

Chapter 1

Sidestepping his way down the steps of the Santa Monica Courthouse, Ed Mustard didn't allow himself a sneaky armpit sniff.

Sweating, exhausted, he wondered when the feeling of triumph would arrive. Or if not triumph, relief. Surely getting through this morning meant he could move on. Instead, guilt, Ed's familiar, comfortable companion, hummed in his brain. He hadn't been there when she needed him. He hadn't done enough. Hadn't done the right thing.

Enough. You're moving forward now. Ed ignored the barrage of questions from the reporters and spectators who crowded around him. Ignored the loudmouth with foul breath who tromped into Ed's personal space like a love-starved Basset hound. Ignored the pain in his gut, in his temples, in his clenched jaw.

"Where'd they find her body?"

Lise dead is getting more attention than she ever did, alive. Not right, not fair. Except for the tight, twitching jaw, Ed thought his expression remained blank. But his mind? Not blank. *Okay, who could fix it? Who could make her life have as much meaning as her death?*

"Why didn't her parents know?"

"Were you two secretly dating again?"

"Is it true you were dating starlet Carly West?"

Dizziness and nausea kick boxed through Ed's torso. A gust of air burst from his lungs. Breath he'd been holding, unaware.

Arguments, no doubt ill-founded and off-base, joined the inner sparrers. His once sharp brain, now fuzzy and unruly, struggled to decide.

Okay. One quick statement and maybe they'd let him escape.

Better get this over before Bob brought out the duct tape and muzzled him like a pit bull in a nursery school. Ed assumed Bob would wrap up things with the opposing attorney at his typical pace. Fast.

Ed shuffled his dress shoes, trying to wriggle toes unaccustomed to anything less comfortable than Crocs. He cleared his throat and spoke, volume high enough to reach the farthest recorder.

"The death of my ex-wife Lise Clanahan shocked me, saddened me, and, I know, devastated her many devoted fans. Since it happened, speculation and accusations have overshadowed the simple truth. A cherished young woman died, tragically."

The reporters jostled one another but remained silent. Ed took a breath. "Today, Lise's grieving family and I have come to an agreement. It is my hope that with this settlement, we can all move forward into healing."

The sappy statement made his esophagus burn with acid but he choked it back. The sappiest part? He spoke the truth. He would love to heal. Love to move forward.

Or perhaps move back a decade.

Something hard and sharp struck Ed's head. He flinched and ducked. In front of him a reporter stumbled backward, held upright by his neighbor.

Other reporters backed down the stairs, poised for flight, alert.

More objects bounced off Ed's shoulders, his head. He covered his head with his arms, and a bucketful of gravelly, sharp, gritty sand and rocks pelted him. He choked on a cloud of black dust. Sandy grit covered his hair, face and arms. He opened his eyes and saw at his feet chunks of gray, white and black material ranging in size from grains to lumps.

"Heal that, asshole."

The words broke the stunned silence like ice cubes cracking crystal. Heads turned to search for the hidden hurler, but Ed didn't need to see her to recognize the voice of Marliiss Clanahan, Lise's mother. Coarse, harsh and bitter, as if she'd swallowed lye.

He closed his burning eyes. He licked his lips. Tasted grit, an acrid, smoky taste.

He looked again at the black stuff scattered at his feet. He shuddered and gagged. He knew, knew beyond doubt, knew without need for analysis, what struck him. Breakfast and bile fought their way up his throat but he choked them back. No way would he upchuck on the courthouse steps. No way could he give these avid reporters that photo op.

He turned away and vomited in his briefcase. Wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his summer weight wool sports coat.

He faced the reporters and stood, alone, gritty, grieving, humiliated, amongst the scattered ashes of his ex-wife.

Someone gripped his bicep.

Bob Gilman, his attorney, muttered in his ear. "For Christ's sake. Can't leave you alone for five minutes." Gilman, known in the world of entertainment law as Triple B, was tall and broad and imposing. And black, bald and ballsy.

Gilman moved so that his left shoulder covered Ed's right shoulder. Not much protection, but enough for Ed.

