

# Chapter One

I was staring down the vocal end of a forty-four magnum. Any second now, it would scream at me, shout, blow my fucking head off. I was scared, pinned down, trapped. In spite of being overcome with terror, I noticed how the night wind felt on my face; it made me feel alive and I wanted to stay that way.

I moved the fingers of my right hand lightly against my thumb, to see if I could move at all. The fear only seemed to be immobilizing; I willed myself to do something, to think.

Behind the gun there was a desperate young man and behind him were two more men, exactly like the first, except they didn't have the gun.

*Think Cally, I screamed to myself, don't die because you're afraid.*

It occurred to me to be annoyed that this little shit with soulless eyes was going to kill me. It deeply bothered me that this dark-faced punk was experiencing a sense of power over me. I became angry, intoxicatingly pissed. Still terrified but something else, too, I was furious.

So he thinks I'm helpless, fine, good, just maybe that could save me. A cold, honest drip of fear-sweat hit my right eye as my indignation took control. I let loose a frightened cry and pulled my hands to my mouth. Cowering in true terror but using the move as a cover, I turned away from the gaping mouth of the weapon. My hands moved across my chest, down to my stomach, toward my bag hanging against my right hip. He was screaming at me not to move. From the corner of my adrenaline-pumped vision I saw him think about firing. Even as I crouched and twisted instinctively away from his weapon, the edge of my reason used the motion to hide my hand reaching for my own pistol. The weapon I carried but had never imagined I would have to use. His cracked-out eyes darted to my waist; my right hand found the hilt of my gun. The weapon in his hand was shaking, jerking as the drugs coursed through his veins, yanking his nervous system out of focus, out of control. His eyes followed my hand back up as it extended out toward him and he turned his head slightly to protect his face from his own bullet's explosion. Through the sights of my gun I saw his eyes closing as his fingers began to squeeze. I forced my eyes to stay open, to aim, giving me my only chance. Accuracy. I heard two sharp cracks. His first, I think, but I had drawn, aimed and fired all in one sweeping motion. He had

thought about it. Fired blind. Bad choice. He fired his second shot as my first round hit him. I was five feet away, maybe. Point-blank, but he'd missed me. Can't close your eyes and aim.

I fired again, tracking his body in my sights on his way down to the pavement. I broke my tunnel vision away from him to quickly check his friends who had been standing behind him, but they were already turning, running, back into the darkness like cockroaches escaping the light.

Melting ice was running down my face and body. I couldn't hear anything except the smashing of my heartbeat against my eardrums. Turning back to my assailant, I saw he was looking at me with absolute surprise. It had never occurred to him that he was mortal. Not until this instant had he realized he would die. In his final moment, something real flickered back into those inanimate eyes.

It made me sad. What he could have been, the choices he might have made, the brilliant endless possibilities of life. But this was the choice he had made and those possibilities were ending here. For the first time he seemed human to me and I wanted to take it all back, to give him another chance.

He still had the gun in his hand, it still had a voice, but it seemed to whisper at me now as he shakily tried to point it at me. I decided not to listen.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to whatever spirit was left in him.

Blam. I watched myself shoot him in the head.

The eyes went dead again. I was alone. Isolated in an unreal world, time seemed to be elongated and distorted, my senses weren't responding the way they were supposed to. My eyes saw a picture that my brain would not accept.

It was oddly quiet. Then slowly, I noticed my right arm felt very heavy, so I let it fall to my side. Because it seemed so obvious, I walked over and kicked the gun from the dead boy's grasp. Alarmingly, I heard nothing as I watched the metal scrape across the cement. The gun explosions on my unprotected ears had deafened me, just as the explosions of fear and horror had numbed me. I backed up to the storefront on Ventura Boulevard, where death had come, and leaned my cheek against the cold, hard window, needing to feel something. My lips, slightly parted, rested hard against it.

The bitter taste of the glass made me roll away. I leaned back against the building for support but it couldn't hold me up and I slid down hard to the cement.

