

Chapter 1

“A Change Is Gonna Come”



October 4, 1967

My first day at Valencia High started with a bloody nose. I had physical education class right after homeroom, and I wandered around the sprawling school, looking for the gym, for ten minutes. When I finally found it and changed into my PE uniform, I saw that the other girls were playing volleyball. I groaned. I loved nearly all sports, but I had always loathed volleyball. Something about spiking the ball and charging the net never worked for me. But of course, I didn't have a choice. The teacher assigned me to a group with another white girl and two black girls, who eyed me with suspicion. That kind of thing happened in every school. I was the perpetual new girl, the one nobody trusted.

Sure enough, as soon as we started playing, one of the black girls elbowed me in the nose. Immediately, blood spurted all over my clothes. I lay on the floor and tried not to cry. The girl apologized and helped me up, and the teacher gave me a towel to hold over my nose.

She told the white girl from my team to take me to the nurse's clinic.

“Thanks,” I said to the girl when we were on our way. “I don't think I could have found the clinic on my own.”

“Sure. Not a problem. I hate volleyball.”

I glanced at her to see if she'd read my mind and was making fun of me, but she seemed serious. I tried to remember her name, but pain and embarrassment drove out that information.

“Me, too,” I said, sniffing back blood. “It’s my first day here.”

2

“Not a great way to start at a new school. But your mom will probably come and take you home or at least bring you clean clothes.”

“Not likely.”

“Really? Why not?”

I sighed. There was no way I was going to get into my family’s weirdness with a girl whose name I couldn’t even remember. I held the towel more tightly on my nose and mumbled from beneath it, “She’s really busy.”

“That’s too bad. Your nose isn’t great.”

That was cold comfort, but I nodded, trying to be polite.

She guided me through a maze of hallways to a door marked Nurse’s Clinic. Smiling, she said, “See you around,” before turning away.



UNSURPRISINGLY, MOM said she was too busy to come to the school. Luckily, the nurse helped me clean myself up enough to attend the rest of my classes. My nose looked like a balloon and felt like a hammer was pounding into it, but I held my head down and tried to cover my face with my hair.

Just before the end of the last class, the principal gave announcements for the next day over the intercom. I listened with half an ear and thought about my crummy life. Moving all the time,

new schools every few months, walking into classrooms and having everyone stare at me—I could go on and on about my woes, but it did absolutely no good. Nobody cared how I felt.

“Should meet at the track tomorrow...”

Wait. Had the principal said something about the track team? I tapped the guy in front of me on the shoulder, and he turned to look at me. “What did he say about track?” I asked.

He glanced at my nose then quickly looked away. “They’re looking for some new kids to be on the track team. Tryouts are tomorrow.”

“Do they take girls?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.” He shrugged, nodded, and turned back around.

Suddenly, my nose didn’t hurt so much. I loved to run. I ran around all the time on the farms where we lived, just for the fun of it. Being on the track team would give me something to do other than go right home after school and start on my chores. And it might also give me a life of my own, for however long it lasted.



THAT EVENING DURING supper, I gave it a shot. I hadn’t asked to do anything after school since I’d played basketball in Ohio, two moves back, and Mom owed me this. Glancing between Mom and Dad, I said, “They’re looking for new people on the track team. I’d like to try out. Mom, will you pick me up at four thirty tomorrow?”

She stared at me for a moment before saying, “After what happened to you today, you want to do something athletic? I can’t believe you.”

“It was just an elbow in the nose. I guess I got too close to that girl when she was trying to spike the ball. That won’t happen when I’m running.”

“It wasn’t just an elbow in the nose. You could have fallen down and hit your head, and that might have triggered a seizure. You’re too fragile to take risks like that. In fact, I’m going to write a note so that you won’t have to take PE at all.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. She only brought up my epilepsy when she didn’t want me to do something. It never stopped her from making me do heavy work around the house, like washing windows or moving furniture. No matter what my mom said, I knew running wasn’t bad for me, because I’d run long and hard playing basketball without the slightest problem.

Mom always kept me from doing what I wanted. I was tired of it. “But, Mom, I like PE, except for volleyball. I’ll be more careful. Don’t write a note. It’ll make me stand out even more than I already do.”

She bit her lip and glanced at Dad, who shrugged. Then she shook her head in defeat. “All right, I won’t. This time. But if it happens again, I will write that note. Now, eat your supper.”

I took a few bites and tried again. “I really want to try out for the track team. I’d play basketball if I could, but the gym teacher said they don’t have a girls’ team here. Besides, I haven’t had a seizure for as long as I can remember.”

“Which is exactly why you shouldn’t join the track team. Running is harder on your body than basketball, Faye. I don’t want to risk it.”

That made no sense. “You wouldn’t be risking it. I would.”

Dad slammed his hand on the table. “Don’t sass your mother,” he said, raising his voice and giving me a stern look.

Dad mostly ignored me, but things didn’t go well when he paid attention.

I looked down at my food. "Sorry."

Arguing was getting me nowhere, so I needed to change my strategy. Mom got weird sometimes, and when that happened, lying was my best bet.

