

Chapter 1

The Olive Avenue off-ramp materialized out of the pre-dawn fog like something from a dream. The exit sign, chalkboard green during daylight, looked almost black in the darkness. Claudia Rose steered the vintage XJ6 off the Golden State freeway, melting smoothly into the light stream of street traffic.

The late winter morning had started cold and early—three-thirty. Chill bumps had rippled her skin as she slipped from under the covers and silently gathered her clothes. Jovanic stirred and mumbled a promise to keep the bed warm. Working as a detective for LAPD, he was accustomed to being roused in the middle of the night. But though he urged her to hurry back, Claudia knew he would be asleep again before she closed the front door behind her.

The GPS was telling her to turn left, then right on Front Street, not far from the Metrolink Station. Another left, another right. She followed the directions blindly, scanning the row of industrial buildings for the television studio. With any luck, she would get her *Hard Evidence* interview done and make it home to Playa de la Reina and Jovanic by six-thirty.

A segment producer for the faux-news show had called the day before, needing a handwriting expert for the weekend's lead item: the latest celebrity misbehaving. The producer, Peggy Yum, said that the early morning show aired live on the East Coast at 8:00. Given the three-hour time difference, Claudia would need to arrive at the Burbank studio before sunup.

She had almost turned it down. But Peggy Yum didn't easily take "no" for an answer. Her pretty face and misleading smile hid a personality tougher than a strip of rawhide. She'd been quick to point out that if Claudia refused the job, there were other handwriting analysts, some perhaps less ethical, who would be more than happy to fill the breach. Besides, the free advertising she would get in terms of TV time was worth more than she might earn in six months.

The handwriting Yum wanted examined stemmed from the DUI arrest of a young female singer who had taken over the headlines. Her third arrest. Worse, this time, the disgraced diva's two-year-old son had been in the car with her, adding child endangerment charges. Yum had somehow obtained a copy of a note the singer had written to her boyfriend while in custody at the Lynwood Jail, Los Angeles County's main lockup for women. Despite her star status, the Beverly Hills judge who'd sent her there had run out of patience and was threatening to extend the singer's stay to thirty days.

Claudia had agreed to analyze the handwriting, which Peggy Yum subsequently scanned and emailed to her, but as soon as she opened it she could see that there was little she would be willing to publicly discuss. The first thing she noticed in the large size and extreme roundness of the letters, which reflected the singer's profound need to have the world revolve around her. The girl had already proven the truth of that assessment by her behavior. The lower loops were left open in a hook shape that pointed to the left. After studying the writing, Claudia formed the opinion that the young woman had probably been the victim of childhood sexual abuse. But she wouldn't say that on the air. Even misbehaving public figures deserved some privacy.

Greeting her in the studio's reception area, Peggy Yum led Claudia to a small room, explaining that the production company rented the remote space when they needed to interview someone far away from the in-studio hosts. She wouldn't be able to see the New York hosts as they questioned her about the handwriting, but they, and the audience, would see her on the monitor.

With the exception of a club chair, a television camera mounted on a tripod pointed at the chair, and a monitor, the makeshift studio was bare. A swath of black fabric had been draped behind the chair where Claudia would sit for the interview, providing a backdrop.

The videographer, a youth in sweatshirt and jeans, was doing double duty as sound man. He hooked her up with an earpiece and a lapel microphone, snaking the wires up under her suit jacket and clipping them to her collar. When he was satisfied that they were as unobtrusive as he could get them, he stepped away and asked her to count to ten for a sound check. Yum said to sit tight, she would be on after the next commercial.

Waiting for the signal that they were going live, Claudia rehearsed in her head what she was going to say. Then Yum came to stand behind the monitor and held up three fingers—two—one. Mouthing the countdown. The host's voice came through her earpiece:

"Next, internationally recognized handwriting expert, Claudia Rose, who is going to give us her opinion on the handwriting of..."

