

# Chapter 1

“*No*, girlfrien’.” The woman gave an emphatic shake of her head that set elaborately beaded braids swirling. “Dat was *not* her way. Not *suicide*.”

Claudia Rose figured her for around thirty. High cheekbones in a strikingly handsome face, café au lait skin, athletic frame in a casually elegant Chanel suit. The lilt in her voice suggested West Indies.

Her companion was Wal-Mart Goth. A girl about eighteen in tight, low slung jeans and a brief top that showed off a pierced navel. Unnaturally black hair cut short and spiky. A tattoo decorated her upper chest: seven daggers thrust into a bloody heart. In the dry-eyed designer-clad crowd, she stood out like a dot of spaghetti sauce on a white dress, weeping into a soggy tissue as though her heart were broken.

“Stop your cryin’.” There was a sharp edge in the beaded woman’s order.

“But I’m *scared*,” the girl said, dashing Claudia’s sympathetic assumption that her tears were for Lindsey Alexander, the woman they had come to bury.

“You *should* be scared, girlfrien’!”

“The *cops*...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*.”

“But it could have been an accident...couldn’t it?”

“An *acci-dent*?” the older woman’s tone echoed scornful disbelief. “I say someone *do her in*. Now you stop it, girl! You are makin’ a scene.”

A muddy trail of mascara dribbled down ashy pale cheeks. The tissue shredded and the girl switched to the back of her bare arm.

Claudia dug a clean tissue from her purse and leaned forward to offer it. The girl turned, snatched the tissue with the suspicious glare of a feral cat, and wadded it against the one in her

hand. She blew her nose with a loud, wet snuffle, pushed the waterlogged mess into her Levis pocket, then hurried off without a word. Flicking an annoyed glance at Claudia, the older woman followed.

Claudia lifted a brow at her friend, Kelly Brennan, who had also observed the exchange with interest. “Think she could be right?”

“What, that someone killed Lindsey?” Kelly snorted rudely. “Why not? I wanted to kill her myself. Not only me. *Everyone* hated her.”

“That’s cold, Kel. I don’t think anyone hated her enough to *kill* her.”

There was a short silence. Then Kelly said so softly that Claudia almost didn’t hear it, “I did.”

“You did what? Hate her enough to kill her? There’s a pretty big leap to actually doing it, which is what those women were talking about. Anyway, there was a suicide note, remember?”

Kelly shrugged. “I guess that was good enough for the cops. I wish *you* could’ve taken a look at it.”

Claudia pursed her lips, nodding agreement. Yes, she would definitely have liked to see the note that had been found on the floor beside Lindsey’s bathroom Jacuzzi. What handwriting analyst wouldn’t?

Handwriting had been Claudia’s passion since childhood, her career for more years than she cared to count. And it had created the bond between Claudia and Lindsey in college. Both psychology majors, they had opted to specialize in handwriting analysis. Kelly, who had been Claudia’s best friend since the first day of kindergarten, had started out with them, but had gone on to Southwestern and now practiced family law.

They had been close friends, Claudia, Kelly, and Lindsey. It seemed a lifetime ago. Then Lindsey had seduced one of Kelly’s boyfriends. The first time, she’d seemed genuinely contrite. But over the years, the backstabbing had escalated, until finally, her acts of treachery went beyond the point of forgiveness and tore the friendship apart.

*What a hypocrite, I am, Claudia thought. Attending the funeral of someone I didn’t like or respect. What the hell am I doing here?*

*Exhuming memories better left buried.*

She turned to view the fans and paparazzi waiting at the bottom of the hill, an unruly mob decked out in bright T-shirts and shorts, floppy hats, and sunshades, crowding around the largest pair of wrought iron gates in the world.

Forest Lawn Memorial Park. As a stately convoy of limousines made the turn into the wide driveway the mob overflowed onto Glendale Avenue, calling out to the limos, hoping for a glimpse of their favorite stars through darkened windows.

“This whole damn thing is a Hollywood cliché,” Claudia muttered, leaning close to Kelly’s ear so that no one else might hear.

Kelly made a sound that might have been agreement and said, “So, where else would you expect Lindsey to be buried?”

“Good point.”

