

# **GALLERY** **OF THE** **DEAD**

# One

Linda Parker stepped into her two-bedroom house in Silver Lake, northeast Los Angeles, closed the door behind her and let go of a heavy, tired breath. It'd been a long and busy day. Five photo-shoots in just as many different studios scattered all across town. The work itself wasn't that tiring. Linda loved modeling and she was lucky enough to be able to do it professionally, but driving around in a city like LA, where traffic was slow-moving at the best of times, had a special way of exhausting and irritating the most patient of souls.

Linda had left home at around seven thirty that morning and by the time she parked her red VW Beetle back on her driveway, the clock on her dashboard was showing 10:14 p.m. She was tired and she was hungry, but first things first.

'Wine,' she said to herself as she switched on her living-room lights and kicked off her shoes. 'I so need a large glass of wine right now.'

Linda shared her single-story, white-fronted house with Mr. Boingo, a black and white stray cat she had rescued from the streets eleven years ago. Due to his advanced age, Mr. Boingo barely left the house anymore. Running around outside, chasing after birds he could never really get to, had lost its appeal

several summers ago and Mr. Boingo now spent most of his days either sleeping or perched on the windowsill, catatonically staring out at an empty street.

As the lights came on, Mr. Boingo, who'd been asleep on his favorite chair for the past three hours, got up and stretched his front legs before letting out a long, carefree yawn.

Linda smiled. 'Hey there Mr. Boingo. So how was your day? Busy?'

Happy to see her again, Mr. Boingo jumped to the floor and slowly approached Linda.

'Are you hungry, little one?' Linda asked, bending down to pick up her cat.

Mr. Boingo snuggled up to her.

'Have you finished all your food?' She kissed his forehead.

Linda had known it would be a long day, so she had made sure she left Mr. Boingo enough food, or at least she thought she had. Taking a step to her right, she checked the food and water bowls tucked away in the corner. Neither was empty.

'You're not hungry, are you?'

Mr. Boingo began purring; his sleepy eyes blinked twice at her.

'No, I'm not.' Putting on a silly, cartoon-like voice, Linda pretended to be Mr. Boingo. 'I just want cuddles 'cause I missed my mommy.'

She began gently scratching Mr. Boingo's neck and the underside of his chin. The cat's mouth immediately stretched onto a happy smile.

'You love that, don't you?' She kissed his forehead again.

Cat in arms, Linda entered her kitchen, grabbed a clean glass from the dishwasher and poured herself a healthy measure from

an already opened bottle of South African Pinotage. She let Mr. Boingo go before bringing the glass to her lips.

‘Umm!’ she said out loud, as her body finally began to relax. ‘Heaven in liquid form.’

From her fridge, Linda retrieved her dinner – a small bowl of salad. She would much rather have a double cheeseburger with chili fries, or a large, extra-hot pepperoni pizza, but that would be breaking the rules of her strict low-calorie diet, something she only allowed herself to do once in a while as a treat, and tonight wasn’t ‘treat night’.

After another sip, Linda collected her wine and her salad, and left the kitchen.

Mr. Boingo followed.

Back in the living room, Linda placed everything on her dining table and powered up her laptop. While waiting for her computer to boot up, she reached inside her handbag for a tube of moisturizing cream. After carefully massaging a generous amount into her hands, she repeated the procedure with her feet.

From the floor, Mr. Boingo watched, unimpressed.

The next half-hour was spent replying to emails and adding several new bookings to her calendar. That done, Linda closed her email application and decided to log into her Facebook account – thirty-two new friend requests, thirty-nine new messages and ninety-six new notifications. She checked the clock on the wall to her left – 10:51 p.m. As she began debating if she was really in the mood for Facebook, Mr. Boingo jumped onto her lap.

‘Hey there. You want more cuddles, don’t you?’ The cartoon-like voice was back. ‘Of course I do. I’ve been left alone the whole day. Bad mommy.’

Linda had begun stroking her cat's chin again when she remembered something that she'd been meaning to do for a couple of days.

'I know what,' she said, staring straight into Mr. Boingo's tiny eyes. 'Let's take one of those Face Swap pictures, how about that, huh?'

A couple of days ago, Linda's best friend, Maria, had Instagrammed a Face Swap picture of her and her adorable little Bichon Frise. The dog had a congenital abnormality in its lower jaw, which caused its tongue to stick out all the time. To match it, Maria also stuck out her tongue as the picture was taken. The combination of fluffy white fur, bleached blonde hair, tongues sticking out, and Maria's always over-the-top makeup, amounted to a very entertaining image. Linda had promised herself that she would try something similar with Mr. Boingo.

