

CHAPTER 1

The day everything turned to shit, I stood at my usual spot in front of the apartment building where Little Tiger lived. I leaned against the tagged-up palm tree and watched his brother, Miguel, round the corner, a small backpack slung on his shoulders. He was maybe sixteen, and sold for me sometimes—nothing hard, just a little weed. He said he was trying to save money to buy a car, like he had to have some excuse to do what I did every day.

I had been watching Little Tiger’s family ever since I took over the corner in front of their building. When I first saw them, they were pretty fresh from Mexico. The mom and dad had that humble way about them that got my edges up. The dad drove a truck and he used it to make money, hauling stuff. There was also a sister named Rosa. She was my age, nineteen. Little Tiger was the youngest and they protected him like he was a baby. When I was his age, I was practically on my own, but they hardly let that kid out of the house.

“What’s in the backpack, schoolboy?” I taunted when Miguel got close enough to hear.

“Fuck you, Paco,” he answered, but not unfriendly.

“Come here; I want to check it out,” I said.

He came over, and after a minute, he reached into his pocket and handed me a pack of cigarettes, only there was money inside. I put it in my pocket, slipped out the bills, and refilled it with joints.

When I handed the pack back to Miguel, I noticed the little brother standing behind the black wrought-iron gate in front of their building. Miguel had told me the kid was fourteen, but he looked younger. He was skinny with big dark eyes like you see in pictures of orphan kids. The gate had two signs on it. The biggest, put up by the landlord, said in English

and Spanish, “Tenants Only.” Underneath was a “No Public Loitering” sign from the police. Not to be conceited or anything, but those signs were aimed at me and my crew.

People say we don’t have seasons in Los Angeles, but they’re wrong. In spring you can smell orange blossoms on account of the trees by the college. We also got a big brewery nearby, and when the wind blows a certain way, the whole neighborhood smells like cooking beer. I smelled the two things mixed together, orange blossoms and beer, and me and the kid stared at each other.

“Hey, Little Tiger, what you looking at?”

I called him Little Tiger as a joke. I guess I thought I should have a nickname for him ’cause everyone else did. Standing at the corner all the time, I heard what everybody called everybody else. The kid’s name was Luis, but mostly people used his middle name, Ricardo, or Ricki. Some of the neighborhood bullies called him Dickie. If he had been bigger or tougher, they might have called him something better, like Dick or Dick-head, but he was a goofy-looking, friendly kid, and the meanest thing anyone could call Luis Ricardo Bustamante was Dickie. And I, just for the hell of it, called him Little Tiger.

“Nothing. I’m just waiting for Miguel.”

Little Tiger opened the gate from the inside and stood on the bottom rail so he got a short ride, and Miguel walked into the yard. In the movies, people in the San Fernando Valley sit on chaise lounges around a pool decorated with tropical plants or something. But this yard didn’t have anything but concrete, empty strollers, buckets, and other kid stuff.

I had been waiting on someone, too, my partner Julio, who strolled up like a guy not in any kind of hurry. He had a little nick on his shaved head. Almost all the guys shaved their heads, but I didn’t. I have dark, straight, Indio hair, and I left it long enough to fall on my forehead. Sometimes Julio teased me. Said I liked how my hair made me pretty. Like his shaved head wasn’t just for looks.

No one would accuse Julio of being pretty. He was short, muscular, and thick-looking. He and I had known each other since first grade, and he was mean even then. Julio was the kind of kid always looking for a fight.

Me, I only fought ’cause I was angry. Maybe I wasn’t angry at the guy I was fighting, but it didn’t matter ’cause the fight was still about anger. But Julio, he didn’t have to be angry. He just liked it.

“You’re late.”

“I been talking with my cousin Pedro, who tells me that black guy you sold the corner to needs to be handled, big-time.”

I wasn’t in the mood to hear another complaint about Lamar, so I didn’t answer. I ran my hand over some initials carved into the side of the palm tree. Maybe someone from our gang had cut them, but no one recognized the tag. You could hardly make it out ’cause so many others ran over it, some inked, some sprayed, some cut in deep.

“Paco, you hear what I said?”

“Yeah, you’re complaining about Lamar again.”

Me and Lamar’s older brother had hung together in the fifth grade even though I was Mexican and he was black. We had to let that go ’cause no one else liked it much. The brother moved away, but I ran into Lamar sometimes. Maybe a year before, Lamar had told me he needed to make some money, and I had an extra corner, so I sold him the right to deal marijuana there. A lot of the guys, especially the *veteranos*, didn’t like having a black guy operate in our territory. And Julio kept giving me shit about it.