Ed gave a light punch to Gilman's impressive, even when suit-clad, bicep. "Hey. Good news is I'm no longer a cliché," Ed said. "Bet nobody tossed the wife's ashes on Robert Blake or O.J. Simpson."

The crowd of reporters scattered at the first onslaught of ashes. Who knew? Could have been dirt, could have been anthrax. They regrouped at the base of the stairs.

"Enough," said Gilman. "Zip it shut and stay beside me." He headed down the steps, appearing calm and unrushed.

Beside Bob's height and bulk, Ed's six-foot-two lanky frame seemed insignificant. Okay, puny. He hoped the reporters sensed Bob's don't-mess-with-me-I'm-badder-and-madder-than-you-can-imagine aura. Ed did. He strode beside his friend and attorney, moving at what he hoped appeared a jaunty rather than an I'm-struggling-to-stay-up-with-the-big-guy pace.

Barely moving his lips, Bob spoke. Ed wondered if that was an elective or a required course in law school. "Bad enough you wanted to settle. That in itself was crap. But making an ass of yourself in front of the media? I'd charge you double if I thought you had any money left."

They'd progressed several yards down the steps, Bob's haughty expression keeping the reporters at a distance, when someone jerked Ed's forearm back and behind him. Someone strong.

Ed stopped.

Bob didn't notice and continued down the stairs.

Ed tried to follow, but couldn't move, couldn't shrug off the grip. He cranked his neck around and saw the angry face of a marshal.

He recognized the marshal as a vocal fan of the late Lise Clanahan, long convinced of Ed's complicity in her death. *Perfect. Absolutely perfect.*

"You can't walk away from this mess, Mustard. Clean it up." The man's other meaty paw held a broom with a dustpan clipped to it. Quick response. Had he been forewarned?

"Good timing. Or is the broom part of your regular gear?"

"Clean it up, dirtball. Or I'll arrest you for something that *will* stick."

Ed moved back up the steps and started sweeping. A large polypropylene jar, colored a faux green marble, slammed between his shoulder blades. The force brought him to his knees. He retrieved the jar and saw Lise's name and the date of her cremation on it.

Nausea struck again. Accompanied by deep uncontrollable shivering. *Christ, what kind of a mother* —. He knew what kind.

A microphone jutted beneath Ed's jaw. He jerked back.

"What hit you? Who threw it? What does it mean?"

Ed recognized the reporter, local TV anchorman Con Lawrence.

And then Bob Gilman stood at Mustard's side.

"What can you tell us about the note? Did you find it?" persisted the reporter. "What did you do with it? Did you kill her? You can tell us the truth now." Eau de garlic overpowered Con Lawrence's mellifluous baritone and Ed reflected it was good smellivision didn't exist. No one but his camera crew knew the hunky anchorman reeked of garlic and alcohol and licorice.

Ed struggled not to inhale, not to grimace. It might seem like guilt. What kind of research did this guy do? The cops had tried but found no evidence to link him to murder. The DA had passed on prosecution.

Con Lawrence again shoved the mike toward Ed. "When's your next film out? What's it about?"

Ed edged away, his heels up against the step. *Ouch. What's my next film about? What's my next move, except to escape these questions?* Excellent question.

Bob Gilman took center stage, well, stairs. "Mr. Mustard has no further comment," he said.

Most of the reporters ignored him and continued to shout questions at the two men. A few headed into the courthouse in search of the tosser of the ashes.

Ed kept his mouth shut and resumed his chore. Bob Gilman stayed at his side, holding the dustpan for the ashes.

In the pile of clunkers and ashes something glinted gold. After a painful moment and a brief flirtation with denial, Ed admitted to himself that the misshapen mass had once been Lise's navel ring. Jesus. He blinked back tears. The ring had outlived its owner. At the mortuary, Ed had accepted her wedding rings but refused any other jewelry she wore that night. Ed bent again to his task. He swept the gold lump onto the tray. He could handle this.

Sweeping Lise's ashes from the courthouse steps was nothing compared to the horror of finding her body.