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My true father

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The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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MY TRUE FATHER

A Thesis

by

DAVID RICE

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2015

Major Subject: Creative Writing

MY TRUE FATHER

A Thesis
by
DAVID RICE

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Dr. Emmy Pérez
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December 2015

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ABSTRACT

Rice, David, My True Father. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2015, 139pp., 7 titles.

MY TRUE FATHER is a young adult novel about a Mexican American family in South Texas, the Castillos, falling apart. Abel Castillo discovers he may not be the biological son of his father, Alberto Castillo. Abel's father and brother turn against him and Abel has to decide between families. Abel has to learn what's more important, family bloodlines or those who love you.

DEDICATION

My journey in the MFA Creative Writing Program would not be possible with the support and love of my family and friends. My parents, Rojelio and Maria Rice. My sister, Renée and her husband Josh. My brother Roger. My Grandfather David Hume Rice. Papa Lalo and Mama Locha. Tía Lucía. Tía Minnie. Cousin Raul.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my committee. Dr. Emmy Pérez, Dr. Amy Cummins and Dr. Jaime A. Mejía. Jaime, can you believe it's been 25 years of friendship? The committee was patient and supportive. Every call, text and email I made to my committee was answered quickly and with good advice. You three were a great team.

I want to thank Liza and Nora in the MFA office for their quick wit and humor. The UTRGV library staff for saying “Shhhh,” and Virginia and George Gause. The student workers in the computer labs, and how about a hand for those folks in the Graduate Office. Dr. Phil Zwerling for helping me with the paperwork and good conversations. David Carren for his friendship and advice on screenwriting. Rob Johnson for his friendship and his Beat class. Marci McMahon for her help with the Mexican American studies program and her Latino Theater class. Eric Miles Williamson for his advice on writing a novel. Good stuff Eric. Steve Schneider for his help in poetry. My classmates: Veronica Solis, Amalia Oritz, Jose Rodriguez and Silvia Vera. And the late great Bill Broz. You will not be forgotten.

All my fellow MFA students were inspiring and supportive. I think my classmates were at times, downright hilarious and their valley humor and insight made every class a great experience.

My friends: Francisco and Yvonne Guajardo, Laura V. Rodriguez, Yvette Benavides, David Martin Davies, Christianna Davies, Rick McNulty, Ellen Stader, Mari Akira, Tony Chapa, Mickey Yawn, Christopher Caselli, Patricia Fraga, Steve Scheibal, Charles and Kirsten Moody,

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago I was presenting at Saint Edward's University in Austin, Texas and I was taking questions from students. One of them made a comment. He said I was changing the names of the characters in my stories into Spanish, and passing them off as Mexican American stories. The professor was a bit worried, knowing I speak my mind and often with too much color. The class was Literature of the Southwest and the students had read Mexican American writers so they had some knowledge of Chicano/a stories, and yet this insulting comment was made.

After class the professor Cory Lock, a good friend of mine, apologized for the student, but I didn't expect a white student to fully understand Mexican American literature. At the class is being offered and he took it. I brushed off his comment because I know when we tell our stories we honor the names of our hometowns and families and I have met my share of folks who don't want to learn about our culture. I have met plenty of Mexican Americans who don't speak Spanish and I that's okay with me. My Spanish is terrible, but I don't run or hide from my Mexican heritage. You won't hear me saying I'm Hispanic. I'm Chicano, Mexicano and Mexican American, but I will never be Hispanic. I love being Mexican American and it's a great feeling to belong to The Rio Grande Valley. But I didn't grow up reading about Mexican Americans in Texas, much less The Rio Grande Valley. The Mexican culture was around me with family stories going back over a 100 years, but we weren't in the books. The only story I knew with Mexicans was

the story about The Alamo in San Antonio. How the brave Texans were surrounded by the Mexican troops and how the Texans fought with honor for Texas, but the textbooks didn't say anything about how the Texans wanted slaves and Mexicans were against slavery.

Mexicans were the good guys and now Texas hides its shameful past in school textbooks under issue of state's rights. March 2, 1836 known as Texas Independence Day, but independence for whom? On March 2, 1836 there were 5,000 African slaves chained to fields across Texas, and by 1860 there were 58,161 slaves in Texas.¹ But imagine if Mexican American students knew Mexico was against slavery? If Mexican American students knew we were on the right side of the issue we'd have a stronger self-esteem. I think it takes a dose of healthy self-esteem to write about your culture, but living in your culture is not enough. You have to reflect on your personal experiences and study your culture. Talk to your family and ask them about the elders. Learn your past, through books about Mexican Americans and through the oral tradition. And embrace the present and clear a path for others. Every short story, screenplay, play, and poem is based on my life experiences growing up in the Rio Grande Valley. The well of material is vast and Valley writers have universal truths all around us. The novel I have been working on for ten years takes place in my hometown of Edcouch and Edcouch is often a character in my work. Edcouch is not just a town, it's a family member and it loves to talk. I think everybody's town wants to be heard.

In 1980 my family left Edcouch for Austin. I was 16 and didn't know anything about Austin. The furthest I had been was San Antonio and it felt like the Valley, but Austin had bigger buildings and it was and still is, very white. I couldn't get my bearings in Austin and though my school was a good mix of students due to mandatory busing, I was missing home. I didn't know I

¹ Texas Historical State Association

was Mexican until I left the valley and I didn't understand what a Mexican American was until I joined the Chicano Culture Committee at U.T. Austin in 1985. Several friends from the Valley moved to Austin and we became active in the Chicano Committee: Francisco Guajardo, Miguel Guajardo, Jaime Vela, Yvonne Cardenas and others from across Texas. We had help from faculty: Rolando Hinojosa-Smtih and Ricardo Romo. The committee organized conferences and symposiums on Mexican American topics, invited guest speakers who explored the roles of Mexican Americans in American Society and challenged us to speak up for others and more importantly create a space for Mexican American voices and stories. And all the while, we were building our own education.

In December 1989 my brother Roger was killed in a car accident and his death was the beginning of my writing journey. Before his death my plan was to be a politician or maybe go to law school. I was happily married and my wife was supportive of my career choices. I figured with my white last name and my brown skin, I could go far in politics or law, but my passion was writing, but I didn't have the guts to write and who'd be my audience? The Chicano Culture committee focused on social issues and didn't invite any Mexican American fiction writers.

My grandfather David and some high school teachers, Mrs. Zavaleta, Mrs. Meader, Mrs. Nixon and Mr. Ochoa said for me to become a writer, but it was almost an impossible task since I didn't like to read. After Roger died I thought every day about how death comes too quickly even if you live to be 101. A day not doing what you love is a wasted day. A few months after my brother's death I told my wife I wanted to be a writer. She said what we both knew.

“A writer? How are you going to do that? You don't like to read, you can't spell and you can't sit still for five minutes.”

She was right and to top it off I have dyslexia and ADHD. My brother and I weren't allowed to drink coffee or sodas as kids and I still don't drink coffee or sodas. Writing was going to be a challenge, but my wife didn't stop with my lack of skills. What was my subject going to be? I told her I was going to write short stories about being Mexican American and growing up in the Valley. My wife, who was born and raised in Arkansas and had been to the Valley several times, was quick.

“Mexicans don't read and don't buy books. If you write about being Mexican no one is going to read your stories or buy your books. You'll be broke all your life.”

In 1987 I was a reporter at Southwest Texas State University, The University Star and I had some experience in writing and meeting deadlines, but those were news stories, and I wanted to write fiction. I did my best to persuade my wife and explained how I thought there was a market for Mexican American stories, not because I wanted her support, but because I loved her and didn't want to lose her. But honestly I didn't know any Mexican American writers. I had met Rolando Hinojosa Smith in 1986, but I didn't know he was a writer. I had never read a book by a Mexican American writer and by 1990 there were plenty: Rolando Hinojosa Smith, Tomás Rivera, Sandra Cisneros, Dagoberto Gilb, Américo Paredes, Gloria Anzaldúa and many others. But I didn't read any of their works in school or college.

My wife and I went through a painful separation and I decided to focus on reading. I was not in college at the time and drove a UT shuttle, going round and round all day. Before I drove a bus I used to work for the Austin public library and shelved 100's books a day. I knew there were lots of books on how to write and I used to thumb through the pages wondering if I could be a writer. I had a copy of *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*, fourth edition by James H. Pickering. I began to read the stories in the collection very slowly, as I read anyway since I

have dyslexia. I'd go to the public library and look up dissertation abstracts on the stories. I'd sit at a table and read the bio of the author and essays about the story. I wanted to learn how to deconstruct a story and put it back together again. I needed to learn how stories worked: paragraphs, transitions, foreshadowing, metaphors, double entendre, etc.. My grandfather David, who died in 1984, told me a self-educated man can do anything.

In the spring of 1991 I took a creative writing class at Southwest Texas State University and my professor, Karen Brennan didn't like my story too much, "Guilt Shaped Cookies." I later changed the title to "Heart Shaped Cookies." She said she didn't understand it and I told her I didn't write it for her. I was an older student, 27 and had a sense of urgency to my writing. Brennan said she didn't think she could help me but she did what a good teacher should do. Find the right mentor for a student in need. She introduced me to Jaime Mejía who was from Donna, Texas. Brennan and I became good friends. Mejía at the time was the only Mexican American faculty member in the English department. I showed him my story and he read it in front of me and when he finished, asked what Mexican American writers I had read. My answer was a disappointing none. Mejía, an avid reader, loaned me some books and said he wouldn't help until I read the books. Fair enough. I read books by Rolando Hinojosa Smith, Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros. The books by Hinojosa and Rivera were great because they had a Valley feel to them and I could relate. When I was reading Rolando Smith Hinojosa's books, I think it was *Dear Rafe*, I felt as though I knew his writing style and it came to me. It was the mid 80's and I was flying from RGV to Austin on Southwest Airlines and the flight magazine had one of his short stories, "The Gulf Oil Can Tin Santa Claus." It was a great story about home and I wanted to keep the magazine, but thought it best to leave it for someone to read.

I returned the books to Mejía and he had a lot of questions regarding the stories and we talked for over an hour. Mejía wrote his dissertation on Hinojosa Smith and just being with the man who studied one of my heroes, Hinojosa, made Mejía my hero too. It was the beginning of a good friendship but also of high expectations. Mejía asked what my plans were for writing. I told him I wanted to write a collection of short stories and have it published by the time I was 30. I thought if I could write a book by 30 my wife might take me back. I could show her how serious I was about my found passion. Three years to write and publish a book seemed possible.

Mejía has an expressive face and gave me a good dose of reality. He said I was arrogant to think I could write enough stories for a book and he was right. I didn't have an MFA and not even a college degree. But I was determined to write and said I'd follow his advice and commit myself to the discipline required to write my book. Mejía nodded and said we'll see. A month later, one Friday night, Mejía and I were at the Showdown bar in San Marcos having a drink. It was a good night and I had a few friends there. Half way into the night, Mejía leaned over to me and said, "You know what Hinojosa is doing right now?" I didn't know and thought maybe Hinojosa was giving a big talk at a conference. I said I didn't know.

"He's writing and you're here drinking," Mejía said with a disapproving shake of his head.

His line stung deep and to this day, when I'm goofing off, I think Hinojosa is writing right now and I get to writing.

Over the summer I took a short story class with Robert Randolph. It was a short session class and I didn't miss a day. Randolph, like Mejía, was good at deconstructing stories; something I enjoyed because I knew the key to writing stories was studying how they worked. Between Mejía and Randolph I began to work my "Guilt Shaped Cookies." It took weeks of re-

writes. Writing what you know is a great place to start, but you still have to write it well and re-writes are the best part of writing.

My parents were not too keen on me being a writer. I think for most Mexican American parents being an artist is a bad idea. College is meant for getting a degree so you can get a job. A degree in business, science, law or to become a teacher. Something practical because we don't have the luxury of being artists. I'd show my parents my work so they could see I was doing my best, but three magic beans don't mean much to most people. I didn't think of writing as a way to make money, but maybe I should? One day I was in the computer lab of Flowers Hall at Southwest Texas. I spent many hours there working on my stories since I didn't own a computer, but I did own an Olivetti electric typewriter and I used it a lot. The lab director Beverly Braud was super cool and let me print as much as I needed. She even read my drafts and encouraged me to keep writing. The lab assistant, an M.A. graduate student named Mark, was a nice guy too and one day he had a damn good line. I was working on my stories and this girl came in and started flirting with me. After a couple of minutes of giggling Mark came over and kicked her out. I was dumbfounded.

“Why did you do that?”

“You come here to write, right?” Mark asked.

“Yeah.”

“When you're here you think your writing, but you what? You're not writing. You're making money. Writing is making money. Get back to work,” Mark said with a jab of his index finger.

In the Spring of 1992 I submitted my story to the college literary magazine, *Persona*. In 1987 when I was a reporter I'd read *Persona* and thought, there's no way I could ever be in this

fancy literary journal and I never saw a Spanish surname name in it, but Mejía liked the story and so did my parents and I did too. If the journal passed on the story, it'd be okay because my audience was the Rio Grande Valley not central Texas, but of course I wanted to see the story in *Persona*.

In the fall of 1992 *Persona* published “Guilt Shaped Cookies” and though I wrote the story, I didn't write it alone. My parents, Mejía, Jeff Trejo, Eddie Ray Bills, David Robledo and Frank Guajardo read my drafts and to this day, they still encourage me to write as if I'm writing my first story. Frank Guajardo was teaching high school at Edcouch-Elsa and he began to use my stories in his class. These were drafts mind you, but Frank thought they were good enough to share with the students. He even invited me a to speak to his students. At the time, I thought it was good practice and I had been practicing my stories at a coffee shop in San Marcos called the Blue Pearl.

A friend of mine, Courtney Dever, said I should read my stories in front of a live audience. Every Thursday they had open mic at Blue Pearl and a lot of graduate students read their material, so I might as well too, right? By the time I got to Edcouch-Elsa, I had plenty of practice reading out loud and I knew the audience in my hometown might like the stories. I thought if you were Mexican American and liked reading, you might like the stories. But people like stories they can relate to regardless of cultural background or level of education. You don't have to be a bunch of graduate students hanging out in a coffee shop. The best stories are often told at quinceañeras, weddings, funerals, around the breakfast table and bar-b-que pits. People like stories about themselves. Better yet, if we're the heroes in our own story, and don't forget, Mexicans were against slavery.

What I didn't know was the impact of what I was doing. I think Frank knew because he was a teacher and believed Mexican Americans needed to celebrate their stories. A student in one of my presentations at EE was Juan Ozuna. Juan became a teacher and a few years ago I visited his students and he said, when he saw me read my stories, he thought. I can write my own stories too. It was good to hear Juan say he wanted to be a writer and there have been so many more saying they want to write valley stories. I think it's progress for our region and our culture. Edcouch has a lot to say and so does every town, city and neighborhood in the Valley.

My first collection was all about me and about proving something to me. I didn't think too much of how the stories could help in the classroom or help others find their own story. I was a selfish writer - maybe most are?

On June 22, 1994 fourteen stories I wrote were accepted for publication by Bilingual Press. *Give the Pig a Chance and Other Stories* was the title though I thought of maybe calling it *Heart Shaped Cookies and Other Stories*, but *Give the Pig a Chance and Other Stories* was a better fit given I did need a chance. I think Mejía and Hinojosa had something to do with the book getting published. Mejía and Hinojosa knew Gary Keller and I'm sure they asked him to give me a chance. Hinojosa gave my book a blurb, something I didn't ask for, but much appreciated. Mejía helped edit every story along with Frank Guajardo and my parents. The stories had been tested in front of audiences thanks to Frank and my visits to the Blue Pearl, but Mejía suggested I remove the story, "The Circumstance Surrounding my Penis" and to take out the profanity. But I said I wouldn't censor my stories.

"High schools won't be able to buy them and it'll hurt your book sales," Mejía said.

I think what Mejía meant was the need for the book, not about book sales. And looking back I wish I could change the book, but I can be pretty terco. Mejía did give me some stern

advice though. He gave me a big lecture on how I didn't deserve to have a book published. How the stories weren't bad and there were better writers out there. I just got lucky.

“You're young and you can play up the book, but you have a choice. You can be famous or you can be a writer. Let go of the book. Don't hold its hand.”

I wasn't about fame or money. I wanted to be a better writer. I wanted my stories to be judged not on who wrote them or who can read them the best out loud, but for the content. In a time when fame is important and that's every time and recognition from their peers brings validation, well, I get it, but it's not me. Writers die, story on.

Mejía was right about the book sales. Schools couldn't buy it and it still didn't bother me, at first. I got invited to quite a few schools to talk to students and I wasn't good at it. There's a lot that goes into it. Part performance and throw in as much as you can on teaching how stories work. As I visited schools I notice a lack of Mexican American books on library shelves and classrooms. In 1996 there were quite a few Mexican American writers, but not enough in the classroom. I visited a school, I think it was Edinburg and a teacher let me have it. He asked why I put stories in my book he couldn't use in the classroom. I said I was a writer and wasn't going to censor my stories. He gave me an almost angry look.

“Oh, this is all about you, huh? I need books I can use in my class and all you can think about is what you want.”

His comment echoed in my head for months and he was right. Schools needed books Mexican American students could relate to and use to spring board to other stories. I think Chicano/a literature is important, but it's good when they bridge to other stories in the canon and there are lots of great stories in the canon. Sometimes our students need stories with a Mexican American cultural experience they can relate to so they can grasp other stories in the canon.

In 1996, a couple of months after *Give the Pig a Chance* was published I received a letter from Harry Mazer. Mazer found the galley for *Give the Pig a Chance* at the Strand Bookstore in New York City and read the galley. He contacted Bilingual Press for my address and asked me for a story for his new collection, *Twelve Shots: Outstanding Short Stories about Kids and Guns*. I couldn't believe he wanted a short story based on the galley and I knew I had to write a good story if I was to build a working relationship with Mr. Mazer. I wrote, "God's Plan for Wolfie and X-Ray" and his editor at Random House, Lauri Hornik read the story and emailed me for a meeting. I was spending a lot time in New York in the 90's and met her at Random House to talk about the story. She asked me to consider writing a novel. I didn't think I was ready for a novel and I didn't like writing or reading long stories. I'd read a big book and when I was done reading it, I'd say why didn't you just say so in the first chapter?

In 1996 I was flying from New York and in the hop from Dallas to Austin, I met Rob Johnson. We managed to sit together and started a friendship still going strong. He wanted a story for his collection, *Fantasmas: Supernatural Stories by Mexican American Writers*, Bilingual Press 2001. The anthology sounded great. I submitted "The Devil in the Valley." The story first appeared in *The Llano Grande Journal* in 1998.

In 1997, when I began to writing the stories for *Crazy Loco* I was surrounded by students. At the time I was working at Edcouch Elsa High School for the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. How I wrote the stories with students walking in and out of the office is beyond me, but I think their hope for the future and their constant talk of home life was inspirational. Writers are told to write at a desk in solitude, but I wrote my first collection in a computer lab at Southwest Texas State University surrounded by college students. I like to write

with people around me. I'm not sure what it means, but if I am going to write about people, best to be around people.

In 1999 I gave Lauri the short stories and to my amazement, she accepted the collection, but again these stories had been tested by students, friends and family. Edcouch Elsa students read my drafts and the staff of the Llano Grande Center. My editors for every story were Frank Guajardo, Yvonne Guajardo, Jaime Mejía, Samantha Smith, Natasha Sinutko, R. Renee Rice, Lisa Bell, Christopher Caselli, Laura Cloud, Michele O'brien, Laura Rodriguez, my parents and anyone else who took the time to read my stories. Sometimes I'd step out of the office at Llano Grande and come back to find a student reading one of my stories I left laying around. It was a great feeling.

Beats me how many folks have read a draft of my stories, but each one had a valuable comment. And each reader, made the story better. I don't write alone. Given all the support on *Crazy Loco*, Lauri and I had long conversations on each story. She had lots of questions and I was able to answer them, not simply because I grew up in the Valley, but because I was working for The Llano Grande Center and our interest was pedagogy of place or what some call, place-based Education. To study one self in depth and express yourself in print, audio and video.

Frank Guajardo was the one of the founders and the director of The Llano Grande Center, and to watch him from go The Chicano Culture Committee in 1985 to The Llano Grande Center in 1996 was not surprising. And to watch Frank go from high school teacher in 1992 to Dr. Frank Guajardo and my college professor in the fall 2013, was a complete circle. Frank is never without insight into learning. A good friend to the last.

Crazy Loco was released in 2001 and was well received. It won Best Books for Young Adults 2002, was a finalist for the Pura Belpre award, Notable Books for a Global Society, and

finalist for The Pen USA children’s literature award and a finalist for the Tomas Rivera award. But best of all, we got a play out of it. The story “She Flies” was adapted for stage by Mike D. Garcia. Mike is from McAllen and one of the founders of Nushank Theater Collective in Austin. Mike pulled together the cast for the 40 minute play: Marita De La Torre, Gavino Barrera, Anika Treviño and Ellen Stader. Music by Brian Ramos. U.T. Gear UP funded the play to travel across the Rio Grande Valley and over 9,000 students saw the play. I’m happy to say the play, “She Flies” is in my last book, *Heart Shaped Cookies and Other Stories* and schools can read and perform the play whenever they want.

Reading is supposed to engage students and moreover get them excited about literature and the possibilities. Mike D. Garcia has an essay in the book to show the power of a writer and playwright working together. Lots of stories can be adapted for stage and screen and students in our region can bring stories to life.

Though *Crazy Loco* did well with critics and sales, I felt the stories were maybe too long? I thought about what the teacher said years before. Write stories teachers can use in the classroom. I believe literature can lower the drop out rate, but we can’t wait till students are in high school to read Mexican American stories. We have to get 4th and 5th grade students hooked on reading. I thought about writing flash fiction, one page stories with them in mind.

