CHAPTER 7

Strike in the Salad Bowl of the World

August 1970

Sabino

The cool ocean air that the lettuce loved wafted into the Salinas Valley from the nearby Pacific coast. Tourism was the major industry along the stunning shoreline of the Monterey Peninsula. Just over the Santa Lucia Mountains thousands of workers toiled in the Salinas fields. Many never saw the ocean, less than twenty miles away. Life behind the lettuce curtain revolved around agriculture. More lettuce grew in the Salinas Valley than anywhere else on earth.

Artichokes, broccoli, celery, tomatoes, and peppers all flourished in the Mediterranean-like clime, but lettuce was the dominant crop—more than 650,000 tons tended and harvested by the lechugeros and the steadies. Lechugeros were the firemen of the fields: tough, strong lettuce cutters accustomed to working as a team. Paid by the piece, a trio of elite lechugeros could cut and box as many as 2,400 heads of lettuce an hour. They followed the crops, from the early lettuce in the Imperial Valley into Yuma, Arizona, in the late winter, and then up north to Salinas. The steadies were irrigators and tractor drivers, who could work nearly year round at a single company. Lechugeros looked down on the steadies’ routine labor, but the steadies viewed themselves as an elite with special skills that earned them a nickel more in their hourly pay.

Sabino Lopez was a steady, an irrigator like his father. Sabino had
made his first trip to Salinas from Mexico as a teenager, joining his father at a company where the older man had worked for years. They lived in Rancho 17, one of several labor camps on the large D'Arrigo Brothers ranch. The housing was cheap and convenient for workers without a car. The small run-down room in the barracks was up against the railroad tracks that ran along Highway 101. Sabino knew the schedule of almost every train, especially at night.

From his father, Sabino learned to cook, to wash his own dishes, and to adjust irrigation valves. The slight seventeen-year-old was a quick study, and at the end of the season the foreman suggested Sabino move in with him and work year round. The teenager was tempted, but his father grumbled at the idea of returning home to Mexico for the holidays and facing his wife without their son. Work never ends, Julian Lopez told his son in Spanish. Sabino declined the foreman’s offer, repeating his father’s counsel: _El trabajo nunca se acaba._

The following spring, father and son returned to Salinas and walked from the bus station to the D'Arrigo ranch. The foreman told them there was no work for them. We’ll wait, Sabino’s father said, thinking they had arrived too early. There won’t be any jobs for you two, the D'Arrigo foreman replied. As they stood in the road, with no money and no place to go,

Sabino’s father asked what his son had told the foreman the year before in turning down the permanent job. _El trabajo nunca se acaba,_ Sabino said. Then Julian Lopez explained to his son why they had been fired: Work ends when the foreman says so. To suggest otherwise was unacceptably presumptuous. The foreman could replace an irrigator as easily as a broken tractor.

The comment the teenager had made unthinkingly sent the pair of irrigators walking down Harkins Road, looking for work. They found jobs at Merrill Farms, one of the larger ranches in the Salinas Valley. There they were paid more than at D'Arrigo, fed hot meals at lunch, and given enough time to water the fields carefully. Irrigators worked in pairs—one in the fields, checking the water flow in each row; the other at the control valves, making adjustments according to hand signals from his partner below. Sabino enjoyed the work and liked to think about the variables; the dirt varied from spot to spot and year to year in how much water it could absorb.

Sabino first heard about the union when he went for help with his taxes. The young irrigator showed the tax preparer all the pay stubs he had saved, another habit acquired from his father. The tax man clucked over Sabino’s long days, all at $1.10 an hour, never any overtime. There is a man coming to help farmworkers, he told Sabino. Cesar Chavez is working in the grape vineyards now. Sabino tucked the information away and waited. Mexican unions were powerful in his home state, Jalisco. They were frequently corrupt, but Sabino had also seen their ability to shift power from employers to workers.

In the midst of the grape strike, Chavez came to Salinas. Sabino was one of hundreds of farmworkers waiting expectantly at the Towne House Motel. A short Mexican wearing a large hat brushed by Sabino and excused himself as he made his way to the front of the room. When he took the podium, Sabino realized he had just had his first encounter with Cesar Chavez. Just as in Delano, his unimposing stature stood in stark contrast to the inspiring speech. Chavez talked about wages and working conditions, but also dignity, justice, and respect. The message resonated with Sabino, isolated in the fields with only a few years of elementary school, no English, but great pride. Quietly, Sabino burned at the way growers viewed Mexican farmworkers—industrious but never smart. The Mexicans had a saying: _Como dios a los conejos, chiquitos y orejones._ The way God looks at rabbits, short with big ears. Sabino had few complaints about his situation at Merrill, But he could not forget the way his father had been
cavalierly fired after years of good work, just for an offhand remark by his clueless son.

Chavez returned to Salinas sooner than he had planned. On the summer day in 1970 when he sat down in Delano to finalize the historic grape contracts, the Teamsters signed secret agreements in Salinas. The vegetable growers had invited the rival union in to preempt Chavez, confident that the Teamsters would neither interfere unduly with management rights nor empower workers. At Merrill Farms, Sabino's bosses brought Teamsters in to proselytize to the workers on company time. But the workers knew about Cesar Chavez's union. Angry that their fate had been determined in secret, the workers felt sold out.

As soon as the Teamsters appeared in the fields, Chavez set up temporary headquarters in Salinas. Sabino and his father joined the large crowds that rallied around the union leader, condemning the grower-Teamster alliance. Workers demanded a strike. Chavez announced the action on August 24, and the next morning thousands of workers shut down the Salinas lettuce fields at the height of the season. The harvest dropped to one fourth of normal.

Harkins Road, the street Sabino and his father had walked down when they were turned away from D'Arrigo two years earlier, now filled with flags and Huelga signs. The farmworkers marched, sang, and waved homemade banners, each company boasting a distinctive flag. When the Teamsters waved American flags to counter the red and black UFWOC banners, the union picked up red, white, and blue flags too. Soon there was not an American flag to be bought in Salinas.

Sabino proudly walked out on strike from Merrill Farms, the cautious steady confidence leaving a coveted job despite the warning that he would never work there again.

Jerry

The vegetable fields of Salinas were foreign territory for Jerry, but his metabolism matched that of the lechugeros. The boy who had thrived on moving from school to school shifted excitedly from the grape victory to the next battle, walking away from the Delano celebration without a backward glance.

He noticed differences in Salinas immediately. The response to Chavez among the vegetable workers was more muted, respectful but not worshipful. The workers were committed, but practical. They wanted to know if the union would help support them during a strike. They listened intently and cheered Chavez with a quiet militancy but without the adulation of Delano.

Vegetable workers tended to be single men, rather than the families that predominated in the vineyards. The lechugeros worked piece rate—paid by the box instead of a flat hourly wage. They negotiated rates that could fluctuate daily, depending on the field, the conditions, and the season. They were a close-knit fraternity, far more accustomed than the grape workers to challenging authority. That trait meshed with Jerry's personality. Anxious to exploit the new terrain, he watched workers stream into the union office, asking for representation, eager to picket, ready to form committees.

The union drew strength from another ally that had been conspicuously absent during most of the Delano strike—the Roman Catholic Church. The bishops had appointed a committee to deal with farm labor issues, and Monsignor George Higgins, a Washington, D.C., cleric, had emerged as the dominant voice. Higgins, known as "the labor priest," had shuttled back and forth a dozen times in six months to facilitate negotiations with the Delano grape growers. In August he made his first trip to Salinas, hoping to mediate a resolution between Chavez and the Teamsters.

Negotiations culminated in an all-night session at the Towne House Motel, Higgins attempting to broker a deal between Jerry and a Teamster leader. Around dawn, Jerry and a law school classmate he had recruited took a break and walked around the hotel parking lot. Bill Carder had joined the union staff only a few months earlier, after a chance encounter with Jerry at a Chavez speech on the East Coast. At Boalt Hall School of Law in Berkeley, Carder had admired Jerry's irreverent confidence and his ability to motivate people. Swayed again by Jerry's personality, Carder moved his family across the country, landing in Delano just as the grape strike was ending. He feared he had missed the major action. Then the lettuce strike began. At dawn in the Salinas hotel parking lot, Carder gratefully inhaled the cold, fresh air. His day had started twenty-four hours earlier on a picket line at four A.M. As negotiations droned on inside the hotel room, he had been taking notes just to keep himself awake. He marveled at his friend's stamina; Jerry showed no sign of wear. Carder, Jerry said exuberantly as they paced the parking lot, we've got the world's greatest jobs.

