

# Chapter 1

His weight was crushing my body. Deep inside me a guttural scream was building, desperate for release, but each time he thrust, the breath was forced out of me. His fingers gripped my wrists so tightly that I feared the skin would break. His eyes burned into mine as his breathing quickened to short, hard bursts. I struggled to break away, to move, to shift his weight off mine and get control again. But as his movements quickened, his weight and his strength held me down. I strained for dominance, lost the battle, and succumbed to the inevitable. He lowered his face to mine and covered my mouth with his.

Panting and shaking, I met his kiss and returned it. Laughing lightly, I said, “Okay, you win.” Smiling, and without breaking the full contact of our bodies, we both rolled onto our sides, and I nestled my head into his shoulder.

Running a finger down his chest, I admired the strength and shape of my man, especially pleasant after enjoying what that strength and shape could do to me.

I’d only known him a year; we’d met as suspect and detective, moved quickly to tentative lovers, to my accepting his proposal. It had been quite a ride.

“Evan?” I asked, looking up into his deep-water-blue eyes and sinking a hand into his thick, black hair to pull his head back.

“Yes?” he answered lazily, pulling his gaze with pleasing reluctance away from scanning the length of my legs.

“Do you want a big wedding?”

The edges of his mouth twitched just enough for me to see the joke coming. “Well, you know,” he began, and I started to laugh, “that all little boys dream of a big wedding and wearing a fancy white dress. Queen for a day, that’s me,” he finished in a fake lisp; it didn’t come off on my ultimate man’s man.

I smacked him on his firm butt and he grabbed my arms, pinning me down again. “I’m serious, honey,” I pleaded. “I’ve got to get started planning this.” I was exaggerating a little. I had already hired the most expensive event team in town, given them a budget that would have bought a three-bedroom house in Beverly Hills, and all I would have to do was tell them what kind of cake I wanted. They’d pretty much take it from there.

“Yes,” Evan said after considering seriously for a moment. “I want a big wedding,” he said, then started kissing my neck, mumbling the next words as he moved down. “I want a gigantic wedding. I want everyone to know that little ol’ Detective Evan Paley is marrying the most beautiful woman in the world, Callaway Francine Wilde.” He came up for air, then said, “And I don’t care if they can see the ring through my nose,” before diving back onto the skin where my neck curved into my shoulder.

The roughness of his morning beard touched off a skirmish in that ticklish spot, and the heat of his mouth was turning my after-sex glow into a flashing green light. If he went on this way, we’d never get out of bed.

I fought for control. “If you want everybody to know, then are we going to be able to announce the engagement?” I asked. “I think, uh,” I moaned, distracted. “Stop that. You usually let other people know you’re getting married before you send out the invitations.”

“Soon. I don’t think it’ll be real helpful to the undercover drug bust I’m working on right now to have my picture published in the social section of the L.A. Times.” His words were muffled as he nuzzled my neck, biting softly.

“You think the crack dealers read the social section of the L.A. Times?” I asked.

“Read? No, but they can look at the pictures.”

“Let me go,” I said, struggling to release my arms.

“If you promise to be good,” he told me with the low, throaty vibrato that worked on two of my most sensitive areas—only one of which was my inner ear—and kissed me long and hard.

Looking up at him mischievously, I said, “Oh, I’ll be very good.”

He let go, and I smacked him on the butt again. Then, laughing, I rolled out of his reach onto the floor, and he came after me, trying his best to land a retaliatory smack on my backside. Laughing, I slipped away and he chased me across the bedroom, but I made it to his walk-in closet and slammed the door behind me, turning the lock just as his fingers reached the knob on the other side.

“Fine,” he called through the door. “You can just stay in there.”

“I’m not coming out until you call a caterer!” I yelled back.

“Leave it to me!” came the muffled response. “I’m sure our guests will love having Tito’s tacos at the reception. Don’t worry about a thing. I can picture it now. The grand ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton on Maui, the tables decked with nothing but the finest in purple plasticware, our classy guests expressing their gastronomic delight as they sip Cook’s champagne and enjoy their taquitos and menudo.”

His voice was growing fainter, as though he were leaving the bedroom, or at least pretending to.