I think stories are written in three levels. First is the plot of the story. Second is the devices used in stories such as metaphors, symbolism, double meanings and foreshadowing. The third level is high concept. What does the story mean and get the students to discuss the characters and their motives. The upside and consequences of the characters’ actions. Stories can teach life lessons and maybe keep students from making the life mistakes.

The idea of flash fiction was a hard sell. Dial Books wasn't too keen on the idea and neither was Bilingual Press. René Saldaña knew I was working on a book of flash fiction. I thought it would be fun to write 100 flash fiction stories and I shared some with René. He was contacted by Jon Scieszka who was putting together an anthology of flash fiction titled *Guys Write for Guys Read: Boy's favorite Authors Write About Being Boys*, 2008. I submitted "Death of a Writer" and it was accepted. René too has a story in the collection. Two valley writers, two valley friends in a collection again. Our first collection was Rob Johnson's anthology and now Jon Scieszka and in the future, it gets better. *Juventud! Growing up on the Border*, VAO Publishing, edited by René Saldaña Jr. and Erika Garza-Johnson, 2013. *Arriba Baseball! A Collection of Latino/a Baseball Fiction*, VAO Publishing, edited by Robert Paul Moreira, 2013. And while it's great to be in a collection with René, it's also an honor to be with so many other valley writers and it's only going to get better. Best of all we get to meet them at schools and literary festivals. And least we forget all the writing going on in middle schools and high schools. Teachers are encouraging students to create books of poetry and stories and others, like David Bowles have started publishing houses, VAO Press. No one writes alone in the Valley.

In 1996 I got a call from Anne Mazer, the daughter of Harry Mazer. She wanted a story for collection she was editing, *Working Days: Short Stories about Teenagers at Work*, 1997. I wrote a story about my brother's death, "The Crash Room." It wasn't an easy story to write, but where I can I write about my family in my stories and Roger is quite a few of them. In 2004 "Tied to Zelda" was published in *Tripping Over the Lunch Lady and Other School Stories*, edited by Nancy Mercado, Puffin Books. Nancy worked for Lauri at Dial Books. I'm happy to say Nancy and Lauri are still in my life. Nancy asked for another story for *Baseball Crazy: Ten*

Stories that cover all the Bases, Puffin Books, 2008. I wrote “Tomboy Forgiveness.” Three months went by and Nancy had not contacted me so I called to ask what’s what.

“David, I’ve read all your stories and this one is the best you’ve written,” Nancy said.

A nice thing to say but that’s one reader in the world and that’s what’s great about stories. You share your stories with your parents, family, friends and colleagues and stories are measured by the reader, not a literary critic or an editor in New York City. The best judge is someone who reads your story, and a forgotten door in their mind opens to the possibilities of their own story.

In 2011 *Heart Shaped Cookies and Other Stories*, Bilingual Press was released. The book is what the teacher asked all those years ago, at least I hope it is. *Heart Shaped Cookies* took stories from *Give the Pig a Chance*, stories published in anthologies, flash fiction and “She Flies,” the play written by Mike D. Garcia. Karen Van Hooft at Bilingual Press wasn’t sure about the collection idea. But I knew the book could do well in schools. Not for books sales, but for the simple need. *Heart Shaped Cookies* book had tested stories. Most of the stories and the play had been tested with students and live audiences. I knew the book was unconventional and most likely wouldn’t get a book review from the critics who give out awards, whoever they are. I knew the best argument for publishing *Heart Shaped Cookies* was based on the book sales of *Crazy Loco*. Every six months I get a sales statement of *Crazy Loco*. At the time over 50,000 copies of *Crazy Loco* had been sold and I told Karen Van Hooft *Heart Shaped Cookies* could maybe sell as many.

Publishing houses like Bilingual Press, VAO Publishing, Arte Publico, Cinco Puntos and Wings Press have to sell books to survive. We have to support publishing houses who print regional stories. When I watch a Mexican American writer present, I buy their book and

sometimes I can't finish the book because I don't like it, but we still need to support the home team.

I've been working on a novel for over 10 years and it has been difficult because I think most stories have been told. How do I write something fresh? I wrote a working draft and Dial Books for Young readers and they said they were interested in the novel and so I began to work on it, but again, I found the story boring. After months of working on it I felt as there was nothing left to write and I submitted *My True Father* in 2010. In 2011, they rejected the book. I don't blame them one bit. My novel was a wreck. The character were shells and the spine was not strong enough to hold the book together. It's shameful to bother an editor with a lousy book, and I have read enough books to know what's lousy.

In 2011 I was knee deep in co-producing two movies in the valley: *Gone Hollywood* and *Los Scavengers*. I, along with Valente Rodriguez, and my co-writer David V. Garcia were having meetings and exchanging 100's of emails weekly. We managed to finish both movies, but it was difficult to bounce back. Both movies went straight to DVD. Producing both movies pretty much got in the way of giving my novel the attention it needed. And on a personal note I lost a wonderful girlfriend, Julie. But that's another story.

In the spring of 2013 Frank Guajardo suggested I try the MFA program at UTPA and the thought of going back to college didn't sound appealing. I had been around MFA creative writing types in Austin and they didn't know the first thing about play dough, much less writing. The best they can do is eavesdrop on conversations because they have very little life experience. They are good writers, but have no story.

I talked to Rob Johnson and he said the MFA was good enough for poet Erika Garza Johnson, and I came to learn poet Amalia Ortiz was also in the program. And I could study with

screenwriting with David Carren who had over 100 screenwriting credits. Frank also said I could work on novel and it would work towards my degree. After lots of thinking I applied and was accepted. I was on a mission in the MFA program. I wanted to take classes to help my writing. To make me a better writer and I was going to make the best of the program.

The first semester in the MFA program I saw Eric Williamson on campus and he asked me why I was in the program and I told him to study with screenwriter David Carren and fix my novel. He asked me how many copies of *Crazy Loco* had sold and I told him over 50,000 copies and he said I'd get published because publishing houses decide to publish you based on previous sales. I laughed and told him it wasn't the case with my novel. My novel needed a major overhaul, but what was going to hold it together? I wasn't sure and though I had plenty to write about the novel had to have a strong spine.

Family dynamics in the valley are interesting, because of the language, cultural, history and region. I have noticed a lot of Mexican American writers focus on external factors. Gangs, drugs and violence in a Latino family, but I think the real struggle is internal. Not man vs. society, but man vs. man. How does a family cope with itself? How does it keep from flying apart because families are always changing; births, deaths, marriages, divorces and family reunions every weekend. I seldom see an official family reunion in the valley. Because they're not a once a year event, they're every weekend.

A novel has to be real for me and I focused on four books, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Ordinary People*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *And The Earth Did Not Swallow Him*. *Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are great reads, but I don't believe the main character in each book. The attention to detail each character has is over the top and I don't expect characters to be so insightful. Scout Finch is only eight and I think she remembers too much in detail. And though

Holden Caulfield is 17, I still don't believe him much either. Both characters have too much control over scenes and dialogue. *And The Earth Did Swallow Him* is spot on, maybe because I'm Mexican American and the stories open a door in my mind to my own family memories. *Ordinary People*, like *Catcher in the Rye* is filled with internal struggle. Both families in the novels are falling apart over the lack of remorse of a son/brother. The struggles fit perfectly with the religious and loyal Mexican American family. Love may not be able to keep a Mexican family together, but loyalty will.

Many Mexican family members are loyal to each other and it leads to lots of internal struggle. A brother puts up with his brother-in-law simply because he's the husband of his sister, and the father of his nephews and nieces. A Mexican American family will always leave a door open for a family member, even if it brings nothing but pain to the family. The internal struggle makes the family even more religious. In many situations if a family can't talk out the pain, they will pray it away.

The internal struggle is far more destructive than the external struggle. As I mentioned earlier using gangs and drugs as the reason for problems in our families is not the issue. Our families have a difficult time with direct conversation. We are polite to a fault and often hope the problems in our families will go away with prayer or time. Mexican Americans love watching movies and TV dramas as a way to communicate. If you go the movies in the Valley you'll see lots of families sitting together, and I imagine on their drive home they talk about the movie. But in reality they're talking about themselves or trying to use the characters on the screen to make a point about what's bugging them.

Valley families, regardless of church affiliation, all suffer from Catholic guilt. I think half of what Mexican Americans do everyday, is do their best to avoid Catholic guilt. But I

don't think it's wrong to make someone feel guilty for not putting family first. Family is priority one, from your valuable time, to the money in your pocket. It's hard for Mexican Americans to get rich, because there's always a family member who needs help and you can't put a price on family loyalty and love. The funny thing is, Mexican Americans would rather have your time over money. To help with the yard, wash the cars, clean the house and put up holiday lights or anything requires action. Mexican Americans appreciate the effort and the willingness to help to each other.

If we as a culture addressed our internal struggles, there would be far fewer external struggles. Our families would be strong and healthy if we could talk about our problems. We love each other so much that we can't bring ourselves to say something critical because we want to be nice, and so we let it go until it becomes an external issue.

My novel is about a family questioning its loyalty. The story center is a father (Alberto) and son (Abel). Abel is rumored not to be the biological son of Alberto. Alberto rejects Abel even though he raised him from birth. Alberto's wife is having an affair and Alberto thinks Abel is covering for his mother. Abel's brother (Adam) who is the biological son, takes Alberto's side in the father and mother conflict. The mother leaves the family, and Abel is left to reconcile with his father and brother. In the novel, Alberto violates an unspoken reality in the valley. Love of family is more powerful than the blood in your veins.

In the Valley it's not uncommon for families to take in children from other families. My father was adopted by my white grandfather, David Hume Rice, in the 1950's. And my tía Mare raised a girl who was given up at birth. She's my cousin and David Hume Rice is my grandfather. Both by heart and it's more important than blood. I know this to be true, but so does every valley kid.

The best stories for valley students are the ones they can debate in class and come to a new understanding. I try to challenge students to think about what they say, and to reflect on their actions. In the novel, Abel's biological father is gay and it's not an issue for Abel or Adam, but it's an issue for Alberto, the father. Valley students know love is more important than blood or sexual orientation. The older generations in the valley have a long way to go in regards to sexism and homophobia, but students in our region will turn the tide. I know they will. But it will take brave administrators, daring teachers and more stories about our region. Stories students can share with their parents. I encourage students to take the stories home to read with their parents, and to come back with questions the parents have. We can't rely on movies to be the catalyst for conversations in our families. Stories and poems read at the kitchen table are more powerful than any commercial media. And stories and poems written by students, and read at the kitchen table, strengthen the foundation of families. Our region is built on story and we are natural storytellers. We as writers, teachers, students and parents must spend a little more time at the breakfast table to tell a story of the family. The phrase, "One time your. . ." creates new doors to insights and future memories.

The UTRGV MFA program has helped with proper instruction, and lots of writing workshops. I know there are critics of writing workshops, but if it makes you a better writer, then share what you write. And poetry is key. I read somewhere that a Raymond Carver said poetry makes you a better writer. I think he's right. And the best thing about the program was being part of a group of valley writers. I also pursued my certification in Mexican American Studies to learn more about my culture. I learned more about the external writing struggles of my culture and how many solutions were internal. If we find our voice, we can rise above the noise. To

believe in ourselves as a culture, region and a people with a great history. A people on the side of justice, and the right side of history.

Years ago I was accepted to Breadloaf at Middlebury College, and I almost went. But I thought, if I go there and I have any writing success they'll take credit for it. I'm not from a loaf of bread. I'm from Edcouch. I'm from pan dulce and Mexican chocolate on sweet Sunday mornings with my family. Walking across UTRGV campus gave me a strong sense of belonging to the valley and my region. My fellow students made me happy. I know they'll write stories, plays, screenplays, poems and Texas will be better for it.

My novel, *My True Father*, has lots of Spanish names, takes place in Edcouch and it's not for everybody. The Castillo family in the novel is falling apart and doing its best to hold on to its family name. Only to learn love is more important than a last name. I hope my parents like it and my friends won't mind. I hope students like it too, but wouldn't it be great if students in middle school and high school had read lots of Mexican American stories before they read my novel and look me in the face and say, "Your book isn't good. I can write a better one."

EL FIN

MY TRUE FATHER

Chapter 1

I knew Ms. Futuro was going to call on me. Teachers always do even if I was in a car crash and in a coma and everybody in the Rio Grande Valley knew it. I watched Ms. Futuro's eyes narrow as she scrolled through the attendance sheet. Her index finger stopped, and made eye contact with me like she knew me, but I didn't know her.

"Abel Castillo." She enunciated my name slowly.

"Yes ma'am."

She walked around her lectern and put her hands on her hips. She had dark brown eyes and wore her hair in a tight bun and had a face smooth as stone. She didn't smile or show any signs of mercy. If her goal was to intimidate me, it was working. The room got so quiet I could hear the seconds on the wall clock.

"Is that your name?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

"Pretty sure? You don't know your own name?"

"Yes, I'm Abel Castillo."

"Well then, it's your lucky day. You get to answer the first question of the school year. Since this is Honors Biology everyone should know this. It can be found in every drop of blood. Abel, what is the double helix?"

I went for the easy answer, "It's DNA, the building blocks of life."

“That’s right. It’s all in the blood. Passed from one to another. Please come up here and sketch the double helix. Students in my class always show their work.”

She crossed her arms and I stood up like I was going to challenge a bully. I walked to the board, but when I was about to draw the twisted ladder, my mind went blank. I closed my eyes and played back what she said because sometimes teachers drop hints. Her words bounced in my head, *Passed from one to another*. I never thought about blood like that. My grandfather passed his blood to my father and my father passed his blood to me, but if that were true, I’d be a star athlete like my older brother. Adam was a natural in every sport, but maybe I had more of my mother’s blood? Two-thirds my mother and one-third my father? There was a knock on the door and I thought great, I get some extra time because now my head was filled with fractions and fractions always messed me up. Ms. Futuro opened the door and was handed a note from a student worker.

“Abel, you’re wanted in the assistant principal’s office.”

“The principal’s office?”

She shook her head, “No, the assistant principal’s office.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong,” I said placing my hand over my heart.

“Maybe it’s guilt by association. Get your stuff and go.”

I walked through the halls trying to figure out what I had done? School just started and I was a ninth grader, a brand new student so how could I have done anything wrong? As far as I was concerned I had only done two things wrong my entire school career. In fifth grade I tripped José Contreras in the cafeteria, making him fall face first into his plate of enchiladas, but he didn’t lose an eye or anything, because enchiladas are soggy and soft and he didn’t even burn his face, because cafeteria food is never hot. But the meanest lunch lady in the cafeteria, Mrs. Grita,

who always wore a whistle around her neck, blew her whistle and was on us like a referee, because she was a referee for the girls' volleyball team, the girls' basketball team, the girls' softball team, the girls' soccer team, and lived to blow her whistle. She escorted us to the principal's office and told him I was to blame and if it were up to her she'd eject me from the game because the whole cafeteria floor was covered with enchiladas, rice and beans, chocolate milk, and was a waste of food and God doesn't like it when we waste food, and her hardworking staff doesn't like cooking for ungrateful children. Then she stomped out saying she had more enchiladas to cook.

The principal asked if I thought it was funny picking on a newly arrived immigrant from México. I said no because there were lots of kids in our town from México. I explained how José knocked me down during P.E. and I was just getting even. José admitted it, but said it was my fault.

“We were running around the track and I was running between the lines, pero éste corre como un burro sin mecate,” he said with exaggerated hand gestures. They say Mexicans can't talk without using their hands, especially if they're trying to be dramatic, so I threw up my arms.

“Nobody told us to stay between the lines. He's just mad cause I'm faster,” I said. The principal threw up his arms and banged his desk.

“You both get detention and you'll sit next to each other, that way, you can be friends.” A stupid idea because we weren't even allowed to talk, so how could we be friends? And I don't know sign language in English, much less in Spanish.

The second time I'd something wrong was in sixth grade. One day I was between classes and the bell was about to ring but I had to pee and by accident I ran into girls' restroom and saw

Albesa Amor in her bra. It was a training bra and there was nothing to see and besides what was she doing with her shirt off anyway? But I let out a nervous laugh and that's all it took. Albesa's mother was the school nurse and the next thing I knew we had a parent-nurse conference. I didn't even know you could have those kinds of meetings? My parents sat patiently listening to Nurse Amor while I tried my best to look sorry but I couldn't even make eye contact with the nurse because I couldn't stop thinking about my mother squashing her breast.

See, my mother was an X-Ray technologist and did mammograms and told me she had given nurse Amor a mammogram. This was confidential information and I wasn't supposed to know and I wish I didn't know, because now all I could think of was her breast. I told nurse Amor it was an honest mistake but she didn't believe me because Albesa told her I pointed at her and laughed. Okay, I did laugh, but it was more of a chuckle and I never pointed. In fact I covered my eyes as fast as I could and ran into a wall trying to get out of there. I could have broken my nose and now I wish I had and then maybe I wouldn't be getting lectured.

Nurse Amor said I needed to be more sensitive. Dad laughed and threw up his arms.

“More sensitive? I think he's too sensitive. He cries at sad movies and even the funny ones and sometimes, even cartoons and he knows how to sew. More sensitive my ass.”

Nurse Amor shook her head, and Mom sighed in defeat. And those were the only two bad things I had ever done: Tripped a kid into a plate of enchiladas and nothing happened and I saw a girl in her training bra and there was nothing to see.

When I walked into the school office Adam was sitting in a chair with his hands behind his head, legs stretched out looking like he didn't have a care in the world.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“What? I’m always here. What are you doing here?”

I put my hands up, “I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s what they all say. Did you walk into the girl’s restroom again?” Adam grinned and raised his eyebrows. “In high school, no training bras.”

I scowled, “Mom said it wasn’t funny.”

“Pft, Dad said it was funny.”

The secretary looked up from the counter and asked me what I wanted. I told her my name and she nodded.

“Yes, sit with your brother and I’ll tell Mr. Bracamontes you are both here.”

I sat quietly for a moment watching kids and teachers walking by and the front desk secretary answering the phone. The school office chatter was getting to me.

“Why are we here?” I asked Adam. I was pretty nervous, but not Adam.

“Pft, who cares? At least we’re not in class. I didn’t do nothin’ and you never do nothin’ so they got nothin’. We’re innocent.”

“Yeah, but it’s the first day of school. Why would they call us to the principal’s office?”

Adam rolled eyes, “Como chingas. He’s not the principal. He’s the assistant principal. He’s got no power. All he does is park cars at football games and stand around in the cafeteria. If we’re in real trouble we’d be seeing the principal and he’s never here,” Adam yawned. We watched kids and teachers walk in and out of the office. Whenever a girl came in and walked to the front desk, Adam looked at me and gestured to the girl’s butt. He’d put out both hands like he was weighing melons and either grinned in agreement or shrugged his shoulders as if to say sure why not. To him all melons were good.

Our tío Chato walked into the office taking off his big straw hat and wiping sweat off his face with a bandana. He wasn't our real tío, but he and dad were best friends and grew up together. They were like brothers since dad didn't have any brothers or sisters, and all tío Chato had was sisters. Mama Cece, our grandmother, invited tío Chato to everything our family did.

Tío Chato was in charge of mowing the yards of the elementary, middle school, and high school. He mowed the baseball field, football field, soccer field and wherever grass grew on school property. Everyday you'd see him riding his mower or guiding a weed whacker around mesquite trees, cactus and palm trees. Tío was a big round man and couldn't even tuck in his shirt. He had the darkest skin of any Mexican we knew, his hairy gut stuck out over his pants and his belly button was permanently filled with grass clippings and so were his ears, and he smelled of gasoline all the time.

“Órale, what are you guys doing here? You guys in trouble o qué?”

Adam was quick to defend us. “We didn't do nothin'. We're innocent.”

“That's what they all say.”

“No really, tío. We didn't do anything, we both got notes from the principal's office,” I said.

Adam shook his head. “Ay, it's the assistant principal and he's got nothin' on us.”

Tío Chato looked around and in a hushed tone said, “The assistant principal? Bracamontes, ese cabrón. Don't tell him nothin.' Even if he gives you detention or expels you from school. Give him nothing.' ”

“We're not saying crap.” Adam crossed his arms. “We're brothers, and brothers stick together no matter what.”

The secretary walked up and said Mr. Bracamontes was ready to see us. Tío Chato adjusted his pants by the belt. “Órale, nos vemos” and left shaking off grass clippings as he walked away. We followed the secretary down the hall, and Adam looked at me and grinned as he pointed at her swaying butt. I scowled and gestured for him to stop. She led us to his office and told us to take a seat. The room was lined with bookshelves filled with books and trophies. We sat in chairs facing a big desk with a computer on it. Adam looked on the desk and saw a nail buffer like the one our mother uses.

He got up and picked it off his desk, “Check it out, this dude does his nails.”

“What’s wrong with you? Put it back.”

“Relax, it’s just a nail buffer.” He put it back and didn’t say anything. The office silence was making me uncomfortable.

“Have you ever been in here?”

Adam shrugged his shoulders, “Yeah, it’s no big deal, but the last assistant principal had baseball trophies, this one has tennis, pft.”

“Do you know who this guy is?” I scanned the room and on his bookshelf was a picture of Ms. Futuro standing next to two men. Adam pointed to the nameplate on the desk. “Yeah, Mr. Lucio Bracamontes.”

Mr. Bracamontes walked in and we stood up like we were taught when an adult walks into a room. I stood with a snap but Adam rose like he was volunteering to do something he didn’t like.

“Such good manners. Please sit, you’re my guests,” he said as he sat. He wore a white pressed shirt molded to his bony body and colorful tie with school children on it. Silver wire-rimmed glasses boxed his brown eyes and his hair was slicked back in thick gel. A gold college

class ring sparkled on his right hand ring finger and his fingernails had a bright pink shine. He didn't say anything for a few seconds then noticed his nail buffer. He did his best to look like it was no big deal and put it in his desk drawer as if it were a pack of gum.