'Yeah, let's do that,' she said, nodding at her cat, her voice full of excitement. 'It will be fun, I promise you.'

She picked up Mr. Boingo, grabbed her cellphone and tapped the icon for a Face Swap application she had already downloaded.

'OK, here we go.'

She readjusted her sitting position and considered the image on the tiny screen. A couple of framed paintings, together with a silver light fixture, could be seen on the wall directly behind her. To the left of the paintings was the doorway that led to a short corridor and the rest of the house.

Linda was very particular when it came to taking pictures, even the ones done just for fun.

'Umm, no, I don't like that,' she said, shaking her head at Mr. Boingo.

The lights in the hallway behind her were switched off, but the ones on the silver fixture were on, giving the image on her screen an odd background glare. She readjusted her position once again, this time moving a little to her left. The glare was gone.

‘Yeah, much better, don’t you think?’ she asked Mr. Boingo. His reply was a slow, sleepy blink of the eyes.

‘OK. Let’s do this before you crash out again, sleepyhead.’

Using the Face Swap application couldn’t be any simpler. All she had to do was take a picture. That was it. The application would instantly identify the two faces on the screen, place a red circle around each of them and then automatically swap them around.

Linda picked up Mr. Boingo and sat back on her chair.

‘There,’ she said, pointing to the screen on her cellphone. ‘Look there.’

Mr. Boingo, looking like he was about to doze off, let out another lazy yawn.

‘No, silly cat, don’t look at me. Look there. Look.’ She pointed at her screen one more time, this time snapping her fingers. The noise seemed to do the trick. Mr. Boingo finally turned and looked directly at Linda’s cellphone.

‘There we go.’

Losing no time, Linda put on a bright smile and quickly tapped the ‘photo’ button.

On her screen, the first red circle appeared around her face, but as the second one quickly followed, Linda felt something constrict inside her chest like a tourniquet, because the application didn’t place it around Mr. Boingo’s tiny face. Instead, it placed it around something in the dark doorway directly behind her.

## Two

‘Good evening, everyone.’

Despite having the assistance of a microphone and a powerful PA system, UCLA psychology professor Ms. Tracy Adams understandably projected her voice a little louder than usual. She was standing before a full-to-capacity one-hundred-and-fifty-seater lecture hall, and the chit-chat of so many animated voices made the place sound like a giant beehive. The audience comprised not only enthusiastic criminology and criminal psychology students, but also several other tutors, who were all very interested in hearing tonight’s lecture.

Professor Adams’ captivating green eyes, behind old-fashioned, black-framed cat-eye glasses, circled the auditorium.

‘We’re just about to start,’ she continued. ‘So if those of you who aren’t already seated could please find a seat, that would be much appreciated.’ She paused and waited patiently.

Professor Adams was no doubt a fascinating woman – intelligent, attractive, knowledgeable, charismatic, elegant and intriguingly mysterious. It was no wonder that so many of her students, male and female, had developed a somewhat adolescent-like crush on her, not to mention some of the faculty staff. But tonight, Professor Tracy Adams wasn’t the

reason why the large lecture hall, located on the northwest quarter of the UCLA campus in Westwood, was heaving with people.

A full minute went by before everyone had finally taken their seats.

‘Well,’ Professor Adams said. ‘I would like to start by thanking everyone for being here. If only I could get this sort of turnout to all my classes . . .’

Subdued laughter broke out across the auditorium.

‘OK,’ she carried on. ‘Before we begin, if I may, I’d like to give you all some background information on tonight’s special guest.’ Her eyes briefly moved to the tall and well-built man standing to the left of the stage.

The man, who had his hands tucked into his trouser pockets, replied with a timid smile.

Professor Adams’ attention moved to the notes in front of her, resting on the speaker’s podium, before returning to the audience.

‘A psychology graduate from Stanford University,’ she began. ‘He received his first degree at the age of nineteen.’ Her next three words were delivered with a deliberate pause between them. ‘*Summa cum laude.*’

A wave of surprised mumbling moved across the room.

‘Also from Stanford University,’ she continued, ‘and still at the tender age of twenty-three, he received a Ph.D. in Criminal Behavior Analyses and Biopsychology. His thesis, which was titled “An Advanced Psychological Study in Criminal Conduct” became, and still is to this day, mandatory reading at the FBI’s NCAVC.’ A short pause. ‘For those of you who don’t know, or have forgotten what NCAVC stands for, that’s the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime.’



