

Chapter 1

I'm standing in front of Bluford High School, blood on my elbows, gash on my head. My ribs feel cracked. The school is crowded, and I'm three hours late.

I wish I could cut again.

Ms. Spencer, our school principal, will bust me for sure if I go in now. She's heard enough from the other teachers about me, Martin Luna, the dangerous kid from the barrio who used to go to Zamora High. Last time I was in her office, she just stared at me, judging me, her eyes beaming like a cop's spotlight.

"What's the problem between you and Steve Morris?" she asked.

"Nothin'," I said. Even though I hate the kid, I ain't a rat.

She crossed her arms and sighed, still looking at me as if I was some kind

a puzzle. I could see she was losing patience. I don't blame her. I ain't easy to deal with. Still, I stared back at her until she was forced to look away. You can't stare me down. I've been hit by people who would scare you on the street. I don't run from anyone, not principals or kids like Steve Morris who give me trouble. That's part of my problem.

But I ran this morning. I bolted like the roaches in the basement of our old apartment when you turned the light on them. Back in the day, me and my brother would chase them into the shadows, though Huero would never stomp them like me. He was always a good kid. I miss him so much.

What I ran from wasn't no kid. It wasn't the police or a gang. It was bigger than that, and I am not sure running is even gonna save me. And all I got right now is this school that can't handle me and the words my English teacher, Mr. Mitchell, said yesterday.

"Martin, you are talented, and you could have a bright future ahead of you. Don't throw it away. When you feel things getting out of hand, when you know you're getting over your head, talk to me. I'm here for you. I mean that."

I shrugged off his words when he said them. But now I'm hoping they're true, 'cause I feel like I'm bein' swept away. I'm over my head. I realized it this morning, but it's been happening for months, years actually. Now I gotta make a choice.

I see the security guard at the door watching me. He's talking to someone on a radio. Ms. Spencer is on her way out to me. This is it.

What should I do?

All this started on July 10th. I remember exactly what happened because I still dream about it. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night covered in sweat, my heart jumping against my ribs. I'm never gonna forget.

Me and my four homeboys were hanging out in the alley behind my friend Frankie's house. We were watching him wax his 1972 Pontiac LeMans. Chrome wheels and as blue as the ocean, the car was Frankie's baby. If you asked him, he'd say he treated it better than any person. It's true.

The southern California sun was beating down on us, making the concrete

so hot the bottoms of our shoes got soft and sticky, but we had music from the car stereo. And Chago, one of our boys, had a case of beer. I never drank the stuff because I saw what it did to my father, and what he did when he was drunk, but Chago was different. He liked his beer, and he didn't get too out of hand, so it was all good.

We were just kicking it, talking cars and girls, when Frankie looked at me and Chago.

"Homies, I gotta find me a chick. I spend way too much time with you low-lives," Frankie said.

We laughed. Frankie Pacheco was the toughest guy in our crew. He also got in the most trouble. There were lots of rumors about things Frankie had done, but he never talked about them unless he was drunk, and then you couldn't listen to him. A scar on his left side marked where someone had stabbed him last summer. I was there that day backing him up. I watched Frankie kick the kid with the knife in the stomach and face. Frankie knew how to handle himself. He was nineteen, three years older than me. Other people might've had problems with him. But we thought

he was family.

“Dude, you’re dreaming,” I teased, throwing a light punch his way. “You ever look in the mirror?”

Junie cracked up and nearly spit out a mouthful of beer onto Frankie’s car. He was always laughing at something.

Frankie punched me right back, the hit glancing off my shoulder. The two of us always pretended to fight. Though we never said anything about it, I think we both knew there was a serious edge to it.

“Hey, Martin,” said Jesus, one of the other guys. He was puffing a cigarette. It made him stink like my father. “I got Huero at 11:00.”

I swung around in time to see a small figure ducking behind a green metal dumpster the size of a pickup truck. It was Huero, my eight year old brother. Huero’s real name was Eric. Huero was just his nickname, a Spanish word that means *light-skinned*. We called him that since he was a little kid ’cause his skin was paler than mine and my mom’s.

“He’s back *again*?” Frankie asked, shaking his head and dropping his fists. Frankie didn’t like many things, especially kids. “I don’t know *nobody* who worships someone like that little brother

of yours worships you.”

It was true. Huero had a habit of following me, no matter where I was or what I was doing. It was frustrating and I tried to discourage it. I mean, how do you deal with someone who looks up to you like, well, like a big brother?

I wasn't always the best at dealing with him, but I didn't want him around, especially when we were drinking or checking out girls. It isn't cool to have your little brother there when you're trying to get a girl's phone number. And I didn't want him around the cigarettes and the alcohol. He would see that on his own in a few years, I thought. I was wrong.

“Make sure you take care of your brother,” my mom said earlier that day. Most of the time, I did that by sending him away, making up lies to get him to leave. Anything that gave me more time with the boys.

