

CHAPTER 1

Being tall helped Neil reach inside the Dumpster. The stench of warm, rotting garbage and the buzzing of flies didn't faze him. From experience he knew that this particular trash container, situated behind an AM/PM convenience store, was a reliable source of still-sealed, barely-expired sandwiches and burritos. On a good night, he could find dinner without even having to climb in.

His fingers touched a polyethylene food package and he fished out a previously-frozen Hot Pocket, then a Lean Cuisine chicken and rice entrée.

Disgusting. Not only in Los Angeles, but from sea to shining sea: rampant consumption, egregious waste.

A rasping sound came from behind the Dumpster and a filthy, bent-over man appeared. One of thousands who camped in dry canals and under freeways in L.A., the homeless wretch exhaled intoxicating fumes, his hungry eyes fixed on Neil's catch. Neil looked with pity on the man's mental and physical brokenness. This, too, America had thrown away. He handed the Hot Pocket to the man, who offered a toothless smile and staggered away.

Dumpster diving is un-American.

Neil strolled out of the dark alley, as young, strong, and sane as the transient was not. He was neither homeless nor destitute. Dumpster diving was his moral choice.

He sat on a bench at a bus stop, eating and enjoying the dry warmth of a July night in Southern California. He knew only ten miles away, on the coast, the weather was quite different. At that

very moment, a chilly, damp marine layer probably covered his father's house.

How appropriate.

He checked his watch. Quarter to two. Axel should be here in fifteen minutes.

A girl in a red miniskirt and four-inch stilettos swayed her hips down the sidewalk, parading in the glare of the streetlights. An LAPD cruiser drove by and she scurried to the shadows like a cockroach.

He adjusted the Chico State hoodie he was wearing to make the letters more clearly visible. In this part of L.A., high school dropouts far outnumbered university graduates. A bit of shabby collegiate apparel from a town five hundred miles away was an easy way to identify himself to Axel.

They'd never met and knew little about each other. That's how the organization worked.

He found himself staring at the girl. She looked sixteen going on thirty. Though he was probably six years older than she was, she made him feel immature. He wondered what Pops would say if he brought home a girl like that. Dear old dad was a useful barometer of subversiveness; the paterfamilias thought flip-flops were an assault on decency, and he was proportionately outraged by most anything else. When Neil pierced his nose, the old man shrieked. When he dreadlocked his long, sandy-brown hair, the old man made threats. When he dropped out of college, the old man kicked him out of the house and cut him off. Neil found it all very satisfying. He never saw his father anymore.

Now he tested himself against bigger foes.

A silver Chevy Malibu pulled up to the curb. He smoothed the front of his sweatshirt. The girl in the miniskirt glided forward. He intercepted her before she reached the car door.

"I saw him first," she said.

"He's not here for you," Neil said.

The passenger window opened and Neil leaned in. The driver was a heavy-set, middle-aged man with a beard that nearly covered the scar in front of his right ear.

"Ready, Chico?" the driver said.

"Ready."

He stepped over a trickle of urine dribbling down the gutter toward a storm drain and climbed into the car with Axel.

His accomplice was older than he expected—probably in his fifties, at least as old as Pops. All the radicals Neil knew were youths. It made sense; Axel was probably a skilled freelancer, not a dedicated militant. For Neil, direct action was a passion; for Axel, it might be just a job.

“You got the address?” Axel said as the girl turned her back to them and they drove away.

“I got it but it wasn’t easy. You wouldn’t believe how many derelict gas stations there are in Jefferson Park.”

“You sure you got the right one? If I have to do this twice, it’s gonna cost you.”

“I’ll know when we get there. There won’t be any mistake.”

He spoke with false authority and glanced at the black duffel bag in the back seat.

“The detonator’s up here,” Axel said, patting a satchel on the armrest. “I always keep ’em separate until the end.”

Neil swallowed and withdrew his arm into his lap. The wind slapped his face as the Chevy accelerated up an on-ramp, awakening his senses, heightening his anticipation. At night, a car could actually reach full speed on an L.A. freeway. They covered the mile and a half to the exit in less than two minutes.

In this part of the city, there was none of the famed Hollywood glamour. They drove down a street lined with thrift shops, space available signs, and billboards demanding to know if you’d been injured in an automobile accident. A paper McDonald’s bag and cup lay squashed in front of a payday loan outlet, ketchup squirted like blood on the sidewalk. They traveled about ten blocks without speaking. The scenery didn’t improve.