The negotiating session ended with a brief but ultimately unsuccessful
détenent. Just as in the 1966 DiGiorgio fight, the union battled the growers and the Teamsters—a formidable alliance. Jerry went into the fields to talk with workers at Hansen Farms on the second morning of the lettuce strike and found himself surrounded by a semicircle of ten pickup trucks and a dozen Teamsters. While Jerry exchanged sharp words with the owner of the ranch, a Teamster known as “Tiny” began menacing the attorney. Jerry weighed about two hundred pounds, but Tiny outweighed him by half and easily lifted Jerry off the ground. The last thing Jerry remembered was a black-gloved fist approaching his head. Jerry ended up in the hospital for several days with a concussion. His picture ran in the newspaper, and the union revealed in the publicity. “I didn’t have a chance to test my commitment to nonviolence because I was pinned by this other guy,” Jerry quipped.

Though the workers’ militance made picket lines far more effective than they had been in Delano, Chavez pursued essentially the same strategy: He focused on two large ranches owned by multinational companies whose products were susceptible to boycott pressure. The top target was Interharvest, a large lettuce grower owned by United Fruit, which also marketed Chiquita bananas. Eager to avoid a banana boycott, United Fruit agreed to negotiate a contract if a majority of the two thousand workers signed cards favoring the union.

Monsignor Higgins was selected to count the cards. A United Fruit official kept wandering into the office where Higgins was tallying the votes. Finally the company official beseeched Higgins: We need the union to win decisively so that we can negotiate without antagonizing other growers United Fruit wanted cover. The labor priest kept the conversation secret. When Higgins finished the count, he announced the union had won. He declined to reveal any numbers, and the union trumpeted an overwhelming victory. “Eighty-five, ninety percent of the workers had signed cards. No question who represented the workers,” Jerry boasted. In fact, Higgins’s careful tally showed the union had narrowly fallen short of a majority.

The union signed a contract with Interharvest that provided job security, grievance procedures, $2.10-per-hour minimum wage, and a ban on the use of DDT. Two other ranches followed suit, but the overwhelming majority of companies stayed with the Teamsters, and the workers stayed on strike.

As economic pressure mounted, the growers devised more sophisticated legal strategies to break the impasse. When Jerry came out of the hospital after his concussion, Carder took his boss to a borrowed office, the floor covered with stacks of injunctions. Each grower had filed a separate suit to block the union from picketing. Carder received a continuance from an unfriendly judge when the lawyer pointed out he had to respond to twenty injunctions in three counties in the next eight days. In the first month of the strike Monterey County judges granted sixty injunctions, and the union appealed almost every one.

The growers argued they were innocent victims, caught in a fight between two unions; in California, strikes were illegal in jurisdictional disputes. Jerry decided to challenge that underlying legal assumption. He thought he could prove that the Teamster deals, signed with no input from the workers they purported to protect, were not legitimate contracts. Carder had an idea for another counterattack based on the same reasoning. Collective bargaining agreements were exempt from antitrust charges—as long as the contracts were legitimate. The union had amassed piles of evidence that the growers had signed contracts in secret to preempt the workers from joining the union of their choice. Late at night, Carder worked with a pencil and a yellow legal pad in the deserted Monterey County Courthouse library. (He had gotten a key after he noticed the growers’ attorneys had access.) Unions had never been sued under antitrust law, but Carder thought he could argue that the growers and the Teamsters had colluded to artificially depress wages for workers.

“Often we act on what well may be mistaken assumptions,” Jerry wrote in his journal. “No mistake seems fatal or even important so far. Cesar has been able to breed amazing confidence in some of us who actually believe and act on the proposition that there is no ill from which some good will not flow.”

Eliseo

Summoned to Salinas along with boycotters from around the country, the erstwhile picket captain from Delano saw immediately that this was not Martin Zaninovich’s “so-called strike.” The vegetable workers were really on strike. Eliseo was not in California long enough to see much else.

By the time he arrived in Salinas in early September, after driving from Chicago, Chavez was seeking a way to end the strike. Dozens of injunctions had crippled the protest. The union had run out of money. Gas alone cost a thousand dollars a day. “I have to call a boycott,” Chavez told a group of boycotters who had rushed to California to help. “See, that’s the only card that we have that we haven’t played.”
Chavez called a rally on September 16, Mexican Independence Day, the fifth anniversary of the meeting in the Delano church that had launched the grape strike. He told the strikers to return to work. He told them to find jobs where they could, and to continue organizing around the committees they had formed during the strike. To win, Chavez stressed, the union needed to turn again to the tactic that had won contracts in the grape vineyards. He announced the lettuce boycott the next day, calling it “the most powerful weapon that can be used.”

Eliseo longed to stay in California, preferring action in the fields to selling the cause in a distant city. Chavez asked the farmworker to return to Chicago. Eliseo deliberated for several days. He talked to Dolores Huerta, who had recruited him in the 1966 DiGiorgio strike. He told her his heart was in helping the grape workers in his home town, now that they had contracts. Finally he decided that if he worked for the union, the union's needs took precedence.

Eliseo was not the only hard sell. Chavez had to work to re-recruit the old boycotters, the vast majority of whom were not eager to return to the cities. The lettuce workers voiced even more reluctance to leave their jobs and travel across the country. Only a few agreed. “The strike will never generate the kind of power that the boycott can generate. It just can’t. It’s just not made that way,” Chavez exhorted them, making his pitch for boycott volunteers. The union must exert pressure from the outside to win, he argued. They must move the fight to the cities, away from communities where the agricultural interests held sway.

When he was ready to make boycott assignments, Chavez asked Eliseo and the other boycott leaders to address the volunteers. Dorothy Johnson had first worked on the boycott as a student at the University of Washington, picketing Seattle grocery stores. She had taken her sleeping bag to Delano and camped out in Filipino Hall during spring break her senior year, then headed back to California right after graduation. She ended up on the Washington, D.C., boycott. When the Salinas strike began, she joined the caravan of boycotters who traveled west, more cars joining in at each major city along the route. She celebrated her twenty-second birthday along the way, a week before arriving in Salinas. When Chavez asked the boycotters to select three cities for their next assignment, almost everyone ranked San Francisco first. Johnson did too, though she knew she lacked the seniority to land such a coveted spot. For her second choice, she wrote down Chicago. Eliseo’s reputation was well known among boycotters, and she had been impressed by his speech. He interviewed her briefly and accepted her on the Chicago boycott team. They headed east.

Back in Chicago, Eliseo tried to redirect all the goodwill and credibility he had built up during the grape boycott. But the lettuce boycott was as murky as the grape boycott had been simple. Stores were selling union lettuce—mostly harvested by Teamsters. Eliseo struggled to explain that the Teamsters had sweetheart contracts imposed through an unholy alliance with the growers. At the same time he tried to promote lettuce harvested under the handful of UFWOC contracts. Eating habits worked against the boycott too. Grapes were a luxury item, lettuce a staple. The per capita grape consumption was two pounds a year; for lettuce, the figure was 22.3 pounds. Persuading people to eat cabbage salads was not easy.

Just before New Year’s 1971, Eliseo borrowed a supporter’s Winnetka home for a staff retreat. They tried to develop strategy to rebuild the boycott and treasured the rare respite. “Not only did we enjoy the pool table and the fire place, but we also genuinely appreciated all the food you left us,” Eliseo wrote in his thank-you letter. “Our budget does not allow for many turkeys, and we usually find ourselves in a rut as far as the kinds of food we do buy. The variety of food, then, was also greatly appreciated.”

