

Chapter 1

Forest Lawn Memorial Park near Hollywood.

From her position at the top of the hill, Claudia Rose had a clear view of the unruly mob crowding the entrance below. Fans and paparazzi, decked out in T-shirts and shorts, yelling to the Mercedes, the Jaguars, the Ferraris and Beemers passing through the largest pair of wrought iron gates in the world. Many had brought folding chairs and umbrellas, braving the brutal end of summer sun, hoping to catch a glimpse of their favorite stars. Others just came to gape at the spectacle.

“Hollywood cliché,” Claudia murmured to her friend Kelly Brennan.

Kelly made a face that suggested a bad smell. “What else would you expect from Lindsey?”

By the time the convoy of limousines arrived, the mob had overflowed onto Glendale Avenue. With a platoon of CHP officers in gold helmets and jackboots running interference, the limos turned in and snaked their way up to the grave site, where Claudia and Kelly waited with the other early arrivals.

They watched the limos ease to the curb and disgorge six matching hunks in dark suits. Lindsey always did have an eye for style. The pallbearers gathered behind the hearse to receive the satin-rubbed mahogany casket, well-toned abs flexing beneath jackets designed by Armani, Canali, and Zegna, as they heaved it to their shoulders. GQ cover-worthy. Funeral as screen test?

Where else but Forest Lawn would you find burial plots named Babyland and Graceland? Claudia mused with more than a little cynicism. What other cemetery would sell reproductions of famous statues and other works of art? Where else were celebrities buried than anywhere in the world?

Lindsey Alexander had not herself been a celebrity, but was the well-known CEO of a major PR firm that represented some of the biggest names in the industry. She had started out with Claudia and Kelly more years ago than either of them cared to remember, majoring in psychology with a specialty in handwriting analysis. After a few semesters, Kelly switched to Law, and Lindsey, attracted as she was to the limelight, took her degree in Public Relations and Marketing. Death had claimed her at the height of her career.

“Holy shit,” Kelly breathed, her gaze stuck on the pall bearers. “Talk about star-studded.”

“They must be melting in those suits,” Claudia observed, fanning

herself uselessly with the prayer card she had picked up in the chapel. "It's hot as hell out here."

Kelly, who looked quite comfortable in a sleeveless black number that Claudia had last seen on her in a nightclub, smirked. "Well, that's appropriate. She wouldn't want to be in hell all by herself."

The Southern California afternoon was as dry and still as the bones beneath the sod on which were standing. Ninety-eight degrees by eleven o'clock, the mercury had continued to rise to 104. *Maybe Kelly's right. This really is hell and we're all sharing it with Lindsey.*

For the twentieth time Claudia asked herself, *what are we doing here?* The answer came quickly: *Exhuming memories better left buried.*

Her right temple was throbbing and the sun beat against her neck like an angry drummer. She needed water. Better yet, a vodka tonic. As she was mentally pouring herself the drink, a conversation in front of them caught her ear.

The speaker was a strikingly handsome woman. Café au lait skin, athletic frame bristling in a casually elegant Chanel suit. Her companion, a teenager in tight, low slung jeans and a brief top that showed off a pierced navel, was strictly Wal-Mart Goth.

"No, girlfrien'." The woman said with a West Indies lilt. An emphatic shake of her head set elaborately beaded braids swirling. "Suicide was *not* her way. I don' believe it."

The girl continued weeping into a soggy tissue. Unnaturally black hair cut short and spiky. A tattoo decorating her upper chest: seven daggers thrust into a bloody heart. In the dry-eyed designer crowd she stood out like a dot of spaghetti sauce on a white dress.

"Stop your moanin'." The beaded woman demanded with a sharp edge to her tone.

"But I'm scared!" The girl's whimper dashed Claudia's assumption that her tears were for the woman they had come to bury. *Scared of what?* A muddy trail of mascara dribbled down the girl's pale cheeks. "I'm freakin out."

"You *should* be," the beaded woman hissed.

"But the cops...said...they said she killed herself."

"De cops! I am tellin' *you*, girl, before she come to dis earth, dat one make a pac' with God how she will go out, and it is not like *dis*."

"Maybe an accident...maybe?"

"An acci-*dent*?" The beaded woman's tone spewed incredulity.

"Someone *do her in*. Now you stop it, girl! You are makin' a *scene*."

The tissue the young woman was using shredded, and fearing she was about to switch to her bare arm, Claudia dug a clean tissue from her purse and leaned forward to offer it.

Turning with the suspicious glare of a feral cat, the girl snatched it and blew her nose with a loud, wet snuffle, then pushed the waterlogged mess into the little purse slung over her shoulder and hurried off without another word.

