

Chapter 1

“Martin, do you have anything to say for yourself?” Mr. Gates says to me. I can hear anger in his voice.

He’s the superintendent of Bluford High School—a large silver-haired man in his late 60s. His lips are pencil thin, and there are bags under his eyes. Bags from listening to stories like mine.

I know he’s going to throw me out of Bluford. I can’t blame him. All he knows about me is what he’s read in the thick folder on his desk.

I can see the pink suspension notices from my seat. He flips through them like he’s leafing through an old phone book. I know the words he’s reading. I remember the last letter the school district sent to my mother.

MARTIN LUNA has on multiple occasions displayed severe behavioral problems in school and on school grounds. He has repeatedly engaged in threatening and hostile confrontations with other students, and he has violated school attendance policies numerous times. Furthermore, given his most recent outburst, it is the opinion of this district that he poses a threat to students and faculty. As a result, the district recommends that MARTIN LUNA be expelled from Bluford High School.

My mother cried when she got the letter. I found it laying on our kitchen counter stained with tear drops that made the ink bleed. I crumpled it up right then, but it didn't matter. The damage was done.

Today's my hearing—my last chance.

"Well?" he says. He's looking at me now. He doesn't even blink.

The auditorium is quiet except for someone coughing as I stand to answer him. I hear my mother sniffle behind me. *I'm so sorry for everything, Ma, I want to say. I feel guilt clawing at my*

chest like invisible hands.

“Please don’t do this,” my mother yells out. “He’s a good boy. *Please!*” I turn to see her standing at her seat holding her hands as if she’s praying to him. Her nose is running and her voice is trembling. It reminds me of how she was three months ago, the day my little brother died. I close my eyes to push the memories back, but it doesn’t work.

“Ms. Luna,” Mr. Gates cuts in. “I understand this is difficult for you, but we’ve already heard what you had to say. Now *please* let your son speak.”

My mother sits down, crosses herself, and quietly wipes her eyes. She’s never backed down from anything, but this time I know she expects the worst. So do I.

Mr. Gates turns back to me. He closes my folder, drops his pen, and rubs his forehead like he’s got a bad headache. I am in trouble. No question about it.

“Mr. Luna, in just two weeks at Bluford High School, you have been in several serious fights. You have cut school, skipped classes, and last Friday in the middle of yet another fight, you struck a teacher. This behavior is unacceptable. Unless there are some extenuating

circumstances, I'm afraid we have no choice but to expel you. Now, this hearing is your opportunity to tell your side of the story. Martin, what do you have to say for yourself?"

I look up at him because some of his words escape me. *Extenuating circumstances?* I don't know what they are. But I do know there are reasons why I shoved old Mr. Dooling into a wall, why me and Steve Morris keep fighting, why my anger sometimes explodes like a gunshot.

I never meant for any of it to happen. I know I screwed up, especially when I pushed the teacher. But everything else I did was the best I could do, was the only choice I really had.

There's no way Mr. Gates will ever understand this. His eyes tell me what he thinks—expelling me is the right thing to do. There's no changing his mind. I can see that.

Still, like Vicky said, I gotta try. I take a deep breath and begin telling him the truth, how it started days ago when I stumbled into Bluford a bloody mess . . .

"Oh my God, Martin," Vicky said as she looked at the cut over my eye. Her

mouth was wide open and her hands covered her cheeks. “Who did this to you? Was it Steve?”

I shook my head no. I wished she didn’t have to see me this way. I could taste blood in my mouth and knew some was on my face. She deserved to know what happened, but I had no time to explain. Frankie and the rest of my crew were on the road, and someone was about to get hurt. I had to do something. Now.

“I’m fine, Vicky. I’ll catch up with you later,” I said, but my voice cracked into a nasty whisper. I was dizzy. Too many punches to my head.

“Quick, Martin, inside right now,” barked Ms. Spencer, our principal. She led me past Vicky straight to the front office. “The rest of you get back to class. There is nothing to see here.”

It was almost time for first lunch period, and a small crowd of students had gathered at the front of the school to see my entrance. They looked at me as if I had just shot someone. *What are you starin’ at?* I felt like saying, but I had more important things to worry about.

“Ms. Spencer, I need to speak with someone I know. He’s a cop. His name is Nelson Ramirez. I need to speak with

him. *Now*," I said. She studied my face carefully, not sure whether to trust me.

