.

Friday night's Patterson High football game is against the Modesto High Panthers. It is going to be a real test for our guys because Modesto is a highly rated team. This is also the last preseason game. Modesto is the only big school that we will play against this season. They also play in a much harder league with bigger schools. However, Patterson's population is exploding because more and more people are moving here from the Bay Area. Coach Long says it's just a matter of time before we will have to play in a tougher division.

Friday afternoon my dad arrives home early so we can drive in to Modesto in time for the start of the game. This time, my parents let Lavonne invite two of her girlfriends along for the ride. The three of them all climb in through the back door of the van. Their names are Latisha and Kortney, and they have been hanging out at our house a lot lately. They both live around the corner on the next street. All three of them are boy crazy. One by one they are taking turns rating the boys at the middle school. At the same time, they are putting on makeup and taking turns spraying on cheap perfume. After a while there wasn't any air in the van.

The drive between Patterson and Modesto is pretty boring. The entire way into town both sides of the road are lined in almond and walnut trees. There are also a lot of fields that are planted in alfalfa, corn, tomatoes, onions, and beans. My dad says that the entire Central Valley has not recovered from the economic downturn, and that there are no jobs available locally except in farming. I'm almost 16 years of age, and it seems like the economy has been in a downturn all my life.

By the time we reach the outskirts of Modesto the three girls have succeeded in driving the three of us crazy. My father's solution to the incessant talking is to turn up the volume on his favorite country western station, but when he does the girls only talk louder. Finally, I decide to just try and ignore them.

Tonight's game was moved to the Modesto Junior College Stadium because they are expecting a large crowd. The Modesto High football team has also won its first 2 preseason games, and they are expected to be contenders for their league title. It takes a while before we finally found a parking place, and before we can even get out of the van we are getting all kinds of static from the people who are cheering for Modesto High. This is because Lavonne, Kortney, and

Latisha, all have Patterson High pompoms. It is also because my parents are dressed in Patterson High Tiger red and gray sweat shirts.

Just a short time after we sit down in the visitors section, the Patterson Junior Varsity fumbles the ball. According to the scoreboard we are losing 32-7, in the fourth quarter. The people in the stands are quick to tell us that Modesto High is playing their second and third string. It doesn't look good for our junior varsity, but I'm sure our varsity will do a better job.

The varsity game starts right at 8 o'clock. The referee tosses the coin and we win, electing to receive. Modesto then kicks the ball out of the end zone, and we take over on the 20 yard line. It doesn't take long before everyone in the stands realizes how badly we are outmatched. Their linemen are enormous. They had six guys as big as Chad Campbell. On the very first play they sacked Sal and ground his helmet into the dirt, and on the next two downs he is forced to run for his life. Now it is 4th down and we need 17 yards, so Coach Long elects to punt.

Modesto's punt returner takes the ball to their 40 yard line, and only three plays later they score their first touchdown. The extra point is good, and then once more they kick the ball into the end zone. The very next set of downs, Sal tries his best to avoid getting sacked, but it was hopeless. Finally, our line completely collapses and their largest lineman picks up Sal like a sack of potatoes and throws him on the ground. The crunch is so loud that it is heard in every corner of the stadium, and the loud crunch silences the crowd. Soon afterward, the Patterson fans emit a huge gasp when they realized that Sal isn't moving. He didn't have a chance.

Both coaches rushed onto the field with their assistants, and they quickly surrounded Sal. Then after a couple of minutes of preparation they placed him onto a stretcher. Carefully, they load him into the ambulance for the ride to the hospital. We all hope that he will wave to the crowd, but there is no response. Then someone in the crowd says that he has been knocked unconscious. Sal is followed into the ambulance by his mother, who has a firm grip on his hand. The second she is inside they turn on the flashing lights and took off. Just seconds later Sal's father walks up to the cheerleaders, where he finds Sunny in tears. Sal's dad asked her if she would ride with him to the hospital.

Our second string quarterback Ernie Potter is a freshman. Ernie still hasn't reached his growth spurt, and he is only 5 foot 2 inches tall. Until tonight he's only played a few downs against Gustine High. In defense of Ernie, he should

be scared. At times it looks more like pin the tail on the donkey than a football game. Just as soon as they hike Ernie the ball he takes off running for his life with the Modesto linemen in hot pursuit. He doesn't stand a chance. Ernie ends the night with negative yards, and the final score is 42-0. We never played one down on their side of the field, and it would have been worse if they hadn't taken out their starters.

After the game my mom and dad insist on going by the hospital to see how Sal is doing. When we finally arrive at the Modesto Hospital the main waiting room is filled with people from Patterson. The first person we see in the room is Sunny Luna.

Sunny tells us, "He's hurt really bad. The doctors have already said that he's out for the season. I can't believe it, Tyrell."

Only a couple of minutes later Sal's father steps out of the elevator to give everyone an update. From the look on his face I can tell that he is obviously shaken up.

He says, "Sal's awake. He has a few broken ribs. They're going to do a brain scan on him in a little while, as a precaution. It looks like he's out for the season. The doctor says that he'll have to stay in bed for several weeks. Tyrell, he asked to see you."

Without hesitating, I follow Mr. Marquez into the elevator and he pushes the button for the third floor. Then when we enter Sal's room his mother is in tears. The moment I enter the room I am surprised when Sal manages to grimace an awkward smile. His eyes are swollen, and there are tubes running in and out of him. It is obvious that he has been knocked senseless.

Finally, Sal manages to speak, "Tyrell, it looks like the football season may be over for me."

"Oh, come on Sal. You can't mean it," I replied.

He responds, "My ribs are broken and I hurt everywhere. I hurt worse than I ever hurt in my life. They say I have to stay in bed for weeks without moving. Those Modesto linemen are huge. I can't believe that those guys are in high school. I couldn't find our receivers."

I didn't want to hear what he was saying.

I told him, “Sal you always heal quickly. If I know you, you'll be back on the field in a couple of weeks.”

His face grimaces in pain when he responds, “I hope so Tyrell, but that brings up tomorrow. You and I have skated together since we were little kids. Only you know how much I wanted to win the city skateboard championships. I'll be back next year.”

“Sure you will, Sal, you'll win it next year. Nobody in town can ride a skateboard like you,” I told him.

Tears well up in his eyes and I can tell that he is struggling for consciousness.

Then not more than a moment later a nurse enters the room and declares, “Everybody needs to get out of the room so that we can load him onto the gurney and take him into x-ray.”

I have no idea how long he had been knocked out. I'm sure that all of the people in the waiting room want to see him, but that isn't going to happen tonight. Finally, we get back in to the van and head home. We are all in a real somber mood. The entire way home, I keep hearing the sound of him getting crunched. It was horrifying. I can't believe how hard he got hit, and how loud it sounded. Then after we are about half way home my attention turned to skateboarding, and I began thinking about the tricks that I am going to perform in tomorrow's championship. Now, with Sal out, I can win the whole thing.

The next day I took off for the Patterson Skateboard Park early so that I can pay the \$10 registration fee and get my number. At the same time, I have some new stick-um that I want to try on the surface of my board. Everyone in the tournament is required to wear a helmet with knee and elbow pads. My helmet and pads are all black, so they match my hair. I am surprised by how many people are in the park. It seems like the whole town is here.

By the time I arrive, the first three tiers are almost finished. These are the tiers that feature the elementary kids. Just as soon as they are done, the middle school kids are going to battle it out. The Master's Division, which is my level, will follow immediately afterward. I am really surprised when I looked over at the judges table and realize that Mr. Phish, Clint Boreman, and Sergeant Sanchez are the judges.

Points are scored according to level of difficulty, tricks, and originality. Each participant gets 3 minutes of skate time to do their thing. Then, after everyone has skated the judges choose the 4 finalists. The Final Four then perform a 5 minute routine for the championship.

Soon after the youngest kids are finished, I decide to get something to eat. Mrs. Purdy and Mrs. Boreman are in charge of the refreshment booth. I purchase a hot dog from them and then sit down on a bench to watch the festivities. Then to my surprise, I spot Lavonne's friends Kortney and Latisha waiting their turn to skate. I have never seen them at the park before, so I am amazed when both of them turn in respectable runs. They are in the girls 13 and 14 year old tier, and from what I have seen of the other runs, they probably each won a trophy.

When it is almost 12 o'clock, all of the skaters in the Masters Division are told over the intercom system to gather in front of the judges' box. From the looks of things, everyone who signed up, has shown up. Then about a minute later Clint Boreman gets out of his chair, removes his baseball cap, and then walks around to the front of the judges' table.

He states, "I put the numbers 1 to 12 in my hat. Everybody needs to reach inside it and pick a number. The skater who picks the number 1 will go first, followed by 2 and so on."

Eddie Cruz is surprised when he picks the number 1. He will be followed by Collin Craven, Mambo Rosas, and then finally it will be my turn.

Mambo's associates, One-eyed Joey Galvan, Tiny Garcia, and Jesus Christo Reyes are all sitting in front of the viewing stands under a tree, on the far side of park. Gang colors are not allowed during the tournament, but they are all wearing red tennis shoes and belts.

I am really surprised to discover that my friend from Patterson Elementary, Dalton McCoy has entered the contest. He will skate directly after me. I am surprised because I rarely see him at the Patterson Skateboard Park. This is probably because his family lives on a remote ranch about 10 miles up Del Puerto Canyon.

The second after we all pick out of the hat I walk over to shake his hand and say, "Hello."

I remarked, "I haven't seen you at the skate park much this year."

“We live so far up the canyon that it is hard for me to come to the park, so my dad built a half-pipe on our property. It's actually pretty cool,” he said.

Just then, Mr. Boreman announced, “It's time for the big event of the day. Will the participants in the Masters Division, please get in line.”

Just as soon as we are lined up in order, he explains the rules, “One skater leaves the judges' platform every two minutes. If you run into another skater you are disqualified. The first routine is 3 minutes. Only the top 4 will make it into the finals. Creativity and the level of difficulty count heavily on your scores. We will be starting immediately. Eddie Cruz, you're first up.”

Eddie looks like a nervous wreck as he waits for his heat. Then when he takes off, he immediately wipes out. Next up is Collin Craven, and he roars past Eddie like he is standing still. Collin gets some decent height off the first small ramp, and then he impresses the entire crowd when he nails a 180 degree Ollie perfectly. You can watch his confidence soar as he heads for the mega ramp for a 360 degree turn. Moments later Collin hits his landing, hard, and maybe it isn't pretty, but he is still on his board. I don't believe it. I have been trying to do that trick for a year. Collin receives a huge roar from the crowd, not surprisingly; Leticia Lopez's voice is the loudest. She and Sunny Luna are watching in the viewing stands, and they are cheering for him like crazy.

Only two minutes later, Mambo attempts to impress the judges by going for some major air. He then manages to complete a clean 180 Ollie. This trick alone will probably put him in the Final Four. His subordinates, Jesus, Joey, and Tiny Garcia, are all going crazy every time he completes a trick.

Finally, it is my turn. I know that if I am going to beat Collin then I am really going to have to get major air. I start my routine with a front-side tail-slide across a bench, which is a trick that no one else in town can do, and I follow it with a 180 degree Ollie off of a small ramp. Then when it seems like everything is going as planned I made up my mind to try a 360 degree turn. This trick will guarantee my place in the finals. My takeoff couldn't have gone better, but just as I finished my rotation everything falls apart as my time ends and I tumble across the pavement.

Skating right on my tail is Dalton, and as I get up off of the ground I realize that he is putting in a fantastic performance. He is like a wild man on the course. Dalton sails through the air like he has wings, and as smoothly as possible he

completes a 360 like it is nothing. The crowd loves it. At this point I am getting nervous about making it into the Final Four.

Just as soon as the last person finishes their heat, we gathered around the judges' stand to wait for our results. None of us can believe how long it took to arrive at a decision. Finally, Clint Boreman announces over the intercom that they have the results.

He gets out of his chair, and announces, "Here it is folks. It was really close, but we have a decision. It looks like the Final Four are Collin Craven, Mambo Rosas, Dalton McCoy, and Tyrell Walker."

Tiny, Jesus, and Joey all went crazy screaming. At the same time, Leticia and Sunny looked pretty excited themselves. The moment they quieted down, Mr. Boreman goes over the rules.

Once more he tells us, "Everyone skates this time for 5 minutes. The top 3 get trophies. If you run into another skater you're disqualified. May the best man, win."

None of the 8 guys that had been eliminated liked what they had heard, especially Eddie. Each one felt like they should be in the Final Four. I am surprised that Mambo has made it. In my opinion, many of the others were equally as good. One more time we picked out of a hat. Only this time Mambo picked number 1, Danny picked number 2, Collin number 3, and I picked number 4, which is alright as far as I was concerned.

Just a minute later, Mr. Boreman signals for Mambo to start his routine. The first trick he tries is grinding the rail, but half-way through the trick he loses his balance and bails. Then by the time he managed to get back on his board Dalton had already roared pass him and was sailing through the air like he is ready to fly. It is now clear to everyone that Dalton can win it. This time his routine is flawless. Shortly after Dalton finishes, Collin took off. He starts with unbelievable 180.

Again, I hear Leticia's voice, "Go, Collin!"

Collin turns and waves in her direction. He then pushes his board around the lip of the bowl as fast as he can before heading straight for the mega-ramp. Everyone is on the edges of their seats for what they expect to be the biggest trick of the day, a backward 360° when suddenly out of nowhere a folding chair

flies through the air. Without warning, the chair smacks the hits the ramp with a loud smack, right in front of the approaching Collin, who doesn't have a chance. The second he made contact with the chair he flew end over end hitting a concrete wall head first. Collin hit with a thud and didn't move. None of us can believe what we are seeing. Then suddenly, Leticia jumps out of her seat and starts screaming at Tiny Garcia so loudly that everyone in the park can hear her. Then only a moment later both Leticia and Sunny are swinging their purses at his head.

Mr. Phish and Clint Boreman immediately rush onto the course to see if Collin is alright. Then as Leticia continues to scream, Tiny Garcia starts laughing in their faces which just makes things worse.

At the same time, I turn to the judge's stand, and Sergeant Sanchez is looking in the same direction as everybody else.

I said, "Sergeant Sanchez, I think Tiny threw that chair."

He replied, "You might be right."

Without hesitating, Sergeant Sanchez got on his phone and called for backup. I can hear him telling the dispatch that it is the First Street Boyz again. At first I just stand there watching, but then that stupid Tiny grabs Sunny by the hair, and it looks like she needs help. I jumped on my board and in just seconds I reach the far end of the bowl, and hot on my heels are both Eddie and Dalton.

The second I jump off my board I shouted in his face, "Tiny, get your hands off of Sunny now."

