

Prologue

Ol' Man Sammy

It never fails.

Each time I run, I ask myself if it's worth it. Straining for each new step—legs feeling more like tree limbs than muscles and tendons. Laboring for breaths till I'm panting like a shaggy dog on a summer day. And like always—instead of quitting or tanking it—I just push myself more, running faster, running further. I wonder if it's my way of trying to discover myself—who I truly am? What I can truly do? And yet, after yesterday every mile, every hurt, every pain and sacrifice seems so worth it. I'm so close to my dream I can almost reach out and touch it.

I'm known as “*El Gato*” in the neighborhood—two Spanish words that mean “The Cat.” It's been my nickname since I was a little runt, tripping over my feet and smacking my head against every corner simply because I loved to chase cats. There's even a scar over my left eye to prove it.

I'm also known as hardheaded, and not because the knocks to my forehead resulted in a callous. My mom says I'm hardheaded because I'm the second most stubborn person she knows. Yep, you guessed it—my father is number one.

But I'm El Gato now because I fight! In the ring I have cat-like quickness and I'm a fierce competitor. I won't stop until they pull me off my opponent. It's what I do. It's who I am. And I'm proud of it. Matter of fact, I come from a fighting family and I'm *this*

close to being awarded the Golden Gloves Regional Championship! One more fight will determine that. We'll see. I haven't lost since my very first fight, and that's all I intend to lose. EVER!

The only thing standing in my way now is a dude named is Kyle Brodie. He's been a champion for three years running, so the way I see it, that makes him my greatest enemy—my greatest foe. They say he's an animal in the ring—I think '*Caveman*' is what they call him? They say he punches out opponents like a jackhammer punches through concrete, and he don't blink when you hit him. Well you know what? I'm not going to let any of that cheap talk play with my head. The way I see it, that Brodie guy better be watching out for me, because I'm going to be in *his* face next Saturday. And I ain't gonna be smiling!

As I came around a band of trees in the park, I was surprised to find ol' man Sammy being shoved to the floor by some punk in baggy jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. The dude had two other friends with him and it was obvious they were trying to shakedown the easy-going drunk, or *borracho*, as we say in the hood. They were cursing at him and laughing at the same time.

Now if there's one thing I can't stand, it's an unfair fight.

I wasted no time. I hit the first one before he knew what hit him—a shot to the kidney and he was on his knees. The second guy wheeled around and took a wide swing at me. I ducked and drove a left hook into his torso, then came over with a short right flush to the chin—BAP—it was lights out for him. He collapsed on the grass and just lay there.

“You want some of this, vatos?” I roared. “Come on, get up. Come get it!”

The last guy had his hands up and his fists clinched, wondering if he should charge or run away.

“Ahhh,” winced the first one, holding a hand to his lower back. He turned and yelled at the guy on his feet, “What are you waiting for? *Hit him.*”

“Wait . . . Mooch, I think that’s Rudy Galvez—the boxer dude from school.”

The first guy looked up at me and his eyes went wide. “Come on, get Arty. Let’s go.”

I was still bouncing on my feet—bracing for another attack—but it never came. Instead, they picked up their fallen friend and tore out of there like swatted flies on rotten fish.



“Yo, Sammy,” I said, helping him to his feet. “You okay?” The old man’s eyes were bloodshot from all the booze. They say ol’ Sammy never met a bottle he didn’t like, and I believe it, for he reeked of hard alcohol—powerful smelling, like it had been poured all over his clothes.

“Watcha talking about, Rudy boy? I was about to deck the whole lot of ’em,” he explained, almost falling back down. “Another second, and it’a been all over, I tell ya.”

I couldn't help but laugh. That's one thing ol' Sammy was good for—a good-natured laugh or two. A black man in his early sixties, Sammy had a full head of white hair and a matching beard.

“The punks take anything from you?” I asked.

Sammy looked at me funny. “And I thought I was going blind. You see anything here wortha takin’?”

I didn't have to look hard to know what my homeless friend was talking about. A crude cardboard structure had been set up along two adjoining trees. From inside the opening, I could see a few tossed woolen blankets and a dirty pot scraped clean. And a few feet from there was a stolen shopping cart with articles of what looked to be new clothing, piled high atop recyclable materials.

“Yeah, well, I was told beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Take care of yourself, ol' man.” I advised as I began to jog away.

“Wait—wait—wait, youngster. Howja do yesterday. Didja qualify?”

I nodded confidently. “The Regional Championship is this Saturday.”

“Well, hallelujah!” he said, pumping a fist in the air. He might have jumped too, but I don't think his feet left the ground. “You be sure to keep those hands up, Rudy boy, you here? You gonna be champ one day. You gonna be champ.”

“Thanks, Sammy.” I smiled, and continued on my way.



The Coming Storm

When I entered the gym a short while later, the cheers erupted immediately. “There’s vato loco pretty boy!” someone hollered.

“*El champion.*” said another, calling me champion in Spanish.

Another guy ran up with pen and paper. “Excuse me sir, can I have your autograph? You’re that Gato dude, right?”

I just shrugged them off. Let them have their fun, I thought. I knew my boys—the gym rats—were just messing with me. We make light of it, but when one of us wins, we’re all stoked.

As I walked toward the locker I passed my two older brothers, Memo, who was eighteen, and Jesse, who was seventeen. They were both working the speed-bags, making them sing like machine guns—ta-da-da, ta-da-da, ta-da-da, over and over again.