“Up ahead, on the left,” he said.

Rush Limbaugh once suggested that environmental wackos were to blame for the Deepwater Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico. Neil chuckled. The hypocritical old windbag had cried wolf. No sensible person would listen if he made such an accusation again.

Even if this time, he was right.

Axel made a U-turn and parked under a burned-out streetlight half a block from the abandoned gas station. While Axel gathered his gear, Neil stepped out of the car and scanned the area for witnesses. The block was empty.

He walked onto the disused property and wished Pops could see him now.

Vandals and thieves had stripped the CaliPetro station of everything valuable. All the windows were smashed. Gashes in the walls marked where the copper wiring had been ripped out. But he wasn't interested in the old building. Instead, he focused on the pavement behind the graffiti-covered gas pumps.

"Ain't much left," Axel said as he joined Neil in the shadows. "Don't look like you need my talents to finish it off."

"The target is the underground storage tank, not the building."

They walked past overgrown oleander shrubs that ringed the station, stepping on a carpet of pink flower petals.

Axel stopped. "You hear something?"

Neil listened. Soft rustling and babbling sounds were coming from behind a rusty propane tank. He crept closer to see who—or what—was hidden there.

A dirty sleeping bag and a shopping cart told him all he needed to know.

"It's some homeless nut job," he said. "Probably schizo. Don't worry about it."

He turned on a flashlight and skipped the beam across the pavement until it landed on a vented hole cover about eight inches in diameter.

"There it is," he said and padded to the spot. Axel handed him a tool and held the light while Neil pried open the cover and peered into the hole.

"Jackpot," he said.

"This is the one?"

"Absolutely. I can see the electronics. Digital readout, probably a pressure monitor."

Axel returned the flashlight to Neil and rummaged through his duffle bag. The crazy guy behind the propane tank cursed and muttered nonsense about green cars and the circus. Neil ignored

him. He felt giddy. This was his biggest operation yet for Earth Jihad. If it succeeded, they might make him a Cell Leader.

“Package is ready for delivery,” Axel said. He held up a homemade, tube-shaped explosive device.

“Dude, are you sure that’s going to work?” Neil said. The pipe bomb was smaller than he imagined.

“Nah, it’ll never work. Why don’t you fix it,” Axel said and pretended to toss the device at him.

He fell for the ruse and ducked. The bomb maker laughed at him.

“Don’t worry, this baby’ll mess things up. Plus there’s gas down there. After we’re done there won’t be anything left.”

“Good. We want to teach them a lesson they won’t forget.”

Cautiously, Axel slid his device into the hole and set the timer on the detonator. Neil replaced the cover.

“Five minutes,” Axel said.

They sprinted for the car and sped off into the night.

* * *

The homeless man living behind the propane tank cursed the strange men for invading his territory. When they were gone, he cursed them for leaving. He crawled into his sleeping bag, cursing everything and nothing.

His eyes had only just closed when an explosion jolted him awake. The earth trembled and the metal disk that covered the underground storage tank was blown high into the air. It fell and clattered on the concrete. Blue flames shot like a geyser from the hole in the pavement, casting heat and a hellish light. The homeless man screamed and cast aside his sleeping bag as if it were on fire. For once, the discordant voices in his head spoke in unison. He ran away tearing his hair, looking every bit like the madman he was.

CHAPTER 2

Stinking black tar squeezed Christina's legs and held them fast. If she sank much deeper, it would be impossible to pull them out. Thick and hot, the asphalt bubbled and oozed around her, embracing the athletic young woman in the same murderous grip that had claimed the lives of countless creatures over tens of thousands of years.

Coffee-colored bones littered the pit where Christina stood, macabre proof of the tar's tenacity. The bones were all that remained of extinct animals that were trapped in the goo and died of dehydration millennia ago. The tar preserved their remains, just as it would Christina's if she didn't escape. She wondered how long her one-liter water bottle would keep her alive.

Until lunchtime, she thought, cheerily taking a swig.

"Chrissy! Is that your phone?" a female voice shouted from a nearby equipment shed.

Christina listened and could just make out the tinny notes of the ring tone she'd assigned to her cousin River.

"It's my cousin again. Can you turn it off for me?"

"Doesn't she know you're here?"