Tiny just stood there acting stupid with his mouth open, so I smacked him square between the eyes. Unfortunately, the punch has little effect, and he still isn't letting go of Sunny's hair. So once more I hit him with everything I have, only this time I sock him in the stomach, and finally he buckles over and lets her go. It's at this time that Mambo comes after me with a vengeance. He threw a sucker punch at my head with his right hand, but I saw it coming out of the corner of my eye. I respond with a flurry of punches to his head, and the war is on. The for the next couple of minutes we stood toe to toe exchanging punches until finally Sergeant Sanchez separates us.

Just a few minutes later half of the Patterson Police Department arrives, and breaks up the fight between Dalton and a badly defeated Jose Reyes. Only then

do I realize that Eddie has plummeted One-eyed Joey. Mambo is having a tough time staying on his feet, and there is blood running from his mouth and nose. Moments later, the police order us all to line up against the bathroom, and spread eagle so they can search us for weapons. When they are finished patting us down, they put us all in handcuffs. One by one they place the four First Street Boyz in the back of patrol cars, and they place Dalton, Eddie, and me in the back seat of Sergeant Sanchez's patrol car.

Just as soon as Sergeant Sanchez closes the door, I can hear Mambo yelling at Tiny, "Look at the mess you got me in, Tiny."

After all of the melee, I have forgotten about Collin. He is now on his feet, and trying to shake off the crash. Before long he turns in our direction and gives us a thumbs up. About ten minutes later, the patrol cars turn on their flashing lights and we are on our way to the Patterson Police Station.

From the backseat of the patrol car I asked, "Sergeant Sanchez, you're not going to let those First Street Boyz wreck the tournament, are you? I practiced all year for this; I need to go back to the skate park. I haven't had my turn."

The sergeant answered, "The skateboard tournament is over."

I replied, "You can't be serious, a year of practice is wasted because that stupid Tiny threw a folding chair. Look, I don't even like Collin Craven. I can win the city championships, just give me a chance."

Sergeant Sanchez said, "No, Tyrell, a year's worth of practice was wasted because you punched Tiny between the eyes. Matter of fact, Mambo doesn't look very good either."

Wow, I can't believe what he is saying.

Angrily, I fought back, "What do you expect? That stupid Tiny was dragging Sunny around by the hair. Tiny threw that chair at Collin, and to be honest with you it felt really good when I smacked him in the head. I mean, everybody in town is scared of those guys."

No sooner had I finished talking both Eddie and Dalton broke out laughing. They were laughing because we had just held our own against the worst gangsters in town, in front of the whole town.

Still angry that we were being arrested, I refused to give in, “Sergeant Sanchez, I did what I had to do. Please take me back to the skate park.”

Sergeant Sanchez stares into his rear view mirror, “Dalton, I don’t see you in town much. Where are you going to school?”

“I’ve been at Harney School in Del Puerto Canyon. I got kicked out for fighting, so I’m going to have to start Del Cielo High next week.”

“Well, that should be interesting, a lily white kid like you, in the middle of gangster paradise,” Sergeant Sanchez replied.

Only seconds later, we pull into a parking space behind the police station, and Eddie says, “I sure hope you guys aren’t going to lock me up again. It’s not like I stole a car. I mean, I just got out of juvenile hall.”

Sergeant Sanchez looked at Eddie and just shook his head. He then turns off the ignition and opens the door so that we can all get out. In the parking lot is Sunny’s car. I’m sure that she and Leticia are already inside the station.

Shortly after entering the building I spot Sunny in the hallway, and she says, “We already called your dad and told him what happened. He’s on his way here.”

“Thank you, Sunny.”

I am sure that my dad is going to explode. I have been told repeatedly by my parents to stay out of trouble this year, with no excuses. Once inside the station, they immediately separate each of us into different interrogation rooms. Almost as soon as the door closes, Sergeant Sanchez starts telling me about all the trouble I was in for assaulting Tiny and Mambo, but I didn’t believe him. How can I possibly be in trouble? Surely, he hated Mambo and Tiny just like everybody else in town.

Sergeant Sanchez asks, “Are all of you guys in the Latin Kings?”

“I’m not in any gang, Sergeant Sanchez. I hang out with Eddie because he likes sports and he’s in my algebra class,” I answered.

Less than a minute later, through the window in my interrogation room, I can see my dad coming through the front door. He is as angry as I have ever seen him. The second he enters the police station, Leticia and Sunny gave him a big hug.

I can hear Sunny as she tells him how I had stood up to the First Street Boyz. My dad didn't need to hear another word. He doesn't like gangs.

Only seconds later, he opens the door to the interrogation room, and in Sanchez's face he declares, "I'm here to get my son. I just talked to Sunny and she says that Tiny threw a chair at Collin Craven, and that the police didn't do anything about it.

Sergeant Sanchez responds, "Mr. Walker, we haven't had time to do anything about it. Right now we're just trying to get to the bottom of this."

"From what I hear, my boy did your job for you. Where were you guys when Sunny got attacked. I hear that the First Street Boyz had it coming. Isn't it about time somebody stood up to those Norteños."

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience Mr. Walker, but there were a lot of punches thrown. We're just trying to find out what happened. It looked like a gang war out there. Those boys wrecked the entire city tournament, and I have already heard from the mayor. Word spreads quickly in Patterson, and he wants someone to answer for what happened."

"It sounds to me like Mambo and Tiny wrecked the tournament. Tyrell, tell me son, what happened, who threw the chair?" my dad asked.

"I didn't see who threw the chair. You'll have to ask Leticia and Sunny. All I know is that Tiny had Sunny by the hair, and I told him to let her go, and he didn't so I smacked him."

"You knocked Mambo senseless," said Sergeant Sanchez.

"Evidently, he didn't have any sense to begin with or he wouldn't have picked a fight with me. I spent the entire summer pushing around a big ass carpet cleaner," I replied.

My dad smiled, "He sure did, and Mambo and Tiny spent the entire summer selling drugs on the corner of 1st Street and West Main. Every time I drove down West Main, there they were on the corner with their pit bulls. Since when does the Patterson Police Department defend drug dealers?"

"All right, Mr. Walker, I get your point. I'm going to release Tyrell to your custody

and we'll probably charge Tiny with mischievous mischief, a misdemeanor for throwing the chair. Your boy can go.”

“What about Dalton and Eddie?”

“They assaulted Jesus Christo Reyes and Joey Galvan,” Sergeant Sanchez said.

My jaw dropped open when I thought about somebody getting arrested for assaulting Jesus and Joey.

I said, “Are you kidding me? You're going to arrest Dalton and Eddie for defending Sunny. They're the leaders of the First Street Boyz. Sergeant Sanchez, you should be giving them an award.”

He replies, “You know darn well that Eddie is the leader of the Latin Kings.”

It was hopeless, and my chances for the city championship had vanished. I can't wait to get out of the police station. At the same time, I am disappointed that Sunny and Leticia have left before I had a chance to thank them. I'm sure that they are worried about Collin.

Once inside the van, my dad doesn't hesitate to voice his concern, “Tyrell, I'm proud of the way you stood up against the First Street Boyz, but I'm afraid that we're going to have problems with those boys down the road.”

Chapter Five

Monday morning when I arrived at school, Dalton McCoy and his parents are already sitting inside Mr. Ortega's office. I am glad that he is finally enrolling. Just as soon as we see each other, big wide smiles break out across our faces. This is the first time that I have seen him since the blowout at the skateboard park. The McCoys are getting the usual spiel about what Mr. Ortega expects from Del Cielo High students. The moment Mr. Ortega finishes speaking Mr. Phish joins them for his part of the discussion. I played both Little League and Pop Warner with Dalton, and I was really impressed by the show he put on at the city skateboard championships. I think that he could have won it if we had had a chance to finish.

Finally, after another 10 or 15 minutes passes, Mr. Ortega opens his office door, and we can hear him tell Mr. and Mrs. McCoy, "It has been a pleasure meeting with the both of you. I'm sure that Dalton will enjoy going to school here."

At the very same time Mr. Phish can be heard telling Dalton, "I saw you skate at the city tournament. It's too bad about what happened because you could have won the whole thing."

I can tell that Mr. Phish has completely taken him by surprise.

Dalton rolls his eyes, and says, "Tiny cost me that trophy. I practiced all year for the city tournament, and to see it all disappear like that was hard."

Suddenly Mr. Phish's face lit up like a light bulb, like he has something important to say.

Smiling from ear to ear he tells Dalton, "The Rosehaven Volleyball Tournament is in a week. We sure can use another tall player. Adding you to the roster will make us real contenders. We can dominate the nets."

"I've played city league volleyball for four years. My mom and dad both played

on a team,” Dalton replies.

“This is great news. Wait till I tell Mr. Ortega,” says the excited Mr. Phish.

Wednesday, when we arrived at school the volleyball roster was already posted in Mr. Phish's classroom window. My name appeared on the very first line followed by Chico, Dalton, Chili, Mambo, Wendell, Katrina, and Eddie. However, it doesn't take long before I realize that the students whose names did not appear on the list are deeply disappointed. At the same time they are really angry because Dalton McCoy has just enrolled in the school and he is already on the team. They had practiced and he hadn't.

I was really surprised when Katrina Cortez scored high enough on her diagnostic tests to get into my algebra class. Even better, she and Dalton has joined our study group. Wendell Chung, Eddie Cruz, and Veech Martinez make up the rest of the study group. Every day this week, I have been forced to stay after school to receive help on my math assignments.

This week, Veech was placed in a foster home, and he is having a tough time. Wendell's family wants him to stay with them, but Veech says that there just isn't room for him. For me, Wendell is God-sent. He's the reason that I haven't lapsed into depression and completely given up hope. Wendell organized the two things that right now make me want to come to school. He recruited me for both the volleyball team, and the math study group. Without either of them my life would not be the same. When I took algebra at Patterson High I was always on my own, and being on my own meant disaster. Math just doesn't come easy for me, but now I feel like I have a chance and passing algebra has become the most important part of my life. If I pass algebra I can get my old life back, my old friends, football, and maybe even Leticia. I've made up my mind. I don't want to be a disappointment to my parents any longer.

My parents want me to be the first person in my family to go to college. If I fail, I'll end up at Del Cielo High until I graduate. None of the graduates from here go to college. Success here means that you enlist in the military. The United States Marines sign the majority of the students that graduate from here. The recruiters stop by here on a regular basis, and they know every student by name, including mine.

My dad says that the kids that graduate from Del Cielo High and don't enlist, end up with their picture in the stolen car section of the Modesto Examiner Newspaper. According to Mrs. Purdy, my dad is right. She says that over the

years there have been a lot of Del Cielo High graduates in the newspaper for a wide variety of crimes, including bank robbery, rape, and murder.

Thursday, the day before the tournament, I decide to walk Katrina home. Katrina lives in the Walnut Acres Migrant Farm Camp, which is over the railroad tracks and on other side of Highway 33. When the final bell of the day sounds, I am waiting outside her classroom. Soon afterward, when she gingerly exits the classroom I can tell by her smile that she was expecting me. Before long, we're giggling at things that most people probably wouldn't think are funny.

Shortly after we cross over the rail road tracks, we stop at the park near her house and sit down on a bench. The park is empty, except for a man who is cutting the grass. Just as soon as we sit down, Katrina opens up her backpack and removes the flash cards that Mr. Phish has given her. The cards contain 20 of the most frequently used verbs in the English language. They have the verbs written in Spanish on one side, and the English translation on the other side. We flash the verb cards until we head to her house to get something to eat.

The streets in Walnut Acres Camp are dotted in neat leaf piles. The camp is very clean and during the day it is really quiet because everyone that lives here is either working or in school. My dad says that the people that live here work as hard as anyone on the face of the planet Earth. He says that they all work in agriculture in some capacity. I can tell you from personal experience that during the summer they face some very hostile working conditions because the temperature here can reach 114° F.

When we first enter Katrina's house, we discovered her mother hunching over the stove warming tortillas that she has filled with beans and melted cheese. Starving, the two of us are about to sit down at the kitchen table when her mother reaches out to shake my hand.

Mrs. Cortez says, "Mucho gusto."

"And it's a pleasure to meet you too, Senora Cortez," I politely answered.

Veech had told me that she would like me calling her senora, and Katrina's mom is grinning from ear to ear. I am surprised how much they look alike. Katrina is the spitting image of mother. Mrs. Cortez is wearing a blue apron that is tied around her back, and her black hair is neatly tied in pig tails. She has the rosiest cheeks that I have ever seen.

The moment the tortillas have warmed Mrs. Cortez asks, “¿Tienen hambre?”

“Claro que si,” Katrina answers.

The second Katrina finishes answering, her mother hands us each a bean and cheese filled corn tortilla wrapped in a paper napkin. I am really hungry, and the warm beans and melting cheddar cheese are delicious together, so it all went down pretty fast. When Mrs. Cortez sees how hungry I am, she quickly returns to the stove and removes the top off of a large pot that is cooking on top of the stove. Steam pours from the pot the second the lid is removed. It’s a soup of some kind, almost orange in color. Mrs. Cortez fills a bowl to the top, and smiles as she hands it to me.

She calls it, “Menudo.”

After I finish the delicious soup, once more the two of us sit down on the front porch and resume flashing verb cards. Before long, I am learning Spanish as fast as she is learning English. They don't offer Spanish classes in the Patterson schools until high school. I guess it's because everyone here speaks it except for me.

After we have been flashing cards for almost a half an hour, a Walnut Acres Security car drives up. Behind the wheel of the security car is a close friend of my mother, Officer Betty Suarez. Mrs. Suarez looks pretty official in her uniform and badge. I can tell that she is happy to see me.

She rolls down her window, and says, “Tyrell Walker, my how you have grown. You're so tall that I can hardly believe it, and look at those carpet cleaner biceps. My goodness! I remember when you were only up to my waist. How are your mama and papa?”

“Why they're great Mrs. Suarez, and thank you for asking. My dad is working all of the time. I help him whenever I'm not in school. My mom is staying busy volunteering at the church,” I reply.

Mr. Suarez smiles, and then continues, “I haven't seen your parents since last summer at the Apricot Festival. I see that you have already met the Cortez family. They're new to Patterson.”

I said, “Yes, Mrs. Cortez is the best cook ever.”

“Tyrell, a week from Saturday we're celebrating my daughter's quinceanera. It's in the Walnut Acres Conference Center at noon. Tell your mom and dad that I want your whole family to come,” she said.

“Thank you for the invitation, Mrs. Suarez. I'm sure that my parents would love to come.”

She then turns to Katrina, and in Spanish tells her that the invitation extends to her family. It is nice of her to invite all of us like this. Matter of fact, this is the first time anyone besides Sal has invited me anywhere since I got kicked out of Patterson High.