Forest Lawn, where burial plots had names like Babyland, Graceland, and Sweet Memories. Where reproductions of famous statues and other works of art were offered for sale. Where more Hollywood celebrities were buried than anywhere else in the world.

Not that Lindsey herself had been a celebrity, of course. Having dropped out of handwriting analysis after a few years, she had turned to the public relations field where she

could be nearer the limelight. After reaching the height of her career as a publicist, she'd been content to make her famous clients the main attraction.

Kelly stared over the tops of her Gabbana shades at the platoon of CHiPs in golden helmets and jackboots handling crowd control. Petite, girlish for her thirty-nine years, Kelly had eyes the special blue of a summer sky, fringed by artificially long, dark lashes. Her hair was a cap of curls, currently blonde, trimmed a half-inch from her head. She was wearing a little black number that Claudia had last seen on her at a nightclub.

Kelly's eyes turned to a limo easing to the curb fifteen feet away from them. Six matching hunks climbed out, their movements as practiced as if they had rehearsed for a major production. "*Ho-ly shit,*" she breathed. "Talk about star-studded."

Every last one of Lindsey's pall bearers was *GQ* cover material. They gathered behind the hearse and lifted the satin-rubbed mahogany casket to their shoulders, well-toned abs flexing beneath coats designed by Armani, Canali, and Zegna.

*Funeral as screen test?*

"They must be melting in those suits," Claudia observed, glancing down at her friend, who was half a head shorter. "It's hot as hell out here."

Kelly's smile turned into a smirk. "Well, that's fitting, don't you think?"

Claudia ignored the remark and began fanning herself with the prayer card she'd picked up in the chapel. The flimsy bit of cardboard had no effect on air as dry and still as the bones beneath the sod. Ninety-eight degrees by noon, the mercury was still rising. She wished she were in her car, the air conditioner cooling her skin as she headed for Playa del Reina, the small beach community where she lived.

"I could be home right now, working," Claudia grumbled.

Kelly grinned. "It's Saturday afternoon, for crying out loud. What's so pressing that you have to kick your own ass for taking time off for a funeral?"

"I have a court-ordered handwriting analysis to do. They're using it in a custody issue. A six-year-old kid."

"Abusive parents?"

"The mother claims the ex-husband takes the little girl in the shower with him."

Kelly's face twisted into a grimace. "Well I know what I'd do with him. I'd give him the knife."

Claudia gave her an eye roll. "You *would*. Thank god, all I have to do is describe his behavior."

They fell into step with the well-heeled group of mourners, picking their way around the graves. So many deaths represented by the bronze and granite monuments, so many tears.

Claudia's own inability to dredge up the slightest hint of emotion for Lindsey Alexander bothered her. *What kind of person feels nothing over the death of an old friend?*

*Former friend*, she amended. So much for the pack of tissues she'd tossed into her shoulder bag in the event she was overcome with grief.

A sage-colored canopy had been erected graveside to protect Lindsey's mega-clients from the brutal sun. The funeral director escorted some two dozen guests to folding chairs in the shade. The lesser glitterati were left to jockey for whatever prime spots remained, standing room

only.

“Look, there’s Ivan.”

Claudia followed Kelly’s pointing finger and saw a middle-aged man in the front row, twisting in his seat to scan the crowd. Ivan Novak, Lindsey’s close friend and business manager, wedged between a handsome couple that Claudia recognized from television campaign ads. State Senator Bryce Heidt and his wife, Mariel.

Spotting them, Ivan waved at Claudia.. He stood up and began to make his way toward them, stopping to shake hands with sympathetic guests who reached out to him. As he grew nearer, the puffy pink flesh around his eyes told the story. He had shed his share of tears for Lindsey; probably Claudia and Kelly’s share, too.

“Hey, you two, thanks for coming,” Ivan said in a subdued voice. “I know it wasn’t easy for either of you. I appreciate it.”

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

Shorter than Claudia, Ivan was almost at eye-height with Kelly, though she was slight and fine-boned. As he spoke, his stocky body seemed taut with the effort of controlling his emotions. “No, Kelly dear, okay is something I am definitely *not*.”

