

Desert Blood 10pm / 9c

**A Novel by
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The new billboard out on the Sierra Highway was the largest we had ever seen. It was easily thirty feet high and seventy feet across, and it took eight enormous steel poles just to hold it upright. Drivers heading north through Palmdale could see it from many miles away, a gaudy and out-of-place object on the edge of California's vast Mojave Desert.

Straddling our bikes on the shoulder of the busy highway, Lalo and I stared up in astonishment. Passing cars kicked up bits of gravel that stung our bare legs, but we didn't notice. Our mouths hung open as we contemplated the miracle of such a fantastic sight appearing just minutes from our own neighborhood.

There were four gorgeous women and one equally handsome man spread across the billboard's immense façade. They were young, beautiful models with the exact kind of faces that deserved to be ten feet tall. The partially clothed females were the stuff of every teenaged-boy's dreams, including my own. All four were posed in short skirts or low-slung jeans and tight halter-tops. They had pouting lips, huge breasts, and long, tan legs that caused more than one speeding motorist to hit the brakes.

Under any other circumstances, those women would have lived in my fantasies night after night. But on this particular billboard, out on this particular stretch of highway, it was the young man posing with them that held my attention. Dressed in a crisp blue policeman's uniform, he dominated the foreground with a presence that was both awe-inspiring and appealing. He had a boyish face that made mothers blush and girls squeal, with a dimple in his chin, wavy black hair, and big dark eyes that locked onto

yours and didn't let go. His unbuttoned shirt revealed the kind of lean, buff body that skinny, self-conscious boys like me openly admired. His hands were planted on his hips, and he glared down at us with a look of utter superiority.

Written across the bottom of the sign, in letters as red as the setting sun, was his name, Nicholas Hernandez, and the name of his top-rated television show, Desert Blood.

Lalo pulled a camera out of his backpack and I hopped off my bike to pose for photos in front of the massive advertisement. Standing directly beneath the giant sign, I smiled, waved, and stuck out my tongue with each snap of the shutter. In one picture, I planted my hands on my waist, furrowed my brow, and mimicked the man looming over me.

After several minutes, I traded places with Lalo, and we finished the roll of film by taking pictures of him doing uneven handstands and awkward back flips.

Above us, Nicholas Hernandez continued to glower. I didn't care. I couldn't wait to show him the pictures we were taking. I knew he'd laugh.

You see, Nicholas Hernandez is not only the hot Latino star of the popular television crime drama, Desert Blood, he is also my dad.

My name is Gus González, and I'm fourteen years old. Last summer, in a move that stunned the entertainment industry and changed my life forever, Nicholas Hernandez became my legal guardian. Ignoring the advice of his manager and the criticism of his fans, the famous twenty-six-year-old actor hired a hotshot attorney, went to court, and made an emotional appeal to three separate judges.

And then, in a media frenzy that dominated the supermarket tabloids for more than six months, he adopted me.

Chapter 1

In **big bold letters**, the front-page tabloid headline announced that I'd been abducted by aliens: **HERNANDEZ HEARTBREAK! Adopted Son Taken Captive Aboard Flying Saucer.** An accompanying color photo showed a silver spacecraft blasting into the night sky, trailing streaks of mysterious purple and green lights.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed, scanning the details of my unfortunate abduction and wondering at the same time if I had a clean shirt to wear. I'd already tugged on a pair of slightly dirty jeans, but I had no decent underwear, and my balls were chafing uncomfortably against the denim. It was my turn to do the wash, and Nick knew it. He never forgets when it's time for me to do my chores.

He'd come into my room ten minutes earlier, stepping over mounds of reeking clothes in order to shake me awake. "Time to get up, Gus," he'd said, pulling open the drapes and flooding the room with the blinding early light of the desert sun. "Lalo's already here."

I dropped the tabloid onto a stack of similar ones next to my nightstand and began picking through two piles of unwashed clothes. After several minutes of searching, I finally settled on a plain yellow T-shirt that only had a tiny spot of ketchup on one sleeve. I pulled it on, rubbing my palms across the front and attempting to smooth out the wrinkles.

I had just bent down to look under the bed for my shoes when I heard someone calling my name.