Friday, the drive to Rosehaven High in Turlock takes 50 minutes. The tournament starts at 8:00 AM sharp. At the same time, Mr. Phish wants to make sure that we will have plenty of time for warm ups, so he tells us to arrive at Del Cielo High no later than 6:30 AM. The morning of the tournament, my dad surprises me and volunteers to drive me to school. When we pull in front of the main building, some of the team has already arrived, and Mr. Phish is busy loading up the school mini-bus with bottled water, volleyball equipment, and uniforms. He is both coach and driver.

Just as soon as everything is inside the mini-bus, Mr. Phish shouts, “Everybody get on the bus. It's a long way to Turlock.”

The road to the Rosehaven High is through the heart of dairy country, and over and over we find ourselves stuck behind hay haulers, tractors, and manure spreaders. You can tell from the energy inside the mini-van that everyone is excited because the chatter is nonstop. Most of us rarely have an opportunity to venture outside of the city limits of Patterson. After we are about half way to Turlock, I was surprised when Wendell asks me about my visit to Katrina's house.

I said, “Wendell, Katrina's mother is an amazing cook. She made us the most incredible soup that I have ever eaten, called menudo.”

All of a sudden, Wendell looks at me like I am crazy.

He says, “Tyrell, do you know how menudo is made?”

“No, I sure don't. This was the first time that I have ever had it. All I know is that it is delicious.”

Wendell replies, "Tyrell, you ate cow intestines. Menudo is cow intestine soup."

I shook my head no, and said, "I don't believe you, Wendell. How can someone from China know about a Mexican soup? Are you serious, Wendell? You better not be lying to me."

"I swear to you, Tyrell, I'm telling you the truth. I know about food. Have you forgotten that my family owns a restaurant? People from all over the world eat all kinds of things. You should try Chinese food sometime."

I don't know if I should believe him or not.

When we are just a short distance from Rosehaven High, Mr. Phish announces, "You guys are the best team that I've had since coming to Del Cielo High. You can win this thing as long as you play team ball. They are expecting 20 teams today. Remember to use all three hits, and play as a team. We can improve our chances of winning by just getting our serves over the net. We don't have to do anything fancy, just get the ball over the net."

Katrina has no idea what he is saying, and doesn't seem to care. Everything is new and exciting to her, including me. The entire drive her eyes have glared out the bus window at the passing landscape. Just as soon as we drive onto the Rosehaven High campus we are met by an armed security guard. The guard directs Mr. Phish to park next to the other school buses.

The moment Mr. Phish turns off the engine, he hands us our uniforms. The new black Del Cielo High uniforms have our school mascot, the Bulldog, on the front, and our numbers on the back. The matching baseball caps are emblazoned with a big D.C.H. Most of us pull the t-shirts over our existing clothes because it is still a little cold. Then, the next few minutes we all remain on the bus petrified.

From our seats on the mini-bus we can see a dozen schools warming up on the volleyball courts. Many of the teams have professional looking uniforms, and their warm ups include some impressive drills that none of us have ever seen before. I count 10 courts in all, 4 on asphalt, and 6 on grass.

Finally, Mr. Phish starts yelling at us to get going, he says, "Come on Del Cielo, let's go out there and win this one. You guys have prepared for this, and now is the time to show it. I expect the best out of everybody today. This is no time for heroes. We play together and win together. Let's go, Del Cielo High!"

Straight away in unison we let off a short barrage of Bulldog barks, and then one by one we began to exit the bus. Every school bus in the parking lot has the name of its respective school emblazoned across its side. Many are from as far north as Sacramento and Davis, while others are from as far south as Fresno and Visalia. I believe that it is now or never and that we are as prepared as we are ever going to get. This is probably the best chance any of us will ever have to win a tournament of this size.

After about twenty minutes of warming up there's a call over the loud speaker for a coaches meeting, but before Mr. Phish takes off for the meeting, he tells us, "You guys continue to practice your serves while I get our schedule and a copy of the rules. Whatever you do, don't get into any trouble."

Before long we're surrounded by teams in every colored uniform possible. Then while we wait for Mr. Phish to finish his coaches meeting, we continue to take turns practicing our serves. Over and over, Katrina tries to serve the ball overhand, but is entirely unsuccessful. Collectively, we all decide that she is has to serve underhand.

Before long, Mr. Phish arrives from the meeting with a copy of the tournament schedule.

He says, "Everybody, gather around. Our first game is against Ceres Continuation School."

Mr. Phish is as serious as I have ever seen him.

Just as soon as we circle around him, he tells us, "It is rally serve to 25, just like we play at home. You guys know how it's done. They're going to try to slam the ball down our throats. It's up to us to respond. We can win this thing. Mambo you're going to serve first. Chili you're our starting setter. You'll be on the front row between Tyrell, and Dalton. I want to start, Chico, and Katrina in the back row. Eddie and Wendell, we'll rotate you guys into the game. We start on Court 6."

The second we walk out onto Court 6, the referee tosses the coin, and we win. Mambo wastes no time delivering the first serve. He is hoping to catch them off guard, and it does. The ball fell untouched for our first point.

Mambo shouts the score, "1-0."

His next serve goes straight into the net and drops at Chili's feet. The score is now even at 1-1, and it's their serve. Their first server is a tall skater type with long dread-locks, with a wicked serve. Before we know it, the score is 7-1 in their favor. Then finally Dalton stops one at the net and it is again our turn.

This time it is Katrina's serve, and I can tell that she's a little nervous.

In her thick Spanish accent, Katrina yells "2-7", before socking the ball underhand with everything she has in her. Then we are all amazed as the ball soars so high in the air that Ceres loses it in the Sun. Miraculously, the ball fell untouched on their side of the court. We score 3 more points behind Katrina's serves until she trips and delivers one into the net. Once again, it is Ceres' turn to serve the ball. The score is 8-6 in their favor.

Mr. Phish is going crazy pacing the sidelines. He is nervous as I have ever seen him, and every time a rally ensues his arms are flailing in all directions.

He shouts, "Come on Del Cielo! We can win this one. Don't let these guys get the best of us.

Unfortunately, their next server is really tall, and he launches the ball like a missile. His serves come at us so fast that the girls are scared to get in front of it. We try everything we know, but it's hopeless, and he is mowing us over like bowling pins. By the time we stop him they are so far ahead that there is no catching them, and we lose 25-15. On the sidelines, Mr. Phish is trying to not to show his disappointment, but we can see it painted across his face.

While making every attempt possible to conceal his disappointment he tells us, "Come on Del Cielo there are plenty of more games. We're still in this thing. Let's get going, Elk Grove is waiting for us on Court 2. We beat them last year. I want Wendell to replace Chili as the setter for this game. Otherwise it's the same starting lineup. Tyrell, you're serving first, just get the ball over the net. You can't score if the ball doesn't go over the net."

Once more, we win the toss. This time, Mr. Phish tells me to serve first. Only this time when I serve, I take my time so I can look for weakness in the Elk Grove defense. Then when I am sure I have spotted it, I take a deep breath and toss the ball way over my head, timing it perfectly when it descends. The ball warps over the top of the net and drops for an ace.

Mr. Phish yells, "One more time, Tyrell. Hit it with everything you have."

"1-0," I yell.

Again, I toss the ball in the air, and again I connect with it perfectly. Only this time a huge rally ensues, and it ends with our second point. Then before I know it the momentum is on our side, and we pull ahead 12-1. Their first serve went straight into the net, and now it is Mambo's turn to serve. Only this time he is in his groove and unstoppable. Not only is he accurate, but his ball roars over the net in a totally unpredictable manner. At the same time, their setter is struggling to set up plays. The game is never close, and we win 25-6. The result is that our self-confidence is building, and before we knew it we are on a roll, defeating both Los Banos and Lodi Continuation Schools.

However, our joy is short lived when we realize that our next opponent is the largest school in the tournament, Elliot Continuation High School of Modesto. Then when we walk out onto the court we all realize that Mambo already knows some of the guys in their starting lineup, and he embraces one guy like he is his long lost brother.

Proudly, he introduces the guy to the team, he says, "Everybody, I want you to meet Enrique. Can you believe it? He was my celly in juvenile hall when they had me locked up for that Latin King thing. I can't believe that he is here, we are like brothers. I thought that he was locked up in Stockton at the California Youth Authority. I'm really amazed that he's already out."

Almost before he's done introducing Enrique, the referee blows his whistle for the start of the game. This game Mambo delivers the first serve, only this time he hits it straight into the arms of their setter, who sets the ball up perfectly, placing it just above the net for the kill. Immediately, Enrique reacts, and he unleashes a wicked overhand assault that rockets directly into the side of Chili's head knocking her to the ground. It hit her so hard that she fell to the ground and scraps up both her arms and knees. Immediately, Mambo explodes. He can't believe what he has just seen, and he has no problem forgetting about their friendship. Without warning, he lashes out in anger and charges toward Enrique to extract vengeance, but Mr. Phish sees it coming, and he quickly grabs Mambo from behind before he can get near him.

"Calm down, Mambo," Mr. Phish insists, "If we get kicked out of the tournament for fighting then they win. You need to calm down."

“Let me go, Phish. Let me go,” Mambo shouts.

“I will let you go, if you promise me that you'll calm down.”

Finally, Mambo shakes his head in agreement, and Mr. Phish cuts him loose. The second he does, Mambo rushes to Chili's side. At the same time, Mr. Phish calls for a timeout.

“Pepper, are you alright?” he asks.

Obviously she isn't alright. Her lower right cheek has been cut by the ball. Without hesitating, Mr. Phish goes for our first aid kit, removes some gauze and then places pressure on the wound. Then just as soon as the wounds stop bleeding he cleans and bandages her wounds as best he can. The moment he finishes he tells us to gather around.

Mr. Phish says, “Chili's pretty torn up. We're going to have to rotate her out, but keep her in the lineup.”

According to the tournament rules we will be forced to forfeit if we don't have 2 girls in the lineup, and we don't have an extra girl. Either Chili stays in the lineup or we're out of this thing.

Just as the timeout ends, Mr. Phish shouts, “Wendell, you're in for Chili.”

The Elliot server is a small Asian American who they call Shrimp Boy.

Then, just as soon as Shrimp Boy is about to serve, Mambo yells, “Come on, serve it here, Shrimp Boy. I like to eat shrimp.”

Mambo, Eddie, and Dalton are all on the front row when Shrimp Boy unleashes what can only be described as a wicked serve. After he scores two aces, we have no idea how we're going to stop him. The ball is just coming over the net too fast. Then finally, Wendell figures out where his next serve is going, and he is there waiting for it. Wendell sets Eddie up perfectly for the kill, and the ball hits the back line for a point.

Both teams are fired up and it seems like each rally is longer than the one before. The game goes back and forth until the game is tied at 23-23, and it is Eddie's serve. Eddie puts the first one into the far right corner, and when they return the ball Dalton, Chico, and Mambo all leap above the net at the same

time, creating an iron wall. Mambo is still looking for blood, and somehow he manages to get a piece of the ball with his closed fist and it rockets towards the Elliot players for the kill. It is now game point. Eddie's next serve clips the top of the net and then drops untouched on their side of the court for the final point. We are 4-1, and it is time for lunch. At the same time, we have no idea if we have made it into the finals.

We have been smelling hamburgers cooking on the barbeque for the last 30 minutes, and I am anxious to eat. While we stand in line to get the food we watch as the coaches rush their results over to the judges table so that they can total their points. The entire team is gathered at the same table together. In anticipation of the results, we barely said a word to each other as we ate our hamburgers.

Halfway into his burger, Wendell speaks up, "We played great. I think we made it into the Final Four."

Eddie responds, "We would have beaten Ceres, if Mr. Phish had started me."

I replied, "I don't think that you would have made a difference, Eddie. We were nervous and not yet warmed up. Besides, they were really good."

The second I finish talking, the Rosehaven coach's voice came over the intercom.

The coach announces, "I have the results. I want to thank all of the schools for coming. The level of competition this year is the highest that I have ever seen. This is our 32nd year of holding the tournament and each year it gets better and bigger. Congratulations to Ceres and Tracy Continuation High Schools. They both emerged undefeated with 5-0 records. After lunch, they will play for 1st and 2nd place trophies on Court 1. Playing for 3rd place trophies will be Peterson Juvenile Hall of Stockton, and Del Cielo High of Patterson. They will be playing on Court 2 for 3rd place trophies. 4th place receives ribbons."

We are so excited that we all jumped out of our seats.

"Say what! Did you hear that?" says a stunned Wendell, "We're playing for trophies. I knew we could do it!"

Shaking her head in disbelief, Chili can barely speak.

Finally she utters, "I don't believe it. Del Cielo High has never been in the finals of anything. We have to win. We have to win so that we can prove to the people in Patterson that we're not a bunch of losers."

Nothing like this had ever happened to any of us. Eddie is right, Del Cielo High has never won anything, anywhere.

Then when we get up and start walking toward the permanent asphalt volleyball courts, I told the team, "We didn't come this far for a ribbon. We can go home with a trophy. Make every serve count."

They all nod their heads in agreement I can't help but notice the maturity of the other team. They look like adults compared to us. Some of the guys on the Stockton team have tear drop tattoos which means that they have spent a lot of time locked up. One of them is bald, and two have full beards. They make Mambo's First Street Boyz look like boys. Then before we get started Mr. Phish asks us to again all gather around.

"These guys are all from the San Joaquin County Juvenile Hall in Stockton, and from what I hear they play volleyball all day long. They also lost to Ceres. Let's win this thing for the school. Play team volleyball, and use all 3 hits."

Mambo can barely contain his excitement, "Mr. Phish, let us at them. That trophy is already mine."

It has been warming all morning, and it is now almost 80° F. Consequently, both sides are walking onto the court with a lot less clothing than they have been wearing. Again, we gathered around for the coin flip, only this time we do not win. I can only hope that this isn't a trend. The guy who has lost his hair starts the game with a nice jump serve and the game is on. The ball is sailing back and forth until we were all tied at 12-12. Now, it is Mambo's serve.

Mambo wastes no time tossing the ball as high as he can over his head, and then smacks it on the way down. He hit it as hard as I have ever seen hit the ball. The ball rockets only an inch over the net before slamming into the asphalt, untouched. Mambo is on fire like I've never seen him. We then score 7 more times behind his serving before he gets over confident, and hits one too long. The referee immediately calls it out, but everyone quickly realizes that Mambo really doesn't like the call.

He screams in the referee's face, "What's wrong with you? Are you some kind of

idiot?”

Without a moment of hesitation, I grab him by the waist to stop him from getting too close to the referee, and as I do Mambo continues let loose with a whole lot of four letter words. The next thing I know he turns his anger in my direction.