“This is different.”

“Yeah? So what makes this different?”

Julio caught my eye and stared hard, like he wanted to be sure I took him serious. “He called my cousin a wetback.”

I’d known Lamar since he was a kid, and he was an easygoing guy. He didn’t look for trouble, which was the only reason I let him have the corner.

“Are you sure? Maybe your cousin’s telling stories.”

“Pedro’s an asshole, but he doesn’t make shit up.”

I felt the ragged knife marks on the tree. I used to see a story in those initials. Guys’ honor carved on a tree. But I couldn’t tell anymore who was who. Was that our gang or some other crew from way back? How old was the tree anyway? It bothered me how I couldn’t see the history clear, ’cause this was the only memorial those guys had.

There was a time when all I wanted was a place on that tree. But I was almost twenty and it hadn't happened. When I jumped into the gang, I never expected to live to twenty. I was good with that as long as people talked about me after I was gone. I wanted them to say what a stand-up guy I had been, a real *vato loco*. The thing was, it hadn't turned out that way, and I couldn't see a clear path from here. I didn't want to be a grown man selling dope to kids and bragging about my glory days. I sure as hell didn't want to rot away in any prison, or come out edgy like so many guys I'd seen, and I didn't want some shitty job where miserable guys order you around and don't pay you nothing.

A car went by. Some older guys in work clothes passed us. Julio stared across the street, waiting on me.

If word got out a black guy insulted one of us on our turf, things would get ugly. Gang wars have been started for less. And I would get the blame for letting Lamar have the corner, so I was gonna have to fix things. I had trusted Lamar to work inside my turf, and he was mouthing off about wetbacks. I didn't care what Pedro had done or said, Lamar should've watched his mouth out of respect for me.

"You ready to do something about it?" Julio said, hoisting his jeans as if to imply his balls were so heavy they needed to be held up.

Things were simple for Julio—a guy pisses you off, so you go after him—but I wanted a way off this street. The problem was, I didn't see any good way to go. Hell, that stupid kid I called Little Tiger had more options than me. Henry, my distributor, had hinted I could go on a run for him, and I thought that might be my ticket. He even said it'd be a way to bring me up in the business. He liked how I had managed the truce with the local black gang, said that was what made him trust me. So this problem with Lamar had to be handled right, rough enough to defend barrio honor without getting the black gang on our asses.

"Okay, let's take care of it, but we got to be careful not to go too far. We get an apology, then leave. Got it?"

Julio's lips did this twitchy thing.

I looked down the block where I had K keeping watch. He was the youngest member of my crew. We'd been calling him K for so long I didn't

even remember his real name. I flashed him a signal to come to the corner. It was almost 4:00. Soon the kids from the middle and high school would stop by, hang out, and buy a little dope. Then the vending truck would pull up. I got a kick out of that. After they stopped at the office buildings on Van Nuys Boulevard and the car dealerships on Roscoe, they came to our corner, to us. That's how regular our business hours were.

K walked up asking, "So where's the lunch truck?"

"Every day you ask the same dumb question. The truck don't get here till four," Julio said.

"K, you stay here. Me and Julio are gonna take a walk."

"Damn straight, I'm staying. I'm getting a burrito and a fucking donut."

Julio turned, and with his hand behind his back, flipped K the finger. Me and Julio walked off slow, backs straight, eyes forward. Determined, powerful, that's what I wanted people to see when they saw me. I didn't want this confrontation, but if it had to be, I would do it right, like I always did.

Every other building on our street had some version of a "No Trespassing" sign. My favorite was posted on the building with a bunch of mowed grass: "Private Property. No Trespassing pc Sec 602L. No Loitering pc 647C. No Drinking. Violators will be arrested and prosecuted." I spat as I walked by. Prosecute that, I thought.

Except for the distant *whoosh* of cars from the 405 freeway, like most 'hoods in the San Fernando Valley, unless the police helicopters circled, ours was pretty quiet. I could hear the chirps of those little birds that swarm around certain trees, and an occasional car driving by.

The next block had fewer signs and some houses squeezed between the apartment buildings. Lamar's corner was four blocks away on a street of small houses. He would not be alone. He played on the high school basketball team and always had one or two of the school jocks hanging around.

Lamar and a friend sat on some stranger's lawn, wearing their team shirts, talking. When me and Julio strode toward them, Lamar tensed up. He said something to his friend and by the time we got close, they stood side by side.

We stopped just short of Lamar.