I spoke loudly so that my voice would carry through the thick door. “This is exactly why straight men aren’t allowed to plan their own weddings!”

“You’re only saying that because you think I’ll forget to order the piñata.”

Stifling a laugh, I put my ear to the cherrywood door and listened intently. We were at Evan’s house, and his master bedroom was a spacious affair. There was a good twenty feet of sisal flooring between the bed and the closet, and I could just picture him sneaking across it. I closed my eyes to try to pick up a soft footfall or a crackle in the matting, but all I got was eerie silence.

Most likely he was watching the door from the other side.

I could play the waiting game. I sat down on the thick wool carpet.

Through the door I heard the muffled ringing of a phone. I hoped he’d answer it and give himself away, but it rang a couple more times and then stopped. Still no activity, and I bore easily.

“Honey?” I called out, cracking the door open an inch or two. The bed was empty; so was the room. I came out cautiously in case he was waiting to ambush me. But the room was absolutely still. I walked to the foot of the bed and looked out through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back garden and the pool. “Evan?” I tried again, softly, so as not to seem a fool if he was right there somewhere.

No answer.

Then I heard a slight murmuring coming from the bathroom. I tiptoed to the door and got ready to spring on him when he came out. He was whispering, but the marble room magnified the sound, bouncing it out at me.

“I can’t come right now. I told you, you need to stay calm and it’ll be all right.” He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, “That’s not fair. You know I care about you, and you should know by now what I’ll do for you.”

I leaned my head around the doorjamb until I was at an angle where I could see Evan's reflection in the long mirror. He had the phone up to one ear, and as he listened he backed up a step and looked out the half-opened door to check the closet.

Glancing back, I realized I'd left the door open, and I heard him say quickly, "I'll have to call you back."

With a chill in my heart I moved to face the open door. He appeared in it and saw me standing there looking at him.

It seemed as if my inner ear had given up on my sense of equilibrium. The room was rocking, and Evan's face looked guilty and pained.

Trying to keep my voice from freezing up, I asked, "Who was that?"

He sighed and dropped his head, caught. I suppose I should have been grateful that he didn't just lie to me. On the other hand, I was so afraid that I was ready to buy even a weak excuse.

"It's ... something I can't talk about." Not surprisingly, he wouldn't meet my eye.

"Why not?" I asked, feeling the closeness between us fall away, as though he were being reeled backward away from me at incredible speed, growing more and more distant, until he was nothing more than an unrecognizable speck.

"Cally, listen." He reached out for me, but I backed away, so he let his hands drop and said, "We've talked about this. There are things it's better you don't know about."

I wasn't going to be put off by that. "Who was on the phone?"

Now his arms came up across his chest; the defensive stance served to alienate me even further by arousing my anger. "You need to let this go," he said in a voice that was half beseeching and half radioactive.

I knew that Evan was such a good detective that he would recognize even the slightest signs of fear or panic. So, I turned my back on him and walked to the bed. When I felt that my indignant anger was shielding the rest of my physical responses, I sat down and faced him. "Listen," I began, "we're engaged. We're picking a date for our wedding. I'm supposed to be the woman you love and trust. How can we ever expect to share each other's lives if there's a huge part of you that's off limits to me?"

Having a tense conflict with someone you're vulnerable to when you are both stark naked is like double exposure. I knew he was affected when he reached for a robe and put it on before he came into the room. "Callaway, this isn't something new."

"Yes," I corrected him, "it is. Because from what I just heard, that wasn't police work, that was something personal." I watched his face carefully and saw a struggle pass across it: an urge to soften and open up versus a trained response to harden and hide.

The training won. "I can't tell you about it, you have to trust me." He moved to the bed and sat down next to me. He touched my leg, then put his hand on my face, turning it gently to look at his. "Please, trust me."

Never in my life had I wanted anything so much; it was right there, trust it, let it go, let him have mine, and know that I was safe anyway. But nothing in my past had taught me how to do that. Starting with a mother I couldn't trust, I'd moved on to a stepbrother who hated me, a father who died when he was the only one I had, and men who loved me for my money.

Trust wasn't something I could bank on.