I couldn't blame her. Where I come from, you don't talk to cops, and you don't expect them to solve problems. I learned that when Huero, my little brother, was killed. For months, my mother and I waited for the police to do something. All we got from them was an apology and some excuses about workload and too many cases.

But Ramirez was different. He was Chicano like us, a friend of my mom's who grew up in the barrio. He held my mom at my brother's funeral and understood that the day Huero died, part of me died too. Where else could I turn?

"I already called the police, Martin." Ms. Spencer said as I collapsed into the squeaky chair in her office. "I called your mother, too. She's on her way," she added.

My headache was getting worse. The last thing I wanted was my mom to see me this way. But I didn't have time to worry about it.

"Call Ramirez," I repeated, rubbing my swollen jaw. "Here's his phone number. Tell him Martin Luna is looking for him." I handed her the crumpled

piece of paper he'd given me over the summer.

"Why him?" Ms. Spencer asked, studying the scrap like it was a fake ID card or something. "If you did something wrong, now is the time to tell me so you won't get in any worse trouble."

I wanted to curse her out right there. Behind her wire-rimmed glasses, she couldn't see nothin'. I wasn't afraid of any punishment she could give me. A suspension? A letter? That ain't nothin' compared to watching your brother die in your arms, seeing his blood drip onto your shoes, feeling his skin turn cool in your hands. And now more blood was about to spill.

"There ain't no worse trouble!" I growled, tired of talking to her. I jumped up and reached for her office phone. But my legs were weak, and the room suddenly felt like waves were rolling through the floor. I leaned against the wall to stop from falling.

"*Martin!*" Ms. Spencer yelled, grabbing me and easing me back into the chair. Her eyes were wide with worry.

"*Please*, Ms. Spencer," I said, pointing to the phone.

"Okay, okay. I'm calling him right

now. Just sit down and don't move," she said, nervously dialing the numbers. "But if there is something I can do to protect you and the other students in this school, you need to let me know."

Protect me? Too late for that, I wanted to say. The room was spinning. I grabbed the chair to steady myself. "Just call him."

I knew it would come down to this. I knew it the second I agreed to meet my homeboys in the parking lot outside Bluford. Our crew—Frankie, Chago, Junie, and Jesus—were about to do something we had talked about since Huero died. We were going to get revenge.

After months of searching, we found out who shot my brother—a punk named Hector Maldonado. We'd talked about what we'd do all summer. For a while, I dreamed about it night and day. It was the only thing that pushed the hurt away. The only reason I had to get up in the morning.

Don't get me wrong, I ain't a gang-banger. I've stolen a few things and gotten into some fights, but I never did something serious like this before. But everything changed when Huero died. I

snapped like an old rubber band.

Frankie Pacheco knew this. He was the oldest and toughest in our crew. He got us guns and showed us what we needed to know. And for a while I was ready to let it all go down like that.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Just three shots. A blast of sour gun smoke. The screeching of tires as Frankie's old LeMans pulled away. The same sounds I heard the afternoon Huero died. That would be the end of it.

But I couldn't do it.

In my head, I kept seeing my brother's face, Vicky's eyes, my Mom's tears. And I kept hearing something my English teacher, Mr. Mitchell, said. *You could have a bright future ahead of you. Don't throw it away.*

Call me soft. I don't care. You're not the one who sits at your brother's grave, listens to your mother crying in the dark, and knows what it's like to lose someone. If you were, you'd understand why I couldn't be like the coward who drove down our street and stole my brother's life with a gunshot.

"Yes, this message is for Officer Ramirez," Ms. Spencer said. "This is the principal at Bluford High School. I have

Martin Luna here in my office. He seems to have been involved in an altercation and wishes to speak with you. He says it's important."

I put my head in my hands. A message! Where was he? It was the one time I needed to reach him, and he wasn't there.

Call me anytime, he had said when he gave me the number. Yeah, right.

I felt Ms. Spencer watching me. I knew she was wishing I never transferred into her school. But if I'd stayed at Zamora High, I'd be in jail or dead already.

That's why my mom moved out of our old neighborhood, making me start my sophomore year at Bluford High. I was so angry when she told me, I almost punched her. Can you believe that? I hate when I get that way, but Huero's death did that to me.

The move added 45 minutes to her bus ride to Wal-Mart where she worked as a cashier with Nilsa, Frankie's older sister. But she did it—to *save* me. It didn't work.

"Where is he?" a man yelled into the office, shattering my thoughts. "Where's Martin?"

I looked up to see Mr. Mitchell. The

throbbing in my skull was worsening by the minute, and the room was fuzzy, like an old TV that isn't tuned in right.