They almost looked like twins, except that Memo’s head was perfectly bald. *Pelon!* I thought, for baldy. Not me, I like my hair—

especially when it's slicked back. My family exaggerates that if I'm not boxing, I'm combing.

Several guys were whapping away at the heavy-bags, others making their jump ropes sing as they sliced through the air with a whooshing sound. It was all music to my ears. I was in my element. I was comfortable in the gym, my home away from home. Sure it smelled like old socks, musty and leathery at the same time, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Even the fight posters on the wall were a welcome sight. Posters of local legends and former world champions like Bobby Chacon, Albert "Tweety" Davila, Danny "Little Red" Lopez, Genaro "Chicanito" Hernandez, and Carlos Palomino to name a few. Back in the day, they all had their moments. But my favorite was Oscar de la Hoya. Maybe it was simply his confidence or his steely glare in the picture, but it inspired me each time I passed it. He was known for his mastery in the ring, his speed and his left hook. There would only be one "*Golden Boy*" as he was known to the world, but it was the type of greatness I wanted for myself, no matter the cost.



Twenty minutes later I was having my hands wrapped by my Uncle Alex, or my *tio*, so I could go a few rounds in the ring. Tio was my trainer, and right away he noticed something unusual—a small welt over one of my knuckles. In his usual way, he locked eyes with me. "What's this?"

"What's what?" I returned.

"The knuckle's swollen here. What? The ring ain't enough for you? You taking fights in the street too? What'd I say about that?"

"Come on, tio. I didn't go picking no fight, okay?"

“So what happened then?”

I looked around embarrassed, catching a few guys glancing away quickly. Just off to the side was a sign on the wall that read, “YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN’T HIDE!” It was a quote from Joe Louis, one of the greatest heavyweight champions of all time. And that was *exactly* how I felt at the moment.

I turned my attention back to my uncle as he continued wrapping my hands from his stool. “I was doing my roadwork and found some punks knocking ol’ Sammy around, so I stepped in. What’s the big deal?”

“Guys?”

“Yeah, guys—three of ’em. So what?”

“Gato, how many times I gotta tell ya this ain’t the same hood? Now a day’s you get shot just for standin’ on a corner.”

“Yeah, well, I can take care of myself.”

A fire ignited in my tio. As he leaned in close enough to practically head-butt me, I could smell jalapeno chilies on his breath. “Rudolfo Galvez, let me tell you something and you listen good.”

I sighed heavily and shook my head some, knowing I had no choice.

“You got a chance at greatness. It’s staring you in the face and you act like it comes every day. You’re sixteen-years-old for crying out loud, maybe good enough to reach the Olympics one day, and instead you’re out swapping punches with a couple punks?”

“I told ya they was bothering ol’ Sammy.”

“And so what? What’s the old guy to you?”

“He trained you when you was fightin’, didn’t he? Pops too?”

“Right! Like we owe him something. The only thing Sammy Mabry lived for was a bottle.” My tio looked away in disgust and shook his head. He seemed to be reliving something as I watched him carefully. When he spoke again it was more softly. “We

weren't good enough for him and neither was a wife and kids. Leave him be I say."

"That's messed up . . ." I muttered under my breath, realizing I should have just shut up.

"What?"

"I said that's messed up . . ."

"No, messed up is being too selfish to look past yourself," he argued back. "If only he could have just . . . what am I saying? Why am I justifying this to you?"

My tio shot up from the stool and knocked it over accidentally. At least I think it was by accident. "I'm done here."

Gil the assistant trainer looked over in concern. "Alex, where you going? Don't ya want him going a couple rounds?"

"He's yours!" he yelled, waving a dismissive hand.

As I climbed into the ring, I felt about as tall as those hobbit people. My brothers both glared at me and shook their heads. "Way to go, Rudy boy," teased Memo. "Upsetting tio like that."

"Memo just shut up!" I fired back.

Gil began to slip the headgear over my head as Jesse slipped under the ropes and stepped inside the ring.

"Hey-hey, careful now, Gil," Jesse warned. "Watch the headgear. He don't like his hair messed up none. Aw, look, that hair's out of place now. Does anyone know a hair-dresser?"

Memo laughed and added, "Yeah, he's a pretty boy, you know. Says he's more handsome than Oscar dee-la-Hoyaaaa."

"I'll give you Oscar, all right," I threatened. "Wassup? Why aren't you in here?" My oldest brother had already showered and changed like he was going somewhere. Usually, he was the last to leave.

"Nah, I got me some biz today."

Just then a few whistles went up in the gym. I looked over to see a pretty Latina entering the gym. She had dark brown hair with

red streaks in it. Her makeup was heavy, but she was so cute it didn't matter. Surprisingly, she was heading straight for Memo. "Memo, baby, sorry I'm late."

My *hermano* turned around and she practically flung herself at him. "Hey, Sonia, baby," he said tenderly before planting a small kiss on her lips.

As I watched them, I thought the girl looked familiar.

"Catch you guys later," Memo said, looking up at us. "Don't go killing each other. You guys have clean-up duty and I can't go taking your loads, no matter *what* Ma says."

"Serve you right if we never go back." kidded Jesse.

"Excuse me, Gato," Gil interrupted. "If you can put your eyes back in your head, we can probably start sparring now."

I looked away from Memo and his girl a little redder in the face.

Gil turned to Jesse. "I want you to press him, set a good pace. He's fighting the champ Kyle Brodie on Saturday, and he's going to need every round to prep."