"Hey, González! Get your ass up! *Ándale!*"

I grinned and jumped to my feet. It was Lalo Perez, my best friend. It's a role he takes very seriously. We met eight years ago, when we were both six and in the first grade. The Mexican children were seated together at tiny desks in the back of the classroom, and Lalo's desk was right next to mine. He spoke very little English back then, and I didn't know any Spanish, so we mainly communicated through a series of gestures and made-up words. It was several weeks into the school year before Lalo discovered I didn't have a father and that my mother had been killed in a car accident when I was four, leaving me orphaned. When I told him I lived in a group foster home without any parents, he burst into tears so loud that Mrs. Collins, our teacher, had to send him out of the room. Since then, Lalo has always gone out of his way to take care of me. He seems to get some kind of personal satisfaction out of it, so I usually keep my mouth shut and let him do it.

"Hey, Lalo," I called out. "Come in."

He slapped the outside of the door and entered the room. He smiled when he saw my outfit. "Has Nick seen you yet?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"You gonna let him?"

"Maybe," I lied, stuffing the front of my T-shirt into my pants. "He won't care." Another lie. I sniffed my underarm curiously. *Christ*. I smelled like a dog. I grabbed a stick of deodorant from the top of my dresser and applied a generous coat, along with a few squirts of cologne that one of Nick's brothers had given me for Christmas. I took another whiff and determined I'd be all right for the day, but I would definitely need some clean clothes before school tomorrow.

"You should have held out for the BeastMaster," Lalo decided, putting his hands on his hips and looking around at my messy room. "The BeastMaster wouldn't care how

dirty your clothes were or what you wore to school. He'd probably let you wear a loincloth."

"What about the Invisible Man?" I argued. "Last week, you said I should have been adopted by him!"

Lalo shrugged. "I changed my mind. That guy would have been a real pain in the ass. You'd never know if he was spying on you or not."

We both laughed. For as long as Lalo had known me, I'd been a ward of the state, and the idea of a well-known television star taking in a scrawny Mexican teenager still prompted good-natured teasing from him. Almost a year later, my unexpected adoption still seemed impossible to believe.

The day Nick and I met, he rode up to St. Gregory's group home on a large brown horse he'd rented from a stable on the edge of town. He was dressed in a worn pair of Levi's, a plain white shirt, scuffed leather boots, and a dust-stained hat. A red bandana tied around his neck made him look like an authentic Mexican *vaquero*. His arrival generated quite a bit of excitement among the dozen or so kids who lived there. A couple of the older boys recognized him and watched with amazement as he dismounted and tied his horse to the front porch. "Isn't that Nicholas Hernandez?" one of them asked in an awed tone.

Nick introduced himself to everyone and announced that he was looking for me. "I saw your name in the paper and wanted to meet you," he said, shaking my hand while the rest of the boys gathered around us, staring. "You're a real hero." He was referring to a story in the *Antelope Valley Press* describing how I'd saved the mayor's puppy from being eaten by a coyote when I'd thrown rocks at the predator and scared it away. Even though the entire article was no more than a few sentences, Mr. Connolly, our head counselor, had

cut it out anyway and put it in a frame for me to keep. He was always doing things like that. It was his way of making us feel special.

I was twelve at the time and had lived at St. Gregory's for more than eight years. Saving that puppy turned out to be the luckiest thing I'd ever done. Nick's publicist had seen the article and arranged an exclusive visit for her most famous client to come and meet me.

"That was a very courageous thing you did, Gus," Nick said, sitting on the porch and looking at me with admiration. He began telling me all about his life as an actor and his role on a new TV show called *Desert Blood*. He asked me plenty of questions about myself, too. I told him about my mother being killed in a car crash when I was four, and what it'd been like growing up in foster care. He listened to my story with an expression of genuine concern and fondness. Before the day was over, we were talking like old friends. He even let me ride his horse.

After that, Nick's visits became more and more frequent. Then, a year after we first met, he surprised everyone by adopting me. We've been together ever since.

"This place is a dump," declared Lalo, kicking at a tangled mound of dirty jeans and snapping me out of my reverie. "Nick should hire a maid."

"He says chores help develop character," I answered, rolling my eyes to show I didn't believe it.

"You gonna do laundry tonight?" Lalo posed the question casually, but I knew him too well to be fooled.

"You can come," I said, "but you can only take two socks and one T-shirt. He'll miss anything else." I paused. "And *no* underwear. He counts them, I think."

