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opening extract from

Faultline

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Chapter One

Timeline: Wednesday, 2.15pm

The sun shone, bright in the sky. Caroline De Witt could remember the days, not so long ago, when the sky had been a rather horrible yellowy colour at this time of year and the newscasters on the radio all gave warnings about the pollution levels. Maybe there was something to be said for environmental campaigns after all – today was a beautiful day to be in the park, now that those disgusting LA smogs were almost a thing of the past.

Caroline sat, with her back against a tree and watched a scattering of kids playing on the grass, watched over by their mothers (and, because this was California, a few dads too). Although it was the holidays she knew she should have been studying – had in fact brought a couple of books with her – but it was more fun just chilling out.

At first she thought someone's dog must have been trying to chase a cat or something. The shrill, high-pitched noise seemed to come from a very long way away, a couple of hundred metres off to her left and behind a small shrub-covered rise. Caroline frowned as she looked over that way, wondering what was going on; no-one else seemed to have heard anything.

She picked up her sunglasses and put them on in order to see better into the sun, and thought that it was odd the way the air at the centre of the rise looked like it was boiling; it was hot, but not hot enough, yet, for that kind of ripple effect. The sound of a child crying made her look away. No big deal, just a teddy bear ownership upset, but when she looked back something had changed.

There was an animal, a big animal, running down the slope into the open parkland. For a moment Caroline thought it was a kangaroo, but then it occurred to her that kangaroos don't run, they hop – and anyway, the nearest zoo was in Griffith Park, and that was miles away, so a kangaroo wasn't very likely. She leaned forward, shading her eyes, and squinted to try and get a clearer idea of what she was looking at and then she noticed that, whatever the creature was, it was obviously hurt and in trouble.

Before she had a chance to be surprised that it was also light green with vivid blue stripes running down its side, she saw three more creatures, much smaller ones, come tearing over the slope after it.

Caroline stood up. There was something very, very wrong here, but she couldn't work out what it was; fascinated and scared at the same time, her eyes stayed fixed on the drama unfolding in front of her. She could hear that other people in the park had also spotted something was up – adult voices were calling for children to come to them – and she knew she herself should probably run, but all she did was get closer to the tree.

The three smaller creatures, all of them making a weird chittering sound, then leapt on the big animal and started attacking it ferociously. The big animal screamed and blood sprayed, like a lazy fountain, into the air. It was like watching one of those documentaries on TV where some poor antelope gets taken out by a pack of hyenas. Only on TV they showed the whole thing in slow-motion – here in the park it was all real-time. Extremely fast, very real time.

Caroline could feel her heart pounding, fear rising as she watched the horrific sight, her mind still not able to make any sense of what she was seeing. These animals looked incredibly familiar, yet at the same time totally unreal, and the violence and savagery of the fight was so intense it was staggering to watch.

And then from somewhere over to her right she saw a young boy come riding on his bicycle. He must have been nine or ten years old, dressed in bright coloured shorts and a white T-shirt, his long bleach-blond hair flying out behind him.

She saw him skid to a halt, staring open-mouthed at the bloody tangle of claws, flesh and teeth twenty or so metres in front of him . . .

She saw one of the smaller creatures stop what it was doing and jerk its tiny, elongated head his way . . .

She saw it leap off the flailing body it was standing on and start running towards the boy . . .

Caroline tried to scream, but nothing seemed to work. The boy took one look at the compact, almost lizard-like

thing scything his way and began frantically pedalling, his rear wheel throwing up bits of grass. But he was too slow. As Caroline finally managed to get her feet to do what she told them and started running, she saw the creature launch itself through the air. The boy didn't have a chance.

By now the whole park was in total uproar, but above it all Caroline heard someone yelling something about getting back, keeping away, and the next thing she knew shots were ringing out.

Gunfire was something everybody assumed somebody living in Los Angeles would be very familiar with, but outside of cop shows on TV, Caroline had never actually heard it before. It was loud, but in a dull, thudding kind of way, and she heard it like a drum beat – *BAM! BE-BAM-BAM-BAM!* – four shots in quick succession.

The creature attacking the boy appeared to be hit by an invisible punch, its head flung sideways as a bullet exploded through and out of its skull, and then it stopped moving; a hurried glance told her the rest of the creatures had also been shot. Caroline realized she was shaking uncontrollably and that her face was wet with tears. A nice quiet afternoon in the park had turned into a waking nightmare of loud, red death.

'Are you OK? Are you hurt?'

Caroline looked round to see a man standing next to her. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt with a couple of ball-points in the pocket and looked like a shoe salesman, except he was holding a large gun that still had a wisp of blue smoke trailing out of its barrel.

'I'm fine . . . really, I'm OK,' she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand. 'What . . . ?'

'I got no idea,' said the man, shaking his head. 'I was just having my lunch over there,' he waved behind him, 'heard all the commotion and came round the trees to see this butcher's shop— Did you see what happened, how it started?'

'All I saw was this big animal come running over the hill, and then the three smaller ones came after it . . . and then . . .' the tears started coming again as she remembered,' . . . and then the boy . . .'

'It's over now,' said the man. 'My partner's radioed in for help . . . ambulances and stuff . . . we should move back, not touch anything.'