She checked her notes then looked back to the crowd.

‘Despite being offered a profiler’s position with the NCAVC’s Behavioral Analysis Unit several times, tonight’s guest has never accepted the offer, choosing instead to join the Los Angeles Police Department.’

More surprised mumbling, this time a little louder.

Professor Adams waited for it to die down before continuing.

‘As a member of this city’s police force, he moved through its ranks at lightning speed, becoming the youngest ever officer to make detective for the LAPD. Since then, his crime-solving record has been second to none.’

She paused again, this time for effect.

‘Our guest tonight is a highly decorated detective with the LAPD’s HSS – the Homicide Special Section – which is an elite branch of the Robbery Homicide Division that was created to deal solely with serial and high-profile homicide cases requiring extensive investigative time and expertise.’

Professor Adams raised her right index finger to emphasize her next point. ‘But that’s not all. Due to his background in criminal behavior psychology and the fact that this beautiful city of ours seems to attract a very particular breed of psychopaths . . .’

Laughter returned to the lecture hall.

‘. . . Our guest was placed in an even more specialized entity within the HSS. All homicides involving overwhelming sadism and brutality are tagged by the LAPD as Ultra Violent Crimes. Our guest tonight does a job that most detectives in this country would give their right arm *not* to. He is the head of the LAPD’s Ultra Violent Crimes Unit.’ She turned and once again looked at the man standing by the side of the stage.

One hundred and fifty pairs of eyes followed hers.

‘It took me a *looonng* time to finally persuade him to come to UCLA as a guest speaker and to talk to all of you about one of the most intriguing subjects as far as criminology and criminal psychology are concerned – the modern-day serial killer.’

The room fell eerily silent.

‘Tonight, it gives me great pleasure to be able to introduce to you Detective Robert Hunter of the LAPD.’

The place erupted in ovation.

Professor Adams motioned Hunter to join her.

Detective Hunter freed his hands from his pockets and slowly took the three short steps that led up to the stage. As he locked eyes with the professor, she gave him a confident smile, followed by a very sensual but almost imperceptible wink. He broke eye contact, faced the applauding auditorium and shyly bowed his head. Hunter really wasn’t used to any of this.

‘Break a leg,’ Professor Adams whispered as she handed Hunter the microphone and left the stage the same way he had come up.

Hunter waited until the place had gone quiet again.

‘I guess I would like to start by once again thanking all of you for being here. I must admit that this wasn’t what I was expecting.’

It was Hunter’s turn to give Professor Adams the eye.

‘I thought that I’d be speaking to maybe twenty to twenty-five students, max.’

More laughter from the crowd.

Renewing her smile, the professor shrugged at Hunter from the edge of the stage.

‘Before I begin, please allow me to explain that I’m no public speaker and I’m certainly no teacher, but I’ll do my best

to try to relate to you what I know, and to answer whatever questions you may have.'

Once again, the audience broke into applause.

Hunter was unsure what the audience's knowledge level was, so he started with some basic definitions – like the difference between a serial killer, a spree killer and a mass murderer. The explanation was substantiated by a few examples of incidents that had taken place recently in the USA.

He proceeded by giving his audience a seven-point list of the phases of a serial killer, from the Aura Phase – the very beginning, where the killer-to-be starts to lose his/her grip on reality – to the Depression Phase – the great emotional let-down that in most cases follows the murder act.

'Before I move on,' Hunter said as he finished explaining the final phase, his voice taking a much more serious tone. 'When it comes to serial homicides, the most important thing I'd like you to remember is that ...'

He was interrupted by his cellphone vibrating inside his jacket pocket.

He paused and reached for it.

'I'm so sorry about this,' he said, raising his right hand at the intrigued audience. 'If you could all give me just a minute.' He switched off the microphone and placed it on the podium. 'Detective Hunter,' he said into the mouthpiece. 'UVC unit.'

As he listened to the caller on the other end of the line, his eyes found Professor Adams'. No words were necessary. She could read the expression on his face. She'd been by his side before when a similar call had come in.

'You've got to be joking,' she mumbled the words in disbelief before taking to the stage again and approaching Hunter. 'Why am I not surprised this is happening tonight?'

Hunter disconnected from the call and faced her.

‘I’m terribly sorry, Tracy,’ he said, his voice low and constricted. He could see her disappointment. ‘I need to go.’

She nodded her understanding. ‘It’s OK, Robert. Go. I’ll explain it to everyone.’

As Hunter rushed off the stage, Professor Adams grabbed the microphone from the podium, let out a sad sigh and faced a very confused crowd.