“So, you're the Castillo brothers.” Adam nodded like *yeah, what's it to you?* Mr. Bracamontes leaned forward.

“Let me guess,” he pointed at me. “You're Abel in 9th grade and you're Adam, in 11th,” he said as if he wasn't sure, but he knew.

“Yeah,” Adam nodded. “We in trouble? Cause me and my brother didn't do nothin'. We're innocent.”

He chuckled, “Adam, we're all sinners in the eyes of the Lord. See, I'm new here, and I want to meet every student in the school, because in a way, you're all my kids. One big family,” he said with a chuckle.

“Every student in the school? There's like a thousand,” I said.

“Okay we met, can we go now? I have P.E. and the bell is going to ring and if I'm late I'll have to run extra laps.”

“Adam, you're in baseball, right?”

Adam nodded.

“Yes, I hear you're pretty good. My father played baseball. Abel, what do you do? Are you in any clubs?”

“I want to join the medical field club.”

“A sports jock and a doctor, interesting.” He leaned back. “You two are pretty different.”

Adam frowned. “I like computers. In our car garage, I'm the one who teaches Dad how

to use them. Right Abel?”

“Yeah, Adam can find all the parts we need and cheaper too.”

Mr. Bracamontes raised his brow and acted like he was impressed.

“And Abel, you don’t play sports?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m trying out for basketball.”

“You tried out last year and didn’t make the team. You were the water boy.”

I didn’t know how he knew, but I guessed school people know everything about you. I wanted to say something but I didn’t know what to say, but Adam jumped right in.

“He’s not gonna be the water boy this time. We practice all the time and Abel is a good player. He’ll make it this year.” Adam crossed his arms. I was thinking now I better make the team.

Mr. Bracamontes sat like he was checking us out for some top secret mission and leaned forward with a loony smile.

“Well, it sounds like you two are fine young men. The kind of students we need in this school.” He stood up. “If you ever need anything, my door is always open.” He shook our hands like he had just sold us something we didn’t want.

When we walked into the school hall we looked at each other trying to figure out what just happened.

“What was all that about?”

Adam shrugged, “Pft, he’s a pervert. Let’s sue the school.”

Chapter 2

We lived next to Dad's parents, sweet Mama Cece and gruff Papa Lali, which meant twice of everything. When Adam and I cut the grass for our house, we had to cut theirs too and if there were flowers to plant, and there always were, we had to plant for both houses. And when we put up Christmas decorations, we had to put up theirs too and of course take them down, and Halloween too. And when we washed our parents' cars, we had to wash my grandparents' cars. Whatever we did for one house, we had to do for the other. But being neighbors had lots of great things too.

Papa Lali could fix almost anything and had a tool for every task. Nothing stayed broken in our house because he said things don't like to be broken. The best thing is almost every night they came over for dinner and Mama Cece was a great cook.

"Mom, any more tortillas?" Adam asked, looking around as if the tortillas were hiding, but they're always in the center of the table wrapped in a cloth. Mama Cece unfolded the cloth. "Aquí m'jito." Dad and Papa Lali reached for the tortillas. Under each of my father's fingernails was a dark layer of car grease and mom lightly slapped his hand.

"Alberto, did you wash your hands?"

Dad twisted his hands back and forth, "Qué? They're clean. I used the orange hand cleaner so my hands smell like oranges." He took a whiff of his hands and put them out for Mom to inspect.

"I think you need a manicure," she said.

"Honey, what kind of man does that?"

"Doctors."

"I'm a mechanic. I work on cars, not people," dad said with his chest out.

“Our assistant principal does his nails,” Adam said.

“Did you get sent to the principal’s office again?” Mom said. “What did you do this time?”

“What? I didn’t do nothin’,” Adam said.

“Anything? You didn’t do anything. Not nothing.’ Learn to speak,” Mom said in exasperation.

“But mom, it’s true. He didn’t do anything,” I said.

“How do you know?” Mom snapped.

“Because we both got sent to the office. Brothers stick together,” Adam said with a grin.

Papa Lali grunted, “Did they spank you?”

“Papi, they don’t spank kids anymore,” Dad said.

“Por qué no? Unos nalgasos always works,” Papa Lali said with his mouth full.

Mom rolled her eyes. “So why did you both go to the principal’s office?”

“He isn’t the principal, he’s the assistant principal,” I said.

“That doesn’t matter. He’s still in charge of the school,” Mom said.

“We saw tío Chato and he said the assistant principal is a cabrón,” Adam said.

Mama Cece jumped in, “No maldiciones at the table.”

“But Mama Cece, that’s what tío Chato said,” Adam said.

“No importa, no bad words at the table,” Mama Cece said.

“What did the assistant principal want?” Mom asked.

“He said he wanted to meet every student at school because we’re his kids. What a freak.”

Adam said.

“Adam, don’t talk like that about your elders. Even if they’re freaks,” Dad said.

“Yes Dad,” Adam said.

“So, what did he want?” Mom asked.

“Well, he knew what grades we were in. He called me a computer geek and Adam a jock,” I said.

“Pft, I know how to use computers. I’m the one who teaches Dad how to use them.”

Adam said. “Right dad?” Dad nodded with a grunt.

“Who is he?” Dad asked.

“Mr. Lucio Bracamontes, do you guys know him?” I asked.

Mom shook her head.

Dad frowned, “Lucio Bracamontes. He’s the son of Hector Bracamontes, he’s a daddy’s boy. Rich. His father owns lots of land with oil and he’s gay.”

“Who’s gay?” Mom asked.

“The son, Lucio Bracamontes.”

“How do you know that?” Mom asked.

“Everybody knows. He’s about my age, not married and no kids.” Dad threw his arms up.

“What’s that tell you?”

“Es verdad,” Papa Lali said. “God made him gay so he won’t have any children. It’s punishment because Hector Bracamontes is an evil man and God doesn’t want evil people making babies.”

“No digas eso, Mama Cece said. “God doesn’t punish people and He makes everyone in his own image. We’re all God’s children.”

“You don’t even like Hector Bracamontes,” Papa Lali said. “You worked for him and you said he wasn’t nice.”

“He’s different. He doesn’t know how to talk to people.” Mama Cece said.

“Bracamontes can’t be trusted, Papa Lali said. “I drove trucks for him, and he never gave me my last check.”

“You worked for Mr. Bracamontes?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s how I met your grandmother,” Papa Lali said.

“I thought you guys met at a dance?” Adam said.

“Sí, pero your Mama Cece worked for the Bracamontes’ and I made her quit and she married me and we had your father.”

“You didn’t make me quit,” Mama Cece said. “I was a maid for Mr. Bracamontes and his wife, and I met your Papa Lali and we got married.”

“Were they rich back then?” Mom asked.

“Yes, but now they have oil and they own other things so they’re more rich,” Papa Lali said.

“Does Mr. Bracamontes, the father have a daughter too?” I asked Papa Lali.

Papa Lali paused and mama Cece spoke up. “Mr. Bracamontes raised two children, a son and a daughter. Y es todo.”

“I hear he has other children,” Dad said.

“Don’t be spreading rumors. I raised you better,” Mama Cece said.

“Sorry Mami,” Dad said.

“Sí, those Bracamontes’ have money. They own a private jet and a box at the Dallas Cowboy Stadium,” Papa Lali said.

Adam nearly jumped out of his chair, “What? They have a skybox?”

“Yeah, that’s what the rich do, Dad said. “Sit in a box at the stadium and eat steaks.”

“Even if you gave me all that, I still wouldn’t want to be a Bracamontes,” Papa Lali said.

“Those people have no principles. All they want is money.”

“But Papa Lali, if they have so much money, why is Mr. Lucio Bracamontes an assistant principal?” I asked.

“Hector Bracamontes’ wife was a school teacher,” Mama Cece said.

“Education is a noble profession,” mom said.

“Yeah, but maybe he’s just there to meet boys,” Adam said with a chuckle.

“Adam, that’s not funny,” Mom said.

“It’s not funny and it’s not nice,” Mama Cece said.

“If he touches you boys,” Papa Lali said. “We’ll take his money and get season tickets to the Spurs.”

Chapter 3

I liked high school and thought it was going to be a big school, but 1,000 students is not a lot of people. I had seen most of them at church, the stores, football games, weddings, quinceañeras, and besides, in Edcouch-Elsa, two small towns combined, only had only 7,000 people. So everybody knew everybody better than they knew themselves. Coach Sosa knew me too well. He was my 7th and 8th grade basketball coach and I was the waterboy each year. Each time I tried out for the team and didn't make it, he'd say, "You're not cut out for sports." I didn't know what he meant because my whole family was into sports. My father played football and baseball, and my brother was in cross country and baseball, and my cousins, boys and girls, were in sports. I came from a family of athletes, but the truth was, I was the worst one, and it bugged me.

When I found out coach Sosa was the JV basketball coach, I wished I had flunked 8th grade. At least I'd have a chance to prove myself to someone who didn't have an opinion about my family blood. I knew I'd have to work twice as hard to make the team and that's because I worked twice as hard in 8th grade than I did in 7th grade. I had to do better than my best, because if I made the team, dad would come to my games. He went to Adam's games and meets, and if I played basketball, he'd come to my games too. I spent a lot time watching dad cheer for Adam, and just once, I wanted him to cheer for me. Adam could run without tripping and had complete control over every muscle in his body. He could throw a football with a smooth spiral and never over-threw or under- threw a baseball. When I was six my dad told me, "You throw like a drunk monkey and run like a blind donkey." He said it in a funny way and I don't think he was trying to be mean, but Dad and Adam laughed, I laughed along with them, but it hurt my feelings. I remember crying when I told Mom what Dad said. She smiled and said, "Don't listen

to him. Remember, you were born to read books,” and gently tapped my temple.

My Dad's family had a risky tradition of looking into the future. When a Castillo turned one year old, they were put through a destiny test. Four items would be placed in front of the child: money, bread, pencil and a book. Each future could not be bright, shiny or colorful. The money had to be an old crumbled dollar bill. The bread had to be plain and tasteless. The pencil had to be a faded brown with a dull point and the book, dark and heavy. For each item there were two paths. The money meant you'd always have money or be greedy. The bread meant you'd either never go hungry or be a glutton. The pencil meant you'd be an accountant or just doodle your life away. The book meant you'd be smart and maybe a teacher, or just get lost in someone else's life.

When Adam turned one year old he reached for the bread just like dad did when he was one. But when I took the test I went for the book and it shocked my father and Papa Lali because no Castillo ever did that. Years later my mother told me she wasn't surprised because she loved reading books and I liked reading books too, but no one goes to a library and cheers for people reading books. Readers don't get to wear jerseys with cool numbers on it and go on road trips and get to stop for hamburgers if they finish reading a book. And they don't have cheerleaders jumping for them or a band playing music. All you get is stars put on a poster board in the corner of the library and if you're lucky a box of pencils. I have boxes and boxes of pencils.

When I knocked on the doorframe of coach Sosa's office, he was sitting with his head in a sports magazine and didn't look up. “What can I do for you, Mr. Castillo.”

“Hi, coach. So I hear you're now the JV basketball coach.”

“That's right Castillo,” he put the magazine down. “There's no escape.”

I cleared my throat, “I was wondering if I could try out for the team.”

“I don’t know, can you?”

“Yes coach. I’m really ready this time.”

“You been practicing?”

“All summer with my brother.”

“Yeah, that brother of yours is a natural like your father. Too bad he likes track and baseball. Sabes qué, looks like you’re a little taller. Okay, practice starts next week, and son, you better work three times as hard as last time.”

When I told Dad I was trying out for the JV basketball team, he was under the hood of a truck, working on a motor and hopped down like a happy kid and dropped his hand on my shoulder. The way he lit up when I told him I was trying out made me want to make the team even more.

“Good for you, mi’jo. Let’s see, come here.” One of the walls of the garage had a gray vertical steel beam with dozens of pencil height marks of Adam and me.

“Take off your shoes and straighten up.”

I leaned against the cool beam and stretched my neck as high as I could. Dad took a pencil and let it rest on the top of my head and made a mark.

“Okay, let’s take a look.”

Just then Papa Lali walked into the garage and saw what was going on and clapped his hands. “How tall is he now?”

“Hey Papi,” Dad said. “Abel wants to try out for the basketball team.”

“Pues, that’s good. I’ll get you a lucky rabbit’s foot,” he said with a thumbs up.

“Papa Lali, I already have three lucky rabbits’ feet.”

“Pues, a rabbit needs four legs to run and you need to be fast.”

Dad finished his marking and we stood back to look at the results. “Alright, you’re up to 5' 6”. Not bad.”

“Isn’t that too short?” I said.

“Not if you’re fast like a rabbit,” Papa Lali exclaimed.

“Hey, no excuses but don’t tell your mother that you’re trying out. You know how she gets about sports. Just get on the court and do your best.”

“Thanks dad. I will.”

“I know M’jito. You always do and that’s what matters,” he patted my shoulder. That’s when dad gives me pats on the shoulder, not for getting an award for reading the most books or acing a test or winning three science projects in a row; 2nd, grade, 3rd grade and 4th grade, but for trying out for a sport, and that’s all I needed from him.

I was smarter than most of the guys trying out and I knew the plays, but luck was important and I wasn’t very lucky. I knew I’d have a better chance of making the team if my quilt had a basketball on it. My quilt said I was going to be a doctor. Another crazy tradition in my family, but this one was on my mother’s side.

Every Sunday we’d go to church and then to Mom’s parents’ house for lunch and it was something we had to do, since we saw the Castillo grandparents every day. My brother and cousins threw around a football and I sewed quilts. It started when I was a little kid. I spent Sunday afternoons playing under a quilt being sewed together by the women. I’d lay flat on my back under a quilt frame and watch patches of colors moving across my body. I’d listen to grandmother Reyna, Mom, and the comadres sharing half-truths-rumors about the family. I’d

help by passing cotton and patches. By age five, I could thread a needle and took a seat at the quilt frame and helped create the futures they planned. Each member in the Reyna family received a quilt when they turned one year old and the image on the quilt became the dream of the sleeper, but dreams sometimes almost come true.

Cousin Marcos had a truck on his quilt because they wanted him to own a truck dealership, but instead he drives a garbage truck for the city, but he has health insurance and a dental plan and his kids have straight teeth. Cousin Maria had a big house on hers because they wanted her to live in a big house, but instead she works at a hardware store, but she gets a 15% discount on everything and at Christmas everybody gets tools. Cousin Esteban had an airplane on his quilt because they wanted him to be a pilot, but instead he throws luggage under the plane, but his family gets to fly for free and they never lose their luggage. Cousin Bobby had a baseball on his because they wanted him to be a professional baseball player, but instead he lives behind a city baseball field and gets his windows broken all the time, but with the 15 percent discount cousin Maria gets it all works out.

The quilts they made for Adam and me involved long conversations filled with hopes and fears. Mom said grandmother Reyna wanted to put a T.V. on Adam's quilt so he'd become a famous movie star, but grandfather Reyna said no because he might end up selling televisions. One day, grandfather Reyna was watching Adam playing with a toy rocket ship and Adam threw it across the room and grandfather Reyna clapped his hands and said Astronaut. Grandfather Reyna drew a rocket ship and they titled the quilt "El Primero." Mom said grandfather Reyna wanted Adam to be the first in our family to explore the heavens. My quilt didn't have a long debate and didn't involve toys being thrown around. They put a medical cross on my quilt because they wanted me to be a doctor and that's why I was invited to help sew the quilts. Mom

said grandfather Reyna wouldn't let dad take me outside to play football so I could learn how to sew. He said if I could sew then I could be a doctor, because that's what doctors do. Cut you open, take things out or put things in, and sew you up.

Chapter 4

The first day of basketball practice I got some “What are you doing here” looks from the players and one of the players said “Hey waterboy.” I had tried out with them before when I was in middle school but I was now taller and faster, but they were still taller and faster. There were some other guys I didn’t know and they were on the JV team the year before and so it looked like I was going to have a tough time making the team. The coach came into the gym and blew his whistle.

“Who knows what, ‘Don’t rest on your Laurels means?’” Coach said.

I knew what it meant but I didn’t want to be the first one to raise my hand.

“Come on, all champions know this quote.”

I looked around and the players had blank stares. I slowly raised my hand.

“It comes from the Greek Olympians. Just because you win doesn’t mean you get to relax. You have to keep getting better every time.” I felt stupid saying it because knowing what it means doesn’t mean you can do it.

“That’s right. When Olympians win they put leaves on their heads and that’s called a laurel, it’s a crown. Just because he won, doesn’t mean he gets to rest on his victory. He must play even better to keep the crown. Just because you played last year, doesn’t mean you get to play this year. Everybody is going to hustle 110 percent. If you play at 100 percent, you won’t be on my team. You got that?”

The players nodded and coach blew his whistle. “Let’s go. Run. Move it! Put some speed in it.” We ran as fast as rabbits. He’d blow whistle and shout faster and I felt as though he was

directing his comments at me. After practice he'd give pep talks and if he had anything negative to say about practice, he'd look at me as he said it.

For a week my legs were burning, but I was determined to make the team or die on the court. The drills were almost mathematical and confused me. They weren't the same drills we used in middle school and everyday coach Sosa added something new. During one of his math maze drills I tripped and hit the court hard and coach blew his whistle and everybody stopped. Coach's head popped over me.

“Castillo, you okay?”

I rolled on to my back and focused on his face.

“I think so.”

“Quit flopping. This isn't soccer.”

I got up and he patted my shoulder something, he never did.

“You're doing good Castillo,” he said.

The last day of tryouts I ran as fast as I could and kept my eyes on the ball. After the last sprint, I leaned against the wall with the other players. I was covered in sweat and was breathing like a horse. I looked up and saw Mr. Bracamontes sitting in the bleachers and thought it was weird. I didn't think it was part of his job, but maybe he had nothing better to do? We made eye contact and he waved and it creeped me out. I turned away hoping nobody saw him waving at me.

Coach blew his whistle and said listen up. He stood with his clipboard and I knew it was time for me to start imagining my name being called out. I read somewhere it helps to visualize something and so I visualized the coach saying my name.

“If I call your name, you made the team. If I don’t call your name, thank you for trying out. If you don’t make the team, stay in shape and eat right. Don’t be eating crap out of the machines and don’t be drinking sodas and those stupid energy drinks.” He started calling names and I counted the players in my head. I knew there could only be 12 and when he got to number 12 it wasn’t my name he called. I knew my father would say it was okay and we’d be watching Adam receiving medals and trophies all year. I knew the feeling of rejection and for the first time I was okay with it. Maybe sports weren't in my blood?

Coach paused, took a deep breath and glanced over at the assistant principal and said, “Abel Castillo.” I didn’t believe it and fear spun in my stomach.

“Me?” I asked meekly.

“Yeah, you,” coach said like *how many other Abel Castillo's are trying out?*

I looked at the players who didn’t make the team and they were pissed off and the ones who made the team were pissed off too. Even the coach was pissed off. Everyone was pissed off at me. I looked up at the bleachers and Mr. Bracamontes gave me a thumb up and everybody saw it. Everybody walked off the court and left me standing there. All these years of trying out for the team and when I finally made it, I felt like I didn't earn it.

That night at the dinner table I was quiet. Dad knew it was the day I made the team or not and I could tell he was braced for bad news. He probably visualized all day me saying, “I am going to be a waterboy.”

“So how was school today?”

I nodded and sighed, “I made the basketball team.”

“Finally,” Adam said. “I knew you would.”

“Congratulations M’jito,” Dad banged the table. “All day I kept saying to myself, ““He’s going to make the team.””

“Maybe one day you’ll play for the San Antonio Spurs,” Papa Lali said. “I’ll have to get you more rabbits’ feet.”

Mom narrowed her eyes at me. “You didn’t tell me you were trying out?”

“Mom, please.”

“And your grades?”

“I can keep them up.”

“That’s what Adam said when he started playing baseball.”

“Mom, I’m passing all my classes,” Adam said.

“Passing is not good enough. How do you expect to be a rocket engineer with bad grades.”

“That’s what Grandfather Reyna wants, not me,” Adam said.

Papa Lali grunted and dad put up his hands to stop the bickering.

“Ya, that’s enough. Mi’jo I think it’s great that you made the team, but your mom’s right. Grades are very important. Keep them up and everything will be fine,” he said with a nod. He leaned back in his chair and tried to change the tone. “So your coach thinks you’re pretty good. See, that coach in junior high didn’t realize your potential.”

“Dad, it’s the same coach from last year, Coach Sosa,” I said.

“Well, I guess he thinks you’re better now,” Dad said.

“I don’t know. There weren’t even enough uniforms for all of us. I have to wear one like from 10 years ago. It’s all itchy and it’s number 13 too. Maybe I shouldn’t even be on the team.”

“Come on, mi’jo. You’ve been practicing and you’ve gotten better, right Adam?”

Adam shrugged his shoulders. “He still misses free throws, but he’s faster and he knows all the plays. They’re stapled to wall in the restroom, right in front of the toilet. I know all the plays too and I think they stink.” He laughed. “Get it? They stink?” I chuckled because I did that with everything I studied: the multiplication chart, the periodical element chart and the organs in the human body.

Dad ignored my brother's joke and looked at me. “You made the team because your coach wants the best players,” Dad said with firm hand on the table.

“I guess.” I thought I should tell them who was there because by tomorrow it would be all over school and then all over town. Most of the houses in our town didn’t have internet and we didn’t need it. “Mr. Bracamontes was at my tryouts.”

“Mr. Bracamontes?” Mom asked.

“That dude’s a freak,” Adam said.