I looked again at the still twitching body in the unnatural position between myself and the curb. There was no way I could grasp that he was dead. That this man/boy would never speak or breathe again, that the life would not return to his eyes. I hadn't intended that. It had been this barbaric contest to see who could make it into the next few minutes, and sitting there on the sidewalk, I couldn't process what that meant or how it felt to have been responsible for ending his life. I was bludgeoned with the overwhelming blow of it, it was just too much to absorb. Leaning my head back, I shut my eyes. Ah, there's the breeze.

What was I doing here? I never came to the valley. It was ugly, stark. It seemed a fitting epitaph that this boy would die here, and nothing would change, except me. I would be changed forever.

Dinner with a business associate at a mediocre Italian restaurant had bought me this. I had spent the evening telling him how to do the job I paid him to do, avoided his predictable, not-so-subtle attempts to hit on me, I even picked up the fucking tab. I looked down again at the dark stain of blood coming from a dark stain of a human.

"Shit," I said.

That helped a little, so I tried it again.

"Shit. I'm fucked."

Talking out loud seemed to bring the surreal moments into sharper focus.

"Okay, now what? Run? Where? If they find me, I am double fucked. Stay and try to explain." My turn to take responsibility.

I was offering alternatives, but I'd already made my choice; Daddy raised a law-fearing girl. That thought made me grimace. How law fearing was it to carry a concealed, loaded nine-millimeter? Well, there's fear of the law and there's fear of the lawless. Daddy didn't raise no victim either.

I pulled out my cell phone and pressed 911 with a shaking finger. My brain was so rattled that it took a minute to remember those three digits. I sat back to wait and

watched as cars started to slow down and the faces inside them stared blankly. Nobody stopped though. I started to laugh to stop myself from crying. No matter how cynical I become about people's bad behavior, it's never cynical enough.

A rising scream choked off the laugh as my eyes fell on the body again, and in shocked silence, my mouth still hanging open gasping silently for air, I thought, somewhere in East L.A. tonight, a mother who could never teach her son respect will cry, and blame me. Tomorrow his friends will tag his name all over the city, to honor him. Because they are in pain, they will hate more, be more violent, cause more pain. The jagged cycle will continue.

"Are you alright?"

Startled, I looked up into the handsome brown eyes of one of L.A.'s finest. *The police here are so buff.* Even as the thought crossed my mind, I knew it was a strange thing to notice at that moment.

"I don't know yet," I said. "I'm not physically hurt. I don't think." I was too disconnected to be sure. I was watching myself from another place, a mercifully numb and ignorant place just outside my body, but a glance at the blood seeping into the cement thrust me back into my body with a slap that smacked. The feeling came back, and the onslaught was too much. My head reeled and my heart pounded.

I had put my gun down on the scratchy stone surface in front of me. I waved a hand at it; the movement was smaller and weaker than I intended. "That's mine, it's loaded, less three rounds. You'll find them in him." It was all I could think to say.

"You want to tell me what happened?" he asked, snapping on a rubber glove and carefully picking up my gun with two fingers. He let it hang, suspended but out of reach until another officer produced a plastic bag, marked "evidence," and then he dropped it in.

"Well, he pulled that gun on me and told me he wanted my bag. He looked cracked out of his mind and well, I shot him." It was the truth, but even to me it sounded like a thin explanation for the most horrific moments of my life.

"Did he fire?"

"Yeah, twice. He missed." My smile felt even more anorexic than my story sounded.

“But you didn’t.” He looked at me with a combination of suspicion and something that inspired my trust. “Three shots.”

“I took pistol training classes with a friend, you know, self-defense? I got to be a pretty good shot. They tell you, two to the body, one to the head.” It was the dogma they teach you in the classes. But I remembered what else they taught me, the reason you were supposed to give if you ever did shoot somebody, so I added, “He was going to kill me.”

“Probably. It’s a good thing you were ready, huh?” That suspicion again.

“Is it?”

“Well, it was lucky.” He was a bit of a smart-ass. I narrowed my eyes and looked straight back at him.

“Yeah, it’s my lucky day.” I said.