Almost before she could blink, the segment was over and she was being unmiked, gathering her briefcase and jacket, getting ready to head out. It didn't feel as if the segment had been her finest five minutes.

Peggy Yum seemed to think otherwise. Hollywood excitement sparked through the hip black frames of her DKNY glasses. "Claudia, what you do is so awesome, I'm gonna use you in a *really big* segment. People need to hear more about handwriting analysis. This is gonna be huge—I can *feel* it!" She leaned into a pretend hug and air kisses. "Gotta run, I'll call you!"

Alone in the frigid Jag, waiting for the heater to kick in, Claudia watched the sun rise over the San Gabriel mountains, glad the interview

was over. She was looking forward to crawling back into bed with Jovanic. Working in the hours after midnight appealed to her in a way that getting up early didn't. It was as if the secrets hidden in handwriting were easier to access late at night when she was free of the distractions of phone calls and email. *Maybe I'm part vampire. Note to self: check the mirror for a reflection.*

Not bothering to cover her yawns, she retraced her drive and got back on the freeway, rerunning the interview and Yum's parting words through her head. She'd heard the hype before, and told herself not to take it too seriously. Maybe Yum would call, maybe not. *That's show biz.*

Then her new cell phone rang and sent her heart into overdrive.

Only yesterday Jovanic had insisted upon the purchase of the phone, dragging her to the mall and standing over her for forty-five minutes, leading her through various models before she lost patience and told him to choose one. It didn't matter to her whether her cell phone could download music or allow her to Twitter the world. Why did she have to be in touch with the world at all?

For more than a month, she had resisted thinking about the reason why she needed a new phone: her last one had been destroyed by a murderous psychopath who'd killed someone Claudia knew, and then had pursued her, too.

She had been the one who'd found the decomposing body of her friend. Over the intervening weeks, the memory of that horror refused to be erased or even softened. Yet, she had also put off replacing the old phone, as if doing so would be an act of disloyalty to the psychopath's victim. As if the purchase of a new one would be a final step in closing that chapter of her life, allowing her to move on and leave her friend behind.

The phone continued to ring. She glanced at the LCD display and read *Private Caller*. Early morning calls didn't usually bring good news. She felt a flicker of apprehension as she tapped the answer button on her earpiece. "Good morning, Claudia Rose speaking."

"Please hold for Baroness Grusha Olinetsky," a female voice said,

not waiting for her to respond before the line went silent.

Claudia's attention sharpened. *Baroness?*

She heard a change of sound on the line and a throat being cleared.

"Claudia Rose?" The husky voice pronounced it *cloudia*. "I need to meet vit you as soon as possible." The heavy accent curled around the words, transforming w into v. "I need you to analyze some handwritink. Is *oorgent* matter."

Claudia rolled her eyes. *Every* client thought their matter was urgent. "What kind of analysis is it that you need?" she asked. "Is this a forgery case, or...."

"No! No forgery. I am matchmaker; *vorld class* matchmaker. You never hear of me?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think so."

"Is okay. You call me Grusha. Ve be friends. Ven you come to New York to see me?"

"New York?"

An old Camaro doing ninety raced past, closely followed by a motorcycle, its rider looking like Green Lantern in black leathers and a neon lime helmet. Even at dawn, L.A. traffic had its own special brand of insanity.

"You come right away to my office," Grusha Olinetsky said.

"Look at some handwriting. Tell me about the people, vat they are like."

She made it a demand, not a request. An image of what Grusha Olinetsky's own handwriting might look like crossed Claudia's mind. It was a game she played with herself when she met someone new and interesting. As pushy as the baroness sounded, she would probably crowd her words close together and press the pen deeply into the page, demonstrating emotional intensity. And with her imperious manner, long t-bars.

Claudia said, "If you need the analysis quickly, you can overnight the handwritings to me. I'll return the originals afterwards. I don't need to come to New York for that."