"She knows," Christina said. *But the world revolves around River, so what difference does it make if I'm knee-deep in hydrocarbon muck?*

"I'll take care of it. Is it the red button?"

"Yes, thanks, Linda."

"Be down in a sec."

Christina González tightened the ponytail which secured her glossy, shoulder-length black hair away from her face. She

stood in a hole fourteen feet below the grassy lawn of Hancock Park. Down here she was shaded from L.A.'s midday summer sun, but Excavation Pit 91 was still hot. The air temperature on Wilshire Boulevard that day was at least eighty-five degrees and the tar itself was warm, radiating primal heat it had carried to the surface from its origin deep inside the earth.

Just another Saturday at Rancho La Brea, she thought. This morning before leaving the apartment, River had told her again what a geek she was. River maintained that a twenty-six-year-old Latina should spend her free time volunteering for socially responsible causes, not mucking around in asphalt seeps.

"Make change for the future, Chrissy. Don't waste time on the past," River had said.

But Christina was a scientist (at least in training), and she knew that understanding the past was crucial to predicting the future. Studying the environment and ecosystem of Los Angeles forty thousand years ago was actually quite relevant to contemporary models of climate change. True, her Saturday hobby was a bit geeky, but it was also challenging and fun and important.

Not to mention really messy.

"Ready for some help?" Linda asked as she emerged from the shed wearing asphalt-encrusted boots.

"As always," Christina said to the more experienced volunteer who was her mentor at the La Brea Tar Pits.

That famous name amused Christina, who spoke fluent Spanish and knew it literally meant "The Tar Tar Pits." But a slightly out of kilter name seemed appropriate for this place. Incongruously located in the crowded and affluent Miracle Mile district of downtown Los Angeles, La Brea was an untamed piece of Earth's ancient past. Amidst civilization and luxury, it represented the savagery of raw nature. The first time she descended into Pit 91 she felt the urge to cross herself; she was entering an apocalyptic scene. The pit, with its sulfurous fumes and blackened bones, was grotesque and disturbing like a Hieronymus Bosch painting hanging on the walls of the sleek Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which stood only a few hundred yards away.

A few tourists were gathered on the observation platform above Pit 91 to watch the excavation. They stared as Linda awkwardly climbed down a ladder into the pit, whose rectangular walls were shored up by filthy, tar-stained wooden boards. The bottom of the pit was partially covered by a plywood floor. The open part of the pit floor, where Christina stood in a puddle of gently simmering asphalt, was divided into three-square-foot sections by a grid of metal wires suspended over the tar like clotheslines. About a dozen five-gallon buckets, stained black with tar, stood nearby.

Linda joined her at the grid section where the dig was active. Over the course of about two weeks, volunteers would excavate only this one square, to a depth of six inches. Christina knew the tourists would be disappointed by the tedious pace of real-time fossil hunting.

“They’re hoping you’ll pull out an entire mastodon skeleton while they watch,” Linda said softly.

“Right, with my magic dental pick,” Christina said, waving one of the small tools that she used for the work.

Linda waved to the onlookers and cleared her throat to deliver her standard educational speech.

“Welcome to Pit 91. Currently, this is the only ongoing excavation at La Brea. The fossils found in these tar seeps over the past hundred years include many extinct species of Ice Age mammals that you might recognize: sabertoothed cats, dire wolves, mammoths and mastodons. While these big finds are real trophies, less charismatic life forms—like plants, seeds, and insects—are equally important to science. That’s why instead of using a back hoe to dig up big chunks of asphalt, the volunteer paleontologists at La Brea use these small chisels and toothbrushes to find evidence of even the tiniest living things.”

As usual, the visitors’ attention quickly strayed. A toddler broke free from his mother and she left the platform, chasing after him. The remaining visitors pointed at things and talked among themselves. Then one of them asked, “Have you got any dinosaurs?”

Christina saw Linda roll her eyes ever so slightly as she answered this question for the umpteenth time.

“There aren’t any dinosaur bones in the La Brea tar seeps. Dinosaurs became extinct sixty-five million years before the record here begins.”

The man muttered something and moved on. The others on the platform looked down at the women as if they were animals in a zoo exhibit; they waited for them to growl or pounce or eat. Linda abandoned the natural history lesson and joined Christina at the dig.

“Let’s get to it,” Linda said. “I’m feeling lucky today.”

But before Christina dipped a small trowel into the tar, she was interrupted by what sounded like the world’s largest belch.