“Did he talk to you or something?” Mom asked.

“No, he just sat in the bleachers and when Coach called my name he gave me a thumbs up.”

“I think that guy likes you too much,” Adam said.

“Let’s sue that rich boy,” Papa Lali said with excitement.

Dad put his hands up, “Ya. Look, you made the team. You didn’t miss any practices and you worked just as hard as the other guys. Show them you belong there.”

“I will Dad.”

Chapter 5

All season I did my best. I was even faster than some of the guys and I knew all the plays. At the games I was always ready and cheered for the team, but it wouldn't matter. The coach wouldn't let me play even if were up by a 100 points. At the end of each game I was the only player with a dry uniform, while everybody else was soaked in sweat.

All season Dad, Adam and tio Chato sat behind me but never cheered for me, and why would they? I never set foot on the court. I imagined students and others pointing at me saying that one is the worst player. Finally, Coach let me play in the last game of the year. It wasn't a playoff game, so it didn't matter. We were up by ten points with 30 seconds left on the clock.

I knew this was the moment to show Dad what I could do. I ran up and down the court as fast as I could. On the fast break, I ran to my position and took a quick glance at dad and saw him shaking hands with Mr. Bracamontes and I couldn't figure out why dad would be talking to him? Then out of the corner of my eye I saw an orange blur, but I was too slow. I felt the hard rubber ball hit my face and bust my nose open. I saw coach Sosa put his hand to his face in disappointment and the players went, *oooooo* while some people in the stands started laughing. The referee blew the whistle and stopped the game. Coach Sosa looked me over and patted my back, "Castillo, this is basketball, not soccer," he said. "Hit the bench."

After the game Dad let Adam drive the car so he could practice driving, but Dad was a strict driver's ED instructor.

Dad sat in the passenger seat keeping Adam in line. "Not too fast mi'jo. Smooth and steady. Puro taking it easy and check your mirrors."

"How's your nose?" Dad asked.

“It’s okay. It still hurts a little bit, but coach said there was nothing broken.”

“That assistant principal looked like he wanted to cry when you got hit in the face,”

Adam said with a smirk.

“Adam, keep your eyes on the road,” Dad said.

“I saw him talking to you guys,” I said. “What did he want?”

“He was just bugging us. Asking all kinds of stupid questions and when you got hit, he was like, ‘Awwww, my poor baby,’” Adam said.

“Adam, don’t talk like that.” Dad snapped. “You need to show respect for adults. Even if they’re a little weird. You understand?”

“Okay Dad,” Adam said.

“Adam do you understand? Yes or no?” Dad used his military voice.

“Yes. Respect adults,” Adam said.

Dad unfastened his seat belt and turned to me. “Your assistant principal was just worried. He doesn’t want the school being sued. M’jito, you did good. I know you didn’t play much, but you didn’t quit. You stuck with it and that’s the mark of a winner.”

“Thanks dad.”

“Next year, wear a helmet,” Adam said with a grin and stuck out his tongue and went, “Ahaaaaaaa.”

I laughed a bit. Dad shook his head, “Adam, eyes on the road. You never know what’s ahead.”

Chapter 6

Saturdays were a busy day for my family. Mom would take me to the hospital so I could volunteer and Adam helped dad fix cars in the garage. Dad's dream was to own a chain of shops across The Rio Grande Valley and one day across Texas. He started by joining the National Guard and it helped him get a loan to buy a big box of tools, dig a hole in the ground and build a tin building around it. His plan had three working parts: work on cars every weekend, pay back the loan, and save money to one day build his empire.

Mom said Dad, Papa Lali, tío Chato and some cousins built the tin garage in a few days. One of the Castillo tías was a curandera and she shook good luck ramas on the building and prayed. One of the cousins gave dad a cabrito to slaughter and have a big party. I don't remember, but I've seen pictures of Dad and Papa Lali banging on things and tío Chato operating the backhoe.

From the moment the garage was built, Adam believed it was his. Dad even bought him a box of tools and taught him how to use them. Adam wore a pair of overalls and a pair of work boots so he could be dad's assistant. Dad said he'd get me the same stuff when I got older, but he never did. Adam fixed anything broken. If a light bulb went out, he replaced without being asked. And he loved up keep maintenance. He'd check if the batteries were working in flashlights and every month checked the air condition filter for the house and he was all over the cars. Every fluid level and air in the tires. He looked for things to fix around the house and if everything was working fine, he'd sit in a lawn chair in the garage waiting for something to break.

Mom's life was different from Dad's hot garage. Mom worked at Weslaco General

Hospital. She started as a housekeeper. Cleaning restrooms and patients' rooms and worked her way up to X-ray technologist. When I was little I remember watching her at the kitchen table, sticking oranges with needles, over and over again.

"Mom why are you giving that orange a shot?" I asked.

"Because sticking oranges is better than picking them," she said.

"Honey, can't you do that outside?" Dad said.

"Yeah Mom, needles are scary," Adam said rubbing imaginary pain from his arms.

Mom kept her focus on the orange pores, "I'm never working outside," she said.

One evening Mom placed a big book on the kitchen table.

"What's that?" Dad asked hoping he didn't have to read it.

"Ángel in the blood lab said if I read this book, I can get a better job at the hospital."

"Who's Ángel?" Dad asked with a suspicious tone.

"Ay, Alberto, don't be so jealous. Ángel doesn't date women. He said this book is what I need to read."

Adam leaned over, "What is it?"

"Gray's Anatomy of the Human Body," she said as her finger slid over each word in the title. "It has illustrations of the bones, the veins and all the organs. If you want to be a doctor, you have to read this book."

"It's bigger than the Bible," I said.

"The Bible is for the soul and this book is for the body," she patted the book. "We're going to read this book together."

"Does it have any dirty pictures?" Dad asked.

“It has illustrations of what God made. If you think it’s dirty, talk to God about it,” she said.

Dad leaned back in his chair and let out a huff.

“In the beginning God made us in his own image and there’s nothing dirty about it,” she said with an I’ll-do-what-I-want tone and turned to me with a smile. “And we had to make this book to understand what God created. We’re going to read this book every night and learn everything about the human body. It’ll be fun.”

Reading Gray’s Anatomy wasn’t easy for mom. For months she struggled through the pages with me by her side. Half the medical terms she couldn’t pronounce very well, but every night she stared at the pages and pressed her body to feel the bones under her skin. She’d place her hands to her chest to feel her heart beat and lay her fingers across my little wrist to take my pulse. With each illustration she discovered her body and learned a word. Before long she was quizzing us on the medical terms.

“Your head hurts?” she said to Adam who was complaining about a headache. “It’s your brain that hurts. Your cerebellum.” She placed two fingers on her forehead to show him. Adam touched his forehead and nodded, “I guess,” he said.

“That is called your frontal lobe,” she said with authority.

Dad threw up his arms, “Hijo’le now my head hurts.”

“Well, take an aspirin,” she said returning to her book.

Dad was used to special attention and when he said his head hurt what he meant was honey, take an egg from the refrigerator. Rub the egg between your hands 'til it’s nice and warm, and roll it all over my body until I’ll feel better.

“Honey,” he whined. “An aspirin won’t do nothin.’ I need you to rub an egg on me.”

Adam nodded, “Yeah mom, I need an egg too. That always makes me feel better.”

I smiled, “I want an egg too.”

Mom shook her head with a grin and closed her book. “Eggs have no healing powers. A doctor told me there’s no scientific basis for curing someone with an egg. It’s superstitious nonsense, but if you want, get me some eggs and I’ll rub them all over you.”

We jumped up and ran to the kitchen and returned with eggs ready to roll.

“What doctor told you that?” Dad asked with a low voice.

“A cardiologist. They fix hearts.”

“What does a heart doctor know about what’s good for the head?”

We handed mom the eggs and she took one and began to rub it in her hands to warm it up. She looked at dad and with a raised brow, “They know the head makes the heart work. Okay kids, lie down on the floor and you,” she looked at Dad, “lie down on the sofa.”

“Oh yeah, I can fix a car blindfolded. How many men can do that?” Dad said in a huff.

“You’re the only one, that’s why I love you,” she rubbed his forehead with the egg and dad smirked.

Within a year Gray’s Anatomy paid off. Mom wasn’t mopping floors anymore because she was hired as a file clerk for the X-ray department and since she knew all the bones the techs began teaching her how to X-ray fingers and toes. A year later, without going to college, Mom took an exam, and passed and became an X-ray technologist making good money. On weekends, they let mom bring me to help her file X-rays. I thought it was great. Here I was an eight year old kid getting to look at X-rays of broken bones and mom even took an X-ray of my chest for the elementary science fair. I won second place.

Chapter 7

Every Saturday morning Adam and I dressed for two different worlds. His had the smell of exhaust and grease, and mine the smell of Lysol and blood. We shared a bedroom and as I put on my white lab coat and white sneakers, Adam put on a dark pair of overalls with black work boots. At 15, I was old enough to be an official volunteer at Weslaco General Hospital, and at 17, Adam was driving to the auto part store. I'd go with mom to the hospital and Adam stayed with Dad.

"You should come with us to the hospital, it's pretty cool," I said. I wanted Adam to see what I did, but Adam hated hospitals. He didn't even like drug stores. One time I had to buy Mom tampons because Adam didn't have the stomach for it. He thought it was gross and weird buying "those woman things," but it didn't bug me, because to me, it was a medical thing.

Adam was lacing his boots up. "Those places give me the creeps. Once you go there, they don't let you leave. If you don't die there, they kill you," he said.

"It's not that bad," I said.

"Have you seen any dead bodies?"

"Yeah, but they were all old people. No one lives forever, you know."

"See, that's messed up. I don't want to see any dead people," Adam said.

"What, you're always playing video games where you kill people."

"Yeah but zombies are dead already and I'm doing them a favor."

"You should come. They got hot nurses," I said knowing it would get his attention.

"Yeah, how hot?" Adam asked with a raised brow.

"Real hot and these are women. Not high school girls," I said.

I could see Adam mulling it over. “Do I have to wear a white coat?”

“No, just wear a nice shirt,” I said.

“Yeah, but what about shoes?”

“Everybody wears running shoes. You have lots of them. Just put on your cleanest ones. Come on. It’ll be fun.” I knew I was close now all I needed was cars. “I’ll bet Mom would let you drive too.”

When I told Mom Adam was coming she grinned at Adam. “That’s great and you might learn something. It’s not pretty, but X-rays are about seeing the truth.”

Weslaco General Hospital was small, but busy. They only had one tech at night and took call whenever they needed. When we walked into the X-ray department everyone said hello. Lupita, the file clerk, knew where every file was, and said she’d be happy to give Adam a crash course on the bones in the body. A wall of large white view boxes covered one side the file room and each view box had an X-ray, some with good news and others with bad news.

“Hi Abel. So this is your brother,” Lupita said. “Abel is always talking about you.”

Adam looked a bit surprised. “Yeah, what does he say?”

“That you are a super sports star,” Lupita said with a big smile. “You’re like the big man on campus.”

“Yeah, but guess what? He’s afraid of hospitals,” I said ribbing Adam a little bit.

“I’m not afraid of hospitals. I just don’t like shots,” Adam said while clearing his throat.

“Well here in X-ray we don’t give shots. We just take pictures of the bones. See, your mother takes the X-rays and I file them. Want to see a chest X-ray?” she asked.

I nodded, “Adam, it’s really cool.”

“Can you see the heart too?” Adam asked.

Lupita put a finger in the air, “Ah, some people, that’s all they have in their chest.”

Lupita and Mom showed us images of broken noses, broken arms, broken wrists, broken fingers, broken ribs, broken hips, broken feet and broken toes. Halfway through the broken bones a doctor walked in and Mom stood up.

“Oh, Dr. Steele. How are you?” she said. I had seen other hospital doctors before but I had never seen Dr. Steele. He looked like a California surfer dude with smooth tan skin and bright blonde hair.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Dr. Steele said. “I needed to ask you about a patient you X-rayed a couple of days ago.” He turned to us with a surprised look. “Hey, are these your boys?”

“Yes Dr. Steele. Abel volunteers here on Saturdays, and this is Adam's first visit to the hospital,” she said. “I wanted Adam to see what we do here.”

“Alright, a special guest. What grade are you guys in?”

“I’m in 9th grade,” I said.

“I’m in 11th,” Adam said.

“That’s great. You guys having a good time?”

“Adam and Abel, Dr. Steele is a cardiologist, the best one in South Texas,” Mom said.

“Abel, what does a cardiologist do?” she asked me knowing I knew the answer, but I guess she wanted to show me off.

“They fix hearts,” I said.

Dr. Steele chuckled like a cheesy soap opera doctor. “Well, I try my best.” Mom and Lupita gave courteous giggles.

“So, can I steal you away for a few moments?” he asked.

“Of course, Doctor. Lupita can you watch the boys for a little bit?”

“Sí, sí, como no. I have thousands of X-rays to show them,” Lupita replied.

“Great. I’ll be right back. If you boys want something from the vending machine, it’s just down the hall. You know where it is, right Abel?” I nodded. They walked off and I noticed Adam kept a suspicious eye on the blonde man.

“Bueno, let’s play a game. You boys try to guess what the thing is, Lupita said and began showing us X-rays with objects in people. We got lost in the parade of knives, screwdrivers, pipes, bullets, buttons, paper clips, rings, pennies and dimes.

“People eat pennies and dimes?” Adam asked.

“Pues sí, people put all kinds of things in their mouths. Then, when they go do number two it all comes out,” Lupita said with grandmother honesty. Adam started laughing.

“Pues sí, we give you a big Ex-lax y luego empujas for a long time and it all comes out,” she said as if she has seen it a thousand times. Adam made a face of disgust and I told him it was only natural to do number two.

We looked at some more X-rays for a while and Adam said he wanted a soda.

“Lupita, where can I get a soda?” Adam asked.

“There’s a machine in the staff lounge down the hall.”

“You want to come with me?” Adam asked me. I could tell he was a little nervous about walking by himself in the hospital, but I thought it’d be funny if he saw a dead body.

“Nah, you’re on your own,” I said.

Adam gestured for me to come with him.

“What? There’s no zombies here. This is real life.” Adam gave me an I’ll-get-you- back look and walked off.

Lupita looked at me with a grin. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s just afraid of hospitals.”

I helped Lupita file some X-rays and after a few minutes Lupita pointed at the wall clock.

“I think you better go look for your brother. He could be lost or something?”

I let out a sigh, “Either he’s lost or he’s talking to a nurse, I’ll go check.” I walked down the hall and saw Adam talking to the custodian and I could hear Sonny asking him questions.

“Are you okay? Do you need some help?” Sonny asked.

Adam stared at the man with his mouth partly open, but didn’t say anything and Mom turned the corner of the hall.

“Sonny, this is my son, Adam,” she said. “He’s my special guest today.”

“Qué bueno, it’s good to bring your kids. That way they know what you do here,” Sonny said.

I walked up. “Hey, where have you been? Did you see a zombie or what?” I had never seen Adam looking so flustered.

“I was just coming to get you boys,” Mom said ignoring my concern. “You guys hungry?”

Adam shook his head. “I’m not hungry. I don’t feel good,” he looked at mom.

“I’m going home.” Adam started walking. Mom gestured for me to follow him. Adam walked at a fast pace and when I caught up to him I tried to figure out what was bugging him.

“You okay?” But he wouldn’t say anything. “Hey, if you want out, you're going the wrong way, it’s this way. I pointed down a hall and Adam charged ahead. We walked out to the parking lot and he stopped at the car and gave me a hard look. I couldn’t tell if he was mad or about to cry.

“Adam, what is it?” I said. “You want me to go with you? We don’t have to stay here, you know.”

He snapped. “No, you stay here. You stay right by Mom. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You stay here.”

“Adam, come on. What is it? Did you see somebody dying or something?”

“Didn’t you hear me? Go inside and keep an eye on mom. Don’t let her out of your sight.” He got in the car and I didn’t move. He looked at me, and angrily gestured for me to get back in the hospital.

“Get your ass back in there,” he said and sped off.

When I walked back to the department, mom was x-raying a patient so I sat down and waited in the hall. Dr. Steele strolled by and gave me a half grin and a half friendly wave. I nodded and watched him walk away and decided right there and then, I didn’t like him. When Mom stepped in the hall I told her how Adam left all mad and asked if we should do something. She sighed.

“I can't do anything about that. He's like his father, he just doesn’t like hospitals.” She turned around and went back to work like it was no big deal. I knew mom could be detached, because it was something you had to learn working in a hospital because people die and stuff like all the time, and you had to keep your cool around the staff. Like if someone died in the ER or

anywhere in the hospital you weren't supposed to make a big deal about it and you always downplayed someone's injury no matter how bad it was. But to me it was a big deal that Adam took off in huff, and the fact that she just shrugged it off didn't make any sense to me, because Adam wasn't a patient, he was her son.

Chapter 8

The next day Adam was not being his usual smart-mouth self. It was Sunday and every Sunday we went to Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church and it was when he was at his best and being a smart mouth. My family sat behind Mr. and Mrs. Gamez and they had three good looking daughters and all three were on the cheerleading squad. It drove Adam crazy, but all through mass he didn't make any comments about their butts and I knew this was a sign that something was terribly wrong.

He didn't say how some girls were *not* blessed by God and how some were God's chosen few or how some were lost in the desert for all eternity or how the church could save money if they let us drink beer instead of wine or how the holy sacrament would taste better if they let us dip them in salsa. And right before the part of mass where we had to say "Peace be with you," his favorite part because we got to hug the three sisters, he leaned over to me and said he was going to the restroom. I mean the only reason he liked church was for the Gamez sisters and instead he leaves to go to the restroom?

Adam was not being himself at all. There were no wise cracks at the dinner table either and he let me watch whatever I wanted on T.V. After three days I couldn't take anymore of his kind behavior so I made an opportunity to see what was bugging him. After school I was talking to some friends when I saw him sitting alone on a low brick wall waiting for dad to pick us up. Normally he sat with his track friends and I was the one who sat alone. I walked up and sat next to him and let the hot afternoon breeze flow between us for a bit before.

"What time is dad going to pick us up?" I said.

"When he gets here," Adam said.

"It's pretty hot, huh?" I said.

Adam reached down and picked up a small rock and threw it at a metal trashcan and of course, hit it. "It's the Valley, it's always hot," he said.

"How's cross country?" I asked.

"Same as last year, we suck."

"But, you're the fastest on the team."

"I'm only the fastest because everyone else runs like a bunch of fat pigs," he replied with toss of his hand.

"Hey, pigs are pretty fast," I said with a shrug. "I was watching T.V. and they showed a pig running 10 miles an hour on a treadmill. That's a six minute mile."

"Please shut up," Adam said.

"I'm just trying to make conversation. Hey, maybe your coach should get some pigs from the FFA to run cross country," I said with a grin but Adam wasn't buying it. He stared into the distance and didn't say anything. I took a chocolate bar out of my backpack. It was a bar of World's Finest Chocolate and I knew he loved chocolate. When Adam was in ninth grade he had a crush on some girl in the band and he bought the entire box of chocolate she was selling just to impress her but she ended up with a guy who played all the band instruments, including the piccolo. I broke the bar in half and offered him half. He looked at it but didn't show any interest. I showed him the wrapper and he took his half and said thanks.

I watched him through the corner of my eye eating the chocolate. I took a bite and let the chocolate melt in my mouth as I tried to figure out what was bothering him but I didn't want to sour the chocolate by asking.

"Good chocolate, huh?" I said.

"Yeah, every year the band sells them so they can go to band camp and play with flutes,"

Adam said with another bite.

We heard a sound behind us and we turned around to find our assistant principal, Mr. Bracamontes, standing behind us with his hand on his hips like a super hero who just saved the world.

“Actually, half the money the band raises goes for new instruments and the other half goes for a field trip,” he said with his goofy smile. Adam turned back around and rolled his eyes and said under his breath, “Freak.”

I heard what Adam said and was sure Mr. Bracamontes heard him too, but Mr. Bracamontes just kept on.

“So, what are you boys doing?” Mr. Bracamontes asked us like we were in kindergarten.

“We’re waiting for our dad to pick us up,” I said.

“Are you boys ready for the school tests?” He asked with a half sincere smile. “You know the school tests are very important.”

Adam turned with a scowl, “How come you’re always bugging us? We haven’t done nothing. Adam turned back around. I was taken a back by his response, and looked up at Mr. Bracamontes.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it,” I said.

Mr. Bracamontes put out his hands. “No problem, I’m just trying to be friendly. You boys have a good day,” he said and walked off humming a tune. Adam let out a huff of air and stood up and put his hands on his hips like coaches do when they are in a tense game. He was quiet for a moment. I didn’t know what was bugging him, but I thought it was best to just let it ride.

“Did you watch Mom after I left the hospital?” he asked.

“What do you mean? It’s a hospital. It’s safe. There’s no zombies there,” I said with a little laugh.

“Listen, don’t let mom out of your sight. You got that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you like that place, but I don’t like that doctor we met.”

“But you don’t like any doctors.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m saying, I don’t trust that guy.” Adam got up and threw the rest of his chocolate bar in the trashcan and started walking.

“Hey, where are you going? Dad’s picking us up,” I said.

“I am walking home, see you later,” he said with a wave of his hand.

I watched him walk behind the school and I threw my half of the chocolate bar in the trash too. When dad got there the first thing he did was ask where Adam was.

“He said he was walking home,” I said with a shrug my shoulders.

“Did you guys get into an argument?”

“No. He just said he wanted to walk home.”

“Is he okay? Is something wrong?” Dad asked.

“Beats me. But he’s acting weird. If you want, I can call him or send him a text?”

Dad let out a concerned huh, “No, leave him alone. You teenagers are hard to figure out sometimes.”