“Huero!” I barked, stepping away from Frankie's lowrider. “Come out of there.”

Huero came out from behind the dumpster a second later, pushing along his squeaky, weather-beaten bicycle. He took that bike everywhere.

“What did I tell you about following me?”

“Sorry, Marty,” he stammered. “I just—”

“You just what?” I prodded. “You know you’re not supposed to be here.”

With puppy-dog eyes, he looked over at the boys and ignored me. “Hi, guys, I got some gum. I can share it with you.”

Chago and Frankie shook their heads at me and glanced away embarrassed.

“Go home, Huero—*now!*” I ordered.

My brother stared at me then. Just for a second, but long enough for me to see his disappointment. All the kid wanted was to be with me, and there I was sending him away.

“Okay, Marty,” he said, sounding defeated. “I’ll see you later then, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a nod, feeling guilty for chasing him away. I couldn’t stay mad at Huero for long. And no matter how bad I treated him, he just kept coming back to me with those eyes. The kid looked at me like I was a superhero or something. *Me*. He was too young to know better.

I watched him for a second as he began to pedal away, and then I turned around. “Brothers! Did I tell you guys

what he said this morning?" I asked.

"What's that?"

"Huero said he wants to be just like me when he gets older. Can you believe that?" The idea seemed silly to me then. Now it haunts me.

We all laughed, but then we heard Huero shouting in the distance.

"*Marty!*"

I turned back to see him pedaling my way as fast as he could.

A half block behind him, a white sedan was speeding down the alley in our direction. Something was sticking out of the window. It glinted in the bright sunlight.

"Watch out, Marty," Huero yelled. My little brother was trying to protect *me*.

The car raced toward us, its windshield tinted so I couldn't get a good look inside. Huero was pedaling fast, but the car was coming faster. I yelled for him to get out of the way, but he wasn't rushing for cover. He could have hid behind the dumpster, or he could have darted to the side of the street. But instead Huero came toward me, his big brown eyes wide open and unblinking as he pedaled, the bike squeaking like a field of crickets.

Chago, Jesus, and Frankie were scrambling behind the lowrider. I could hear their shoes scraping the concrete.

“Get down, homes!” Frankie yelled.

Then the shots rang out.

Pop! Pop! Pop! They sounded like loud firecrackers, but the smell was different, more crisp, like the smell of burning matches. The kind that burns the inside of your nose.

Huero reached me, leaping from his bike into my arms as the car approached. I didn't have time to think. I just grabbed him and turned so that my body covered his like a shield.

More shots rang out. A bullet zinged past my ear. Another hit the sidewalk and rocketed into a window somewhere. I can still hear the glass breaking in my dreams. Then, just as suddenly, the bullets stopped. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw the car turning the corner, its wheels squealing like some kind of demon.

“They're gone, dude,” said Frankie. He stepped out from behind the Le Mans.

My heart was about to jump out of my chest. I'd heard gunshots, and I'd seen a store after a shooting. But I'd

never been shot at before. I took a deep breath when I was sure they were gone.

"It's okay now, Huero." I said. My little brother looked like he was sleeping. I almost didn't want to bother him. "Huero?" I repeated.

The guys rushed to my side as I remained kneeling.

"Come on little buddy, wake up. What's the matter?" I put my arm under him to sit him up, and I felt the wetness in my hand. It was warm, like bathwater, but it was coming out the back of his head.

"Martin, it don't look like he's breathing," Chago said softly. The tone of his voice alarmed me 'cause Chago never talked like that.

"Oh, no," Junie said.

My vision was breaking up like I was seeing the world through shattered glass. My hands were red, and my little brother's life was spilling out onto the street, mixing with the soil like rain.

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Not to my brother.

"Come on, Huero," I said, rocking him like I did when he was little. "Come on."

People were starting to gather around,

but I blocked them out. Huero was going to wake up. He had to.

I touched his cheek. He was still warm, and his skin was soft like when he was a baby. But my fingers left smudges of blood on his face, and his body was limp. "Wake up for your big brother," I said. "Wake up!"

A woman screamed in the crowd behind me, and then I heard a voice.

"Call an ambulance! That boy's been shot."

I couldn't talk or move or think. I just sat there on the ground holding my little brother.

Someone put an arm on my shoulder. I turned to see Frankie there, his eyes dark and stormy, his brow rumpled like a dented car.

"We'll get them, homes," he said. "We'll get them." He patted me on the shoulder and walked away. I heard the sirens screaming closer then.

I couldn't let go of Huero when the medics arrived. They had to pull me away because I wasn't going to give up on my little brother. But inside, I knew he was gone. And, in a way, so was I.

Whoever shot him tore a hole through my heart too, a black hole that,

instead of blood, gushed only a desire for revenge. And as I endured the trip to the hospital, the sound of my mother wailing at the top of her lungs, the sight of my brother's blood spilling into the sink when I washed my hands, that desire grew like a tumor.

That was two months ago.