

LEAD IN LIFE by Dr. Laura Murillo

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

CHOICES

We came from nowhere. My mom and I were running errands for the day and had just finished exchanging some items at Gulfgate Mall on a beautiful, sunny Saturday morning. There H was nothing unusual about the day, except a feeling in my gut.

As we pulled into the parking spot, I noticed to the left and front of the spot there were bushes, small shrubs—no big deal. Yet, something inside me whispered, “Don’t park there.” I didn’t pay much attention to the voice. After all, we were just running in to return a few things, and then we would be out and on our way. Not listening to my intuition that day ultimately changed my entire life.

At eighteen years old and fresh out of high school, I had the world in the palm of my hand. I felt invincible and I believed I could succeed at just about anything I set my mind to. I had developed an unshakable focus and a dogged work ethic while working at my dad’s neighborhood restaurant from the time I was ten years old. I started out just piddling around, waiting tables and helping in the kitchen. Over time, I took on new responsibilities, like greeting customers, cashing out the register at the end of the day, and ordering supplies, all the necessary tasks of running a family business. By engaging with the employees, I was able to speak a lot of Spanish and appreciate the hard work they did every day to feed their families. As the youngest of nine, I was the one who tagged along with my dad to the restaurant. I felt a deep connection to both of my parents and was honored to have a solid relationship with both of them.

With our errands complete, and back at the car, I slid into the driver’s seat of my shiny red 1985 Ford Thunderbird, a graduation gift from my dad. As soon as my mom opened the passenger-side door and eased down into the seat, a man appeared on her side, startling us both.

He pushed her into the seat, reached across her body, and aimed his gun just inches from my head. His voice was rough with anger, his breathing quick with the urgency to get what he had come for, whatever that was.

“Get out of the car now!” He said. “Leave everything. Get out now.”

“No, no, no!” my mom screamed, shaking uncontrollably, unable to move from her seat.

With a quick glance at the perpetrator, I took stock of him. He was about twenty years old, slender, and tall, wearing a green T-shirt and blue jeans. Somehow, I managed to remain calm, almost too calm. “Take what you want,” I said. “Just let us get out of the car.”

As he pressed the gun into my right temple, his hand shook, and I could feel the vibration of his nervous grip on the handle with his finger on the trigger. When I didn’t move, he pressed the barrel even further against my flesh. I turned my head slightly towards him and looked deep into his eyes, searching for an indication that there was at least an ounce of reason within him, something that would ignite the compassion to spare my mom and me from any further trauma. Instead, all I saw in his eyes was desperation and anger. With my mom still screaming and nearly hyperventilating, a frightening thought crossed my mind. *Oh my God, he’s going to kill me in front of my mother, and he’s going to kill her too.* Despite the urgency of the moment, I felt terrible that she would have to witness such a scene. No parent should ever have to experience that kind of tragedy.

“Get out!” the gunman shouted, louder this time, with more anger and desperation and the gun firmly against my head. “I’m not playing with you.”

Then came the sound, like an echo in a dark room, bouncing off cement walls. *Click!* He pulled the trigger and, with that simple act, had the power to destroy my life. My eyes shut tightly and my shoulders raised to my ears in tense anticipation, ready to feel the pain of the bullet entering my head and exploding. In a millisecond, I envisioned the horror of remnants of my brain tissue splattered throughout the vehicle, covering my mom, the car seats, the windshield. Yet, that simple click yielded nothing. The gun had jammed. With uncontrollably shaking hands, I quickly grabbed the driver’s side door handle and pushed the door open.

“Mommy!” I yelled. She was frozen with fear, unable to exit on the passenger side, where the gunman leaned across her body. With little thought, I took hold of her hand and snatched her petite body across the center console and out my door, her shoes still on the floor where her feet had been. In what seemed like one swift movement, the gunman hopped into the passenger seat, slid over to the driver’s side, and drove off, leaving my mom and me standing in the parking lot of Gulfgate Mall,

shaking and in shock. I watched the car speed away, the strap of my mom's purse dangling out the passenger door. Relieved that we were still alive, I stood there, holding my mom tightly, and we cried.