“*Nyet!*” Just one word, but adamant. “Cannot take from here. Don’t worry, I pay you good. You come tomorrow, I make plane ticket for you. Is *oorgent.*”

She’d said that before. Still, Olinetsky’s urgency did not have to become hers. And so far, the baroness hadn’t said anything that made Claudia want to get on a plane on Monday and fly to the east coast.

She interrupted as Grusha started to talk about flight arrangements. “Wait, please. I’ll need you to give me more information than this. You’re asking me to travel a long distance to see you, but you’re not giving me any details. I need you to tell me something about the purpose of the analysis.”

The silence on the other end of the line dragged out, the reply so long in coming that Claudia began to wonder if she had hit a dead zone and lost the call. She was about to ask, *Can you hear me now?* when the Baroness spoke again.

“So. I use graphology for long time. I know is good tool to learn about people and I have every member analyzed. Helps me know more about them and who is good match. But last graphologist make some mistakes. Bad mistakes. I see you on TV show this morning, I call them up and ask for your number. I want to meet you face-to-face and then I will know if you are the one who should replace this bad person.”

Claudia was beginning to get the feeling that there was a lot being left unsaid that might affect her decision as to whether or not she would accept the assignment. “What’s the name of the graphologist?” she asked more sharply than she had intended. “Who have you been using?”

Grusha Olinetsky spat the words as if they tasted bad in her mouth. “His name is Andrew Nicholson. Incompetent! I do not trust this man to work for me another time.”

Claudia hesitated. She and Andy Nicholson might work in the same field, but she couldn’t bring herself to think of him as a colleague. Throughout the years she had known him, Andrew Nicholson had made it a habit to inflate his credentials out of all proportion to the truth. It didn’t seem to bother him that he was committing perjury. A few months

back, he and Claudia had gone toe-to-toe on opposing sides of a major forgery case. Her client's attorney had exposed Nicholson's lies and was now threatening to file charges against him. Andy had been seeking revenge against Claudia ever since, concocting outrageous tales and telling them to anyone who would listen.

Maybe Andy's luck had run out. Maybe Grusha Olinetsky had found a chink in his armor.

"Tell me more," said Claudia at last.

* * *

She quickly stripped out of the business suit she'd worn for *Hard Evidence*. Jovanic rolled over and followed her with sleep-bleared eyes as she slid under the covers and backed up against his long, lean body. After a couple hundred nights of practice they fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

A couple of hours later, after they had steamed up the windows, then dozed for a while, Claudia told him about the phone call.

"You'll never guess who my new client is."

Jovanic got up and headed for the bathroom, his voice floating back to her. "Is it, ummmm, Michelle Pfeiffer?"

"You wish."

"Barack Obama?"

"Now you're just being silly." She heard the toilet flush and the faucet running, then he was back, diving under the covers and snuggling next to her. She gave his arms a vigorous rub. "You're freezing."

“So warm me up,” he said, nuzzling his cold chin against her neck and making her squirm.

She slid a leg over his hip. “You plum wore me out already, Columbo.”

“You wimp,” he teased. “So, tell me. Who’s the new client?”

“Her name is *Baroness* Grusha Olinetsky. She runs a ritzy dating club.”

The rude Bronx cheer he gave made his opinion of her new client more than clear. “I know exactly who you’re talking about. She was on some trashy TV show awhile back. What does she want with you?”

“To analyze handwriting, of course.” She turned over to face him. “What’s wrong?”

He gave her a skeptical look. “I don’t know, babe. She looked like a sleazy character to me. You might want to think twice before you get involved with her.”

Claudia arched up and gently caught his bottom lip between her teeth, then let go. “I’ve had other sleazy clients and you’ve never complained. Anyway, my job is to analyze handwriting for them, not judge their morals. And check this out—she wants me to come to her office in New York and meet with her. Tomorrow.”

Jovanic’s fingertips halted their lazy journey along her thigh. “New York? What about Annabelle?”