“What was that?”

Linda frowned. “Sounded like a gas bubble, but it was too big.”

The sound repeated, a deep, resonant belch followed by a higher-pitched tinkling sound, like rain. A group of teenagers dashed onto the observation platform. They giggled and tittered with excitement.

“What’s going on?” Christina shouted up to the crowd.

A middle-aged gentleman who looked like a high school teacher answered.

“The pool is spitting tar.”

“What?”

Christina and Linda exchanged an incredulous look.

“That’s impossible,” Linda said.

“It happened,” the man replied, “and I’ll tell you, it’s freaking us out.”

“I have got to see this,” Christina said.

The women abandoned their voluntary task and climbed out of the pit. In the shed, they quickly removed their boots and gloves, and dressed in street clothes. Christina noticed an asphalt smudge on her arm but ignored it for now. There wasn’t any point in cleaning up as she expected to return to the pit to work for another hour or two.

“You hear anything?” Linda asked.

“No. I hope we didn’t miss it.”

Christina sprinted effortlessly up the path toward the Lake Pit, her legs well-toned from running and cycling. Aside from the

Page Museum, which displayed La Brea's unparalleled Ice Age fossil collection, Lake Pit was Hancock Park's main attraction: an enormous pool of bubbling tar that sat just a few yards off busy Wilshire Boulevard. She noticed a pattern of black droplets on the grass between the asphalt lake and the paved path that curled around it.

Wow, the lake did splatter pretty far.

"Have you ever seen this before?" she asked Linda.

"No, and I've been volunteering here for twelve years. We sometimes see fresh tar seeps in the grass. They come and go. But I've never seen the Lake Pit splash all the way up here."

The summer Saturday crowd at La Brea had dispersed when the lake acted up, but the more curious souls were again gathering at the ten-foot-tall wrought-iron fence that surrounded the lake. Christina approached cautiously, listening for unusual noises, and ready to run if necessary. At first, Lake Pit looked the same as always: black, sinister, and boiling with a rainbow-hued scum of oil floating on top. The life-sized statue of a female Columbian mammoth was frozen in a dramatized struggle to escape the murderous lake while a distressed baby and a daddy mammoth looked on from solid ground. The traffic on Wilshire Boulevard flowed past, oblivious.

"The pit looks normal now," Linda said.

Christina studied the lake with an analytical eye. The rate and size of bubbles popping at the surface seemed close to average, maybe a little more vigorous than usual, but she saw nothing like the size of the bubble that must have caused the spill. She stepped closer.

Contrary to what many visitors thought, the tar pits at La Brea were *not* boiling. In the summer, the tar was warm but not hot. The bubbles that continuously disturbed the surface of the Lake Pit were not filled with water vapor, like a pot of soup cooking on a stove. Instead, the bubbling was caused by rising gases produced by oil-eating bacteria. The bacteria lived underground in the Salt Lake Oil Field, a petroleum reservoir deep in the sedimentary rock upon which Los Angeles sits. Various components of the crude oil in the field escaped to the surface around Rancho La Brea through natural fissures

in the rock. The accompanying gases floated to the top of the asphalt and burst into the atmosphere as bubbles in the “boiling” tar.

Christina had been waiting for a chance to tell some school kids on a field trip that the bubbles were bacteria farts. Today, she was puzzled by the magnitude of the fart required to expel asphalt fifteen feet from the edge of the tar seep. If the bubble had risen in the middle of the lake, then the droplets had flown even further.

“Chrissy—” Linda said, putting her hand on Christina’s arm.

She followed Linda’s anxious gaze to a distant corner of Lake Pit. A smooth, colorful dome was rising in the tar like an oily balloon. It was the largest gas bubble she’d ever seen at La Brea, and when it burst it sprinkled the onlookers on that side of the lake with tar. A girl shrieked and the people scattered, but before any of them had traveled more than a few steps, a second bubble appeared.

In what seemed like slow motion, this bubble grew wider and wider until she thought the surface tension couldn’t possibly hold it together a millisecond longer. Then the bubble exploded. The sound reminded her of an ocean wave plunging into a blowhole—a low-pitched, almost musical blast followed immediately by the slopping sound of erupting liquid.

This time, the tar didn’t sprinkle the crowd. It rained down in a torrent, a momentary geyser of sticky asphalt that washed over a few unlucky visitors and coated them like victims of a mishap at a molasses factory.

