

Chapter 1

“You’re coming, right?”

For a second, Vicky Fallon wasn’t sure if her best friend, Teresa Ortiz, had heard her. Their last class had just ended, and the corridors of Bluford High School were filled with the roar of rushing students and slamming lockers. It was so noisy, Vicky was about to repeat her question when Teresa’s dark brown eyes narrowed.

“Coming where?” she asked innocently.

A group of boys jostled by, bumping her. Teresa shot them a mean look. “Watch where you’re goin’,” she grumbled, shaking her head. Her black hair, pinned up in a loose ponytail, swished against the back of her neck like a mane.

“You know, Martin’s hearing!” Vicky said. She’d mentioned the hearing to Teresa earlier but didn’t get a clear answer. Now sophomores, she and Teresa had been friends since kindergarten. They had been neighbors until three years ago when Dad moved the family to their little house off Union Street. Some of Vicky’s earliest memories were of playing with Teresa. But lately Vicky felt a strange tension between them, especially when Martin Luna’s name came up.

“I thought you had to go straight home to help your *abuelo* today,” Teresa said. Her voice had an edge to it. A hostile edge Vicky had heard countless times. But it was never aimed at her.

“I do . . . I mean I *did*,” Vicky said with a wince. It was true her grandfather was moving into their house this afternoon. Her mother had made the decision after he slipped in his apartment and cracked his hip last month. Mom had even reminded Vicky this morning to come straight home after school to help.

“I’m leaving as soon as the hearing’s over. What can I do? Martin needs us to show up for him,” Vicky explained, trying to push the image of her grandfather

from her mind. Ever since her grandmother died last year, he had been wilting like a tree caught in an endless drought.

“That means you, too, Teresa,” Vicky continued. “You read what Martin wrote in English class about his little brother dying. You know Steve and his friends have been ganging up on him just because he’s new—”

“That’s one version of the story,” huffed Teresa.

“Look,” Vicky said, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know what you’ve got against him, but—”

“You don’t know what I’ve got against him?” Teresa snapped, her eyes glaring. “Do you even remember what today is?” she demanded.

Vicky shrugged, trying to remember.

“*Great,*” Teresa muttered, tossing some books into her backpack. “The fitting for my *quinceañera*? The dresses for *las damas*? For my court? Hello! I can’t believe you totally forgot.”

Vicky took a deep breath. *Not this again,* she thought.

Teresa’s fifteenth birthday was a month away, and lately her party, her *quinceañera*, was all she ever talked

about. Her dress, her shoes, her court, which boy from school she would ask to be her escort. Teresa even boasted how her family decided to hire a DJ and arrange a special Mass for her at St. Anna's Church. Vicky knew the tradition. She'd gone to her cousin's *quinceañera* a few years ago. But she also knew Teresa's parents weren't rich. They would have to borrow money to pay for it all.

What a complete waste, she thought.

"Come on, Teresa. We don't have time for this now," she said quickly, eyeing her watch. The hearing was about to start. "Besides, I already told you I couldn't try on dresses today—"

"No, you told me you couldn't come because *your grandfather* was moving in," Teresa shot back. "Now it sounds like you're not coming because of Martin Luna." She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You've dropped everything because of him!"

"That's not true!" Vicky said angrily, her head beginning to pound. "He's in trouble. You know what I'm saying, Teresa. This is his last chance—"

"Do you even hear yourself? Ever since he came to this school, you've been running around after him like

you've never seen a boy before!" Teresa's voice rose as she spoke. Vicky noticed two girls at the end of the hallway staring at them. "It's not like he's even worth it. I mean all he's done since he got here is fight and get into trouble—"

"You know those fights weren't his fault! He never started anything. You know how Steve and Clarence are—"

"Would you wake up, Vicky?" Teresa interrupted, shaking her head so strongly that her ponytail whipped along her neck. "Martin isn't any better. Him getting expelled is probably the best thing for everyone—especially you!"

You're wrong, Vicky wanted to say. You're totally wrong about him. You don't know him like I do. But there wasn't time. She needed to go. Now.

"Are you coming or not?" Vicky demanded.

Teresa's eyes flared. She slammed her locker shut and started walking away. Vicky couldn't believe it.

"See you tomorrow, Vicky," she said coolly. "By the way, you owe ninety-five dollars for your dress, whether it fits or not."