The beaded woman flicked a glance at Claudia, rolled her eyes, and followed at a more leisurely pace.

When the two were out of earshot, Claudia turned to Kelly, who had also been observing the exchange with interest. “Think she’s right?”

“That it wasn’t really suicide? Why not? Everyone hated her.”

“Surely, not enough to *kill* her.”

“*I* did.”

“Wanting to kill someone is a big leap to actually doing it. Anyway, what about the suicide note?”

Kelly shrugged. “It was good enough for the cops, but I wish you could’ve taken a look at it.”

Claudia could not agree more. As a forensic handwriting analyst, the note that had been found beside Lindsey’s dead body was of particular interest. As a former friend of Lindsey’s, she felt she owed it to her to at least have a look. But the note had not been publicized.

Following the pall bearers, they fell into step with the well-heeled mourners picking their way around the bronze and granite monuments, jockeying for a seat in front of the open grave. The funeral director was showing a few special guests to folding chairs under a canopy that had been erected to protect Lindsey’s mega-clients from the sun. The lesser glitterati were left to elbow their way into whatever prime spots remained, standing room only.

“There’s Ivan,” Kelly said.

Claudia followed her friend’s pointing finger to a middle-aged man in the front row under the canopy. Lindsey’s close friend and business manager, Ivan Novak, was wedged between a handsome couple that Claudia knew from his campaign ads. Senator Bryce Heidt and his wife, Mariel.

Spotting them, Ivan got up and excused his way through the crowd. The puffy pink flesh around his eyes told the story: he had shed his share of tears for Lindsey. “Thanks so much for coming,” he said. “I know it wasn’t easy for either of you. It means a lot to me.”

Kelly reached out to give him a hug. “You look like you haven’t slept in days. Are you okay?”

Shorter than Claudia by several inches, Ivan was almost at eye-height with petite Kelly. “No, Kelly dear, okay is something I am definitely *not*.” He mopped his face with a wilted handkerchief, then stuffed it back in his pocket and laid a damp hand on Claudia’s arm. “I’ve got to talk to you privately. Find me at the reception.”

Claudia hesitated. Joining Lindsey’s jet set crowd for cocktails and hors d’oeuvres was the last thing she’d had in mind for the rest of the afternoon. “Well, I wasn’t actually——”

Ivan's face fell. "You *have* to come! We can't talk here, the service is about to start. It won't take long, I promise." His grip on her arm tightened and he stared into her eyes with such intensity that she took a step backwards. "Don't disappoint me, Claudia. For Lindsey's sake."

She's dead, but the drama continues.

The funeral director stepped up to the lectern and asked for their attention then, and Ivan dropped her arm and hurried back to his seat.

"Go to the reception and find out what he wants," Kelly said. "I'll be there, and...hey, look, there's Zebediah."

"Where?"

"Sitting behind Brad Pitt and Angelina. You can't miss him in that seersucker jacket."

Claudia had to smile at their friend's choice of funeral wear. The summery blue and white stripes made him easy to spot under the canopy. "I guess being Ivan's ex-therapist puts him on the A-list."

"I have a feeling Ivan's gonna need a whole lot *more* therapy before this is over."

"I wonder what will happen to the agency. Poor guy, he's devastated."

Kelly's face soured. "He's the *only* one who is."

Claudia shifted uncomfortably. Considering their shared history, she could hardly blame her friend for her bitterness toward Lindsey, but a sense of propriety made her give her friend a sharp poke with an elbow. "Shhh!"

Kelly, though, was on a roll. "Good thing the casket's closed. Otherwise, she'd rise up and sink her fangs into someone's jugular."

The hum of conversation abruptly died as a priest Claudia recognized from a recent TV appearance took the podium. Looking pale and soft, Bishop Patrick Flannery opened his gilt-edged missal and peered over the assembled crowd. He would be lucky if he didn't come away from the afternoon with a nasty sunburn on that bald pate.

"We are gathered here today on this sad occasion to bid a final farewell to Lindsey Alexander, a woman much revered..."

"Good thing he didn't say 'much *loved*,'" Kelly stage-whispered.

"Shut *up*."

"...often seen in the news with the clients to whom she devoted her life, Lindsey Alexander came to Hollywood with nothing but raw energy and a unique gift for recognizing talent in others, on which she built her agency..."

The bishop's reedy tenor was no competition for the eggbeater clatter of Channel Seven's news chopper overhead. Claudia could hardly make out his words, but she could not bring herself to care. The truth was, Lindsey had been a self-serving ball-buster. But brutal truths like that did not belong in a eulogy.