The boycott limped along. By March, disarray had set in across the country. Boycotters were confused about which produce to target. UFWOC
companies had quietly dropped the UFWOC label. The boycotters found out from supporters who were spot-checking produce. "The biggest gripe—and we aired quite a few—was the decision to leave off the eagle on some lettuce boxes," Eliseo wrote Chavez. "The entire conference was literally outraged that such a decision had been made in the first place. But there was also a lot of discontent with the fact that we had not even been informed of the decision... Frankly we look like fools when our supporters come to us asking questions that we cannot answer."

He ticked off a host of other deficiencies on the part of the Delano administration: Not meeting orders for buttons and bumper stickers. Sending out stickers that did not hold up to the midwestern winters. Passing on inaccurate information. Failing to send key documents, such as existing contracts and details on pesticide usage. Issuing shifting and contradictory directives. Eliseo ended with a recent example: The Chicago team had scrapped a major six-week offensive after receiving an order to suspend the boycott because the union was in negotiations—only to be told days later that the boycott was back on. "I hope we find out soon what is going on," the twenty-five-year-old concluded. "Confusion is not conducive to effective boycotting."²⁰

Weeks later, Eliseo was headed back to California, uncertain of his next assignment. "Anyone that worked with me during the past years in Chicago knows that one of my favorite sayings was 'Boy, will I be glad to get back to California.' But now that the time has come, it's a little harder than I thought it would be," he wrote in his farewell newsletter, printed on the offset press whose acquisition had made him so proud. "For a long time I have wanted to get back to the fields and work with the people who do and will make up the union. For the opportunity and challenge to finally come, I am grateful. On the other hand, our union is what it is today largely because of the sacrifices made by people in Chicago and other cities. Leaving the people who have helped to form our union is difficult, and finding words to thank them is even more difficult."²¹

Those he had worked with in Chicago thanked Eliseo in return. "From your Illinois friends, our lives here have been enriched and will never be the same because you have shared your life with us," read the inscription in a copy of Studs Terkel's Hard Times. From Kathy Fagan and two fellow Northwestern students who had organized the Jewel boycott in Evanston, Eliseo received a copy of Saul Alinsky's book about organizing. Rules for Radicals. The inscription read: "Eliseo, from three radicals you helped break the rules."
THE UNION IS NOT LA PAZ

Chapter 8

The Union Is Not La Paz

May 1971

Chris

Four dozen religious leaders gathered at an isolated compound in the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains, the loud whistles of passing trains the only intrusion. A few small homes, two hulking, run-down hospital buildings, and some small offices dotted the grounds of the former tuberculosis sanatorium. Cesar Chavez saw something different. He sketched for the clergy a grand vision of what the complex would become: a home for the union's leaders, an educational center, and a place to experiment with collectives. A wealthy union supporter had surreptitiously bought the hundred-acre campus about thirty miles east of Bakersfield, and Chavez was gradually moving the union's headquarters away from the vineyards of Delano to the tiny town of Keene, California. He wanted a name that combined religious imagery and peace. He christened the retreat Nuestra Señora de la Reina de La Paz. Our Lady Queen of Peace. The compound quickly became known simply as La Paz.

The visiting clergy were handed a list of items urgently needed to transform the ramshackle buildings into the communal home Chavez envisioned: 240 sheets, 60 mattresses and covers, 100 blankets, 400 towels, 200 pillows, a commercial washer and dryer, a large heater, a floor buffer, a tractor, a jeep, a chain saw, a large coffee maker, and latex and enamel paint. The guests were escorted to their rooms in one of the former hospital wings—decrepit, dingy dorms with shared bathrooms. Accustomed to a subsistence lifestyle, Chris had not thought twice about the accommodations. Besides, he had brought the religious leaders to La Paz for symbolic rather than practical reasons. They were charter members of the National Farm Worker Ministry, and Chris wanted to tie the new group as tightly as possible to Chavez.

Like everyone else, Chris had rushed to Salinas when the lettuce strike began. He coordinated one of four marches that converged in Salinas the first Sunday, the weekend he was supposed to be picking up his middle son from camp. He helped raise money and sent out news alerts. With a militant workforce in the vegetable fields and support from the Catholic Church, Chris was not needed the way he had been in Delano. Chavez had other plans for the minister.

The union had a foothold in the vegetable industry and more than one hundred contracts in the grape vineyards, covering a total of about 48,000 jobs. Chavez turned his attention away from the mechanics of running the union. He focused on how to sustain his movement. He talked about a Poor Peoples Union and farmworker cooperatives. He spoke admiringly about the Jehovah's Witnesses, sending an aide to research how they organized conferences, won court cases, and successfully distributed their newspaper. He viewed a broader effort to organize the poor as the next struggle. He had studied movements that failed and was determined to avoid their mistakes; a new battle was vital to keep people engaged. "You get a union, then you want to struggle for something else," Chavez said. "You just keep struggling like that, that's the only way."

To support his crusade, Chavez suggested that Chris transform the California Migrant Ministry into a national ecumenical organization. A national ministry also would head off another potential problem. Dozens of groups had sprung up to help the rural poor, taking advantage of federal funds available from the War on Poverty. Chris and Chavez wanted to establish an organization they could control, that would consolidate power and ensure that the religious community spoke for farmworkers with a single voice.

Selling church people on a broad-based movement to help the poor was not difficult. Chris quoted Chavez in the Migrant Ministry newsletter, "Our goal is a national union of the poor dedicated to world peace and to serving the needs of all men who suffer." Religious support was crucial, Chris wrote, to build "a union that intends to serve the needs of
all rural poor people and that intends to join with other organizations in fighting for peace and justice throughout the world."

Chris's largest hurdle was defining the relationship between the new ministry and the union. To close the deal, Chavez traveled to Atlanta in January 1971 to attend the founding convention of the National Farm Worker Ministry. His message was not subtle, and some of the union's strongest supporters privately balked. In a confidential letter after the Atlanta meeting, Monsignor George Higgins described Chavez's presentation to the clergy:

He made it abundantly clear that what he wants is a national organization of religious leaders who will support UFWOC 1000 percent with staff and funds and will do so without asking any questions or offering any advice. In my judgment, he appealed very directly to the guilt feeling which so many Protestant social activists seem to harbor in their souls and even went so far as to threaten them with the enmity of the poor (meaning, in this case, farm workers) if the religious community fails to measure up to his expectations.7

Chris scornfully dismissed such criticism, particularly from Catholics. They had not even been around in the early days, when friends really mattered. Even now the Catholic Church had not endorsed the boycott, choosing instead to anoint the bishops' committee as a mediator. Chris also rejected arguments that the ministry risked losing its independence and objectivity by forming such a close alliance with Chavez. Chris was convinced the way to be most effective was from the inside.

When the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) board met for the first time at La Paz, Chris easily addressed one set of complaints: He promised to use hotels the next time instead of the old hospital rooms. The fight over the new ministry's mission was trickier. Chris engineered two moves that bound the group tightly to the union and set the ministry's course for decades. He insisted other groups be allowed to join NFWM only with the approval of Chavez. Then he called a vote on the mission statement he had drafted: "NFWM is a movement within the churches to be present with and support farm workers as they organize a national union under the leadership of the UFWOC to overcome their powerlessness and achieve equality, freedom, and justice." After much debate, the motion passed 14-5, with eight abstentions. Chris was unanimously elected director.8

Chris returned to La Paz a few months later to attend a conference of California boycotters. He spoke with his usual combination of earnest but passionate rhetoric and practical advice. They were fighting for the rights of others, he reminded the boycotters. He walked them through a typical organizing scenario: Form an interfaith committee. Visit store managers and explain the farmworkers' cause. Stress the moral responsibility to help. When the managers say they have a responsibility to their customers, tell them that's not good enough. Then tell them you'll just have to go to the customers yourself. "The boycott is a legitimate moral weapon that the farmworkers should have... that's got to be our position," he told the boycotters. "Keep hammering it again and again and again."