"Ninety-five dollars!" Vicky fumed, unable to hide her outrage. "You never

said that!”

“Yes I did, but you weren’t listening,” Teresa grumbled. “You were probably thinking about *Martin* or something,” she added, saying his name as if it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Vicky wanted to tell her off right there. She didn’t have a single cent to spend on Teresa’s party, let alone ninety-five dollars. Where could she get that much money? Certainly not from her parents, who did nothing but argue about money since her dad lost his job at the auto dealership months ago.

“*Whatever*,” Vicky muttered. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

She turned her back on Teresa and hurried away.

Vicky spotted Mr. Mitchell, her English teacher, as she neared the auditorium. He was standing outside the scuffed steel doors in a dark blue suit. A small group of students huddled near him. They looked scared.

“Just in time, Vicky,” Mr. Mitchell said with a smile. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“I guess so,” she said, grateful that he had decided to help defend Martin. She glanced into the auditorium. In the distance, she could see Martin and a

woman who must be his mother, her olive face lined with worry. Looking at them, Vicky's stomach sank. She had never spoken at a hearing before and wondered if she had made a mistake by agreeing to now.

"Kinda scary, huh?" said Eric Acosta, the freshman Martin defended in his last fight at Bluford. After Martin got in trouble, Vicky had asked Eric to help her gather people to support him at his hearing. Eric bravely agreed to help, but now he looked nervous, fidgeting with the zipper of his backpack as he looked at her.

"Yeah, a little," she mumbled, her mouth suddenly dry. Nearby, Vicky saw Roylin Bailey, a junior who failed English last year and was now in her class. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed on his chest, his loud mouth unusually silent. A small group of boys from Eric's gym class were there too, as well as two boys from the freshman football team. They looked tense, like witnesses before a trial. She knew some students at Bluford considered them snitches for being willing to speak up to the superintendent. But what choice did they have? If they kept silent,

Martin would be kicked out unfairly. Allowing that was worse than being a snitch, Vicky figured.

“Well, I think this is everyone,” said Mr. Mitchell, taking a second to look at each of them. “Your presence at this hearing is important. No matter what happens, I’m proud of you for standing up for what you believe in. And I am proud of you, Vicky, for getting everybody together.”

“Thanks,” Vicky muttered, cringing at Mr. Mitchell’s ominous words.

No matter what happens.

She still couldn’t believe that Martin Luna was about to get expelled. It felt as if he was being stolen from her somehow. It wasn’t right.

Sure, Martin had been in a few fights since he transferred to Bluford. But that was because Vicky’s ex-boyfriend, Steve Morris, started with him. Yes, Martin had shoved a teacher, but that was an accident. He was just trying to protect Eric. Yes, Martin walked Bluford’s halls with a swagger, but he also had the darkest, most intense eyes Vicky had ever seen. Eyes that pulled her like a magnet whenever she looked into them.

“All right, everyone. It’s time. Let’s

go,” Mr. Mitchell said. He quickly led them into the auditorium. Gray metal chairs were arranged in neat rows on the speckled tile floor. From behind, they looked like gravestones in a sea of dusty cardboard.

Vicky felt her stomach tremble. Her mind raced with questions.

What if Martin is kicked out?

Would he be sent to juvenile hall?

Is this the end for us?

Just a few days ago she’d stood with Martin, alone in the small apartment he shared with his mother. That was when he told her how Huero, his eight-year-old brother, had been killed in a drive-by shooting last July. Martin’s eyes glistened with tears as he showed her pictures of him. She could still hear how Martin’s voice shook as he described how Huero died in his arms, the blood dripping through his fingers.

“*It should have been me,*” Martin had confessed, leaning into her.

In that moment, she felt the weight of his body, the rhythmic thump of his heart. All his anger and swagger were gone. Instead, Martin cried and she held him, touched his face, felt the pain gush from him in waves. She had never been

so close to a boy, not even with Steve Morris, her ex-boyfriend. It was as if they were the only two people in the world. As if she had reached in and touched his soul somehow.

And then it happened. She kissed him, tasting his tears as if they were her own. Though it was days ago, she hadn't told anyone about what happened. Not her mother who was too stressed lately to listen. Not her father who seemed to care more about watching football than anything else since he lost his job. Not even Teresa. Vicky knew she'd only roll her eyes.