“Dear God!” Christina said, and instinctively dashed into the melee to help.

About a dozen people dripping with tar fled toward the shelter of the Page Museum, leaving black footprints on the path. Christina approached a group of three drenched individuals who seemed rooted to the spot. She guessed they were a family, two adults with a child. They each were covered with tar on one side. The child was wearing a baseball cap which mercifully had shielded his face from the worst of it; she could see he was a boy. His parents’ faces, however, were completely tarred. Their eyes were closed, and they were gasping for breath through open

mouths, lips black, arms extended and hands turned upward in a gesture of helpless supplication.

She had to get them away from the pit in case the blast was repeated.

“Hurry, this way,” she said, grasping an outstretched hand from each blind adult and towing them to safety. “Come on,” she encouraged the boy, who followed.

Zombie-like, they stumbled away from the pit until Christina felt they were out of danger. The adults gagged and moaned. The tar was choking them. Seeing no alternative, Christina swallowed her modesty and removed her shirt. She used the cotton tee to wipe tar from the eyes and nose of the one who appeared to be mom. Linda, who was now at her side, hesitated a moment, then pulled off her shirt and did the same for dad.

The boy tugged at a clean corner of his mother’s shorts and pleaded over and over, “Mama? Mama?”

As the woman recovered her vision and began to breathe normally, she dropped to her knees to examine her son. The man, too, shook off his catalepsy and turned anxiously to his family.

Meanwhile, sirens wailed at the park’s front entrance on Wilshire, and emergency workers poured into Hancock Park.

“Are you okay?” Christina asked the woman, handing her the ruined shirt. The woman nodded vigorously but didn’t speak. She spat out a discolored glob of saliva and rubbed her son’s hands with the soiled fabric.

A pair of EMS workers jostled Christina and Linda aside and took over care of the tarred family. Now standing uselessly on the fringe of the excitement, Christina crossed her arms to cover her partial nakedness. Her determined efforts to exercise and stay fit kept the natural curviness of her contours in check, but she didn’t relish putting her body on display.

“Didn’t expect to do a striptease today,” Linda said. “I think there are some old undershirts in the Pit 91 shed.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Christina said.

They returned to the shed, staying far away from the Lake Pit. Christina poured some solvent on a towel to clean the tar off her skin. Linda found the undershirts—dirty, worn cast-offs

donated for use as rags. They smelled foul, but Christina had little choice and put one on.

“Not exactly red carpet wear, but I suppose it does the job,” Linda said, using a small mirror to check her face for tar droplets.

“What does it mean?” Christina asked. The adrenaline rush was over, and her scientific mind was taking control.

“It means I won’t see you next weekend,” Linda said. “I’m sure they’ll close La Brea until someone can explain what happened.”

They stepped out of the shed and for a moment watched the activity and flashing lights over by Lake Pit and the museum. Christina tried to make sense of the exceptional event.

So much gas erupting from the pit, she thought. Why?

One of her Ph.D. research projects at UCLA had to do with the petroleum geology of the Los Angeles basin, so she knew quite a bit about asphalt seeps and underground crude oil. But nothing in her experience or knowledge could explain such a large deviation from the normal pattern of gas flow at Rancho La Brea.

“I’ll ask my P.I. about it,” she said.

“You have your own private eye?” Linda asked in confusion.

“No, no, not that kind of P.I. My principal investigator. That’s what we graduate students call our boss. He might know if there’s been some seismic activity or something to explain this.”

Then she sniffed the air.

“Do you smell anything, Linda?”

“This disgusting shirt. But other than that, just the usual. A whiff of rotten eggs.”

“Hydrogen sulfide gas,” Christina said. “There’s always some of it around here. But it doesn’t seem any stronger than usual, even after those big bubbles.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Linda agreed.

Christina closed her eyes and focused on her sense of smell. She sniffed again, trying to sort out the odors of sweat, solvent, tar, and hydrogen sulfide.

“I think I smell something else, something I’ve never noticed before at La Brea. But my nose may be playing tricks on me. Can you smell it, Linda?”

Linda sniffed, wrinkling her face in concentration. A few seconds passed.

“It’s really faint, but it sort of smells like vinegar.”

Christina gave a satisfied smile. “That’s what I think, too.”

“Is it important?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m a scientist. It’s my job to make observations.”