Now he’s screaming in my face, “Let go of me, Tyrell.”

I said, “I’m not going to let you wreck this for us, Mambo. We’ve worked too hard.”

At this time, the referee has seen and heard enough, and he responds by throwing Mambo out of the game. In turn, Mambo becomes even angrier, and he lets loose with another barrage of four letter words.

Finally, Mr. Phish enters in the fracas, “Mambo, that’s enough out of your mouth. Go sit on the bus before things get worse.”

However, Mambo isn’t in a listening mood, and he acts like he hasn’t heard anything that anyone is saying. It’s at this time that we all realize that the entire episode has been witnessed by the school’s security officer, and he has heard enough.

The security guard is insistent, “You heard your coach. Pack your things and get on the bus.”

Mambo knew that he is outmatched. Angrily, he starts walking toward the bus, followed closely by his escort. Things can’t get any worse. We have just lost our best player and the only substitutes we have are Eddie and Chili, and Chili isn’t going back on the court any time soon.

The score is 20-13 in our favor, and their turn to serve. Their next server is tall and lanky, and his body is completely covered in jail house tattoos. We all watch in suspense as he tosses the ball high in the air, and then hits it on the way down as hard as he can. His first serve flew over the net like lightning, and it doesn’t take long before the score 7 quick points. Finally, he hit the ball long and we let it go. The score is now 21-20 our favor, and Mr. Phish decides to put Eddie in the game.

Our front row now has Chico, Katrina, and Dalton, and I’m playing the back row with Wendell and Eddie. At this point, the rallies are becoming longer and

longer and every single point is harder to earn. Nobody wants to give up. Finally, the score is tied 23-23, and their tallest girl is serving. Dalton was waiting for it, and he met the ball as it was just clearing the net with a hard overhand spike. The ball smacked the ground untouched.

This is what we have been waiting for, and it's my serve. Sweat is pouring down my face, the sun is in my eyes, and I'm as exhausted as I have ever been. I just need to make this serve good. On the sidelines, Mr. Phish is about to lose his mind.

"Just get the ball over the net, Tyrell," he shouts, "Just get the ball over."

I took a deep breath, and shout, "Let's go, Del Cielo Bulldogs."

The entire team responds by barking in unison, and once more I toss the ball high over my head and met it as it came down. Only this time, when it comes down I don't try to kill it. Instead, I barely punch the ball, and it clips the top of the net and then drops to the ground on their side. Mr. Phish screamed as we won the match.

We had won third place and a trophy. Just as soon as the game ends, we all line up to shake hands with the other team. Then as soon as we finish shaking hands, we all follow Mr. Phish over to the trophy table.

Then as we walked to the table, Wendell gloats, "Nobody believed me when I told you guys that we could do this."

"You were right about this one, Wendell," I said, "I didn't think we could do it."

It is only after we went to the staging area for the awards that we learned how close we had come to winning the whole thing. Ceres has won the entire event. I can't help but think that if we hadn't played them first that we could have finished higher.

We each got a trophy of a volleyball player on a platform that is about a foot tall. At the same time, the school receives an enormous one. Mr. Phish looks pretty elated. It is now 4:00 PM and just as soon as Mr. Phish gets the school trophy he calls Mr. Ortega, and from the sound of the conversation, they sounded really excited by the news.

Soon after we board the mini-bus we all call home to tell our families about our

victory. All the way back to Patterson we are talking non-stop about our success. That is everyone, but Mambo, who is still angry at me for getting in his way. I tried to talk to him, but it doesn't do any good. Then as we get closer to town I forget about him, and start worrying about my impending algebra test. This one is going to make me or break me. I'm going to have to study as soon as I make it home.

When we finally arrive back at Del Cielo High it is dark, and Katrina's mother is nervously waiting for her in front of the school in the family pickup truck. At the same time, I can't help but notice that Joey Galvan's Chevy Lowrider is waiting for Mambo across the street.

I said, "hello" to Katrina's mother and then went inside the school to get my algebra book so that I can complete my homework assignment. Mr. Phish is putting away the ice chests, uniforms, and volleyball equipment. He also needs to clean the mini-bus.

He looks at me and asks, "Would you and Wendell mind giving me a hand emptying the mini-bus?"

We both nod our heads, and then Wendell replies, "Of course we will, Mr. Phish."

Just as soon we are finished putting everything away Wendell and I grab our trophies, cross the street, and start walking home. We are both grinning from ear to ear and proud of our accomplishment. Then just as soon as we cross at the light on M Street, we separate. Wendell took a right turn to head to his house while I proceeded along the southern edge of Middleton Park to my house. The park is always empty at this time of night. It is also poorly lighted because of city cutbacks.

It isn't long after I entered the park before Joey Galvan's Chevy Lowrider appears at the far end of the park. Not realizing that I am being watched, I continue walking into the darkest section of the park. Then all of a sudden Joey made another quick pass, and I start getting a little nervous. Making things even worse, the windows in the car were so darkly tinted that I couldn't tell who or how many were inside. The only thing I know for sure that Mambo is inside.

Immediately, I looked around for help, but I am all alone. I ran as fast as I can through the park with my heart beating out of my chest. At the same time, Mambo and Jesus Reyes got out of the car and they are right behind me. When

out of nowhere Joey pulls up next to me in his car. Then when he slams on his brakes, Tiny Garcia gets out and tackles me to the ground. I am trapped like a rat, and they waste no time kicking the heck out of me.

Scared for my life, I scream for help, but it is to no avail because no one can hear me. Then, suddenly a set of headlights heads in my direction. At first I'm certain that it's more members of the First Street Boyz, but it's not. It's my dad, and he is driving like a desperate man in my direction. Then, when he is almost on top of us he slams on his brakes and gets out of his van swinging a shovel like a madman. His first swing almost takes Mambo's head off, and the second hits Tiny square in the back. They couldn't get back into Joey's car fast enough.

The moment they are out of sight, my dad grimaces, "Are you ok, Tyrell? I was afraid they would try something after the skateboard tournament. It looks like they beat you pretty good, son."

My nose and mouth are bleeding, the rest of my body is aching, and I am having trouble opening my eyes. I search around in the darkness for a few minutes until I found my algebra book. My poor trophy is in a dozen pieces, and the pieces are scattered everywhere. After my father catches his breath, and is sure they were gone, he puts the shovel away in the back of the van before returning to help me. It reminded me of when I wrecked my skateboard.

After we get in the van, my dad tells me, "I think that we should call the police and report this."

I shake my head no, before replying, "Let's not call the police. It will only make things worse for me, and besides the juvenile hall is full, and they will be out in no time."

"OK, Tyrell. It's your choice, but if it were up to me, I'd go to the police."

I pleaded with him to understand, "I don't want to be labeled a snitch at that school. We have our second algebra test on Friday and I'm going to pass it, and get my life back. Dad, I like sports. I want to play sports for the rest of my life. I had a great time today, you should have seen us. We got third place out of 20 teams. I want to play next year with Sal, on the Patterson High football team. I miss it."

"Wow, I want you to turn it around too son. I don't want you graduating from a continuation school, and I don't want you cleaning carpets or laying floors all

your life. It is hard work, and a hard life. Your mama and I want you to go to college and become someone.”

We're home in a couple of minutes, and I ran straight upstairs and into the bathroom because I don't want my mom to see me how badly I have been beaten. The second I shut the door, I take off my clothes and open the door to the shower. Once in the shower, I start cleaning up my bloodied body. One by one I wash the worst wounds, and then as soon as I'm out of the shower, I cover them with bandages. I am in so much pain that I can't believe it.

Chapter Six

Saturday morning I woke up feeling like my face has been kissed by a freight train. At the same time when I run my hand across the top of my head I find that it is completely covered in lumps. At this point, even thinking about getting out of bed makes my body hurt all over. Downstairs, my mom and dad are talking in the kitchen. I can tell by the tone of the conversation that they're really upset about what happened last night. My mother is saying how we should go to the police, but my dad is having nothing to do with it.

Without hesitating, he tells her, "Those First Street Boyz, have done drive-by shootings all over town. Remember what happened to Joey Galvan. He lost his eye last year in a shoot-out with the Latin Kings. It happened on the corner of 1st Street and West Main Avenue. If we stay calm, maybe they'll forget about Tyrell, and this will pass."

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that my mother is having a difficult time with what had transpired in Middleton Park.

Especially, when she replies, "I just hope you're right, papa."

I spent the entire weekend cleaning carpets with my dad.

Monday morning, when it's time to go to school, I get up and glance in the mirror and can hardly believe what I'm seeing. My face looks like it has been used as a tether ball, and every place I touch still hurts. One by one, I remove each of the bandages, further exposing my two black and blue eyes, bruises, and swollen nose. When I finish redressing my wounds, I put on my clothes and head downstairs.

Just as soon as I reach the bottom of the stairs I see that my mother is busy making pancakes for breakfast, which is great because I'm starving. Then as I sit down at the breakfast table I begin having second thoughts about going

to school. This is because I am embarrassed about getting beat up and don't really want to go to school with the guys that did it. On the other hand, if I don't go to class, and I fail algebra, my life is over, and I'll never make it back to Patterson High. It's at this time that my mother takes a break from cooking pancakes and takes a long look at my face. Almost immediately, tears well in her eyes.

I said, "Don't worry, mama. Everything will be alright. I can take care of myself."

Just the sight of her crying makes me feel awful, but at this point there is nothing that I can do about the way I look.

Shortly after she places a plate in front of me, my mom says, "Tyrell, your dad and I are wondering if you would like to invite your math study group over to our house tonight, so that you all can study for your mid-term algebra test. We'll supply pizza and soft drinks."

Inviting my algebra study group over to the house is a real surprise. It's a surprise because my mom thinks that only gang members go to Del Cielo High. This is complicated by Mrs. Purdy, who loves to come over to our house to share the latest gossip with my mother. I'm sure the kids in my algebra study group have been pre-approved by Mrs. Purdy. None of them are gangsters except for Eddie. Gangsters don't need algebra. They think that they're going to make a living dealing drugs and robbing people.

Finally, after my stomach is almost full, I replied, "Why thank you, mama. They're the best students in the whole school. It's about time that you met some of them. Not all of the students that go to Del Cielo High are bad, mama."

"Isn't your new girlfriend, Katrina Cortez, in your study group?," she utters, "Mrs. Purdy says that she's a real beauty. We've heard you talking about her since she arrived in Patterson and we really want to meet her."

"Mama, I don't know if Katrina is my girlfriend. It's different than what I had with Leticia Lopez. Leticia spoke English. Katrina and I can barely talk to each other without a translator. Honestly, mama, I really don't know her very well. Mostly we just stare at each other."

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that my dad is sitting on the edge of his seat waiting for an opportunity to jump into the conversation.

He wastes no time reaffirming what my mother is saying, “Well, nonetheless, you're spending a lot of time with Katrina these days and we would like to meet her.”

Now, I'm not so sure that I want to invite Katrina to the house. It would take our relationship to another level, and I don't think that I'm ready for another commitment. The truth is it hurts when you get dumped, and I am just barely getting over Leticia giving me the boot.

Finally, after thinking about it a minute, I smile and reply, “I think that you will really like Katrina. Do you remember Dalton McCoy? He just enrolled at Del Cielo High. He was on my Little League team. He's really grown. You better get 2 pizzas. All teenagers like to eat pizza.”

Then when we get in the van for the ride, my dad doesn't say a word all the way to school. Once inside the main room I'm surprised when I find that only Veech and Katrina have arrived. They are both busy eating breakfast in the school kitchen, so I sat down next to them. Directly across the room, Mrs. Purdy is standing behind her desk with the telephone in her ear, and she is talking so loudly that everyone can hear what she is saying. She has a parent on the phone whose son hasn't come to school in a few days.

“And what day do you expect him to get out of juvenile hall?” she asked.

At this time, I notice that Mr. Phish and Mr. Ortega are standing in front of the trophy case glaring at our giant new trophy. Mr. Phish has placed it in the middle of the case where everyone can see it. I have never seen Mr. Phish look so proudly, but even with the huge trophy, the case looks empty. Then as the school day begins, and the students and staff are entering the school, Mr. Ortega is telling anyone who will listen about how great the win is for the school. They are so busy gloating that they haven't noticed my battered face. Then as the bell is about to ring, and classes are about to start, I take a quick look around the school, and find that Mambo is nowhere to be found.

During both history and English class, it is hard for me to focus because of my injuries. By the time my algebra class starts, I quickly forget about how badly I hurt. This is because we are reviewing for tomorrow's huge mid-term. Right now, I am in uncharted territory because I have always flunked out before I have gotten this far. Up until now, I have turned in every homework assignment, and for the first time in my life I think I understand everything. Then just before the class is about to end, I invite Wendell, Veech, Eddie, Dalton, and Katrina, to

come over and cram for the test.

Without hesitating they all tell me, "Yes." It's at this time that Dalton and Wendell start asking me about my wounds, but I'm hesitant to give them an answer.

Evidently, they too fear failing, and they think that it is a good idea to do a group study.

I said, "My mom says that she'll provide pizza and soft drinks."

Just as soon as I find out that they are coming, I call my mom to tell her the news. Then when school lets out, the six of us gather in front of the school, for the walk over to my house. At first, we are barely moving along because we're all reading our text messages. Soon after everyone puts their cell phones away, we pick up speed and cross through Middleton Park. It's at this time I start to get nervous. Suddenly, being there brought back the entire ugly episode.

There are small parks all over Patterson, and at times there are problems in each and every one of them. However, Middleton Park is the closest one to our house, and it has always been a safe place. My family celebrates birthdays and special occasions over there, and I have spent a good portion of my life playing on its slides and swings. Now, I'm a nervous wreck when I enter it, and when a Chevy lowrider cruises by I'm ready to run for my life.

Soon after we exit Middleton Park we turn on to my street, Road Runner Avenue. Our house is the third one on the left. The street hardly has a car on it. This is because almost everyone in our neighborhood works in the Bay Area. Our house is easy to spot because it has our blue 4 door Chevy Malibu in the driveway with 2 flat tires. It is also the only yellow house on the street.

When we arrive, my mother is waiting at the door, and she greets everyone at the door with a handshake. Then when it is Katrina's turn, she gives her a kiss on the cheek, and a big hug. It makes Katrina very happy, and she responds with a huge smile.

Glowing with joy, my mother says, "I just put the first pizza in the oven. I hope you all like..."

Wendell knew the answer, "Pineapple and Canadian bacon. I'd know that smell anywhere. My parents own the Chop Chop Chinese Restaurant downtown. It's across the street from Wilbur Garcia's Taqueria. I spent the summer washing

dishes and dreaming about Wilbur's pizzas. I think he makes the best pizza in town and his burritos are just to die for.”