Lalo earns extra cash by secretly selling Nick's personal possessions on Internet auction sites like eBay. Half-eaten food items and worn articles of clothing are goldmines,

often fetching upwards of twenty or thirty dollars each. Lalo gives me a percentage of his earnings. I do my best to keep him honest and never let him take anything Nick isn't getting ready to throw in the garbage anyway.

"Are you ready to go?" Lalo asked impatiently. "Nick is cooking this morning, and it smells delicious."

My heart sank. "He's still here?" I asked with surprise. "It's Thursday!" Even though much of *Desert Blood* is filmed just north of Palmdale, every Thursday and Friday the entire cast and crew travel to Los Angeles to shoot additional interior scenes on one of the huge sound stages in Burbank. On those days, Nick leaves the house right after shaking me awake and putting some cereal on the table. The sixty-mile drive to L.A. is often crowded, and he likes to get on the road before the rest of the rush hour commuters.

"He's in the kitchen, scrambling eggs." Lalo ran a hand over his black, heavily gelled hair and wiped the sticky excess on the leg of his jeans.

"We'll have to sneak out," I said, casting my gaze around the room for any clean clothes I might have overlooked. "Nick will never let me out of the house looking like this."

"Does this mean we don't get to eat?" whined Lalo as he followed me down the hall. "I'm starving."

I held my breath when we walked into the kitchen. Nick was standing at the stove, dressed casually in a pair of tan khakis and a sky-blue Armani shirt. He was immaculately groomed, his glossy black hair stylishly combed and his light brown skin still freshly scrubbed after a morning shower. At the moment, he was frying a skillet of *chorizo* with his back to us. The rich aroma of the Mexican sausage filled the room.

"¡Buenos días!" I shouted, snagging a handful of flour tortillas from a stack on the table and moving quickly towards the back door. Lalo was right behind me. For a minute,

I thought we might make it. But Nick was prepared. The door was locked, and the security chain was in place.

“Gus!” he barked, his voice firm but not unkind.

“¿*Qué?*” I asked, using one of the few Spanish words I knew. Sometimes he thought that was cute and cut me a break. I fumbled with the door’s deadbolt, still hoping for a clean escape.

“Eat,” he commanded, stepping forward and pointing at the table. A heaping plate of scrambled eggs sat next to a pitcher of orange juice and a basket of Mexican sweet bread. “*Tú también.*” He pointed at Lalo. “*Come.*”

“We’re going to be late,” I argued, returning to the center of the room and plopping into a chair.

“I’ll drive you,” he countered. “After you change your clothes and wash off some of that cologne. I could smell you as soon as you came out of your room.”

I felt myself redden.

Lalo snickered.

I scooped some eggs onto a plate, covered the mound with a warm tortilla, and smothered the entire thing with salsa. From behind me, Nick reached over my shoulder and added a portion of still-sizzling *chorizo*.

“You smell like a locker room,” he said to me.

“Thanks,” I told him—for the sausage, not the insult.

Nick has a soft spot for Lalo and made him a huge plate of food. He poured us both glasses of orange juice and milk. When we were settled and eating, he pulled a slice of wheat bread from the toaster, brushed it lightly with strawberry jam, and sat between us munching it.

“Aren’t you going to be late?” I asked him. “You’re usually gone by now.”

He lifted his broad shoulders slightly and frowned. “I’m going to Copper Creek today, but I don’t have to be there until nine.”

I nodded and took a bite off the end of a rolled tortilla. Copper Creek is the television studio where all of the outdoor action sequences for *Desert Blood* are filmed. The flat, desolate terrain provides a realistic background for the show, and since it’s close to our house, it’s convenient for Nick. It was one of the reasons we’d moved to Palmdale after the adoption.

“I thought you worked in L.A. on Thursdays,” Lalo pointed out, breaking off a huge piece of *pan dulce* and shoving it in his mouth.

Nick shrugged. “The producers are doing something special this week.”

“And you’re not included?” That seemed unusual, and I said so.

“You’re the star!” Lalo hollered, spraying the table with bits of sweet bread.

“It’s nothing like that,” Nick assured us. He managed a weak smile, but it was obvious something was bothering him.

“Is everything okay, Nick?” I asked, wondering what was really going on. I’d overheard him on the phone the night before, talking to his ex-girlfriend Aurora for almost an hour. Even though he’d broken up with the popular movie actress more than a year ago, I suspected he still had feelings for her.

