



Chapter 1

The first body washed ashore Saturday morning. It was discovered in Abalone Cove in Rancho Palos Verdes by a group of fishermen who had thought the decomposing corpse was a marine animal. The Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies responsible for protecting the citizens of Palos Verdes spent their entire weekend scouring the beach for clues to the man's identity and why he'd been sliced and dumped on such a beautiful Southern California beach.

I didn't hear about the body for a few days. That happens a lot in Los Angeles. With more than one hundred fifty people dying every day in LA, the news gets old and stale.

It was early May, and I was just settling back into the LA lifestyle after being away for three years. I was back working at the *Crime Reporter*, a small rag of a newspaper where I had gotten my first legitimate start years earlier. I had joined the *Crime Reporter* crew with the sole purpose of uncovering police corruption in Southern California. Between the Los Angeles Police Department, which handles the city of LA, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which attends to the unincorporated areas in the county, someone is always screwing up.

It was a fun job, and they actually paid me to do something I would do for free. They gave me a steady paycheck and kept me so busy I had

little time to resort to my old lifestyle of stealing cars.

I also had acquired a new ride: an original green 1966 Porsche 911. If I was going to live in Malibu and drive into LA every day for work to piss off law enforcement, I needed a ride that would draw attention. I wanted to be seen.

I normally didn't work on Saturdays, but I hadn't been in the office all week and was annoyed at the text messages and e-mails from my editor. He was quite impatient waiting for my next big story. Unfortunately, I had spent the entire week digging into several LAPD officers, with no luck finding any dirt. I was starting to think the chief was doing something right.

I had missed the Saturday story run. For the first time since returning to the *Crime Reporter*, my name wouldn't be on the front page. I didn't care too much about that, but as the only Pulitzer Prize-winning writer on staff, I knew my name sold papers. So did the editors. Missing a deadline would upset them. Apparently the newspaper business wasn't doing so well in the age of the Internet, and that was somehow my fault.

I woke Saturday morning feeling on top of the world. Mattie Hardwin was sleeping next to me with a satisfied smile on her face. I wasn't hungry. I skipped the coffee, but grabbed a shiny red apple from the clean, spacious kitchen. I looked around at Mattie's place, a far cry from where I had grown up. My life was finally on the upswing. I decided to drive to the office for a few hours to catch up on the crime reports and be a responsible working stiff.

I was driving to the *Crime Reporter's* offices on Sepulveda Boulevard when Orin McKay, my only real friend at the paper, called me on my cell phone.

Orin is a funny little old Irishman whom I allow to follow me around because he listens to me and because he's a hell of a writer. He's kind of like a leprechaun, except he surprises people by being very street smart. He follows the obituaries closely, always looking for leads. Unfortunately, he wasn't calling me with a story.

"Luc, there are two deputies waiting for you in your office," Orin said.

I smiled as I slowed my Porsche at a red light along Pacific Coast Highway. I had done something right this week after all. I pitched the remains of my apple out the window.

"Did they say what they wanted?" I asked.

"No, but they mentioned that John Carliss was on his way, too."

John Carliss was an old high school rival. We had shared a jail cell together once after a bitter fight. His father, still a cop at the time, was able to get us both released. Since the fight, John had joined the LA County Sheriff's Department as a deputy and over the years worked his way up the ranks. He had recently been promoted to assistant sheriff, but Sheriff Bernie Maclay had four such assistants, so I didn't actually know what John did for a living. John was always concerned about my stories.

If I had to put a face to my enemy, it would be John. He stood up for the organization I was trying to take down. He was a good, honest cop and the only one who had no problem going head to head with me. He had nothing to hide, and I knew I'd never find dirt on him. When writing my stories, I discovered that John did as much investigating as I did. If he found one of my targets to be innocent, he'd present me proof before I could get the story in the paper. If he found my target to be guilty, he would undermine my story by putting the deputy on administrative leave. It was a clever response that somehow always made the department look good and me look like a vindictive reporter out to ruin someone's life.

I decided a confrontation with John wasn't what I needed this morning, so I told Orin I wouldn't make it into the office after all, and if John showed up to tell him to make an appointment.

I pulled a U-turn at the next light and followed the highway back up the coast past Santa Monica and into Pacific Palisades. My cell phone rang again. I ignored it, figuring it was either John or my editor, and tried to enjoy the drive.

The weather was cool for May, but the overcast skies most Southern Californians knew as “June gloom” had crept in early this year. With the offshore marine layer hanging on, the inland areas wouldn’t see sun until late in the afternoon. At the coast, we would be lucky to see the sun at all.

Pacific Palisades is known as the place where the sea meets the mountains. Palm trees and multi-million-dollar homes line the highway. On one side, the Pacific shoreline stretches out to the abyss. On the other, the high cliffs and bluffs look ready to fall on top of you. I drove past the beautiful beaches toward Malibu, where I was currently living with Mattie.

I had moved in with her just a few months earlier when her divorce to my best friend, Spencer Hardwin, was finalized. It was a difficult transition for all of us, but we were making it work. I would do anything for Mattie. She was the reason I had the life I had.