The National Farm Worker Ministry would recruit volunteers for the boycott and subsidize union staff, Chris said. But he saw his role as helping to build something greater as the new, more mature phase of the movement: "There is a sense in which the religious community keeps reminding people, even after the struggle gets real old, keeps reminding people that what this is all about is human beings who are suffering and are trying to take hold of their own lives and build something beautiful for themselves and for all the rest of us."9

Eliseo

Eliseo dreamed of building something too, no less ambitious than Chris's soaring vision. When Eliseo finally returned to the fields, he encountered an operation in as much disarray as the old hospital buildings at La Paz. Eliseo set out to build a local union.

He had driven home from Chicago to Delano, in a blue 1969 station wagon that members of United Auto Workers Local 600 had chipped in to buy for $2,860.10 He was home only briefly before heading to his new assignment: field office director in the Imperial Valley. Chavez went along to help orient Eliseo to the job in Calexico, a border town at the southeastern corner of California. Chavez traveled as usual with his security guard and dogs, Boycott and Huegla. Eliseo followed, driving with Dorothy Johnson. The caravan stopped in Palm Springs because Chavez wanted bagels and lox. Dorothy had never eaten either. She had grown up in a Presbyterian home in Seattle and was accustomed to the boycott diet of baloney and white bread. In Chicago she had started working on the boycott in a suburb and then moved downtown to be closer to Eliseo. They
soon became a couple. They shared a quiet reserve and complete commitment to the cause, and each offered the other a passport into a foreign culture.

They arrived in Calexico in summer, the desert heat so enervating that Dorothy spent the first few days in bed before her body could adjust. The Imperial Valley was a desolate desert transformed into a lush agricultural paradise by the country's largest man-made irrigation system. Water from the Colorado River flowed into the American Canal and then into thousands of miles of canals and ditches that cut a checkerboard pattern as they nourished acres of cotton, melons, and vegetables. In winter the Imperial Valley produced 90 percent of the country's lettuce. Many of the Salinas growers had fields in Imperial, so they could harvest and ship vegetables almost all year round.

Eliseo walked into a mess. The union's tiny storefront office in the Hotel El Rey was infested with crickets. The first staff person to arrive each morning went around with a pail and broom, sweeping up buckets full of crickets and dumping them outside. The tiles were in chaos; opened letters had been returned to their envelopes and dumped into drawers. Eliseo moved to more spacious quarters around the corner, put in a counter to separate the meeting area from the office in back, and organized a filing system.

As the winter lettuce season began, Eliseo faced more complex problems. A key provision of the contracts required that all jobs be filled through a hiring hall run by the union. Growers placed orders for workers; the union dispatched them on a seniority basis. The hiring hall was supposed to eliminate favoritism and the capricious power of labor contractors. In practice, the system created dislocation and chaos. Longtime workers at one ranch were dispatched to a new company. Families were split up. Workers returning from Salinas wasted time by having to apply for their jobs all over. The union, with little administrative capability, was in charge of maintaining complicated seniority lists. Accusations of favoritism were common, and side deals had been the norm—as Eliseo discovered when workers tried to curry favor and secure jobs by bringing food and candy.

Compounding the problem, union leaders had adopted rules that required members to pay dues each month—whether or not they worked. The back of the membership card had twelve squares, one for each month. Dorothy ran the Calexico hiring hall, and her orders were not to dispatch anyone unless each square had a colored sticker showing that the

$3.50-a-month dues payments were up to date. Often workers owed several months for time they had been unemployed. For large families, the amounts added up.

The problems were new to Eliseo. But the hiring hall had been inciting anger in the grape vineyards since the contracts were signed more than a year earlier. Most workers in the Delano and Coachella vineyards had evinced little active support for the union. The growers had acquiesced to contracts because of pressure from the boycott. The hiring hall and the union's rigid policies were antagonizing workers rather than winning them over. Union officials, in turn, looked with disdain at the ungrateful grape workers who had not fought for their contracts and did not appreciate the benefits—bathrooms, drinking water, reliable employment, fixed hours, and overtime.

Cesar's brother Richard saw the difficulties clearly and had been trying to get Cesar's attention for months. A carpenter by trade, Richard Chavez had been on his way to a middle-class life in 1962 when his older brother convinced him to help build a union for farmworkers. When the lettuce strike started and all the union leaders flocked to Salinas, Richard Chavez was left alone in Delano to set up a hiring hall and figure out how to administer dozens of new contracts. Practical by nature, he grasped the problems right away. After visiting all the field offices in mid-1971, he grew increasingly concerned that the union was alienating its members. His brother brushed off the warnings. Richard Chavez thought the union's punitive measures—collecting back dues and firing members who did not attend meetings—so destructive that he simply stopped enforcing them. 11

Eliseo knew none of that. The field office directors did not compare notes. The union ethos was sink or swim; you solved problems on your own. Eliseo soon decided the Calexico hiring hall made no sense for workers returning to the same jobs year after year. He abolished the hiring hall for all but new workers. To address the back dues problem, he came up with the Comité de Cuotas (Committee on Dues). When a worker owed dues and objected to paying, Dorothy sent him to the comité, representatives from each union ranch. Workers made their case to their peers, and the comité decided whether to grant a hardship exemption. The comité served double duty: It deflected anger away from Eliseo while helping to build leadership among the rank and file.

Eliseo quickly made an adjustment of another sort. He jettisoned the rhetoric of the boycott as he absorbed the reality of the fields. For four
years, he had been selling the story of militant poor people fighting for their rights. In Calexico, he found workers focused on their jobs, not on the cause. "I was beginning to believe that all the farmworkers have a little red book stuck in their hip pocket and they’re all ready to go out there and start the revolution with rifles in their hands," Eliseo told a meeting of boycotters. "Then I come back and I find an entirely different story. The farmworkers aren’t there, you know, running down the streets by thousands with rifles in their hand. They’re people who are just trying to make a living. A decent living. These are people who are trying like hell to get themselves a strong union."  

The workers learned about Eliseo too. They had been accustomed to a hiring hall where the union replaced the labor contractor as patronage dispenser. Workers watched skeptically to see if Eliseo really meant what he said about enforcing strict seniority and union rules. They discovered he was a by-the-book guy. He went into the fields to make sure workers were not cutting deals with foremen to bypass the dispatch system. Farmworkers began to read the contracts and learn their rights.

Eliseo seized opportunities to show members how the union worked for them. When he won $163 in back pay and reinstatement for a fired worker, Eliseo presented the check in front of hundreds of workers. He told stories about the boycott and explained the crucial leverage it provided in negotiations. Motivated by Eliseo’s enthusiasm, workers voted to help picket supermarkets in Los Angeles. They arranged a schedule and traveled north one crew at a time.  

With his staff of seven and monthly budget of $2,400 (including living expenses), Eliseo steadily built the union’s base. Attendance at weekly meetings grew, and workers carved out time to volunteer. Rosario Pelayo had seven children and worked full-time in the broccoli fields. Her first encounter with the Calexico hiring hall had left her furious—Dorothy had refused to issue a dispatch because Pelayo owed back dues. But Pelayo watched the system change. She saw Eliseo treat people with respect, and she saw the results. She and her friends became a team of committed volunteers—Becky and Guicho and Pancho the poet, who read his verses at union meetings. Eliseo became convinced that the ranch committees—the leaders elected at each company to represent their co-workers—were key to the union’s success.

In La Paz, Chavez focused on a different key to success. He convened a meeting at the new headquarters to relaunch the lettuce boycott. Volunteers in San Francisco were close enough to the fields to hear criticism about the hiring halls. They had drafted a letter in preparation for the conference, questioning whether the union had sufficient staff and asking why grievances piled up. In his opening speech Chavez angrily rebutted criticism of the union’s contract administration. He put forward field office directors from Fresno and Delano to refute the charges. They piled on the boycotter who had written the letter. Then Chavez called on Eliseo.