That evening Adam sat like a rock on the sofa watching some sports channel with Dad and Papa Lali. I was helping Mom and Mama Cece place bowls of ground meat, rice, beans, lettuce and tomatoes, and hot tortillas on the table.

“Dinner is ready,” Mama Cece announced.

We took our seats and started serving ourselves, but no one took a bite until Mama Cece gave thanks for the meal we were about to receive. It was a typical dinner filled with compliments from Papa Lali on how good the food was. He'd say *qué sabroso* as he chewed like a cow, and Dad would try to show him up.

"Nothing beats home cooking. When I was in boot camp I missed my wife's delicious food," he said as he rubbed his belly. Mama Cece gave a gentle chuckle and mom smirked.

"How was work today? Save anyone?" Dad asked mom as he put a fork full of rice in his mouth.

"No, but we did have a heart attack in X-ray today," she said.

"Ay Dios," Mama Cece said. "Anybody we know?"

"No, he was a Winter Texan."

"Cool, did you call Dr. Leo?" I asked with excitement, and explained to the table. "When someone has a heart attack they say, 'Paging Dr. Leo. Paging Dr. Leo' and wherever the heart attack is, the doctors and nurses run there. It's like 20 people, right mom?"

"Well today, it happened in X-ray and it got pretty crazy. ER Doctors, EKG, respiratory therapists, lab techs, and nurses were all over the old man in seconds."

"Did he live?" I asked in suspense.

"No, *pobresito*. They worked on him but they couldn't stabilize him. He was in his eighties, though. He lived a long life."

"Diosito has a time for everyone," Mama Cece said solemnly.

Papa Lali jumped in with one of his jokes. "Unos primeros y otros despues. Y yo, voy despues." He and Dad started laughing. Adam who typically laughed at Papa Lali's jokes broke a tiny grin and mom and Mama Cece shook their heads.

There was a pause and Adam spoke up. “Couldn’t the heart doctor save him or was he busy working in his office?”

Mom glared at Adam. “Dr. Steele is a heart surgeon. He’s not part of the Leo team. Only ER doctors, ER nurses, because they’re trained for that kind of emergency.”

Adam pushed his food around his plate and said nothing. Dad didn’t like the silence.

“So Abel, how was school today? Learn anything new?”

“Not really, all we did was study for that dumb standardized test,” I said.

“It can’t be that dumb,” Mom said.

“It is, because our assistant principal is a freakin’ pervert,” Adam pounced.

“Hey, I told you not to talk about your elders like that,” Dad snapped. Adam slouched lower and grumbled, yes sir. Dad took a deep breath and the table was quiet for a moment.

“So what did he do this time to make you mad?” Dad asked Adam with a raised brow.

Adam straightened up. “It was like a sneak attack. Abel and me were just sitting, waiting for you, and he comes outta nowhere and starts asking things. Adam began mimicking the assistant principal. “ ‘Waiting for a ride? You ready for the school tests? How’s your father. How’s your mother?’ Pfffff. It’s none of his business. He’s weird.”

“Maybe he’s just a friendly man,” Mom said.

“You don’t even know him. He’s weird. Right, Dad? Like when Abel got hit in the face with the basketball. Man, Mr. Esparza acted like he was the one who got hit. He should just leave us alone,” Adam said.

Dad took a deep breath, “He’s just different. God says it takes all kinds. You just keep your grades up.”

“Yeah Dad, but don’t you think it’s messed up?” Adam said. “I think he’s up to something.”

“Ya, that’s enough. I just want to eat my food in peace and all I hear is people dying of heart attacks and weirdos bugging my sons, Dad said and then his cell phone went off. He looked at who was calling and shook his head with a grin.

“It’s Chato,” he said, but Mom was quick because most of the time Chato had no problem, he just wanted someone to shoot pool with.

“We are having dinner, call him back later,” she said.

“It’s Chato, he’s family, maybe he needs something?” Dad answered the phone. He got up and walked out the front door. The table chatter came to a stop and Papa Lali, who didn’t like silence either, started another joke. He loved telling jokes and would go all out, using voices and body movements. I never got any of them but Adam would laugh his head off.

“So, there’s this baby and he says to his father, ‘Hoy me voy a morir. Y despues, mi papa se va a morir, And then the baby dies right in front of the man.’” Papa Lali says and puts his hands up in shock hamming it up. “Pues, the man is sad and they have a funeral y todo. A few days later he tells his best friend what the baby said before he died and his best friend says ‘Qué curioso. Sabes que? El otro dia, se murio el lechero.’ ”

He slapped the table and started laughing. “A que viejo,” mama Cece said. I looked over at Adam and his body shook with laughter, but he kept it inside. Mom rolled her eyes.

Dad walked back in the house. “Chato’s truck won’t start. He’s at the Golden Cue. So, I’m going over to help him.”

Adam stood up. "I'll go with you."

"No, you have homework?"

"I can do it later," Adam said.

"No, after dinner you get to the garage and do your homework," Dad said and grabbed his keys.

Mom made a disapproving face. "How long are you going to be there, because I know Chato, and he's going to want you to stay and play pool, eat a bag of chicharones and play those stupid video games."

"Okay, I might play a couple of games of pool, but I'll be home early," dad said and gave us a wave as he walked out the back door.

Mom and Mama Cece began clearing the table and Papa Lali walked out with Adam to the garage where dad had an office with book shelves of car repair manuals, a desk and a computer with wireless Internet.

I walked into my office which was the spare bedroom where we had a desk and a desktop computer, the ironing board, and boxes of stuff we were never going to use but we were never going to throw away either. I heard Dad's truck driving off and heard my grandmother saying bye to Mom. After a few minutes mom knocked on the doorframe.

"Hey Mom."

"I just got a call from the hospital. They need help," she said.

"Make sure Adam finishes his homework."

To me it was no big deal because the hospital only had two techs at night and sometimes they got slammed, but Adam wasn't buying it. He must have heard mom's car drive off. I heard

the back door open and slam shut and stomping through the house. And Adam came into the spare room.

“Where the hell is Mom going?” he demanded.

“What?” I said.

“I heard her car. Where’s she going?”

“They called her from the hospital.”

“Bullshit, you believe that crap.”

“Why are you getting so pissed off?”

“She’s not going to the hospital.”

“That’s where she’s going,” I said

“Don’t you see? Dad takes off and all of sudden mom gets a call. It’s bullshit.” He put his face in his hands and looked like he was trying to rub it off.

“They need her at the hospital. They only have two techs at nights and sometimes they get slammed. You know that, I said.

“You just think she’s perfect, don’t you? That she never does anything wrong, well you don’t know her. I’m telling you, she’s not going to the hospital. I’m outta here.”

“Hey, Mom said you need to finish your homework,” I said looking for an excuse to keep him from leaving, but he just waved me off and stormed out the front door slamming it. I didn’t know what to do, but I figured he just had to walk off whatever was bugging him. I finished my homework and jumped on the sofa and flipped through TV channels.

Close to ten I saw car lights sweep through the front windows and I knew a car was in the driveway, but the motor didn’t sound like Dad’s truck or mom’s car. I looked out the window and saw a cop car. I opened the door hoping it wasn’t one of those visits where they tell you

someone in your family is dead. The cop walked up and gave me a nod as he reached the brightness of the porch light.

“Hi, I’m Officer Salvador, are your parents home?”

“No, is everything okay?” I asked.

“Is your brother Adam Castillo?”

I looked and could tell it was Adam in the back of the cop car.

“Yes. Is he okay? Did something happen?”

I heard the loud low rumbling sound of Dad's truck coming down the street and he pulled up.

“That’s my father. Why is my brother in your car?”

The cop ignored me. Dad got out of the truck and as he approached the house he stopped, looked in the through the door window of the police car and patted the glass gently. As if to say to Adam everything was going to be fine. He walked up.

“Is everything okay? Why is my son in the back of your car?”

“Hello, I’m officer Salvador.” He shook Dad’s hand.

“I am Alberto Castillo. Is my son in trouble?”

“Not really, I’m just trying to keep him from getting into real trouble. I found him and some high school kids drinking beer out by one of the canals off FM 186. They weren’t doing anything bad, like shooting guns or things like that, but they were drinking and they’re all underage and that’s against the law. We have a real problem with underage drinking.”

“Are you going to arrest him?” Dad asked.

“I gave him a breath test and there wasn’t much there and he doesn’t have any previous arrests. So, I figured he’s a good kid, just going through a tough time. Since there was no harm

done I'll let him go this time, but if he does it again, he'll be spending sometime in front of the judge."

"Thank you officer. He's a good kid, but he's been acting a little off lately, right Abel?"

Dad turned to me for support.

"Yeah, I think it could be school or something like that," I said.

"Well, it's none of my business," the officer said. "But he was mumbling something about his mother. You can never tell what's going through their heads."

"I should know what's going on in his head. I'm his father," Dad said. "Abel, get inside the house."

I went inside not knowing what to do. I sat down on the sofa and turned on the T.V. but kept the volume low. When I heard the cop car drive off I looked out the window and saw Dad talking to Adam. I sat back on the sofa and watched T.V., making sure the volume was loud enough so that I couldn't hear what they were saying. After a while they walked in and dad told Adam to hit the showers. Adam walked by me and didn't say anything. I could hear Dad going through the fridge and he took out one of his Mexican sodas. I heard the shower start running and Dad called me.

"What are you watching?"

"It's a crime show," I said. "They found some blood and they're about to bust the guy by using DNA, but the guy is innocent." Dad wasn't listening, but I felt better talking about someone's problems, not ours. He walked into the living room, stood for a moment.

"So, your mother is at the hospital?"

"Yeah, they called her," I said.

"Do me a favor, call her and see if she's okay. He gave me the house phone.

“Should I call her cell phone?”

“No, call her at the hospital,” he specified.

I dialed the number and he watched me as I waited for someone to answer. I recognized the voice of Gloria, the laziest tech they had.

“Hi Gloria, this is Abel Castillo. Can I talk to my mom?” She said yes and put me on hold. I looked at dad and told him that Gloria was getting mom. When mom got on the phone she asked what I wanted in a hurried way.

“I just called to see if everything was okay.” She told me that she was really busy because there was a school bus accident and they had to X-ray all the kids. I repeated what she said so dad would know.

“A school bus accident?” I made sure I made eye contact with Dad. “Wow, okay mom. I just called to see if everything was okay,” I said, noticing a small wave of relief across dad’s face. “I’ll see you when you come home,” I said and hung up.

“So, she’s there, I mean she’s okay,” Dad said.

“Yeah, she said there was a school bus accident and they have to X-ray all the kids,” I reassured him.

Dad nodded. “Listen. Don’t tell your mother about what happened tonight with the police.”

“Is everything okay with Adam?”

“He wouldn’t tell me what’s bugging him. I think he just needs some space.”

Chapter 9

In the morning we acted like nothing had happened. Adam got up extra early and went to the garage to finish his homework, something he never did. He stayed in there until we were ready to leave. On the drive to school Adam sat in the back seat letting his silence do the talking. Dad didn't say much either. At school I was a little off and I had a hard time focusing on what the teachers were saying. I was worried about Adam, but I knew he didn't like talking about what was bugging him. In the crowded halls between classes I kept my eyes open for anyone selling chocolate bars, then I saw Mr. Esparza walking towards me. I made a quick 180 and ducked into the first open door. A teacher erasing a chalkboard turned her head.

“Looking for a job?” she asked.

I looked around and noticed the walls covered with posters of doctors, nurses, and others in business suits.

“What's this class?” I asked.

“It's C.O.A., Careers of America,” she said it like it was the best thing in the world.

“You take this class and we can get you an internship at a hospital or clinic. So, what kind of work do you want to do?” she asked and moved her hand as if she were introducing a princess,

“Albesa wants to be a doctor.”

Albesa sat in an old comfortable recliner reading Gray's Anatomy. She looked as though she was deep in thought. I knew her as the ugly duckling back in junior high who got me in trouble, but training bras were long gone.

“Hey Albesa,” I said and she didn't respond.

“My mother is an X-ray tech and I want to be a doctor too.”

Albesa looked up from her book, “Really? I don’t think they allow perverts in medical school,” she said without looking up.

“You two know each other?” The teacher asked me with a pleasant surprise.

“Yeah, he likes to hang out in the girls’ restroom,” Albesa said.

I cleared my throat and let out my nervous laugh that got me in trouble the first time. “I don’t hang out in the girls’ restroom.” And I thought to my self, change the topic fast.

“So, what’s this about? You take the class and get a job?” I asked before the teacher had a chance to ask me anything about my honest mistake.

“That’s what we do. It’s Vo Ed. Take the class next semester and we can get you started. Albesa will be here too. Her uncle is the director of the blood lab at the hospital. Come after school and I’ll tell you more about it.” I nodded and said thank you and said bye to Albesa, but she didn’t bother to look up.

At dinner, the air was fractured from the night before and I decided to tell the family about the career program to ease the tension.

“I met this teacher today, she teaches Vo Ed,” I said.

“Qué es eso?” Papa Lali asked.

“It’s Vocational Education. You take the class and they help you get a job,” I said. “I told her mom works in a hospital and I want to be a doctor.”

“That’s great. You already do a lot of volunteering at the hospital so that’ll work in your favor,” Mom said.

“Yeah, but then you have to take late night calls,” Adam said.

I didn’t get what Adam meant and Mom ignored his comment.

“Boy, last night I could have used your help. We had a bus accident, not a bad one, but

we had to X-ray every kid who had an injury, even if it was a bruise,” Mom said.

“We heard the noticias. Gracias a dios que nadie se murio,” Mama Cece said as she put her hand to her heart.

“Sí, gracias a Dios,” Papa Lali said.

Adam pushed his food around, “Really? How many people did you X-ray,” he said with a cold stare.

Mom let out a huff, “I’m not sure, but I didn’t sit down all night.”

“You don’t know how many? What school were they from? Do you know that?” Adam pushed.

Dad didn’t care for Adam’s tone. “Adam, that’s enough. Your mother works very hard for our family.”

“I’m just asking how many patients she x rayed, but she doesn’t even know. Doesn’t that tell you something? She probably wasn’t even there.”

“What?” Mom said and looked at dad for him to do something about Adam’s defiant behavior.

Dad stood up, “Adam that’s it, come with me.”

Mom didn’t say anything as Adam walked out.

Mama Cece cleared her voice, “Adam is like his father. When Alberto was a boy he’d get mad about a lots of things. Pobresito.”

“I don’t get mad about things,” Papa Lali said. “He gets his impatience from your side of the family. If you have patience you don’t get mad so easily.”

We finished our dinner with little conversation. Papa Lali and Mama Cece left and Mom and I sat on the sofa and watched some TV. After a while Dad and Adam came back in the

house. Both were quiet and dad looked mad, but I wasn't sure if he was mad at Adam or someone else. Adam grabbed his backpack and walked out the back door.

"I'll be in the garage. I need to work on a car and Adam is going to do his homework," Dad said with an icy tone. The back door slammed shut and I looked at Mom for a response. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Mom, do you think maybe you should talk to Adam to see what's bugging him," I said.

"Why? Your Dad knows him better. I know you better. That's how it works. Don't worry about Adam. Focus on your studies."

I wanted to argue, but she was right about dad knowing Adam better, but if she knew me better, then why couldn't she tell how much it bugged me that Adam was going through a tough time?

Chapter 10

When the spring semester started there were two things I wanted. One was to sign up for C.O.A. and the other was to play some sport, but I wasn't sure what I could tryout for. I walked down the hall to the smelly athletic department and knocked on Coach Sosa's doorframe. He had his head down reading a sports magazine and without looking up said "Now what?"

"Hi coach it's me, Abel Castillo."

"I know. What can I do for you today, Mr. Castillo?"

"Coach, I want to tryout for a team."

"What sport?"

"Any sport," I said.

"Any sport, huh? You got speed, balance and agility. It's too bad we don't have a wrestling team or gymnastics, you'd be great in those sports and tennis would be good. Golf too. There's track."

"My brother runs track," I said.

"Listen, why do you want to be in sports anyway? You're a smart kid. Don't you work in a hospital and stuff like that?"

"It's a family tradition. My great grandfather, grandfather, Dad, all my tios, and cousins played sports. I should be in sports too."

"Well, you're different. You don't need sports, you have brains. Use that muscle instead," he said with a grin and tapped his temple.

"So you're saying I shouldn't be in sports."

"I didn't say that. I just think there are better things for you." He snapped his fingers.

"Like soccer. That's a great idea. You know how to use your nose, but this time use your head."

Hey, how's your Spanish. Most of the players are Mexican Nationals."

"But, I don't know anything about soccer."

"So what, you're quick as a rabbit. You go see coach Luna and she'll give you a tryout," he said with a fist bang to his desk. "Como la vez?"

"You think I'd be good at soccer, really?"

"Hey, it's the world's biggest sport. Play here and maybe one day the World Cup, right?" he said and he was getting pretty fired up about it so I had to say yes.

I nodded, "Okay, I'll tryout, and I will make the team," I said with a grin.

"Now, that's a winning attitude," he said. "Hang on one sec, let me get her on the phone." He picked up the phone and dialed. He grinned at me as he waited for the coach to answer. "Coach Luna, this is coach Sosa. I am sending over a new soccer player for you. He as quick as a rabbit," he said and paused. "Yes coach, his name is Castillo and he is on his way. Thanks coach." He hung up the phone. "Castillo, the rest is up to you.

When I met with coach Luna she was in her office reading a sports magazine. She looked up and gave me a friendly smile.

"Do you speak Spanish because that's what most of our players speak," she said.

"Un poquito," I said and she chuckled. She didn't bother asking me if I liked soccer or if I even knew the rules of soccer. She shook my hand and said, welcome to the team.

"Don't you want to see my run or something? I mean I don't even play soccer."

"Hey, I have an open door policy, anyone who wants to play soccer, plays on my team. Just show up everyday for practice and you'll do fine," she said.

She gave me some papers for my parents to sign, a game schedule and directed me to the equipment room for my uniform. I even got to pick my own number, 44; it was my father's number when he played basketball so I thought it would bring me some good luck.

That evening Mom was not in the mood to cook and picked up Whataburgers instead. The grandparents didn't come over for dinner either. It was just the four of us squeezing ketchup packages on fries and munching quietly.

Mom started with the questions. "So, how was school?"

I jumped in, "I'm going to play soccer."

Dad looked surprised, "Soccer? Well, you'll be the first Castillo to play soccer. We'll have to get you some soccer shoes."

"You better learn Spanish. That's all they talk," Adam said.

"My Spanish is okay," I said.

Mom was not happy. "Abel, what about your grades?"

"Mom, I kept my grades up when I was playing basketball or when I wasn't playing basketball," I said. Mom took in a breath ready to launch into some speech but dad cut in.

"He's a Castillo. Sports are supposed to be in his blood," he said dramatically.

"Just because you played sports doesn't mean Abel has to. He doesn't have to do everything you do," Mom said.

Dad moved away from the table and pressed his back against his chair.

"What are you talking about? He doesn't do anything I do right now," he said. Mom looked puzzled. "Look, Adam and Abel can do whatever they want. I just want them to make good grades."

Dad pushed his fries around using his hand with the grace of an ape and looked at Mom.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you X-rayed Mr. Bracamontes?” Dad asked.

“You x-rayed Mr. Bracamontes?” I asked.

“I hope he broke his neck,” Adam said under his breath.

“How did you know I X-rayed him?” Mom asked.

“Me and Chato saw him at a store. He said you X-rayed him,” Dad said.

Mom smirked, “Did he tell you how he sprang his wrist?”

“Yeah, he said he did it while bowling,” Dad said.

“What an idiot,” Adam said.

Dad frowned, “Adam, don’t talk like that. He just did a dumb thing. Everybody does dumb things,” he said and looked at Mom. “Why didn’t you tell me you X-rayed him?”

“What’s the big deal? I X-ray people all day. I can’t keep track of all of them.”

Dad gave Mom a stern stare and looked at us, “So, when I saw him at the store I told him to leave you guys alone.”

“Why did you do that?” Mom asked.

“The boys said he was bugging them, right guys.”

“Yeah, he’s in love with Abel,” Adam said.

“Shut up,” I said.

“It’s true. Everybody knows he let you on the basketball team and you should have seen him when you got hit in the face.” Adam said.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Dad said. “I told him to leave you guys alone.”

“I don’t see what the problem is if a principal is showing some interest in his students,” mom said.

“I think he’s showing too much interest,” dad said. “And he’s not the principal. He’s the assistant principal.”

Adam looked at me, “Did he let you on the soccer team too?”

“Shut up Adam,” I said.

“Ya, both of you,” Dad said.

“You’re the one who started this whole thing,” Mom said to Dad.

“Me? Your friend Bracamontes is the one who started this whole thing,” Dad said.

“I don’t even know the man,” Mom said.

Dad shot her an I-don’t-believe-you-look, “Oh, you don’t know him?”

Mom shook her head, “What’s gotten into you?”

“Didn’t he used to work in the library? Let’s see that was,” Dad looked at me. “How old are you Abel?”

“15,” I said.

Dad banged the table, “That’s right. 15 years ago. When I was at boot camp, running my butt off, sending you and the kids every penny I made, and writing you letters almost everyday.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mom said.

“Well, that’s where you used to hang out, at the library?” Dad asked.

“It’s a library, lots of people go there.”

“And what? Read books about the human body?” he said with a raised voice and his dark skin was getting red.

“What’s your problem?” Mom asked.

Dad pushed away from the table. “I’m not the one with a problem. I need to work on a car. Adam I need your help.”

“Can I help?” I asked.

“No Abel, you stay with your mother and read some medical books,” Dad said with the flick of his hand. “Come on, Adam.”

I sat quietly as the two walked out the back door and Mom saw my disappointment.

“Mi'jo, it's okay,” she said. “You were born to be a doctor, not a mechanic.”