My mother smiles, and then responds, “This pizza isn't from Wilbur Garcia's. It's a take and bake and it will be ready in about ten minutes. It's so nice to finally meet you all. Tyrell has told me so much about you kids. Why don't you all sit down at the kitchen table, and make yourselves at home.”

We quickly took our places, and got right to work. Mr. Phish has been very explicit about what we need to know if we want to pass. After a brief discussion, we decide to go over one problem at a time, and not proceed until we all know how to do the problem. Katrina's algebra book is the same as our book but written in Spanish with English translations. Fortunately, much of the vocabulary is similar. Shortly after we get started, things begin to bog down when we realize that we will have to memorize the Pythagorean Theorem.

Finally, the first pizza is done, and our jaws drop when my mother opens up the oven and remove the pizza. Just as fast as she can she starts slicing. The smell is heavenly and it makes our empty stomachs growl. Our mouths are wide open as we watched her place two pieces on each plate. Then, finally she hands a plate to each of us.

In her sweetest voice, she insists, “Go ahead and get started eating.”

In unison, they reply, “Thank you, Mrs. Walker.”

Then just as soon as soon as we start eating, I realize that Dalton is staring at the bandages on my face.

Once more, Dalton asks, “Tyrell, what happened to your face?”

I finally gave in and told them what happened.

I said, “Mambo, Tiny, Joey, and Jesus Reyes jumped me last night in Middleton Park. I was on my way home from the Rosehaven Volleyball Tournament. I tried to run, but there were too many of them, and they had Joey's car. Thank God my dad came looking for me. You should have seen him swinging a shovel at Mambo's head. My dad saved me.”

At that moment the entire table gasps, and no one can believe what they are hearing.

It's at this time that Eddie interjects, "They would have killed you, Tyrell. Everybody in town knows that Mambo hates you. He hates you because you kicked his rear in front of the whole town at the city skateboard championships."

Just as soon as Eddie finishes Dalton says, "I guess that means that they want me dead too, Eddie."

Eddie has been around Patterson his entire life, and like everyone else in town he has had several run-ins with both the First Street Boys. He is visibly angry.

I tell Eddie, "I didn't have a choice. If I had let them hurt Sunny, I never would have stopped hearing about it. Sal has always been there for me like a brother."

Dalton looks like he is about to explode.

He asks, "Did you call the police? You know that those guys carry guns."

"Del Cielo High is their school. I just want to go back to Patterson High. They won't take me back if I cut classes or don't pass algebra. This is the third time I've taken algebra. I have to pass this time."

Before I can go any farther, tears start welling up in my eyes. I didn't want them to see me like this. I am so embarrassed.

Dismayed, Wendell hands me a napkin to dry my eyes, and then tells me, "Don't worry, Tyrell, I'll help you get through algebra. I want to go to Patterson High myself next year. I want to play on the tennis team."

Katrina barely has a clue about what is being said, but she can see the bandages on my face. Little by little, Veech translates what I am saying. It's at this time that she takes my hand and holds it as firmly as she could. At first I like the attention, but the test is tomorrow and we all need to study. Even worse, we are running out of time. At that point I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I am more determined than ever to pass algebra. It took me the entire next hour to memorize the theorem. Finally, we all decide to take a break.

Then as we all took a break around the table, Veech said, "I didn't know how to tell you guys, but it looks like I'm going to Zamora, Michoacan, Mexico, to live with my grandparents. They're my mother's parents, and they don't want me being raised in a foster home. They want me to live with them. I've spent my

entire life in Patterson and all my friends are here. I want to stay here. My dad is going to be in prison for the rest of his life for what he did to my mom. My mother always said that she wanted to retire in Zamora. It was her dream. I guess I'll give it a try."

I can't believe what Veech is saying.

Shaking my head in disbelief, I tell him, "Veech, all of your friends are here. You can't be serious."

It is clear that he wants to talk.

Abruptly, he continues, "They're the only family that I have. I've got a ride to Zamora with a family that lives in Walnut Acres Camp. It takes 55 hours to drive all the way to Michoacan. I hear that Katrina and her family are also returning to Zamora, next week."

I can't help but be startled. My entire life I have gone to school with migrant students who leave and never come back.

I said, "What are you saying? You're saying that Katrina is leaving."

What he is saying makes my heart stop because she hasn't said a thing about leaving.

I glared into her eyes, almost too afraid to ask, "How long are you going to be gone?"

Veech knew that he had let the cat out of the bag.

Katrina shrugs her shoulders and then says, "¿Quien sabe?"

Veech translates, "She said, "Who knows!" It's up to her parents. I know one thing. If they are returning to Patterson, then they will be back by the first of March."

"March," I declared, "I can't believe what I am hearing. This is November. March is a lifetime away."

I didn't know what to think. It seems like everyone in town has family in Mexico except for us. It also seems like everyone likes it in Zamora because they're

clearly not in any hurry to return. Neither Veech nor Katrina knows how long they will be gone. Christmas vacation in the Patterson School District is always 3 weeks because of the annual migration to Zamora. The only thing that I know for sure is that I am already missing both of them.

We studied until it is almost 9:00PM. At this time we are all convinced that we can pass the test. Soon after we are finished studying, my dad drives everyone home so that there won't be any more episodes. I guess I'm growing up because this is the first time in my life that I have studied this hard. My brain is tired and worn out.

The next morning I wake up early with butterflies in my stomach. If anyone ever had a phobia of math, it'd be me. I eat my breakfast as fast as I can, and then race to school so I can review my math notes before the test. Soon after the first bell sounds, Mr. Phish starts lecturing on the Great Depression. He is telling us about how Wall Street had crumbled under wild speculating. I have no idea what "speculating" means. The entire time he is speaking it is difficult listening because of the looming algebra test.

Just as soon as algebra class starts, sweat immediately pours from my forehead, and my heart races. This lasts until Mr. Phish finally places a copy of the test on my desk. Then as I look the test over I am pleased to see that there are no surprises. It is all there the way Mr. Phish said it would be. One by one I work out the problems until I am the last one in the room. Soon after I have double checked and triple checked for errors, I get up from my desk and walk to the front of the room to turn it in. Mr. Phish has been patiently waiting for me to finish.

"How do you think you did, Tyrell?" he asks.

"I think I passed, Mr. Phish. How about grading my test for me?"

Mr. Phish got a big kick out of me wanting the results so quickly.

Then, as he sat there exposing the gap in his front teeth, he says, "You mean right now? Let's get this straight. You're willing to miss part of your lunch period for the results of a math test? I'm amazed, Tyrell. Please take a seat. This will only take a few minutes."

Mr. Phish opens his top desk drawer and takes out his answer key. Then, one by one, he checks all of my answers before breaking out in a big grin. On the

surface, he appears a bit surprised, even grinning further.

Finally, his mouth drops wide open, and he utters, "I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. Tyrell Walker got an "A" on an algebra test."

I can't believe it.

I started shouting, "Yes, yes, yes!"

I'm sure that I they can hear me all over Patterson, but I don't care. For the first time in my life I've gotten an "A" on a math test. During what remains of the lunch break, I decide to call home to tell my mom about what I had done. She is really excited. Then as soon as she hung up, I called my dad, who is even more excited.

It's at that point that I decide to take the afternoon off from my studies and celebrate by going to the skate park after school. When the last school bell finally sounds, my dad is waiting for me in front of the school. Just as soon as I get in the van he tells me how proud he is of me. I've never seen him so excited.

He said, "I told you, you could do it, Tyrell. You just needed to make up your mind. Now all you have to do is keep this up until the end of the year."

"Do you think that you can give me a ride to the skate park? I haven't had a chance to get on my new skateboard since the tournament."

He didn't reply, but after I ran in the house and got my board, and then return to the van for the ride to the park I can see that he is worried. Then as we drive toward the park, I can tell that he doesn't like the idea of leaving me there.

He says, "If you have any trouble, I want you to call the police."

I know he's scared.

Without hesitating I nod my head in agreement, "I will, dad. I've got my phone."

There are about a dozen kids skating when we arrived, and most of them are a lot younger than I am. I spent the next half an hour going off of the mega ramp before Sal Marquez and Sunny Luna surprise me and pull up in his parents' black Buick SUV. Just as soon as he turns off the ignition, the two of them get

out of the car. They seem very excited as they hurry in my direction.

“Tyrell, I have good news,” Sal said, “I just got released by my doctor to play next week in the last game of the season. It's against first place Escalon.”

“That is great news, Sal. The team hasn't played well without you. Escalon is a real powerhouse this year, and they're going to be tough to beat. Most of Patterson thought that your season was over.”

Suddenly, I realized that he was staring at the wounds on my face.

He asked, “Who beat you up, Tyrell?”

“Mambo and the rest of his creeps jumped me in Middleton Park on the way home from the volleyball tournament.”

Sal shook his head.

“They did this because of what happened in the skate park during the championships. How many of them were there, Tyrell?” he asked.

“Four, Mambo and three of his First Street Boyz.”

Sal said, “You kicked his butt fair and square at the tournament. He's such a loser. You need to get out of that school, Tyrell. You don't belong there.”

“Sal, I'm doing everything that I can. Can you believe that I'm passing algebra?”

“I told you that you could do it, Tyrell. That's good news because next year we can win the league if we have you on the team.”

Sunny grinned, and asked, “Who is this new girl you're seeing, Tyrell? The guys on the football team say she's pretty.”

“Katrina Cortez.”

Sal said, “It's about time that you got another girlfriend. It's been a long time since you and Leticia broke up.”

“I'm throwing a party to celebrate Sal's return to the team,” Sunny said, “We want you there. We've invited the entire team. You should bring her to our party.”

We'd love to meet her.”

“Thank you for asking me, but I'm afraid that Katrina can't come because she's returning to Mexico for Christmas vacation.”

“The party is a week from Saturday night.”

It was time to change the topic. I knew that anything I said was going to go straight to Leticia. She and Sunny were as close as sisters.

“Are you here to skate, Sal?” I ask.

“I'm not quite ready to skate yet, Tyrell. The doctor says that I need to stay off the board for another week. The x-rays are pretty good, and my ribs look like they are healed up.”

It made me happy to see Sal up and moving so soon after getting crushed. Then as I watched as the two of them walk away, I thought about how I am finally doing well. Sal wants me on the football team, and I needed to hear that from him. It gave me back some self confidence that I have lost. My family hasn't gone to a game since Sal got injured because without him the team is just plain lousy.

Tomorrow is the Suarez Quinceanera, at the Walnut Acres Conference Center. I'm a little nervous about it because this is the first time that both families have met. At the same time, it may be the last time that I will get to see Katrina. The next morning my mother made us both put on our Sunday church clothes. Lavonne protested because she doesn't like wearing a dress. My mother wants us to put on our best impression. She tells Lavonne that everyone wears a dress to a quinceanera. I have never been to one so I had no idea if they did or didn't.

Mrs. Suarez is happy to see us when we arrive, and she immediately introduces us to her daughter Luz Maria Suarez. Luz Maria looks beautiful in her white quinceanera dress. The moment we are introduced, my mother hands her our present. Luz Maria then takes it over and places it on a table that is already filled with presents.

The moment Luz Maria took our present, I spotted Katrina standing in the far corner talking with some of her girlfriends. It is the first time that I had seen her in a dress, and she looks amazing. I marveled at how she has been in town just

a short time and already has made a lot of friends.

Just as soon as she spots me, she wants me to meet her father, Pedro. Without hesitating, Katrina grabs me by the arm and takes me over to meet him. Then just as soon as I shook her father's calloused hand, I realize how hard he must work. Soon after we are introduced, the Mariachi band starts setting up.

After I finish shaking his hand, Mrs. Suarez announces that the food is ready. The food looks delicious, and I probably took too much, but I love enchiladas, tacos, and tamales. My family then joins Katrina's family at their table. After we have all eaten, Katrina pulls me outside just as the Mariachi band starts playing. Once outside, we sat down on a bench and for the next few minute, we can't leave each other alone.

Then after a few minutes she surprises me when she says in broken English, "We will be back in Patterson by the end of February."

Without hesitating, I reply, "I will be waiting for you."

Friday night's game is against Escalon High. Escalon is 50 miles east of Patterson, and they are crazy about their high school teams. Escalon always has a great football team, and they are last year's reigning Division D State Champions. The newspapers are saying that they have the best defense in the league. They have also allowed the fewest number of touchdowns.

Friday afternoon my dad gets home early, and he is as excited as I am to see Sal play. Soon after leaving the city limits it starts to rain, and never stops all the way to Escalon. The entire way there I focus out the window in disbelief at the torrential downpour.

When we arrive attendance in the stadium is sparse. It appears that a lot of people have been scared away by the rain. Only about half of the bleachers on the Escalon side are filled. The Escalon fans are wearing yellow and green in ponchos, and the Patterson fans are wearing red and gray ponchos. There are less than 100 Patterson fans sitting in the stands, and most of them are family members of the players.

Patterson wins the toss, and chooses to kickoff. Chad Campbell kicked the ball deep into their end zone, and they got the ball on the 20 yard line. During the first set of downs, it was raining so hard that the receivers couldn't hold on to the ball. Complicating matters, the players are covered from head to toe in mud, and

they are so muddy that it is difficult to tell which side they are on. Then when we get the ball, we immediately encounter the same problems. Sal passes the ball and our receivers have trouble holding on to it.

During the first half, the ball is punted six times on fourth down. The half ends with the game scoreless. Sal has only completed 4 passes.

During the half time break the rain finally stopped. The result is a better playing field. They kick the ball into our end zone, and we return it to our 30 yard line. Sal quickly connects on a series of passes, until we finally find our way into the end zone. Our extra point kick is wide.

We are now ahead of the reigning state champions 6-0. However, Escalon is known for being tough and they aren't about to let down the home crowd. The very next possession they march down the center of the field in a carefully executed series of short running plays until their star running back races into the end zone. Their coach elects to go for 2 points, and again we can't stop the run. They are ahead, 8-6.

On the very next set of downs Sal trips and fumbles the ball and Escalon recovers. This time Chad Campbell and the Patterson defense manages to hold them at the goal line and force them to kick a 20 yard field goal. We are now down, 11-6. This time Escalon's kick went out on the 35 yard line. We are all panicking because the clock is quickly running out. Only Sal isn't about to let anybody wreck his return. He takes the snap, tucks the ball under his right arm, and takes off running as fast as he can towards the end zone. He dodges one Escalon tackler after another until they take him down on the 2 yard line. The Patterson fans are going crazy.