He shook his head and mopped his damp face with a snowy handkerchief. Turning to Claudia, he laid a pudgy hand on her arm. “I have to talk to you privately,” he said, effectively shutting out Kelly. “You *are* coming to the reception, aren’t you?”

Claudia hesitated. Joining the jet set for cocktails and hors d’oeuvres was the last thing she had planned for the afternoon. She had become recently acquainted with Ivan through her professional connection to Lindsey, and was certain he had invited her and Kelly because Lindsey had given him the impression that they were still dear old chums. The truth was, Claudia had tolerated her former friend over the past few months, only because it had been a professional necessity.

“Well, actually I wasn’t—”

Ivan’s face fell. “But you *have* to come! We can’t talk here, the service is about to start. It won’t take long, I promise.” His grasp on her arm tightened. “Don’t disappoint me, Claudia. For Lindsey’s sake.”

*She’s dead, but the drama continues.*

She watched him hurry back to his seat as the funeral director stepped up to the lectern and asked for their attention. “I wonder what’s going on with Ivan,” she murmured.

Kelly shrugged. “So, go to the reception and find out. I’ll be there, and...hey, there’s Zebediah. That seersucker jacket is sooo Zeb.”

Claudia had to smile at their friend’s choice of funeral wear. The summery blue and white stripes made him easy to spot. “I guess being Ivan’s ex-therapist rates him a seat.”

“Yeah, well, I have a feeling Ivan’s gonna need a whole lot *more* therapy before all this crap is over.”

“Poor Ivan. He really cared about her.”

Kelly’s face soured. “He’s the *only* one.”

Claudia cleared her throat uncomfortably. Considering their shared history, she didn’t blame Kelly for the way she felt about Lindsey. Still, she felt compelled to register a protest. “How about putting a sock in it, Kel? There’s a better time and place for that discussion.”

Kelly stared straight ahead, her chin jutting forward defiantly. “I don’t give a shit about the time or place.”

A woman standing in the row ahead of them turned a shocked glare on them. Kelly returned the glare, but lowered her voice a notch. “The only reason I came here is to make sure the bitch really *is* dead.”

Claudia caught the faint whiff of alcohol on Kelly’s breath and it came as no surprise. Since their early teens Kelly had dealt with stress by drinking, Claudia by working more hours. Soon, someone would need to find a way to cram twenty-six hours into a day.

“We can talk about it later,” Claudia said a little more firmly, but Kelly wasn’t ready to let go.

“It’s a good thing the casket’s closed. I can see her rising up and sinking her fangs into someone’s jugular, can’t you? I’ll *never* forgive her for the things she did to me—she ruined my wedding night, not to mention all the other times she fucked me over. Fucked *you* over, too, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Claudia certainly had not forgotten any of the cruel tricks Lindsey had played in the name of fun, nor the easy shifting of blame for her own misdeeds. She and Kelly had debated over the past week whether or not to attend the funeral. There had been as many reasons to stay away as there were to come. In the end, maybe it was curiosity more than anything that had brought them here.

As Claudia sought an appropriate response to Kelly’s tirade, the funeral director stepped to the podium and the hum of conversation abruptly died as he introduced a priest in white vestments.

Bishop Patrick Flannery, looking pale and soft, opened his gilt-edged missal and peered over the assembled crowd.

*He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t come away from the afternoon with a nasty sunburn,* Claudia thought, noticing that his bald pate was already an interesting shade of fuchsia.

“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*.” Claudia gave her friend a sharp poke with an elbow.

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

The bishop’s reedy tenor was no competition for the eggbeater clatter of Channel Seven’s news chopper circling overhead, and Claudia could barely make out the words. Her right temple was throbbing and the sun beat against her neck like an angry drummer. She needed water. Or better yet, a vodka tonic.

*Is this funeral ever going to end? Or is this really hell, and we’re all sharing it with Lindsey?*

She gave up trying to listen. The way she saw it, Lindsey had been a self-serving ball-buster. But brutal truths like that didn’t belong in a eulogy. Her thoughts gravitated inevitably to the final act of betrayal that had severed their friendship. Events that had burned deep into her memory and still had the power to mortify.

But that was more than ten years ago, and now, Lindsey was dead.