I looked at Evan, handsome, strong, smart, everything I always wanted, and said, "I'd really like to trust you. I really would." And then I got up and walked toward the bathroom. When my feet touched the cool marble of the bathroom floor I turned back, feeling like something more should be said. "Trust goes both ways, Evan. I know I haven't had much practical experience with that in my life, so who am I to spout off about it? Then again, maybe that's exactly why I'm so clear on the theory."

He was angry now. I knew I'd crossed the line. "Damn it, Callaway, I've told you that you're much safer not knowing some things about my work."

"And I said I could handle that," I finished for him. "And I thought I could, but now ..." I paused as I recognized the numbness in my heart that came from being pushed out, and I knew, consciously for the first time in my life, what my reaction to that would be: a revengeful secretive life of my own. "Now I know myself much better. I wouldn't want to pull away, but I would."

"That's a choice," he insisted.

But I shook my head sadly. "It's self-defense," I told him.

He leaned forward and said earnestly, “You don’t have to defend yourself from me.”

That might be true, but right now I didn’t feel certain of that. I felt cold and numb. “Listen, I’m going to take a shower,” I said. “I’ll be out in a little while. Can you”—I could feel myself slipping into tears—“can you just give me a few minutes? Please?”

He looked as though he wanted to say more, to stop me, but he held back and nodded his head. Rising, he said softly, hopefully, “I’ll be downstairs. Take your time.”

As I turned away he spoke again. “Cally?” I turned back. “I love you,” he said, “more than anything. I adore you.”

I regarded him, and his pain. It looked real, but I couldn’t find the words to form a response. Instead, I nodded and closed the door.

Turning the water on so hot that it stung my skin served to punish the first chill out of me, yet I couldn’t help going over the phone call in my head. Didn’t I have a right to know to whom he was saying, “I care about you?” Wasn’t he culpable too? I might need to learn to be more trusting, but not from someone who wasn’t trustworthy, and I sure didn’t need to learn to be a victim. Better to be the suspicious one than the fool.

But even with this diatribe raging in the steam of the shower and my brain, I could hear the sane voice of my best friend, Ginny, saying something sage like, If you trust someone and they cheat on you, it doesn’t mean you’re a fool, it means that they are an asshole.

I stayed in the shower until my skin was stinging and so many thoughts had come into my head that it felt as crowded in the spacious shower as Santa Monica Pier on Cinco de Mayo, with all the pathetic litter to boot.

Turning off the water, I opened the solid glass door and grabbed a towel. The mirror was steamed up, and I could only make out a shadowy suggestion of myself as I dried off and began to brush out my hair. Being thick and wavy, my blond hair was much longer wet than it was dry, and even then it fell to the center of my back. When I had wrestled my impetuous tresses into long, neatly combed rows, the ends of which dripped now lukewarm droplets of water onto my rounded bottom, I

reached forward and smeared my palm back and forth across the mirror, revealing a streaky image of a pensive me.

My usually bright blue-green eyes looked as though I had drawn a curtain over them from the inside. And though my body was reflected as shapely and taut as ever, my mouth was set and thinner than usual, making me look older than my thirty-five years. I put down the brush and tried to catch my own eye and make it smile, but I didn't respond.

And then I heard the shots.

They sounded like the sharp popping of fireworks from the rooms downstairs, two quick and then one deeper, louder retort. Catching up the towel and wrapping it around me with both hands, I yanked open the door and ran through the bedroom to the hallway, where I paused and listened, trying to hear over the resounding booming of the blood pulsing in my ears.

Very faintly, I heard angry male voices and then two more piercing rounds of gunshot.

Stepping back into the bedroom and trying to keep my breath from coming too quick and shallow, I spotted Evan's holster over the armchair in the corner. His badge glinted at me mockingly, and then I focused on the gun. As quietly as I could manage, I crossed to it and tried to pull the gun from its nest with one hand, but it was strapped in and I needed both hands to free it. Without a thought, I dropped the towel, pushed the snap open, and slid out the heavy nine-millimeter. It was a man's gun, meant for Evan's large, strong hands and arms. I pushed the safety off and struggled to land a round in the chamber. The action was hard and required almost more strength than I had in my fingers. I caught a piece of skin between my thumb and forefinger when it snapped back, and I saw rather than felt the indentation and the blood that seeped from it.

