

# DON'T CALL ME HERO

Ray Villareal



DON'T  
CALL ME

HERO

**ALSO BY RAY VILLAREAL**

*Alamo Wars*

*My Father, the Angel of Death*

*Who's Buried in the Garden?*

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Summary: Ninth-grader Rawly Sanchez's life is hard—his brother is in prison, he works at his mother's restaurant to help make ends meet, he is failing algebra and the girl he has a crush on does not know he exists—but when his dramatic and impulsive rescue of a wealthy celebrity from a flooded creek makes him famous, he does not know what to think about his new-found popularity.

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*For my daughter, Ana*



# CHAPTER ONE

**R**awly Sánchez sat in a booth at the back of his mother's restaurant and stared blankly at his math sheet. He had gotten a 64 in algebra on his last report card, and it looked like he was headed toward another failing grade.

"How do you expect to run a restaurant if you can't do math?" his mother had scolded him. "I have to figure out paychecks, taxes. I've got to keep up with the inventory. I run the register and total up customers' checks. I need to know math to do all that."

Rawly knew math. At least as much as his mother did. He could add, subtract, multiply and divide without too much trouble. He even had a decent understanding of fractions and percentages. But the homework his teacher, Mr. Mondragón, had given him didn't make any sense.

*Write an algebraic equation for each of the following and solve,* it said at the top of his paper.

Rawly read the first problem again.

1. An airplane pilot is flying from Atlanta to Seattle at a speed of 525 miles per hour. When the plane is 660 miles from Seattle, the pilot is informed that he won't be cleared to land for 90 minutes. At what constant speed should the plane fly to arrive in 90 minutes?



Rawly sighed. To him, the problem was as impossible to understand as the hieroglyphic writings of the ancient Egyptians he had learned about in social studies class. It had taken the discovery of the Rosetta Stone to help decipher the meanings of those strange drawings. Rawly felt he would need some type of Rosetta Stone to help him figure out his homework.

He moved on to the next problem. That one didn't make any sense, either. Neither did the third or fourth one.

Mr. Mondragón had recommended that Rawly start attending Saturday morning tutoring class. But if Rawly did that, he wouldn't be able to see Jaime any more.

Almost every Saturday, for the past eleven months, Rawly and his mother had gone to visit his brother in Midway, Texas. Now, after tomorrow, it would be Thanksgiving break, at the earliest, before he would get to see Jaime again.

Rawly looked at his watch. Nine fifty-two, it said. In eight minutes his mother would close the restaurant, and he could put another wasted Friday night behind him.

Suddenly the doors swung open. Cruz Vega and five of his teammates walk in. With them were Cruz's newest girlfriend, Sharon Gilroy, and four other girls.

The North Oak Cliff Bisons had just won their sixth straight game, having defeated their long-time rivals, the Ernie L. Fedette Falcons, 31 to 7. Cruz had thrown two touchdowns in the game and had scrambled into the end zone for another. The playoffs were on the horizon, there was no question about it. But the Bisons had never doubted they would make the playoffs. Their goal since the beginning of the school year had been nothing short of winning the Class 5-A State Championship. And Cruz

Vega knew better than anyone that he was the Bisons' ticket for getting them there.

Standing under the archway at the entrance of the dining room, Cruz snapped his fingers. "Service! We need some service here!"

His group laughed.

The only customers in the restaurant were an elderly couple that had arrived a half hour earlier. The couple glared at the rowdy teenagers. The man said something to the woman that made her nod in agreement.

Sharon Gilroy looked around the restaurant and wrinkled her nose. The plaster walls were a dingy, off-white color. Pictures of a Mayan village had been amateurishly painted on them. A large pyramid, the famed Temple of Kukulcán, stood in the center of the village. Strands of fat, Christmas tree bulbs were strung across the low ceiling, adding color to the dimly-lit room. Mariachi music played from the speakers above the cash register.

Sharon wrapped an arm around her boyfriend's waist and said, "Come on, Cruz, let's get out of this dump. Anyway, I think the restaurant's closed."

He shrugged her off. "No, it ain't. Somebody'll be here in a second." He looked around for someone to seat them. "Maybe La Chichen-Itza ain't anything fancy schmancy, but at least they serve real Mexican food here. Not like in those uppity, over-priced restaurants like the Mexi Cali Diner that use words like guac and chimmis because guacamole and chimichangas sound too ethnic. Nah, this place is just fine."

Other than Sharon Gilroy, no one else in the group had questioned Cruz's restaurant choice at which to celebrate their win. After all, he was the hero of the game.

"Service!" Cruz snapped his fingers again. "Hey! Anybody working here tonight?"

Rawly ignored him. He was not about to get up to greet Cruz and his friends. They could seat themselves, for all he cared. Or better yet, they could just leave.

Cruz Vega, superstar quarterback. Big donkey deal.

Rawly knew him from school. Not that they were friends or anything. Cruz was a senior and a hotshot football jock, who didn't have time to waste on lowly freshmen like Rawly. Cruz was also a celebrity of sorts. His name was often featured in the football game results in *The Dallas Morning News*.

Vega, Bisons, Too Much for Lakeview  
Quarterback Vega Throws Three TD Passes in Win  
Bison Quarterback Cruz Vega's Late TD Keeps  
North Oak Cliff Unbeaten

A pep rally had been held earlier in the day in the school auditorium, and the entire student body was invited to attend. Cruz spent most of his time onstage blabbing about himself, shooting his mouth off about his "destiny." What especially irritated Rawly was that he had to listen to Cruz repeat his stupid catchphrase over and over: "We're on Cru-u-u-z control, baby! Woo!" He must have said it a dozen times.