“Mom, I can be both,” I said. “Dad likes it when I work on cars.”

Mom stood up and began clearing the table. “He likes you to be at his level, that's what he likes. Don't worry about him.”

Chapter 11

But I did worry and was doing my best to make dad proud of me. Even though I didn't have to try out for the soccer team, I still had to show the coach I could be a good player. But it was going to be tough because José Contreras was the captain and he hadn't forgotten about the enchiladas. The first day of practice José made sure no one passed me the ball. The players all spoke Spanish, but I knew what they were saying even though my Spanish was terrible. Dad missed the first game because he said he had to finish a car but it was okay since all I did was run back and forth, but at least I was on the field.

Our family dinners were not as regular as they once were. My soccer practice would often run late, Adam was busy with baseball, and mom began working late more and more. And on the rare occasion when we were all at home at the same time, dad and Adam insisted they had to fix a car and stayed in the garage while mom watched TV in her bedroom or talked on the phone. It was obvious to me that we were drifting apart, and I tried to blame soccer, baseball, the hospital and broken cars, but I knew the blame was with me, Adam, Mom and Dad. The church did its best to keep us together. Every Sunday it made us hug each other and mumble "Peace be with you." I started liking going to church just for hugs and began praying for peace in our home.

Home life wasn't great, but at school I was getting somewhere with Albesa because we were the only ones who wanted to be in the medical field. My big break came when we took the volunteer orientation class at the hospital.

At eight, on a Saturday morning, we sat quietly in the administrator's office and Albesa was dressed like a doctor. She was wearing scrubs and a lab coat. I guess she was trying to make a good impression and I should have done the same, but I didn't have any scrubs. I wore khaki

pants, a white shirt tucked in, white sneakers and I had a lab coat, but it wasn't as crisp and bright white as Albesa's. The woman who gave us the tour knew my mom, but it turned out she was good friends with Albesa's tío in the blood lab, so she was a little nicer to Albesa. But I knew I'd have my chance to show Albesa I knew a lot of people in the hospital, but it turned out she knew almost every employee. Everyone I knew, knew Albesa, and they commented on how smart she was and how pretty she was. Apparently her tío threw parties at his house and Albesa was at every party getting to know the hospital staff and her tío had been bringing her to the lab since she was eight.

“What? I've been coming here with my mother since I was eight too and I have never seen you,” I said.

“I spent most of my time in the lab helping tío Ángel and sometimes I'd walk the floor with him to watch him draw blood.”

“My mother said she used to clean the blood lab,” I said.

“My tío taught her how to draw blood,” Albesa said.

“You never told me that.”

“You never asked.”

When we walked into the radiology department the first person I saw was Sonny, the head custodian for the hospital. I went out of my way to show Albesa I knew everyone in X-ray, even the custodians.

“Hey Sonny,” I said and shook his hand like we've been friends for years. He smiled and returned the gesture and went crazy when he saw Albesa.

“You look great in a lab coat,” he said and gave her a hug.

“Hi tío Sonny,” she said.

“Do all your tíos work here?” I asked.

Albesa laughed and sure enough, everyone in X-ray knew her and even though they knew me better, none of them said I was smart or good looking.

The last stop of the orientation was the blood lab, a place I had never been in, and I was pretty eager to meet her tío, since everyone in the hospital seemed to know him except me.

Ángel walked into the lab office in a suit and he dressed better than the doctors. He looked more like a Mexican soap opera TV star. Curly shiny hair, green eyes, and brown flawless skin. When I shook his hand and introduced myself he almost went nuts.

“I know your mother,” he said with a smile. “She’s the prettiest woman in the hospital with her long black hair, her long eye lashes and creamy skin. She makes me so jealous! Oh my God, you look just like her. You have her eyes and her hair. You’re so handsome,” he said in excitement and looked at Albesa.

“Mi’jita, you better keep your eyes on this one,” he said. I could feel my cheeks turning red then Ángel went over the top.

“You know Albesa, you two would make beautiful babies.”

“Tío,” Albesa said.

Ángel looked at me, “I love to tease her, but it's true. You two would make beautiful babies. But don’t lay your hands on her. You got me. You wait until she finishes college, then I don’t care.” He said with the flip of his hand.

I grinned and changed the subject.

“So my mom used to work here?” I said.

“I remember when she was a housekeeper. She used to clean this lab and I taught her

how to give shots.”

“So, you're the one. When I was a little kid I used to watch at her home practicing on oranges,” I said.

“That’s right, I’m the one,” Ángel said. “I’m teaching Albesa too. Right Mi’jita,”

She nodded, “Yeah, but when can I stick a real person?”

“Why don’t you practice on Abel.” Ángel said.

I let out a nervous laugh. “After a hundred oranges, maybe. So, you’ve known my Mom a long time.”

“Yes sir, she’s a hard worker. Now she practically runs X-ray and you, I hear you want to be a doctor.

“It’s on my quilt,” I said.

“What? A drawing of a malpractice law suit?” Ángel said with a grin.

“I have a medical cross, and my brother has a rocketship.”

“A rocketship?” he asked.

“Yeah, they want me to a doctor and my brother a rocket scientist.”

“Such high expectations,” Angel said. “I didn’t have a quilt, but I slept with my sister’s Snow White blanky. There’s no such thing as prince charming. So, those quilts don’t work.”

“Sí tío, but we have control over our own lives, you know. I’m going to be a doctor and so will Abel,” Albesa said.

Her comment surprised me because she was sticking up for me and I didn't know how to respond, but Angel did. He looked at Albesa.

“You like him, huh?” he said a teasing way. “You want his baaabies.”

“Tío,” Albesa said and playfully slapped his arm and looked at me. “Don't listen to him.

He doesn't know anything.”

I put my hands up, “He knows more than I do.”

Ángel snapped his fingers, “No, que no.” Albesa sneered at him.

Chapter 12

Though hospital orientation was supposed to be a little bit of time in every department, we spent most of our time in the lab. It was fun learning about blood. But the best part was seeing how playful Albesa was around Ángel. I figured that's how she was around anyone she felt comfortable with.

“What time is your lunch break?” Ángel asked.

“I guess whenever time I want,” I said.

“Bueno, come back at 12:30 and we'll all go to lunch, unless Albesa has any objections.”

“Don't be late,” she said with a grin.

When I got to X-ray the place was busy, and as soon as Mom saw me, she put me to work.

“Come with me. I need your help.”

I followed her to ER where I knew most everybody and kept my eyes wide open. ER was the place to learn about pain, intense emotion, and how to handle yourself in stressful situations. All three came into play when I saw the patient mom was x-raying. He looked like he was in his early twenties and his left leg was really messed up. I found out later that he was riding on a tractor with his father, plowing a field and fell off, landing between the plowing blades, cutting up his leg pretty bad. His lower left leg was in shreds and his calf muscle was barely hanging on to the bones. A nurse and I put on some gloves and lifted the man's leg up so mom could slide the X-ray cassette under it. It was bloody, but at the same time it was real life drama and I couldn't wait to tell Albesa all about it.

When I saw her at lunch I went straight into the story.

“This morning ER was crazy,” I said. “This man came in who fell off a tractor that was

pulling plow blades. He fell right into the blades and it almost cut his off leg. The doctor let me hold the leg while my mom X-rayed it.”

“That’s gross,” Albesa said.

“Yeah, but somebody had to hold his leg and luckily I was there,” I said.

“Lucky? Ya, please stop it,” Ángel said. “You may think it's cool but I’ll tell you what, that person didn’t think it was cool. He doesn’t think he’s lucky and I’ll bet you his whole family is in the waiting room praying for him.”

“What?” I said.

“I’m just saying that you make your job sound fun and I’m glad you like it. I like mine too, but we deal with people who are in a lot of pain. Like this morning, we were up on the floors and we saw a man dying of cancer. Right Albesa?”

“It was horrible,” Albesa said with a gentle shake of her head.

“It was horrible and it was terrible,” Ángel said. “And his family was crying and everything. There was a priest there too and you know what that means.”

I paused and they looked disappointed in me, especially Albesa. I slowly nodded. “I didn’t think about it that way. I’m sorry. I guess I need to be more sensitive.”

“Yes, you need to be more sensitive. You’re not a kid anymore,” Albesa said.

“You can’t be a great doctor without good bedside manners and that goes for boyfriends too,” Angel said. Albesa gave Angel a friendly slap across his shoulder.

When I got back to X-ray the first thing I did was look up the file of the man with the messed up leg. I noticed the name on the folder, Gilberto Contreras. The only person I knew named Contreras was José Contreras. I thought for a moment and walked down the hall looking for Mom. I found her in the hall talking to Dr. Steele. If I was Adam I probably would have gone

ape and stormed out.

“Hi mi'jo, what's up?” Mom asked.

“Hello, Abel. Well if you'll excuse me I need to make my rounds,” he said.

The man walked away and I watched him until till he turned the corner. I thought he was too happy.

“What did he want?” I asked.

“He just wanted to know about a patient. You need something?”

“Yeah, you know the patient who came in this morning? The one with the messed up leg. Where is he?”

“They took him to surgery and amputated his leg below the knee. Pobrecito and he's so young.”

The news was a blow to me. “They couldn't save it?”

“You saw how bad his leg was. It was too far gone. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it's just weird. I think I know his family.”

“If you see them, don't tell them anything. Remember, we can't tell the patients or the family or anybody about their condition.”

“I know, I have to lie.”

Mom put her hand on my shoulder. “Hey, you know the rules. Only doctors can tell the truth.”

“I've heard doctors lie to patients,” I said.

“Well, they have their reasons. Maybe they're trying to protect them. Hey, I've got patients to X-ray. Want to help?”

“No, no, I’ve got some filing to do,” I said.

I went back to the file room and looked on the computer to see what room Gilberto Contreras was in, but he hadn’t been assigned a room yet. Ángel’s words came back to me. The man’s family was here, crying and praying for him. I told the office clerk I’d be right back and walked to the surgery waiting room. It was packed with sad family members whispering and praying in Spanish and in the middle of the worry was José Contreras sitting next to a crying older woman. He held her hand as she laid her head on his shoulder. I walked up and José looked up with his eyes watering. He let go of the woman’s hand and slowly stood up. I put out my hands out and said I was sorry, like it was my fault.

José looked me over and saw my lab coat and name tag, “You work here?”

“Yeah, I’m a volunteer.”

“My older brother was in an accident,” José said.

“I’m sorry about what happened to him,” I said.

“How did you know?”

“I volunteer in X-ray.”

José’s eyes lit up a bit, “Did you see my brother? Is he is going to be okay?” he asked and his family members all quieted down to listen to my reply. I had to put my best lie-to-the-family face on.

“No, I didn’t see him. I work in the file room and saw your last name and came to see if it was someone I knew.”

José shook his head. “My brother loves to run. He is a great soccer player. He taught me how to play. My father was driving the tractor when it happened. My father is blaming himself,” he said with a sorrowful sigh.

José put his hand out and I shook it and again said I was sorry. José nodded and sat back down with his mother. I walked back to the file room in a daze. I kept seeing the bloody leg and the pain in his face and I felt shame for being so lucky. When I got to the file room I looked around and when I didn't see anybody, I put my head down and shed a few tears.

Weeks later our shared experience carried on to the soccer field and José started passing me the ball. It didn't make me a better soccer player, but it did improve my bedside manners.

Chapter 13

One Saturday Mom went to San Antonio for a workshop on the new catscan machine, while Adam was playing in a baseball tournament in McAllen. Normally dad would attend the tournament, but Saturday was a busy day at the garage and he had a few cars to work on. I decided to blow off the hospital and help Dad and Papa Lali in the garage, since they'd need some help and I wanted to show them they could count on me.

"Good, you work with us," Papa Lali said letting his big hand drop on my shoulder. I didn't know much about cars, but I knew all the names of the tools and it made dad pretty happy. All morning I passed tools, answered the phone and coughed at car exhaust. Dad would get text updates from Adam about the games and if Adam's team was doing well. At lunch we washed our hands with the orange handcleaner and went to Tacoriendo Tacos. Dad and Papa Lali knew everyone there, and when we walked in the cook gave us a greeting and the waiter, who looked as old as Papa Lali, gave us the center table.

"Your table," he said.

"Gracias. Juan, this is my son, Abel," Dad said and Juan shook my hand.

"Ah, the one who wants to be a doctor," he said.

I smiled and said yeah.

"Your father talks about you all the time. Let me give you some advice. Don't eat too much Mexican food, it's bad for your health," he said with a laugh and Papa Lali and Dad joined in.

"You guys come here every Saturday?" I asked.

"It's tradition," Dad said. "We fix cars, have lunch and when the day is done, beer. No beer for you."

“Qué, when the day is done? I'm having a beer right now,” Papa Lali said and ordered a beer and a botana for the three of us. Our waiter nodded and walked off.

Before I knew it we had chips and queso and a botana in front of us. Papa Lali and dad made themselves big tacos of chicken and beef fajitas and even the owner came by and sat down with us. Dad introduced me to the owner and he knew who I was too.

“Ah, el doctor,” the owner said as he put out his arms like game show host. “Your father talks about you all the time.”

Dad patted my back with a smile and looked me in the eyes, “You’re a good kid. You can do anything you want as long as do your best.” For the first time I felt sports were not important to dad and being a doctor would make him proud.

After lunch we went to back to the shop and this time dad put me to work. I helped him take out a broken alternator and put in a rebuilt one. I pulled on a crow bar so dad could tighten the bolts that held it in place. He noticed that all my practice at sports, though I didn't play much, was paying off in strength.

“Hey, don't pull so hard. The belt will be too tight,” he said. “Tell you what, you're getting pretty strong.”

As we were working the garage phone rang but we couldn't answer it. Once the alternator was in Dad clapped his hands.

“Okay, turn on the car,” he said.

“Me?” I said.

“Yeah, you're not going drag racing or anything like that,” he said.

I turned the key and the car started up with no problems. Dad walked up to the door with a smile.

“Great, now back it up and park next to the garage,” he said. “I’ll guide you.”

“But shouldn't you do this? I mean this is not our car, I said.

“Just back it up,” he said. I was a little nervous but I tried to act cool. As the car was moving the garage phone rang again but dad kept waving for me to back up into the alley. I pulled out of the building and parked it next to the garage with ease. Dad smiled and nodded.

“Atta boy,” he said. “Now go see who's been calling.”

I felt really good and bounced up to the house. When I went inside, I saw there were two messages. I played them and it wasn't good. Both messages were from Adam's baseball coach. The first message was coach leaving his number asking Dad to call him. The second message explained what was going on.

“Hello, this is coach Zavaleta again. Listen, we're in McAllen and Adam got mad about something that's none of my business and took off. I have called him several times on his cell phone but he's not answering. You need to call him, because we're taking off in few minutes. I need to get the players back to school. Please call me. Thanks.”

I ran out and tried to rush dad back to the house. I was kind of freaking out, but dad was calm.

“Who called?”

“Adam's baseball coach,” I said.

“Is Adam hurt?”

“No, but the coach said that Adam got mad and took off,” I said.

Dad pushed the button on the voice machine and I watched for his reaction when he listened to the message. He motioned for me to write down the phone number. Then he heard the second message and took out his mobile phone and dialed. He didn't say anything as he waited

for someone to pick up.

“Adam, where are you?” Dad said. “Stay there. I'm coming to pick you up. No, I'm not mad at you. We'll talk about it when I get there. I will be there in 30 minutes. Don't go anywhere.”

“Give me the coach's number,” he said, and I handed him the piece of paper. He dialed the number without saying anything; I could tell he was in his military mode.

“Coach Zavaleta. This Alberto Castillo, Adam's father. I called Adam and he's okay,” he said and listened and shook his head. “Well, I'm his father. I should know. You get your players home and I'll go pick up my son. Thank you sir and sorry for all the trouble.”

He looked at his watch. “Okay, you and your grandfather finish the cars. I'm going to pick up Adam.”

“Do you think Adam is okay?” I asked.

“You heard the message, he got mad about something and ran off. Go help your grandfather and tell him where I went,” he said.

I stood still, not sure what to do because I was worried about Adam. I thought about asking dad if I should go with him, but I knew he wouldn't let me.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Get moving. Those cars don't fix themselves,” he said.

When I told Papa Lali what Adam did, he grunted.

“He's like your mother,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Pues, when you two were little she got mad a couple of times and ran off,” he said.

“Adam will be okay. Your father knows how to handle him. Come on, we got work to do. Cars don't fix themselves.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon helping Papa Lali fix cars and it was pretty cool, except I didn't like getting grease under my fingernails. But Papa Lali said if you fix cars you get grease on your hands, if you fix people you get blood on your hands. And he was right, but at the hospital, we wore gloves. Papa Lali was an old man, but strong and was lifting heavy parts and tightening nuts with little effort. By 5:00 we are all done and Papa Lali gave me a firm handshake.

“Bueno m'jio you did good honest work today. Maybe you should be a mechanic? See I wouldn't want to be a doctor, because you can't really tell if people are getting better. With engines, either they turn on or they don't,” he said. “Bueno, I'm going home. When people come to get their cars, you take their money. You earned it, and put it in the box in the desk.”

“But shouldn't you stay?” I asked.

“Qué, just tell them what they owe us. Everything is written down. Show them the parts we bought and the hours we worked on the car. And when they pay you, always count the money. Some people can't count,” he said and shook my hand. “You did real good today, mi'jo. Hasta luego.”

I walked around the garage and decided to clean up the place. I swept the dirt floor, wiped dust, oiled the hinges on the garage doors, and used the hand cleaner and a roll of shop towels to clean the tools. The place was looking pretty good and by 6:30 all the owners had come by with cash to pick up their cars. I locked up the big garage doors and looked at the late afternoon sun. I thought wow. I worked all day in the garage. I took a rag from my back pocket and wiped the sweat off my forehead and realized that I did it just like dad.

I heard my cell phone ring on the back desk of the garage and it was Albesa. She wanted to know if I want to go with her to cousin's quinceañera and her tío Ángel would drive us.

“Is this like a date?” I asked.

“No, this is not a date. This is a quinceañera, If it was a date you’d be buying me dinner.”

“Do I have to dance?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Cool, how come you weren't at the hospital today?”

“I stayed home and helped my Dad and grandfather fix cars,” I said.

She chuckled. “Okay, Mr. Fix it. We’ll be there at seven-ish to pick you up.”

I rushed to the bathroom for a fast shower and managed to get the grease out from under my fingernails. I was pretty excited. I knew how to dance and thought maybe I could impress her on the dance floor. While I was getting dressed I heard dad's truck pull into the driveway and waited until I heard the front door close before I walked into the living room. Dad and Adam looked mad at me, but I hadn’t done anything.

“What are you all dressed up for?” Dad asked.

“Albesa is picking me up at seven. I am going with her to a quinceañera,” I said.

“Come sit. We need to talk,” Dad said with a stern voice.

We sat at the kitchen table and they looked like they were going to gang up on me.

“Now Abel, I’m going to ask you some questions and I don’t want any lies. You understand?” Dad said like a calm judge.

“Dad, I’ve never lied to you,” I said.

“Okay. Where’s your mother?”

“Mom?” I asked giving him a confused look.

“You heard him,” Adam snapped.

“Adam, I said I'd handle this,” Dad said, and Adam leaned back in his chair crossing his arms.

“Do you know where she is?” Dad asked.

“She's in San Antonio for a workshop,” I said.

Dad stared at me and I didn't say anything for a moment but the silent stare was killing me.

“What? Why are you asking me?” I asked.

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“Yes, she's in San Antonio for some workshop stuff. You know that.”

“No she's not,” Adam said.

“What do you mean?” I asked with a sinking feeling that something was very wrong and I was getting blamed for it.

“Are you protecting her,” Dad asked.

“What? Protecting Mom from what? What are you talking about?” I said. “You asked me where Mom was and I told you. She's in San Antonio for a workshop. The hospital sends people for workshops all the time.”

“Mom is not in San Antonio. I just saw her in McAllen with that heart doctor,” Adam said.

“Who? Dr. Steele?” I said in disbelief.

“How come you said him and not anybody else?” Dad said.

“Because that's the only heart doctor I know. He's the chief cardiologist,” I said.

“Well your mother is not in San Antonio. She's in McAllen with that cabrón,” Dad said.

“Did you know this was going on?”

I shook my head and turned to Adam. “That guy is like 100 years old. Are you sure?”

“Hell yeah. I saw them making out at the hospital that one time I went with you. Why do you think I hate that place and now I caught their asses coming out of a store holding hands like they were boyfriend and girlfriend. Adam threw his arms up. “The whole baseball team saw them. Everybody saw them.” He stopped and put his face in his hands in anger. The house got quiet and I could hear was the kitchen clock ticking. “Abel, are you sure you didn’t know anything about this,” Dad pressed me.

“No dad,” I said as I exhaled and let my head drop. I lifted my head and could feel my eyes swelling up. “What are you going to do?”

Dad shook his head, “Tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to divorce her ass!”

We didn’t say anything and dad let his body slump in his chair and he looked around the room.

“You do everything right and it still doesn’t matter,” he said. “Tomorrow when your mother comes back from her bullshit workshop in San Antonio we’ll have a talk. I guess she’s not happy.” We heard a truck drive up in front of the house.

Adam looked out the window, “Who the hell drives a purple truck?”

I got up and looked out the window and saw Albesa stepping out of the truck in a nice dress, and then I remembered the quinceañera.

“Oh, that's Albesa and her tío,” I said.

Dad put some money on the table. “There's some money. Adam, let’s go to the garage.” They walked out the back door as the doorbell chimed.

I took the money and my cell phone and watched dad walk out. He didn't turn around like he normally does when he steps out of the house. The doorbell chimed again. I opened the door,

and when I saw Albesa looking beautiful as ever, I felt my body beginning to fall apart. I wanted to give her a hug to keep myself together, but I didn't want to look stupid.