"What happened?" he asked, shaking his head. The other day, he gave me an "A" for an essay I wrote about Huero. I wondered what he'd say if he knew another kid was about to die because I was too scared to talk.

I stared at him, my heart pounding. My hands sweating. The room seemed to spin. Overhead, the bell sounded announcing the beginning of first lunch period. Time was running out like blood from a cut.

"Martin, what is it?"

I knew it would take Frankie at least a half hour to get to Hector's house. It hadn't been that long since we fought. If I acted now, there still was a chance I could do something. But I wasn't ready to rat out my boys. I ain't a snitch.

Up until a month ago, Frankie and I were like brothers. *Family*, he called me and the rest of our crew. I even took a beating to earn that word. That's how we did things.

But then Frankie admitted that the bullet that killed my brother was probably aimed at him. I don't know why I

never thought of it before, but it made sense. Frankie was the one with the knife wound, the homie most feared on our block, the tattoo-covered 19-year-old who had enemies everywhere. Of course the bullet was meant for him, not an eight-year-old boy. Not Huero.

The news changed me. It was like I'd been asleep and suddenly woke up. Questions kept popping in my head in the middle of the night, cutting our friendship like a knife. Making me secretly hate him. Why did Huero have to pay for what Frankie did? And why was Frankie free to cruise the 'hood while my brother's lying in the ground?

Frankie wasn't stupid. He knew I was changing. That's why he wanted me to do the shooting this morning. It would make me as guilty as him, and it would mean he'd always have something on me in case I gave him trouble. I'm sure he planned it this way. But he didn't plan on me backing out.

"I'm not doin' it, Frankie. I'm serious," I announced while we were all sitting in his LeMans ready to get Hector. The car got as quiet as a grave.

You should have seen Frankie's face. If it were a gun, I'd be dead right now. I

jumped out before anyone could stop me.

Chago, my best friend from back in the day, tried to change my mind. He was worried about what Frankie would do next.

“C’mon, Martin. We’re family, man. Brothers,” Chago said. “Let’s go.”

The word stung me. *Family*. It was like a slap in my face. Look what the word did to me—it cost me my brother and was about to turn me into a criminal. That ain’t what family is supposed to be. Anyone who says so needs to get their head examined.

“My brother was Huero, Chago,” I said. “And he’s dead because of something Frankie did. You know it’s true. What we are about to do, it ain’t family, Chago. It’s crazy.”

Frankie lost it. His jaw tightened up, and he got this cold look I saw once before when he jumped a kid for talking to his girlfriend. The guy was already on the ground when Frankie’s foot smashed into his face with a heavy wet thud. I can still hear the sound. The guy moaned and threw up, and Frankie backed away, acting like he was trying to protect his new steel tipped boots from the

mess. Like they were more important than another person.

Frankie was ready to do worse to me when he stepped out of his car. Don't get me wrong. I can handle myself in a fight. But I'm no match for Frankie. His fists pounded into my face and side, knocking me to my knees. That's when he pulled out his gun.

"You can't leave your family, Martin," he said. His nine millimeter was pointed at my face. It was the first time I looked into the barrel of a gun.

All I could think about was the bloody mess I'd be when my mother found me, how she'd cry at my funeral with no sons at her side.

"I can't go no further. Do what you gotta do," I said. I whispered a prayer just in case.

Frankie blinked.

Maybe it was the guilt he had for Huero's death. Maybe it was that he didn't want to shoot me in daylight where a crowd of people could witness it. Or maybe it was because he was shocked that I was willing to die to prove I ain't a killer. I don't know what it was, but Frankie let me go.

"This ain't done," he growled and

jumped back into his car.

I believe him.

The clock over Ms. Spencer's desk said 10:38. Frankie and the boys had been on the road for 20 minutes already. There were at least two guns in the car, and the only one who knew their plan was me. I was wasting time.

"C'mon, Martin. It's like I said before. You have a choice. You can end this right now," Mr. Mitchell said, staring at me like I was a puzzle. "We're listening."

I could feel myself zoning out, like there was a fog settling over my brain. All last night, I replayed how this day would go down. When I grabbed my bandana and left to meet Frankie, I knew I had to walk away, that Frankie was gonna come at me like never before. But I figured if I could just escape and get to Bluford, it would all be over.

I was wrong.

Looking at Ms. Spencer's tight jaw and Mr. Mitchell's wide eyes, I knew it was just beginning.