Jesse nodded through his headgear and the bell sounded.

We both came forward. For as long as I can remember, I've been mixing it up with my brothers—both inside *and* outside the ring. They're the best sparring partners I have, and we rarely hold back. This was to be no exception.

Jesse sent a straight-right to my midsection and a left uppercut to my jaw. I swatted the first punch and stepped away from the second. It was my turn now. I followed with a three-punch combination, sending a lightning fast jab, a left hook, and a right-cross. Two of the blows landed firmly, snapping his head back.

Not discouraged, he came back with several body shots. When I covered up he shoved me hard to the ropes and opened up with a combination of his own.

Immediately after I made him pay for his aggressiveness—left uppercut, right, left. The shots stunned him momentarily, enough that I could slide to my left. Then I fired a flurry of short looping punches to his head.

Being the cagy fighter he is, Jesse came in under my attack and waged a war on my ribs. I was forced to lower my arms for protection. The seesaw of action continued like this for the remainder of the round and into the second. If it were a scoring match, it would have been a closely contested bout.

As I awaited the final round, I took my mouthpiece out and Gil refreshed me with some water. I then adjusted my headgear more securely and prepared for war.

“Gotta show me more, Gato,” Gil indicated. “You gotta dig deep this round.”

I nodded in agreement.

Across from me, Jesse had that gleaming look in his eye that said he was going to give me everything he had left. A take no prisoners glare.

Gil turned to my brother. “Give it to ’em, Jess.”

CLANG!

Jesse came out of his corner like a man shot out of a canon. And like the canon, he was planning to lower the boom. A hard right hand came sailing over my head, and then a left hook and three or four uppercuts. I circled away from his power, but two managed to graze me hard enough to startle me. But he didn’t stop there; he kept coming forward, pursuing me from one corner to the next, firing shot after shot like a robot with no regard for personal safety.

I was forced to use every defensive trick I had, at least until I could find an opening or he slowed down. I bobbed, I weaved—I slipped and dipped—I blocked, I parried—I presented a moving

target, I moved left, I moved right. Always he was right on top of me, hardly allowing me a chance to get set.

I've had many sparring partners over the years, but it's always Jess who's been my favorite. Aside from being my brother, he has always been the most challenging. And honestly, if he had more of a competitive nature, he would be the best Galvez-family fighter of all. You see, Jess had a heart of gold, the kind of guy who loved just about everybody. We always kid that Jess wouldn't hurt a fly. I sure wish that were true right now.

Memo, on the other hand, was all heart and little ability. Oh sure, he has skills, but it's always his body that fails. A few serious hits and Memo's face is swelling or bleeding.

I guess that's why most people think that I'm the real deal, because I have Memo's heart and desire, and Jesse's physical tools.

CRACK!!! I just took a strong left hook—one that actually staggered me!

“What are you doing, Gato?” growled Gil. “Wake up!”

I may have looked at it as a sparring session when it started, but it was an actual fight now, and I WAS LOSING!!!

I got tagged again, this time from a left uppercut. My legs felt wobbly. It was time to let out all the stops. No more survival mode, I determined. Enough was enough. It was all or nothing time. I was in the *zone* now—totally absorbed and focused on what was before me. I was being driven by adrenaline, by rage, by something deep inside.

As soon as Jesse leaned in again, I fired two lightning fast jabs and a quick right. They stopped him dead in his tracks. Like a piston, I fired several more jabs at him. Because most fighters are right-handed, their power punch is the right-cross. However, I'm actually left-handed—a southpaw—and my power is in my left hand. It makes my jabs, hooks, and uppercuts that much more

dangerous when I'm fighting out of a normal—or conventional stance.

Jess backed up a step, but I pounced on him, delivering blow after blow like a well-oiled machine.

The tide was turning.

As his hands came up, I pounded away at his body. The punches began to take their toll, for Jesse was laboring to breathe. I didn't let up though, not when I knew how dangerous he could be still. Head, body—head, body, I continued to flail away.

Not surprisingly, Jesse didn't give up. He must have got a second wind because he was going toe-to-toe with me, trading punch for punch, neither of us willing to give an inch.

DING-DING!

The bell sounded and the round—or fight—had ended. I was exhausted. Jesse looked like he was going to drop too. We had just experienced a bruising fight—a war.

All of a sudden claps, shouts, and hollers went up from the gym. To my surprise, all the guys were standing ringside, having watched us fight our hearts out. I was so into the sparring session I failed to notice them.

“Now that's the way I like it,” Gil raved. “You perform like that on Saturday and you're the new champion, Gato!”

Jess and I didn't say a word. We just embraced each other. I felt proud of him. That was my bro' who just gave me *one-bad-round!*



Not long after, Jesse allowed me to drive us home in Memo's pickup truck. I had just received my driver's license two weeks before. As we climbed out of the truck, it seemed as though Jesse

had something on his mind. He had been quieter than usual during the drive. Of course, it was probably out of fear of my driving.

He turned to me just before we reached the porch with a dark expression. “Hey, Rudy,”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t worry about Saturday.”

“I ain’t worried none.” I returned confidently.

“I know you’re not,” he added. “And hey, I worked you hard because I want you at your best for that Brodie dude. He’s going to be your toughest, you know.”

“What? You don’t think I can win?”

Jesse laughed some. “I know you can win. I mean, you got *me* in your corner, right?”

