

# Chapter 1: Vanessa Starts a Fight she Can't Win

Vanessa walked with her twin brother Bryan to school on the first day of tenth grade, pulling her wheeled backpack behind her. Bryan didn't say anything as they walked. He seldom did. After all, Bryan was "in the spectrum." He had high functioning autism and didn't engage in casual conversation.

They were twins, and looked similar. Both had brown hair, although Vanessa's was curly and Bryan's straight. Both were thin. Vanessa was short. Bryan wasn't tall, but was eight or nine inches taller than her.

The walk seemed long. It was actually less than a mile, but it had been a really hard summer and Vanessa wasn't eager to get back to school. Her father had mysteriously disappeared only a few months before, and she really wasn't sure what to say when people asked her about it. Honestly, she wasn't sure what would be worse, people asking her about it or people not asking her at all.

Bryan walked forward as usual. Nothing ever seemed to phase him. Being in the spectrum didn't mean he didn't have feelings, but he seldom ever let them show. He would describe himself as someone who watched everything but seldom spoke.

Bryan did watch everything. That was true. At least he seemed to notice details no one else did, and he remembered them too. He never forgot a locker combination or a birthday.

He could tell people how many stairs were on a staircase and quote almost every episode of his favorite TV series.

Vanessa wished at times she could be as calm as Bryan appeared. She walked along pulling her wheeled backpack. It wasn't cool. Most high school students slung their backpacks over one shoulder, but Vanessa couldn't, due to a back problem that no doctor could diagnose. Whatever the problem was, it made her back hurt and kept her from dancing, playing sports, and other things normal teenage girls did. She often longed to do the activities she couldn't but kept telling herself to not dwell on what she couldn't do but to focus on what she could.

“Are you excited to start school today?” she asked Bryan, hoping for a conversation that wasn't likely to happen.

“Umm...” he answered, furrowing his eyebrows and running his hand through his hair. “Umm...”

That was too abstract of a question, so she rephrased it. “You're eager but still nervous about starting school today, aren't you?”

“Umm... something like that,” he answered, with some eagerness that she understood but still with a rather forced speech, as his words often sounded forced.

“What are you taking?” she asked. She actually knew, but wanted the conversation.

“Math, Biology, music,...” he began. He listed off his classes and told which teacher he would have for each.

Vanessa looked around. Something felt really odd. Sure, people usually were nervous on their first day of school each year. Being more nervous due to her father's disappearance

was understandable too. Yet, there seemed something even more wrong, something dangerously wrong. She looked around, feeling like someone was watching her, but saw nothing. That was ridiculous. Why would anyone be watching them? Surely, she was just being paranoid. Still, the feeling didn't leave. Ever since her father disappeared she'd not felt safe. Of course not. Her father protected the family well. He was smart and strong. She'd always looked up to him. Yet, he was gone, and no one even knew if he was alive. She had to keep hope.

“What are the noble gasses and what colors do they glow in neon signs?” she asked Bryan, hoping to take her mind off her nerves.

Bryan's eyes went excitedly wide as he was glad to know the answer. He first explained that if not filled with neon, a sign is not a neon sign, that some were argon signs or xenon signs or such. Then he listed out all the noble gasses and what colors they would glow. It didn't take long, as there aren't many. He had to add that there were also glowing signs due to carbon dioxide, but that was a molecule not a noble gas.

By the time he finished, they were walking up to the school.

There were groups of friends standing around talking to each other. That was normal. Vanessa recognized many of the people as she'd been to James Madison High the year before.

Vanessa walked over to her friends Sophia and Paul. Due to her handicap, Vanessa didn't hang with the popular crowd. They weren't overly accepting of her back problems or her brother's autism. Her best friend was Sophia. They'd been friends since they were little and only lived a few blocks away.

Sophia wasn't in with the popular crowd either. She was very pretty and very innocent looking. She had long, straight, red hair and loved to quote Shakespeare. That wasn't surprising because she was very into theater and had been in many plays.

Paul was also a theater person, but he had no desire to be on stage. He worked tech for school plays. He often wore black to school, as all techies wear black during shows to not draw attention to themselves. He really didn't like to draw attention to himself at school either. Consequently, he was often overlooked. Yet, he was brilliant. He could not only run the technology, he could create very cool effects, and had a great vision of what should be done. He was also a straight A student.

They began talking as usual. As they talked, several people they knew walked past and made comments like "I'm sorry to hear about your dad," or "I hope they find your father soon." None of them stopped and talked, likely because they really didn't know what else to say.

Vanessa noted that the reminders of her father seemed to be agitating Bryan. It had to be hard for him to not be able to verbalize his emotions. He was twisting his hair around, a habit he often did when he was uncomfortable.

The warning bell rang, so they started to walk to the front door. As they did, a big guy bumped into Bryan. "Watch where you're going!" the guy scolded.

"You...umm... bumped me," Bryan responded, not sounding condemning or scolding, just correcting the information with his usual stilt in his voice.

The boy instantly caught his awkwardness. “What do you know?”

“Umm... birthdays,” Bryan answered. “I know birthdays.”

The boy laughed. “You don’t know mine. You don’t even know my name. What is it?”

“Umm...” Bryan stumbled. Then he blurted out. “How would I know? You haven’t told me.”

“I’m Griff,” the boy hissed leaning close to his face. “Remember that name.”

“I will,” Bryan replied matter-of-factly. “I remember names.”