“Hey, you ready?” she asked all happy.

“Yeah, let’s go,” I said and she took my hand and pulled me in a playful way to the truck.

The quinceañera was packed and the band, Los Laytons, was keeping the dance floor busy. Everyone was having a good time, and the girl who was celebrating her 15th birthday had her chamberline do some silly dance they had been practicing for weeks. Albesa was being nice to me and I met a lot of her cousins and I think I got the thumbs up. Her parents were there too, and it looked like they knew what was going on with my family. But it could have been my imagination going nuts, but in my town, news traveled fast and if it was gossip, even faster. I did my best to look as though I was having a good time and then I saw a couple of guys from the baseball team. And if they knew, then I was sure everybody knew. I could feel I was the butt of jokes, and every time I saw someone whispering into someone’s ear, it wasn't because the music was loud, they were whispering about me. I felt my cell phone vibrating and it was Mom; I didn’t answer it. After a minute I felt the phone vibrate again, but this time with a message. Everything and everybody at the party was in slow motion and the music sounded warped. I felt like I was going to pass out. I started to sweat and I needed some fresh air. I told Albesa I was going outside for a minute and she nodded and said she’d be waiting. She was being sweet, everything I always wanted, but at the wrong time.

I went outside and sat on a bench and watched people for a while. Albesa’s family was very rancho, and all of the men had on straw cowboy hats with western cut suits, crazy belt buckles and shiny boots with polished silver tips. The women in dresses too tight and all of them in high heels. I could tell they were a hardworking family, just like dad’s family.

Once I got my nerve up, I dialed to get my message and heard Mom's voice sounding somber. "Abel, your dad left a message and I'm sure you're mad too. I called Adam and he didn't pick up. I left him a message. Honey, I'm really sorry but you and Adam aren't little kids anymore, you're all grown up. I think I've been a good mother. I think I've done my end of the job. I'm really sorry mi'jo. Please call me back. I'll talk to your dad tomorrow. Abel, everything is going to be fine. I'll talk to you soon, okay? I love you. Bye."

I shook my head and thought about what she meant by all grown up. What the hell does that mean? As if pain stops when you're grown up. Saying she did her end of the job. A job? Being a good mother is a job? What a bunch of crap. I felt a soft touch on my shoulder. It was Albesa with a hopeful smile and some queso on her chin. There were chips and queso at the quinceañera and Albesa was not a neat eater. The girl always had ketchup stains, salsa stains, spaghetti sauce, chili, on her shirts and this time she had queso on her chin.

"Hey, you okay?" she asked.

I wasn't sure if I should tell her what was going on, but there was no one else I could talk to and I just needed to get it off my chest.

"My mom is having an affair."

"What, are you sure?"

"Yeah, Adam said he saw her today with Dr. Steele."

She gasped, "The cardiologist?"

"Yeah, the heart doctor. The guy who fixes hearts, pft."

"But he's like 100 years old," she said.

"Adam said the whole baseball team saw them, so now the whole town knows and I'll bet the whole hospital knows." Albesa sat next to me and held my hand.

“I didn't know and if Angel knew he would have told me. So, not everyone knows,” she said and we were quiet for a moment, but Albesa was like me and didn't like silence. “Does your father know?”

“Yeah he knows, he and Adam think I was lying for Mom.”

“What? You wouldn't do that.”

It felt good knowing Albesa believed me.

“I know. I would never lie to Dad or Mom, but that's just it. I wouldn't *lie* to them, but would I *lie* for them? Adam said he caught Mom and Dr. Steele making out at the hospital a few months ago.”

“What was Adam doing at the hospital?”

“I made him go with me so he could see what we do. I guess he saw enough.”

“Why didn't Adam tell you he saw that?”

“He doesn't tell anybody anything. That's how he is. But now, it all makes sense why he's been acting so weird and why he hates the hospital. And today, after the tournament, Adam caught mom and Dr. Steele coming out of the mall and the whole baseball team saw it too. It sucks. There are two guys here on the baseball team, so they know too. Everybody knows my mom is,” I lowered my head. My chest got tight and I felt like I was going to cry, but I knew I couldn't in front of Albesa. I had to control myself and try to believe none of this was my fault. I felt Albesa's arm around my back and she patted my shoulder.

I had seen lots of family members holding their loves in the hospital. Trying to ease the pain. Albesa's arm was a band of warmth holding my body and her hand was there to steady me.

“If there's anything I can do to make you feel better, just let me know, okay?”

she said in true bedside manner.

I lifted my head and gave her a grin. I wanted to break the bad mood I was in.

“You mean, like get me a heated blanket or a glass of water or some jello?”

Albesa smiled, “That’s right. How can I help you Mr. Castillo?”

I looked at her and I thought, she’s so perfect and I saw the drying queso on her chin.

“You could wipe the queso off your chin.”

She giggled and put her hand to her chin. “That always happens to me.”

I smiled and felt a little better.

Chapter 14

When I got home the house was empty and I let my body slouch on the sofa in defeat. I looked around the living room and for the first time I noticed how many family pictures we had. I got up and walked around the house and looked at them. The ones in the living room, the ones on the refrigerator and in the bedrooms. We even had one in the bathroom. It was a picture of Adam, me, Mom and Dad at the beach. The picture was in seashell frame that said South Padre Island, Texas on the bottom and mom looked like the happiest mother in the world. Maybe at that moment, she was. The sound of the waves, the soft sand and the endless blue sky. Her little children by her side and her husband building a sand castle for his family. None of us knew tomorrow, all we knew was a day at the beach under a bright sun.

I washed my face, brushed my teeth and sat on the sofa to watch T.V., but decided I didn't want to be up when Dad and Adam got home. I laid in my bed. On my quilt. Staring at the spinning ceiling fan. I thought it would take me a while to fall asleep, but I felt my muscles letting go of every bone and I fell into a deep sleep.

When I got up in the morning I knew Adam hadn't slept in his bed because it was still made. I thought maybe he went off and did something stupid and was now in the county jail, but I heard the drone of the T.V. I walked into the living room and Adam was sitting on the sofa watching sports highlights and Dad was in the kitchen pouring a cup of coffee. Adam acknowledged me by tossing back his head and dad did the same thing.

I sat on the love seat and watched the sports announcers talk about how exciting every game was the day before, but I don't think we cared. It felt like the three of us had been doing yard work all day and were too tired to think or talk. Adam didn't say anything and neither did dad. I thought about saying something, but keeping my mouth shut was saying enough. After a

few minutes dad spoke up.

“You two need to get dressed. Your tío Chato will be here soon.”

I was a little confused. “Tío Chato is going to church with us?” I asked.

“Nope, Chato is taking you guys fishing. Unless you want to go with your mother.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Mom is outta here. She’s moving out today,” Adam said without looking at me.

“What? Just like that?” I said.

“Hey man, that’s what she wants,” Adam said.

I stood up. “Dad, is that true? She wants to leave us?”

“Abel, she’s been seeing that man for two years. Two years of making a fool out of me. Making a fool of our marriage. Shit, making fools of all of us. You, me, Adam your Papa Lali, your Mama Cece, all of us. I want her out today. You can go with her if you want. They can both teach you how to be a doctor.”

I shook my head. “I’m staying with you.”

Dad nodded. “You do what you want. You’re a grown up.”

When tío Chato arrived he didn’t say anything about the problems, he just clapped his hands. “The fish aren’t going to catch themselves.”

We jumped in tío Chato’s big four-door truck. On the sixty mile drive tío Chato didn’t shut up. He talked his head off like he always does. Talking about high school football, the San Antonio Spurs, his truck and how he met a woman on a website and was going to San Antonio just to meet her. About a new lawn mower he wants for the schools, he talked and talked, but not one word about the family drama. When we got to South Padre Island we fished off a pier for a while, but caught nothing. Then we got hungry and tío Chato took us to a hamburger joint that

had a pool table.

We ate and shot pool for a while and he drove us along the beach so girls could check out his truck. He put on his mirror sunglasses, rolled down the windows and smiled and waved to every girl as if to say “yeah, you want me,” but none of them waved back. We drove along the beach until there were no other cars, trucks or people. I had never been so far down the beach, but tío Chato said it was his favorite thing to do, go as far as you can until you didn’t see anymore people.

He finally parked his truck, took off his sunglasses, his shoes and let his chubby feet expand in the sand. He made us take off our shoes too. He had three reclining lawn chairs in the truck bed. We took them down and we walked to the edge of Texas where the sand was clay, damp and cool, and we sat in our chairs and greeted each tide. It was late in afternoon and the unpolished orange sun behind us made a dull smear on the salty foamy water.

Tío Chato smiled, nodded and didn’t say anything. We sat and didn’t say anything either. After a while Adam gestured for me to look at tío Chato who was snoring with a big smirk on his face. He looked like a Mexican Buddha with a thick mustache, wearing a San Antonio Spurs baseball cap. Adam and I shared a silent laugh.

I watched the waves rolling in and out. The rhythm of the water was soothing and I began to relax. I looked out over the endless gulf of Texas and tried to put things in perspective. My family problems were a drop in the ocean. What’s one drop of blood in the ocean?

“Mira, over there,” tío Chato said. “The first star.”

Adam and I looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders.

“So what,” Adam said.

“Órale,” tío Chato said. “Starlight, bright star, I make a wish. Make it right and make it

bright.” Tío Chato said and clapped his hands. “No que no.”

“What was that?” Adam said.

“Yeah, I think you got it wrong,” I said.

“N’hombre. Some girl taught me that when I was in Arkansas working the fields. Yeah, that redhead had a big crush on me,” he patted his round stomach. “Yeah, if I had married that woman you’d have some Mexican redhead cousins.”

“If she had eyes, I don’t think she’d marry you,” Adam said.

“Qué, Love is blind,” tío Chato said.

“Okay, but she’d have friends who could see and they’d tell her not to marry you,” Adam said. Adam and I laughed for the first time in months.

Tío Chato threw his arms up, “Puro caga-palos.”

Chapter 15

When we got home I thought half the furniture would be gone, but all the furniture was still there, and yet the house felt empty.

“How was the beach,” Dad asked.

“It was good. Women, love my truck,” tío Chato said.

“You guys okay?” Dad said.

Adam's face started turning red and his voice began to break.

“Did Mom really leave?”

Dad cleared his throat, “Yeah, but it's not your fault. I couldn't ask for better sons. People just grow apart sometimes.”

Adam put his head down and went to the bathroom. I heard the shower running. Adam did that a few times as a kid. Once he lost a big race at a track meet and went into the bathroom and turned on the shower so nobody could hear him crying. Tío Chato gave dad a hug, shook my hand and left. I wasn't sure what to do, so I sat on the sofa and turned on the T.V. and dad sat on the sofa too and I gave him the remote but he just tossed it to his side and slouched. Adam walked out the back door and I figured he was going to the garage to find things to fix. After a couple of minutes dad got up and said he'd be in the garage.

I stared at the T.V. and after a while, I got up and walked around the house. All the pictures were still there. She didn't take any of them and that's when it hit me, she really wanted out. To forget about us and never come back. I felt my eyes welling up and needed to splash some cold water on my face. I went to the bathroom and saw the blank wall where the beach picture hung earlier. Mom took me and Adam's favorite picture. I felt better knowing she did care.

The next day at school I felt the kids looking at me, but no one asked me about what everybody knew. Mrs. Durante moved me from the X-ray department to the blood lab. “Why are you doing that? I don't know anything about the blood lab.”

“That's why I am moving you, so you can learn more about blood. One day it might save your life.”

At the end of class Albesa passed me a note with a crayon stick figure drawing of us holding hands. She smiled and gestured for me to turn the drawing around to the other side of the paper. She had written a note saying that she was the one who asked Mrs. Durante to move me to the Blood Lab. The note made me happy and I thought too, being with Albesa in the lab would be a good thing.

I wanted to keep my mind off what was going on with mom and dad, and soccer was a good place to start. We had our last game on Thursday and I wanted to be ready. There was a knock on the door and Mrs. Durante went to the door and stepped out and called my name.

“The assistant principal wants to see you. You better take your things just in case you're there when the bell rings,” she said.

I grabbed my things and walked down the hall and felt my anger rising with each step. I mean, what does he want now? It better not be anything to do with my family. If he brought them up, I'd do what Adam would do, and it wouldn't be nice. Right before I walked into the front office I saw tío Chato wiping his forehead.

“Donde vas?” he asked.

“The assistant principal wants to see me,” I said with a scowl.

“Don't tell that pinche güey nothing,” tío said with the point of his finger.

I nodded and when I went inside the office I didn't even stop at the front desk. I just

walked past the secretary. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I have a meeting with the assistant principal," I said it as if I was a mad teacher ready to tell him to take this job and shove it. I walked to his office and he was sitting behind his desk clicking on his keyboard.

"Abel, come in. Please have a seat," he said like everything was great.

But I didn't move. I stood in the hall where I knew everyone could hear me.

"Look, my father already told you to leave me alone. I haven't done anything wrong so you have no right to call me just because you feel like it. This is harassment."

Mr. Bracamontes put his hands up and stood up slowly. "Abel, I know you're going through a tough time. I just want to make sure you're okay. Every student is my concern."

"It's none of your business. Just leave me alone and quit harassing us," I said and stormed out. As I walked past the secretary she nodded and mouthed, "Good for you." I wasn't sure what she meant but I nodded like I just won something.

During soccer practice I played hard to get everything out of my system. I didn't want anything left in my body. Each time I got the ball I ran as fast as I could and kicked with all my strength as though nothing else mattered. When I walked home I was exhausted but I felt better because even though I was tired, I knew I still had some strength left. My cell phone rang in my back pocket and I was hoping it was Albesa, but it was Mom. I wasn't going to answer but the picture of her smiling on the screen softened me up but I still wasn't happy.

"Hey Mom," I said.

"Hi Abel, can we talk?"

"Yeah, I'm just walking home."

"Abel, I'm really sorry about all this. Your father and I have just reached a

stopping point,” she said her voice sounding far away.

“Dad says you’re having an affair with Dr. Steele and he thinks I knew about it.”

“I told him that you didn’t know anything about it,” she said.

“Whatever, what you did was wrong. Adam’s baseball team saw you with him.

Now the whole school knows.”

“I know, I know. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re sorry. What about me and Adam? Even the stupid assistant principal called me into his office to see if I needed to talk about anything,” I said, then it hit me that maybe she called him. “Did you call him?”

“No, I didn’t call him. What did you tell him?”

“I told him it wasn’t any of his business.”

“If you want, I’ll call Mr. Bracamontes and tell him to leave you alone.”

“Did you call Mrs. Durante too?”

“No, I didn’t call anyone.”

I was so frustrated I shook the phone. “Did you tell dad I should be with you, instead of him?”

“What? I never said that.”

“Are you sure? Because he thinks I should live with you and that man.”

“I didn’t say anything like that.”

“Quit calling people and leave me alone for a while. This is your mess not mine.”

“M’jito, I love you very much and I want what’s best for you,” she said.

“Your stupid affair was not the best for me and you still did it!”

There was a pause, “Do you hate me?”

I sighed, “No, I don’t hate you. I’ll talk to you later.”

That night, at the dinner table Papa Lali and Mama Cece were in a somber mood.

“At least you boys are grown up,” Papa Lali said. “You’re not little boys anymore. You’re men.”

“A si? Men feel pain too,” Mama Cece said.

“Mami, we have each other and that’s what’s important,” Dad said and changed the subject. “How was school today?”

“It sucked. The whole school knows about Mom,” Adam said. “The coach called me in and said he was 100 percent behind me.”

“Mrs. Durante, my Vo Ed teacher, re-assigned me to work in the blood lab,” I said.

Dad nodded. “Chato told me you were called into the office today.”

I took a deep breath, “Yeah, Mr. Bracamontes said he heard we were going through a tough time and wanted to see if I wanted to talk about it.”

“What’s that guy’s problem?” Adam said.

“I told him to leave you boys alone,” Dad said.

“I told him to mind his own business and to quit harassing us,” I said.

“That man is getting on my nerves,” Dad said.

There was a pause and Papa Lali broke the silence. He turned to me, “Y tu soccer?”

“You guys have won most of your games, right?” Adam said.

“We have a pretty good team,” I said. “We have our last game this week. It’s a home game.”

“Yeah, I heard the announcements. They’re always trying to get people to come out for

soccer,” Adam said.

“I saw on TV where in other countries people get into fights at those games,” papa Lali said.

“Como animales,” said Mama Cece.

“Nobody fights at our games because nobody goes,” I said.

“I’m sorry m’jito, each time I’ve had too many cars to fix,” Dad said. “I will go to your last game. When is it?”

“Thursday, at six,” I said.

“I’ll be there.”

“Thanks Dad, I might get to play more since it’s our last game.”

The next day during lunch, I saw José in the cafeteria and asked him if he would ask the coach to start me in the last game.

“I think you could start. You’re better now,” José said.

“Thanks, my father is coming and I want to show him I can play something.”

“Didn’t you play basketball last year?”

“Yeah but I was the worst player. The only time I played I got hit in the head with the ball.”

“In soccer you can use your head,” José said.

At practice I blocked out the family problems and focused on my drills. I could see myself passing the ball to a striker and watching the ball hit the back of the net. After practice the coach walked up.

“José says you want to start on Thursday. Why didn’t you ask me?”

“Okay Coach, can I start on Thursday?”

“I don’t know, can you?” she asked.

“Hell yeah.”

“Now you're talking,” she said.

Chapter 16

On Thursday, I wore my soccer jersey at school and when I saw another soccer player I'd give him a fist pump. Dad and Adam said they were coming to the game and so were tío Chato, Papa Lali and Albesa, so I had to do my best. After school I did my homework in the library and at five walked into the locker room.

“Remember, la cabeza,” José said.

Right before the game, I checked out the stands and it was the most people we ever had. I saw Dad, Adam, tío Chato and Papa Lali sitting in a row and Albesa and Ángel sitting in the row just below theirs. I thought about waving to them but I didn't want to look like a rookie. On the field, I kept my eyes on ball and every chance I had, I'd take a quick look to see if dad was watching.

At the second half I decided it was time to play big. I knew I could set up José for a goal if I could just get the ball. It happened fast. A teammate passed me a high ball and out of reaction I did a header in the direction of José. It wasn't a pretty pass but José kicked the ball and hit the back of the net. The team went nuts but in the stands there was confusion. I looked up and saw dad and tío Chato fighting with Mr. Bracamontes and coach Sosa and a bunch of people around them trying to stop them. I ran to my coach.

“What's going on?” I asked in a panic.

“It's a real game. We got animales,” coach Luna said.

“That's my father,” I said and ran up the stands.

Albesa and Ángel tried to stop me from trying to break up the fight.

“Let me go,” I shouted.

“This is between the idiots,” Ángel said.

“Dad stop it, stop it!” I shouted but he didn’t listen. Dad was wedged between the metal bleachers and he couldn’t get his balance to swing a punch. But he had a good hold of Mr. Bracamontes and was throwing jabs to Mr. Bracamontes body. Tío Chato and coach Sosa were on the stands shoving each other with no style. I thought Coach knew how to fight, but he looked more like he was trying to carry a mattress, and tío Chato’s arms were too short to get around his big belly.

“Adam, do something!” Adam was shouting at dad to stop, but he wouldn’t break his hold on Mr. Bracamontes.

Seconds later a police car sounded its siren and a rush of police grabbed Dad, tío Chato, Mr. Bracamontes and coach Sosa and pulled them apart.

“Pues que pinche güato? Knock it off right now or I’ll arrest both of you,” the cop shouted. Dad stood huffing and puffing like a bull.

“I told this mendigo to stay away from us,” Dad barked.

“I’m the assistant principal of this school. I have the right to be here,” Mr. Bracamontes said as if he was defending the United States Constitution.

“You don’t have the right to be harassing my family,” Dad shouted and pointed at Mr. Bracamontes and spoke to the police officer. “This man keeps harassing my sons.”

“I leave Adam alone,” Mr. Bracamontes said.

“What’s this about?” the police officer demanded.

“Éste baboso thinks he’s Abel’s father,” tío Chato said.

I looked at Albesa and Ángel and they nodded.

“Abel’s too smart to be the son of a mechanic,” Mr. Bracamontes said. In a flash dad broke free and punched Mr. Bracamontes across the jaw. Mr. Bracamontes and coach Sosa

jumped in and so did tío Chato and the fight started all over again.

I took some steps back and looked at Adam. Adam locked eyes with me and shook his head slowly in disbelief. I looked around and people were looking at me with pity. My head began to throb and I saw the plowed fields behind the high school and ran towards them with all my speed.

I ran past the high school gasping for air and brought down my pace. My heart was pushing my rib cage so hard I felt like I was going to pass out. I didn't understand why Mr. Bracamontes would think he was my father? It meant my mother slept with him? My mother, what the hell? She slept with my assistance principal and a doctor. I tried to shake it out of my head and I heard a truck horn. It was Ángel and Albesa driving next to me.

"Let's go to South Padre Island," Ángel said.

I came to a stop and was huffing and puffing. "What?"

"Let's go to the Island and watch the sunset. It'll be good for you."

"Right now?" I said.

"When it gets tough, the tough go to the beach," Ángel said.

"Come on Abel. Let's get out of here," Albesa said.

I placed my hands on my hips trying to catch my breath and nodded.

I got in the back seat and laid down for the one hour drive to South Padre Island. I didn't say anything as Ángel played music on the radio. Every now and then I could hear Ángel and Albesa talking to one another but it was a soft voice.

Ángel pulled into a roadside store. "Since this is a road trip, I'm buying snacks. Want anything?"

I sat up, "Yeah, I'm thirsty. Just get me whatever, thanks."