He sighed. “The latest ratings came in last week, and *Desert Blood*’s numbers are down considerably from the same time last year.” He didn’t say it, but I knew what he meant: *Before he’d adopted me*. “The producers want to try to attract a more teenaged audience, so they’ve decided to give Gabriel a long-lost younger brother.”

“That’s original,” I muttered. My voice was heavy with sarcasm.

Gabriel Santana is the character Nick plays on the show. A baseball player-turned-cop, Gabriel is honest, brave, and considerate. He's also an audience favorite and current two-time champion of *TV Guide*'s "Most Beloved Action Hero" poll.

"Anyway," Nick continued, taking a bite of his toast, "they're holding a couple of casting calls for the show, and—" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized his mistake.

"Really?" asked Lalo, taking a quick swig of milk and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His brown eyes gleamed. "What kind of casting calls? Do they need any handsome teenagers?" Lalo had been bugging Nick to find him a role on the show ever since the adoption. He'd never acted a day in his life, but that didn't stop him from demanding a chance. Every once in a while he seemed completely serious, but most of the time he did it just to be annoying. The more he asked, the more Nick resisted.

Nick laughed and held up his hands. "Don't even think about it," he said. "Put it out of your head right now. It's not going to happen." He looked at me and pointed. "That goes for you, too."

I couldn't care less. I'd seen enough of myself in the tabloids to convince me to stay away from a career in show business.

"Why can't I audition?" Lalo asked. "Don't you think I can do it? I can, you know! Just give me a chance!" He pouted his lips and glared at the floor. I could tell he was faking and suppressed a smile. He was a lousy actor.

"My mother's coming over to fix your dinner tonight and stay with you until I get home," Nick said to me, ignoring Lalo and swiftly changing the subject. "I want you to come straight here and wait for her." He looked at me with a stern expression. "*¿Comprendes?* I don't want you hanging around school after classes."

Tomasa “Tommy” Hernandez is Nick’s mom. She and Nick’s father live in Lancaster, the next city north on the freeway. She often drives down to Palmdale to stay with me after school on the days Nick works late. I’ve tried telling him I’m too old for a babysitter, but he doesn’t listen, so I’ve stopped bringing it up. Tommy isn’t too bad, actually—and she’s a great cook.

“There’s a soccer game this afternoon, and we were planning on playing with the other kids,” I said, putting on a glum face and looking at Lalo for support.

Nick shook his head. “Not today.”

“You’re the one who’s always encouraging me to make new friends,” I grumbled. “How am I supposed to do that if you make me stay inside every day?”

“It’s *not* every day,” he corrected me. A concerned expression crossed his face. “I’m serious, Gus—no messing around after classes.”

“When will you be home?” I asked, acting like it was no big deal.

“We’re wrapping an episode today, so it might be late. Don’t wait up.” He took another bite of his toast before setting it aside. “And don’t forget to do the laundry. Okay, *muchacho?*” He reached out and ruffled my hair. I waited for Lalo to laugh, but he didn’t. His own parents were just as bad. Worse, even. They *kissed* him.

Lalo had abandoned his pout and was eyeing the half-eaten slice of toast Nick had put on the table. “Are you done with that?” he asked.

“There’s a loaf of bread in the refrigerator,” Nick replied, pushing back his chair and standing up. “Help yourself, but be quick about it. We need to get going.” He began clearing away the dirty dishes.

Lalo pulled a crumpled plastic baggy out of his front pocket and snapped it open with a flick of his wrist. He carefully slid Nick’s slice of toast inside and sealed the package securely. “That’s all right,” he said. “I can finish this piece.”

I couldn't help smiling. I knew some lovesick girl would pay her entire allowance for that sticky piece of dried bread, even after it grew moldy and began to crumble apart.

Nick glanced at his watch. "You have three minutes to get ready," he informed me. "There are some clean clothes in your closet." Not surprisingly, that was the one place I hadn't looked. "Lalo and I will be waiting in the car while you change."

I hurried to my room where I stripped and redressed, adding what I'd just removed to a pile of dirty clothes needing to be washed. Feeling much more presentable, I grabbed my backpack and ran outside.

"Hurry up, Gus!" Nick shouted at me as I stepped through the back door and into the hot sunshine. He and Lalo were already in the car, and he had the engine revving. "Make sure you have your homework! Leave the air-conditioner on! And don't forget to lock up!"