“Yeh,” I threw a couple pretend punches his way, but he didn’t react like he usually does by punching back. “Something else bothering you, Jess?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a growing look of concern. “You remember that girl with Memo today?”

I nodded. “She looks familiar.”

“That’s Sonia Zarate.”

I had to think about it a moment. “Little rowdy Sonia from the barrio?”

Jesse nodded. “He said he’d been seeing someone named Sonia, I just didn’t think it was her. Her brothers are all big-time homeboys. They’re connected with the Vaquero Loco gang.”

“They *are* the Vaquero Loco gang.”

“Exactly.”

“Come to think of it, Memo has been dressing sorta different lately. You see how baggy his new pants were today?”

Jesse nodded uneasily.

“You gonna mention it to Pops then?” I asked.

“Let me talk to Memo first.”

“Ahh, it’s probably no big deal,” I claimed. “Besides, can you imagine Memo a home-boy? Forget it! Let’s go chow down!”



The family sat around the dinner table enjoying one of Ma’s home-cooked meals. All of us except Memo, of course. My mom had prepared beef *cocido*, a Mexican-style soup with cabbage, potatoes, Garbanzo beans, and of course, meat. It was one of my favorite meals. *Memo’s loss*, I thought.

As he typically did, Pops was thumbing through the newspaper while he was eating.

“So mija,” my mother began, addressing my ten-year-old sister Nina. “Did you enjoy going to church this morning with Jesse?”

“Em-hmm,” she answered with a beaming smile. “They were all very nice, Mama. And Pastor Ponch, he’s funny.”

“That’s good.”

“You ought to join us sometime, Ma,” Jesse suggested. “As a matter of fact, we should all go. Easter is coming and . . .”

My mom shook her head and interrupted, “I don’t know, mijo, you know I was raised differently. I think maybe it’s too late to change now.”

“Change is never too late, Ma. What do you think Pops?”

“Hmph.” he answered, not bothering to look up.

“Rudy? You’ve been promising for how long now?”

“Got no time right now, Jess.”

Jesse just took another spoonful of *cocido*. He mighta’ been disappointed but he didn’t show it. That was Jesse.

Nina looked up at Pops with her big brown eyes. “Daddy, think you can attend my recital this week?”

“Not sure, baby,” my father said slowly. “You know daddy has lots of work.”

“I know.” Nina admitted sadly.

My mom wasn’t pleased. “Emilio, can’t Carlos close this week?”

My father looked up at her with a stern face. “Rose . . .”

“No, Ma’s right, Pops,” Jess added. “You ought to come out and see Rudy in the gym too. He’s looking real good.”

“I’ll be lucky if I can make the fight Saturday.” My father folded the newspaper over and placed it on the table. He then walked off into the living room.

Jesse and I simply exchanged glances.



Once my food had settled, I slipped into some sweatpants and walked outside. I was bothered that my father wasn’t sure he could make the fight or my sister’s solo performance. *How could he not?* I thought. *He was our father!*

I figured I would just go out and run a few miles, distract myself long enough to think about something else. But as I looked over I saw that the garage door was open. It meant Pops was rearranging his tools again.

It was as good a time as any to have a talk with him, although it wouldn’t be easy. I had always looked at my father as a good man, always providing for the family—seeing that we had food on the table and clothes on our back. But my father was never an affectionate man, the kind of man to give you a pat on the back to say you’re doing well. He led more with actions than words. After his professional boxing career had come to an end, he used what he had left of his earnings and bought an old automotive shop. It

wasn't a big money maker, but it always provided enough for our family of six.

"Hey, Pops," I greeted. "You have a minute?"

He nodded in answer. Sure enough he was shifting the wrenches on his tool board from one area to another.

"I'm gonna go do a couple miles—but hey, I uh—I thought I'd ask you something."

My father looked up at me, and the scar tissue over his eyes was made visible from the fluorescent lights above. Even his nose was well illuminated, having been flattened and bent from years in the ring. "If it's about Saturday, it's like I said . . ."

"Nah—nah," I returned quickly, trying to disguise my disappointment. I suddenly recalled tio, my father's brother. "Actually, I wanted to ask you about ol' Sammy Mabry."

He stopped what he was doing. "He okay?"

"Oh yeah, he's okay. I just wondered what happened to him, is all. He was a great fighter. Ain't that what you said before?"

"Samuel was *magnifico* at one time. He had it all—speed, strength, heart. When you watched him fight, it was like listening to music—to an eight-piece mariachi band!"

We both chuckled at that.

Then the haunted look that my tio had earlier appeared on my father's face. "Too bad, things could have been different."

"What do you mean?"

"He thought he could erase things with a bottle."

"What kind of things?"

"Memories mostly. Ghosts. Samuel killed a man in the ring and he couldn't forgive himself. He was never the same after that."

"I never heard that before . . ."

"Not something you talk about, mijo."

Just then the telephone rang from inside the house.

"Yeah, guess not." I admitted.

My father started to collect his screwdrivers, but I still felt somewhat troubled. If I didn't speak up now, I knew I was going to regret it. "Say, Pops," I began. "I understand the shop is real busy right now—but listen, it really would mean a lot if—"

"Emilio!!!" my mother screamed.

We both knew something was wrong from the sound of her voice. My father accidentally dropped a hammer and it clanked to the ground, just an inch from his foot. It didn't matter as he raced to the front yard to find my mom. "What's wrong?"

"It's Memo," she cried out of breath. "He's been hurt and he's in the hospital!!!"

