

Ghost BROTHER

SYLVIA SÁNCHEZ GARZA



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This book is dedicated to my loving parents, Joe V. Sanchez and Elida Reyna Sanchez. I love and miss you both very much. Thank you for being an inspiration to me and always believing in me.

IN MEMORIAM

Elida Reyna Sanchez (1933-2019)

Joe V. Sanchez (1932-2021)

Cris

My brother is dead.

I stare at his picture surrounded by candles propped up on the living room coffee table.

“Carlos... what happened?”

He smiles back at me, frozen in time, pale looking with dark, straight hair and blueish eyes that look as if you can precisely pick them up like jewels.

“It could have been you, Cris. You’re a miracle,” Mamá says.

I guess I should be happy.

I tiptoe into our bedroom, then slam the door. The floor is hard and cold; crumbs stick to my bare feet. Light from the window cracks through the torn curtain. I sit down on his bed as I’ve been doing every day, hold on to his pillow, trying to embrace the scent. It’s not there anymore. I open up my laptop and turn on some music. We like old eighties rock.

“Your dad loves that music,” Mom always says.

I strain my ears to listen to Talking Heads, “Once in a Lifetime,” and remember the sickening thoughts stuck in my head. I start typing into the Google search engine. *Drag Racing Accident, Malton, Texas*, and several articles come up. My brows knit in a frown, and my laptop screen stares at me, glow-

ing discontentedly. I click on the one that says “Investigation,” and nothing. I click again. “Ughhh.” It freezes. I slam my laptop shut and stuff it into my backpack. “Dammmmn—internet reception, again.”

Nothing ever happens in Malton, at least nothing ever happened until a few months ago on *that* Friday. Most of the time I stay in my room, locked up, reading, typing whatever I can on my laptop to get everything out. I’m using the school’s laptop and hotspot. We can’t afford that stuff. I immerse myself in books to help me leave this place, at least for a while. Everyone in this town remembers the accident; they just don’t want to talk about it.

Our tiny community in deep south Texas is still shaken by the news. It’s not a big city, but Carlos and I like it here.

Today, the sun is popping up between the gray clouds. A bright red cardinal sits on the edge of the yard by the oak tree as I walk outside to get the daily newspaper for my mom. I never read it anymore; I’d rather check my phone. She still prefers to see everything in print, even though everyone I know uses their phones for almost anything and everything. I place the paper on our kitchen table and notice that blasted across the front page is, “Police investigate fatal drag racing accident: search for the third car continues.” I check my phone. I have text messages from my best friend, Damian, but I don’t feel like responding. He wants to know the same thing I do; I know him. Damian practically lives at our house, except lately he’s giving me space. My phone vibrates. I stare at it, then silence it. Will we ever be able to forget that day? For me, May 23, 2015, became the worst day of my life. For my brother, Carlos, life ended.

“Talk later,” I whisper to the phone without answering it. The sink faucet steadily drips... I stare at it shaking my head.

We need to fix that. Drip, drip, drip. The rhythm stays in my mind.

Everything about Carlos and me was different, from our hair to our skin to playing football. He played; I didn't. If not for my asthma attack a few years ago, I guess I could have played if I wanted to. It just wasn't my thing. We're brothers and in the same grade, and we have always had a bond. As kids, we'd share our birthday celebrations with one cake and a homemade *piñata*. Our grandma always made it and filled it with candy. I never enjoyed beating the uniquely crafted masterpiece into a million pieces. Carlos, on the other hand, was competitive. He kept the shattered pieces as trophies.

Now, Mom meanders around the house, and my father, who I don't even know, wants to reunite. He's been MIA for most of my life. But Mom doesn't want him around. Could he be so bad?

Oh.... and I went back to school a few weeks ago and had to face everyone as if everything was fine. Nothing is fine. Nothing will ever be fine.

Carlos

I stand in the living room next to the old, torn-up sofa. Cris is mirroring me. I'm looking at my football picture. Yep, I scored lots of points for our team. They should have found the one where I'm running with the ball. My hair was longer then and curled up on the ends. That's a good one, but I guess they didn't have time to pick a better one. "Hey, brother. I'm here, CC." Mouthing words, I try to place my hand on his shoulder. When we were kids, sometimes we'd call each other C and CC. I was C and Cris was CC. That was only between us. Now he doesn't have anyone to call him CC.