All we need is 2 yards, but Escalon isn't about to let it happen. The first two plays result in incomplete passes. Then on the third down Sal tries to run the ball in, but they stop him dead without a gain. All of a sudden, it looks hopeless, and the clock is winding down. Their defense is just too good.

Coach Long has paced back and forth the entire night, and now he really looks desperate. Then suddenly, when there is under a minute to go, he starts waving his arms and screams at the referee, "time out ref, time out." The entire game has come down to this play.

It is at that moment that we all realize that he is putting in our 6 foot 6 inch, 320 pound defensive lineman, Chad Campbell in at running back. Then as the

huddle breaks, Sal calls for the snap, and lays it right into Chad's hands. Chad wastes no time. He dashes straight into the Escalon defensive line, bursting into the end zone just as the clock ran out. The Escalon fans are stunned, as we win 12-11. The moment the game ends we all rush on to the field to congratulate the team. My dad says that it is the first time that we have ever defeated Escalon in Escalon. I don't doubt it. My entire family ran down on the field to congratulate Sal and the team.

The second I see him he asks, "What a great game! You're coming tomorrow night to our party, aren't you?"

Just as fast as I can I reply, "I wouldn't miss your and Sunny's party. The team looked great tonight, Sal."

There is no way that I would not go to Sunny's party tomorrow night. Her family owns a dairy on the outskirts of town and they have a really nice home with a swimming pool. Sunny's parents are really cool, and they like to entertain. It seems like I have been to her house for a party every year since I was in 5th grade. The next evening, when it is getting close to the time to go, I put on the best clothes that I own, and make sure that my hair is perfect because I knew that Leticia would be there.

Unfortunately, my dad gets home late and he can't take me to Sunny's house until 8 o'clock, and from the look of the crowd I am the last one there. Most of the players are sitting around the swimming pool, and I haven't been inside her house for 5 minutes before I hear a voice that I recognize.

"Hello, Tyrell. How are you doing?" says Leticia Lopez.

My heart skips a beat the instant I hear her voice. Leticia is dressed in black spandex pants and wearing the highest spiked heels that I have ever seen.

"I'm doing great, Leticia. How are your mom and dad?"

"My mom and dad are fine, Tyrell. I know you don't like them. I haven't had a chance to thank you for smacking that Mambo at the city skateboard championships. I'm sorry that they tried to arrest you."

"You're welcome Letty. Sal would have killed me if I had let that slime bag Mambo harm Sunny."

“I thought that you were protecting me, Tyrell.”

“Tell your parents that I'll be back at Patterson High next year. My grades are good, and I'm passing algebra.”

“Tyrell, you can't be mad at my parents the way you were headed downhill. I tried to get you to go to class, but you wanted to go to the skateboard park. What kind of future is there in skateboarding? You can't possibly blame them. Besides everybody knows that Del Cielo High is where all of the gang members go.”

“I'm not ever going to be in a gang, Letty. I know that I made some mistakes in the past. I want to return to Patterson High and play football. Then, I want to go on to college and play more football.”

No sooner have I finished defending myself when the Chainsmokers' song “Closer” came over the speakers, and all at once everyone starts dancing. The sound system at Sunny's house is really good. Without hesitating, Leticia grabs my hand and we started dancing like it was old times.

After the song ends, I ask, “Where's your boyfriend, Collin?”

At first there is silence. It is obvious that she doesn't want to answer.

Then finally she tells me, “He got started drinking early. Right now he's passed out in Sunny's bed.”

I can't help but crack up, but before I have a chance to get hysterical another great dance tune came on and once again we swing out to the middle of the dance floor. It is at this time that Leticia grabs me by my right hand, and pulled me closer. For a moment it seems like old times.

Over the music she asks, “I hear you have a new girlfriend, Tyrell.”

“You mean, Katrina Cortez?”

“Tyrell, they say she's a really beauty.”

I smile, and then really get down on the dance floor, using all of my best moves. The entire time Leticia is staying right with me. Finally after I have been at the party for a half an hour, we both take a break when Sal and Sunny made their

first appearance. Sal has already spotted us on the dance floor.

He gives me a hug, and above the blaring music he says, "How are you, my brother?"

"That Escalon game was something else, Sal. Chad was unbelievable. He's a one man army. Beating Escalon is huge."

"Thanks, Tyrell. I wish I hadn't gotten injured at Modesto High. It hurt my chances for getting a scholarship. The season was real disappointing. I heard that they might even fire Coach Long. Come outside to the pool so I can introduce you to the new guys on the team that you don't know."

One by one Sal introduces me to the new guys. Many of them are sophomores who are playing varsity level for the first time. I did my best to remember everyone's name, but all I could think about was Leticia. Then when I looked around for her, she was gone.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Chad Campbell watching Sal make the introductions. Today's Patterson Irritator newspaper has a picture of him scoring the winning touchdown on the front page. I can't help but grin at his demeanor.

Then when the opportunity is right, I tell him, "Chad, I went to the Escalon game and you were amazing."

"Thanks, Tyrell. I wish the other games had gone like that one. Sal tells me that you are going to play football with us next year."

"I sure hope so Chad, my grades are good. It's up to Dr. Davis to let me back in to Patterson High."

He said, "We need height and size. Most of our guys this year were too small and they had a hard time protecting Sal. If we're going to win the championship next year, we're going to need some bigger guys like you, Tyrell."

I never saw Leticia the rest of the night. I am really disappointed, and at the same time I'm sure she is with Collin. I decided to call my dad and have him pick me up.

The second that my dad pulls up, and I get into our van, he asks, "Did you have a good time, son?"

“I sure did. Sal introduced me to all of the new guys on the team.”

“Those are the guys you should be hanging out with, I bet that they're all going to go to college,” my dad said.

When Christmas vacation finally arrives, I thought that I would be able to spend all three weeks hanging out with my friends, but instead I have to work for my dad cleaning carpets. This is because my dad needs my help. Also, I still owe them for the Patterson Elementary Petunia Garden bill that Mrs. Sousa had sent. I didn't go to the skate park once the entire vacation. Not only did I not have the time, but I think that Leticia's lecture had an effect. Maybe she is right about what she is saying, and it's time for me to grow up.

The entire vacation I never heard from Katrina, and for all that I knew she was in Arizona or New Mexico picking fruit. The fact that she hasn't made an effort to contact me dug on my mind. I am working so hard during Christmas vacation that I am looking forward to school. From what I can tell, making a living is very difficult.

The first day back to school, after Christmas vacation, is pretty ordinary. Our classes are pretty small because none of the students who have left for Mexico have returned. The second the first period ends, I walk over to the restroom and use the facilities. Not long after I finish going the bathroom I stop outside Mr. Phish's classroom to talk to my buddy Wendell about his Christmas vacation. Soon afterward, class is starting and Mr. Phish waves at us to come inside and sit down.

Only a minute after I sit down, Eddie Cruz also returns to the classroom after using the bathroom. His eyes are focusing straight ahead into his Iphone as he sits down. The second he sits down, Mambo Rosas gets out of his seat and begins pounding Eddie's head with his bare fists. Eddie is caught completely off guard, and in a futile attempt to save himself he rises out of his seat and begins returning punches. At this time, everyone that doesn't want to be in the middle of the fracas runs to the corner so that they won't get caught in the crossfire. There is no way we are going to get in the middle of a fight between the leaders of the Latin Kings and the First Street Boyz.

In an instant, Mr. Phish leaps out from behind his desk, and grabs them both by the collar, and as he tries to take control of the situation, Chili whacks him in the back of the head with a large dictionary. Mr. Phish hits the floor face first with a

big thud. He is out cold.

It is at that moment that the members of both gangs start fighting, and the room erupts into total pandemonium. The fight is unfair right from the very beginning because our class is largely made up of First Street Boyz. However, it doesn't deter the Latin Kings, and they, for the large part held their own.

Just as soon as the chairs started flying in all directions, all of the pregnant girls flee for their lives. Then without any warning, the biggest book case in the room crashes to the floor. Finally, Mr. Ortega busts into the room with a fire extinguisher in his hands pleading with them to stop.

He shouts, "Stop fighting right now. I'm talking to all of you."

When he realizes that they're not listening, he begins spraying fire retardant in the direction of those who are throwing punches. The fire retardant quickly puts an end to the war. Soon afterward, Mr. Phish opens his eyes, and slowly gets back on his feet. At the same time Wendell and I rush over to help him stand.

I ask, "Are you alright, Mr. Phish?"

At first he didn't answer.

Then finally, he says, "I'm OK."

"You don't look OK," I reply, "I think you need to sit back down."

At the same time, Mr. Ortega orders all of the First Street Boys to go to the main room and take a seat, and he instructs all of the Latin Kings to sit on the outside lunch tables. He is afraid that things would erupt again. Then, after a quick discussion with Mambo and the First Street Boyz, Mr. Ortega meets with the Latin Kings.

He says, "I sent the First Street Boyz home. I'm going to give them a 15 minute head start before excusing you. I'm suspending Mambo for 5 days for starting the fight. Anyone who participated in the fight gets an automatic 3 day suspension. Also, if I find out who knocked out Mr. Phish, then I'm going to expel them. School is canceled for the rest of the day because of the bodily fluids in the classroom. According to state law, the classroom has to be cleaned and disinfected for AIDS before I can't legally let you back in."

Mr. Ortega suspended all of the participants for 3 days. The result is that there are a lot of empty seats in the classroom. Three weeks later, we got our report cards for the semester and I got a B+ in algebra, which in my world is extraordinary. I passed every class. The new semester starts next week. This semester in Mr. Phish's CORE class we are going to study American Government instead of United States History. At the same time, we will be playing softball in PE. Softball season is the best time of the year at Del Cielo High. I keep saying to myself that all I have to do is survive until the end of May.

Chapter Seven

The second semester begins on the first Monday in February, and immediately there are some surprises. The biggest surprise is that Mr. Ortega has decided to let Tiny Garcia, Jesus Christo Reyes, and One-eyed Joey Galvan back into Del Cielo High. On the same day, he also enrolls Annette Garcia and Anita Ceja. Both girls are well known athletes, and they played for the Patterson High Softball team last year. Annette is a pitcher and Anita plays catcher. Nobody knows how they ended up at Del Cielo High but I have known them both since Patterson Elementary.

It is hard for me to believe that Mr. Ortega has admitted Tiny, Joe, and Jesus because they have been known to spend every available opportunity recruiting new gang members. I've been around Mr. Ortega long enough to know that he is going to try and save everybody. My feeling is that most of the First Street Boyz can't be saved because all they think about is making easy money.

This semester, I have to retake a semester of biology because last year I flunked the second semester. The class is taught by Mr. Horseman, and it meets in his classroom after lunch. In our CORE classes, we are already preparing for the state tests. This is because our state test scores have been bad as long as anyone can remember, and the state is threatening to take over the school. Personally, I have no idea why the state would want Del Cielo High.

This semester, our math study group is meeting on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This is so that Mr. Phish can attend. Wendell says that the class has become so difficult that even he needs help. Once more algebra is scheduled for 3rd period, just before P.E. class.

According to Mrs. Purdy, this is only the second time that Del Cielo High has been invited to the Rosehaven Softball Tournament. She tells us that the invitation came only after our third place finish at their volleyball tournament. Mr. Phish says that it is an honor because it is the largest alternative education co-

ed softball tournament in the state, and they never invite schools as small as ours.

On the first day of softball, Mr. Phish has us all start by taking batting practice. I'm a little rusty at the plate, and very few of my hits manage to reach the outfield. On the other hand, Dalton proceeds to hit the heck out of the ball. Tiny, Mambo, Joey, and Jesus Reyes spend their time at bat trying to hit the ball out of the park. Then, just as soon as we are done with batting practice, Mr. Phish has us play a short intermural game. Our first tournament is next month at Los Banos. I played in it last year, and it features a half a dozen small farming community continuation schools.

The week before the Los Banos Softball Tournament I am surprised when a letter arrives from Katrina Cortez. There are butterflies in my stomach when I open it. Of course, I can't understand a word that she has written, so the next morning I get to school early so that I can have Mr. Phish translate for me. None of it is good news. Her father is working in Zamora and for now they are staying there. She has no idea when they will be returning to Patterson. The letter leaves me with an empty feeling. I am disappointed, and heartbroken.

Mr. Phish says that the Los Banos Softball Tournament has been around for a long time and the best we have ever done is fourth place. Then, when it is only three days before the tournament, Mr. Ortega surprises us all by making Mambo the team captain. He tells the P.E. Class that he wants Mambo to channel his leadership skills into something constructive. Needless to say, we are all stunned by his decision.

The day before the tournament, we are in the middle of our lunch period, when Mambo knocks on Mr. Ortega's office door, and then enters. Then after the two of them have a brief discussion, Mambo emerges from Mr. Ortega's office. He slowly strolls across the main room, and then proceeds to tack his team roster on the bulletin board. Just as soon as he finishes, we all crowd around to see who is on the team. At first, I can hardly believe what I am seeing. Mambo has given every position to the First Street Boyz. It's an all First Street Boyz team except for Anita and Annette, and he can't eliminate them because continuation softball tournaments require that 3 girls play on the field at all times. Chili Rodriquez is also on the list. She has just given birth to their third child, and according to Mambo, is ready to play.

I am about ready to explode, and when I confront Mambo about leaving us off the list he just laughs in my face, and when he's done laughing he calls me a

series of four letter words. It is all pretty disgusting, so I decide to do something about it, and I walk over to Mr. Phish's classroom to complain.

The second I enter his classroom I tell him, "Mr. Phish I thought that you wanted to win. If I had known that this was the way it was going to be, I would have taken another class. I can't believe that you're letting Mambo get away with this!"

Mr. Phish is totally unprepared for an answer, and instead he just sits there with his mouth wide open, and doesn't reply.

Finally after a long pause, he answers, "I'm not involved in the decision. Mr. Ortega is the boss and I have to do what he says because I'm not a tenured teacher. He wants to show those kids that there is something in life other than gangs. Mr. Ortega thinks that he can turn Mambo around and make him a productive citizen."

All I can do is shake my head in disgust at what I'm hearing.

It's at this time that I peer straight in Mr. Phish's face, and remark, "I've known Mambo Rosas for a long time. He and the rest of the First Street Boyz are nothing but trouble."

The day of the tournament, my dad drops me off at school early so he can get to a job in Modesto. Mambo and the softball team are already gathering in front of the school for the ride to Los Banos, which is 45 minutes south of Patterson on the I-5 Freeway. Those of us who have been left off of the team watch from a distance as they board the school districts brand new mini-bus. We have been screwed, and there is nothing we can do about it.