"*Ay, Dios mio!*" he remarked—Spanish for 'Oh, my God!'



Bad to Worse

“*What* do you mean I can’t see my son? *I have to see my son!!!*”

“Mr. Galvez,” the police officer said sternly. “I would suggest you calm down before we *all* do something we’re going to regret.”

Jesse came over and placed a reassuring hand on my father’s shoulder. He then addressed the officer. “Sir, isn’t there anything you can tell us about my brother?”

The officer looked at all of us undecided. I saw that he had a hand resting on his club.

“Please?” Jesse added, looking right into the officer’s eyes. All five of us, my parents, Jesse, Nina, and I had piled into the van and raced to the hospital moments after we received the news from an anonymous caller. When we got there, everything was chaos. There were patrol cars with lights flashing and police officers posted outside the emergency room doors. Even plain-clothed detectives were mulling around, jotting down notes and gathering facts.

“First of all, your son, Guillermo Galvez, is going to be okay.” the officer started to say. “He sustained a superficial wound to his shoulder. Docs are stitching him up now. Secondly—he is—and will remain in police custody.”

“For what?” My mom asked in shock. “My mijo is a good boy!”

“There was an altercation between blacks and Hispanics at a neighborhood rave-style party.” The officer hesitated before continuing. “A young black man was shot and killed, and your son was involved. That’s all I can say right now.”

“What?” my father questioned. “You must be mistaken.”

The news was too much for Nina as she began to sob heavily.

“Rudolfo,” my mom urged. “Please take Nina . . .”

As I led her away, I heard the officer conclude, “If you want to help your son, I suggest you find a good lawyer. He’s going to need one.”



I don’t think any of us got any rest that night. We had returned home when it was clear we weren’t going to be allowed to see Memo for any reason. The first thing my father did was jump on the telephone and contact anyone who might know a lawyer. He didn’t have much success. Either everyone was asleep or the businesses were closed until morning.

As for my mother, she locked herself in the room with Nina and all we could hear was occasional weeping. She had begun to argue with my father about the bad neighborhood when we got home—something they argued about at least twice a year—but my father made it clear he wasn’t in the mood for arguments.

Alone in our room, trying to make sense of things, Jesse and I just looked at each other. He didn’t seem nearly as upset as I was.

“When the cop said a *rave-style* party, he talking ’bout those flyer parties you hear about?” I asked.

“The ones with all the drugs and booze and sex—yeah.”

“What’s Memo doing there? He don’t go to those things.”

“He doesn’t . . . but Sonia probably does.”

I began to rub my forehead, feeling tired and confused. It was hard to imagine the sun coming up in the morning.

All of a sudden a slight smile was etched on Jesse's face. *What could he be smiling about*, I wondered.

"Remember that one summer when mom and dad took us to the Plaza for a picnic?" he recalled.

"You mean when we were playing hide-and-seek?"

"Yeah. Remember Memo and the tree?"

I nodded back with a grin. "When the ants crawled up his pants and he's jumping up and down like his behind caught fire?"

"I thought he was just pretending to be a jockey on a race horse." Jesse laughed.

"That was a fun day."

"Thank God for happy memories, huh?" he concluded.

As I looked at him carefully, I realized that my brother was always the calm and steady force in the family. It was something that had always puzzled me about him, but I never thought to ask.

"Can I ask you something, Jess?"

He returned a nod.

"How is it you never seem to get rattled by things? I mean, Pops is in a world of his own, you can't talk to him. Ma has cut herself off from the rest of us, and I'm like—I'm going crazy here just thinkin' about Memo. Why aren't you losin' it?"

His eyes fell to the ground for a moment before he looked back up. "It's funny you say that 'cause I used to think that about *abuelita*. That year before she died, I used to wonder how this wrinkled little old lady, our grandma could appear so strong."

He paused before he continued. "When Nina got really sick with Meningitis you were probably as old as she is now."

"Yeah, I think so. Those days at the hospital were the longest, weren't they?"

“Well I don’t know if you remember, but on the third night, Nina’s fever shot way up. One of the doctors approached mom and dad and didn’t know I was standing around the corner listening.”

“Why? What’d the doctor say?”

“He said Nina probably wouldn’t last the night.”

“Wow, Jess.”

“I went into Nina’s room right then and found her alone. I stared at her; there were all these tubes coming out and all. She looked so helpless. I just started balling at that moment—I couldn’t help myself. Well the next thing I know, abuelita comes in and sits next to me.” Jesse’s eyes drifted over as if he could still picture her next to him.

“You know what she did?”

I shook my head.

“She starts praying. Before I know it this peaceful feeling comes over me, a sense of calm. It’s hard to explain it, even now,” he added, shaking his head in amazement. “So the next day news comes that Nina’s gonna be all right.”

Jesse rose from his chair and plopped himself down on his bed. “That was a great day, Rudy. I didn’t know what abuelita had at the time, but I knew whatever it was, I wanted to have it too. I needed to have it.”

My brother patted his pillow a few times and tucked it under his head. “We’re gonna get through this, and we’re gonna find out what happened to Memo. But for now . . . it’s rest we need.” With that he flicked the light switch and the room went dark.

“Night, Jess.” I said simply.



The next morning the sun did come up. I lifted my head from my pillow and saw that Jesse wasn't in his bed. As I entered the kitchen I found him and my mother sitting at the table. The morning paper was flipped open.

"What's going on?" I asked groggily.

My mom quickly wiped away a tear. Jesse had his head down and his eyes closed like he was meditating.