Rawly wondered about the blond glued to Cruz's side. He had never seen her before. It didn't matter. There would probably be a different girl with Cruz the next time he saw him.

"Hello-o-o?" Cruz called. "We've got some hungry customers here. If somebody doesn't show up pretty soon, we're leaving."

Good, Rawly thought.

At that moment, Rawly's mother stepped out of the kitchen. When she saw the teenagers, she grabbed an armload of menus and hurried up to them. "*Buenas noches*. How many in your party?"

"How many in our party?" Cruz turned to his friends. "You hear that, guys? I told you we were having a party."

His friends clapped and cheered.

The old couple looked up again and gave them dirty looks.

"There are eleven of us, ma'am," Cruz said. "Unless you count him twice," he added, pointing to Juan Salinas, a monster-size, defensive tackle, affectionately known as Big Feo. "Then we've got an even dozen."

Big Feo grunted.

"Give me just a minute and I'll get a table ready for you." Mrs. Sánchez rushed to the back of the restaurant and told Rawly to help her push four tables together.

Rawly cursed under his breath. Why did those clowns have to show up now? He flung his pencil at his math sheet and dragged himself out of the booth.

After Cruz's group was seated, Rawly served them glasses of water, baskets of tortilla chips and cups of hot sauce.

Cruz clapped him on the back. "Thanks, Pancho. Tell you what. You give us real good service, and I'll leave you a dollar. Okay?" He flashed Rawly a quick wink.

"I'm not your waiter," Rawly said coldly. "And my name's not Pancho. It's Rawly."

"Raleigh?" Cruz snickered. "You mean Raleigh as in the capital of Virginia?"

*Raleigh's the capital of North Carolina, you moron,* Rawly wanted to say, but he held his tongue.

"Hey, you guys hear what this kid's name is?" Cruz said. "It's Raleigh, as in Raleigh, Virginia."

"Hi, Virginia," Sharon Gilroy said sweetly with a wiggle of her fingers.

"Hey, Virginia, bring us some tortillas," Big Feo said. "And some more hot sauce."

Rawly scowled at him. "Somebody will take your order in a minute."

"Well, tell them to hurry it up," Cruz said. "We're starving."

As Rawly walked away, Cruz tossed a half-eaten tortilla chip at him. "C'mon, Pancho, move it!"

Rawly's face burned with anger. He wished he could turn around and slap that smug smile off Cruz Vega's face.

Jaime would have done it. He'd punch Cruz's nose so far into his face, it would stick out on the other side of his head, like a unicorn's horn. Jaime could whip all those loud mouths. But then, none of those guys would have ever spoken to Jaime the way they did to him. They wouldn't dare.

Teresita and Isabel, the only servers working the nightshift, waited on Cruz and his friends.

Rawly returned to his booth, but he could still hear the group talking and laughing. It was impossible not to.

" . . . burned their secondary . . . ran in that third touchdown like their defense had fallen asleep . . . made a fool out of their so-called strong safeties." Cruz couldn't get his fill of bragging about himself. "We're gonna go all the way to the state championship. And you wanna know why? 'Cause we're on . . . "

"Cru-u-u-z control, baby! Woo!" the group chimed in.

The guys high-fived each other. Sharon Gilroy snuggled up to Cruz and kissed his neck. The old couple rose

from their table, paid their bill and left. But not before complaining to Rawly's mother about the noisy teenagers.

It was almost eleven o'clock, and the restaurant had closed, but the partying continued. Not that Rawly's mother minded. Sure, it was late, and the kids were loud. But they were bringing in money, something La Chichen-Itza desperately needed.

Rawly craned his neck and stared at the group as they ate and joked and laughed. A strange feeling tugged at him. He wanted to get up to join the party, to be part of their celebration.

Rawly eyed the blond as she continued to caress and kiss Cruz. He tried to imagine what it would be like to have her as his girlfriend—to feel her body pressed against his, to taste the tenderness of her lips, to enjoy the sweet scent of her perfume.

Cruz turned around to find someone to refill his iced tea glass and caught Rawly staring at them. He smiled and winked.

Rawly shrank against his booth, red-faced.

The partying continued until almost midnight. Finally the group paid and left.

As they made their way to the parking lot, Rawly stood at the front window and watched them. The guys and girls exchanged handshakes and hugs. Sharon Gilroy gave Cruz a long kiss before slipping into the car with him.

After they drove off, Rawly remained at the window, transfixed. He wondered where they might be going next. Home, probably, but maybe not. When Jaime was a senior in high school, he used to stay out late—long past midnight—with his friends.

"*Ándale*, Rawly. Don't just stand there," his mother said, snapping him out of his trance. "Let's get this place cleaned up so we can go home."

Rawly looked around the room. Teresita and Isabel were flipping the chairs upside down and sitting them on the tops of the tables so the floor could be swept and mopped.

"Some day all this will be yours," his mother often told him. "Yours and Jaime's." She said it as if the restaurant was supposed to be some great inheritance Rawly and his brother should look forward to owning.

Rawly couldn't imagine spending the rest of his life working seven days a week, running the restaurant. Jaime certainly wasn't going to do it, especially not after his accident.

Rawly had no idea what his future held for him, but one thing he knew for certain—he was not going to be stuck in this crummy restaurant forever.

While he swept, Rawly's mind drifted off to another place, to another world. Where he was idolized. Where the girls swarmed around him. Where people were dying to be his friend.

Where he was Cruz Vega.