The Calexico field office director refrained from the personal attacks that the others had used. He did not address the complaints directly, other than to suggest that those who grumbled generally didn’t have enough work. Instead he talked about his own experience in Calexico. He talked about the importance of having workers take ownership of the contract. “It doesn’t do us any good to have a good leader and good directors or anything, unless the people themselves are really with it, unless they’re organized and are really doing everything in their power to enforce those contracts,” Eliseo said. “See, we don’t enforce the contracts—they do.” He told them about the power that came from sitting down with a committee of workers to negotiate in a grower’s office. He told them the growers were coming to respect the workers and to understand they needed their cooperation. Everything Eliseo was learning in Calexico was shaping his idea of how the union should work.

“I want to make this one thing clear,” Eliseo told the group. “The union is not Cesar Chavez. And the union is not La Paz. The union is out in the field offices, where the people themselves are building it.”

**Sabino**

The quiet irrigator from Jalisco was one of those people building the union. He regulated the water in the fields of one of four vegetable ranches under contract in Salinas—the same companies Eliseo worked with during the winter in Calexico. In a union organized around personality and devoid of structure, the two offices took different approaches. From the start, Salinas was the militant heart of the union.

Sabino worked at Freshpict, which was owned by Purex. The consumer products conglomerate had dumped the Teamsters and signed with the union rather than risk a boycott of Purex’s well-known products, which included Sweetheart soap and Brillo pads. Sabino faithfully attended union meetings, watching and listening. He became friends with an older union leader at the ranch who mentored the irrigator. Sabino in turn helped his friend, whose rigid union dogma and rough edges often antagonized
others. Sabino discovered that his own calm demeanor and willingness to listen helped him play the role of conciliator and broker compromises. He was elected union steward for his crew of steadies. For the first time, he could make a difference not only in his own life, but in the lives of others.

Sabino’s new post, the lowest rung on the union ladder, offered a vantage point from which he observed the battle to establish power in the vegetable fields. The union’s aggressive tactics in Salinas delighted Chavez, who was frustrated by the recalcitrant workers in the vineyards. He soon began extolling the “liberated ranches” of Salinas, triumphant islands amid the hostile “Ranch Nation” controlled by greedy growers.

The differences between Delano and Salinas began with the crops themselves and the fabric of the lives of those who tended the plants. A grape grower nurtured the same vines year after year; he was invested in the fields and tethered to his land. His workers often returned to their same jobs and worked with the same crews, for the same supervisors, in the same fields. Vegetable growers could pick up stakes and plant anywhere. They mostly rented land. They could switch fields every three months, as soon as a lettuce crop matured. The total number of acres under cultivation changed frequently, altering the supply and the price. The structure of the vegetable industry further complicated the economics. There were growers, harvesters, packers, and shippers. They made deals with one another in combinations that shifted depending on the market, the weather, and the workforce. Some vegetable growers shipped their own produce. Some shippers bought all their lettuce from growers. Some shippers hired crews to harvest crops planted by third-party growers. “Union-grown lettuce” often meant lettuce that was planted and harvested by nonunion workers but shipped by a company with a union contract. Freshpict and Interharvest were unusual in that they did everything; hired workers who grew, thinned, irrigated, harvested, packed, and sold the vegetables.

The first ranch to be “liberated” was Interharvest, which had been first to sign a contract in the summer of 1970. A year later the foremen resisted giving up the power they had traditionally wielded. Grievances accumulated, unresolved. Frustrated, the workers introduced the company to la tortuga—the turtle. They worked so slowly, they cut production to 20 percent of normal, reducing their own wages by 80 percent. The union staff from the field office went into the fields and theatrically yelled at the workers, chastising them for breaking the contract. Everyone enjoyed the show—except the growers. Crew leaders strictly enforced the slowdown, arguing for hours with workers who wanted to return to normal speed and make more money. Lettuce was wilting in the fields. Finally the union and the company had a summit meeting. The company met the workers’ demands.

The ranch leaders at Freshpict learned from Interharvest. At Freshpict, the tension grew until there were thirty-seven grievances and no resolution in sight. The company brought in a nonunion crew to harvest some lettuce. Workers decided that one particular foreman who was harassing union members had to go. The tortuga began. The company sent telegrams every day to La Paz, complaining about illegal work stoppages. The two sides met at La Paz, and the company agreed to get rid of the crew boss who had touched off the slowdown and become the symbol of the old power of the foreman. When Freshpict put him back to work two weeks later, the tortuga returned. The company fired all three lettuce crews for violating the contract. The next day the broccoli and celery crews reduced their harvest to 20 percent of normal. Sabino and the other irrigators cut back the flow of water so the crops were getting a fraction of what they needed. The company capitulated in the face of the workers’ new-found solidarity.16

Sabino saw the tortuga as an extraordinary measure, not to be used lightly. The turtle evened out the scales. For years, workers had suffered arbitrary treatment; now they were a force to be reckoned with. No longer could growers take workers for granted. When he went home to visit Mexico, Sabino’s family and friends listened in amazement to his tales about the tortuga, the power of the union, and its fight for justice.

From the vegetable workers, Chavez frequently recounted, he had learned what had to be done in the grape vineyards. The grape workers blamed the union for anything that went wrong. They had to be trained to get angry at the company instead. Chavez said. They had to be taught to subvert the contracts. “If we don’t teach them that, first of all, they don’t deserve a union, and we don’t deserve to be leading,” Chavez said. “The places we really have a good union is where they’ve gone through this kind of a fight,” he said, describing the Salinas vegetable workers’ battles. As he and Marshall Ganz went across the country meeting with boycotters, they told the story of the tortuga. And Ganz always bragged about how the irrigators made sure that the water ran slow.17
As the union slogged through its building phase, not quite at peace but for the moment not at war, Jerry’s mission shifted. Instead of fighting injunctions on picket lines or confronting growers in court, he bantered with them in hotel conference rooms. Jerry found himself cast in a role he relished: negotiator.

Jerry had been drawn to the law because of his natural ability to talk rings around others. He had expected to spend most of his time as a lawyer framing arguments; he had not anticipated so much deal-making. Jerry thought fast on his feet and could argue both sides of an issue, enabling him to anticipate opponents’ moves. He honed his natural instincts by observing his new teacher, a master negotiator.

Chavez was a “gentle intimidator” who used “adversity as an ally, sacrifice as a positive good,” Jerry wrote. He analyzed Chavez’s tactics: “Work and penance. His ability to relax. To clown, to be mean as hell—unreasonable.” Together Jerry and Chavez schemed and plotted pressure points they could push that would in turn exert pressure on the enemy. Just like the carom shots that Chavez was fond of executing at the pool table: You hit one ball that hits another to make the shot. The boycott had proved they could play that game.

Jerry watched Chavez use meetings as a negotiating tool, knowing exactly where he wanted to end up and patiently steering the conversation until he reached that point. Chavez held out for what he wanted even when there were costs. He wore down the opposition, sometimes with a bluff. The union contracts required that growers contribute to a jointly administered health fund. Chavez insisted the union control the fund, and for more than a year he refused to spend the money at all. Growers became increasingly irate about paying into a plan that wasn’t benefiting farmworkers. Finally at a summit meeting Jerry presented a complicated legal argument that asserted the union was exempt from certain federal laws and thus had the power to act unilaterally. He was not at all certain that was true.

Chavez sat in the rocking chair he used for his bad back and rocked back and forth as Jerry made the case. “It was really a hell of a bluff,” Jerry recounted gleefully. “They gave us complete control of the plan. We coerced them that day, which was exactly what they deserved. They agreed to let it be a rubber stamp... I learned a lot about negotiating that day.”

Jerry felt Chavez trusted him, and the union leader gave the lawyer leeway to devise his own strategies. Their styles meshed. Jerry was quick and brisk, feet up on the table and a toothpick in his mouth so often that growers placed them next to his plate at lunch. He joked that he’d given up smoking and gotten Dutch elm disease instead. He was known for his quick repartee and poor dress. When a grower’s attorney asked Jerry how many of the four buttons on his shirt should be open, Jerry responded: It depends on the amount of hair on your chest. The more conservative Delano grape growers tended to take Jerry’s insults personally and found less common ground. His banter held greater appeal for the vegetable crowd. Whether they liked him or not, adversaries admired Jerry’s intellect and feared his memory for detail.