"Something in the paper about last night?"

She ignored the question. Instead she pretended to smile through her red, swollen eyes. "How 'bout some bacon and eggs, mijo?"

"Sure, Ma."

"I want you and Nina in school today," she said, opening the refrigerator and removing the bacon and eggs. "Jess is going to stay home with me—see what we can do."

"Okay. I'll walk Nina to school then." I offered.

"Thank you, mijo."

"Where's Pops?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'm going to go wake up your sister."

As I leaned over the newspaper, the headline read:

GANG FEUD AT FLYER-PARTY RESULTS IN DEATH

Jesse finally lifted his head up to me. "It don't look good, Rudy."

I read a little further on, but there weren't many details. In fact, the article was only a few paragraphs long. There were no names given—no number of arrests. It did, however, say that the incident was believed to be racially motivated, and identified the two gangs as the Vaquero Locos and the Shady Town Bandits, a black gang that ran the same neighborhood.

“Memo ain’t a minor,” Jess added. “If he’s involved in this, he’s going to be tried as an adult.”

“You don’t really think Memo had anything to do with this, do you?”

“Let’s hope not.”

All I could do was shake my head. How could things change so much in a day, I wondered. “What are we going to do, Jess?”

“Well I was thinking . . .” he began to say, then hesitated.

“What? You were thinking what?”

“Never mind.”

“No, what is it?” I pried.

He looked at me carefully, not sure if he should continue. “Well you remember Elgin Jeffrey right?”

I thought about it a second. “Elgin from elementary school?”

“Yeah,” Jesse nodded. “So here’s the thing—I see him around sometimes. We don’t talk or hang out like when we were in kid school, but he’s not chasin’ after me either—”

“Wait a minute!” I interrupted. “Isn’t Elgin in Shady Town now? The short, ripped guy with muscles over every inch of his body?”

“Yeah, I know—just hear me out.”

I was shaking my head as I was listening.

“What do you think of me talking to Elgin? See if he can tell me anything? Hey, maybe I can even smooth over this whole thing for Memo’s sake?”

“Don’t be a fool, Jess!!! You actually serious?”

Jesse looked hurt by my reaction. “Too crazy, huh?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

“Yeah, I probably don’t have his number anyway.”

I slapped my brother lightly on the shoulder. “Look, let me pin that weasel Chucho at school today. If anyone knows anything, it’s him. He’ll talk to me.”

“Nah, just go get ready for school, I’ll get breakfast going. Don’t worry ’bout it.”

As I walked away, I chuckled. “Talk to Elgin? That’s funny, Jess.”



Freddie Castro gave me a shout out, “Rudy, man, mi amigo! You did it man, you rock! You’re going to be fighting for the championship!”

“Way to go, Gato!” yelled another from the other side of the classroom.

“Drop him like a fly, Rudy, baby!” blurted someone passing, raising his fist to mine and rapping knuckles.

I had expected a couple close friends to know about my win on Saturday, but not this many. It seemed as though the whole school knew about my victory. *Is this what it feels like to be a famous?* I thought. I felt special—like I was somebody. If it wasn’t for Memo being in trouble, it might have been a perfect day.

“Everyone quiet down, please,” Mr. Ledbetter said. “The principal has an important announcement this morning.”

What’s that about? I wondered. Since when do they make announcements during first period? Our brains were barely functioning at that hour.

I looked around as confused as everyone else. Suddenly the speaker-system crackled. “Ahem, is the P.A. on, Ms. Pierce?”

“Sir, it’s on—it’s on, go ahead.”

“Right. Good morning, everyone, this is your principal Mr. Kenehan. If I can have a moment of your undivided attention,” he began. “Coming into your classroom and disturbing your studies isn’t something I wish to do, but this morning news has come that

is too good to pass up. After all, it isn't everyday Mercer High School has a possible champion the likes of an Oscar de la Hoya. So, for that reason, the teachers and faculty of Mercer High would just like to extend a hearty congratulation to Rudy Galvez, who will be fighting for the Golden Gloves Championship this coming Saturday. I bid you all to do the same."

The classroom erupted in hoots and hollers. If there were students who didn't know about Saturday a moment ago, they did now.

"Good day." Mr. Kenehan concluded as the mike went off.



It was lunchtime and I slipped my comb back into my pocket. As much as I enjoyed all the attention, I wanted to find Chucho Carillo. Chucho wasn't his actual name, but it didn't really matter because his mother was the only one who knew his real name and she wasn't going to tell.

Chucho was a character. For some reason, I always pictured him as this thin vato who was actually an escaped scarecrow from some cornfield in the sticks—like something out of a children's horror novel or something. His clothes were a million times too baggy for him, no two hairs on his head were in place, and he had this weird smile all the time, like his face was frozen that way.

Chucho was also the little gopher-boy for the Vaquero Locos so I figured he might know something.

Some of the boys I was hanging with were busy clowning around with each other so I slipped away toward the lockers. It was the first place to look since Chucho had a habit of standing around there during breaks, gawking at the girls. Sure enough, I

found him standing there trying to make small talk with a girl opening her locker.

I came up behind him but he was too busy to notice.

“Wassup, Chucho?” I greeted.

Startled at first, the girl smiled as soon as she recognized me. “Hi, Rudy. I heard Mr. Kenehan this morning. Good luck on Saturday.”