I watched Albesa and Ángel go in the store and I laid down and fell asleep. The next thing I knew we were crossing the bridge from Port Isabel to the Island. I sat up and all the windows were open and I felt the salty air on my face.

“Hey, we’re just in time to watch the sunset,” Ángel said.

Ángel drove his truck on to the public beach and cruised over the wet sand. There were a few cars and trucks on the beach and a breeze was coming off the gulf water. I put my head slightly out the window and let the wind cool me. Ángel parked his truck on the sand and pulled down the tailgate so the three of us could watch the blue sky fade into the gulf.

“I like watching the waves,” Ángel said. “Abel take off your soccer shoes and take my beautiful niece for a romantic walk, but don’t get in the water. There might be jellyfish and they’ll sting your balls.”

“What?” I said.

“Ay sí, when I was a little boy, a jellyfish stung me all over my back, under my arms, across my chest and my little balls. It was horrible.”

Albesa laughed and called him grosero. I took off my soccer shoes and Albesa took off her shoes too and we walked on the wet sand holding hands.

“Did you watch me play?” I asked.

“Yeah, you’re really fast and your hair looked great.”

We were quiet for a few waves and I took a deep breath.

“So, who started the fight?”

Albesa shook her head, “I don’t know, but it was weird. Ángel and I were watching you play and we heard your father say things to Mr. Bracamontes. We looked behind us and your father and Mr. Bracamontes were standing really close to each other and Mr. Bracamontes said

something like, 'he's my son' and your father said 'stay away from my family' and he pushed Mr. Bracamontes and everything started."

I stood up, "Mr. Bracamontes said I was his son?"

"That's what he said. Is that true?"

"Beats me, I don't know. My Mom's been acting really weird."

"What do you mean?" Albesa asked.

"Well, on the first day of school Mr. Bracamontes called me and Adam to his office. He said he wanted to meet us. Then he'd come to my basketball games and now this. He bugs me at school too, always asking stupid questions."

Albesa was quiet and stood up and held my hands.

"I think you look like your father. He's good looking just like you."

"Hey, don't be making passes at my Dad. I already have enough problems."

Albesa smiled and gently kissed me on the cheek.

"Let's sit for a while. I want to watch the waves," she said.

I put my arm around her waist. I could feel my heart beating in sync with her hers and I laid down on the warm rock. I held her hand and looked at the darkening blue sky searching for a star so I could make a wish. Walking back to the truck I noticed Ángel on his cell phone walking back and forth. He hung up as we walked up.

"Did you two have a romantic walk?" he asked with a sing-song voice.

"Yeah, it was nice. Thanks for bringing us," Albesa said.

"Yeah Angel, thanks for everything. I'd probably still be running," I said.

"Well, don't run off. That was your mother on the phone," Ángel said.

I put my hands on my hips. "What did she want?"

“She's been calling everybody to find you and just wanted to make sure you're okay. The police arrested your father and that idiot.”

“What?” I said.

“Well, you saw them fighting como animales. I would have pepper- sprayed them, tazed them and thrown them in the monte. Your Mom says for you to stay away from Mr. Bracamontes.”

I shook my head, “Do you believe Mr. Bracamontes is my father?”

“It doesn't matter what I believe,” Ángel said.

“But what if my Dad isn't my father?” I asked.

“The man who raises you is your father, sonso. Ya, don't make things worse. Your mother is in pieces and your father was arrested. Isn't that enough drama for one day?”

Chapter 17

When Albesa and Ángel dropped me off at home I saw the bluish T.V. light coming from inside the house. I walked inside and Adam was on the sofa watching sports highlights.

“Where have you been?” Adam asked without turning.

“I was at the beach.”

He turned around. “You went to Padre Island?”

“Yeah, Albesa and her tío Ángel took me.”

“Yeah, good for you. While you were on Spring Break I was sitting at the jail waiting for dad to get out.”

“Where is he?” I said.

“He’s with Tío Chato.”

I lowered my head for a moment and raised it up. “Ángel told me the police arrested Dad and tío Chato.”

“Crap. Does everybody in the world know our problems?”

I sighed. “Mom called him looking for me and told him about the fight Dad got into.”

“Who told her? Probably that freak who thinks he's your father,” Adam said.

“I don’t care what he thinks. Dad’s my father and you’re my brother, right?” I said then I heard a muffled motor sound vibrate through the house.

“That’s my ride. I’m outta here,” Adam said.

“Adam, we’re brothers, right?”

Adam reached for the door and turned around. “Look I don’t know what we are? Half brothers? Quarter brothers? Dad losing his cool and Mom is acting stupid and now you might be the son of a freak.”

“Adam, we’re brothers,” I said.

“I’ll catch you later.”

I heard the truck drive off and I sat on the sofa and saw my soccer bag on the floor. I opened it and found my cell phone with calls from my mother and messages, but I didn't feel like hearing any more problems. I went to the bathroom and washed my face and looked at the empty spot where the picture of me, Mom, Dad and Adam once hung. I went to my bedroom and laid down and fell asleep. I don't know how long I was asleep when I heard tío Chato's voice. He turned on the bedroom light and shook me.

“Get up and get dressed. We gotta go to the hospital,” he said in a tone that scared me.

“What happened?”

“Adam was in a car accident and they took him to your mother's hospital. We need to go.”

“What? Is it serious?” I said jumping out of bed.

“I don't know. But you need to grab a bag of clothes just in case. Adam is in surgery and your father and mother are there with him.”

When we got to the hospital tío Chato parked his truck and we sat there for a moment and I looked over the hospital and saw stars filled with wishes. I imagined people praying. People in the hospital chapel, in rooms, in the lobby, in E.R., I.C.U. and in the surgery waiting room. All the prayers in the hospital floating through the roof and all the prayers in the Valley sailing up to God.

“You ready?” tío Chato said.

I shook my head, “No.”

“Hey, you need to be strong for your family,” tío said.

“Tío Chato I need to know what’s going on. Why does Mr. Bracamontes think he’s my father?”

“Hey, I don’t know anything about it,” he said as he put his hands up.

“You know something. You don’t like him for a reason. You have to know something. Tío, I need to know the truth.” I could tell he was holding something back.

“Tío, I’m tired of lies, can’t just one person be honest with me? You have always been there for my dad, can’t you be here for me. Please.”

Tío let out a sigh. “Mira, you know how people like to make things up.”

“Tío, just tell me.”

“Ay, before you were born your mother used to go to the library everyday and that’s where pinche Bracamontes worked. And people in town thought there was something going on, but the guy was gay. People love to make up crap.”

“So, Mom was seeing Mr. Bracamontes when Dad was at boot camp?”

“We don’t know that, nobody knows,” tío said. “You need to stay focused on the family right now.”

“Does dad think that Mr. Bracamontes is my father?”

“No he doesn’t. That’s why he got into the fight with pinche Bracamontes. My primo is your father, not Bracamontes. Now stop it. Stop making this into some pinche telenovela. You got it?” I nodded.

When we entered the hospital I went straight for X-ray because I knew I could find out Adam’s condition instead of going through the hospital information desk.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Tío Chato asked in a nervous hush. He was like a lot of people, afraid of hospitals.

“Yeah, I know all the short cuts,” I said.

“Can’t we just go the normal way? We got no pinche badges.”

“We don’t need any badges,” I said.

When we walked into the X-ray department there were only two techs working, and luckily I knew both of them. They looked remorseful when they saw me.

“Abel, sorry about your brother,” one of the techs said. “Your father is here and he even gave a pint of blood too.”

“Where’s my mom?” I asked.

“She was the first one here. One of the EMS guys called her when they found out Adam was her son. She was here before the ambulance. She x-rayed him and gave him a catscan too. Right now she’s in surgery with him,” the tech said.

“How is my brother?”

They shrugged their shoulders and gave me the standard hospital answer. “They’re doing the best they can, you know that,” the tech said.

I sighed and nodded, and shook his hand and said thanks.

From their cool reaction, I knew Adam must be in bad shape, but they couldn’t tell me the truth even if they knew or wanted to. It was just like when I lied to José Contreras about his brother. Tío Chato and I walked to the surgery waiting room where Dad was pacing. I could tell he had been crying because his eyes were red, and when he saw me he gave me a big hug.

“You okay?” he asked me.

“Not really. How long has Adam been in there?”

“About an hour. Your mother is in there with him.”

“How is he?” I asked.

“Well, he didn’t break anything, but he hit his head against the frame of the truck and he’s not doing good, but he’s strong.”

“I don’t get it. How did this happen?” I asked.

“He was out on Highway 186 with a bunch of kids and they were drag racing and one of the cars lost control. Adam was sitting in a truck on the side of the road, and the car that lost control slammed into the truck. The kid driving the car was pronounced dead at the scene. It’s pretty sad.”

“Was he from our town?” I asked.

“No. I can only imagine what his parents are going through,” Dad said solemnly.

I shook my head, let out a sigh and sat down. Dad sat next to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Thank God your mother works here,” he said.

“Dad, it’s a good hospital and people come out of comas all the time,” I said.

“It’s in God’s hands now,” tío Chato said.

“Science can help too, tío.” I said.

Tío Chato cleared his throat, “You’re right Abel. I’ll be in the other waiting room.” He hugged Dad. “I’ll pray for Adam and the doctors.”

Dad nodded, “Bueno, we’ll see you out there.”

“Órale,” tío Chato said and walked out. I waited until I couldn’t hear tío Chato’s footsteps.

“So, you got into a fight today?”

Dad let out a huff of air and took his hand off my shoulder, and nodded. “Yeah, I did it for you,” he said. He put his elbows on his knees and held his hands tight.

“Do you believe him?” I asked.

“No I don't mi'jo, but what's important is what you believe,” he said.

His eyes started to well up and I felt like I was going to burst into tears. Then mom walked in with a doctor. She looked exhausted and broken.

Dad stood up, inhaled all the worry in the room, and mom rushed to him and gave him a big hug. They held each other for a while, and then, at the same time, exhaled and sat down. Dad held mom's hand. Then the doctor walked in.

“Hello, I'm Dr. Rodriguez. I'm sorry about Adam. We're doing the best we can,” he said and shook Dad's hand. The doctor looked at me and gave me a nod.

He took a seat and pulled it close to Dad and Mom. I had seen Dr. Rodriguez before and he was always walking around with a serious face. He wasn't nice and I didn't like him very much, but he was a good doctor.

“Adam has received major head trauma and we are moving him to I.C.U. He's in a coma, and we have to run more tests,” Dr. Rodriguez said.

“A coma?” Dad's eyes widened.

Mom put her hand on Dad's shoulder. “Honey, people come out of comas all the time.”

Dr. Rodriguez took in a breath. “I know it's difficult, but I think it's best if you went home and got some rest. We'll know more tomorrow,” he said.

“Can we see him?” Dad said.

“Yes, Victoria knows where he is,” Dr. Rodriguez said. “Adam is a strong young man, but he has severe head trauma so, when you see him, you need be strong for him. I will be in touch.” He shook Dad's hand.

Chapter 18

When we walked down the I.C.U. wing the walls didn't seem as white as the other halls and I could feel the cold floors through the soles of my shoes. I never realized how noisy I.C.U. was, the beeping of machines and hissing of ventilators. I looked at the patients as we walked and each one had a ventilator and I thought to myself everyone there was half dead, the patients and the visitors. I tried to remember if anyone ever made it out of I.C.U. Some of the hospital staff used to joke that I.C.U. stood for I'll-See-You-Later and I used to laugh, but it wasn't funny anymore. Nothing in the hospital was funny anymore. And it wasn't cool to work in I.C.U. and it wasn't cool to work E.R..

A nurse came out of the one of the units and greeted us with a fake sympathetic smile I had seen done by doctors and nurses.

"I'm sorry about Adam, but he's stabilized and I want you to prepare yourselves. He's had severe head trauma," she said.

Dad nodded. "We understand," he said, but he really didn't because when we saw Adam, dad grabbed the rail of the bed to steady himself. Adam's head was swollen in red and purple bruises and his eyes were closed shut. He had an air hose from his neck to a ventilator that pushed air into his lungs. I couldn't believe it was Adam and I looked at his medical bracelet to make sure his name and birthday were on it. It was his name and I tried to remember what we gave him for his last birthday, but I couldn't.

Dad whispered "Ay M'jito" and began to sob. Mom began to cry too and she leaned on Dad's shoulders. I stood at the end of the bed and saw his chart. I wanted to have the power to pick it up, read it and make Adam better, but all I could do was watch mom and dad in anguish. I sat down and heard the loud sounds of hissing and beeping machines keeping Adam alive. I put

my hands over my ears to block it out and when I did, all I could hear was my heart trying to pound out of my chest.

When we left Adam I could feel that we were not complete as a family. We sat in a private waiting room and tried to figure out what to do next. Dad wanted to sleep in the waiting room, but Mom convinced him that he needed to go home and get some rest.

“I can stay. I know the hospital and I brought clothes too,” I said.

Mom looked at dad for an answer. Dad kept his hands on his hip and took a deep breath.

“I’m keeping my phone on, if anything changes, anything, you call me or your Mom,” he said.

“I will Dad,” I said.

“I want you to stay in X-ray. They know you there,” Mom said.

“Okay Abel, you got first watch,” Dad said and then turned to Mom. “You going to be okay?”

“Yes, I’m staying at my parents’ house. I will be here in the morning with them,” she said and then gave my Dad a hug and whispered something through her breaking voice.

I heard him say “No digas eso. It’s not your fault.” They let each other go and then dad gave me a hug. “I’ll be here in the morning.”

I walked to X-ray and a tech got me some blankets and a pillow, and I made a bed on the carpet floor of the file room, but I didn’t lie down. I began to file X-rays and tried to keep busy. I filed for about an hour and noticed on the view box that there was an X-ray of a chest and I had a flashback when Adam wanted to see a heart.

There was no way Adam’s heart could stop beating. He could pump an ocean of blood and still go strong. No one could stop him. I lay down on the carpet and closed my eyes and

imagined Adam running through the plowed fields surrounding our town, running by every canal and every farm road in the Rio Grande Valley. He'd run under the hottest sun and through the strongest gulf hurricanes. And if you let him, Adam would run forever. His heart could outrun any ventilator, and if I knew this, so did the doctor.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and I opened my eyes and there was Albesa with Angel. They gave me hopeful smiles.

"You okay?" she asked.

I got up and wiped my eyes. "How did you know I was here?"

"Everybody knows you're here. All your family is here and a bunch of high school kids. Adam's track team is here and the baseball team, and your soccer team is here and even the basketball team. Coach Sosa, coach Luna and Mrs. Durante," Albesa said.

"Are my parents here?" I asked.

"They're on their way," Ángel said.

"I need a big favor." They nodded.

"My Dad gave blood last night. I need to know if he's my real father."

Angel shook his head, "Tas bien terco."

"It's important to me. You have his blood in the lab, don't you?"

"What you are asking me to do is against the law. I could lose my job."

"I need to know. Please Ángel. Can't you take some of my blood and see if it matches dad's blood," I pleaded.

"Listen to yourself. You just called your father, Dad. Isn't that enough for you?" Angel said.

"For me, yes. I believe he's my dad, but I don't want any doubts or this could go on

forever. Please help me,” I said.

Ángel paced the floor and looked at Albesa.

“What do you think?”

“If it makes Abel feel better, then I say yes.” Albesa said.

“Stand by your man, huh?” Ángel said. “Abel if we do this, you’re going to feel better?”

“As long as my Dad has doubts about me then he won’t love me the way he loves Adam.

Please Angel, I need to know,” I said.

“Ay, que cabezudo. It’s not a competition between brothers. Parents love their children differently, at least in my world, but it’s still love.” Ángel said.

“Please Angel. It means a lot to me. I won’t ask for another thing,” I said.

“Yeah sure, next thing you’ll be asking me to buy you beer. Ángel threw his arms up.

“Okay, I’ll do it, but I’m not taking one drop out of you. Albesa can do it.”

I looked at Albesa. “Will you?”

Albesa shrugged her shoulders. “What if I miss?”

“You won’t miss. Abel has great veins, but none of the blood goes to his brain,” Angel said.

Once we were back in the lab, Albesa got everything ready and she tied a rubber tube around my left arm, just above my elbow. I followed her instructions and made a fist and released, and then she lightly slapped the inside of my elbow and swabbed my arm with an alcohol pad.

“Are you going to look away like most men do?” Ángel said.

“No, Albesa and I are going to do this together,” I said.

I watched Albesa steady the needle with her soft brown fingers and she let it slide into

my vein and I didn't feel anything. My red blood began to fill the tube and she pulled the needle out. She placed a cotton ball on my arm and a band-aid and I bent my arm. Then she leaned over me and I felt her warm breath on my face and she gave me a gentle kiss on the lips and whispered I love you. She leaned back and she had tears in her eyes.

By eight my parents were at the hospital and I met Mom in the X-ray department. Mom bought some breakfast tacos, but I wasn't hungry.

"You need to eat. You're going to need your strength," she said.

"Where's Dad," I asked.

"He's in the waiting room but don't go there, stay here," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the families are acting stupid and I don't want you getting caught in the middle. The Castillos' on one side and the Reyna's on the other," Mom said. "One of your tías on the Castillo side has some ramas and she is trying to exorcise the bad luck from our family. Crazy woman."

"Well, sometimes what you believe is more important," I said.

"No, facts are facts and you should only believe what you can prove," Mom said.

A nurse walked in and she was really good friends with mom. She gave Mom a big hug and told us that Dr. Rodriguez wanted to meet with the family.

"Has his condition changed?" Mom asked. Nurses can be pretty good liars, but this one was lousy and she tightened her lips and her eyes welled up. "I don't know," she said. Mom shook her head and the nurse began crying and they both hugged again.

We walked with the nurse to a private room, one I had never seen before. Dad was in there and he stood up when we walked in. In his right hand he had a rosary and he rushed to

mom and gave her a hug and hugged me, then we sat down.

“All the relatives are here and his teammates too,” Dad said.

“That’s good. When Adam comes out of this,” Mom’s voice broke a bit and then she regained her composure. “When he comes out of this, we’ll tell him how all the family and his friends were here to see him.”

The door gently opened and it was Dr. Rodriguez. We stood up and he shook dad’s hand and mom’s hand and my hand, too.

“As you know, Adam has suffered a massive head injury. Currently there is no brain activity and no motor responses of any kind. This morning, we took him off the ventilator and it took 20 minutes for his heart to stop. Once his heart stopped, we performed resuscitation and put him back on the ventilator. I’m very sorry.” He was telling the truth. Mom put her head down and dad being the optimist asked, “What’s the next step?”

“Adam is in great psychological condition and his heart is very strong, we would like you to consider organ donation. You would just need to sign some release forms,” the doctor said and then it hit Dad, Adam wasn’t coming home.

“Organ donation? Yes, yes, Adam would want that,” he said and his voice broke and he did his best to hold back the tears. “Pues sí, Mi’jito can save somebody else. It’s what he would want. Then Dad broke down and we held each other so tight that I knew Adam would never leave us. We’d still celebrate his birthday, Christmas and we’d always have a candle lit for him. His grave would always have flowers. And he’s picture would hang by the front door so he could see us off and welcome us home, and we knew his spirit would protect us. We followed the doctor to Adam’s bed and Mom and Dad each held Adam’s hand. Dad took the rosary and put it in Adam’s hand.

“M’jito, this is from your Mama Cece,” he said and closed Adam’s hand around the prayers. “Ay m’jito.”

Mom gently rubbed Adam’s forehead. “M’jito, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she began to sob like I had never seen. “Forgive me, por favor, forgive me. Ay m’jito. Take me with you, por favor, no me dejes.” It looked like Mom was going to pass out. Dad held her. “Honey, no es tu culpa.” The nurse rushed in and helped Mom out of the room. We could hear mom’s crying fading down the hall.

Dad wiped his tears and walked to Adam’s side and held his hand and kissed him on the forehead. He stood there for a long moment and then he let go of Adam’s hand, looked at me and reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded envelope and held it up

“M’jito, Ángel told me what you did this morning. These are the results of your blood test. I have not read them and I don’t care what this says,” he ripped it in half and let it fall to the floor. “I’m your father.” I rushed him like a little boy and he hugged me so close I knew he was my father.

Chapter 19

Since Adam's death I had been working more in the garage, saved my money and Dad and I bought a trophy case for Adam's trophies and medals. It was pretty nice. It was jet black with gold trim just like our school colors. It had glass shelves and lit up. At night, it was always on. It was our shrine to Adam. The day we bought the trophy case we began to box Adam's things. Dad figured when I had sons maybe they might want their tío's letter jacket, baseball glove, baseball cap or stop watch.

For the longest time I left our bedroom the same way so Adam could come home if he wanted. When I cleaned the room I'd clean his side too, and when I washed my bed sheets, I'd wash his too. He always liked the scent of clean sheets. He liked the soft noise of the ceiling fan. Sometimes I'd leave on for him in case he came home he could sleep soundly under his quilt.

One afternoon, after working all day in the garage, Dad said I needed to take the bed out and put in a desk, so I could do my homework. I was a day a long time coming. It had been two years, and I was getting ready for college and did need a desk. We took down Adam's stuff and carefully placed it in boxes and the last thing to take out was his bed. Dad was going to keep the bed frame since it was part of the bunk bed, so when I had sons they could use it too. As we began to lift the mattress the phone rang and Dad stopped to answer it. He went out of the room and I decided to lift the mattress. I took it off and on the box spring was the framed picture of Adam, me, Mom and Dad at the beach. I held the picture and looked at Adam and me smiling. It was the picture Adam and I saw every morning to remind us we were a family. Mom sitting in the sand with a big smile, Adam standing by her side smiling with his little hand her shoulder. Tiny me on her lap and Dad building a sand castle too close to the tide. I hid the picture and never told Dad about it. He still thinks that's the only thing Mom took when she left us, but I

know she took everything.

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