Throughout 1971 Jerry held out hope of reaching an agreement that would void the Teamsters’ sweetheart contracts in the lettuce fields. He held on-and-off-again bargaining sessions with lawyers representing several blocks of vegetable growers. They met as often as twice a week, in hotel suites from Marina del Rey to San Francisco. The most progress Jerry made. “On July 23rd at 2:38 in the afternoon, they agreed to the bulletin board clause,” he reported dryly, referring to the standard clause about what could be posted on the company bulletin board.

By the end of the year, Jerry focused on arguments to present to a meeting with Chavez and AFL-CIO president George Meany. Meany had condemned the Teamster contracts, but the AFL-CIO did not like boycotts; its members worked as meat cutters and retail clerks at the stores the farmworkers boycotted. Meany had asked the union to suspend the boycott and engage in good-faith negotiations, and Jerry had dutifully complied. But the months of glacial progress yielded nothing more than the bulletin board clause. “I sat there for seven months listening to these schmucks,” Jerry told a meeting of union volunteers. “... It’s a lot more fun to be fighting than it is to be listening to this stuff.” Now the union was going to ask the powerful labor federation to support a more aggressive approach, including a lettuce boycott. That would probably mean an independent charter for the farm workers union, so that they could undertake the boycott without compromising the AFL-CIO.

Jerry also looked beyond the lettuce battle to his next negotiating task—the grape contracts, which would begin to expire in early 1973. Complaints about the union’s administration had intensified. The handful of growers who had been the earliest union supporters were now among the most vocal critics. The growers had signed the contracts to buy labor peace. Chaotic hiring halls, wildcat walkouts, and tortugas defeated the purpose. They
appealed directly and through intermediaries in an effort to straighten things out before renegotiations commenced.

Several growers went to Monsignor Roger Mahony, a Fresno cleric who served as secretary to the Bishops' Committee on Farm Labor, and Mahony wrote Chavez to relay the complaints. Keene Larson was trying to make the contract work but found himself stymied by inexperienced, zealous union volunteers, such as the one who ordered him out of his own fields. Workers had so much trouble paying back dues when they returned to Coachella at the beginning of the season that Larson stood outside the hiring hall with several hundred dollars, handing money out to his employees so they could pay up. Instead of breaking bonds with employers and transferring authority to the union, the new system often did the reverse. Mahony warned Chavez that farmworkers across the Fresno diocese expressed resentment and the bishop encountered “increasing animosity towards the UFWC efforts, in particular by many Mexican-American groups.” Chavez sent a curt reply: “You must know things that I don’t.”

Lionel Steinberg, the first grape grower to sign, praised Chavez’s leadership but questioned his administrative ability. Steinberg urged the union to get help from experienced negotiators in the AFL-CIO—an offer Chavez had previously turned down—to avoid problems like back dues, or contracts that expired at different times. Because he had signed first, for example, Steinberg’s wages went up to $1.90 per hour while a competitor was still paying $1.75. Chavez had the opportunity to become one of the great labor leaders of the country, Steinberg said, but only if he focused in that direction. “Is it a social movement or is it a trade union?” Steinberg asked.

Once in a while Jerry privately shared some of those concerns. He confided to Fred Ross that finding plaintiffs for some suits in Salinas had become difficult because the union wasn’t organizing aggressively enough. He urged Ross to talk with his protégé about staying focused on the farmworkers. Richard Chavez intensified efforts to persuade his brother that the union was alienating workers. Cesar needed to be out with the people more, his brother told him. He was losing touch, living in La Paz, away from the fields. He was fooling himself if he thought the people loved the union. The poor staff and rigid policies were backfiring. Richard Chavez went so far as to warn that the union would lose the contracts. But no one took him seriously.

With more than one hundred grape contracts and tens of thousands of dues-paying members, Chavez moved confidently to expand into a national union. The AFL-CIO granted the farmworkers an independent charter, and he began to draft a constitution. When Arizona passed an anti-union law, Chavez staged a twenty-four-day fast in Phoenix and organized a drive to recall the governor. In Florida he signed the union’s first major contract outside California, covering twelve hundred workers who picked oranges for Coca-Cola’s Minute Maid division. Chavez saw Florida, with thousands of farmworkers and horrendous conditions in the fields, as the logical place for the union’s next major base. He pulled Elseo out of Calexico and sent him to Florida to oversee the new contract and build a statewide operation.

Chavez had finished shifting the union headquarters to La Paz, and he wanted Jerry to move there too. Jerry was resisting. He much preferred Delano. With People’s Bar and two movie theaters on Main Street, Delano was a major metropolis compared to Keene, a crossroads with nothing more than a post office, a general store, and the former tuberculosis sanatorium. Nearby Tehachapi, less than half the size of Delano with five thousand residents, held little appeal. The isolated environment at La Paz made Jerry claustrophobic. He did not like meetings, and there seemed to be always an endless meeting underway. It was harder to escape meetings, and harder to escape, period.

Most of all, Jerry shared Richard Chavez’s concerns about being out of touch. Jerry felt removed from the action when he visited La Paz, far from the communities of workers, growers, and attorneys with whom he interacted. Only the railroad tracks of the Southern Pacific, constructed through Keene to bypass the Tehachapi Mountains, connected the rural retreat to the fields of the Central Valley. The tracks built to transport produce from the fields to the cities of southern California ran smack through La Paz, and freight trains regularly rumbled by, their deafening whistles bringing conversation to a halt.

Chavez badly wanted Jerry at La Paz. As an incentive, Chavez offered Jerry any accommodation on the grounds. In the summer of 1972 the Cobens moved into a double-wide trailer at the end of a dirt road, as far as possible from the hospital buildings and offices at the compound that Jerry dubbed “Magic Mountain.”
CHAPTER 9
Back to the Boycott
June 1972

Ellen

Cat Stevens was singing “Morning Has Broken” on the car radio as Ellen Eggers drove from Nevada into California, just a few weeks after graduating from Ball State University. She had come west from Indiana largely by chance. A friend had given her a church brochure listing dozens of summer programs, and Ellen had picked the National Farm Worker Ministry. The ministry was advertising for help on the Los Angeles boycott, and Ellen was looking for a meaningful experience before heading to graduate school in social work. She knew nothing about the lettuce boycott and wasn’t too sure of the difference between Cesar Chavez and Che Guevara. But the internship sounded in line with her career goals, and she was eager to see California.

On June 15 a dozen summer volunteers gathered for orientation at a Los Angeles church on Sepulveda Boulevard, and Ellen met Chris. He showed films about the history of the union. Then he explained the boycott, which Chavez had officially relaunched a few weeks earlier. Within minutes Chris won over the enthusiastic twenty-year-old from Muncie. He conveyed the justness of the cause and the urgency, and Ellen could see how much he cared. Chris sketched out for the new recruits the moral imperative. He stressed that farmworkers were counting on them. Just days before, Ellen had gorged on lettuce to get her fill for the summer. Swayed by Chris’s passion, she moved quickly from ignorance to outrage.

Chris divided up the summer interns among the coordinators and assigned Ellen to a group led by Sister Ruth Shy. Shy had grown up in St. Louis, where she had helped host Chavez on his 1969 national tour with Chris. She moved to Denver and joined the Sisters of Loretto, one of the most progressive orders of the Catholic Church. The sisters had invited the Denver boycott director to a meeting. After listening to the story of the farmworker from Delano, the nuns endorsed the boycott. They picketed Safeway supermarkets, went to jail, published stories about the boycott in their newsletter, and sewed black and red Huelga flags for a Salinas protest march. By the time she took charge of Ellen’s boycott group in the summer of 1972, Shy had been working full time for the union in California for more than a year. She helped set up the new union headquarters at La Paz, then moved to the coast and organized farmworkers on weekend bus trips to picket Los Angeles supermarkets. When he geared up the lettuce boycott, Chavez sent Shy to Los Angeles to help. She was a rail-thin, no-nonsense, chain-smoking workaholic, always at her desk when Ellen arrived, and still there in the early hours of the morning, double-checking plans for the next day. Shy was as committed and single-minded as Chris, and Ellen liked them both right away.