Annabelle Giordano was a troubled young teen who was staying in Claudia’s home for a while. She had been another intended victim of the psychopath. Although she put up a front of fierce independence, the girl’s vulnerability was apparent to Claudia, especially in sleep, when nightmares made her cry out in panic.

“You know I’ll make arrangements to take good care of Annabelle,” Claudia said. “I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem. Are *you* gonna be a problem?”

He frowned. “That kid clings to you like a life-preserver. She’s not going to like it.”

“I know, but maybe it’s about time she started loosening her grip

on me a little bit.”

“Now you’re just rationalizing. I can see that you’ve already decided to go.”

Claudia tickled the hair curling across his belly. “Listen, Columbo, in case you’ve forgotten, you’re the cop; I’m the one with the psych degree. I’ll take good care of Annabelle, don’t worry your pointy detective head about it.”

Jovanic was silent for a long moment before his fingers started moving again, brushing her skin with the lightest of touches. “Why doesn’t this woman just Fedex you the handwriting she wants analyzed?”

“I don’t know, except it sounded like she didn’t want to let them out of her sight. Maybe there’s something valuable about them. I’ll find out when I get there.”

“How long?”

“She didn’t know for sure, but at least three or four days, maybe a little longer.” Claudia braced herself for a bigger objection, mildly surprised when he gave in without further argument. She added, “Andy Nicholson’s been working for her. Apparently, he screwed up—no big surprise—and that’s why she wants to hire me.” The prospect of being called in to fix Andy’s mistakes pleased her immensely. “How could I refuse an opportunity like that? It’s one thing that I personally can’t stand him, but he gives the whole field of handwriting analysis a black eye.”

Jovanic continued to look unhappy. “I think you ought to stay out of his face, babe. That asshole would just as soon put a hit out on you as look at you. He won’t appreciate you scooping up his client.”

“She’s not his client anymore, and I didn’t take her away from him, *she* called *me*. Hey, I’m not worried about Andy Nicholson, his only weapon is words.” She began to recite in a singsong voice, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.”

Jovanic removed his hand and sat up, throwing the blankets off. His scowl sent a clear signal that he didn’t appreciate her lame attempt at humor. He stood up and reached for his shorts, pulled on a tee-shirt.

“Claudia, for god’s sake, haven’t you had enough shit in your life lately?”

Do you really need to do this right now?

She knew he was talking about the discovery of her friend's body. His words were like a bucket of icy water, dousing her enthusiasm for the job.

What she had gone through had left her feeling that she'd lost any semblance of control over her life. It didn't matter how much she tried to push away the grotesque images of the bloated body she had stumbled across, they nipped endlessly at the periphery of her consciousness like a little yapping dog. She thought this must be what schizophrenia was like, battling voices that wouldn't be silenced.

Jovanic had been aware of her depression and anger since the murder, but she didn't want anyone, including him, to see how nakedly exposed she felt. She'd been there before.

A flash of memory—large hands pulling her where she didn't want to go; threatening: *I'll hurt you if you don't do what I say.*

As if she hadn't been hurt anyway. She pulled the covers up around her neck and squeezed her eyes shut, as if doing so would protect her.

"Claudia?" Jovanic was leaning over her and he sounded concerned. He sat down on the edge of the bed, encircling her in his arms, holding her safe.

As if she could ever *really* be safe.

"Baby, you don't have to go to New York right now," he said, letting her know that despite her best efforts, he could see through her with a detective's eyes. A lover's eyes.

She wanted to answer that she would call Grusha Olinetsky and cancel the assignment; that she would stay here and let him take care of her. But she knew that if she gave in now, she would never be able to stand on her own again. So instead, she said in a tight voice, "Andy Nicholson isn't going to hurt me and there isn't any danger in this job, it's an exciting opportunity."

"Did Olinetsky tell you what kind of mistakes Nicholson made?" Jovanic prodded, refusing to let it go.

Claudia lifted a bare shoulder in an elaborately casual shrug. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll find out when I get there.”