Mr. Phish's substitute shows up 5 minutes late. He tells us to do the work in the book, and stay quiet. The entire time I am in class I keep saying to myself that if Mr. Ortega wants to put a trophy in the trophy case, then Mr. Ortega needs to play his best players.

The next morning when I arrive at school there is a Los Banos Police car parked in front of the school. Then when we enter the school, Mrs. Purdy instructs us to go wait in front of our respective class rooms. At this time there are two uniformed policemen standing in Mr. Ortega's office, and from the looks of things they are pretty fired up. It doesn't take long before I figure out that something bad has happened. None of the First Street Boyz are in school, and Mr. Phish is

nowhere to be found. Just a short time later, once more the same male substitute arrives and opens up our classroom. Without hesitating, I sit down and my hand goes up.

The sub asks, "How can I help you?"

I inquire, as politely as I can, "Did something happen in Los Banos?"

The substitute responds, "I have no idea. They called me early this morning, and told me that they would need me for a second day."

It's at this time that everyone in the room turns in the direction of Anita and Annette. They are the only ones in attendance who had gone to the tournament yesterday. Minutes pass like hours, but the second the bell sounds announcing the end of the first class we all rush outside to get the story from the girls.

Anita and Annette are clear that they don't like being put in this position. At first they refuse to answer, but eventually they realize that we're not about to let up until they tell us what had happened. Only a minute later, Anita does all of the talking.

She says, "Things went bad right from the very start. Mr. Phish exploded in anger because all of the Boyz walked off the bus wearing red socks and red tennis shoes. He told them that there were rules against displaying gang colors, and that they were going to get them kicked out of the tournament. He ordered them to get back on mini-bus to change back into their white socks. There was nothing that he could do about the red tennis shoes. This made Mambo angry. The Los Banos Softball Park is pretty small with only has 4 diamonds. Pretty soon, we found out that all of the other teams were Sureños. Almost immediately, both sides started throwing down gang signs, and all of the other teams wanted to fight us."

Anita is so excited that she is almost hyperventilating. She pauses for a moment. Then, she needs another minute to gather her thoughts before she can continue.

Finally, she takes a big gulp of air and finds the strength to continue, "It was horrible. We couldn't get anyone out. Jesus, Joey, Mambo, and Tiny were awful. Tiny hit the ball into deep center field, but he ran so slow that they threw him out at first base. They kept trying to hit home runs, but instead of home runs they hit popups. We got beaten badly 3 games in a row. Then, after lunch it

was our turn to play the home team, Los Banos.”

“When Los Banos got up to bat, we couldn't get anyone out. They had two guys in scoring positions, when this big guy named Chuey came up to bat. Chuey drove one out of the park. He hit the ball so far that it landed on the roof of a house across the street. Just as soon as it cleared the fence, Mambo became as angry as I have ever seen him. I thought he was going to explode. Then when Chuey rounded first base, Mambo stuck out his foot and tripped him. The big guy went down hard, and the moment he did, the entire Los Banos dugout emptied. They wanted to kill Mambo.”

“Mambo ran as fast as he could into our dugout. There he grabbed bat for self-defense and boy did they come after him. You could see the blood in their eyes. Mr. Phish and the Los Banos coach tried to get him to put the bat down before he hurt somebody, but Mambo was scared. He just kept swinging, and somehow he nailed the Los Banos coach in the forehead. He hit him pretty good.”

“Mr. Phish had no choice, but to call 911. The police arrested Mambo and placed him in handcuffs. According to Mr. Phish, Mambo is now 18 years of age, so for the first time he went to jail.”

“Just as soon as Mr. Phish got all of the First Street Boyz on the mini-bus, they all began flashing gang signs out the bus windows. The Sureños responded by hurling rocks at us. There was broken glass everywhere, and the bus is a wreck. It was a real mess.”

During the second period, Mr. Ortega came into our class to talk to us.

I can tell that he is really upset, “I'm sure that you all heard about what happened in Los Banos yesterday. I just received a hand delivered copy of the police report, and it says that Mr. Phish did everything he could to stop what happened. I've never been more embarrassed. I suspended both Jesus Reyes and Joey Galvan for 5 days for fighting. Mambo is facing expulsion. I have decided to cancel the Rosehaven Softball Tournament.”

I can't believe what he is saying, and what about Mr. Phish's job? For sure, he will lose it now. Immediately, I raise my hand, so that Mr. Ortega will call on me.

He says, “Tyrell.”

I insist, "Mr. Ortega, I don't think that it's fair for you to punish us for what those guys did. We didn't have anything to do with it, and I don't think that we should be punished for their bad behavior. Besides, Mrs. Purdy told my mom that Mr. Phish is in danger of losing his job. Mr. Phish is the best teacher I've ever had, and this isn't his fault. I want to play in the Rosehaven Tournament for Mr. Phish."

At first, Mr. Ortega is a little startled, and it takes a long time before we have an opportunity to hear his reply. In fact, he is silent for so long that I am just about certain that he has given up on the idea of a Del Cielo High sports program.

Finally, he lets off a big groan and then asks, "How many of you want to play on the Del Cielo High softball team, at the Rosehaven Tournament?"

In a second, every hand in the room is raised. Even the soon-to-be mothers are raising their hands.

Mr. Ortega looks over the classroom and says, "I don't know what to say. I can't afford to have another episode like this because it could cost me my job. They destroyed a brand new mini-bus, and it's going to cost a fortune to get it repaired. All of the bad publicity has been a nightmare for me. My telephone hasn't stopped ringing. Even worse, I'm going to have to explain what happened in front of Dr. Davis and the school board. I have no idea how they're going to react."

"Mr. Ortega, I promise you that nothing will happen," I reply.

Finally, after what seems like eternity, he responds, "Alright, I give in. I'm going to give you guys one more chance, and there better not be any more problems. Tyrell, I'm holding you personally responsible, and I'm putting everyone on notice. If you're failing a class, in a gang, or not behaving in the classroom, then you're not going to the Rosehaven Tournament."

"Thank you, Mr. Ortega, you won't regret it," I tell him grinning ear to ear.

Then before I even have a chance to celebrate, he says, "Don't get too excited, Mr. Walker. I'm putting everyone here on notice, if there are any problems between now and then, I'm going to cancel."

The next day Mr. Phish came back to work, and I am totally ecstatic because we have the first algebra test of the semester tomorrow. Right now, I can't afford to

lose him. He's my life line, if I lose him now, I'll never pass algebra. We spent the entire algebra class reviewing for the next test. Then just when class ends, Wendell invites me over to his house to study. The entire time that we are walking over to his house the only thing on his mind is the tournament. We studied until Wendell's parents call, and tell him that their restaurant is packed and they need him to bus tables. It doesn't matter because I'm prepared.

The next day, the moment we finish taking the math test, we head straight out to the softball diamond for an inter-mural game. No sooner have we taken the field when Joey's Chevy low rider appears. Joey's front windows are rolled down. Inside the car I can see Joey, Jesus, and Tiny, and they are all wearing red bandannas. We all watch nervously as they continue to cruise past the softball field until Mr. Phish decides to call 911. The second he puts the phone to his ear, Joey starts waving an Uzi machine gun out the car window. Immediately, we all ran for our lives, but there is no place to hide.

Sergeant Sanchez arrives in what seems like an eternity. He quickly orders the First Street Boyz to get out with their hands up in the air. Then, none of us can believe it when Sergeant Sanchez reaches into Joey's car and pulls out an Uzi machine gun. Then when he pulls the trigger, a steady stream of water came squirting out of the nozzle.

Only a second later, Sergeant Sanchez announces, "It's OK, everybody. You can get off of the ground. It's only a squirt gun that looks like a machine gun."

Jesus and Joey really think that it is funny, and they are laughing hysterically. Unfortunately for them, the police didn't like it at all. They arrest them all for making a terrorist threat. We are sure that Mr. Ortega will cancel the tournament, but when we get back to school he doesn't say a thing about it.

At lunch time, Mr. Ortega taped a list of those who would be permitted to participate to his office door. Out of all of the people in our P.E. Class, I am one of the few to make the team along with Wendell, Chico, Anita, Annette and Dalton. The rest of the students on the eligible list are in the migrant program, and they have never played softball. Not a single Latin King or First Street Boy is on the list.

The next day, Mr. Phish decides to bring all of his migrant students to the softball diamond for P.E. Class. I am not surprised because he is desperate for talent. Maybe, out of the 8 students in this class, one or two will play well enough to help the team, but none of them own mitts.

At this time, Anita and Annette prove to be a huge asset because they both are native Spanish speakers, and excellent hitters. From behind home plate Anita patiently instructs the migrant students on how to swing the bat. It is fun to see their excitement, but mostly they just hit foul tips. The next day, Mr. Phish really amazes me. He shows up with new gloves for the ESL students. He tells us that the gloves have been donated by Clint Boreman, which doesn't surprise me.

By the end of the week we are told that Mambo has been sentenced to the time that he has served, and he is already out on the streets. Just as soon as he finds out, Mr. Phish starts looking out the window of the classroom like he's expecting a drive-by. Just watching him makes the class nervous. The moment we enter the main room for lunch, Mrs. Purdy waves for me to come over to her desk.

"Veech Martinez called me from Zamora last night. He's on his way back to Patterson," Mrs. Purdy exclaims, "I told him that he can stay with me until he graduates next year."

I can't think of anything that I would rather hear, "That is just fantastic. We sure need another infielder."

Mr. Purdy takes a stapler out of her drawer before continuing, "I have something else. Mr. Ortega thinks that he found him a job at one of the local warehouses."

I am really excited. I didn't think that I would ever see Veech again. At this time, it is obvious to all of us which of Mr. Phish's recruits can play. It's already clear that Simon and Chico are the two guys who have the most potential, but we still need one more girl. Anita and Annette are as good as they come, but we needed one more. Mr. Ortega has ruled Chili is a gang member, thus ineligible, but it doesn't matter because we all know that she won't play without Mambo. The rest of the girls are pregnant.

Annette can slow pitch as well as anyone. Simon and Chico will play right and left field and Dalton can play center. Under the rules of the tournament, every single player on your team must have a turn in the batting rotation. So, in our situation we will be better off if we show up with the roster minimum of 10 players. We will lose for sure if we show up with a group of people who have no hope of getting a hit or catching a ball.

The next week, both Veech Martinez and Eddie Cruz returned to Del Cielo. Except for a boot heal mark that is still visible on his forehead, Eddie's wounds have all but vanished. The day after Eddie returns, he tells Mr. Ortega that he is through with gangs. Most of us didn't believe him, but whatever he said to Mr. Ortega worked because he made Eddie eligible for the softball team.

Less than a week before the Rosehaven Softball Tournament I get the biggest surprise ever, when Katrina Cortez walks through the front door of Del Cielo High. At first I don't believe what I am seeing. She seems taller, and even prettier than the last time I saw her. It has been a long time, almost 3 months. Everything about her seems different. She seems so mature, and she is sure happy to see me.

We held each other in a long embrace, as I asked her about her family, "How are your mother and father?"

She replies, "They are fine. Do you have a new girlfriend, Tyrell?"

"Your English has really improved," I answered.

I don't think that I have ever been so happy to see someone in my life. I had given up hope of ever seeing Katrina again, and her timing couldn't have been better. Just seeing Katrina makes me realize how much I have been missing her. At the same time she's the extra girl that we need desperately need to satisfy the Rosehaven entry requirements.

The day of the tournament all of the members of the softball team are told to arrive at school early for the ride to Turlock. On the way to school, I have my dad swing by Katrina's house to pick her up. Once again her family is living in the Walnut Acres Farm Camp, and when we arrive to pick her up she is patiently waiting outside. Then when we pull up in front of the school, I am not surprised to see the oldest bus that the school district owned parked in front of the school. I doubt that they will ever let Del Cielo High students use the new mini-bus again. Before we get on the bus, Mrs. Purdy hands each of us our uniforms, a sack lunch and a bottle of water. The uniforms have numbers on the back, and a picture of a bulldog on the front.

Soon after Mr. Phish finishes loading the softball equipment, he opens the bus side door and we all get on board. The tournament is in the Turlock softball complex which is adjacent to Rosehaven Alternative High. There is hardly a peep out of any of us as we round the Patterson circle and then quickly exit

Patterson's city limits. Soon after we cross over the San Joaquin River, I start to feel overwhelmed. We are short on talent, but we are very high on hope. Before long, the sign on the side of the road says, "Welcome to Turlock." Then just as the sun's rays perch we pull into the softball complex.

The second Mr. Phish turns off the engine, he says, "This is why we have been training. It's up to you guys. You can win it, if you want to win it. Let's get out there."

The moment he stops speaking we all respond with the bulldog bark. It's at this time that we get out of our seats and follow Mr. Phish off of the bus. He wants us to warm up on the diamond farthest away from the entrance. Then as we warm up, Mr. Phish walks over to the signup desk to get our schedule. At the same time, buses filled with softball players are pulling into the parking lot one after another. Before long, Mr. Phish returns with a copy of the schedule and rules.

Then as he stands stoically on the pitcher's mound, he tells us, "Gather around everybody."

Abruptly, the entire team rushes in to hear what he has to say.

When he has everyone present, Mr. Phish gives us his final instructions, "There are going to be 12 schools here today. The teams are divided into two divisions of 6 teams apiece. The winner of each division plays for the championship. The second place teams play for third and fourth place. Only the top 3 teams get trophies. These are 6 inning games, and if the game ends in a tie then it's a tie on the books. No bunting is permitted. The ball has to be hit passed the pitcher's mound to be a hit. Everybody hits. We play Stockton first on Diamond 1. They have some really big guys."

No sooner does Mr. Phish finish talking when there is an announcement over the public address system. The announcement says that we all need to report to our assigned diamonds immediately. Hastily, Mr. Phish grabs the equipment bag, and as fast as we can, we all head to Diamond 1. The tournament hasn't even begun and we are already late.

The second we arrive on Diamond 1, the umpire points us toward the dugout along the first base line, and then starts shouting, "You guys need to hurry up. The games all have to start on time."

Veech hurries as fast as he can to home plate for the flip of the coin. Stockton calls tails and wins. They choose for us to hit first. It's at this time that Mr. Phish posts the lineup and batting order in the dugout. I am starting at first base and Wendell is our leadoff batter. Their pitcher is a tall, freckled faced, red headed girl. She arches the first pitch high over Wendell's head, and it drops across the plate. The umpire yells, "Strike!"

Wendell is unfazed. Once more, the girl delivers the same pitch, but this time he drives it over the head of the second baseman and it falls in for a single. The second it drops in, we leap to our feet cheering. Veech has been anxiously waiting for his turn in the on deck circle. He hit the first pitch, a hard grounder that shoots under the glove of their second baseman and keeps rolling into right field. Mr. Phish doesn't hesitate to wave Wendell all the way home, and Veech advances to 3rd base. Now with Veech in scoring position, it is Anita's turn at the plate. Anita swings at the first pitch and misses. The very next pitch she smacks a single into short right field, knocking Veech home. Our turn at bat ends with the score 2-0.