I had to stop and dig in my front pocket for my house key. It was attached to a small, white rabbit's foot Nick had given to me on the first day we met. Upon learning that we were both born in the Chinese Year of the Rabbit, Nick had handed me the furry key chain as a gift before he left St. Gregory's. I didn't think the foot was real, but it was still pretty cool—and so far, it'd brought me nothing but luck.

"We're going to be late!" Nick shouted again. "Let's go!"

Jeez, I thought, fumbling with the key as I twisted the deadbolt into place. Lalo was right. *I probably should have gone with the BeastMaster.*

Chapter 2

We took Nick's silver BMW to school. He'd bought it just last month for his twenty-seventh birthday.

Lalo always insists on sitting in the front whenever we go anywhere. I don't mind. I'm happy to sprawl out on the leather backseat, wait for Nick to lower the convertible roof, and stare up at the cloudless blue desert sky.

As we traveled east down Rancho Vista Avenue into the center of town, dozens of kids, trudging along in the early morning heat towards school, stopped and stared. Lalo took a pair of dark sunglasses from the glove box and put them on, waving to the kids like he was the Grand Marshal in the Tournament of Roses Parade.

Nick slipped a Chayanne CD into the stereo, and I began singing along in the backseat. Nick had met the Latin pop star on the set of his first movie and had been a fan ever since. The only Spanish I knew I'd learned from Lalo or from listening to Chayanne. As a result, I was only proficient with curse words and dozens of useless phrases about running around naked on a beach or making love in a meadow full of butterflies.

I had just begun belting out a tune called *Tu Pirata Soy Yo* when a piece of folded yellow paper under the driver's seat caught my eye. It was trapped beneath the edge of the fancy BMW floor mat and pushed back just far enough to be almost out of sight. It must have fallen from Nick's pocket without his noticing. He was obsessed with keeping his new car clean and never allowed a single scrap of trash to accumulate. I reached down and fished the paper out with my fingers.

I glanced up at Nick in the rearview mirror. His eyes were focused on the road and the surrounding traffic. Holding the paper low in my lap, I unfolded it quietly and scanned

the page quickly. It was a carbon copy of an official-looking document. Written across the top in big letters were the words LOS ANGELES COUNTY POLICE.

I fought back my excitement. This had to be a prop from the show! My eyes skittered to the bottom of the sheet, and I recognized Nick's small but neat signature. It was almost too good to be true. Other than scripts, Nick never brought anything home from work. Auctioned on the Internet, this single piece of paper would easily fetch a hundred dollars—maybe more. I felt myself grinning like a fool. What a lucky day!

“You okay back there?” Nick yelled over the rush of the wind as we came to the Sierra Highway and made a right turn. I looked up to catch him studying me in the rearview mirror. He had an unworried smile on his face.

I quickly refolded the sheet of paper and wrapped my palm around it so he wouldn't see what I'd found. I nodded happily and leaned back in the comfortable leather seat, letting the warm desert air wash over my face. We were approaching the huge billboard erected last week. My cheerful mood disappeared when I noticed someone had already scrawled the words *DIE PERVERT* across Nick's chest in fluorescent green spray paint. If it bothered him, he didn't let it show. He seldom did. “Don't take it personally,” he'd told me the year before, when the stories in the tabloids had been particularly cruel. “It's all part of the job.” I stared at the ugly green words and wondered what kind of hateful person would go to the trouble to scale a billboard in the middle of the desert to write them. Had it been someone from my school? *Was it someone I knew?*

Nick turned the car onto Avenue R, and the sign mercifully disappeared from view.

“You have to get me an audition,” Lalo was insisting from the front seat. His normally persuasive powers were not having the desired effect.

“Forget it,” Nick said again, glancing in his side mirror and shifting lanes. “It's probably too late, anyway. The auditions are being held tomorrow, and the casting director

has already signed up enough kids to try out.” He looked over at Lalo. “One of the boys from my acting class will be there.” Once a month, Nick volunteers his time to teach a drama class at our school. It’s held every second Tuesday and is supposed to get young people interested in the arts and theatre. I’d never attended—I heard enough about that stuff at home—but I knew Lalo had gone with Nick once.

Lalo looked at Nick with narrowed eyes. “Which kid?” he asked.

