



RAPID READS



THE BARRIO KINGS

WILLIAM
KOWALSKI



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Summary: While finishing his high school diploma and preparing for the birth of his first son, Rosario Gomez struggles to stay out of the gang life that killed his brother. But when his old friend Juan gets out of jail, his past returns to haunt him.

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CHAPTER ONE

My name is Rosario Gomez. I'm twenty-three years old. I stock shelves at the supermarket downtown. I wear a tie to work every day, even though I don't have to. I wear a long-sleeved shirt to cover my tattoos. But I can't hide all of them. There's one on my right hand that says *BK* in small black letters. That one I can't hide. So I try to keep my right hand in my pocket when my boss is around.

My boss is Mr. Enwright. He's a fat, bald white guy who gets mad easy. But he's okay. Some of the other workers here call

him Mr. Enwrong. I do not do that. Not to his face, and not behind his back. I need this job too bad. Enwright told me that once I get my GED he will promote me to assistant manager. That would be the most important job anyone in my family has ever had.

I was not always this straight. I came up rough. My neighborhood was on the news almost every night, and the news was never good. It was the kind of *barrio* nice people don't visit. There was nothing there for them. There was nothing there for me either. There was only survival, and I had to fight for that.

I dropped out of school to run with a gang called the Barrio Kings. I did some things I'm not proud of now. Like I said, I had to survive. I used to be the best street fighter around. I didn't like fighting. But I had no choice. I pretended to like it though. I used to smile. That scared people even more. And when you're scared, you lose.

The Barrio Kings

Most fights are won before they start. You win them in your head, before you even throw a single punch.

I was just lucky that I was good at fighting, the way some people are just good at music or art. Sometimes I wonder if I should have been a boxer. But I always used to get this sick feeling in my stomach after I hit someone. It stayed with me. I don't miss that feeling. It's been a long time since I was in a fight. I hope I'm never in another one.

Things are different now. I've had this job for three years. I've stayed out of trouble. I don't go back to the old barrio anymore. I don't even miss it. Now I work from nine to five. After work, three days a week, I take the crosstown bus to the community college. That's where I take my night courses. I'm almost done with them. In just three weeks, I'm going to finish my high-school studies. Then I'll be the first person in my family to have a diploma too.

After class, I take another bus home. I live with my girlfriend, Connie. She's twenty. We've been together for two years. We're going to have a baby in a month. We already know it's a boy. We're going to name him Emilio. We have a crib all set up for him. We have a bunch of toys and clothes too. Connie's Aunt Carlita gave them to us. She has eight kids, so she has a lot of extra stuff.

By the time I get home after class, I'm wiped. But Connie has not been feeling too good lately, so usually I make dinner. I can't believe how big she is. Her feet hurt all the time. So do her hips and knees. I feel bad for her, but there's nothing I can do. And Emilio is almost here. I can't believe I'm going to be a dad.

Mr. Enwright told me that when I get that promotion, I will have to work longer hours, but I'll make more money. I can't wait. I have a plan. I'm going to save up money,

and I'm going back to school. College this time. I'll take some business courses. I figure by the time Emilio is five, I can be a manager, and I will make even more money. That would put me on the same level as Mr. Enwright. I think Emilio will be proud to know his dad is a boss.

But I'm not stopping there. I want a business of my own. I don't know what kind yet. All I know is, I can see it in my head. Just like I used to see myself winning street fights. I can see myself in a three-piece suit. I'm not sitting in an office though. Who wants to sit still all day? Not me. I like to move around, talk to people, shake hands, make deals. I see myself in an airplane. I'm speaking different languages with people in other countries. Maybe I'll be selling things. Maybe I'll be setting up deals. Whatever it is, I'll be good at it. And I will make a lot of money.

But right now I need to come back down to earth. Mr. Enwright doesn't like it when

people slack off. Not that I ever do. I just don't want to give him a reason to get mad at me. Not when everything is going so well.

Today is Thursday. That means I have class tonight. I hate riding that bus, but I can't afford a car right now. Cars are really expensive. You have your monthly payments, your insurance, your gas and repair costs. All that stuff adds up quick. And every penny I spend on a car means one penny less in the bank.

It doesn't matter about the bus. I don't mind. I do dream about a car though. I know just what kind I want. Not a low-rider, like I'm some kind of punk. I want a serious car. I want a black Lexus SUV with a leather interior and tinted windows. I want people to look at that car and wonder who owns it. I want them to admire it. And it will have a nice stereo too. The kind you can hear a mile away.