Annette's slow pitch arch is one of the best that I have ever seen. Over and over she gets them to pop up or ground out. By mixing up her pitches she manages to hold them scoreless until the fourth inning. In the fourth inning, their center fielder, with 2 outs and a runner on, hits a home run, tying the score at 2-2. Then with the game still tied in the top of the 6th inning, we are in desperate need of a run, but Veech and Wendell both ground out, and we are quickly running out of options. Now it is all up to Dalton. Dalton's first pitch is way outside. However, the second pitch is right over the plate. Dalton rears back and drives this one into the right field corner, and then proceeds to fly around the bases as fast as I have ever seen him run. At the same time, the right fielder picks up the ball, and turns to throw the ball toward home. Then with the throw bearing down on Dalton like a rocket, he dives head first for home plate, arriving under the catcher's tag. We are ahead 3-2.

Mr. Phish shouts at the top of his lungs, "This is it. Hold them, Del Cielo!"

Annette proceeds to not give them a single pitch over home plate. The result is they swing at bad pitches and pop up. It's three up and three down, and we have won our first game.

The next team on our schedule is Clovis Alternative School from the Fresno area. This time we win the toss, but the Clovis team jumps on the scoreboard with a run following a series of singles. This game, Mr. Phish has Annette as

our leadoff hitter. She punches one that falls in for a single. Wendell then hits a pop up into center field and the rover and the right fielder collide going for the ball. In the confusion that follows, Mr. Phish waves Annette home, and we are tied at 1-1.

Neither team scores a run during the next 4 innings. Both teams put up amazing defense, and getting a hit is almost impossible. Finally, in the bottom of the 6th with the game still tied and one out, Veech and Anita hit back to back singles, and it is my turn to bat. The outfielders all back up to the fence expecting me to smack the ball, but we only need is a single to win. The next pitch is right over the plate, and I punch it down the 3rd base line, in fair territory, and Veech scores for the win.

Our third game is against the biggest school in the tournament, Elliot High of Modesto. They have also won both games. Their coach plays golf with Mr. Ortega on Saturdays, and they have a big bet going. He told him that they are going to kick our rears. He also told Mr. Ortega that they have the best infield in the tournament.

We won the toss, so again we let them bat first. The score was tied at 2-2 until the 4th inning when Anita knocked in two runs with a double. Then, in the bottom of the 5th inning, they score two runs on a ball that rolls between Chico's legs and continues until it hits the fence. The score is now tied 4-4. At the start of the 6th inning, the tournament officials came over to talk to Mr. Phish.

He turned to tell us what had been said, "I just got word that if we win here, we make it into the final 4. We're now in uncharted territory, no team from Del Cielo High has ever gone this far in a big tournament. We have to hold them."

We end the inning with Wendell and Veech turning the best double play ever. Now, it is our final turn at bat. Eddie is up first, and he hit the third pitch to the shortstop, and he bobbles the ball, allowing Eddie to arrive safely at 1st base. Next, Wendell punches a single over the second baseman's head, and Eddie races all the way home. We won 5-4.

Just as soon as the game ends, one of the tournament officials comes over to tell us that we are playing the home team Rosehaven Alternative High School. They are the only other undefeated team. Over the years, Rosehaven has developed a reputation for having great athletic teams, and they are well disciplined. We have 30 minutes to eat our sack lunches and go the bathroom before the game starts on Diamond 1. However, none of us is very interested in

eating or drinking, we want to play.

We are totally surprised by what happens next. Suddenly, all of the classroom doors open at the same time and hundreds of students empty out of their classrooms and surround the diamond. They immediately try to intimidate us by shouting crude comments and blowing noise makers. It's at this time that we all learn first-hand about the home field advantage.

Then when Rosehaven's pitcher warms up we can't believe what we are seeing. The narrow chested pitcher throws the highest arched pitch that any of us have ever seen. Mr. Phish has Anita lead off, and the second she steps up to the plate she receives a chorus of heckling from the students. She swings wildly at the first pitch and misses the ball entirely. This causes the crowd to go crazy, and the awful things that they are saying overwhelm her.

Finally, Mr. Phish calls, "Time out."

He then walks up to Anita and places his arm around her.

He tells her, "Don't let these people get the best of you. This is just between you and the pitcher. Keep your eye on the ball, and take a big cut. You can do it Anita. Start us out with a hit."

The next pitch is a big fat one right over the plate, and Anita hits the ball into shallow right field, where it is caught for the first out. Veech and Wendell follow her, and they ground out, making it three up and three down.

Rosehaven's leadoff batter smacks the first pitch down the 3rd base line. Eddie backhands the ball on the third bounce, and his resulting throw is wide, forcing me to pull my foot off of the base. Then when the umpire yells, "safe," I cringe.

Their next batter is their left handed first baseman. He hits a hard line drive and it roars past Katrina in right field. The ball just keeps going until it reaches the right field fence. Katrina races after it, and a few feet from the fence, she threw it as far as she can, but it is hopeless. Both runners score on what turns into an inside the park home run. The Rosehaven students are going crazy with excitement. At the same time, Mr. Phish can tell that we are quickly falling apart.

He ran out onto the infield shouting, "Time out, ump."

At the same time he waves for all of the infielders to meet at the pitcher's mound

for a conference.

He says, "Everybody, calm down right now. These guys are nothing special. We can beat them, just like we've beat everyone else. Don't let this crowd get to you, that's what they want. They want you to fall apart. Let's calm down, and get them out."

Standing in the batter's box is their shortstop. He lines a hard grounder straight into Wendell's glove. Wendell pivots, and throws a sizzler to me at first base for the first out, beating the runner by a mile. The second the umpire yells, "Out," we all start to calm down, but our joy is short lived when we realize that the biggest guy in the tournament is up next.

Their coach yells, "Hit it out of here, Moose."

Moose rears back in the batter's box and then launches the first pitch into deep left center. Immediately, Simon takes off running towards after the ball as fast as he can, and just when it is about to clear the fence for a home run, Simon leaps as high as he can and brings the ball down for the second out. Their girl rover follows Moose up next. She pops up for the third out.

When we return to the dugout, Mr. Phish says, "The left fielder is playing real deep. Punch one in, Tyrell."

From the batter's box I can tell he is right. I am going to have to hit to the left side of the field if I want to get on. The first pitch is inside, and a perfect pitch for what I want to do. I punch the first pitch over the third baseman's head, and slowly begin running to first base, thinking that the ball is foul.

Then suddenly the umpire yells, "Fair ball."

The ball rolls into the far corner, and as fast as I can move I round second base before sliding into third base for a triple. Chico is next up, and so far today he hasn't gotten a hit. This time at bat he swings at the first pitch, knocking a grounder that rolls untouched between the first and second baseman, knocking me in. Then, Eddie hits in Chico with a double, and the score is tied 2-2.

During the next three innings both teams play flawless defense, as we are once more locked in a dead tie. In the top of the 6th inning, the tournament officials once more enter the dugout to talk to Mr. Phish. They are there to make it clear that we will continue playing until there is a winner.

Katrina is the first batter up in the top of the 6th inning. She swings at the first 3 pitches, and never gets near the ball. She strikes out. The Rosehaven students can smell blood, and they jump on the moment, heckling louder and louder. Annette is up next. She pops the ball straight up and the pitcher catches it for the second out, and we are in big trouble.

Anita hit a grounder to the third baseman, and he makes a terrible throw allowing her to arrive safely at second base. There is one on, with two outs, and it is Veech's turn at bat. Veech rears back, and the ball came right over the center of the plate. He swings and the ball sails over the head of the short stop and then proceeds to clear the left field fence. Veech pumps his right fist into the air, rounding the bases grinning ear to ear. Wendell is next up and he grounds out for the third out and we are ahead 4-2.

Then as we take the field for what we hope will be the last time, Mr. Phish pulls Annette aside and tells her to pitch to them outside. Their shortstop leads off with a single, and Annette walks the very next batter. Now, we are in big trouble because Moose is next up. No outs, bottom of the sixth, 2 on, and their best hitter at the plate. None of us are surprised when Moose takes a vicious cut at the very first pitch, and the ball sails into right field towards Katrina. I can barely watch when I realize that she has lost the ball in the sun. Then just when everything looks hopeless Katrina sticks her glove into the air and catches the ball, but both of the runners advance.

Now, there are two runners in scoring position. Their next batter swings and the ball rolls straight into Wendell's glove. Wendell reaches out to tag the runner, and then threw the ball to me on first base in time for the double play. The game is over, and we have gone undefeated.

We all lined up to shake hands with the Rosehaven team, before following Mr. Phish to where they are presenting us our trophies. Our trophies are gold, and they depict a batter. The one that Del Cielo High received stood almost 4 feet tall. Just as soon as we loaded up our equipment, we all got on board for the ride back to Patterson. The moment we are settled on board, Mr. Phish announces that he has talked to Mr. Ortega on the phone.

He says, "I just talked to Mr. Ortega. He's buying pizza for the entire team. We're going to meet him at Wilbur Garcia's."

We couldn't be more excited as we all yell our approval. Then when we are

about half way home, I call my buddy Sal Marquez to tell him about our win. He didn't think that we had a chance of winning. Sal is really excited.

He keeps telling me on the phone, "I don't believe it. You mean that you guys beat those big schools."

I laugh, and then reply, "We sure did. We're on our way to Wilbur Garcia's for pizza. Mr. Ortega says he's buying. Why don't you join us for the celebration?"

Sal replies, "Sure, I'll stop by. Can I bring Chad Campbell?"

"I don't see why not," I utter, "We should be at Wilbur's in about 20 minutes."

Just a short time later, we pull in front of Wilbur Garcia's, and Mr. Phish gets out the bus with the school's trophy. The trophy looked even bigger when he places it on a table in the middle of the restaurant for everyone to admire. Mr. Phish ordered 3 Canadian bacon and pineapple pizzas, and some pitchers of soft drinks. His smile was enormous, and it stretched from ear to ear.

Then as he poured us each a soft drink, he says, "I couldn't be more proud of you guys. I didn't think that we had a chance."

I asked, "Does this mean that you'll get to keep your job, Mr. Phish?"

He just stands there staring me in the face, and then finally he answers, "I was ready to quit after what happened in Los Banos. I didn't think that I ever wanted to coach again."

Just as soon as Mr. Phish finishes pouring the soft drinks, he enters the rest room to relieve himself. Suddenly, Mambo, Jesus, Joey, and Tiny pull up in front of Wilbur's in Joey's Chevy low rider. We all watched through the window as the four of them jumped out of the car and then burst through the front door of Wilbur's.

Mambo asks the girl who had just taken our order, "Where's Catfish?"

Afraid for her life, she nods towards the bathroom. Mambo walks straight over to the bathroom door and shoves a chair under the door knob so that Mr. Phish can't get out. I am sure that they are packing guns.

Mambo then turns and once more glares at the trophy.

He then says, "That trophy is ours, you guys stole it from us, and we're going to take it home."

I have heard enough.

I immediately rise up out of my chair and as directly as I can I told him, "We're here to celebrate, and you guys aren't invited. How about leaving us all alone, Mambo?"

Mambo snarls, "You better watch it, Tyrell, or you're going to be the first one to pay."

The moment he finishes speaking, Sal appears in the restaurant doorway. Sal has heard everything that Mambo has said, and he is really angry.

He rips into Mambo, "Everybody in town is sick of you. Why don't you do what Tyrell told you to do, and leave everybody alone?"

Suddenly, Tiny Garcia wants to get involved.

He says, "Sal, if you know what's good for you, you'll show Mambo more respect. Nobody talks to Mambo like that!"

Knowing that he has all of the cards with Tiny backing him up, Mambo once again snarls, "Now what are you guys going to do about it. I'm taking the trophy home."

Chad Campbell has arrived with Sal, but so far he has been sitting back just listening. Until now, he has been reluctant to get involved.

Finally, he looks straight at Tiny and shouts, "Tiny, if you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of this. This fight is between Tyrell and Mambo."

It is at this moment that my entire team rises out of their seats.

Without hesitating I tell him, "Your problems just got bigger, Mambo."

Mambo came out swinging, and his first punch hit me square in the nose. It hit me so hard that I tumble backwards and fall into the ice machine almost crashing onto the floor.

Then as I struggle to regain my composure, Chad comes over and put his arm around me, and yells, “Go get him, carpet cleaner. This is what you've been waiting for.”

My brain is rattled, but I respond with a flurry of punches that force Mambo to retreat out the front door of Wilbur's, and onto the street. There, in the middle of the downtown, we hook it up, exchanging punch after punch as the crowd gets bigger and bigger. Before long Mambo gains the upper hand by using a series of counter punches, and I stumble to the asphalt on my knees. Then just when I think that I'm going down for good, I hear Katrina's voice.

She screams, “Get up, Tyrell. Get up.”

I can see the tears welling in her eyes, and just when it looks completely hopeless, I somehow find the strength to get back on my feet. Only this time, I go after him with everything I have, flattening Mambo with a combination of punches. Suddenly, he goes down on his face and doesn't move.

Then with Mambo struggling for consciousness, I tell the rest of the First Street Boyz, “If you know what's good for you, you'll get this sack of garbage out of here.”

Joey, Tiny, and Jesus carry the semi-conscious Mambo to the car, and drive away as fast as they can go. At the same time, Wendell lets Mr. Phish out of the bathroom, and he calls 911. The Patterson Police Station is only a block away, and Sergeant Sanchez finds their car almost immediately. He pulls the First Street Boyz over, and inside the trunk of Joey Galvan's car he finds a large quantity of methamphetamine, and a large cache of guns that had been stolen during a residential burglary.

The next day, the newspaper came to school and takes our picture. The very next issue, a story about the team appears on page 3. On the front page in big headlines is a picture of Mambo and the story about the drug bust. The article tells how the police broke up Patterson's most notorious gang, the First Street Boyz. It says that the leaders of the gang are all facing serious prison time.

Just a few weeks later, we are all excited when we learn that Mr. Phish is going to be the new varsity football coach at Patterson High. I guess that miracles do occur because I end the school year with a “B” in algebra class. I didn't miss a class all year, as a result, Dr. Davis the school superintendent, lets me back into

Patterson High. At the same time, he admits Wendell, Veech, Dalton, Katrina, and Eddie. Now, they all want to go to college. Eddie says he's done with gangs and stealing cars. I certainly hope so, because we're getting our Chevy Malibu fixed, and he knows where we live.