“C.J. Delacruz. He’s a senior—and he’s also a pretty talented actor.” Nick pursed his lips thoughtfully. “He might actually have a chance at landing the role.”

“I’m in your class!” Lalo bellowed. “Sign me up, too!”

Nick pulled the BMW up to the curb in front of school. He slipped the gearshift into neutral. “Don’t you ever give up?” he said with a laugh.

“Is the brother going to be a nice guy like Gabriel?” Lalo asked him, opening his door and folding the seat forward so I could climb out after him. “Or is he going to be a jerk? I’d much rather play a bad guy, of course. Girls like that.”

“They’re thinking of making him gay,” Nick teased. “You’d probably have to kiss another boy in every episode.”

Lalo made a face. “Would they be cute?” he wanted to know, “or would they look like Gus?”

I slugged him in the arm.

“Ouch!” he screamed, but I could tell he wasn’t really hurt.

A small crowd of students had gathered in front of the school and was watching us with interest. A Nicholas Hernandez sighting isn’t particularly rare up here, but it still draws an audience, especially teenaged girls. I moved to the side of the car and blocked their view. “Thanks for the ride, Nick,” I said, sliding my hand behind me and pushing the still-folded paper I’d found deep into my back pocket.

He looked up at me. “Do you have enough money for lunch?”

I only had about a dollar in change, but I didn’t want him opening his wallet with everyone watching. I’d borrow something from Lalo. “I’m fine,” I said, eager for him to leave so I could show Lalo what I’d found.

Lalo had moved over to where the girls were gathered. He was flirting and showing off. He was still wearing the sunglasses. I saw him point more than once at Nick, then the car, and finally at me. He said something that made the crowd squeal with delight, and several of the girls began hopping up and down with excitement.

Nick tightened his seatbelt and watched me carefully. “You can play soccer for an hour after school,” he surprised me by saying. “But then I want you to go straight home. And stay inside the house, Gus. I don’t want you out on your bike or running around the neighborhood. You’ll need to get a ride—can Lalo’s mom pick you guys up?”

I nodded. “We’ll call her,” I said before he could change his mind. I looked at him and managed a lopsided grin. “Thanks, Nick.”

He put the BMW in gear and prepared to drive away. “I’ll see you tonight then, okay?” He smiled at me.

Before he could drive away, Lalo raced back to the car. He was clutching an armful of notebooks. “Hey, Nick!”

Nick sighed and arched an eyebrow in response. He knew what was coming. We both did. It happened all the time.

“Do you think you could sign some autographs before you go?” Lalo licked his lips and glanced back over his shoulder. He waggled his fingers at the group of girls, and they waved back. There was another round of squeals and giggles. I noticed Sara Flores smiling at me and felt myself blush. I looked down at my feet and wrinkled my nose, trying to appear indifferent.

Nick could never say no to his fans, and for the next few minutes, he scribbled his signature in every one of the proffered books. He had a stack of eight-by-ten headshots he kept in the car for situations just like this. He passed a handful to Lalo and gave him an easygoing smile. “Anything else I can do for you?” he said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Yeah, you can sign me up for an audition tomorrow.”

“Call me if you need anything,” Nick said to me, digging into his pants pocket and pulling out his cell phone. He never turns it on until he leaves for work in the morning. Nick has a full team of agents, managers, publicists, and lawyers who seldom hesitate to call in the middle of the night. “Be good,” he said, beeping the horn and pulling away from the curb. Seconds later he was around the corner and out of sight.

“You need help with those?” I asked, watching as Lalo juggled the pile of notebooks in one hand and the stack of glossy photos in the other.

“Here,” he said, sliding most of the photos to me.

I walked with him towards the front of the school, careful to keep the headshots facedown so none of the boys gathered around us would see. “You were driving Nick crazy,” I told him. “You know he doesn’t want us to have anything to do with the show.”

Lalo grinned at me and winked. “I think I’m wearing him down,” he said happily. “By tomorrow, I’m sure he’ll agree to let me audition. C.J. won’t stand a chance.”

We reached the crowd of girls, and they swarmed around us, chattering with excitement and clamoring for their autographed notebooks. Before I could distribute Nick’s photos and escape, Sara Flores caught me by the arm. Her fingers felt cool against my skin, and I made no attempt to pull away. I enjoyed her delicate touch.