After I washed the dishes, I asked Mom, in my most innocent voice, if I could stay after school the next day and go to the library. "The math teacher's going to tutor people who need it, and I'm really behind." I tried to keep the sarcasm out of my voice when I continued. "It's not running, so it shouldn't harm me."

She grunted then folded and shook out the dish towel several times. "All right, you can do that as long as you keep your medicine with you."

I headed to my room and managed to maintain a straight face until I'd closed my bedroom door. Then the smile broke through. Success!



AFTER SCHOOL THE NEXT afternoon, I sat on the bleachers and watched as six boys in maroon-and-orange T-shirts ran around the track. A slim man in shorts stood on the infield grass, a whistle around his neck, tapping his foot. The coach, I presumed. He glanced at his watch and frowned. Eventually, a boy came out from the school and wandered over. After a short conversation, he joined the others on the track.

I waited, but nobody else showed. Finally, leaving my books on the bench, I made my way over to the coach. He was writing something on a clipboard but looked up when I stopped a few feet away. The eagerness in his eyes turned to disappointment when he saw me. He asked in a strong accent, "Can I help you, young lady?"

I couldn't think of how to begin, so I just stood there, tongue nailed to the roof of my mouth. He tapped his foot and waited.

I cleared my throat and said in as strong a voice as I could muster, "I'd like to try out for the track team."

The corners of his mouth twitched as he stared at me. "Back home in Cuba, girls were involved in all aspects of sports. But in Valencia, only boys are allowed to join the track team. I'm sorry. I wish I could help you, young lady, but I can't." He turned his attention back to his clipboard.

I stood rooted to my spot, getting more annoyed by the second. He obviously needed to add people to the team, and from what I could tell, only one new boy had shown up. After all I'd gone through to be there, the coach wouldn't even let me try out for the piddly high school track team just because I was a girl?

I cleared my throat. When he looked up again, I said, "Uh, how far is one lap around the track?"

"A quarter mile. Four laps make a mile." He smiled at me. "You can run for fun if you want to. Just stay in the outside lanes. But if you're going to run, let me give you a tip: start slow."

I walked back to my seat and untied the wraparound skirt I'd worn to school over my shorts. I would run a mile that day if I had to crawl. And I would run it as fast as my feet would carry me.

I joined the boys and began to jog on the track's soft surface. The rubber gave a little with each step. I felt like I was running on a trampoline or a cloud. I stretched out my legs and swung my arms and watched the world whiz by. My mind settled into a peaceful hum, my breath slow and easy.

The first curve arrived quickly. I sped up. The jog turned into a flat-out sprint, with my feet kicking up high behind me and my arms pumping. As I ran, I lifted my arms out to shoulder height, feeling about three years old. I pretended to be an airplane, for no other reason than that it was fun, and laughed for sheer joy.

The boys on the track team glanced at me curiously, but nobody said anything, so I kept running. Some of them were faster than I was, but I didn't care. I was running like the wind, and I felt light and free.

Before long, the Central Florida heat and humidity got to me, and I started breathing faster. I slowed down just a little. Then I noticed that a girl had joined me on the track. She was running slowly, as though it hurt.

I caught up to her and matched her pace. "Hi, I'm Faye."

She looked at me and said in a snotty tone, "Yeah, I know. You told me when I took you to the clinic yesterday. In case you don't remember, I'm Francie."

I could feel my face flush. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. I was in a lot of pain yesterday." Because we moved so often, I had an ironclad rule to not make close friends so I wouldn't be sad or miss people when we moved. Mostly, I didn't even bother to learn people's names. Francie would just have to get over being mad. Or not. I really didn't care. Running was one of those things a person could do alone, and I was used to being alone.

I sprinted off and ran around the track as fast as I could. When I lapped her, I slowed down and waited for her to accept my apology. But she didn't even look at me. *All right, then.* I was done trying to make up.

But after half a lap of running at her pace and not talking, I couldn't help myself. "So, *Francie*, do you run a lot?" I knew I should follow the ironclad rule, but she was a girl, and she was out running. We didn't have to be friends to run together.

"Today's my first day. I read in a magazine about this girl who got attacked by the race director when she ran the Boston Marathon last spring. Can you believe that? It pissed me off so much I decided to try running."

The Boston Marathon. Something about it sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. I shook my head and looked over at Francie. She seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

"So how do you like it? Running, I mean."

She panted as she said, "I'm not sure. It's harder than I thought it would be."

I didn't think running was hard. I liked the rhythm of my feet hitting the ground and the way the wind dried the sweat from my face. I wasn't sure what else to say, so I ran ahead, gradually speeding up until I was flying. After my fourth lap, I collapsed onto the grass, huffing and puffing. I'd run hard, and except for being tired, I felt fine. Mom had been wrong about running causing a seizure.

The coach walked over to me, a big smile on his face. "I timed you, and you were faster than most of the boys. You didn't tell me you were such a good runner."

I laughed. “You didn’t ask. You just turned me down.”

“I’m sorry about before. You know, I don’t think the rules specifically exclude girls. I guess it’s just a custom here. Anyway, I’d like to have you on the team. I can’t say for sure, but you’re fast enough that you might even get a track scholarship to college.”