Moving to the bedroom door again, I leaned my back against the wall, listening. Nothing. Holding the heavy, awkward weapon in both hands to steady it, I peered cautiously down the hall and over the banister to the front door. From my vantage point I could see only the top of it, and not much of the floor of the entrance hall.

Why doesn't Evan call out to me, tell me that everything is all right?

But nothing came. That meant that either someone was still in the house or ... I didn't want to think about it. Instinct silenced me, sharpening my hearing.

Hugging the wall with my naked back, I moved with slow sidesteps toward the head of the stairway. Still, I heard nothing.

I started down, and three stairs from the ground level I heard a door creak.

Is it Evan?

Someone, I was sure, had tried to open the office door very quietly and it had betrayed them. I waited. Somewhere, in the back of my brain, as though I were observing the fact from a distance rather than as a sensation, I became vaguely aware that I was not only naked, but cold. It was so still that I could hear the wine refrigerator in the bar humming quietly, and it was two rooms away.

Forcing my breath through a small O-shaped mouth to try to control both my panic and the noise of my breathing, I leaned all my weight onto my downstairs foot and very slowly lifted the other one to bring it to meet it. Then, painfully slowly, I began the next creeping move down one more eight-inch stair. As I tentatively placed the toes of my bare foot on the lower step and began to shift my weight, the step creaked. Too late to pull back. I planted myself as firmly as I could and brought the gun straight up in front of me just as I saw a man spin out from the hallway and drop to one knee, pointing his weapon at me.

His gun, a big-ass forty-five, had a gaping void for a muzzle that looked to me like a long dark tunnel of death with no light at the other end. I forced myself to look past the gun and aim at the face beyond it, adjusting my hands with a minuscule motion to get the face down my sights. As I aimed, I could feel that the trigger was too big for my hand, I didn't have a firm grip on it, and it was tight, hard to squeeze steadily, which made it very hard to keep my aim. I forced all my focus into the gun and my target, willing them to meet, expecting to see the flash of his explosion before mine. But it didn't come.

He had had time to finish me, but he hadn't done it. The nasty weapon was still extended toward me, exhibiting all its lethal potential, and Evan's gun in my hand was every bit as eager to launch a bullet. But we both held.

He wasn't a young man. His hair was wavy and graying. I noticed a few flecks of dandruff on the shoulders of his dark houndstooth jacket. The thought flashed through my mind that he was somewhat overdressed for an armed assault. The irises of his eyes were wide with adrenaline, and they watched my face hard for signs of firing.

But I held. Locking in on his eyes, I watched his lids to see if they started to close to protect themselves from his own gun's blast. But his eyes stayed open, looking at mine. Two seconds lasted a year, and then his eyes flickered, but not protectively. They slid down my naked body and then back up. With a sudden movement that made my spinal cord jolt six inches backward, he yanked his gun back, and then, with a last strangely respectful look at me, he spun away and disappeared down the hall.

Exhaling hard, I sank onto the stairs, shaking. But I could only allow myself three quick inhalations to inflate myself before I moved again. I had to find Evan. What the fuck is going on?

I moved on down the hallway, keeping the gun extended in front of me, though the weight of it was making my arms shake. They were vibrating, and everything around me was following their example, moving, pulsing. As I took each cautious step I jerked the gun from side to side to follow movements caught in the corner of my eye. It took my shake-and-baked brain half a minute to realize it was my own heartbeat that was making the material world around me pulse.

I choked back the cry for Evan that was rising in my throat. Someone else might answer my call. Someone who was the antithesis of help. So I clenched my jaw and crept quietly forward.

Is he hurt?

The office door was opened halfway. Following an example set by Evan in a similar situation that I did not want to think about right now, I went up against the wall next to it, then pushed the door open a little with my foot. The door swung open a few more inches, but nothing else happened. Namely, it didn't acquire any new holes.

Wishing to hell that I had Evan to do this for me, I spun into the doorway, dropped onto one knee, and scanned the room fast from one side to the other, lining up the gun with my point of view.

It was completely devoid of human life.

But there was a human. A body on the floor.