In the days that followed, I was terrified that the gunman would find us and try to kill us. He had driven off with not only my car, but also with our purses, which included all our identification. My mind went wild, thinking of all the things he could do with that information. To help ease my concerns, my dad changed the locks on every door in our house. We canceled our credit cards and got new ones. I got a new driver's license and replaced all the other items that were stolen. Still, I was in a state of panic, afraid to leave the house and afraid to be there. I felt like a prisoner in my own home. My mind created scenarios of the gunman regretting that he didn't shoot us and coming after us to finish the job. There I was, eighteen years old, having been held at gunpoint, and I was a total wreck. My life had been spared and it was just beginning, but I was afraid to live it.

College was next in my future, and I knew the transition would bring a very different experience from my years at Austin High School, where my classmates voted me Most Likely to Succeed, Most Popular, and Class President, and where I graduated with honors among the top five percent of my peers. Austin High School is in the Houston Independent School District located in Houston's East End.

By the time I entered college, I was working three jobs—at the family restaurant, at my sister Lupe's beauty salon, and at a radio station.

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I grew up, but I loved helping people and I thought being a journalist, in some capacity, would be important because I saw so few people in that space who looked like me. With so much on my plate, I buried my emotions about the car-jacking and didn't tell anyone about the emotional turmoil I was experiencing, partly because I didn't want anyone to pity me and also because I didn't want to feel like a victim. I was losing days and weeks, focused on what could have been instead of being grateful for what was.

In short, I was living in fear.

Even more than the fear, I felt a grave sense of guilt for having put my mom in harm's way. I blamed myself for not trusting my intuition that told me not to park in the spot. My poor decision could have ended both our lives. I was overwhelmed with guilt that I had endangered my mother's life. Interestingly, my mother's response was to panic at the moment of the attack, but following the

incident, she was surprisingly calm and thankful to God that nothing happened to either of us. Our responses were so different, and whether I realized it or not, I learned by watching how my mother responded to the event. She was resilient and she quickly moved on, even though I still suffered from the trauma.

Thankfully, about three weeks later, the police arrested the gunman and found he was tied to a string of similar crimes in other states. That didn't do much to ease my mind. I was still traumatized by the incident, and I worried I would never be able to function normally. Everything startled me. I knew my fears were unfounded since the gunman had been caught, but fear had carved out a place in my mind that caused me to isolate myself from the world, from my life.

One day, while at home alone, I began saying aloud to myself,

“Mom’s okay, you’re okay. Everything is going to be okay.” I paced the floor of my bedroom, ringing my hands and staring at my feet as I placed one foot in front of the other. “Mom survived. You survived. You are here, now, and you have to live.” It was as if someone outside of me was giving a pep-talk, hoping to snap me out of a darkness that threatened my existence. I was a young woman with a future, but I had allowed a terrible experience to paralyze me with fear. I knew I couldn't go on living like that. I realized then that I wanted more. I wanted to live. That strong desire ignited in me a resiliency I didn't know was there. I realized I had a choice. I could either let that one person, that one incident, control and overpower me, or I could use that experience to my benefit, as an opportunity to strengthen myself. I chose life and made a conscious decision to live every moment with urgency, to be joyful, more appreciative, more thoughtful, and more engaged with each person in my life. An incredible zest for life was created, and I willingly embraced it.

My decision to release the fear and instead embrace the power to control my thoughts and actions felt wonderful. Somewhere deep inside, a determination grew that would not allow one person to keep me from being the best I could be. Instead, I realized how fortunate I was to survive being held at gunpoint and that I would not let my life be in vain.

Despite how traumatic that event had been, neither my mom nor I had been physically hurt, and I was grateful for that. In fact, the incident made us even closer than we had been. It was a strange, terrible experience only the two of us shared. Yet, I had to choose how I would live with it. I chose to acknowledge that everything was okay, that I was resilient, and that I would persist in every endeavor going forward.

I transitioned from fear, guilt, and grief to joy, happiness, and a zest for life. My appreciation for life grew daily, and I became obsessed with living my life to the fullest. My focus turned to

accomplishing as much as I could. I decided that whatever I put in my mind to do, I would do it and take nothing for granted. From then on, I committed to live every moment with urgency and passion. That single decision was a pivotal choice point in my life, allowing me to see the power and impact of my resiliency and the value of taking these lessons from life experiences and moving forward with people, passion, and persistence.