“*Hola, Gus. ¿Cómo estás?*” she asked with a bright smile. I’d known Sara since the seventh grade and had never really considered her pretty until just this year. She was slightly taller than me, with long black hair that hung straight down her back. Her dark

eyes sought to make contact with mine. She was clutching her signed notebook in her free hand. I could see Nick's signature scrawled boldly across the cover.

I had to clear my throat before my voice would work. "Hey Sara," was all I could manage before looking down at my feet again. I wasn't very good with girls. Living in a home for boys all my life had left me lacking social skills with the opposite sex. I didn't know how to talk to them, and barely managed to stammer my way through any encounters I did have. Ever since the adoption, I'd noticed the girls at school paying a lot more attention to me. They stared at me in class and said hi to me in the halls. I could never tell if it was because of Nick or not, but I always assumed it was.

"I can't believe Nicholas Hernandez is your dad!" Sara sighed dreamily, looking over my shoulder at the curb, even though Nick was long gone. Her expression was still slightly star-struck.

I felt a stir of disappointment. She was just like all the rest. "Uh, yeah. I guess. I mean, he just—he just adopted me."

"You're so lucky," she gushed, bouncing slightly on her toes. "He seems like such a nice, down-to-earth guy. Not conceited like other celebrities you see on TV. I'll bet he's a wonderful father."

"He has his moments."

"And he's so *handsome!*"

I never knew what to say to that, even though I heard it all the time.

"You look a lot like him," she added, studying my face.

That was something I *didn't* hear all the time.

"You think so?" I managed a stupid grin and felt my confidence raise a notch. "No one's ever told me that before. Thanks." I tried to puff up my thin chest and stand straighter than normal. "Do you watch *Desert Blood?*" I knew it was a ridiculous

question. Every person in school watched, including the teachers. The guys loved staring at the girls on the show, and the girls loved staring at Nick.

Sara gave me a look suggesting I was crazy. “*¡Sí claro!* I never miss it. Your dad—I mean Nicholas—*¡es muy caliente!*”

I gave up. I wondered if I would ever find a girl who was more interested in me than in Nick. It didn’t seem likely.

“See you in class,” Sara said, removing her hand from my arm and joining her friends as everyone began filing into the building.

“Yeah,” I replied. “See you.” I rubbed at the spot where her fingers had been, already missing her touch.

Several moments later, Lalo rejoined me wearing a huge smile. “Beth García gave me her phone number and asked me to call her,” he announced. “She might want to go out.” The possibility of a date seemed to have made him forget all about the audition.

I pushed the encounter with Sara from my head and reached in my back pocket to pull out the paper I’d found in Nick’s car. “Take a look at this,” I said, waving it under his nose.

He snatched it from my fingers and grinned. “*¿Qué es esto?*” he asked, removing his arm from my shoulders in order to open it up.

“It’s a prop,” I said. “Some kind of police report. Signed by Nicholas Hernandez and used on the show *Desert Blood*.”

“No shit?” he boomed as we passed through the front entrance and into the noisy hallway. “Where’d you get it?” Even Lalo knew Nick never brought anything home from the set.

“It was under the seat in his car,” I replied, lowering my voice as if someone might be listening. “It must have fallen out of his pocket. I don’t think he knew it was there, so I snagged it when he wasn’t looking.”

Lalo shoved my shoulder with a laugh.

“I need to borrow some lunch money,” I told him as he stopped walking and stood reading the sheet of paper I’d handed him. I could see his lips move as he digested every word. “Nick will pay you back tomorrow,” I added, hoisting my backpack onto one shoulder and preparing to head off to Biology. “Is that okay?”

Lalo didn’t answer. He was frowning with disbelief, and his brow was crunched in concentration. It was the same expression he got when we were in math class and the teacher asked him to solve a difficult problem. “This is weird,” he said. “It says someone’s been sending Nick—and you—threatening notes.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, impatient to get to class before the first period bell rang. I’d already been late three times that week.

He tapped the report with his finger. “It says so right here—Nick’s been getting letters threatening his life. Yours, too!”

“Nick plays a police officer,” I reminded him. “That paper is just something he used on the show. Do you think you can sell it?”

Lalo looked up at me and shook his head. “I don’t think I want to,” he surprised me by saying. “I don’t think this paper is a prop, Gus. I think it’s real!”