Chucho looked over and nodded at me. “Oh, yeah, hey, Gato.” Then he turned to the girl. “Hey, Steph, me an’ Gato, we’re tight you know.”

The girl just smiled weakly, closed her locker and left.

“Good friends?” I repeated, leaning against a wall. “I’m glad to hear that, ’cause I got some questions.”

“ ’Bout what?” Chucho asked, irritated that the girl escaped.

“Last night . . . ”

“Watcha talking about, homie?” Chucho answered.

I could sense that Chucho was playing dumb with me. I’m not sure what you would call it, but after being in the streets for a few years, you almost develop a sense for when someone is lying. And the last thing I wanted was word games when I knew Memo needed help. So I looked around and seeing no one nearby, I sort of bumped Chucho hard into the lockers.

“Hey, homes,” he challenged. “Hands off!”

“Actually, I didn’t use my hands, Chucho,” I said calmly. “Want me to show you the difference?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means I ain’t playing no games, *friend*.” I replied.

As we stood there in silence, I stared him down. I was on a mission, and I wasn’t going to leave until I had what I wanted.

Chucho appeared resentful that I had him cornered. He finally looked around with a fearful expression and then turned to me.

“All right, so maybe Tony Comacho did mention there was some kinda trouble last night at a party on 34th Street. Waddaya wanna know?”

“What happened?”

Chucho shrugged. “Something about a Shady Town chick having a problem with Sonia. A couple bumps on the dance floor and they were rippin’ each other’s hair out.”

“Then what happened?”

“One thing leads to another and then the dudes are mixing it up, according to Tony.”

“Was my brother Memo fighting too?”

“He was the first one—right in the middle. One of the Shady boys even shanked him across the shoulder with a blade.”

To hear him say those words made my heart sink. I didn’t want to ask more questions—but I had to! “Well where did the gun come from?”

“Tony said the gangsta from Shady Town was packin’—the one that croaked. He pulled it out and Memo tried to stop him—they wrestled for it and when it was over ol’ Shady boy was dead. Serves ’em right for throwin’ down on us.”

NO!!! a voice in my head raged. *Not Memo! Why did it have to be Memo?!!* It felt like someone just punched my gut. I had one more question. “The cops—did they arrest anyone besides Memo?”

Chucho shook his head slowly. “Dude, it’s messed up they got your bro’, but he’s Vaquero to the core—the risk we take, right?”

Vaquero? I thought. *My brother wasn’t a member of no gang!* A fire erupted inside me as I shoved Chucho against the lockers. “Don’t ever say that about my brother, you hear?”

“Rudy? That you?” came a voice from behind me. I looked over my shoulder to see Mrs. Rivers, the math teacher strolling over.

“Is there a problem here?” she asked politely.

“Nah,” I answered, moving away from Chucho. “No problem, Mrs. Rivers.”



Nina and I had a block more to walk before we reached home. The whole way I was sick with the news on Memo, but I didn't show it, I didn't say a word to my little sister. Instead, I pretended that everything was going to be okay. I even raced her most of the way home, the footrace taking our mind off our troubles, but also getting us home faster. I was anxious to give the news to Jesse.

“What's that over there?” I shouted. Nina turned and I broke into a run.

“*Hey, cheater.*” she protested.

Nina chased after me. As it was most of the way over, we were neck and neck. Finally she overtook me. “I won!” Nina announced proudly, reaching the house first.

“Ahh, not again!” I replied.

As I came up just behind her, I noticed the truck was missing—Memo's truck.

“Hi, miija,” my mom said, greeting Nina at the door. “How was your day?”

“Good. Ma, I raced Rudy and I beat him again!”

“That's my girl.” Mother looked up at me next. “Hello, mijo.”

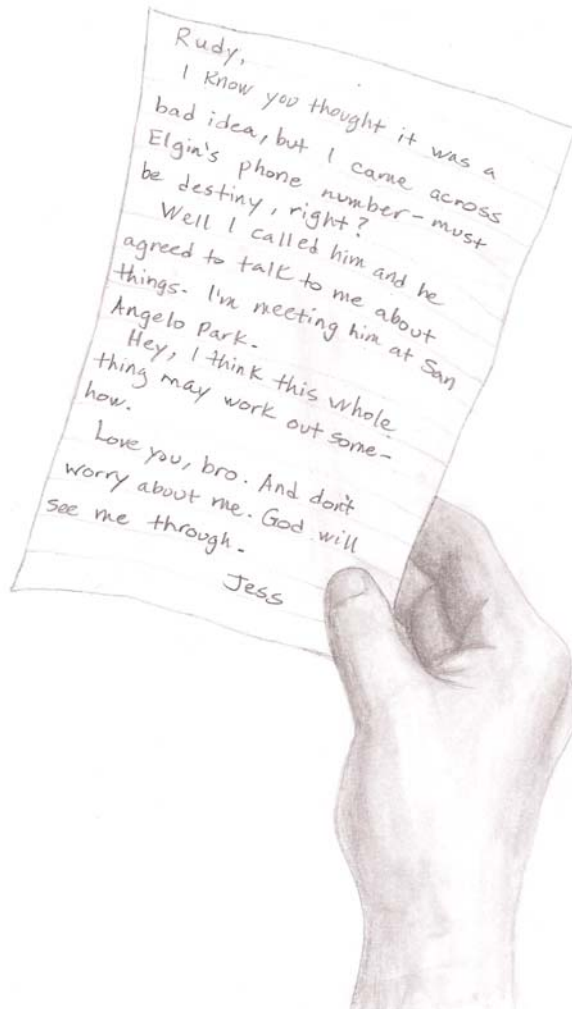
I met her with a courteous kiss on the cheek. “Hey, Ma, why is the truck missing?”