I gaze out the smudged window at the sky illuminating the cold darkness of night, and I'm overcome by the endless brightness. The summer vanishes like eerie mist, and I hum Pink Floyd. Yes, I'm still numb. My mind is stuck, fragments of my nightmare from that day loop over and over and don't let me sleep. I see myself waking up in a cold sweat, shaking with eyes wide open, only to figure out I can't sleep. How am I supposed to sleep? I guess I don't. If only I had taken the wheel.

Ever since our dad left, Cris thought it was his responsibility to watch after me. Mamá didn't even have to ask him; he just did it. He was always the more responsible one and definitely more mature, I admit. He always helped around the house with

the cooking and cleaning and even kept up the yard. Yep, I guess he had better grades, too. I didn't have time for that with football. I was the one meant to do bigger things, any way you look at it. "Don't worry about anything, *m'ijito*. You'll probably be able to get a football scholarship," Mamá would tell me. Well, so much for that.

He picks up my picture, shakes his head and exhales. I see his breath on the glass of the picture frame, and then he sets it back down carefully. He walks into our bedroom, and I follow him. I sit down on my bed and watch him mess with his computer... always studying. Everything is the same. My football is there, my backpack is tossed by the side of the bed. I hated lugging that thing around. Even my guitar is leaning against the wall. I tried playing it, but I never got good enough. Cris was the one with musical talent. He was good at it. He's not one to brag, but he can sing and write music. It comes naturally to him. Mamá used to tell us Uncle Carlos also played by ear. He didn't need sheet music. I guess Cris is kind of like him.

Cris gazes at the screen, clicking on the keyboard. I glance over my shoulder, noticing the curtains moving, and forget for a minute I'm in this other reality. Cris closes his eyes, folds his arms across his chest and leans back. Who is he going to talk to now? Damian has his own issues. How is he going to get through school without me there? He does have that nerd thing going on.

"I'm here," I try to say, but nothing comes out. I've been practicing, but still nothing.

I focus on what's happening and try to piece everything together. I'm getting fragments of what happened, but not everything makes sense. I notice the picture of Cassandra and me by my bed. I do remember Cassandra and the accident. There was an accident. I can't get that out of my head.

I hear noises in the kitchen. Without realizing how, I'm sitting across from Mom. It's as if I have some superpower or something. I can appear where I need to be. It's crazy. She's gripping a cup of black coffee. There's a picture of the Virgin surrounded by red roses on the cup, and the white of her knuckles sticks out more than ever.

"No llores, Mami. Ya no llores, Mamita."

The tears roll off her face and splash into the cup. Sobs and gasps for air engulf her and fill the gloomy room. She rests her head on her crossed hands.

"Don't worry, I'll do something," I try to tell her.

I want to crush or hit something. It's not fair my mom is heartbroken. My body is weightless—*nada*—but I still hurt inside. The truth will come out. I have to find out who was driving the third car. Why was it there? I'll figure it out. If I can get my dad over here, he can help. I know I've seen him, but how do I communicate with him?



It's the night of the end of the school dance and we've all been looking forward to it. Cassandra and I have gotten closer, and who knows what tonight will bring.

"Well, we can't take my pickup. I need to fix the tires, and I haven't had a chance to do it. Besides, it's not comfortable for the four of us. We probably won't all fit in it," I announce.

It would be nice to go in my pickup, though, because I'm always in control whenever I'm behind the wheel. It's my old faithful. Yeah, it's beaten up, but I've worked on it to restore it, and now it's pretty cool. It's nothing like Cassandra's, though.

Cassandra's thick black hair glosses down her back and bounces with the slightest movement. She always pushes it

out of her face and then plays with her big hoop earrings. She came from a family much better off than ours, not that they're rich, but we are SNAP poor, and they definitely aren't like us. When we were kids, we had food stamps, but now it's a government card. I guess she is a small step above the dirt poor we are, which is way better. Cassandra's dad bought her a Jeep Cherokee to drive to and from school, and she doesn't even have a license yet. It's used, but still, that's a pretty big deal. She's a bit spoiled, I guess.