'But what about the boy?' Caroline looked over her shoulder and saw another man, also with a gun in his hand, standing with a small group of parents and children. 'Shouldn't we see if . . .'

'Even from here I can tell there's no point,' said the man. 'Come on, let's get back with the others. We'll have to take statements and details from all of you.'

'What can *I* tell you?' Caroline almost shouted, anger rising as her fear ebbed away. 'I don't know what those things are, *I* don't know where they came from any more than *you* do!'

'But it's my job to find out, miss,' said the man, calmly, putting his arm out to usher her down the slope. 'I'm a policeman, a detective, it's what I do . . . ask questions and look for answers.'

'I'm sorry for shouting,' said Caroline, sniffing. In the distance she could hear the mournful wail of sirens. Lots of sirens. 'I'm upset . . . those things, it was so horrible – what could they possibly be?'

'Apart from dead, I've no idea, miss,' said the detective, putting his gun back in the leather holster clipped to the back of his belt. 'My kid was watching the DVD of *Jurassic Park* last week and, if I didn't know any better, I'd've said they were dinosaurs . . .'

Chapter Two

Timeline: Wednesday, 2.45pm

The air-conditioning in the *Post-Register*'s offices wasn't cranked up very high for two reasons: it wasn't really hot enough outside, but mainly the machinery was far too old and decrepit to take the strain. The summer, when it arrived, was going to be murder.

This time in the afternoon was always pretty slow. The evening deadline was hours away and the only people really working were the feature writers whose stories weren't tied to the push and shove of the news pages. Reporters looked down on the men and women of the Features Department – they had no idea, so the feeling went, what was meant by pressure.

At the News Desk, actually an untidy collection of a dozen or so old wooden desks all littered with paper, screens, keyboards and half-drunk cups of cold machine-made coffee, sat three people: Tony Stone, the *Post*'s Science Editor, Elaine McFarlane, who covered crime, and Jamie Delgado, a sixteen-year-old who wanted to be a journalist when he left college and whose father was an old buddy and golfing partner of the paper's owner.

As long as he didn't get in the way, and he didn't complain about getting coffee and doughnuts whenever

he was asked, Jamie was more than tolerated by the news team. An unpaid slave was a definite bonus to office life. On the other hand, Jamie loved being there – what better way could there be to spend your holidays than in the middle of something as intense as a newspaper?

Even when nothing was happening it was interesting listening to the reporters talking about past triumphs, great jokes they'd played on colleagues on other papers and what a bunch of time-wasters most TV people were.

Elaine, a noisy thirty-something blonde originally from somewhere around Chicago, was leaning back in her chair and throwing scrunched up pieces of paper into a nearby bin – and mostly missing. She was telling Tony about a cop she'd heard was suing a local Mexican restaurant for causing 'actual physical harm' because it had put too much chilli powder in a dip it had labelled 'mild' when the phone went.

'News desk,' said Tony, picking up the phone as it was right next to him and then listening. 'For you,' he said, waving the receiver at Elaine. 'Something about a shooting in a park out in the Valley.'

Elaine grounded her chair and punched a button on her phone. 'McFarlane here,' she said. 'Who'm I talking to?'

Jamie watched as she nodded and took quick shorthand notes on the pad she always kept within easy grabbing distance. 'Who got shot?' he asked Tony.

'Dunno,' he shrugged. 'Some kid, I think . . . the caller was a little incoherent.'

'Was it a drive-by?'

'Don't think so, not gang territory,' said Tony. 'Maybe a domestic – we'll find out soon enough, she's coming off the phone . . .'

'I owe you one, Dave,' Elaine said to her caller, cutting the line and immediately redialling.

'What's happening?' asked Tony.

'Major incident in some park out in Tarzana . . . whole place cordoned off.' Elaine frowned, standing up and grabbing her bag as she waited for the phone to be answered. 'Apparently more cops out there than on a St Patrick's Day parade and my car's in the— Julio? Hi, Elaine, is the Honda ready yet? It is, right, I'll be down.'

'Can I come with you, Elaine?' asked Jamie, mentally crossing his fingers; this sounded like a biggie and he really wanted to go. 'I've got film in my camera . . .'

Elaine looked at him, thought for a moment and then nodded. 'OK,' she said, 'but stay with me and do *exactly* what I tell you.'

'Great!' Jamie punched the air and went to get his camera bag.

'It's like having a excitable Labrador pup around the place,' said Elaine. 'Except he hasn't got a tail to wag.'

'He's OK,' grinned Tony, 'for the son of a friend of the boss . . . could've been a heck of a lot worse – remember that kid we had in here a couple of years ago? Did nothing but complain all the time?'

'Yeah, Jamie's all right,' Elaine turned her monitor off and picked up her mobile phone. 'Tell Henry – *when* he

gets back from his executive lunch – to save me some space on the front page . . . I've got a feeling about this story.'

Tony watched her as she walked out, Jamie following her. She was right; if Jamie had had a tail it would have been going nineteen to the dozen right now. He also thought she was probably right about the story; Elaine had what they called in the business a good nose for stories and he wondered what she'd find out about this particular one.

Technically he was part of the features team, but only because the editor had one day insisted they needed a Science correspondent and had made him it as he was a physics graduate – which in Henry's eyes made him the perfect choice to do the job. Tony sighed and got up. He supposed he'd better get back to work.