"Okay, the hearing's about to start," Mr. Mitchell whispered, interrupting Vicky's thoughts. "That's Mr. Gates up there. He's the superintendent," he said, nodding toward an older white man who sat at the end of a long table. The man held a thick folder and glared down at Martin as if he was annoyed at him.

"Great," Vicky mumbled to herself.

Ms. Spencer, Bluford's principal, sat at the other end of the table. Martin and his mother were in chairs in the front row. Martin's face was pale, his jaw tense. She knew he was scared. She wished she could get up and sit next to him.

“When it’s your turn,” Mr. Mitchell advised, “remember not to excuse Martin’s behavior. We all know what he did was wrong. We just want Mr. Gates to understand that there are reasons for Martin’s behavior and that expelling him isn’t the solution. Understand?”

Vicky nodded as Mr. Gates cleared his throat and read a long list of disciplinary problems. Each was a charge against Martin.

Fights. Cutting school. Skipping classes. Hitting a teacher. The list seemed to go on and on. Vicky wondered if Martin even had a chance.

“Well, Mr. Luna, what do you have to say for yourself?” Mr. Gates asked when he had finished reading. “Why do you think you should be allowed to stay at Bluford High?”

Martin stood up nervously. Vicky’s heart pounded. She leaned forward in her chair waiting for him to speak. Behind her someone coughed. The air in the auditorium suddenly felt thick and heavy. Martin stammered.

“*C’mon! Say something!*” she wanted to scream.

Seconds ticked by. Martin seemed overwhelmed and unsure of himself.

Vicky was in agony.

“Fight for yourself!” she almost shouted the words in the middle of the auditorium. If he didn’t explain himself, Vicky knew her help would be useless. He would be expelled in a few minutes.

“C’mon!”

Finally, Martin broke his silence.

“I’m sorry about what happened the other day. I never meant to hurt no one. Things in this school are a little different from where I come from,” Martin began. He then described the events of the past year, including the day his brother got shot and died in his arms.

The auditorium grew silent except for the sound of his voice. Vicky cringed at the sad details and winced when Martin admitted he had been so angry he wanted to kill his brother’s shooter. Mr. Gates didn’t even blink as he spoke.

But then Martin told the story about how he had changed from that path. He admitted his mistakes and described how people at Bluford had helped him, including Mr. Mitchell.

“Maybe if I never came to this school, I’d have thrown my life away. But being here gave me a chance to think and see another way,” he said glancing at the

crowd. “And more than anything, I have to live a better life for my little brother. I gotta live the future he’ll never have,” he confessed, his voice heavy with emotion. “That’s what I hope to do right here at Bluford.”

A hush gripped the auditorium. Even the janitors had stopped working to listen. It was as if everyone was stunned by what they heard.

“*See, I told you he wasn’t bad,*” Vicky wanted to shout to anyone who would listen.

Mr. Gates cleared his throat. “Does anyone else have anything to add on this matter?” he asked.

Mr. Mitchell stood up. Vicky joined him, her palms sweaty and her knees shaking. This was her chance to help. But as Mr. Mitchell explained why they were there, Mr. Gates smiled and silenced him with words that thundered through the auditorium.

“I don’t think expulsion is necessary at this point . . .”

Vicky’s jaw dropped and then she heard herself cheering. Mr. Mitchell and others clapped loudly as Martin hugged his mother. Vicky rushed forward, unable to stop herself.

“Oh my God, Martin. You did it!” she cried, embracing him. “I’m so happy for you!”

“Thanks, Vicky,” Martin said as tears rolled down his cheeks. “Thanks for being here.”

Vicky wiped her eyes and hugged him once more, surprised at her own feelings. She was thrilled for him but also happy for herself. She would get to see him again. What they started could continue. It was a dream come true.

“I can’t stay,” she told him. “I promised my mom I’d be home a half-hour ago.” She tried to smile. “I’m probably in big trouble.”

“Go,” Martin told her, though she could tell by the look on his face that he really wanted her to stay. “I’ll talk to you later?”

Vicky nodded. “Yes, definitely. Congratulations, Martin,” she said, forcing herself away from him.

She glanced over her shoulder one last time before leaving the auditorium. Martin was shaking hands with Mr. Mitchell, but his eyes were on her.