A track scholarship? Really? I couldn’t keep the grin from my face.

Convincing him to change his mind about me hadn’t been too hard. Maybe Mom would be just as easy to win over. I’d give it another try when I got home.

He leaned over to shake my hand. “I’m Coach Lopez. Welcome to the team.”

Francie joined us, panting and flushed. Coach Lopez asked her if she wanted to be on the track team, too. “You’re not fast, but I can tell you’ve got endurance. I can train you to go faster, and you might be good in the two-mile race.”

“No, thanks. I do want to go far, but fast doesn’t interest me.”

“All right.” He turned to me. “See you tomorrow after school.” Glancing at Francie, he said, “I’ll still coach you, if you want, even without you being on the team.”

Francie shrugged and waved to me as she ran toward a woman who was standing in the doorway of the school. I picked up my books and headed for my locker. Not only had I made the team, but I might even get a scholarship to college. Suddenly, my world was bright with possibilities.

Then I spotted Mom walking toward me, an angry scowl pulling down the corners of her mouth. *Uh-oh. Trouble.*

I trudged to meet her, my mind spinning with thoughts of how I could get out of this situation.

Mom looked like a thundercloud. “You were supposed to be in the library,” she said, spitting out the words like bullets.

“Uh, it turns out I got the day wrong. So I ran instead.”

“I’ve been watching you for the last ten minutes, missy. You stayed after school to run, after I specifically told you not to last night.”

She’d caught me, so I faced her and tried to keep the excitement out of my voice. “I wanted to try it, and I like it, Mom. I ran a mile today, and nothing bad happened. And I got on the track team.”

Mom glanced around. The coach was staring at us as if he wanted to come over and introduce himself but was waiting for an invitation. Mom ignored him, took a deep breath, then turned to me and said in a low, tight voice, “Where are your books? We’ll continue this when your father gets home.”



WHEN MY DAD CAME IN from the orange groves, I heard Mom talking to him in a hushed voice. I tensed and waited for him to call me into the living room. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be too mad.

“Faye, get in here.” I winced at his tone. Apparently, he was.

When I went in, he was standing in the center of the room, an angry scowl on his face. “I understand you lied to your mama.”

“Well...” I sat down on the couch and crossed my legs, trying to keep the one on top from jiggling.

“What have we told you before about lying?” He wasn’t yelling, at least not yet, but his words were clipped and careful, like he was holding himself back. I knew not to sass him when he sounded like that.

“That I shouldn’t do it.” Of course I knew it was wrong. But what choice did I have if I wanted to run?

His eyes bored into me. “That’s right. So why did you?”

I stood up and faced him, quivering all over. “Because I feel like I can be good at running, and I’m not good at much else. You move me all over creation and expect me to be okay with it, but I’m not.” In spite of my best effort, a whine crept into my voice. “Running doesn’t hurt anybody. Why is it such a big deal?”

He took a breath and glanced toward Mom, who shook her head and marched into their bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Dad sighed and shrugged then went to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of Mountain Dew. After he took a drink, he said over his shoulder, “Go to your room. We’ll let you know when you can come out.”

I stomped to my room and turned the radio up loud. Aretha Franklin was belting out, “Respect,” and I sang along as loudly as I dared.

Mom and Dad talked in their bedroom. I couldn’t hear their words, but Mom sounded really upset. Eventually, Dad came out and called me back into the living room. In his most no-nonsense voice, he said, “Your mama thinks that even if other girls could run without harming themselves, which is doubtful, it’s bad for your health. So you need to come home on the bus, and you can use your extra energy to weed Mr. Barrett’s vegetable garden. You can only run on the track if it’s during a class when you’re supervised.”

“But Coach Lopez will be...”

“I don’t want to hear it. Maybe next time you’ll think twice before you lie to your mama. Now, go and apologize to her.”

I trudged to their closed bedroom door and called out, “Sorry. I won’t do it again.” Another lie. I would run again as soon as I could.

“All right,” came the muffled voice from within. “Go do your homework.”



FOR A WEEK, I STAYED in my room as much as possible after school and barely made any headway in weeding the Barretts’ vegetable garden. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t have minded helping out the old people who owned the farm where we were tenants, but I was on strike, and I wanted it to show.

By Wednesday, I started to wonder if my strike was pointless. I had my heart set on being a PE teacher when I grew up. About the only thing I was good at was sports, so it made sense that I would be a good PE teacher. But to reach my goal, I would have to go to college. The truth was that farm workers like the people in my family didn’t go to college. They started working in the fields as soon as they left high school and then worked until they dropped. Picking fruits and vegetables, all day every day, wasn’t my idea of living. If my parents forced me to do that, I might as well be dead.

As I wallowed in my misery, I thought I must have been insane to even hope that I could accomplish something so... huge. The problem was that I didn't have another dream to replace that one. Still, a little voice deep inside told me that if I could do something big like get a scholarship to college, maybe I could make a different, happier future for myself.

By Friday, I'd decided that I wasn't quite ready to give up on this dream, even if it was pointless. Maybe a miracle would happen.

Only two and a half more years until I was eighteen, and then I would be free.