I was so close to paradise, but a glance to my right, up the steep cliffs, reminded me I was still living on the edge. One wrong step, and it could all come crashing down.

When I turned the corner toward Mattie’s house, I felt the first stumble. Two black-and-white LAPD patrol cars were parked in the long driveway. The front door stood wide open. Panic gripped me as I slammed the car into park.

Running toward the door, I saw two uniformed police officers standing in the doorway. They jumped as I came in, and one of them spilled coffee down his arm. It dripped onto the red Spanish tile. Mattie’s dog was raising hell from the back yard, which scared me more than the officers did.

“What the hell is going on?” I yelled.

Mattie walked in, and I felt myself relax just a bit. She was alive, safe.

I don’t think she actually knows how much she commands a room when she walks into it. Every head turned in her direction, yet her eyes were on me. She looked like an angel, soft and fragile next to the men with uniforms and guns. Her chocolate hair hung to her shoulders.

Her small face was soft, and although it hinted at sadness, I knew she was okay.

“Luc, I’m sorry. I tried to reach you on your cell.”

I grabbed her hand, mostly to keep her at my side and away from the officers.

Two other men appeared from the living room. They wore suits, stood stiffly, and had serious looks on their faces. They had their badges already out, offering me a look.

“Get the hell out of here,” I yelled, ignoring the badges.

“Luc—” Mattie said, her voice soft. The protest stopped when I held up my hand.

Taking the cue, one of the officers wearing an expensive black suit stepped forward and offered his hand to me. I didn’t bother to shake it. I was looking for an arrest warrant, or at the very least a search warrant. I didn’t see either.

“My name is—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I interrupted. “You’re all the same. You’ve been harassing me my entire life. If you think I’ve done something illegal, you can discuss it with my lawyer.”

“Mr. Actar, we’d just like a few words with you.”

“No.” I looked at Mattie. “Did they give you anything?”

She shook her head. My fear turned to anger as I tried to figure out why these men were in Mattie’s house.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked.

The officer who had offered his hand smirked. “Yeah, we know your whole story. You felt harassed by law enforcement as a punk kid, and now as an annoying adult you write stories attacking anyone wearing a badge.”

“What’s your name?” I asked, wondering if I had written anything about him lately.

“David Marquez. Do you want me to spell it for you? Try as you might, you won’t find anything dirty on me.”

Marquez was in his late thirties, but I could still see enough of the cocky attitude new officers often display right out of the academy. I immediately dismissed him and focused on the older man who was obviously in charge.

The man waved to the uniforms at the door. "Wait by the car," he said, taking the mug from the one who had spilled coffee on himself. He turned and handed the mug to Marquez. Finally he broadened his shoulders and looked me straight in the eye, as if daring me to confront him. He was older than Marquez, with gray sprinkled through his thinning hair and mustache. He held himself like a lifelong cop, and his demeanor told me he was used to controlling the room. I knew that if I was going to start trouble, I should stay away from him. It wasn't cockiness oozing from him like his younger partner; it was confidence.

"My name is Evan Carter," he said, pulling out a business card. "We just need a minute of your time. We can discuss this anywhere you'd like."

I knew the threat was coming. He would suggest talking here or at the police station. I didn't like the threat, and I didn't like the options.

"Luc, please just listen to them," Mattie said.

"I'm not answering any of your questions. This is Mattie's house. You don't belong here."

"When was the last time you spoke to your father?" Marquez asked.

I grabbed the coffee mug from Marquez and pointed at the door. "Out!"

Carter turned and waved Marquez ahead of him toward the door. Once Carter was across the threshold, he turned around and faced me, squaring himself for anything.

"Mr. Actar," Carter began again, "I'm sorry to tell you that your father is dead."

I stepped forward. "Get out of Mattie's house."

Marquez took a step toward me. "You don't need to be hostile. Mrs. Hardwin let us in."

I didn't like him. I could tell in his eyes that he was smug and enjoyed messing with me, but he made a mistake by mentioning Mattie.

So I threw the coffee in his face.

I smiled at his pain and confusion, but his older partner was faster than I had anticipated. As the smirk disappeared from Marquez's face, Carter grabbed my arm, spun me around, and shoved my hands toward my shoulder blades. Pain shot up my arm as he twisted my wrists, and my forehead crashed into the wall. Bells rang in my head, and black spots appeared. I heard the handcuffs click as they tightened around my wrists.

I was handcuffed before the mug shattered on the Spanish tile, the coffee spreading toward Mattie.

Carter pulled me away from the wall. "Down," he instructed before kicking the backs of my knees. I fell, and intense pain engulfed my bad knee.

"You're an asshole," I muttered.

"Mr. Actar, I'll forgive you for your rudeness and your misdirected anger and pain over your father's death, but you're going to have to ask the judge for forgiveness for assaulting an officer."

I looked over at Marquez. He was still wiping coffee from his face. The other two officers were watching, shocked, but with a glint of humor in their eyes.

"Luc Actar, you're under arrest," Carter said.