Griff laughed, looked around at his groupies, and mocked, “Of course you will, you retard.”

Retard was a word that really bothered Vanessa. She often scolded people for using it. Yet, that day, it bothered her so much worse, perhaps because she had hoped tenth grade would be better, or perhaps because her father was missing. Yet, she just couldn’t take it. She walked over, shoved Griff back and demanded, “Take that back! Don’t ever call him that again!”

Griff laughed, as she couldn’t hurt him. He shoved her back. With her bad back, she fell to the ground.

No one had ever seen Bryan lose it before, as he prided himself at being a pacifist, but the sight of seeing his sister knocked down set him off. He charged at Griff and tackled him.

For a moment there was a struggle. Griff definitely was stronger and more experienced in fighting, so he easily rolled

on top and hit Bryan. That didn't stop Bryan. As many boys in the spectrum, his pain tolerance was high.

He would have kept fighting, but a very strong, popular boy, named Dylan, came over and pulled them apart. "That's enough, Griff," Dylan scolded. He held Griff by the collar and warned, "Don't ever call someone a retard again!"

"You're not so tough," Griff retorted as he threw a punch.

Dylan blocked, pulled back his fist, and warned, "Don't make me hurt you." Griff punched him, so Dylan punched back. "I warned you," Dylan reminded him.

Griff didn't respond, as the vice-principal was there demanding to know what had happened and calling everyone into his office.

That wasn't a good way to start the school year. Vanessa lay on the ground and cried.

Dylan came over to her, reached out his hand, and offered, "Can I help you?"

He helped her up. She thanked him and asked, "You're Dylan, right?" It was a stupid question, as everyone in the school knew who Dylan was, but she really didn't know what else to say.

"Yes, I'm Dylan," he confirmed with a bit of a chuckle, as he was used to girls being awkward around him and saying silly things. He then assured her that she and her brother could count on him not to let people pick on them.

"Why?" Vanessa asked. "You don't even know us."

“I don’t,” Dylan agreed. “Yet, I have a sister in a wheelchair. I’ve always been protective of people who have differences. Griff is a bully, but I’ll make sure he doesn’t keep bothering you.”

“You can’t if you get suspended,” Vanessa pointed out. “I’m afraid of what is about to happen. We will all likely start off this school year either being suspended or in detention.”

“I guess we’ll see,” Dylan replied, not really seeming too worried about going to the vice-principal’s office.

Vanessa was very worried. She went into the office and looked around. The room looked cold and metallic. There was a desk in the room, several chairs, and file cabinets and bookcases all along the walls.

She sat in a chair, as did Bryan, Dylan, and Griff. Vice Principal Anderson sat across his desk from them. He tapped his fingers together for a moment, saying nothing. When he finally spoke, he said, “I am disappointed.”

He had Dylan explain what happened and seemed to trust his explanation without question. He then looked at Griff and warned, “It seems your reputation is correct. Technically, you didn’t start the fight, although I understand you provoked it, so I won’t suspend you, but I will give you in-school detention for the entire week.”

“No!” Griff complained. “I didn’t do anything. They started it.”

“Silence, or it will be two weeks,” Vice-Principal Anderson rebuked. Griff became instantly silent. Anderson then looked at Vanessa. “You did technically start the fight, so I will either

have to suspend you or give you in-school suspension. I will talk to your mother.”

“Um... what about me?” Bryan asked.

“I will have to discuss how to discipline you with your counselor,” Anderson answered. “You will be disciplined somehow.”

“No!” Bryan insisted, jumping up from his chair in an unusual rage. “He deserved it.”

“What if you had seriously hurt him?” Anderson argued. “You could have. Do you think he deserved to be seriously injured over an insult?”

Bryan thought for a moment, staring intently in front of him. “Yes,” he concluded. “Yes.”

“Go to detention,” Vice-Principal Anderson insisted. “All of you, go.”

“What about me?” Dylan asked.

“You were just breaking up the fight,” Anderson answered. “Go to class.”

“He hit me,” Griff complained.

“The decision is made,” Vice-principal Anderson concluded. “All of you, go. I will notify your parents.” He suddenly stopped and looked at the twins. “I’ll notify your mother,” he corrected. “I’m sorry about your father. I’m sure if you weren’t already so stressed this wouldn’t have happened today. Both of you have excellent academic records.”



“I’m sorry,” Vanessa cried. “I’m really sorry.” She looked over at Griff and explained, “I’m sorry. I get defensive about my brother.”

Dylan looked over at Griff and warned, “And I get protective of people with handicaps, so don’t mess with any of them again.”

“Enough,” Vice-principal Anderson scolded. “All of you get out of here. I’ll notify detention and parents.”

Vanessa cried. How could she have gotten into a fight on her first day of the new school year? Her mother would be so disappointed, and she’d already been through so much. How could she put her mother through more? Since her father’s disappearance, her mother was broken. How could she add to it with a fight? “I’m sorry,” she again apologized.

They all walked out of the main building. The detention room was a trailer outside. As Vice Principal Anderson walked with them to the trailer, Vanessa looked around. Again, something seemed really wrong. Maybe it was just nerves from going to detention, but it felt like more. Again, she felt as if someone was watching them.

She walked on, entirely unaware that detention was the least of her troubles, and soon she and her brother would be in a dangerous adventure where lives would depend on them, and they would be lucky to make it out alive.