The night starts with Cassandra joining us at our house. She's dressed up in a fancy pink dress with matching high heel shoes. Her hair is up in a stylish wrap with flowers in it like a dancer in a Broadway musical. Cassandra is eager for us to check out her Cherokee.

"I'll drive, Cassandra. I don't drink anyway." Cris, as always, tries to be the big brother that he is by a few minutes ahead of my birth.

"The boring brother." Cassandra winks at Cris.

"I like to read—that's not boring," he answers.

She throws her head back, giggling, making her hair bounce up and down.

I smile at her and start to laugh. "Great, then we're set. *¡Dale!* It'll be great!"

Cris, Damian, Cassandra and I all pile inside her car. There's dust covering the dashboard, and the seats seem torn at the edges. Cris has never even driven her car, but is eager to get behind the wheel.

We're dressed up in our best blue jeans and collar shirts. No one knows what the night is going to bring. Everything starts moving so fast. It's just a blur.

"Hold on, Cris!" I yell out. "Stop the car. I forgot something."

The Jeep stops, and I turn and run back inside, yelling back, “Y’all know I can’t go anywhere without my jacket.”

It was my letterman jacket, the one that my dad wore when he was in high school. Grandma would tell us whenever he’d wear the jacket, he scored a touchdown the next game. And when he wore it, he passed his tests, even though he hadn’t studied for them. When *I* wear it, I feel close to my dad. I’m protected.

I slip on the jacket and place my hands in the deep pockets, sliding my fingers across the smooth wooly material. I head back out and yell, “All right, all right, let’s go! ¡Vámonos!”

Mamá steps out into the front yard and waves at us, blessing everyone, signing the Cross in the air, then blows us a kiss. We back up, and she comes up to the Jeep, leans into the window and says, “*Qué Dios los bendiga.*” She reaches in and kisses Cris and then comes around and kisses me. “*Los quiero mucho.*”

I hold my cheek. “Love you too, Mom,” both Cris and I say in unison.

We take off with Cris behind the wheel, laughing along with everyone in the car. The cologne and perfume mix, creating a fresh new aroma in the air. I inhale slowly and hold onto the sweet smell of hibiscus mixed with herbal sage and close my eyes for a moment. I’m alive. We are alive. Turning the radio up full blast, I turn to Cris, and we both start head-banging to the beat of Queen, pretending to be Wayne and Garth in *Saturday Night Live!* It is old school, but we love “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

The air is crisp, and the evening is gleaming with brightness. There are few cars on the road as we make our way toward the high school. We arrive at the dance and hear the blaring music coming from inside the gym. It’s probably not

too packed because the parking lot is still kind of empty, and it is already getting late. As we get out of the car, I raise my collar and turn away from the whirling wind.

When we enter the gym, the DJ is playing some blah song, and a few people are on the dance floor with the lights only semi-dimmed. Scents of recent PE classes, baked goods and cologne fill the huge room. Kids are grouped in their designated corners of the gym just like the way they assemble during lunch at the cafeteria tables, only now there's no scent of tater tots or pizza.

We walk past the chaperones at the front door and then past the athletes. They give us a "S'up" nod and keep talking to each other. We walk past the nerds, but they don't even notice us. Then we see Jack, aka, Big J, and Red standing next to the snack bar. They are the only kids in school who send chills down our spines. It's as if they always have a radar on us.

Damian stops. "What the hell are they up to now?"

"This doesn't seem like much of a dance, guys. They're not even playing our kind of music," I say.

Cassandra's face gets long, and she stares at the floor. Then she looks around for some of her friends.

"Let's just give it a chance. Maybe it'll pick up in a bit," Cris says.

"Yeah, fine. I'm going to the ladies' room, *chicos*," Cassandra says, seeking refuge where she knows we can't join her.

"What do all of them possibly do in there all that time?" I ask.

We stand outside the girl's bathroom for what seems hours until Cassandra comes back with glossier lipstick on. She seems better, a little brighter as she takes a seat at a table next to us and a group of our friends.