Ellen’s group was assigned to the San Fernando Valley, the large suburban swath of Los Angeles to the north of the Hollywood Hills. First they had to find a house that would also serve as an office, and a landlord willing to rent to a group of unrelated activists. The best prospect turned out to be a house owned by the internationally famous transsexual Christine Jorgensen. She wanted to meet the people who would live in her home. Ellen and the others looked at the woman they had read about and tried not to stare at her hands as Shy explained their work. They moved in, and Ellen told friends back home that she was definitely in southern California.

Shy taught the volunteers how to conduct a house meeting campaign to educate consumers about the need to shun nonunion lettuce. Fred Ross had pioneered the house meeting, a Tupperware-style mode of organizing: Ask a supporter to invite a few friends over for a small meeting. Then enlist the friends to invite over their friends, until you reach a critical mass. Shy had the new recruits map the area, drive around, and note friendly churches, likely supermarket targets, and sympathetic community organizations. Then Shy gave them lists of contacts and sent them out to make more.
Ellen was inspired by and a little in awe of the older woman, who had worked directly with Chavez and always had ready answers for the intern's questions. Shy drummed the history of la causa into the young people who had not lived through it, so that they could pass on the lore. Ellen spent days knocking on doors, persuading people to sign cards pledging not to eat nonunion lettuce. She learned her first Spanish: *Esta es una promesa ni comer ni comprar lechuga.* (This is a pledge not to eat or buy lettuce.) One of the farmworkers in the house patiently helped Ellen memorize the words to "De Colores" so she could join the singing at union meetings. The kid from Indiana who had never seen a tortilla learned that burritos were named after donkey ears, while Malcriados were not food but newspapers that she was expected to sell.

Ellen told the union's story over and over. She had never seen Cesar Chavez, but she was proficient at reciting the details of his life. Finally, the first weekend in August, her boycott house was summoned to La Paz. Volunteers from around California gathered in the North Unit, one of the old hospital buildings, to hear Chavez outline their next crusade: Defeat Proposition 22. The growers had gathered enough signatures to place an initiative on the California ballot that would ban secondary boycotts and mandate elections in a way that would effectively disenfranchise all seasonal farmworkers. "The only time we come together is when we're in trouble," Chavez welcomed them ruefully. "We have two days of hard work to determine the best and most efficient course we can take to overcome this threat against our union on Election Day."

His speech was rambling, his manner alternately funny, informative, and stern. Star-struck, Ellen took pictures. Chavez lectured the volunteers on his twin pet peeves: excessive phone bills and poor care of union cars. He shared news of recent victories: a grape grower had finally agreed to negotiate. He outlined a campaign to register one million new voters to help defeat Prop 22. Humbly, Chavez credited the hard work of the people in the room for the union's success. "It is always a source of amazement to me how our union can withstand attacks and stay a viable force and continue to make progress," he said, picking up a bullhorn to be heard over the passing Southern Pacific trains.

Then he shifted from proud father to stern patriarch. At La Paz, people worked harder than anywhere else, he said. He demanded it. If you were not willing to work around the clock, he warned, better leave now. "We are servants of people in need," he told the group. "We don't get paid. None of us... If you see someone not doing his work, you tell them so and work it out. We don't have time to deal with people who are confused. We work day and night, and don't need the extra burden of having other problems."

Ellen was so mesmerized by the charismatic leader that she scarcely paid attention to the substance of his talk. Besides, she was going home in a few weeks; she would not be around long enough to fight Prop 22. But she loved being at La Paz. At night she listened to Jessica Govea, her beautiful voice singing union songs and traditional Mexican ballads. Ellen soaked up the atmosphere of people drawn together by a common purpose.

The next week, boycott director LeRoy Chatfield summoned the Los Angeles boycott staff from around the county to a meeting downtown. The union was in a life-or-death struggle, he told the volunteers. All of them would be expected to work seven days a week, instead of six, until Election Day. The summer volunteers would please stay on. You're staying, Shy said to Ellen as they headed back to the San Fernando Valley. It was a statement, not a question. Ellen demurred. She reminded Shy of the reasons for going home: a new nephew she'd never seen, a new boyfriend waiting, and the wedding of her college roommate. In the car, Ellen thought about what she had been telling people all summer, about the sacrifices she had been asking them to make. By the end of the half-hour ride, she had changed her mind.

Ellen called her mother and sobbed as she explained the importance of the union's struggle and why she had to stay. Ten years from now, she reasoned, she would not remember whether she went back to see her nephew and her boyfriend. But she would always remember if she left when the movement needed her to stay.

**Chris**

The theologian Chris admired most, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, believed in a suffering God on earth. During World War II the German pastor had condemned his own church for valuing its survival above the cause of saving Jews. He was executed for helping Jews escape the Nazi regime. In the union, Chris saw opportunities to practice the sort of servanthood that Bonhoeffer preached.

Chavez described sacrifice as a powerful weapon that made others want to help, to be near those willing to give up so much. Chris was exhibit number one. He often said Chavez had a genius for reaching in and
pulling out the best in those around him. Ellen's decision to stay was a
good example. "We'll organize workers in this movement as long as we're
willing to sacrifice," Chavez told a group of church leaders. "The moment
we stop sacrificing, we stop organizing. I guarantee that." He already saw
danger signs. Three times during his short speech, he mentioned rumblings
disaffection with the union's five-dollar-a-week allowance for its staff.
Voicing particular impatience with farmworkers, Chavez said those interested
in making money should go back to the fields, where wages had in-
creased substantially under union contracts. "So we tell the workers, 'If you
want to make that kind of money, go back. That's where the money's going
to be. Not here.'"22 Chris thought the speech so significant that he typed up
a transcript for supporters, left copies in the office as handouts, and often
quoted the text in his own tracts.

Chris knew he could not match the standard that Chavez set. Chris
would be home at night watching TV with Pudge, while Chavez was reading
labor history and Gandhi. "I need first of all people who can work as
much as I'll work," Chavez told a group of volunteers. "I don't like them to
take vacations. I don't like them to run around in expensive cars. I don't
like them to wear ties. I'm a son of a bitch to work with... I work every
day of the year. I just sleep and eat and work. I do nothing else."23 Chris
pushed himself relentlessly to do more, and where he fell short in hours,
he compensated with efficiency and loyalty. Chavez said he could name
only five people he could count on to get something done, with no
excuses. Chris was one: "They just look at me and blink their eyes and do it.
I may be wrong, they still do it. But it's also a reciprocal thing, they have
more influence with me than most anybody else."24

So when Proposition 22 qualified for the November ballot, Chavez again
relied on Chris. Voters in California could legislate by initiative; anyone
who gathered a sufficient number of signatures could place a measure on
the ballot. The agricultural industry was hoping to defeat Cesar Chavez at
the polls.

In the late spring of 1972, reports trickled in to the union suggesting that
supporters of Prop 22 had used fraud to obtain the hundreds of thousands
of signatures necessary to place the initiative on the ballot. Chris loaned
LeRoy Chatfield a couple of tenacious diggers who worked in the farm
worker ministry. They produced enough evidence for the union to launch
a full-scale campaign to document the extent of fraud.

Ellen joined the small army who worked off barely legible lists of
names and addresses to track down people who had signed the petitions.

Many lived in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. They readily ac-
nowledged they did not realize what they had signed. Most voters said
they had believed the proposition would help farmworkers. At the end of
each conversation, Ellen asked the hoodwinked voter to sign an affidavit.
Within weeks union volunteers across Los Angeles had amassed thou-
sands of sworn statements from people who had been told that Prop 22
would lower food prices. help farmworkers, and support Chavez.

Then the union volunteers located people who had circulated the peti-
tions. The paid petition-gatherers testified they had been told to cover up
the attorney general's neutral, accurate description with a bright pink or
yellow card. They called them "dodger cards," because they dodged the
real intent, saying instead that Prop 22 promised to "give agricultural
workers their true choice of union representation." As one signature-
gatherer told Ellen, he was paid thirty-five cents per signature and used
the subterfuge because "many people would not sign the petition if they
found out that it was against Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers
Union."25

Once the union had collected hundreds of declarations, Chris and
Chatfield took a small group to meet with Secretary of State Jerry Brown.
They asked him to pull the proposition off the ballot. Brown declined, but
said he would help. He denounced the fraudulent tactics, opened an in-
quiry, issued subpoenas, and requested district attorneys initiate criminal
investigations. The publicity raised Brown's political profile, established
an alliance with Chavez, and gave the union a new line of attack as Elec-
tion Day approached.