“Oh, Jesse said he was going to pick up a package from the post office and visit a friend about Memo. He left about a half hour ago.”

A sinking feeling hit me. “A friend? What friend?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

I wanted to ask about Memo—if there was any news, and about my father—but something told me to check the bedroom first. When I got there I found a note on the bed.



Rudy,
I know you thought it was a
bad idea, but I came across
Elgin's phone number - must
be destiny, right?
Well I called him and he
agreed to talk to me about
things. I'm meeting him at San
Angelo Park.
Hey, I think this whole
thing may work out some-
how.
Love you, bro. And don't
worry about me. God will
see me through.
Jess

As fast I as could I raced past the hallway and into the living room. “MA, YOUR KEYS!!!” I yelled. “WHERE ARE THEY?”

“What?” she answered. “Rudy you just barely got your driver’s license!

Just then I saw the car keys resting on the coffee table.

“Just because your fath—!”

I snatched them before she could finish her sentence. I didn't have a moment to lose.

“Rudy? Wha—What’s wrong?”

My mother followed me outside but I was already screeching down the street in her van. My heart was beating so hard I thought it was going to burst through my chest. There are moments in our lives when our brain seems to click off and we just react—when something so extreme occurs it’s like we become someone else. This was one of those times. I can’t say what was going through my head because I hardly remember any of it. It’s like I was there living it—going through it—and yet I wasn’t.

San Angelo Park was only a few miles away and I was getting there very quickly, narrowly avoiding moving cars and missing parked ones. My only real driving experience had been with someone in the car with me, and moving at a nice, calm pace. Actually operating a vehicle under stressful circumstances was much different. Because of my inexperience I was forcing the van to lurch a lot, jerking it, but I didn’t care. Nothing mattered except reaching Jesse as fast as I possibly could.

As I pulled into the parking lot I realized just how large a park San Angelo was. Although I ran through it almost every day on my way to the boxing gym, I never really appreciated its size. It probably ran as long as a whole city block and included several baseball diamonds, basketball courts, tennis courts, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, even picnic areas with shady trees and barbecues everywhere. How was I going to find Jesse in time, I wondered?

I lowered the windows to my left and right so I could get a better view of the park, and started to drive slowly through the parking lot. My head was bobbing like I was in the ring. I was doing everything I could to get a better visual and locate my brother.

Suddenly I heard firecrackers going off—POP-POP-POP! Who was messing with firecrackers, I thought. They were illegal in Los Angeles, and New Year’s Eve had long since passed. *What if...?* a voice in my head had started to say. I pushed it away but it came right back. *What if those weren’t firecrackers?* Then my heart skipped a beat—someone was screaming! And then another. And another!

I slammed on the brakes. From a distance away I could see people fleeing as if a pit bull were chasing them—falling and tripping over each other.

I punched the accelerator pedal and the van jumped the curb. In an instant I was bouncing over the sidewalk and then driving through a baseball diamond—all to get to the section of the park others were trying to escape. The faster the van surged forward the more grass was being kicked out from under the tires. I couldn’t get there fast enough, I feared.

As I got close I saw that people had stopped running. In fact, some were rushing back in the direction of the basketball courts. I couldn’t make out what was drawing their attention because several adults were starting to gather; others were frantically dialing their cell phones.

About fifty yards away I came to a screeching halt and jumped out of the van. I can’t even remember if I put it in park.

“Get back!” a man barked at the crowd. “Get all the kids back.”

“What’s going on?” I yelled, hoping it was nothing more than a simple twisted ankle or a muscle cramp some stranger had suffered.

A young woman started crying. “Oh, God, I can’t believe it. Not here.”

“Send the kids away!” another person was shouting.

As I rushed into their midst, I came face to face with my worst nightmare—Jesse was lying there in a pool of blood. He had taken

three bullets to the chest. At that moment I felt as if I was floating outside my body, like I was watching a cop show and the whole thing was just being staged by actors—like it would go away the moment the commercial started. I was shaking my head in denial when I softly spoke, “No.”

Someone in the crowd noticed me. “Do you know this boy? Is he a friend of yours?”

Jesse had been lying deathly still, but he opened his eyes and spotted me. “Hey, little brother,” he smiled weakly. He started to cough blood and I knelt at his side and lifted his head.

“Don’t talk, Jess. Just hang in there, okay? Just hang in there.” My brother looked so frail and tired in my arms, not the strong 17-year-old who a day before was knocking me upside my head. He closed his eyes again and his breathing slowed.

“It’s all right, Rudy—get to go home now . . . tell Memo . . . did what I could . . . and forgive ’em, Rudy . . . you got to forgive.”

His last word was more of a hiss and then he felt heavy in my arms. “Jess?” I gasped.

“Oh, God, no!” someone cried out behind me. “He’s dead!!!”

The word felt dull in my head. *Dead?*

A male voice called out, “Did someone get 911?!!!”

“They’re on their way. They’re coming!”

In the distance I could hear the wail of an approaching siren. Help was on the way for Jesse, but help was too late.

I lifted my eyes from his limp body and searched for the person responsible for this. I decided right then and there that I hated Elgin Jeffrey with everything that was in me. My mind reeled back to the words, *‘He can run, but he can’t hide.’*