

Prologue

Fifteen Years Ago

“No *más*.”

Carlos jerked off the earphones and sat up in bed. The stench of something burning filtered into his bedroom and stung his eyes.

Meth.

“*Drogas*. Look at you. *Repugnante*.” His mother’s voice carried easily from the living room, thanks to the thin walls of the mobile home.

Great. His stepfather was strung out on drugs. Again. It’d gotten worse since he’d been laid off at the refinery. So had the fights.

Joya pequeña! Surely his little jewel hid in the corner of her closet, just like he’d taught her. He had to find her, hold her, and sing into her ear until *Mamá* and Robert finished yet another argument.

Carlos whipped off the covers, slipped out of bed, and crept over the beaten-down carpet to his door.

“I told you to speak English. No more of that Spanish crap.” Their voices, right outside his room, pushed him back a step.

Whack!

A thud shook the trailer. His mother cried out. “*¡Suficiente!* I can’t take any more. We’re leaving.”

Carlos had never understood why she’d married the *gringo* in the first place and moved them to this hick town. He tightened his hands into fists. He had to get out without being

seen...had to get to *joya pequeña*. At only eight, their fights terrified his half sister.

“Leave anytime you want.” *Whack!* “Take that worthless son of yours too. But you aren’t taking my princess from me.” *Smack!*

His stepfather was on a rampage. One like Carlos had never seen. His pulse throbbed as adrenaline coursed through him.

Bam! Bam! Bam! “You will not take my daughter, do you understand me?”

Carlos’s door rattled in the frame.

“Robert, *parada. Por favor.*” His mother’s sobs echoed off the walls, rooting Carlos to the floor. He’d never heard her beg. Ever. Not even when his own father had left them.

Whack! A thump shuddered against the base of his door. More of his mother’s sobs. Then...heavy footfalls. Toward the end of the hall.

Toward his sister’s room.

Carlos jerked open the door. His mother, bloody and battered, fell across the threshold. Her already-swollen eyes locked on his. “Stay put! Don’t come out.”

“¡Mamá...*joya pequeña!*”

“I’ll take care of it, *miel*. Stay put.” She rolled onto all fours, crawling back into the hall. “Robert! Leave her out of this.”

His sister’s bedroom door creaked open.

Joya pequeña, please be in the closet. Please be hidden.

Mamá pulled up on the back doorknob. “Robert! Leave her alone.” She staggered behind her husband.

“Momma!” His sister screamed.

Carlos raced down the hall.

His mother blocked him as she reached for his sister who cowered on her bed, little knees pressed to her chest. Carlos hovered behind Mamá, his hands curled into fists.

Robert turned, fist tight, and plowed it into Mamá's face. The cracking resonated down Carlos's spine as she fell to the floor. His little sister screamed again.

Robert lunged and wrapped his hands around Mamá's throat.

"No!" Carlos jumped on his back, angling to get his forearm against the base of Robert's neck. His stepfather reeked of liquor—mixing alcohol with meth was what had probably sent him into such an uncontrollable rage.

Robert shrugged him off. "Get off me, you worthless piece of—"

The curse was lost as Carlos thudded against the floor. His shoulder collided with the wall. Hot pain shot through him. His gut tightened. His sister's sobs tore at his soul.

His stepfather was going to kill Mamá! He had to stop Robert...but how?

An idea darted into his mind. No, not that. But then his gaze hit his mother's lifeless body. One more scream from his sister cemented his resolve.

Carlos pulled himself off the floor and scrambled down the hall. Past the living room...through the kitchen to Mamá's bedroom.

He tugged the dresser drawer. All thumbs, he fumbled through his stepfather's socks.

Come on, come on.

Flesh met cold metal.

"Carlos!" His sister's scream sent waves of fear crashing down his spine.

He palmed the 9mm, then raced down the hallway. He stumbled over his own feet twice. He gripped the gun tighter.

His little sister screamed again. His stepfather's voice muffled.

Carlos ran through the kitchen. The gun hit the handle of a pot on the stove. Metal crashed as the pot fell. Spoons clattered against torn linoleum. Glass shattered as whiskey bottles tumbled to the floor.

He swerved to miss the ottoman as he passed through the living room. He kept moving down the dim hall.

Mamá lay on the floor...not moving...her chest didn't rise or fall. Her eyes were open, but no life lit the orbs. They were flat. Dead.

The back of Carlos's throat burned. His heart raced, pulse echoing in his head. He tightened his hold on the gun.

Robert hulked in the doorway between the bedroom and the back door, holding Carlos's little sister. Tears streamed down her chubby cheeks. Her eyes were wide, scared. She reached for Carlos with both arms.

His stepfather spun.

Snap!

Her head jerked as it made contact with the metal frame of the backdoor. She gasped, then went limp.

Robert's eyes went wild. He dropped her like a sack of potatoes, as if she had no meaning or value. Eyes closed. No movement in her.

Carlos glanced at her small body, now in a crumpled heap on the stained carpet. "No!" His knees wouldn't support him. He leaned against the paneled wall, fighting the urge to throw up.

His stepfather faced him, his features twisted into something Carlos had never seen before. "You killed my princess, you worthless puke. You broke her neck!" He took thundering

steps toward Carlos.

Straightening, Carlos lifted the gun and pointed the barrel at Robert. “You killed Mamá and my *hermana pequeña*.”

Robert lumbered toward him, his eyes narrowed and focused on Carlos.

The only things Carlos cared about in life were gone. Dead. Murdered.

He sucked in air. Tightened his grip. Slowly exhaled.

And pulled the trigger.