Chatfield oversaw the campaign, and Chris was in charge of the final
push in Los Angeles: a massive human billboard campaign. "No on 22" and
"Prop 22 is a Fraud" read the giant black and white signs. Chris culled
through city data to calculate how many cars passed through major intersec-
tions at different hours. He figured out where to station billboards for maxi-
mum impact during morning and evening commutes. From all over the
state, farmworkers poured into Los Angeles to help, camping out in tents in
an East Los Angeles park. Volunteers came from around the country. Ellen's
mother flew in from Indiana, to see for herself the cause that had been too
important for her daughter to come home.

Each morning around five, the volunteers gathered in Lincoln Park.
Over coffee and pan dulce donated by Mexican bakeries, they listened to a
pep talk from Chris. Then he dispatched them for the morning rush hour.
Each team piled into a van that had been stocked the night before with
the giant signs, on foldable poles so that they would fit into the vehicles. Once at their posts, the volunteers spaced themselves out, six or eight to an intersection, and waved the signs at motorists. The novelty alone attracted attention—so much so that Chris quickly jettisoned his plan to position demonstrators on highway overpasses. During the first day they caused several car accidents when motorists looked up to wave.

At lunchtime the volunteers regrouped in the park, and Chris called out statistics on how many cars had driven past their billboards during the morning rush. He went over the theme of the day. Sometimes the billboards stressed endorsements: "Catholic Bishops say No on 22," or "LA Times says No on 22." Then he sent the troops out again from two P.M. to six P.M. for the evening commute. Ellen's arms ached at the end of the day.

Single-minded, the union workers paid scant attention to the presidential campaign that was also going on. Merrill Farms, Sabino’s old employer, printed endorsements of Richard Nixon on its lettuce crates. At the Democratic convention in Miami, the union made "boycott lettuce" such a pervasive phrase in speeches and signs that Senator Edward Kennedy began his address with "Greetings, fellow lettuce boycotters."

On Election Day, Nixon, who had proudly eaten grapes during the boycott, won California in a landslide. But Proposition 22 lost overwhelmingly. The union defeated the measure by a margin even greater than Nixon’s win over George McGovern. More than 58 percent voted no on Prop 22, and only 42 percent in favor. Ellen had been so nervous during the day that she smoked a joint, defying the union’s strict policy against drug use. At the victory party she danced with Chavez. Still groggy, she very much regretted breaking the rule.

Chris celebrated in a more sober fashion but with no less joy. The union had risen to the challenge once again, everyone pulling together, united in the face of the enemy, and proving that a righteous cause and hard work could triumph over the most powerful industry in the state.

Sandy

Sandy Nathan left his Pennsylvania home for Columbia Law School in 1966 with the nebulous idea of ending up some cross between a small-town lawyer and a social crusader, a character like Atticus Finch. Higher education also seemed a pragmatic approach to avoiding the draft. Though he had a medical classification that took it into account, a mild hearing impairment, by the time Sandy graduated from college the Vietnam War was conscripting even those whose status had seemed relatively safe. Sandy marched in antwar demonstrations, campaigned for Eugene McCarthy, and joined students occupying buildings at Columbia during protests in 1968.

He graduated from law school and headed west, still far from enamored of his chosen line of work. He gravitated to political activists in Los Angeles. When Sandy passed the California bar, he and three friends arrived at the formal swearing-in dressed in jeans and work shirts—in solidarity with the workers. They leafleted the well-dressed crowd at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion before the ceremony began. Then they were sworn in as lawyers, and the four young men thrust their right fists in the air.

Sandy worked for a poverty law project at UCLA, then joined a lawyers’ collective in Venice, then traveled in Europe. By the beginning of 1973, he needed a job and heard the farmworkers were looking for a lawyer in Los Angeles. He interviewed with Jerry and LeRoy Chatfield at
the end of January. They asked Sandy to work for next to nothing. He accepted on the spot.

After defeating Prop 22, the union had decided to focus on a secondary boycott against Safeway supermarkets. They urged shoppers to shun the stores until the dominant chain in southern California stopped carrying nonunion lettuce. Sandy’s job was to sue Safeway, both as a nuisance and to generate fodder for boycotters around the country. Chris had organized the Interfaith Committee to Aid Farm Workers, which served as the plaintiff for the lawsuits Sandy drafted. As their first collaboration, they held a press conference to display organic cookies purchased at Safeway, carefully preserved in the freezer—and full of bugs.

Next, the Interfaith Committee sued Safeway for selling inferior grades of meat at higher prices. Rosemary Cooper, a longtime supporter in northern California, consulted animal diagrams in her cookbook to gather samples of neck bones labeled as spareribs.8

By the end of his first three months with the union, Sandy had filed eleven nuisance suits. Then federal inspectors detected a residue of the pesticide Monitor 4 on some California lettuce, and the union decided to sue every supermarket chain in California that could be selling the contaminated produce. Sandy knew the approach was so broad that a judge would almost certainly dismiss the suit, but the charge made good headlines. The union served notice on hundreds of supermarkets, and incredible lawyers flooded the union office with calls. Chris sent Ellen and a group of boycotters to camp out in a legislator’s office until he agreed to hold hearings on the poisoned lettuce.

Ellen had been on the Safeway campaign for several months, assigned to picket the Safeway at Third and Fairfax and then the store at Third and Vermont. The union was turning away as many as three thousand people on weekends from eighteen Safeway stores across the city; the chain claimed it was losing more than $5,000 a day at each store.7 Ellen lived in one of two “boycott houses” in Los Angeles, a two-story Victorian on Hobart Street, home to as many as two dozen volunteers. At night the boycotters went “Dumpster diving” at Safeway stores to try to find useful information—or food. Ellen had a sweet tooth and always looked for the day-old sweet rolls. On Sundays, her one day off, she often headed to Venice Beach, where Sandy lived. She borrowed his bicycle and rode along the boardwalk by the ocean, her only escape.

Sandy was expecting to move to Salinas in the spring. Just before he was hired, the union had won a significant victory in the California Supreme Court: The judges ruled that the Teamsters had signed sweetheart deals with the Salinas vegetable growers, without any input from workers, who appeared in fact to favor Chavez’s union. The court refused to void the contracts. But the judges ruled that the strike was not a jurisdictional dispute, since the Teamsters had no legitimate claim to represent the workers. That opened the door to strikes and picketing. The union planned another run at the big vegetable growers. Jerry had told Sandy he would help out on the strike when the lettuce season got going in late spring. The union had received its charter and was now the United Farm Workers of America (UFW).

The three-year grape contracts expired in spring too. Unhappiness with the hiring hall and the administration of the contracts had not abated, but Chavez dismissed the problems as grower propaganda emanating from “unliberated ranches.”

Sandy had been working in Los Angeles for less than four months when he was sent to Coachella in April for a few days. He drove his beat-up MG convertible east from Los Angeles, past the Palm Springs oasis for which the Coachella desert was famous, to the hot, dusty, poor farming areas, acres of grapes and citrus and dates. The grape contracts signed in 1970 were expiring, and the Teamsters were taking them away. The Coachella grape growers had seen how well the sweetheart contracts with the Teamsters worked for the vegetable growers. They wanted the same deal.

When Sandy arrived in Coachella, he called Jerry. Jerry told Sandy he was staying there indefinitely. The union was going on strike.

Sandy was stuck in a hole-in-the-wall hovel in the sweltering desert, some days writing out briefs by hand when he couldn’t borrow a typewriter. For the first time in his life, he felt good about being a lawyer. He was making a difference in people’s lives. And having a blast. He told his parents he was proud of the work he did, and that meant the world to him.